

The Eastern Townships – Mae Sot Education Project

Canadians working for Burmese Migrant Children in Thailand
A Newsletter to our Supporters – Late Summer 2010

ET-MSEP begins its 7th year of assistance to Burmese Migrant Schools

On June 14th our seventh team of four students headed for Mae Sot to provide a variety of forms of assistance in six Burmese migrant schools and one college project. The college project is funded by the Canadian NGO, Project Umbrella Burma (www.projectumbrellaburma.com). PUB also funds a hostel for unaccompanied youth in Mae La Refugee Camp. The college, Kaw Tha Blay, offers a post-secondary program for Karen youth and is dedicated to building leadership for the people of Karen State in Burma.

During the spring, when Bangkok was troubled by civil unrest, we worried that the project might have to be cancelled this year. Regretfully but understandably, because of this unrest, one of our five volunteers withdrew. However, we did our homework and received many reassurances from PUB friends and others in Thailand who are managing various projects in spite of the political uncertainty there. In the process, we connected with the *Imagine Thailand* (www.imaginthailand.org) team in Mae Sot. This Canadian NGO has provided safe, clean drinking water to a number of migrant schools. We are very happy to be able to collaborate

with other Canadian projects along the border in Thailand such as PUB and *Imagine Thailand*. With the reassurances from these very well placed experts and after some soul-searching by both our volunteers and our committee, we felt that we could carry on.



Volunteers enjoy their first day in Mae Sot

Who are we?

The ET-MSEP Project Committee is made up of: Avril Aitken, Carinne Bevan, Emily Evans, Lissa McRae, Anabel Pinero, Mary Purkey, Garry Retzleff, Marjorie Retzleff and Barbara Rowell.

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> or contact Mary Purkey at marypurkey@gmail.com.

Sad news for us: Our Treasurer Derek is resigning from the Project Committee



Many of you will remember Derek Heatherington as the animated, though occasionally flustered, auctioneer at our two art auctions. What you may not know is that he has, for a number of years, managed the unglamorous work of balancing our accounts, making up our annual budget, transferring money for school donations and volunteer allowances, keeping an eye on the two foundations so that we do not miss donations or fail to thank donors...and more. Like so many people who take on this kind of volunteer work, Derek has been involved in more than one volunteer activity and [given his teaching load of five large classes] has found that he needs a break. We are deeply grateful to Derek for all of his contributions and hope that he will consider becoming involved again at some point in the future. In the meantime, we are recruiting a financial officer! So if any of you with such talents would like to join our team, please contact us.

Note: Thanks to a substantial donation from an anonymous donor, this year we will be able to contribute \$2000 to each of our partner schools in comparison to \$1000 in previous years!

Two vignettes of life at BHSOH during July by Christine Morris, Volunteer

Part I: HAPPY CANADA DAY, TEACHER!

HAPPY CANADA DAY!!! I had SO much fun teaching today. I was SO proud of my lesson plans. Get a load of this: for my math classes, I taught them about Canadian currency, how it compares to their currency (the baht), what the difference between dollar and cent is (because they don't really have cents here) which of course is a lesson in fractions. (THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT I'VE BEEN TRYING TO TEACH THEM!!! :). I got to go over the names of the coins, why they have those



Grade 9 students working on the puzzle

names, why they have the queen on the back and why they have the pictures of animals and sailboats etc. on the fronts. It was an amazing English lesson, a perfect math lesson, and TOTALLY in tune with Canada day celebrations!! Plus, I had brought Canadian coins with me for the lesson that they got to keep which they all thought was SOO cool.

For the English classes I had a Canada themed word search handout prepared that the kids LOVED with relevant and useful vocabulary and a 100 piece puzzle of the map of Canada for kids to alternate turns with. Of course, I also brought the Canadian flag with me to hang up during the class. When they finished their handouts, I had Canada day stickers to give out, which they all put on their cell phones or workbooks to show off. For students in my GED (the American high school leaving diploma) preparatory class I had rub-on tattoos which they really liked too. Each student in my English classes also got a Canada pencil. I gave the leftovers to some of the teachers and the principal, and they all thought it was great! The principal even said that had I told him in advance that it was Canada day we could've done a nice ceremony in the morning. Too bad I didn't think of it!

