

The Eastern Townships – Mae Sot Education Project

Canadians working for Burmese Migrant Children in Thailand

A Newsletter to our Supporters – Late Summer 2011

Coming soon... A Project Evaluation

Our project is now in its 8th year! Over the next six months, we will be surveying our partners (both here in Canada and abroad), our longstanding donors, committee members and past and present volunteers regarding what is working well and what needs improvement. Although each year is a new story, we feel sure that this process of reflection will yield useful insights. If *you* would like to offer your reflections or be part of this project review, please contact Mary Purkey at marypurkey@gmail.com.

Committee Member Sunny Lau travels to Mae Sot in August for some on-site observation



Sunny Lau

I am so grateful to be able to get to Mae Sot this summer despite the hectic schedule. Having just returned to Canada, I am now still digesting what I experienced, what I saw and heard.

I was supposed to observe Barbara's class on the first day. I went into the school only to find that they had cancelled all afternoon classes because of a special assembly to commemorate the 1988 Revolution. The whole school crammed into a small hall which was originally classrooms separated by dividers. There were speeches followed by speeches, made by the school director, senior teachers, and students, all in Burmese. While I had no idea what they were saying, students from the lower grades to the upper ones were all paying such great attention that I could hear a pin drop, something we could rarely find in schools nowadays. When the Grade 11 class started to lead the whole school to sing, a song sung by the protesters during the movement, my heart just melted. Part of it reminded me of the 1989 student pro-democracy movement in Beijing. Part of it reminded me of the loneliness and longing for home any refugee or migrant would have, which as an immigrant to Canada I could easily relate to, although in terms of hardships it was nothing compared to theirs. Yet, in their eyes, I saw strength and resilience; in their smiles, I saw their eagerness to learn, their desire to reach out to love and be loved. They all revered our student volunteers and respected them as teachers in their own right. This just made us want to be better teachers, to humble ourselves and be better human beings.

How you can help

Contributions to the Mae Sot Education 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.

Viewpoints from Volunteers in Thailand...

"I talk, I listen, I understand."

An excerpt from a recent Blog by Barbara Cvenic,
Project Volunteer in Mae Sot
See <http://maesottravels.tumblr.com/> for more.

Mae Sot, Thailand. It's been one month to the day that I took my first steps on your cracked concrete sidewalks. One month of rain falling softly against a tin roof and lulling me to sleep, of exploration and adventure. One month of late nights sitting out on the porch and talking while mosquitoes feast on my legs. One month of students' smiling faces and new friends and letters to old ones. One month of so, so many joys.

Today, I went to a farewell party for a teacher at the C.E.P. (Continuing Education Project). There was much food and conversation and a lot of lovely people. After dinner all of the students paid homage to their teacher who was returning to England after almost a year of teaching in Mae Sot. He had to take some deep breaths and keep the tears from coming as he made a little speech to his students, and then they proceeded to make their own speeches to him, to thank him for all of his teaching and guidance. The students called him their friend, their brother, their uncle, their father.

After the speeches they went down on their knees and prayed for him. In Buddhism, one of the students told me, teachers are held in such high esteem; they occupy the same category as monks and parents. So here was this man, sitting in front of a group of students, bowing their heads to the ground (for most of them were, in fact, Buddhist), and praying for him. He had made that much of an impact on their lives.

I sat thinking about how this man was on his way out of Mae Sot, moving on to his life at home, telling the students that he hopes to visit them

one day in Burma, and here I was, having barely begun my time in this magical place. Even though I've just barely scratched the surface here in terms of teaching and relationships, I think about the connections I've already made with my students, and the thought of leaving is already enough to break my heart...

I spent most of the past two days at my school, BHSOH. On Friday morning some of us volunteers paid for gas money so three cars could take us and the boarding students at the school to a nearby reservoir to go swimming. It was breathtakingly beautiful — mountains perfectly mirrored on a still lake — and some of us went swimming while the rest just enjoyed the time away from



Barbara with some of her students

BH. It's so hard for these kids because they are illegal here in Thailand and can rarely travel outside of the school.

