



Client Profile



Kwee

Kwee, a 26-year-old Kentucky Refugee Ministries client from Myanmar (Burma), arrived in September 2006. However before coming to Louisville, she had to undergo a long and unimaginably difficult journey.

A member of Myanmar's Karen ethnic minority, Kwee was forced to flee her native village with her family at the age of 16 when it came under attack by government soldiers. As part of a campaign extending over two decades, Myanmar's military junta has displaced hundreds of thousands of Karen. Human rights organizations have catalogued widespread incidents of rape, torture and forced labor.

When the village Kwee's family fled to also came under attack, the family had no choice but to make an arduous trek to the only safe haven available: a large United-Nations-administered refugee camp across the border in Thailand. "They came and burned everything, (took) everything from me," said Kwee. "I got nothing left. That's why I (had) to go to Thailand. There's no way we can stay."

Kwee spent nine years in the crowded Thai camp, living in a makeshift bamboo hut roofed with a plastic sheets. It was in the camp that Kwee met her husband Beh, now 30.

In 2006, the U.S. State Department approved the admission of several thousand Karen refugees living in camps in Thailand. Beh and Kwee were part of the first group resettled by Kentucky Refugee Ministries.

In preparation for their arrival, a team of church volunteers readied Beh and Kwee's apartment in Louisville's South End with donated furnishings and household items, to which Kwee soon added several vases filled with handmade paper flowers. The couple's first days included a whirlwind of appointments: applying for Social Security cards and food stamps, receiving medical exams; and getting oriented to their neighborhood and the bus system.

Beh and Kwee settled into a regular routine of attending KRM's English classes each morning, quickly establishing themselves among the program's most conscientious students. Visitors to their apartment noted that the schedule for an evening English review session was strictly adhered to.

In the afternoons after English class, the couple met with their case manager, attended orientations on employment, cultural adjustment and managing a bank account, and were regulars in the KRM computer lab, practicing their typing and learning how to use the internet.

In contrast to Thailand's sweltering heat, Louisville's cold winter weather came as an unaccustomed shock. However, as Kwee and Beh celebrated their first Thanksgiving with a group of church co-sponsors and then Christmas, there were signs that their acclimation was proceeding apace: more English, more smiles, more laughter.

The new year brought a new chapter in the couple's resettlement. In early January, four months after his arrival, Beh was placed in a full-time production job at the Anderson Wood Products, a 100-year-old family-owned company in Louisville's West End that has provided many newly-arrived refugees with their first job opportunity. The following month, Kwee herself began a full-time position at Koch Filter, another local company whose workforce has for years included refugees from various countries.

In her spare time, Kwee continues her study of English, meeting regularly at her apartment with a volunteer tutor. She has also enrolled in an art class at a local community center. Most of all, she is hopeful of seeing her mother, who was resettled in Utah. In the meantime, thanks to a new cellphone Kwee purchased with one of her first paychecks, mother and daughter are able to share their many new experiences in the United States by phone.