



Our new logo!

The Mae Sot Education Project

Canadians working for Burmese Migrant Children in Thailand

A Newsletter to our Supporters – Winter-Spring 2012

Check us out at <http://www.ubishops.ca/maesot/>



From left to right back: Samantha Silva, Alexandra Marcotte, Alexis Chouan, and from left to right front: Meaghan Moniz, Michelle Frise and Gabriella Brault-Fortier.

A new team of volunteers prepares to go to Mae Sot

This year, MSEP will be sending six volunteers to Thailand instead of the usual four or five. We were so impressed by each of these applicants that we found it difficult to exclude any of them. Obviously, more volunteers means more fundraising. However, it also means greater capacity to assist our partners. Another important development in the preparation of volunteers this winter is that they are all following a Faculty of Education course at Bishop's taught by Project Committee member Sunny Lau. The course, entitled *Teaching Second Language learners*, should provide our volunteers with a stronger foundation than we have been able to offer in past years.

UPCOMING FUNDRAISING & OUTREACH EVENTS

April 28th: Join us for another of Veronica's scrumptious Thai dinners!

Those of you who have enjoyed our Thai Dinner over the last two years will be pleased to know that another (our 3rd) is scheduled for Saturday, April 28th. The menu and tickets will be forthcoming soon. As in the past, the dinner costs \$50 per person of which \$30 is a donation to the project for which a tax receipt will be given. Please don't miss out on what will be a delightful evening and a culinary experience, prepared once again by local chef, Veronica Kaczmarowski. Tickets will be available from Project Committee members and volunteers. This year, the dinner will also include a "book launch" featuring a display of children's art from the project initiated by Anne-Marie Laverdure last year (See article in next column).

June 2nd: Everyone is invited to our 3rd live auction of art from two borders (Thai-Burma and Townships)

The Project will also hold its third live art auction on Saturday, June 2nd at Gillygooly Gallery in North Hatley, thanks once again to the support of gallery owner Margot Graham Heyerhoff. We are currently soliciting art works from artists based in the Townships and will also feature works by Burmese artists from the Thai-Burmese border. We hope that all of you who have followed our activities will not only attend but will pass the word to other art lovers who might enjoy this event.

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.

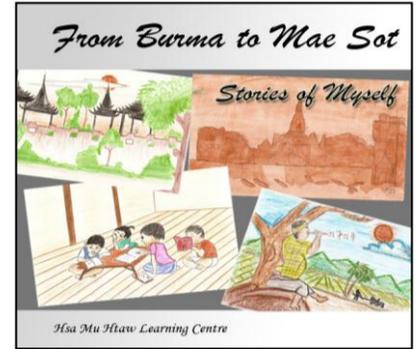
From Burma to Mae Sot – Stories of Myself

A unique art project by Burmese children...

...reaching out to Canadians

While in Mae Sot this year, one MSEP volunteer, Anne-Marie Laverdure, initiated a project at Hsa Mu Htao Learning Centre – the creation of a beautiful book of children's art and commentaries. With considerable effort on the part of Anne-Marie and a small team on our Project Committee and thanks to funding provided by the Canadian NGO Committee on Burma, a CIDA-funded program focusing on outreach and support for Burma in Canada, the project has reached fruition. The book is actually in print! We believe that it will not only provide a voice for migrant children; it will also carry important messages about the value of culture and education in building civil society in Burma. Our plan is to use the book for public education both in the

Eastern Townships and elsewhere in North America. We will "launch" it at our Thai dinner by showing the originals of the children's art work. If you would like to have Anne-Marie do a presentation on this project to members of your community, please contact us.



What about the news from Burma?

If you have followed developments in Burma over the last year, you will know that in January, several hundred very important political prisoners were released and the Karen in eastern Burma agreed to a cease fire with the army to allow for peace talks to begin. Media censorship also seems to be lifting. Thus for the first time in decades, we can see some signs in new government policies that the oppressive situation in the country may be changing for the better. You may be wondering how these developments affect our project.

