



# Mae Sot Education Project

## Newsletter

### Fall 2014

[www.maesot.ubishops.ca](http://www.maesot.ubishops.ca)



## A New Team of Volunteers Leaves for Mae Sot

Our 2014 volunteers left for Mae Sot in June. Find out about their first impressions by reading about their experiences, beginning on page 3. Pictured left to right: Lauren Cavanagh, Kathleen Bibeau and Sévan Belleau. Also in this this edition, read about the repatriation of refugees to Myanmar. Details on how to support the project are found on the last page.

## An Optimistic Progress Report on Two Struggling Schools: How MSEP is helping

During the last months, MSEP has played a larger-than-usual role in helping two of our partners carry on, thanks to a number of our donors. BHSOH, which was at risk of closing in March, is now receiving funding from MSEP and Child's Dream, a Swiss-based charity that has worked in the migrant community since 2003. Child's Dream is covering cost of land and rent and most operating costs. However, thanks to two donors, MSEP is paying for food costs and cook's salary for the year, along with the building of a new kitchen. Whereas in the past, the school was dependent on a donor for daily delivery of food, it now has the capacity to provide meals for the children in the way it considers most appropriate – and everyone is happier! In addition, a recent \$5000 donation will make it possible for us to set aside some "scholarship" funding for older students who are accepted into GED or vocational education programs after finishing at the school. It is exciting for us to be able to join with another organization in this way to enhance our assistance to one of our partners. [Pictured above right: Primary students at lunchtime at BHSOH]



In the second instance, Hsa Mu Htaw Learning Centre lost its funding in May, and therefore had little time to seek new donors before the start of the school year in June. Because we have one fewer volunteer than usual this year, we were able to increase our usual donation from \$2000 to \$3300. We then received an additional gift that will enable us to contribute another \$8,500 to Hsa Mu Htaw's budget. This money will pay rent and utilities costs first and foremost but will also help meet other needs as they emerge during the year. [Pictured left: Lunch being served at BHSOH]

To some degree these donations are stop-gap measures. However, they meet immediate needs and also give our partners hope, energy and some time to make longer-term plans for their future. It is our hope that the ability to continue their work will also provide these schools with the opportunity to

explore new, more sustainable educational options for their students.



## Repatriation of Refugees to Myanmar: What does "going home" mean and will it happen?

"We are not at the stage where we will deport people..."

**2014 is a new year on the Thai-Burmese border.** In May, Thailand experienced a coup that brought what appeared to be a more or less benevolent military government to power at least for the next year. In June migrants and refugees from Burma / Myanmar began to feel the impacts of this new reality. The military announced that it would be repatriating 100,000 refugees to Myanmar in the next year. While talk of repatriation has been on-going since the Burmese military handed the government over to nominal civilian rule in 2011, there has been a quiet assumption that it would not happen so long as concerns about rights to citizenship and work, access to health care and education, and perhaps most important, land restitution were unresolved.

However, in July the talk began to take on a new tone. A July 14<sup>th</sup> report in *The Guardian* quoted a Thai army deputy spokesman, Veerachon Sukhontapatipak, as saying: "We are not at the stage where we will deport people because we must first verify the nationality of those in the camps...Once that is done we will find ways to send them back. There are around 100,000 people who have been living in the camps for many years without freedom. Thailand and Myanmar will help facilitate their smooth return." (from *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/jul/14/thailand-burmese-repatriate-refugees-human-rights>).

Thai authorities have offered verbal assurances that repatriation will be in conformity with "human rights principles", but the statement above brings shudders to some. In the best of scenarios, what happens on the ground when people do start returning in large numbers is anybody's guess. Fighting is still going on in some parts of the country. The Karen / military ceasefire is still not a peace agreement. Centralized health care is nonexistent, and essential health services for many are still being delivered cross-border from the Mae Tao Clinic in Thailand. And finally...the Burmese government is preparing legislation to protect "race and religion" that would institutionalize racism and marginalize all non-Buddhists in the country (See *The Economist*, Aug. 2<sup>nd</sup>,

2014, page 30). The increasingly close ties between the Thai and Burmese militaries are hardly reassuring.

