



JUBILEE PARTNERS REPORT

Fall, 2016

Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people whom
He has chosen for His own inheritance. *Psalm 33:12*

Last June, resident partner Jennifer Drago spent a month in Thailand with our neighbor Pa Saw Paw and her two children. Susan Harper, a family friend who taught science in an after school program with Pa Saw Paw, also accompanied them. Pa Saw Paw fled Burma as a child and lived in Mae La refugee camp in Thailand for twenty-three years before coming to the United States. She and her family lived at Jubilee as assistant staff and were one of the first Karen home owners in Comer. Now, eight years later and a US citizen, she wanted Jennifer and Susan to see the camp and experience how thousands of Karen and Karen-ni refugees are still living. It was truly a blessing for them to be on the receiving end of such genuine hospitality. Jennifer wrote the following reflection about her experience:

Less than twenty-four hours after arriving in Thailand, I was sitting with the pastors of a Karen Baptist church in Mae La refugee camp. It was a surreal experience to be in the camp where so many Karen refugees had lived prior to their arrival at Jubilee. Their stories came to my mind - the anguish of parents listening to their children cry at night because there wasn't enough food; the helplessness of holding feverish babies in their laps with no malaria medicine; the fear of husbands arrested or beaten by police for sneaking out of the camps in search of work.



Jennifer Drago (L), Susan Harper (2nd from R), and Pa Saw Paw (right) in her childhood church in Mae La Refugee Camp in Thailand. Pastor Arthur and his wife Classper have duties beyond that of most ministers: they care for 140 Karen and Karen-ni orphans so they can attend school in the camp.

As I sat under a banner proclaiming "I will go in the strength of the Lord God," I beheld a very different image. Hundreds of Karen, mostly young people, dressed in their best Sunday outfits of colorfully woven shirts and skirts, Bibles tucked under their arms, smiled and chatted as they squeezed together on wooden benches. Baskets were passed among a congregation of refugees to collect money for less fortunate people. Two orchestras sat on opposite sides of the church with a mighty display of horns, trumpets, violins, and drums. As the fourth choir got up to sing, I wondered, "Am I receiving these bountiful blessings of generosity, thankfulness, and praise in a refugee camp? *A refugee camp?*"



On Saturdays, these young girls strap baskets on their backs and walk to the jungle to forage for food. Using machetes, they cut up bamboo shoots to accompany several meals with rice.

I had expected to find filth, poverty, hopelessness, and despair in a camp that houses 40,000 people. And while those were all present, as I meandered through a maze of tightly clustered bamboo houses, I also saw rose bushes and mango trees; kids jumping rope and playing soccer; heard the laughter of friends bathing outdoors; and the sound of guitar strumming echoing through bamboo walls. All were signs of people striving to make the best out of daily life when the present feels very dismal and the future uncertain.

Twenty-five years ago Thailand opened nine refugee camps along the border for hundreds of thousands of terrified Karen and Karen-ni fleeing the Burmese army. Today, many of them have resettled in the US, Australia, or Canada. While new people still arrive at the camp, it is usually to access medical care and schooling; however deficient they are in the camps, these opportunities rarely even exist in their villages in Burma.

after sixty-five years of military rule, ethnic wars, and economic ruin. A ceasefire between the government and ethnic groups is now in place, though the Burmese army continues fighting in some areas. Many Karen fear the peace process is a trick to disarm the Karen army and resume fighting once their weapons have been surrendered.

As often happens when there is a fragile peace treaty on the horizon, donors turn their attention - and money - to other world crises. Some humanitarian organizations are reducing their support; others have moved to Burma in anticipation of refugees returning to their homeland.

Many people in Mae La camp voiced their anxieties: Will the Thai government close the camps and force us to leave? Our houses, schools, and churches were destroyed; what is there to go back to? Are abandoned villages littered with land mines or occupied by the Burmese army? Was my family land confiscated by the government? Is there a factory on it or has another family claimed the land for themselves? So many questions are unanswerable and, with no reassurances, fear and doubt simmer in people's minds.

On two occasions, I had the opportunity to actually go to villages in Karen State in Burma and see for myself their valid concerns. Squatting on the wooden slabs of a long dug-out canoe, our 11-year-old driver took us across the Moei River to a remote part of Burma. We drove through Hta Lar village on a rough, pot-holed

Burma's political situation is changing. A newly elected government is attempting social and democratic reforms

Pa Saw Paw and a school helper in the cooking area of Living River School. The school provides rice porridge to fifty-one students; twenty of the students are orphans who live with their teachers.



track to a small, wooden school, built on stilts and topped with a thatch leaf roof.

We were greeted by Shee Lar, a slim young man in his early twenties, who has been principal for two years. *"We do not have any books," he told us, "but we must educate our children so that Karen State will have a good future."* The school has about 100 students from kindergarten to seventh grade, ages seven to sixteen.

