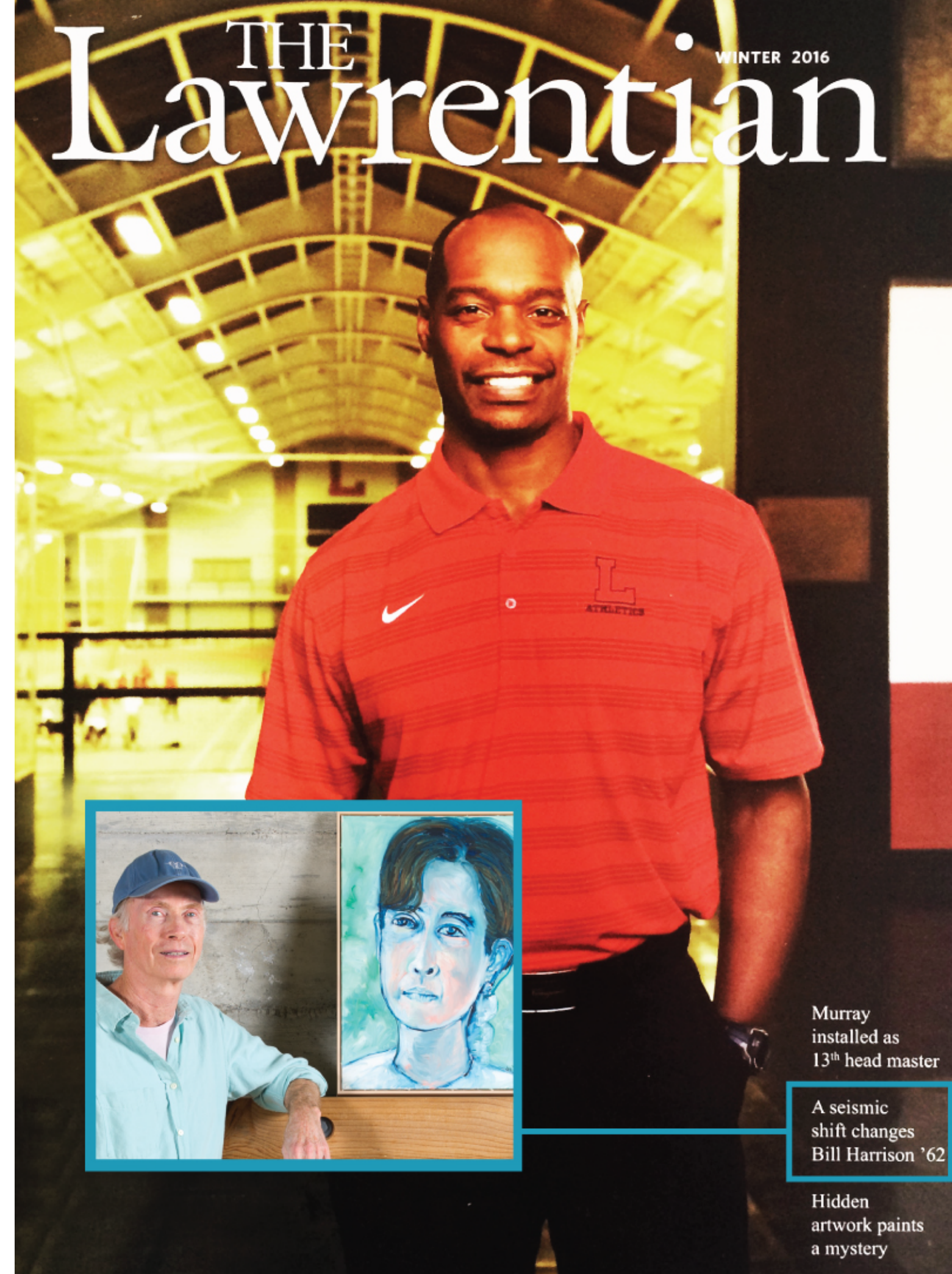


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EDUCATION

Burma Thailand Myanmar

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Murray installed as 13th head master

