

A new school arises!



Khar Lal School Is Now a Reality

Despite enormous obstacles, Khar Lal village in the remote hills of Myanmar's Nagaland near the Indian border can now proudly claim a brand-new, weatherproof, four-classroom schoolhouse. The concrete-and-wood structure was built in less than a year by construction crews with the help of local villagers. What was just a dream last year has become a reality.

The 2,400-square-foot school building cost about \$46,000, financed by Studer Trust with donations from the United States. About half of the funds were raised from more than 125 donors through a global fundraiser last spring sponsored by members of Holy Spirit Episcopal Church in Missoula, Montana, who had trained English teachers in Myanmar in 2015 and 2018. The other half came through a single donor, Diane Oddo Hovey of Greenville, S.C. She had raised funds to honor her brother, Bob Oddo, who had been a science teacher in Mandalay and died there.

While intensified armed conflict and widespread violence in Myanmar following the military coup on Feb. 1, 2021, were the chief obstacle, the school's construction was also hampered by unreliable communications, a barely functioning banking system, travel restrictions and the Covid-19 pandemic. Daily management of the construction project by Studer Trust's team involved lots of travel to remote locations under dangerous conditions.



Transportation was a particular challenge. Khar Lal, in Lahe township, is 1,145 kilometers from Mandalay. While the trip can be made in a day if one travels by air and truck, that wasn't an option for construction materials. Wood, brick, sand and gravel could be obtained locally but other materials such as steel beams, windows and doors and other components as well as construction crews had to go by barge from Mandalay down the Ayeyarwaddy river and up the Chindwin river to Hkamti town and then by truck to Khar Lal.

Several armed conflicts between the junta and local anti-junta resistance forces along the Chindwin river, all the way up from Monywa to Hkamti, delayed the movement of barges. Consequently, it took about five months for the construction materials to reach Hkamti, which was more than double what the team had expected. All the construction materials arrived safely, but there was another challenge: A scarcity of trucks in the remote hills of Nagaland to deliver those construction materials to the school site in Khar Lal. Local residents rallied to help the team, and construction was able to start before the monsoon.

Villagers from Khar Lel pitched in to support construction of the new school building for their children. The village head, the school committee and villagers responded whenever the construction team needed for them to collect gravel, offload construction materials from the trucks, excavate foundations and do other jobs.

The finished schoolhouse is an enclosed concrete structure, 80' long x 30' wide, with a metal roof, furnished classrooms, bathrooms and a concrete water storage tank.

A villager noted, "The school building looks great and is the strongest that I have ever seen." A student said, "We are going to study in this new building—cool!" The building can also be used for community functions and as a shelter in case of a severe storm.



Khar Lel Village has a population of 952 with a total of 131 households. The community's main source of income is farming. Villagers grow rice and various vegetables, such as rice, chilies and beans. The village school, with open sides vulnerable to the monsoon, was started in 1985 by the Ministry of Education in order to provide local children with access to basic education. There are 228 students in kindergarten (age 5+) to grade 7 (age 12+), with 7 teachers. Education levels in Nagaland still lag far behind most other parts of the country. Although about nine percent of the

national budget was allocated to the education sector before the coup, there is still a severe shortage of classrooms and teachers.

Many Myanmar students in rural communities drop out after the grade 4 or grade 7 because there are no higher grades and/or there is a lack of classrooms. For this reason, Studer Trust has been working to build rural middle schools across the country, in order to provide a suitable and safe learning environment.

The school building's formal dedication has not yet been scheduled but will probably take place early next year when Naga tribes celebrate their new year, said Studer Trust chair-lady Cho Cho Lwin.

