

Karenni State Refugees Learning about American Dream in Tukwila

<http://www.unpo.org/article/12054>



Karenni who move to the United States face major problems with integration and employment. Joint efforts are needed to enable them to settle down and move on their lives.

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Below is a press release published by [Tukwila Reporter](#):

This month I learned just how many “communities” one family can be.

I had the opportunity to meet a family who had fled Burma, spent years in a Thai refugee camp, and finally regrouped this year in their new home: Tukwila.

What they are experiencing should be a blueprint for how newcomers to our shores can successfully become part of American society.

Headed by brother and sister Nga Reh and Tee Meh, the seven-member household doesn't have a lot of possessions, but they are working hard to make a life. They're also working to understand what it means to live in the United States. It's a place they've dreamed about for years – for its freedoms, its opportunities, and, most importantly, for its safety.

We may complain about crime rates in South King County, but for this family, who hid in the jungle as soldiers ransacked their homes and ultimately burned their village down, Tukwila is a far safer place to be.

In spite of the hopes and dreams, it's not easy to assimilate to American life. There are many things to learn, and a formidable language barrier to overcome. The family speaks a language called Karenni. It's one of several distinct languages in Burma, and it is also the name of their ethnic group.

In their own homeland, the Karenni are considered minorities, so imagine the complexity of coming to the U.S., speaking a language that few, if any, people here can comprehend. The Karenni in South King County number less than 200 – far fewer than the more prevalent Karen Burmese, a majority Burmese group who have a longer tradition of coming to the U.S., as immigrants and refugees.

According to Simon Khin, founder of the Coalition for Refugees from Burma, and a Burmese refugee himself, the language barrier for the Karenni has major implications.

“We don’t have a Karenni translator here – language is a huge problem,” said Khin, a Karen Burmese who also has to work around the language barrier. Jobs are the most complex of these issues. The Karenni who come here are eager to work, but employers “will hire only people who can speak English on some level,” he said.

That is completely understandable. You need to learn the language, if you want to be part of your country, adopted or not. So what’s heartening is to see just how many other “communities” have become involved in helping this family come into their own.

Traditional Burmese culture is about welcoming neighbors. “Traditionally the Karen and Karenni, in their villages, they don’t have doors in their houses. Everyone knows everyone,” Khin said.

It seems to be playing out in this country, too.

“We know right away when they come in,” Khin said, of what his coalition hears through the grapevine of fellow Burmese, as well as through the international organizations that bring them to Tukwila, whenever a new family arrives.

The coalition helps out in a myriad of ways, from lining them up for English courses, to taking elders on “field trips” so that they don’t feel isolated and can learn tasks like taking public transportation and using American currency.

Another “community” that is helping this family to assimilate is the church. St. Thomas Catholic Church in Tukwila has been welcoming the devoutly Catholic Karenni Burmese for the past few years to its services.

“We’re doing all we can for them through our outreach programs,” said Paul Hardin, a lay minister for the church and all-around volunteer.