

Thailand Excited Kids Get 500 Go-Happy Uniforms

Day 1: 15th September After packing on Sunday 14th and loading up the vans on the morning of 15th, we had a photo shoot send off with Foodpanda, complete with Panda before setting off for Mae Sot. The panda suit accompanied us, to be donned at each Learning Centre by one of the students.

A 7-8 hour drive saw us arrive in Mae Sot around 6pm, to check-in at our usual low priced guest house, and have dinner before an early night and the real work the next day.

Day 2: 16th September

Early on the morning of 16th we were joined by Gift of Happiness resident volunteers in Mae Sot, Khun Kit and his wife Khun Mae, plus Ma Lay from the Migrant Education Group, and set off for our first day of project work proper.

Our first call was the **Hope Learning Centre**. We had visited Hope on a previous project trip in June, and Clown Eckie had performed his show and given a truck load of educational supplies, clothing and toys then. So it was a bit soon to do all that again, and the objective here was simply to distribute uniforms to the 180 or so students at the Centre.

“Simply” is perhaps putting it mildly, as we struggled to juggle sizes, those with sponsor logos and those without (to ensure each sponsor had uniforms handed out at each of our scheduled centres), numbers, and the basic mechanics of the process (that is, getting a workable procedure in place). This first time was a bit of an effort, but we managed and by the end of the day the Project Treasurer even managed to “balance” the remaining uniforms in an evening inventory stocktake (which left them balanced and him reeling!).

These Learning Centres are not formal schools under the Thai Education Ministry, but rather semi-independent institutions set up to cater for the educational needs of children whose parents come from Burma (although they are listed with the Thai Education Ministry). A number come under the umbrellas of organizations like the Migrant Education Group, of which more later. This means they are inherently poor, but there are “poor” and “POOR”. In the case, Hope LC, poor means dirt grounds and (in some areas, floors), thatched roofs, woven rattan walls, very sparse equipment, and children in cast-off clothes that have often deteriorated to little more than rags. Are the kids happy? Yes, they generally are, but they have no sense of community, no school spirit, no real sense that they belong to anything, which inhibits their ability to learn and their own social interactions. It was quite amazing to see how this aspect changed once they donned their brand spanking new uniforms with their bright orange shirts and black pants. As our project snapper, Simon, put it in his diary:

“It reminded me of Eddie’s philosophy that if children in a school all have the same uniform then there is a reduced risk of bullying. When I saw the kids first lining up in there well-worn and grubby clothes, and then saw the transformation in their looks and attitude once they had their new uniforms on, it came home to me that the reason for all this effort really pays off!”

Details of **HOPE LEARNING CENTRE** are:

HEAD TEACHER	NO. OF TEACHERS	NO. OF STUDENTS				NO. OF SHIRTS		
		Grade	F	M	T	Logo	S	L
Daw Thee Dar Oo	10	Nursery	15	12	27	Bei Otto	10	0
082 165 7864	(Incl. Head)	Kind. A	13	19	32	ENJO	10	0
		Kind. B	22	24	46	Food Panda	10	0
		Grade 1	12	7	19	LenPenn	5	5
Ethnicity: Burman 90% (about 170) with the rest a mix of Karen, Pa-U and Muslim		Grade 2	17	12	29	None	93	51
		Grade 3	9	11	20			
		Grade 4	8	3	11			
			96	88	184		128	56

In the afternoon we moved on to the **St Peter Learning Centre**. Now if one thought Hope was poor, this one outdid even that. Tucked way off the main road at the end of a dirt track, down in a valley with a babbling brook running through it, this had to be one of the prettiest sites we saw. The school itself was on the other side of the brook, accessible by a covered wooden bridge. The contrast between the dire circumstances of the school and its site was stark.

This was the first time for a Gift of Happiness visit to this school so Clown Eckie made his appearance and did a full show, to the delight of the kids – even though this entailed jerry-rigging an electricity connection via a motorbike battery! Unlike Hope, St Peter does not have its own electricity!

Uniforms were distributed, the show was a great success, and the children also received a load of donated toys, clothing and shoes.

Details of **ST PETER LEARNING CENTRE** are:

HEAD TEACHER	NO. OF TEACHERS	NO. OF STUDENTS				NO. OF SHIRTS		
		Grade	F	M	T	Logo	S	L
Saw Teemu	5	Nursery	23	21	44	Bei Otto	10	0
087 838 8066	(Incl. Head)	Kind. A	16	4	20	ENJO	10	0
		Kind. B	5	8	13	Food Panda	10	0
		Grade 1	6	4	10	LenPenn	10	0
Ethnicity: 62 Burman, 21 Karen and 20 Rakhine		Grade 2	5	3	8	None	27	10
		Grade 3	4	2	6	(About 30 not present)		

	Grade 4	1	1	2			
		60	43	103		67	10

When all that was done it was back to Mae Sot town as the sun set for a well-earned dinner.

