

The Eastern Townships – Mae Sot Education Project

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

Dear Friends and Supporters,

Our project has come to the end of another year – and the beginning of a new one. To our surprise, three of our four volunteers decided to stay on in Mae Sot when the project ended in December. They are there now, continuing their work in our partner schools. The fourth volunteer has returned to Canada to begin studies in Education. We are grateful to all our volunteers for their amazing dedication. Meanwhile, our Selection Committee has chosen five new volunteers and is now preparing them to go to Mae Sot in June.

Our 2010-2011 Team - Do they look sharp?!

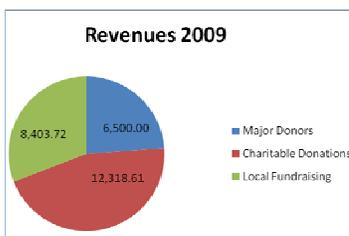
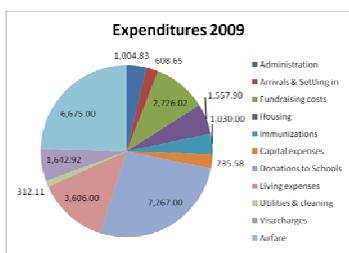


Emily Murray, Felipe Betancourt, Anne Marie Laverdure, Christine Morris, Adrian Downey

Our 2010 team is hard at work preparing to leave for Mae Sot in June. Preparation involves everything from learning to create ESL lesson plans, testing teaching ideas on each other (with the help of teacher trainer, Emily Evans), learning about Thai and Burmese culture and about the political, economic and social situation along the Thai-Burmese border, making travel plans...and of course it includes fundraising!

A Look at our Finances and Fundraising Efforts

We have benefited from the assistance of many organizations and individuals during the last year including local organizations such as the SECC (the Champlain teacher's union) and St. Mark's Chapel. Businesses such as the ETFS have also helped. We are grateful as well to Kumar Hathiramani, a Bishop's fan from Barbados who has provided on-going support. In the last months we have been especially fortunate to have received the support of the Pathy Family Foundation and the McConnell Foundation. Finally, many family and friends have provided



donations of all sizes and given us a variety of opportunities to raise funds. On April 24th, we will host a Thai dinner, thanks to the Oasis Christian Centre and to local chef Veronica Kaczmarowski, and on June 12th we will hold our second auction of Burmese and local art at Gillygooley Gallery in North Hatley, thanks to owner, Margot Heyerhoff who is donating her beautiful space with its view of the hills for this event. If you would like to receive details about either of these fundraisers, please contact one of us on the Project Committee. While the work of raising the money to sustain the project is at times challenging, we also see fundraising events as great opportunities to reach out to our community, share our volunteers' experience and inform people about the hardships that the Burmese people face. Fundraising is thus always about more than dollars. It is about learning, sharing and community.

ET-MSEP Project Committee: Avril Aitken, Carinne Bevan, Emily Evans, Derek Heatherington, Lissa McRae, Anabel Pinero, Mary Purkey, Marjorie Retzleff, 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>

A View of Migrant Education from Pho Cho, one of our partners in Mae Sot

Based on an interview with Pho Cho conducted by volunteer Emily Prangle-Desormeaux

According to Pho Cho, headmaster of Say Ta Nar School, students enrolled in migrant schools are quite lucky to be receiving the quality of education that they are. "Here," Pho Cho says, "[the children] can touch higher levels of education" as opposed to in Burma



Pho Cho and his wife, Nee Shar

where higher education is pretty much unattainable for most of the population. Migrant education is free which is a blessing after the steep tuition fees demanded by the Burmese government. The quality of the teaching is also much better in the sense that liberation from the military government also means liberation from the mundane teaching methods traditionally used in Burmese education.

In schools like Say Ta Nar, the students are strongly encouraged to express their opinions and engage in critical thinking. They also get to learn in a variety of ways such as through group discussions, debates and public speaking, to develop their own "morals and



Emily chatting with Say Ta Nar students through creativity.

[personal] character" and what Pho Cho calls "citizenship skills". "[In Burma] the teachers talk to the students but [in Mae Sot] children can discuss." For times when words don't speak loud enough, there are art classes for students to develop their individuality

Migrant schools are always grateful for volunteers who assist their schools. English skills are prioritized, but people who have other talents or knowledge to offer should definitely give the schools all their best efforts. Say Ta Nar School would love a music teacher in the future, in addition to an English speaker. When asked what the most effective way for other foreigners to help is, Pho Cho suggested that curriculum development (text books for teachers and children) is the first and foremost need, closely followed by better education for the *teachers*.

