

# The Eastern Townships – Mae Sot Education Project

Canadians working for Burmese Migrant Children in Thailand  
A Newsletter to our Supporters – Winter 2011

## Who we are and what we do

The *Eastern Townships – Mae Sot Education Project (ET-MSEP)* is a small, community project based on the campus of Bishop's University and Champlain College – Lennoxville in Sherbrooke Quebec. For the last seven years, we have provided assistance to six informal schools for migrant and refugee youth from Burma/Myanmar, children whose access to education depends on support from the international community. Last year, we began working with a seventh school. Each year we select four or five 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.



*Kathleen, Megan, Natasha, Barbara and Anne-Marie*

In January, the *ET-MSEP* Project Committee selected five students from our campus to go to Thailand: Barbara Cvenic, Megan Irving, Anne-Marie Laverdure, Natasha Long, and Kathleen Mulawka. They will receive several months of cultural, political and TESL preparation before leaving in June. They will also help raise funds to support their journey and assist partner schools.

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, members are: Avril Aitken, Ron Bishop, Carinne Bevan, Derek Heatherington, Sunny Lau, Skylar Lepoidevin, Lissa McRae, Anabel Pinero, Mary Purkey, Garry Retzleff, Marjorie Retzleff, and Barbara Rowell.

## Some new Developments

Our Project Committee is thrilled to have two new members this year. Ron Bishop, a retiree in the community who also has the distinction of being the grandfather of one of last year's volunteers, has offered to take over our bookkeeping. At the same time, Bishop's Faculty of Education Assistant Professor Sunny Lau, has undertaken the TESL training that our volunteers will receive. Having worked with a Toronto school board on a TESL instructor preparation program as well as with OISE/UT in preparing teachers to teach English language learners across the curriculum, Sunny brings considerable expertise to our project. In addition, her current research involving use of critical pedagogy in the teaching of English as a second language will give our volunteers an excellent grounding when they head for Mae Sot in June.

In another recent development, former volunteer and youngest member of our Project Committee Skylar Lepoidevin has received a small grant from one of our donors to return to Mae Sot this summer to work for the Curriculum Project, a Mae Sot NGO, and complete a small research project under the supervision of Professor Lau, to explore ways of helping develop and implement critical pedagogy in schools there. He will report back to us upon his return in August.

## An email message from one of our partners – a sample of the challenges schools face

In recent weeks we have received a number of emails from our old friend U Khaing Oo Maung, the 67 year old headmaster of one of our partner schools. In November, Khaing Oo Maung's school, BHSOH, received major funding for a new campus. The new building and location present new opportunities for development in the future but also some new challenges. Located in a field in the countryside away from town, access to water and electricity have been less than adequate during the first months of operations. While these problems will be solved in due course, the on-going



*Christine & BHSOH Students tour the new school* expense that is most challenging is transportation of children to and from the school. The email message estimated the following transportation costs for the coming year. Note: one Canadian dollar equals approximately 30 Thai baht.

1. Monthly installment debt to motor car company by school: 4,366 baht/ month x 10 months = 43,660 Baht
2. Petroleum for school owned bus: 5,000 baht / month x 10 months = 50,000 Baht
3. Monthly transportation charges for another rental car: 13,000 Baht is paid by HWF (Help without Frontiers, an Italian NGO), but, Thai bus driver asks 17,000 Baht/ month, so we must make up 4,000 Baht / month. 4,000 Baht / month x 10 months = 40,000 Baht.

So the total is 43,660 plus 50,000 plus 40,000 = 133,660 Baht. This total is about \$4290 CAD. It is more than we have to give this school, but with the help of a donor who has enabled us to double our contributions to schools this year, we should be able to donate \$2000. This example gives a glimpse of the challenges schools face and how we "fit in". We cannot provide enough funding to keep any one school afloat. Each school receives help from numerous international donors. What we can do is fill in the gaps that are left by these larger donors

## And some Upcoming Fundraising Events...

*During April, the ET-MSEP will host a flurry of fundraising activities. Watch for a sale table at the University Singers Spring Concerts at the beginning of the month.*

*Then on April 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> some Bishop's drama students will stage *The God of Carnage* by Yasmina Reza in Turner Theatre on campus as a benefit for the project. Tickets will sell for \$6. Voluntary donations of more will be gratefully accepted.*

*We are also hoping to hold a small raffle.*

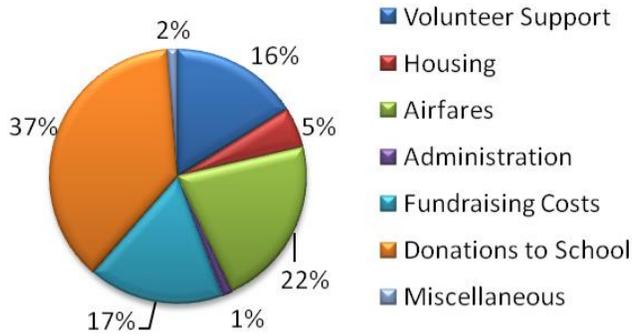
*Last but definitely not least, on April 16<sup>th</sup>, we will be hosting our second Thai dinner at Oasis Christian Centre – and yes, Veronica is back as our extraordinary chef. Tickets will go on sale during March. Once again, the cost is \$50, but a tax receipt for \$30 will be issued for each ticket purchased.*

