

**In Utica family of 11, six are remote learners**

**LEARNING CURVE**

**Amy Neff Roth**

Utica

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UTICA — The big front porch and second- floor balcony on the otherwise modest home look like the perfect remote- learning classroom settings on a warm, sunny fall day.

But the street is too busy and the traffic too loud for the six remote learners who live here to venture outside, says Say Kler Paw, the middle child in this family of 11 Karen refugees, originally from Myanmar.

Instead, the students leave their shoes in the house’s entryway and pile inside along with their parents, maternal grandparents and oldest brother when he’s not at work at the Chobani plant in South Edmeston. The parents work, too, but as paid caregivers for the grandparents.

The family — which, in keeping with Karen tradition, doesn't have a surname — divide up the house for studying based on sleeping arrangements. The three youngest children sleep and do most of their schoolwork downstairs while the three older girls work upstairs in their bedrooms. The six students share five laptops and Chromebooks.

**Helping other immigrants adjust**

Say Kler Paw, 16, bears the brunt of making sure her younger siblings keep up with their online classes while she does her own schoolwork, too, her siblings say. That's largely because her parents and grandparents don't speak English.

Her two older sisters, both students at Herkimer County Community College, help out, too, but Say Kler Paw is the most savvy when it comes to Google Classroom and other remote-learning technology.

so, no one uses earbuds or headphones.

“That’s why we stay in separate places,” explains Eh Moo Taw Heh, 8.

Oldest daughter Kler Moo K’tray Paw, 20, a student at Herkimer College, said she does most of her work at night after 8 when it gets easier to focus. When she can’t handle the stress anymore, she bursts into her sisters’ bedroom next door, singing.

“They’re all, like, go away!” she says.

But all the time spent together during the pandemic has drawn the siblings closer, Say Kler Paw says.

“I feel like we understand each other more,” she says.

The students in the family agreed that they would prefer in-person classes, but they are not whining about the situation. Eh Moo Taw Heh said she doesn’t like it when dust or other detritus gets stuck in her Chromebook keys.

“Everything else is fine,” she says.

Kler Moo K’tray Paw is slightly more concerned.

“When I have class in person, I can understand more what my professors are saying,” she says. “So yeah, I’m kind of disappointed that we can’t have in person, but it’s understandable.”

Say Kler Paw says she'd worry about her grandparents if they were all going to school every day.

And the family’s background gives them a unique perspective on remote learning. Neither their mother, Khee Paw, 45, or father Tay Heh, 54, received an education. Their families were displaced by civil war in Myanmar when they were growing up, Khee Paw explains, using her

“She’s the most responsible,” says brother Saw Kler Kaw Htoo, 10, as his sister shakes her head.

And she doesn’t just help her two elementary- age siblings.

Say Kler Paw assists some cousins and family friends from that larger Karen community who come over for help. Not all the families have older siblings who speak English well and understand the technology, she says, and she feels the district hasn’t done enough to reach out to families that don’t speak English as a first language.

“I’m a bit frustrated about it since I have to help them,” Say Kler Paw says. “I wish the teachers would reach out more to the students.”

But her response to the situation has been to do more. Say Kler Paw has signed up to be a tutor for the Midtown Utica Community Center’s virtual tutoring program, for which her youngest two siblings are signed up as students.

“I had many relatives here that are struggling and their kids are struggling by with all the online stuff, so it really discouraged me,” she said. “So I wanted to sign up.”

Say Kler Paw's family lived in a Thai refugee camp for 10 years, where four of the children were born, before moving to San Antonio in 2011, where their youngest child was born, and then Utica in 2012.

Their situation is relatively common in Utica. Refugees from more than 35 countries have settled in the area since 1979, including more than 4,000 from Myanmar. The Utica schools teach 1,724 English language learners, about half of them Asian, out of a total enrollment of almost 10,000, according to state data. Karen is the most common first language.

**Close quarters draw siblings together**

Even with just their family at home, carving out the space and quiet for schoolwork can be a challenge. Even

daughters as translators. Their only lessons were written on trees with pieces of bark used instead of chalk.

So she’s happy and grateful for the education and opportunities her children are receiving now.

No matter what that looks like.



**Say Kler Paw works on homework on her laptop at home in Utica on Sept. 24. PHOTOS BY ALEX COOPER/OBSERVER-DISPATCH**

