



La Doi: aiming for the stars with school

With a trendy hairstyle reminiscent of superstar Korean actor and singer ‘Rain’, La Doi could be any other teenager living in a big city – he loves pop music, playing and watching football and hanging out with his friends at school.

But, as a refugee from Myanmar life has been far from easy for this young man. Thanks to the support of the Educate A Child (EAC) Programme and the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), La Doi is now accessing education through a refugee community run learning centre or ‘school’ and aiming for the stars....

La Doi was just six years old when his family fled violence in their homeland in Kachin state, northern Myanmar. Like many Kachin people, his parents had been forced to work for the military forces occupying the region.

La Doi’s mother Shan Tei speaks of the terrible conditions in her homeland that forced them to flee. When a soldier tried to rape her, the family made the decision to brave the people smugglers and a dangerous journey to Malaysia rather than risk retribution.

Thanks to the Educate A Child Programme:

- School starter kits provided for dozens of Kachin refugee children
- Better salaries for teachers who are also refugees, helping them focus on teaching

“I don’t remember much from that time but we had to leave because of the war. It was very dangerous,” says La Doi. “I do remember we were put in to a big truck with other people and covered with a sheet. I was very scared and I didn’t know what was happening.”

“I miss my grandparents most and I hope one day I will get to meet them. I remember going with them to collect wood.”

Their family’s journey to safety lasted many weeks – after the initial truck ride, the family walked for some days before eventually catching a lift by car to Malaysia: “When we came to Malaysia I saw things I had never seen before. I had never seen a zoo or trains or a monorail. But I couldn’t go to school because I didn’t speak the language and we were scared of the police.”



La Doi talks with his mother about school, in the small room where his family lives

Educating La Doi

Today, La Doi lives with his mother, baby sister and an older brother in a tiny rented room in central Kuala Lumpur. They eat, live and sleep in that one small room and share a small kitchen and basic bathroom facilities with two other families. Despite Shan Tei's best efforts, the room is damp and bed bugs cause massive discomfort – La Doi's 4-month-old sister is covered in bites – but, with little money available the family must make do.

Security is a continual worry for the family. Refugee communities in Malaysia sometimes mistakenly get caught in raids looking for illegal migrants and the children are often fearful of police or other authorities.

La Doi's two older brothers both work part time to try and make money to supplement the support provided to the family by UNHCR. There is no room for 'luxuries' and without the support of EAC this hardworking family could not afford for La Doi to get any kind of education or schooling.

"I worry about my children here," explains Shan Tei. "My husband left us and we have little money. My eldest son works in a restaurant part time but we struggle to pay for everything – the rent is a lot and with the baby expenses, there is not much left. I am very pleased that La Doi is going to school. Without this support, La Doi would not be able to go to school. I could not afford to pay for uniforms, books, bags..."

"If the school wasn't open I would be working right now," says La Doi. "That would make me sad because children aren't meant to work; we are meant to be in school and studying. With work we fall behind and how can we then get a better future?"

Encouraging dreams with education

"I would like to be an astronaut and to explore space and the stars," says La Doi. "I like studying at school and I like science. Education is very important. Only if I am educated can I help take care of my mother and get a good job. When I am older this is what I will do.

The EAC and UNHCR funded learning centre, or 'school' to the refugee children and families, provides a basic primary school education following a simplified Malaysian syllabus. Classes are held in a large church hall and the teachers here are passionate and dedicated, working hard to offer the children consistent education and some stability.

With the support of EAC and UNHCR, teachers at the school are for the first time receiving salaries for their work, a seemingly basic provision but one that means the teachers, who are also refugees, no longer need to work another job to survive and can concentrate on educating the children. The children are also provided with school starter kits – all the basic supplies including a school bag, books and uniform – needed to go to school.

"I am so grateful to the people who help to pay for the school," says Shan Tei. "I am very happy La Doi can go to school but feel sad that my eldest children didn't get the same chance. I am not educated so I could not school them at home either. I hope my daughter will also be able to go the school – as a girl it is important she is educated because only that will help her have a better future."

For many families this school is the only option for educating their children. Not only does the learning centre provide a basic education, it also offers a safe place for children who would otherwise be left unsupervised while parents work long hours to try and make a living. It also helps the children to form important social networks with their community.

"I feel sad I can't go to a normal school in Malaysia but I don't speak the language so that's why this school is so good. The teachers here are very good and we learn in English and in Chin," says La Doi.

"I like coming to school to learn and to see my friends. When I come to school I chat with my friend and play with them and wait for class to start. My best friend is Mai because he is a very good drawer and can draw anything."

EAC is literally changing the lives of refugee children like La Doi: "Thank you for helping me go to school."

About UNHCR

For six decades, UNHCR has helped save lives, restore hope and rebuild futures. As we strive to bring protection and solutions to millions of refugees around the world, some of the world's leading corporations are helping us have maximum impact, providing an opportunity for collaborating together on initiatives that serve both their social and business interests.

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