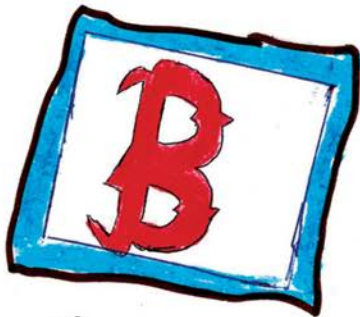
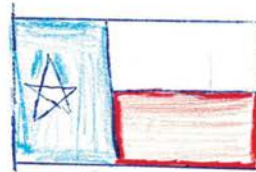
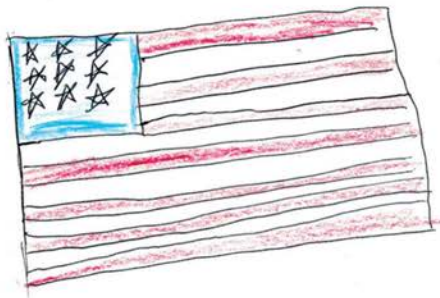
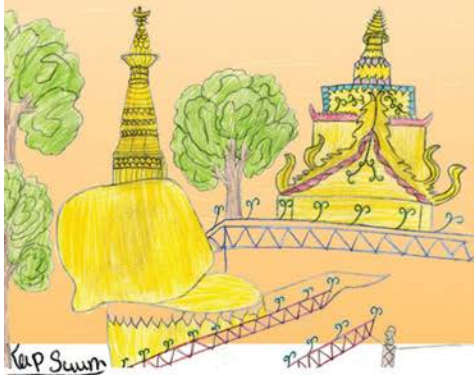


Our Journey to the American Dream



someone / Beh.reh

you going to texas!

me / Kap Suam

going boston.





Preface

The stories collected in this book retell the experiences of refugees as they leave their homelands and settle in the United States. While some of the problems they encounter during the resettlement process are severe, the purpose of this collection is not to criticize particular agencies and institutions, which provide many beneficial services to the community, but to bring greater awareness to difficult situations.

Although not many refugees from Burma are resettling in Lowell anymore, all other refugees who are currently coming to the U.S. are facing similar challenges. Considering this situation, this book is written with three goals in mind. Our first goal is to point out gaps in the refugee resettlement system so that responsible stake holders, especially policy makers, will have a chance to look into the current system and make changes to serve new refugees better in the future. The long-term support for refugees, which is the post-resettlement program, will need to be in place for refugees to become self-sufficient. Secondly, we will provide some of the refugees' background information as well as their needs so that service providers will have a better understanding of the refugees' challenges and can try to find ways to serve refugees better. Lastly, this book not only intends to record the refugees' stories before they fade away from their memories, but also to help future generations learn about their histories, identities, and how their ancestors struggled and sacrificed for their future generations to have better lives.



Acknowledgement

I personally would like to thank all the community members who generously contributed their time, stories and pictures for the book. Adult refugees wrote their own stories in Burmese, which I translated into English, while the refugee youth wrote their stories in English.

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James Aung
Lowell, MA
(February, 2017)


STORIES FROM SAYDANAR

Introduction

Between 2007 and 2016, about 300 refugees from Burma resettled in Lowell, Massachusetts. The majority are ethnic Karen and Karenni from the Eastern parts of Burma. They were traditionally farmers, living very rural lives in the most underdeveloped parts of the country.

These ethnic parts of Burma are resource rich, which has resulted in armed conflict for up to 60 years (since the British handed over independence) between the Military Burmese Government and ethnic rebel groups. As a result there are over 150,000 refugees living in nine border camps across Thailand, and thousands more who are undocumented and working as illegal migrant workers.

Many refugees have lived in these refugee camps for over 25 years, including many who were born there, with no freedom of movement, and no right to work in the camp. The United States has resettled up to 150,000 refugees within the last eight years. Although grateful to have security and a future for their children, the refugee populations from Burma face many challenges to fit into the new system and culture.



After eight months to one year's support by resettlement agencies in the U.S., refugees are expected to have reached a point of economic self-sufficiency. Many are illiterate, having never attended school or attended only primary grades; many have skills only in farming or traditional customs such as weaving; very few speak English; and the majority have never lived even in a city in Burma, let alone a large city like Lowell in the U.S. Achieving self-sufficiency in this time span is a challenge.

SayDaNar recognizes the need for continued support to the community with specific cultural and language bridging, to help all generations acquire necessary coping strategies for life in the U.S. and to reduce the psychological stress and frustrations of cultural adaptation. The community from Burma has a lot to offer a cultural and artistic city such as Lowell, and with the right support, encouragement and empowerment will be able to richly contribute to the present cultural, social and economic environment of the city. SayDaNar supports self-learning, education and growth – seeing the community not as subjects of charity, but as individuals who via effective access to information are able to support themselves and their families and choose the best course of action for their lives in the United States, and to contribute to their new city of Lowell.

Personal Stories of Adult Refugees from Burma currently living in Lowell

Zaw Aung

I lived in Taung Gyi City, Shan State in Myanmar. My father ran a goldsmith business to feed our family. I am the third son out of eight siblings in my family. My father worked alone and was able to feed all our 10 family members. Even though we were not rich, we were able to live comfortably and attend schools. However, when the currency money was de-monetized by the military government in 1985, our family became disordered and my father also died.

As for me, after my father died, I quit school and started working. I sometimes worked as a goldsmith and sometimes worked as a mechanic as I was struggling with the life until the military took a coup in 1988. I became one of the armed group members.

Besides the military government, there is nothing that I do not like about Burma. I love and like everything. When I was living inside Burma, even though I have never faced any physical abuses,




I would have to say it affected our mental health. Because our family became chaos after the currency money was de-monetized and the coup. I really hate the military government and left Burma since 1988 and have never gone back since then.

How should I say for a refugee? We were in a jungle in Thai-Burma border where the armed groups lived. The military accused the villagers of supporting the armed groups and destroyed their villages, and those villagers came to live with us. In 1996, it officially became a refugee camp.

Since then until I came to the U.S. in 2012, the years that I lived in the refugee camp were exactly 16 years. In the beginning of becoming as a refugee, living places and food were getting better. After 2006, when the UNHCR brought the refugees who worked in cities to the camps, we faced many difficulties in the camp. The camp that I lived in is as big as a small town so I would have to say it is quite a big one.

The problems were reduced ration food, reduced materials to maintain houses and not being allowed to go out of the camp. Due to not having enough food for the family, we went outside of the camp illegally to work near the Thai villages under very cheap



wages to support the families. In the beginning, I would say with the permission of the Thai government's personnel, the camp authority, we were allowed to work about one week or 10 days.

However, the transportation fee could eat up all of our wages that we earned for a week or 10 days, so we went out and worked illegally. Because I went out illegally, if I were arrested, the ration food would be cut. The daily wage there was, if calculated in dollars, about 5 or 6 dollars maximum.

Both health and education were pretty good in the camp. Even though the clinic in the camp could not afford to have a full time doctor, there were health care providers who were able to perform quite a lot and lived in the camp as well as two or three cars to transport patients to a hospital in the city. We didn't have to pay to use them.

We had to pay a little for education; for example, the traditional custom fee, such as the entrance fee, teacher fee, etc. With regard to the refugee camp, there was nothing to like about it. Nothing was ok and there was no freedom due to having to live under the Thai military.

We always had to look at their face whatever we did. The most difficult thing in the camp was the future for the children because the education from the camp wasn't recognized anywhere. Because the education was not guaranteed, it was so difficult for families when they didn't have a chance to resettle and go to a third country. The children's future was getting worse when many families didn't have the opportunity to resettle in the third country.

The decision to come to the U.S was for the future of my children. We thought even if my children didn't finish their education,

at least they would be able to go to college and learn from a world standard education. We thought that would be the best we could give them as a parent. Therefore, we tried our best to resettle.

It took 8 years for me to resettle in the U.S. When we were notified to arrive in the U.S. on September 11, 2012, our family was so happy. We gave away all our belongings from our house and killed animals that we had at home to celebrate and have a farewell party. Some were happy and some were crying.

The disappointment began when we got to Quincy, Massachusetts. We were really depressed because on the night that we arrived, the organization that sponsored our family left a chicken and a fried rice box in the refrigerator for our family of six and left us for one or two days. The worst thing was their office was in Boston, but we lived in Quincy. It was not very easy in the beginning due to the language barrier as well as the transportation difficulty.

The office was very far from where we lived so we had to take the subway and buses. Whenever we went to the office, we had to spend the whole day. They only gave us \$10 or \$20 when we went there. We are a family of six but the rice cooker was so tiny and it wasn't enough for us. My wife's niece from Lynn brought a rice cooker for us so we gave her the small one.

Our case was transferred to the Lowell office but the Lowell office didn't help us very much either. We were told that we had signed the lease for six months. We weren't informed until the lease was signed. We were planning to go to Oregon because my friends asked me to move over there. However, we were told that we would not receive any welcome money if we moved. So we requested to move to Lynn where my wife's niece lives but they moved us to



Lowell. We didn't have any bed.

We didn't have a blanket or a mattress. Before we moved, we were told that everything was set up in Lowell and not to bring anything. However, when we arrived in Lowell, the apartment had nothing--no blanket and no mattress. We slept like that for almost two weeks. Finally, we got mattresses from a family who just got here and moved to Minnesota. We picked up his family's mattresses. I saw the different treatment among different refugee communities.

When some Iraqi refugees came, everything was set up almost perfectly. However, when refugees from Burma came, we don't even have food that we eat even though the case manager was an Asian. It began to get better after we moved to Lowell. We have people from the same country here as well as SayDaNar organization.

After getting food stamps and Medicaid, as we became settled in the U.S, I started looking for a job. I started working on April 4, 2013, at the laundry company in Haverhill. I forgot everything to start a new life. As of today, it has been over three years. Children are able to learn their education. If we don't understand things, SayDaNar organization helps to solve the problems so even though we don't speak, read and write the language, we are not disappointed.

Since we can be rest assured for our children, we only need to move forward in our lives peacefully. Therefore, we are very grateful to all the organizations and the U.S government for arranging us to resettle in the U.S. There is nothing that I don't like in the U.S. Since every opportunity has been given, I think we only need to take the action to do it. I like everything because I know that I can live anywhere if I know how to live.




Le Say

I lived in a village with my parents until I was 11. I'm not sure if that village was in Karen State or not. After I left, I never went back to that village. When I lived with them, they sent me to school. We only have elementary school in our village. We worked in a farmland for our living.

About one month after our father died, there was a battle near our village. Some weapons fell in our village so we had to run. Our village was located near a small stream. Everybody ran, and so did I. I couldn't see anyone. I hid in a hole on the sand near the stream where I used to play with my friends. After the battles, when everything became quiet, I came out.

My family was so worried about me because they couldn't find me so they thought I was killed. When they found me, they were so happy and beat me up with a stick. After my father died, no place made me happy. I didn't have any place to go either. One month after that, when my elder sister came back to Karen State, I followed her. I was allowed to stay to the end of middle school.

