

**A Refugee from Burma, Daisy Recounts
Her Extraordinary Journey from Life in a Thai
Orphanage to Life in a Small Private College in Pennsylvania**

Burma, officially the Union of Myanmar and the largest country in Indochina, is bordered by a number of countries, including the People's Republic of China on the northeast and Thailand on the southeast. Human rights in Burma, which is governed by a strict military dictatorship, have been a longstanding concern for the international community. There is general agreement that the military regime in Burma is one of the world's most repressive and abusive regimes, forcibly maintaining control over various ethnic group populations residing there. The Shan people, an ethnic group making up about 10 percent of Burma's population, have clashed repeatedly with Burmese government troops as they fight for equal rights and independence.

Mo Nom Tee Kham, a young Shan woman from Burma who now lives in Pennsylvania and goes by the name of Daisy, bravely recounted the story of her family's flight from Burma to Thailand and their experience as refugees there, as well as their arrival in the United States after securing asylum in this country.

Leaving Burma

Daisy was twelve when her parents announced that the family would be going on a surprise vacation to Thailand. Excited, Daisy packed lightly—five little outfits in a small suitcase, nothing more. Daisy was worried that the vacation might get in the way of her final exams, but her father told her not to worry. Daisy, her brother and their parents left their lovely home in Burma, where her Dad had a successful law practice and her mother worked as a homemaker, taking an early morning flight to the Thai border. A friend of Daisy's father picked them up at the airport and arranged for their drive into Thailand.

Daisy had absolutely no inkling at the time that she would never be returning to her home or her country. Only later did her father explain to her the perils faced by her family if they had remained in Burma. Daisy's father had for some years been involved in an underground political resistance movement seeking to improve the lot of the Shan ethnic minority group of which Daisy's family were all members, but the risk of being exposed and punished by Burmese government authorities had grown too great. The need for secrecy and caution had forced Daisy's parents to conceal their true intentions and to fabricate the vacation story. Daisy's new life in Thailand, however, turned out to be anything but a vacation.

Life in an Orphanage

Less than a month after their arrival in Thailand, Daisy and her brother were placed in an orphanage by their parents, who found that they could not properly care for their children while trying to start a new life in a new country as illegal refugees. The orphanage, founded by a Filipino and his Norwegian wife to take care of ethnic Shan children, was called The House of Hope. It was Daisy's and her brother's only home for the next year and a half. Forty or fifty other Shan children also lived there, along with the founder's family; another Thai family; and

another Shan adult. Neither Daisy nor her brother had ever before spent any time apart from their parents.

I was so young I was not ready. Living in orphanage is a big transformation. Because in Burma, I'm the "princess." We not rich, but we not on the bottom. But life in orphanage is different. You have terrible people, you have to understand.

Daisy, who had always loved school and had excelled as a student in her native Burma, wasn't able to attend school at the orphanage. Instead, a typical day for Daisy revolved around cleaning and cooking—chores she had never had to undertake before.

Me and my brother, oh my God, we had never cooked. We never even wash our clothes. What are we going to do? Like...for us it was really a big deal.

Initially, Daisy found it almost impossible to adjust to life in the orphanage. She missed her parents and her friends and relatives back home in Burma—terribly. She missed her school. She missed having her own bed. Recognizing that there was no possibility of escaping the conditions of her new life, however, Daisy gradually grew accustomed to the small room—and the one mattress—that she shared with a number of other young girls in the orphanage, and the same scant meals served daily, consisting of little more than rice. Resilient and good-spirited by nature, Daisy was even able to consider herself “lucky” over time:

To have food to eat and a place to sleep... always try to be thankful whatever happened to you, to just think positive. Things get better after four months. I start to understand, to see other people's side of view. I know what I have to do to adjust. The more you live with, the more you get involved with, you become one of them. You understand them.

Although there was no real school, several adults living at the orphanage taught the children some things. A Thai man living there gave informal lessons in the Thai language, for example, and a Shan woman talked to the children about the history and culture of the people. Learning more about the history and culture of her own ethnic group was a revelation to Daisy:

I don't really know how to write Shan and read Shan because in Burma you [are] forbidden to learn your language. You forbid to speak your language. So the first time I learn Shan language, the first time I learned how to write and read it, is in Thailand. I started to learn Shan and I started to learn Shan history. The Shan lady would teach history. She show us book, this really big textbook, and we were, "Oh my God, we have a really huge history!" And I start to learn the history. Oh, that really get into the politician side of me! In Burma you will never know. But then when you come here, you start to know who you really are. Because there is no Burmese to control, to stop you.

