

CAPTURE CHANGE STORY**Den Eng**

Formerly, migrant workers did not dare do anything especially interacting with Thai government officers. After they gained more knowledge from us, they felt prepared to coordinate with those officers. They were confident to speak up for their rights. This is how they have been changed.

– DEN

Den spent his childhood in Myanmar. He was born in Taungoo and moved to a border town named Tachileik with his family. After finishing high school, his parents decided to start a new chapter of their lives in Thailand.

He pursued further education in Chiang Rai while volunteering with The Freedom Story. Previously, he was a Thai-Myanmar interpreter with exceptional speaking and writing skills in both languages. He has tried to lend his neighbors a hand as much as he could.

“I love supporting others and I did have some experience. When I heard that The Freedom Story was recruiting more volunteers, I decided to join them. It has expanded my opportunities to help workers.”

Reducing human trafficking risks among ethnic migrants is an essential goal of The Freedom Story. To accomplish this, Den equips vulnerable workers with the appropriate knowledge to protect themselves from traffickers.

The Freedom Story also focuses on raising awareness about labor rights and turning knowledge into action. Generally, Den’s task could be divided into three stages. Community visits are the very first stage since they provide opportunities for the staff to build relationships with migrant workers and learn about their experiences and problems.

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Next, Den will give workers advice and assistance on issues such as social security benefits, labor rights, and employment policies. The third stage is to conduct trainings and activities about human trafficking and migrant rights.

Den explained that most of the workers did not know much about their rights. Some never knew about the unemployment benefits to which they are entitled. However, there has been a gradual change among them.

"After attending the training, they had began to know their basic rights. They learned how to access government services. They also were empowered to speak up for their rights. Some of them contact us to request help. For instance, there was a female worker who had just delivered a baby at the hospital, resulting in high costs. She did not realize that she had social security benefits which cover childbirth and child allowance. After we advised her, she subsequently asked us to accompany her to talk to the officer. A week later, she finally received all benefits."

Another successful case was a volunteer community leader in Chiang Rai. Den had trained him for a while. Now, with greater knowledge, the leader was able to share lessons with other migrant laborers in his campsite.

The global outbreak of COVID-19 has not just impacted Den's daily life, but that of the workers he supports. His work involves visiting migrant laborer communities and meeting individuals regularly when they are in need. He could not do this during COVID-19.

"We have not been allowed to enter campsites. So, we cannot run a training session or arrange community visits. It has had a substantial effect. Nevertheless, we have attempted to reach our target through social media. That is how we adapt to this situation."

His solution when everyone was required to social distance was social media and the online Resource Toolkit. This is a data library providing information about COVID-19, migrants' basic rights, and Trafficking in Persons (TIP) risks. With the Resource Toolkit, Den could more easily work because he did not need to find information anywhere else. Everything in the Toolkit is in multiple migrant languages, which makes it easy to pass on.

"It is a helpful platform with information in Burmese, Khmer, and Lao. I could skip the translation stage and instantly share the labors' rights via Facebook since I have my own page for migrant workers. I think the Resource Toolkit would be advantageous for all NGOs."

Even though an unpredictable epidemic has affected humans around the world, the mission for migrant workers has never been stopped. Young, determined migrant volunteers like Den have not given up. He has continued to find new tools and opportunities to to empower Burmese laborers and improve their quality of life.