When I was taking grade 6 exam, I took the exam in a jungle




under a tree because we ran away from our village due to the fighting. I got malaria and was very sick when I took the exam. My teacher asked me to go home but I refused to go because I didn't have enough time coming to school. Sometimes, we have 2 days or 3 days of school in a week. Sometimes, if the situation was not good, we had to hide in a jungle.

The medication was so bitter and made me dizzy. Sometimes, I was thinking back, and I thought we almost died. We didn't have a clinic, no medications. We heavily relied on home remedies for any sickness. One time, I was very sick and fainted but nobody was near me. One of my friends, when she had fever, her body was so hot so we placed some banana leaves on her chest as well as on her back to release the heat.

When I lived in the Karen State, we had to walk one whole day to go to where food was stored. We went as a group. We left when the sun rose, around 6 am, and walked through jungles, climbed mountains up and down until we reached where the food was stored. By the time that we got there, it was already dark. Then the next morning, we carried rice and walked back to our village.

I worked as a schoolteacher in a village for one year. I only had 2 students in my class. Families were not able to send their children due to difficulties. Families who lived a little far from the school couldn't come to the school because they didn't have an umbrella in the rainy season. They didn't have a raincoat or shoes. We had to clean an old fish paste sack to use as a raincoat.

After Manalplaw fell, it was around 1994 and 1995, we didn't have a permanent place to stay. We moved here and there and hid here and there. I wasn't personally tortured but I have seen those



things. I had to run when the enemies came, move when there were battles, and run from the battles and bullets. We ran from the village to the jungles without having food and places to sleep. Nothing was good since we had to live in a jungle.


The sound of shootings was behind us. We were not sure where were the shootings and bombings, we just ran. When we were hiding in the jungle, we were a group of people, families, relatives and friends. For food, we tried to carry some rice that we had. We cooked the rice with a small pot and made soup with some vegetables that we could find in the jungle. We tried to inquire where it would be safe for us and traveled there.

Before we were able to build a hut for us, we placed leaves on the ground and slept on them. Things were getting worse and worse. It became the worst in 1997. I like the natural and the traditional culture, the religions that we ethnic groups believe in.

However we faced unfair treatment from civil war. They tortured us, killed us. They burnt our houses. They destroyed the paddy fields. They came during harvesting time and put fire on the paddy fields and burnt all the rice stocks. Sometimes, we even had to cook corn.

They gave us so many kinds of troubles. Due to the civil war and the conflict, our living was in trouble. For example, I know a girl who now lives in Minnesota, when she was about over 1 year old, her parents went out with a group of about ten for grocery shopping at another village to feed their families.

On their way back home, they met with Burmese soldiers and everyone, all women and men, were arrested. Her father's neck was cut and he was killed. They were detained somewhere near the



border. Finally, they were able to find ways to escape and her mother came back to her daughter. However, since the mother got back, she was sick all the time until she died. The daughter was left with her grandparents.

It took us about one month to get to the refugee camp. During our journey, our food ran out so we had to ask for food from villages on the way. Sometimes, we even had to boil corn and ate this. We were left behind because we were trying to take care of some people who were more vulnerable than us.

Some people who knew where the refugee camp was had gone first. Nobody was able to help each other. We didn't know where the refugee camp was and were wondering and looking for the refugee camp for three days along the river on the Thai Burma border. One day, someone found us and took us to the refugee camp. When we crossed the river, my sister and her daughter, who was only one month old, were almost drowned.

My sister suffered a lot from the harsh journey. After delivering her baby she wasn't able to stay warm and got wet in rain. Since we got to the refugee camp, I never had a chance to return. I wasn't able to return either. Sometimes, I was thinking about it and I didn't understand. We had to run and run and I didn't know why we had to run. Did we run because other people ran?

We slept without mosquito nets so many of us were bitten by mosquitos and got malaria. My elder son was always sick. He also got malaria, which he was treated for only when he got to the camp. Both of my sons have different issues. With my elder son, I carried him all the time and breastfed him whenever he was hungry.

However, I had to leave my younger son when he was young.

Before we came to the U.S., my youngest son was sick and hospitalized. We were given the date to travel to the U.S. but the flight was postponed because of his condition. We had to wait 6 more months. My younger son was malnourished because I wasn't able to stay home to breastfeed him when he was young.

We lived in the camp for 15 years. In the camp was a food warehouse, health care clinic, school, camp committee, security, youth organization and women's organization. The camp that I lived in had 15 sections. Each section had about 150-200 people. I think the total population was over 15,000. We got enough food. The foods that we got were rice, cooking oil, bean, chili, fish paste, canned fish and salt. Those foods were distributed by NGOs such as MHD and ZOA.

Due to the need in the school, I had an opportunity to work as a teacher. I worked for 10 years. During the first 3 years, I got 300 bhats per month, which is probably 9-10 U.S. dollars. After that, I got 500 bhats per month until 2008. In 2009-2010, based on the teaching subject and the years, I got 760 bhats. There are two elementary schools, one middle school, four high schools, KYLMA and NKJC. The main subjects that are taught in the schools are English, math, Karen language, Myanmar language, history, geography, and science. The rest is arts and crafts. Recently, the Thai language is also taught in the schools.

For healthcare, there is a laboratory, hospital, clinic, and maternity clinic. Those are all free. The difficulties that we faced in the camp was the affect on our health due to mosquitos and sand-fly bites, and because of not enough clothes, blankets, mosquito nets, and other materials. We had no food for nutrition. There is no



opportunity to go out to earn money. Therefore, we got into trouble.

Due to many difficulties, we decided to come to the U.S. for our children's future when the U.S. called for resettlement. International Organization for Migration (IOM) helped us to come to the U.S. and gave a medical check up. For elderly people, disabled people and people with chronic diseases, a nurse accompanied them from the camp to the U.S. Because of the language barrier, a person was assigned in the airport to help refugees. Finally, we arrived in the U.S.

In the beginning, we met with our case manager. We felt sad because everything was new: language, houses, place and location. We couldn't think of how to build our lives. Even though, I knew that everyone had more or less their own difficulties, I felt as if I didn't have the ability. However, when I met with other people, they told me about their experience when they got here. I was glad to see friends, people who helped us.


The biggest difficulty is the language because we can't read and write. However, I got a job because of friends and people who are here. I was happy because I was able to overcome 50% of the difficulties. In America, everyone has the same rights. The ones who live here are kind and have good will. You have opportunity to work as much as you would like to. I like those things. For that, I greatly appreciate it.



Key Meh

When I was in Burma, we worked in a farmland for living. We had family and relatives there so they came to help when we had work. We also had a school but it was only at the elementary level. Because we were illiterate and not educated, we had to work on a farm. The best thing I like about it was we were able to live in our own house, our own space in our town in our own country. Due to various conditions of the country, the ruling of the Burmese government is not good.

It will be endless to talk about how the Burmese government and the Burmese soldiers bullied us. We felt as if whether we lived or died, nothing would make a difference, so we wandered in jungles wherever they took us, and finally ended up getting to the refugee camp, which we didn't even know existed. We lived in the camp for 10 years. Life in the camp was just like that. We built a hut for our family with wood and bamboo that was distributed by the organization in the camp. Rice, oil, beans and salt were also given but we had to be frugal in order to get through the whole month. If I have to talk about it, there will be a lot.



The most difficult thing was not having security for our lives. We worried about it too much. The camp is a big one but I don't know the measurement. I never have asked the number of families or people in the camp. I heard other people say it but I forgot. Food was distributed by an organization; I would say a world organization. Sometimes, it was enough for the whole month but sometimes it wasn't. The people who have education can work in the camp, like a schoolteacher or a health worker. I used to work as a schoolteacher. When I started working, the salary was 500 bahts, and then it was increased by the years of working. When it is 10 years, the salary will be up to 800 bahts. 500 bahts is \$16.66 and 800 bahts is \$26.66.

For health, we had a clinic. If we had a regular illness, we went to the clinic. If too serious, the clinic sent us to a hospital in a city. However, it didn't work out well. There were so many people who died, but who shouldn't have died. There was no doctor in the hospital. We didn't have to pay money. Compared to my village, I liked the camp because it was clean, had health care for children and a little education.

There were schools and the system was memorizing. Children went to school. The Thai authorities were very scary. What I didn't like is we were not allowed to go out of the camp. I felt as if we were detained in a detention center. The thing that made us so stressed out, was that illiterate people could not do any work so they did not have enough to support their families. People became what they should not have become.

Therefore, I decided to come to the U.S. When I came to the U.S, I came with an interpreter on the way. But there was no interpreter when I got in the U.S. So I showed the IOM bags that I




had with me, then a security officer accompanied us. After that the ones who would help us came to pick us up with their cars.

I didn't know what happened in the beginning in the U.S. I didn't know the direction, east or west. Sometimes, I felt as if I was dreaming. I didn't know anybody. I didn't speak English. I didn't know what to do. Getting around was also difficult. I didn't know whom to contact. I had never used the stove in the apartment where I lived. I was so worried if I used it wrong. Later on, when I got to know the people who came before me, I asked them to help me. I started my new life gradually.

When we met with the caseworker, we were told to call when we need help. We didn't have a phone yet that time. After we had a phone, we called them when we needed. When I called, the phone was never picked up. I was told not to call during working time. When I called after work, I was told that it was their personal time and didn't pick up the phone. I didn't know what time to call. It was worse when we got sick. We didn't know where to go. I didn't know the hospital or the clinic.

When I got to know the places, I didn't speak the language and didn't have a car. When we met with the caseworker, we talked to him about it. Our caseworker asked us why we came to an English country if we didn't know anything, and if we only came to give trouble to other people. The caseworker also said that in this country, they only care about children but not elderly people, and to learn by ourselves for everything. If we needed to go to an office or a hospital, we needed to be able to go by ourselves. The longest they, caseworkers, took care of us was from the beginning to a month. After one month, they had nothing to do with us.



The caseworker never showed us where and how to apply if we didn't get health insurance and food stamps. We were so stressed when we didn't get those benefits. We didn't have food stamps and health insurance because we didn't speak the language and we didn't know what to do. We only got health insurance for 8 months after our arrival.

Food stamps were only given to kids who go to school. Sometimes, some people from an organization, I didn't know which organization, came to visit our apartment. They opened the refrigerator. We didn't know what they were talking and asking about. We guessed that they might be asking the name of our caseworker so we told them the caseworker and the agency name. They looked here and there and then went back. Because our caseworker told us not to open the door to anyone if we didn't know them, and if we opened the door and something happened, they won't take any responsibility, so not only us, but all the Burmese were so scared.

When my family was in Texas, we never felt safe. We saw a lot of killings and robberies. One Karenni youth was killed outside of his apartment. We lived at the same apartment. His relatives were coming to visit his family from another state, and couldn't find the place so they called him to wait outside. Somebody shot him when he was waiting for his relative outside of the apartment.

When the police came, they said that he wasn't a citizen so there was nothing that they could do about it. Another Burmese Muslim from our apartment was also shot in his knee when he was sitting and chit chatting with his friends at his balcony. A car drove by and shot at them. When one Chin student came back from school, some people hit him with a rod on his head. He was admitted to a



hospital for a week.

