

Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience

Stories across Generations: Burmese Americans in King County

Application Contact

Julie Salathe
Grants and Sponsorship Manager

Mailing City Seattle

Council District 8

Organization Director

Beth Takekawa, Executive Director

Website

www.wingluke.org

Incorporated 06/27/1966

Revenue 2015 \$2,699,267

Revenue 2014 \$2,328,940

Mission

To connect everyone to the rich history, dynamic cultures and art of Asian Pacific Americans through vivid storytelling and inspiring experiences.

Short Project Description

Partnering with the Burmese American refugee community, The Wing will make local Burmese heritage stories publicly available through oral history gathering, digitized artifacts, and other resources.

Project Discipline / Choice Criterion

Heritage Interpretation

Venue Address

The Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific
American Experience
719 S King St
Seattle WA 98104

Amount Requested \$10,250

Total Project Budget \$63,250

Venue Council District 8

Project Venue Notes or Comments

One oral history/digitization event and a public presentation will take place at a community center or public location in Kent or Tukwila.

Project Description

The Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience (The Wing) will present "Stories across Generations: Burmese Americans in King County." The project will bring to light untold and little-known histories of the Burmese American refugee community through conducting research; holding oral history trainings and gathering oral histories; and hosting a one-day digitization event for artifacts, photos and archival materials (summer/fall 2017). The project then culminates with a public presentation, pop-up display and online

resource to share the stories and further connect youth, families, and their community with the broader public (winter/spring 2018).

Research will be done by staff and a project intern in local and regional archives, including the Burke Museum which holds Burmese community materials from the 1970s. Two oral history trainings will be held for Burmese American youth and families. Participants will be trained to conduct oral histories (mostly audio with select video) with their parents and families. Interviewers, interviewees and others will then record their stories and bring in their materials for one digitization event. One training will take place in Kent; the other training and digitization event will occur in Tukwila.

Heritage materials held by Burmese American families and organizations reflect the refugee's journey from home country to refugee camp, and finally to King County. For example, a 1976 photograph shows Simon Khin with his family in Rangoon, Burma, right before being sponsored to come to the U.S. in October 1977. We are excited and eager to uncover the wealth of materials to be shared.

Personal stories as shown in the photo take on incredible significance when framed within historical topics for the project, including: civil unrest and military-run government in Burma; 1980 Refugee Act that allowed the U.S. President to set yearly ceilings on refugee admissions and the establishment the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement; and the impact of attacks of September 11th on refugee admissions. With present-day issues related to refugees and national policies towards resettlement worldwide, exploration of these historical topics rooted in the personal experience of King County residents is extremely timely and relevant.

The project culminates in a public presentation, pop-up display and online resources. The public presentation (location tbd, most likely Kent or Tukwila) provides an opportunity to share the stories with participants, community members and the broader public. The pop-up display will be made of 4-5 portable panels with information about Burmese American heritage in King County that can be used at future Burmese community gatherings, such as New Year celebrations and youth soccer events. The online resource (hosted by The Wing) will present context about Burmese American heritage in King County as well as provide access to oral histories and digitized items.

This project emerges from connections made during our 2010 exhibit, "A Refugee's Journey of Survival and Hope," which explored the experience of refugees from Asia resettling in the U.S. We are working with the group "Northwest Communities of Burma", and basing our activities on direct requests by Burmese American community leaders, who form the project's Community Advisory Committee. The Committee advises on all aspects of the project as well as recruiting community participants.

Washington State is one of the top 10 states accepting refugees for resettlement, receiving 48,573 refugees between 1983 and 2004. From 2002-2011, Burmese made up the largest refugee group resettling in the U.S. Currently approximately 2,000 Burmese American refugees have been resettled in Washington, with the King County population centered around Kent and Tukwila. The Burmese population in our area is constantly fluctuating, due to ongoing resettlement and secondary migration and is incredibly diverse with over 130 ethnic groups, including Karenni, Karen, Chin, Kachin, Muslim, Burman and Chinese Burmese. The Burmese American community is fragmented, and members desire opportunities to strengthen ties across ethnic groups. Moreover, with the recent rise in anti-immigrant, anti-refugee and anti-Muslim rhetoric, the community's need to educate the public about their experiences in King County is very real, urgent and pressing. In addition, King County residents have little or no knowledge about this community, making the need for resources detailing the heritage of Burmese refugees more significant.

