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## January 28th 2025 / Trimester Report III / September – December 2024

Dear friends,

The situation in Myanmar is increasingly frightening and difficult and is particularly so in Yenangyaung. Daily life as we know it – well ordered, with comfortable homes, shops stocked with our favourite foods, functioning public transport, electric power available 24/7 and a plentiful supply of clean water is a hopeless dream for nearly all people.

Forced recruitment, relentless fighting, and publicly announced threats of punishment—such as five years in prison or a 1-million kyat fine for merely using a VPN—are just a few reasons why my heart bleeds for our friends at Light of Love and Lei Thar Gone. Adding to the fear, police and military have the authority to forcibly seize and inspect anyone's phone to check for VPN usage, further deepening the climate of control and oppression. Finally, the ever-changing rules and regulations add to their struggles.

On Sunday, 12 January, when the police forcibly took a boy straight from the construction site where he was working with the mason on the new pre-school, the brutality of the conflict became personal and hit home painfully. My heart didn't just bleed—it stopped altogether.

*Zoe wrote: the boy has been taken to one of the bases to train. After two or three months, they will send him to operation areas (in other words: the war) My heart breaks for him and his family. He is the primary source of income for the family. Most of the boys from the mason's group ran away to other places, where their names are unlisted.*

It's obvious that this incident has far-reaching consequences—not only for the boy and his family, who now face unthinkable pain and uncertainty, but also for the mason, whose workforce has been depleted as other boys fled in fear, and for Light of Love, as the construction may possibly face delays.

But Zoe also wrote:

*On the other hand, despite difficulties, challenges and fear, I bought 200 visses of oil - 400 bottles that can cover until June (about 350 litres for the children's monthly rations)*

I admire Zoe and Lyon's steadfast courage in spite of so many difficulties. And I also admire their perseverance and sacrificial dedication to Eric's vision for the underprivileged children in the Dry Zone!



**In spite of all fear and challenges – life goes on....**

**So, first of all, some exciting news... Time For A Wedding**

On August 21<sup>st</sup> **Lyon**, Eric's son - now responsible for the Guesthouse (among many other things) - married **July Thin**, a lovely young woman from Yenangyaung.



Signing the marriage contract in a quiet ceremony at Lei Thar Gone



And after the end of Burmese Lent, in October a proper wedding party, with plenty of food for all 1'500 guests – festivities that left the bride and groom tired but happy!





## Meanwhile at Light of Love...

For me, the entire vision and mission of Light of Love is summed up by these two photos:



This is **Zun Yadi Maung** on the left, at home in May, before enrolment at LOL on the right, only 7 months later, during the LOL Christmas celebration on December 23<sup>rd</sup>



Before a school year begins, Zoe always seeks out underprivileged families whose children could be enrolled in kindergarten and whose parents or guardians are willing to let them attend LOL. Here is **Zun Yadi Maung**, age 6. She has a younger sister, who was sadly given away for adoption, and a younger brother, born 2023. They live with their grandmother as their mother left them when the baby brother was 3 months old. Both parents have remarried and have no contact with them. Their grandma is an odd-job worker, mostly doing laundry for the neighbours. Zun has to look after her brother when grandma is away. Granda's income is not enough even for the daily food. When Zun first came to LOL, she was a wild, sullen and very aggressive child, completely unable to obey rules or follow daily routines. She was malnourished and therefore frequently ill. Zoe took her for a general check-up and the doctor prescribed vitamin supplements to boost her immune system. Her health has gradually improved and thanks to regular, nourishing meals she has put on some weight.

But most of all, it was the patient, tender care and especially the love given to her by Zoe and the teachers that triggered the incredible transformation in her.



Diligently doing homework...

Zoe and the other young teachers still overseen by PSIE (the Teacher Training Institute in Yangon where they trained) are required to submit monthly reports to their supervisors. In December, it was Zoe's turn to write the journal. Here is her summary of events, in her own words:

## *December Edition*

*Date: 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2025*

### *The Overview Situation for December*

The last month of the year, December, passed by with happiness, excitement, the spirit of unity, and the shadow of missing our beloved late founder. Time has passed within a glance, but many things happened, and students and teachers learned abundant skills mindfully or even without notice. Generally, December was occupied with the monthly exam, Sports days, common birthdays, individual games, Christmas celebrations, awarding ceremonies, and December and New Year Holidays. Those events allowed us to experience the difficulties, challenges, and ways to overcome them with understanding, strength, and unity to meet our goals.

