

# Life After Refuge

An alumna's journey from  
asylum to college graduate

**In** the nearly 125 years the United Kingdom (UK) occupied Myanmar (formerly Burma), the British fought endlessly to exploit the religious, cultural and linguistic peculiarities that distinguished the country's majority Burmese population from its minority ethnic tribes, such as the Karen.

By the time Burma obtained independence from the UK in 1948, internal prejudice had reached inexorable levels, and the country broke out into a civil war that remains to this day.









Mary relied on hard work, college resources and her drive to accomplish her nursing dream throughout the ups and downs of her educational journey.

Over the decades, the dominant Burmese military has burnt down countless ethnic villages, especially in the Karen States. Hundreds of thousands of civilians presumed to have connections to the armed opposition have been persecuted and displaced. To escape the constant fear of being raped, tortured or killed in what has been described as one of the world's longest-running civil wars, the first Karen refugees arrived in Thailand in 1984.

For the first 16 years of her life, undergraduate Nursing alumna Mary EdwardToe ('16) never set foot beyond the barbed wire fence surrounding the refugee camp in Thailand where her Karen-born family resided. She spent her days fantasizing about what existed on the other side—and praying for the chance to someday see it with her own eyes.

Mary's parents, Hto Toe and Mu Naw, were among the first Karen people who sought refuge in 1984. They settled at Kamaw Lay Ko refugee camp where they birthed and raised four children—Mary included. In 1995, the Burmese military attacked and demolished Kamaw Lay Ko. Fortunately, Mary's family survived the invasion and relocated to the Mae La refugee camp.

The number of children in the Toe family reached six by 1998. They all attended school at the camp and began learning basic English at an early age. Surrounded by what seemed like endless despair, Mary felt an inherent desire to someday become a nurse—a



farfetched dream for a young girl trapped in a world where a career and a college education were unthinkable. There was hope, though.

In 2006, Mary's family applied to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Due to the countless refugees in the Toes' same position, there was no telling if or when they would ever experience life beyond that barbed wire fence. Finally, after a year-and-a-half of constant prayers and wishful anticipation, the Toes received word from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees that their application was approved.

About three months later, Mary, along with her parents, grandfather, two brothers and three sisters, stepped outside of the Mae La refugee camp for the first time together. "I felt like a bird free from a cage," shares Mary. "As I exited the camp, I was thinking about my dream, freedom and a better life."

The Toes boarded a plane and set off for their journey to the U.S. They first arrived at L.A. International Airport. After clearing the security checkpoint, they stayed overnight in a hotel. The next morning, the family took a connecting flight to Houston, Texas and then headed to their final destination—Omaha, Neb. "We didn't choose to come to Omaha, but we believed that God sent us here for a reason."

As she disembarked the airplane and soaked in the unfamiliar reality that

surrounded her, Mary had a moment of solace. "I could feel that this was a place full of opportunities and hope, and I knew for sure that I could fulfill my dream of becoming a nurse."

Mary attended Omaha South High School and overcame any language inhibitions she had by taking English as a Second Language lessons. "It took me four years of living in the U.S. before I felt I was fluent," she says.

After graduating high school, she enrolled in the Pre-Nursing program at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Partway through the program, she began researching nursing schools in the area. "It didn't take me long to decide that Clarkson College would prepare me to be the best nurse," Mary says.

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She enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program in fall 2013. The following year, she received the exciting news that she was selected as a Gateway to Success Minority in

Nursing Scholarship recipient, which awarded her \$10,000 each academic year she remained in the BSN program, as well as a summer internship experience at Nebraska Medicine.

"I am forever thankful to the Gateway Scholarship committee and mentors for opening the door for me to enter a career in health care," says Mary. "I wouldn't have achieved my dream without this scholarship."

In her final semester in the BSN program, Mary took on her preceptorship, working the night shift on 6 West at Nebraska Medicine where she cared for trauma, bariatric and general surgical patients.

Many mornings after completing her shift, she walked to campus to attend

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class and pass the day studying. "Clarkson College was like my home," she says. "I was always so glad to be a student there."

Mary acknowledges that completing her BSN degree was more difficult than she could have anticipated. "The journey was full of challenges and obstacles that seemed impossible to overcome, like learning how to think critically and answer questions in a limited amount of time." With English being her second language, much of the medical terminology was particularly difficult to learn. "But with the hard work and the resources that Clarkson College provides, I was able to overcome those challenges," she states proudly. "Against all odds, I made it and I finally accomplished everything that I worked so hard for."

On Saturday morning, Dec. 10, 2016, Mary crossed the stage at the Clarkson College commencement ceremony and graciously accepted her diploma. This was a surreal moment for a young woman whose dream of becoming a nurse for so many years existed only in the times she looked high into the infinite sky and imagined life being different.

Just weeks before graduating, Mary shared her story with a mixed race class of fourth graders at a midtown Omaha elementary school. She told

them that despite the disadvantages or discouragement they may feel sometimes, the trajectory of their education is largely in their hands. "I feel like if I can

do it, anybody can do it," Mary says. "Being an ESL student doesn't mean you can't accomplish your dreams. Anything is possible to those who believe in themselves and work hard."

Following Mary's presentation, the ESL resource teacher at the school overheard one of the students say to another, "I want to be just like her."

After passing the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses, Mary's short-term goal is to gain more experience on the medical-surgical floor for the next two or three years. "My long-term goal," she says, "is to work in my community (the Karen Community) here in Omaha."

Mary expresses her gratitude to all those at Clarkson College who helped her realize her lifelong dream. "Nursing is not just a career for me—it is a calling," she says fervently. "I feel I was born with a passion to make a difference in peoples' lives and would like to thank all of my instructors for their support and good work, kindness and patience and for calling me by name when they saw me. I will never regret that I chose to come to Clarkson College."





Mary would like to dedicate this article to her late grandfather, Edward Pway Taw. When Karen resistance against the Burmese army arose on Jan. 31, 1949, he was among the body of Karens who fought for freedom and equality. "He dedicated so much of his time protecting Karen people and lost everything the day he stood up against the Burmese Army." Pway Taw died in a bombing attack in 1958 carried out by the Burmese Air Force.

1 / Mary in the Simulation Lab on campus. 2 / Mary with two fourth grade students at a local elementary school.