A seismic shift changes Bill Harrison '62

Hidden artwork paints a mystery



Hands Across The Sea



The 2004 Christmas Tsunami stirred [Bill Harrison '62](#) to bring change to Burmese migrants.  BY SEAN RAMSDEN

Speak of a “seismic shift” to Bill Harrison ’62, and he can certainly appreciate the metaphor. A thirty-year resident of Northern California, the retired corporate banker and real estate consultant is well acquainted with the distinct feeling of tectonic movement beneath his feet. Some are nothing more than faint tremors, barely perceptible. Then there are those earth-trembling shocks with the power to transform, unleashing the kind of strength that permanently alters the course of a life.

And sometimes, the seismic shift isn’t a metaphor at all.

Harrison was vacationing in Phuket, Thailand, on December 26, 2004, enjoying a languid morning in his second-floor hotel room, about two hundred yards from the beach. The day was unfolding slowly for Harrison after the prior evening’s Christmas celebration, and he was not alarmed when he sensed the familiar rumbling of the earth.

“I had felt a number of those before in California, so I went down to breakfast, then went back up to my room,” he says. A short time later, Harrison was about to head to a beachside grocery store, but,

with a lingering headache, he lay down to watch highlights of the Boston Red Sox’s improbable comeback in that year’s American League Championship Series.

“All of a sudden there was an explosion and I thought, *wow, I don’t know what that was,*” says Harrison, who then heard a second blast. “People started screaming and I saw there was a lot of water in the courtyard below. I thought that the reservoir up in the mountains had broken. Then there was second wave of water that was much deeper, and I heard more screams: *From the sea! From the sea!* And that’s when it was clear that this was a tsunami.”

The “Christmas Tsunami” killed more than 230,000 people in fourteen countries, with waves nearly one hundred feet tall. Harrison believes his life was never in any real danger – the hotel was constructed of sturdy concrete built to endure such a situation – but he was nevertheless plunged into the peril of the event.

“We had to wade through this knee-deep, filthy, snake-filled water to get up on high ground where we could watch this whole thing unfold,” Harrison recalls. “I think it was one of those moments where

you face something that tells you that life is a fragile commodity, a don't-waste-your-time kind of thing."

Already well acquainted with the region, Harrison remained in Thailand, moving up and down the coast, trying to be of aid. "I saw for the first time how many Burmese were working along the coast, what terrible conditions they endured, and how they couldn't even go and identify the bodies of their families because they didn't have the right papers," he said. "I was ready to retire from the business world, and here was a real cause that kind of hit me in the face at the right time. So I said, all right, *this is what I'm going to do.*"

Southeastern Asia has long brought a sense of peace to Harrison. He has traveled frequently to the region since a six-month sabbatical brought him to India, Nepal, and Thailand in 1983. "I was trying to get out of a 15-year banking career, and I was ready for a change," he recalls of his initial trip. "The whole idea of Asia was kind of exotic to me, and I thought this would be a good place to go, about as far away as you can get."

The protracted distance from the United States appealed to Harrison, who had grown disenchanted with his banking career despite his success. After graduating from Princeton and earning an M.B.A. at Wharton, Harrison worked for a time as a corporate banker with Philadelphia National Bank before moving on to Crocker National Bank in San Francisco. Climbing the ladder, he distinguished himself in corporate lending before heading up his own department and moving into the real-estate side of the business. He was a senior vice president before deciding to get away. Harrison felt unsatisfied with his work, but in Asia, he felt revitalized. It was a place, he discovered, where his burdens melted away.

"I was leaving an anxiety-filled situation at the bank, which sometimes manifested itself in crowded situations. I didn't really like crowds. Then I got over there, and I thought, *This is going to be even worse*, but it was just the opposite. The crowds are much larger, yet it just felt completely calming to me," explains Harrison, who returned ten times from 1983 to 2000 and even began practicing Buddhism



in a way he calls "more philosophical than religious."

