

Claire Darmstadter

Hello, everybody. I am so lucky to be joined today by Andrew Trumbull, co-founder of the Burmese Rohingya Community of Wisconsin. Thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me today.

Andrew Trumbull

My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. So first would be great if you could walk us through some terminology. And for listeners, I do have a section on the website that kind of breaks us down. But it'd be great to get an expert's opinion to weigh in. So would you be okay if I asked you a couple questions about that?

Andrew Trumbull

Absolutely.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. So the first is Myanmar versus Burma. And in general, when referencing the people from the nation, is Burmese a general descriptor, or is that just referred to the people that are considered Burman? Or was the relationship of all those terms?

Andrew Trumbull

So Burmese I think is indicative of anybody that is from Burma. While the country's official title is Myanmar, it was formerly Burma. I think everybody who calls someone from Burma calls them Burmese.

Claire Darmstadter

And now in terms of what groups are here in Wisconsin, correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe the three most populous groups are the Rohingya, the Karen, and the Chin. Is Rohingya the language most Rohingya people speak and then Burmese is more kind of commonly spoken by the other two groups? Or is that more of a common denominator language for everyone, whereas the first language is more of a local language?

Andrew Trumbull

Yeah, that's a good question. It gets a little bit tricky here. So Rohingya, typically speak the Rohingya language, some were able to learn Burmese while in Myanmar. But the course that most Rohingya take, especially regarding resettlement. It means that they've lived in another country where they were resettled out of since the United Nations does not resettle out of Myanmar, or neighboring Bangladesh. So Malaysia and Thailand are the most common places. And so for Rohingya families that are resettled, oftentimes, they'll start a family in Malaysia, and oftentimes, the husband or wife, they might not be both Rohingya. And so you have mixed languages between the spouses. And then the kids who are growing up in Malaysia speak Malay. And so when they arrive here, it really complicates the dynamic a whole heck of a lot. For the Karen, they also speak their own language and share similar traits in terms of some

speaking Burmese and others not. And I don't know enough about the Chin to speak to, to their language.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, so now personally, could you give us just an overview of your educational and linguistic background and how you kind of came to be involved with the BRCW?

Andrew Trumbull

Sure. So I was born in Virginia, I was raised in Germany, and lived in the Midwest for the most part since. And so I went to the University of Illinois, in Champaign Urbana, Global Studies major, and the focus in arms control disarmament and international security. So I suppose this is kind of the first role that I've had, where my major kind of comes into play, which makes me very happy, because all my other jobs really weren't. I also completed an AmeriCorps service term in Milwaukee, in the near West Side, focusing on community safety, and community engagement.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, and so if I understand correctly, you work in partnership with another individual who is a refugee himself, I believe, and speaks many different languages. So what do you each bring to the table? And what do you learn from the other person? So you can be a successful cohesive unit?

Andrew Trumbull

Yeah, that's a really good question, too. So I'm American, and Anuwar is Rohingya. And so we have very, two very different sets of capacities. Anuwar is among the best interpreters in the country. And so for people who are, who arrived here with very limited English ability, his role in the community was really just very obvious, the amount of good and help that he could provide. So my role as an American is to facilitate all the American things. So whether it's technology or whether it's kind of the bureaucratic side of things like creating a nonprofit or you know, any of the licensure and that kind of stuff. I handle most of the incoming English language correspondence. So when we set up the organization, we run a charitable 501(c)3 here in Milwaukee. When we opened up our lines of communication, we basically opened up the floodgates to all the service providers, the great, wonderful people that are helping and doing fantastic jobs, but they're struggling to serve these communities, not just the Rohingya, and the Karen, but other resettled groups as well that have language barriers. And so it's been, yeah, really an educational experience for me. I imagine I've learned more in the last five years. And I have, you know, the 25 years before that. So yeah, so Anuwar is a remarkable leader. It's a difficult position for him, because within about a week or two of his arrival here in the United States, we started working towards this project. He hasn't taken any days off, he hasn't taken a vacation, once. So. So yeah, there's a lot of hard work that's going into this. And we certainly, kind of, I often think of ourselves as together, we make one really capable human being, because we don't necessarily have all the time and capacity ourselves. And so together, yeah, we're considerably stronger.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, it's just incredible, even from what you can read online, just the amount of work you're doing is really incredible. And so I really thank you for all you're doing. Can you talk specifically about the ESL program that I believe you run and just kind of how it's changed as a result of COVID? And you talked a little bit about how they might live in different nations prior to coming to the United States? So is there any exposure to English usually prior to arriving? Or is it completely starting from scratch? Or what does that usually look like?