After swimming with the mountains, we took the buses to a hot spring nearby, boiled chicken and pigeon eggs to share and then climbed a mountain to a massive cave with a beautiful stone Buddha at entrance. Though the climb was hard, it was so nice, carrying some students on my back when they got too tired and making wolf calling noises as we trekked through the jungle. Then came the rock climbing into the heart of this cave with bats and darkness all around and only the shouts of students calling out, "Teacher, teacher, this way," guiding me down into the depths.

It was fun seeing these beautiful places, but it was even more special playing tag with some of the girls, grabbing one little boy tugging at my leg, throwing him into the air and catching him safely in my arms, laughing and talking with students in the back of the pick-up truck as it bounced along the dirt path to the hot spring. I felt really connected to all of these beautiful souls.

These children are becoming my brothers and sisters, my children and my friends. They are the reason I wake up every morning happier than I've ever been. They are the reason I want to spend every night at the school and give them everything I can. They are the reason I cry when I think about the state of the world sometimes and at the same time the reason I smile when I think about this world and the people inhabiting it. They are the reason I want to teach and make a difference, to open myself up to everyone I meet. They are the reason this last month seems to have flown by so quickly and that I wish my time here would last forever.

A Year of Challenges for Our Partners

In the paragraphs that follow, some of our volunteers reflect on the particular challenges facing their schools this year.

First, from Anne Marie Laverdure...

At Hsa Mu Htaw school, teachers work a lot as a team. They welcome me with arms wide open each and every day that I open the gate, that is if the students are not faster than I am to open the gate and greet me.



Anne Marie with school friends

They are like this despite the fact that they are facing many difficulties at the moment. The teachers haven't received any salary for four consecutive months now. This means that since the school year started in June, they have had no money come in except for our donation. Transportation was not paid since the beginning of the year. If the bus driver runs out of his own money to put gas in the truck, there will be no kids at the school since they will not have any ride there and back. The rent, electricity and water bills have not been paid for a few months either. Still, the school staff doesn't let these difficulties prevent them from going on and doing what is the most important: teaching the students. They will overcome these problems as a community. They are very generous people and offer so much more than what they have. They are very grateful that the Eastern Townships Project sends volunteers every year and continues to

support them. As a volunteer, I feel that I have so much more to learn from the students and the teachers. I feel very privileged to teach at Hsa Mu Htaw, a wonderful school with wonderful students.

From Megan Irving...

Parami school has been bustling with activity lately. The school is moving all of the female boarding students from its old location into new dorms on the present campus. They have also begun building a new classroom



Megan at work

(funded by our own project). Presently grade two has over 60 students, all of whom have been squeezed into one classroom. Once this new building is ready the grade will be split into two groups which will benefit both students and teachers alike. Two small staff houses are also being built, and there are plans for more construction after the rainy season is over. School organizer, Min Lwin dreams of having a library, more staff housing and a computer room. The school's numbers have increased considerably this year, and with both female and male boarders living on the same campus, these changes will make life better for everyone

And finally, from Natasha Long...

Kaw Tha Blay College is a wonderful community environment where the students and teachers live together rather isolated from the resources of a city. While this environment offers many benefits to the students (such as the capacity to find their own food, wood, and the beauty of its location), it also offers unique challenges including the need to ensure the students eat a well-balanced diet. Although students are accustomed to harvesting vegetables



Natasha and Kaw Tha Blay staff

from the forest and the farm at the college, sometimes the only available food has been rice and fish paste. While this diet is partially cultural preference, there have been concerns about the need to supplement it with meats and vegetables that can only be bought at the markets. Due to budget restrictions and location, these are sometimes in short supply. During the rainy season, there has also been a problem with the main water supply and well. In response, a dug out has been created to ensure that the college is supplied with the necessary water to ensure proper hygiene and cooking needs.

However, the biggest challenge the school faces is the need to respond to the large growth in the student population. Although it is increasingly difficult to support the growing number of students, it is even more difficult to deny any student the opportunity of a higher education. This means a shortage of teachers and a shortage of course materials, pens, and pencils and other school supplies. There is also a general shortage of books or an adequate library

and internet access for students to conduct research or expand their own knowledge or for teachers to use as teaching resources. Increased donor support could help solve some of these problems.

