

"America Has Been So Good to Us"



(Clockwise from top right) Kaw Soe Win and Naw Win May in their new kitchen; with the kids during construction; daughters Tabetha and Christina; the girls with Mom and Dad on the front lawn

Kaw Soe Win fled a brutal Burmese dictatorship in pursuit of a safe haven for his family. Thanks to Habitat, they found a house, happiness—and a bright future

BY ANNE CASSIDY

On a bright summer day last June, Burmese refugee Kaw Soe Win, his wife and their seven children dressed in colorful native costumes to celebrate the completion of their new home in Utica, New York. Kaw Soe had prepared a few remarks to thank the Habitat volunteers and say how much they and all of his new American friends meant to him. "We came from a land where we faced poverty and persecution, but now we have a real home—built not just with materials and sweat, but with love," the 65-year-old said. "It is truly a blessing from God."

When Kaw Soe and his family arrived in Utica in October 1999, it was indeed the end of a long, painful odyssey. He grew up in a small village in southern Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) and, as the son of a Baptist minister, was educated by Christian missionaries. After two years studying economics at Rangoon University, he became an accounts clerk in the government's agriculture department. But like many of his countrymen, he chafed at the repressive, brutal, military dictatorship that has ruled Myanmar since 1962, which routinely drove cit-

izens from their homes, coerced them into forced labor, and imprisoned, tortured and killed them. In 1968, Kaw Soe, who belongs to the minority Karen ethnic group, quit his job and joined the Karen National Union (KNU), a resistance organization waging war against the government. "I wasn't fighting with weapons, but with pen and paper. We were simply trying to restore democracy and human rights," says Kaw Soe, who traveled through the countryside urging people to join. It was dangerous work, and he was paid only with food and lodging.

While organizing in southern Myanmar in 1972, he met Naw Win May, a nurse's assistant with the KNU. The couple fell in love and married the following year, then worked side by side until the birth of their son in 1977. Settling in a town in the southwest, the couple had another son and five daughters

CONTINUED

HABITAT FAMILY

over the next decade, and Naw Win devoted her attention to caring for them while Kaw Soe continued to work for the democracy movement and travel from village to village. In 1995, government troops launched a major offensive against the KNU and occupied their headquarters. The organization began to splinter and, fearing for their lives, the Wins fled to Thailand.

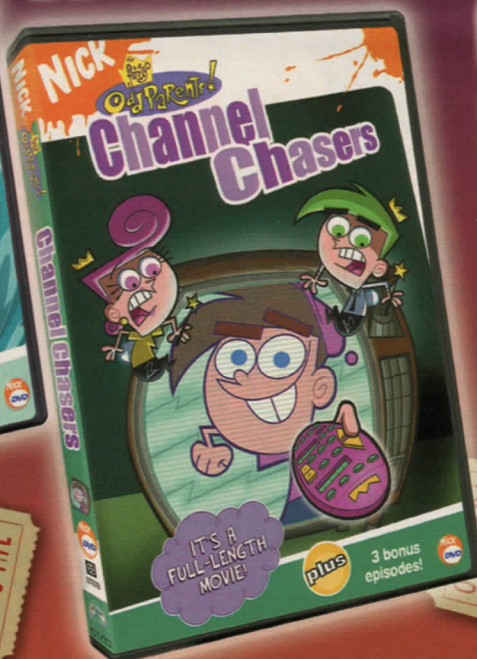
For two years the family lived in bamboo huts in jungle refugee camps. But they were still in danger, since the camps harbored enemy informers and were often raided by Burmese government troops. The Wins were greatly relieved when they were granted United Nations refugee status in 1997 and were permitted to move to Bangkok, where they applied at the U.S. Em-

bassy for refuge here. After spending a month in an immigration detention center, they moved into an apartment with the help of friends. It would be two long years—during which the family received financial assistance from the U.N.—before the State Department, in conjunction with a local refugee organization, sponsored their move to Utica.

