This guide is intended to help Boise State University (BSU) students prepare for their service-learning experience with the Idaho Office for Refugees (IOR). Learning about a refugee’s nation of origin, their culture, and their historic background is central to understanding who they are. Additionally, tips for teaching English and interacting socially will improve communication and the chances of a successful experience for both student and refugee. It takes many human-service professionals as well as volunteers from the community to participate in refugee resettlement. Thank you for helping to welcome refugees to our community.

The Staff of the BSU Service Learning Center

Where Is Burma?

Burma, also known as The Union of Myanmar, is the largest country of mainland Southeast Asia. With 261,228 square miles it is roughly the size of Texas. Burma land shares borders with Bangladesh and India to the west, China to the north and Laos and Thailand to the east.

Burma is a land of diverse landscapes from the 1,119-mile coastline in the southwest to snowy mountains in the north. Three mountain ranges run north to south, dividing three river systems. Rich forests, including dense tropical jungles cover 50 percent of the country and beautiful beaches can be accessed along the Bay of Bengal.

Climate

Close to the Equator, Burma has a tropical climate with three seasons. During the rainy season from July to October, rainfall can be as much as 200 inches along the coast to as little as 100 inches in the arid central lowlands.

Very few refugees have seen snow. Average temperatures range from 70° F in the northern mountains to 90° F in the delta and coastal region. During the cool season from November to February, temperatures can drop to 32° F in the northern mountains.

What was their journey?

Mimi is one of the 385 Burmese refugees who resettled in Boise. Most Boise-based Burmese people are families with children. She left Burma because of economic hardship and moved to a refugee camp in Thailand. There, she applied for asylum in the U.S. and waited six years. Others wait longer depending upon their destination, including Austria, England, Norway, Sweden and New Zealand.

Allowed only two suitcases, Mimi boarded a bus to Bankok 18 months ago and caught an international flight to New York City. After filing papers at Port Authority, she flew to Boise. The entire trip took two and a half days of non-stop travel. After spending her first year living with another refugee family, Mimi now has a job and her own apartment.

Life in Burma

According to the United Nations, most of Burma’s 55 million people live in farm villages along the fertile lands of the Ayeyarwady River, which empties into the Bay of Bengal through many mouths forming a delta.
The country is divided into seven administrative states, each home to a particular ethnic group with distinct customs and traditions. The Buddhist “Burman” make up two-thirds of the population. They are followed in number by the Shan, then Karen, Arakanese, Chin, Kachin, Mon, Naga, Rohingya and Wa. Most of the smaller groups live in the hills and mountains bordering Burma.

Each state has a capital city, most notably Mandalay, Yangon (previously Rangoon) with 2.5 million people, and the country’s new capital, Nay Pyi Daw.

Cities have paved streets, modern vehicles, tall buildings, institutes of higher education, entertainment and cottage industries. Most city dwellers live in concrete apartment flats. Outside of cities, highways are largely unpaved.

Religion
About 85 percent of the Burmese people belong to the Theravada school of Buddhism which teaches that people can find happiness by freeing themselves of worldly desires. Other religious groups include Christians, Hindus and Muslims.

The people of Burma practice a social hierarchy with Buddhist monks receiving the most respect, then the elderly.

Christians and Muslims are allowed to practice openly, however face persecution in socio-economic ways. For example, it is impossible to join the army or get a government job.

Most villages have a Buddhist monastery at the center of social and religious activities. There are many festivals and at puberty, girls and boys go through separate religious initiation ceremonies. Burma has been called Land of Pagodas and Golden Land because thousands of Buddhist temples and shrines dot the landscape. Some are hundreds of years old and many are gilded with gold leaf.

Despite centuries of Buddhist practice, many people worship spirits and folklore passed down from ancient times. People leave simple shrines of fruit, flowers and tobacco are left to appease evil spirits or ask for good fortune. Some seek the advice of an astrologer to name one’s child.

Language
Burma has a high literacy rate of 89% according to UNESCO. Virtually everyone speaks Burmese, the official language. When spoken, it sounds much like Chinese. The written script, a series of circular and semicircular letters, was adapted from a southern Indian script. Because it was a British colony, most people speak at least some English. There are also several ethnic minority languages spoken.

How one speaks to another is determined by social status. When addressing monks, one uses formal speech. Elders, teachers, doctors and those worthy of respect are addressed in polite form with honorific titles. A less formal of speech is used when speaking among equals in age or status.