Project Impact

"Stories across Generations" will allow the region's Burmese American community to gather, record and share its history. Through family stories and heritage materials that span the journey from home to refugee camp to newly-adopted home in King County, the project will help foster communication and healing within the Burmese community as well as connect the public to the stories of this recent refugee group and raise awareness and understanding of the Burmese refugee community.

Sharing and affirming lived Burmese history – across generations as well as within the community – would be transformational for the Burmese American community and an opportunity to present their culture, history and stories to King County residents. Many Burmese refugees arrived with few belongings, and the opportunity for Burmese American community members to gather, digitize and preserve their oral histories and records of resettlement and growth would be of tremendous benefit. There has never been an opportunity for the community to document and share its history, and much history from the 1980s and 1990s is fading in memory. Local Burmese American youth have never come together to gather their family and cultural history and explore their identities as Burmese Americans. Burmese American youth will understand their history and have greater pride in their cultural heritage and identity; Burmese American parents will understand their experience in the context of history and have greater connection with one another and younger generations as they share stories; diverse groups within the Burmese American community will have an opportunity to reflect on similarities and differences between their experiences; and all will understand that the Burmese American story is an important part of the history of King County and preserving heritage materials helps preserve their stories.

The public presentation provides an opportunity for participants to gather, share and celebrate their accomplishments made through this project. The pop-up display provides the community a lasting resource to showcase its heritage – whether at annual new year

celebrations, summer youth soccer tournaments, or church gatherings. Online resources will further serve King County residents by making the oral histories, digitized items and research on Burmese American heritage broadly available. Excitedly, we also have the opportunity to integrate this project onto The Wing's forthcoming dedicated page on the national "Your Story, Our Story" website headed by the Lower Eastside Tenement Museum, sharing the project and King County heritage more broadly. All oral histories and digitized materials will be preserved through our Governor Gary Locke Library and Community Heritage Center. Oral history and digitization participants will receive copies of their own materials. Project materials will then be available for free to the public at the Library and through the Museum's onsite and online collection (<http://db.wingluke.org/>). We maintain over 25,000 educational resources and materials including books, periodicals, oral and video histories, photographs, historic documents and other artifacts related to the local history, culture and art of Asian Pacific Americans. "Stories across Generations" helps to strengthen our collection by adding more refugee stories as well as materials from the diverse Burmese American community.

Relevant Expertise / Experience / Accomplishments

The Wing is the only pan-Asian Pacific American museum in the nation, recognized for this unique role by designation as an Affiliated Area of the National Park Service and as one of the first affiliates of the Smithsonian Institution in the Pacific Northwest. The Wing's exhibitions and programs are developed through our nationally recognized Community Advisory Committee (CAC) method (<http://www.wingluke.org/community-process/>). The Wing has institutionalized a practice of engaging everyday community members to envision and implement exhibitions, and programs, working hand-in-hand with community members to create powerful, authentic stories and experiences. We work with multiple generations of diverse APA communities, including newer immigrants, refugees and migrants from Southeast and South Asia and the Pacific Islands. Community members meet over 12-24 months to organize community participation, determine themes and storylines, create exhibitions and related community programs, ensuring direct community empowerment and ownership. "Stories across Generations" will be rooted in our community process, led by a Community Advisory Committee in partnership with Northwest Communities of Burma. (See attachment for partial list and bios of Committee members.)

The project lead is Michelle Kumata, our Exhibit Director, who also developed The Wing's 2010 "A Refugee's Journey of Survival and Hope" exhibit, and several exhibits related to the refugee experience (2015 "Naga Sheds Its Skin: Khmer Americans", 2012 "Vietnam in the Rearview Mirror", and 2010 "Paj Ntaub: Stories of Hmong in Washington"). Ms. Kumata has extensive experience collecting oral histories for exhibits and training community members to do the same. Oral histories will be transcribed and translated with drafts reviewed by The Wing staff, community partners and participating youth. Five interviews will be selected for videography based on willingness of participants and diversity of stories. Ms. Kumata also has produced several easily-transportable pop-up displays,

including “Meet Me at Higo” and “Nisei Veteran” for community festivals and outdoor gatherings.

