



Burmese Refugee Project  
..... 2011  
Annual  
Report



## Table of Contents

Introduction: Our progress in 2010 .....	3
2010 Calendar Year Projects and Developments .....	5
Another New Hire .....	5
Volunteers Provide Supplemental Tutoring, Counseling, and Research.....	5
Efforts to Find New High Schools for Neediest Cases .....	7
New Website .....	8
Continued Medical and Psychological Assessments and Counseling .....	9
Art Therapy Project .....	9
After-School Activities and Youth-initiated Workshops .....	10
Medical Follow-Up Examinations .....	10
2011 Plans and Projections .....	11
New School Initiative .....	11
Expansion of Existing Initiatives .....	12
Ongoing Mental Health and Medical Initiatives .....	12
2010 Budget and Finances .....	13
The Burmese Refugee Project Budget.....	13
The Banyan School Budget.....	15
Political Update .....	16
The Recent Release of Aung San Suu Kyi: A Cynical Ploy? by Kyi May Kaung .....	16
Community Profile: Jab .....	19
Appendix A. About the Burmese Refugee Project .....	22
Who We Serve .....	22
Mission .....	22
Our Approach to Community-Building .....	22
The Services We Provide .....	22
The Shan in Thailand .....	23
Results to Date .....	24
On-going challenges .....	25
Summary .....	25
Appendix B. Environmental Workshop Curriculum .....	26

To make a tax-deductible donation, please see <http://www.burmeserefugeeproject.org/donations.html> for credit card transactions. If you prefer a check, please send it to:

Burmese Refugee Project  
c/o Peter Muennig  
Columbia University  
600 W. 168th St., 6th Floor  
New York, NY 10032

For more information, please see our website (<http://www.burmeserefugeeproject.org/>) or contact the BRP Executive Director, Celina Su ([celinasu@gmail.com](mailto:celinasu@gmail.com)).

## Introduction: Our progress in 2010

We are delighted to report that in its 10<sup>th</sup> year, the Burmese Refugee Project (BRP) continued to help over 200 Shan refugees in northwest Thailand access education, health, and legal services, with virtually no administrative overhead.

In 2010, we welcomed a new social worker, Joe; she has already begun to assist our previously overworked social worker and teacher, Lydia. With the help of several volunteers, we have made great strides in tutoring English and other subjects and completed a broad-scale art therapy program. Finally, with the help of three medical students from Columbia University, we completed a new round of medical and psychological assessments of the community.

In 2010, the BRP population grew slightly. The BRP provided the essential financial and social support necessary for 54 refugee children to get an education. These children would not be attending school otherwise. Over 20 of these children are now attending *mattayom*, or secondary school, and four new arrivals from Burma are now enrolled in schools for the first time. All but a handful of these children come from families in which no older family member can read or write in any language, let alone help their children with math, history, physics, or literature. Yet the Shan refugee children are outperforming many of the local Thai youth in school. Almost all of the children continue to perform incredibly well—at or near the top of their respective classes—and many more have passed the high school exam. (This is not an easy task in Thailand, even for native Thai children.)

Northern Thailand has experienced economic development and prosperity in the past couple of years. As a result, some of the refugees are earning more at work than ever before. This is especially true of day laborers, who can garner a higher price because they are in shorter supply, but it is also true of some of the more traditional rock collection jobs the Shan people have relied on for long-term employment. (The rocks, which are collected from rivers, are used in the booming construction industry. The families who engage in sharecropping remain comparatively poor, even vis-à-vis other refugee Shan households.) More families, for instance, have been able to build outhouses and to purchase means of transport, such as bicycles or motorbikes. However, the refugees have no means to own land or open bank accounts, and few adults can read, so they have great difficulty navigating Thai institutions.

Without a means for saving the money or a working knowledge of how to better invest it, the families sometimes expend their meager savings on alcohol, gambling, or methamphetamine. (Methamphetamine is sometimes used by employers to increase the productivity of their employees at work, creating a vicious downward spiral of dependence on the drug for work and dependence on higher income for the drug.) Thus, the BRP has stepped up work on stable home environments, safe learning spaces for the children, safe sex and reproductive health workshops, and psychosocial counseling.

Despite these efforts, the Shan children continue to score somewhat below Thai children on our assessment of psychological well-being. We have therefore redoubled our efforts in counseling. In fact, in 2010, we had the help of an experienced school counselor,

Michelle Emry, who worked with the children using collaborative art therapy. Michelle previously worked with at-risk youth, and she proved to be a natural with the Burmese Refugee Project kids as well.

For those children whose home life is especially difficult, we have secured placements in private schools. In 2010, Nuan, an orphan who had been living with her sister and her sister's abusive husband, was the first student to attend private school. (Nuan was profiled in the Winter/Spring 2005 Burmese Refugee Project Newsletter.) She is extremely happy with her new life. Others in the community now call her the "city girl" because of her modern haircut, tee shirt, and jeans. In fact, the transformation in Nuan has inspired the other children with difficult lives to work harder so that they, too, can test into private school. This year, Artit and Jab will also begin attending schools in Chiang Mai, once the new academic year begins in May.

## 2010 Calendar Year Projects and Developments

### Another New Hire

Last year, Roj and Kaan, who have been working with the Burmese Refugee Project for the past 10 years, handed over the reigns to our new social worker, Lydia. They continue to volunteer their time to help with managing the children in private school, but Lydia was left to do the work of two people. She did a fantastic job of it, and she has been able to cope with the help of longer-term volunteers. Still, we came to realize that volunteers were not enough. Even with the help of our volunteers, staff turnover means that additional time must be spent on training. Lydia's tutoring work alone often required her to be in two places at the same time. Therefore, we hired Joe, who is originally from Bangkok and holds a university degree in Communications, and who is a long-time resident of northwest Thailand.

Joe is a lucky find. She has incredibly impressive interpersonal skills, and the refugees have opened up to her very quickly. Joe is especially adept at speaking with refugee members with honesty, candor, and warmth. In addition, she worked with some of the same children we work with today back in the 1990s. Back then, the BRP was unofficial, consisting of local Thais who provided free Thai and math skills to Shan children. She helped Roj and Kaan, who ran an informal school out of a hut. Although Joe stopped volunteering with the informal school after a couple of years, she remained in the area.

When officially (re)joining us in December, Joe immediately started on the task of reconnecting with the older kids, two of whom desperately needed help, and working closely with parents to tackle more of the tensions in the refugee community's adult population. She has also been helping with tutoring and with refining the curriculum.