For our school partners in Mae Sot, this change in the situation has had repercussions as many teachers and students in the migrant schools have families living in the refugee camps. Many fear being separated from their families if some are returned and others are not. Many fear also what awaits them on the other side of the border. Amidst the uncertainty, rumours abound and feed the fears. It is unclear what the possible closing of refugee camps means for the migrant population (outside the camps) – which, on one hand, is an essential part of Thailand's economy and, on the other hand, is made up of people intimately related to refugees in the camps, and who share some of the same fears of persecution back home. Already, migrant schools experience increasing hardship as some foreign donors assume incorrectly that support for them is no longer needed.

Our volunteers have also felt the impact of the changing environment as they have observed more frequent identity checks along the roads and listened to the stories of migrant teachers who feel more vulnerable and students (some of whom have never been to Burma/Myanmar) who worry about their future. One of our "ex-volunteers" who is presently teaching in an English immersion program in Umphiem Refugee Camp found herself without a job for several weeks while the military closed the camp to foreigners while it was verifying identities. It is thus an extremely interesting, if unsettling, time for them to be in Thailand – a "learning experience" beyond what any of them anticipated. Whatever worries they feel as foreigners in this environment, they know that they have a country to which they can return in security at any time, a country in which fear of their government or concern about loss of basic rights are fundamentally nonexistent. Would that it were so for the Burmese – especially those belonging to ethnic and religious minorities – in Thailand.

[Pictured above: Ban Mai Nai Soi Refugee Camp]

# 2014 Volunteer Snapshots

*"...my hair is plastered to my face, my vision is blinded by sideways rain, and I feel as though the wind might pick me up and carry me off into the jungle. Uncomfortable as this is, my inner ten-year-old (who would gladly drop the bike and dance in the rain) is in a fit of giggles..." Lauren*

Pictured left: at the ruins, 2014 Volunteers Sévan Belleau, Kathleen Bibeau and Lauren Cavanaugh



## An Average Day in Mae Sot Lauren Cavanaugh, 2014 Volunteer

It is breathtakingly beautiful here. As I bike home from school, I marvel at my surroundings. In the foreground, I see burnt orange stains on the pavement before me from betel chew spit, lush bright green rice paddy fields on my left and right that have grown practically before my eyes over the last three weeks, and a beautiful, cream-coloured cow lying on a patch of dirt by the road, swatting flies with her tail. In the background there are strong, tall trees and the bamboo frame of a building not yet complete. Beyond, I see dark green rolling hills and dark jagged

mountains that reach into sky – a miraculous blue canvas spattered with idyllic white puffs of cloud. The sun is hot but not unbearable, and my recently acquired accessory, The Sweat Mustache, makes an appearance. I may not look my best, but I don't think about this while I admire the beauty around me. I am in Mae Sot.

It starts to rain. At first, the drizzle provides temporary relief to my hot skin. Before long, the clouds conquer the sky and turn from crisp white to hazy, dark gray. The rain is no longer a pleasant break from the afternoon sun; instead, each drop inflicts a sharp sting where it strikes my skin. This rain, the same rain that makes the rice paddy fields grow so fast and the foliage flourish the way it does, is unlike any rain I've ever felt. This is a violent, nasty rain. The wind picks up, and somehow it rains harder. My full-length fuchsia poncho offers little protection and by now, my hair is plastered to my face, my vision is blinded by sideways rain, and I feel as though the wind might pick me up and carry me off into the jungle. Uncomfortable as this is, my inner ten-year-old (who would gladly drop the bike and dance in the rain) is in a fit of giggles and it shows on my face as a smirk as I realize that I have no control over this torrential downfall of water from the sky. I am in Mae Sot in rainy season.

