



**Refugee  
Community  
Empowerment  
Association**

# Two Groups, Two Strategies, One Goal: Youth Empowerment for Burmese Refugees & Teen Volunteers

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## Introduction

Ethnic minorities in Burma (officially Myanmar), including the Karen and Karenni, are persecuted and forced to flee the country by the ruling military regime (US Dept. of State, 2011). These refugees are currently being resettled in the United States, including Houston, TX.

Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) augment limited resettlement services provided by the US Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement. Tzu Chi Foundation in Houston, TX, supports the Burmese families further through the resettlement process. A grass roots organization, the Refugee Community Empowerment Association (RCEA) provides a support network and identifies resources available to their community.

Throughout the last year, we have worked with Tzu Chi Foundation and members of RCEA to provide services to adolescent Burmese refugees helping them successfully integrate into life in the United States and transition as smoothly as possible into the next chapter in their lives.



## Project Format

**Branch 1: Tzu Shao** – Worked with youth leader to help with youth guidance and group organization through teambuilding workshops and service-learning mentorship for twice-monthly service activities with Sun Youth.

**Branch 2: Sun Youth (RCEA Youth)** – Worked directly with recently resettled Burmese refugee teens in weekly classes to promote health literacy and reduce acculturation stress.

## Methods

### Tzu Shao

1. Conducted needs assessment
2. Utilized participatory methods to determine best organizational structure for group
3. Conducted teambuilding workshops
4. Provided planning instruction/guidance and lesson plan templates (for Sun Youth lessons)
5. Created evaluation form
6. Provided mentorship to youth leaders

### Sun Youth

1. Conducted needs assessment
2. Created health lessons
3. Reinforced English language skills
4. Provided supplies for self-expression project



## Reflections

Albert Schweitzer sums it up nicely: *“Eventually all things fall into place. Until then, laugh at the confusion, live for the moments, and know EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON.”* The past year has been a growth process for all – a continuous cycle of motivation, dedication, and inspiration. We are eternally grateful for having had the opportunity to learn from the communities within which we worked in our communal efforts to motivate each other to reach our potential as leaders and as people.



## Participants and Activities

**Tzu Shao** – teen volunteers from Houston branch of the Tzu Chi Foundation

- Teambuilding workshops
- Participatory activities
- Twice-monthly activity sessions with Sun Youth
- Creation of organization structure (officer structure and monthly lesson plan committees)

**Sun Youth** – recently arrived Burmese refugee teens settled in Sharpstown area

- Weekly health & well-being lessons
- Twice-monthly activity sessions with Tzu Shao
- Development through personal expression activities



## Outcome

**Tzu Shao** – through participatory activities and teambuilding exercises, an organizational structure was established to better coordinate efforts in service with an emphasis on what it means to serve

**Sun Youth** – weekly health lessons and personal expression projects have encouraged the teens to have confidence in their abilities as they transition into school-based supplemental programs while allowing them an outlet for their cultural pride and self-expression

**Sustainable links** with UT School of Public Health

- Initiated recycling program with Tzu Chi
- Tutoring for Sun Youth
- Contacts with Refugee Resource Collaborative through Catholic Charities
- Connected student groups across the Texas Medical Center with Tzu Chi to create refugee hygiene workshop for newcomers every year

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## References

US Department of State: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/rls/dos/221.htm>, 2/18/2011