

Annual Trip Report

MSP / MBSPF

Myanmar Schools Project / Myanmar Burma Schools Project Foundation

December 2013





Cover photo: Village men proudly show us the new school MSP built in Daung Nyay Char.

Above photo: Young students line up to greet us in the schoolyard in Belin.

Below photo: A student from Ha Naung Daing reminds us of why we do this work.



Making a difference in people's lives

At Myanmar Schools Project/Myanmar Burma Schools Project Foundation we believe education makes a difference in people's lives. We have spent over eight years in Myanmar building over 40 schools and clinics that support countless communities, countless people, and countless children.

This year, in December 2013 we spent 13 days in Myanmar visiting our many previous projects and looking at sites for new projects. Steve Armstrong, Roger Brain, and Duke McElroy and Sharon and Rich Stewart were the travellers. There are many, many stories: this is just a glimpse into the world of Myanmar School Projects.

Always Impressive Daw Sanda

This year, our trip started on December 1 with a visit to Daw Sanda at the new building that U Hla Maung and Sharon and Roger Brain built two years ago. We were very impressed with the upkeep and maintenance of the building and once again impressed with Daw Sanda herself. She has started a new school in Hmawbi (100 ft x 30 ft) with 10 nuns from Yangon who administer it. It accommodates a combination of poor local children and orphans.



Daw Sanda would like to be able to extend the education at Pyapon to grade 8, which requires a two story 30 ft x 60 ft building, for a total of 3600 sq. ft. The estimated cost is 400 lakhs of which 100 lakhs has already been donated. We will consider funding some portion of the expenses.

Good morning to you!

People often ask what it's like to travel in Myanmar. Here is an excerpt from Duke's travelogue journal on December 2:

Awake early for a day-long trip to Belin, we all engage our respective morning ablutions. Steve drinks his Keemum tea and preps his breakfast smoothie. Rich and Sharon get down half a bowl of their breakfast cereal. Roger gets in his minimum 15-20 minutes exercise. Duke catches as much of the 49ers game as he can on WiFi before we gather at 4:30 and pile into the 8-passenger van with our prepared sandwiches and yellow note pads for the 4 1/2 hour drive. We've been going to the Belin area for 4-5 years now, contributing to the gradual development of 5 school sites in the area.

Before we leave Yangon, we swing by Panditarama to pick up Daw Khin Aye Kyaw, Belin Sayadaw's kappiya (monastic agent/assistant who handles the funds we offer for his distribution.) Then we stop to pick up our

translator for the day, Thi Thi Win, a gregarious, fun-loving friend of Daw Khin Aye Kyaw. The two women slide into the rear seat and after a brief welcoming chat settle into an early morning nap. In our respective audible zones on the bus we nod, whisper, meditate, or gaze into the oncoming lights as we head into drive through the dark and into the approaching dawn.

Government Requirements for the Good



After crossing paddy field dikes and ox-cart paths through the forests, we arrived at the Nyaung Palin (Belin 1) school yard and were greeted by a gathering of villagers and school children in their colorful traditional Pa-O ethnic clothes. We sat down beside the monks (inside the new assembly hall we donated funds for in 2011), and hear how our previous funds were spent and learn about the current need for a kindergarten room and other improvements.

The Mon State government has recently mandated requirements for kindergarten rooms in all villages for children age 3-5, for early education as well as monitoring for childhood health. We speculate that this increased concern is a result of Aung San Suu Kyi's sustained interest in improving the educational system of Myanmar and we realize it is all for the much needed good of the 38 village children between the ages of 3-5 here.

The 30' X 45' building is expected to cost about \$7,000 and the increased school attendance will require another two toilets being built at an additional cost of \$600. In addition, the villagers would like to construct a fence around the entire school yard, buildings and playground, yet another requirement of the government.

All the villages we visit are trying to make the improvements to satisfy the government's requirements. Fences don't educate children but the government only offers services, such as teachers, to villages that satisfy all the requirements. At one school we were asked for the following to help meet the new government requirements by June 2014:

1. 44 glass windows to replace the wooden shutters, 18 lakh= \$1,800
2. 280' iron chain fence along the front of the school, 16+ lakh= \$1,600
3. 272' brick wall fence 5' high between the school yard and a nearby cemetery, \$2,300
4. Painting inside and outside, \$700
5. 2 room dividers to make 3 temporary rooms out of the one large room, \$500
6. Ceiling tile throughout the whole building, est. \$10, 000 (this seemed high to us so we'll get an estimate from our contractor, Maung Maung Gyi in Mandalay)
7. 2 toilets for students, \$600

More schools in Hnin Pale

When we arrived at Hnin Pale we were surprised to see a new school building under construction. We were told that the government was funding the construction of a three classroom building for grades 1, 2, and 3 as it would be safer for the young children than the nearly derelict buildings now in use. The bid cost of the government built classroom building was 324 lakh, (\$32,400).