The digital archiving event will be led by The Wing’s Collection Manager Bob Fisher who has been with the Museum since 1996 and is responsible for overseeing The Wing’s Collections, Governor Gary Locke Library and Community Heritage Center, museum loans, acquisitions and accessioning of artifacts, and online collection database. Mr. Fisher implemented the Museum’s digitization program in 2000 and has since been the lead for the digitization of over 7,000 photographs and imaging of over 1,000 objects and 500 archival documents. Mr. Fisher has attended the Northeast Document Conservation Center School for Scanning at the Getty Center and holds a Digitizing and Sound Recordings certificate from the American Association for State and Local History. The Wing follows standard museum practices as outlined in our collection management policy and would include providing participants with appropriate loan documents, use permission forms, protective folders and containers, restricted access to original materials, monitored environment and stable and restricted storage areas. Additionally, we will adhere to and reference other sources for digitization such as the Federal Digitization Guidelines Initiative, American National Standards, Getty Conservation Institute and Heritage Preservation. Volunteers from Northwest Communities of Burma will be trained and ready to gather metadata describing each item. Volunteers will also share about how to best preserve physical items at home and provide them with a simple handout with best practices.

Managing the public presentation is Vivian Chan who has been the Museum’s Community Programs Manager since 2000. Ms. Chan plans and implements a broad range of public programs both onsite and offsite (approximately 60 each year). Last summer Ms. Chan assisted in hosting 80 educators from around the country who attended The Wing’s National Endowment for the Humanities Landmarks of American History and Culture workshops for teachers. The public presentation and project components will be publicized through a range of media outlets (see under “implementation”).

Project Implementation

Previous meetings with our Community Advisory Committee (CAC) established the components for this project. Preliminary work has already begun including:

- January-March 2017- Begin outreach for oral history trainings through community networks (12 youth signed up as of February);
- March 2017- Continue meeting with CAC to discuss oral history interview questions and confirm training locations and desired make-up of participants;
- April-May 2017- Confirm participants for oral history trainings, finalize training materials, continue to publicize events through community networks and The Wing media outlets.

Project implementation will consist of:

4Culture Panel

- June 2017- onward - Hold monthly meetings of the CAC related to project development and implementation;
- July-August 2017- Conduct two oral history trainings, gather oral histories, purchase digitization equipment, test and prepare for digitization event;
- September-October 2017- Hold one-day digitization event; transcribe and translate oral histories;
- November 2017-January 2018- Produce pop-up display to showcase project and its stories and materials;
- February 2018- Hold public presentation; begin work on online resource;
- April-May 2018- Complete online resource, appraise digitized materials and incorporate materials and metadata into The Wing's database, conduct evaluation of collected materials and project overall.

After the close of the project, materials will be made available through The Wing's Governor Gary Locke Library & Community Heritage Center, the Museum's onsite and online collection (<http://db.wingluke.org/>). Evaluation of the project will help inform future community projects to gather oral histories, digitize materials and present stories and will be completed through a summative survey of participants and community partners, quantitative attendance tracking for the oral history trainings, digitization event and public presentation, and anecdotal notes from project staff.

For a lasting contribution to King County heritage, primary outcomes include:

- Creating a platform for the Burmese American community to share their personal stories and heritage in King County across generations and among diverse ethnic groups as well as to the broader public;
- Training youth and families to gather oral histories and educating community members about the value of preserving heritage materials;
- Creating permanent resources to share about the Burmese American experience in King County; and
- Raising general awareness and understanding of the Burmese American experience and refugee community and recognizing that they are an integral part of King County's heritage.

And specific objectives concurrently will be to:

- Directly engage 10 Community Advisory Committee members and 1 project partner to gather oral histories, digitize materials and produce public presentation, pop-up display and online resource;
- Compile 20 oral histories of Burmese American community members (15 audio and 5 video); digitize photos, artifacts and documents from 10 more, along with research to be highlighted through the online resource and archived in our Governor Gary Locke Library and Community Heritage Center (free and open to the public) and made accessible for future research;

4Culture Panel

- Reach 100 attendees at the public presentation, with the pop-up display on view; and
- Publicize through a range of media outlets including The Wing's e-news (13,000 households), quarterly calendar (12,000), educator newsletter (1,000), website (25,000 monthly visits), and social media (7,500/Facebook, 3,600/Twitter).