Day 3: 17th September

Khun Kit, Khun Mae and Ma Lay met us again this morning after breakfast and we set off about 9am – this time heading north of town whereas yesterday we had gone south.

Our first port of call was **Sauch Kha Hong Sar Learning Centre**. Eddie had been here some time ago – just how long ago being indicated by the fact that the Head Teacher had since given birth to a little boy who is now almost 18 months old (called Khaumpeejo in Mon, or Nophon in Thai). In terms of buildings this school was better off than both Hope and St Peter, although it still had no electricity and Eddie agreed to donate a generator to the school on a future trip (he had bought the machine personally earlier). However, because of the lack of electricity and the inclement weather, Clown Eckie did not make an appearance at this school – next time, though ...

Uniforms were again distributed, along with several bags of educational supplies, clothes and toys. We also did some promotional shots for the Foundation's new online shop item, a school supplies kit of pencils, crayons, an eraser, notepad, ruler and the like.

Details of **SAUCH KHA HONG SAR LEARNING CENTRE** are:

HEAD TEACHER	NO. OF TEACHERS	NO. OF STUDENTS				NO. OF SHIRTS		
		Grade	F	M	T	Logo	S	L
Mi Seik Khamar Chan	6	Nursery	14	13	27	Bei Otto	10	0
089 705 6154	(Incl. Head)	Kind. A	N/A	N/A	N/A	ENJO	30	3
seikkhamar2008@gmail.com (home)		Kind. B	16	11	27	Food Panda	10	10
		Grade 1	10	11	21	LenPenn	10	10
Ethnicity: Burman 44, Mon 49, Karen 4, Pa-U 4, Shan 4, Muslim 4		Grade 2	6	9	15	None	15	11
		Grade 3	6	4	10			
		Grade 4	7	2	9			
			59	50	109		75	34

After a quick grilled chicken lunch at a local eatery (of the open air, wooden post variety!) it was back out of town (quite some way, in fact, about 30 kms north), to **New Road LC**.

New Road was another previously visited centre, and its buildings too were of the more substantial sort (that is, concrete and not bamboo!). Here the weather had cleared a bit and Clown Eckie appeared from behind a van for an outdoors show – complete with a wag of an audience participant who seemed well aware of just what a whoopee cushion was and darted well out of its range behind Eckie's back, only to dart back to grip his chair as instructed before he even knew she was gone! As always, the teachers and several passing adults, plus some from nearby houses, watched the show as well. It is

one of those performances that has something for everyone and appeals to all ages (even crabby old me still gets a laugh out of it every time!).

Once again we handed out uniforms (although only to lower grades and as many as we had left – this was quite a big school and we did not have enough for every child this time around). One of the older boys donned the panda outfit and made quite a show of his own, and we again gave out bags of educational supplies, clothes and toys (there were enough stuffed animals to give one to just about every toddler there! I must admit the backs of those vans seem like magical bottomless pits, the amount of stuff that comes out of them!).

Details of **NEW ROAD LEARNING CENTRE** are:

HEAD TEACHER	NO. OF TEACHERS	NO. OF STUDENTS				NO. OF SHIRTS		
		Grade	F	M	T	Logo	S	L
Daw Thinn Thinn	10	Nursery	20	21	41	Bei Otto	10	10
087 524 4471	(Incl. Head)	Kind. A	23	15	38	ENJO	27	30
		Kind. B	17	21	38	Food Panda	5	5
		Grade 1	24	20	44	LenPenn	10	0
		Grade 2	9	13	22	None	28	5
		Grade 3	16	9	25			
Ethnicity: Almost all Burman with a few Karen and Pa-U		Grade 4	8	7	15			
		Grade 5	6	2	8			
		Grade 6	4	4	8			
			127	112	239		80	50

And so we all tumbled into bed after another full day. Khun Berm arrived from Bangkok with another truckload of goods that evening.

Day 4: 18th September

Khun Kit and Khun Mae met us yet again, but Ma Lay was not meeting us until after midday.