With 582 students now in 13 classrooms, they were requesting funding to build a three classroom building (3 – 30' X 30' rooms) for an estimated cost of 200 lakhs (about \$20,000 or \$8/sq. ft., a good price). When we asked how they planned to build for such a lower cost than the government contractor, they explained that local villagers would volunteer and no one would be taking a profit. When we noticed that at least one and maybe more trees would have to be cut down, we asked them to re-plant 2 trees for every one cut down to make space for the new classroom building. Shade is crucial in this climate.

An Update on Appammada

We have been actively supporting the abbess at the Appammada nunnery for many years. She is also educating children whose parents can't afford to send them to the government school. She presently has 258 students and 8 teachers. She has received funding to pay for teachers for the year at \$50/mo and other operating expenses at \$30/mo. 19 people are living in the building we donated last year.

She has ambitious plans and showed us a picture of a proposed two story building, 55 ft x 27 ft, to be primarily used as a dormitory for nuns and teachers. She thought the cost of the building would be 500 Lakhs. The Stewarts felt that it was certainly a worthwhile project. In her long-range plans she would also like to have a 3 story school building.



Keeping Tabs

We are constantly working to ensure our funds are used effectively. To address the perennial problem of not having on-going contact with someone in the Belin area once funds are transferred and the buildings are being built, we offered 2 lakh (\$200) to the Headmaster of the school, U Win Thu, to take photos and monitor the funds distribution and send us periodic reports of how the project was coming along.

Remember Inyer?



Last year we agreed to supply a second school in Inyer if the village built their primary school. Inyer is in a beautiful little valley and the children have been educated in buildings donated by the local monastery (when we were here last year the education dept. informed us that they must move out). The villagers have completed the primary school and we would like to build in the spring, which will take about two months. There will be 133 students in the primary school and 110 students in the middle school coming from five villages. There are presently nine teachers with three living on the school site.

Maung for the next 100 years

We couldn't do what we do without the help of competent people like Maung. As an example, consider his work at the Daw Htut Daw village school campus where we have funded \$7,000 worth of renovations and build a new 120 ft X 30 ft five-classroom building school at a cost of \$35,000. It was a beautiful building with a lot of natural light, fans in all ceilings, appropriately sized desks and very clean as was the whole campus.

We also looked over a 100 ft X 30 ft five-classroom building the government had funded and had put out to bid. It was clear that there was a substantial qualitative difference between it and the one Maung had constructed and Maung explained the difference in his own work ethic and tight management of the funding budget as well as his selection of superior building products. He explained he is building for the students **for the next 100 years**.



Maung is a very competent young entrepreneur. He is diversifying into many lines of work: real estate, farming peanuts and beans, a plant nursery, building construction, furniture manufacturing for his Spanish clients. Today we learned that he is the most competent crater in Mandalay, packing large items for shipment abroad. He is a confident, careful, considerate young man of exceptional talents. He is a joy to work with.

Keeping Kids in School

During a visit to Daung Nyay Char village where we had built a 30 ft x 36 ft three-classroom building we were dismayed to hear that there were decreasing numbers of students in the higher grades: grade 1 had 64 students, grade 2-50, grade 3-40, grade 4-31 and grade 5-22 students. We were told that many parents relied on their children to help work in the field or to take care of younger siblings to allow both parents to work in the fields. The village was obviously very poor. In addition, since there was no school nearby for grades 6,7, 8, (nearest one is 7 miles away requires boarding of students with other families but there was insufficient funds to do that), the students mostly stop schooling after grade 5 or before. There are 300 families with a population of 1,500 people in the village.

To address the issue of kids not attending school, we were told that if the younger children, age 3-5 could go to a kindergarten nursery, the older children could attend grades 3, 4, 5. Since the village could not afford to pay for kindergarten teachers, we offered to pay for them for a year and if in one year there were more kids in the upper grades, we'd consider building the classrooms to house grades 6-8.

We heard the same tale of poverty keeping children out of schools in many villages we visited: Taung Patt Village, Sagar Inn. In one village we spoke extensively and enthusiastically of the value of education, and the need for their children to have knowledge so they could get the jobs of the future because they all cannot be farmers. We encouraged them, as a village, to value education higher. At times it felt like we were scolding them. They listened politely but there is no way of knowing whether they took it in or had any intention of addressing the issue.



Myanmar Pipes Projects

In Baw Nin Gon (Ywa Thit/ new village) we were so impressed with the quality of construction of the 30 ft x 60 ft five-classroom building for grades 1-5 and the new housing for the teachers, we asked them, what next? We were told that all the children in the village went to school. Instead of a new school, they requested piping to bring water from a spring 7,500 ft away. They insisted that the local monk was skillful in water system design and had helped other villages nearby. They hope to have enough water for everyone in the village and possibly for irrigation too. We offered to send uniforms for all 90 students and to provide the funds for the pipe when they give us the information on what is needed.