One other thing made this day WONDERFUL too: When we first got to the house, I noticed that the "night table" in my room was held up by math and science text books. My heart broke. Apparently since no one in the house had ever taught math or science, this was the only conceivable use of these books to any of the former residents... until today! I've been using one of the text books to teach my math classes, but today Adrian biked to the school with me and brought all the math and science text books to BHSOH for the students to use and keep. You should have seen them at lunch time. Kids of all ages just tearing through the pages to look for words they knew or try to understand as much as they could. They were so thirsty for knowledge; they were asking questions and were so happy. The teachers were ecstatic to have more text books to teach from – though they seemed a bit ashamed or unhappy to find out that our Canadian grade 7 curriculum compares to their grade 9, 10 and GED. I am going to do my best to find higher level materials to help them go further. For now, it was just so nice to see the books put to use RIGHT AWAY! All in all, I had an amazing Canada day!



A burned child – a bad day at BHSOH

Part II: A WEEK OF UNSETTLING EXPERIENCES

Some unfortunate events unfolded at BHSOH this week. On Tuesday the kitchen/eating area, situated right beside my classroom on the upper level of a traditional Thai house, completely collapsed with students standing underneath. A big tub of hot curry spilled leaving some students with 1st,

2nd and 3rd degree burns on their legs, arms, backs, shoulders and, in one case, face. No one broke any bones, but along with the burns, there were sprains and bruises, leaving over 20 students severely injured. A roof had fallen in last week as well, an accident on a much smaller scale, as its sole purpose was to provide someshade – and thus a bit of comfort – and no one had been injured. Having already been in a financial crisis before the latest catastrophe, the school is struggling with how to go about administering hospital funds and medical funds. Fortunately, repairs started the next day and the kitchen was quickly reconstructed by the landlord.

Hearing about this accident only added to other stresses existing at the school. Monday was a special day called Martyr's day, so in honour of this, the school played a video on Aung San and his assassination I was surprised that such young children would be exposed to such violence and conscious of being in a different culture, a much less sheltered culture in many ways. The Martyr's Day celebration led to another interesting learning experience for me: One of the things that I've learned while being here is that my students come from very different places and within Burma. Some are Burman, some Mon, some Arakanese, some Karen. These different ethnic groups speak separate languages and have their own sets of resentments. So, while watching this movie on Aung San, one of my students started explaining to me why he hates Aung San so much. It's



The collapsed kitchen at BHSOH

because the Arakanese people hate the Burmese people. All Burmese people. He hates Aung San Suu Kyi and does not wish her to be their leader – even though she's been under house arrest for 20 years fighting for democracy for ALL of Burma. He was upset because she had never visited Arakan state and knows nothing about his people.

This started an argument between him and another student who is Burman. She expressed her discontent with Burmese military and past events and insisted that she holds no resentment or hatred on a personal level with any Arakanese people. Sadly, these students have figured out how to be in the same room together, learning, while evidently maintaining their hatred for each other and showing it with frequent rude comments. How upsetting it was to see that students, who for the most part all wish to be free and have common goals, should feel hatred for each other. Obviously, I wasn't expecting all smiles and sunshine here. I understand, if only on a very superficial level (for now anyway), what is going on in Burma and what the students have gone through; I just wasn't expecting hatred that has been passed down from previous generations in my own classroom. It seems like such a waste.

Beyond these unfortunate experiences, daily life goes on....Every now and then I chuckle to myself as I see

someone on a motor bike holding on with one hand and hanging on to a live chicken in the other; or a family on a motorcycle with dad driving and mom in the back holding their baby with one hand, sometimes in the basket. Just some things that we would never see in Canada. I almost hit a goat the other day biking to school. It's usual to almost hit a cat or dog because they're all over and are pretty slow, but there were a bunch of goats blocking my way on Tuesday and they decided to dart out in front of me as I biked by. I didn't hit any. I was careful. I just thought it was funny. I was also almost bit by a snake the other day biking as well. It arched its neck as I biked by and went for the ankle, but I swerved away and avoided running it over. Entire events happen just in my bike ride to school most days. It's quite funny actually.

Recent Project Fundraising Activities



Along with our usual methods of solicitation, this year, in April, ET-MSEP hosted a Thai dinner, made possible by the generosity of chef and caterer Veronica Kaczmarowski [see www.artdelanutrition.com for more...] who donated her extraordinary talents and the Oasis Christian Church which donated a beautiful space. Eighty

enthusiastic diners attended at \$40 a plate, and the dinner and a mini-auction of several Burmese paintings combined netted \$4000. If you missed this dinner, keep an eye out for next year's!