Many in the world are eager to see an end to the economic sanctions and political isolation that military dictatorship has effectively created. Both humanitarian aid and development organizations and foreign investors see opportunities in Burma, in some cases out of a desire to help and in some cases for self-serving reasons. However, in a recent live video conference at Carlton University, hosted by Canadian Friends of Burma, democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi reaffirmed that the sanctions and isolation have succeeded in putting pressure on this repressive regime in recent years and that it is too soon to assume that "democracy has broken out". She, other democracy activists and those leading the struggles of the ethnic peoples of Burma, along with international human rights organizations, have made it clear that the ordinary people of Burma, including those displaced to neighbouring countries, have yet to feel the impact of new government overtures. Indeed, although the government is nominally civilian, the military continues to dominate behind the scenes and more overtly in ethnic regions.

Recognizing the instability of the situation in their country and uncertain of its future, the people displaced from Burma, including our partners in Mae Sot, continue to face insecurity and hardship in Thailand. Thus continued advocacy and support for the Burmese people, both within Burma and along the borders, remain imperative.

Other News

Coming soon: Project Evaluation Report

Over the last months, we have begun surveying our partners (both here in Canada and abroad), our longstanding donors, committee members and alumni volunteers regarding our project.

We are now beginning to digest all the thoughtful comments many of you have given us and should soon have a summary report that will hopefully guide us in the coming years. If *you* missed out on this process and would like to offer your reflections or be part of this project evaluation, it is not too late. Contact Mary Purkey at marypurkey@gmail.com.

Committee member Skylar heads back to Thailand to teach for World Education

Former volunteer and current member of the Project Committee, Skylar Lepoidevin, has just been hired by World Education to teach the English Immersion Program (EIP), a leadership training program for young adults at Umphium Mai Refugee Camp. He is the third MSEP volunteer to go from being an unpaid student volunteer for us to a full-fledged teacher at Umphium. Needless to say, we are extremely proud of Skylar's accomplishments and gratified that he has chosen to continue to engage with Burmese youth in their search for higher educational opportunities. We expect him to send news from the border during the coming year.

On leaving Thailand and coming home...

By Barbara Cvenic – 2011 Volunteer

The return to "normal" student life is sometimes painful for volunteers. Our 2011 team has now returned to North America, although one, Megan Irving, has stayed on to continue working in two schools through the end of March. What follows here are the reflections of one of our volunteers, Barbara, written as she wrapped up a blog she kept throughout her time in Thailand.



Barbara with headmistress Tha Zin

every day, but I have to learn how to take all the joy and optimism those kids filled me with while I was over there and keep it going, spreading the light, just like they taught me to do. So I thought I'd share this story instead.

As I was waiting in the airport in Bangkok for my flight back home, I walked into a shop to buy a magazine. My eyes trailed across the racks trying to spot the National Geographic I was looking for when suddenly, there was Aung San Suu Kyi staring me down. I was taken aback for a second before reaching out and taking the Time Magazine from the shelf, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's unblinking face on the cover, the title "Brave New Burma" tucked under her ear like a lock of hair. I started to laugh as I headed for the register, hardly able to believe this coincidence. It felt like just the nudge I needed.

I had left Mae Sot in a flurry, hurrying my goodbyes because I couldn't bear to prolong them, couldn't linger in doorways or hold on to embraces. I knew I would never be able to leave if I did. And so I left Mae Sot the same way I came in, like a tornado, half smiling, half crying, cracking jokes and dancing my way out of rooms that I could only hope I'd see again soon. It was the hardest thing I'd had to do... Why did I have to leave this place which had brought me so much joy?

All the goodbyes stung in their own way, and I'm still not over them, probably never will be. But that day at the airport everything felt especially hard. I was still in Thailand, still in Bangkok, even, I could just leave, get on a bus and go back. Make the drive out to BHSOH, pull up and smile and wave at those who had been outside already and saw my arrival. Walk over to the girl's dormitory to drop off my overnight bag, say hello to grandpa and talk about the latest news, have my bucket shower before dinner and then prepare for study hours with Kyaw Min Tun before cuddling up with the girls to go to bed afterward. It was all still possible.