One of my Karenni neighbor's car was hit by a Bhutanese car, and they both argued and were about to fight. When 911 was called at around 1pm, the police came over around 3pm. When police officers came over, they didn't even come close. The police officer also told them not to come closer. They stood from the other side of the street and shouted to inquire what happened.

Many Karenni students dropped out of school because they were struggling in the school because of the language barrier. They didn't want to go to school so they pretended that they went to school in the morning, and came back in the afternoon along with the other students. We didn't know where they were wandering the whole day. I never stopped worrying until my sons came back home. Even though I was afraid, and knew that it wasn't safe to go out at nighttime, I was determined that even if I had to die, I was going to look for them until I found them.

With regard to America, it is very good for opportunities. However, I am very worried for my children because if they can't take all the opportunities, it could lead to the worst life. Another thing is if you don't speak English, you lose so many opportunities. Now, we would say it was getting better after arriving in Lowell, Massachusetts.

However, I still lose many opportunities and benefits because I do not speak English. I really want to learn to speak English. The school has a speaking class but it doesn't fit with my work schedule. It always is one thing or the other missed. What worries me the most is whenever I think about the funeral expenses and the cemetery to bury me in when I die.



Peter Nyint

I was born in Loikaw Town. Back then, the Burma Socialist Programme Party ruled the country. I was the eldest son in my family. The year I was born was 1960. I grew up in Pruso Town after my parents moved from Loikaw to Pruso. I studied from grade 1 to grade 4 in Pruso Town. After I passed grade 4, I moved to Taung Gyi City to continue my study. The school is called Seminary. I studied from grade 5 to grade 10 at that school. I dropped out of school after I failed grade 10. After I quit the school, I started working as a missionary. I tried to apply to a civil servant position but I didn't pass the interview. What I like the most about the system was the affordable commodity prices. For example, a sack of rice was only 22 kyats.

My family has 7 sons. During the Burma Socialist Programme Party, porters were taken from my family because of having too many boys. Even though I was never taken, one of my brothers was always taken as a porter. That is the thing that I dislike the most in Burma. Therefore, I moved to Karenni Revolutionary Area in 1985. I served as a schoolteacher in the area. That time, the refugee camp

was not established yet in Karenni Revolutionary.


Only later on, Karenni refugee camp was established. In the Karenni refugee camp, the fixed monthly salary for the Elementary school teachers was 300 bhats, the middle school teachers 400 bhats and the high school teachers for 500 bhats. After the Karenni refugee camp was officially recognized, salaries for teachers were given according to their years of working by an NGO called JRS. I served as a school teacher for 27 years in the camp.

Due to the frequent Burmese military attacks to the Karenni Revolutionary area, the Karenni people couldn't stay there anymore so they crossed Thai land and formed a Karenni refugee camp in Thailand. I lived in the refugee camp for 24 years. The most difficult thing in the camp was not being allowed to go outside freely.

Karenni camp 1 and Karenni camp 2 were demarcated. I guess the population was over 20,000. Food and living spaces were given for families in the camp so it was enough for daily needs. However, there was no extra. We were allowed to work in the camp. I worked at the education department as a teacher and earned 950 bhats. I do not know about the exchange rate to U.S. dollar.

There is a clinic in the camp and there are health care workers. We didn't have to pay when we went to the clinic to get treatment. There are schools in the camp from elementary to high school. Every school-aged child is allowed to study. The education system in the camp is very similar to the system in Burma. However, the Karenni language was the extra subject.

When we were living in the camp, we had to be afraid of the Thai authorities. Thai soldiers, who guarded the camp, beat me when I came back in the night after visiting other places. I decided




to come to the U.S. because we were not allowed to go out freely. I lived happily in the beginning of arriving in the U.S., because I didn't have to be afraid of the Thai military, police and the Burmese military.

My family of six came to the U.S. on the 1st of April, 2009. That time, the caseworker placed us in an apartment. We didn't know any other Burmese family. In the beginning, the caseworker fed us chicken and bread. We ate like that for 2 weeks. After that, the caseworker gave us \$80 so we went to a shop and bought the food that we were familiar with, rice and curry.

However, it wasn't enough so we requested the caseworker again. The caseworker said that we had to buy food with the \$80. Even though we said it wasn't enough, the caseworker refused to give us more. After a while, he gave us \$80 one time, and \$120 one time. We had to buy food for our family. Our family received a food stamp card only after 2 months. Things were getting better because we were able to buy food with the food stamp card.

Then, one of my daughters got hit by a car and admitted to a hospital. I had to go to the hospital in Boston to look after my daughter for 8 months. I was very worried and sad. During that time, I wasn't able to eat home food. I ate whatever food that the hospital fed me. Later on, a Baptist pastor heard the news and came to see me. He gave me \$500. Only that time, I was able to go to a shop and ate the food that I like so it was getting better.

However, transportation was not good. I was able to go back to see my family only once a month because it was the time that I didn't know how to get around. I could even say Rev. Maung Maung Htwe is my benefactor because while I was taking care of my



daughter in the hospital, he helped me with money and food. Even though my daughter came back from the hospital, she fell off from the bed and broke one of her legs. We had to admit her in the hospital again.

I am the head of household but because my daughter was in the hospital, I wasn't able to work. I went to a local agency for about one year to learn English. Therefore, the food stamps benefit was continued for us. After that, I started working. Since the year that I started working, the food stamps benefit was reduced because it was said that my salary was getting higher after working. Sometimes, the food stamps benefit was cut for one or two months. We had to send the documents to request it and had to apply again. After that, the food stamps benefit was allowed.


However, it was not like before. My eldest daughter wasn't in my household list so I had to contact the food stamps office to fix it. The food stamps office added my eldest daughter but they took out my youngest son so I had to contact the caseworker again. The benefit was getting less and less because we had been living here almost 7 years. Now, the food stamps benefit was only \$19 for a month. If it is not enough, we have to spend our money to buy food. My daughter became 19 years old so she is not eligible to receive the food stamps benefit. I like the health benefits in the U.S.



Philisato Kawhla

My name is Pilisato Kawhla and I was born on April 12, 1991 to a poor family in Myanmar. I did not have a chance to live longer with my parents because when I was just seven years old, they sent me to a boarding house for my education. I moved to Thailand because of the instability of political situations in Myanmar. There were a lot of violations, torturing, human rights abuses and forced labor in Myanmar. Most people got out of the country for jobs, security, and education.

So, I arrived in Thailand in April 2006 as a refugee. Then I went to school until I graduated from Karenni Post Ten in 2011. After that I was teaching at a Karenni high school as a volunteer for two years. Then I married Teresal JoeJar as my forever partner on July 12, 2012, and my daughter was born on December 19, 2012. After my daughter was born, I tried to find my specific future for my family. As everyone knows, there is nothing more important than family. I am the man who has to build the future for my family. I could not imagine my family's future living in a refugee camp forever, because there were no opportunities, security or freedom.



Nobody wants to leave their family, but I had to because I had to try for my family to escape from the refugee camp, and I did not have any other way except by immigration. My wife could not go with me because she did not have the UNHCR document registration card. We wanted to live together forever, but we painfully had to be apart because of the future of our family.

I arrived in the US on January 15, 2014. After I had been here for a year, I heard in January 2015 that my daughter was suffering from retinoblastoma cancer. Even though I heard this bad news about my daughter, I could not do anything, and tears fell down from my eyes. My wife and I encouraged each other to be strong and we hoped our daughter would recover again.

Unfortunately, I did not have any chance to hug, touch, take care and see my daughter until the day she passed away on July 4, 2015, due to retinoblastoma cancer. Nothing is more painful than losing a daughter. When I had lost a daughter, I did not want to lose my wife anymore. My strongest wish is to reunite and be with my wife forever.

Now my wife is lonely living in the refugee camp without her daughter and husband in a scary shelter and environment. She has to live with bad neighbors. Sometimes people undervalue and underestimate her instead of encouraging her. She faces a lot of disturbances by living there because most of the people there are too rude.

Sometimes they call her as a widow, and they tell her to marry another one, and sometimes they tell her that your husband will not come back anymore or he will get married to another women. In this current situation, she still can try to overcome all

these disturbances, but I'm not sure that she can overcome more disturbances in the future. Even though I hear from my wife that she is faced with difficult situations, I cannot do anything for her.

How much pain we have for loving each other without being together and losing a daughter. We cannot stop crying whenever we are talking on the phone. She has a lot of depressions and pressures by living alone with all the difficulties she is facing. Now, the doctor said she is suffering from the symptoms of heart attack and needs to take medicine everyday. In the beginning, I thought it was best for my family if I came here, but everything is getting worse and worse. I do not want to lose my wife again and I cannot let what happened to my daughter happen to my wife.

Youth and Young Adult Stories

Ma Gret: “The most terrifying experience I ever had.”


Have you ever experienced being a refugee in your life? Would you want to know and learn how it feels to be a refugee? I'm going to tell you about a refugee's life and the feeling of being a refugee. It is how my family and I experienced our lives since I was born.

First of all, my parents were originally from Burma. They moved to Thailand in 1990, because they were forced to move out by the Burmese military without knowing where to go. They lost



their homes and land, therefore they had to settle in a refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border. It is hard to live in a horrible place facing difficult situations.

Therefore, to be called a refugee is the opposite of an insult; it is a badge of strength, courage and victory. They fought for better lives. I was born as a refugee and had lived there for fourteen and half years. Life was very tough because there was no freedom and we couldn't do whatever we wanted. We also did not have enough



food and were told to just stay in the camp. If anyone left we would be arrested by a Thai soldier.

In our lives as refugees, we have struggled with lots of things, such as jobs, economics, and education. We were not allowed to go wherever we wanted besides the camp. Can you image how hard this would be? If you were in my place what would you have done and how would you feel?

Secondly, my father was a teacher and my mother was a homemaker. We did not have much income because my father was the only one who worked in my family. Fortunately, my siblings and I got an opportunity to study while living in the camp, however we did not learn much English because our English teachers were not originally English-speaking people, so their English was not fluent.

A million people have lived in the camps, and they have faced situations similar to what my family did. Most of the refugees have lived there for several years. Many preferred to live in a better place, so most of them decided to make a new settlement to places such as U.S., Australia, New Zealand, Finland and Canada.

However some of them are still remaining in the refugee camp even though there is no way for them to go outside. They are intending to go back to Burma to rebuild the homes and lands that they have lost. For example, my uncle's family and my aunt's family want to keep their own places.

Thirdly, as times have gone by, the UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency) has offered protection and assistance to ten millions of refugees to move to a different country for a better life. Therefore, my family and I were told to apply for settlement to the U.S. Surprisingly, we thought about it and made an agreement. So, my



family and I finally arrived in the United States on April 2, 2009.

I feel like my life is getting much better here than it was as a refugee in the camp, because I get more opportunities for an education to make my future better. Nevertheless, I was faced with a language barrier because I did not know how to speak English at all when I first got here. Sadly, I felt discouraged and isolated when I started going to an American School. It was pretty hard for me to learn a second language, I even cried in the class because one of my classmates made fun of me saying: “You’re stupid and you don’t know how to talk.”

