

## Karen students graduate from Metropolitan State University

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The backgrounds of Misecal Htway, Moses Moe, Moon Soe and Has Simeon are anything but traditional.

Forcibly removed from their Burma homeland, the members of the Karen ethnic group spent years in a Thailand refugee camp before arriving in Minnesota. So perhaps it is fitting that Htway, Moe, Soe and Simeon all ended up at Metropolitan State University, which attracts many nontraditional students. The four are believed to be the first Karens to graduate from the university; they are also among a select few Karens to earn bachelor's degrees in Minnesota.

"We appreciate what they have accomplished," said Saw Morrison, program manager of the Karen Organization of Minnesota, a Saint Paul nonprofit that aids Karens with employment, social service, health, youth and other programs. "We are excited about their generation."

As with many Karens – who reportedly comprise about seven percent of the Burmese population – the four fled Burma after being targeted by that country's military. Many Karens spent years in Thai refugee camps before selecting Minnesota as their new home. Morrison estimates about 7,600 Karens now live in Minnesota, the largest contingent in the country.

"Minnesota has a history of assisting refugees, especially those from Southeast Asia," said Morrison. "The state does a good job of helping refugees with social services, education, transportation and employment opportunities."

However, Morrison said very few Karens have graduated from four-year colleges because many are still in survival mode. Since many have lived just a few years in the United States, they are still improving their English language skills.

The four fall semester Metropolitan State graduates all regularly assist Twin Cities area Karens as interpreters. Htway and Moe work many hours as needed as interpreters in medical, social service and other situations. Simeon and Soe are teaching assistants for Saint Paul Public Schools.

Htway, a social work major, plans to work in social services assisting Karens and other new

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refugees. Moe, a human services administration major, hopes to serve as a human services administrative assistant. Simeon, a criminal justice major, plans to become a probation officer. And Soe, fall semester outstanding student in Metropolitan State's School of Urban Education, expects to land a teaching job in Minnesota. If that occurs, he says, he will become the first college-educated Karen teacher in the state.

As recent college graduates, the four are aware that they are higher-education role models for the Twin Cities Karen community. Several said they hope other Karens follow in their footsteps at Metropolitan State.

"I learned a lot at Metropolitan State," said Simeon. "It has very good advisors and instruction and it has a very good criminal justice program."

Morrison expects many more Karens will enroll at Metropolitan State and other higher-education institutions.

"We know that getting an education is very important for our community," said Morrison. "I think in the next five to six years we will be seeing more Karens graduating from colleges and universities."