When the Wins arrived in New York—with only a few suitcases to their name—they were met by members of the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees, which had rented an apartment for them and registered them for public assistance. In addition to providing English classes, the center also helped Kaw Soe and Naw Win find jobs and enroll their children in school. For spiritual suste-

nance, the family joined the Tabernacle Baptist Church, where they became active members and aided other Karen refugees in Utica. After Kaw Soe and Naw Win secured assembly-line work at ConMed, a medical technology company, they began to long for a home of their own. Tabernacle pastor Mark S. Caruana convinced them to apply for a Habitat house in June 2002, and the family was approved in October.

The Wins jumped into home-building with passion. A nine-person family and willing friends were able, in a matter of months, to log the 500 hours of sweat equity required to close on their new house on Steuben Street, one of three Habitat homes on the block. The project started with a “blitz build,” which meant that much of the con-



IT'S A DOUBLE DOSE OF MOVIE MAYHEM!

EXPERIENCE THE ADVENTURES ON DVD AND VHS



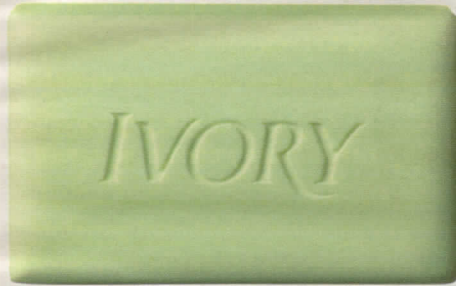
www.nick.com www.paramount.com/homeentertainment

Date, art, availability and DVD special features subject to change without notice. © 2004 Viacom International Inc. All Rights Reserved. The Fairly OddParents created by Butch Hartman. Nickelodeon Rocket Power created by Klasky Csupo, Inc. TM, ® & Copyright © 2004 by Paramount Pictures. All Rights Reserved.

NICKELODEON



INTRODUCING IVORY ALOE



IT'S IVORY PURE & ALOE GENTLE



For soft, baby smooth skin.
Available in bar and body wash.

© 2004 P&G

struction happened during a three-day period in April 2003. On the first day, when more than 100 volunteers—including police officers, firefighters and Utica Mayor Timothy Julian—showed up, the Wins were astonished. The last time they built a house, it was a bamboo hut in Thailand—and they did it all themselves. “I remember people painting and carrying heavy boards—and Mayor Julian on the roof with a hammer in his hands,” says Kaw Soe. “This project had a great deal of support from this city,” says Sharon Smith, vice president of Oneida County Habitat for Humanity. “By day’s end, the house was up, doors and windows installed, and part of the roof on. It was amazing to watch.”

Since the Wins moved into their four-bedroom house, the family has

been thriving. Four of the daughters have already graduated high school and gone on to college: Ruth, 23, and Kaneh Paw, 21, both study nursing in Buffalo; Esther, 18, is a freshman at Erie Community College; and Tabetha, 20, studies banking and insurance at Mohawk Valley Community College in Utica. The girls receive financial assistance from their schools and have student loans as well. The Wins’s youngest child, Christina, 16, is still in high school, and lives at home with Tabetha and her big brothers, Lawkwa Htoo, 27, and Simon, 25. The boys, who were already past high-school age when they came to the U.S., have worked at restaurants, a nursing home and a local casino in order to contribute money to the household—and the \$341 monthly

mortgage payments. They also take college classes when they can.

While all the children can still remember the harrowing years in Myanmar, they now savor small pleasures that most of us take for granted. “It’s very different here,” says Tabetha, who was 15 when the family came to the U.S. “People aren’t poor, they have freedom, and they are safe.” For his part, Kaw Soe is most grateful for the kindness shown by so many in Utica. “When we arrived, we felt like strangers,” he says. “But thanks to Habitat, the Tabernacle church, and friends, we don’t feel that way any more. Now we feel at home.”

LHJ.com

Get involved! Learn more about a Habitat project in your neighborhood: www.lhj.com/habitat