




Karen Students Celebrate Culture

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When Ithaca City School District (ICSD) 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 School (I.H.S.), she replied, "a way to share my culture and people with my school."

That response inspired Kirchgraber-Newton to apply for an Ithaca Public Education Initiative (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.

Over the next year, Poe and fellow students planned and organized an event to celebrate their Karen culture. This May, 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 created by Poe of photographs depicting the daily life of Karen people. The dance troupe then performed the Bamboo Dance, and afterwards invited the audience of staff and students from across the high school community 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."



During the weekend that followed the cultural exchange program, I.H.S. and Utica students and their families joined in celebrating the Karen New Year and Southeast Asian Water Festival at Cornell's Johnson Museum of Art. The students performed a Burmese dance, the Karen Rope Dance, and the Bamboo Dance. After the events at the museum, which also included attendees from Cambodia, Laos, Burma and Thailand, the I.H.S.

students took the Utica dancers to a state park for a hike, and to a Southeast Asian banquet at Cornell.

“We were able to bring the Karen people of Utica together with Karen people of Ithaca,” Kirchgraber-Newton said. “Both groups are so excited that this is the beginning of a much larger collaboration and relationship between the communities.”

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