

ESOL VOICES: Student Spotlight

Thi Dah Tway

Thi Dah is an ESOL student who has lived in the United States for 5 years with her family. She is one of many Burmese children born in Thailand in refugee camps. Thi Dah lives is currently studying health and hopes to someday earn a degree in Nursing at MCC. In this story, Thi Dah writes about a memorable experience from her childhood.



Photo by Suzanne El Rayess, 2014

The Fire

“Get Up! Thi Dah!” one of my older sisters woke me up. I was not all awake yet, but I could hear people shouting “Fire....Fire!”

I opened my eyes as quickly as I could and saw everyone from the house was outside and holding hands. My older sister was trying to grab her clothing box. My father yelled at my sister, “Stop taking stuff. Take your sister and run. Stay together with our family!”

It was 1998. I was only a four year old girl. There was a big fire in the middle of the night. It was not only a few houses that were on fire. The whole camp was on fire, and it burned every house. My sister grabbed my hand and started running. My whole family was holding each other’s hands. I was holding my sister’s left hand, and I was on the end of the left side. However, our hands were broken-up because there were too many people running and going between our hands.

I was left alone standing in between the fire and people who were running. I was standing there

and looking for my family, but I couldn’t find them. I was crying and shouting “Abulay! Ama! Apa!” I lost them. I was really scared as the fire passed just by, right in front of my eyes. Even though it was the middle of the night in winter, it felt like mid-summer. It was really bright and very warm. Although it was not so dark for me not to see, still I couldn’t find my family because my eyes were full of tears.

Suddenly, I felt someone grab my hand and run. I didn’t even know who that person was. I couldn’t even see her, but I was following her. I looked to the other side of her while we were running. I saw one boy who was the same age as me holding her hand, too. He was one of my brother’s friends. Soon, I saw a lot of people who were sitting in a place where I had never been. In that place, many people were crying, and some were screaming. Then I looked up to the person who was still holding my hand, and I saw that she was the lady who was a friend of my big sister.

Her parents and my parents knew each other, too, and they were like cousins to us. While I was looking at the people, she held my hand tight, and we walked to one corner and sat with her family. I was still looking at the people and trying to find my family but I did not find them, so I felt so bad and questioned where they were in my mind, but there was no answer.

The lady came to me and said, “Don’t feel bad. Don’t make yourself hurt. You will be fine. Tomorrow morning, we will take you home to see your family.”

I replied, “Don’t you see there are no more houses and the whole camp is empty now.”

And she said, “I see that. I feel bad for that too, but if you’re crying for that, nothing will happen. Now pray and go to sleep to have some energy for yourself for tomorrow.”

How could I sleep? There was too much noise of crying and screaming. I stopped crying and tried to get some energy myself. Due to the fact that I ran so much, of course, I fell asleep quickly.

When I awoke, it was a bright and shining morning because there was nothing covering the sky. For a moment, I felt like it was a perfect day. Soon, I realized there was nothing left except ash and smoke.

The lady came to me with a huge smile on her face and said, "Now! Let us take you home where you belong."

Then I replied "Home! Where? There's nothing left of home except ash and smoke."

"What I meant is to your family."

"Are they all fine?" I asked.

"I'm afraid not because they lost you last night. Now, shall we?" she responded.

We left the unknown place to go home. On our way home I saw people were still crying, and I saw a camp without houses and filled with smoke. We went home together because her family lived close to my house. Before we got home, from a far, I could see my house had burned and the only

thing left was smoke. I saw my family standing by the burning house and looking at it.

My older brother, who saw me first, shouted, "Look! It's Thi Dah! She's alive!" My mother came to me and hugged and kissed me. She was crying so hard that her voice and words were shaking.

"Thank you so much!" She thanked the lady and said, "I don't know how to thank you."

She kept thanking her nonstop for saving me and bringing me back. The lady, named Samila, said "Please.....it's alright, I did it not for a price, and she's my cousin who is also my sister."

My two older sisters, who were hugging me, ran to her and hugged her so tight that she had to push them off to breathe. Everyone in my family hugged me and said they were all glad that I was safe. My second oldest sister came to me and said, "Next time hold my hand tight and never let go, not ever again! No matter

what situation we are in, understand?" I shook my head, and she hugged me so tight.

The next night, we had to sleep on dirt on a thin sheet under the open sky. My siblings asked me to tell my story, and they made fun of me for crying so hard on the night of the fire. They told me their stories. They all thought I had not survived the fire and crowds of people. They also said they had never before seen our father cry and running or searching around like a crazy one. The night of fire was horrible; however, the night after that was a perfect one for me because I never thought my parents loved me or cared for me. I always thought of them as strangers who didn't know me. I was only a middle child, so I felt left behind all the time. Now I understood that even though they have so many children, they do love and care for all of us.

ESOL Voices a collection of stories written by ESOL students at Monroe Community College. This semester, we are highlighting students from Asian countries. Look for a new story in the Tribune each month. We hope you will find these stories interesting and inspiring.

Katie Leite & Pamela Fornieri, ESOL Program, February 2014
