

EXPLORING THE TREE OF LIFE WITH WOMEN FROM BURMA

The women in our group come from rural and remote parts of Burma. We have been in Australia for less than 2 years and are all learning English. Most of us had never done any drawing or painting before, so we began to explore these media of expression playfully.

One week, we had paint and white cups and we each painted on a cup which then became a keepsake that be used every day. Then our facilitator's sister, an artist visiting from Belgium, came over and showed us how to work with water-based and acrylic paint and brushes. We all painted our trees of life after this instruction and they looked beautiful: very colourful and bright.

We talked about trees and what they mean to us in Burma. One woman said they use wood every day, to build houses, boats and furniture and as firewood for cooking and warmth. Another one remembered how she would sit to rest under a tree, to feel cool and happy in its shade on hot days. 'We have many trees in Chin State, so we don't need air conditioning.' 'Trees treat everybody the same way', said someone else, 'whether you are poor or rich, they will give shade to anybody'. Someone mentioned that trees produce oxygen, making the air clean and fresh, which is good for your health; and that the leaves are useful, as are the fruits. Everyone mentioned liking the colour green.

Over the course of several weeks, we used part of our meetings to do more work on the trees. We slowly filled in our personal histories, strengths, values and names of people who have helped to get us through hard times. We also wrote down our hopes and wishes for the future. Sometimes we shared personal stories while working on our trees, other afternoons each of us would be working in private concentration. We enjoyed these times of introspection and remembering because they were very peaceful and healing.

We planned a party to celebrate the good things in our lives which making the tree of life has made visible and to invite some people who are important to us. We decided to treat the guests to Burmese food and to display our trees. Our group facilitator explained the process of making the trees of life to our guests and we had photographs of Burma and a map to talk



with our guests about where we come from. Then each of us got a certificate with photographs of the trees and of our group. Suddenly, one by one we found the courage to speak in front of all the guests. We told them about ourselves and about what making our trees of life and being in the women's group means to us.

"It is good to realise that I have something to give to others, that I am not only receiving from them. I never thought that my smile and my friendship are gifts."

"Being in this group and making the tree of life has given me strength. I want us all to be strong women and for our group to be strong so we can help each other."

Some of the guests were crying and it was very beautiful to be sharing these moments with people we care about. It is the first time many of us had a chance to invite people to celebrate something here in Australia; a very special time.

STTARS Women from Burma Group, August 2009



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