

Kanchana stays focused

Burma is changing, but the transition has just begun and refugees still stream across the Thai border to the Mae Tao Clinic seeking medical help.

Colleen Ryan

Kanchana Thornton has been living in Mae Sot on the Thai Burma border, about six hours drive from Bangkok, for over a decade.

She knows better than most that this strange little city, with its dark underbelly of gem traders and drug runners and its special role as a haven for refugees fleeing the military regime in Burma, has, surprisingly, a number of quite funky restaurants and cafes. Some of them would not look out of place in Melbourne's Richmond or Sydney's Surry Hills. They cater to the aid workers, many of them Australian, who have flocked in their hundreds from all over the world since 1988 to help the displaced Burmese.

But here we were at SP Kitchen. The location was dreadful, right on the highway on the edge of town. Trucks rattled past. The seating was outdoors, wooden plank tables and benches. We were there for the food, Kanchana assured me. A side benefit was that we could escape the hothouse atmosphere of downtown Mae Sot.

Mae Sot's proximity to Burma has resulted in a city where sleazy opportunism sits alongside the quiet desperation of a displaced people.

Some 150,000 refugees live in camps along the Thai side of the border. Just across the river is Burma, where another half a million people have been forced to leave their homes over the past two decades as fighting raged between the Burmese army and the Karen and Kachin ethnic minorities.

The world is changing for Burma – for the better under the more liberal government led by Thein Sein. And it is changing for Mae Sot too. There is a new sense of optimism. You can feel it. In refugee camps and at the bars and restaurants frequented by ex political prisoners from Burma, with their portraits of The Lady, Aung San Suu Kyi, on the walls, the conversations are hopeful. Maybe one day it will be safe to go home, to Rangoon or Mandalay or the Karen areas of Burma. The Lady took her seat in Parliament just last Wednesday.

But there is a downside too. In some ways, the situation in Mae Sot is becoming even more dire. Transition is difficult. Change rarely comes quickly.

That is what Kanchana wanted to talk about. But first we order. The focus of the menu was Italian – pizzas and lasagna. But, on Kanchana's direction, we stick with local cuisine. The prices are a surprise. Main courses at 50 baht (about \$1.70) are less than half the price of a bottle of Heineken beer. We settle on two Burmese curries, one pumpkin and one fish, a min ka yat salad, and, since we are in Thailand, a Pad Thai. For drinks, it is orange juice and mineral water.

Kanchana first visited Mae Sot in 2000 with her husband, author and journalist Phil Thornton. They were living in Sydney's eastern suburbs, at Bronte, and Kanchana worked as a nurse in the emergency department at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. Kanchana, now 45, was born in Thailand but attended high school and university in Sydney and lived there for 20 plus years. She and Phil had a good, settled life.

But the situation in Mae Sot so alarmed them in 2000 that they tossed in their careers and beachside life in Sydney and moved to the border area of Thailand, "just for a year or two", says Kanchana, "just to help out a bit" – Phil to write and train young Burmese journalists to report on the situation inside their country and Kanchana to volunteer as a nurse and liaison officer at Mae Tao Clinic.

They never left. There is still too much to do. Kanchana doesn't see herself as some kind of modern day saint, working on subsistence wages in tough conditions for a decade. She waves away any comments that



remotely resemble praise. "I am just focused on the job to be done."

The food arrives. The Burmese curries are stunningly good and as we eat, Kanchana fills me in on the history.

The Mae Tao Clinic was set up by a young Burmese doctor, Cynthia Maung, who, fleeing the Burmese regime in the late 1980s, recognised the need to provide urgent medical care to her fellow refugees. It was

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meant to be a temporary clinic and started as just a one room shack with a rice cooker as a sterilizer. But the need has never gone away, it has only grown. Dr Cynthia is still there over two decades later, running a ramshackle hospital that caters to the health-care needs of over 150,000 displaced persons a year. The clinic treats up to 800 people a day. It is an extraordinary feat. Many of the patients have walked for days from inside Burma, and then crossed the border illegally, to seek help.

But there is only so much Mae Tao Clinic can do – complex surgery and many medical issues are beyond it. And Kanchana was

particularly valuable. With Thai as her first language she could deal with the Thai authorities when patients needed to be transferred to government hospitals in Mae Sot. She could communicate, in a way that a Burmese cannot, to negotiate access for a patient who has no papers, no legal standing and no local language.

