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April 6th 2019 / Trimestral Report I / January - April 2019

To start - **a matter on our own account**: following the repeated suggestion of donors, Zoe and I have decided to turn the »Quarterly« Report into a »Trimestral« Report reducing the number of reports per year from four to three. These will compile and send them to you in April, August and December. This gives me some margin for collecting facts & figures and is also better suited to the scholastic year.

25 February marked the **END of the 6th full school year** and it was fittingly celebrated – all the children and teachers with birthdays in February and the coming months were honoured. The menu of choice was Moke Hin Gar. (Note: as is often the case, there are frequently multiple spellings for one and the same thing – especially food! And rarely consensus which is correct. »Moke Hin Khar« or »Mohingar« - however spelt, it remains a tasty, comforting rice noodle soup with chick peas, spices & fish, is considered **THE national dish of Myanmar** and is always a favourite with the children!)



Mmmh... ice cream for dessert!

I would like to share some special moments as well as some facts & figures with you.

Achievement awards:

We held the »Achievement Awards« Celebration on 15 February. In each class all subjects were reviewed and all exams taken into account. The government schools only award those that excel in their studies. In contrast, we give awards in three categories:

1. study award (based solely on grades)
2. social award (for those who excel in the social field – helping other students or serving their communities, grades are not taken into consideration)
3. combined study & social award

The three highest ranking students per class were honoured and received an award.



Unknown to the teachers, we also created a special »100% Attendance Award« for them. Three teachers were honoured for their diligent and loyal presence throughout the school year. **Students and teachers alike received a trophy, a certificate and a cash allowance. It was a happy and meaningful event!**

- A person without a National Registration Card (NRC) is de facto non-existent and his/her scope of action is extremely limited. Because many of the children at LOL don't have clear family backgrounds, most don't have NRC cards. We decided to tackle this problem and try to officially register every child. We chose 52 children over 10 years of age for the first group and on 28 February six (!) government officers from the Ministry of Immigration came to LOL, interviewed the children and inspected their documents. Forty-one applications were successful, these children will receive their NRC cards. For the other 11 the papers were incomplete and will need further work.



Patience is required... queuing for an NRC



Piles of paper work....

- Good teachers are not easy to come by and so this is another matter we have tackled. My plan is to train apt students that successfully pass their 10th Standard Matriculation Exam and have them return to Light of Love as qualified teachers. I am very thankful to Juergen and Margrit Pumpluen of the Hirten-Kinder Foundation for having established an Education Fund exactly for this purpose. I am happy to report, that since January Cho Cho Nwe, Hnin Htet Htet Naing and Shwe Yamon Phoo are in Yangon, attending a one-year English course. Afterwards they will attend a two-year training at the Pyin Nya San Ye Teacher Education Centre - run by Catholic sisters. During these training years they will stay at my Yangon house and Nikki, my sister will look after them. Cho Cho Nwe and Hnin Htet Htet Naing attended LOL from its beginnings in 2013 and Shwe Yamon Phoo began one year later. Cho Cho Nwe's story is a wonderful example of how lives are being changed! Now 18 years old, she started LOL in 8th grade, failed the 10th Standard Exam twice, diligently persevered and finally passed last June. She was given a much sought-after English major spot at Yenangyaung college. Following my advice, she however gave up the spot and opted for the three-year training in Yangon – a course of life she would never have dreamed of a few years ago! (incidentally - her only parent - her mother has HIV for which we finance treatment at AZG (Doctors without Borders) and she works as a maid in Yangon.



Cho Cho Nwe enjoying a wrap



Hnin Htet Htet Naing in action at LTG

- While on the subject of education – slowly the system is changing... we are not allowed to fail students – even if it were absolutely justified. And if ever one is failed, justification is such a never-ending ordeal - so, usually none fail (at LOL we actually failed one child in KG and one in Grade 2 this year) But then it's different with the 10th Standard final exam which many do fail. So, a huge number of expensive boarding schools have opened up for 9th and 10th grade students, where they are drilled in military style – and the success rate is high. The children pass the exam. Up to now, a passing grade meant a guaranteed place at university. Now colleges and universities are changing their application mode and students must take an entrance exam even though they passed the 10th Standard exam. The entrance exams focus on general knowledge and comprehension, but because the 10th Standard exam is all done by rote learning many fail... so it will become imperative for the government to rethink the education system.
- May Thazin Aung has completed her first of a two-year training program in sewing, embroidery, knitting and other formative subjects at the »Mornese«, a Training Centre for girls established by the Salesian Sisters in Anisakan. She is doing well and is very happy there.



May Thazin Aung at work...



Graduation Day – 2nd year students with diplomas and 1st year students on the threshold of becoming seniors

- 5th – 9th grade students enjoyed an excursion to Mt. Popa and Bagan on March 1st – a fun way to end the school year and a reward for their diligent studying.



- The solar installation has been functioning well since the end of last November. We have never had to use the generator since, which is a huge relief and also massively cost saving as the price of diesel has nearly doubled. Due to a national renewal of power lines, six-hour power cuts have been announced on all weekends for the next three years - so the timing is ideal. Maintenance is low – we have washed the panels only once so far. So, although it was a big investment, it is great to have a reliable power supply. It will be interesting to see how the plant performs during the rainy season!

