

Refugee Sponsorship

St. Clement's has a long history of involvement with the sponsorship of refugees. Recently Parish Council agreed to the sponsorship of a Karen family who had been living in the MaLa Refugee Camp in Thailand since 2006. They are registered refugees with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. They are: Saw Tsar Gay Htoo (father, 39 years old and a teacher in the high school of MaLa camp), his wife Lu Kay Paw and 2 boys: Alexander (9) and Lay Kler (7).

We'd like to give you a bit of cultural background (drawn from a paper prepared by IOM Bangkok in 2006 as a tool for settlement workers and sponsors) on the Karen people, their lives and struggles as refugees and how we envision their settlement here in Vancouver once they arrive.

"According to some sources, the Karen people are descendants of the Mongols. They were among the first groups to settle in the area that is now called Burma/Myanmar. When the British colonized Burma in the 19th century, the Karen were favoured by the British over the Burmans because of their superior education. At the same time, missionaries from the West, especially Baptists, converted many to Christianity. When the British departed in 1948 civil war broke out and Karen became a hunted and persecuted people. Today, many Karens continue to flee Myanmar for refugee camps in Thailand.

Life in the camps is basic and tedious. Refugees do not have the freedom to leave, to see betterment for their lives and there is little employment within. Each camp has its own refugee-run schools.

The Karen naming system is a challenge for Westerners to understand. The Western pattern of 'first name' and 'last name' does not exist. Most often, a Karen will have a string of 3 or more names; some, however, may have but a single name."

It may surprise many to learn our involvement with Karen refugees date back to the early 1990's. One of our parishioners, Mary Davie, travelled to Thailand fairly often with her husband, Harry. With contributions from the St. Clement congregation she would take gifts to Burmese refugees in camps along the Thai border. St. Clement's youth group contributed to schooling costs of a student by fund raising and these funds enabled a promising student to attend a boarding school.



Mary Davie, on the right, travelling by boat to remote camps along the Thai/Burma Border.

In 2009 the PWRDF (the Primate's World Relief and Development Fund) celebrated its 50th anniversary by acting as a sponsoring agency for 50 refugee families. St Clement's, together with the NV Deanery and Highlands United Church were asked to sponsor two visa-ready Karen families. Their camp, deemed unlivable by UNHCR, was in process of being closed and our parish was determined to provide these two young families with a better and safer life in Canada. Later that summer we welcomed Kler & Eh Moo and little Eh Tha Nay as well as Lu Wah, Pak Gay and Lau Ra to Vancouver. They settled very successfully in Surrey where there is a good-sized Karen community. It was a huge step of faith that paid wonderful dividends to us all. Both families attended Deanery church services sometimes dressed in traditional Karen clothing.



Kler, Ehmo, Eh Tha Nay and Juliana (born in Canada). All are now Canadian citizens and proud owners of their own home. Recently Kler Taw became a pastor at his local Karen church.

The successful sponsoring of two Karen families was such a rewarding and rich experience that, as money and time allowed, we continued to sponsor refugees. In 2015 REST (Regional Ecumenical Sponsorship Team) formed and St. Clement's continues to this day as an active participant in sponsoring families from Syria, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo and Afghanistan.

This Sunday the Zamani family will be coming to St. Clement's to say a personal thank you to the people who prayed for them, and funded them for the 2.5 years they waited for their eventual entry into Canada.

Visiting Opa on Bowen Island.



Nasrin and Maryam.