I continue biking through the rain and I see a pack of stray dogs in the distance. My daily run-ins with these dogs have not yet made me feel comfortable with them. There are as many stray dogs in Mae Sot as you can count. As I approach them, it is clear that I have entered their territory and they are not happy about it. Their menacing growls make my heart rate increase and I pedal as fast as I can to pass through the terrain of these angry canines. A particularly mangy looking creature barks a threat and tries to nip my bare ankle as I pass. I manage to clear the brood unscathed. I am in Mae Sot in rainy season among frightening stray dogs.

I make it home, my sopping wet clothing making me feel fifteen pounds heavier. I rinse my feet in the bathroom, and notice that my toiletries are missing. My toothbrush, travel-sized tube of toothpaste and razor have all disappeared. I wonder if our cleaning lady tossed them, thinking they were trash. Kathleen and Sévan notice they are also missing some belongings. When we find a bottle of soap crudely chewed apart, we conclude that we have a fourth part-time roommate that likes to borrow, but not return, shiny objects and small things; we have a rat. I am in Mae Sot in rainy season among frightening stray dogs and thieving rats.

The discovery of our new roommate is humorous and after a good laugh and some shared concern about what to do about him, we go about our afternoon. Kathleen and I decide it is time to find a blender for the house. While we readily eat what Mae Sot has to offer, we crave the cold amalgamation of fruits and vegetables that we both drink devotedly at home in Canada. We find a shop that sells clothing and food and an assortment of home appliances. Of course, we do not know the Thai word for "blender," and have forgotten our phrase books at the house. After a series of charade-like actions that somehow required full body movements, the saleswomen look at each other and laugh. We realize that we will not be understood here. We find another shop down the street, although this one only sells

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mattresses. We find the saleswoman here and after the same charade game, she understands what we are looking for and points us in the right direction – down the street, turn right, turn left, look for a bank, go straight, then you will be at the right shop. Surprisingly, we find this shop. An enthusiastic salesman opens the door for us and we are welcomed into a wonderfully frigid air-conditioned space. We play charades with this salesman, making motions and using broken English that we think will help him understand what we are looking for. "Food in," we say while making the motion of putting food into a container. This is followed by the exaggerated motion of putting the top on a blender, pressing a button and making loud and aggressive whirling, blending noises. We end our mime show by pretending to pour out the contents of our imaginary blender, and drink our delicious imaginary smoothie. We conclude with, "yum!" He laughs and understands, and we leave the shop with a new blender. I am in Mae Sot in rainy season, among the frightening stray dogs and thieving rats, constantly playing charades.

After enjoying a well-deserved smoothie and unwinding, this day is over. This day, much like every other day in Mae Sot, has been filled with unique challenges and no shortage of new experiences. Falling asleep, I listen to the night critters outside, and I realize that time is flying. I have spent almost two months listening to night critters and falling asleep on this floor. Every night, I've fallen asleep happy. I am happy to be here, happy to have this experience. I am in Mae Sot in rainy season, among the frightening stray dogs and thieving rats, constantly playing charades, and I am very, very happy. Pictured above, the 2014 volunteers, Lauren, Kathleen and Sévan at a Karen celebration.



## Two months into the experience: Some reflections

**Kathleen Bibeau, 2014 Volunteer**

The first time I saw the poster for the Mae Sot Project was one week before the closure date. I knew I had to apply. I was at a point in my life when I knew what one of my important goals in life was, but I had to confirm this idea with a concrete experience. And the Mae Sot Education Project was that concrete experience. I am currently teaching English to Burmese children with different socio-economic backgrounds, religions, ethnicities and stories. But I am not only teaching them grammar. I am teaching them acceptance, perseverance, and curiosity. I am teaching them English to increase their opportunities, and I believe that this empowerment will not only benefit them, but also their community. I am here to make them want to learn, to always aspire to acquire more knowledge. And I know they have this desire to always learn a little bit more when I walk into one of my classes, and I hear one of my fifth graders shout: "I like Monoclonius!" (A dinosaur's specie they learned a month ago), or when my fourth graders sing the song of the week

while completing their grammar exercises. These little moments, when I can assess the impact of my implication in this project, confirm for me that my intuition was right when I first looked at that poster Mae Sot Education Project poster.