Education
Patterned after the United Kingdom’s rule, Burma’s schools are operated by the government, teaching both English and Burmese through the twelfth grade. School is required for children aged five to nine.

Higher education is worthy of great respect and a foreign degree is considered superior. There are nearly 150 government run universities, colleges, nursing schools and a medical school.
Family structure

Buddhist tenants of duty and responsibility are most evident in villages. In urban areas, there are more small, nuclear families.

In the villages, people have large extended families. Elders help rear children and each child can later contribute on the farm. Boys and girls are accepted equally as precious gifts and lead a carefree, lifestyle, allowed to play outdoors or accompany parents.

Parents expect obedience and children have a duty to look after parents in old age. Typical families include grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins living under one roof.

Largely people marry for love, however arranged marriages can still be found as parents hope for a mate with the same ethnicity or economic status.

Food

Indian and Chinese influences are apparent in many aspects of Burmese culture, including food. People eat rice with every meal and often stir fry vegetables alongside fish, shrimp or chicken but rarely red meat. Seasonings are very important and include chili peppers or paste, turmeric (an element of red curry) onions, garlic and ginger.

Burmese enjoy sweet rice snacks and seasonal fruit such as bananas, strawberries and durians. Lepet, a salad snack made with pickled tea leaves, bean sprouts, nuts and sesame seeds is served at feasts and to visitors in homes along with plain tea. As flour is scarce, cakes and other baked goods are reserved for special occasions.

Way of Life

In both rural and urban areas men and women wear a long, tightly wrapped skirt called a longi. Men’s are typically tied in the front, whereas a woman’s are folded at the side.

People observe a cultural segregation of sexes in Burma. It is believed that a man cannot prosper if he touches women’s skirts and other articles. Public display of affection between sexes is also taboo. According to [Cultures of the World, Myanmar], women in Burma have equal social status to men with more rights than in many other Asian countries. For example, a woman keeps her name after marriage, owns property equally with her husband and runs the household. Many women work outside the home, own a business or become professionals.

In the world of religion, however, women are regarded as inferior to men; a woman cannot enter certain parts of religious buildings and cannot become a monk.

Economy

Agriculture forestry and fishing are Burma’s leading industries. Rice and teak comprise a third of Burma’s export income. Other crops include vegetables, fruits, sugar cane, peanuts, sesame seeds, corn, tobacco, cotton and rubber. Most crops are raised on small family farms however the government owns the land.

Burma is rich in natural resources, including oil and natural gas, zinc, lead, tin, silver, jade, sapphires and 90 percent of the world’s rubies. Gemstones and opium are significant, but illegal exports to other Asian countries. Tourist potential remains undeveloped because of weak infrastructure and Burma’s international image.

Burma was once known as the richest country of Southeast Asia and largest exporter of Rice and teak worldwide. Burma’s socialist government, (1962 to 1988) drove the country into deep poverty. Economic conditions have worsened in recent years. Western countries have banned investments and suspended trade with Burma in protest of the military regime’s human rights abuses. According to the United Nations, Burma’s average inflation was 30% from 2005 to 2007.
Tropical catastrophes also play a hand in Burma’s economic hardship. Cyclone Nargis left 140,000 dead and two million homeless in May, 2008. The Ayeyawady delta area, once the “rice bowl of Asia,” was devastated, causing rice prices to double worldwide.

**Conflict**

Burma has been a politically unsettled country for decades. After gaining independence from British occupation in 1948, the Burmese people saw their government change from democracy to socialism to military rule in just four decades.

In 1988, the second military dictatorship seized power and shortly thereafter, imprisoned newly elected democratic officials.

Rebellions against the one-party rule, demonstrations for a return to democracy and battles between ethnic groups have ended in violent military attacks and imprisonment.

Wave after wave of Burmese have fled persecution to neighboring countries since 1988. The US Department of State estimates one million Burmese have fled to Thailand, Bangladesh and India. Another million are “internal refugees;” villagers who were chased from their homes after the state seized their farms and businesses. About 3,000 villages in Eastern Burma have been completely destroyed.

Human rights organizations report that forced labor, child labor, sexual violence and human trafficking are common. Ethnic minorities who live along Burma’s frontiers are special targets for military abuse. There is no independent judiciary in the police state, no freedom of speech or assembly, all media is screened and government spies are everywhere.

