

November 2017

An Evening with EMBARC - Celebrating Five Years of Community

EMBARC celebrated five years of community Thursday, October 12, 2017, at the Tea Room in Downtown Des Moines! It was a wonderful night with family, friends and community supporters. We welcomed the Ethnic Youths from Myanmar and the Mizo Youth as performers for the evening. Board member Tin Moe and community members Mi So of Des Moines and Joana Lwin of Waterloo spoke at the event about their personal experiences and what EMBARC means to them. It was a meaningful way to look back over the last five years and get excited about what's to come. Nearly 240 people joined the celebration and more than \$20,000 was raised in support of the community and EMBARC. Congrats to everyone on a job well done!

EMBARC FLU CLINICS

EMBARC held three flu-shot clinics this fall, serving the communities both in Des Moines and Waterloo. More than 500 people received vaccinations at these events! Thank you so much to Covenant nurses, Waterloo First United Methodist Church, Polk County Health Department, Clive Community Center, all our volunteers and everyone who came to be vaccinated. Flu clinics exist to help members of the refugee community access free or low-cost flu shots and increase awareness of ways to combat illness.

EXPANSION OF EMBARC COLLABORATION IN MARSHALLTOWN

EMBARC continually works to refine and enhance local oversight and integration in the communities we serve. The refugee community in Marshalltown has benefitted in many ways from our partnership with Mid-Iowa Community Action (MICA). Recently, we expanded our relationship by subcontracting with MICA to provide daily oversight of the EMBARC programs in Marshalltown.

Effective October 1, 2017, MICA assumed greater responsibility for operations, while EMBARC is taking a supportive role and will provide MICA with technical assistance to create culturally sensitive practices that facilitate effective refugee community leadership. MICA is a host site for RefugeeRISE AmeriCorps members and a subcontractor for our VOCA program, and is helping us plan the ongoing strategic direction of this important work.

For access to EMBARC programs in Marshalltown, please contact:

MICA

[1001 S 18th Ave](#)

Marshalltown, IA 50158

EMBARC FISH PROGRAM

An amazing story of refugee family's harrowing journey to Iowa

By Kathie Swift

Imagine an almost fairytale setting: a clearing in the sunlit jungle, home to a small village in Karenni State, Burma (now called Myanmar). Located in the south-central part of the country, the area is rocky and mountainous. Baby baboons and jungle animals of all kinds dash through the tall grasses and swing through the trees. The time is about 50 years ago.

Lush green vegetation, bright blue skies and colorful flowers and bushes of all kinds crowd the landscape. Small two-story homes standing on stilts dot the clearing. Built of bamboo, each top story provides living quarters with doors and windows open to the fresh air. Thatched roofs provide welcome shade. Families make their homes here — living, eating, learning, cooking, sewing and teaching home crafts to the children. Bamboo ladders connect upstairs to downstairs where farm animals, including pigs, chickens and cows, enjoy the cool shade and gentle cross winds.

Little Nga Meh, born on a state holiday in Burma 1961, played in the family's garden, chock full of vegetables and grains, occasionally shushing away a tiny tiger cub, chattering birds or small jungle creatures. Years later she remembers the day when a baby elephant approached her and she, in turn, started running towards him. Suddenly she became aware of the baby's huge mama, trumpeting loudly, wide-eyed, ears flapping above her head, charging towards her. Nga Meh quickly fled to safety.

The village families ate food grilled in bamboo leaves. They found medicinal roots in the jungle; Nga Meh even planted a flourishing lemon tree which, sadly, village thieves carried off. The little girl also remembers adult friends and relatives walking three hours up the mountainside to party, drinking wine made from rice at the top. Baby bamboo shoots were especially tasty snacks. Nga Meh's five brothers attended school for four or five years while she stayed home cooking, cleaning and taking care of her younger brothers. At the age of 20, Nga Meh married Poe Reh* in a marriage arranged by her parents. Nga Meh'd had someone else in mind but parental obedience was expected.

Not all was as serene as it might have seemed in this village. In fact, as an adult, Nga Meh said she never remembered feeling truly safe after civil war erupted throughout all of Burma in 1962. Peace was totally disrupted in this once freedom-loving country, home to eight ethnic groups: Nga Meh's Karenni, the Kachin, the Chin, the Burmese, the Karen, the Rakhine, the Mon and the Shan.

Pitting government forces armed with guns and explosives against rebel ethnic militia groups, bloody warfare became a way of life in the small villages. Many frightened residents were killed; others fled into the jungle to hide. The killing and human rights abuses continued for 66 years under this dangerous military regime. Many tribal guerrillas also fought each other, and the danger of these ongoing skirmishes escalated violently.

