



KSDC

A Photographic Journey



Ban Nai Soi

Before arriving at the Karenni Social Development Center, you'll pass through Ban Nai Soi, a small town home to people from both Thailand and Myanmar. The streets are lined with shops selling food and everyday goods, and the locals greet you with warm smiles. Stray dogs wander freely, and it's not uncommon to see entire families of four balancing together on a single motorbike. The community is lively, with people always out and about. Along the way, you'll pass a temple, a bike shop, a cozy coffee stand, and much more.



The students I taught at KSDC came from Karenni State in Myanmar, a region home to 13 ethnic groups. Some had parents from different backgrounds, which sometimes left them unsure of where they belonged or how to define their identity. Seven of my students are members of resistance groups fighting against the oppressive Myanmar government, which refuses to recognize the independence of the Karenni people. They fight for their freedoms every day, all while seeking opportunities to strengthen their community. For many, KSDC is more than a school, it's a place to pursue education and envision a better future.



The drive into Nai Soi was absolutely breathtaking. During my time at KSDC, I rented a motorbike, which gave me the freedom to explore the surrounding area at my own pace. I quickly fell in love with the landscapes, endless rice fields, winding roads, and untouched nature as far as the eye could see. On weekends, I would often ride into town just to get a cup of coffee. Those quiet rides became some of my most peaceful moments. There was something about being on the bike, surrounded by the beauty of northern Thailand, that brought me a deep sense of calm and contentment

Before reaching the school, you must cross the river, which is on the only road in and out of town. During rainy season, the weather is unpredictable, and the water can rise quickly, and trust me, it gets worse than this. Here, my students and I are linking arms to cross safely. Locals often band together to guide motorbikes through the current so they can shop for ingredients or travel to the nearby city of Mae Hong Son. One day, while I was walking into town, the local dog Jurrey trotted along beside me. The current was too strong, and I watched in horror as she slipped into the river. I jumped in after her, and together we made it to safety. The experience was a reminder of how chaotic the environment can be, yet also how ready the locals are to help. Occasionally, a passing truck will offer you a spot in the back to make the crossing a little easier.



You'll never go hungry at KSDC. The students are always happy to cook, often preparing me three meals a day. Ingredients come partly from local shops, but much of the food is grown in their own gardens or raised themselves. Chickens roam freely around the grounds, and a few skilled sharpshooters among the students retrieve dinner for the next day. In the evenings, you might see someone with a slingshot heading out to hunt for the whole group. From the moment the catch is brought in to the moment it's served, every step is done by the students themselves. You can see a few of the meals that were cooked for me below, including a breakfast I got in the city of Mae Hong Son one Sunday morning.





Roasted pig spine by
the fire side

My students loved to stay active, filling their free time with all kinds of games. We often played volleyball, football, and a Southeast Asian favorite called Caneball, a sport similar to volleyball, except you can't use your hands. Players would leap into the air, twisting into backflips to spike the ball with their feet into the opposing team's zone. I once took a spike from my student Shar Reh, and the red mark it left made me look like a walking bullseye. Beyond sports, they enjoyed chess, Uno, and popular mobile games like Mobile Legends and PUBG, though many of their phones can no longer handle the newest updates. Their days were busy: cooking and cleaning from 5 to 9 a.m., classes until lunch, more lessons in the afternoon, a short break before cooking dinner, eating, and then studying until around 9 p.m. They have very busy days and rarely have time for leisure, yet when they do, these are some of the activities they enjoy to pass the time.





My hosts at KSDC were gracious enough to include me in a variety of traditions celebrated in Karenni State. One of the most memorable was the DeeKu Festival, a celebration of unity and heritage. In the days leading up to it, students spent hours hunting for DeeKu leaves, used to wrap sticky rice that would be eaten during the festivities. On the day itself, they went from house to house, performing traditional dances they had practiced all week. At each stop, we were offered food and drink, which we gladly accepted. I was even taught how to roll betel nut, wrapping it in leaves with a dab of what was akin to a “drywall paste.” Chewing it gives a tingling sensation. That day, I also had the chance to try a local “medicine,” which turned out to be porcupine droppings soaked in whisky.



