

## **Coming to America** **A Story for All Ages by Aaron McEmrys**

I have been spending a lot of time lately with families of refugees from Burma. Burma is a country far away, almost all the way to China. If we took some shovels and started digging straight down and went all the way through the Earth, when we eventually got through to the other side, we might find ourselves in Burma.

Now, can anyone tell me what refugees are? Refugees are people who have lost their homes because wars come through and destroy everything or they have to run away from bad people or because they have no food or water. The refugees I work with had to run away and hide in another country because the ruler of Burma is a very mean person and he hates the Karen people, so he is always sending his soldiers to burn their villages and beat them up and treat them like slaves. The Karen people are just ordinary people, but they speak their own language, look a little different than other people in Burma and have their own traditions and music and way of life. For some reason this drives the ruler of Burma crazy! He wants everyone to be exactly alike – just like him.

Anyway, my Karen friends ran away from their homes and their country, and then they had to live in giant camps with thousands of other refugees, hoping to someday be able to live their own lives again. The church I work with in Denver has been helping these families get out of the camps so they can come to America and start their new lives. Of course, the families are very happy for a chance to come to America, but it is also scary for them. Most of the kids have lived their whole lives in the refugee camps, and have never been outside the walls of the camp even once. They don't speak English, and when they get off the airplane in Denver, all they have is the clothes on their backs – no friends, no money, no food, no jobs – nothing.

That's where we come in.

When Moo Pay and her granddaughters, Paw Ka Rur, Wa Htee Shee and Paw Thay La first got off the plane, there were a whole bunch of us there to meet them, even though it was the middle of the night. Some of the kids had made a big, beautiful banner that said, "Welcome to America!" We knew this family would need a lot of help. You see, Moo Pay is their grandma, and she is 84 years old. Nobody knows where their parents are, so she has been taking care of the kids all this time all by herself.

So we helped them get settled into an apartment of their very own. We had to teach them everything – how to use an oven, how to catch a bus, even how to speak English – and you should have seen what happened the first time we took them to a huge American grocery store! They had never seen anything like that in their whole lives. They taught us lots of things too, like about their food and music and how to speak some their language (which I am terrible at!).

But we were still worried about them, because we knew how hard it could be for the girls to get used to American schools where nobody spoke their language and to deal with

living in a big American city all by themselves. Have any of you ever moved and had to start going to a new school? We visited them a lot, and they started coming to our church most Sundays.

But we started to get even more worried because we noticed that every time we went over there, all the food was gone! So we took them shopping and got more food – and then, two days later it would all be gone again! We couldn't believe that such little people could eat so much food! So it was back to the store again and again, and then, well, what do you think happened? Right. The food was gone again.

We couldn't figure out what was happening, but we were really worried. What was happening to the food?

But then, one day, I stopped by for a visit. Nobody was home. As I was leaving, a couple little kids who I didn't know, came running up and took me by the hand. They kept pointing down the hallway, and tugged me along after them. They took me to a different apartment – and there was May Poo and her family – along with a bunch of other people, all crammed in that little apartment having dinner! The place smelled wonderful, like steamed rice and spicy curries and fresh vegetables.

I came in and sat down and realized everyone was speaking the same language – they were all speaking Karen! The whole apartment building was pretty much filled with refugee families from all over the world, and the girls had found a couple other families from Burma! And so the case of the missing food was solved – they hadn't been running out of food at all – they had been sharing it! Each family was taking all their food to that one apartment and then they would cook and eat all their meals together. So one apartment was the food apartment, and another was the one where all the kids would hang out and play while the adults were out looking for jobs. They had discovered their own special community, like one big family, right there in that building, thousands of miles away from their homeland.

And so I stopped worrying so much. I knew that they would be fine because they were all taking care of one another. None of them would ever have to go hungry or be lonely. They were a family, and they would be just fine, even in this strange new land. I learned something really important there – I was used to thinking about my family as me, my wife Eliza, my kids – you know - my immediate family. But that day I learned that we can imagine any kind of family we want and we can build any kind of family we want to. It's all up to us!

That made our church a lot more fun too, because once we met all of them we didn't just invite May Poo and the girls to hang out with us – we invited everyone – and as we all got to be friends, it was as if my family, and our church family – got bigger and better too, because now we are all connected.