"It helped a lot to explain that as a Thai you want to do the right thing by these people, as a human being," Kanchana says. "We are not talking about race or nationality, we are just talking about human beings and the right to good health. It made it easier for the program for me to be able to explain to Thai security what we were doing and why we were doing it."

But in 2004 Kanchana took it one step further. "I came to notice that there was a group of kids Mae Sot Hospital (and the clinic) couldn't help. And nothing seemed to be done. There was no mechanism in place for this group of children. As a nurse I knew that these children could be helped but if they didn't get help their life would be in danger. Some of them could die, or they would suffer all their life, some would be outcast. As a volunteer organization I felt we needed to do something. As a nurse, I couldn't turn a blind eye simply because it was not part of my duty, not part of my job description, to help these people. So we created a unique system."

This was eight years ago. Kanchana and two volunteer doctors, an Italian and an American, set up BCMF, the Burma Children's Medical Fund, to organise and pay for treatment at Chiang Mai Hospital, five hours away by road, for children whose problems were too great for Mae Tao Clinic or Mae Sot Hospital. Kanchana has run BCMF herself

since 2006 and has helped more than 500 very ill children. Not all have survived – but most have and it is all run on donations.

The first donations came from Kanchana and Phil's friends in Australia. Then Kanchana identified a group of wealthy Swiss bankers who were helping fund schools in Chiang Mai. They came on board with an initial donation of \$50,000. And now they take on several new cases a year. Other established charities have allocated funds. Kanchana reached out to Rotary Clubs in Thailand and Australia. Individuals have helped, like the Macquarie Bank employee who last year organised a read-a-thon and then convinced Macquarie to match the funds raised. An Australian entrepreneur also stepped in to underwrite a modest salary for Kanchana, so that now administration costs of BCMF are less than 2 per cent. Australia's Union Aid Abroad group, Apheda, processes donations to ensure they are tax deductible for Australian citizens and 98¢ in every dollar goes to treat and transport patients.

Before lunch I had met one of Kanchana's patients – Phyto Maung Maung, a playful, cheeky five year old boy. When he came to Mae Tao Clinic as a three year old, his parents had walked for four days from inside Burma to seek help. He was very ill. The clinic diagnosed him with leukaemia and dengue fever. Without BCMF's intervention he would have died within a few weeks. But Kanchana found a donor to pay for his treatment at Chiang Mai Hospital. He and his mother have spent much of the past two years there.

Now he is in remission and in all likelihood will lead a full and healthy life.

Kanchana has set up an adult medical fund as well now.

But she is very concerned about the future of BCMF and of organisations like Mae Tao Clinic. The rush to help inside Burma has left the border areas starved. There are still 150,000 refugees in camps, there are still hundreds streaming across the border every month seeking urgent medical help. (Burma spends just over 1 per cent of its annual budget on health.)

"There is a big impact on the border area at the moment because everyone is moving their funding inside. Yet people still come across the border asking for help because there is just nothing in Burma for them.

"At the moment it is a set up period for all the NGOs (non government organisations) in Burma. But to withdraw the budget from the border, when nothing has been set up yet inside, where are these people going to go? There is just nowhere for them to go and we are starved of funding. It is very tough for us."

Kanchana estimates that it will take five years to establish adequate medical facilities inside Burma. "If something had already been set up inside why would people take the risk of death and danger to come across the border to ask for help, medical help. Wouldn't you stay in your neighbourhood to get treatment? I mean, we don't just get poor people coming from all over the country, we get people like teachers coming across the border asking for help, to get treatment, well educated people. They come from the Indian border and from the China border area. From the Indian border it takes five days (to get to Mae Sot) and you don't know how much debt they go into to come across the country to look for help."

Kanchana can't go back to Bronte yet. "It is wonderful that things are changing inside Burma," she says. But it is going to take years to clear the problems inside the country and to move hundreds of thousands of displaced people from Thailand back to the homes they left so long ago.

In the meantime, there is a real danger that life is going to get even tougher in Mae Sot.

SP Kitchen

Min Kar Yat salad 40Bt
Burmese curry with pumpkin 50Bt
Pad Thai 30Bt
Burmese curry tomato and fish 50Bt
Orange juice 20bt
Mineral water 10Bt
Total 150 baht (\$5)