



BRIDGING BORDERS CULTURAL LIAISON

Final Report, compiled and written by Kimberly Schmit, Bridging Borders Program Coordinator, September 4, 2018 University of Utah

Contributing Bridging Borders Partners

Include:

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Institutional Partners: The University of Utah: the Asia Center, College of Humanities; the College of Social Work

International Partners: International Rescue Committee/Thailand; St. Aloysius Gonzaga, Institute of Higher Studies, Taunggyi, Shan State, Myanmar

Introduction

In December of 2017, Bridging Borders and the Asia Center at the University of Utah worked together to create a new position for Bridging Borders Cultural Liaison. The position title, Asia Center Instructional Research Staff, allowed for the formalization of the work that Bridging Borders Cultural Liaisons have already been engaged in for years, as well as the opportunity to develop new curriculum, engagement plans and capacity building programs that have both immediate and long-term impact on Bridging Borders communities. What follows is a summary of the original scope of work, course curriculum, consequential impacts & reflections, and summary of the Karen college pathway program development. During the 2017/2018 year, this position was held by Garroe Wah. The term of work was for eight months, from December 1, 2017 through July 31, 2018.

Bridging Borders lead partners submit this report with enthusiasm. We are very thankful to Asia Center for its leadership, support and work in legitimizing the critical work that community leaders do to create equitable partnerships that enhance our shared communities. The results exceed our expectations and we believe that because of the work of Garroe Wah, in this position, we are seeing the emergence of a new model for University-Community partnerships with immigrant and displaced communities. We look forward to further collaboration.

Bridging Borders is a global collective working together to transform traditional boundaries and create vital networks that lead to innovative opportunities and pathways in education for communities living at or working with those at the margins. The collective is focused on higher education and community relationships, including a diverse group of community partners, academic departments and centers (faculty, staff, students) and organizations. For additional information contact Dr. Rosemarie Hunter, at r.hunter@socwk.utah.edu



Bridging Borders 2018 Workshops were conducted in Mae La and Umpiem Camps, Tak Province, Thailand/Burma (Myanmar) border. Picture is of Mae La Camp.

INSTRUCTIONAL RESEARCH STAFF/BRIDGING BORDERS SCOPE OF WORK

- Design and teach a Karen Language and Culture Class for Asia Center to be attended by Bridging Borders (BB) participants and outside students, as identified by the partners (i.e., past participants of BB, Asia Center affiliated students)
 - Create a curriculum including language, history, culture, geography and current events about the Karen communities that will be visited in Thailand
 - Teach 1 class/week for 6 weeks (1-hour class)
 - Participate in discussions regarding how this might be offered on-line
- Act as the Lead Cultural Liaison for the BB 2018 program
 - Attend planning meetings
 - Connect BB to community members who may be interested in being additional cultural liaisons
 - Provide expertise to support the development of the program
 - Travel to the Thailand/Burma (Myanmar) border
 - Conduct trainings, provide translation, support cross-cultural connections between different participating groups, etc.
 - Participate in debriefing meetings in-country and in US, post-trip
- Connect current and potential UU students from Burma or Thailand/Burma (Myanmar) border to the Asia Center
 - Resource sharing, potential support group, pathway/pipeline program development
- Attend additional relevant Asia Center, College of Social Work, etc. meetings and events
- Work with Asia Center, College of Social Work and additional interested partners to support the development of an expanded BB program that grows in its capacity to be attended by first-generation UU and SLCC college students from Burma and Thailand to return to their home countries in a learning and teaching capacity
 - Goal: national, model program

Week One: February 17, 2018

I. Introduction

- a. Game (intention to feel emotional response to being in a new and different culture)

II. Karen History & Demographic

- a. History (British occupation, Japanese occupation, Burmese military regime)
 - b. Landscape (camps, rural Burma and cities (Mae Sot and Bangkok))
 - c. Refugee Camps
 - i. **Nine refugee camps** along Thai border line with the population of over **90,000**. * Reference: <http://www.theborderconsortium.org/>
 - ii. **Five internally displaced people (IDPs)** on Burma border with the population of over **8,000**. * Reference: <http://www.theborderconsortium.org/>
 - d. People (many ethnic group from Burma in the camps with similar culture, tradition and beliefs & differences)
 - e. Migrants in Thailand (Mae Sot and Bangkok illegal workers from Burma and Refugee camps)
 - f. Deportation to Burma (dangerous consequences-bail out vs. being sent to battle field as a porter; vs. public volunteer job; bridge vs pick-up truck)
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Week 2: March 3, 2018

