

Karen Education and Empowerment at the Border  
Thailand (Thai-Burma Border)

Georgetown University

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<https://blogs.commonsgorgetown.edu/karen-education/>

### Summary of Project Goals

At its heart, our project aimed to empower migrant Karen refugee students from Burma to realize change in their own lives, through both personal narrative writing and community involvement. We strived to build self-awareness, encourage self-confidence, and inspire future leaders, while ourselves, coming to better understand the implications for migrant, refugee life as a result of the war.

In addition to Davis Projects for Peace, we received further support to realize our goals from Georgetown University: the School of Foreign Service, the Justice and Peace Studies Department, and the Center for Intercultural Education and Development. We also received material donations from American Speechsounds, Oxford University Press, Pearson-Longman Publishers and Compass Publishing.

### How was your project implemented?

We arrived at Thoo Mweh Khee eager and excited to introduce a new curriculum to students that focused on leadership development and creative writing. Entering our six classrooms on our first day, we dove into teaching wholeheartedly, yet soon found that we would be facing more challenges than expected: language barriers with students whose English level and vocabulary was not prepared for reflective writing; an unfamiliarity and hesitant attitude towards critical thinking and problem-solving; a cultural tendency to perpetuate a hierarchical and formal classroom dynamic; and most surprisingly, structural and cultural gender division in the classroom, division of labor, and overall expectations among students, families and even the administration.

**Adapting to our new challenges**, we decided to focus on building personal relationships with our students. By coaxing them into casual conversations and spending time with them after school, we hoped to ease them out of their shells and build their confidence so that we could better engage inside and outside the classroom. In particular, we established nightly journaling, whereby every other night, students wrote a letter to one of us, which we would then respond to and return the next day. We had no guidelines for the journals, which initially confused many students. Yet as we shared our own lives and experiences, the students too began to trust and write more personally, delving into issues of family separation, death and migration. We were amazed by their honesty, some even telling us it was the first time they had shared their whole story with anybody. We are honored to have been their confidants, a role we value with the utmost reverence and respect.

Through the journals, evening music jams, and porch-bound heart to hearts with our students, we seemed to become **friends first, and teachers second**. No longer solely formidable "Thramu" in the classroom, we were able to more openly discuss the Montgomery Bus Boycott and UN refugee food rationing in leadership class and more fully reflect upon "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" as a prerequisite to narrative writing. As rather fervent feminists, however, we continued to struggle with such a divided classroom and community, ultimately deciding (whether correctly or incorrectly) to use our limited time to encourage as much confidence as we could on an individual basis. Despite our struggles, we had overwhelming successes: in leadership class, students designed seven projects, ranging from clean-up at the local clinic to raising Burma awareness through art; in writing class, they wrote beautiful poems and heart-wrenching narratives, displaying an openness and willingness to reflect.

We could not have found ourselves implementing our project in a more welcoming and receptive community. To **ensure our project's sustainability**, in fact, our leadership and writing curricula are currently being continued by Australian volunteers and will become an institutionalized part of the student's education when they depart. As the school grows by two hundred percent every year and has plans to return to Burma in the next few years, we hope that the healing and empowering effects we saw in our 150 students will continue to reach those who join Thoo Mweh Khee Senior College.

## **Project Sustainability**

Seeking to ensure our project's long-term impact, we are also taking measures from the US:

1. We are establishing **Wings, a scholarship fund** to support TMKSC's graduating students taking the GED for application to university.
2. Concurrently, we are also in the process of **publishing a collection of student works** (stories and poetry) to raise awareness about Burma and the Karen community and provide a source of funding for TMKSC.

## **How do you define peace?**

We often say that peace is the absence of danger or war, a void of conflict and fighting. It's the freedom from fear of violence. But in this sense, none of our students have ever known peace. Their lives have been plagued by destruction and violence, their memories scarred with gunshots and flames. Many have been running away their entire lives, leaving behind homes that have been burned, tortured, and violated beyond compare. Asked to describe their safe place, some will ask, "Is it okay if it's imaginary?" and others will answer, "I never feel safe."

Yet despite the darkness that has plagued their lives, they smile eighty-seven times a day, laugh insanely often, giggle and guffaw, wink and tease, joke almost nonstop, regularly burst into spontaneous song and revel in being happy in the moment. Somehow they have found a way to have peace in the present, in spite of war in the past. Rather than allow the horrors to define and dictate their present lives, they have actively chosen to live, not running away from the past, but running towards the future.

It seems as though we often constrain peace by construing it as either peace-time or war-time, a black and white distinction, a false dichotomy too simple to be true. While such longstanding peace is certainly ideal, that does not mean warzones are without peace, or even that peaceful areas go without war. We can find **peace in moments**, in little parcels that deliver a smidgen more rest and calm to turbulent lives. Peace can be found in the in between moments, the momentary lapses in the darkness and fear: a newly composed singing medley, a birthday Thanksgiving noodle dinner, a late night card game with friends. It doesn't have to be all or nothing.

## **How does your project contribute to peace?**

With students who inspire us to find pockets of peace in our everyday lives, our project was ultimately neither about educating nor empowering. Our students, even if they don't yet realize it, already have the mindsets to be the Karen community's future leaders. Ask them what they want to be in the future and ninety percent of their responses will be doctor, teacher or translator. Ask them why, and they'll say: "because I want to help my community." These talented youth, beautifully committed to their people, will be at the forefront of their generation when the time comes. Our project was simply about **equipping them with tools** for when that day arrives.

Through our leadership classes and personal narrative tutorials, we have introduced new ideas that we hope they will carry with them. We hope they'll recall our lessons on Martin Luther King, Jr. and discussions of Gandhi, but more so, our conversations on nonviolent resistance, peaceful protest and the importance of listening to all opinions, even if they are diametrically opposed to our own. We hope exposure to poetry and journaling will imbibe them with the power of reflection and self-awareness, of thinking and pondering before and after action.

Our project was aimed at cultivating peace now – through leadership projects, the scholarship fund, and publishing of the narrative collection – but even more so, in the future. We hope we provided our students with some tools to herald peace, both momentary and life-long, as leaders of the future.

## **Personal Statement (Jocelyn Fong)**

Despite the separation, destruction and migration splattering their lives, our students refused to be defined by their pasts. They exemplified perseverance, smiling even when your insides are breaking. They did not need any empowering; we simply helped them see the power of their own voice, a candle, as they wrote, in all of the darkness.



Jocelyn Fong and Laura Grannemann with TMKSC students at Mae, La Refugee Camp, Mae Sot, Thailand

TMKSC students writing a song, a common occurrence at a school with incredible musical talent



Students from TMKSC prepare flyers about littering and recycling for their community involvement project in leadership class