

Teacher's learning experience - Omahan visits - Omaha World-Herald (NE) - July 22, 2013 - page 01A

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This is how far Omaha teacher Betsy Hoefer was willing to go to help her refugee students from Thailand. • A plane ride to the other side of the globe. A pickup truck ride into the jungle. An hour's walk daily from the village where she stayed for three weeks to two schools where she taught English.

She washed her clothes in the river. She slept on the floor inside a mosquito net. She used what euphemistically can be called a "squatty potty."

None of this fazed the young woman who ditched a promising corporate career to teach middle school. She had spent a year teaching in an earthquake-devastated part of Peru with no electricity and running water. And her idea of down time is to start teaching summer school for OPS one day after a 30-hour journey home.

This is where I catch up with our intrepid traveler.

I meet Betsy, 33, early on a Monday morning at **Howard Kennedy Elementary**.

Some 200 children, born in the mountains of Myanmar or in the refugee camps of Thailand, are eating breakfast in a north Omaha cafeteria. There is a poster bearing the Statue of Liberty's image telling them in tiny print about their civil rights. They are eating cereal and graham crackers and drinking milk. Some are yawning and resting their heads on the tables. Others are giggling and doing sing-song hand-claps. Aside from the sleepyheads, these elementary-age children look happy to be here.

"They really want to learn," Nickole Carmichael, principal of this summer school session at Kennedy says. "They're eager."

These children are from tribes of persecuted ethnic minorities that fled the military junta that ruled Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, from 1962 to 2011. Their families hid in the mountains and then crossed into the jungles of Thailand, landing in refugee camps that dot the border between the two countries. Camp life is hard. Fire, with bamboo huts and open-flame cooking, is a constant threat. Education is spotty. Travel is limited.

The U.S. in recent years has let some refugees into the country, with many landing in a place about as foreign as it gets — Omaha.

OPS has shouldered the education of these Burmese refugees, who are most commonly referred to by their ethnic group names: Karen, Karenni, Chin or Kachin.

Some students have landed in Betsy's computer classes at Monroe Middle School and in her Saturday school language class at Franklin Elementary.

These north Omaha schools are a world away from where Betsy grew up.

She went to Millard North, graduating in 1997. She earned a finance degree from Texas Christian University.

She built a strong resume that included big-time companies: Bell Helicopter in Fort Worth, Texas. Election Systems & Software and Kiewit Corp. in Omaha. She kept the books for Kiewit's coal mining arm.

But something nagged at her. The best part of her job wasn't the work but the people. The best part of her week wasn't the time she spent in the office, it was the time she spent volunteering for a group that worked with Sudanese refugees.

Betsy thought about a future with Excel spreadsheets. Then she applied for a teaching job in Peru, quit Kiewit and worked as a waitress until it was time to leave for South America. After a year there, Betsy returned to Omaha and worked at Starbucks and as a substitute teacher while earning a teaching certification. This fall she will start her fourth year at Monroe Middle School.

She was one of six Nebraska teachers, and the only one from OPS, awarded a \$5,000 professional development fellowship through the national nonprofit Fund for Teachers. She used the grant to go to Thailand, where she hooked up with a Thai-based relief organization called Rain Tree Foundation, which provides social welfare help to Thailand's poor. This group set Betsy up in a northern Thailand village outside Nai Soi. She lived there for three weeks with a Karenni school principal and her social worker husband.

Betsy spent her mornings teaching English at the Karenni Bible School, a post-secondary school that provided English, music and religious instruction. Her students were college-age and most had made incredible sacrifices, including risky travel from Myanmar, to live there.

She spent afternoons teaching sixth-graders in a village outside a Thai military checkpoint for one of the refugee camps. The village was called Long Neck, a reference to a Karenni group's controversial practice of wearing so many rings around their necks that their necks become elongated.

Betsy found her students in Thailand to be eager, bright and hard-working, just like her refugee students in Omaha.

Unlike her modern computer classroom at Monroe, Betsy taught in thatched, open-air huts with a chalkboard.

"I'm here as your teacher," Betsy told them, "but I'm also here to learn from you."

Here's what she learned: Many Burmese and Thai people are either willfully or accidentally ignorant of the terrible repression caused by Myanmar's former military dictatorship.

Another lesson: Villages may not have had much, but they shared and were extremely gracious and protective of her.

Jungle life is hard. It's very physical. And sometimes you encounter sudden frights, like three huge, looming bulls who appeared in her walking path one day.

She showed her Karenni students in Thailand pictures of her Karenni students in Omaha. In one case, Karenni Bible School Principal Htoo Lar Paw gasped in shock. There, published in an OPS book on refugee students, was Ka Paw Say, who went to the Bible school before immigrating to Omaha.

This shrank the world for Betsy.

Back in Omaha, she stood in the Howard Kennedy library overseeing a reading program that pairs older, more English proficient refugees with younger newcomers.

The library buzzed with voices talking in English and Karen and Karenni dialects. Sitting in one corner were a pair of girls, Rosalin Htoo, 14, who landed in Omaha three years ago unable to speak English and Pawlew Paw, 12, who came to Omaha last year.

Rosalin had an open book on her lap and was pointing to the English words as she read aloud.

"Some people see Jack and Jill and their ..." she begins.

"Pail," Betsy softly prompts.

"Pail of water," Rosalin finishes.

Betsy said she went to Thailand to help her students. But the trip, she said, may have made the biggest difference for her.

She's even more grateful now for the things she took for granted, like a bed, a shower, being American.

"When you meet people who are stateless, who have had so much taken from them ...," her thought trailed off as she told me about a busload of Burmese students who had to pay fees to Thai soldiers for not having identification.

"I'm trying to figure out how to fit back into life in Omaha," she said, "having the knowledge and experience that I did."

Contact the writer:

402-444-1136, erin.grace@owh.com

twitter.com/ErinGraceOWH

CITATION (APA STYLE)

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