So, I was shocked and I didn’t know how to respond to him. But I was also optimistic because I believed that I would eventually make it one day. Although I have faced many obstacles, I’ve never wanted to give up on things easily. In addition, I feel like I’ve been improving my English learning skills each day while going to school. Nonetheless, I honestly still feel scared and shy towards other people or students while communicating with them.

In conclusion, being a refugee or an immigrant from another country is not an easy thing to face; I would say that it is important to learn the language before entering a new country. That would be the best way to start. And refugees and newcomers to the new place shouldn’t be neglected by others and should not regret going to a new country with many opportunities.




Dah Hsi

Everyone has different experiences in their life. Some are good, some hard, some easy and some so tough that it is hard for you to forget. There is a place where there is no electricity or other electronic services, and not enough food to make a living. Also poor education and on top of that, there is no freedom. That was a place where a little girl Dah was born and grew up.

First of all, my name is Dah Hsi but most people call me Dah, which is a short and easy name. I was born in a Thai refugee camp. I always wanted to travel place-to-place and see the beautiful side of another world. I am afraid to get stuck in just one place without any freedom at all, a place where you cannot even go outside to look for food or a job for a better life. Despite this, we had no choice and we could not even do anything about it because we were just a refugee people that lived under the control of the Thai government and the United Nations. All of the food, clothes, and education are from the helping hands of the UN organization.

My original country is Burma, which is also known as Myanmar. Myanmar is where my parents were born and grew up.



Due to civil war they had to flee from their country. They made their living and new life in a Thai refugee camp and I was born there. Even though I was born in Thailand, I'm not a Thai citizen, nor a Burmese citizen.

It's hard for us to live as non-citizens for both countries and there is no way we can go out to other places. Both of my parents are Karen. Karen is one of the ethnic groups in Burma. Most people here do not really know what the Karen people are when I tell them I'm Karen. I know it's hard for them to understand because Burma is just a small country, but we have so many different ethnic groups and they all speak different languages plus different dialects. However, the main language in Burma is Burmese.

I grew up and graduated from high school in the refugee camp before I came to the United States. While I was attending high school in the Thai refugee camp, I had to learn 4 different languages: Burmese, Thai, English and Karen. It's hard for us to speak one language to another language but we try the best we can. I stayed in the Thai refugee camp for 15 years and I went through so many experiences.

I don't regret the past where I came from because I learned from my mistakes and I'm happy to share my experience with those who don't know and don't have the same experience as me. I'm not ashamed of myself for being a young refugee girl because I have learned a lot from that. I came to the United States in 2010 when I was just a 16 year old girl. Then I went to Lowell High School and graduated from there in 2014. I'm thankful to God for all the blessings I have received until this moment of my life. I'm proud and happy to be who I am.



Der Say

In 1991 I was born in a Thai refugee camp. I am from Burma. My home family originally is from Burma. My parents were born in Burma. My parents moved to Thailand at Kay Bo refugee camp. My parents and I were living in Kay Bo camp and after five years our village was burned by the Burmese army soldiers. We ran; we could smell the fire and the smoke burning as we escaped with heavy breath.

My parents and I had to run away to hide in the forest to save our lives. It was dark. We had to stay still and we had to stay high up on the hill. We were scared because the Burmese and Thai soldiers were shooting at each other. This was very scary for us, but we eventually got to a Thai refugee camp after many days.

We thought we were safe in the refugee camp but we were not. My parents and I experienced terrible suffering imposed by a brutal Thai military. They made it hard for my parents and we had very little to eat. My parents and I had so many problems living that we looked for a better place. We felt so sad and frightened because we didn't know that we could go when we were ready. My parents




and I tried to find another refugee camp where we would be safe.

My parents and I moved to Mae La refugee camp. When we moved to Mae La camp, I was five years old. Before this, I use to live in the Kay Bo refugee camp where I started preschool, and then, I suddenly had to stop. On Mae La, I had to restart preschool when I was five years old. I had to learn three different alphabets. I had to study Karen, Burmese, and the English alphabet language. I studied hard to learn all three languages.

After preschool, I was going to elementary school. I had to start first grade. I had studied seven subjects. I studied Karen, English, science, math, Burmese, history, and geography. I studied hard because I wanted to learn all seven subjects. Then I completed elementary school. After elementary school, I went to middle school. I had to start fifth grade in middle school. I was scared, I did not want to fail.

I studied nine subjects in middle school. I studied Karen, English, math, science, Burmese, history, geography, Thai, and the Bible. English was my hardest subject, but I never gave up. I continued to study hard. When we lived in the refugee camp, we had to work hard and study hard in life. When we lived in the refugee camp, we couldn't go anywhere. We had to stay in the camp all day. We were so bored and we didn't have fun. We also felt very bad because we didn't have freedom.

Then, when I entered the seventh grade in the refugee camp, I heard that our camp leader had announced that the American government invited us to come to the United States. My parents told my siblings and I that we were going to the United States. My siblings and I said we didn't want to go to the United States. We



were very hesitant because we didn't know how to speak English. My parents told us that they wanted us to get an education. My siblings and I said we would go to the United States, even though we still didn't know how to speak English. My family and I agreed to come to the Americas. All of us applied to come to America, and in 2007, we arrived in the United States.

On our first day in America, we felt so uncomfortable because we didn't understand what anyone was saying and when we got off the airplane, everything was very confusing. We felt so isolated because we didn't know how to get anywhere. After a few weeks, we felt much better. Then, the horrible feeling returned because my brothers and sisters and I had to start high school very soon. We were extremely nervous relying on our limited English. On our first day at high school, we felt so scared because we didn't know everyone. To our surprise, many of the students and teachers helped us find our classrooms. We felt miserable because we didn't know anything about where we lived, or what we were studying. But, we all studied hard in high school.

I studied hard enough to attend a program where I can get my education and also get my career. I am now studying to be a certified nursing assistant at Shriver Job Corps. I am also working on completing my studies to get my high school diploma. I think you would agree that my journey is now complete.




Dahlia Paw

To start with, my name is Dahlia Paw. I was born in a very small village in Thailand, called Mae Ler Maw, but my parents are originally from Burma. The village where I was born consisted of about 15-20 families. Lives there were very simple with not much investment for a better life. The villagers work in the field on a daily basis and feed themselves off from the farm.

The roofs of the house are made of thatch leaves and the walls are made from bamboo. I lived there until I was 4 years old, then my mom decided to move into Mae La camp because they have a school and it is free. In the village, there was no school and the villager does not even know what is the meaning of being educated.

Mae La Camp is one of the largest refugee camps in Thailand, with more than 40,000 refugees. It is mainly composed of ethnic Karen people (84%), the third largest ethnic group in Myanmar. They fled following attacks by government forces against the KNU (Karen National Union). Life in the Thai refugee camp is as boring as it was in the village.

The Thai police forbid the refugees from going outside the



camp because they do not have a Thai passport and are not Thai citizens. When Thai police see refugees go outside the camp they would arrest them and put them in the jail. The weekly food rations for refugees are distributed by UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and include essential items such as rice and oil.

Rations are only provided to registered residents who are physically present at the time of distribution. Some people who had Thai passports were allowed to go outside and make extra money, and some people work inside the camp so they do not just depend on the food given by UNHCR. As for my family, we did have a pretty good life in the camp compared to other families who had just enough food for each day.

In camp my mom worked for the Women Social Worker (WSW) organization. The WSW helps single mothers who had been displaced. They provide a house and food for the mother and her children. As a WSW my mom made about 350 baht, which is about 12 US dollars.

School in camp was fun, even though it's made of bamboo and thatch because I got to be with my friends all the time. However, I did not like the school system and how the teacher teaches. The teacher made the students memorize what they teach and never asked them to understand it. So most of the time students forgot what they learned the next day.

I did not like to learn back in the camp because at the school I went to, most of the teachers do not know how to lecture due to lack of knowledge and education. In 2007 the United Nations started sponsoring refugee people in Mae La camp. The following year my




parents decided to come to the United States for a better education and a better life.

At first my mom did not want to come because she was afraid that life might be more difficult for her and my father since they do not speak any English. However, for my brother and I to have a better future, they were willing to face any challenges.

I moved to the United States in 2008. The first two years in the United States were very tough due to the language barrier. I still remember how boring it was the first day of my school in the U.S. because I couldn't communicate with my classmates and I did not have any friends.

Everybody in the room only spoke English except for me and my brother; we felt like strangers from a different planet. Everything was different from what I had imagined, including how people talk, act, and dress. I thought life would be easier and school will be fun but it wasn't. Besides this, my family encountered culture shock, so we were afraid to go outside the house and thought police might arrest us if they saw us going outside, since this had happened to my family back in the Thai refugee camp.

After a year in the United States I made a new friend because I could speak enough English to communicate with them. As time passed on, I had overcome this struggle. However, as for my parents, it is hard for them to learn a new language and find a good paying job. So, in my house I play the role similar to head of household. I am responsible for writing monthly bills, rent, and all the paper work my family receives from the mail. I am doing all this because my parents are trusting in me since they cannot speak the language. At this moment I had come to realize how important education is



and understand that it is the path to my better life.

High school was the best experience in my life because I learned a lot about making new friends. During my high school years, I discovered my interest in things I want to do in the future. I got involved in after-school clubs and became part of a sports team. Besides this, I volunteer at SayDaNar Development Center and at the International Institute. Doing this helps me to improve my confidence and language skills.

Last but not least, I am a sophomore student at MCC (Middlesex Community College) and hoping to transfer to a four-year college afterward. I want to become a nurse because I enjoy nurturing sick people. In general I also love to help people as well. At the moment I have to finish my prerequisite in order to get into a nursing program at MCC. It is going to be a long and hard process because of limited spaces available for nursing students, but I am ready to fight for my dream and a better life.



Bawi Ka Zham


“Everything I know about morality and the obligation of men, I learned from football (soccer)”

– Albert Camus

In July of 2007, I made a list of goals I hoped to achieve for my family and what I wanted for the lives of my five young cousins. My ambition was unwavering, yet I prepared myself for the possibility of many difficulties. One of these obstacles was severe poverty.

My personal goals stood as a testament to the love and obligation I felt towards my family. This deep commitment to succeed for my family and myself was inspired by loss. I lost the person whom I loved and needed the most in the world. I was twelve years old when I lost my grandmother, living in Aasaw Village, Myanmar. Aasaw is a small village located on a mountain ridge without electricity, running water, and education.

Only thirty percent of children attend school. Of that thirty percent, only five to ten percent graduate from high school I used all




my strength and my need to survive by hiking 45 miles to the border of India in order to hunt and sell what I caught to pay for school. When I lost my grandmother, I decided to leave the country because I could not bear to walk past the place where she was buried. Each time I walked past was a cold reminder of my beloved grandmother's hope to stay alive until I grew up and could care for myself.

Even though my life was full of misery, I realized it was not the end. My childhood may have met an abrupt ending, but instead I began to plan for the future, for my cousins and for myself. My list included: leaving Myanmar, going to Malaysia, finding a job and most importantly, attending a university.

