



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

BRYCS Youth Conversations: Paw, a Burmese Karen Teen

In January 2017, Paw shared her resettlement journey and experiences with BRYCS staff on what it's like to be an immigrant teen in the United States.

Family Background and Migration Story

My family originally came from Myanmar/Burma, but I grew up in a refugee camp in Thailand. My family and I are Christian. I was born in a Karen village called Ma Ner Phaw. However, my family fled from the Karen village due to the civil war (ethnic conflict in Myanmar). My village was burned down by the Burmese military and many people were killed. My family had no choice and we had to leave everything behind. We had to walk many days through the jungle to get to Thailand. We survived and were resettled in the Mae La Refugee Camp. I have experienced the struggle of living in the refugee camp for 14 years. We had very little resources and lack of education in the camp. Even when we were in the camp, we weren't very safe and we lived in fear. We were stateless and didn't really have hope for the future. We had limited resources in many aspects: education, work, health, and rights. We weren't allowed to travel anywhere outside of the camp. Thankfully, we had the opportunity to come to the U.S. in 2007 and I resettled in Illinois.

Life in the U.S.

I was surprised in many different ways with school, healthcare, cultural & diversity within the city, and rules and laws. Everything is so different in the U.S compared to the camp. It is so much better here. I get to go to school, use a computer, have access to better education, learn about new things, and participate in different activities. I am thankful to get to go to school here because the condition of the school is so much better. As a young person, I wish I could have been better informed about reaching out and asking for help, and seeking resources.

I wish I knew that coming to America is a new world where you are required to not be shy, to be proactive, and stand up for yourself. I wish heard about the reality of the education system and employment before coming here.

The hardest thing so far has been learning the language at the beginning and stepping out of my comfort zone. Managing stress and responsibilities such as taking care of my younger siblings and family, school, work, and community involvement. The hardest part would be struggling with different things while trying to survive and succeed at the same time.

After school programs and summer programs were very helpful when I arrived because I didn't know anyone and felt very isolated at school. However, later on there were some extra curricula activities that helped me to step out of my comfort zone.

Advice for Teachers

My overall advice would be to take extra time at the end of the day, during lunch time or the end of the class to explain if there something that wasn't clear. Also, my teacher would speak a little slow which helped especially when I was new to the country. Moreover, my teacher referred me to clubs that helped me to develop leadership skills and make my life in school easier. Another important point is that my teacher showed that they understand where I am coming from, encouraged and support me. It means a lot and I felt much better when going to school.

I don't have a lot of advice for my teachers because I had great teachers who were very helpful. But two more pieces of general advice:



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- Have some basic knowledge about where your students are coming from and the struggle of what they are going through because it would help students to feel that they could ask for help or instead of being scared of their teacher and seeing them as an authority figure.
- Teachers shouldn't treat ESL students as normal students because ESL students have to adjust to many things such as school system, learning the language, the cultural adjustment, and taking care/responsibilities for family. Therefore, it is important for teacher to be aware of the student's situation and possibly adjust the materials or projects that ESL has to do especially toward the new arrivals. Because when you are new, you are feeling overwhelmed in so many ways.

Advice for the Community

Please don't discriminate or stereotype against refugees. There are different types of ethnic groups and different people from various countries who come here as refugees and all have different backgrounds, experiences, and cultures that they bring with them here in the U.S. Welcome them by smiling when you see refugees or people who don't speak really good English, because it will help them feel at ease. Also, speak slowly and don't assume things about certain groups of people. Be open minded.

Advice for Immigrant Teens

Take time, continue your education if you can. Work hard and don't give up until you reach your goal. Don't be shy or let other people step on you. Speak up for your need, seek out help or resources—ask for help when you need it – your teacher, friend, social worker, etc. Also, connect with other young adults who have already come here for a while. Seek opportunities and explore new things. Don't stop when you have to face difficulties, continue to find solutions, learn how to manage your stress and how to release it. Don't be scared to take a leadership role and help others because you will become well rounded and you make friends on that journey.

Future Goals

In the next five years, I would like to go back to school and receive a Master's degree. I want to continue to work in the social work field, and enhance my skills and knowledge. I also would like to create a non-profit organization where I could work with young and adult refugee and immigrant women to empower and encourage them physically and mentally, and to tell their story through photos and art. I want to grow professionally and I want to work in the field where I can help and make a difference in my community.