

## **Akron's Karen community celebrates Martyr Day words and photos by Zairé Talon Daniels**

On August 17 at the Copley Soccer Complex, the Karen (ka-ren) Community of Akron celebrated an important holiday known as Martyrs' Day. Martyrs' Day is a celebration in honor of the Karen who met their demise in defense of their families and way of life, as it has been threatened by the Burmese military's efforts to ethnically "cleanse" the region. The Karen are an ethnic minority group who settled in Burma, which is now known as Myanmar.

In attendance at this celebration, visiting major general of the Karen National Defence Force Organization, Nerdah Bomya explained that in addition to remembering their fallen comrades, this day celebrates the life of monumental cultural leader and revolutionary warrior Saw Ba U Gyi, who was the first president of the Karen State, known as Kawthoolei in the Karen language. Saw Ba U Gyi was influential in forming the Karen Central Organization shortly following the defeat of the Japanese at the close of World War II. The post-war period and reconstruction were difficult and soon boiled into a full-blown civil war that is still being waged in the jungles of Burma to this day. Saw Ba U Gyi was killed in combat around August 12, 1950 and many global celebrations of the Karen happen within this week every year.

"We have a very unique culture and identity. Most people that meet us think we are Burmese, but we are not. We are a special ethnic group coming from Mongolia and settling in Burma," General Bomya says.

Cultural exchanges like this help to inform others about different traditions and history.

The Martyrs Day celebration began with the traditional Wrist Tying ceremony, which is believed to bring protection to the community. Then attendees proceeded to enjoy the good weather with a two-day tournament of soccer, volleyball, and chinlone. Chinlone is a Burmese sport that is similar to volleyball, but with players using their feet to send the ball over the net. Dotting the sidelines were tents and booths offering a taste of Karen cuisine. Groups of women sold garments made of blue and red while men helped to cook and reminisced about the time when their youth allowed them to compete in the games.

Daniel Strichko, a former employee of Gojo, attended the Martyrs Day festival. Daniel became interested in the Karen people from his experiences working with them through a labor initiative endorsed by the International Institute of Akron.

"If you get to learn who people are, and understand why they are doing certain things, you grow," Daniel said. "As you learn what other people have been through, what they value, how they live their lives, it puts a different perspective on the things that you do in your life."

// BIO: Zairé Talon Daniels is currently a senior at the University of Akron studying photography, art history, and anthropology. In his free time, he enjoys reading, fitness, and meeting interesting people. He hopes to pursue his career in photojournalism with National Geographic or Vice News following graduation.