Daisy Volunteers as a Translator

About a year into her stay at the orphanage, Daisy's spirits improved significantly when missionaries came to the orphanage requesting a translator. As it turned out, Daisy and her brother were the only orphans there who had attended school previously and knew some English.

Because the missionaries also hoped to help out the children at the orphanage—and begin providing them with some education, as well as books and clothing—Daisy was eager to volunteer her services.

Daisy loved translating among three languages—English, Shan and Thai—as well as the esteem and respect she garnered as the resident translator at the orphanage. She would sometimes marvel to herself:

Wow, I cannot believe this. I never thought I gonna be living orphanage and be happy with it, you know!

A year and a half after being placed in the orphanage, Daisy's parents returned to reclaim Daisy and her brother. Daisy was thrilled to be reunited with her parents, but much to her surprise, she was also a little sad to leave behind a life she had come to appreciate. Fortunately, even after moving into a house nearby with her family, Daisy was invited to continue working as a translator at the orphanage, and even earned a little money doing so.

Daisy and Her Brother Go to Work

After several months of this new life, however, Daisy's parents announced that both Daisy and her brother would have to work harder to contribute more in the way of income for the family. Unable to speak or understand Thai, Daisy's parents had difficulty themselves finding remunerative employment.

Daisy's brother—now a slight fifteen-year-old—found full-time work as a courier, lifting and carrying bags weighing 120 pounds and more, all day every day. Daisy—now fourteen years old—found a job as an assistant at a pharmacy, where she worked 14 and 15 hour days, seven days a week, and earned about \$2 per day. As it turned out, however, serving as a pharmacy assistant was only one of the roles expected of her. Other responsibilities included assisting at a family-owned clothing store and food store, mostly cleaning the shops and organizing their stock. When her employer discovered Daisy's English language proficiency, he also assigned her the additional responsibility of teaching his children English. Daisy can't recall ever having a single day off during the year she worked there, but exhaustion was the least of her concerns at the time. Fully aware of her illegal status, her employer was not shy in wielding power with implicit threats, and Daisy worried about what might happen if she tried to quit. When she felt that she could endure her abusive working conditions no longer, she was told, "You're not going anywhere. You cannot go unless we say you can go. If we cannot find a replacement, you still stay here." Daisy felt trapped:

They just manipulate your mind. They know where they stand. They know what they can do and you know what you're able to do, too. You don't want to talk too much. You just say yes, yes, okay. They just torture you mentally too. You cannot say no. You never say I don't want to do it. I cannot do it. That's not what I get paid to do.

Daisy also felt considerable guilt, seeing her brother working even harder than her and having to endure still harsher conditions. And over time, as she gradually came to know other Shan exiles,

Daisy realized more than ever how fortunate she still was. When Daisy first encountered Shan girls making a living as prostitutes, she initially was disgusted and felt hostile towards them.

I was 15, I don't understand, why would you have to become a prostitute. I didn't understand there's no chance. I don't want anything to do with them. I don't even smile at them. I was really mean to them because I don't understand.

As she learned more about their circumstances, however, Daisy was less inclined to be judgmental:

Like people don't have a chance, you know, when the country's bad, terrible situation, the only option for you in Thailand is to find a job and you do it.

What pained Daisy most in her new life was missing school. Without legal status in Thailand, Daisy was not permitted to enroll in a Thai public school, even if she could have carved out time to attend. Daisy felt intense sadness when she saw girls her own age in the streets in the afternoon on their way home from school, wearing their school uniforms:

Oh, look at them, they might be my age, they're going to school, they're having fun. I wish I could go to school like that. I wish I had the normal life like them, just go to school, hang out with your friends, go watch movie, you know. But that is not me, you know. What could I do. I was not happy; that's my depressing time— 4 to 7—when I see that, but I try to ignore as much as I can.

Daisy was also troubled by her father's depression, which developed and deepened as her family remained stranded in Thailand.

My dad, he became really lost and depressed for a long period after we reunite living together, after that for six months he become crazy. He's lost. When he look at me and my brother, he feel it's his fault and he felt guilty for putting us in that situation. He was going through a really big depression, big lost moment.

Living without an Identity

Everyone in Daisy's family felt lost, having been stripped of their former lives and identities and even their nationality. As Daisy explained:

You're no longer Burmese. Thai don't give any documents for you. So like—documentary speaking—you are nobody. You are non-existent. When I think back, it was really sad. You are human being and you don't belong anywhere. That's really sad. You don't have Shan identity card cause there's never a Shan identity card. There's always been a Burmese, but when you flee and left Burma, you become against them and you no longer citizen. You live in Thailand for like three, four years, but do they give you any documents? No. So you were documentless. It's really sad to be that.

