

The Eastern Townships – Mae Sot Education Project

<http://www.ubishops.ca/maesot>

A newsletter to our supporters – December 2008

Dear Friends,

The Eastern Townships – Mae Sot Education Project is completing its fifth year. Our first newsletter last winter met with an enthusiastic response. So here we are again with some reflections on both our project and the situation unfolding in Burma and along the Thai-Burmese border. Let's start with our project...

Vignettes in the life of the Mae Sot Education Project...

November 2008, Mae Sot: I am sitting on the teak porch of a rustic Thai house that doubles as a school. Its two small rooms, porch and space under the house accommodate more than 100 Burmese migrant children. With me are Pho Cho and Nee Shar, the couple that run this school. Nee Shar is nursing her six-month-old, and Pho Cho is expounding on a new "book" he has written, a social science curriculum for the primary level that is now being circulated among interested teachers in migrant schools in Mae Sot. To my delight, he explains how he matches some of the children's books we have given him to subjects in the curriculum. Using them, he engages the children in discussion of children's rights, environment, community. He talks about how our volunteers have given him a chance to observe new teaching methods. He is one of the few teachers we know here who has embraced the concept of interactive teaching. His book is full of activities that engage children in active learning, and when he asks me if I can send more "teacher training" materials, I tell him that truly, I am not sure we have much to teach him. However, on this visit to Mae Sot, at Pho Cho's request, I brought a copy of the Ontario math curriculum for grades 1 to 10 (along with a stack of lower level math books). We go over its organization and the developmental approach to teaching math taken in Canada and talk about how some of it might be adapted to the teaching situation in the migrant schools.

Thanks to the support of our community and the dedication of our volunteers, our project has flourished this year. Our June 5th Art Auction fundraiser at GillyGooly Art Gallery brought in an astonishing \$10,000, thanks to the generosity of 14 contributing local artists, a host of hopeful bidders and the hard work of gallery owner, Margot Graham Heyerhof. In spite of a falling



Stephanie playing a game with students

The financial support given by bigger NGOs for rent, rice and teachers' salaries inevitably falls short. This year our partners used our donations variously, for curry to supplement the lunch diet of rice, for two computers to assist both teachers and students, for teachers' salaries, for a school trip, for assistance to a family that would have otherwise pulled their precocious child



out of school to work, for teaching materials, etc. One partner has just identified shoes and medical care as two immediate "emergency" needs. We know that in the coming year, one will need money for repairs to its falling-apart building. In addition, as the Thai Ministry of Education wants the schools to use particular Thai texts to teach Thai, money will be needed for them.

Perhaps most important, traveling to Mae Sot this fall, I could see that five years of contributing to these schools have created bonds of friendship and appreciation. Repeatedly school heads told me, when speaking of one of our volunteers, ".....works so hard!" Three of our volunteers this year spent some nights each week sleeping with the students at their schools. All celebrated special events, played sports and "hung out" together with them. These signs of care are deeply meaningful to the children and teachers.

From volunteer Valerie Beaulieu Blanchette – A few days ago, I was looking at my school: the used tables, the lack of furniture and the leaking roof. One man came beside me. "The school looks so good today. You should have seen it last year, it was pitiful," he said. Then I looked at my school with new eyes. There were posters on the walls, flowers on the table, the kids were happy. The money given by foreign countries is so important for all those little changes that are huge for them.

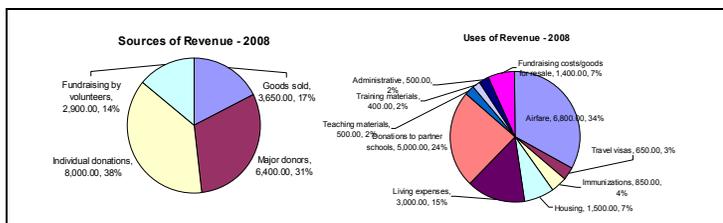
For young Canadians, living and working together in close quarters in an unfamiliar cultural situation requires flexibility, understanding and compromise. Walking my bike through the night market, Mae Sot's destination of choice for cheap delicious food, one evening, I see our volunteers dining together at one of the outdoor tables. All are smiling and laughing. Here they are, at the end of their 5th month in Mae Sot, a group of five very different individuals (including project committee member Barbara Rowell who has joined them for the year) enjoying each other's company. I know that volunteers spend considerable time and energy preparing lessons and trying to figure out how to integrate interesting content, imaginative activities and variety into ESL teaching. I know that the locations of schools require that they bike distances in pouring rain and grueling heat. As I watch them together, I get a glimmer of the personal growth that each has undergone through participation in the project.



Dugal helping his students with classwork

A new problem...