Upon his first visit to Myanmar (formerly Burma) in 2000, he was immediately hooked. Though he was fond of all the Asian nations he had visited, Myanmar found a place in his soul. Not only did he feel at home, but he felt needed.

"IT'S SUCH A BEAUTIFUL PLACE WITH BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE, BUT THE BURMESE WERE JUST ABSOLUTELY TRAPPED IN A PATHETIC MILITARY DICTATORSHIP, AND THEY DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT," HARRISON SAYS.



Indeed, the nation of fifty million people has endured its share of strife. Following the end of British rule in 1948, Burma became an independent republic, but a 1962 military *coup d'état* saw the end of a parliamentary government and the rise of a repressive regime. Well before Harrison's first visit, the military junta had dragged the once-prosperous country to its knees.

"They just drove the economy down and sold all the natural resources directly out of the government to India, Thailand, and China, took the proceeds themselves and rather than spending them on their own country, simply built up the military," he explains. "So it wasn't a question of a *poor* country; it was a question of a rich country with bad leadership that was misusing the assets. So that's why you see that and say, *This has got to be solved.*"

In 1990, Myanmar held free elections for the first time in nearly thirty years. Future Nobel Peace Prize-winner Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy captured more than 80 percent of the 492 seats in the country's parliamentary government, but the regime refused to relinquish power, and Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest. Worse yet, some 90 percent of the population lived near or below the poverty line, with one-third of all children suffering from malnutrition. The



national education system, once a proud Burmese institution, was decimated at all levels. The lack of jobs in Myanmar led huge numbers of Burmese to leave their families for neighboring countries – mostly Thailand – where more than 3 million Burmese migrants sought work and a better life. By 2000, Myanmar was at the bottom of misery-index categories like human rights, health care, poverty, and corruption.

“IT WAS A FASCINATING PLACE WHERE I DIDN’T REALLY FEEL LIKE A TOURIST. I FELT LIKE I WAS WATCHING A REALLY SAD POLITICAL SITUATION, A PLACE THAT WAS WELL BEYOND TOURIST ACTIVITIES,” HARRISON SAYS. “BUT I FOUND MYSELF DRAWN BACK YEAR AFTER YEAR.”



So it was that Harrison found himself in Southeastern Asia in December 2004 as the 9.2 earthquake deep beneath the surface of the Indian Ocean sent the tsunami speeding eastward at four hundred miles per hour toward the coasts of Indonesia, Thailand, and Myanmar. The natural catastrophe spurred Harrison’s efforts to educate expatriate Burmese migrants and prepare them for a successful return to their homeland.

“After the tsunami, we went on a long trip to the Andaman Sea, and we just couldn’t find anything where I could have the right kind of impact,” Harrison explains. “So I went back to Phuket, and we were taking rice to a construction camp about two blocks from my hotel. It was really run down, like a slum. So I asked the translator, ‘Do your kids need education?’ And they said no, our kids are back in Burma, but we need education.”

Harrison understood their plight. “There are four million Burmese people in Thailand, a country of 60 million, and maybe two-thirds are economic migrants who came because of the failed economy in Burma,” he says. “They’re starving, so they come over to Thailand, where they do the work that the Thais don’t want to do. They work twice as hard and for a third of the wages.”

But, Harrison adds, the Burmese are also routinely mistreated and disrespected in their new land, which heightens their already desperate situations. What they want more than anything is to be prepared for a return to a more prosperous Myanmar.

“These were adult Burmese migrants – subsistence-level workers – sending half of their meager salary back to Myanmar, and they needed education *themselves*,” he continues. “So I said, ‘Hey, that’s a good idea; I haven’t really heard of anybody doing that.’”

In response, Harrison started the Burmese Migrants Education Project (BMEP), soliciting donations through a sponsoring 501(c)(3) charitable organization. He started small, receiving contributions from approximately twenty-five friends, many of whom were his Lawrenceville classmates. He began traveling two or three times a year to Asia to initiate and oversee education projects, and by late 2005, two were operational in Phuket and Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand.

