

## A Family Journey in Humanitarian Aid

By Sophie Braccini



Naya Olmer distributes toiletries to Burmese orphans Photo Ksenija Olmer

The Olmers have an unusual tendency to want to make a difference when they travel abroad. The Orinda family has its origins in Eastern Europe, and maybe the difficult times those countries have endured during the 20th century have inspired the parents to show the world to their children through a different lens than that offered by resorts and tourist traps.

“My parents try to pick places that have an education and exploration aspect to them,” says Lana Olmer, the middle daughter of the family. “My mom likes to say, ‘We are not tourists, we are travelers.’”

After Africa and South America, the family decided to choose an Asian country and set their hearts on Burma. Olmer asked their travel agent, a Burmese resident, if he knew of a place they could visit, either a school or an orphanage, where they might offer some help.

“My English Kindergarten teacher is retired and has opened an orphanage,” he said, “she could certainly use some help.” Their objective set, the Olmers started fund-raising for the orphanage. The children got involved as well. “During my junior and senior years of high school, I got a lot more involved with the process,” says Lana. “The summer before junior year we went to Africa (South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, and Zimbabwe) which was the first time I had ever witnessed truly devastating poverty. It really opened my eyes and made me want to get more involved. I joined a service organization, Interact, at my high school after returning. We (my family) used Interact as a sort of launching pad for a lot of the fundraising we did for the orphanages in Burma: car washes, dinners, brunches, etc.”

Once in Burma, they saw how extensive the needs were and decided to spend a day with the head teacher to use the \$1000 they had brought. With that amount they managed to buy the supplies for building a water tank, 20 blankets, cooking oil, cooking pots, and 3.5 tons of rice, enough

to fill the little stomachs for four months. “It’s amazing what can be done with a thousand dollars, this was the most meaningful shopping trip we had ever made,” says Olmer. They were able to offer to a 2nd orphanage as well.

“This was such an amazing experience to give to others what we take for granted” says Naya, who was 14 years old at the time, “after seeing such wide spread poverty I think more philanthropically when I travel.”

For Lana, too, the event was very meaningful. “When I first arrived at the orphanage, I mostly felt uncomfortable. It is so hard to look square in the face of such disabling and intense poverty. Most people try to avoid the parts of life that make them uncomfortable, and there was no way I could ignore the conditions the orphans lived in, or how obscenely extravagant my life suddenly seemed in comparison. I was absolutely shocked at the living conditions. It was a rude awakening. The kitchen was literally a pot on a fire. The bathrooms were.... I have no words really.”

“Knowing that I had an impact on the lives of others is such an amazing feeling, especially at the age of 17,” says Lana, “It’s empowering and humbling at the same time. A lot of people don’t realize just how capable they are of making a positive change.”

Since this first trip, other friends of the Olmers have gone to both orphanages. The Bashin-Sullivans went last Christmas with their two children. Before the trip, they organized a fund raising dinner for twenty people; and had talked to clients and collected \$2200 in donations. The money funded food, clothing and medicine for the orphanages.

“I was amazed how my children engaged with the Burmese kids, preparing food together, giggling and laughing,” says the mother, “they were very phased to see how little these children had, all their possessions could fit in a small box.” When they came back home, she remembers a comment from her 10-year-old daughter as she was making her bed with her mother, “I bet the kids in Burma would love to have a box spring bed like that.” She had seen them sleeping on wooden platform with or without thin mattresses on top. “My daughter had seen their condition with her own eyes and realized the differences; something was registering there,” concludes Bashin.

Olmer is aware of the possible perverse effects of charity: populations otherwise resourceful might become dependent. So, the “Ducks Project” was formed. Ducks feed on vermin that infest rice fields and provide very nutritious eggs. A flock could provide the orphanages with sustainable access to protein and a potential source of income.

The Olmers have entered an intensive phase of fund-raising to purchase the birds. The Orinda bookstore helped along the way. Those interested in contributing can come to the next fundraiser on Saturday May 10th, 2-4 pm, in a magnificent private garden in Moraga. There will be a lecture on orchid varieties and care, wine tasting and desserts. For more information contact the Olmers at 254-5439 or email [Xenija@aol.com](mailto:Xenija@aol.com).