I. Local Culture & Tradition

- a. Greetings (Karen, Burmese and body language)
 - b. Hospitality (guest friendly, very welcoming, generous, bettle nuts & tea)
 - c. Beliefs (Christian, Buddhism and Islam)
 - d. Family (husbands work and wife stay home, 18 and above dependents (family driven society), adult first/youth last)
 - e. Making a Living (backyard garden, breed animals (especially: pigs, dogs and chickens))
 - f. Food (rice, veggies and meats (pets...you are included))
 - g. Transportation (walk, motor cycles, cars (camp leaders and NGOs only))
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Week Three: March 17, 2018

I. The Role of Social Services in the Camps

- a. Camp leadership positions (camp leaders, security guards, section leaders)
- b. Public Services (health care-physical, mental, shelters; religious buildings; libraries; agriculture-eg. COEER; orphans housing; sports-eg. Right To Play)

Week Four: March 31, 2018

I. Rights and Reality

a. Burma

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|----------------------|----|-------------------------------|
| i. Free to work | vs | Lack of jobs |
| ii. Free to travel | vs | Strick, limited and expensive |
| iii. Safe to stay | vs | Unsafe government |
| iv. Public Education | vs | Private Education |
| v. Free speech | vs | Media control |
| vi. Health care need | vs | Health cost |
| vii. Housing | vs | Housing bubbles |
| viii. Risk takers | | |

b. **Refugee Camps in Thailand**

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|-----------------------------|----|---------------------------|
| i. Restricted to work | vs | Risky/Comparative jobs |
| ii. No citizenship | vs | Travelling freedom |
| iii. Safe to stay | vs | Unsafe outside the camp |
| iv. Fair Education Standard | vs | Post high school dead end |
| v. Free speech | vs | Under control |
| vi. Free healthcare | | |
| vii. Free housing | | |
| viii. Used to comfort zone | | |

Week Five: April 14, 2018

- I. **Mental and Emotional State in the Camps** (lack of future; domestic violence; alcohol and substance abuse; criminals; suicides; power unbalances; people with disability; smile)
- II. **Solutions** (family and parenting education; mental health education; agriculture and sports; shelters and recovery centers; NGO jobs; faith based activities and events; resettlement)
- III. **What are other solutions?**

Week Six: April 28, 2018

- I. **Making friends with refugees in the camp** (listen to them; picture with them; share story; have positive conversation and be hones; be a resource for them if possible; ongoing relationship)

**Weekly languages lesson topics included learning basic conversation skills (i.e. greetings, thank you, good bye) in Burmese and Karen and for both informal and formal settings. Relevant, weekly PowerPoints are available upon request.*

COURSE FEEDBACK: QUALITATIVE & QUANTITATIVE (8 PARTICIPANTS)

QUANTITATIVE: Pre & Post Test Comparison Summary:

For the questions reflecting increased knowledge, 8 of the 10 measured reflected significant improvements.

*where people in the camps come from ($p = .001$)

*what daily life is like living in the camps ($p = .021$)

*how to keep myself safe and healthy during the trip ($p = .006$)

*the typical family structure and roles of the people living in the camps ($p = .048$)

*the leadership structures within the camps ($p = .003$)

*words and phrases I can use to engage in basic communication with camp residents ($p = .009$)

*how I can apply what I learn through the trip to building relationships with people of refugee background living in Utah ($p = .003$)

For the questions reflecting comfort level two questions reflected significant change in comfort level. This is likely due to most students having already had relatively extensive travel experiences.

* training the topics that have been identified as you “topic areas” in the refugee camps ($p = .048$)

*giving trainings and presentation through translation ($p = .005$)

“I loved learning about culture, history, people. The power points were well done, lots of info and pictures. I always was sad when I couldn't come to a meeting.”



QUALITATIVE: Post Test Questions & Example Response:

What stands out to you as the most helpful areas of learning you experienced in this course?

- *overview of the roles of non-governmental organizations going in and out of the camps
- *depth of which depression, substance use, and trauma plague these camps
- *first-hand knowledge from the instructor, language skills, ways to build relationships with residents
- *culture and history, customs, cultural nuances norms, wisdom
- *ABCD model, context of camp, social structures, how to better develop relationships with community
- *depth on the topics
- *well-planned schedule

What topics would you have liked to have learned more about in this course?

- *more about religion preferences in the camps
- *more information about historic and current religious factors within the camps
- *more about differences between ethnic groups
- *learn more language and use language more in class (greetings, writing, speaking and reading)
- *application back here, studies from the camp
- *more about the repatriation of the Karen refugees currently taking place
- *pretty much every topic covered should have learned were covered
- *increased depth with everything



“Garroe’s first-hand experience both in SLC & on the border led to a new area of increased perspective. Garroe is a gifted teacher.”

“This was great - keep this format.”

“It was profound how deep it did go despite it being a survey.”