## How you can help

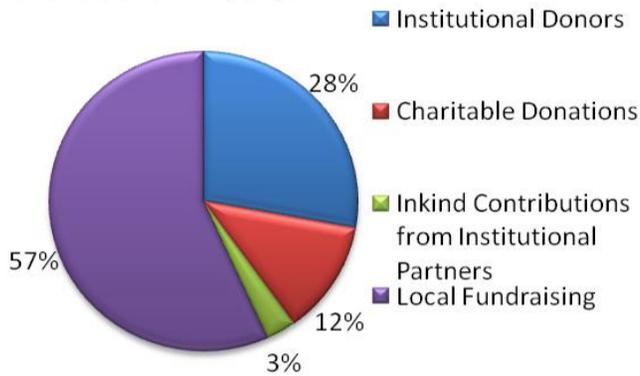
Contributions to the project are always welcome, and tax receipts will be issued. Donations may be made to either the Champlain College Foundation (specify Mae Sot Education Project) or to the Bishop's University Foundation (specify Mae Sot Education Project), Box 67, Champlain College, Sherbrooke, Quebec J1M 2A1.

For more information: <http://www.ubishops.ca/maesot>

### Expenditures 2010 - \$38,890



### Revenues 2010 - \$52,042



## A comment on our financial situation in 2010

As the pie charts above indicate, we were able to raise about 23,000 last year through the efforts of volunteers, committee and of course through the generous participation of our community in two major fundraisers. In addition, we were fortunate to receive a significant grant from a donor that enabled us to substantially increase our financial contributions to our six partner schools in Mae Sot [over the preceding years]. During the coming year, we anticipate lower revenues from fundraising. However, we hope that renewed support from this donor will enable us to continue our high level of support to schools, as well as to send five (as opposed to four) volunteers to assist them. Our surplus from last year should give us a great head start. Another small anomaly in the expenditures for the last year was the abnormally high cost of airfare. Because of the unrest in Bangkok during the spring, we chose to fly volunteers into Chiang Mai at greater expense than usual. Hopefully, this year, life will be tranquil in Thailand, and this precaution will be unnecessary.

**Note: Volunteers often see the world through fresh eyes upon their return from six months in Thailand. Here, Adrian Downey and Emily Murray reflect on the changes in their perspectives.**

### On Laziness

By Adrian Downey, 2010 Volunteer

A year ago I was doing much the same thing I am doing right now, sitting in my room on a Sunday afternoon writing an essay which had been left until the last minute for no other reason than my own laziness. However, since last year I've been to the other side of the world, learned to speak a few different languages, tasted every inedible animal you could dream of and helped some amazing young adults on their way to becoming productive members of a society that is under threat of extinction. So you might be thinking that such an experience would really put things in perspective for me, and that it would really make me want to get off my lazy butt and chase the educational dreams that my former students have been constantly trying to achieve as part of the Karen refugee community in Thailand. Well, you'd be half right in that assumption.

When I get lazy, I think back to the times my Karen students



Adrian (right) & students & staff from Kaw Tha Blay

worked for three hours on a journal for me and how happy I was to read their work and then I think of all the times I have had to force my way through something that was penned off in the ten minutes before class. In those moments I feel great pain for my teachers, but I still get lazy sometimes, and here's the reason why. In Thailand, we were doing something profound. We were helping other people and helping ourselves in the process. We could move mountains for a student without the red tape we have in Canada, and now that I'm back here, forcing my way to the library every morning at 8:00am because I feel like I owe it to those students to be the best that I can be, I feel the greatest pain I've ever known: apathy. I look around and I see people who generally do not seem to care and it makes me mad. Ask friends in a bar what they think about Burma, and they might fake interest, but they don't really care.

The saving factor for me now is the project, those who've gone before and those who are on their way. When I see the smiling eyes of those who are about to leave, I can't help but feel invigorated by their passion. And in every memory I share with other returned volunteers, I remember that there are people in the world who do care; they just need something to pull them together. That's what the project does; it weaves together a community of unique personalities who are all passionate about helping people. In my life I've been profoundly lucky to have been a part of this family, and I hope that those who read this hear the passion dripping from my words and can see how life changing this has been for me, and then maybe they will want to do something to continue to make the project possible. Last year this time, I was lazy because I didn't care; now I'm lazy because I feel like no one else cares. I hope that readers will prove me wrong.

## Culture Shock

By Emily Murray, 2010 Volunteer

We've been back for two months now. I still think of the students, of the teachers, of the house and the other volunteers every day. I wonder what I would be doing if I were there, if I would have been able to lesson plan up until now. I wonder what the weather would be like. I also spend much too much time wondering whether my old students miss me, partially hoping they don't, but really hoping they do. I fall asleep planning ways to get back to Mae Sot every second night. I still occasionally hesitate to flush toilet paper, and I hold my own arm when I shake hands.



Emily enjoying a class with one of her students

I love Canada, but every time I leave my apartment wearing more layers than a birthday cake, I cry a little on the inside. Besides the snow, the other obvious shock was spending more money in one month than I spent in the six months in Mae Sot combined.

I recently bought a pair of running shoes, they were a good deal and came with a pack of socks so I was okay with my purchase. Later that day, when I put them on, all I could think about was how much I hate wearing socks and what I could have done with the few dollars if I'd spent them in Thailand.

Our little goes such a long way over there. With my sneakers I could have given both my schools each a soccer ball, a cane ball, and a package of badminton birdies. I could have given the cash to the schools to keep for students' birthdays. I could have filled the gas tanks on the school bus. I could have bought them months worth of chillies...

I gained so much from my experience. It's as though anything is possible there. I still sometimes think of a good idea for a lesson or a game, and kick myself for being so far away. If the ocean was a little smaller, I would swim across, then walk.