Then in June we held our second live auction of art at Margot Heyerhoff's Gillygooley Gallery in North Hatley. Margot not only contributed her beautiful space but also framed many of the paintings and mounted the exhibit for us. Sixteen Canadian artists and one writer contributed their works (along with fifteen Burmese artists). The auction was held on a very busy weekend filled with numerous competing events; thus the turnout was somewhat less than hoped for. However, the bucolic setting and spectacular early summer blue skies were magical, and the bidders were spirited. With the generosity of both artists and bidders and thanks to Margot's expertise and



Margot Heyerhoff with some of our auction crew



An auctioned painting by Saw Wi Htun

guidance, we took in \$9000. Watch for the next live auction in summer 2012, and if we missed you, please let us know if you would like to receive an invitation.

Along with these events, we have continued to peddle wares (including beautiful scarves and goods made by refugee women) from the border and to seek donations from supporters who understand the value of this small project. In contrast to large NGOs, we are able to funnel youth volunteer and material assistance to a very needy population with almost no administrative costs (apart from stationary), thanks to our community's support, the in-kind contributions of Bishop's University and Champlain College, as well as the dedication of our project committee and volunteers.

A special thanks to all the Canadian artists who donated their work to our art auction this year:

Ophra Benazon, Joyce Schweitzer Cochrane, Sara Peck Colby, Paula Curphey, Lucinda Doheny, Lisa Driver, Mary Martha Guy, Carolyn Honey Harrison, Randi Heatherington, Margot Graham Heyerhoff, Carolyn Jones, Janna Kendall (for her book) Patricia Lemieux, Stuart Main, Jessica Masters, Barbara Matthews, Denis Palmer, and Donnie Rittenhouse.

Developments in our Partner Schools

Each year brings changes to the situations of migrant schools in Mae Sot. During the last year, Parami School has moved to a new "campus" where it has built a number of new buildings with help from donors such as ET-MSEP. Last year saw the construction of classrooms and a special cottage for volunteers who wish to stay at the school. During the last months, Felipe has had a chance to help construct a new dining hall. He is also involved in a gardening



project that will hopefully provide vegetables for the children at Parami. During the last weeks the school has begun to look at the possibility of raising pigs and Felipe has proposed that we provide piglets for this project.

At BHSOH, a new campus that will provide more secure dorms for the boarding students is also in the works. Unfortunately, it is located several kms further from Mae Sot than the current school location. Thus we will need to consider possibilities for transportation for volunteers assisting this school in the coming months.

Other schools, including our new partner Kaw Tha Blay College, are continuing to develop as children grow up and need more complex courses. Among the many needs expressed by schools are scientific calculators, Math Compasses, Logarithmic Books, musical instruments, guitars

and supplies for life: mosquito nets, rice cookers, seeds and other supplies for new garden projects, water filters, money for school transportation and for buildings...the list goes on.

About 2/3rds of the world's 12 million refugees live in protracted refugee situations in which thousands of people have been stuck in limbo, with no end in sight, for more than 5 and often as many as 20 years! They suffer from poverty, disempowerment with all the attendant psychological problems, donor fatigue as donors move on to new "emergencies", and often statelessness as well.

The Burmese in Thailand: An example of a Protracted Refugee Situation (PRS) By Mary Purkey

In the world today, there are more than 30 situations in which people who have fled persecution have been stuck in limbo *for years*, sometimes decades, with no end in sight. They subsist either in isolated and often desolate camps where only crude necessities of life (rice, flour, oil) are provided or in urban settings where they have more chances of eeking out a living but where they are also more vulnerable to deportation – or refoulement back to their home countries to face further human rights abuses. Such is the situation of the Burmese in Thailand. This fall the government of Myanmar/Burma hopes to entrench its rule more deeply by holding sham elections for a sham parliament in which the military will hold the lion's share of power. It says that it is "on the road to democracy" but international NGOs such as Amnesty International, as well as the United Nations itself, have challenged the validity of these elections. Especially as the Karen ethnic minority is pushed against the Thai-Burmese border and political activists continue to suffer from harsh and long prison sentences, the prospects of going home in security for the Burmese who have fled military rule are very grim indeed.

About 150,000 of these people live in the seven refugee camps that dot the Thai-Burmese border. Another 1.5-2 million exist as urban refugees, or "illegal migrants" (the line between these categories blurs in Thailand). Mae Sot is one Thai city where many of these people have found a tentative kind of asylum. Not only is it home to dozens of ex-political prisoners from Myanmar/Burma who live in constant fear of deportation, but it is home to thousands of ordinary people seeking work and a more dignified existence than is possible in their own country. Among them are enough children to fill the approximately 62 migrant schools in the Mae Sot area. Education is one of the greatest and most compelling needs in all protracted refugee situations. Refugees know that their children's lives have a chance of improving *only* if they have access to education. In Thailand, refugees living in camps receive basic education through the help of international NGOs. Outside the camps, in towns such as Mae Sot, education is an acknowledged theoretical right for all children, but education for migrant children is not guaranteed or funded by the Thai government. Poor

Burmese children who do not speak Thai and who lack legal documents and money for school fees are not able to claim this right. Our project seeks to help these children realize the fundamental right to education.