Kaw Tha Blay College – a New Experience... and a New Partner for ET-MSEP

By Alexander Wisdom, Volunteer – March 2010

In January, Alex went to Kaw Tha Blay College, in a village north of Mae Sot, to assist this project funded by the Canadian NGO Project Umbrella Burma. Here is some of what he has discovered there.

As the temperature grows ever closer to the unfathomable, (at least by Canadian standards) 40 degree Celsius threshold, my students and I sit under the palms at the edge of a field. Noticing the sweat dripping down my face, Thein Pike Soe, a second year Karen student at Kaw Tha Blay Learning Center, asks if I am thirsty. Within a matter of seconds he shimmies up the thirty foot, branchless tree, and tosses down a massive coconut, which unfortunately explodes on a rock when I fail to catch it. However, a second is tossed and moments later has been macheteed into a makeshift drinking vessel. We are preparing to venture off to the edge of the fields, near the jungle, to retrieve a 500lb teak log to serve as a post for a new classroom extension. As I sit in the shade, sipping coconut milk, I realized just how lucky I am to be here, on the Thai-Burmese border, with these amazing people.

Living at Kaw Tha Blay (KTB) with these students is an experience like no other. Teachers are treated so well that I actually sometimes feel a little guilty. I often have to smuggle my dirty clothes onto the back of my motorbike before I journey back to Mae Sot for the weekend. When my students ask if they can do something for me, like my laundry, they often won't take no for an answer. They are all so grateful to be here. For most, the opportunity for a post ten education simply did not exist back home.

The students, whose ages range from 18 to 21, have been chosen to study by village leaders back home in Karen State or within one of the refugee camps along the border. Their nominations were largely based on their commitment and dedication to their people. The Karen have been in armed conflict with ruling Burma Junta for more than sixty years now. These students come to KTB with the belief that educating themselves is the key to ending their suffering. They enter the two-year program to develop skills that they can take back to their communities – to be able to help their people as medics, teachers or even as political leaders.



Alex with Kaw Tha Blay students

After two years of post-ten education, some of the students even want to continue their studies further. For a few of them, their eventual goal is university, but competition is high and options are few. An extra, voluntary class has been added for the students wanting to continue. In these last few weeks before the end of term we are preparing for the entrance exams. It is somewhat of a long shot, but they are going to try their hardest and hope for the best. Something the Karen are used to doing.

Perhaps more important than the knowledge they are taking from their classes, is what they are learning from being part of the Kaw Tha Blay family. The students live and work together 24/7. They are responsible for running entire campus. Their duties range from cooking and cleaning for sixty people, to raising livestock and farming the land. The student's complete involvement in the school holds this place together and creates personal bonds that I have never seen before. KTBLC's motto - that the community is greater than the individual - will guide the futures of these young adults. It is a message that will put their education to the greatest possible use, which is helping to relieve the suffering of their people.

Canada in the amazing community where I live? How is it fair, that someone else who was born on the same day, at the same time as I was, doesn't have access to education, healthcare, or security when they go to children to sleep. Many of them spent their nights in the classroom, where they would get sick, cold, and bitten by all sorts of bugs because there is little to no protection from the pests or the natural elements. The faculty sleep? There are two stories that truly illustrate the unfair differences in our world that I would like to share.

The first took place in late September. The primary school I teach at every day, Hsa Mu Htaw, did not have enough space for all the boarding wanted to find the students a better place to sleep, but it had been four months since the teachers had even been paid, so how would they possibly provide the financial resources necessary for sheltering more students? Thus in late September my father came to visit me, and using money given to us by our community, we built a dormitory/library/activity room for the students of Hsa Mu Htaw school. When it was complete, the family of one of the boarding students, Naing Win Tun, came to see the building and to thank us. Naing Win Tun's older sister came as well as his parents, but that day I found out that he has 3 other older sisters. Unfortunately, they could not come to school that day, nor could they any other day, because they are the older siblings whose lives are devoted to working in order to make enough money for the family to survive. Their seed just happened to be picked a few years before their brother's.

The one sister I met is twenty years old and works in a textile factory sewing every day of the week from 8:00 am until 8:00 pm. If she feels so inclined, she can do overtime, working from 8:00 until midnight. Ironically, she has to pay to sleep at the factory that exploits her on a regular basis, and this is her life, day after day after day. Her parents pulled her out of school when she was in fourth grade. I am also 20 years old and an older sister; yet my family and my government give me money so I can go to school. I can enroll in any program, and become whatever my heart desires. I have my future laid out in easy paths ahead; all I have to do is walk down them. Naing Win Tun's sister's future lies in a factory; yet she missed a day of work and walked several kilometers to come meet me with a huge smile on her face.