Deeku Festival



Preparing the Deeku Leaves

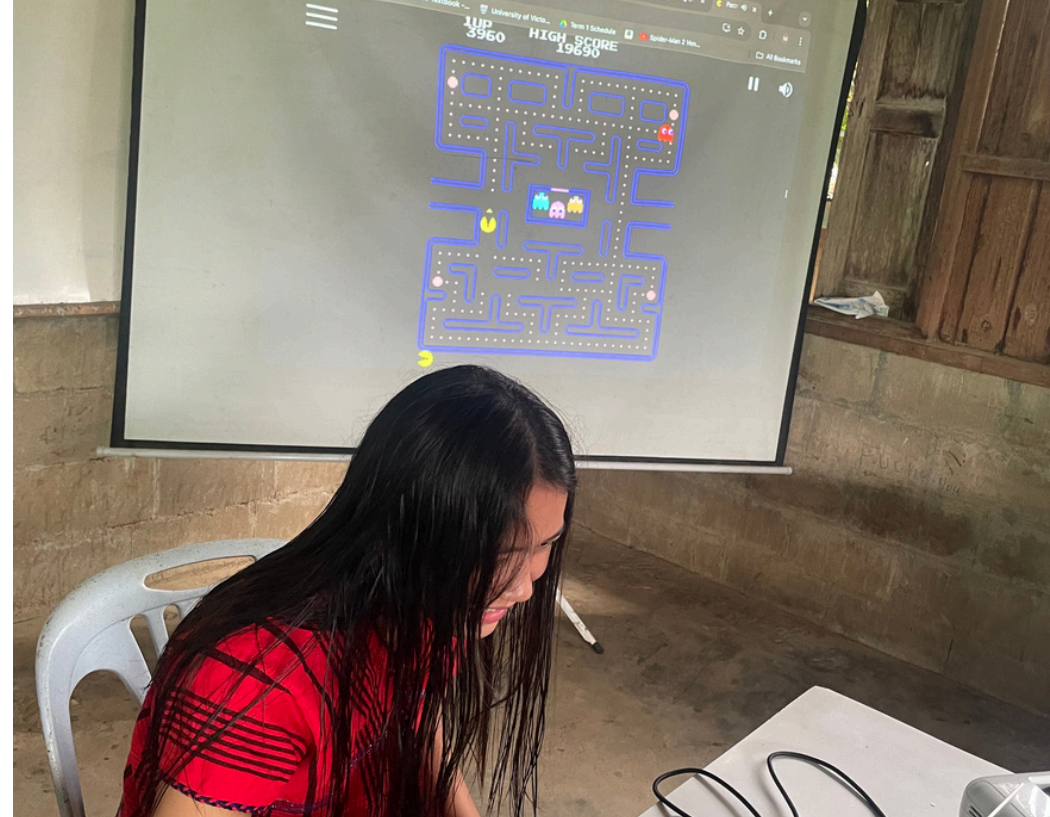




Outside of games, students loved to read, write, play music, and sing. Here, Htee Moe is reading Harry Potter aloud while the others listen, with Juerry and her baby Nugget nearby. You can even see Moe Moe Myar giving Nugget a bath. In the evenings, students would bathe and brush their teeth in the river. I joined them a few times. The boys had their own spot across the field, tucked away in the bushes, where they would bathe and spend time. One day, we decided to have a full-on mud fight, hurling clumps of mud at each other from a distance. My shirt was completely ruined, the stains refusing to wash out, a permanent reminder of the “battle,” which I still keep to this day. The students always found time for fun and never took life too seriously, something I admired deeply.



