

**A Volunteer Report
Mr. Seng Lee
November 2005 and February 2006**

Tomato Village

Volunteer-Report by Seng Lee, February 2006
Title: *Tomato Village (English)*

About three months ago I was on my way to Tomato Village for the first time. As the bus careened from left to right and then back again along the winding road to Mae Hong Son, the city-boy in me wondered for the umpteenth time whether I had made the right choice. It was on the spur of the moment to send an email to Child's Dream to venture an interest in volunteering to teach in Tomato Village's Community learning centre. I wanted to do something outside Singapore for my year-end vacation and was surfing the web for some holiday information in Thailand when I came across the Child Dream's website. I was intrigued by what the people of Child's Dream are doing and thus I applied for a volunteer position.

And a while later, there I was - sitting beside a lady holding onto two chickens on the rollercoaster ride. The next three weeks were both a rewarding learning experience and a fun relaxing period for me and now, here I am, at the end of my second visit in February - typing this report in Chiang Mai and trying to give words and form to my feelings and experiences - an impossible task (though I try my best) - for one would have to be there to really understand it.

Tomato Village or Baan Huay Ma Kay Soam is an ethnically mixed village that consists of Shan, Hmong, Pa-O and Karen people. It was situated on the slopes of the mountain range that forms part of the boundary between Thailand and Burma. Most of the adults in the village are from Burma and while they are not recognized as refugees, they came to Thailand to escape the bad living conditions on the other side of the border. The children, however, were born in Thailand and they were the reason why I dug deep in my pockets and flew over. Benjamin, the first person from the village I got to meet is the headmaster of the learning centre and my host. He is really somebody - a person who has dreams, seen them shattered and now trying to create dreams for the next generation, begrudging them nothing. He and his family have been gracious hosts and I enjoyed my daily interactions with them. His dreams and hopes fuelled my own to try to make a real contribution (though my passion could not protect me from the winter cold - from tropical Singapore, I found the cold weather rather trying at times).

The children that actually studied at the learning centre presently form a minority of the children in the village. They are one of the most enthusiastic bunch of students I have ever taught and definitely the most appreciative. The people of the village are not rich - mainly farmers or small shop-keepers and this school has the expressed purpose of seeking to provide the students with more options in life - that when they master the English language - they will be

able to have a better future and give their parents and their own future children a better life. I, as with the volunteers before me and after me, a giver and bearer of that hope. And I strongly believe that the project, with its growing scores of children, is a success. On my second visit, I found that the enrollment levels had risen. Some of the children have been great hosts and guides to the village and its environs, bringing me around their favorite hang-outs and introducing me to their families - given my linguistic deficiencies as I do not speak much Thai and none of the village languages, I really had a great time. The best times I had were in the classroom, teaching, playing games and interacting with the children - chatting (in mongered English and Thai) with Ou, Pang, Aoy, Phanuphan, Saeng, Doum Khum, Ampha, Raveewan and more during the class breaks at 7.30pm and weekends were surreal and I treasure our times together.

Having spent slightly over one month in all in the village, I really feel that I had gotten a better deal with this experience - my time with the people of the village and especially with the children, seeing them happy most of the time - makes me appreciate what I have more and also what is lacking in my life - a positive attitude. Having the company of other volunteers from different parts of the world - Germany (Christine), The Netherlands (Peter), Britain (Damian) and Sweden (Bruno) is gratifying, with me knowing that there are people who also want to give a better future to a group of children whom could have been easily forgotten and ignored if not for the efforts of one great man (Benjamin) and one great organization (Child's Dream). The challenge (at least to me) is to maintain the learning centre and to try to expand it to include the neighboring villages. I will be back again - definitely - and this report has not seen its last sentence yet.