

NO MORE HIDING

One year, two imprisonments and a snakebite later, refugee brothers from Myanmar reunite in Richmond

By Kate Andrews

The first time Aung Naing had to say goodbye to his younger brother, he was on the run from Myanmar's military junta.

He and his uncle were arrested in March 2006 for purchasing cattle in Myanmar — also known as Burma — and selling them over the border in India, next to their home in Haka Township. Selling livestock in other countries, which violates one of the junta's laws, was one of a few ways to make ends meet.

Aung, then 16, spent a week in Than Thang, a prison for Chins, his ethnic group. He ended up bribing a guard to free him and returned his grandmother's home in Haka with no money.

The brothers' maternal grandmother had raised them; their mother died from an illness when Aung was 5, and their father had fled to India — the brothers were too young to remember their parents.

Upon Aung's release, he spoke to his grandmother by phone, and she told him, "You cannot stay with me," he remembers; the family — and Aung — would have been at risk of arrest. He said goodbye to his brother, Ahu Thang, and began an arduous journey by vegetable truck, raft and foot, through southern Myanmar, Thailand and Malaysia, two countries where Myanmar refugees are considered illegal.

An unofficial camp for Chin refugees near Kuala Lumpur became Aung's home for the next year. Tents covered in plastic serve as kitchens and washrooms; refugees sleep in the jungle under mosquito nets, trying to elude the RELA, a Malaysian military police group that raids the camp at night.

A United Nations outpost at the camp assists refugees with paperwork to escape Malaysia for countries where they would be accepted as legal residents.

Aung was referred by the U.N. to the United States government, which then handed responsibility for the teen's care to Commonwealth Catholic Charities, the Richmond branch of the national nonprofit agency. The agency has custody of youths until they turn 21, or they can decide to leave the program after they turn 18.

By early July 2007, Aung's future was beginning to look brighter, as his fall departure date for Richmond approached. However, that month was bittersweet. Thirteen-year-old Ahu had just joined him in the camp, having also traveled through Thailand and Malaysia. Myanmar's government had been leaning on Ahu, trying to get him to reveal where Aung was.

Aung didn't have to give his younger brother much advice on staying safe — the trip had made the boy wary of potential dangers both human and animal. "He knew how to live and sometimes run away," Aung says.

The two didn't get to spend a lot of time together, because both worked construction jobs and sometimes had different sleeping schedules. Like many Chins in the camp, Aung used his meager income, three dollars a day, to buy a cell phone — a piece of technology necessary for survival. If a raid was on, ref-

Part One of a nine-part series that will follow Aung and Ahu during their first year at L.C. Bird High School. For future installments, visit richmondmagazine.com.



From left: Aung and Ahu

(NO MORE HIDING continued on page 94)

NO MORE HIDING continued from page 75

ugees spread the word, warning others to stay away from camp.

Meanwhile, the U.N. was working on Aung's trip to Richmond. The brothers said goodbye again in late September 2007, and Aung gave Ahu his cell phone, with a promise they'd meet again.

In a photo taken at the Richmond airport, Aung — a slender young man with a rugged face — looks worn out and disoriented after more than 24 hours in the air. "I was scared, he was scared," recalls Stefanie Perkins Pollay, his original social worker. He was her first international refugee. He spoke next to no English, and four months later, alarming news arrived.

In January, Ahu's phone didn't work. Unable to reach his brother, Aung called a friend, Mang Hre, and learned that Ahu had been arrested in a raid. Ahu served 45 days in prison, after which he was deported to Thailand. Aung didn't know his brother's whereabouts until April, when Ahu made his way back to the Malaysian camp.

Later that month, while he was hiding in the jungle at night, a snake bit Ahu between his toes. Feverish and with extreme swelling in his left foot, Ahu waited two days for medical treatment while his friends collected money to pay for medicine. In Richmond, Pollay increased her efforts to bring Ahu here.

On Wednesday, Sept. 17, Ahu boarded a plane in Kuala Lumpur with other refugees, carrying a white plastic bag with official documents, including his I-94 form — an arrival-departure record that served as his only form of identification and his "golden ticket" to the United States, as his social worker, Kim McRae, puts it.

He arrived in Richmond's airport on the morning of Sept. 19, 10 minutes early, with only the social workers waiting in the terminal. Aung and Janey Neff, the brothers' foster mother, were on the way.

Ahu, pale and fine-featured, looked down the hall, tapping his left foot nervously. And then came Aung, breaking into a jog toward his brother.

They clasped hands, smiled broadly and spoke to one another in Chin: "How are you? Are you happy?" Aung asked.

They stood the same height, less than 5-foot-6, and walked with the same long strides to baggage claim; from behind, they were obviously brothers.

"No more hiding and no more running," Aung translated into English from his brother's Chin. "So excited." ■