Remaining “documentless” jeopardized the health of Daisy’s family as well. They were terrified when, after Daisy and her father were injured in a motorcycle accident, they felt compelled to seek medical help:

Luckily enough I didn't broke any bones, but still at that situation you have to pay cash and it's scary too for you to go to hospital instead of worrying about your health, you're like I don't have documents, I pray no police going to show up and I hope that they not going to put me in jail. Instead of, oh my God, I hope the doctor is here and take care of my health, take care of my dad. Money is not enough and when you worry about policeman when you are in that situation, that's what happened when you're nobody in the country. Like, oh my God, when they ask your name you have to fake it. You have to give some fake name and your address is fake because you don't want the police to come.

You're not Thai and that's usually how it's really nervous about police. But, as I said, that's not being anybody in the country. An accident situation happened and you don't have anything, you know.

Recognized as Refugees—and Back to School

Fortunately, over time, Daisy’s father was able to pull himself together and begin to focus on how to extricate his family from their stateless purgatory. He began the process of applying for refugee status with the United Nations. Happily, the family’s application for refugee status was finally granted, which provided them with a stronger claim to legal residency in Thailand. As legal refugees, Daisy and her family were less fearful, and new opportunities opened up for them. Daisy’s father was able to find gainful employment, which meant that Daisy and her brother no longer had to work full time to support the family.

At the age of 16 1/2, Daisy was at last able to return to school. With help from the orphanage, arrangements were made that enabled both Dairy and her brother to attend an international school in Thailand. They were both ecstatic:

Me and my brother were like, oh my God, cannot believe going to regular school! Oh my God! Oh my God I can't believe I'm sitting with these people, young age. I'm 16 and they were so young and like this is a private international school. The teachers are all you know, Americans. Oh my God, this is so cool! Like first day of school, I cannot wait! The principal put me on the scholarships and like, wow this is good! So we're like, everything is good! Like me and my brother we're like, God this is crazy! I cannot believe it, it was the best moment for me. It's like I waited so long to get that position, to get where we at that point. Like, four years been waiting.

Although their return to school was wonderful, it was also a huge challenge. Daisy and her brother worked until 2:00 in the morning most nights, struggling to get through their homework. Their classes were all taught in English, and although they had some proficiency in the language, they found themselves having to painstakingly translate many assignments, word for word. But they persevered and did well:

We're really proud. I win the math award, I scored the highest. Things are going well. I don't have to be scared of police anymore. I'm somebody. So we're like okay, I'm refugee. I am happy. I can go anywhere I want and being at that moment it seemed everything is fine.

After Daisy began meeting other Burmese kids living in refugee camps in Thailand, she considered herself more fortunate than ever.

What comes up to my mind is like these Karen families. They live in refugee camps, I think more than five years, sometimes almost close to a decade they've been waiting in the camp just to get resettlement. I mean when you're in a camp, it's a tough life, the camp. Is like they do offer you food and stuff like that, but for you to not have any activities, you know, just like, you're just living in the jungle day by day hoping that your future going to come. Oh my God, I'm so lucky even though I go through a lot, like even though the first couple or few years have been tough but comparable like I still live in orphanage, I don't have to work hard, you know, I become a translator, I learn English. I learn how to speak Thai, you know. I had a chance to work and finally we go to U.N. International School, so I am so lucky.

Moving to the U.S.

Daisy's gratitude grew more abundant still when at last her family was permitted to resettle in the United States. Her excitement upon arriving in New York City was intense:

Oh my God, this country is crazy! We just speechless. We could not talk. We stayed at the window. God, this is New York City! We come to the IRC [International Rescue Committee] office the next day and we see this yellow cab in the 42nd Street and we were, oh, my God, I know this! This is from the movie we see and like this yellow cab exactly like that. It was so great and we came and the I.R.C. help a lot. Without I.R.C. I don't know what we going to do. The I.R.C. give education, they help my brother out for the GED, they send me to the right high school for my age, to find a job for my mom, everything was terrific.

