

## Speaking up for southeast Asian refugees

By: Nancy Crotti    December 11, 2013    0

When Eh Tha Khu left a Thai refugee camp for Minnesota in 2010, he planned to further his education. Then 27, he completed high school and Bible college in the camp, but neither of those counted when he reached the United States.

Like many refugees who came before him, Khu had to start over here, learning English and dreaming of pursuing a high school diploma or a GED while working to support his young family.

Khu is one of about 7,000 Karen (pronounced kuh-REHN) refugees from Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, to escape political persecution in his homeland. He lost two uncles in the long-running civil war between the Burmese military and the Karen National Union army. Two elders of his church were arrested for no apparent reason. Khu's family later learned that Burmese soldiers had killed them.

Khu's parents opted to remain in Myanmar, where they own a farm and his father is a Baptist pastor. They wanted their children to go to America to further their education. Khu, his twin sister and one of their seven brothers fled to Minnesota.

He applied to be a youth academic support counselor at the Karen Organization of Minnesota (KOM), a refugee aid group based in St. Paul. With references from a couple of people he knew in the camp, Khu landed the job six months after arriving here. This year, he was promoted to a manager of the youth, social services and community health programs.

Khu was one of the fortunate ones. His English is good and he has a job. Many other Karen struggle with English, and therefore with finding work, housing and transportation. One man Khu knows has spent \$3,000 trying to pass the Minnesota driving test. (The test is free the first two times one takes it, and costs \$20 each subsequent time.)

"That's a challenge," Khu says. "They don't understand the language and they don't understand the rules."



Kara Genia spends her time educating legislators and senators from St. Paul, Roseville and Maplewood about Karen refugees, their needs and hopes for life in America. Most are under 35, she said. (Staff photo: Peter Bartz-Gallagher)

Numerous traffic tickets and accidents involving refugees convinced KOM to ask the state Department of Public Safety to have the driver's manual translated into Karen, Khu said.

The group faces other problems, such as young Karen residents getting involved with illegal drugs, according to Khu.

"The drug sellers are targeting them as a new marketing place," Khu says. "They just got here and they try to adapt to systems here and they try to adopt the way that people here live. They end up seeing those bad things and going that way."

### **Learning a different life**

Most Karen living in Minnesota are young, hard-working, and willing to do anything to support their families, according to Chong Bee Vang, executive director of the nonprofit KOM.

Many of the state's Karen live on St. Paul's East Side, with some in Roseville and Maplewood. Many carpool daily to work at food processing plants in places like Albert Lea. Others have found work at a meat processing plant in Worthington, where they share apartments together.

As they learn the English language and American ways, they also learn from the experiences of the refugees who came before them, according to Kara Genia, who began representing KOM at the Capitol earlier this year. Genia spends her time educating legislators and senators from St. Paul, Roseville and Maplewood about these refugee constituents, their needs and hopes for life in America. Most are under 35, she said.

"That's definitely a point that I stress to legislators: that they are still coming and they are very young, and as much as they may one day want to return (to Myanmar), they're probably here for the long run," she says. "Given that they are so young, they'll be starting families here. They're a group to be aware of, for sure."

Churches helped the Karen when they first arrived here, including First Baptist Church of

St. Paul, where many Karen worship in their own language. But the Karen soon realized they'd need more support than churches could provide and founded KOM, Vang says.

The organization employs 15, with three Minnesota Opportunity Corps volunteers and one volunteer from AmeriCorps' Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) service program.

KOM provides employment and social services, education in financial literacy, leadership and help in navigating the local transportation and legal systems. It offers mental health referrals for those who experienced trauma in war, refugee camps and resettlement.

The organization works with two Karen-speaking case managers from the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation who help individual adults with mental illness and lead a support group. Its youth program refers students with mental health issues to the Center

for Victims of Torture or Northwest Youth and

Family Services. KOM also educates refugees about preventative health care and choosing a primary care provider.

### **Expecting big things**

Although KOM has not directed Genia to work on any specific legislation, the group is keenly interested in addressing health disparities between Asian-Americans and whites. KOM will likely support other organizations' efforts to close this gap rather than seeking sponsors for legislation on its own, Vang says.

Vang came to KOM after working as director of immigration and employment services at World Relief Minnesota, an affiliate of Baltimore-based World Relief, the international relief and development arm of the National Association of Evangelicals. Vang has also worked in case management as a youth advocate at The Link, a Minneapolis nonprofit that works to help at-risk youth stay in school, support themselves while homeless, find housing and enroll in positive alternatives to the juvenile justice system.

Genia took over her husband's business, lobbying service Animikii LLC, after he died in March at 48. She has three small children and is pursuing her doctoral degree in public administration at Hamline University. Her husband, attorney Jim Genia, was a longtime registered lobbyist for Grand Portage Tribal Reservation, a contract that Kara Genia now holds.

Legislators and other Minnesotans can expect to hear more from the Karen as more refugees arrive and their families grow.

"Minnesota has always been good about helping refugees, I would say better than any other state," Genia says.

"We'll see in the next five or 10 years that they'll be a group that we can probably see some big things from."

### **The Genia File**

Name: Kara L Genia

Job: Owner, Animikii, LLC

Age: 38

Grew up: North Oaks

Lives in: Shoreview

Education: B.A., political science, University of Minnesota; master's of public policy, Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota; in dissertation phase of doctorate of public administration, Hamline University.

Family: Son, Jack, 5; twins Kaitlyn and Michael, 2.

Hobbies: Spending time with family and friends, involved with kids' activities, home improvement projects, reading.

