

Kaw Tha Blay, A Place Where I Grew Up

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For me to talk about Kaw Tha Blay (KTB) is like to talk about my family – my big family. I see KTB as my home where I have a lot of brothers and sisters. In fact, among all my “brothers and sisters of KTB”, I am the only one who stayed in KTB hostel for the longest period of time. And for that, I feel so special to KTB and I'm so grateful for what it has done for me; so here in return, I would like to share some parts of my story at KTB.

Well, to begin my story, I have to go back to the year 2002 and talk about why I came to a refugee camp in the first place. Like many young people and children, I came to Maela Refugee Camp to learn and get an education. In 2002, I finished my primary school in my village and there were no schools for me to go next because there was only a primary school in my village. And, if I wanted to continue my education, I would have to go to another village or town which would cost some money. Unfortunately, for this reason, it would be impossible for me to continue my school because my mother didn't have any money. Instead of going to school, I would end up as a farmer like many of the village kids. However, shortly before I decided to work on a farm, a good news was brought to my village that there would be a trip or journey organized by a teacher in Hteepadohta village. The purpose of trip was to take young students to a refugee camp and send them to a hostel or dormitory where they could stay and study there without any cost. This was a very good opportunity for me to continue my school, so my mother decided to send me along with some kids from my village.

On the appointed date, we gathered in Hteepadohta village and we were ready to travel to our destination. Led by two teachers from Hteepadohta village, this journey was made up of about (35) young students of age ranges from 11 to 18. Among the (35) students, (10) of them were from my village and the rest were from Hteepadohta village and nearby villages. It was in March, summertime in Burma, so the weather was not that bad to walk, however, it took us several days to reach Ma Ta Waw, a small town on Thai-Burma border. We crossed Moei River, a river which divides Burma and Thailand, by boat. When we arrived on Thai side, we were a little bit scared and we felt kind of unsafe because we just crossed the border *illegally* without any documents or passports. Shortly, we were asked to get on a mini bus which was arranged to take us to the refugee camp. However, this mini bus didn't take us to the camp because if it did, we probably would be stopped by the Thai police at the check points, so instead, the bus to Kwee Lah Hay, a small Karen village on the bank of Meoi River. We spent a night there; and on the next day in the afternoon, Saw Kshakalu came and picked up us with his truck and took us to his hostel in Maela camp.



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It was dark already when we arrived in Maela Refugee Camp. Underneath the bright moonlight, we got off the truck; entered the camp; and walked up small hills until we reached a building which was mostly made of bamboos and woods and its roof was made of large leaves. Most of us couldn't believe this was the place where we would be taken to because our expectation of Beh Klaw (a common name for Maela Refugee Camp for the Karen people) was totally different - we expected that Beh Klaw would be like a town and have tall buildings; but here, the camp was made of small houses built with bamboos, woods and leaves. At first, many of us looked unhappy and homesick because this place was terrible, but few days later, we made new friends through working and playing together. After all, this refugee camp was not bad at all – in fact, it became our new home and we enjoyed living in the hostel.

In June 2002, I was enrolled in a school in the camp called "Mission High School" which was situated very close to KTB hostel where I stayed. I had already finished my fourth grade in my village and I was supposed to be in my fifth grade; but the principal of the school didn't allowed us, me and most of new students from different places, to be in our intended grades because of many reasons such as different school curriculum that we had, but most importantly, we didn't have any certificates or transfer letters from our old schools. Then, I was put in fourth grade and in the first month, it was a big challenge for me because the contents of the subjects that we learned here and in the village were totally different – even the pronunciations of English words were different, and the worst thing was most subjects taught in the camp were in Karen language; but in my village, all the subjects were in Burmese. It took me a while to figure out how to read and write Karen. So, I along with my friends from the villages, did poorly in our first tests. But few months later, I could read and write Karen very well and, on mid-year exams, I got the highest grade in my class and received a first prize for that. My teachers were very proud of me for what I had succeeded. And, of course, my good work at school was noticed by Saw Kshakalu, the director of KTB hostel, who then sent me to a better school in the camp called Eden Valley Academy (EVA) later that year.

I stayed in KTB hostel from my fourth grade until I finished my high school in EVA and volunteered there as a teacher for one year. Through all these years that I had been staying in KTB hostel, I experienced and noticed many great things that KTB had done to young people. KTB had made differences to the society and improved many individual lives. Each year, KTB supported many students, especially students from poor family inside Burma, who couldn't afford to go to school anymore. In one year, KTB hostel in Maela camp accommodated more than (90) students. KTB hostel had provided so many things to its residences that some parent couldn't do. KTB gave us good food, school uniforms, stationaries, school fees, sport equipment, musical instruments and other needs such us clothing and toiletries. To compare with other kids in the camp, we were much luckier than most kids. We had been given healthy food – lots vegetables, and fish or chicken once a week. And, we also got to grow our own vegetables because we had a big compound. Moreover, we even raised our own fish in our ponds.