Many students come from distant villages so they live at the school in sparse dorms, sleeping on the bamboo floor at night and washing their laundry by hand at the water pump. Since the schools have very little money, the students are responsible for all the daily functions. One group collects firewood; another cooks the twice daily meal of rice and greens. One group cleans the school while another takes care of the grounds. Some catch fish in the streams or harvest wild greens while others care for chickens and pigs. It was impressive to see Karen schools operate by subsisting off the land - with the children providing most of the labor.

Hta Lar village's medical clinic is a worn-out metal building with only a few wooden beds and a shelf of medicine. However sparse its amenities, it annually serves over 3,000 people, many arriving from nearby villages after an all-day trek through mountainous terrain. Malaria is the most common illness and, thanks to international aid, the clinic has a sufficient supply of medicine. But the clinic doesn't have a way to treat pneumonia and diarrhea, the leading cause of death among children.

In desperate situations, the medic sometimes sends the critically sick patient to a hospital in Thailand. This means crossing the river, hiring a truck to drive several hours to the hospital, and paying the hospital for its services. It is an expensive, time-consuming, and arduous journey for a sick person to endure.

Gathered around a plastic table with the medic and two eager assistants, *I asked, "What do you hope for yourselves in the future?" One replied, "To help my people improve their lives."* The other nodded in agreement. That was not the answer I expected. In my travel experiences, young people, often frustrated by the lack of opportunities in their country, wishfully plea for help in obtaining a visa to work abroad.

I looked at those young, bright-eyed assistants, full of energy and hope, and thought what a wonderful future Karen people could have in Burma. With very little resources and money, they are building schools, teaching students, and caring for the sick. Their heartfelt and enthusiastic desire for a better life was echoed by everyone I met: Karen people are using their ingenuity, persistence, and resilience to rebuild their lives and their country.

A school is one of the first buildings villagers construct in Karen State in Burma. Sitting on the floor with scant school supplies isn't a deterrent to these eager learners.



Shee Lar, the school principal, at the receiving desk for patients at Hta Lar medical clinic.





As we left one village, a fourteen year old boy gifted us with a chicken. "God bless you," he exclaimed, waving us good-bye. Here was a chicken raised by the students at this school; a chicken that would not be eaten by these students. Their joy in sharing from their meager supplies was abundant as we humbly received their blessings.

A precious gift of a scarce chicken showed the love of the young people for the visitors from afar.

One school teacher, who has twenty students living with her family, explained, *"With one hundred dollars, I can buy a child a blanket and enough rice for a year. I am always asked to take more children but I don't have the money."* We would like to send a one-time gift to the schools, churches, and medical clinic Jennifer visited in Thailand and Burma. Please help us make a difference in a child's future by using PayPal on our website or sending a check to Jubilee with "Thailand/Burma" designated on it.

from the people of Jubilee



Who we are

Jubilee Partners is an intentional Christian service community in north Georgia. Our primary ministry is offering hospitality to newly arrived refugees. We are a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization; donations are thus tax-deductible. Your donations and support of our work are most appreciated.

Jubilee Partners

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Oh, the sadness of farewells! In Fall, 2011 Steve and Rachel Bjork came to Jubilee and ended up becoming partners. Rachel gave expert guidance to our English classes for refugees, and Steve was work coordinator for our resident volunteers.

They came with just one child, Lorraine, but when they departed in August to re-establish life in their native Massachusetts, they left with Simeon, now 3, and newborn Felix. We miss Steve's special woodworking talents (but continue to enjoy the cherry wood furniture he left behind.) Rachel's thoughtful and caring wisdom is also missed. We wish them well as they settle in to their new life and home.



What a great summer we had at Jubilee with bumper crops of blueberries, watermelon, and two new babies! As mentioned on the left, Steve and Rachel had Felix join their family.

Above you can see proud mom Rangsey Chheng holding daughter Sochenda.

We all agree she gets the award for being the quietest baby, although dad Chris and big brother Kosol may have different opinions!



Those of us who were here in 2007 well remember Samuel Johnson and his three siblings, refugee orphans from war-torn Liberia. What a joy to have Samuel visit Jubilee recently; he is now a college grad and introduced us to his wife Mary.

We were thrilled to hear Samuel describe his dream of helping children in former war-torn countries in West Africa. But even more exciting was to learn of the reality of the *House of Hope*, an orphanage for 16 children that has been built in Guinea.

A non-profit organization called "*My Vision for Refugees*" oversees this inspiring work, and has also built wells in several areas to provide clean drinking water.

Jubilee has made a donation to support this endeavor. If you would like to find out more, you can send an email to:

<myvisionforrefugees@gmail.com>

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College students prepare freshly gathered wild greens at Kawtholei Karen Baptist Bible School in Mae La Refugee Camp in Thailand. Ten students prepare two meals daily for 450 students - without using any canned or pre-packaged food. Astounding! Look inside for full report by Jennifer Drago on her visit to Thailand.