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9-2024

Sponsorship and Solidarity: Tracing God's Goodness from Myanmar to Indiana

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Sponsorship and Solidarity

TRACING GOD'S GOODNESS FROM MYANMAR TO INDIANA

On Dec. 22, 1999, amid the winter chill, my parents stepped foot in Fort Wayne, Indiana, carrying only a few bags filled with clothes, shorts and flip-flops. Having fled Myanmar's hot and humid climate as refugees, they were immediately confronted with the bitter cold of the Midwest. It was the first of many trials navigating life in America.

As my parents adjusted to the unfamiliar climate and surroundings of Fort Wayne, they carried with them the weight of their past and the memories of a homeland left behind. Raised in Myanmar amid political unrest, persecution and genocide, they had known hardship long before their journey to America. My father, Kyawzwa Myint, at the age of 18, participated in protests during the infamous 8888 uprisings against the military junta. Because he refused to be a spectator in the fight against the coup, he joined the All Burma Students' Democratic Front. Standing shoulder to shoulder with fellow activists, he fought for a brighter future for his homeland.

While my father was actively involved in the fight against the military junta, my mother, Than Than Aye, experienced persecution firsthand as a member of the Karen (Kayin) ethnic minority in Myanmar. From a young age, she bore witness to the atrocities committed by the regime, fleeing from violence

and oppression that preyed on her community. Her childhood memories are stained with the trauma of persecution, yet her resilience and determination to survive have been a guiding light throughout our family's journey.

Despite vastly different paths, their lives intersected in the most unlikely of places: Mae La refugee camp in Thailand. Here, amidst the harsh realities of displacement and uncertainty, they met and eventually married. United by a shared determination to build a better future for themselves and their family, they set their sights on America.

After arriving in Fort Wayne they began their journey in a new land. As one of the first families to arrive from Myanmar, they faced the daunting task of adapting to a new culture and way of life. Amid struggles, they discovered acts of kindness and generosity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. During the late 1990s, churches of different denominations in Fort Wayne were actively



▲ Kyawzwa Myint and Than Than Aye, the author's parents, in Myanmar. Undetermined date.

sponsoring refugees from Myanmar. The First Fort Wayne Seventh-day Adventist Church was among them, playing a pivotal role by providing assistance and guidance to newcomers like my parents.

Among the compassionate individuals within the First Fort Wayne Church was Jeanette Griffith, whom I knew as Grandma Jeanette, whose generosity and empathy would leave an incredible mark on my parents' journey. Serving as our sponsor, she extended a lifeline of support and guidance to help us navigate the challenges of resettlement. Beyond the practical assistance she provided, her genuine care and friendship became a constant presence as she treated my mother as one of her daughters and my older siblings as her grandchildren.

As my father grappled with the challenge of supporting his family in this new land, Grandma Jeanette came to his aid once again. Not only did she assist him in securing a job at a nearby manufacturing plant, but she also took on the role of his driving instructor. My father fondly reminisces about those early morning lessons in her Chevy sedan. She would take him to empty cemeteries to practice maneuvers, quipping that it was the safest spot for driving practice since everyone there was already resting.

After my little brother and I were born, my parents' journey took another turn as they embraced the responsibilities of raising two sons born in a foreign land. Throughout this new chapter, the support and guidance they received from Grandma Jeanette and the church continued to shape our lives profoundly. Not only would church members donate children's clothes, cribs and toys, but the church also had a food bank that provided groceries and essentials.

As I grew up, I witnessed firsthand the goodness and compassion of the church community. Through their financial sponsorship, my little brother and I were able to attend the local Adventist grade school, where we received not only a great education but a sense of belonging and community. The church didn't just stop at education: When new waves of refugees arrived, they established ESL classes where parents could learn English and children could receive homework help. Furthermore, the church sponsored students like me to attend

Adventist private schools for both elementary and high school, providing opportunities for us to experience a Christ-centered education. I have proudly attended SDA-affiliated schools throughout my entire academic career, including Aboite Christian School, Indiana Academy, Southern Adventist University, as well as Andrews University.

Looking back on my family's journey, a consistent theme of goodness emerges. This thread of kindness woven throughout has not only helped us navigate challenges but also enabled us to flourish. It is through the goodness of God and the unwavering support of our community that my nieces and nephews now grow up in a country free from the threats of persecution, genocide and war. Fort Wayne, Indiana, has become a sanctuary for thousands of refugees, all thanks to the kindness of its residents. Moreover, the goodness instilled in me by my parents and nurtured by my community inspires me to pursue a career in the medical field, driving my desire to perpetuate this cycle of goodness. ■

Htet Myint is a medical laboratory science/pre-med major at Andrews University and part-time barber on his days off.

This article first appeared in the Andrews University student publication "Envision" magazine.



▲ Grandma Jeanette (Jeanette Griffith) and the author's mother, Than Than Aye, visit in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 2019, shortly before Griffith's death.

▼ From left, Khine Myint, Kyawzwa Myint, Than Than Aye and Htet Myint at the First Fort Wayne Seventh-day Adventist Church.