This class was very helpful, so much better for the experience. Garroe is a wonderful, passionate teacher. He could do this type of teaching in so many venues. Thank you!”

Garroe's Reflections on his experiences in Mae La and Umpiem Camp:

Economically, there is a dramatic change compared to my last trip to Mae La camp back in 2012 and now because local mini-markets are filling up the streets. In addition, by means of transportation, the streets are now crowded with motorcycles which wasn't the case at all compared to my last trip when I saw only very few of them on the street. Would this be the



Roles:

*co-instructor for all group psychosocial trainings & co-instructor for youth committee trainings (please refer to International Rescue Report for specific activities and outcomes)

*liaison to local families and organizations

*on-going cultural advisor

*translator & interpreter

*program advisor for creating connections between Bridging Borders partnerships and camp individuals (i.e. individual camp residents to connect to St. Aloysius Gonzaga Institute of Higher Studies, individuals to connect to Case Management)

Note: Garroe was visiting and working in the camp where he was raised (Umpiem). This allowed for significant connections to occur for BB participants, as well marked a critical moment for camp residents (both resettled and living in the camp)- a former resident returning as a leader, bridge

on going here and there.

Mentally, I personally feel very much empathy for the people in the camp and the difficult moment they have been experiencing emotionally due to their uncertain future and all the events I explained

reason the camp food ration being reduced? However, this doesn't mean the camp is financially doing well. Only one-fourth of the population is enjoying this local financial freedom because they have their relatives in the third countries who support them financially and help them become mini-entrepreneurs so that they do not need to depend on their relatives' financial support. On the other hand, the rest of the population is in the camp are on their own and have no one to depend on and still financially struggling but keep hoping for good luck while risking their life sneaking out of the camp for jobs in nearby Thai villages to support their family financially.

Politically, current camp situation seems reportedly very complicated due to the resettlement process to the third countries which is now postponed for uncertain period of time and repatriation back to Burma is also showing a red flag to the camp people due to uncertain safety and future. For the young men and women who took a risk coming into the camp for better education also expressed concern toward the repatriation promises. In addition, regardless of current new leadership and the National Cease-Fire Agreement, tension between the Burmese military and armed ethnic minorities are still out there and unexpected random fighting between the two are still

above indirectly elevating the level of their mental condition. Employment is currently the major fact that is helping the people in the camp to focus more on their job which mean lowering their emotional and stress level. Unfortunately, the NGO's jobs are limited which indicate less supplies and more demand and this high unemployment rate is very hard to address.

Overall, the Bridging Borders Program at least help to some degree that the education pieces we have provided were reportedly very practical and very helpful to the camp NGOs workers. This is how far we can reach and we hope the workers will reach out to the rest of the camp population which will bring a huge impact in the camp. In addition, the connection that Bridging Borders Program introduced in the camp such as SAG school and Case Management program also opened a door for those that expressed their hunger in education and gave some hope to not give up but keep moving on.



"Probably the biggest difference was Garroe's presence. His knowledge of the community and heart felt love of the people came through from day one of our time together. It made me want to share in doing all I could to provide support for the effort." –BB participant (post-trip reflection)

ST. ALOYSIUS GONZAGA INSTITUTE OF HIGHER STUDIES – UNIVERSITY OF UTAH (COLLEGE OF SOCIAL WORK) PARTNERSHIP

St. Aloysius Gonzaga Institute of Higher Studies (SAG-IHS) is small school of higher education located in Taunggyi, in the Shan State of Myanmar. It currently offers a 3-year teaching program which is attended by students from all over Myanmar, most coming from rural poor areas. In 2014, the College of Social Work from the University of Utah and SAG-IHS began a partnership focused on developing and incorporating an undergraduate social work degree. Currently there are no social work degrees in Myanmar.

**This was not included in the original scope of work. The opportunity arose for Garroe to join the team at SAG-IHS and therefore he traveled with Dr. Rosemarie Hunter, Dr. Aster Tecele, and Maung Maung Tinn (border community artist/activist partner). His contributions to the partnership were profound stemming from*

his ability to bridge cultures and form vital and unique relationships. Results of his work include: an increased depth to research projects and development of individual and community student mentorship opportunities.

Garroe's reflections on his experiences with SAG-IHS:

A Trip to Taunggyi is totally a new thing for me and it was one of an amazing experience I will never forget. Firstly, meeting with diverse students with their minor ethnic backgrounds make me feel the healthy environment the school has created and the gender equality that the student confidently can taste it. The SAG-IHS scholarships and separated male and female dorms are a plus. The school management team was also very welcoming and provided their best to our group. Thank you SAG-IHS for that. Locally, the location is not stressful but quiet and peaceful for the students to focus on their learning. Curriculum wise, most of the students seemed enjoying it because the teaching style is not boring, and students have freedom to be as much creative as they can in terms of their learning style. Most of the students that are in SAG-IHS are pursuing their carrier in Business while Teacher ranked the second, and Tourist Guide ranked the third. Reportedly, only very few of the students have a strong background already set to fulfill their carrier dream after graduation which means the rest will have to work hard on their own to get to their dream carrier.