As many of you know, about 4 years ago, we began working with Ek, who is a Shan Burmese refugee himself (see the Winter 2008 *Burmese Refugee Project Newsletter* for a profile). He has been tutoring other Shan in the area in English, Thai, and math for many years as a volunteer, so he is well-known and trusted in the area. Ek has been helping us with special initiatives. For instance, he assisted us with our complete medical assessment of the community, translations of basic Thai surveys into Shan, and translations of English-language community handouts into Thai.

### Volunteers Provide Supplemental Tutoring, Counseling, and Research

In 2010, we were lucky enough to host six interns who generously dedicated time and effort to BRP efforts:

Michelle Emry holds a Bachelor of Social Work from the University of Portland recently completed her Master in Human Rights at the Curtin University of Technology in Australia. Michelle worked with us previously to help connect us with other refugee NGOs and inter-governmental agencies to research the possibility of obtaining birth certificates and documentation of Shan refugees, and tutoring the BRP children in English and providing after-school activities, especially for the neediest cases.



This year, she came back armed with art supplies to help us with an ongoing problem in the community. It turns out that Michelle has experience working with troubled youth, and is now enrolled in a second masters program in psychological counseling. She initiated a comprehensive art therapy program, which was self-funded and executed over a 6-month period. She's second from the left in the picture here.

Emily Hurstak (both senior and junior), Erica Ferrand, and Kelly Burke all came to Thailand to help conduct a complete medical and psychological assessment of the community. They went from house to house to interview patients, take blood pressure measurements, and conduct medical exams as needed. They are in the process of writing up their findings for a medical journal.

Emily Hurstak, Jr. graduated from Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons with a combined MD and MPH from Columbia's Mailman School of Public School. She is a first year internal medicine resident at UCSF in the SFPC primary care program, a program designed to train leaders in primary care for underserved and vulnerable populations. Her interests include homeless healthcare, preventative health, and global health.

Emily Hurstak, Jr., was joined by her mother, Emily Hurstak, Sr., a clinical Nurse Practitioner.

Erica Farrand graduated from Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons in 2010 after completing a Doris Duke Clinical Research Fellowship in the Center for Liver Disease and Transplantation at CUMC. She is a first year internal medicine resident at Columbia University - New York Presbyterian Hospital. Her interests include health care policy, hepatology, and global health.



Kelly Burke graduated from Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons in 2010 after completing a year of research in the Department of Clinical and Molecular Genetics at CUMC. She is currently a first year pediatric resident in the Community Pediatrics Track at the Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital of New York, Columbia University – New York Presbyterian. Her interests include primary care, hematology, oncology, and global health.

Dominic Boyle is a student from Madison, Wisconsin, currently studying music and political philosophy at Sarah Lawrence College. In Wisconsin, he worked on organizing statewide conferences for LGBTQ students and their Allies, and also interned with a LGBT Political Advocacy group. After graduating high school in 2009, he came to work with the BRP for three months during his year off. He hopes to continue working with social justice groups as he goes through college, and

hopes to make his way back to Thailand to work for the BRP again.

Dom contributed the following reflection about his time with the BRP:

*During my time with the BRP I taught in two locations, at the Rock Village with Lydia, and by myself at [another location], continuing what Erica and Emily started. It was hard to teach without a classroom, and it was hot and the kids were often tired, but I think we accomplished a lot... The kids... started writing more, and they started being able to sound out new words! ... With such a large group it was wonderful to be able to split up the kids into two groups roughly based on age and ability. That allowed us to keep the kids engaged for longer.*

*I loved playing with the kids too, and we all had fun swimming in the river, and when Michelle organized a trip to the pool.*

*Some days were certainly harder than others, but when it was a good day and teaching went well, it was so worth all the hard days. In reality I was only there for a snippet of peoples' lives, but I am glad I was, and I hope they are too.*

As Dom's reflection shows, volunteering is no easy task. The workbooks that the children use in the formal schools, for example, contain many errors. The children have to work after school, so they are often exhausted by the time the tutoring starts. Still, our hard working volunteers have made an immeasurable difference, and the kids are coming along very well academically and exhibiting much greater confidence in their learning abilities than before.

### Efforts to Find New High Schools for Neediest Cases

In 2010, a number of our young students moved into the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades. This was a huge milestone. Most Thai children in the area do not successfully test into high school. Our students have done very well in this environment, and we have had a high placement rate.

However, as we indicated in last year's annual report, high school can be a difficult time for adolescents. By the standards of wealthier nations, rural Thai schools provide a less than ideal learning environment. This is not only true with respect to academic standards, but also with respect to the psychological support afforded students.

As noted in the last report, to overcome some of these challenges, we began working relationships with a number of private schools, some of which are willing to make special exceptions for children in the Burmese Refugee Project. Many of these schools are very strong institutions, teaching an array of subjects in three

#### Why Mandarin is Important for the BRP Community

China has grown to become the world's second largest economy. It is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, growing at over three times the average rate of the United States over the past few decades. It is also the dominant economic force in Asia. Mandarin is therefore slowly replacing English as the "must learn" language within Asia. Children with English and Mandarin skills will have a much brighter future than those who can just speak English alone, and many private schools in Thailand already offer or mandate English and Mandarin classes from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade on.



different languages (Mandarin, English, and Thai), and employing advanced teaching philosophies, such as the Waldorf or Montessori approaches.

As mentioned above, we successfully placed Nuan in a strong private school last year. This year, we also placed Jab and Artit (whose mother was profiled in our *2010 Annual Report*) in Chiang Mai schools. Because Artit has not consistently lived with his mother for many years, and because his father passed away years ago, he is effectively an orphan. Thus, Artit can thus largely do as he chooses. In contrast, it was a challenge to convince Jab's father to let her go because he wanted her to

continue doing all of the housework. Although she has an 18-year-old sister and a 14-year-old brother, it has always been Jab's role to wake up two hours before school and fetch water, cook all family meals, wash the entire family's clothes, etc. Jab's mental well-being and school performance was suffering from her household duties.



The BRP social workers worked intensely with both Artit's and Jab's families, meeting with them 1-2 times a week for over two months to talk about the children's aspirations, their roles in upholding family responsibilities, and potential ways to meet everyone's needs.