Daisy's mother had never worked outside the home before she moved to the United States. But the family's resettlement in the United States required her to seek out gainful employment and, happily, this experience brought her unexpected pleasure:

She don't even work back in Burma. You take care of your family, cook, wash, clean, that's your role. I'm amazed how she can take it because she's 46. I'm really amazed she can able to do that because she doesn't complain. She understand the situation. She understand we're in a different culture, different country and she just take it without question and without complaints and still when she came back home, she still cook for us. She still take care of us. If you have a chance to drop by my home you know how she take care. She cleans, everything is nice and neat, she take care of it. My God, she's such a strong woman, you know! It's a lot for her and she don't speak English when she came here. I mean for me, I speak English a little bit and I'm still young and I understand how it's so difficult to live in New York City, but she's like 46 years old, she don't speak English, she don't know anything. She cannot even take subway by herself. But she say I'm

going to go it, so she go the subway by herself. She go to work. She start to listen. Now we don't even worry about her anymore.

She work in the lamp sewing company, so you make a lampshade, like hand-making, so, she love it. She love the job. She always loved to do something with hands back home. She knit and she make a sweater for me and brother so something do with hands she love it. So she enjoy her job. So right now we don't have to worry about her. She goes to subway; subways go wrong, she's just like, okay, it's okay, she go ask people and she follow the group and she figure her way out in the city and I'm really proud of her.

Daisy herself was thrilled to be able to attend an accelerated continuing education program in New York City with other students similarly situated who had had their education disrupted:

Wow, it was crazy. I went to high school, this Manhattan continuing night-and-day high school, so it was my first time to really enter school again besides the International School for a year. It's different, but, International School you're the oldest, but continuing school you're almost the youngest because at the high school the average age is like 19, like for immigrants, like us, and high school drop outs.

And I was like, oh my God, this country's crazy! You don't have to give money for education?? It just amazed me. I know Thailand, they have free education, but still they have some fees even for middle school or high school. But over here it's totally free, like, I don't even buy anything. I even get a textbook and notebook from school! So I will like, okay, this is great, this is United States, they get a free education. So that was great, I adapted.

I study hard. So you taking classes, like 8 classes, 9 classes a day and you have to take, on top of that, you have to study hard and get tutoring so that you will pass your Regent exam. Like the New York State require to take six Regents, six different subjects in order to get a high school diploma. So I've been catching up and working hard. When you come here like four years of high school you're going to wrap it up, so like I have to write essays a lot and I cannot handle it in a short time, but I slowly adapted. I don't know how I get it through with this. Oh my God I graduate with good average, a GPA of 96.5. How did I do that, you know?

This is United States, and it really make me happy and I can adjust it. It was great and as I said, that school was immigrants and drop outs.

I met couple of refugees from Africa. From Africa most of them, a lot of people that I met and we just talked. I think one of them had both hands chopped off because he was in a bomb or something and he just lost his two hands. So he went to high school with me. He was the same graduate and we talked and people were like, God, two refugees this year; and we start to know each other and we talk about; he talked about his country and I talked about mine a little bit too.

You see a lot when you meet a lot of people. You talk to like, oh my God, it's not only our country. The knowledge, you really get the knowledge. New York City is such a good place to get all this information feed up to you.

Daisy Goes to College

The opportunity to attend a small private college in Pennsylvania was even more thrilling and intense for Daisy:

I'm a sophomore. I'm going my fourth semester. It's great. I mean my life always be in transition, like adapting Burma to Thailand, adapting such a big difference. Adapting Thailand to New York City, big difference. Adapting my international high school to New York City public education, big change. Adapting to New York City education system to private college, oh my God, that's like, big job.

Once I was really struggling. Like you want to be somewhere and sometimes you're just so tired of this between, this between step and you want to skip and you want to be there, but, no it not going to work that way, you have to go through each and single step in order for you to get wherever you want to get. I'm like that is so true, I'm like okay, I cannot skip it. I will go through it and do my best. I will get there. My first year I move in and I live in a freshman dorm. So I became the oldest again. In Thailand I'm the youngest, now I'm oldest. They're like, God, you're old already and I'm like thank you.

People come from different states, you know. Each family have different type, different chemistry, the way they talk is different too. I was like, wow, even among the white people, the family is totally different. One family may be tough on the kids like I drop you off, this is your stuff, make sure you take care, bye bye. But others like, "Here let me decorate your room, what you need." Oh my God like me, my parents don't even drop me off. I go to a friend of mine and we just take off.

I'm like, wow, this is going to be tough. I start to meet a lot of people. I said that in New York City it's such a place to gain knowledge and all this information you can just look and learn, but college you see America as a whole. You see other people from different states and they're telling you what kind of high school they went to, what type of stuff they talked with their friends, it's just amazing.

