

SOAR Immigration Legal Services

Reconciliation reflected in efforts to reunite families

One key theme of reconciliation is to bring people together to unify and unite. Sponsors Organized to Assist Refugees (SOAR) legal staff work to reunite husbands, wives and children across the miles and years—families who have been separated by war, poverty and violence.

Maung and his wife Htay are one of those families. Both were born in Burma. They married in 1967 in Rangoon and raised four children. Maung worked at Rangoon General Hospital, and Htay worked as a teacher.

In 1998, the entire hospital staff, including Maung, rose up against the Burmese government, who threatened to seize control of the hospital. Interrogated by government security forces, Maung fled Burma for Thailand in 1994, leaving Htay behind. From then on, Maung and Htay had almost no contact. It was too dangerous, as the Burmese government monitored letters and phone calls. When he could, Maung sent money home through a trusted friend and left brief phone messages for Htay with his mother.

Eventually, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) processed Maung as a refugee, and in 2005 he came to the United States. Soon after arriving, SOAR helped Maung file papers to bring Htay to the United States. The U.S. embassy in Rangoon scrutinized the application, and three years passed before Htay's case was finally approved—thanks to repeated advocacy efforts by SOAR's legal staff.

In 2008, after 14 years apart, Htay, now aged 64, and Maung, now aged 61, reunited in Portland. This November, they will celebrate their 42nd wedding anniversary.

The legal team at SOAR assists refugees—like Maung and Htay, who settled in Portland and its surrounding area—from all over the world. In the month of January alone, SOAR helped clients from Ethiopia, Liberia, Cuba,



Photo credit: Liz Stuart

SOAR Immigration staff helps reunite families. From left: Olivia Horgan, SOAR Immigration attorney; Maung Maung; Htay Aung; and Yin Nwe Liu, SOAR case manager.

Somalia, Iran, Sudan, Burma, Eritrea, Ukraine, Russia, the Gambia, Uzbekistan and Rwanda.

Our services put families on the path to U.S. citizenship by assisting with a wide variety of immigration applications. In 2008, SOAR filed 165 applications for permanent residency, 103 applications for work permits and 60 applications for U.S. citizenship. SOAR also filed 40 petitions to reunite family members. Staff fluency in Spanish and Russian helps clients feel welcomed and understood in their native language.

This summer, SOAR's legal team is thrilled to have two law student interns: Megan Johnson from Willamette Law School and Phuntsok "Jimmy" Namgyal from Lewis and Clark College. The students will provide critical support to SOAR's bustling office.

For more information about SOAR's legal work, please contact Olivia Horgan, program manager, at ohorgan@emoregon.org or (503) 284-3002.