



December 2021

Border Crossings

A Newsletter of the Brackett Refugee Education Fund



Continued Conflict Disrupts Schools

By Brian Brackett

Brian Brackett is a grandson of founders Liz and Tom Brackett, and son of long-time BREF South Asia representative Chris Brackett. He joined the board in 2020 and manages the Volunteer ESL Teachers Group.

Even before the military coup on February 1, 2021, Burmese army attacks in the months prior led villagers to flee into the jungle. Schools in these areas, already struggling to deal with a raging COVID-19 pandemic, were obviously devastated. Remarkably, some schools were able to resume operations in subsequent weeks and finish out the school year, but many were not as fortunate due to the continued threat of army attacks. In the last week of March, Burmese jets bombed several villages, again displacing residents and shutting down schools.

The ongoing coup, predicated on fictitious election fraud accusations by military leaders, has enraged people all over the country who turned out to protest. These protests gradually turned to an armed struggle

of young people carrying out bombings and assassinations of army supporters and informants. Many young people came to the ethnic regions to get military training from the ethnic armies, including the Karen National Union (KNU) in the Karen State. These young people set up the People's Defense Force (PDF) all over Burma. These regions, aligning with the PDF, saw a rise in conflict with the Burmese army, particularly in the Karen, Kachin and Kayah States. PDF recruits are training in many of the same districts as the Community Schools Program (CSP) and schools funded by BREF. Renewed fighting has demolished many school buildings, with



Children from Gaw Khee Middle School going to school.



Children study in the forest using a bamboo chalkboard.

thousands of newly displaced persons hiding in the jungle in the rainy season. With a parallel government composed of leaders from the toppled regime, elected parliamentarians vowing to fight by mobilizing the PDFs, and ethnic armies facing a stubborn junta, the chaotic situation is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

BREF helps fund four schools in the CSP in this area. We also support a program that helps encourage these students to go on to study in high school. Many times there is no high school within walking distance and they must find board in another village away from their home. With conflicts rising and ever-changing COVID restrictions, getting funds into the hands of schools has become increasingly challenging. Eh Thwa organizes these journeys to distribute money for teacher stipends which are hand delivered to small village schools in Karen State. Thank you, Eh Thwa!

Story of Naw PNT



Naw PNT was born in Kar Nar Dern village, Karen State, in Eastern Burma. She is 21 years old and the eldest child in her family. Naw PNT is one of the students who received help from BREF to attend high school and college. She attended KG to the fourth standard in Kar Nar Dern Primary School and after that she moved to Saw Bwe Dern Middle School to continue studying. After the seventh standard she moved to Mae Sot to attend 8th to 10th standard in the Children Development Centre (CDC) school. After she passed 10th standard she went back to her village and attended Mutraw Junior College (MJC) in Day Bu Noh village for three years. This year is her final year in college. In college she learns about speaking, writing and reading English, science, math, social science and basic computing. In the 2021-2022 school year she started teaching in one of the CSP schools.

Left: Naw PNT (actual name withheld).

The Volunteer ESL Teachers Group

Beginning in 2018, but growing over the last two years due to the pandemic and the need for online learning, the Volunteer ESL Teachers is a Facebook group created by the Brackett Foundation to connect teachers with students. The group has grown into more than 400 teachers now, many of them ESL teachers by training and interested in volunteering their time to get English into these hard to reach classrooms, houses and communities. We focus on conversation skills, showing students the value (and fun!) of communicating in another language with someone across the world. In future newsletters, keep an eye out for our VESL Teacher Spotlight highlighting the great work these teachers are doing.



School supplies delivered into the jungles of Burma.

2021 Annual Appeal Update

With your help, the schools and scholarships in Thailand and India have been able to continue throughout 2021. However, with the turmoil in Burma and the continued pandemic, the future for so many students in the area is uncertain. Educating refugees and displaced persons has been our passion for more than 25 years now and we believe it is the best way to lift these people, and their future generations, into a brighter future. If you haven't given this year, or are able to increase your gift, we ask that you support BREF's education projects and scholarships. From BREF, our students, and schools, we want to say thank you. Thank you so much for the change you have made in these people's lives. We could not do what we do without you!

Board of Trustees Transitions

By Russell Brackett

BREF would like to thank **Mark Sommer** as he steps down from the board. Mark was a student of founder Tom Brackett and a long-time supporter of our work before joining the board 10 years ago. In his time with us, Mark brought discipline and transparency to our finance and budgeting activities. I had the pleasure to travel with and get to know Mark in Asia a few years back, spending a couple of weeks in northern Thailand where Tom and Liz got started. For that, I am grateful. Mark has agreed to stay close and support Paulo Flor on treasury and investments.



We are excited to announce that **Kathy Sabino and Jenny Jones** will be joining our board. **Kathy** lived in New Delhi, India as a child, pursued Asian studies at university, and taught World History in Hamilton Central School. A few years ago, she traveled to Aizawl in Mizoram State to interview students on behalf of BREF. Over the past year Kathy has been assuming much of the daily BREF operations from founder Liz Brackett. Operations have been particularly difficult during the pandemic, and we could not be more fortunate than for Kathy's support. We're pleased she has agreed to join the board.

Jenny Jones comes to us with degrees in Southeast Asian Studies and Public Policy. Her interest in Asia began while at Asia Watch, researching and working on human rights issues. She met her husband Josh Hawley in graduate school, subsequently joining him in Thailand while he was in the Peace Corp. More recently working as TREPs with BREF, Josh and Jenny have been able to rekindle some of those relationships from their early years in northern Thailand. Jenny and Josh were central to our effort to move to online applications and interviews, allowing us to continue qualifying students and awarding scholarships during the pandemic, putting your generosity to work while many other NGOs were idled by travel restrictions.



Smiling children show their new pencils.

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, Jenny Jones, John Littleton, Kathy Sabino 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.



CSP founder, Eh Thwa, on one of her journeys into Burma.