A very bright light this year at the college has been its success in starting a soccer team for the boys. They have played in several exciting matches at Mae La Refugee Camp and with neighboring village teams which have drawn out all the college students to come and cheer for their team very loudly and with much enthusiasm. It has been a source of pride and community spirit and a break from everyday routine. Recently, the girls have also been trying to start a volleyball team (there are already 20 or more students signed up). They want the same chance as the boys to be engaged in sports or in extracurricular activities. Needed soon: four or five volleyballs for their practices!

The college makes the absolute most of what little resources it has and whatever the problems, there is a beautiful the sense of family at this school which makes it so special; everything is shared equally between everyone and everyone is made to feel like this is their home away from home – even a complete stranger – for the college has made me feel completely welcome, cared for me as if I had been there forever, and given me so much despite having so little.

Viewpoints from Volunteers in Thailand...

The Story of a Boy Welder and a Dream of Education for All

An excerpt from a recent article by Kathleen Mulawka
Project Volunteer in Mae Sot

Every day biking to school, I see children. Many are on their way to school, but many are on their way to work or are already working. Early mornings and late evenings make a long hard day of work; but what is the alternative? That is the problem: these young Burmese kids are living a reality that means they do not have another choice...

While I bike to and from my school, there are faces I recognize and pass on a regular basis. I don't ever stop, but every day I catch a glimpse of one particular child's face – or half of his face at least. He is perhaps 12 years old and works fusing pieces of metal together. If you've ever seen a welder at work, you may have noticed the masks they wear to protect their eyes; you may have noticed the thick coveralls they wear to protect their skin, and the heavy boots that cover their feet – steel toed and strong. This boy is crouched down wearing athletic shorts and mismatched flip flops. He holds a piece of glass over his face with one hand and the blinding blue flame in the other hand and focuses his eyes on the work before him.

I don't know this boy's name, where he is from or how old he is, but I know he is a child – with a small frame, soft face and fingers that barely fit around the handle of the blow torch. Each day that I pass this shop, I want to stop and steal this child from this blinding flame and remove the apparent protective scrap of glass. The work he does is blinding him from seeing all that he is being robbed of as a child: his freedom to run and play, fall and scrape his knees, his right to sleep in on Sundays and enjoy the morning sun, his right to an education or at least to safe working conditions.

In Canada, children dread the alarm that rings and wakes them from sleeping in late. Kids struggle to get out of bed, complain about their bowl of frosted flakes and intentionally miss the school bus to get a day off to watch the latest episode of *Gossip Girl* or

Family Guy. Where I am now, children and their parents are racing to get that one last space available at a migrant school. New families come to Mae Sot every single day. Although many come with nothing but backpacks, they always seem to make an education the very first priority. Unfortunately, there do not seem to be enough schools with enough funding for these people. Thus for many unlucky families, who have escaped into Thailand, there seems to be no other option but to bring their children with them to do unforgiving work – the harsh reality of daily life for an illegal migrant worker.



Kathleen with students

At night when I close my eyes, my thoughts race through my head a thousand miles a minute. Eventually I tire, I drift, I sleep, I dream. Some say dreaming is a person's subconscious at work – a way to help resolve unresolved issues. But in the daylight, in our conscious life, we can dream in a different way. A dream can be a journey engraved in our hearts that we follow in the hope of finding happiness, relief or self-completion. A dream is motivation and strength to encourage perseverance in the most unpromising and desperate situations. A dream will shine light into the deepest darkest corners and give hope and faith that the impossible is actually possible.

I have a recurring dream of a world where those who *are* able to *express* their rights will understand their responsibilities and work to fight for rest of the global population whose rights have been forgotten. It is a dream for parents forced to sell their children in hopes of making a little cash to eat; for the little girl thrown into the sex industry with no education or access to an alternative way; for workers without unions who get shown the door if they ask for a raise; for the families whose communities have been burned to the ground; for the populations suffering famine while their politicians raise taxes; for a 12 year old boy with a small frame and soft face, holding a piece of glass to shield his eyes from the blinding blue light.

My dream is that one day, education will no longer be just a dream for the millions of children across the globe who have no access to it, 60% being young girls. One person with a dream might not make a difference. But with a hopeful and dream-invested global community, there is potential to do much more, and those of us privileged enough to have mandatory schooling have a responsibility to unite and ensure that this dream of receiving an education, stolen from millions of children, is awakened each time a child opens his/her eyes. This battle can be won if enough people are willing to dream.

