

From refugee camp to Yale Park to their own home

Learning Community liaison helps a 'go-getter' from Myanmar achieve goal of homeownership for her family

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Thaw Meh is only 32 years old, but she's experienced so much upheaval already.

Born in Myanmar in southeast

Asia, she spent 10 years living in a refugee camp on the Thailand-Myanmar border as her country's long-simmering civil war raged on.

She arrived in America in 2016 as a refugee and was quickly

overwhelmed by the language gap and the difficulty of figuring out how to get to the grocery store when you don't drive.

And in September 2018, she and her family — husband Nga Reh, 36, their four children and his mother, Ko Meh — were evacuated from their home at the Yale Park Apartments in north Omaha after city building officials shut it

down because of extensive code violations. Five hundred tenants, all refugees from Myanmar, found themselves suddenly homeless.

Her family spent time in a temporary shelter, sleeping on cots, before moving into another apartment.

But Thaw Meh set a goal: by the end of October 2019, the family

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would have a home of their own.

And with some determination, hard work and help from a family liaison with the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties and a grant program at U.S. Bank, they pulled it off.

By October, she and her husband, who works the second shift at a Tyson Foods meatpacking plant in Omaha, had bought and moved into a pale-yellow three-bedroom house in northwest Omaha. A photo shows a smiling Nga Reh holding their new house key.

"Now it's our house," Thaw Meh said, speaking through Karenni interpreter Nathan P. Ngarlaw.

Nikki Daigre, the Learning Community family liaison, met Thaw Meh and her children — Boe Reh, 11, Ay Lu Reh, 9, Su Meh, 6, and Joseph, 3 — when the older kids attended Franklin Elementary.

Thaw Meh had been referred to the Learning Community Center of North Omaha, where she took English as a second language and parenting classes. The Learning

Community's Parent University offers dozens of classes to parents on topics like financial literacy, discipline, school curriculum and the importance of reading to young children.

The classes are free, and close to 300 families participate each year at the north Omaha center alone, said Jamalia Parker, the Learning Community's director of family engagement services. They've found that families who take the classes report being less stressed, feel more comfortable engaging with school staff and are more resilient when it comes to weathering problems that crop up.

"We believe it's very important to have parents involved," Parker said. "We always say parents have to partner in their child's education."

Daigre helped Thaw Meh navigate a school system in a new country and pick up new life skills, like working toward U.S. citizenship and getting a driver's license so she could become more self-sufficient.

"Thaw Meh is amazing," Daigre said. "She's a go-getter."

Then concerns over living conditions at Yale Park came to a head.

The family lived in a Yale Park unit for only about six months, but Daigre remembers a persistent smell of gas there during home visits.

Nga Reh and Thaw Meh said there were ceiling leaks and windows that wouldn't shut right, keeping the apartment stuffy in the summer and freezing in winter. (Yale Park landlord Kay Anderson has maintained that many of the complaints were overblown.)

Thaw Meh said that when city inspectors moved in after receiving dozens of housing complaints, she was scared and confused.

"What's going to happen to my kids? Where are they going to go to school?" she remembers thinking.

The family moved to a new apartment, and the kids transferred to Walnut Hill Elementary. But space was tight, and Thaw Meh longed for some privacy, a safer environment and a yard for her kids to play in. She confided in Daigre about her home ownership goals, and Daigre looped in a real

estate agent and found out about a grant program to help with the down payment.

Using a translation app, Daigre and an NP Dodge agent exchanged listings with Thaw Meh via text and helped walk the couple through the mortgage application process.

Now, they're an inspiration for other Parent University families striving to save up and buy a home. According to follow-up surveys with former Yale Park families, more than 30 have bought a house since being evacuated, and they express higher levels of satisfaction than the families still renting sometimes less-than-stellar apartments.

With the family now on the hook for mortgage payments, Thaw Meh wants to start working soon.

And their kids have already started working on her and Nga Reh: Now that they have a home and a backyard, when can they get a pool?

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THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

Nga Reh, with wife Thaw Meh, holds the key to their new house in northwest Omaha. The two are refugees from Myanmar and were evacuated from the Yale Park Apartments in September 2018. At top, Thaw Meh holds son Joseph, 3, in the kitchen of their new home.