



Life Stories

Past, present and future

70 years of British Council Burma

CREDITS

Project Team:

Alex Finlayson
Kevin Mackenzie
Kyi Kyi Pyone
Matthew Sheader
Moe Moe Soe
Myo Ko Ko Oo

— —

With thanks to:

Khaing Khaing Tin
Mairead Condon
May Mon Aung
Naw Moo Moo Paw

The project team would like to thank the following individuals and organisations for their creative contributions:

Bridge Agency (exhibition and design)

Yangon Heritage Trust

Boothee Thaik Htun (photographer)

Manuel Oka

Dr. Su Lin Lewis, Lecturer in Modern
Global History, University of Bristol

Myanmar Photographic Society

U Pe Myint Oo

Joanna Loxton, Records Reviewer,
Records & Archives, British Council

Most of all, we'd like to thank all of our interviewees. This book is dedicated to them and to all the people British Council Burma has met over the last seven decades.

For more information, please visit www.britishcouncil.org.mm/life-stories

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**I would like to thank
the British Council for
all that it has done.
You have helped us to
connect cultures and
forge futures.**

”

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, May 2015

Foreword

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the first British Council representative to this country. He landed in a Burma still coming to terms with the devastation of the Second World War and seeking to establish itself as a newly independent nation.

Memorably described by Rudyard Kipling as ‘quite unlike any land you know about’, the country has remained a mystery to much of the world since that time. It is only in the last few years that it has re-emerged onto the international stage, with visitors now arriving in large numbers.

We are both proud of our history here and humbled by the experiences of the Burmese people during an extraordinary seven decades. So when it came to deciding how to mark the anniversary, rather than telling our own story, we decided to tell theirs.

All of the people whose stories appear in this exhibition are people we have been privileged to come into contact with at some point over the past 70 years. This may have been a deep engagement or a relatively fleeting one. The point is not to take credit for their achievements, nor to exaggerate the role of the UK in their lives. Rather, it is to shine a light on a people used to living in darkness, to begin to understand their values, what drives them and their hopes for the future.

A number of themes arise from their stories. Perhaps the most striking is the compassion shown towards others, the commitment to improving other people's lives. Another is the pursuit of knowledge, the value placed on education and international opportunity, not for personal gain but to help make a difference. A third is resilience, the character to succeed in the face of quite overwhelming challenges. And, I think, strength in diversity: a country made stronger by its uniquely diverse population, and the tolerance and perspective this can bring.

Life Stories is more than a retrospective. As well as people with long memories we hear from those who represent the next generation, looking to shape a new democratic future. In revealing their stories we hope there might be some indications of what kind of future awaits the Burmese, and an insight into building friendly knowledge and understanding in this fascinating land.

*Kevin Mackenzie, Country Director,
June 2016*

“

Our first principle is about understanding, mutual understanding. You improve the world by improving relationships between the people of the world - and that for me is the role of the British Council.

”

Sir Ciarán Devane, Chief Executive, 2016

Where Knowledge Thrives

When I first came to Myanmar in 2006, information still travelled in secret. Rumours were conveyed in teashops, magazines were smuggled into the country, and international news was accessed through proxy servers in backstreet Internet cafes. It was almost impossible to own a mobile phone, as a sim card cost US\$2500. A bookseller on Pansodan Street told me quietly about his prized Burmese copy of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The once prestigious University of Yangon had been emptied of its undergraduate students, sent out of the city to study in other universities and colleges around the country.

I remember visiting the British Council's library, teeming with students and filled with books from all over the world, as well as books about Burmese and Southeast Asian politics and history. Along with the American Centre and Alliance Française, it seemed to me one of the few places in Yangon where the exchange of ideas was openly encouraged, and where events brought students, artists, and writers out to gather in public. As a historian, I've long been fascinated by temples of learning - schools, libraries and universities - places where knowledge thrives. As a centre for global education, the British Council has been a small but important part of the social history of modern Myanmar, and points to the willingness of its people to engage with the wider world, even when it was most difficult to do so.

Histories of Education

The pursuit of knowledge has been a feature of Burmese society for centuries. Burma was long known to have high rates of literacy due to the education provided to boys by Buddhist monasteries. The court of fifteenth-century Mrauk-U in Arakan welcomed Japanese samurai, Bengali poets, and translated works from Persian and Hindi.¹ As European empires stretched their tentacles across Asia in the nineteenth-century, Burma's modernising king, Mindon Min, and his princes consumed ideas, believing that knowledge was power. They sent their children to school in India and beyond, read and financed English-language newspapers, and delved into new fields of science and technology.²

The violence of colonial occupation in the nineteenth century was followed by decades of rapid social change. The colonial government, as well as new merchant firms, required skilled talent, meaning that English education was the key to lucrative employment and social mobility for Burmese. Missionaries and colonial officials opened Christian as well as 'lay schools', providing education to girls as well as boys.³ In cosmopolitan Rangoon, Muslim, Jewish, Chinese, and European communities opened their own schools for children of multiple faiths. Pioneering Burmese educators combined the teaching of Buddhist religious principles with modern science.⁴

In 1920, Rangoon University opened with the support of donations from all sectors of Burmese society. Initial plans for the university were fraught with arguments between Burmese barristers educated in Oxbridge and London. When plans for a residential, Oxbridge style system were announced, students instigated a large-scale boycott, seeking to make higher education more widely accessible to those who could not afford the high cost of residential fees.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, nationalist movements emerged across Asia. Students used the languages and

20 April 1946

British Council's first representative
J.S. Bingley arrives in Rangoon and
establishes office at
55 University Avenue.

1948

British Council open
new premises at Rander
House accommodating a
Library, Reading Room,
Classrooms and combined
Lecture Hall and Cinema.

1949

First branch library
established at Moulmein
Municipal Library. Further
branch libraries follow in
Taunggyi and Mandalay.



January 1948

Burma becomes
independent with
U Nu as Prime Minister
and Sao Shwe Thaik
as President.



**Lectures on many aspects
of British life and concerts
of music live and recorded,
were arranged in the
British Council House and
elsewhere, and audiences
for these functions and for
film shows increased to
over 12,000 a month.**



**Annual Report
1947-48**



Rander House in 1961 | Getty

ideas they learned as a mirror to their British colonisers, who equated 'Britishness' with notions of liberty but refused to give freedom to their colonial subjects. Colonialism and the onslaught of Western ideas threatened to overshadow the richness and diversity of Burmese culture, but English also became a vehicle by which students, legislators, writers, and aspiring leaders could read about other cultures and international politics, and make their voices heard.

Britain, Burma and the World

Anti-colonial movements emerged all over the world in the wake of the First World War. No longer 'the empire on which the sun never set', Britain faced a crisis of political and cultural legitimacy in the 1920s and 1930s. With the rise of Hollywood, the success of the Russian revolution, and the growing industrial power of the Meiji Empire, it was America, the Soviet Union, and Japan who provided new models to emulate.⁵ Learning from the French, who established the Alliance Française in 1884, the British government established in 1934 the 'British Committee for Relations with Other Countries', later shortened to 'The British Council'.⁶

After the Second World War and Burma's independence in 1947, a broken Britain returned to Burma not as a coloniser, but as a partner on the international stage. Previously, Burmese students in government schools had to swear allegiance to the King, learn English songs, and read British history. But in the post-colonial era, cultural influence had to be earned, not imposed.

Britain faced stiff competition from the rest of the world to make an impression on the new nation. When the first British Council officer arrived in 1946, the Americans had already set up a U.S. Information Centre, featuring a library and reading room well-attended by university students. Throughout the Fifties, there were visits from the Moscow and San Francisco Ballet, African-American opera singers, Chinese intellectuals,

“

In the post-colonial era, cultural influence had to be earned, not imposed.

”

December 1950

The Burma Photographic Society (now known as the Myanmar Photographic Society) is formed at the British Council offices.



The first photography exhibition is held in the reading room of the British Council in January 1951

| U Thein Maung, patron of the Myanmar Photographic Society



Rangoon Police Commissioner U Khin Maung Maung interviewed by the BBC's U Tin Maung in 1956. The Police Chief visited London for a study tour arranged by British Council | The Guardian 18 June 1956



British Press Service

NEWS FROM BRITAIN
PRESS COMMENT-

ISSUED BY
THE INFORMATION SECTION
BRITISH EMBASSY, RANGOON

H-246

October 31, 1959

BRITISH COUNCIL LIBRARY EXTENDED

The British Council Library, at the corner of Phayre and Merchant Streets, has now extended its facilities and accommodation. A large room, formerly called "The Studio", has been equipped with new bookcases, magazine racks, and desks made from Yimma wood by the Forest Industry Department.

Both the Library and Reading Rooms are now open for longer periods. The new hours are from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily (Saturdays up to 1 p.m.). This, it is hoped, will enable all to take full advantage of the wide range of facilities. Membership of the Library is now free, and no deposit or subscription is required.

The Library has over 14,000 volumes, including fiction, children's books and works on all subjects of general interest. There is also a reference section. In addition, the current issues of some 120 periodicals and newspapers are available for reading, while members may borrow old editions.



The library in 1961 | British Council

November 1961

U Thant unanimously
appointed Secretary-General
of the United Nations.

**Rangoon
following
military
coup** | AFP



March 1962

Military coup d'état led
by General Ne Win.

