

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)



## Wharton volunteers co-host Thanksgiving dinner to welcome Burmese refugees

**By: Sushant Mukherjee (WG'09) Contributing Writer**

**Posted: 12/3/07**

Refugees from the war-torn Karen state in the eastern hills of Burma enjoyed a lavish Thanksgiving feast on Saturday. A group of over 50 Wharton student volunteers and partners joined with the Nationalities Service Center (NSC), a local refugee resettlement NGO, to welcome these new Philadelphia residents.

Since their arrival to the United States three months ago, the Karen Burmese have faced difficulties adjusting to their new home. Most of the older refugees do not speak English, several are suffering from serious illnesses, and many are struggling to find employment of any kind.

Yet the Karen Burmese are no strangers to hardship. They have been living in refugee camps on the Thailand-Burma border since 1973, and have been fighting the Burmese military junta for more than 58 years for a state of their own. It is the world's longest running civil war.

Refugees in the camps lived with the constant threat of attacks by a Burmese military outpost, two miles from the Thai border, which often shelled the camps indiscriminately with heavy artillery. Some of those who have arrived in Philadelphia are amputees who lost their limbs in landmine incidents; others are ex-child soldiers who escaped from the military.

On this night, however, they were able to put their troubles behind them. Dressed in colorful blouses and longyi (sarongs), the boys and girls performed a ceremonial bamboo stick dance accompanied by Karen music on the keyboard. Their parents looked on, smiling proudly. There were also representatives from other refugee communities, including Vietnamese, Eastern Europeans, and Liberians. They had second and third helpings of turkey, and heartily ate other Thanksgiving favorites like mashed potatoes and gravy, stuffing and pumpkin pie, all brought by Wharton students and their partners. Students and partners even prepared traditional Burmese rice and sweet potato dishes.

The Wharton community itself rallied together remarkably to host the event. In a school where time is the most precious commodity of all, students turned out in large numbers to cook, serve and interact with Philadelphia's refugee community.

One moment early in the evening stands out in particular. I stopped in the middle of the room, a stack of paper plates in hand, and surveyed the scene before me. Six of my classmates had rolled up their sleeves and were furiously at work carving eight turkeys.

Three others were in a corner, entertaining a group of excited refugee children, while another was chatting animatedly with an elderly Liberian man who had fled his country and arrived in the U.S. just eight months ago. Others had positioned themselves behind the long tables stacked with food, ready to begin serving.

It was one of those moments to truly savor, a moment when the softer side of Wharton was on vivid display.

It also seemed particularly fitting that the refugees were being welcomed with the uniquely American celebration of Thanksgiving. As Juliane Ramic, director of community services at NSC, noted, "Thanksgiving has always been, more than anything else, an immigrant holiday."

The Karen Burmese, like all newly arrived refugees, have a long, arduous journey ahead, as they navigate their transition to life in the U.S.

With the gift of Thanksgiving, hopefully we were able to convey the message that they are not alone in this challenge, and that along the way, they will find the support they need to build new lives for themselves and their children in their new home, here in Philadelphia.

---

© Copyright 2009 Wharton Journal