Other news from Thailand....

The months since our volunteers arrived in Thailand have been full of demanding challenges and opportunities to learn.

School Politics

The development of friction within the Burmese educational community regarding the management of funding from foreign NGOs has provided an unusual kind of learning opportunity for

our volunteers. As the number of migrant schools has grown, administration and relationships with major donors have become more complicated. Our volunteers have had the opportunity to observe from a distance the efforts within the Burmese community to ensure fairness and transparency in distribution of funds. As in our own corner of the world, these efforts entail disagreements and negotiation between people and groups with different priorities. As a result of these conflicts, in June, the Burmese Migrant Workers Education Committee (BMWEC) broke into two organizations, each of which is trying to receive and manage funding for a group of schools in its own way. The story of how this reorganization will evolve is unfinished. The ET-MSEP has ties to schools in both groups and has avoided entanglement in this situation by making our donations (roughly \$2000 CAD to each of six school partners) directly to our partners rather than to either of the emergent new bodies. Hopefully, the ways in which funding is given will not disempower the Burmese people, who already suffer from victimization by forces beyond their control and bear a heavy burden of unavoidable dependence on foreigners.

Enough illness!

The biggest challenge for our project this year has been illness. Two of our volunteers have endured episodes of illness that required hospitalization. One, Natasha Long, was seriously ill and is still recovering. Although we all know that the project entails such risks, needless to say, these episodes have been unsettling. On the positive side, from them, the volunteers have learned the importance of teamwork and support for each other, reconfirming in the project committee's view, the importance of our philosophy that we do not simply select and "ship off" individual volunteers but rather that we work to create and prepare a *team* over a period of months before departure. Although we hope not to repeat these episodes in the coming months, we are extremely proud of the way in which our volunteers have managed these two situations. At the same time, realizing that Natasha will not be strong enough to manage the more challenging environment at the College for some time, we have had to "shift gears" and are presently making plans for her to spend her last three months in Thailand volunteering in a post-secondary school project in Mae Sot. We especially regret that this change will make it difficult for us to offer the kind of assistance we would like to offer to Kaw Tha Blay during the fall. We are trying to approach this situation creatively and hope that Natasha will be able to continue assisting Kaw Tha Blay students during their visits to Mae Sot and hopefully through use of skype.

Former Volunteers return to the Border

The allure of the vibrant Burmese community on the Thai-Burmese border, the friendships forged over time and the desire to assist this displaced community continue to draw our former volunteers back to Mae Sot. This summer, Skylar Lepoidevin (now a member of the Project Committee) spent three months volunteering for The Curriculum Project, an organization that develops teaching materials for migrant schools. Skylar also had the opportunity to engage in some teacher training at a number of the refugee camps in the region. Another ex-volunteer from the first year of our project, Nisha Toomey, is also returning to Mae Sot this fall for a year to assist the Youth Connect Project there in development of entrepreneurship and training activities for Burmese youth. Dugal Monk and Kristyne Houbraken, volunteers from 2008, have also maintained close relationships with our partners and continue to go back to Mae Sot for more.

A last bit of news...ET-MSEP joins the CNC

As we informed our readers in our Winter 2011 newsletter, the ET-MSEP is now a member of the Canadian NGO Committee on Burma (CNC). Superficially, the situation in Burma changed in November 2010. The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the military junta that has ruled the country for the last decades, ceased to exist formally. A so-called parliamentary government was ushered in with the ex-military ruler Than Shwe (now in civilian clothes) at the helm. The military retains decisive power in this parliament. Opposition groups are excluded from genuine participation and opposition leaders continue to endure life threatening prison conditions. As a member of the CNC, we are eager to encourage our politicians to be informed about and proactive in fostering the development of genuine democracy in Burma. We hope that they will also support Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's demands for release of the 2200 political prisoners in Burma as a condition for lifting economic sanctions directed at the country's rulers. Finally, we are eager for opportunities to do outreach, to inform the general public regarding the situation in Burma. Please let us know if your organization would like a speaker on this subject!

Who we ate 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. Project volunteers this year include: Barbara Cvenic, Megan Irving, Anne-Marie Laverdure, Natasha Long, and Kathleen Mulawka. 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.

How do we spend our funds?

