

'I belong here'

Hope Academy provides Karen refugees with resources for success

When the U.S. Department of State gave Eh Thaw Thaw's parents the option of coming to the United States instead of staying in the refugee camp in Thailand, the decision came down to education. His parents packed up their family, left all they knew and came to the United States so Eh Thaw

Thaw and his siblings could go to school. The problem, he quickly found out, was that the public schools were not prepared to handle him and his fellow refugees from the oppressed Karen ethnic group of Burma. He completed sixth grade in Thailand, but was placed closer to his age group in 8th grade in Kentucky. His English consisted of the ABC's and "Hi,

how are you?" It added up to a lot of frustration. He understood little in class and couldn't articulate his confusion. After repeated mockery of his questions in class, he stopped raising his hand.

For fellow Karen refugee Chee Low the frustration in class was bad, but bullying made things worse. Students threw things at him in class, then laughed when he retali-



Hope Academy meets in donated classrooms of Crescent Hill Baptist Church, a CBF partner congregation.

Annette Ellard, center, has used her experience as a former public school teacher to help create Hope Academy.

ated and couldn't explain to the teacher what happened. He didn't dare walk the halls alone due to the intimidation he felt. "Go back to China," students said to him. He resorted to sleeping in class or cutting it altogether.

"Skipping school is better than being laughed at," Chee Low said.

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship field personnel Steve Clark and Annette Ellard minister among Karen refugees in Louisville, Ky. They saw Eh Thaw Thaw, Chee Low and other boys their age struggling. They saw young men who wanted to learn but were increasingly lashing out in the public schools.

As a former public school teacher, Ellard knows there's not enough time to devote to each student who needs it, especially if that student has limited understanding of the language and little foundation of knowledge in the subject.

She knew they needed a change. She and Clark felt called to start Hope Academy in August 2011 with eight students from the Karen community, all boys between 16 and 20. Girls often suffer through school more quietly and make it through. Younger children pick up English, make friends and fit in more easily. High school boys, however, really struggle at this critical time when they are figuring out who God created them to be, Ellard said.

"There was no more waiting," Ellard said last summer. "We have to do something now."

So they started Hope Academy with no budget in a donated room at CBF partner Crescent Hill Baptist Church. A Sunday



school class donated \$300, which became the fall budget. A Karen Sunday School class donated 400 pounds of rice, which became school lunch.

"From the beginning it has been clear that Hope Academy is God's project," Ellard said. "We are blessed we get to be a part of what God is doing."

Clark and Ellard create an environment where the boys can succeed and grow spiritually. Ellard and other volunteer teachers take time to explain the subjects. They pray and read the Bible together. The small group size allows for field trips, where students can use all their senses to learn about ecology in the forest or history at Abraham Lincoln's birthplace. Seeing Lincoln's humble beginnings, Chee Low had a revelation. A smile exploding across his face, he said, "He was poor like me."

The main subject, however, always comes back to English. Student Der Lwe said he learned more English in one year at Hope Academy than in the previous four years of living in America. He's comfortable talking in class without ridicule. He's no longer frustrated, intimidated or angry.

"My home is really in heaven," said Chee Low. "But now I feel like I belong here."

With an education, Der Lwe hopes to become a leader for his people — a different kind of leader. Before Hope Academy, he thought the only way to help his people was to be a soldier. He now believes with an education he can have a greater impact for the Karen and their homeland. He and his classmates are advocates, writing letters to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton before her visit to Burma and meeting with U.S. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell on relations with Burma.

Chee Low doesn't have plans for college. Instead, with a better education he hopes to have a better paying job than his current landscaping job. With two disabled parents, the responsibility falls on him to make sure his four younger brothers have the opportunity to go to college.

Eh Thaw Thaw, Chee Low and Der Lwe are set to graduate next year, following the four students who graduated this spring at a formal commencement ceremony complete with gowns, speakers, "Pomp and Circumstance." Two of those graduates begin community college this fall.

By contributing writer John Foster

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Learn how you can partner with Steve Clark and Annette Ellard's ministry at www.thefellowship.info/serve or contact CBF staff member Chris Boltin at engage@thefellowship.info.