1962

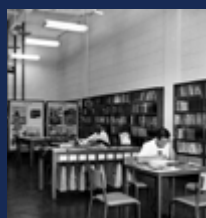
Rangoon University student
union destroyed. All
universities temporarily shut
down by the military.

1963

British Council
Representative granted
diplomatic status and office
moved into the British
Embassy on Strand Road.



The library in 1961 | British
Council



**The Reading
Room at
the British
Embassy** |
Foreign and
Commonwealth
Office Archive

Philippine artists, and Japanese performance troupes. Burmese musicians, dancers, and intellectuals went abroad on cultural missions. Young, urban Burmese read magazines and took part in film workshops and seminars provided by various embassies and cultural institutions.

In an atmosphere of Cold War competition, the British Council built its foundation in Burma. It strengthened its relationship with universities, focused on the teaching of English at university level, trained English teachers and journalists, and gave adult education classes. It provided foreign scholarships, established libraries, screened films, and worked closely with the Ministry of Education. The British Council's key partner, Rangoon University, was at this time one of the best in Asia, attracting students from all over the region.

Meanwhile, outside Burma's cities and along its new border with Thailand, civil wars raged. The aftermath of the Japanese occupation had left the countryside in disarray, and ethnic minorities dissatisfied with their place in the new nation. The Burmese parliament descended into political factions. In 1960, U Nu invited General Ne Win to take over government temporarily. In 1962, Ne Win's military government seized power for the next two and a half decades.

Trying Times

Under Ne Win's government, nationalism reigned in its most extreme form. English-educated Indians, Anglo-Burmese, Indo-Burmese, and Sino-Burmese, many from the civil service, and others whose businesses had been nationalised, left the country. In response to a student protest, the Rangoon University Students' Union was blown up, and the university temporarily shut down. In 1964, after the university's re-opening, all the teaching had to be in Burmese. A generation of Burmese educators used to teaching in English suddenly had to come up with a new curriculum in Burmese, including inventing a Burmese vocabulary for scientific terms.⁷

April 1964

Public performances banned and all libraries maintained by foreign missions ordered to close to Burmese citizens.

August 1966

British Council stop operations along with all other foreign cultural organisations.



During this most difficult last year of the Council's existence in Burma, I acknowledge my great indebtedness to our locally-engaged staff.

They face almost certain unemployment when they leave the Council, and the problems of daily life in Rangoon grow steadily more intractable, but they have nevertheless worked as loyally and conscientiously as in former, happier times. The British Council owes them a great deal.



D. Hardwick, Representative
Annual Report 1965-66



The Soul of Rangoon - Monica Mya Maung

Following a military coup and the decision of the new government to isolate Burma from the world, the British Council was asked to leave the country in 1966.

Fearing confiscation, and destruction, of its library books, British Council librarian Monica Mya Maung hid 200 precious titles across the Embassy in as many cupboards and drawers as she could find.

Miraculously they all survived until the British Council re-opened in the late 70s. The rescued books formed the core of the library. To this day, the collection is available to members to read on request.

Monica was re-engaged as librarian and served until 1989, when she retired in her mid-seventies with an MBE. Paying tribute to Monica's heroics, British Ambassador Dr. John Jenkins described her in 2001 as "the soul of the British Council Rangoon".

British Council News, Nov 2001-Jan 2002

That year, public performances were banned and libraries maintained by foreign missions were ordered to close. Fearing confiscation of its books, British Council librarian Monica Mya Maung hid 200 precious titles across the Embassy. In 1966, the British Council was expelled from Burma, along with all other foreign cultural organisations. Western influence declined, while Burma's relations with the Soviet Bloc grew. Ten years later, in 1977, the British Council was called back to Burma on account of Ne Win's perception of declining English standards. (Rumours circulated that the general's daughter had failed to obtain a university place abroad). It opened as the cultural section of the British Embassy, with Monica Mya Maung's rescued books forming the core of the library.

In 1981, Ne Win reversed his earlier decision and made English the main language of instruction at university. Again, a generation of teachers schooled only in Burmese had to suddenly come up with a new curriculum in English. The drastic changes imposed on Burma's education system caused havoc and confusion, especially for students made to learn in languages unfamiliar to their teachers.

One year later, in 1982, the British Council officially reinstated their offer of scholarships for Burmese students to study abroad. Throughout the 1980s, the library remained active and a Teacher's Resource Centre was opened. The British Council also managed the Overseas Development Association's programmes in Burma on education and natural resource co-operation. It sponsored study tours for doctors and civil servants to come to England for educational visits, and worked closely with the Fisheries Corporation and Forestry Department to conserve the fishing and forest industries, under threat from large-scale trawling and logging.

Meanwhile, throughout the 1980s, the Burmese economy plummeted and student protests began to escalate. In 1988, a clash between students and police escalated into the first mass democracy movement in the country. Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Burma's nationalist hero Aung San, had

1977

Burmese Government request the resumption of British Council activities largely as a result of decline in standards of English in public and academic life.

June 1978

British Council re-established as the Cultural Section of the British Embassy.

1982

British Council officially reinstates offer of scholarships and bursaries for Burmese students to study abroad.

1987

75 Burmese travel to UK under programmes and visits managed by British Council.

1981

English reintroduced in primary schools as a second language and as the medium of instruction in Universities after 18 years.



The Council's main task is to manage the expanding Overseas Development Administration programme in technical and scientific co-operation. For the ODA, two projects in fisheries and crop storage brought in six British experts; both projects have considerable export potential for Burma.



Annual Report 1985-86

1988

88 pro-democracy demonstrations started by students quashed by the military killing thousands.

The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) formed. SLORC wages a campaign against the newly founded National League of Democracy (NLD) party.



1988

Main Arts and Science Universities of Rangoon and Mandalay are closed.

November 1988

All British Aid and Official Development Assistance (ODA) programmes suspended.



By 11am, the Ambassador decided to allow us all to go home early. I set off home with our 75-year-old librarian. We stopped to view the joyous, peaceful parades and euphoric slogan-chanting of a people celebrating their first experience of free speech for 26 years.

The terrible outcome, five weeks later, after army trouble makers had done their worst mowing down the demonstrators and strikers in their thousands, was, on that glorious day, happily unimaginable.



Tom White, Cultural Attaché
1985-89 | BBC News

returned to Burma from Oxford to take care of her mother, and became the unifying symbol of the movement and the leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD).

The government announced that elections would be held and established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). SLORC waged a campaign against the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi, complaining of Western intervention into local politics. The NLD's landslide victory at the election was immediately ignored, and SLORC reasserted its authority as a military regime, suppressing dissent and keeping the country under martial law.

Quiet Engagement

After the crushing of the democracy protests and the failures of the election, Burma's image abroad was at an all-time low. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. Exile groups and human rights organisations began a campaign for severe Western sanctions to be used against Burma.

Education suffered in response to the events. Universities were closed and students were jailed or forced into exile. Teachers, seen as responsible for instigating the students in 1988, were duly punished through 'refresher courses' modelled on rural re-education camps in the People's Republic of China.⁸

Throughout the 1990s, the British Council moved cautiously, maintaining a policy of quiet engagement, focusing on supporting education and building relationships with civil society groups within the country. In 1996, it re-opened its Teaching Centre, providing a training programme for English teachers in both the state and non-state sector. It maintained regular contact with women's groups, the Attorney-General's office, the Ministries of Forestry, Education, Information,

May 1990

National League for Democracy (NLD) win the general election, but the result is ignored by the military.

1991

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi wins the Nobel Peace Prize whilst under house arrest.

Over the period from 1989 to 2010, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is detained for 15 years at her University Avenue residence.



1996

British Council opens the Teaching Centre in Yangon.

1997

British Council opens in Mandalay.

1990

A Self Access Study Area and a Computer Room with 10 machines opens.



The overriding aim of our work in Burma is to provide the Burmese people with cultural and intellectual lifelines to informed and free contact with this country. We strongly believe that these are as important there as they were in keeping alive the hopes of intellectual and political freedom in Eastern and Central Europe.



Sir John Hanson, British Council Director General | 18 July 1995

1998

Together with the Embassy, the British Council helps establish a network of libraries for outreach training known as the Millennium Centres. Ten were opened by 2000, with numbers doubling in subsequent years.



and Health, radio and television industries, and Institutes of Economics, Archaeology, Medicine, Foreign Languages, and Education at Yangon University.

In 1997, SLORC was replaced by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), in an attempt to ‘cleanse’ the government of corruption and give it more respectability as Burma prepared for ASEAN membership. Severe Western sanctions took hold during this time, as foreign companies pulled out of Burma, arguably reducing Western leverage in the country.⁹ Burma, instead, turned to China, Russia, India, and its ASEAN neighbours.

As relations with the West grew increasingly strained, the British Council assisted ordinary Burmese with access to information, books, English, and internationally recognised UK qualifications. It opened an office in Mandalay and helped establish a network of libraries throughout the country, expanded its Yangon library and teaching centre, and launched diploma courses with the Open University. In 2005, as the Internet boom took hold in the rest of the world, the British Council offered one of the few sites in the country where Internet access was provided to the public.