Harrison also partnered with Dr. Thein Lwin, a leading Burmese educator who was already located in Chiang Mai, and started a Burmese migrant learning center there. The location was strategic to Harrison, who is also committed to a larger goal: the effective repatriation of the newly educated Burmese migrants back into their homeland, all in the hope of restoring democracy to Myanmar.

“The political exiles and the organizations that were dealing with the problems inside Myanmar, trying to support Aung San Suu Kyi and trying to bring democracy to Myanmar, were mostly located in Chiang Mai,” he says. “That’s where Dr. Thein Lwin had his program, so that’s where we started.”

At the BMEP-funded Chiang Mai Learning Center, a ten-teacher staff taught English, Thai, Burmese – many Burmese migrants speak only informal, slang-like dialects – and computer skills to adult students who worked in factories, night markets, hotels, restaurants, sex shops, and construction sites. Within two years, more than 1,400 Burmese migrant workers had attended three-month courses, and the demand continued to grow. Despite long hours at tiresome jobs, these Burmese migrants were starved for education.

“For the first time in Thailand, where they had always been marginalized, they felt a sense of purpose and a sense of worth,” Harrison says.

Propelled by Harrison’s efforts, BMEP forged ahead on a shoestring budget – “A little money goes a long way in Southeast Asia,” he says – and the organization was able to make physical improvements, too, including air conditioning and new computers.

With an eye on the larger picture, Harrison traveled to Myanmar eight times from 2005 to 2007 to observe the situation and support discreet education and humanitarian initiatives, such as assistance for ethnic weavers studying in Yangon and a law scholarship in Mandalay. Sometimes, though, even cautious efforts had dire consequences when his actions aroused suspicions. One small education project he initiated in northern Myanmar turned tragic when contact with Harrison led to imprisonment and abuse at the hands of police for two members of a family receiving aid from BMEP.

“That kind of situation happened again and again in terms of people trying to do things inside Myanmar before 2010. It would backfire, or your phones were tapped and people were listening to you wherever you were; they were spying on you,” he recalls. “You get kind of comfortable thinking, well, I’m just doing education and there’s no real worry on this. For me, the risk was only deportation, but for my Burmese friends, it was far greater.”

The Saffron Revolution in September 2007 turned the international community’s gaze upon Myanmar. Led by Buddhist monks, thousands of Burmese protested the decision of the military government to cease subsidies on the sales price of fuel in a display that resulted in more than a dozen deaths and earned the attention of the world. Still, though the world was able to witness the junta’s brutal tactics, the police and government soldiers crushed the peaceful marches and imprisoned many monks. Once again, the Burmese people were left demoralized.

As the year drew to a close, Harrison returned home to Nicasio, California, discouraged about the failed demonstrations and the lack of political progress in Myanmar. However, the crisis did allow BMEP to finish the year with a flurry of fundraising success.

“Thanks to your financial and moral support, I feel revitalized and ready to move forward,” Harrison wrote in his year-end report to donors. “As a small organization, we are nimble, fast to act, and able to alter our course quickly if conditions dictate.”

It turned out to be a darkly prophetic sentiment. Cyclone Nargis, the most devastating natural disaster in the nation’s recorded history, crashed down upon the Irrawaddy Delta in southern Myanmar on May 2, 2008. In its wake, at least 140,000 were dead, while some 2.5 million survivors were left without shelter, adequate food, potable water, or medicine.

Harrison says the ruling generals withheld information about the size and scale of the storm prior to its arrival in the hopes of avoiding a delay in an upcoming parliamentary election. Their decision led to a serious state of unpreparedness among the residents of the delta.

“After the disaster, international aid workers and their emergency relief supplies were denied access to the delta for three weeks,”

Harrison recalls. “No one had experienced a natural disaster where the biggest obstacle to relief was the victims’ own government.”

