

A Week With Child's Dream in Mae Sot

Ask any Burmese migrant kid living in Mae Sot what he wants to be when he grows up and you are likely to get three typical answers – Teacher, Medical personnel, or Soldier. In their little confined world, occupations such as bankers, pilots, accountants are fairytale-like, or sometimes even unheard of...

I had the opportunity to talk to these migrant Burmese children when I went on a one week volunteer trip to Mae Sot, a small town situated along the treacherous Thai-Burma border in Northern Thailand, with four other colleagues from 19th to 26th February 2006. Since we returned, many people have been asking us about our trip, and our first respond is always a prompt “Great!” But I hate to use a mere “Great!” to describe our trip, as it grossly fails to encapsulate, in entirety, the mind sobering and invaluable experiences we gained.

Setting up a playground and library at Hsa Thoo Lei Migrant School

Considering the fact that the most energy sapping task that we engage in these days is probably the occasional frantic running (*ahem*... late) from the subway station to the office, building the playground was really tough and laborious. Not to mention the fact that the sun was mercilessly sweltering!



Being the clumsy and pampered city kids, we suffered some minor cuts and bruises, not surprisingly... Yet none of us bore any thoughts of giving up because we couldn't bear to break the hearts of the children, who had the keen “I-can't-wait-to-get-onto-the-swing” expression all over their angelic faces.

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Visit to Mae Tao Clinic

We had the honor to visit the famous Mae Tao Clinic, where we met the clinic's director, Dr. Cynthia Maung. It is hard to believe that underneath her quiet and gentle disposition, Dr. Cynthia is in fact one tough lady. She has won a slew of international humanitarian awards and is affectionately hailed as the Nightingale of Burma for almost single-handedly transforming a dilapidated barn in Mae Sot into the current Mae Tao Clinic to provide free treatment for the sick and wounded fleeing Burma's oppressive regime.

We were overwhelmed by the sights at the Mae Tao Clinic -- Malnourished children lying frail in the wards. Patients walking around with their prosthetics legs. Heavily pregnant women who look not more than 20 years old. Despite the somber mood and depressing sights, the clinic epitomized what is seemingly the most important thing to the Burmese migrants – “Hope”.

The hope to recover.

The hope for better life.

And the hope to return to their homeland. One day.



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Mae La Refugee Camp – A Human Warehouse



It is almost cruel to use “picturesque” to describe the view at Mae La Refugee Camp. But with tranquility lingering in the air and boundary-less horizons against the crisp blue skies, it is not difficult to mistake this place as a paradise. Not until the barbed wire fences and patrolling Thai soldiers come into your sight.

Personally, it was a surreal feeling for me to step foot into Mae La, the largest refugee camp in Thailand. Back home in Singapore, it's ubiquitous to hear youths whine about how boring and aimless their life is and I'm guilty of being one of them too. Until I saw the conditions in the camp, I feel like slapping myself for my childish incessant ramblings. Refugees are shut off from the outside world by Thai authorities for security reasons, living conditions are bleak, there is little the refugees can do to occupy their time, and the most “*brilliant*” thing is refugees do not know how long they will be there.. 5 years? 10 years? A lifetime?



Afterthoughts

I recalled a heartwarming experience where a girl from one of the migrant schools, tugging at my hand and shyly saying “Thank you” (in Burmese) to me after we had build the playground. It was a simple “Thank you” but it completely melted my heart. Perhaps the children see volunteers like us as *angels*, who help to make their lives a little better and happier. If only I could communicate in Burmese, I would like to make known to them that they are my “*Angels in Disguise*” for their smiles and innocence made my day.