



Autumn 2013

A Publication of The Episcopal Refugee Network of San Diego

## Meet Our Staff **Hilda Ro**

Members of five of the seven different ethnic groups in Burma live in San Diego: Karen, Burmese, Karenni, Shan and Chin, each with its own language and cultural traditions. Hilda, a Karen, primarily works with this population and speaks English, Karen, Burmese, and Thai.



**A**fter spending 24 years in a UN Refugee Camp in Thailand, Hilda Ro arrived in San Diego in 2007. Hilda had been more fortunate than most refugees because her parents were able to send her to a missionary school where she learned to read, write and speak English. Initially, she found work at an African Alliance Healthcare Clinic, and then five years ago we were pleased to have her join the Network as an outreach worker.

Many of these families have spent most or all of their lives in refugee camps, where they were provided free medical care, mosquito nets, blankets and food – mostly rice and yellow beans. Most of the refugees from Burma lived in bamboo huts, cooked outside, and are illiterate in their own language. When they arrive here they must attend school to learn English, find a job and adapt to a radically different urban environment that includes paying bills.

Hilda says that the most important part of her job is helping families deal with bureaucracy—not only translating, but in explaining what's happening and what's going to happen. She helps complete forms for school enrollment, DMV and government programs. She goes with our clients to the doctor or hospital to translate for them, and she's even brought meals to patients who are unable to eat hospital food. As there are very few translators available for these languages, her work is essential to helping families succeed in the community.

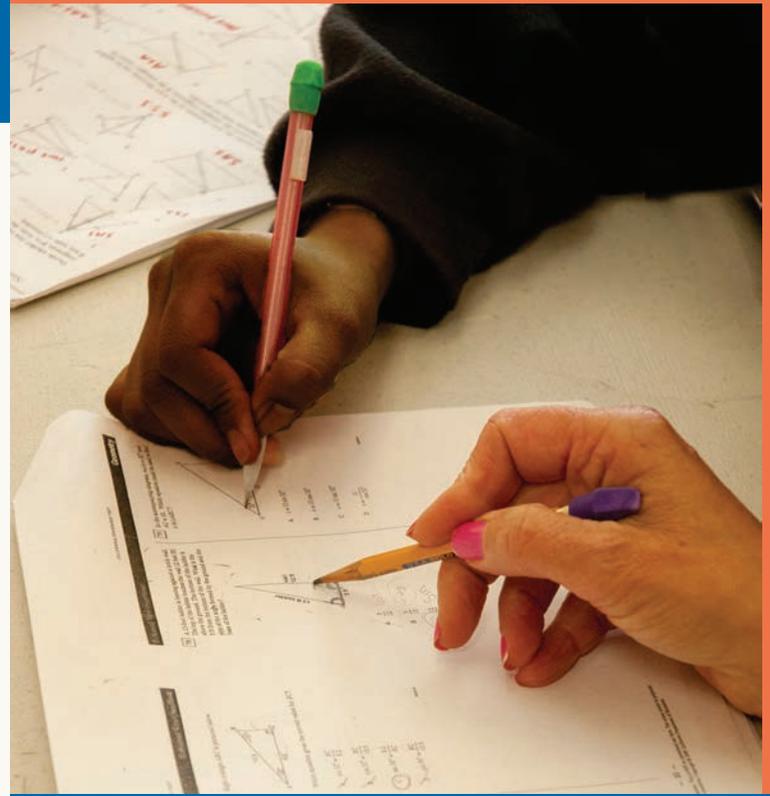
She's also a key person in our tutoring program, held at St. Mark's every Tuesday and Thursday and is our cultural liaison, helping us to understand the needs and strengths of these families.

Hilda and her 8-year-old daughter and 14-year-old son are in the process of becoming U.S. citizens. They are such a wonderful addition to our community.

