

## **Celebrating Karen New Year**

### **Akron's Karen community welcomes the year 2759**

#### **words and photos by Zairé Talon Daniels**

Many of us saw the year new year arrive as 2020 on our calendars and smartphones. But the Karen people welcomed in the year 2759, according to their traditional timetable, at a celebration on Jan. 4 at the Akron Public Library. The festivities included guest speakers, traditional music, food, and a display of dancing from several cultural groups, including Mon, Nepali and Congolese dancers.

“The Karen New Year is held on the first day of Pyathoe, which marks the end of the year’s rice harvest,” says Karen Community of Akron chairperson Saw Ajino Wah. It is customary to have a feast to celebrate the year’s good harvest and to consecrate the land for the year to come. In addition, this period is when new houses would be built for community residents.

In modern times, the holiday is more for family and friends to get together and enjoy sports, food, and traditional dancing and music, as many Karen live outside the borders of their homeland, according to Eh Saw, a young leader in the Karen Youth Leadership Club. This holiday is a very important day that symbolizes Karen solidarity nationwide. Due to the military regime in Myanmar, many Karen have been forced to leave their homeland because of decades of fighting.

About 1,000 Karen people have moved to the Akron area in the last decade with help from the Karen Community of Akron and other groups. The majority of Akron’s Karen residents were born here or in refugee camps. Other Karen people are spread out across the rest of the United States, Europe and Asia.

Cultural displays such as this allow the elders in the Karen community to pass on their traditions to the youth who may not have experienced life in Myanmar.