



# Diggin

Deep For

# MYANMAR

## 2015

### Background

Sue and Sahin Ozturk established the Vera Thomson English language school in Lintha Village around fifteen years ago. Lintha is a small fishing village of approximately 5000 people near Ngapali Beach on the west coast of Myanmar. From small beginnings with just one small classroom, the school has grown to a multi classroom complex with permanent teaching staff that support and educate over 350 children. In addition to conducting English language classes, the school provides a pre-school, computer tuition classes and a library.

On a visit in 2012 we were so inspired by what was being done that we offered to assist in any way we could. Sue identified that a lack of suitable toilets was a major issue for the community and that only about 40% of the people in the village had access to acceptable toilet facilities.

My background and experience in small scale sanitation placed me in perfect position to lend a hand. In 2013 I returned to Lintha with a group of experienced volunteers to build a prototype toilet suitable for around 30-40 people. With the knowledge gained and experience of that trip we returned again in 2014 to successfully build three more toilets. With these successes under our belt we returned in April this year with a plan to build five more toilets.



The original school classroom



One of the new classrooms

## The problem

Poor sanitation and open defecation contribute to groundwater contamination and because most of the drinking water supply for the village is drawn from groundwater wells it is extremely likely that this contributed to some of the health issues in the community. Lack of toilets causes particular problems for women who are often forced to wait till after dark to relieve themselves in a discreet place in the village or in the bush where they are at risk of abuse.

World Health Organisation/UNICEF statistics state that:

- *2.5 billion people don't have access to adequate sanitation, one in three of the world's population.*
- *748 million people in the world don't have access to safe water. This is roughly one in ten of the world's population.*
- *Over 500,000 children die every year from diarrhoea caused by unsafe water and poor sanitation. That's 1,400 children a day.*

The following is an account of the progress being made and our experiences and achievements from this year's trip.

### Toilets built last year

This year's visit was our first opportunity to inspect the three toilets we built last year. It was very satisfying to find that they were being well maintained by their new owners and the septic systems were all functioning extremely well, in fact above expectations.

Just as satisfying is that some locals have adopted our design for use in their own systems. Broader acceptance of this treatment process will help reduce groundwater contamination which will have ongoing health benefits for the community.



Inspection one of last years toilets

### The 2015 Trip

This year's trip was very rewarding for Digging Deep for Myanmar and our team of enthusiastic volunteers, Jo & Tim Banner, Jane Owen, Jamie Maslen, Evie Maslen, Mel Howarth, Yasmin Mouftakir, Katie Mead, Sophie and myself.

Our fundraising commenced in late 2014 with a goal was to raise enough money to build five toilets, three in the village and two at the government school. Jo & Tim offered to raise funds to build at least one toilet while Mel, Yasmin & Katie agreed to fundraise for the school toilets. Sophie and I pestered our friends again and received great support, with many donations coming from sponsors who had donated in previous years. Our good friends Kerry & Ken Campbell and their family donated a toilet in their own right and Wilma Kippers & Martin Hastings donated \$500 as a 50% contribution to a toilet. Through the kindness of so many caring and compassionate people our target was easily

reached with enough surplus for a modest war chest for emergencies and to aid next year's program. Thank you so much for your generosity.

Our activities have expanded since last year and in addition to building toilets, we were able to conduct a health and hygiene program at the English language school as well as deliver and distribute around 180kgs of donated goods. We have also sponsored the short term support of a family of five that had tragically lost their mother and found themselves in a situation of extreme hardship.

Our visit was again supported in Myanmar by Sue (Mama Sue) and Sahin Ozturk, founders and operators of the Vera Thomson English language school which is supported by the Andrew Clark Trust.

### Toilets

We set an ambitious target to build five toilets in ten days. Work commenced on 2<sup>nd</sup> April and needed to be complete by 12<sup>th</sup> as Thingyan (Water Festival) commences on 13<sup>th</sup> April when the whole country grinds to a standstill.

Htein Lin, our man on the ground in Lintha, ordered and arranged delivery of most of the materials for the work so they were ready when we arrived. He did an excellent job and everything was ready to go when we arrived.

The people who would benefit from the new toilets were given the task of excavating the hole for the septic tanks as their contribution to the project. This was done prior to our arrival in order to save time.



**Septic tank hole dug, the work begins**

We again employed local tradespeople to do the bulk of the work as we believe that is far better to employ local people as it helps to stimulate the local economy. We were again astounded by their capability and work ethic. The builder and his staff of around eight men and women were able to complete all five toilets in the ten days. Only basic tools and equipment, no complaints, nothing ever too much trouble and all this in 35 degree temperatures and high humidity. For their efforts, they receive around \$5 US per day, a relatively good wage by Myanmar standards.



