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an educational program

Values Education for Children and Young Adults

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## Living Values e-News

Living Values: An Educational Program Newsletter

**May 1999**

**In this Issue**

[Previous Issues](#)

### Worldwide Happenings

- [Thailand](#)
- [Vietnam](#)

**Thailand: Refugee teachers in Northern Thai mountains are determined to make values grow.**

by Rachael Flower

**“Love has gone from the classroom. If we can’t teach children to care and love, wars will continue”**

Winsome Gordon, UNESCO

It's not easy to have hope when the brutality of war is raging, where countless people have fled for their lives and where landmines are once again the weapons of the jungle. But the glimmer is there and a group of refugee teachers way up in the Northern Thai mountains are determined to make it grow.

Children affected by war and those in refugee camps have been exposed to events that no child, much less an adult, should experience. The time in chaos and trauma dramatically affects and interferes with the acquisition of healthy social skills. Some children have learned violent behaviours which interfere not only with intrapersonal and interpersonal well-being, but also negatively affect later adaptation and contribution to a healthy, productive society. The sad fact

is that in this, the most violent century in recorded history there are millions of refugees around the world. Scarred emotionally by their ordeal, and perhaps physically, these people need the special warmth and nurturance of a values-based educational approach if they are to live fulfilling lives. Unfortunately the vast majority of children and adults in war do not receive special healing activities after their trauma. Healing from the trauma of war usually takes years, and for many never happens completely. However, now a new education programme has been developed to directly address this issue.

With the support of UNICEF and UNESCO, Living Values Educational Programme is being piloted in jungle camps along the Thai-Burma border – an area which alone has over a hundred thousand refugees - and has proven to be extremely successful. The activities are designed to offer an opportunity for the children to share some feelings about war – and to express the emotions of grief, pain, and anger. The grieving process is combined with values activities in such a way that children are supported and validated. Children are identified as peacemakers. The expression of pain and the opportunity to develop a voice against what hurts is important in the healing process and for personal empowerment.

The values activities in the Living Values Programme will not erase the effect of war and the painful memories, and they are certainly not a substitute for therapy. However, they are excellent healing, cost-effective activities which give children some tools to release and deal with their pain while developing positive adaptive social and emotional skills which will elicit more positive experiences in life. The activities open a door into a more peaceful society. Children are asked to think about peace and examine constructs needed to build a peaceful society.

After a recent training programme in a border camp a core group of 37 teachers are reporting remarkable results. There's more hope, more positivity, and a more peaceful atmosphere they say, not only in their classrooms, but also in their homes. The other camp teachers are eager to be trained and so further programmes will take place next year, including teachers from other camps also. Ultimately the teachers will be able to train their own and the programme can spread.

This pilot training programme itself was a very special experience. Having been invited over a year ago to organise a programme I and Diane Tillman (American-based educational psychologist and author of most of the Living Values material) set the date for May this year, and in the mean time had material translated into Karen language ready for distribution during the workshops (most of the refugees along the border are Karen since these are the main targets of the military regime). Diane flew in especially from the States and we set off from Chiang Mai in a lorry laden with a hundred boxes of donated teaching materials and toys. These would later be transferred to four wheel 'off roaders' for the latter part of the journey. The journey to the camp is long and uncomfortable at best, but this year the rains were early and the 'road' if you can call it that, was so muddy that our truck with chains on the wheels had to be dug out of ruts several times along the way and it took double the normal time. Then came the long walk to the camp itself.

The camp holds some 10,000 people and is growing fast as more refugees run from their homeland. Most of them are Karen hill people from Burma since they are the main targets for the Burmese military attacks. We stayed in one section with about 1000, all living in self-made bamboo huts situated beside a small stream. These people are a mix of Christian and Buddhist, and carry with them a rich cultural heritage which includes exquisite weaving and the kind of singing that would warm the cockles of anyone's heart. And there's not much else to do in a

refugee camp.

It's hard to express the powerful sense of love that was evoked over those 10 days of training, but it was a moving experience for all of us. A transformative journey through the loss and pain of war and on to joy and hope, the material having been designed to carry people through their grief and air and heal some of the scars. For some it was very hard at times, and their faces were lined with sadness, but the visualisations, the acceptance, the songs, the deep sharing and the feeling of connection in the group carried everyone along. And it was important for the teachers to truly enter into the spirit of the training if they are later to carry the children through it. And this they did. To see them on the last day all dressed in their traditional costumes, singing their favourite old song of love and peace was one of the most special moments of my life. Sung in four tones and sounding almost Maori the song tells of the treasure of love and how with this the house, though externally poor, is rich. Blessings shower from above.