In 2008, it was time for me to leave Myanmar and go to Malaysia. My mother was not there to take care of me, and my uncle had five children to send to school. If I had stayed, I would have been forced into child labor, or I would have become a soldier for the Burmese Army. I had to leave. When I finally got to Malaysia, I worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week. I did not have the time, the money or the opportunity to attend school. I lived with thirty people in one apartment so that I only had to pay fifty RM, about fifteen U.S. dollars, each month.

Working on my own and living in a crowded apartment, I thought of my cousins, my grandmother and of the countless times I played soccer with my family. Thoughts of my family and my village overwhelmed me, but also led me to stark realizations. I always knew that I loved my family. I realized that we also needed each other to succeed. It is impossible to score a goal for the team without passing the ball to each other.

I sent back most of the money I made in Malaysia to my



cousins so they were able to remain in school. In 2011, six students graduated from high school in Aasaw. Five of them were my cousins! I was very proud.

I am a firm believer that we must take turns passing the ball and scoring the goals. They scored that goal for our community, and I assisted them by passing the ball. I worked and I ran for the opportunity to help my family and we won!

Many things have changed since I first played soccer with my family, but this ideology continues to guide me today. With it in mind, I aspire to complete the last wish on my list – attend a university.

Knowing against all odds that I can accomplish anything I set my mind to, I will not only attend a university, but graduate with an engineering degree. Then, I will say thank you to my family, my teachers, and my friends, who helped me achieve my goals.




Mee Reh

My name is Mee Reh, I am 24 years old. I came from Myanmar to Thailand as a refugee in 2010. I would like to explain about my autobiography and educational history. English is my second language and I am not good in reading and writing or speaking. I attended school for 9 years in the refugee camp. I learned how to write and read while I was living in the camp.

There are many people like me facing the same situation as well, more than 50,000 people who live in the camp and couldn't get out because we weren't allow to go out of the camp. And we never had enough food, not enough health care and not enough education. UNHCR provided a clinic and school for us but not enough. Back home in Myanmar, I had not been in any situation that my parents always complained about, because they had been ruled by a military government.

I was only about 5 years old when my family decided to run away from the military. After facing many difficult situations in our life, we were looking for a better life and decided to come to the United States. I have been attending school in the United States for



4 years now. I have been learning how to write, read and speak in English. To be honest, I couldn't speak any English when I arrived in the U.S. but I always pushed myself to be challenged. I speak 3 different languages (Karenni, Burmese and English).

One particularly good experience I had in my past education is with the subject English. I love to learn English, because the English language can change my life to live in the United States. I really like America, because I have more freedom, healthcare and education. I love to live in the United States.

I know by myself that I have to study hard and work hard to be a good academic student. I always give plenty of time to learn more and more and I am ready to challenge myself.

One particularly bad experience I had previously was that I came to the United States very late. When I got to the United States, I was already 17 years old and started to learn English when I was 17. That was really the worst experience I ever had studying in my life in the United States. But I never gave up. I understand that to start with the beginning is a good start, and it is good to have a strong foundation.

In 2010, I started school in the United States at Lowell High School and I loved Lowell High because I had a chance to study with all students from across the world. It was very good to learn with international students. I have been learning reading and writing from high school through college.

I didn't know that America had so many different cultures or religions before I came to the United States. But now I truly know and I love to present my culture. I won't ever forget about my culture and I won't ever forget where my story began.




Say Paw

I came to the United States when I was 14 years old. I was born and raised in a refugee camp at Thailand. However, my parents are originally from Burma. There was nothing much that I know about Burma since I did not live there, but I did know how we struggled to live in the camp.

My father started to tell me his story when I was around nine years old. At that time, I was surprised and understood right away why my parents had to live in Thailand as a refugee people. It is not easy to live in the camp or in the United States. My family had to overcome obstacles both in the camp and the United States, in different situations.

I remember my father told me that the reason why he came to the camp was not because he wanted to. They had to flee from the Burmese military, which came and burned their houses and land and then killed the people who did not have a chance to escape. My father had to run all the time and hide inside the forest until he got to the border of Thailand. He started his new journey as a refugee person in Thailand.



Living in a Thai refugee camp was not easy. There are many camps that were in Thailand. I believe people faced different experiences living in the camp, but for my family, it was not easy. The house that my family lived in was built of bamboo and thatch. The house was not a problem to us at all, but other things could be a problem.

For instance, the Thai government in charge of us did give us rice and other food to eat. The thing was, that we couldn't eat the same food everyday. My father needed to have a job, so he could buy us delicious food. We did not get to eat good food as we wished. At the rainy time, my family planted vegetables and sold them to others. That is how my family made money.

The second reason was that we could not go out and get jobs freely in Thailand. We were just living there as refugee people, not as residents of Thailand. We did not have permission to go outside freely. My family wanted to be able to eat delicious food and wear nice clothes, but we did not have the money. When we really needed money, my dad secretly went out and found a job to work.

After my family got free from living in the camp, we came to the United States. But we still had to face problems. My family and I had never lived in a city. My first year in Lowell was terrible and the major problem that we faced was language. I am sure that my parents had to face a lot of stuff while living in Lowell.

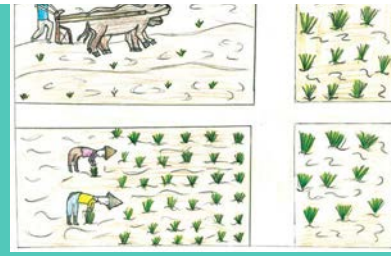
However, as a student, I had to go through all the process of attending school and getting to meet new friends. During my first day of school, I felt so nervous and worried. The teacher talked to me and I did not understand what they said. I also felt afraid while sitting in the classroom. And I wish that I could just go back to the

camp instead of living in America.

Everything got much better after two years of living in Lowell. As a student, I learned English faster than my parents so I used my basic English to translate for them when they had an appointment. Sometimes, I explained to my parents about their mail. I felt less stress when I first arrived in Lowell. It is not easy for me to go through all this especially when I did not know any English. However, I worked hard and tried my best in school so that I could help my parents.

As a child, I went to school everyday but I did not get to learn the English language. I only got to learn my native language. For me, it is tough to live in the camp because we did not get to see the real world. We just lived there as a survivor and we worked hard to make our life better. When we came to the United States, it was hard to adjust and learn new things at first.

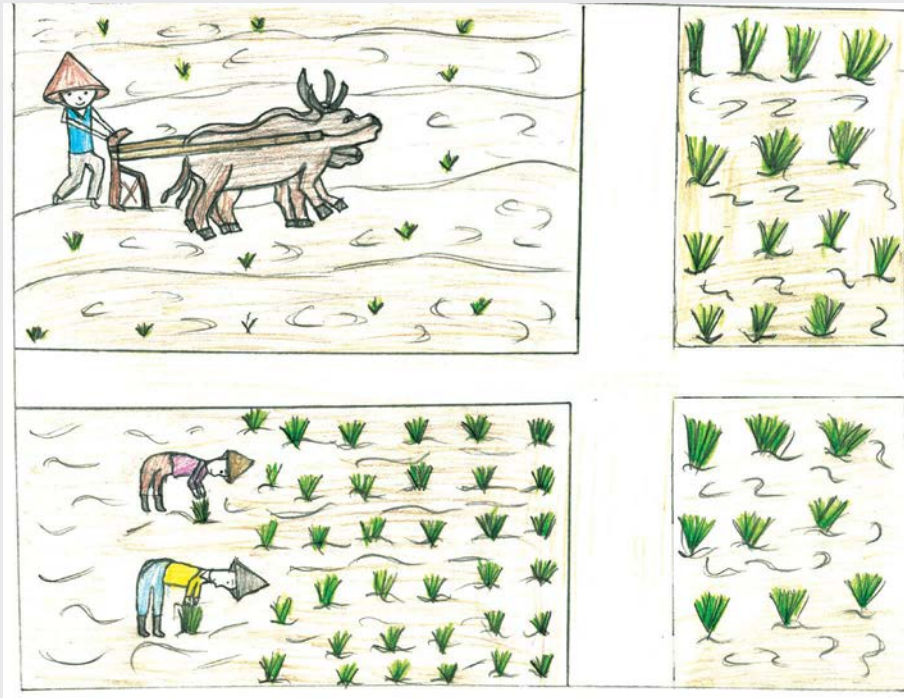
Over time, my family got used to living here. I am glad to be in United State because I have freedom. There is more opportunity for us to earn money than there was in the camp. Nowadays, I still try to learn more English and I still struggle with English grammar, vocabulary and sentences. But I think it is much better than in the camp.



Thank you to the children of Saydanar for their artwork, which was all completed in preparing for the "Eat to Educate" cultural event during Spring, 2016



