

Shortly after 8 am on Christmas Eve, Kieran from Wilkinson St. David's Church, myself, and most of the two sponsored families put on mittens, hats, and coats and headed for the Karen church at Dufferin and Steeles. As excited as everyone was for the outing, the mood was certainly tempered by the fact that Lah Wah, with mobility issues and feeling under the weather, announced she wasn't feeling up to going. And with her staying home, Hser Eh Tha Mee, who has to be in the running for best daughter ever, decided to stay home and keep her company.

The subway and bus ride to church was surprisingly fast and free of hassles. The kids have become so comfortable on the TTC that the biggest concern now is that one of them will stray a little too far from the rest of us. As we were making our way through Finch Station from the subway to the bus, I noticed a busker playing a guitar, and went over to drop in a coin. In a heartbeat, every child in our group raced to their parents, arms outstretched, hoping to make a similar donation. Like children everywhere, these kids are always watching and learning.

The service was long: a sermon and a host of speeches in Karen, a Christmas pageant, and a variety of music and dancing acts. And yes, the jolly old elf in the red suit made an appearance, Ho' Ho' Ho'ing up a storm, and throwing candy to the huge and adoring throng of kids. It ended around noon, and nearly all of the 150 or so in attendance reconvened in the lunch room downstairs for a buffet feast. And what a feast it was. There was enough Karen food to fill even my rather large appetite, and needless to say, it was all amazing. They also had bags of chips and cans of pop, which our kids must have squirreled away in every place imaginable, because all through the day and well into the evening, I'd hear a can opening, or a bag tearing, and look over to see a giggling child at the end of it.

Around 2:30, just as the lunch was wrapping up, Sarah, Kieran's partner in life and in refugee settlement, informed me that Tee Mui had spoken to her mother and that Lah Wah was feeling better and wanted to attend our 5 pm service. This was great news. We had resigned ourselves to just going home after the Karen service but now everything had changed. With too little time for all of us to go back to the apartment, Sarah generously offered to drive all the way to Main Street to bring them herself. In the meantime, I took the families to Nathan Phillips Square, where everyone had a good laugh at all the adults who had trouble skating. From there, it was on to the Eaton's Centre, where eyes became saucers at the enormous Christmas tree and the cavalcade of lights, sounds, and people. And finally it was off to Queen's Park, where I was to discover that snowman building is indeed a universal art. Every child took to making their perfect snowman. And Paw Loy Hay, with a devilish grin, even grabbed the toque off of one of the boys heads to accessorize her snowman. Frosty would have been proud. As it grew closer to 5, we packed up, and marched up the street to The Redeemer. But not before each child, led by Bwe Ku Say, turned, waved, and spoke in perfect English, " Bye, bye, Snowman."

The church was almost completely full when we got there, with just enough room at the back for the families and me to squeeze in together. Sarah arrived with not a moment to spare, dropped off the ladies, and we all settled in for our second pageant of the day. The adults were attentive and the children were well behaved, with far less climbing on each other than at the Karen church. Later, as the collection plate came around, the attendant, hoping to avoid any embarrassment, passed the plate around the family. But when they saw that I made a donation, it was Finch Station all over again with a throng of little hands outstretched, ready to make a donation.

When it was time for communion, Lah Wah stood up, with Hser Eh Tha Mee, so proud in her traditional dress, on one arm, and me on the other. Together we made our way down the aisle and up the stairs. Someone leaned in and asked me if they spoke any English or if I could speak their language. When I sheepishly replied no to both, she gently whispered, " I just want to tell them how beautiful they are." Truer words were never spoken.

On the subway ride home, Lah Wah waved off any notion of using the elevator, and with white knuckled intensity, even braved the escalator. When we arrived at Main Street, with one last group of stairs to contend with, she lifted her long green coat, took a deep breathe, and with all of us at her side, climbed them two at a time. At the top she smiled, laughed a little, and had a look that seemed to say, everything is going to be okay.

I've been a member of The Redeemer for over 6 years, and I can say that I've never been more proud than I was that day. Proud of the entire Redeemer community and everyone in attendance that night who were all so respectful and welcoming. Proud of everyone who donated their time, money, clothing, and furniture to make this day possible. Proud of our Refugee Settlement Committee who continues to carry out this ministry with such grace, dedication, and humility. And mostly proud of Lah Wah, Ta Kai Hae, and their entire family, who have endured so much, but still have the faith and courage to believe in the possibility of a new life and a better future.

Happy New Year everyone.
Duncan Garrow