

A life full of hope

This story was published Monday, November 27th, 2006 in the Tri-City Herald

By Elena Olmstead, Herald Valley bureau

Until three years ago, Aung Sithu, 18, never had a formal education, let alone knowing how to troubleshoot problems on a computer.

The Kennewick High School student's education came from bits of pieces of information he learned while staying in refugee camps along the border of Burma and Thailand with his family.

Then, in 2003, Sithu and his family, including parents Myint Myint Sein and Kyaw Swe Sithu and two sisters, were brought to the Tri-Cities through World Relief.

Sithu was born in Rangoon, Burma, to a Burmese father and a Karen mother. It wasn't long after he was born that a military junta took over the country, destroying villages, taking control of property and pushing many Karen out of the region.

Since then, families like Sithu's have been forced to find refuge wherever they can. Sithu said in his case his father was a military official, and was forced to leave the country early in the conflict.

Sithu said his family moved to Thailand, but there was little work for them because they were illegal immigrants. His parents ended up sending him back to a refugee camp along the border to get some form of education. There, he learned some math, as well as the Burmese, English and Karen languages.

In order to qualify as refugees, Sithu's family had to spend three years in a large political refugee camp in Thailand, where they were kept fenced in a five by three-mile enclosure.

Finally, on Aug. 6, 2003, his family finally left Southeast Asia, and Sithu's life changed dramatically.

He couldn't speak English when he arrived. Now, he's getting ready to graduate, loves working with computers and is on the school's wrestling team.

Although Sithu and his family arrived in the Mid-Columbia through World Relief, another group has adopted them. Richland's Global Gateway Network, which operates the House of Hope orphanage for Burmese children near Three Pagodas Pass in Thailand, learned the family was in the area and quickly befriended them.

Sithu now does odd jobs around Global Gateway Network board members, Marv and Joanne Erickson's, Richland home. Joanne Erickson said she's come to think of Sithu as a son.

"He's been such a blessing and his whole family have been such a blessing," she said.

Joanne Erickson and her husband visited Thailand in May with Robert and Sandy Armstrong. Robert Armstrong is Global Gateway Network's field director for southeast Asia. He recently left for another three- to six-month-long stay in Thailand.

Sandy Armstrong said since the House of Hope orphanage was founded in the spring, the group has seen progress in 21 Karen children living there. The children are flourishing in Thai schools.

She said Global Gateway Network helped pay for Thai language lessons for the children, and has provided money for medical supplies and food.

"The children are excelling in athletics and singing," Sandy Armstrong said. "Their cheeks are plump and they have toys."

With the success of House of Hope and another orphanage the group operates in Vietnam, Sandy Armstrong said Global Gateway Network is looking into building another orphanage in southern Thailand, near Malaysia.