They finished the training with the strong conviction that they would use the material in their classrooms. The headmaster was more than happy to allow them curriculum time for these activities. We returned a couple of months later to see how they were getting on, and the reports were remarkable.

When we arrived the teachers had spent all the previous day sticking up on bamboo walls (with the last of their sticky tape!) all the pictures their students had drawn as part of the values activities. There were the expected burning villages, guns, dead bodies, blood... lots of black and red. But then this was balanced with many pictures of stars and flowers and peaceful scenes as per the positive visualisations they had been taught. They were all saying how powerful the visualisations were and how much more peaceful, well-mannered and articulate the children were. Apparently they look forward to these lessons more than any others.

Some teachers were apologetic that they had not managed too many classes yet but it was for a very good reason. Their school had washed away in a rain storm at the beginning of term and they'd spent three weeks building a new one!

Some teachers said that parents of their students were strongly encouraging their children to study well in these classes and were themselves keen to know more about the programme. Other interesting spin-offs have been family relationships. Several teachers said that their relationship with their spouse and children had improved. They feel more positive and peaceful now. One of the cheekier teachers announced to the class that he rarely fought with his wife now (before quarrels were constant). I checked with his wife later and it was indeed true.

As far as we could see, the only real problems that have come to light are lack of time - since their other curriculum studies are so intense and due to the school flood fiasco, time was an issue. And noise. Classrooms are close together, and bamboo isn't exactly sound-proof. But we're working on finding solutions. The headmasters of the various schools showed a willingness to adjust things so let's hope.

We were presented with beautifully woven Karen shoulder bags and grateful smiles. And, after an evening of endless visitors to our humble hut, we began the long journey back to another kind of civilisation.

The teachers and mothers expressed their wish to give something back, though they had nothing physical. But they gave in so many other ways. We couldn't have been taken care of in a more special way. Real room service - hot water flasks refilled throughout the days, bathing water brought in buckets from the big water drum, vegetables delivered. Any time I tried to pick

some of the edible leaves growing around the house two young boys would appear with handfuls of much better quality ones. And maybe a papaya. And a roof and wall repair was performed during heavy storms - try getting that kind of service in the west! Though admittedly, a bamboo house with a teak leaf roof is a bit less complex.

Underestimating how much it would cost to get everything into the camp we had been virtually run out of money, and how funny it was to have a refugee offer to lend us some after she sold her pig for \$35! Fortunately we didn't need to take up her offer.

They had another chance to offer their help when on the last day Diane developed severe back pain after slipping on the mud (the rains came early this year). To make sure she made it out in time to get her flight from Chiang Mai

during the early hours of nectar on the day of our departure they carried her half of the way out along muddy paths and stream beds in a hammock hung on a bamboo pole.

I'll be returning in June for just a weekend to see how they are getting on with their classes. All the teachers were keen to use that material and the headmaster of the school gave permission for high and middle school teachers to use 3 sessions per week for Living Values Refugee section activities and primary to use 5 sessions. If all goes well, eventually some of them will be also be able to train other teachers. Something many of them are keen to do. They are also going to meet together each month to share experiences and gather stories and songs from their own culture to be included in the pack.

Something that struck me very deeply was how powerful the material is that Diane has written and compiled. The balance of facing deep pain and loss and also celebrating the beauty of the human heart - it really is amazing to see it happening and also amazing to see her love, her faith and her clarity. She has truly created something special and both of us got the distinct feeling that this will spread fast throughout the camp and further.

He is thrilled about the programme and wants to implement it throughout the 11,000 strong (and growing) camp. We gave him some Living Values books, some virtue reality books and 1000 virtue boxes for distribution in several camps. That evening we spoke with teachers at the special school for post-high school students and it was decided that we would run a youth retreat in the camp in October for all the 45 twenty to twenty-five year old students. Four of them, as trainee teachers, are already familiar with our approach, and were very excited at the prospect of their own retreat.

## **LVEP in Vietnam**

The Living Values Education Programme was presented in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh to various governmental and non-governmental organisations including the International Relations of the Department of Education and Training, UNICEF, World Village Foundation and LCMS World Mission in Hanoi and the Open University Women's Study Centre, Christina Noble Foundation, UNICEF, Prince of Wales Business Leadership Forum and Save The Children Fund in Ho Chi Minh.

Professor Tran, the Vice Director of International Relations, Department of Education and Training and Ms. Huong Nguyen, Education Officer, UNICEF will be attending the SOul of Education forum in July at the Asian Pacific Retreat Centre to learn more about LVEP and

participatory learning.

Dr. Diane Tillman will be visiting Vietnam in September to conduct a small training programme.

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