

# Burmese activist embarks on new life in Ithaca

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

**ITHACA** — He still voices his opinions as strongly as he did in his native land.

The key difference now for Htun Aung Gyaw is that now he can do so without the threat of death or imprisonment.

"If I want to demonstrate, no one can capture me. Here, you can criticize the government if you want," he said.

One of the most outspoken government protestors in Burma over the past two decades, Gyaw is now enjoying the taste of freedom in the United States. Aided by the efforts of the

Catholic Family Center and two Roman Catholic churches, Gyaw has started a new life in Tompkins County.

The 40-year-old Gyaw and two other Burmese activists, Aung Kyi Oo and Aung Kyi Myint, currently live in a city apartment into which they moved at the beginning of this month.

While relatively unknown in this country, Gyaw is widely recognized — evoking both love and hate — in his native Burma, located in south-central Asia. He has been both a hero for the common-folk and a thorn in the side of the governing bodies.

Due to his protests of Burma's military regime, which had overthrown the former democratic system in 1962,

Gyaw was imprisoned from 1975-80. During that time he was subjected to squalid living conditions in which he witnessed and experienced disease, malnutrition and physical abuse.

After all political prisoners were released in 1980, Gyaw worked underground for the next eight years. Following a 1988 uprising between pro-democracy demonstrators and the military regime, Gyaw fled from Rangoon, the country's capital, to the Burma-Thailand border on Burma's southeast side. He left behind his wife and two children, whom he has not seen since.

Gyaw acknowledged that various attempts have been made on his life over

the years, but that the risks he took were necessary.

"If we are passive and cowards, nothing is going to change," he commented.

In Thailand, Gyaw became first chairman of the dissident group known as the All Burma Student Democratic Front. However, faced with the threat of deportation back to Burma — and into government hands — Gyaw opted in 1991 to apply for refugee status at the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok.

He moved to New York City a year ago with the help of the United States Catholic Conference. After a bout with malaria, Gyaw journeyed on to Ithaca, where he now majors in Asian studies at Cornell University. His education is funded by a grant from Asia Watch, a human-rights organization similar to Amnesty International.

Last month, Gyaw was joined in Ithaca by Oo and Myint. Although the men have arrived with few possessions, they have received financial support from the Catholic Family Center, 25 Franklin St., Rochester.

In addition, parishioners at Immaculate Conception Church, 113 N. Geneva St., and St. Catherine of Siena Church, St. Catherine Circle, have served as sponsors for the refugees. Both parishes have made occasional requests seeking furniture, appliances, transportation and employment opportunities for the men in their church bulletins.

Gyaw speaks fluent English and is pleased with the opportunities and support available to him in the United States. Yet he also admits that his adjustment, at times, has been a slow one.

"Sometimes I get homesick, so I try to meditate," said Gyaw, a practicing Buddhist.

Despite the geographical gap that now exists, Gyaw plans to continue fighting for democracy in his homeland. He is currently attempting to organize the 110 to 120 Burmese student political refugees now living in the United States, with hopes of resuming formal protests against Burma's military leaders.

"I want the United Nations and U.S. government not to recognize the Burmese government; I want them expelled from their United Nations seat," said Gyaw.

Jim Delaney, who serves as refugee program manager at the Catholic Family Center, would not be surprised to see Gyaw succeed in his latest quest.

"He's a real leader. You can see that in talking to him," Delaney remarked.



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Htun Aung Gyaw, who spent a year in a Burmese monastery, sitting in his Ithaca apartment. Next to him is a photo of his late godfather, who died in 1986; a container of holy sesame-seed oil; and two Buddha statues.

## Parishes set galas to mark past, present

### Members to honor old, new buildings

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

**ROCHESTER** — Parishioners at St. Jude the Apostle Church, 4100 Lyell Road, Gates, and Ss. Peter and Paul, 720 W. Main St., will celebrate significant events this Sunday, June 27.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark will preside at a special dedication and consecration Mass for the new church and parish center at St. Jude's.

The 4 p.m. Mass will be followed by a dinner at Logan's Party House, 1420 Scottsville Road.

Meanwhile, Ss. Peter and Paul Parish will mark its 150th anniversary with a 10 a.m. Mass. A reception on the church's front lawn will follow from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

In addition to Bishop Clark, other notables expected to attend St. Jude's celebration include Bishop Dennis W. Hickey, U.S. Rep. John J. LaFalce (D-32nd District), and Ralph J. Esposto, supervisor of the Town of Gates.

The Knights of Columbus' recently formed 155-member color corps will also take part in the ceremonies, according to Father John J. Steger, St. Jude's pastor.

The new church will seat between 800 and 850 worshippers, and the new parish center can accommodate 500 people for dinner functions, Father Steger said. The church and the center take up a combined 26,000 square feet,

he added.

The cost of building both the new church and parish center was \$2 million, the Gates pastor said. Thomas Castelein, architect with Bergman Associates, designed the project. The church was constructed by D'Agostino General Contractors, Inc.

For information on St. Jude's celebration, call the parish at 716/247-4322. Dinner tickets, which cost \$20 per person, are still available.

Originally constructed as St. Peter the Apostle Church on King Street in 1843, the City of Rochester's fourth Catholic church was renamed Ss. Peter and Paul in 1859. The current church and its former school were constructed in 1910 at the current site on West Main Street.

Administered by the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary since 1967, the parish today boasts a number of outreach ministries, including:

- Damien Care Center, which offers educational, diagnostic and medical referral services;
- The Neighborhood Community Center, which organizes residents around community issues;
- Priceless Clothing, a donated

clothing service;

- Ss. Peter and Paul Day Care Center, which cares for 33 children;
- Ss. Peter and Paul Mutual Housing, which offers affordable apartments located in the old school;
- and St. Peter's Kitchen, which serves free meals to between 200-300 people six days a week.

The parish also serves as the neighborhood site for the distribution of emergency food from Southwest Ecumenical Ministries.

To learn more about Ss. Peter and Paul's celebration, call 716/436-3110.

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