Our first port of call was the famous **Mae Tao Clinic**, which does such good work providing free medical care to so many people who would not otherwise be able to afford it. On my last Mae St project trip I had a tour of this facility, and it is very extensive – and it is also more than impressive what they do with relatively so little. What a pity they, like so many worthy charities, struggle with funding.

A whole vanload of clothes (adult clothing here), bedding and medical supplies was left with the clinic, including a small oxygen respirator and sterilizing equipment for baby bottles.

The clinic's Simon Dickinson, Operations Manager, thanked us very much for the goods and undertook to have certificates made for this and past donations this year. Eddie is to send him dates for previous visits (end April and June).

Then we set off on a shopping expedition to purchase a month's supply of rice, plus high protein food and other cooking supplies for the **Social Action for Women (SAW) Organization 's Health Care House**. This house, on the outskirts of Mae Sot, caters for 17 women, plus 11 children under the age of 12, all with HIV/AIDS. We were met by SAW head, Dr Htin Zaw, who outlined the organization's work. The Health care House has 3 permanent staff and 4 volunteers looking after the women and children (the women were away at the hospital getting their supplies of anti-retroviral drugs, and the children were at school).

The non-profit SAW is a joint venture with the Thai registered Suwanamit Foundation. It focuses on the needs of disadvantaged women and children, running 22 programmes in 5 shelters:

1. A Safe House for Orphan Children (93 kids);
2. The Health Care House we were at;
3. The Green Hope Centre – looking after trafficked children and victims of gender-based violence (5 children and 15 adults);
4. A Child Crisis Centre, with 73 10-18 year old children – whose parents are in prison or have HIV/AIDS, are abandoned or have no contact with their parents;
5. A boarding house for children from Myanmar conflict areas. They stay there while they attend schools.

Dr Zaw undertook to make a certificate to acknowledge the donations given (a Bai Anumortanarbat) and Eddie will email him a scanned copy/sample. Dr Zaw said they could always use donations of clothing.

On a future visit we will go after 4pm or on a weekend so as to see the women and children actually at the Centre.

Our last stop was **Thoo Mweh Khee LC**, again on the south side of town down past Phop Phra. This was perched on a hill and was a huge school, with over 600 students from Nursery level all the way to Senior High School. They also had an Irish volunteer teacher for three years to help teach the senior grades.

There was no uniform distribution here, as all 500 uniforms were already gone – but perhaps on a later visit? Clown Eckie ascended to the hilltop and did another outdoors show for the more junior grades. On a future visit he will do a show for the whole school, but that entails setting up the local community "hall". Toys and educational supplies were handed over and the show was a great success, despite having to be cut short right at the end by a late afternoon shower. I heard the Irish teacher tell the school head that "That was really great" as we left.

Details of **THOO MWEH KHEE LEARNING CENTRE** are:

HEAD	NO. OF	NO. OF STUDENTS	NO. OF SHIRTS
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TEACHER	TEACHERS	Grade	F	M	T	Logo	S	L
Saw Pway Dooh	31	Nursery	11	7	18	Bei Otto	0	0
086 207 1891	(Incl. Head)	Kind. A	10	7	17	ENJO	0	0
pwaydooh@gmail.com (Home)		Kind. B	7	15	22	Food Panda	0	0
		Grade 1	20	19	39	LenPenn	0	0
Ethnicity: Mostly Karen, with some Burman, Mon and Muslim.		Grade 2	15	10	25	None	0	0
		Grade 3	16	9	25			
		Grade 4	13	17	30			
		Grade 5	23	25	48			
		Grade 6	21	24	45			
		Grade 7	19	20	39			
		Grade 8	19	31	50			
		Grade 9	29	37	66			
		Grade 10	37	36	73			
		Post G 10	70	85	155			
					310	342	652	

Then it was back to Mae Sot for our final night, which was spent at dinner with three representatives from **Migrant Education (ME)** discussing various aspects of what Migrant Education does, what ME would need to do to become a registered Thai charity, and avenues for future cooperation between ME and Gift of Happiness.

These discussions were too long and detailed to set down here but are rather covered in a separate report. For those interested, more on ME and its work can be found on their website:

www.migranteducationgroup.org

Those present from ME at the dinner were:

- Saw Htoo Paw, Programme Manager
- Rachel Russell – a temporary 3 month worker at ME (092 706 4846); and
- Ma Lay – Assistant Accountant.

And that was it – back to the hotel to bed and an early start for the return trip to Bangkok.

Day 5: 19th September

Return to Bangkok, leaving around 9am and getting back around 5pm – just in time for Friday evening traffic!

Report written by:

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