**We always found time for
fun in the class**



My main responsibility during my time at KSDC was teaching English. This involved preparing a basic curriculum and teaching each group for a couple of hours each day. Since I don't speak Burmese, you might wonder how teaching English was even possible. Fortunately, most students begin with a foundational English course before advancing to the more intensive KSDC program. In the basic course, they gained essential skills in reading, writing, and comprehension, which gave them a starting point to build on. Early on, I realized that in the limited time I had with them, there was only so much new vocabulary or grammar I could realistically teach, especially beyond what they had already learned. Instead, I focused on helping them develop their confidence and fluency through conversation and presentations. It wasn't that their English was poor; rather, many just lacked the confidence to use it comfortably. As a solution, I designed lessons where students gave short presentations on topics they enjoyed. They might explain how to make their favourite recipe or talk about a song they liked and why. These assignments were simple but effective. Over the six months, I saw their confidence grow significantly. More and more, I overheard students speaking English during meals and study sessions. It made me incredibly happy to know I had helped them reach a point where they felt comfortable using English in their daily lives, not just in the classroom.





It was surreal to see animals living so freely in their natural routines. Dogs roamed outside, rarely belonging to just one household. Most acted as security, keeping watch at night, and were seldom allowed indoors. In town, the streets were lined with strays, each guarding their own territory. Female dogs often have up to two litters a year, and you can easily spot the older ones, their faces more tired and teats long from years of nursing. I was lucky enough to watch many animals grow from birth. I still remember the day a litter was born under the office, behind the school's cross. I was quite ill, but after a nap, I got a text from my students saying, "Jurrey baby." Summoning what little energy I had, I went to see them. The pups were the smallest I'd ever seen, with their eyes still closed, letting out tiny yelps for their mother's attention. It was a moment I'll never forget.



My birthday at KSDC was very special. I had no idea the students had planned anything, and I felt incredibly lucky to have my girlfriend with me at the time. The day started like any other. I taught my regular classes, and everything seemed normal. In the evening, the students asked me and my girlfriend to sing a song for them, so we began to play Hey There Delilah. As we were performing, the lights suddenly went out. I assumed it was just another power outage, which wasn't uncommon, so I kept playing. But then, to my surprise, the students came around the corner singing "Happy Birthday" and carrying a cake. We all cheered and celebrated together. They had even brought me traditional Karenni clothes as gifts, a matching orange dress for my girlfriend, Lindley, and a shirt for me. As is their custom, I shared a spoonful of cake with each of them. The fact that they used their limited resources to create something so thoughtful meant the world to me. It became the most special birthday I've ever had





Weekends at KSDC were far from restful, students kept busy running errands and taking care of chores around the school. Each year, one student is chosen to be the community barber. In this photo, you can see Fray giving Moris a haircut, a routine part of weekend life. Many students spent their time gathering food and materials or repairing parts of the school damaged during stormy nights. You'd often see them burning excess scraps or climbing trees to collect coconuts. Others would head down to the river to wash their clothes, hanging them out to dry in the sun. There was even a routine scramble if it started raining during class, students would suddenly dash out to grab their laundry and rush it back to their rooms before it got soaked. These moments showed just how self-reliant and hardworking they were, always taking care of each other and the space they lived in.



Busy weekends





Because the students are refugees, they lack official identification papers and are not allowed to travel far beyond the town of Nai Soi. Their movements are heavily restricted, which limits their exposure to life outside the refugee community. However, on special occasions and national holidays, local law enforcement looks the other way, allowing refugees in the area to gather in the nearby city of Mae Hong Son. On one such occasion, we travelled into town to visit a local carnival. The streets were alive with food stalls, games, and music. We tried everything from sugary donuts to crunchy crickets. There were games of skill and chance, and my student Shar Reh even got kicked off one after winning too many times in a row. He walked away proudly flaunting the prizes he had won, many of which he generously gave to his classmates. What struck me most was seeing the students so full of joy outside their usual routine. They were dressed in their best clothes, and they were able to experience something far removed from the jungle environment they're usually confined to. Experiences like these made the everyday struggles a little easier, for them and for me.





