

MY STORY photo project: pictures on the edge

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A man washes his cow in a river. A spirit house stands alone in a field. Not the kind of images one would expect to see from the border area between Thailand and Burma. No photos of land mine victims, malnourished children, or burned out villages. Instead, images of daily life on this shared border taken by the Burman and Karen who live there: in refugee camps, as illegal migrant workers on the Thai side, or inside Burma, in IDP areas in Karen state.

Wherever they live, life is precarious: subject to harassment and deportation by the Thai authorities on the one hand - victims of sporadic fighting, forced labour, or, used as human shields by the Burmese military on the other.

The project

Since 2006, we have run the *MY STORY* photo project, giving entry-level digital cameras and basic photo instruction to small groups of young Karen and Burmese on both sides of the border.

Based in Mae Sot, Thailand, on the western border with Burma's Karen State, the project was conceived as a means of giving a voice to people who might not otherwise be heard. The idea is not new; while conducting a literacy study in Peru in 1973, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire asked people questions in Spanish, but the answers had to be as photographs. PhotoVoice, and the American Farm-Security Administration programs of the 1930's are just two of many examples where photography has been used as a means to visualize and give value to people's lives, identify social problems, express themselves creatively, and to have fun!.

The workshops, which run from 10 days to 2 weeks, involve a lot of looking at and talking about the pictures the students take. They are given assignments which are then downloaded onto a computer (or two, if we are lucky) and then we all talk... and

talk. Some recent assignments have included photographing someone at work, photographing someone or something from three different angles, photographing the same subject at different times of the day, photographing something you like/dislike, and building a photo essay as a group - where each student contributes an image to the narrative.

At the end of the workshop the students edit their work down to 2 or 3 images each which will be used for exhibition. The photographs are then professionally printed, matted, and framed for a travelling exhibition that begins at our home base, Mae Sot, in Thailand, then travels to Nova Scotia and wherever else we can find a venue.

To date, the *MY STORY* photo project has been exhibited in Vancouver, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, Seattle, San Francisco, New York City, and Bangkok. Prints from the exhibition are for sale, with half the proceeds going to the photographer and half going back to the project to purchase new cameras. The project has trained 115 participants, including Karen and Burman and also Kachin, Akka, Chin, and Shan. The youngest student was 15 and the oldest was 53. In 2009, seven former students took teacher training and will travel to IDP areas in Burma, after the rainy season, to run the project.

A little background

While teaching English to young Karen in 2005, I visited a refugee camp with a Karen activist. The camp was a five-hour, gut-churning drive up a mountain from the nearest town. Water came from the Salween River at the base of the mountain. In rainy season the road was next to impassable. He showed me the bamboo schools, the weaving shed, the tin working shed, and the clinic where a doctor visited once a week - possibly. It was a rough, dusty place, with a few generators, a few NGO's, the UNHCR, and not a lot of hope. Knowing my husband's and my background as photographers, he asked, 'Why don't you do a photo workshop with some of our young people?' 'They have nothing to do, so there are problems with drugs and alcohol.' His idea was for them to tell their stories to the outside world, through images and words.

After I came home, I spoke to my husband Nat, about the idea of doing some kind of photo project. He agreed, and in March 2006 we returned to Mae Sot with five entry-