Visitors / Volunteers

- Lilian Senn, who helped Annick Bayle out with her sewing classes last year, has been busy with her school class in Switzerland, making Pom-poms for the caps, knitted and donated by various French sponsors
- Liz Savage from the Netherlands, an English teacher trainer and friend of Hilary King, stayed for a few days in January, worked with the teachers and observed procedures at LOL.



Liz with Eileen at LOL

Please find her impressions at the end of this report.

Meanwhile at Lei Thar Gone Guest House...

- The first Quarter of 2019 was quite busy, although due to the political situation, bookings for Myanmar in general are much lower than a few years ago. This downward trend was reflected in our 2018 financial statement, with sales down by 20% compared to 2017. Many companies – travel agents, hotels, restaurants and other tourist-related businesses - lost as much as 50% in sales - so we have every reason to be grateful!

- The excursions we offer generated sales of more than US\$1600 in 2018, which meant that because of the Guest House local companies/families also profited, which is for me a meaningful added benefit.
- To two-yearly application for a renewed Guest House license was quite a procedure this time because all businesses must receive EMP approval (environmental management plan) before licenses can be renewed. Lei Thar Gone has already been inspected and received approval, but results have yet to be processed. We are currently operating on a provisional license (with no expiration date!) until the new government system is fully implemented.
- In January we had very special guests staying for two nights. Harold Stephens, known as Stephens or Steve, is an American author, adventurer and travel correspondent. In Asia he is a famed author, he has written many books. His famous best seller is: Who needs a road. He and his team were once again on an expedition - travelling through Myanmar from top to bottom - doing research for a book – and the most amazing thing and truly an inspiration for me is that Stephens is 93 years old!
- Therese arrived back again on 17 February and spent over four weeks with us. Among many other things she trained Ame and Sumon in the reception, did accounts with Zoe, taught English, worked on a marketing mail for business/foreign government agencies in Yangon to promote Lei Thar Gone in the hope of opening a different market segment in order to fill some rooms during the months when foreign guests are few and far between. The personalized mail was sent to 40 individuals – from Ambassadors to Bank managers and NGO Country directors!
- Guests continue to praise Lei Thar Gone and this remains an important factor for our success because sites such as booking.com, TripAdvisor and AirBnB are frequently referred to by travellers to help them decide on and plan their routes. More frequently than in the past, people come to stay based on reviews, even modifying their journey and accepting detours.

We are happy to share two of the latest reviews with you:

TripAdvisor "Relaxation"

12 Jan 2019 / Freimueller, Waiheke Island, New Zealand

A very cosy place with a beautiful view and garden with pool. Small cosy bungalow with great breakfast. You should not drive past this place. The income from the guesthouse is used for a school. Extremely friendly staff with good English language skills.

Booking.com January 2019

Tim from the Netherlands

We had an amazing stay at Lei Thar Gone. The guesthouse is really lovely and the sunset from the terrace is one of the best you can get. The perfect breakfast is also served at this terrace. At the nicely decorated restaurant area you can order a daily three course menu, if you prefer. We recommend to do so; the food is really good! The guesthouse is part of a bigger project, which includes the nearby school. We were able to visit the school and say Minglabar to the children. Staff and organisation, keep up the good work! We really enjoyed our stay and would love to come back one day!

Impressions of Light of Life High School / © Liz Savage

I first heard about Light of Life High School from my friend and colleague Hilary King, who volunteered here as teacher and staff trainer last year. Her enthusiasm for the school, the children and the staff convinced me that this must indeed be a special place. I was planning a trip to Myanmar so I included a few days at Lei Thar Gone Guest House so I could visit the school and find out for myself what was happening there. With many years of experience as a teacher educator in the Netherlands and having worked myself in Myanmar I was particularly curious to find out whether the school had indeed managed to develop the more learner-centered approach which Hilary had introduced.

I have been here three days now and visited the school each day, observing lessons and talking to teachers, and I have to say it has not only met but also exceeded my expectations. The first thing that struck me arriving at the school was the very clean and well-kept yard, and the energy, vitality and curiosity of the kids, who ran up to greet me and ask questions... in very comprehensible English! It was great to see the small size of the classes, and the bright and airy classrooms with movable furniture and whiteboards. Unusual in other schools I've seen here. Next was the notable absence of chanting which usually greets a visitor to a Myanmar school. Instead I saw pupils actively at work and receiving individual feedback so they could improve. I was particularly impressed by a grade 5 English class where pupils were interviewing each other in pairs about their best friend, really communicating with each other ... in English of course! I was glad to see that something of Hilary's input had definitely stuck. I also saw a computer lesson in which pupils were using laptops to develop their 21st century skills: experimenting and creating, and at the same time developing their digital skills.

It gives me hope to see a school providing such a rich and effective learning environment with such minimal resources. In fact, the school provides what is perhaps the most essential ingredient for the future of this country... real education.

Liz' Blog gives a more detailed insight:

<https://mandalaycalling.wordpress.com/2019/02/01/light-of-love-high-school/>



This report was compiled and written by Therese, on behalf of Eric & Zoe.