

## Bound together by song



Schools - Schools

WRITTEN BY RAY WEIKAL

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The human voice can be a powerful vehicle.

North Kansas City High School vocal music teacher Mike Shirley knows the strength of singing. He sees it every time his mixed choir gathers for practice and students from at least five different countries are brought closer together.



Anna Faltermeier/Sun Tribune — Members of the North Kansas City High School choir rehearse Christmas songs in class Oct. 28 at North Kansas City High School. Several students in the choir are refugees from Myanmar, including junior Bwey Htoo Soe, second from left, junior Plow So, center, and sophomore Eh Hit Kaw, second from right.

In the past 18 months, the transformative impact of corporate singing in Shirley's choir was made even more obvious with the addition of five Karen (pronounced "car-rin") students.

The choir has become a kind of refuge, Shirley said, for young people who still have vivid memories of government persecution in Myanmar and life in squalid camps along the border in Thailand.

"The thing that's so unique is that they came to this country where they don't speak the language and they've managed to thrive at our



Anna Faltermeier/Sun Tribune — North Kansas City High School junior Eh Htoo Na rehearses in choir class Oct. 28 at North Kansas City High School. Na is a refugee from Myanmar.

school and in this choir," Shirley said. "They're a really amazing group of young people."

With the help of North Kansas City Schools interpreter Paw Wah Tamla, student Bo Bo Htoo explained that the Karen are an ethnic minority that has been under attack for decades from the military dictatorship in the former Burma.

All five students have multiple family members who were killed by government forces, Htoo said.

"We moved to Thailand because the Burmese army came to our village and killed a lot of people," he said. "If my family had stayed, they would have been killed, too."

Most Karen are Christians, according to the students, and they practice a form that emphasizes corporate worship

and community well-being.

Choral music, the students said, is a central facet of Karen culture. When they came to the U.S., singing at church and school became a way of staying connected with each other and building new relationships with their new neighbors.

"Singing is very important to preserve our ethnic group," student Eh Htoo Na said.

Kitty Robker works with students in the English-language learner program at North Kansas City High School. She was one of the adults who encouraged the Karen students to join Shirley's choir.

"Some of the other staff and I noticed that they loved to sing," Robker said. "We'd find them sitting together at lunch, singing. And their singing is so beautiful."

As a way of educating his students about world music and to highlight the school district's ethnic diversity, Shirley requires all of this choir members to come up with something they can perform that reflects their heritage.

During a show last year, Shirley's Karen contingent sang the hymn "We Can't Live Without Jesus" in their native language. The response from the other students was great, according to Eh Hit Kaw.

"People know more about where we're from and who we are because of our music," Kaw said.

Staff writer Ray Weikal can be reached at 389-6637 or