

## Moon Soe: From refugee camp to college diploma

Written by

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A Burma native is one of four Karen people graduating fall semester from Metropolitan State University.

Soe joined three other Burmese natives in graduating from the university. They are part of a just a handful of ethnic Karens – an ethnic group that makes up about seven percent of the population of Burma – who have earned bachelor's degrees in Minnesota, according to graduate, Moon Soe. Moreover, Soe was selected outstanding student in the university's School of Urban Education.

"Metropolitan State is a very nontraditional school that is accepting of diversity," said Soe, who lives in Saint Paul. "I felt like I belonged there and that I knew how to find support and resources that I needed."

Soe arrived in Saint Paul in 2008 at age 21 after spending many years in a refugee camp. He and his family fled Burma after that country's military attacked rural Karen villages.

"There was gunfire and bombing, so we couldn't live in the villages anymore," said Soe. "Bombs would land three feet behind us as we were leaving. No one in my immediate family died in the fighting, but some relatives did. It was a very traumatic experience."

He was only eight when he and his family crossed the Thai border. They moved to another refugee camp in northern Thailand, where they spent the next 13 years.

Soe works full-time as an educational assistant for the Washington Technology Magnet School in Saint Paul. He tutors English-as-a-second language students, most of whom are refugees and immigrants, and works with their parents in monitoring the children's progress. Soe also advises the school's Karen Club, an after-school program for Karen refugee students.

Apart from his job, Soe also helps his Karen neighbors with English translation. In addition, he helps them secure social services, drives them to grocery stores and offers other assistance as needed. He said Minnesota boasts more Karen refugees than any other state, with perhaps 6,500 – 7,000 in the Twin Cities.

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Soe graduated from Century College in 2011 with an associate of arts degree. By obtaining his bachelor's degree at Metropolitan State, he became the first in his extended family of about 100 to graduate from college.

"My family is very proud of me," said Soe.

Soe's plans include becoming a U.S. citizen – he has already passed the citizenship test – and working as an instructor teaching grades five through 12. Assuming that occurs, Soe said he will become the first college-educated Karen teacher in Minnesota and possibly even the United States.

At some point, Soe hopes to return to Burma, assuming it is safe.

"There are thousands of people there who don't receive an education," he said. "Many children learn under trees or in the jungle. I would like to go back and find resources for them and help them rebuild their lives."