As mentioned in our last newsletter, the children of the "first generation" of migrant school education in Mae Sot are growing up. Many have reached the limits of what schools can offer presently and wonder how their lives will unfold, whether further education will be possible. While in Mae Sot this fall, in addition to doing a workshop for a young adult leadership class at Umpiem refugee camp, I taught human rights "mini-courses" at three schools for "post ten" youth. One school, Min Ma Haw, is dedicated to preparing students to pass the American GED qualifying exam in the hope that it might win them admission to a distance university education program out of Australia. I found myself wondering if Bishop's (or perhaps a group of Canadian universities) could not also offer a distance education for these refugee and migrant youth. Another leadership program, "Wide Horizons", provides a year of leadership training to 24 students who then go on to do internships with local Burmese NGOs. Neither program offers an "escape" from



the situation of statelessness (in some cases) or the lack of identity papers and thus mobility for these youth. Neither is able to provide them with a full-fledged future, but both provide meaningful engagement with ideas, practical skills and most important, hope. One of our partners, Parami School, is constructing a new building (funded by a Japanese union and a Colorado church) for its 300 students in the hope of offering vocational training someday. A few other small programs also exist, but collectively, they can hardly begin to meet the challenges of this generation. Some students will become migrant school teachers, and others will seek resettlement to countries such as Canada (a controversial choice in the Burmese community since it depletes the community here of leadership). A few will even take their chances on returning to their country for whatever further education might be available in its dysfunctional educational system, a grim prospect when one considers the fate of free thinkers there during the last month. Such is their desperation.

From volunteer Kristyne Houbraken – My experience with migrants and refugees from Burma has been eye-opening, educational, and life changing. They have welcomed me into



Kristyne at work

to help in the very little way that I can, and everyday it is made apparent that my presence here is appreciated. While I cannot live here on the Thai-Burmese border forever, I will never forget my new family and the time I've spent with them. Because of the personal connections I now have, I will continue to put my modest efforts towards this cause from wherever I may be and hope and pray that the futures awaiting my younger brothers and sisters are bright.

Coping with bad news from Burma / Myanmar

Inside Burma during November, a generation of activists, 23 leaders of the 88 Generation Students Group, were sentenced to 65 years imprisonment for the crime of leading the Burmese people in nonviolent protests against increases in the costs of fuel and consumer goods in August 2007. Most had been detained for over a year already. They have now been sent to prisons in remote corners of Burma where their families, UN investigators and the ICRC will have no access to them, where malaria is common and health problems inevitable given prison conditions. The number of political prisoners in Burma has doubled since the “Saffron Revolution” that so inspired people around the world. Its leader, Buddhist monk U Gambira, has been sentenced to 68 years, and the comedian Zarganar received 59 years – for organizing delivery of aid by a group of entertainers to victims of Cyclone Nargis. These draconian sentences are the SPDC’s way of insuring no opposition will exist when it holds the fake elections planned for 2010 in the unlikely hope of convincing the world of its legitimacy as a government. Here in Mae Sot, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (www.aapp.org) documents each prisoner’s



“Sitting by the Iron Gate” by Htet Lin

situation, tries to help prisoners’ families and pleads with the outside world to take some meaningful actions to help free Burma from military rule. It is a small organization with a gargantuan task, part of a network of brave Burmese people (many ex-prisoners) inside and outside Burma, who are trying to sustain the struggle for democracy. No one is giving up. Hope resides in a new generation of young activists, “Generation Wave” (some of whom have also just been imprisoned for their activities). They need the support of governments like our own and of people everywhere!

And what about Thailand?

We continue to watch the political situation in Thailand. Although currently, the problems that beset the Thai government

do not seem to have serious consequences for our project, we understand that the political instability may become more problematic when King Bhumibul dies. We are mindful of the need to have contingency plans both for volunteers’ security and for continued delivery of assistance to schools. However, knowing that the Thai people value both social and political stability and their good relationship with the outside world, we expect to be able to continue working for the Burmese people who find themselves “stranded on the Thai-Burmese border.”



Valerie and Dugal – recipients of the affection of their Burmese students



A final thought

Finally, there is the ‘World financial Crisis’! What does it have to do with Burmese migrant people in Mae Sot? As in North America, factories in Mae Sot will close, but in Thailand, migrant workers who are now making slave wages will have nothing. Thai society provides Burmese workers and their families with no safety net to protect them from destitution. However difficult life may become for Canadians as hard times loom large, it is our hope that the economic malaise does not provide people in our rich part of the world with a rationale for withdrawing support for those whose labor helps sustain the artificially low cost of our lifestyles. In the coming year, all the Burmese on this border will find life more difficult. Please continue to express your solidarity with them in whatever ways you can.

On behalf of the ET-MSEP Committee, our volunteers and our Burmese partners in Thailand, heartfelt thanks to all of you who have lent so much support over the last five years,

Mary Purkey, Project Coordinator



The Eastern Townships – Mae Sot Education Project continues to be guided by an energetic project committee composed of faculty from Bishop’s University and Champlain College as well as several members of the Lennoxville community: Carinne Bevan, Emily Evans, Derek Heatherington, Rina Kampeas, Lissa McRae, Anabel Piniero, Mary Purkey, Marjorie Retzleff, Barbara Rowell, Stephen Sheeran.

Would you like a speaker?

If you would like one of our volunteers or committee members to give a talk to your community or school group about our project or the situation of the Burmese people, please contact us c/o Mary Purkey at mpurkey@crc-lennox.qc.ca or at (819) 564-3666, ext. 621.

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, Québec, Canada J1M 2A1