## Getting to know Thai driving etiquette: Observations of a committed cyclist

**Sévan Belleau, 2014 Volunteer**

This story begins when, arriving at 7am in the Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok and on our way to the Wendy Guesthouse, we got our first view of the Thai driving... Traffic lanes seemed to be simply mysterious

suggestions someone must have drawn on the road, and the 80 km/h speed limit was more like a 120 km/h cruise – then slam the brakes to avoid an accident and floor it back to 120. The two lanes ended up being used by our driver as a single one so that if the car in front of him ever made a surprise turn, he could turn to the opposite side so that we wouldn't

crash.

The driving didn't get better on our arrival in Mae Sot. Actually it might have gotten worse... Here the two lanes were being used as two lanes, but as soon as someone was too slow in front of a driver, the too often overcharged pickup trucks would take a detour into the opposite lane and pass from the right to the left side of the road. Too many times in the last two months, I've been biking to school and have witnessed drivers come within inches of head-to-head collisions, and I have come to think that the drivers don't even get bothered by a driver going straight in their direction at 150 km/h.

One thing that surprised me about these wild and unpredictable drivers was their attitude towards cyclists. As an avid cyclist, I've seen many types of people on the road, and what really impressed me here was that these drivers are actually very conscious about bikers. Very rarely will a car not change lane if I am on the side of the road, and even if I am considerably far away, they always make the choice to wait and let me go by before they take off again. Back home a vast majority of the drivers would have tried to go before I arrived but, too often miss-judging my speed, would have end up cutting me off. Another thing that impressed me about these users of the road was that when they honk a cyclist here, they actually mean it as a gentle and kind warning. If they see that you are looking in the wrong direction and could be put in situation that might turn out bad, they give a tap to their steering wheel to make their presence noticed. I must admit having being saved a few times by this when I was biking to school and admiring the beautiful view a little too much to notice a car at a nearby intersection. All in all, getting to know the roads in Thailand has proved to be so far an enlightening cultural experience!

## MSEP Project Committee enters a new phase... Departing members share some thoughts about the project

How does a project committee such as MSEP's manage – composed as it is totally of volunteers? This summer, members of the project committee gathered at Restaurant Shalimar in Lennoxville to celebrate the contributions of several long-time, exceptionally dedicated members of the committee who are withdrawing to pursue other interests. Unfortunately, Sunny Lau was unable to attend, but (while indulging in delicious pakoras, tandoori lamb and butter chicken) Emily Prangley Desormeaux [left in photo] and Carinne Bevan [right in photo] shared some of their thoughts on how they see the project and their own engagement in it.

Emily captured the value of the project, saying, "MSEP is a beautiful example of a community-based organization. It seems to cultivate solidarity among everyone it touches, from the dedicated committee members, to the volunteers, to the loyal local supporters who attend our events and make donations year after year. That is part of what makes it so special." Carinne added: "What I found compelling was the prospect that the project I was involved in was helping to make a difference, however small, to the lives of migrant children in Mae Sot."

At the same time, we discussed the challenges that a small project such as ours faces: Carinne explained some of the challenges she had encountered: "I discovered that we have to respect that some people in the community would rather donate money to local endeavours. However, I also came to understand that even small donations count! When people in the community donate, they feel involved and it generates a sort of loyalty. This is vital to the life of a small project as many of those people will want to support fundraising events in an ongoing way. In this vein, it may seem contradictory, but I found it sometimes hard to keep MSEP fresh and relevant [to others], to

find a way to maintain the interest in and support for the project without creating a sort of supporter 'fatigue'. This has implications for donations-in-kind, art auctions, raffle ticket sales etc." In spite of such challenges, Carinne also noted that working with other committed committee members who also felt strongly attached to the project has been deeply rewarding for her. "There was a real sense of pulling together when doing fundraising events."