**Life in refugee camps**

Refugee camps are large primitive villages where people have shelter, open markets for food and clothing, and can even small gardens. There are medical clinics and missionary run schools.

“It’s still not home,” said Mimi. Family members are separated; some went to different camps or are living outside of camps. There are people from many different religious groups, mainly women and children, no paid work and there is no leaving camp. “Without a home, there is not hope, no future,” she said.

It is difficult to determine the literacy rate in camps. While schools teach English to the twelfth grade, attendance is voluntary and many teenagers stop going. This becomes problematic after resettling in the US; those without high school diploma cannot attend college.

**Why Boise?**

Boise has become a popular relocation destination for refugees due to its size and access to refugee resources. Boise is small enough that refugees can walk or ride bikes to get around town and it has a public transportation system. Also, Boise’s size doesn’t overwhelm refugees as a larger city might.

Boise has a strong network of non-profit agencies set up to accommodate refugees. These agencies provide refugees with English language tutoring, job placement assistance, and health and social services. On the other hand, Boise has its challenges. There are few speakers of refugees’ native languages. Refugees’ low English levels typically limit their employment options to the service industry. The time restrictions caused by bus schedules can also be a problem for refugees.
How Can I Help?

As a student volunteer, you will be playing many roles during your interaction with your refugee family. You will serve as their guide in a place where everything is new and different. One of the biggest obstacles for the refugee family will be honing their English language skills and adapting to American culture.

Help Refugees Learn English

According to the Agency for New Americans (ANA) Volunteer Packet, many refugees arrive in America with little to no English skills. While ANA provides English classes five days per week to their clients, it is recommended that clients meet with tutors in addition to the class time in order to receive as much education in the English language as possible.

It is important to know the specific English goals of the individuals you are helping. For example, is the goal to improve their English skills in order to help them with job applications and interviews, or is the goal to learn American slang and idioms in order to help with social interactions?

Even though it is not your responsibility to teach refugees to speak English fluently, a simple overview of our sentence structure and some basic phrases would help them improve their English skills.

There are many resources devoted to English tutoring, but the resources listed below are specific to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Another great resource is the ESL teacher who is teaching the refugees English, as the teacher will have many resources to share with you.

- Real English - Interactive Video Online
  - This site provides video lessons for interacting with others in English. It covers useful English phrases such as “hello,” “What is your name?” “My name is…” etc.
- Thinkfinity Literacy Network
  - This site contains training for teachers and tutors, lesson plans, and interactive activities for English language learners.

- ABC’s for Tutors: 26 Teaching Tips
  - By Shirley Brod
  - Technical Assistance for English Language Training Projects 1997-1998

Getting to Know Americans

America is a nation composed of many people with diverse cultural backgrounds. The following “tips and suggestions” highlight some aspects of American culture for new Americans.

Greeting and Interacting

- Arrive on time, promptness is important.
- Americans shake hands and look each other in the eye when introduced.
- Stand an arm’s length from the other person when talking and make eye contact often.
- Refrain from kissing others and remember that American men do not hug each other.
- Respond with “thank you,” after a compliment.

Talking

- Americans love to talk about their lives, jobs, careers, and hobbies. They are comfortable talking about the number of children they have and will often discuss future children before they have them.
- In order to avoid misunderstanding, try to speak English in most situations.

Subjects to avoid include:

- Money
- Religion
- Politics
- personal appearance (weight, height, skin color)
- sex

- It is far more common in America to meet at a restaurant for a meal or at a coffee shop to talk than to meet for these occasions in someone’s home.
- Expect to pay for yourself at a restaurant, even if someone invites you.
- Wait for a specific invitation, including a day and time, before visiting others at home.
- Extend a specific invitation (including day and time) for others to visit your home.
When invited to an event at someone’s home, it is completely appropriate to ask your host for a suggestion of what you could bring/contribute.

Understanding women’s roles

- Many women in the U.S. work outside the home. Others choose to work at home, raising children and managing the affairs of the household. Women do not always marry and do not always have children.
- Refrain from asking women about their marital status as it may cause them to feel uncomfortable.

Meal time

Except when eating fast food such as hamburgers, Americans use utensils to eat their food and use napkins to wipe their hands and faces during a meal. Belching is considered inappropriate during a meal.

Smoking

Smoking is permitted only in designated areas and is often forbidden indoors or within a person’s home.

