



A CHAMPION OF EDUCATION

Building Schools, Creating Hope

By Paul Grondahl



They call her *Tharamupadoh* in Burmese, “great teacher,” a moniker of respect that honors the daring and pioneering work of Naw Paw Ray. The prize-winning Burmese educator has defied authorities, endured imprisonment, and resisted harassment in order to build schools that provide an education for thousands of persecuted refugee children with no legal standing who struggle to survive along the border of Thailand and Myanmar, formerly known as Burma.

Since 1998, about 2 million Burmese from the Mon, Karen, Karenni, and Shan ethnic minority groups have fled ethnic persecution, sectarian violence, military harassment, economic hardship and political oppression in their homeland. About 500,000 are legal migrants, 150,000 live in refugee camps and the rest eke out an illegal, marginal existence as roving masses of "internally displaced."

Naw Paw Ray, a member of the Karen (pronounced kuh-REN) ethnic



group, was one of those forgotten souls. At 13, she fled with her family into the jungle when soldiers from a military junta targeted the Karen community and set fire to their small village. As they scooped up what few belongings they could carry and ran in terror, the young girl took one last look at the place she called home and watched the small schoolhouse where she studied engulfed in flames.

"It was terrible. I cried and cried. I wanted to be a doctor," she said. Her dream was destroyed and a long nightmare of living in fear, and staying on the run, was just beginning.

Small of stature but possessed of a big heart and limitless ambition, she used her resilience and resourcefulness to succeed as an educator against all odds. Paw Ray, 53, has won international acclaim for founding the Burmese Migrant Workers Education Committee (BMWEC). She opened her first school in a bamboo hut in 1999 for 25 students between the ages of 3 and 12. Today, she operates 24 schools

for about 3,800 students along the Thai-Burmese border and oversees a staff of 180 teachers and 15 administrators who work for her not-for-profit humanitarian organization. She is the subject of a recent documentary, *All You Need Is Love*, narrated by Sigourney Weaver, and among her donors are the director James Cameron (*Titanic*, *Avatar*) and his wife, Suzy Amis, who visited Paw

Ray's schools in Thailand. She has received international recognition for her work and a fellowship from Ashokan, a global humanitarian organization.

Paw Ray was in Albany recently, visiting the oldest of her five children, a 32-year-old

daughter, LueLu Pathaw. LueLu lives with her husband and children in the city's Delaware Avenue neighborhood, which is home to a large Burmese population. About 1,200 Burmese, primarily of the Karen ethnic group, have been resettled in the Albany area since 2005 by the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI). They are among more than 2,500 refugees USCRI has resettled in Albany from two dozen embattled countries that also include Thailand, Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Nepal, Ethiopia, and Eritrea.



Nearly half of the Albany school district's 1,000 immigrant students are Karen, the largest single

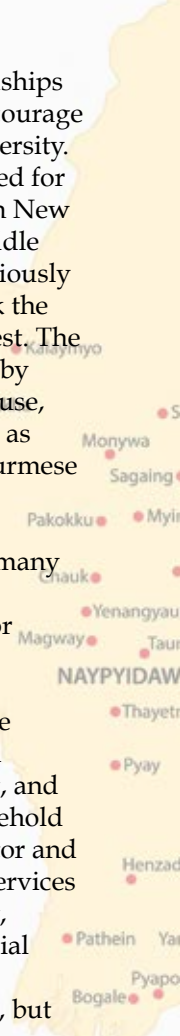
immigrant group, and their language recently surpassed Spanish as the second-most commonly spoken in Albany's schools next to English. The dramatic increase of Karen students and other refugees has strained the district's resources for ENL (English as a new language). Their numbers

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also present educators with an opportunity to discuss the hardships of migrant populations and encourage students to explore cultural diversity. The Albany school district hosted for the first time in January a Karen New Year celebration at Hackett Middle School. The gathering had previously been held in a city park to mark the traditional end of the rice harvest. The Albany community was joined by Karen people from Utica, Syracuse, and other upstate cities, as well as Hartford, Conn., for a day of Burmese food, music, dance and culture.

"The Karen are wonderful people who have overcome so many hardships," said Debbie Taylor, director of corporate services for SAANYS and a volunteer with USCRI. For several years, she has assisted two dozen Burmese refugee families in Albany with transportation, literacy training, and donations of clothing and household items. She has served as a mentor and de facto caseworker to secure services ranging from remedial tutoring, doctor's appointments, and social services.