I still remember every time I hear my friends in the cafeteria. If you say, for example, ice cream, right away they can talk about that for like two hours, this ice cream. One object can be stretched for two hours. I just sit there like, oh my God, like it's such a culture that I don't understand. I never remember having, I think because they have not a tough life as mine, just a regular life, it's just regular so they can talk that. That's the way they talk. But for me and where I come from, for me to sit down and talk about ice cream for two hours, never heard of.

That's why it's so hard for me. I'm like, okay what do I need to talk about. I'm trying hard to absorb American culture and Americans. You don't have just one American culture. It's like too many things to digest and every one is different too.

This is crazy, but I'm happy that the way I'm interacting with my family right now would never happen if I'm in Thailand or Burma. The way I'm acting, like the way I'm talking to them right now, sometimes I'm almost like a counselor for them, for my dad especially, since he don't have

his résumé and he don't know where to find job, things like that, I will tell him where to look for job. I look at his résumé the best I can and I help him a little bit. I think they learning from me and I giving something back to them about America, so it was great. I'm very lucky to go to school or else I will never experience that and I will not gain knowledge from that.

Daisy's Family Faces Constant Challenges

Life is still hard for Daisy's family. The food stamps and other special assistance they received when they first arrived in the United States are long gone. Daisy's mom has had chronic pain in her wrist for the past six months, but can't afford medical care in the United States. Although Daisy's father earned a law degree in Burma, his legal training has not helped him earn a living here. But Daisy, as always, continues to think of herself as an energetic, positive person. That has always been her role in the family.

My God. My brother always said that I always keep smiling and make the family really positive energy. That's what my role is, when the difficult time kick in, I'm always the person going to be smiling and just be happy, you know, positive energy, he said that. And one thing, I'm just giving them a lot of information. Knowledge is too much word for me to use, I cannot use that, but I'm really feeding lots of information for them.

But sometimes Daisy isn't sure what she can reasonably dream.

Right now I don't know. I'm really lost. I am not sure where I'm standing. American dream, I don't know if it can happen or it cannot. I don't know. I'm really in the process of, I really want to see this. I'm in the process of seeing if it's true or not.

I am proud and I'm happy that I stay positive but sometimes the energy level you have it's disappear. I'm not going to lie. Sometimes I sit back and God Mo, you're such a crazy person. Oh I don't know how many times I been adjusting to different culture, it's just crazy. I'm positive energy person, like my policy, if you say describe Mo, she's positive. She's this energy thing that we don't have in the room. When we have policy meeting, they know that I'm positive energy. They know my plan is to just make them encourage and be joyful when something good, you know.

Sometimes something kick in and I'm so tired. I told a friend of mine, I cannot wait to chill. What do you mean. Just chill, you know, like nothing to worry. I cannot really recall any time that I'm chilling. I would love to just chill. I would love to do that. Like to just do work that I love and just chill. The word chill is like people use a lot, I don't understand when I come here, like my black friends, like I'm chilling. What does chilling mean? I look in the dictionary, and now I understand chilling. Chilling. To chill. No worries. Don't worry about money, don't worry about nothing. Just chill. I just want to chill. That's my dream, to chill.

Dreams of the Future

Daisy has a list of dream jobs. The first would be to work at the United Nations, and address economic and social issues of developing countries. The second would be to work as a financial

analyst for a bank. The third would be to serve as general manager for a basketball team! But if given the chance to return to Burma, this is what she says:

I talk about my dream job and I have the lists that I told you, but the other side of me being who am I, as a Shan, as a refugee, I can never take that part out of me. You know, I will love to go back to my country and I want to do lots of stuff. There's a lot of stuff, you know, contribute and change and I mean if I just became rich here one day, one day become millionaire, billionaire, I will start to do some, if I'm really in that position, if I'm ready. My parents are set and they happy and I'm happy and I'm really good to go, at that point then I would definitely go back to my country. I would definitely fix the education system and the economy. I will do it cause I think I can do it, but I don't have what it take to do it, but I think I can do it. So I will love to go back to country.

This is where Daisy stands now:

I'm grateful where I'm at right now today. When I look back, it been really up high and down low and I'm in the process of going through, what you call to make a dream, and trying to figure out to see for myself how far can I go and just how far I can go and how intelligent I become every day. Intelligent is a big word, but I'm gaining knowledge and information and the more you just go through with your family, it becomes, now is what motivate me to live with my family and that's all I'm living for and I cannot wait to look back at right now, one day, just look back like, no way, you're there and look at you. I cannot wait to get there and I'm doing my best to get what I want to get and what I want myself to be.