For more background on this subject, take a look at the 2009 VSO report: *Migrant schools: a human rights perspective – Inclusive education for Burmese migrants on the Thailand/ Burma border*

http://www.vsointernational.org/Images/migrant-schools-a-human-rights-perspective_tcm76-23048.pdf.

More from our volunteers.....

BUILDING MEMORIES TO LIVE BY

By Adrian Downey, Volunteer
August

My memories of Thailand will not be of the beautiful mountains or the crazy motor cycle adventures through the jungle, but the tests of moral character that are present in every passing second.

I will remember vividly the night market children who wait while we eat with their hands outstretched looking for a baht or two. Their eyes scream "teach me to fish," but these are the children we can't teach to fish; they are needed by their parents, or they don't have parents and need to fend for themselves, so we give them fish for a night and let them eat and enjoy in hopes that someday their families can afford to send them to school.

I will remember being outside an expensive western-style bar, listening to Burmese migrant workers play music, and hearing the sharp scream of a woman falling under attack. I can't explain what came over me, but when I heard that



woman's cry, and when I saw that man strike her, I was ready for war. Felipe was there to talk sense into me and calm me down, but if he had not, I'm sure I would remember that night for different reasons.

Adrian's Kaw Tha Blay students studying hard Most of all I will remember my students, who are with me now as I write this, peering over my shoulder talking in Karen and laughing. I would do anything for them, and sometimes that is a problem. As westerners, we have a tendency to love too tightly, and that is a tendency which can cause problems with the locals. You see, before they were my students, they were people; they lived, felt dawn and saw sunset glow, and faced tragedy all in the same breath. They have cultural identities, complete with benefits such as unbridled and uncompromising kindness and vices such as their love for the drink and shyness (which I've done my best to dispose of in my classroom with varying levels of success). Even though I love my students like brothers, sisters and friends, I realize that there are certain things I cannot help them with.

For example, I've never spoken out against the practice of chewing betel nut, even though it is obviously toxic and destructive, and it pains me to watch such beautiful women taint their glorious smiles. When the principal told me it is against the rules, I said fine, I will enforce the rule on campus, but when I see a student at the store chewing betel nut, how can I stop him? Wouldn't there be hell if the teachers at Bishop's or Champlain



Adrian hard at work

went around slapping the Tim Horton's mugs out of the student's hands? I want to see my students succeed, and they are doing so in their own right; they don't need my beliefs and cultural bad habits changing who they are for the worse.

That is the biggest test of moral character I face; for the first time in my life I am being looked up to, not as a student, but as a teacher, and these Karen students see their teachers differently than we do in the west. For the Karen the teacher can do no wrong; the teacher is a model of perfection. A model of Perfection, that's funny, I'm about as far from perfection as possible, but to them I seen flawless. So the test is, can live up to that expectation. Can I, a third year university student with a list of bad habits a mile long, be a good role model for students my own age? Well I haven't got much of a choice now, do I? So I'm changing; trying to become the change I want to see, growing up, and those changes I will remember and live with forever, like it or not.

Listening to the voices

By Felipe Betancourt, Volunteer

As I lay down in my friends hut located at Parami migrant school, I realized how lucky we, as Canadian citizens, are to be living in a fair and developed country. I am surrounded by people who have suffered so much, due to the injustice of inequality, that they were forced to flee their homes for good.

As I read my friend's writings, I read the thoughts of an illegal Burmese migrant living under Thai rules with little freedom and without citizenship. Every single word breaks my heart into a thousand pieces. My eyes water and my heart aches for the way this world is unfairly organized; the way it is unbalanced for the people living under dark clouds where even their existence can go unnoticed. Just imagine a life where you live in an undeclared prison because an undeclared war is happening in your homeland, and your human rights are barely taken into account in either place.

