



Illustration: Kirk Lyrtle

From Burma to Waterbury, Connecticut

A man called So Ray Ber sits in the living room of his two-story house in the North End neighborhood of Waterbury, Connecticut. Finger paintings drawn by his sons at school hang next to his TV. Looking out his front window, the 25-year-old smiles as he thinks about the last four years he's lived in Waterbury.

"When you come here, you study and you learn what sort of things are going on in the United States," So Ray Ber says. "The life is always good here."

So Ray Ber is one of about 25 Karen refugees from Burma (also called Myanmar) who live in Waterbury. More than twice that number were originally resettled in the city, beginning in 2007. Since then, the Karen community has weathered a tough transition and an equally tough job market. The agency responsible for their resettlement lost its federal funding over its handling of the Karen people's transition to life in the United States. More than half of the original families who were resettled in

Waterbury have since moved to other cities—some to the Midwest, others to the Southwest. But today, So Ray Ber and the rest of the remaining community have found stability and comfort with the aid of local community volunteers and through their own resilience.

Who Are the Karen People?

The Karen in Waterbury have fled the world's longest-running conflict, which has been fought for decades between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Burmese government. The Karen are the second largest ethnic group in Burma, with the majority living in the Karen State, on Burma's eastern border with Thailand. Since 1949, the KNU has been fighting to establish an independent Karen State. To combat this separatist movement, the Burmese government has adopted counterinsurgency tactics that treat civilians as the enemy, burning villages and forcing

villagers to resettle to areas controlled by the government. Government soldiers have also been accused of massive human rights violations. And even in government-controlled areas, forced labor, high taxes, and economic deprivation are common.

The conflict has pushed thousands across the border into Thailand, and refugee camps are scattered along the western Thai border. Since 2006, the United States and other countries have made a concerted effort to resettle the refugees from these camps to third countries. In 2007 and 2008, the nation with the largest number of new refugee arrivals in the United States was Burma. In the years that followed, it has been second only to Iraq. Of the 73,293 refugees resettled in 2010, 16,693 were Burmese.¹

The Karen were ready to leave Thailand, where educational opportunities were limited, and people weren't allowed to leave camp or take jobs. If they did leave camp, they risked arrest and detention at the hands of Thai authorities. Although many did not

know much about the United States before they arrived, they knew that third-country resettlement would provide a freedom of movement and opportunity for advancement that they would not receive in a protracted refugee situation.

Most of Waterbury's Karen population began arriving in 2007. Some ran into problems. Newspaper accounts reported that many of the Karen were resettled into an apartment building that had broken windows and a leaking ceiling. The heat was turned off at one point in November, and the building's owner was cited by the city. In addition, school officials had trouble getting Karen students vaccinated. And there was occasional nastiness: one Karen couple found human waste smeared on their apartment door; another man was told to "go back to China" by a co-worker. In time, the problems with housing and vaccinations cost the first resettlement agency its contract with the State Department.

There also were problems with getting steady employment. Many of the refugees worked at a cable factory in Torrington, about half an hour away, but work was sporadic. By December 2007, some refugees were already headed to other states, claiming that the cost of living in Connecticut was too high. Many had strong networks of friends and family who had resettled elsewhere in the country, and those who left Waterbury often joined them.

"When other people move, they hear that other states are better than Connecticut state, so they moved because of that," says Paw Mu Naw, a 29-year-old man living in Waterbury. "Or people move because their family get to another state, so they move there."

Today, only five families—about 25 individuals—remain in Waterbury. Nevertheless, those who stayed in the city are happy where they are. So Ray Ber and Paw Mu Naw now both work for a grocery store, stocking shelves on the night shift. They were hired after their boss read about the community's problems in the local newspaper. The new job offers more stability than their previous jobs in Torrington, and the work is within walking distance of their homes.

Making It Work

So Ray Ber and other Karen refugees have been able to get their driver's licenses, which makes it much easier to get around the region. But in So Ray Ber's case, obtaining a license was difficult. He took classes

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with a volunteer for a year, but he failed the written test, which could be administered only in English. Finally, he heard that Arizona provided an interpreter during the exam, so he flew to Phoenix, took the test, and passed. After So Ray Ber completed the process, other Karen in Waterbury went to Phoenix to take the test.

Throughout their time in Waterbury, the refugees have been greatly aided by volunteers from local churches, who stepped in and picked up where the resettlement agency left off. English as a Second Language classes were offered to the Karen three times a week, and still are. Volunteers would pick up refugees and drive them to the grocery store or to doctor appointments until the Karen had their own licenses. Today, when asked who they turn to for help, some refugees still cite volunteers, affectionately known by their first names, as their main contacts.

The Karen also rely on one another for help. The children play together, and the adults work together. Family members and friends often share apartment space. Lin is one example. A 28-year-old who was resettled in California in 2007, he recently moved to Waterbury to live with a friend. In California, his friends had not been able to find jobs and moved away, so he decided to try Connecticut. He plans on getting his GED and attending college and says that he wants to study either accounting or business.

The Karen community in Waterbury still faces challenges, and finances can be a problem. Another resident, Anny Paw, admits, "I think [my husband's salary is] not really enough. If it's enough, we don't have to apply to get a food stamp. But we have ... to apply for a food stamp for the family." Soon after her arrival in Waterbury, she stopped working in order to raise her

children, but she is hoping to start work again soon. But that may take a while. So far Anny has not been able to find work in Waterbury, and she lacks any transportation that would enable her to commute to nearby cities.

The Karen in Waterbury who have steady employment, new mobility, and a core group of devoted friends are surviving and even thriving under the great burden of exile. They are rebuilding their lives, working to increase their skills and education, and studying English during the hours they are not working. Most important, they are happy with their current lives.

So Ray Ber's oldest son now talks to him in both English and Karen. The family has traded a three-room flat in a high-rise building for the comfort of a house. So Ray Ber owns a minivan, which he drives to go fishing whenever he's not working. In the next few months, one of his brothers will arrive, and So Ray Ber hopes to return to Thailand later this year to visit another brother and convince him to join the family in Waterbury. So Ray Ber looks forward to visiting Thailand, but he plans on staying in Connecticut.

"I'd like to stay here because I have a job here in Waterbury is good. I like to stay here because I have good friends," he says. "I like to live in Waterbury because Waterbury is the best for me ... I would say everything is good for me to stay here."

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Endnote

¹ See http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_rfa_fr_2010.pdf.