We are happy to announce that Jab passed the test to enter Nuan's school, and Artit is entering another school in Chiang Mai to become an electrical engineer. He worked closely with Jo to research different school options, pass the entrance exam, and gain admission to the program that he feels best fits his family's needs. The pictures here are of Artit (top) and Jab

(bottom) in March 2011 at their respective new schools.

## New Website














On a much smaller note, we recently revamped our website a bit and invite you to check it out. Feel free to give us feedback, too: <http://www.burmeserefugeeproject.org>



## Continued Medical and Psychological Assessments and Counseling

As mentioned above, Emily, Erica, and Kelly came all the way from Columbia University's medical school in New York to conduct a complete medical assessment of the community. They were accompanied by Emily's mother, who is an outstanding clinician, to oversee their hard work and to help out. This assessment consisted of blood pressure checks, height, weight, a medical history, a drug history, and exams directed at any specific problems that members of the community might have had.

### Hypertension (High Blood Pressure)

<p><b>What is blood pressure?</b></p>  <p>Blood pressure is force that the blood causes when it presses against the tubes (blood vessels) that carry blood around the body. The heart is a muscle that pumps blood around the body through blood vessels when it beats.</p>  <p>During each heart beat, the blood pressure varies from a maximum number (systolic) to a minimum number (diastolic). Normal value is 120/80. High blood pressure is 140/90 or higher.</p>	<p><b>Complications of Hypertension</b></p>  <p>High blood pressure can hurt the blood vessels and the heart muscle by making it harder to pump the blood. High blood pressure increases one's risk for heart attack (heart damage), stroke (brain damage), kidney disease, failure of heart muscle, disease of blood vessels supplying rest of body</p> 	<p><b>Controllable Risk Factors</b></p>    	<p><b>Lifestyle Changes and Treatments</b></p>     
--	---	---	--

To get a better sense of how the Burmese Refugee Project is doing, they also repeated their work with Shan people who are outside of the purview of the project. In technical terms, they worked with a "convenience sample control group." It allows us to get an idea of whether and how the Burmese Refugee Project might be improving people's health.

and writing up their results. Previous work done by Columbia University medical

students resulted in two publications in the *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*.

<p><b>เรียนรู้เรื่องความดันเลือดสูง</b></p> <p><b>ความดันโลหิตคืออะไร ?</b></p>  <p>ความดันโลหิตคือแรงที่เลือดได้บีบจากหัวใจเราส่งออกไป (หลอดเลือด) ที่นำเลือดสู่ทั่วร่างกาย ก้านเนื้อหัวใจ เป็นที่บีบเลือดทั่วร่างกาย นำหลอดเลือดเมื่อมันเต้น</p>  <p>หัวใจเต้นแต่ละจังหวะ ความดันโลหิตจะแตกต่างกันจากจำนวนสูงสุด หรือขั้นต่ำสุด โดยค่าปกติระหว่าง 120/80 ถ้าความดันโลหิตจะสูง 140/90 หรือสูงกว่า</p>	<p><b>ภาวะแทรกซ้อน ของ ความดันโลหิตสูง</b></p>  <p>ความดันโลหิตสูงสามารถทำลายหลอดเลือดและกล้ามเนื้อหัวใจได้ ด้วยการบีบเลือดจาก ความดันโลหิตสูง เมื่อยที่จะเป็นโรคหัวใจ และหัวใจวายได้, หลอดเลือดในสมองแตก (ความเสียหายสมอง), โรคไตในหลอดเลือด</p> 	<p><b>คุณสามารถควบคุมได้ หลีกเลี่ยงปัจจัยเสี่ยง คือ</b></p>    	<p><b>การวิถีชีวิตด้วยการ รักษาโรคความดันสูง</b></p>     
--	--	---	--

To the left is one of the instructional handouts they put together for their counseling with individual refugees on battling hypertension.

### Art Therapy Project

While one would not necessarily know it from working with them (as the BRP children seem to get along and laugh easily), the Shan kids have tended to score poorly with respect to

peer functioning on a test of psychological well-being. In simple English, this means that they were having a tough time getting along with others their same age. When Michelle Emry, a previous volunteer, learned of this, she initiated an extensive art therapy program especially for them.

Art therapy is perhaps the ideal approach to this specific type of problem because it helps the kids work together on a common goal to accomplish something that is both fun and rewarding. As such, it is relatively low stress, and it does not carry with it the institutional feel of school projects. It also helps the kids learn from one another. Low-income children like the Shan rarely, if ever, receive the chance to work with media like

photography, tee-shirt art, plasticine clay, or other materials that higher-income children sometimes take for granted. The kids were allowed to keep and display their work... something in which they have taken great joy and pride.



Michelle made this happen all on her own, raising funding from friends and family all over the world to purchase the supplies. The kids are asked to work together to create designs, engage in digital photography projects, paint faces, make beads, embroider, make sand art, make tee-shirts, and make jewelry. Amazingly, Michelle financed the entire project herself. We are now in the process of repeating our psychological assessment tool (the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) to see how much progress has been made.

### After-School Activities and Youth-initiated Workshops

In 2009, the Burmese Refugee Project revamped its tutoring program. Previously, the work had been directed at assisting children with their schoolwork. However, the schoolwork was not what we considered to be up to basic learning standards. For example, the materials the students were sent home with contained a number of errors that would lead to a misunderstanding of the concepts that were being presented.

We therefore purchased some basic but accurate learning materials, including a complete English learning course. Both of our social workers are fluent in English, and they are able to correct any mistakes that the children are learning in school. They are also both college-educated and proficient in math and other topics. Thus, we have slowly transformed our tutoring initiative into an after-school program designed to both supplement and enhance the local school's educational efforts.

The third phase of the after-school program involved introducing new workshops upon the request of the students. For instance, the students indicated that they are interested career information, drug and substance abuse issues, and environmental issues. They also expressed interest in topics relating to self-esteem. Lydia and Michelle worked together to develop curricula on these topics. For an example, please see Appendix B. Environmental Workshop Curriculum [on page 27](#) for a glimpse at some of the environmental workshop's contents. In addition to attending the workshop and participating in exercises, the children sewed fabric totes to reuse in place of the plastic bags that are so ubiquitous in Thailand.

### Medical Follow-Up Examinations

Peter Muennig, one of the co-founders, met with community members who had elevated blood pressure on the last medical assessment. All of those with critically elevated blood pressure were receiving treatment. However, none of them had blood pressures within acceptable limits. These community members are following up with their primary care physicians for a re-check and a rebalancing of their medications.