But then Aung San Suu Kyi reminded me of some things. Great changes have been happening in Burma, but it still has a really long way to go, and so do I. Mae Sot, I'm convinced, was never supposed to be a permanent place. At the beginning, many of the people living there didn't think it would be. They thought things would get better and that soon they'd be able to return to their homes because how long could such injustices and cruelties really last?

But they did last, and they're still going on, despite the media's portrayal of the new Burmese government. There are people dying every day in the ethnic states of Burma especially, widespread fighting still going on, rape and forced relocation happening. So while everyone is hopeful that the wheels of change have indeed started to turn, it's not over just yet. The fight for justice and the very most basic rights of humanity is still underway. Burma must continue to fight, and so must I.

No matter how much I wanted to, I couldn't stay in Mae Sot forever. In the end it's not my home because it's not really home to any of the Burmese people I grew to know and love there. It's a place that grew out of necessity, but it's not somewhere I can make my life, at least not yet.

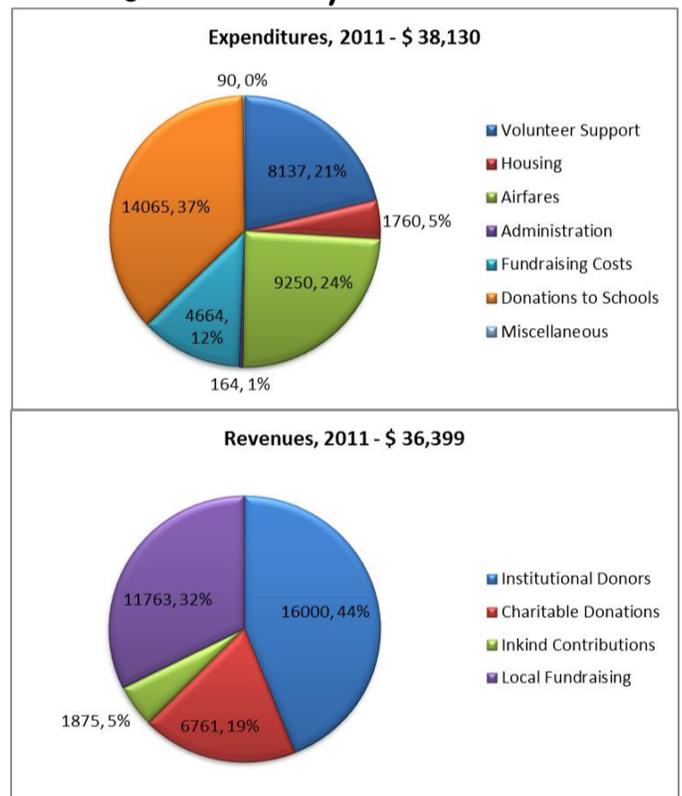
My six months in Mae Sot has changed me in ways I couldn't even imagine. I know that I've come out of this experience a better and more conscious person but also one that has a new drive. I'm certain of what it is I want to do now. And while Mae Sot has helped me grow into this woman I'm becoming, I'm not there yet, and I can't stop until I get there.

The next day, flying home, I saw a rainbow in the clouds somewhere over the frost-tipped mountains of Japan. I thought: what would my kids think if they were able to see this right now? I pulled the Time magazine out of my bag and gave Aung San Suu Kyi a smile before settling into my seat to read.



Barbara & Tha Zin riding "home"

A look at our finances in 2011



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. In recent years we have also 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, members are: Avril Aitken, Ron Bishop, Carinne Bevan, Sunny Lau, Skylar Lepoidevin, Lissa McRae, Anabel Pinero, Mary Purkey, Garry Retzleff, Marjorie Retzleff, and Barbara Rowell.