Feeling the desire and obligation to help, Harrison rushed into action. He described one relief trip to his local newspaper, *The Point Reyes Light*, in September 2008, writing:

With \$20,000 in one hundred dollar bills hidden in my pockets to avoid an illegal 33 percent currency conversion charge and possible confiscation by the military, I returned to Yangon on July 15. ... Three days later, my Burmese community-based organizer, a guide, and I drove seven hours over terrible roads to the hard-hit delta town of Bogalay. ... Following an oppressive, sweat-soaked night, our group headed to the Irrawaddy River and boarded three boats overloaded with humanitarian supplies. ... Something registered as soon as we turned into an inlet towards the village of Kyat Tanyin. It was a beautiful setting, but felt like a ghost town. What had been a healthy fishing and farming community of 400 before Nargis was now home to 133 shell-shocked residents living in temporary thatched huts. The hardest statistic: 87 children before the storm, 12 after. Rice paddies were dead with salt water. No structures built before May 2 survived. Clearly, this was the place to focus our rebuilding effort.

All the while, the Chiang Mai Learning Center continued to grow. By the end of 2008, some four thousand students had availed themselves of the classroom experience there, and BMEP and the teachers in Chiang Mai agreed that it was time to take the next step. The BEAM School – an acronym for Bridging Educational Access to Migrants – offered a broader and deeper curriculum that could lead to admission to a university or to advanced vocational skills.

“The focus was on college-prep courses and specialized vocational skills, always with an eye on the migrants’ return to Myanmar,” Harrison says, noting that students were selected for the program based on their passion for their homeland, as well as their ambition, potential, and need. By the start of 2010, there were thirty-five students on a two-year university prep track, with another

twenty-five enrolled in a six-month vocational program. In just five years, BMEP received over \$500,000 in contributions from a growing list of supporters.

To this day, Harrison takes no salary from BMEP and pays for all his own travel expenses, including flights, hotels, and meals. More than 90 percent of all money raised goes directly to BMEP programs. His original network of twenty-five beneficiaries has expanded to about two-hundred fifty, still composed primarily of old friends and contacts from Lawrenceville, Princeton, and Wharton, with whom he can maintain personal contact.

“I continue to believe that BMEP operates most effectively as a private, grassroots, education-oriented humanitarian organization with my direct and personal involvement in all activities in Thailand and Myanmar,” he explains. “It allows a small organization to have



big goals and gives donors confidence that their gifts are put to use where they will have the greatest impact.”

By the end of 2011, with the BEAM School firmly established, Harrison began to consider even more initiatives. BEAM opened a cultural center near the school, hoping to promote interaction among the Burmese and other regional groups.

“We starting sponsoring entertaining and informative programs that celebrate the cultural past and present of the diverse individuals and communities in Chiang Mai and the

surrounding region” Harrison says, adding that the cultural center also taught English, Thai, Burmese, Japanese, and Chinese language courses.

“Once the BEAM programs began growing in reputation, we started getting volunteers – those living in Chiang Mai or family members of BMEP donors – from organizations like Princeton in Asia and the Volunteers in Asia, which is affiliated with Stanford University,” Harrison says. Before long, BEAM became a registered Thai Education Foundation and was the regional center for GED test preparations – a standardized college-entrance exam similar to the SAT. Students from the Thailand-Myanmar border and throughout northern Thailand were finding their way to BEAM.

“A lot of people were surprised, but our student success rate for the difficult, English language-based GED exam was higher than 90 percent,” Harrison says.

Conditions were beginning to change inside Myanmar, as well. Thein Sein, a reform-minded ex-general, was elected president of the nation’s new, constitutionally mandated, civilian-run parliamentary democracy. Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in late 2010 after spending fifteen of the previous twenty-one years in confinement. Within a year, scores of political prisoners were also freed, and Suu Kyi was elected to Parliament. Increased personal freedoms and reduced press censorship, as well as the establishment of new diplomatic and economic contact with the world, led observers to believe there was hope in Myanmar.

“The military government decided that they would engage with the world rather than be considered despots and war criminals, leaving a horrible legacy, and everybody got very excited,” Harrison says. “Secretary of State Hillary Clinton went, President Obama went, the world went, and the aid agencies moved inside [Myanmar], so it was very positive.”