## 2011 Plans and Projections

Our priorities for 2011 lie in (1) laying to groundwork to start a Montessori school in collaboration with members of the broader local community, (2) broadening the existing knowledge base of the Shan children, (3) planning for college entrance for those students who are accepted and can obtain partial scholarships to attend, and (4) continuing efforts to improve mental health outcomes in the community.

### New School Initiative

The planned Montessori curriculum-based school, which will be called The Banyan School, will be a not-for-profit school that strives for academic excellence, intellect, and compassion among its students. The school seeks to provide a comprehensive, high quality education program under the leadership of a trained educator and administrator. Courses will be taught in English, Mandarin Chinese, and Thai, with an emphasis on Mandarin and English. (Thai is learned by immersion outside of school.)



Roughly 40% of the student body will consist of Shan children from the Burmese Refugee Project. The remainder of the student body will consist of Thai and foreign students who live in the area. These better-off students will greatly broaden and enhance the learning experience of the Shan students. They will also render the project sustainable; while the startup costs will be substantial, the tuition charged the better-off families will allow us operate without any

ongoing donations. By mixing students, we will better be able to tackle racial discrimination via our commitment to an economically and culturally diverse student body.

The Banyan School fills gaps left open by local Thai public schools in several ways:

1. It will provide multi-language instruction, so that students whose native language is not Thai will benefit from appropriate pedagogical approaches.
2. Students without Thai citizenship will face no discrimination or barriers to entry.
3. The school will provide instruction and adhere to academic standards higher than those currently met by the public schools. (Presently, many of the public schools' elementary school graduates cannot pass the national secondary school entrance exam, and the top students in the local high school have had low passing rates for university entrance exams.)
4. The school's tri-lingual instruction is in keeping with other international schools throughout Thailand. This will help students to meet requirements (and garner scholarships) at a much wider range of secondary and post-secondary schools, both in Thailand and abroad.

While the Banyan School is a collaborative initiative, we hope to fully fund the start-up costs with individual donations. Truly sustainable projects are rare in international development, and we hope that this unique opportunity will entice donors to provide an additional push that will render the school, and help render the Burmese refugee project, financially independent after the first year of operations.



As part of this initiative, the BRP has already held meetings for prospective tuition-paying parents. We have also met and shared resources with the Chiang Mai Montessori Preschool in Chiang Mai and the Khom Loy Development Foundation in Chiang Rai. Finally, we have put together a team of dedicated and skilled volunteers to oversee on-site construction, lead the school as headmaster (the first year *pro bono*), help to gain accreditation, train teachers, and develop our curriculum.

For more information on this initiative, please go to its webpage:

<http://www.burmeserefugeeproject.org/banyanschool.html>

### Expansion of Existing Initiatives

With the help of interns from Columbia and New York Universities, we will be working on new after-school and Mandarin-language initiatives in the coming year.

We are especially excited that we will be joined by a freshly minted graduate of Columbia University's Teachers College, a Masters in Education program, Tierney Tobin, for a full academic year. Tierney will help us further develop and improve our after-school program. The ultimate goal of the tutoring program is to prepare the students for national university placement exams, which are critical in determining who gets placed and who gets a scholarship to attend university. While the Shan are stateless people, and therefore difficult to place in universities, we are confident that we will be able to help many of the Shan children matriculate.

### Ongoing Mental Health and Medical Initiatives

The BRP's mental health initiatives address gambling habits, reproductive health problems, and drug use. We are grateful to have such a well-rounded, talented team—Shan-, Thai-, and English-speaking, male and female—working with the BRP right now.

In addition, we will continue efforts to provide medical follow up for those community members who have high blood pressure. While we do require that the adults pay for their medications, the cost of doing so is not prohibitive in Thailand. Typically, the medication costs under \$1 per month, leaving plenty of household funds for food and other needed expenses. This approach allows us to maintain buy-in from the community, and empowers community members to take charge of their illness. For instance, it provides a stronger incentive to reduce alcohol consumption (a known risk factor for high blood pressure).

## 2010 Budget and Finances

This year, we present two independent budgets, one for the Burmese Refugee Project, and one for the Banyan School. While these two projects may ultimately become financially interdependent, we will keep them separate for fiscal year 2011.

### The Burmese Refugee Project Budget

Last year, we received \$12,081 in individual donations (excluding those for Michelle’s arts therapy project). More than 77% of these donations came from new donors, including a \$10,000 personal donation from a family that knows international development very well—We cannot think of a greater honor or vote of confidence. For the first year in our organizational history, we were entirely funded by individual donors rather than foundations. We are grateful for these funds, as they will ensure that the BRP continues its essential work in a coming year with extra transitional staff expenses, and a donor environment that continues to be impacted by the global economic crisis. We cannot thank our friends and supporters enough for these funds, which allow us to accomplish the sort of on-the-ground, grassroots work and capacity-building most needed in marginalized refugee communities.

In 2010, our credits outstripped our expenditures by just under \$3,000. Thanks to ongoing support from individual donors, the BRP’s assets at the end of 2010 stand at \$34,030. (We had over \$20,000 in assets at the end of 2009.)

<i>2010 Financial Summary (in US dollars)</i>		
	<b>Expenditures</b>	<b>Credits</b>
Staff salaries	\$2,517.24	
Intern stipends	\$1,035.34	
After-school activities	\$608.79	
School uniforms and books	\$1,080.00	
Emergency medical expenses/ services	\$248.82	
Neediest cases	\$3,841.38	
Individual donations		\$12,081.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$9,331.03</b>	<b>\$12,081.00</b>

