

'I want to help my son achieve his dreams'

August 28, 2008

By Darryl James, Special to the Oregonian



Trueman (center) plays piano at a recent Friday night gathering for Karen refugees at Lifegate Baptist Church in Southeast Portland. With him are (from left) Me Me Win, Me Me Lay, Htoe Son and Sudarat Gordon.

There's no visible trigger for the panic attack. Ramona Nester, 51, holds her head in her hands as her sudden cries echo the length of an empty hallway.

Her husband, Htoo Gay (TOO-gay), leans forward on metal crutches and pats his right hand on his chest to explain. "Heart," he says. "Heart."

It's one of the 46-year-old immigrant's only English words.

His wife's heart is heavy with scenes of jungle refugee camps, predatory Burmese soldiers and farm fields pocked with land mines like the one that took Htoo Gay's left leg and part of his right foot in 1991.

The couple and their 16-year-old son, Johnny Trueman, are members of the Karen (kuh-REN) ethnic minority. They arrived in Portland last month in a wave of Karen people fleeing persecution in their native Myanmar. Many, like Htoo Gay and his family, spent more than a decade in refugee camps along the Thai border.

About 200 have settled in Portland, according to the city's Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization. Members of the Asian community are helping the new arrivals acclimate and expect another 5,000 Karen in the next few years.

The federal Refugee Resettlement Program has helped 23,000 Karen refugees reach the United States in the past two years. Most arrive without resources or support systems.

"A lot of people who come over here feel so isolated," says Sudarat Gordon, who coordinates programs on crime prevention and teen pregnancy education for Karen refugees through

Portland's New Life International Baptist Church. "A lot of them have no education and do not speak English."



Htoo Gay, who lost his leg to a land mine in Myanmar, talks with his son, Johny Trueman, before the music starts. Htoo Gay relies on his son to translate into English for him.

Last month, the city's Vision Into Action Coalition awarded a \$10,000 grant to Pastor Prachan Rodruan of New Life for the Karen programs, mostly targeted at 11- to 19-year-old girls. In the border camps, Gordon says, it's common for women to have children before age 19. Plans also are in the works for a youth Karen Connection and Sport Day this summer.

Rodruan and Gordon hold multiple events each week to help Portland's Karen immigrants avoid isolation and culture shock. The ultimate goal is to create a strong, self-sufficient Karen community.

On Friday nights, they host discussion groups and music at Lifegate Baptist Church in Southeast. Sunday mornings, Rodruan leads worship services for the largely Christian immigrants.

Like Htoo Gay, many need housing and work but are overwhelmed by city life and unable to navigate public transportation. Htoo Gay's family is living temporarily in the basement of Rodruan's home with three other immigrants.

Despite the difficult transition, Htoo Gay is hopeful.

"I'm so blessed and fortunate I got a chance to come here," Htoo Gay says, speaking in Karen through two interpreters. "Like anyone else who is a father, I want to help my son achieve his dreams."

Trueman, who taught himself piano in a Thai refugee camp, now composes music and will attend Parkrose High School this fall.

Htoo Gay, once a farmer along the Myanmar-Thailand border, was forced with other Karen to "clear the way" through the land-mine-laden countryside for Burmese soldiers. He escaped uninjured but later tripped a mine while cutting bamboo for his hut.

"I don't want to call it a home, because it was a hut," he says. "If you ask me to describe my living conditions, what I saw and what I grew up in is every Karen village and every household is all the way though brokenhearted."

-- *Portland News*; 503-221-8199; portland@news.oregonian.com