



December 2020

# Border Crossings

A Newsletter of the Brackett Refugee Education Fund



## Reflections of My Visit to Thailand

By Lily Brackett

Lily Brackett is a granddaughter of founders Liz and Tom Brackett, and daughter of former and current board members Ted and Penelope Brackett of Maplewood, NJ. She is a senior at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY, where she is majoring in physics. Earlier this year, Lily visited several of the BREF projects in Thailand on her way to a semester abroad program in Bhutan. After graduation, she hopes to pursue a career in environmental engineering.



Lily Brackett (right) with Eh Thwa, head of the community schools program.

It was nearly a year ago. I spent a week in the border town of Mae Sot, Thailand, visiting BREF schools. It is funny to think about that kind of travel nowadays, interacting with so many people, eating and talking with new faces every day. The week was a whirlwind of interactions and information, but certain moments stood out.

One such moment happened on my trip to the secondary school in Mae La Camp. I didn't know what to expect when I arrived. However, the upper level students in the English class I walked into clearly did. There were 60 students in the room. I was ushered into the front of the classroom. I wasn't much older than the students, but they referred to me as "teacher." They inquired as to what lesson I had prepared for them.

I was clearly unprepared. I stood in front of the class and racked my brain. I thought of my only other language, Spanish. What would I have wanted to do if a random Spanish speaker walked into my high school classroom and attempted

to conduct a "lesson?" I asked questions about their lives – what they did for fun? What did they want to do after they graduated from the camp school? Did they like learning English? Did they like school in general? Some kids were very chatty. Some shared very personal things. Several were silent, but they all were attentive, seemingly fascinated with me, and pleased to share or have stories shared.

After 10 minutes or so of conversation, the resident teachers told the students to stand and sing the school's anthem for me, "Brighten the Corner Where You Are." Being serenaded suddenly was unexpected and lovely; I didn't quite know what to do. Again, they seemed to know perfectly well. They sat down from their song, and promptly demanded that I sing.



At the ALCC school, with the professors and staff.





*At the ALCC school, with the students of the upper level class and the professor.*

I laughed it off at first, but then thought, why not? I had brought nothing to offer them, and here they were, telling me exactly a thing I could give in this moment to make up for it.

A group of boys in the back started joking about how one of them played the guitar, and I promised to sing if he came up and played with me. The boy walked forward with a guitar and I asked him what songs he knew. He said he knew anything I would like to sing. Curiously, I began to sing “Hallelujah” and the boy started to play, not exactly knowing what chords belonged to this strange English song. The two of us stood there, in front of the class, caught in an impromptu and unlikely duet, trying hopelessly to meet on a common tune. I sang a few stanzas, and he strummed one final melody, and we both laughed and sat down.

I am not sure why, after so long, our strange, out of tune rendition of this 80s classic stuck with me. But I think that maybe it was because during that moment it didn’t matter that I was probably making a fool of myself in front of a bunch of strangers. I was happy to be there, doing my best to make these people, kids my age, smile. And give them something back for everything that experience would give me.



*Children from Hee Poe Dern Primary School ready to carry the sand and stone.*

## 2020 Annual Appeal Update

We have been able to continue our schools and scholarships in Thailand and NE India in spite of the pandemic. We need now to ensure the program continues next year. We’ve been so pleased with you, our donors, and we hope this continues through the month of December. If you haven’t yet given this year or are able to increase your giving, we ask that you support BREF’s education projects. Our students overseas would greatly appreciate it. Thank you!

## Then and Now

By Liz Brackett



Many years ago I was telling my friend, Maria Laxa, about attending a Karen communion service in Thailand, where we all sat on the floor. I noticed two men in front of me, who always stood, knelt, or sat together, shoulder to shoulder. At the end of the service, I realized that one was blind, a victim of the war and the other his helper. At this point Maria stopped me and exclaimed “I must help that man.” It was futile to point out to her that our organization was about education, not veterans, as a determined Maria handed me money.

We managed to give it to Tamla for the blind man, and every year he would come to see us to say “Thank you.” When Maria died, her daughter Jana continued the help.

One year I noticed that a little child, about 2 years old, was helping him and guiding him around obstacles. My friend Tamla explained that this was the man’s niece, and she was focused on helping him. I insisted that she go to school when the time came, and we would help her with expenses.

What a treat to get this picture in the mail with a note that the 2-year-old toddler is now a grade 6 student and Mayser’s adopted daughter is receiving a BREF scholarship.



## Transitions



BREF would like to thank founder Liz Brackett as she steps down from the board and from her roles as Treasurer and Operations Manager. This was her second tour on the board since BREF was started more than two decades ago, and she has been at the center of our operations the entire time. Recent board addition Paulo Flor has assumed Liz’s duties as Treasurer and we have established an Office of the Treasury (including Mark Sommer and Russell Brackett) to take over her efforts on developing budgets and maintaining cash flow. Additionally, Sue Bauman supports us critically in making sure funds get to where they are intended and in keeping our accounts; Adger Williams helps on the development side making sure your contributions are properly accounted for and directed. It clearly takes a village to run the business side of BREF and Liz assembled and then led the team from its inception. We are grateful.

Sally Brackett is stepping down from the board and her position as Chair. She recently completed her second, five-year term on the board and has led the organization through some challenging times. We’re managing a move from a very high-touch process to one that operates entirely online and remotely. While we of course hope that this is temporary, there has been great opportunity to improve, organize and make “how” we do what we do, more efficient. Most challenging has been Sally’s effort to manage BREF’s transition from a reliance on our founders and village elders Tom and Liz Brackett, to self-reliance within the present generation of BREF leadership and a quiet confidence that the village will live on. Thank you Sally.



Our newest board member Brian Brackett is a grandson of founders Tom and Liz Brackett and son of long-time BREF South Asia representative Chris Brackett. He and his wife Erica live in Merida, Mexico, where Brian works as a language instructor teaching English. His pilot program in conversational English is the first new type of offering for us in many years. He recruits volunteer teachers to give an hour per week managing live online conversations (Zoom) to help students gain confidence in using their English conversationally. Brian is very interested in exploring opportunities to support refugees in Central and South America. We welcome Brian to the board and look forward to his energy for the mission of BREF.



The Brackett Refugee Education Fund, established in April 1997, is a small not-for-profit foundation organized to help educate refugees. Currently the Fund is concentrating its efforts on refugees from Burma in India, Thailand and Bangladesh. Our trustees are Russell Brackett (Interim Chair of the Board and Executive Director), Dianne Becker, Brian Brackett, Penelope Brackett, Paulo Flor, Melinda Jackson, John Littleton and Mark Sommer. The Fund has 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status, EIN 16-1523586. It seeks support from friends, family and foundations. In order to make most efficient use of the money it receives, the Fund has adopted the following policies:

- All administrative and communication costs will be supported by the trustees;
- Living and travel expenses of trustees and volunteers, while on business for the Fund, will be donated by themselves;
- The Fund will not sell or give away the names and addresses of any of its contributors;
- Although the Fund is happy to receive contributions at any time, only one fundraising campaign will be made each year;
- The Fund has no paid employees, so administrative and fundraising expenses are very low, typically less than 4% of total expenditures; and
- Because the trustees donate far more than required for administrative purposes, every dollar you donate will go towards helping people receive an education.

