

Push for Equal Education

In Myanmar





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"Drip, drip, drip..."

A leaky ceiling welcomed in the pouring rain, creating a faint ambience enhanced by creaking floorboards and shuffling chairs. The musty stench and sweltering heat, unbearable in any other situation, was masked



completely by an almost-tangible air of anticipation that had settled amongst the room's occupants. In that tiny classroom in Yangon, Myanmar, where my friends and I volunteered as English teachers, I surveyed the room full of beaming smiles and uncontrollable excitement, and learned more about their lives and needs.

I first went to Myanmar the summer of my sophomore year, alongside a group of friends who all wanted to make a difference. We leveraged a governmental connection to institute our own non-profit in the country, and designed our own curriculum teaching village students the grammar and verbal skills they would need to pass the English college entrance exam. In Myanmar, surrounded by kids who had spent more time toiling in factories than learning in schools, I realised how fortunate I've been, and grieved because they deserve better. I met Micky Khaung, who, since he was just 10, had ingested packets of pure caffeine at night so that he could stay up and study until morning; now, at age 17, he suffers from a devastating heart condition, and, despite earning top marks in all examinations, he can't afford to attend university locally or abroad. I was frustrated. I knew that I didn't have the resources or time to meaningfully help Micky and all the other students I'd met, but I knew that I had to do something.

The urge kept gnawing at the corners of my mind, and after returning home, I began a long period of self-reflection that culminated into the realisation that the privileges I enjoy in life are not just a gift but a test. They represent a chance to prove myself, to demonstrate that I'm driven and can make the most of the opportunities I've been granted. But most importantly, it's a test of my commitment to helping others, because I believe it's my responsibility to open doors for people who deserve more but were given less.



A year later, I returned to Myanmar and was once again greeted by the same beaming smiles and heart-wrenching stories. I still spent time teaching and working with the kids – and to this day we remain in contact through video chat – but, hoping to make a lasting change in the education system, I also conducted research and wrote a paper on the difficulties facing educational NGOs operating there. In the research paper, I attempted to raise awareness for the horribly lacking education system and suggest improvements for aid going into the country on behalf of non-governmental organizations. The most challenging piece of the process wasn't the writing, or the language barrier, or even traveling around a foreign nation with no inkling of an idea regarding the destination, but rather connecting and networking with these local/international organizations who had better things to do than entertain a high school-aged researcher.

All in all, I sent upwards of 100 emails to organisations across the nation asking for an interview or to share their thoughts on the matter; to receive a measly fifteen emails back, five of which would be polite rejections, was quite simply unimaginable at the time. Rather than give up, I pushed myself and networked for days on end in an attempt to get invitations to community coordination events that were rare to come by and surprisingly exclusive given their title. I took buses for hours across the city from location to location, often skipping meals to make room for appointments. Countless times I arrived at an office, only for an assistant to tell me that the boss wasn't in, or that suddenly something 'came up' as workers whispered about my age and shook their heads.



I learned that being passionate about something doesn't mean that others will want to help you, even if that passion is for a good cause. Only a true dedication and some tough skin will allow you to accomplish the things you truly care about.