

Refugees find solace for their children at Christ-St. Peter School

MILWAUKEE – A picture of confidence, the seven-year-old folds her arms and lets a long “hmmmm” escape her lips as she ponders her favorite moments as a second grader at Christ-St. Peter Lutheran School on Milwaukee’s near south side.

Soon, Naw Hsa Say rattles off all of the things that fill her mind: “I like silent reading and book shopping,” she says, later realizing that she really means library time. For Naw Hsa Say, any book from *The Magic Treehouse* series for young readers makes her happy. She adds that she likes her teacher, Mr. Yerkes. She loves the “morning message,” which is always about Jesus. She is particularly fond of her class trip to the Milwaukee Zoo, where she learned a lot about what is in the ocean.

Her eyes glisten and her smile widens as she taps a finger on her head and says, “I want to learn and make my brain strong.”

Naw Hsa Say is one of about 20 children from refugee families that have settled in the school’s neighborhoods, around 22nd Street and Greenfield Avenue and 8th and Scott. Once residents of Myanmar, formerly Burma, these families were among the very few Christians in their native country – members of the Karen community – who were persecuted for their faith and ethnic heritage. Many have sought refuge in nearby Thailand to escape the civil war in their native country, caused by the turmoil among the 135 ethnic groups there trying to take control. Many of the families here remember little about Myanmar, since they have lived as refugees in one of nine Thai camps for the bulk of their adulthood. But now settled in Milwaukee, the families are sinking roots and allowing hope to take hold, particularly for their children. They hold education in high esteem and have funneled their children into the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, mostly because word of mouth has traveled through the resettled Karen Community, espousing the program’s benefits.

Hser Per Le Wa, a junior at Wisconsin Lutheran High School, is a graduate of Christ-St. Peter and also a School Choice student. As many older students do, she provides translation for an elder – Poe Thay, father of Blessing, who is attending four-year-old kindergarten at Christ-St. Peter.

“A lot of people seem to send their children here, and it’s good to have the same culture together,” Poe Thay says through his young interpreter. The young father arrived in Milwaukee about four years ago and works at a pizza factory.

Faith drives much of the Karen Community's decision to send their children to a Lutheran school. Christ-St. Peter is a Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod school. Htoo Say Deih also has a son in the four-year-old kindergarten class. The father touches his hand to his chest and says through an interpreter that he chose the school because it teaches religion, things of the heart. He has friends and family who attend Christ-St. Peter Lutheran Church, where he is particularly fond of the singing. Htoo Say Deih has lived in Milwaukee for nearly six years and works at the Hilton Milwaukee City Center downtown.

Lah Bwe Paw is a graduate of Christ-St. Peter and a freshman at Wisconsin Lutheran High School. Her elementary teachers inspired her to learn to read, because it was through reading that she began to better understand how to talk with people and live in this new country. She has been in Wisconsin for six of her 16 years, and has been able to attend the private schools through the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program.

"My parents didn't know about Christ-St. Peter when I started school here in third grade," Lah Bwe Paw says. "When I graduated from fifth grade, they were looking for a new school, and a friend told them about this great school. I thought it would be just for me, but my mom wanted me to watch over my brothers and sister." She has two younger brothers and a sister at Christ-St. Peter.

Learning the language was the most important part of her elementary schooling, says Lah Bwe Paw. "When I mixed up my English, you know, how to use the past, the present and the future, the teacher would help me."

"I also had to get over my nervous," she says, pausing to see if she chose the right word. "I had to go to school, get to know the school and talk about myself." Now, Lah Bwe Paw is navigating high school just fine and has dreams of becoming a nurse.

In the meantime, she has been telling her younger brothers to work hard in school, which she admits is difficult. Christ-St. Peter is academically challenging, but she says she knows they can accomplish much.

Principal Brett Baade stands in the hallway of the Greenfield campus, explaining that Christ-St. Peter is very much a neighborhood school and draws students from countries represented by the seven flags hanging from the wall. Roughly 70 percent of the student population comes from Latin American heritage, about 20 percent are African American or Caucasian, and about 10 percent is Karen.

“The first Karen student came to us in 2008,” Baade says, “and it has just grown from there. The community, which has settled in the neighborhood, has embraced our school. It fits their culture, where they want a small classroom environment, someone to teach Christian values, and caring teachers. Most of our students come by word of mouth.”

The influx of Karen students has challenged the school. Language has been their biggest barrier to learning. As a result, the school has hired a full-time English as a Second Language teacher to assist. Communicating with families has also presented a challenge. There are few translators available who speak the language of the Karen Community, so often the school is pressed to depend upon older students.

“Still, even though they don’t understand English, the parents of our Karen students come to every single school event,” Baade says. “It’s amazing when a student starts picking up the English language. As they get comfortable with English, they get more comfortable with their peers, and their lives begin to change.”

The wall of Margaret Polzin’s tiny teaching room is indicative of the language challenge. Signs say: “Yesterday, I rode my bike to the park.” “Today is....Yesterday was...Tomorrow will be...” Every day, all day, Polzin works one-on-one with students to lift their English knowledge and comfort. After school, she works with a group of students from the Karen Community.

She encounters more than the expected language gap. “They are very reserved and quiet, but they want to learn and grow and become part of the community. They want to fit in with their friends,” Polzin explains.

Often she is the bridge of understanding for children who are straddling two cultures. “They remember what it was like to be in Thailand and Burma (now Myanmar). Often they will say they miss things, like certain foods, the mountains and swimming.”

Because of the strife in their native country and their status in refugee camps, life was a lot freer for them. They did not attend school, many could not read and write in any language, so the transition to daily school has been difficult for many of the students, Polzin explains.

Once, at the end of a rather trying day, Polzin casually said to a student that she would not cook supper when she got home, but would just put a frozen pizza in the oven. The student had no idea what pizza was, Polzin says. Then, the student admitted that her family never used the oven in their apartment because they didn’t know how.

That prompted Polzin to create “Kitchen Bingo,” one of the students’ favorite games. Students match pictures of everyday objects – toasters, spoons, stoves – to learn the name of the object, what it does and how to use it.

Polzin says her experience is so rewarding. She cannot help but feel the hope of a child as he or she finally grasps basic English. With a foothold on some basic words and understanding, a student’s learning just blossoms exponentially, she says.

Fifth grader La Yer Say is one of those students. Polzin can see the confidence that has grown in his reading and writing, as a result he is much more active in classroom learning. “He’s right in there, and he is eager to navigate things on his own now. That’s what you want, to build those skills that opens the world.”

That’s precisely what parents want, too, as they send their children through the School Choice program to Christ-St. Peter. Taw Taw stands next to his 8-year-old daughter, San Moe, who reads with him and her younger brother and sister every night.

“I think she would be a good teacher,” Taw Taw says, choosing to show his English skills rather than speak through an interpreter.

His smile is charming and his pride in his daughter nearly lights the room. Taw Taw has been settled in Milwaukee for about eight years and works at a foundry. “This school teaches respect. It teaches about Jesus. It is a good school,” he says nodding.

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