As my friend contemplates his situation in an attempt to find a better way to live, his thoughts and feelings hold this pain: *"Please, let me go home because I cannot stay here*

alone. I have no friends. Could you live trapped alone, as I live in this world? When I was in my beautiful village, I saw many Karen people who got in trouble because of SPDC Burmese Soldiers punishing people unjustly. The villagers had gardens enough for our community to flourish; we had enough food for our daily living. But now we are war refugees because the SPDC destroyed our villages. Now the only things we have left are broken homes, broken families. Now we are struggling because we do not have a home, we do not have a unified family. Everything is broken now, we have been violently assaulted, and we are hopelessly alone in the struggle. My people need my love, my help, should I ignore them as well?"

A local Burmese leader helped me to consider this: *"Well, you know, Burmese people are always struggling for their lives, wants, dreams and for a fair life. We have to fight and be strong, we cannot allow fear to enter into our minds, ourselves and be repressed by the injustices towards our country, our people and our land. We have to stay awake and be strong until we can someday go back to our homeland and accomplish our deserved freedom after so many years in the struggle."*

Listening to these voices, being involved with the Burmese community, has encouraged me to work with others and continue building a better world, however possible.

One more vignette by Christine Morris....

THAILAND – THE LAND OF SMILES AND LENDING HANDS

This is the true Thailand experience: Yesterday, I had a bunch of books to bring to BHSOH from the project and a bunch of candy and clothes for students from last year's volunteer, Skylar. The added 50 pounds weight in books on my back and in my basket made the 6k trek to school a bit tougher than normal. Then, to add to this difficulty AND the sun beaming down hard on my skin, I got a flat tire. About 2 or 3k along, I had to stop at a red light so I checked the tire-yep, pretty flat. I still had 3 or 4 more kilometers... I sighed and pushed on. All of a sudden, a woman in a truck stopped beside me and asked where I was going. I told her, and she said, "You want help? I take you in my truck!" and before I could say anything, she was out of the truck helping me with all my bags and books and lifting the bike into the back of her truck. Inside, she blasted the AC and we had a wonderful conversation. She's got family in Canada, she's good friends with our landlord here, she owns a restaurant near our house that she'd like me to come visit (if I can find it.. I don't remember her name or the name of the restaurant). I asked her to stop by the house whenever she could. It was one of the nicest things anyone's ever done for me...a stranger.

School went just as well. I had photocopies of two somewhat abstract pictures that I asked the students to write a story about. After, I had them pass their stories around for peer correcting. In my opinion, it is an excellent way to assess the students' levels, see if they can pick up mistakes and what level of imagination they can express in English. It worked really well and also gave my voice a break. I got to

sit and observe... I never get to sit and observe! I felt like i was cheating a bit, but hey, they were learning and enjoying and we were all moving forward! Then on my way home, I couldn't find the place on the highway to pump up my tire, so a man walked about a kilometer with me to the garage. He pumped up my bike and refused to take any compensation from me. People were very helpful and giving yesterday (And always, I assume!). Overall, it was an extremely good day.

Reflections on being there – and staying long enough to make a difference

By Emily Murray, Volunteer

Mae Sot is no stranger to strangers. In the short time that we've been here, I've briefly met and said good bye to a dozen volunteers who were here for between three weeks and two months. They were all lovely people, but they are gone now, and soon I will have forgotten their names. I wonder if they remember those of their students. I know that

their students will remember them though and know that they cared, and this is of paramount importance.

The headmasters, teachers and students at our schools express their gratitude for our help every day. They also tell us how wonderful it is that we are staying for six months. Our students try so hard, and their families make heavy sacrifices for them to be in school. I have friends back home who still think that our time here is too long, who wonder why I could not also stay for but a month or two. The longer I am here, the more I understand that anything short of six months is certainly not long *enough*. It has taken me the entirety of the past two months to establish a foundation for my lessons, and to develop a bond of trust with my classes.

I've yet to memorize all eighty-five of my student's names. To be fair, Burmese names are at times oddly similar, and extremely difficult to pronounce. I'm working on it. In any case, I'm glad I have four months left to make the difference that I came here to make.

**To Bishop's University and Champlain College – Lennoxville Students:
If you want to work for social justice, are interested in international
volunteer work with youth...and want a life- changing experience,**



**apply to participate in the
*Eastern Townships – Mae Sot Education Project (ET- MSEP).***

**Note: Two information sessions by former volunteers will take place on campus
during September and October.**

Watch for announcements of times and locations!

Application deadline: December 10, 2010

**For application forms see
Avril Aitken (Bishop's) or Anabel Pinero (Champlain) or go to
<http://www.ubishops.ca/maesot/volunteer.html>.**

Send us your email address if you would like to receive our newsletter electronically twice a year. You will also find our newsletters posted on our web page in the Bishop's University website: <http://www.ubishops.ca/maesot>.