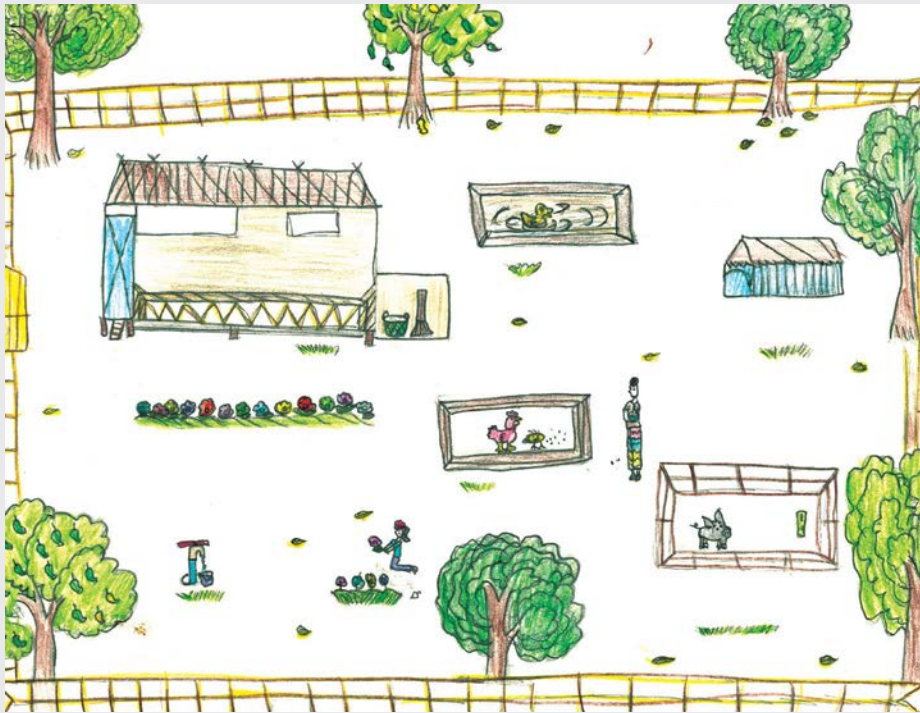




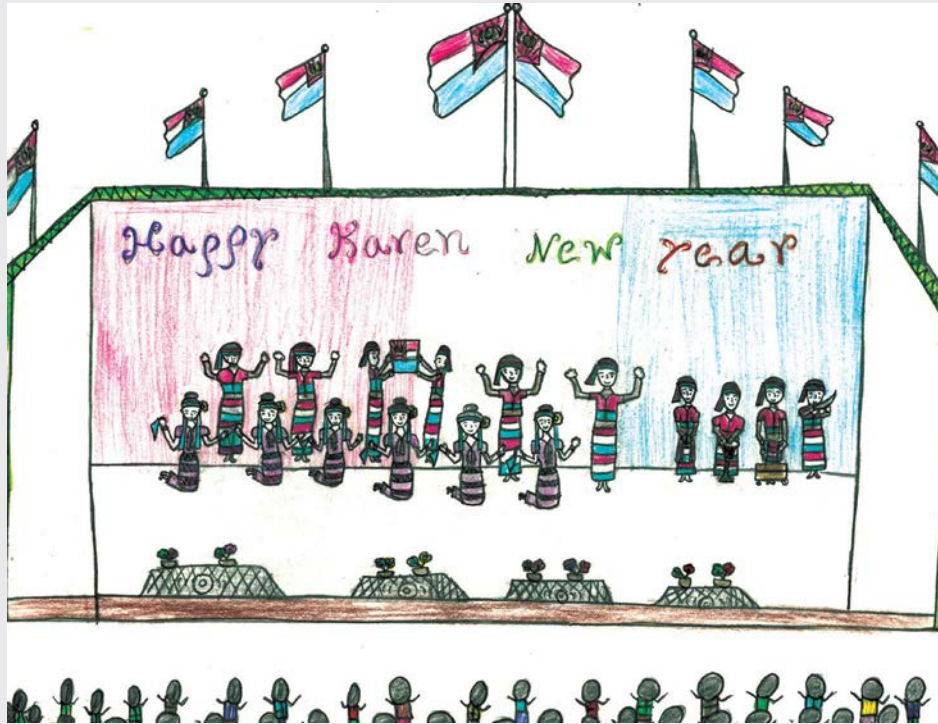
















Stories from SayDaNar Casework

James Aung

I came to the United States as a refugee in 2008, and was originally resettled in Boston. I got a job, and moved to Lowell. I saw that many refugees from Burma were struggling due to their language barrier and lack of knowledge of the system. I started volunteering to help them as much as I could. I went on home visits to help them, and tried to get the families' needs. I took them to their appointments.

Whenever they called me, I tried my best to go and help them. However, realizing that I couldn't help their problems by myself alone, I reached out to other Burmese community members who have been here for many years. Our group tried to help and support the refugees from Burma, and finally formed SayDaNar Community Development Center. Here are some stories from my experiences helping the community.

School Advocacy

When one of the community leaders, Mrs. Wah (not her real name) told me that her family was moving to St. Paul, Minnesota, I was so sad. I didn't want the family to move. She and her husband are very active and always help other people. I asked why they decided to move to St. Paul. I was very confused because they were doing well.

Both husband and wife had full time jobs at the same company and they had a car, which the husband drove to their work




Photo - Tory Germann

everyday. Their work was more or less a 30 minutes drive from their apartment. The family was also almost ready to buy a house and even enrolled in Individual Development Account (IDA), through which a family can get up to \$8000: the family saving up to \$4000 and the matched money from the program up to \$4000, to buy a house.

The family doesn't need to pay the money back since it is a government program to assist refugees. Mrs. Wah told me that her sister's family was coming from Thailand to resettle in the U.S soon. Her sister wanted her eldest daughter to go to a high school. Mrs. Wah worried that her niece might not be able to enroll in the high school here since she is almost 18 years old.

The high school here in this area doesn't allow the registration of any young adults who are 18 years and older. In St. Paul, however, she said that high schools accept young adults up to 21 years. She also said that her sister is a single mother with three children and doesn't speak English so she needs to support her sister because she will be struggling in the system due to her language barrier and lack of knowledge. I felt really bad because I wasn't able to help very much, and knew that the family had to restart their lives again from the beginning.



The family withdrew their IDA savings account and lost an opportunity to buy a house and moved to St. Paul in July 2014. After a few weeks, Mrs. Wah called me to let me know that her husband got a job at an egg farm, which was more than a 2 hour drive from their home, so he couldn't come back home everyday.

He stayed near his work and shared an apartment with his colleagues, and came back home once a week. She said that her family wasn't very happy in Minnesota and wanted to come back to Massachusetts. Her sister's family from Thailand came to the U.S. in March, 2015. Her eldest niece was able to enroll in a high school in St. Paul and started grade 9.

I was so happy when Mrs. Wah told me that her family as well as her sister's family would like to move back to Massachusetts. However, she wanted to make sure that her niece would be able to enroll in a high school because her niece turned 18 last April. I told her that since her niece was in grade 9, she should be able to register in the high school here.

However, I told her that I would double check with the public schools. I reached out to a staff from the public schools to find out about it and I was told that the student should be fine since the public schools should accept any student up to 21 years old. I let Mrs. Wah know about it so she decided to come back. She asked me to buy air tickets for her families as well as to rent an apartment for her family and her sister family.

I bought flight tickets for the end of June, 2015 and rented a four bedroom apartment for her family. We also set up furniture at the apartment before they came. We went to pick them up at Boston Logan Airport on the day that they came.

Mrs. Wah took her niece to register at the high school in the

middle of July, 2015. However, her niece was refused registration because she wouldn't be able to graduate from high school when she turns 22. Mrs. Wah asked me for help so I contacted the staff that I reached out to before from the public schools administrative office and explained the situation.


I was told that the student has the right to be in the school until she is 21. The staff contacted the high school registration office then she asked me to tell the family to go back to register. The family went there the next day, and the student was able to register. She took an assessment test and was told that she would start from grade 9.

However, in the beginning of August, 2015, the student went to the high school registration office again since she didn't hear anything from the high school. She was told that the High School Headmaster refused to let her enroll due to her age, since she wouldn't be able to graduate at 22. I contacted the staff and explained about the problem.

The staff said that she would contact the assistant superintendent office regarding the issue. In September, I heard back from the staff and they told me that the assistant superintendent said that the student would not be able to go to high school due to her age.

It was suggested that I should file a complaint to the Department of Education (DOE). I asked the mother and the student to see if they agreed to file a complaint. With their permission, I filed a complaint. A staff member from DOE got back to me the next day and asked me some questions to clarify the story. Then he said he would contact the public school.

The next day, I got a call from the public school attorney. He said that he looked into the case and the student never requested for




an appeal. I told him that the client didn't know and just came to the U.S. a few months ago. The attorney said that the superintendent would take her complaint as an appeal for her case. He said the superintendent has looked at the case and reconsidered that she should be allowed to attend high school.

He told me to inform the student to come to the high school to be enrolled tomorrow. The student and her mother went to the high school the next day. Everything went well, and she was able to start her school right away on the same day.

This has been an ongoing problem for refugee youth who are over 18 and were denied enrollment in high school due to their ages, not only refugees from Burma but also other refugees from different populations. Some refugee families from Burma moved out of state because their children were not allowed to enroll in high school.

It doesn't just happen in one city since I also saw some cases in other areas as well. A refugee girl from Burma in another city also faced the same problem when she tried to register to enroll in high school. She was denied and not allowed to attend high school. She was told to go to an ESL class and get her GED if she wanted to continue her education. She asked me for help so I got involved, and went through the same process. After my unsuccessful advocacy with the Parent Information Center as well as the Superintendent office in the city, I finally filed a complaint to the Department of Education with the girl and her mother's permission.

The girl was allowed to attend the high school after DOE got involved. However, I received a letter from the Superintendent, which states that the decision not to allow her to attend high school was the right one, therefore, the girl should go to an ESL class to



earn her GED. What surprised me was even though I received that letter, which confirmed their previous decision, the school also allowed her to attend high school.


After she was able to attend high school, I got a call from someone who is helping the African community. She said her refugee community also faces the same problem. It is a gray area, and public schools administrative staff make decisions based on what they think will be the best for their schools, not what is the best for the students. Although a staff from DOE told me that it is a law that public schools should allow students who are under 21 to enroll in high school, neither I nor the DOE staff could find this detail.

Unemployment benefits

Even though everyone is enjoying the summer, refugees from Burma are struggling to pay their rent. Every year, the sewing company that many refugees from Burma work in closes for two weeks. Workers are asked to apply for unemployment benefits. Depending on the years each individual has worked at the factory, clients will get paid either for one week or for two weeks.

The ones who have been with the company at least two years and over usually get paid for two weeks so they don't need to apply. However, the company closed for three weeks this last August, so everyone who worked for the company tried to apply unemployment benefits as no one gets paid for the third week.

The workers are given information where they can ask for help to apply for the benefits at a local career center. They can also apply over the phone or online. Due to being computer illiterate and having a language barrier, clients usually go in person to the center.



The career center used to help clients to apply for the unemployment benefits; however, the office doesn't do this anymore since a couple of years ago, due to budget cuts from the government. The center will give a piece of paper to any one who walks in to their office that explains how to apply for unemployment benefits either online or over the phone. Clients will always come back to me to apply for their benefits.

Many clients came to see me to apply for their benefits in August. The new ones were easier. I just needed to go to the website and create accounts and apply for benefits for them. The most difficult cases were the ones who have applied in the past and have accounts but forgot their passwords. It would not have been easy even if you speak the language and have computer skills.

Calling the unemployment office is worse than a nightmare. Whenever I call the phone number, the minimum waiting time is 45 minutes, but I usually have to wait over an hour. I keep waiting and waiting until someone answers the phone, if I am lucky. Many times, the line is disconnected before someone picks up the phone or while I am talking to the staff member after waiting for almost an hour.

A client came to show me a letter that he received from his company. When I had a look, it was an instruction about how to apply for unemployment benefits either online or over the phone. This client had applied for his benefits last year so I tried to help him to log in to his account in our office computer. However, he forgot the password of his account so he couldn't log in.

He also didn't remember the secret question so I had no option but to call the call center. I am very reluctant to call the call center because I knew that I would have to wait at least one hour. I was right! I kept waiting for about an hour until the line got

automatically disconnected.


I had to ask the client to come back the next week because the call center closes at 4:30pm and it was already after 4pm so we would not be able to make it. My office hours are usually in the late afternoon on Wednesdays and early afternoon on Fridays so I can only help them to apply on Friday afternoons.

The client came back the following week so I called the call center again. This time, I was lucky to be able to talk to a staff member after waiting for over an hour. I explained the problem so the staff verified with the client over the phone and sent a link to reset the password. Finally, I was able to help the client to log in to his account and open a claim for his unemployment benefit. He was notified that he would receive his benefit of over\$300.

He came back after a few weeks because he didn't receive his benefit, which he was supposed to receive. I helped him to log into his account and to see if he missed anything. Finally, I had to call the call center phone number again because there was nothing wrong with his claim. Again, I had to wait over one hour before a staff member answered.

The staff member said that the check was sent to a wrong address so I gave him the correct address. However, both the client and I were confused because the client never moved to the address that the staff member mentioned. I was also told to call a phone number to request the check be sent to the correct address. I called the number and talked to a staff member but he said that I was calling the wrong department.