From around 2003, the British Council focused on engaging with a new generation of leaders in Myanmar. It began a series of courses on economics, the environment, gender, and human rights that gave aspiring politicians, educators, activists, and ethnic minority leaders resources to reflect on their society and its institutions in wider and international perspective. It also offered a space for conversation clubs, started in 2005, for ethnic groups to meet, discuss, teach, and learn from each other in a safe environment. Through the British Council’s library, a local volunteer network began engaging in fundraising and community initiatives, from working with street-children and the elderly to teaching English at orphanages and schools for the disabled. Participants of all these initiatives continue to be active in politics, the private sector, and in civil society today.

Openings

In 2007, thousands of monks protested on behalf of the public on the prohibitive costs of living for ordinary Burmese in what Western media sources dubbed the ‘Saffron Revolution’. Burma saw the rise of ‘citizen journalism’, as videos and photographs were broadcast via the Internet to the world. The failures of the movement to enact political change left many in the country disheartened, as international organisations searched for avenues of support.

When Cyclone Nargis tore up the delta in 2008, hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives, and millions were left homeless. In the wake of such a devastating event, an extraordinary volunteer effort followed. Monks and monasteries channelled aid through their networks, while students, artists, and taxi drivers drove out to the delta with bags of food and clothing. Gitameit, an independent music school, turned into a rapid relief centre, while photographers went out into the delta distributing food and documenting stories of the hungry. Nargis also provided openings for renewed relationships with the United Nations, Western countries, and ASEAN partners seeking to provide humanitarian assistance.

During this time, the British Council’s DFID-funded Pyoe Pin programme, launched in 2007, began supporting grassroots civil society organisations all over the country, particularly to improve the lives of the poor. These engagements lay the foundations for work with farmers’ and fisheries’ coalitions, HIV/Aids networks, teacher education groups, and journalists, as well as improving access to justice through mechanisms like legal aid. From 2011, Pyoe Pin focused on strengthening relationships between civil society groups, government and the private sector to support collective action on policy reforms.

In 2011, under the leadership of Thein Sein, the Burmese government undertook a series of reforms, including

2005

British Council Library provides internet access to members for the first time. It maintains the only public access connection in the country when the plug was pulled nationwide during the 2007 demonstrations.

2007

Saffron Revolution: anti-government protests led by Buddhist monks broken up by military crackdown.

December 2007

Pyoe Pin, a DFID-funded governance and civil society strengthening programme, begins.



Monks demonstrating during the Saffron Revolution | YHT



Rural development support | Tim Webster

May 2008

Humanitarian crisis following Cyclone Nargis causes catastrophic destruction and the deaths of an estimated 138,000 people.

November 2010

The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) claims victory in a flawed general election. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is released from house arrest.

March 2011

President Thein Sein sworn in as president. A series of reforms are undertaken including loosening restrictions on the country's media and releasing a number of political prisoners.

January 2012

A delegation of young civil society leaders visits London, the first trip of its kind to the UK.

April 2012

Parliamentary by-elections see 43 NLD candidates including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi win seats.



The 88 Generation (Peace and Open Society) delegation to the UK, after their visit to No.10 Downing Street in June 2013



British Embassy / British Council building today | Manuel Oka

September 2014
British Council and DFID's English for Education College Trainers (EfECT) project, co-delivered with VSO, places two English trainers in every Education College and University of Education to train 2,100 teacher educators.



Crowds celebrate NLD victory | AFP

November 2015
The NLD win a landslide general election victory to form a government.



Daw Aung San Suu Kyi speaking with the newly arrived EfECT trainers with Kevin Mackenzie in August 2014 | Kyaw Kyaw Winn

August 2015
MyJustice, an EU-funded programme to improve access to justice begins.

March 2016
U Htin Kyaw sworn in as Myanmar's new president.

loosening restrictions on the country's media and releasing a number of political prisoners. Slowly, international organisations and businesses began arriving back into the country, providing new opportunities, as well as challenges, for ordinary Burmese. Thousands of Burmese sought to learn and refine their English skills. Funds, training programmes, and opportunities emerged for civil society organisations operating in an increasingly more tolerant political environment.

In 2013, the University of Yangon began accepting undergraduate students, now allowed to choose their own major. A university professor told me recently that some of the students have better English skills than their teachers because they have been able to go to the British Council and American Centre to access the Internet, books, international media, and language resources; traditionally these were sites where the university faculty, as government employees, were not allowed. But today, opportunities for university faculty to travel, access resources, and engage in partnerships with foreign scholars and institutions may help to make the country's universities world-class institutions once more.

I noticed drastic changes in Myanmar from 2012, with posters of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and exile news magazines like the *Irrawaddy* being sold in the stalls of downtown Yangon. New bookshops and art galleries sprung up around the city, with writers starting new literary journals and magazines. Today, half of Myanmar's population now owns a mobile phone and can freely access the Internet. Information, ideas, and languages from around the globe are all at their fingertips, as young and old openly discuss and debate the trajectories of the future. After a long, tumultuous journey, circuits of knowledge in modern Myanmar now flow not in secret, but through open channels to the wider world.

Su Lin Lewis is a historian of modern Southeast Asia based at the University of Bristol.

1. Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps* (Faber, 2007)
2. Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (Cambridge, 2001)
3. U Kaung, "A Survey of the History of Education in Burma Before the British Conquest and After." *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 46:2 (1963).
4. See Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (Hawaii, 2014)
5. See Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, 2016).
6. Philip M. Taylor (1978). 'Cultural Diplomacy and the British Council: 1934-1939', *British Journal of International Studies* 3:3, pp. 244-265.
7. Oral history interview. U Thaw Kaung with the author. April 7, 2016.
8. Michael Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 178.
9. Charney, p. 184.







“

**We would like to start
these connections
again.**

”

U Thaw Kaung

U Thaw Kaung is the former President of the Myanmar Libraries Association and remains its special adviser. He continues to be closely associated with the University of Yangon, where he set up the faculty of library studies and taught for almost three decades. He has a long connection with the UK.

I was born in Yangon in 1937, in a clinic on the site where the American Centre is now. My father was the headmaster of the Rangoon colonial government high school, at the time the best government school in Burma. He was close friends with U Nu and U Thant, both also headmasters at the time.

We spent the war years in Shan State, where my father had been appointed chief education officer. He was friendly with the local sawbwa, who helped us hide from the invading Japanese in huts in the forest.

In 1943, still during the Japanese occupation, we moved back to Yangon. We stayed near the Shwedagon pagoda because we knew the British would not bomb that area. We built a little bamboo hut to live in, in the compound of a house occupied by my father's boss, the Director of Education.

I first travelled to the UK in 1947, when I was nine years old. My father's main task was to look after all the state scholars that were being sent to study in British universities

following independence. In 1948 he opened the Burmese embassy to London.

In England I would listen to schools programmes broadcast on BBC radio, and I started to read. My father would bring me many books, which have stayed with me throughout my life.

Of the scholars that my father found places for in the UK, many went on to become well known doctors, engineers and lawyers back here in Burma. One that I knew very well went on to become a pilot for a civilian airline, and another became Burma's first national librarian. Later, after Ne Win came to power in 1962, I found out that most of his generals had trained at Sandhurst.

I would listen to schools programmes broadcast on BBC radio, and I started to read. My father would bring me many books, which have stayed with me throughout my life.

We returned to Burma in 1950 and my father was appointed Director of Education. I went to the Methodist High School (now Dagon no.1), along with other children of prominent families. My youngest sister became very close to Aung San Suu Kyi.

The first contact I had with the British Council was in 1951, when I joined the library. It was one of the most modern libraries in Yangon at that time, and I became very close friends with one of the assistant librarians. He later became my deputy and then chief librarian in Mandalay.

“

**I came back in
1961 with ideas
to modernise the
university library, but
within a few months
everything changed.**

”

My father died suddenly in a car accident in 1957 in Calcutta, where he was printing exam papers. His body was brought back to Burma and he had a state funeral. I was 19.

In 1960 I was sent to University College London as a state scholar. I came back at the end of 1961 with a lot of ideas to modernise the university library but within a few months everything changed.

In March 1962 Ne Win seized power. He made a speech reassuring university students that nothing would happen to them and telling them to concentrate on their upcoming exams. In June there were riots on campus and the military cracked down. By July, the students' union was blown up and the university closed for the next two years.

When it reopened in 1964, all the faculties had been split up into separate institutes, each with its own rector and staff. A 'new system of education' was proclaimed and English was downgraded. But the riots persisted and there were regular closures.

For the first 15 years after the coup I was unable to leave Burma. Very few foreigners would come, in fact at one point Ne Win banned foreigners from coming at all. But by the early 1970s his mind was already changing. He realised that the

Before the war, Rangoon University had been one of the best in Southeast Asia. By the time I retired in 1997 there were only 6,000 students and this number then fell further to just 2,000.

policy of teaching all subjects in Burmese was not working. We didn't even have scientific terms.

In 1976 I was sent to Australia for three months' training in teaching library studies. Everything had changed since my last trip abroad. I discovered automatic doors for the first time, and central heating. Then in 1983-84 I was sent to London for a further three months, with support from the British Council and British Library.

I share my father's strong regard for the British system. The University of Rangoon was modelled on it. In addition to our studies we had a lot of clubs, such as painting and music, and a very good rowing club, all started by the British. I think it's a good model.

Before the war, Rangoon University had been one of the best in Southeast Asia. When I first went in 1954 it was already regaining its pre-war standards and by the 1960s it had 60,000 students on three campuses. By the time I retired in 1997 there were only 6,000 and this number then fell further to just 2,000.

