

## Karen immigrants, who began arriving in the U.S. in April, share Asian and American dishes at a picnic in Buchmiller Park

**In America, on to a new life Karen refugees from Burma seek help and a future in Lancaster County --  
By HELEN COLWELL ADAMS, Staff writer (Sunday News - Published: Sep 09, 2007 12:11 AM EST)**

LANCASTER COUNTY, Pa - When the Burmese soldiers bombed his village, Bwe Paw fled for the Thailand border. He was 9 years old. His parents were among the dead in his Karen village. Paw spent five days hiking through the jungle to reach the Mae La refugee camp across the Thai border. He spent the next 12 years there.

On a recent Saturday afternoon, Bwe Paw was sitting on a picnic bench at Buchmiller Park, remembering his journey from the jungles of Burma to the suburbs of Lancaster. He was surrounded by 25 other Karen refugees, their American sponsors and friends at a picnic to welcome the county's newest neighbors.

The Karen, an ethnic group in Burma, have battled the Burmese government for decades and often have been driven out of their villages in campaigns of what their American advocates call ethnic cleansing. Finally cleared to immigrate, the Karen are settling around the country — including, with the help of Church World Service and American Baptists, in Lancaster County.



Bwe Paw, one of the recent Karen immigrants to Lancaster County, hopes to become a history teacher someday. (Blaine T. Shahan, Sunday News)

"I believe our new neighbors, the Burmese Karen, will add to this pool of good will and compassion we have here," said one of their advocates, the Rev. Bill Offutt. "When they are settled in and able to show their appreciation for the kindness shown to them, I know they will offer a helping hand from a willing heart."

### Oppression and escape

The Karen are the second largest ethnic group in Burma, with about 7 million people, according to the Karen Human Rights Group. Since World War II, Karen resistance forces have fought for autonomy. In response, the military junta that controls Burma has forced ethnic populations to leave their villages and move to army-controlled areas. An estimated 150,000 Karen are living in nine refugee camps in Thailand. Another half-million to 1 million are hiding within Burma. The Karen rights group's Web site explains that since 1997, "close to 200 villages in Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts of northern Karen State have been shelled and burned without warning, driving the population into hiding in the forest." That's what happened to Bwe Paw.

When the Burmese army attacked his village, and his parents were killed, Paw and his brother and sister walked for five days, through jungle and over mountains, to reach the refugee camp, which housed 40,000 people. His siblings are still in Thailand; his sister is trying to immigrate. "Sometimes we don't have enough fresh air," he said. "It was so close — so many people are in the camp."

There also wasn't enough fresh water, said Eh Wah, a group leader for about 700 families in the camp. He and his wife and two children escaped after their village was bombed. Because the Karen are split between Buddhist and Christian, Wah said, Buddhist Karen were firing on Christian Karen heading for Thailand.

When they arrived, "they were restricted to the camp and couldn't go outside. If they did, they were driven back," Eunice Thetgyi, a Karen who immigrated here 30 years ago, said in translating for Wah. Families lived in small huts, with an entire family in one room.

The Karen were among some of the earliest converts to Christianity in Southeast Asia through the efforts of the man credited as the father of world missions, Baptist Adoniram Judson, who arrived in Burma in 1813. Their plight is documented on the Web, including Karen Konnection ([www.karenkonnection.org](http://www.karenkonnection.org)), run by American Baptist missionaries Duane and Marcia Binkley. Through the Binkleys, the Rev. Offutt, a retired Baptist pastor who lives in Lancaster County and serves a ministry in Bear, Del., got involved in the resettlement efforts.

With the help of Westgate Baptist Church and its pastor, the Rev. Roy Johnsen, Offutt organized a banquet last month that raised more than \$3,000 for the resettlement. "I know of [the Karen] as a happy, joyful, singing people who are loving and kind even though they are considered the lowest of the lower class by the Thai people," Offutt said. "... So when I heard that some of them were coming here and when I heard of the limited resources of Church World Service to provide for the large number coming, I determined to do something to help, even though I am a newcomer to the area myself. But I know that the people here are people of compassion and faith. They only need to be told of a need, and they will give a wonderful response. And this is what happened."

#### Coming to America

In 2006, the U.S. State Department permitted 9,300 Karen refugees from one camp to resettle in the United States. This year the government approved refugees from Mae La camp. Church World Service, a national ecumenical agency that works with refugees, resettled 26 Karen — six single men and four families — in the Lancaster County area. Another 18 may be coming later this month.

The picnic at Buchmiller Park on Saturday, Sept. 1, was the first time the local immigrants had come together since arriving in America, in small groups, starting in April. Some are living in York. Others are in Lancaster, Strasburg, Millersville and Elizabethtown. All are sponsored by local churches. Bwe Paw, now 21, is living just south of Lancaster. He has a temporary job picking corn. "I wanted to come to this country to get an education," he said. Someday he'd like to be a history teacher.

Sheila McGeehan, the Lancaster director of Church World Service, said more sponsors are needed. Sponsorship means a commitment of three to six months, during which the church provides housing, food, friendship, advice, orientation, transportation and help getting Social Security numbers and jobs, registering children in school and placing adults in English classes. The immigrants need intensive aid, translator Eunice Thetgyi observed. Even before the refugee camp, the Karen lived in rural areas, where school isn't mandatory, books are scarce and babies aren't diapered, she noted. "It's like having a newborn," she said.

At the picnic, one man approached Mindy Nolt of Church World Service and showed her an envelope. She explained the envelope contained a bank statement and that he'd get one every month, showing how much money he has.

Eh Wah told Thetgyi that "here there are a lot of things he has to go through that he has not gone through" — applying for papers, going to school. The Karen feel they can't do those things on their own, which makes them feel helpless, he explained. Despite the transition, the Karen said they're happy to be in America.

Bwe Paw said he likes the weather — during monsoon season in Burma, "in our camp we have to wear boots to school" because of the mud — and he's still adjusting to American food.

Eh Doh Htoo Wah, 21, Eh Wah's son, has been here since July 12. While he is still looking for a job, he said he likes his new life. And the food's OK, he added. His father, whose oldest son is still in Thailand, arrived in mid-August. He plans to enroll in an English class and find a job. Eh Wah likes America very much, Thetgyi said. "Because of the freedom."