### *Challenges in Teaching and Learning*

The challenge was that this month, we could not focus on teaching since the school timetable was filled with activities. After or before the exam, students and teachers were busy preparing for and practicing for the events. So, teaching and learning did not occur during this month. Instead, learning happened in the areas of other soft skills.

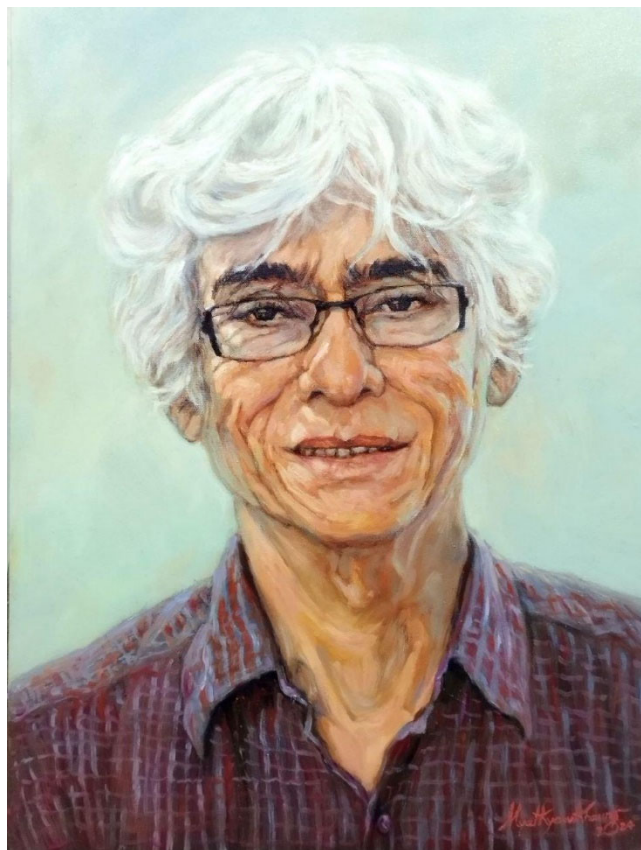
### *School activities*

- **Common Birthday** – we celebrate this item by singing birthday songs, giving small presents, thanking speeches, saying wishes from 2 teachers and 3 students to December born, conclude with greetings. We encouraged a sense of belonging and showed our care and love through this activity.
- **Sports day** – It took place for two days, 20<sup>th</sup> Dec for primary classes and 21<sup>st</sup> for middle and high classes. The theme of the sports day was “unity.” It ended with no accidents and met the objective. Students followed the rules and regulations for the sports day, and unity and caring for the younger ones on each team were shown clearly. Concerning the venue, for evening sessions, we went to the Futsal field, as we have many students and to carry out the team game, we need a larger and proper space for safety reasons, and we wanted students to experience and explore the new place.
- **Christmas celebration and awarding ceremony**—30 students who passed the 2023-2024 school year outstandingly received the award, plus the winning teams from sports day, the drawing winners, and the teacher of the year 2024 prize. Our teammate Teacher Noe Zin Hmwe received the award, and the students voted for the prize. They vote based on the teacher who supports them academically, socially, and emotionally. We are so proud of this achievement. We celebrated Christmas by playing parcel games, singing Christmas songs, and dancing. Students' day, they could show their parents what they had been doing at school.
- **Giving presents by Santa**- A newly added item for this year was giving presents to parents and guests from Santa Nwe.
- **Individual games**—included five corners, type of shooting, kicking, and throwing game. Student council members were in charge of this activity. It took place between the birthday celebration and parcel game activities and lasted for 1.5 hours. It was fun for most students, and SC members learned the specific skills.

My heartfelt appreciation to my teammates and local teachers for the perseverance, patience, dedication, good team spirit, time, and energy they put into all those activities that made these special days happen.

In addition, we praise God for his countless blessings on each activity and each one of us. We thank him for His faithfulness, which allowed us to pass a dreadful year with love and care from our loved ones, made us free from hunger, comforted us from fear, and supported us in continuing our mission and vision.

