

Students Get a Close Up Look at Life in the Jungle



Students have a chance to see what it's like to live and work in the dense Burmese (Myanmar) jungle thanks to regular updates from Dave Small.

by Melissa Friesen

You know that feeling when you learn something new and it kind of changes your life? Picture a class full of students in grades 1-3 lying on their bellies and kneeling on the floor blowing rubber bands across a line marked in front of them. It seems fairly irrelevant, and slightly odd, but the impact it's having on the students may be nothing short of life changing.

At the beginning of the year, SCAP teacher Wilma Kooistra brought in Dave Small to speak with her class. He's been working with Free Burma Rangers for several years, bringing aid and good news to Burmese refugees and those deep in the jungle in need of help. Little did she know that bringing him into the classroom one time would turn into an ongoing relationship for

the class.

Every few weeks, Dave sends an update, sometimes a video of something like a wild monkey or photos of his hammock in the jungle. Once it was a video of the world's largest refugee camp in Bangladesh for the Rohingya people, with over half a million people living in squalor. The children sitting in a safe Northwestern Ontario classroom saw kids just like them living in conditions quite the opposite.

The latest update included rules for a game that some students from a jungle school. The building was made out of barn board and each class looked like a stall, without its own walls or doors. The highlight of the video for the students here was a game the students were playing during their recess. It was about as sim-

ple as one could imagine. Make a line in the dirt. Throw a couple of rubber bands on one side of the line. Try to blow the bands over, one at a time, onto the other side. Insert pure child joy, a healthy dose of competition, and with that line drawn on the floor, a kind of erasing of all the lines that have been drawn between these two sets of children. No longer Burmese or Canadian, rich or poor, just kids and a game that works anywhere.

"It's different than just learning about something for a week and then moving on. It's daily throughout the year. So yeah, I do expect that it will have a lifelong impact at least for some," said Wilma.

But it's more than just getting updates from the other side of the world. The students are moved to action. Before school

starts in the morning, the class participates in devotions, where they pray about the concerns they have. Those concerns include Dave, of course. In fact, they pray he wouldn't encounter any "creepy crawlies" when he's deep in the jungle. They also pray for the kids they see, and also the Burmese army. Essentially, no one is off limits. They pray for the people running from trouble and the people causing it. "They have such a spirit of belief and trust. They're not afraid to ask God anything," says Wilma.

So the impact has already begun. "It gives them something to really care about first of all." She notes that in comparison to the children they see on the videos, they're all quite well taken care of (and then some). "It's great exposure for them for how people live in other parts of the world. Otherwise, we stay so myopic in our views and it's easy to forget about the bigger world especially when you're young."

Learning about another culture, another way of dressing, playing, learning



The students in Wilma Kooistra's Grade 1-3 class, like Sam, learned a new game, one that came all the way from Burma!



Gemma positions herself to test out her lungs while one of her classmates looks on.



Seth does his best to get the rubber band over the line and score one point!

and living has sparked a lot of curiosity and care from the students. "The compassion and the empathy that they have for others is amazing. They pray for the kids in the refugee camp because they know they can be without food for a day or more or without a family."

And Wilma says this just isn't something that can be replicated in a short study or lesson. The fact that there is ongoing communication makes all the difference. The people in the videos have names and stories and families. It

becomes real for the students and requires them to reflect on their own life. "It's one thing to tell the kids these stories, it's another to be able to see videos of it firsthand."

In fact, the class has even made an effort to "visit" Burma on Google Earth. The students know that when they're awake, the people there are sleeping, and that life in a lot of ways looks opposite for the people on the other side of the earth. What they do with that knowledge, only time will tell!