

Semcac Head Start Staff Success Story

Austin Head Start Center – Su’s Story

By: Su Meh

Su Meh is a tri-lingual paraprofessional in the Austin Head Start center, and an interpreter for our home-based program. She is living the dream that began while growing up in the Ban Mai Nai Soi refugee camp in northern Thailand. Su Meh dreamt of a better life for herself and her family. Life in the Karenni refugee camp was always stressful. They foraged for food in the forest, always careful not to venture too far from the camp for fear of landmines and being shot by the Burmese guards. There was no electricity or running water. Su cooked over an open fire and walked to the well every day to bring back water, always fearful that she would never see her family again. As refugees, they were not permitted to leave the camp, so they were unable to find legal work and they had little access to healthcare or education. Then, on March 3rd, 2010, Su’s dream became a reality. Carrying a few personal possessions in garbage bags, she, her husband, and small son boarded a plane and took a three-day flight to the United States. They landed safely in St. Paul, Minnesota and moved to Austin, where her husband found employment. As Su had more children, her sister-in-law suggested that she and her family enroll in Semcac’s Head Start program. They and their four children have been actively involved in the program for the past five years. They regularly participated in socializations and parent meetings. She was elected to the office of the President for Early Head Start Home-based parent committee for one year. Meanwhile, Su is active in the local Karenni community, and she has helped to organize the Dee Ku and Kay Htoe Boe Festivals. It was during a home visit that Su’s talent for interacting with the community came to light. During this particular visit, there was a steady stream of Karenni people at her door requesting her assistance with letters and paperwork they had received for all manner of reasons; school, insurance, benefits, etc. to help them settle in to life in Austin and the U.S. Su patiently took the time to assist each person. Remembering the goal Su had set for herself, her home based educator, along with her ESL teacher, encouraged her to accept the position of interpreter for our program. She embraced the position whole heartedly, advocating for Head Start within the Karenni community by setting up appointments for families to enroll in the Head Start program and assisting them in filling out the enrollment papers. She kept the office very busy! While she started as an interpreter, she grew her skills in early learning and child development through her work with the program. This included her own challenges with her young autistic child. She moved into the center para position; and she is helping our program to bridge the cultural gap in serving special needs children, and ensuring strong transitions with the school systems. She believes in Head Start and says that the support her family has received means a lot to her. It has helped her family to grow and be stronger, better and helped her reach her dreams. For example, she attained her U.S. citizenship in 2016, with Head Start support (with studying). Her family plans to purchase a larger home made possible because of her income. She also is looking forward to completing her GED in 2019, and then, enrolling in college courses to become a preschool teacher.