As the strife worsened, Nga Meh and Poe Reh were no longer able to farm or even live in safety. Along with six-year-old Beh Meh, they fled out of the jungle over rough trails into neighboring Thailand, where they joined an over-crowded refugee camp teeming with others seeking safety.

Life was unbelievably difficult for thousands of adults and children living in the camp. The United Nations helped the refugees build homes out of forest resources and provided rice, beans and oil. Food was always scarce. Attempts to grow food turned out poorly. Children had to carry water from wells a good distance away for drinking and washing. Healthcare was minimal, and disease was rife. About once a year, residents got access to new clothes of all sizes, donated by people from around the world. Older children taught basic skills to younger children, who then taught the next generation. English lessons were hard to come by. Refugees tried their best to earn money, working for others in the camp who were hardly better off than they were, or finding work beyond the camp fence.

After 13 years in the camp, 19-year-old Beh Meh finally received permission to live in the United States. Nga Meh and Poe Reh's daughter flew to the U.S with her two children, three-year-old Nae Meh and six-month-old Poe Meh. They reached Des Moines where Lutheran Social Services and Catholic Charities helped Beh Meh and her little ones find a place to live. The three only received basic support, including housing, a medical health care visit, Medicaid and food assistance. Within 90 days, Beh Meh was expected to find work, enroll her children in school, connect to ESL classes and earn enough to support her and the children.

In 2009, Nga Meh came with her two younger daughters, eight-year-old Koe Meh and four-year-old Mu Hae. Knowing very little about Iowa, Nga Meh was scared at first, meeting so many new people, facing new customs, eating new foods and living in an apartment. Poe Reh joined his family a year later.

The children attend local schools and have learned English quickly. Nga Meh studies English four days a week at DMACC and Poe works at Tyson Foods in Perry, where he's been for several years. The entire family lives in a two-bedroom apartment sparsely furnished with red and blue woven mats on the floor and a large round table with matching chairs.

Nga Meh and her family are part of the EMBARC FISH Program, which matches recent refugees with local families, who mentor them through a wide variety of day-to-day learning endeavors and guide them through multiple new experiences.

Longtime Des Moines residents Cheryl Long and Diane Messerli have worked with Nga Meh and her family for the past five years. The volunteers provide emotional support — managing health care appointments, arranging rides, explaining services, helping furnish the family’s home, teaching the adults how drive and connecting the family to the community through social and cultural programs and events.

Cheryl and Diane have taken the family to the Science Center, the swimming pool, the Iowa State Fair, the library and many other destinations to help them acclimate to their new American life. The volunteers and Nga Meh have become close friends, who discuss life in Burma as well as Iowa. “It’s so wonderful to be part of someone’s life in this way,” said Diane. “I can remember the first time Nga Meh let us take the children — without her — on an outing...such a remarkable measure of trust.”

Cheryl finds Nga Meh “an amazing inspiration” for her bravery in surviving the war, the jungle marauders, the camp and her new country. “What Diane and I share with Nga Meh and her family is truly amazing,” Cheryl said. Diane serves on the FISH Program Board and Cheryl trains new volunteers in the program.

Nga Meh and Poe Reh recently moved into a brand-new Habitat for Humanity house after contributing more than 400 hours of work to make them eligible. Nga Meh credits the FISH program with helping her family finally get a home of their own.

*In Burma, women take the surname of Meh and men are called Reh.

Summer Highlights

EMBARC COMMUNITY-BASED ESL PROGRAM

Fun with purpose (and puppets)

Every afternoon this past July, 40 elementary school students in Waterloo participated in the EMBARC Summer Literacy Camp led by teachers and older refugee youth. The teen leaders, many who speak English as a second language themselves, trained with RefugeeRISE AmeriCorps members for two weeks prior to volunteering as literacy coaches.

Students were organized into small groups, where they gained English literary skills through

storytelling, reading, writing and playing. The month of fun activities came to an end with a puppet show for the parents, written and performed by the kids.

Here's what some of the teen leaders had to say:

"I love everything about this camp. I love the activities, the kids and the leader...it was amazing."

"I learned a lot at this camp — about myself and the kids. I learned that leadership is not just learning from others but learning from yourself, also."

"The kids got to have fun and the leaders got to have fun, too."

Find out more here:

[From students to teachers: reading camp for refugees](#)

[Summer puppetry program teaching English the fun way](#)

CULTURE AND CUISINE

Cooking class at Three Pines Farm

Ah Lei's cuisine and culture classes at [Three Pines Farm](#) on July 22nd was a big hit with individuals of all ages.