Note...In United States, students can change major or their carrier anytime they want because we have lots of jobs and better education system here but not the case here in Burma. It is very black and white in terms of picking your profession due to the way the education system is set in Burma. For instance, a high school graduate in Burma can only pursue their carrier as a medical doctor if they get A or A+ on 5 school subjects or as an Engineer if they get A or A+ on 4 school subjects and etc. which mean if you got no A's you will never be able to pursue the above professions for the rest of your life. On the other hand, in US, there is no restriction as such but anybody is allowed to pursue their dream profession as long as they complete the required courses. So, it is very important to motivate them how to achieve their goal but it's very dangerous to tell them they can change or switch their profession because there is no alternate pathway to take them to a different profession as mentioned above.

Eight students (3 from Mae La Camp, 4 from Karenni Camp and 1 from Nupo Camp) are in SAG-IHS and their future carrier or dream is reportedly uncertain. Most of them initially expect that they will study aboard after graduation from SAG-IHS which they realized soon as they joined the school that it's actually not the case but just a miscommunication. However, regardless of the miscommunication, they don't seem disappointed and/or thinking of quitting the school but instead they are planning to finish the school and hope for the best for their future.



At that moment of time, during our stop at SAG-IHS, Bridging Border's involvement brought them a kind of motivation to help them keep moving on because they had learned that they are physically and mentally strong and they are the one who can make the change. I hope they will keep our Bridging Border professors' guidance and information in their heart and keep moving on. I, myself, also enjoyed meeting with the students, got to know them and learned from them. It was an amazing experience knowing how much they value education and the motivation they have to achieve their goal.

Lastly, per Father Paul's comment, students are very happy to physically meet with foreign teachers and expect to be able to meet with foreign teachers a few times in a year which brought me empathy on them. For that I am thinking of doing something to help those students meet their needs with the best that I can and hoping that I will be able to a visit to the school again. Honestly, I do want to do something for those students, but I am not sure what I am going to do and how I am going to do. However, I will do something despite uncertainty.

"Continue the work with cultural liaisons. Move toward cultural liaisons more active in leading and designing the program, teaching in country; but, also engaging a group of CLs that can develop and plan their program goals in connection with other partners and community goals." -BB participant (post-trip reflection)

STUDENT COLLEGE PATHWAY SUMMARY

In April 2018, Garroe Wah, identified two college students from the Karen community to spearhead a research project focused on understanding the successes and barriers for the Karen community in their efforts to access and succeed in higher education. The two students are female, both born in camps along the Thailand/Burma (Myanmar) border, and are currently attending college. One is in her final year at Salt Lake Community College and is majoring in Teaching and the other is in her final year at the University of Utah and is double majoring in Teaching and Art. Garroe chose these students, both because of their past and current positionality, and also as an effort to develop young, female leadership with the Karen community.

Rather than beginning with making one-on-one connections to Asia Center and additional resources at the University of Utah for students from the Thailand-Burma border, Garroe chose to develop this research project in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the context of his community in

relation to higher education. Garroe's end goal is that the research project leads to the development of a pilot college pathway program to launch in January 2019.

As part of this work Dr. Yda Smith from the Division of Occupational Therapy was also chosen to support the research process. The group submitted an abstract for to the 2019 American Occupational Therapy Conference in New Orleans. The abstract is titled, *Occupational Barriers and Social Supports among Members of a Karen Community of Former Refugees: Impact on Higher Education Access*.

Sample Research Questions:

Focus Group

- *What are your dreams for you and your family?
- *What has been helpful in you reaching your education goals?
- *What are the barriers have that gotten in the way of you achieving your education goals?

Survey

- *How do you identify yourself? (Karen, Karen-American, American, Other)
- *What is your gender?
- *What language(s) do you speak at home?
- *How well do you speak Karen? How about English?
- *What is your level of education in the United States? How about your parents?
- *What is your level of education back in your home country? How about your parents?
- *Do you plan to go to college?
- *For student: Do your parents expect you to go to/complete college?
- *For parent: Do you expect your child to go/complete college?
- *What is your current working position?
- *With whom do you live?

Research Timeline/Outcomes:

- April – Research project discussed and created
- May – Developed focus group and survey questions
- June – Conducted 3 focus groups with 22 individuals (participants also filled out an extensive survey)
- July/August – Transcribed the focus groups and collated survey data
- September – Analyze data
- October-December – Meet with potential partners, define pilot program, secure funding and space