He told me to call the main number. I didn't have enough time to call the main number since it was around 4 pm already so I asked the client to come back next week. The client has come to see



me to make the phone call every Friday. However, we have not been lucky enough to talk to a staff since nobody picked up the phone even though we waited for over an hour each time. The telephone line was always disconnected. The client was even saying that the government does it purposely so that people will give up applying for the benefits. It has been almost two months already but the client has not been able to receive his check yet.

When I met with a staff member from the career center, he told me that now there are only three places across Massachusetts answering all the calls. As a result, people have a very long waiting time. He suggested to me that it was better to do it online. I explained to him most of my clients are computer illiterate on top of their language barrier. I asked him if his office can help when the clients come in for help. He said the clients could use the computers in his office and his staff could help clients and explain how to apply online.

However, he said that he didn't have enough staff to go through the whole process of applying for the unemployment benefits. Every year, many of them struggle to receive their unemployment benefits and most of them have given up applying due to the difficulties.

Medical Bills


One of the Burmese refugees who doesn't speak English came to see me today. He brought a medical bill that was for a doctor's visit back in August, 2015. He said he didn't understand why he received the bill because he had medical insurance, and he paid the co-payment during his visit. I called the phone number on

the bill, and found out that it was from a specialist clinic.

I was told that the clinic needed to have a referral from the patient's primary care physician (PCP), which the patient didn't bring. I called his PCP office and requested them to send a referral to the specialist office so that his visit could be billed to the medical insurance. The staff member who does referrals told me that his doctor didn't know about the appointment, and plus it was out of the time frame, which is 90 days, so the insurance won't accept the referral even if the doctor sends one.

I explained that this client was referred by his PCP to this specialist in the past, and that is why he got a follow-up appointment. The staff looked into the system and found out that his PCP did refer him to the specialist back in 2014. The staff member explained to me that the patient never came back to inform his PCP that he went to see the specialist back in 2014.

Therefore, even when the patient got another follow-up appointment from the same specialist in 2015, his PCP wasn't aware about the appointment. Now it is over the 90 days period, so the insurance won't pay for his visit; therefore, he will have to pay for it from his own money. The staff member also told me that the patient needs to come back to inform his PCP every time he sees other doctors so that his PCP is aware of all the issues and can follow up as needed. I feel really bad for the client because it is not his fault that he went to see the specialist. He didn't make the appointment with the specialist's office. And he didn't know that he needed to bring a referral or had to go back to inform his PCP about his visit. Why did the specialist see him in the first place if he didn't bring a referral? Why wasn't he informed that he has to bring a referral when he got the appointment?



Even though any health care providers receiving funds from the government are required by law to provide an interpreter for patients with limited English proficiency, private doctors, who do not receive funds from the government, are not required to provide interpreters for patients. When refugees' primary care physicians refer their refugee patients to see specialists for further evaluation regarding their health problems, refugee patients struggle to get the services from specialists due to the language barrier. However, refugees are still new to this area, and don't know where to go. In addition, refugees are required to bring their own interpreter. When refugees can't find anyone to translate for them, they simply just don't show up for their appointments.

If providers are able to provide interpreters, not only will the refugees have a better understanding about their health, but also the providers will be able to treat their refugee patients more effectively, because the refugee patients will be able to follow the providers' instructions. As refugees are able to evaluate their health problems with specialists, they are more likely to be able to prevent themselves from getting sick. Therefore, the refugees will become healthier, as a result, their health care consumption will go down and so will their health care expenses in the long run.

Electric bills

Recently, many new electric companies were trying to get new customers. Their representatives worked very aggressively to get new customers for their companies. One time, I saw one of the sale representatives was knocking on the front door of an apartment very hard and didn't stop until the door was opened. I have seen the


same kind of situation many times among refugees from Burma. Each time, I had to call the electric companies to cancel their contracts, which they didn't even know that they had signed up for until they received welcome letters in the mail. When they brought those letters to me for translation, they all were very upset after they found out the truth.

A client, who has limited English, came to see me with a letter that he received from an electric company. The letter was welcoming him as a new customer. He was kind of confused by the letter because, he said, he never applied for electric service from that company. After a short conversation, I found out that a lady knocked on his door, and tried to talk to him in English a few weeks ago.

He didn't understand what the lady was talking about besides the word "electric," because he understood the word "electric" in her talking. He gave his electric bill because the lady was asking to show it to her. He just said sometimes "yes" and sometimes "no" during the conversation, even though he didn't fully understand what the lady was talking about.

I explained to him that the new electric company was offering him a lower rate, compared to his previous company's regular rate. However, the rate that he receives from his previous company is lower than the new company is offering because he got a discount rate due to his income and his family size. Finally, he understood what the lady was talking about.

I called the electric company, explained the whole situation, and cancelled the service because the client wanted me to do so. I explained to him that in the future if he doesn't understand anything, do not say "yes" or sign anything, even if he understands and doesn't want it. The families could have forced the sale representatives to



leave but they didn't do it. On top of the language barrier, due to coming from war torn zones and living under a military government, many refugees from Burma are afraid to speak up for their rights. They are always afraid to deal with anyone who has power.

Citizenship applications

Today I helped one of the clients for his citizenship application. I still remember that he didn't speak a single word of English when he came to the United States in 2009. Now he is so eager to take his citizenship. He always comes to the citizenship class on Saturdays at the SayDaNar office. Sometimes, other people may miss class but he never does.

He is so determined and works very hard to earn his citizenship. Regardless of his English language barrier, he tries his best to learn the 100 civic questions and all the information from the citizenship application so that he would be able to pass the interview and become a citizen of the United States. I am so glad to have a chance to support his dream.

There are many people in the community from Burma in Lowell. Many of them are due to apply for their citizenship. However, not many of them are willing to study for the citizenship test. Their excuse is that the test is so hard because they don't speak English. However, I don't think it is true. They just give up learning and don't want to study because they think that they are too old to learn. I can't wait for the day that this gentleman passes the test and becomes a citizen of the United States. He will be a very good example for the rest of the community that it is never too late to learn and if people work hard enough, they can achieve their dream!

Travel Documents

Today, one of my clients came to see me and said that he was going to New York to pick up his travel document for a trip to Thailand. He has never been to New York, so he is going with one of his Karenni friends so that he won't get lost. He has been here in Lowell for only over a year so he is not eligible to apply for a passport since he is not a citizen of the United States. However, he can apply for a Refugee Travel Document to travel outside of the country. The reason that he is going to Thailand is to see and support his wife, who has been depressed since her daughter died. His daughter died a few months ago due to lack of medication in the camp.

I helped him with his travel document application at the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) and visa application at the Thai Embassy in New York. When he submitted his application, he also put a prepaid envelope for return postage, but the embassy said that they never received the prepaid envelope. He purchased a plane ticket and his flight is on March 9, 2016. However, I had told him that he didn't need to buy a ticket for his visa application, because I called the Thai Embassy to find out whether he would need a ticket for the visa application or not. I was told that a ticket was not required, but he bought it anyway because his friend said he needed it.

Sometimes, people trust more the information that they receive from their friends. In this case, he wouldn't even need to go to New York to pick up his document if he hadn't bought his flight ticket. He could have found another way to get his document back. Now, due to his flight schedule, he doesn't dare take a chance to



wait and decided to go to New York to get his document so that he will be ready to travel by March 9th.

Proof of residency

One of my clients brought a letter from Mass Health, which states that he and his wife need to submit their proof of residency in order to be eligible for health insurance. The family has been here for almost 5 years and their status has not changed. They have lived where they were since they arrived in the U.S. They also had submitted the same verification in the past for a few times but Mass Health still was asking them to submit the same information again and again.

The letter also described a list of acceptable letters for the proof of residency, including utility bills, pay stubs from the last 60 days, mortgage or lease; but the wife has none of those. All the utility bills as well as the lease are in her husband's name. She used to work but had to quit her job due to her medical condition, and now her husband is the only person working in the household.

Therefore, she can't provide her pay stubs either. I suggested the husband ask his wife to go to the city hall to request a proof of residency letter. The city issues the letter and charges \$3 per person. He can then submit this letter to Mass Health.

I have seen this kind of situation many times when clients are asked to submit some verification to determine their eligibility by government agencies. It is reasonable that the government agencies will need to verify the information to determine the eligibility. However, it is a big challenge for refugees, especially, the newcomers, because refugees don't have any of the acceptable

verification forms that are listed. It will create extra stress for the refugees on top of all the challenges that they are facing in the new countries.


401 K

One client, who wanted to enroll in a 401 K retirement plan, asked me to help. She said that her company told her to call a phone number in order to enroll in the program. She doesn't speak English so I called the phone number that was given to her. I explained the situation to the associate from the financial firm and requested a Karen interpreter. The associate asked me to verify her information and whether I could assist with the interpretation.

Even though I requested an interpreter, he didn't call an interpreter but went back and forth with me to verify my client's information. I told him that I don't speak the client's mother tongue, so finally, he told us to hold while he was trying to get an interpreter. When the interpreter came on the phone, he spoke the language that we didn't understand, so I intervened and asked the interpreter what language he speaks.

The interpreter said that he speaks Korean so we told him as well as the financial representative that we were looking for a Karen interpreter, not a Korean interpreter. I had a feeling that this would happen because the representative didn't pay attention when I was telling him the name of the language. From my experience, it happens a lot because Karen and Korean are very similar, plus most of the people are more familiar with Korean, but not Karen.

The representative told us to hold so we waited. We were on hold for a while but didn't hear anything, and finally we found out that he hung up on us. We were so frustrated with the situation but



we didn't have enough time to call back again. I asked my client to come back next week to call the financial firm again.

The following week, she came back so I called the same phone number, and got a representative from the firm on the phone. I explained to her that my client wanted to enroll in the program and needed a Karen interpreter. She told us to wait and called a Karen interpreter right away. She got a Karen interpreter and was able to help the client. Finally, the client was able to enroll in the program. Even though a company has the same rules and policies, it still depends on employees who provide the services directly to the clients. For example, from the experience with this financial firm, even if it is required for employees to provide language support for any client who has the language barrier, some employees don't want to provide it because it is not convenient for them. This makes it much harder for the clients.

Specialist referral

Today, I helped one of my clients who has been referred to a specialist. She came to show me a letter from her health clinic, which states that she needs to call the specialist's office to make an appointment. The client doesn't speak English and doesn't know where the specialist's office is.

I called and made an appointment for her, and then translated the paper and explained to her where she needs to go, and gave her the address so that her husband can take her there. I also requested an interpreter for her so that she will have no communication barrier when she meets the specialist, and better understand what is going on with her and what kind of follow up she will need to do



afterwards.

In the past, the clinic staff called and made appointments for patients, then informed the patients about their appointments. However, they stopped doing it. I called the clinic staff member who refers patients to specialists the first time, and I found out that clients received letters to call the specialist's office to make appointments. I asked how could the clinic expect their patients to call to make an appointment.