If in doubt as to whether smoking is permitted, ask specifically and be prepared to go outdoors or to another area to smoke.

Activities With Refugees

According to past volunteers, every activity is a learning opportunity for refugees. A good first step may be sharing a meal in the refugee’s home to get acquainted with the family and help them practice speaking English. Once refugees feel comfortable, outings in town provide first-hand experiences with American culture.

In addition to the activities suggested below, refugees might have specific errands in mind. Volunteers are encouraged to plan activities within walking distance or take public transportation instead of using their own vehicles.

- Meet refugees at The English Language Center (1607 W. Jefferson Street) for tutoring resources. This is a familiar meeting spot for refugees.
- Show refugees the resources available close to their homes: bus stop, parks, places of worship, post office, stores and health clinics.
- Role-play daily-life scenarios such as going to a pharmacy and purchasing something.
- Demonstrate where to shop for food and introduce English names for common foods
- Show refugees specialty shops like thrift, consignment and outlet.
- Take them to see some of Boise City’s intramural sports games and show them how to sign up (www.cityofboise.org).
- Take refugees to ride a Valley Ride bus, teach them how to learn the routes and practice making change (www.valleyride.org).
- Take them to the movies (non-violent ones).
- Meet children after school and walk to a park to practice English or play games.
- Take them out for a hamburger, pizza, hot dog, doughnuts or ice cream.
- Go to the public library together and show them how to get a card, check out books and read the paper.
- Help them fill out forms such as job applications
- Invite refugees to cultural events at BSU and around Boise such as the International festival and concerts (www.boiseweekly.com; www.bsuevents.com)

Is it something I said?

Refugees are eager to learn how to fit into American culture and may be hard pressed to admit what Americans do to offend them. The following tips are intended to help minimize misunderstandings.

Useful Phrases

- “Ko” and “Daw” are used for addressing adult men and women, respectively.
- “Maung” and “Ma” is used to address younger men and young women respectively.
- “Saya” and “Sayama” are used to address teachers, doctors or employers, with the latter the feminine form.

Comment [KB11]: Excellent section. Very helpful.
Burmese people are taught to bow to elders and others who hold positions of authority as a measure of respect and will avoid direct eye contact for the same reason. Don’t be surprised if they look away during conversation until they learn more about American culture – it’s a sign of respect.

Wearing revealing clothing may make some Burmese uncomfortable. Burmese observe a segregation of the sexes. Women in particular are conservative dressers, covering their chests, shoulders and legs. Don’t wear a string bikini on your first meeting.

Burmese may seem to beat around the bush to avoid giving a strong negative answer to a question, because they are taught not to cause another person trouble or loss of face. Don’t get frustrated, just change the subject.

Refugees have survived great hardship including interrogation, violence, loss of loved ones, enslavement and homesickness. It is extremely important to respect their privacy and refrain from asking probing questions about family members who are not here in Boise.

It is O.K. to ask what religion they are to help them find the right kind of resources. Keep in mind that they may have suffered persecution for their religious beliefs and now is not a good time to debate the finer points of scripture.

Where Can I Learn More?
The websites listed below provide more information on refugees and links to helpful resources.

- **Idaho Office for Refugees**
  
  The Idaho Office for Refugees (IOR) works to promote mutual understanding between refugees and the larger community by sharing information, encouraging social interaction and developing opportunities for refugees to participate in all aspects of community life.

- **Agency for New Americans**

  The Agency for New Americans (ANA) provides case management, employment services, immigration assistance, and services to older refugees under agreement with the Idaho Office for Refugees.

- **Kwintessential; www.kwintessential.co.uk/index**
  
  This site contains a wealth of cross cultural training information, including interaction tips and cultural quizzes.

- **Refugee Resources for Service Learning; www.guides.boisestate.edu/refugees**
  
  This is a collection of refugee resources for service learning students at the Albertsons Library.

- **Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)**

  CAL is focused on improving communication through better understanding of language and culture.

- **US Department of State; www.state.gov/g/prm/108723.htm**

  The Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration provides updated information about refugee statistics and international aid programs

- **UNHCR - The UN Refugee Agency; www.unhcr.org**

  The United Nations High Council on Refugees leads international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide.

- **TrekEarth.com; www.trekearth.com/gallery/Asia/Thailand.htm**

  This site is all about learning through about world cultures through photography.