I once did some research on the overseas Chinese in Penang and Singapore and their connection with the Burmese. One old man told me that during the colonial times if you could afford it you sent your children to England but if you didn't have that much money you sent them to Rangoon. Our graduates used to be easily accepted to universities in the UK or US for postgraduate studies.

Now we would like to upgrade the teaching and library facilities and rekindle our relationships with universities overseas. We had a very good connection with the British Library but the people I worked with have all retired. They helped us a lot in the old days and now we would like to start these connections again.

A woman with short dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark top with a light-colored geometric pattern. She is standing with her arms crossed against a solid blue background. The image is monochromatic, with the woman's features and clothing appearing in shades of blue and white.

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**We need to create
change through the
system.**

”

Ja Nan

Ja Nan was born in Myitkyina, Kachin State, the daughter of a Baptist minister. She is Director of Shalom (Nyein) Foundation, which aims to establish a just and peaceful society for all people in Myanmar.

I grew up in Myitkyina back in the early 1960s, during wartime. We were safe because we were inside the city but couldn't go outside the city limits. My father is a Baptist minister and has dedicated his life to achieving a peaceful community.

I would serve tea to guests at our home and all I would hear was “our house was burnt down” or “my son needs to go to school but he's been recruited by the military” or “my daughter was raped by soldiers in front of us”. Even though I didn't physically experience suffering I heard about it all the time.

Later I moved to Yangon to study law. I was shadowing a lawyer representing a poor lady from the delta whose land had been confiscated. She would travel to Yangon for the court hearing but the court just gave excuses. So I learnt that the law did not bring justice to the powerless.

Immediately after graduating from the law school in 1987 I joined the Insein Theological Institute. In my second year the 88 uprising took place, and we saw shooting from the library. The seminary shut down and I started to think about studying abroad.

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I would serve tea to guests and all I would hear was “our house was burnt down” or “my son has been recruited” or “my daughter was raped by soldiers”.

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In 1989 I moved to Philadelphia in the US to study music and the bible, supported by the family of a missionary friend of my father's. I started hanging out with Americans who were about five years younger than me. At 22 I was learning to be a teenager.

My college vice principal would ask “So Ja Nan, how was your day?”. I would always answer “fine” until one day she said, “That’s it. I don’t want to hear any more ‘fine’.”

One thing I valued was the learning culture. I got to think critically for the first time. As a teenager I was timid and stayed at home doing crochet. But my time in the US changed me.

My college vice principal rented out rooms and at dinner she would always ask “So Ja Nan, how was your day?”. I would always answer “fine” until one day she said, “That’s it. I don’t want to hear any more ‘fine’.” From her I learnt to express myself.

I returned to Myitkyina to teach. My father started the Shalom foundation in 2000. In 2003 I became a full time employee, and in 2014 I became the head of the organisation. My dad had initiated a fellowship program supporting the negotiations between different ethnic groups. The religious and ethnic leaders were represented on a platform in which they could share their experiences and design strategies to support each other.

I went to the US for a second Master's in Peace Studies. After I came back we started to become more strategic. We didn't want just to respond to needs but to develop a more holistic approach to peace building. Justice and relationship building became the two central aspects of our work.

Shalom is a non-religious, non-ethnic organisation. In the beginning our organisation was seen as religious, as Kachin, but now our staff are drawn from all four main religions and are ethnically diverse.

Of our many projects a long term one is Interfaith. One clear characteristic of our society is division. We are divided over ethnicity, religion, gender and this is a consequence of military rule: the more divided a people the less powerful they are.

Even though we haven't yet had a fully satisfactory result from the peace process I think we have managed to keep it going. We are playing a facilitation role between different armed groups, as well as between armed groups and government actors. International support is very important.

In 2008 I was awarded a Chevening Fellowship to do a three-month course in the UK called 'What Makes Democracy Work?'. It helped me understand issues in the constitutional referendum happening at the time, and particularly looking at it through an ethnic lens. Many were opposed to the revised constitution and the 2010 election but we argued for the need to engage with it.

I am so sick of the war and of all the ways we have tried and failed to bring about change. People have taken up arms, there's been non-violent struggle and this hasn't got us anywhere. We need to engage and create change through the system. That's the message we send to the exile groups and government bodies who support these campaign groups from outside.

We know there are no immediate results. We pragmatically tell ourselves it's going to be a long process because the most established institution in this country is the military. Whether we like it or not we need to give them credit and a peaceful exit. The first success was the exit of Than Shwe in 2010. If we had put pressure on him we probably wouldn't have had an election.

I am so sick of the war and of all the ways we have tried and failed to bring about change.

In this coming term of the new government we don't expect there will be a complete change. This government will still struggle with the military because the military will still be sitting in government. I hope what comes out of the National Ceasefire Agreement is a political dialogue which will some day change the constitution. We need to continue to have patience, but I am optimistic.

We are very grateful to the British Council for creating a space for learning and engaging with each other and with ideas from abroad. Programmes such as Pyoe Pin and Amatae have helped us and other local organisations become more professional. They provide the resources, skills and knowledge that local communities or organisations do not have, and I think that is such a helpful thing.



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**I want my audience to
be like my characters.**

”

Ju

Ju, or Dr Tin Tin Win, has been a best-selling author for almost three decades. She writes novels as well as articles about environmental conservation, peace and human rights.

I was born in 1958 in Yae-Nan-Gyaung, Magway division, the third of five children. My parents owned some oil fields and were quite rich. But after General Ne Win seized power oil came under public ownership, and my parents lost everything.

I didn't understand it at the time because I was very young, but I remember my parents being very silent over dinner. Life became very difficult for us. My father had not been to school. He had been a monk growing up but gave up the monkhood to look after his mother. My mother, being a girl, had been expected to look after the family shop. She only completed primary education even though she had passed with credit and wanted to continue. Perhaps because my parents hadn't finished their basic education they prioritized ours.

My parents first introduced me to books. My father encouraged us to read religious books when we were young and my mother introduced us to literary books. She gave me Marlar by Du Won, which was the first novel I ever read. It took me about seven days to finish it, and it ignited my desire to be a writer.

I read a lot when I was young. The novelists I liked most were Takatho Bone Naing and Khin Swe Oo. Mostly, their characters are poor, but hardworking, honest and intelligent. They value dignity and ethics. Takatho Bone Naing's female characters were the kind of person I wanted to be. Most are university teachers. So I grew up wanting to be not only an author but also a university teacher.

My plan was to apply for a science scholarship and then teach at the university. But that ambition was thwarted when my elder brother had to drop out of the University of Medicine. That news made my mother sad and desperate, and then seriously sick. She pushed me to attend in his place.

I really didn't want to be a doctor because I was frightened of blood, but I didn't want to see my mother so unwell. I relented and chose life as a medical student.

I never forgot my dream to be an author. I wrote a short story and submitted it to the university magazine. Not only was it selected for publication but it was awarded first prize. I decided I needed a pen name, and chose "Ju" because it is easy to say, easily remembered and non-gender specific.

In June 1980, while at the university, I sent a short story to a respected magazine called Shu Ma Wa. I had to wait a year to see it appear. I began to think it had been rejected but, unexpectedly, Thet Nge Chit was published in June 1981. I began to send more short stories to Shu Ma Wa and another magazine, Pay Hpoo Hlwar.

After graduation I opened a clinic in my home town, while continuing to write. In 1987 my first novel A Hmat Ta Ya ("Not to Forget") was published. I was 29. It became a best-seller. But it also provoked outrage among some who thought my characters were having pre-marital sex. They weren't – the girl just visited the boy's hostel occasionally – but I was shocked by the criticism. A well-known writer told me not to respond to it so I didn't. He and others told me to keep writing.

My mother died in 1985, and six years later my father and I moved to Yangon. I continued to write novels, but found out they were being published without my knowledge. I decided to publish them myself. The first novel I released was *Mane Ma Ta Youk Ye Phwint Ha Win Khan Chet* (“Open Confession to a Man from a Woman”), which also became a best-seller. It enabled me to buy a flat.

My main characters have nearly always been female. They are independent and value knowledge, love, dignity, honesty and ethics. Most of my audience is also female, and I want my audience to be like my characters.

I have never felt that studying medicine was a waste. It’s difficult to make a living as a writer, especially at the start. Having my own clinic meant I could look after my parents. It also enabled me to express myself more creatively: without this income I would have just written to earn money. It helped me appreciate the value of knowledge and, what’s more, studying medicine helped me learn English.

Between 1995 and 2000 I was a member of the British Council library. I borrowed books, watched films and attended workshops given by international speakers. I also used to enjoy going to bookshops. But these days many of the old shops have closed down, and novels are available on the internet. Young people are becoming distracted from reading the printed word.

In recent years the purpose of literature has changed. Writers have tended to focus on topics such as environmental conservation, human rights and criticising the former regime.

I don’t think the change in government will have a direct impact on Myanmar literature. But I hope that with more peace, less corruption and less censorship authors will be able to focus on being creative.



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**Art depends on the
freedom to think
critically.**

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Min Ko Naing

Min Ko Naing is a leading democracy activist and former political prisoner. Imprisoned from 1988 until 2012, on his release he helped to found the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society. The New York Times once described him as Burma's "most influential opposition figure after Daw Aung San Suu Kyi". His first love is art, especially writing and drawing.