**As Zoe mentioned above, the Christmas festivities passed under the shadow of “missing our beloved late founder” by which of course Eric was meant. It's hard to believe that Christmas Day marks three years since Eric passed away! To keep his memory alive, especially for the children and teachers who never knew him, Zoe commissioned the well-known artist Myat Kyaw Khaung to paint a portrait of Eric, which now hangs in the assembly hall at LOL**



**Oil on canvas (18 x 24 inches)**



## The Light of Love family – teachers and students



## Sports Days 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> December



Fun and games...



At Yenangyaung football field



## Christmas Celebration and Awarding Ceremony, 23 December 2024



Teachers performing on stage



Many parents and guardians accepted the invitation and enjoyed the celebration!

Four students, acting as MC (Master of Ceremony) – with their scripts at hand two speaking English & two Burmese



Even Santa Claus was present





Water tank for the Pre-School – foundation, construction material and finished tower with two tanks – heaved up using ropes and manpower!



Pre-School on 30.11.2024

Pre-School on 20.12.2024







Zoe mid-September, enjoying a breath of fresh air and the view. For safety reasons, walks like this are no longer possible....

### Celebrating World Teacher's Day on October 5<sup>th</sup>



### Mandatory Government Training...

As I mentioned before, there are many challenges facing Zoe and Lyon. The following example illustrates these and is a representative sample of these difficulties.

On 2 December, Zoe wrote:

*Myanmar style, last night I received a call from the Township Education Office. They informed me that I must attend a training (concerning the law) for 10 days in Magway, from tomorrow! This training was supposed to take place at the beginning of November, but was postponed to 15 December and I was informed, it would last only two days (instead of the original 10). So, I listed myself as an attendee. Now, at such short notice they changed the days back to 10, moved the date up to 3 December and changed duration of classes to a day (instead of ½ day)*

Nobody cares about people’s schedules, work commitments, or planned events—it was a mandatory order, without exception. One representative from each government and private school was required to attend. So, Zoe had to drop everything and spend 11 consecutive days driving to Magway for the training (in itself a challenge with all the check points on the way and bad road conditions, not to mention the cost) The training consisted of 10 days of sessions from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., with a one-hour lunch break, and 1 day for the closing ceremony in which certificates of attendance were distributed.

The training covered six general laws related to gambling, drugs, the constitution, conscription, crime, and children. For this school year, starting in June, teaching these laws will become a mandatory part of the curriculum. For Zoe, who has no background or experience in legal matters, learning the rights, penalties, and proper interpretations of these laws was very challenging. Now, she is expected to train the teachers at Light of Love, who will, in turn, teach the students. The only resources provided were a book containing multiple errors and a link to the website of the Ministry of Legal Affairs.

The government believes that if all students, as Myanmar citizens, understand the laws and their consequences, they will be more likely to obey them. To ensure compliance, the government will monitor the implementation of these lessons through biannual inspections and regular reviews of the lesson plans.

This training campaign was a nationwide effort. In the Magway Division alone, 956 teachers participated in six separate batches. The training was held in the assembly hall of a government school, where — besides the dry legal content— the repulsive state of the toilets proved to be the greatest challenge to the attending teachers.

### **To end on a brighter note:**



Several classrooms now have a 20” TV screen connected to the teacher’s computers.

Here in kindergarten, the children are watching a film about animals on a YouTube Teaching Channel (in English, spoken by mother tongue speakers). The children love these lessons as most have no access to television at home. Unfortunately, because of the regular power cuts, Zoe and the PSIE teachers cannot use these media tools as much as they would like.



## Lei Thar Gone Guest House News

On the Guest House side, life also remains challenging, although there are always unexpected rays of hope!



Auntie Cherry, whom many of you may remember from visits to Lei Thar Gone, is now retired and grateful for the financial support Lyon provided her.

**Yagi**, a deadly and extremely destructive cyclone hit South-East Asia at the beginning of September. It caused massive flooding and enormous damage in Myanmar. Endless heavy rain produced further erosion and damaged the construction site of the retaining wall.



Inspite of these setbacks, the **retaining wall was completed** mid-November – with a total of 35 truckloads of rocks and at a total cost of 28'445'600 Kyats (approx. \$6'500) A huge effort brought to completion successfully.