The staff said the specialists' offices didn't allow the clinic staff to make appointments anymore because many patients that the clinic booked didn't show up, so the clinic lost money.

That is the gap that we have in the system. Patients will be unlikely to call and go to see the specialists due to the language barrier and not knowing where to go. Then what will happen? Their primary care physicians may think that the patients have gone to see the specialists.

The ones who suffer will be the patients. Their health problems may become worse and some clients may end up going to emergency rooms and staying in hospitals. As a result, not only may they may lose their income, but also our health care spending will increase. We could have prevented this kind of unnecessary cost, but it is not happening.

Gastrointestinal (GI) Test at the Lowell General Hospital (LGH)

Today, one of my clients came to show me his GI appointment letter from a hospital. The letter explains in detail what the patient




needs to do before the test. According to the letter, my client will need to go and get three different over the counter medications. Then he will need to mix them and drink it several times during the night before the test.

He is also not allowed to eat or drink until his test is done the next morning. It really surprises me that the provider thinks the patient will understand the procedure. I also assume that his primary care physician will request an interpreter for his appointment, therefore, the provider at the hospital should know his English level. In addition, it is not his first GI appointment because when I was trying to explain about the complicated process, he told me that he already went there for the GI test in the past.

However, the provider couldn't do the test because he didn't drink the liquid, which needs to be mixed with medication. Without using an interpreter to explain the procedure, how is the patient going to understand clearly what he needs to do before the test? Even if he understands what he needs to do, how he is going to get all the three different over the counter medications from a pharmacy? Even if he gets all the medication, how is he going to make sure that medication is mixed properly and he drinks it accordingly? If he fails any of these requirements, the provider will not be able to perform the test again when he goes for his appointment. That will have a negative outcome for the patient, the hospital and finally even the government. The hospital will also lose its revenue. The patient will not be treated and followed up on as needed in a timely manner, which may have a negative impact on his health.

Therefore, the government may have to spend more for his well being in the future. All these things could have been prevented by simply making a nurse visit before the test, ordering all the



medication to be ready in the office, and explaining to the patient how to mix it and how often he needs to take it. Then the patient will have a very clear understanding about the procedure and will be able to follow the instructions. Then the test could be done without any problem.

This is not my first experience. I had a very similar situation with a different client in the past who called me and said that she got a call from a phone number, however, she didn't understand. She asked me to call back that number to find out what it was all about. When I called the phone number, I was told that she had a GI appointment at the hospital and needed to pick up medication before the appointment. She has been in the U.S. for a few months and speaks no English. Besides, she had no idea where the hospital was. I had to take her to the hospital and pick up the medication, and explain to her how to take it. Finally, she was able to make it for her appointment. About 90% of the refugees from Burma came from a rural area. Everything here is so different from where they came from. Preventive care is not something that the refugees ever practiced in their lives until they came to the U.S. They never go to see a doctor unless they are sick, therefore, having tests to find out what is going on with their bodies is uncommon practice for them.

Moreover, due to the language barrier, clients are reluctant to seek help even if they are sick. Refugees already have stress due to all the challenges in the new country. On top of that, the language barrier also causes stress for refugees because of not being able to express and communicate with others effectively. Many preventable health problems are not prevented in refugee populations due to a gap in the system, which is caused by the communication barrier.

Youth Volunteer

Recently, I got a Karenni youth volunteer to help me with casework. He is studying at Middlesex Community College (MCC) now. When he came to the U.S. six years ago, he was only 19 years old. However, he wasn't allowed to go to high school due to his age. He was told to go to adult education, where he registered and studied for almost four years.

I told him in the beginning that he should go to MCC, because he finished grade ten in the refugee camp. I explained to him that even if he was not allowed to study at the college level, he could start at the ESL level, and then he could eventually move up to the college level. However, he didn't have enough confidence to go to college so he remained in adult education.

Last year, I talked to him again about going to MCC. I told him that he didn't have to pay for his tuition fee since he would be eligible for financial aid. This time he listened to me, so I showed him how to fill out a financial aid application. I also told him to go to MCC to take a placement test. He finally went there, and took a placement test.

Then when the semester began, he started with an ESL class and a math class. Since then, he has been at MCC. Now, he is getting into college level courses and starting to choose his major. I am very glad that he is going to be in college, and even going to a university when he graduates from MCC. I was also able to recruit a Karen youth who is studying at MCC. They both have been helping me to assist families.



We can all be together!

Today, we cleaned the SayDaNar office. We didn't have a chance to organize all the stuff in the new office since we moved in. I asked some community members to help with the cleaning. Most of the community members who come to volunteer at SayDaNar are from different ethnic groups from Burma. Moreover, they all have different religions. Some are Buddhists, some are Christians and some are Muslim.

Most of them have never had a chance to meet people from different ethnic groups for a long enough time to get to know them until they came here. Even now, they may still be within their groups most of the time, but they always come together when I ask them to help with any of the SayDaNar events. It seems like SayDaNar serves as a common place for all of them to come together. They talk, make jokes and laugh while volunteering together for SayDaNar. It is very nice to see them getting along and working together.

We have eight main ethnic groups in Burma. A civil war has been going on between the majority Burmese and other different minority ethnic groups for over half of the last century. There are also tensions among ethnic groups. Sometimes, even the ethnic arm groups fight each other. We all suffer from the civil war regardless

of which ethnic group we belong to.


People, for sure, have different personalities, and it will be very difficult to bring everybody together. However, if we are given a chance and enough time to get to know each other, I am sure we can definitely find ways to live together. If we can get along with each other here, why not in Burma?

It is very important to understand that the process is more important than the outcome. Everyone prefers the best result. However, in my opinion, without being able to bring everyone in the group together, we are unlikely to get the best result even if we get grade A. Besides, without respecting each other, we will not be able to work together. How do we define the best result?

Is getting grade A without the bonding among the students in the group better than getting grade B with the bonding among the students working together to achieve the same goal or vice versa? People have different personalities and expectations. We can't expect everyone to be the same.

We all need to find ways to compromise with each other to be able to work together. It is also very important for us not to judge other people without knowing what is going on in their lives. We need to be aware that different people have different skill sets and weaknesses. Things that can be easily accessible for someone may not be easy for other people.

Refugees from Burma are struggling in Lowell. They have difficulty becoming self-sufficient due to the language barrier and not being able to navigate the system. Since there is no other agency that provides long-term support for refugees from Burma to become self-sufficient in Lowell, the services that they receive from SayDaNar make their lives much easier. They will not feel abandoned and hopeless but supported because there is a place that they can always go for help.



Many of them really appreciate it, and are willing to volunteer to support SayDaNar whenever they can. It is a place where every ethnic group from Burma in Lowell comes and works together, and gets to know each other better. If everyone is given a chance to get to know each other, I am sure most of us will have better understanding about others; therefore, our society will be more peaceful. There will also be less burden on the whole society as individuals become self-sufficient.

Because of SayDaNar, other organizations in Lowell that have been struggling to support new refugees, due to the new languages as well as new culture, get to know more about the refugees from Burma as well as these refugees' needs. Therefore, these organizations are able to find ways to serve the refugees from Burma. As a result, both sides: the providers and the refugees, will benefit, as well as the society as a whole.

SayDaNar is a community-based organization. We do not have any budget to run SayDaNar. Our community members come together to raise funds that we need for SayDaNar by selling Burmese food at the Burmese Food Fair, Lowell Folk Festival and Southeast Asian Water Festival. We especially rely on UMass Lowell volunteer students to run our afterschool program, which is mutually beneficial for both the refugees and the UMass Lowell students.

As a student at UMass Lowell, I am very grateful to have a chance to combine my volunteer work with my education. I am also happy to raise awareness about refugees from Burma in Lowell. It has been a great pleasure to see the connection between UMass Lowell and the communities in Lowell. As this connection grows, both UMass Lowell and the communities can benefit from each other. In the future, I would like to see UMass Lowell have more collaborations with different communities in Lowell.



Burmese Refugees Face Challenges in Their New Homeland

By Nyan Lynn

LOWELL - When she heard the news that her family was chosen and granted permission to go and settle in the U.S., Le Say was overjoyed and excited, not knowing what to expect in her future homeland.

She saw the brutalities of the military junta back in Karen State in the eastern part of Myanmar (formerly known as Burma). Worried about the future, she left her village and fled to Thailand in 1997.



Photo - Nyan Lynn

In Thailand, she stayed at a refugee camp. After staying there for 17 years, she moved to the U.S. with her husband, children and two sisters.

Life in the U.S. is not as smooth as she expected. “I was so depressed and downhearted as everything is quite different from the place I came from,” said 37-year-old Le Say.



Le Say said one of her biggest challenges in the U.S. is not knowing English.

“As I don’t know this language, I’m still facing a lot of problems,” she said in her apartment in Lowell, a 45-minute commuter rail ride from Boston, Massachusetts.

Le Say is not alone. There are thousands of Burmese refugees in the U.S. for whom English is a big challenge, said aid workers.

“They don’t speak the language. So, language barrier is very, very challenging for them,” said James Aung, Executive Director of Saydanar Community Development Center which is helping Burmese refugees in Lowell.

“Even though they know or they can go to the place, but they can’t communicate.”

In addition to language problems, refugees have difficulties integrating into the U.S. culture and navigating its government systems.

Due to the fighting between the government army and ethnic armed groups, tens of thousands of ethnic people fled Myanmar and stayed in refugee camps in Thailand and Malaysia for years. Some stayed there for more than twenty years before coming to the U.S.

Many others continue to live in the refugee camps, waiting to be able to settle in other countries while living on food handouts delivered by humanitarian agencies.

The nature of Burmese refugees is also a barrier to integrating in a new culture, said Meredith Walsh, Executive Director of Worcester Refugee Assistance Project (WRAP).

“By and large, they are a shy, introverted community. So they don’t necessarily go out to make friends with the Americans. When Americans try to speak to them, they might feel shy,” said Walsh who



has been helping Burmese refugees for years.

Another problem with some refugees is that they are traumatized because they saw atrocities back in their country. They still have nightmares.

“I still have fear of SPDC (the junta) in the dream,” said Key Mhe, 54, who moved to the U.S.

She and her family fled to Thailand in 2000 together with other villagers from her area in Kayah State, in eastern part of the country.

While older people like Key Mhe often feel nostalgic regarding the place they came from, younger people do not find it hard to embrace the U.S. culture.

Nga Reh, 22, is one of them. He was born and bred in a refugee camp in Thailand. He did not know how the outside world looked like.

When he heard he and his family were granted permission to settle in the U.S., he did not know what to expect exactly. He said he expected his new home would be much different from the camp where all of the houses are made of bamboo and thatched roof, but he wasn't prepared for much else.

“I was so surprised. There are many buildings here that I hadn't seen before,” said Nga Reh in an office of WRAP. “I'm very fortunate to be in the developed country.”

After being in the U.S. for more than seven years, he is quite familiar with American culture and he is going to college.

He even has a dream to keep his community safe and secured.

“I want to be a police (officer) one day,” he said with confidence.

(Note: This story was written for Visual Storytelling Class at Emerson College.)