My real name is Paw Oo Tun and I am from Mon State. I chose my pen name Min Ko Naing when I started writing. Min means 'young man' in Mon, while Naing is used for older men. I felt there was a generation missing between Min and Naing, so I chose Ko to bridge the gap. So my name represents three generations.

My grandparents only really spoke Mon. When Grandpa wanted to use Burmese he had to think really hard. My parents are also both Mon but I was born in Yangon. I was brought up among Burmese people, so I can't speak Mon.

I grew up in the socialist era, surrounded by slogans. 'Western culture' was a word with huge impact. If you wore trousers you would be called 'a street devil'. If you played the guitar you were 'tainted by western culture'. But our rulers didn't practise socialism themselves. They were a privileged class, and there was no safe place to talk about that.

I studied at the Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT). There was a telephone booth in the middle of the campus which was the only place you could find freedom of expression. Things were posted there that the authorities dared not touch, and we used to go and read them.

Saya Awpikeye used to draw cartoons under the penname Cartoon Man Khe and post them. I followed his example and stuck my own cartoons and articles up at the Botahtaung campus. But mine would be gone after a while.

When I first started out on my political path I never expected it would last this long. Nor that it would be this rough. I always thought that by the time I was in my thirties I could go back to my writing. I write on a weekly basis now, mainly articles, poetry and comics for kids.

The ‘carrot and stick’ approach was ingrained during the socialist regime. But it wasn’t the hard-working people who were rewarded. The small rewards on offer went to people who obeyed orders. Those who dared to challenge the authorities were punished. Everyone lived in fear.

Everyone lived in ignorance too. They did not know their rights, nor how things are done in other countries. People like it so much when, for instance, they read how the son of another country’s prime minister was taken into custody because he was drunk and behaving in an anti-social manner. They are delighted to learn how fairly laws are enforced elsewhere.

It’s important to share our experiences. We humans are lucky to have language for this. When I was in prison I was kept in solitary confinement, but there was a small hole in my cell. I saw how other inmates killed birds for food. Sometimes they only half-caught them and they were injured.

One day I saw a bird get its foot cut off. It flew back to its branch. All the others made a lot of noise but the bird didn’t

have the language to tell the others to avoid the same fate. They kept coming from the same branch and lost their lives.

Under the former government, the arts hit rock bottom. High school leavers with good marks would study sciences while those with poor marks would study arts. Nobody wants to be considered unintelligent so every student opted for sciences, no matter where their real interests lay.

But there's another reason the arts were downgraded. The government perceived artists and philosophers as a threat. They weren't worried about doctors or engineers. It was the same with the law. If a child wanted to study law he would be asked if he wanted to make a living from other people's suffering. That's how judges and lawyers were defamed.

One day I saw a bird get its foot cut off. It flew back to its branch. All the others made a lot of noise but the bird didn't have the language to tell the others to avoid the same fate.

Once, a popular cartoonist called Saya Thawka drew cats and dogs playing golf. He gave them the mannerisms of our ruling class. Our head of state objected and it became illegal to draw talking animals. There was nothing the artist could do but kill them off. How could Burmese art flourish in such an environment?

Art depends on the freedom to think critically. Children today learn everything by heart, even the questions! In our day, we created art by thinking outside the box, which often got us into trouble.

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**It's important
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for this.**

”

Min Ko Naing

I told the cat, “Go that way, son, that way,” and off he would go. If he saw a guard, he would hide. He was our messenger for nine years.

We wanted so much to write in prison, but there was nothing to write with. Then Ko Zagana invented a way. You have to use the walls of the cell, which are coated with layers of whitewash.

Place a plastic sheet against the wall and write on the back of the sheet with a broken piece of reed from the mat or a small piece of bamboo. If you flick your fingers against the wall after that, small particles of whitewash will fall and make your writing legible.

But how to share what you wrote? The guards would be locked up themselves if they were caught carrying our writing. Other inmates didn't dare. So I got an idea. I rolled up my plastic writing and used my cat as a messenger. Yes, we had cats. Fortunately, our cats did not trust strangers. They only allowed us long-term inmates to touch them. Not guards.

I made the roll tight and put it around the cat's neck. My cat was quite furry so it was well hidden. I told the cat, “Go that way, son, that way,” and off he would go. If he saw a guard, he would hide. He was our messenger for nine years. When they transferred me to another prison I had to leave him behind.

It is a huge privilege for us to have access to the British Council and everything it makes available. But we have to remember the underprivileged. I hope the British Council will continue to create access for all levels of society.

A man with short dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark patterned button-down shirt, stands against a dark background. The image is monochromatic with a blue tint.

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**Our main human
rights violation was
ignorance.**

”

Aung Myo Min

Aung Myo Min is the Executive Director of Equality Myanmar. He was a student leader in Burma's 1988 revolution and the first openly gay man among the democratic movement. He has been awarded seven international awards for his work in human and LGBT rights. He returned to Myanmar in 2013, after twenty-four years in exile.

My friends were surprised when I became an insurgent in a Karen National Union (KNU) jungle camp. I was surprised myself.

I became a student activist because of what I witnessed on that fateful day in 1988. I was at the forefront of the student demonstration marching from Yangon University. When we reached the White Bridge we were barred by soldiers behind iron barricades.

Trucks drove into the crowd and police started hitting everyone. We fled in fright. We hid in a house and watched from a window. It was like watching a movie. People running, being hit, lying in the road and being forced into police vans. That day changed me. I was enraged by what I saw.

Later I learnt that it wasn't only students who were treated like this. But when I reached the camp I realised the ethnic experience was even worse. The Karen had been tortured for over 20 years. Their houses burnt down, young men taken

and women raped. From being a student activist I became a human rights activist, living in the jungle.

We would shout “We want democracy! We want human rights!” but I had no idea what these were.

My friends thought I wouldn't last a week in the camp. I had studied English literature but I needed 'jungle culture' to survive. We had to find our own food and build tents. Nobody even knew how to cut bamboo! Technology students designed the tents. Finalising the design took them two weeks but they collapsed as soon as they were built. The Karen found it hilarious.

The army would attack in the summer and retreat in the rains. I knew that even if I picked up a gun I would never hit the target. My skill was communicating. I spent most of my time talking, learning about people's lives and became passionate about helping the community.

In 1988 I didn't understand the meaning of human rights. We would shout “We want democracy! We want human rights!” but I had no idea what these were. But in the jungle we had time to read. Using donated books we set up a 'Jungle University'.

One day I picked up a book called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was unlike anything I had ever read. There were no words from Shakespeare or Bernard Shaw. I had to look up words like 'equality' and 'discrimination'. I realised that our main human rights violation was ignorance.

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My dream is for human rights activists to be able to work openly and freely. I want our country to be a champion of human rights.

”

Aung Myo Min

I was really impressed by what I read. The Karen had suffered so much that they were very suspicious of Myanmar people. But I tried to explain that good and evil isn't linked to nationality, and at the same time I began to understand their position. This for me is the basis of human rights.

When I was young I never thought much about my future. I imagined I would find work as a tutor or in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But my dreams took root in 1988 and became stronger with every passing year in the jungle.

My immediate dream was to go back to my country. That has now come true. My longer term dream is for human rights activists to be able to work openly and freely. I want our country to be a champion of human rights.

In 2000 I set up an organisation called the Human Rights Education Institution Burma (HREIB). There was no mention of LGBT because I didn't want people to think it was because I was gay. I never came out in the camp. Gay sex was illegal there. But later I realised that there was nothing wrong with being gay. It was the law that was wrong.

I started introducing LGBT issues to our work when I was ready to come out myself. I ran training for people who suppressed their sexual orientation for fear of being ridiculed. Later this became Colours Rainbow. Equality Myanmar was set up in 2012. Initially I stayed behind the scenes, but it quickly became active. The organisation has its roots in HREIB. It has grown enormously but its networks, vision and mission remain the same.

I began learning about child rights when I was a refugee. The most two common issues in the border areas are child soldiers and child trafficking. I established a couple of theatre groups run by young people. As with Equality Myanmar I have stepped back so that they can lead.

LGBT rights are not anything special. They're just human rights. Someone's worth or ability shouldn't be judged by his or her sexual preferences.

I'm satisfied with two achievements in my life. I started HREIB with just \$3,000, and it now has more than 50 staff and is well-respected. I'm also proud of what I've achieved for LGBT and child rights. I always say that a good community leader is one who is no longer needed.

Finally in 2013, after 24 years in exile, I was allowed to come back to Myanmar. When I came back I was worried about two things. One was that I would be locked up. The other was whether I would be accepted by society.

There is still a lot of prejudice against LGBT people. Some think being gay is something to be cured. We are expected to wear make-up or women's clothes. I still get comments like 'Saya Aung Myo Min is a great guy. It's a shame he's gay'.

LGBT rights are not anything special. They're just human rights. Someone's worth or ability shouldn't be judged by his or her sexual preferences. I'm proud of being a role model for the LGBT community.

I've known the British Council for years. I used to be a library member before I left the country. After my return, I sent some of my young actors along for forum theatre training and I was invited to speak at the screening of an LGBT-themed documentary. I used to think of the British Council as a place to read but now it offers many programmes. I think it's a great development.



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**My parents always
did a lot for the
community; the same
seeds have been
planted in me.**

”

Kathleen Thein

Kathleen Thein is a professional educator and community service volunteer. She is involved in a variety of educational and philanthropic projects in Myanmar and is a voice for the Hindu community, especially women.