Project Budget*

Expenses		Estimate
Planning	\$0	<input type="checkbox"/>
Design	\$0	<input type="checkbox"/>
Construction	\$0	<input type="checkbox"/>
People	\$26,785	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Soft Costs	\$0	<input type="checkbox"/>
Facility Purchase	\$0	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fundraising	\$0	<input type="checkbox"/>
Services	\$3,400	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Supplies	\$500	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Promotion	\$2,120	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Transportation/Shipping	\$1,000	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Documentation/Assessment	\$0	<input type="checkbox"/>
Equipment/Fixtures	\$9,900	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
In-Kind	\$6,800	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Other	\$12,745	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Total:	\$63,250	
Income		Confirmed
Applicant	\$34,200	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Foundations	\$0	<input type="checkbox"/>
Corporations	\$0	<input type="checkbox"/>
Government	\$12,000	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Individual Donors	\$0	<input type="checkbox"/>
Earned	\$0	<input type="checkbox"/>
In-Kind	\$6,800	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Other	\$0	<input type="checkbox"/>
4Culture Request	\$10,250	
Total:	\$63,250	

* Empty budget fields were not included in this application.

Project Budget Notes

The proposed budget requests \$10,250 from 4Culture (out of a total budget of \$63,250) to provide stipends for youth who assist with the oral history gathering (\$4,500 out of \$6000 total cost, 20 youth x 20 hrs x \$15/hr); \$1000 in transportation for youth (\$50 ea for 20 youth); pop-up display materials (\$2500); graphic designer/design and fabrication of pop-up display (\$1500); audio/video recorders and scanner/computer/USB drives for oral history and digitization equipment (\$750 out of the total cost of \$7400).

The 10 Community Advisory Committee members and 5 digitization event volunteers will donate their services at a value of \$6,800 (10 members x 28 hrs @ \$20 and 5 x 12 hrs @ \$20/hr).

4Culture Panel

We have received partial funding of \$12,000 for this project from the National Endowment for the Humanities Common Heritage grant program. This NEH Funding (\$12,000) plus other funding from The Wing (\$34,200), covers: The Wing's staff and speaker and including \$1500 of the cost for youth stipends (total \$20,785), facility space rentals for public programs (\$3,400); meeting/event supplies (\$500); advertising/promotion (\$2120); a portion of the equipment cost of audio/video recorders and scanner/computer/USB drives (\$6650); and other (22% benefits based on staffing total (\$4,133); and 18% overhead based on total excluding in-kind (\$8,612)).

Support Materials

Support materials may include Work Sample Description, Externally Hosted Work Sample URLs, Board of Directors, Activities List, and/or Equipment List in addition to other attachments.

WORK SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

01: The 1976 photograph shows Simon Khin with his family in Rangoon, Burma, right before being sponsored to come to the U.S. in October 1977.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Co-President

Ellen Ferguson (2018)

Director of Community Relations, Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, University of Washington

Co-President

Casey Bui (2020)

Realtor/Managing Broker, Windermere Real Estate

Vice President

Katherine Cheng (2019)

Manager, Corporate Citizenship and
Community Relations, Expedia, Inc.

Secretary

Mimi Gan (2018)

Independent Filmmaker and Producer

Treasurer

Bruce Brundige (2019)

LPL Financial Advisor,
Seattle Metropolitan Financial Services

Past President

Gloria Lung Wakayama (2018)

Attorney/Partner, Harris, Mericle & Wakayama

Tera Beach (2019)

Community Volunteer

Sai Chaleunphonh (2020)

Partner, Marpac Construction, LLC

Kenyon Chan, PhD (2020)

President Emeritus, University of Washington-Bothell

Nanette Fok (2020)

Grantwriter

Jamie Ford (2019)

Author

Misun Chung Gerrick (2018)

Architect, Olson Kundig Architects

Bo Lee (2018)

Vice President/Senior Portfolio at BNY Mellon

Judd Lee (2020)

CFO, Parallels

Donna Lou (2020)

Community Volunteer

Patricia Norikane Logerwell (2020)

Community Volunteer

Paul Mar (2020)