Andrew Trumbull

Most adults arriving here have not acquired much English at all. I would say, probably 95%, or more of the Rohingya population arrived here almost completely illiterate. So the Rohingya language doesn't have an alphabet. And so using, you know, writing instruments, typing is a challenge on top of, you know, learning the language. Yeah, so education is a key part of our organization. An English acquisition is a huge, huge part of that. So when we started, we began holding classes in person, so for adults and for children simultaneously. And that worked out reasonably well for a while. We also integrated ESL software from a company called DynEd, which is really data driven, really very comprehensive and good for any language level learner. And so the idea there was, well, we know that, for Rohingya, especially for Rohingya adults, retention in ESL classes is very low, because they don't have enough time to stick with it. And so our idea was to get computers, fix them up, put the software, this ESL course, on them, so that they can study at home, on their own time. And then also, at our office, when we had an office to kind of supplement class time, you know what I mean? And, and so that, that went on for a while while we had our office, and unfortunately, we lost our office. And then the pandemic happened. So we had to kind of change a lot of things. And moving to technology is the biggest theme of all of it, and preparing students for a remote school year was a real big part of it as well. So what we did over last summer, was we did remote tutoring over Zoom. So we had wonderful volunteers and we had classes every day, for about a month and a half, during July and August. And then, you know, we see the challenges at home. So how do you create a situation where a child can study well to join classes, and kind of be able to focus. And so some of the challenges we have with the community are okay, they don't have computers. And so we want to make sure that the Milwaukee Public School System was you know, giving Chromebooks to kids. So just being able to fill out that online form to get the Chromebook, you know, creating a how to video on how to do that, which was really, really popular. And so then, okay, the kids have computers. So now what else do we need for them to be able to study? Well, the houses, the apartments that families live in are sometimes loud and a little too crowded. So having a quiet place, and having headphones, a pair of cans that can kind of block out some of the other noise was important. So we bought 200 headsets from a local company here, Koss, that makes headphones. And then we've got those out to kids. And we've been working with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, a senior lecturer there, her name is Lynn Sedivy. So she basically teaches teachers, and a lot of these teachers are in public schools where the Rohingya and other recent refugee students are, and so we were able help them place a lot of these teachers, student teachers, with families to do tutoring. So for this past school year, we were able to place I think about 20 or 25 tutors, which was really great. But unfortunately, you know, typically our brand of outreaches in person, you know, we visit people

at their homes, you know, they visit us. And the pandemic has really put a crimp in that. And it's otherwise been quite difficult.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, and I don't think people really often realize especially even outside of COVID, how big of a change it is coming to Wisconsin as a refugee from things as simple as turning on the stove to dealing with the freezing cold winters and navigating the more bureaucratic things, like parts of the system that even native English speakers would be really confused by. So are there some misconceptions that people have about refugee populations or some things that people might not realize that you can kind of walk us through? Or kind of bust some of those myths?

Andrew Trumbull

I'm not sure if I could speak to any myths or anything like that, I think the most important thing, like you mentioned is they come here, they have to learn everything, you know, they may never have used a stove or a microwave or washing machine, or an oven, you know. And so, I think the most important thing is for us to try and do our best to put ourselves in their shoes. Imagine what it'd be like for you to go into a country where you don't speak the language, and then you have to get all this stuff done, you know, or, you know, and there's there. Yeah, it's impossible to list all the things that are covered, kind of, in this, but they're, they're just trying to live peacefully, you know, and Milwaukee is a good home for them. There's a lot of services, there's a lot of things that the city offers. And there's other really great places in this country as well. And generally speaking, and for those that have made it here, they've kind of won a lottery of sorts, you know, being resettled is like a visa lottery, you know, the chances of it happening are very low. And it takes years for it to happen, decades. So the thing I'm worried about most is that they, they are the kind of the light in the darkness for all their family back home. So the quicker that the Rohingya here can become more prosperous, can make more money, the more help that they can give back and they give back, they give back everything. The Rohingya spend money very frugally, you know, they appreciate the value of money because it's difficult to come by from where they're from just the same way they really value owning property. Because this for the same exact reason that they value education for their children for the same exact reason. So they value the things that they have here. And I think as an American, sometimes we take it for granted.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, for sure. And are there any ways that listeners can support your efforts? So anywhere online that you have campaigns going on or platforms they can follow to learn more about your work?

Andrew Trumbull

Yeah, absolutely. We're actually right in the middle of a fundraising campaign. We're trying to buy a building in the Milwaukee South Side, a community center. So we need to raise quite a bit of money over the next month or two. You can visit us at BRCW.org or on Facebook at [BRCWMke](https://www.facebook.com/BRCWMke). Also search us on GoFundMe I think if you just type in "Rohingya Milwaukee" I think we're like the only one that comes up. But yeah, if you have a few dollars to give to us, you

know every dollar is going to the building. We don't pay salaries or anything like that. We're volunteer run. And yeah, we're putting everything we got into it.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes, I will include all those links in the transcripts and I just thank you so much for your time because I know you're very busy. But I think this is a very valuable perspective to include. So, thank you again and I hope you have a great rest of your day.

Andrew Trumbull

Thank you so much.