



NEWS RELEASE

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MYANMAR REFUGEE HELPS OTHERS START A BETTER LIFE

JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA (Oct. 31,2007) - One of Lutheran Social Services' very own staff members knows first hand the horrors and difficulties that surround the country of Myanmar (also known as Burma). He's seen it, he's lived it, and most importantly, he's survived it. His name is Moon Say, and he is an employment case aide for Refugee & Immigration Services.

Moon grew up in the Southeast Asian country of Myanmar, which is about the size of Texas with a population surpassing 50 million. Even though the land is rich in natural resources, it is economically one of the poorest countries in Asia. The infant mortality rate is 10 percent, and the average life span is less than 60 years. Since 1962, the country has been ruled by various military regimes that have steadily eliminated any opposition pleading for a democracy. The current junta assumed power in 1988 after crushing a democratic movement that led to the deaths of at least 3,000 people.

"If you were against the military, they would kill you," explains Moon.

Increased fighting ensued between the government and ethnic opposition groups and pro-democracy supporters in the 1990s. What followed were major refugee outflows into neighboring countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Bangladesh. Moon and his family were a part of this exodus. In Thailand alone, there are currently over 129,000 refugees registered with the Royal Thai Government and UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees).

Along with his mom, dad, four brothers and two sisters, Moon spent the next nine years of his life as a refugee at a camp in Thailand. The village they lived in was small, and his family shared a small hut. Most refugees lived in bamboo and thatch housing that was built by the refugees themselves. As Moon recounts, they survived off the forest and the mountains. There were no cars, no electricity, no bank accounts, and no clean water. Each morning, they would trek to a small stream and fetch the day's supply of water. Fear kept them out of the city.

Finally, after almost a decade of hard life in the camps, Moon and his family were able to apply to come to the United States. After nine more months, they were granted admission. Moon was the first to arrive in August 2006, and his parents came a few months later. With the help of the LSS Refugee & Immigration Services Program, Moon was set up with an apartment and matched with a job. While in Myanmar, Moon had studied English as a student, but they were only ever taught to read and write. When he arrived in the United States, it took some adjusting to get comfortable with speaking the language. However, a job soon opened up with the LSS Refugee & Immigration Services Program, and Moon was happy to be hired. He works with the same people that helped him begin his new life in the states when he first arrived, and now he helps other refugees do the same. Whether he's taking them to job interviews, helping them fill out job applications, driving them to appointments, or serving as a translator, Moon is proud of the role he plays.

“I want to help them in any way I can,” Moon said of the refugees he works with.

From Oct. 1, 2006 through Sept. 30, 2007, LSS has resettled 74 refugees from Myanmar.

One of the big differences between his old life in Myanmar and Thailand and his new life in America is opportunity. In Myanmar, he explained, there was no chance for a better life, no matter who you were. Now, he is able to attend school and fulfill his dreams. Moon is currently enrolled at FCCJ where he studies English once a week. He is working towards earning his GED. He has a great work ethic, positive attitude and takes responsibility for himself. And in spite of all he has seen, Moon's smile can light up an entire room.

When asked how his life is different in America, Moon summed up his gratitude and renewed hope in life in a few simple words.

“We have a country,” he said as he smiled. “We have freedom.”

Lutheran Social Services of Northeast Florida was founded in 1979 by area Lutherans and community leaders to serve people in need. The agency currently operates four programs: LSS Second Harvest Food Bank (the only Lutheran food bank as part of America's Second Harvest food network in Florida), Refugee and Immigration Services [resettling 90% of all refugees coming to Jacksonville through Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), Episcopal Migration Ministries (EMM), and Church World Service, AIDS Care and Education Program, and Representative Payee Services.

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