I grew up in a very big house in Tamwe Township, Yangon. All my brothers and sisters and cousins and I attended the same school near our house. All my brothers and sisters were very smart, top of the class. I'm not like them, although the teachers did notice me.

My father had a small coffee powder factory called Hanuman Coffee Powder on 51st Street. We weren't rich but we didn't need to worry about money. He was the president of the Hindu Central Board and a youth leader, not only for Hindus but for Buddhists too. He was very well-known in Hindu society.

Our neighbourhood was 90% Buddhist. They were large, well-educated families. There were only two or three Hindu households but we all got on happily. We used to go to the Hanuman Temple near Kandawgyi Lake every Saturday evening. Our parents insisted.

I went to university to study English and graduated in 1983. After graduation I heard they were short of English tutors at Yangon University, so I got a job as a part-time tutor. All my

siblings are doctors and officers but I thought that teaching was the best and most noble position for me as a woman.

I stayed there until the uprising of 1988. Then all the universities closed for two years so I was out of work. My father wanted me to work in his coffee factory but I told him I wasn't interested in business. Then, in 1990, he passed away. I was so depressed.

I returned to work when the university reopened the following year. Things were very different. The students were not as happy as they had been. Nobody felt free. The events had clearly had an impact on the students and their education.

I was transferred to Sittwe University, in Rakhine State. I was not happy at first. There was no electricity except for a few hours in the morning, so we had to rush to cook. I used to get homesick but it wasn't easy to travel to Yangon. The air fare was very expensive as all the airlines were government owned. Even if you had the money you sometimes couldn't get a ticket.

My father wanted me to work in his coffee factory but I told him I wasn't interested in business. Then, in 1990, he passed away. I was so depressed.

All the students liked me very much and helped me a lot, not only the Hindus but the Rakhine and Muslim students too. I got more used to living there after two or three months, and after a year I had settled down. Things were still unstable though. There were regular closures due to uprisings and we, the teachers, had to stay in our hostels. This was happening all over Myanmar.

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”

Kathleen Thein

After I left Sittwe I worked at the Indian Embassy School in Yangon and then at ES4E Language and Training Centre. I joined another international school, YIEC, in 1999. There were only 50 students at that time but now there are two or three thousand. I taught there for six years.

The teaching methodologies used in private schools are very different from those at university so at first I had some difficulties. It took me a long time to plan lessons.

In 1997 I became one of the co-chairs of ELTeCS (English Language Teachers Contact Scheme) organised by the British Council. I attended Sunday workshops every month and gained a lot of knowledge. I attended all the courses at the British Council and at the American Centre and collected a stack of certificates. After four or five years I had the confidence to give presentations to junior teachers.

I was selected to attend a TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) conference in California in 2004. I had had three or four sleepless nights before I went. I was so scared. Would I get lost or miss my connection? But in the end some Hindu friends looked after me. My colleagues at the conference envied me.

Going to that conference totally changed my life. I was the only Myanmar teacher among teachers from all over the world. My experience at the British Council was so useful for that. It gave me the confidence to mingle with international educators.

Now I travel every year, often to Thailand but also to other countries. My sisters and some of my relatives often ask me 'don't you feel scared to go alone?'. But I'm used to it now.

My mother passed away in 2008, after Cyclone Nargis. I wanted to get away so I went to Canada to study at Queen's University. When I came back I established a small classroom.

I follow religious conflict and often represent the Hindu point of view at interfaith dialogue events. I specifically want to be a voice for Hindu women.

My parents always did a lot for the community and the same seeds have been planted in me. I gave free English classes twice a year at monasteries, for religious and youth groups. I believe young people are ambassadors for our country. I gave them leadership skills.

Being a woman I wanted to do something for women. My friend Pan Tee Eain is the director of the women's organisation Creative Home and she encouraged me to join her organisation. She gave me a lot of opportunities to speak there and I gave them free classes.

I have decided to follow in my father's footsteps as a voice for the Hindu community. I follow religious conflict and often represent the Hindu point of view at interfaith dialogue events. I specifically want to be a voice for Hindu women and so I created the Hindu Women's Organisation, and I am a core member of the International Women's Peace Group.

I am dedicated to continuing my community work, as my father did, on behalf of Hindu women in Myanmar.

A man with dark, curly hair and glasses, wearing a light blue and white vertically striped button-down shirt, stands against a solid dark blue background. He is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The image is monochromatic, with the man's shirt and the background being shades of blue.

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**The development
of a country is
intertwined with that
of its music.**

”

Moe Naing

Moe Naing is the co-founder of Gitameit, a non-profit community music school. He is actively involved in the community. His aim is to help develop not only musicians but also community leaders.

I was born in Mandalay in 1968, and grew up in Magway and later Yangon. I liked listening to music from a young age. I am the youngest in my family. My father played traditional instruments and sang traditional songs, as did my brothers and sisters.

Once I visited my relatives in the delta and saw my cousin play guitar. It inspired me to play guitar too, but just for fun. After I left school I started to learn piano at the YMCA, and also started to learn jazz guitar.

I had a friend whose English was very impressive. He suggested I read English books. So I borrowed English books from him and read until he didn't have any more books to lend me.

Another friend suggested I join the British Council library. At that time the annual membership fee was 75 kyats, which was a bit expensive because my pocket money was just 5 kyats a day. So I shared the fees with an English teacher from our street and we shared the books too. We could borrow four books every two weeks, so she read two books and I read the other two.

Once I went to a workshop about graded readers. After that, the British Council started to stock graded readers. I was really fond of these. I felt my knowledge start to broaden. Later, I tried the original novels. I can say the British Council is the place that gave me an education. Now I can communicate with people when I go abroad.

After I left school I started at the university. Following the uprising of 1988, all universities closed for three years. I was one of the affected students. I ended up spending more time playing guitar. In the 1990s I got a job as a keyboard player in a restaurant. I practised during the day and played at night, and stayed for five years.

Then I met someone who changed my life. Kit Young was an American teacher at Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand. She helped me improve my piano and suggested I apply for a scholarship. So I spent a year studying at her university. I used to visit the British Council in Chiang Mai because I missed it in Yangon.

I was aware that studying in Thailand and at the British Council gave me advantages many Myanmar youths didn't have. So I came back in 2001 with the aim of doing something for them. Two years later Kit Young moved to Yangon and together we founded Gitameit.

Our vision was to provide “education through music”. We wanted to produce not only musicians but potential leaders. So we sing and bring people together. I have also put graded readers in our school so that students can read them.

After a few years we set up a community development department. In the beginning, we taught music at monastic schools, showed films, arranged trips and ran teacher training. We also funded a monastic school called “Sandar Rama” on the outskirts of Yangon. Our members contribute 10,000 kyats per month for the salaries of teachers who are working for that school.

I began to get more international experience and to build collaborations. In 2005, I participated in an International Choral Symposium held in Kyoto, Japan. When I came back, I decided to learn choral singing properly.

In 2007 a choir from Yale University visited and we performed together in Yangon. The following year I took a group to the US to perform in fund-raising concerts for the victims of cyclone Nargis, and in 2012 the British Council sent me to the London Jazz Festival.

In my view, the development of a country is intertwined with that of its music. The musical standard of our neighbouring countries is very high. But we have been left behind. As a country develops, the value of its music, arts and architecture increases.

In fact we have a strong tradition in music and place a high value on Myanmar traditional bands ('Myanma Sai Wine'). What we need is public appreciation of the value of music, especially acoustic. With the change in government I hope our young people will get more international opportunities and they begin to see the real aesthetic value of music.

My ambitions have changed throughout my life. When I was young I wanted to be a musician. When I became a musician, I wanted to be a community leader because there was so much to be done in our country. I've decided that when I'm fifty I will give more of my time to the community. I want to share my musical knowledge with the next generation.

Gitameit has now produced hundreds of musicians and potential leaders and we want to continue to do this. We can't expect everything will change for the better just because we have democracy. The current generation will have to suffer and work hard so that the next will have a brighter future.



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**We studied different
religious practices
and cultures and
found things in
common.**

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May Palé Thwe

May Palé Thwe (Pearl) is Founder and Director of the Smile Education and Development Foundation and Training Executive of the Smile Education Training Institute. She is committed to improving education for all.

I was born in Yangon but brought up in my parents' hometown of Mawlamyine. I studied physics at the university, but my studies were interrupted by the 1988 uprising. I got married in the long enforced break and have since raised two children.

After my marriage, we moved to Yangon. Even though the universities reopened in 1990 I chose not to enrol but to study computing and accounting. Many years later I got my degree in English through distance learning. I was, in fact, older than most of my classmates but we got along well and it was fun.

The very first course I did at the British Council was a course for English language teachers. I had been teaching kids in my neighbourhood, which I found really rewarding, and I wanted to improve my skills. My first impression of the British Council was the books in the library. I was awestruck! I immediately decided to send my children to English classes.

After that first course, I was offered a scholarship on another course in Teaching Citizenship. This was a real eye-opener for me. It sparked my enthusiasm for citizenship skills, and taught me how to help others understand equality and human rights. I will never forget my wonderful trainers.

We studied distribution of wealth, mediation, negotiation and problem-solving in a range of scenarios. The most significant thing I learnt was how to approach problems from a human rights perspective. Although my lessons at the university had been engaging and challenging in their own way, the citizenship course opened up a whole new world for me.

