



SHAR TAW MOO: Nomad, refugee, musician, newcomer, student, volunteer

By Heather Hosick

Shar Taw Moo Shar Taw Moo's parents were married in the jungle, a place where many Karen people escaped to avoid the Burmese army. His family members have long been affected by the civil war raging in Burma—also known as Myanmar—since the country became independent from the British in 1948. Shar Taw's mother was only 16 when she first left her home for the jungle; his father also sought refuge there to avoid being forced by the Burmese army to join their ranks. Under the cover of the jungle in the Karen State is where his parents met and started their family.

The jungle was a challenging place, but his family was not alone. Families displaced by the Burmese army would band together to create a working village. Adults and children all had roles that aided their survival, and survival was something they had to think about daily. Shar Taw describes his early educational experience: Sometimes by the river an adult would gather the children together and teach them to write and count. They would practice writing or arithmetic by either writing letters in the dirt or etching numbers into the side of a rock.

As hard as they worked to provide for each other and create their own functional village, it could only ever be temporary. Constantly moving was important for staying hidden. Only two or three weeks would go by in one location before the decision was made to move again. Sometimes the choice was made for them. Shar Taw remembers the times the Burmese army found them. If they were lucky they heard warning shots that would alert them. When this happened they would not grab anything; the important thing was to run.

It is Shar Taw's guess that he was eight or nine years old when his parents made the difficult decision to attempt to find refuge in Thailand. They knew that if they left, they would be letting their country down. However, life on the run meant sacrificing too much for their children. Life in the refugee camp in Thailand was a complete change. The daily threat of the Burmese army was gone and they no longer had to work hard every day for their basic needs. The United Nations provided Shar Taw's family with food rations, and they traded for whatever else they needed.

Once in the refugee camp, Shar Taw was able to start school. He can remember his first major challenge. He was used to applying strong pressure to make his markings on the rock. Now he had new tools for writing, a notebook and a pencil, but it took him time to learn how to use them. He can remember accidentally digging holes with his pencil in the limited amount of paper he had.

When Shar Taw was 16 years old, his parents again had to make a difficult decision. He had developed epilepsy and was experiencing seizures every day. They thought it was safer for him to stay home with his family instead of go to school. Luckily other educational opportunities presented themselves for Shar Taw. His family managed to acquire a guitar and had him attend lessons. He loved guitar and his music lessons. An interesting twist of fate occurred one day when two of his guitar strings broke. There was no way he could afford to replace them. That is when Shar Taw was struck with a eureka moment; with four strings he could learn to play the bass guitar. Soon he became the youngest bass player in the camp and got a job playing in church.

Shar Taw's involvement in the church inspired him to go to bible school, where he found a new way to continue his education. At this time his epilepsy was more under control. The bible school curriculum consisted of learning to interpret the bible, practising music, and prayer. Soon Shar Taw was the top student in the program and was invited to lead the choir in church. Involvement with music and the church is still an important part of his life today.

After 12 years in the Thai refugee camp, the opportunity to come to Canada presented itself. Shar Taw Moo and his family arrived in 2009. With the help of local services they adjusted to living in their new country. ISKA (Immigrant Services Kingston and Area) is an organization that he still praises today. Because language was a huge challenge, ISKA paired him with an English speaker who helped him get around the city and get the things he needed. He jokes that both of them shared "the language of ESL". She did not speak Karen and he did not speak English, but by using gestures they found a way to communicate. It wasn't long before Shar Taw started languages classes in the LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) program.

Moo Soccer

Not a lot of time passed before Shar Taw began getting involved in the community. He was so grateful for his new opportunity and to those who supported him that he wanted to give back. For two years he showed leadership by volunteering as lead facilitator for ISKA's soccer team. He successfully rallied many people to these matches though email. The games were a way to help newcomers make friends and feel comfortable in their new home. Shar Taw wanted them to love Canada as much as he did. Recently he has begun volunteering for TV COGECO. You might see his name credited for filming some of their television programs. Meanwhile he has discovered he has a knack for fixing electronics. He is currently taking business classes at KEYS and hopes to one day have his own business.



Shar Taw sometimes gives speeches across the community, and he begins by saying, "Can you imagine living in a country with no freedom, not having your basic needs met, no health care, education, or even food and clothing?" Shar Taw has never had a passport. Canada has given him freedom and security. It is his hope that in the near future he will proudly become a Canadian citizen.



Heather Hosick is a writer and educator who has found her niche in teaching English as a second language. She began her career in Korea teaching ESL to children. Now she teaches ESL in Kingston to teenagers and adults. What she finds personally rewarding is hearing so many unique stories from across the globe. By speaking to ESL students and professionals in our area, she discovers the stories in our own community.