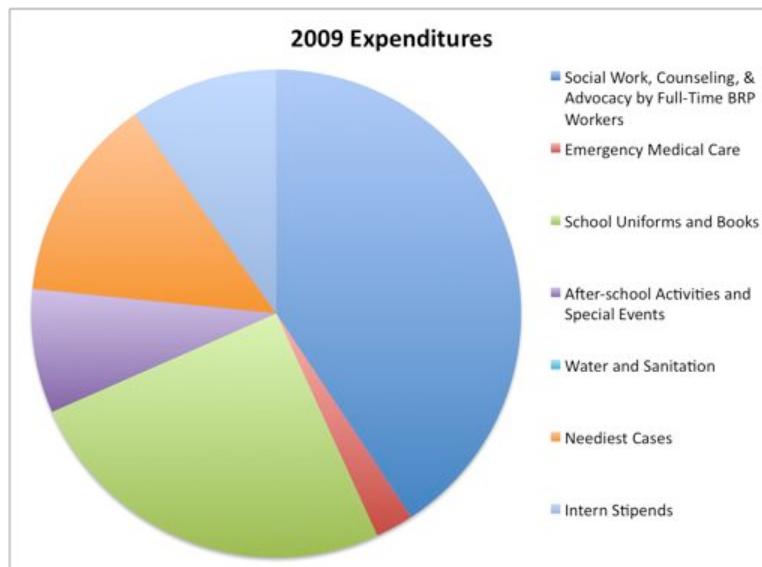
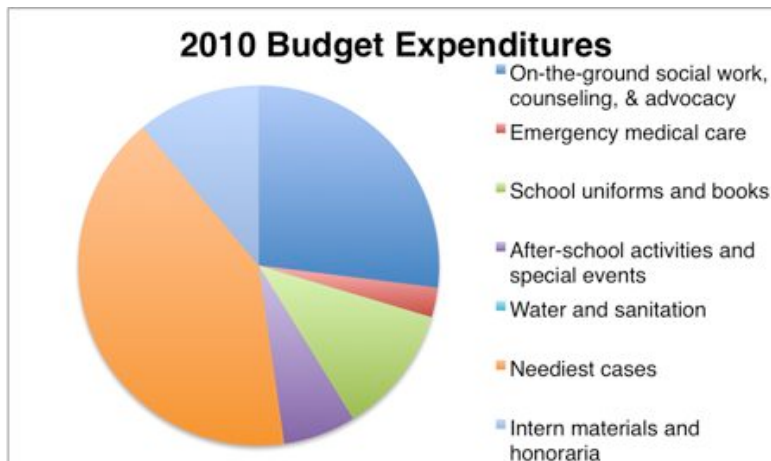
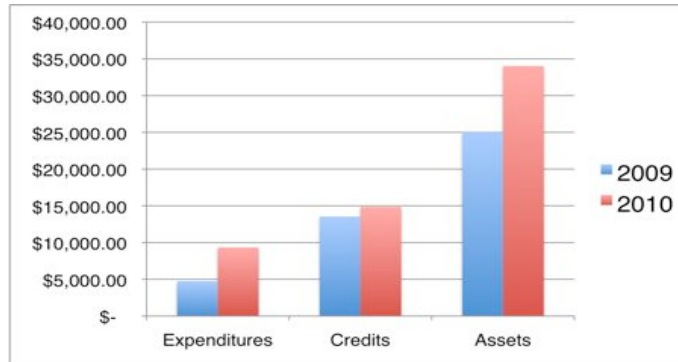
We continue to have incredibly low overhead costs, thanks to our two college-educated workers who are willing to put in long hours for US\$12.50 per day. Still, our expenditures have greatly increased. This is in part because the Thai baht is appreciating relative to

the US dollar and in part because we are now providing health insurance for both project workers. At least as importantly, we are now providing significantly more funding to support the living costs and tuition for the orphans and needy children enrolled in private schools. While this tuition is offset by partial scholarships and is low by high-income nation standards (about \$120 per year), it nevertheless constitutes a significant portion of our budget.

Our costs have thus increasingly shifted toward staff salaries and school tuition. This increase in costs has partially been offset by 3 factors. First, we completed the construction of latrines some time ago, and the community now bears full costs for their maintenance. Second, increased incomes within the community, especially among those

who haul rocks for construction, has increased to the point that it is no longer necessary to provide school uniforms and supplies for over 60% of the children. These costs are now borne by their parents.

### 2009 and 2010 BRP Finances



## The Banyan School Budget

Our Banyan School initiative is just getting off the ground, and we are only beginning our fundraising for this project. Still, a thorough assessment of the local community indicates that those who are willing and able to send their kids to the school for 80,000 Thai Baht (our projected tuition) outstrips the number of seats that will be available by at least 3 to 1. We anticipate that there will be 8 children from the Burmese Refugee Project and 12 tuition-paying children in year one. The school will initially serve only children between the ages of 4 and 6.

The table below presents the start-up and ongoing costs associated with running the school. These costs were reviewed by locals with extensive experience developing land and buildings in the area, using 29 Thai baht per US dollar as the exchange rate.

	Units	Base	Total
<b>1. Fixed start-up costs</b>			
Land	3	31,034	93,103
School house	3	13,793	41,379
Bathroom facility	2	8,621	17,241
Kitchen	1	3,448	3,448
Dining area	1	3,448	3,448
Staff housing	3	5,172	15,517
Nursing station/ library	1	3,448	3,448
Administrative and faculty offices	3	3,448	10,345
Water facilities	1	3,448	3,448
Grounds	1	6,897	6,897
Fence	1	1,034	1,034
Office furniture	3	690	2,069
Classroom furniture	3	2,069	6,207
Classroom Montessori supplies*	6	310	1,862
Additional classroom supplies	6	207	1,241
Computers	3	414	1,241
<b>Sub-Total</b>			<b>211,931</b>
<b>2. Variable annual costs</b>			
Water/ month	12	34	414
Electricity/ month	12	103	1,241
Gas	12	69	828
Sanitation/ month	12	69	828
Janitorial	1	517	517
Cooking	1	517	517
Teaching intern room & board	2	1,379	2,759
Teacher's aide	2	2,069	4,138
Headmaster	1	4,138	4,138
Assistant Administrator	1	2,069	2,069
<b>Sub-Total</b>			<b>17,448</b>
*1 Thai, 1 English, 1 Mandarin			
<b>Total</b>			<b>229,379</b>

## Political Update

The mass unrest between the so-called red shirts and yellow shirts in Thailand in 2010 did not directly affect the Burmese Refugee Project community. These protests were centered in Bangkok, far from northwest Thailand. Nevertheless, the violence last spring leaves the country fractured, with an unstable and fragile government. The former government, led by the Thai Rak Thai party and then-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, generally has the Red Shirt protesters behind it. The current government led by the Democratic Party and current Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, generally has the Yellow Shirt protestors behind it. Unfortunately, both have partially based their platforms on deterring or deporting migrant laborers and refugees from Burma, Cambodia, and Laos.

In breaking news in Burma, on Thursday, March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011, a 6.8-magnitude earthquake struck the Thai-Burmese border. The tremors were felt as far as the Thai capital of Bangkok, but the epicenter appears to be the Shan State city of Tachilek. Around 75 people have been reported killed thus far, but it is quite difficult to obtain accurate information from inside Burma.