**Footings for the school toilet building**



**Septic tank lid being poured**



**Building a toilet in the village**



**The "truck" delivering materials**

The only work that needed to be done by the volunteers was to fit the roof and door. This strenuous work took its toll and we were forced to drink lots of brown fluid at the end of each day to help recuperate.



**Tim "the tool man" hanging a door**



**Jo on quality control**



**Jamie - just testing**



**The school toilets sponsored by Mel, Yasmin, Katie and friends**



Village toilet sponsored by Jo and Tim Banner and friends



Village toilet sponsored by Kerry and Ken Campbell and family

### School Health and Hygiene Program

A lack of awareness of the causes of diarrhoea and other gut infections that can cause illness and even death is a major problem for the community. The following extract from the WaterAid website sums up the issues that confront these poor communities.

*“Where poor hygiene is practised, water-related diseases spread fast. And no amount of taps or toilets alone can prevent it.*

*Simply by washing hands with soap and water after going to the toilet and before preparing food or eating, people can avoid life threatening water-related diseases. Hand-washing alone could cut the risk of diarrhoea almost in half, saving hundreds of children's lives every day.*

*However, improving hygiene behaviour can often be overlooked. This is because tackling the issue is difficult and time consuming. It requires talking to people about potentially sensitive issues and getting them to change long-term, ingrained habits.”*

As a way to raise awareness of the importance of hand washing and better hygiene generally, Katie, Mel and Yasmin prepared a health and hygiene education program which they delivered at the English language school. The program targeted over 300 children aged from around four to twelve years with the hope that they will in turn educate their families in the importance of hand washing. Posters were donated to the school and the teachers were left with handouts and other teaching aids so they can continue the program. They even composed a short hand washing jingle to the tune of happy birthday that could be heard ringing out from the classrooms every day after. The presentations were so successful that they have been invited to return next year. Well done girls!



Katie, Mel, Yasmin and Evie doing the Health & Hygiene training



The kids singing their hand washing jingle

## Helping an unfortunate family through tough times

During our stay we became aware of a family that had tragically lost their mother due to illness leaving the father with four children aged from ten months to ten years. They had little or no money and the father had to leave his job as there was no one to care for the children. Through Sue, we arranged and paid for food to be provided until they were back on their feet and able to provide for themselves.

They were living in a dilapidated shack on the outskirts of the village with few other people nearby. With the wet season approaching their shelter was totally inadequate. There are no government support programs so they were in a desperate situation. Although the other villagers were concerned for the plight of the family and assisted where they could, they were also too poor to be able to help in the longer term.



The family outside their dilapidated shack

Sue was able to find suitable rental accommodation in the village and has leased the basic hut for the family for an initial five month period. Living in the village with community support nearby has allowed the father to return to work and the children should now be able to attend school. We have offered to pay the lease costs of around \$7.50 per week from the Digging Deep fund, a great example of your donations being put to good use. A big thank you to friends of Jane and Jamie, Leo Gulley and Maralyn Cassetta who, on hearing of the plight of this family, donated \$350 to help out.

According to Sue, situations like this aren't uncommon. Often women find themselves destitute with no income and a family to house and feed after being deserted by their husbands. We intend to investigate options for suitable short term housing arrangements to cater for these types of emergencies.

## Help for the community

Our travelling volunteers carried around 180kgs of clothing, sports gear, toys and educational material that were donated by people here in Australia. Things that are often discarded here such as clothing and spectacles are highly valued in Lintha and much appreciated. Toys and sports equipment are popular as these are normally out of reach for these people.



Jane, Sophie and helpers on their way to distribute some goodies



Handing out clothing in the village

The girls handed out masses of clothing in the poorer areas of the village and as in previous years, they were swamped by eager and appreciative villagers. Some of the kids were wearing things that had been donated last year so these handouts are making a difference.

Jamie and Tim organised a sports day on the beach for the local kids and had a huge roll up. Around 130 kids turned up and each went away with a gift or prize. It was a lot of fun and we all had a great time. Thanks to the Nelson Bay Junior AFL Club for donating shirts, shorts and balls. They were a big hit with the kids.



**The egg and spoon race**



**The ever popular tug-of-war**



**The kids had a great time**



**Everyone gets a prize**



**Lintha Marlins AFL team**

**And last but not least**

A big, big thank you to all those people who donated to the cause and for putting your trust in us. I can assure you that 100% of your hard earned dollars are being spent on the ground where it is most needed. It is genuinely appreciated. Thank you for your generosity.

Our man on the ground Htein Lin was there every day to help out organising materials and deliveries, translating for us and helping to build the toilets. Without his help our task would have been impossible. Thank you Htein Lin.



**Htein Lin**



**Sue**

Thanks also to Sue and the staff of Yoma Cherry Lodge who looked after us so well for the time we were in Lintha. Your warmth and hospitality made us feel part of the family. We look forward to returning in the future.