



DOUG CRAWFORD

A charitable mood



David and Cathy Downham were so struck by the plight of child refugees from Burma they've developed an organization to offer them help.

During a vacation in Thailand four years ago, an unscheduled detour took Dr. David Downham and his wife, Cathy, far away from the tourist resorts and white sand beaches to a place all but forgotten by the outside world.

Accompanied by a journalist friend, the Downhams toured a medical clinic and hostel in a refugee camp, one of many established along the border to accommodate thousands of Karen refugees driven from Burma by their own government.

The scene left a lasting impression on the Washago couple. When they returned home, the thoughts and memories of displaced children remained with them.

"We felt like we had to contribute, like we had to help," said David, a retired surgeon.

"We almost felt guilty about returning home to a comfortable life after seeing how the Karens were forced to spend each day."

The Downhams returned to Mae Sot, Thailand, a few months later armed with a small amount of supplies, warm hearts and knowledge.

Four years later, after having spent more than 20 months in total working in the clinic and hostel, the Downhams have founded the only registered international charity based in Simcoe County: Project Umbrella Burma.

"Umbrellas are such an important item where the Karens are," said Cathy, a retired teacher. "They provide shade in the hot season and shelter

them from rain during the long, rainy season.

"Because the Karen people have been forced to flee to the jungle to avoid persecution, many of them live in temporary huts or simply under leaves or umbrellas. It's a tragedy, because they are a very well-educated, kind and beautiful people."

Last winter, the Downhams spent seven months in Mae Sot. David taught Karen medics in the clinics, while Cathy was responsible for teaching English to 120 Karen children.

Using their own resources, they purchased a Nissan pickup truck to transport the children and supplies.

Back in Canada, a board of directors with seven members was established to guide and raise awareness and funds for Project Umbrella Burma. After their return home in June, the Downhams spoke to several major organizations over the summer and established working ties with local politicians, all of whom have embraced the Downhams' efforts.

Buoyed by the increased awareness in Canada, the couple returned to Thailand in early November to continue their efforts.

"We will continue to return to Thailand for months at a time, maybe years at a time, to continue our work," said Cathy.

"We'll keep going until we're too old to step on a plane."

For more information on Project Umbrella Burma, visit their website at www.projectumbrellaburma.com. **SLM**

• Toby Gorman