Retired Director of Real Estate Development, Seattle -Chinatown International District
Preservation and Development Authority

Midori Matsui (2019)

Community Volunteer

JoAnn Mills (2018)

Senior Consultant, Collins Group

4Culture Panel

Victor Mizumori (2020)

Retired Senior Vice President and Division Manager, Washington Federal

Jill Nishi (2019)

Director of the Office of the President and Chief of Staff for U.S. Programs, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Savitha Pathi (2019)

Development Director, Climate Solutions

Michael Shiosaki (2020)

Director of Planning & Development, City of Seattle Parks and Recreation

Diane Sugimura (2019)

Retired Director, City of Seattle's Department of Planning and Development

Mark Takagi (2019)

Wine, Beer and Spirits Specialist, Metropolitan Market

Judy Tobin (2020)

Community Volunteer

Larry Yok, PhD (2018)

Adjunct Faculty, Highline Community College and San Francisco State University

Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience – March 2017
Stories across Generations: Burmese Americans in King County

Biographical Information for select Community Advisory Committee Members

Simon Khin – President Northwest Communities of Burma (NWCBC), Karen ethnic group, emigrated from Burma in 1977; has worked to assist the persecuted and voiceless – in Burmese camps at the Thai-Burma border and in the U.S., assisting refugees from Burma with language and job skills and organizing social and educational activities. Founded the “Coalition for Refugees from Burma” and the “Northwest Communities of Burma” to promote unity among the many ethnic and religious groups. He also works with refugee youth, and organized free summer camps in English, math, drama, P.E. and computers.

Stella Orehia – VP NWCBC, Associate Professor, Health Promotion & Management, Bellevue College. Former Olympic athlete. Born in Burma. In 2013 she completed a 2,000 mile “Riding for Refugees” sabbatical to benefit local Burmese refugees. Volunteer health educator at the Mae Tao Health Clinic at the Thai-Burma border.

Su Myat Thu – Secretary NWCBC, Sino-Burmese ethnic group; came to the U.S. from Yangon, Burma in 2009 as a student. After getting her B.A. in Psychology at Agnes Scott College, she worked as the coordinator of the Agnes Scott Center for Writing and Speaking. She is currently working on an MA-PhD in English language and composition at the University of Washington, Seattle and plans to teach writing at the college level after graduate school. She is an advocate of liberal arts education, language diversity, democratic language policy, second language writing, and working for immigrant students.

Gayhtoo Thaw - Director NWCBC, Karen ethnic group; came to the United States in 2008, the oldest child of a widowed mother; Social Worker involved with Coalition for Refugees from Burma, Karenni Community of Washington, Karen American Communities Foundation, Riding for Burmese Refugees; worked while her siblings went to high school; and then worked to put herself through college.

James (Pyi Thain) Kyaw - Director NWCBC, born in Myanmar, Yangon. After graduating from high school, he participated in the U.S. government’s student cultural exchange program to attend a year of high school in Springfield, Tennessee. Afterward, he continued his education at Arizona State University where he received a Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering. He has worked at Space Data Corporation in Arizona as a Mechanical Engineer, and Schlumberger Oilfield Services Company in North Dakota and Wyoming as a Field Engineer. Currently, he lives in Kirkland, WA and works as an Equipment Engineer at the Boeing.

Rozanna Fang – Director NWCBC, has done research on pregnancy risk factors among Thai women, awarded 2015 WAFP (Washington Academy of Family Physicians) Diverse Constituencies Scholarship. Her interest in social change and health equity stem from experiences tutoring immigrant and refugee youth in Seattle and working abroad in Haiti and along the Thai-Burma border. Ms. Fang has organized with Seattle Solidarity Network against unfair landlords and raised money through Social Justice Fund to support local grassroots networks.

Clifford Chankim, Director NWCBC, Chin ethnic group, refugee from Burma, currently working as Employment and Social Service Case manager with Refugee Women’s Alliance (ReWA) for over (7) years and serving refugee and immigrant population in South King County; President of Seattle Chin Youth

Organization; member of Seattle Chin Community; Seattle Lai Welfare Committee; Seattle Chin Baptist Church; and used to work as Interpreter at the United Nation High Commission for Refugee (UNHCR) office in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Larry Dohrs – U.S. Campaign for Burma, visiting scholar in Southeast Asian Studies, consultant on Education and Sustainable Development in Southeast Asia.

