

# The Eastern Townships – Mae Sot Education Project

Canadians working for Burmese Migrant Children in Thailand  
A Newsletter to our Supporters – Summer 2009

*To All our Friends and Supporters,  
This summer we are letting our volunteers speak for our project by expressing some of the feelings and thoughts that participation in the ET-MSEP has evoked in them. We believe that these writings convey as well as any of us can its life-changing impact on them. However, we hope that they also give a sample of some of the special qualities that these young Canadians bring to their volunteer work in Mae Sot.*

## ANTICIPATION

By Emma Moore – 2009 ET-MSEP Volunteer

The 2009 ET-MSEP Team of Volunteers



My tiny Thai phrasebook feels like a five ton tome, a life line, that fits in my pocket. Mae Sot Thailand is a world and many hours of transit away from the Eastern Townships of Quebec. As five daring and driven Champlain College and Bishop's University students, my colleagues and I will spend six months in Mae Sot teaching the English language to migrant and refugee Burmese children in six separate schools.

My brown broken bicycle will be my best friend. In a city that's roughly equal to the size of Sherbrooke, getting around involves a bit of work and balance – just like riding a bike. If elephants never forget, hopefully I won't either. Safety first; don't be flashy, carry a handful of rocks (for the dogs), and don't be out riding alone late at night. As this is my first trip overseas, I am showing extra diligence in making myself self- and surroundings-aware. Super spicy supper surprises aren't scary; they're scrumptious. Rice is a main staple in Thailand, but as I am sure to find out, it pales compared to the almighty chilli pepper. If I learn to swallow fire prior to departure, my gastronomic adventures may go all the better! Intense preparation is met with great enthusiasm, and great enthusiasm is met with growing confidence.

The experience of higher education enables students to learn a number of important and harsh life skills but none so much as how to live together. What better a way for young people to do this than actually not being in school, but teaching in a school? The Eastern Townships Mae Sot Education project was formed in 2003 to assist Burmese migrants living on the border of Thailand and Burma/Myanmar and annually sends students from Champlain and Bishops University there to teach English as a second language to the children.

The effort that has been dedicated to our preparation for the fast approaching June departure of the Mae Sot five (on June 9<sup>th</sup>) is truly incredible and includes coordinators and past volunteers as well as community friends and supporters. Notably, our ESL teachers and training have been invaluable resources to the five of us as we prepare lesson plans and simplified curricula. Teaching a language one has grown up immersed unconsciously in is surprisingly difficult to do. We have been taught: "Keep it Simple!" Message received – loud and clear.

As excited as any of us may be for the impending journey of a life time, the experience has thus far been humbling as well as thought provoking; our Western-ness clouds us. Burmese people have no homes, children have no parents, rebels have no freedom, and everyone has fear. To support them as they deal with their fears and voice their rebellion against the rule of the SPDC in Burma, to help them to educate their children and provide them with opportunities is the job of *The Eastern Townships – Mae Sot Education Project*, and it is a job that extends well beyond the confines of our well furnished on-campus international centre. This, my friends, is an international responsibility. From Montreal

to New York, New York to Tokyo, and Tokyo to Thailand, our journey barely begins on that first night in Bangkok; it will surely extend beyond the six months for which we have signed on...

## Back Home – Spring 2009

By Stephanie Aubin, 2008 ET-MSEP Volunteer

*Note: Stephanie volunteered at Say Ta Nar, a small Muslim school for Burmese migrant and refugee children in Mae Sot from June to December last year. What follows are her reflections some months after her return.*

Months have now passed since I returned to Canada, and so far not a day has gone by that I haven't thought of my students. I miss them all so much. Their bright smiles were the start to my day and their, "Good morning teacher!" was the welcome of my morning. They were so eager to learn, so ready to do any activity proposed to them. Life had handed them a bad card, being illegal migrants on the Thai Border. Still, they made the best of what they had. Never once did I hear one of my students complain about the life they were forced to live or the fact that so many people around them had so much more than they, so much more than they could ever even hope to have some day. I know I was one of those people, one of those people who had so much more. I had a family, a country, a home, a place where I belonged, opportunities, and an education.

They rejected nothing that was given to them. I knew when I went there that I definitely wasn't in the top league of teachers who could have been handed to them. I was new and inexperienced. With my lesson plan in hand, I attempted to teach



them English as best as I could, day after day. I devised activities, never knowing if they would work or not. I made mistakes. I taught them something only to realize that I should have been focusing on something else, which I then

taught until I realized that their needs were altogether different. Not once did they come up to me and say, "Don't you think we deserve better as far as education goes than an inexperienced teacher such as yourself?" But I know I thought of it often. They did deserve better. These children wanted to learn with such fervor. They saw education as a privilege and not as a right. To them everything that was handed down, every new piece of knowledge, was precious.

I still remember in the morning as soon as the clock struck nine o'clock they would all be standing up on their feet, ready to get the class going. And if I had the misfortune of telling them that class was over fifteen minutes before the end because I figured that two hours forty-five minutes of English at a time was more than any normal child should have to handle, they would all be on their feet, moaning and complaining, "No teacher no! Class no finish! Class finish twelve o'clock!"

It is hard for my mind to conceive that these two different places, Canada and the borderland where Burmese refugees live, can both exist at the same time, both move forward while I can only attend to one of these two. It might sound silly but my mind has trouble grasping that while I am back home finishing my DEC, things are still happening in the little town of Mae Sot, despite the fact that I cannot see them. These two realities seem so different to me, yet I must come to the conclusion that both exist and continue at the same time while one dimension is cut off from me as though it had never even existed. I cannot see Thailand, I cannot see my students, I do not know if they are alright, yet I hope that they have been handed down a terrific teacher who will see to all their needs.