Travel Excerpt: “On the Road to Taung Lar”

“The ride out of town quickly brought us into terraced farmland-- rice paddies along with steep hillsides dotted with orchards, gardens on any flat spot of land, frequent oxen grazing. Teams of villagers harvesting rice by hand with scythes, tying up the sheaves of rice stalks or carrying them to a growing pile. Farming here is much like it has been practiced for the last thousand years or so. No mechanization except the motorbikes introduced the past few year—used to take their produce to market. Since the rains have ended the road is passable but for several months each year it isn’t. Then travel is either on (muddy) foot or ox-cart.”

Q. What’s the Prescription for Giggly and Shy?

A. An ambulance, of course!

After arriving in Taung Lar we were greeted by a long double line of villagers with young men making music noisily on rudimentary instruments: drums, cymbals, clackers. The lines led to the new clinic. We were greeted there by Daw Thazin Cho, the mid-wife assigned to the clinic and Daw Tin Tin Htwe, a mid-wife from a nearby clinic. Together they care for 20 villages.

The clinic cost about \$20,000. The government provides the mid-wife who receives \$100/month after four years of training in higher education. The clinic is open for patients from 9-4 daily Monday to Friday and first aid, medicines as well as birth control are freely available.

Sharon, Rich and Steve interviewed the two mid-wives as to their work, women’s health, pregnancies and deliveries. Rich and Sharon have written up the information for interested medical practitioners who inquire about medical conditions, procedures, etc., as well as opportunities for service in Burma.

We asked the mid-wives if there was anything they needed or wanted for the clinic. Initially they said they would like a delivery bed. Later they got giggly and self-conscious and shy but we teased out of them that what they would really like - an ambulance for taking emergencies to the hospital in Kalaw.



More Projects

1. **Bimie village:** the Rural Health Center was very decayed and un-repairable. A new building would have to be built for the five staff that served 70-80 people/month of the total population of 15,778 and four sub-centers, i.e., clinics staffed by mid-wives. We were convinced of the need for a new building. The village promised to provide the bricks, sand and stone for the foundation and the Head of Nursing promised to get us the official design plans for the clinic the following day in Kalaw.
2. **Pa O ethnic village of Nun Yoke:** The need is for a four-classroom building for grades 5, 6, 7, and 8 to house the 40-50 students per grade who would come from this and four nearby villages. The 1.5 acre plot sits on the top of a high plateau with dramatic views of farm lands below. There is a huge spreading tree on the plateau that will remain for shade on the playground. This 30 ft x 120 ft school is the #1 priority of the school official. We suggested finishing off the partially constructed teacher housing in addition to building additional toilets for the increased student population. We all would have enjoyed going to school here.

Tidbits on the Dana (Generosity) Trail

- We dispersed packets of Italian cosmetics to the female teachers (who all wore huge smiles when receiving them) that Kamala had secured for them in a favorite herbal shop in Florence, Italy.
- We offer some dana to the street urchins selling sparrows to be released-- freedom-for-a-fee.
- To officially open the new school in Thein Kone, we were greeted by all the children lined up for about a quarter a mile on either side of the road with music, a dragon and a dancing elephant. It is hard to describe the feeling of the overwhelming sense of the gratitude of the teachers, villagers and students.
- Steve took two large plastic bags of roasted peanuts we had been given on our travels and asked the local taxi driver to take him to a monastery where he offered the peanuts to entire community of study monks.
- Steve and Roger purchased *e-jagway*, samosas and *la payay* and offered them as alms to 30 monks and money to the 30 tilashin (nuns) who passed by during 30 minutes. The total cost for the purchased goods (along with their teas) was \$2 and the money to the nuns was \$30. Money doesn't nearly go that far in North America!
- In Taung Kyi Kyee, a Denu ethnic village, we met Aye Mya Thwe, a young girl who had what the nurse determined to be pre-leprous skin condition. Arrangement were made to have her taken to the Kalaw hospital the next day and we offered to cover all her expenses for travel there and to Taungyi if necessary for further or additional treatment. We gave the teacher \$100 to purchase clothes and toys for the girl as well as to cover her expenses travelling.



And the winners are...

As you can see, some of our work is new construction, some is renovations, some is upkeep, some money goes for operational expenses, etc. One thing is very clear - the need is endless.

This trip we visited 29 sites and assembled spreadsheets of each village and project. We selected a possible \$525,000 worth of projects to do if funds, labor and time permitted. We then chose projects totalling about \$350,000 to fund and build during 2014.

To our supporters!

We are grateful and happy to be able to continue with these activities. We hope you have enjoyed reading of our trip. Thank you for being part of the journey. Thank you for helping to make a difference in people's lives. Thank you for your compassion for the people of Myanmar and for your Dana in supporting Myanmar Schools Project/Myanmar Burma Schools Project Foundation.

From Duke, Steve, Roger and the entire Myanmar Schools Project/ Myanmar Burma Schools Project Foundation team.



Farewell

This is the last trip Duke will be making with the MSP team as he has decided to retire from Myanmar Schools Project. Without Duke, who was the launching inspiration, none of this amazing adventure would have happened. He is a good man, with a kind heart, a generous and loving nature and a good golf swing. Bless him.