I began to create lesson plans aimed at developing citizenship skills in my students, and acquired the confidence to conduct teaching training workshops. I can still remember the first session I gave, “How to Motivate Students” at Crane International school. I was really nervous but it was well-received.

In 2007 I was fortunate to be offered another scholarship as a Muslim woman to join an interfaith dialogue programme. We were a diverse group. We studied different religious practices and cultures and found things in common as well as differences. Afterwards we founded the Peace Interfaith in Myanmar and began to mediate for diverse communities through social work.

I was one of the very first members of the Civic Society Initiative. We taught English and trained teachers in monastic schools and schools for street children. I have fond memories of that time. Sometimes I even asked my own children, who were teenagers by then, to help me run my workshops. I wanted them to know more about the people around them.

My husband and children have always been supportive of my work for the community. My sons are now studying sound engineering in Malaysia, and my hope is for them to enjoy their life and work. I will not force them to do anything they're not interested in. They love music, which I think comes from me. I love singing and I'm a big fan of ABBA and the Carpenters.

Another fond memory is my first meeting with our Lady, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. I was running the Women's Empowerment Programme organised by the British Council and ActionAid for women from different states. My trainees, some of whom are now members of parliament, arranged for me to meet Daw Aung San

Suu Kyi. I was so excited. She asked me so many questions and, to my relief, I think I managed to answer them well.

I met her again in 2013 at her residence. I had the opportunity to present to her what reforms I thought should be made in the education sector. I really think more money should be spent on education, and inclusive education for all should be our goal. We should not leave children with disabilities behind.

That same year I taught the English component of a joint programme between Johns Hopkins and Yangon University. It was a prestigious job for me. Now I am Founder and Training Executive at the Smile Education Training Institute, a social enterprise. We teach English and run teacher training and mentoring nationwide.

I continue to be involved in education reform through the National Network for Education Reform. I also coordinate the Myanmar Council of Persons with Disability, which advocates access and inclusivity for people with disabilities. I still run courses at the British Council. I present and participate at monthly English language teaching workshops, and the annual conferences in Yangon and Mandalay.

I suppose it sounds a lot for one person to handle but my work is my life. I can never say 'no' to people who ask for help. My husband and sons came to terms with that a long time ago. I enjoy my work, especially training in remote areas. People there are so different from people in big cities.

I see myself as a life-long learner who values quality education the most. My plan for the future is to continue to learn about education management and do my best in developing and enhancing the capabilities of teachers in diverse communities.

My motto is 'keep trying and one day you will achieve your dreams'.



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**I believe strongly in
inclusive education.**

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Tha Uke

Tha Uke is a physiotherapist and the founder and director of the Eden Centre for Disabled Children. From a village in Chin, the poorest and most sparsely populated of Burma's ethnic states, he is a tireless fighter for the rights of children with disabilities.

I was born about 35 miles from Hakha, the capital of Chin State. I am the second of 11 children. My father was a community medical officer, and we used to move around.

After I'd finished school, I came to Yangon to study botany. It was the happiest time of my life. I would spend the holidays at United Christian Fellowship camps, which introduced me to the idea of providing social services to help my country.

When I graduated I returned to Chin to teach in my village. I built a house in the traditional way, and we planted and harvested our food. It's an experience I'll never forget.

A turning point came when my father saw an advertisement for the newly opened University of Paramedical Science. I had to walk the 35 miles to Hakha to sit the entrance exam (something I wouldn't be able to do now). I didn't pass the first time so I took it again the following year.

Only four people were chosen and luckily I was one of them. I started my training at Yangon General Hospital. At that time

all the subjects were taught in English and it was hard. But as there were only four of us we had a lot of support. I only had a few shirts to wear, but I never felt discriminated against.

As a new physiotherapist my first posting was in Pakokku, a commercial town not far from the Chin hills. I had a great time as I was given free rein to carry out my work. I loved my job, realising I had discovered what my heart was into.

Soon it was time for marriage. Back at school my father had made me promise that I would allow him to choose my life partner. As the eldest son this is taken seriously by Chin parents. Fortunately my parents' choice and mine coincided. I got married, had two children and started thinking about my future.

The head asked me how many schools for the disabled there were in Yangon. It was then that I realised how little support there was.

It was a time when many young men were going abroad to look for work. Realising that I couldn't afford to bring up two kids on a local salary, I decided to go to Malaysia and support my family from there.

It was in Malaysia that I got my first experience of working with disabled children. I volunteered twice a week at the Eden Handicap Service Centre in Penang. The head asked me how many schools for the disabled there were in Yangon. It was then that I realised how little support there was.

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The English winter was so dreary and there I was, trying to recover from the loss of my beloved daughter.

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He told me I should go back to Myanmar and make a difference. But I still needed to support my family. After a year in Malaysia I moved to Singapore where I could earn twice as much. I worked at a hospital for the elderly.

After two years abroad I finally got some home leave. When I had left my daughter was only seven months old. Now she was two and a half! I was a stranger to her when she saw me – it broke my heart. I only had one week and when I finally bonded with her, it was time to go back to Singapore.

Back in Singapore I was beginning to question the purpose of my life. I missed my family and was not there to see the children growing up. On the other hand my monthly salary in Singapore was equivalent to about two or three years' salary in Myanmar.

In the end I came back to Myanmar at the end of my contract. I started volunteering, providing services at my own home and the home of my mentor Daw Lilian Gyi, and worked towards setting up my own centre. Finally in 2002, with funding from the Japanese embassy, I set up the Eden Centre for Disabled Children in Yangon.

The following year I learned about the Chevening scholarship programme from the British Ambassador, Vicky Bowman. So as not to leave my centre I thought about applying for a distance learning course. But a friend persuaded me to go to the UK for a one year course in Disability Studies. I needed a 6.5 in IELTS, which was difficult but not impossible due to my background in Singapore and Malaysia.

But fate was really unkind. My daughter passed away a month before I left for the UK. It was so sudden. She had a fever so we took her to hospital but by then it was too late. I couldn't describe my anguish. The English winter was so dreary and there I was, trying to recover from the loss of my beloved daughter. She was just ten years old.

It was an eye opener for me to think of them from a social perspective, people with dignity and rights.

My studies in England completely changed the way I looked at disabled children. I had always seen them from a charity point of view, that they just needed our support. But the thinking in the West takes a human rights approach, helping them to become independent. There is ease of access in the UK, and many disabled people carry out everyday activities without needing a caretaker. It was an eye opener for me to think of them from a social perspective, people with dignity and rights.

Now I am trying to change the mindset in Myanmar and get legislation for disabled people approved by parliament. I have given workshops and participated in many seminars here and abroad. I was encouraged by the recent amendment in the national education law on equal learning opportunities, for which I had lobbied. I believe strongly in inclusive education.

As for my future, I feel that I haven't done enough for my people. One day I would like to leave the Eden Centre in the hands of the next generation, and go back and settle in Chin State.



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**For a strong country
we must have both
peace and federalism**

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Naing Ngan Lin

Naing Ngan Lin is a member of the Yangon regional parliament for the National League for Democracy (NLD). In 2006 he graduated in Politics and Government from the UK's Open University. During the 2015 election campaign he suffered severe injuries when he and his colleagues were attacked.

I was born in Thaton Township in Mon State. I moved to Yangon when I was about three years old. I still live in Yangon with my wife, our son and my parents-in-law.

My parents have long been members of the National League for Democracy (NLD). They used to work at the NLD office, and would send promising young members to the American Centre and the British Council to learn English. Soon I got the chance to attend English classes at the British Council.

It was the first time I had met native English teachers and it was hard at first. But my English improved enough to join the Open University programme run through the British Council, which I later heard had been requested by A May Su (Daw Aung San Suu Kyi). It was a great course.

I graduated in Politics and Government from the Open University in 2006. In our final year our teachers asked our opinion of the programme and whether it should be extended. We gave a lot of positive feedback and said that if it could be

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Prison gave me the chance to learn more about politics. It taught me what was possible.

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Naing Ngan Lin

extended it would have great advantages for Burma. I think there were three more batches.

After graduation I met my life partner. We got married and we have one son. I went to live with my wife's parents in Dawbone township, Yangon. They have been a wonderful support, cooking for us and never complaining about what we do.

June to September each year was the period of most protests against the government. I became actively involved in politics during the 'Saffron Revolution' of 2007. Students were arrested for demonstrating during the visit of UN Special Adviser Gambari in 2008. My wife was one of them. I was arrested the following year and spent two months in prison.

Prison gave me the chance to learn more about politics. From being interrogated I learnt what others were doing, who was working with who and the kind of people I could associate with. It helped me understand what we were dealing with, and taught me what was possible.

**I believe in the value of hard work.
I grew up poor. In my classes at the
British Council, I found listening to
be the most difficult skill.**

After I was released I set up the United Front of Burmese Activists for Democracy, an association for different groups working towards the same aim. It started with just four groups but later rose to eleven.

Then after A May Su was released, she called on me to work with the NLD. With her guidance I founded the Togetherness

Free Education Network for Youth and, later, the Health Network. In 2012, I was proud to be elected as a Member of Parliament for the NLD.