## Doubts

By Dugal Monk, 2008 volunteer

I just spent six months volunteering in Thailand. My time in Mae Sot was tremendously, and I repeat, tremendously, valuable to me. It was the best six months of my life, period. I learned a great deal and more importantly, forged a lot of friendships which I don't believe I will ever forget anytime soon. But I don't think this in any way reflects the utility of what I've done. I would love to be deeply satisfied and convinced that I had helped my students a great deal, because I love them, but I think I have to be careful about just assuming this instead of thinking about it. I do know that I flew thousands of miles both ways, significantly contributing to environmental degradation which is directly increasing malarial deaths in Uganda; I also know that these flights, generously paid for by very kind people, cost a great deal of money that could have been directed to paying teachers, or providing lunches or medicine; in fact, I also know that in some parts of the world, this money could have saved several lives; and I know that many of my students didn't learn that much from me, despite my best efforts. So I don't know what I think about the ethics of my actions. I was undeniably of more use to the migrant/refugee community in my 6 months there than I would have been had I spent this time here working a Joe job. But I wonder if sending the money could have been more useful. It certainly would have been a more generous and less self-serving act, although it probably would not have been recognized as such. Or I wonder if it was wrong and irresponsible of me to go at all for such a short period of time... not even an entire school year. Questions, questions, questions...

### Two Contributions – straight from the heart



Normally, ET-MSEP volunteers commit to being in Thailand from June to December, for six months. However, last December Valerie Beaulieu Blanchette, decided to stay on and finish the school year (which ends in March) with her students. While there, she became aware of the extent of the destitution of some of the migrant families of her students. She visited each of the 35 families and took note of their most urgent needs: tarps for the leaky roofs, mats for the airy bamboo floors, blankets for the cold nights, pots, mosquito coils, etc. Soliciting donations from her family and friends here in Quebec, she was able to purchase these necessities, and with the help of teachers at her school, she delivered them to the families.

Valerie also saw another important problem at Hsa Mu Htaw School, the absence of a playground in the dusty lot surrounding the school. She sought out an NGO in Mae Sot that constructs playgrounds, but it was too busy to help. So she used a guide developed by this organization to design and provide materials for a playground which she paid for herself. Parents and teachers provided the labor for the project. In coordinating it, Valerie realized how important it was to insure that they (and not she) would have ownership of this project. However, she got to enjoy the satisfaction of watching it unfold: "It is nice to do something for the people of Hsa Mu Htaw. I can see they appreciate and they are grateful, and it feels good. The volunteer coming here next year will be very lucky."



The new playground at Hsa Mu Htaw School

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The Eastern Townships – Mae Sot Education Project continues to be guided by a committee composed of faculty from Bishop's University and Champlain College - Lennoxville as well as several members of the community. The project committee and volunteers thank you for your interest in our project and in the struggle of the Burmese people for a life of dignity and freedom in their homeland.

"The cause of liberty and justice finds sympathetic responses in far reaches of the globe...Those fortunate enough to live in societies where they are entitled to full political rights can reach out to help the less fortunate in other parts of our troubled planet. Young women and young men setting forth to leave their mark on the world might wish to cast their eyes beyond their own frontiers to the shadowlands of lost rights... Please use your liberty to promote ours."

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi

### MOVING ON...TO A NEW CHALLENGE

By Kristyne Houbraken, 2007 & 2008 volunteer

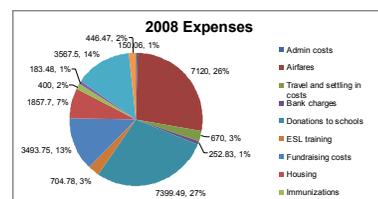
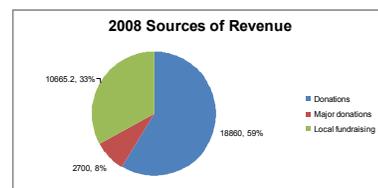


Kristyne teaching in Hsa Thoo Ley migrant school

Through living and working on the Thai-Burma border, my horizons have widened greatly. Through building relationships with local staff and students at migrant schools here in Mae Sot, Thailand, I have learned much about a different way of life, one of overcoming struggle and moving forward while staying motivated despite a daunting status quo. Through being allowed the opportunity to be a leader and role model for youth in these communities, a sincere exchange has taken place. Indisputably, the learning has certainly not only been one way, but mutual. Now, after two years of experience with children and teenagers in primary, middle and high school, I have been entrusted with the task of guiding twenty-four young adults at Umphium Refugee Camp through a year of further study in a World Education program called EIP, English Immersion Program. During this year we will be working on English, teaching, and project management skills. Through a collaborative style of learning, we will cover very interesting and thought provoking topics that will be relevant to the students' lives and which we hope the students will be able to take back to their communities for the benefit of others as well as themselves. Currently, I am being trained and preparing for the approaching school year. My impression as I enter into this very stimulating position is that EIP, with its culturally relevant and flexible (so as to fit the needs of the community) curriculum, its methodology, and its philosophy, is a great project to focus my efforts on as it is something that I genuinely believe in. I know there will be a lot of learning going on during this upcoming school year, and again it will be mutual, collaborative. As a former EIP student and friend of mine just told me, I am very lucky to have been chosen for this job.

### A Look at our Finances

The Goal of our financial planning is to try each year to increase the amount that we are able to give to schools in direct assistance while providing for the basic needs of four or five volunteers sent to Thailand for a six month period. This year, in spite of concerns about the hard economic times, donors have been generous, and our fundraising efforts are bearing fruit. However, as the situation in eastern Burma worsens, schools' needs continue to increase. Thus your help is deeply appreciated.



### 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>