



Ithaca Public Education Initiative

## IPEI Grant Helps Karen Students Celebrate Culture

When English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers Michelle Kirchgraber-Newton and Jennifer Heise asked Karen refugee student Clay Poe what she wanted to accomplish before graduating from Ithaca High, she replied, “a way to share my culture and people with my school.”



Her response inspired Kirchgraber-Newton to apply for an IPEI Red and Gold Grant to help make this happen. Red and Gold Grants are awards of up to \$500 for one-time projects that strengthen and enrich Ithaca schools. Poe and fellow students organized an event to celebrate their Karen culture. More than 60 ESOL students and dozens of other I.H.S. community members participated in a cultural exchange program that brought a Karen refugee dance troupe from Utica to Ithaca for a luncheon, performance and workshop. To introduce the performance, Hser Eh Blut read, in the language of Karen, a speech written by Poe and classmate Pawlerpaw Ler. “Sometimes it is difficult being a student from a place that is so different, a place that seems like a different world,” he read. “It is

difficult to communicate and to feel accepted because we are different. Today, we hope that this event will bring us together and celebrate the diversity of this school.”

The three students presented a slideshow of photographs depicting the daily life of Karen people. The dance troupe then performed the Bamboo Dance, and invited the audience of staff and students to participate.

“This program celebrated and validated the ESOL students’ culture, and it helped break down cultural barriers between students, staff, and administrators,” Kirchgraber-Newton said. “It brought people together to celebrate diversity and multiculturalism. It empowered students who often feel voiceless and invisible. The IPEI grant helped make all of this happen.”

