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## Perth to Thay Maw Ku: The retirees building wheelchairs for kids in need

LATELINE – BY GINNY STEIN

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PHOTO The wheelchair makes its river crossing from Thailand into Myanmar

SUPPLIED

In a small village in Myanmar's jungle, a young boy is getting around with the help of a new wheelchair that has come all the way from Western Australia.

The wheelchair is number 32,468. It was put together by a group of retirees working out of Perth's Wheelchairs for Kids workshop.

Wheelchairs for Kids is made up of 170 volunteers, who turn out 240 wheelchairs a month. They have been sent to children in 66 countries.

Wheelchair number 32,468 had a long journey to get to its intended recipient, nine-year-old Saw Beebe.

After leaving Australia bound for Bangkok, the chair travelled to the Thai border.

From there it was loaded onto a small wooden boat to cross the Moie River into Myanmar.



PHOTO Nine-year-old Saw Beebe was struck down by a bacterial infection two years ago.  
SUPPLIED

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Its final destination was Thay Maw Ku, a small village in Karen State, inaccessible except by foot for much of the year.

Kanchana Thornton, from the Burma Children's Medical Fund, said it was the first time any wheelchair has made it to this village.

"We took some of these wheelchairs inside previously and word spread, and they all come now and request for support because they never received this sort of support before," she said.

The chair will be life-changing for Saw Beebe and his family.

He was struck down by a bacterial infection two years ago and has not been able to walk or talk since.

Saw Beebe's mother Mu Naw Gay, 37, said her son was a happy child up until his illness.

"If he heard the sound of music he would always dance. He is not shy. At first when people see him with this condition, they cried. He had a lot of friends," she said.

Naw Wai, Saw Beebe's grandmother, said the wheelchair would be a big help.

"We will not need to carry him around anymore. He will be able to sit down and only lay down when he gets tired," she said.

"We feel grateful to everyone, you have to come a long way here, to help us."



PHOTO Wheelchairs for Kids is made up of 170 volunteers.  
FACEBOOK.COM

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Back at the Perth workshop, Rotarian Gordon Hudson said the volunteers get plenty of job satisfaction from their work.

"Satisfaction, plus the spirit of all working together," he said.

"In fact we have about 40 volunteers come in each morning for each different shift each day, and for instance if we don't have any work to do which is very rare, they still come in for a cup of tea. It is friendship."

Each wheelchair costs about \$200 to make and they have the approval of the World Health Organisation.

**Watch the story tonight on Lateline at 9.30pm (AEST) on ABC News 24 or 10.30pm on ABC TV.**

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