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YOLO COUNTY NEWS

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Girls sleep safely at Myanmar school, thanks to generous Davisites



Girls line up in front of their new dormitory at Nget Pyaw Daw Monastic School in southern Myanmar that is supported by the Myanmar Children's Foundation. The foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, was founded in 2007 by Davis High School graduate Max Harrington, who desired to help rural school children in the country where he was teaching fourth-graders. Courtesy photo

By Special to The Enterprise

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Thanks to the efforts of several Davisites, more than 60 young girls are moving into a new dormitory at a monastic school far away from the conflict zones of their hometowns in Myanmar.

The donor trip was the brainchild of Susan Steinbach and Leslie Anastassatos, Myanmar Children's Foundation board members, who felt the timing was right to lead 14 Davis residents on a "travel with a purpose" journey.

The group trip last November focused on visits to four monastic and nunnery schools in rural areas of southern Myanmar. Travelers interacted with monks and nuns, observed teachers and children in their classrooms, and donated school supplies, clothing and medicine.

The group also delivered more than \$12,000 in cash to build the girls' dormitory for boarding school pupils at Nget Pyaw Daw Monastic School in the Mon State. That was the result of a fundraising push by the travel group to support education in this fledgling democracy.

Davisites on the trip who spearheaded the fundraising were City Councilman Lucas Frerichs and his wife Stacie, who call the Myanmar Children's Foundation "a small but mighty nonprofit." Also on the trip were Deb and Kent Brittan, Virginia Thigpen, Carol Corbett, Andrew Corbett, Robert Dowling, Robin Holm, Sharon Thompson Wilson, Steve Wilson, Max Wilson and Jim and Pat Grieshop.

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They were joined by Tony Princ, director of Alternative Gifts International, one of MCF's key partners in fundraising, and Popi Anastassatos of Reno. In addition to the school sites, travelers visited popular sites of Golden Rock, Inle Lake and Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon on the trip.

The Myanmar Children's Foundation was created in 2007 by Davis High School graduate Max Harrington, who desired to help rural school children in the country where he was teaching fourth-graders. After many years of quiet, under-the-radar outreach to rural families in Myanmar, the foundation stepped up its outreach in a more public way with the "travel with a purpose" journey.

With slow and steady progressive changes in the Myanmar government over the past few years, it became possible to lead a group of travelers more safely into the areas where the foundation has been conducting its charitable work.

President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Aung San Suu Kyi, democracy leader, in the old capital of Yangon in November 2012. That diplomatic visit came after the release of hundreds of Myanmar political prisoners and signaled the opening of the tourist floodgates, reigniting outside interest in this forgotten part of the world.

MCF supports rural teacher salaries, health and hygiene checks for children, clean water projects, libraries, vocational training and English language programs. The popular "Stay in School" program has been running since 2008, which pairs an American donor with a Myanmar child, by providing the child with a school uniform and supplies, tuition fees and nutritional supplements.

In May of this year, Anna Joy Thigpen Hunt, a Davis resident and MCF board member, checked up on volunteer and research projects at two monastic schools sponsored by the foundation. She taught English conversation and games to young pupils and also taught hospitality English to tour guides in Mawlamyine, a city in southern Myanmar.

Thigpen Hunt said that "although there are instances where involving oneself with charitable issues abroad can do more harm than good, there are many organizations, like MCF, that are ethically and substantially beneficial. MCF is deeply sensitive and aware of the nuances of Burmese society with goals that are guided by our friends in Myanmar."

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Davis acted as a key donor in this effort, sponsoring a showing of the documentary "Girl Rising," with proceeds going to the foundation's building fund. Burmese-born Si Thu Tun and his wife Khine Zin, owners of Mermaid Sushi at the Davis Food Co-op, were keen supporters of the fundraising efforts as well along with the Burmese Student Association at UC Davis.

MCF board members connected with the Campus Community Book Project for this past academic year, "Half the Sky," written by Nick Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, which illuminates the status of girls and young women in the developing world. Steinbach and Leslie Anastassatos co-led a "Half the Sky" discussion group at the UU Church in the fall, and since then, MCF has put special focus on supporting young girls and teens to continue their education.

The foundation's next fundraiser will be a "Back to School

Night,” which is planned as an all-ages event, on Saturday, Sept. 6, at International House, Davis, 10 College Park. Guests will be feasting on a cultural buffet of life in Myanmar: photos, games, film, guest speakers, sparking wine for the adults, cookies and milk for youths.

It costs just \$50 per year to support a rural child to stay in school. More information can be found at www.myanmachildrensfoundation.org or by emailing myanmarkids@gmail.com.



Susan Steinbach (left) and Leslie Anastassatos (right)



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