"They do need a lot of help, but it is very rewarding and I have seen so many success stories," said Taylor, who often meets Burmese refugee families at the airport when they arrive in Albany in winter wearing shorts, tank tops and flip-flops, with few belongings and not knowing any English. The refugees receive a one-time federal government subsidy of \$952 for each adult and child to cover an apartment security deposit, the first month's rent, and basic household supplies. With the efforts of a committed band of volunteers like Taylor, the Burmese refugees have graduated from Albany High School, enrolled at local colleges, landed full-time jobs, saved up and bought their



first homes – in some cases through Habitat for Humanity.

Naw Paw Ray and her daughter are among the success stories. “I don’t remember anything of our time hiding in the forest,” said her daughter, LueLu Pathaw. She grew up in a refugee camp in Thailand and was resettled in Albany through USCRI in 2009. She learned English, raised five children with her husband, earned a GED and works as a health aide at a nursing home. The couple bought a home and LueLu earned an associate’s degree in business at Hudson Valley Community College, where she received a Second Chance Scholarship and made the President’s List. She also works as an interpreter for the Albany school district and has been accepted into the accounting program at the University at Albany.

“She’s amazing, just like her mother,” said Taylor, who’s known the family since they arrived in Albany years ago. She marvels at their rapid assimilation. “Mother and daughter are always smiling when I see them. They are both so positive.” Sadly, Paw Ray’s husband died of cancer a year ago, just a few months after moving in with his daughter LueLu and her family in Albany.

Taylor introduced me to the mother and daughter on a recent evening at the Delaware Avenue branch of the Albany Public Library, near the daughter’s home. Paw Ray had just returned from a fundraising trip for her schools through Pennsylvania, Georgia, Nebraska, Indiana, and Minnesota. She met with educators, religious leaders, and politicians. She returned in early February to her organization’s headquarters in Thailand, following a meeting with a major donor in the Netherlands who provides classroom supplies. The schools are poorly equipped and often only have a few textbooks, which teachers read from while students jot down notes. Teachers write on blackboards primarily, but they have a few computers with Internet connections for high school students. She is seeking more donations to improve classroom technology and to upgrade the facilities. Another

daughter, who lives in Thailand, helps her mother write grant applications.

“It’s getting harder to raise enough funds to keep the schools going,” said Paw Ray, who had to shut down schools in the past two years and let teachers go after a drop in donations from NGOs in the U.S., Canada, and Europe. Paw Ray, a mother of five and grandmother of six, also opened the doors of her home in Thailand to dozens of starving and orphaned children with nowhere else to go.

“The need is so great,” she said. “I feel like I have 15,000 children with all my students. As long as we can feed them, I’ll keep taking more children at my home.”

The schools are a bright spot in an otherwise bleak landscape for Burmese migrant children in the border region of Thailand, known as Mae Sot. More than 80 percent of the kids there live in extreme poverty and have no access to education. Classroom instruction is the best chance for children to rise above the grim reality of human trafficking, being lured into the sex trade, succumbing to drug addiction, or forced into indentured servitude. Her simple, open-air schools are far more than a classroom. They provide food, security, health care, and often shelter for students who are homeless. The classrooms double as kitchens and dormitories, with desks and tables pushed aside to make way for sleeping mats placed on the floor.

Her daughter added softly, “She doesn’t cry in front of me, but I know she does on her own. She works so hard. I’m very proud of her.” She taught at her mother’s schools for a few years before coming to the U.S. She continues to support her mother’s cause from afar, financially and with other assistance.

The relentless optimism of Burmese migrant students and their



unyielding thirst for knowledge are what sustains the mother. “They want so badly to learn, but they never had schools before,” Paw Ray said. “I want them to have the education I never had. I pray the fighting will be over one day and they can return to their villages in Burma.”

In the meantime, she pours her heart and soul into the schools. In the past three years, three of her students have gone on to college in Thailand, helped by a prominent Buddhist monk in Thailand who is underwriting their tuition. “I hope they’ll become teachers and doctors and find good jobs,” she said. “I encourage them to go to the U.S. if they have the chance. There are so many more opportunities there.”

For educators in New York working with refugees and ENL students, Paw Ray has simple advice. “Be patient and kind with them,” she said. “Give them extra help. They will work hard to succeed. They are like all students. They dream of a good life. They just need to be given an opportunity.”

Spoken like a true *Tharamupadoh*, or “great teacher.”

To learn more about Naw Paw Ray’s schools, go to the organizations website at <http://www.bmwec.org> or their Facebook page at www.facebook.com/BMWEC.BurmeseMigrantWorkersEducationCommittee.

PAUL GRONDAHL is an award-winning reporter at the *Albany Times Union*. A paperback edition of his political biography, *Mayor Corning: Albany Icon, Albany Enigma*, was published in 2007 by SUNY Press.