# Do You Know Your ABCs?

Last Spring our outreach workers Nadia and Katherine visited a newly arrived Darfuri family to see how they were settling into their home. A tutor from the local middle school was at the apartment helping one of the children. She asked them to explain to the mother that the younger daughter was in need of additional help as well. The little girl had never learned her ABC's, and now was struggling in school. Refugee children are placed in grades based on their age rather than their knowledge.

We were able to include her in a new tutoring program at St. Luke's, where she learned her ABCs quickly and continued to receive help with her homework through the end of the school year. She was excited to begin school and tutoring classes in September.



## Back 2 School Bash

On August 17, the Episcopal Service Coalition held the second Back 2 School Bash for the Refugee Network at St. Mark's near downtown San Diego. Fifteen parishes/organizations combined their volunteer efforts to provide backpacks filled with school supplies, shoes and socks to more than 200 refugee children, most of them Karen, along with a haircut, photo, lunch, and games. As we drove the kids home, one child held a pair of shoes to his chest and said, "These are my hearts desire." Ages and sizes were gathered ahead of time, so each child picked up a filled backpack with their name on it. If their new shoes didn't fit, they swapped them for the correct size.

During the week backpacks were delivered to 65 children who were unable to attend the party, including a 15 Somali children.



Several parishes and individuals donated additional backpacks and supplies for 87 Sudanese refugee children at nearby St. Luke's.



# Arts and Culture Exchange

Many students from The Bishop's School in La Jolla, California help refugee students with their homework at the Refugee Network's Tutoring Program on Tuesday and Thursday. Two Bishop's parents, Judy Halter and Dawn Calvetti, decided to bring some of the kids back for a summer program and asked Deborah Dorn, our ESL specialist, to help them.



The Bishop's students spent a week studying English as a Second Language techniques and designing a program. Later in July, 13 refugee students joined them for an Arts and Cultural Exchange.

The students divided into four groups, based on interests: theatre, visual arts, dance and talent show and were each matched with a buddy. As the refugee children are still learning English, and our language is not spoken at home, conversing three hours a day in English for two weeks is a huge benefit.

It turns out that cross-culture was more than U.S./Burmese. The refugee children were from four

tribal groups, Karen, Shan, Chin and Karenni, and speak different languages and have different cultures. The program gave the refugee kids an opportunity to learn about each other's culture as well.

They also took field trips to an art studio, the beach, the movie "Monsters University" and the Museum of Man. At the end of the program the students put on a talent show.

"The program was a success and it was one of the most rewarding volunteer commitments I have been involved in San Diego," said Judy Halter. "Both groups of students were so impressive in their generosity towards each other as well as their level of engagement."

## Camp Stevens

They had never experienced anything like it!

Thanks to generous donations from many individuals, parishes, and Camp Stevens, 41 refugee children went to camp for the first time, with a sleeping bag, and a duffle bag packed with ChapStick, sun lotion, soap, shampoo, insect repellent, deodorant, a new bathing suit, toothpaste, toothbrush, refillable water bottle, underwear, socks, and a towel.

# President's Corner

I think that the summer activities we've highlighted in this letter will give you an idea of how many individuals, churches, and organizations are involved with helping refugees in San Diego – and how many different ways they provide their services. We often discuss the help we receive with basic needs: food, blankets, clothes, household items, translation services, and tutoring, but these are some of the special things that happened.

Summer has a special place in our hearts, and we have special memories of school vacation; maybe summer camp or a special program, and always the hustle and bustle of getting ready to go back to school. Thanks to the generosity of our friends, many refugee children enjoyed those experiences this summer – and their parents had the special joy of seeing it.

Thank you all.

*Joyce Justus*

Save the Date for the next  
Amazing Journey Gala on May 3, 2014.

We are located at 4305 University Ave, Suite 630, San Diego, CA 92105

Please be sure to visit our website to see what we do as a charitable organization:  
[episcopalrefugeenetwork.org](http://episcopalrefugeenetwork.org)

Also, "Like" us on Facebook: [facebook.com/ERNSanDiego](https://www.facebook.com/ERNSanDiego)

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The Network has its own 501(C) 3 tax exempt status.

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