Both Emily and Carinne commented on how satisfying the transformative impact of the project on the volunteers is for those working to build the project. One of the



aspects that Carinne found most rewarding was: "interacting with some wonderful volunteers/ former students of mine and just seeing how their

experiences in the schools had brought out a maturity, personal growth an ongoing passion for what they were doing." From her own perspective as both a former volunteer and PC member, Emily made a similar observation: "Seeing the transformations of the volunteers before and after their time in Mae Sot is just incredible. It's thrilling to hear them speak about their experiences and to see how much they've matured and learned about the world and themselves during their work with the project." Finally, as Carinne noted, "Having some of the returned volunteers on the committee means that there is input from individuals with recent, firsthand knowledge of Mae Sot. Their 'on the ground' experiences and understanding of the needs of the schools can be really helpful with decision making." Emily echoed this sentiment too by explaining what this process had meant in her own life: "I feel grateful for having started at one end of the project (as a volunteer) five years ago and to be emerging at the other end now as a committee member. I've developed invaluable work and life skills as well as invaluable friendships throughout my contact with this extraordinary little project."

### Glimpses of a Recent Event: *The Knowlton Art Exhibition*



Pictured left: Volunteers Will, Emily, Elizabeth and Kathleen at Knowlton Art Exhibition

Pictured right: Former volunteer Megan Irving talks about her experiences working with a Burmese labour organization this year at the Knowlton Art Exhibition.



## MSEP - WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO

The Mae Sot Education Project (MSEP) is a community project based on the campus of Bishop's University and Champlain College – Lennoxville in Sherbrooke Quebec. Since 2004, we have provided assistance to six schools for migrant and refugee youth from Burma/Myanmar whose access to education depends on support from the international community. We have also occasionally worked with other schools. Each year we select a group of young people from our campus to go to Mae Sot for six months. While there, they provide practical assistance to teachers and enrichment activities for children in the schools. They learn about the situation of displacement experienced by the Burmese people in Thailand as well as about the challenges for the Thai community in coping with a large population of refugees and migrants. Finally, they share their experience with Canadians. The Project Committee is made up of members of the community, faculty from Bishop's and Champlain, and former youth volunteers with the project. Currently active members include: Avril Aitken, William Bryson, Catherine Isely, Angie Peticlerc, Mary Purkey, Garry Retzleff, Marjorie Retzleff, Michelle Vanloon, and Barbara Rowell.



**Contributions to the project are always welcome  
and tax receipts will be issued.**

### *Donate to MSEP on line*

It is now possible to donate to the Mae Sot Education Project on line. If you prefer to donate to MSEP through Bishop's University, the link below will take you to the Bishop's University Foundation's site for making donations. Click on the link. For the designation, choose "other" from the list of options and then manually type in "MaeSot". You can then complete the rest of the form. Your donation to MSEP will be processed through the Bishop's Foundation. You will automatically receive an e-receipt and then the Foundation will send a thank you card in the mail.

Here is the link: <http://www.ubishops.ca/gift>

If you prefer to donate to MSEP through the Champlain College Foundation, click on the link below. A form will for donating will appear. Follow the instructions for donating. Your donation will be processed through the Champlain Foundation. However, in this instance, you must email Daniel Poitras, the Foundation manager, at [dpoitras@crc-lennox.qc.ca](mailto:dpoitras@crc-lennox.qc.ca) and request that your donation be used for the Mae Sot Education Project.

Here is the link: <http://www.crc-lennox.qc.ca/community/foundation>

Or, donate by cheque at our project address:

Box 67, Champlain College – Lennoxville, Sherbrooke, QC J1M 2A1.

Be sure to include the name of the Foundation and MSEP on your cheque.

*Thank you very much for your support.*

For more information, contact us at [maesoteducationproject@gmail.com](mailto:maesoteducationproject@gmail.com)  
or see [www.maesot.ubishops.ca](http://www.maesot.ubishops.ca).