The second story occurred in early November when I went to Mae La Refugee Camp, which is home to over 50,000 Burmese refugees. I met a young man there, who was also twenty years old, the same age as me. I learned that he came to the camp alone when he was young, because his parents were both killed in a government attack on their village, along with most of the rest of his family. He told me that he just wants to go to university and continue his education, but he explained that once in the camp, it is almost impossible to leave. A scholarship to a university is one of the few tickets out, another major reason so many refugees want more than anything to go on to university. Unfortunately very few are given this luxury. It is extremely likely that he will be trapped in Mae La Camp for the rest of his life as many other generations have, and never receive a university education...at least unless the military junta ruling Burma falls sometime in the near future. It sends chills down my spine to imagine being that particular seed...born in the same year as myself.

These two stories really made me realize how unfair the world is for so many people, and how close to impossible it is for them to do anything to fix it... It is still so unconceivable that people all over the world are born at the same time every day, and their rights, freedoms and future are in the hands of other people right from the start... It is by a stroke of luck that some are born citizens of a government that cares and supports them, or a family that does the same. No matter which seed a person ends up to be in that bag of billions, everyone should have the same rights and freedoms regardless of the geography of his or her birth. After being here in Mae Sot, living with and meeting the many people that I have, if I could have one wish, this would be it.

As a seed, how lucky am I to be one of the few picked to grow up in

Reflections on destiny and chance – from a refugee perspective

Elise (Ella) Bulow, Volunteer – November 2009



Ella and student stringing friendship bracelets

My name is Elise Bulow, but most people call me Ella. I was born in Ormstown, Quebec, and have lived in the rural, close-knit community of South-West Quebec my entire life. I remember once when I was young, I was in the barn watching my dad breed a cow (I grew up on a dairy farm you see). I remember being confused, and asking him "How does the cow have a baby after you stick your arm up there?" He explained it to me by saying "It's like I place a seed inside her and it grows into a baby". After that, I always imagined a big bag filled with seeds, and how out of billions of seeds, I was the seed selected to be born in Ormstown, Quebec on July 29th, 1989...Then I remember thinking what it would be like to have been a different chosen seed.

As a seed, how lucky am I to be one of the few picked to grow up in

Christmas in Mae Sot (Excerpts)

Skylar LePoidevin, Volunteer – December 2009

So it looked like I would be spending another few months as a volunteer with Burmese displaced kids here in Mae Sot, Thailand. The decision came a few months ago when I realized there was still so much I hadn't done yet. Because I had decided to stay, I was faced with...Christmas in Thailand. No snow, no glowing trees, no wrapped presents, no holiday music, and most importantly, no family. What is Christmas without these things? I didn't know. But it really didn't feel like Christmas. I guess this would have to be my first "skipped" Christmas.

I started telling my students that. Telling them that this year was my first year I would be skipping Christmas. "You're going to skip Christmas?" Thu, my grade 10 student asked me. "Yeah, but its ok... I'm very happy to be here," I replied. Later that evening he came up to me. "Teacher, if only we had more money we could do *our* tradition". He explained to me that every year a handful of students go around Mae Sot and do Christmas carolling to raise money for a Christmas party at the school..."How much money does it cost" I asked. "Maybe something like 2000 Baht (\$60) for three nights of singing, but Teacher, don't worry, maybe another year," he frowned. Needless to say, for only \$60 Canadian split between me and another volunteer, I paid. Anyways, I needed *something* to do during the Christmas season.

The next day, after I was thanked by what seemed to be all the teachers and students, they quickly began practicing. And I mean practicing...It was a great week. All the students coming together to sing and getting ready for carolling. I kept joking with the students that this was the only time I had seen them pay so much attention and look so involved.

When Saturday came, the students piled into the truck all bundled up in sweaters (it's the "cold" season here) with flashlights, candles, bells, four guitars and an endless amount of guitar strings. We were off to start our first night. Not only did we sing at every house, but we were also usually invited to have some coffee, tea, food or simply water as well as a donation to our party. We went into a small Burmese neighbourhood where the houses are no larger than two rooms and are built out of tin and anything else found around. They are densely packed together. There were not many lights and I admit that I felt uncomfortable. We began singing and in no time at all we were crowded by children and parents with whatever they had to help us out. Those with no money gave water and small bags of candy, their way of saying thank you.

So this was the beginning of Christmas in Mae Sot for me. Jumping in a truck with my students and crowding together for fifteen hours with what felt like family. I then realized that I didn't have to skip Christmas after all. Sure, there was no snow, no lit up trees and no wrapped gifts, but I now realize there was more – getting together with my new family and spreading the Christmas joy to all!



Skylar and gang, carolling