First Days_Fleeing Myanmar_Ta Kwe Say Lands in Los Angeles

<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/less-week-after-opening-2017-h-1b-visa-cap-hit-n553136>

Apr 16 2015, 9:12 am ET

by NBC News



(L-R) Ta Kwe Say's mother, Ta, and his brother in Burma. Courtesy Ta Kwe Say.

First Days is a weekly series in partnership with the [South Asian American Digital Archive](#), documenting the first-person stories of immigrant America. This week, the story of Ta Kwe Say - who left Dawai, Burma for Los Angeles, California in 2007 at the age of 15 - as told to interviewer, Julie Linn.

BACKGROUND

Myanmar, also known as Burma, has a history of an abusive militant government. Dangerous conflict has forced many Burmese people into refugee camps and resettlement in surrounding countries. Increasingly, they are ending up in the United States.

Ta Kwe Say, a naturalized citizen currently attending The University of Washington, arrived in Seattle on July 3, 2007. In Burma, his ethnic identity as a Karen was essentially his own worst enemy.

The Karen National Union (KNU), with its armed wing the Karen National Liberation Army, is one of groups rebelling against the central government.

Many of Ta's relatives were intimately involved with the KNU's efforts to undermine the central government. This made Ta and his family prime targets of the Burmese military.

"In Burma, we had to be very careful not to let people know who we were. We had to hide our identity," said Ta.



Ta Kwe Say (seated) with his brother and cousins in Burma. Courtesy Ta Kwe Say.

In search of a better life, Ta's mother left him at a Burmese boarding school to go to Thailand. She was eventually granted permission to resettle permanently in the United States.

Ta was still enrolled in the boarding school in Burma when his mother asked him to go to the U.S. with her. He initially refused, and his mother left for America without him.

"I didn't want to go. I think I was just young and didn't understand. It's scary to leave your country and all your friends," Ta reflected.

Around the time he was 12 years old, he and a few family friends moved to Bangkok. For about six months, his home was tucked away in apartment complexes that rose 10 or more stories. He lived in a single unit with about seven to 10 other people, five of whom were children. It was made up of a small living room, one bathroom, and a balcony that served as their kitchen.

A Christian pastor housed him for the rest of his stay in Bangkok. During this time, because he was essentially in hiding, Ta received no formal education. Most of his time was spent inside or at church.

Ta and other refugees seeking asylum in Thailand often do not have the option of staying in the country. They apply for refugee resettlement through the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The IOM works closely with governments and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to provide legal assistance, not limited to temporary documentation. However, documents did not help to quell refugees' fears.

"The police can come and knock anytime. You can be deported or put in jail," said Ta.



Ta Kwe Say with his mother, brother, sister-in-law and her mother, and nephew in Minnesota. Courtesy Ta Kwe Say.

The IOM also works with NGOs and other partners that help provide direct resources for refugees. However, support is often minimal.

"We got enough money to eat everyday, but it wasn't really good. Not very nutritional," explained Ta.

Garrett Kostin, former director of the Burma Study Center (BSC) in Chiang Mai, Thailand served Burmese migrants and refugees.

Kostin explained that even with recent positive developments in Burma's political sphere, there were no fewer migrants in Chiang Mai.

"They're waiting to see if the change is genuine," said Kostin.

Many still seek permanent resettlement.

