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Anita Creamer: He's putting kids ahead of himself

By Anita Creamer - Bee Columnist

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In photos, the compound looks well-tended and cozy, filled with bamboo huts and surrounded by lush green fields. Almost 200 children live here, in the countryside several hours from Yangon, at this orphanage and school run by Buddhist monks.

And now they have friends in Davis.

Or to be precise, in a 22-year-old who grew up in Davis, Max Harrington, who earlier this year established the Myanmar Children's Foundation.

For now, he's living in Myanmar, the impoverished southeast Asian country formerly known as Burma, which is run by a military regime. Until his return home this summer, Harrington works in the capital, Yangon, and makes occasional trips to the rural area to help the orphans.

"In Yangon, Max is teaching some very well-off children and adults," says his mother, Susan Steinbach, who teaches English as a second language classes with the University of California, Davis' extension program.

"But his heart is with kids who are disadvantaged."

They wear gold-and-green uniforms to class each day, these elementary school-aged youngsters at the rural compound. Their teachers make the equivalent of \$6 a month, when the monks can afford to pay them.

The students lack blankets and mosquito nets, and in the cooler season, they sleep in a huddle for warmth.

Through the foundation, Harrington is helping the school fund construction of a two-story schoolhouse and lay the groundwork for financial stability through ongoing moneymaking ventures.

He hopes to take on projects at other orphanage schools, as well.

How refreshing. Just last month came news of a survey of 16,000 American college students, which shows that 30 percent have elevated narcissism scores -- a propensity, in other words, to think that the world revolves only around them and their needs.

from and from those.

Yet Harrington, who graduated from Davis High School in 2002 and the University of California, San Diego, last spring, seems to lack that inflated sense of self-interest -- and his mother says it's because he's an Eagle Scout who grew up working on projects to benefit others.

Says his stepfather, Bob Dowling: "Most people his age are interested in how to acquire things for themselves. He's spending all his talent and energy to acquire things for other people.

"He's not interested in having an iPod. He's interesting in doing something for people who have little."

In high school, Harrington spent six months as a exchange student in Costa Rica. He spent his final year of college studying overseas, too -- first in Ghana, then in Thailand. From there, he took his first trips into neighboring Myanmar, this country largely untouched by outside influences.

"There's an innocence and gentleness to the people that resonates with him," says Steinbach. "He fell in love with the people."

And when he returned home to Davis for the holidays, he brought his hopes for the school with him. With Rita Montes-Martin, a longtime Davis activist, and his mother, he established the board for the foundation, which has applied for nonprofit status.

Before returning to Myanmar in late January, he set up a Web site -- www.myanmarchildrensfoundation.org -- and hosted an introductory fund- raiser.

"I know people older than 40 who don't know what they're going to do when they grow up," says Montes-Martin. "Max knows exactly what he wants."

He wants to make a difference. And he knows there's a lot of world out there, way beyond the borders of the United States.

"I thought, 'We'll have the fundraiser, and that'll be it,' " says Steinbach. "That's how small my vision was. But Max's vision has gotten bigger and bigger. I'm blown away by the direction he's going."

About the writer:

- Anita Creamer's column appears Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays in Scene. Reach her at (916) 321-1136 or acreamer@sacbee.com. Back columns: www.sacbee.com/creamer.

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