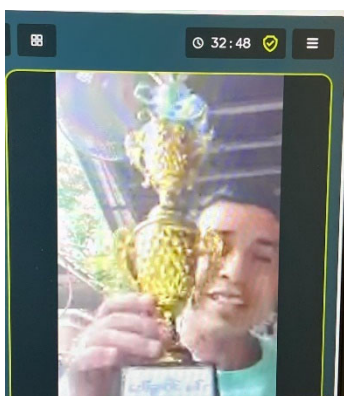




**World Tourism Day** was held in Nay Py Taw on September 27<sup>th</sup>. Seven regions and seven states of Myanmar participated. «Chairman of State Administration Council Prime Minister Senior General Min Aung Hlaing» as he likes to call himself, delivered a speech and inspected all the stalls. Lyon had to attend the event because he is on the board of the Hotel & Tourism Association, Magway. He could not identify with the claims made, as it was alleged that 1 million tourists had visited Myanmar in 2023 and that by September 2024 already more than half a million had arrived. The availability of online visas was also praised. But reality tells a different story...



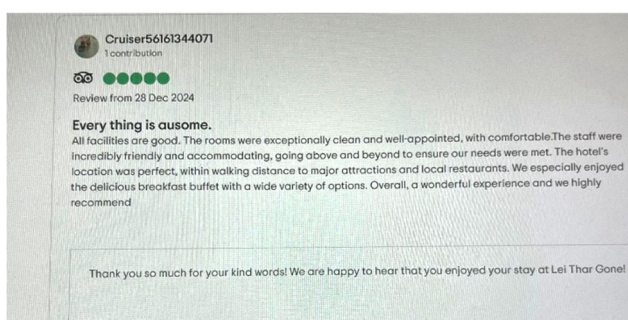
On December 3<sup>rd</sup> Lyon and his wife July Thin attended the Hotel & Tourism ceremony for the opening of **Housekeeping, Front Office and Food & Beverage classes in Magway**. Both Lyon and July Thin enrolled for the Front Office training – 8am to noon, daily for two weeks. The course was not actually compulsory, but the government seems to be «wondering» if owners/staff in hotels, motels and guesthouses are really qualified for the job. Taking this course would therefore guarantee a certain level of training. The course provided «western-standard» training; teaching the application of systematic and professional work approaches. Certificates were given to those that passed the final exam. Happy news – July Thin won 1<sup>st</sup> place and was rewarded with a trophy! Congratulations, July Thin!



Lyon proudly presents July Thin's trophy during our video call on December 18<sup>th</sup>

And finally – **December was a good month for Lei Thar Gone**, with as many as 10 rooms occupied simultaneously. Lyon even managed to prepare «Müesli» for the guests. Fulfilling the guests' wishes during these complicated times was challenging, but it was a rewarding experience—and it felt great to be tired from finally hosting again.

The guests' reactions were not long in coming... a new 5-star review on TripAdvisor filled us with great satisfaction!





**For those that are interested in more in-depth information on the situation, here a few relevant articles about current developments and/or events in Myanmar:**

In an article of 9 November 2024, the junta council admits to only being able to supply 50% of the electricity demand

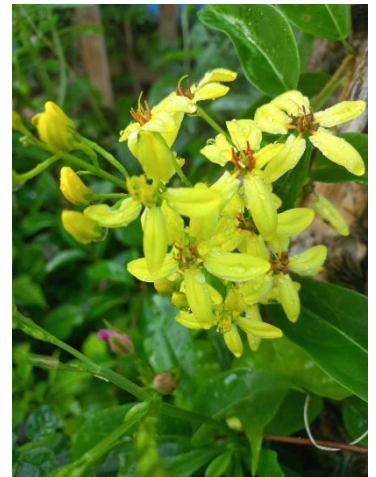
<https://thadinn.com/the-junta-council-admits-to-only-being-able-to-supply-50-of-the-electricity-demand/>

As Myanmar’s Garment Industry Unravels, Desperation is Rising. Mae Aye Win, 32-years old, has been working since she was 1. She says life was “manageable before the coup” but because of the rampant inflation she has been forced to quit her job and take up sex work in order to earn enough to buy food for her two daughters.

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/as-myanmars-garment-industry-unravels-desperation-is-rising.html>

A Year in Myanmar Junta’s Theatre of Absurdity as Military Collapse Loomed. This is an outstanding article that demonstrates the absurdity of the military regime.

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/junta-watch/a-year-in-myanmar-juntas-theatre-of-absurdity-as-military-collapse-loomed.html>



Lovely flowers in Zoe’s well-tended LOL garden