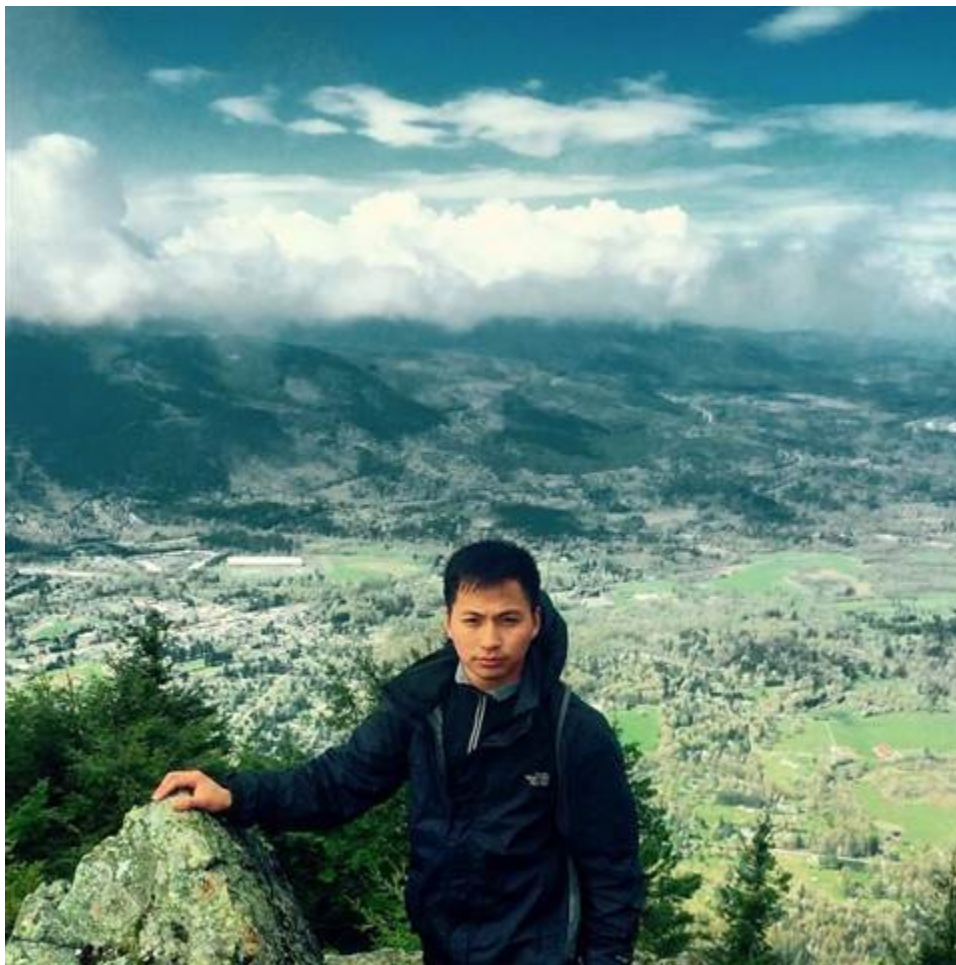
Simon Khin organizes Northwest Communities of Burma, based in Seattle. He sees a general increase in the Burmese refugee community as a whole.

"There are always new refugees," said Khin.

At an event organized by the Burma/Myanmar Student Association UW, a few individuals from earlier waves of Burmese refugees echoed Khin's observation.

Earlier generations describe that they were the only Burmese family in the neighborhood when they first moved to the area. They now watch as the community grows.

Ta's mother was one of the earlier pioneers and sponsored Ta's immigration to America. After about two years living in Thailand, Ta was finally able to move to the U.S. and be reunited with his mother after nine years.



Ta Kwe Say recalls his first day in America. Courtesy Ta Kwe Say.

Ta's Story

"The first day [in America] was July three, so before Independence Day. So it's like, what's going on? Like, is that shooting? I didn't know, but it was fireworks.

I was about maybe 15, 16. I was landed in L.A., and we had to go through security checks. There is a lot of cops and dogs.

So in the airplane, actually, we have a lot of refugees, from, coming from, could be from refugee camps, or could be from Bangkok. And we went to L.A. together, then we split to different cities.

It's kinda scary, you know, traveling by yourself, alone, from one country to another.



Ta Kwe Say poses with friends in Seattle, Washington. Courtesy Ta Kwe Say.

I was by myself coming to Seattle. The security, or one of the people who work in airport greeted me. I had to wait in airport in their office to wait for my mom to pick me up.

First time I see her maybe since, I was maybe seven, eight years old.

Emotionally, I am, I'm happy. Because I haven't seen my mother for a very long time.

And also sad that I had to leave what I know about Burma or Thailand. Getting here is a really good thing, but you don't want to leave your home country.



Ta Kwe Say with his family at his high school graduation in Kent, Washington. Courtesy Ta Kwe Say.

The first day pretty much is for me is being in a new place, and being in apartment. Never had really nice apartment before. So like, oh, the house has a carpet. Okay, great.