In KTB hostel, since there were many students, we had rules and regulations. We had our evening and morning study time, work time where we usually worked on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and fun time – watched TV/movies and played sports (cane-ball, volleyball, football, badmintons, boxing for boys). Talking about work, I think I had learned so many work skills from KTB. I had learned cooking, agriculture, and carpentry. As we were staying in the refugee camp, we stayed in buildings that were made of woods, bamboos and leaves. These materials did not last long, so every year, we had to repair our buildings. From work and sports, we, as brothers and sisters of KTB, had so much fun and learned such important skills for our lives.

It was very obvious that the education in the camp was not that good because of the lack of teaching materials as well as qualified teachers. However, thankfully, I would say the education we received from the camp was much better than most schools in Burma. And, to fill up education needs from schools in the camp, we had our own KTB library where we got many books on different topics and levels. The library was very good for us even though we didn't have any school projects related to them because we didn't have to do research in our schools. So, I used the library mainly just to read for fun and gathered more knowledge. KTB library was the place where I started reading my first book; got to know with World Almanac, children stories, book series: Our Canadian Girl (Marie Claire series– my favorite ones), and “Nancy Drew” my favorite detective series.

Apart from the hostel and the library, KTB had a wider and higher vision for young people, so KTB founded a school called Kaw Tha Blay Junior College (KTBJC) which later became Kaw Tha Blay Learning Center (KTBLC). This school was first located on the other side of Moei River at Mu Aye Pu (Wah Keh Hta), Karen State in Burma. For summer holidays, most schools in the camp would closed from March to May which was almost 3 months long. During our summer holidays, KTB would open summer school so that students from the hostel in the camp who didn't go visit their village would have join it and learn something instead of wasting their time in the camp. The class usually had two levels: lower for children and upper for the adults. In summer school, we usually learned Thai and English. Pi Pi Cathy was one of our English teachers. She was one of the best teacher I have ever had. She taught us a couple of English songs and read us children stories such as “Little Red Riding Hood”. The best part was that she gave us delicious snack during the break. I remembered she once gave us bread and lemonade which we had never had before and it was wonderful. During this kind of summer holidays, we not only had school, we also had other physical training for bigger brothers and sisters. Sometimes, a group of foreigners would come and give some training as well. We also had dentists who would come and clean our teeth and repair our decayed teeth during this time. In addition, we also had other activities such as sports and of course work. Mu Aye Pu was a very great place where we could do many things for fun. We had a very big football field, badminton court, and cane-ball courts. We also went swimming and fishing in Moei River and sometimes we gathered vegetables and oysters.

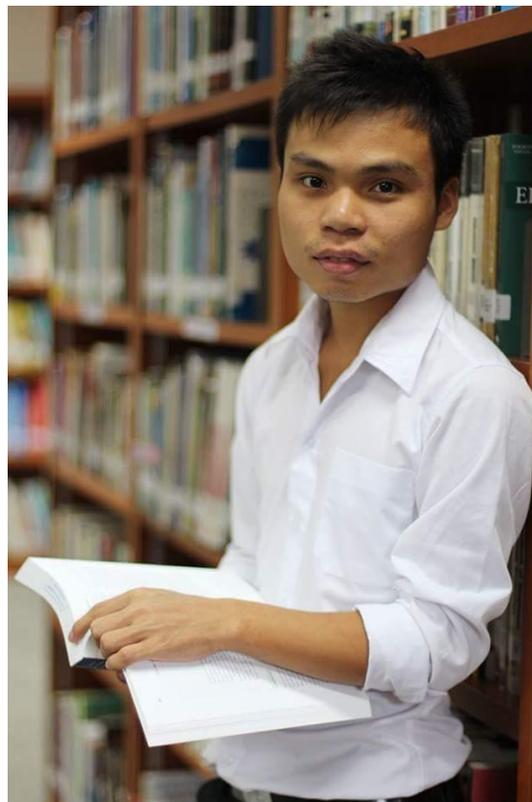
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In 2007, KTBLC was relocated to Tung Tam village, and then I spent most of my summers there. Tung Tam was also a nice place for KTBLC students because there KTBLC still had a very big campus and places to grow vegetables and crops. In Tung Tam, during summer classes, I usually joined the upper class and helped the teacher.

In 2011, after I volunteered in EVA school, I was accepted to study GED in Minmahaw Higher Education Program (MHEP) in Mae Sot. KTB had helped me in my transportation and financial problem to go and stay in Mae Sot. I studied in Mae Sot for one year and came back to KTBLC in Tung Tam in June, 2012; and taught English as an assistant teacher with volunteers from abroad. While teaching in KTBLC, I also learned many things and had so much fun. There were many activities that students do in KTBLC in Tung Tam. One important activity that KTBLC students did was the "Don Dance", a Karen tradition dance. Students practiced this dance and they usually went for a show or contest during an important events of the year. After teaching in KTBLC for three months, in September, I received an email from Prospect Burma which granted me a scholarship to major in Primary Education at Asia-Pacific International University.

Through all the years that I've been studying in university, KTB has still helped me in many ways especially in my financial problem. I'll be graduating next year and will work soon and I will never forget what KTB has done for me and I really can't imagine where I'd be without the support I have received from KTB from since I was little till now.



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