In the morning children's class, students learned how to speak few Burmese words, discussed geography and botany and toured the garden. They also made a delicious pandan and coconut jelly, which they sampled along with fresh raspberry ice cream and crispy tofu.

In the afternoon, the adult class learned how to make a few of Ah Lei's favorite dishes — noodles with vegetables, crispy tofu and sesame balls. Students enjoyed great conversation and community during the cooking and dining experience.

A huge thank you goes to Ah Lei and Joanna for sharing their knowledge and kindness, to Hannah Van Meeteren for lending her artistic talents to the curriculum and to the enthusiastic attendees who made the day great!

EMBARC COMMUNITY PRODUCERS PROGRAM

Thriving in Waterloo

The Community Producers Program offers refugee women instruction in business management, money handling, marketing and food safety. While these individuals are already adept at handcrafting bags, weaving scarves or growing vegetables, they're often

new to selling their wares at the local farmer's market. Community Producers exists to help these women learn new skills to support themselves and their families in their new country.

This past summer, the Waterloo City Council provided a one-acre parcel of city land for refugees to start a garden. Community members donated seeds, vegetables and access to water.

More than a dozen members of the Burma community worked the soil by hand, planting crops to sell for cash. Not only did these individuals have to produce the goods; they had to keep records, make change and speak with customers in English, their second language. The face-to-face dialog between refugees from Burma and native Iowans created an exchange of cultures, as well, resulting in a stronger feeling of community.

It was an exciting opportunity for refugees to grow their agricultural expertise while cultivating new skills to thrive in the American market.

Find out more here:

[Burmese refugees plant community garden](#)

Community Highlights

EMBARC says goodbye to the 2016-2017 RefugeeRISE AmeriCorps service team.

Thank you for all your hard work and finishing strong!

EMBARC receives Iowa Mentoring Partnership Certification

We're proud to be recognized for bringing more caring adults into the lives of Iowa's youth.

EMBARC hosts EMBARC in the Park

EMBARC hosted our second annual EMBARC in the Park event Sunday, September 17, 2017, in Waterloo. The event featured Burmese food, live music, traditional dances and special guest speakers, including Waterloo's mayor Quentin Hart. Hart even welcomed attendees in a Burma language! Local news station KWWL stopped by to document the event, which provides a platform for the refugee community to share their culture with the broader community.

EMBARC participates in Iowa Refugee Summit

The Iowa Refugee Summit took place on October 6–7, 2017. EMBARC program manager Dalia Kyi took part in the education panel, discussing programs and strategies underway in Central Iowa to support the educational pursuits of refugee children and families. The group also talked about current initiatives and approaches to educating children and families

affected by war and displacement, identifying priority areas of programming, support, and intervention to grant young children safety, as well as access to services and environments that allow them to thrive.

Attendees of the summit heard the keynote speech from Ilhan Omar, the first Somali-American to hold the position of Minnesota State Representative. Omar recounted her family's journey as refugees from Somalia to Kenya and then to the United States. She also spoke on the importance of participating in the democratic process, especially at the local level.

Upcoming Events

WIC (Women, Infants and Children)

Burmese, Karen, and Chin languages available every Tuesday at 10:00 a.m.

WIC Clinic Office

[2300 Euclid Ave.](#)

Ste. D

Des Moines, IA 50310

WIC is a supplemental nutrition program for babies, children under the age of five, pregnant women, breastfeeding women and women who have had a baby in the last six months. WIC has been helping families by providing healthy foods, nutrition education and referrals to other health care agencies since 1974.

Green card clinic

First Saturday of every month by appointment only; call 515-528-7525 to schedule

USCRI Des Moines

[1200 University Ave.](#)

Des Moines, IA 50314

Calling All Volunteers

It takes very little time to make a big difference in someone's life. EMBARC is always looking for compassionate volunteers to:

- Practice English with refugee children and supervise their homework.
- Help adult refugees learn English, practice computer skills and prepare for the GED.
- Support EMBARC donation drives.
- Transport refugees to appointments and resource centers.

- Write grants, plan events and fundraise.
- Perform basic clerical tasks, such as filing, data entry, and correspondence.
- Publicize and promote EMBARC.

Special volunteer request:

We are in urgent need of BAA-accredited individuals with green card application experience to help us Mondays 1:00 p.m.–4:00 p.m. and Fridays 10:00 a.m.–1:00 p.m. during our walk-in clinics at Des Moines Vineyard Church.

To learn more, email volunteer@embarciowa.org or fill out our [volunteer form](#).

SUPPORT US THROUGH AMAZON SMILE

Choose EMBARC when you purchase items from [Amazon Smile](#), and 5% percent of the proceeds will be donated back to our organization.

CONTACT US

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