

Hartford's Karen New Year Celebration on January 16, 2016

by Soe Naing

Despite the stormy morning skies of Saturday, January 16th, more than 300 guests attended the Karen New Year celebration held at the Cathedral of St. Joseph's former school auditorium at 140 Farmington Ave. As people entered the building, they saw vendors' tables stacked high with colorful clothing woven in lovely patterns typical of the Karen people's native dress. This was the 10th annual New Year event sponsored by the Connecticut Karen Community Association of Hartford. This gathering brought together Karen residents from across the Hartford area along with other resettled Karen who arrived from their communities in Utica and Albany, New York, Lowell and Springfield, Massachusetts and Providence, Rhode Island. Since 2008, almost 900 Karen refugees have arrived in Connecticut with most making Hartford their new home city and January 16th marked the start of their New Year.

A peace loving people of eastern and southern Burma, the Karen were forced to escape dangerous conditions and live in refugee camps in Thailand because of the decades-long Burmese military oppression against them. The Karen are an ethnic group from the country of Burma, but it is the Burmese who have driven them from their home country. In fact, according to the UNHCR (The U N High Commission of Refugees), more than 73,000 Karen have been resettled in the USA since 2005.



The auditorium quickly filled with adults, children and teens proudly wearing their native dress to mark the importance of this 2755th New Year celebration on the Karen calendar. A number of Hartford's receiving community joined the festivities including the City's new mayor, Luke Bronin and his family, John Gale, Assistant Majority Leader, Most Reverend Leonard P. Blair, Archbishop of Hartford, Rev. Thomas Carr, Second Baptist Church of Suffield and two Connecticut Karen Community Association (CKCA) Advisors, Father Joseph Cheah, St. Ann Rectory, Avon, CT and Mr. Michael Lefebvre. Also in attendance were Mr. Anthony, Chairperson of the Hartford Boy Scouts, several Hartford school teachers, members of AHNA's Welcoming Committee, St. Joseph Cathedral communicants and neighborhood residents. The message relayed on this special occasion was that everyone is welcomed and belongs here.

A very special addition to this New Year was the CKCA Advisor Michael Lefebvre's reading of the letter of blessing from Karen priest, Father Edward Saw Aye Min Htun, who

is planning to come to Hartford and minister to the Karen Catholic community. The Karen Catholic community joined together and appreciated his wonderful message.

Young Karen students from the Hartford public schools presented readings, which focused on various aspects of Karen history. Talented youngsters from the Hartford City Ballet



performed. A youth group demonstrated the popular bamboo dance requiring them to execute quick and skilful steps to avoid touching the rapidly moving bamboo sticks. The Lowell Karenni Catholic Community members honored this New Year celebration with a folk dance symbolizing the unity of the Karen people. The Karen New Year song was sung by members of the Albany Karen community. Guests were then invited to enjoy a generous lunch featuring

more than 30 different kinds of Karen and American dishes.

As the festivities were winding down in mid-afternoon, the skies cleared and guests headed home having experienced a most memorable event honoring the unique culture and rich traditions of the Karen.

photos by Don Shaw. More photos available at <https://goo.gl/photos/NpdDayfW6SjYtjdr8>