

## Myanmar's Mother Teresa

When Dr. Cynthia Maung was a child, living on the outskirts of Mawlamyaing, Myanmar, her brother died from infection after the village midwife cut his umbilical cord with sharpened bamboo. That loss and the cumulative experiences of growing up in one of the poorest countries in South East Asia fuelled her later determination and passion.

Today, Maung is an internationally acclaimed advocate for basic human rights and the rights of women, minorities and children. She is often referred to as the Mother Teresa of Burma. In addition to being an activist, she founded and continues to run the Mae Tao Clinic in bordering Thailand, which provides free care to refugees and others, free training to outreach workers and free education to girls.

Maung's activism is rooted in her childhood, which was spent under military rule at a time when the World Health Organization (WHO) ranked Myanmar's health care system as the second worst in the world, above only Sierra Leone. Myanmar also boasted the world's longest running civil war. She was the fourth of eight children; her father was a health worker and her mother raised farm animals to supplement their income. The family is part of the often persecuted Karen minority.

She admits that she "did not study much but I could still get high marks." While many of her friends were forced to leave school to help their parents financially, Maung said she was very fortunate, particularly as a woman at that time, to go to medical school. After graduating in 1985, she worked in various rural clinics and hospitals. In 1988, during the pro-democracy uprising, the military junta ruthlessly cracked down on activists and tens of thousands of innocent civilians died.

"I and my colleagues fled through the jungle to Thailand to escape persecution," she said in an interview. With only a stethoscope, thermometer, two



Aung Win

**Dr. Cynthia Maung's Mae Tao Clinic near the border of Myanmar and Thailand offers treatment and training, as well as education for girls.**

pairs of forceps and a medical textbook, she treated student activists and war refugees in the jungle camps. In 1989, she founded the Mae Tao Clinic, named after its location near the border of Thailand and Myanmar. Initially, "the clinic was an old shack with a dirt floor." Most of the medics who helped her back then had no formal training. "I

was the only doctor in the clinic. We had to use an old rice cooker to sterilize equipment. With small donations, we bought pillows, blankets, mosquito nets and a big bottle of paracetamol."

"The patients were refugees displaced by war, student activists and economic migrants. Most of them have illegal status, and they and their families cannot

enjoy education and health benefits in Thailand.” The border area is a very inhospitable place, notorious for drug-resistant malaria and tuberculosis, and also for a high prevalence of HIV. Besides those, she says, “I treated patients for landmine and gunshot wounds, malnutrition, hepatitis and dysentery.”

Over the years, Maung has managed to expand the clinic with the help of funding from international governments and nongovernmental organizations. It now has an operating room, basic laboratory services, dental care, eye care, pharmacy, maternity ward, prosthetic limb department as well as a kitchen where food is prepared for the patients.

“Patients from faraway places inside Myanmar are crossing the border to seek care because they cannot afford treatment back home,” said Maung. “We are training backpack medics, midwives and community health workers. The trainees will travel back to their communities inside Burma to provide care. Health professionals from all over the world are coming to volunteer at the clinic.”

Myanmar has many ethnic groups and religions, and all are welcome at the clinic, which has grown into something resembling a village and a community center. Donations continue to be needed for its survival, says Maung.

Maung’s passion for the welfare of women and children extends to her personal life. She and her husband, who also works at the clinic, have a biological son and a daughter and two adopted baby girls who were abandoned at the clinic. “Many young girls on the border end up in the sex industry,” she says. In response to this, she set up a high school for migrant children. “Women and young girls are given job skills training so that they can be independent.”

It has been 26 years since the clinic started providing free medical care. Now, at the age of 56, Maung continues to improve the lives of vulnerable and underserved populations, even though she could easily resettle in the West and earn a good income as a doctor, like her younger brother. But, she says, “The people need me here and I enjoy what I

am doing.” A member of her staff summarizes Maung’s demeanor by saying: “Dr. Cynthia is never angry.”

Her work has also brought many international awards. Canada was one of the first countries to recognize her efforts when Rights and Democracy awarded her its 1999 John Humphrey Freedom Award. *Time* magazine included her in its list of 18 Global Health Heroes in 2005, the same year she was among the 1000-women Nobel Peace Prize nomination. More recently, she received the United States National Endowment for Democracy’s 2012 Democracy Award, and in 2015 she was the joint winner of POSCO TJ Park Prize for Community Development & Philanthropy and the Ilga Foundation Award for Public Service, both given in South Korea.

“I’ve never expected to receive worldwide recognition for my works in a border clinic,” she says in her typical humble manner. — Aung Win, Daly City, Calif.

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