In February 2011, the United States announced that it would meet with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) political party to discuss whether the US should modify its sanctions against Burma. While the economic sanctions are meant to punish the military junta for its 2,000+ political prisoners, repression of ethnic minorities, and denial of basic freedoms, many critics (including some in the NLD) contend that the sanctions have primarily hurt ordinary people in Burma, not the power elites.

The Myanmar military junta held elections last November, the same month that it released Saw Suu Kyi from house arrest, but these elections excluded the NLD.

A member of the Burmese Refugee Project's Board of Advisors, Kyi May Kaung, wrote the following political analysis for the Peace X Peace website (<http://www.peacexpeace.org>) in January. It is reprinted here with permission.

### The Recent Release of Aung San Suu Kyi: A Cynical Ploy? by Kyi May Kaung

As an ardent fan of Aung San Suu Kyi, a true believer in democracy and human rights, and as a mother myself, I can't help but be happy to see Suu Kyi "free at last" and reunited after ten years with her younger son Kim Aris. Ten years must have felt very long, however brave a front she puts on.

I also can't help feeling that letting Suu Kyi go and giving her son a visa is a cynical ploy by the junta to deflect attention away from their sham election and from the military force they are using to crack down on the ethnic minorities who refused to lay down arms and join the Border Guard Force plan.

I think Kim Aris was given a visa and allowed to see his mother because the regime thought he would try to persuade Aung San Suu Kyi to leave Burma with him.



However, he returned to the UK on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December and it does not look like Kim asked his mother to stop her political activity or to leave Burma as the junta may have hoped.

Kim, now aged 33, has turned out to have inherited his grandfather Aung San's and his mother Aung San Suu Kyi's incandescent charm. Instead of persuading his mother to leave and rather than looking defeated, broken or accommodating, as soon as he set foot in Rangoon airport, Kim took off his over-shirt to reveal the fighting peacock emblem of his mother's party, the National League for Democracy, tattooed on his arm.

Watching Daw Suu —smiling, laughing and talking to the crowd—I have a strong sense of *déjà vu* and foreboding. “I've seen this before. How many people in the crowds are junta agents? What if . . .” runs through my mind like a bad soundtrack.

Since her release, it has become surprisingly easy for people outside of Burma to call Aung San Suu Kyi and talk to her or interview her. I cannot believe that this is not intentional on the part of the supreme power holders of Burma. To date, since her November 13<sup>th</sup> release, Suu has talked to Laura Bush on the phone and been interviewed by BBC and VOA Burmese Services, Irrawaddy magazine, Norway-based Democratic Voice of Burma, Time magazine and others. A group of naïve American high school students—who unwisely mentioned on tape “how this came about”—have also been able to speak to her.

Daw Suu even has a weekly call-in radio show with “listeners” which Radio Free Asia publicizes as if the listeners are from inside Burma. However, to date, the people who “call in” are in fact all located outside Burma. Most are “professional dissidents” so to speak. Questions such as this are posed: “Dear Daw Suu, what do you think of national reconciliation, what should we do?” The questions and Daw Suu's answers are pre-recorded and presented in a very Burmese, and I think disrespectful, “two clowns and a lovely princess” style of Burmese *anyeint* shows—the presenters' goofy voices contrasting badly and sadly with Daw Suu's dignified, well-considered, and discreet answers.

So far Daw Suu has not missed a beat, but sooner or later I think the junta will find or invent a “fault.” They have put the onus of delivering such a weighty thing as real democracy on her frail shoulders, while they themselves only promise a fake “democracy.”

I find that I am not the only one who fears Aung San Suu Kyi will be assassinated. Time Magazine's Hannah Beach asked Suu if she would consider wearing a bullet proof vest. An Irrawaddy magazine article says most people in Burma think she will be assassinated.

I think Aung San Suu Kyi should try to live as long as she can. She should accept the Canadian Government's recent invitation to come and accept their honorary citizenship at a special ceremony. She should go to Oslo and accept her Nobel Peace Prize in person and confer with the other Nobel Peace Laureates, the Elders, in person.

Aung San Suu Kyi should go on an extended sabbatical to write down her democratic ideas. Like His Holiness the Dalai Lama and International Campaign for Tibet, she would be much more effective working from outside.

She should not try to be “just a beautiful corpse” as dissident Rachel Goldwyn said

when she negotiated her own release from a Burmese prison in the year 2000.

Like many others, I don't want to wake up one morning and find out that like Benazir Bhutto, Aung San Suu Kyi is gone.

For additional information on the current political context, please see the following resources:

The Human Rights Watch 2010 Burma Report:

[http://xa.yimg.com/kq/groups/20354587/1676921393/name/burma\\_0.pdf](http://xa.yimg.com/kq/groups/20354587/1676921393/name/burma_0.pdf)

*Irrawaddy* Magazine:

<http://www.irrawaddy.org/index.php>

## Community Profile: Jab

We will continue to feature a profile of a different member of the BRP community in each of our annual reports, as we did in our newsletters in the past.

Jab is 17 years old and entering 10<sup>th</sup> grade. She has lived in Thailand since she was two years old, and neither she nor anyone in her immediate family has been back to Burma in the past 15 years. She came with her father, mother, older brother, and older sister. Her mother was pregnant with her younger brother, Taworn, at the time. Her older brother currently lives in Chiang Mai, and the rest of them live together in Maehongson Province.

Jab herself has no memories of Burma. Like her, all of Jab's aunts and uncles moved to Thailand to escape civil conflict and poverty, and to try to give their children better lives. Her father often talks about how much he misses his mother and sister, their two close relatives who still live there, but Jab has never met them.



Since Jab attended the informal school the original BRP social workers ran for several years, she has known them for more than a decade now. In the old class picture to the left, she is the one wearing the gray and purple baseball cap in the bottom row, center.

When the local government shut down the informal school, Jab attended “real” Thai public schools. She remembers her first day: She only played with her fellow BRP students Khong and Kurr, and her brother Taworn, because she was afraid of the other students. Still, this first public school was not too intimidating because there were many other Thai Yai (the local word for Shan people, especially those who have been around for many generations) there. Further, there were Chinese and Lisu hill tribe students as well, so they did not feel like they were the only outsiders.