And also it's so cool that they have hot showers, cool showers, or you can mix it. In Burma and Thailand, we don't have that.

It's all different. It's more organized here. It's cleaner. And even having my own place with bathtub, is really like a cool thing."



Ta Kwe Say's story was first featured by the South Asian American Digital Archive. Courtesy Ta Kwe Say.

Topics [Asian America](#)

First Published Apr 16 2015, 9:09 am ET

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.

December 16, 2010

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.



forging peace across divides

February 23, 2017

4Culture

Heritage Special Projects

101 Prefontaine PI S

Seattle, WA 98104

RE: *Seattle's Burmese American Refugee History Project*

Dear Review Committee:

I write in support of the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience (The Wing) and to confirm my commitment to the Museum's proposed *Burmese American Refugee History Project*. The project will include working firsthand with heritage resources, a significant youth component, oral history training workshops and oral history gathering, digitization of objects and photographs, and research, and development of a framework for a 2019 exhibition by The Wing's Community Advisory Committee made up of local Burmese Americans.

Northwest Communities of Burma (NWCB) builds community among refugees and immigrants from Burma by giving them a reason to come together, enjoy friendly activities, and become more familiar with their fellows, who come from different ethnicity, faiths, and backgrounds. It strives to remove barriers between different ethnic groups of Burma and works to build strong community ties through community events, education, and advocacy.

The Wing is the only pan-Asian Pacific American museum in the nation whose mission is to connect everyone to the rich history, dynamic cultures and art of Asian Pacific Americans. Asian Pacific Americans have a rich history that is integral to the American story and as the fastest growing population, at 18% of Seattle/King County residents, it is vital to properly record and preserve this heritage. In addition to its community-based exhibitions, The Wing collects and preserves oral histories, artwork, historical documents, family heirlooms, and books dedicated to sharing the Asian Pacific American experience.

Burma is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world with more than 130 distinctive subgroups. The Wing's project will provide the participating youths and the broader community with a deeper understanding of one of the fastest growing refugee populations in Washington State and the U.S. Materials gathered from this project will lay the foundation for The Wing's exhibition in 2019.

I am looking forward to consulting with The Wing as they work with the local Burmese American community to plan out the project. Thank you for your consideration to support The Wing and their work for our community.

Sincerely,

Simon Khin
Founder & President, Northwest Communities of Burma
(206) 697-5743
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Kent youth ring in new year, Karen style

by [Hillary Sanders](#) - Jan 12, 2014

<http://www.seattleglobalist.com/2014/01/12/burma-kent-youth-new-year-karen-style/18843>



For the Burmese community in Kent, the Karen New Year is a chance to show off traditions that have long been repressed back in Myanmar.

The sound of the [Karen](#) horn and drums resonated throughout the packed gymnasium, marking the beginning of the 'Don Dances.' The performers moved in perfect sync, not once seeming out of breath.

Members of the Burmese community gathered at the [Kent Covenant Church](#) on Jan. 4 to celebrate the Karen New Year with dance, song, and food.

[The Northwest Communities of Burma](#) (NWCB) organized the event for the seventh concurrent year to bring Karen tradition to the greater Seattle area.

Karen is a state located in the southeast region the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, more commonly known as Burma. Violence against ethnic groups at the hand of the Burmese Army has driven many Karen from their homes since the 1940s, with local populations settling in Oregon, Washington, and Canada.

It is an extremely diverse state, with three major dialects spoken by its people. Several attendees at the new years celebration could speak more than one of these dialects. According to one volunteer, Bel Wah, this can make communication difficult, especially during the two weeks that the youth were practicing their dances for the event.

The dancing was followed by a cooking competition in which Karen dishes were tasted, judged and served to the audience.



Youth perform a traditional Karen New Year dance on Jan. 4 at Kent Covenant Church. (Photo by Hillary Sanders)



The red, white, and blue clothing and head bands worn during the dance performances demonstrate respect for the Karen flag. (Photo by Hillary Sanders)



Dancers of various age groups performed the 'Don Dances,' which are the traditional songs and dance of the Karen people. (Photo by Hillary Sanders)



The performers wrap up the Don Dances with a salute to the Karen flag. (Photo by Hillary Sanders)