The students at KSDC were always ready to lend a hand. One particularly rainy night, I decided to go for a solo motorbike ride. I stayed close to town, enjoying the solitude. The streetlights reflected off the raindrops as I drove through the dark, and the sounds of the jungle surrounded me. I was completely enamoured by the beauty of the forest at night. But I got carried away. I took a corner too fast, and in an instant, I was on the ground. It felt like a dream, but reality hit quickly: I had crashed. After a few moments of gathering myself, I managed to start the bike again and made it back to the school, scraped up and shaken. Another teacher, Bu Reh, helped me as best he could, rubbing hand sanitizer into my wounds and wrapping them in bandages. It wasn't exactly gentle care, but I was grateful.

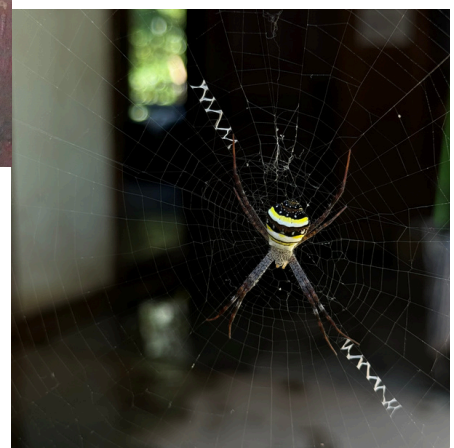


The next morning, I woke up stiff, bruised, and bandaged, looking like a mummy. The students noticed immediately. Without hesitation, they rushed to get supplies to help clean and treat my wounds properly. Throughout the day, they checked in on me, bringing water, food, and messages of concern. Their care and kindness were overwhelming. In that moment, I realized I wasn't just their teacher, I was part of a family. I'll never forget what my student Nge Nge said to me after the other intern had left: "In the class, you are our teacher. But here, you are our brother." It's hard to put into words just how deeply that moved me. The love I received during my time at KSDC is something I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

At KSDC, we were always finding reasons to celebrate, any excuse to laugh, dance, and have a good time together. These photos capture one of our final celebrations, a truly unforgettable night. The students split into groups and performed lip-sync routines they had choreographed themselves. I witnessed incredible renditions of “Gangnam Style” and a mashup of ROSÉ and Bruno Mars’ “APT.” The energy, creativity, and joy in the room were infectious. What I didn’t realize at the time was that this would be my last chance to spend meaningful time with my students. Due to increased police presence in the area, the students had to return quickly to the refugee camp, a place foreigners are not allowed to enter. There was no chance for a proper goodbye. Looking back, I’m incredibly grateful we had that night to celebrate together. It turned out to be a perfect, if unexpected, farewell, full of laughter, music, and connection.







My time at KSDC was truly transformative. Living and working in such a foreign environment opened my eyes to a world far beyond my own. I learned to challenge my assumptions about culture, about what's "right" and "wrong," and about the many ways people live, love, and connect. I learned to let go, to laugh at myself, and to not take things too seriously. Most importantly, I learned to embrace every opportunity with open arms and to give back to my community in whatever ways I can. I came to KSDC to teach English, but I left having learned so much more than I ever could have imagined. I left with new perspectives, deeper empathy, and a renewed sense of purpose. One moment stands out as my time at the school came to an unexpected end. I had taken a short weekend trip, but during my absence, the area around Nai Soi came under police surveillance. Because foreigners aren't allowed in the refugee camps, the students were forced to return early, and I wasn't able to say goodbye. It was a difficult reality to accept, leaving without closure, without a proper farewell to those I had grown so close to.



But one student, Syar Reh, was still in town, his grandmother lived in Nai Soi. On the second-to-last night, it was just the two of us, sitting together on the beach under the stars. We shared a beer and laughed, reminiscing about the months we had spent together. He told me something that stayed with me: that when he arrived at KSDC, he didn't know a single other student. Like me, he had come alone. And like me, he was leaving with bonds that felt like family, relationships built on trust, shared struggles, and genuine connection. That final conversation summed up everything I had experienced at KSDC. We both arrived as strangers. We both left with stories, friendships, and memories that will last a lifetime. I hope one day I can return to see the school again, to reconnect with the students who changed my life, to fulfill a few unfulfilled promises, and to once more experience the wonder and beauty that is KSDC in northern Thailand.

Until We Meet Again