For Harrison, the endgame was always getting the migrants back to a better Myanmar, so he quickly got to work.

“I started developing these programs to assist returning migrants with education, business and training opportunities through an office in Yangon, and working to support a group that worked with education authorities in Thailand and Myanmar – bridging programs for people to get credit in Myanmar for the

courses they’ve taken in Thailand,” he says. “And we were really kind of excited. But then all of a sudden, the progress started to slow.”

Change in Myanmar will probably remain slow, moving in fits and starts, though the recent November 2015 elections once again seem to point the nation in the direction Harrison has long hoped for. Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy appeared to have captured nearly 80 percent of the vote nationwide, and President Thein Sein has vowed to respect the results of the election. In any case, Harrison continues to position his students, the Burmese migrants, for a successful repatriation, as he tries to rebuild the educational system in Myanmar.

“We have a chance to play a significant role in the unprecedented changes occurring in Myanmar,” he says. “In terms of representing the migrant students returning from Thailand, we have a seat at the negotiating table with the Myanmar education authorities.”

Total contributions to BMEP passed the \$1 million mark in 2014, and BMEP changed its name to Education Burma Thailand Myanmar, or EBTM, becoming a registered United States 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation. This change signals optimism for Harrison’s continuing efforts in both Myanmar and Thailand, and it entails greater formal structure, with a board of directors and officers, bylaws, and financial statements, with formalized grant applications and project reporting. Harrison says the organization’s personal touch will endure – he remains the only EBTM staff member, still unpaid and covering his own travel expenses.

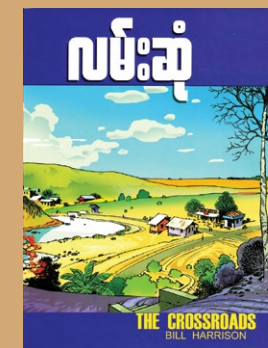
In addition, BEAM’s recently opened office in Yangon is hard at work with programs to increase the number and pace of returning migrants who, Harrison says, “will be able to reunite with their families and use the skills they’ve learned in Thailand to become immediate and active participants in building a healthy civil society in Myanmar.”

For Harrison, it’s a goal a long time in the making.

“This has been my cause, my second home, and my family for the last ten years,” he says. “I find myself constantly drawn back to Asia, lured by the sounds and smells, the heat of monsoon rains, and the smiling, still hopeful faces of the people of Myanmar. I want to be part of it all.”

CREATING UNDERSTANDING AT ‘The Crossroads’

Among the more serious recent divides in Myanmar is the one between Buddhists, who make up 90 percent of the nation’s population, and Muslims, who represent just 5 percent. Historically, Myanmar’s Buddhists and Muslims have lived and worked side by side, in peace, but in the past five years, a nationalist sect of Buddhist monks, led by a charismatic leader named Wirathu, have sought to exclude these Muslims from their communities. The monks have lobbied Buddhist shop owners to display a sign emblazoned with “969,” a traditional mark of the Buddhist core teaching of pride. But in today’s Myanmar, the sign is code for “Muslims stay away,” and “Buddhists stay away from any shop without a ‘969’ sign.”



In his continuing efforts to support a tolerant and democratic Myanmar, Bill Harrison '62 has penned an illustrated book about this conflict that he hopes will help soothe feelings and promote greater understandings of their common culture.

“I said, maybe I can write a story that’s low key and non-threatening, where nobody is right or wrong, something non-political and non-religious, that shows the problem,” he says of *The Crossroads*. “It’s got a happy ending and works out, because the people – friends and shop owners from two families, one Buddhist and one Muslim – align and refuse to abandon their friendship.”

An ally of Harrison who runs a human rights biweekly newspaper agreed to publish the book, which debuted in the late spring of 2015. He also provided translation and contemporary illustrations to make the work palatable to all ages. Each copy tells the tale in both English and Burmese.

“It was a really tremendous exercise doing that over the last year,” Harrison says. “It’s already gotten some traction inside Myanmar, enough that I’m going to do a sequel.”