Nevertheless, there were times when the ethnic Thai students teased her mercilessly, and there were a couple of years when she cried every day. Jab says that she did not have any non-Shan friends in the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 3<sup>rd</sup> grades. Although the teasing continues, she now has a greater range of friends at school.

To compound matters, the teachers often ignored the teasing, effectively condoning such misbehavior. Too often, they themselves discriminated against Shan children. Jab notes that many of the teachers are quite kind, but that others do not value their work or, in Jab's words, “really teach.” Classes are large (with at least 40 students in each classroom), and as the section on our Banyan School initiative explained, the local schools are notoriously poor performers academically. One teacher told her that Shan

children—even those born in Thailand (like her brother Taworn)— may “eat Thai food, and use Thai things, and waste Thai resources,” but they “will never be Thai, and should be sent back to Burma.” Of course, none of the Shan children ever say anything in response.

Despite these challenges, Jab and her classmates from the BRP community have thrived. Jab still enjoys school—her favorite classes are math and gym, and she was especially excited to wear a Girl Scout-like green uniform beginning in the fourth grade. More substantively, Jab is proud to report that from 1<sup>st</sup> until 8<sup>th</sup> grade, BRP children took the top four spots at her school—Kamloo always took 1<sup>st</sup> place, Kurr 2<sup>nd</sup>, Khong 3<sup>rd</sup>, and Jab 4<sup>th</sup>. (Unfortunately, as we noted in earlier newsletters, Khong dropped out of school after giving birth to her daughter, Dao. She is now attending Saturday school to work towards her high school diploma.) Jab noted that even when other children found schoolwork to be difficult, the BRP children easily mastered class materials.

For her electives, Jab takes “snack-making” (a basic cooking class) and farming. She had originally signed up for computers and a class called “society” (a bit like a general humanities and human geography class), but the other students ostracized her, as there were no other Shan students choosing these electives. She then transferred to snack-making and farming, where all of the other Shan students were enrolled. In farming, they read books about animal husbandry and planting beans in the first term, and they cut the grass behind the school and landscape the school grounds the second term. Jab does



*Jab, in her first school uniform, and her father in 2002.*

not think the class is interesting or enjoyable, primarily because she finds it tiring to perform manual labor under the hot sun.

It is telling, then, that even such conditions, Jab says that for fun, she goes to school. Jab’s home environment has been strained enough so that the BRP staff recently worked with her family to allow Jab to attend a private school in Chiang Mai with Nuan, as noted on pages 7-8. She will begin attending this new school in May 2011.

For now, her everyday routine remains the same: Jab gets up at 6 am, fetches water from a well in her village, sweeps the house, makes food for her parents (usually, nam prik ong and rice—she doesn’t eat it herself), changes her clothes, gets her school materials together, and takes a 20-minute walk to school around 7:30. Her first meal of the day is during her 20-minute break at 10 o’clock. After school, she goes home, cooks food, and sweeps the house. She washes her parents’, Taworn’s and her clothes (her older sister Poy washes her own clothes), takes a cold water bucket bath at the well around 6 or 7 o’clock each evening, and works on her homework on her room floor, using a single hanging lightbulb, until 9 or 10 o’clock.

She also helps her parents plant seeds or harvest garlic. Her parents are sharecroppers, and they always command that Jab (as opposed to either her 15-year-old brother or 19-year-old sister) help to pick the family's share. Jab's back often hurts because of this. Still, Jab's education has already helped her to contribute to her family's welfare in other ways as well: She often helps her parents read medicines, newspapers, and government forms. When her father goes to the market to sell their vegetables, Jab usually goes to calculate their sales.

Both the BRP staff and Jab's neighbors have regularly noted over the years that her parents exhibit quite a bit of preferential treatment for both Taworn and Poy, at Jab's expense. Thus, for years now, Jab has said that her school grades would be better if she did not have to do 100% of the housework, and that she would like to finish high school



*Jab in January 2011.*

and go on to college. She notes that on many days, she does not finish doing housework until 10 pm, so she is forced to leave homework unfinished. Her parents have threatened to take her out of school and make her work every year for at least 5 years now. So, it is quite a feat that the BRP social workers were able to build enough trust with Jab's parents, and speak with them often and candidly enough, so that they agreed that it would be best for Jab to continue school in Chiang Mai.

In preparation for her move, Jab has now begun to teach Poy and Taworn how to perform many of the basic tasks she mastered years ago: cooking, calculating kilos of vegetables at the market, etc. She is both nervous and excited for her new school, in ways she has never experienced before. She said that she wanted to continue her studies because that, she will know that "today may be a struggle, but tomorrow will be better, easier, happier."

# Appendix A. About the Burmese Refugee Project

## Who We Serve

The Burmese Refugee Project is a not-for-profit organization that serves Shan refugees from Burma (Myanmar) who are living in Thailand. The Shan are an unrecognized refugee population within Thailand. Most Shan have no birth certificate, and are therefore stateless. “Statelessness” refers to a lack documentation of one’s existence. Without such documentation, it becomes difficult or impossible to establish citizenship in any country, to travel, to receive an education, or to earn a living. Since they have no recourse to the law, stateless people are often systematically exploited.

The Shan in Thailand are fortunate in that they often able to receive temporary work permits from employers. These permits only allow them to perform the job they are sponsored to do and in the town that they are sponsored to do it. (If they are caught leaving the town, they are frequently arrested and deported, sometimes with life threatening consequences.) The temporary work permits can cost up to one-third of the typical Shan’s annual wages. However, this funding is used in part to allow Shan children to attend Thai schools, or to receive other social services that they otherwise could never hope to.

## Mission

The Burmese Refugee Project is a non-profit organization seeking to build participatory models for community development and education in various Shan communities in Northern Thailand. We believe that by building a well-educated, healthy, and economically robust Shan community, we are laying the foundations for self-governance should Burma one day become a democratic nation.

The Burmese Refugee Project plays no role in political organizing and we have no religious affiliation.

## Our Approach to Community-Building

We provide small grants to defray some, but not all, of the costs associated with community development and childhood education. Our project budgets are partially covered using pooled donations from the community we serve. We then supplement these funds, organize the community around a task, such as sanitation or education, and then provide basic oversight. Where the community cannot donate money, community members are required to contribute labor to the development projects. This approach instills a sense of participation and ownership that helps ensure that our outcomes are maximized.