From then until the elections in November 2015 I was appointed to the national parliament in Naypyitaw. People from my constituency would come and tell me their problems. I heard a lot about people being arrested in their homes at night for not having the right papers. I tried to help them.

In 2015 I stood for the Yangon regional parliament with my colleagues Ko Phyo Min Thein and Ma Sandar Min. All three of us were elected and I think we have the right experience to bring to the regional assembly.

I believe that at the regional level, government must have authority to act. We need to establish a more federal structure. Looking at the constitution one can't say we don't have the authority to act at the regional level. But nobody has ever taken responsibility for this.

I believe in the value of hard work. I grew up poor. In my classes at the British Council, I found listening to be the most difficult skill. I put double the effort into my studies at the British Council. The Open University programme was also really difficult but I worked hard to complete it.

As an MP I have many hopes and dreams for my country. I am the secretary of the committee governing the national peace process. I believe that for a strong country we must have both peace and federalism. To achieve federalism we need peace, and vice versa.

I also believe in youth, as the next generation will lead our country one day. I want to encourage our young people to be strong and shine like stars. I have always followed what I believe in, and so I do not expect too much from my son. I want him to do what he wants and will support him whatever that is.

I had never taken much care of my health but being stabbed made me realise how important it is. It took me a long time to recover.

I would like to give the following advice to our young people. One, manage well what you possess. Two, work hard. Three, learn as much as you can and apply it. And four, the most important, take care of your health. When the time comes to work for your country, you must be healthy and strong. If you are not, then everything you have learnt will be useless.

This is what I learnt when I was assaulted during the 2015 election campaign. I had never taken much care of my health but being stabbed made me realise how important it is. It took me a long time to recover. Even when I recovered physically I still had problems mentally. I couldn't sleep at night and still get headaches. So I urge young people to eat and sleep well, and take care of themselves.

A woman with dark hair, wearing a patterned sari, stands against a dark background. She is smiling and has her hands clasped in front of her. Overlaid on the left side of the image is a quote in white text, enclosed in large white quotation marks.

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**Education is a pot of
gold that cannot be
stolen from you**

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Htoot May

Htoot May is a member of the Upper House of Parliament for the Arakan National Party. She is secretary of the Joint Committee for the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly and also of the International Relations Committee.

I was born in Kyauk Tway village in the Ramree township of Arakan State. Ramree is an island in the Bay of Bengal with little direct contact with the mainland. My parents are farmers and I am the youngest of five children. Three of my siblings are boys but my parents did not discriminate against my sister and me for being girls. I was always treated equally by my parents and brothers.

I became interested in learning at a very young age, and really liked going to school. The school shut down for a while after 1988 because of the unrest and I was sad that I was not able to go.

Our village only had a primary school so after grade five I started at a middle school in another village. There was no transport except ox-driven carts, so I spent two hours a day walking through the fields to and from school. It was all right most of the time but in the rainy season we got wet and shivered once we arrived.

There was no television signal in our village, only a hall where we would gather to watch recorded programmes and films.

I want to be a person who can help Arakan state first, can help the development of Myanmar second, and ultimately be a woman who can help the world.

There were very few radios. I only got to watch real TV when I arrived in Yangon.

My parents couldn't afford to send my brothers and me to Sittwe, the state capital, so we left for Yangon where we had relatives who could put us up. My brothers left first and I moved to Yangon in 1996.

I started at the University of Distance Education. I wanted to become a nurse but I found you had to pay a large bribe to get into nursing school and I was not able or willing to pay. I started learning English with an expatriate teacher at a Buddhist monastery in Sanchaung.

I graduated in 2002 and went on to get a diploma in software engineering. It was only then that I started to make friends outside my immediate social circle. Later, my cousins introduced me to a private learning centre. Some of the teachers from that school organized conversation clubs at the British Council. Together with them I started going to the British Council at the weekend to practice my English, and also joined the library.

I was starting to get involved in politics. I was not a party member but the Arakan League for Democracy recommended I attend some courses at the British Council. I found out more about how democratic systems work and also about the political system in the UK.

I gained confidence from these courses and had a taste of 'freedom of education', which was totally different from how we were taught in school. I was allowed to think and learn freely through a student- centred approach. I discovered that I needed to read more than what was in the syllabus, do research and respect intellectual property rights.

From my classes at the British Council I realised the true meaning of the Myanmar saying 'Education is a pot of gold that cannot be stolen from you'. The British Council helped me become a global citizen. Later on, I became a youth member of the Arakan League for Democracy, and also started teaching.

In 2011 I joined the Arakkha Foundation, an education and leadership training initiative for Arakan women from Arakan, Paletwa, Yangon and Ayeyarwaddy Division. I went to Singapore as a representative of the foundation and saw the level of development there. I became strongly motivated to boost development in Myanmar.

I want first to be a person who can help Arakan state and its people, secondly someone who can help the development of Myanmar as a country and ultimately a woman who can help the world.

Now that I'm a member of parliament, the training I received from the British Council has proved really useful. It gave me an understanding of the fundamentals of parliamentary systems, democratic practices and values so now I know what is and is not consistent with democratic values.

I am happy with how my life has progressed. I was not aware that every human being should have a dream until I heard Martin Luther King's speech during one of my classes. I was just coasting along nicely without a clear objective before that. If one has a dream, and the desire to follow it through and remain on the right track to achieve it, I believe anything is possible.



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**You can give a
patient paracetamol
but you can't use it to
treat poverty.**

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Thandar Aung

Thandar Aung won the 2014 IELTS Prize to study overseas. She is currently doing a Master's in International Health at the Charité, a large teaching hospital in Berlin, Germany. Her ambition is to help transform Myanmar's health system.

I was born in Yangon in 1991 and when I was seven I moved with my mother to Bago to live with my grandmother. My father was a civil servant and stayed in Yangon. After school I used to enjoy playing football with my brothers and cousins, but my mother wouldn't let me until I had finished studying.

When I was nine I started attending classes at the British Council. This meant travelling to Yangon three evenings a week. I loved my classes. They were totally different from my classes at the government school, where all the learning was by rote. I remember the things I studied out of interest, like a book on physics from the British Council. I don't remember learning anything at my government school.

The other main difference was that at my government school you were discriminated against according to your family background. That didn't happen at the British Council. Even if I was wearing the poorest clothes I would still be praised if I did well.

At home we didn't discuss politics. We were an ordinary family, we just lived our lives. We were told not to talk about political

things. My mother used to worry that sending me to the British Council meant that my father might lose his job.

There were only two TV channels. One was from the military and the other from the government, which was the same thing. We used to watch Chinese soap operas with Burmese subtitles. Later, when the government changed, we could borrow taped Hollywood movies like Titanic.

I remember going to a public library in Bago. Most of the books were locked away and the only ones that were available for children to read were torn and dirty. When I started at the British Council I began to read more English books. Burmese books were expensive to buy.

I graduated from high school in 2007, the year after I had finished at the British Council. My grades from both schools were good and I went to study medicine at university because my parents wanted me to.

One day we went on a field trip to a rural area. It was the first time I'd seen real poverty. I got more and more fascinated in social factors. That's when I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to do something about the systems.

I graduated in 2014. I decided to study International Health in Germany and won an IELTS scholarship. It was hard in the beginning. I had never learnt anything to do with research before. I went on to take two modules in health financing and health workforce, the two main building blocks of the health system. I'm interested in the issues we face around the world, especially in developing countries.

My studies were in English but outside I would speak in German. I already knew a bit of German from classes at the University of Foreign Languages and the Goethe Institut. I had also learned a little French. Learning these languages opened my mind because I saw the world not just through an English lens. I began to understand the different ways people think.

Before I left for Germany I'd never been on a plane before. Now I've travelled all over Europe. I love travelling. There's one German word I love: 'Fernweh', which is the opposite of homesickness. I feel that all the time. The only thing close to travelling would be reading. But when you're reading you don't really see things for yourself. When you're travelling you really learn from being in that environment, the social interactions on the way.

Now I'm doing an internship on Health Policy and Planning in the Karen Department of Health and Welfare in Mae Sot. After Mae Sot I will need another eight months of work experience to graduate. I really want exposure to other ethnic people in the country.

My vision to reform the healthcare system in Myanmar hasn't changed since my undergraduate studies but my approach might be different. I'm still discovering my strengths. I also don't know how to bring my studies abroad into the government system. If there is no mechanism for me to work inside the system then there will be other opportunities with NGOs and international agencies. I just want to work where I can make a difference.

If I could work as an advisor then that's what I would ideally love to do. I honestly don't understand the political power struggles that take place, not just in Myanmar but everywhere. I don't understand how people love to hold onto power while ignoring the situation of people on the ground. But if there's no leadership then I would do whatever needs to be done.

I think my parents are proud of me but my mum still wants me to do clinical work as a back up plan. But you can't do clinical work as a back up plan, you have to devote yourself to it. I keep telling my mum that to improve public health you need to get to the root causes.

You can give a patient paracetamol but you can't use it to treat poverty.



Life Stories celebrates the lives of some of the inspirational people British Council Burma has met over the last seven decades.

It seeks to provide a record of a country in the midst of enormous change. *Life Stories* is more than a retrospective. As well as people with long memories we hear from those who represent the next generation, working to shape a new democratic future.

This book has been published to mark the 70th anniversary of British Council Burma. It is an accompaniment to the *Life Stories* exhibition hosted in the British Council Library in June 2016.