## The Services We Provide

## 1. Education

Our primary mission is to provide an outstanding education for stateless Shan children. Education helps to ensure that future generations of Shan will have the earnings and skills that allow them to live a long, healthy life. Very few Shan are literate, let alone have any formal education. Therefore, we also hope to provide an intellectual foundation upon which the Shan might rebuild their culture and identity should Burma return to democracy. To these ends, we provide after school programs, defray the costs of school uniforms and books, and, in some instances, pay tuition costs at high quality schools within Thailand. We also plan to operate an elite school that mixes Shan children with better-off Thais and foreigners, providing a cross-cultural emersion program for all of the children in a Montessori environment.

## 2. Sanitation

Most communities are built around a small river or agricultural aqueducts. These waterways were previously used both for the removal of human waste and for drinking water. We supply porcelain toilets, cement, and holding tanks for communities and supervise the construction of latrines. Each community is required to supply materials necessary to maintain privacy, to provide the labor required to construct the latrines, and to pay monthly fees for government waste removal services (a big truck that removes sewage from holding tanks). We have completed our goal of providing one latrine for every four households. Some households have now paid for their own private latrines. Therefore, this is a very infrequent cost.

## 3. Healthcare and Health Education

At the outset of the project, approximately half of all Shan children and adults suffered from chronic minor ailments. One or two people a year require lifesaving medical treatment that they cannot afford. Few Shan still have teeth by the time they reach twenty years of age. We provide emergency medical grants to the hospital, vitamin A, and vaccines to every member of the Shan communities we serve. Since completion of the latrines, we no longer provide deworming medications.

We also provide basic health education to the community. We construct our lessons based solely on their questions and needs. For example, we spoke with girls entering puberty about menstruation, gave tips for prenatal care, and spoke to interested households about family planning.

## The Shan in Thailand

The Shan are an ethnic group currently persecuted by the national government in Burma. The Burmese government has banned the Shan language from all public institutions, engages in systematic rape and torture of the Shan people, and has captured many Shan as forced labor for the national army. Because of this, as many as half a million Shan have crossed the eastern border of Burma into Thailand.

While Shan people living in Thailand often have a much higher quality of life than they would have in Burma, their legal and economic disenfranchisement persists. Although official Thai policy guarantees Shan access to basic social services, real-life protection of these rights in some areas is spotty at best. This is partly due to fears that such services

might attract a large number of refugees from Burma, and partly because Thailand is struggling to provide such services to its own people. Many Shan have working permits, but each earns just \$20-\$40 per month. By way of comparison, a Thai public school teacher earns approximately \$430 per month. Nearly all of a Shan worker's earnings go toward food, with housing needs typically met by squatting on undeveloped or sharecropping land. In addition, the Thai government charges each applicant an annual fee of \$100 for each work permit, which amounts to 3-4 months wages.

The Shan people's Thai residency remains tenuous, even when a family member obtains a work permit. Few Shan immigrants attain refugee visas, even as the Thai government grants Karen and other Burmese minorities refugee status. This situation places the Shan in especially precarious situations, since they do not have access to refugee camps, NGOs (non-governmental organizations), or international human rights institutions.

That said, the Shan also have a long history in northwest Thailand. They share with Thais not just a border, but also a dominant religion (Theravada Buddhism), a linguistic family, and, we hope, an interest in everyday life with peace and dignity.

## Results to Date

The BRP has helped its refugee community to attain significant improvements in health and education outcomes, pool resources for community-driven initiatives, and possess the means and coping mechanisms necessary to make better-informed life decisions.

For example, approximately 90% of the BRP community's adults are illiterate, and most of the 10% who are literate cannot read and write in Thai. The children went from complete illiteracy to grade-appropriate competency in a broad range of topics. Children from the Burmese Refugee Project tend to outperform their Thai peers in local schools, scoring the top positions in most every school in which they are enrolled. We hope to place various children in a "Waldorf approach" school in which they will learn Mandarin Chinese, English, and Thai. We believe that this high level of education is justified because so few Shan are capable of engaging in governance, engineering, law, or other topics required for a functioning state.

Another area of success has been in our health projects. The Shan historically tend to die young of preventable infectious diseases. We have tackled these problems with our successful sanitation and vaccination initiatives. In just 6 years, the Shan children have moved from the bottom 10% of Thai children in height and weight to the 40% of the average height and weights. This is a statistically significant increase.

At the beginning, the BRP provided the concrete and porcelain for the outhouses, while the families themselves built the outhouses; later, the families pooled funds to build additional latrines themselves. Other community-driven initiatives include access to electricity, with each household's contributions determined by their number of household appliances; counseling about family planning; making tofu for household consumption; and informal tutoring over school vacations. Community members have sought the advice from the BRP social workers on issues as varied as prenatal care, child



vaccinations, child discipline, family planning, the school calendar and curriculum, and negotiating at the market.

Additional information on our outcomes can be found at <http://www.burmeserefugeeproject.org/outcomes.htm>.

### On-going challenges

The adults in the communities we serve have high levels of untreated hypertension and poor dentition despite access to health care. Gambling, alcohol abuse, and even prostitution remain common problems among the parents. Teen pregnancy and high fertility rates remain persistent problems. We have also failed to date to sustain our program in Shan culture, to help ensure that the children remember their heritage. We are addressing these problems slowly with the help of our new Shan social worker, who will work with families on the ground to instill a sense of culture, pride, the need for medical treatment, and the importance of education in an otherwise difficult living environment.

### Summary

In short, the Burmese Refugee Project has had tremendous success in helping the younger, school age Shan obtain an education, and all members of the community to thrive at Thai standards of health or beyond. This suggests that we will be successful in moving future generations toward a healthier, happier future. But our failings in the adult population point to the difficulties one faces in tackling major, entrenched social problems. Of course, we will redouble our efforts to tackle these social problems. However, the main challenge we have going forward is to prevent these social problems from being transmitted to the younger generations. This can only be achieved via outstanding schooling and cultural education programs.

To these ends, we hope to move some of the younger children into a new school initiative called The Banyan School. This will expose the children to native English and Thai speakers, provide opportunities for cultural interchange, and raise additional revenue for the project.

## Appendix B. Environmental Workshop Curriculum

As part of our after-school program, the children requested special topics workshops from the social workers. For a glimpse into the environmental issues workshops Lydia developed in response, please see the next page. In addition to the curriculum here, the children watched curated videos about climate change around the world and worked with Michelle Emry to sew fabric totes to reuse in lieu of plastic bags.