Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. (Acts 2:5-6)

The mile-long gravel road that runs between the Jubilee entrance and our school building at the Welcome Center has a rush hour, of sorts. Each weekday morning there is a stream of traffic as some of our neighbors, Karen and Karenni refugees from Burma, come down the narrow road for the 9:30 start of English classes at the Jubilee school. If you are on the road at that hour you get to wave many hellos as the traffic passes by, and a little before lunch you can wave many goodbyes as the traffic streams back out again.

This is a fairly recent phenomenon. It was only about four years ago that the first Karen and Karenni families began moving to Comer from Atlanta and other cities where they had initially been resettled. Now there are more than 100 refugees living in the Comer area, which is roughly 10% of our small town’s population. Some of the families who have moved here spent time at Jubilee in our two-month residential program when they first came to the U.S, but many did not. They are drawn here by friends and family who have moved here and by the landscape of rural Georgia, which is a far more comfortable home for rural people than the streets of American cities. Here they can garden and raise animals again, and a number of our refugee neighbors have already been able to buy homes.

For 35 years, English classes have been at the heart of Jubilee’s ministry to the newly arrived refugees who stay at our Welcome Center. Shortly after the first Karen and Karenni families moved to Comer, we began opening our English classes to neighbor students as well. The first neighbors in the English classes were mostly young mothers; they walked to Jubilee from their homes a mile or two away, carrying children on their backs or pushing them in strollers. They took turns helping with childcare, each mother spending one class a week with the children in order to be able to attend classes the other four days. Now there are about 17
neighbor students, men and women, many who work full-time as well as those who are at home with children. We offer classes to neighbors on weekday mornings during the school year.

The addition of the neighbor students has roughly doubled the size of our English program in the mornings, though that’s not as dramatic an expansion as it sounds. With more young children at the Jubilee School, we now teach a Pre-K English class in the morning in addition to childcare for babies and toddlers. We have always offered 3-4 different classes for adults, though, in order to accommodate different levels of English. Adding students from Comer has increased the size of our morning classes but has not required more teachers. There are challenges to larger classes, but there are advantages, too: teachers say that neighbor students bring additional energy, and it is easier to practice English conversation in pairs and small groups when more students are present.

The neighbors who attend English classes bring a lot more to our program than just bolstered numbers in the classrooms. With new refugees from Burma still arriving in our residential program, our neighbors regularly provide translation, often coming over to help outside of class times. Neighbors frequently come along when we pick up new refugee families in Atlanta, which can do a lot to ease the anxiety of new arrivals.

Neighbors come to visit the refugee families living at Jubilee’s Welcome Center, and invite Welcome Center families to their own homes in town. Sometimes friendships form between our Karen and Kareni neighbors and refugees from an entirely different ethnic group, or an entirely different part of the world. All of

Shae Meh concentrates on the calendar. She lived at Jubilee in 2014 and now comes to class from Comer.

Comer student Pay Reh recently invited his teachers to his wedding! Helping to celebrate with Pay Reh and his bride, Tar Lar, are family, friends and their pastor, Rev.Tha Hgay.
this can have a big impact on the experience of new refugees, who begin their transition to life in the U.S. with a better sense of the challenges that lie before them and a wider network of friends.

The commitment that the neighbor students show and the sacrifices they make in order to attend English classes is inspiring. For those who are working full time, English classes add more hours to an already exhausting day; many of the neighbor students work overnight at the chicken processing plants and then come to Jubilee for English class in the morning before sleeping. A few have changed their schedule at the chicken plant from a day shift to the overnight shift in order to be able to attend the English classes. Parents with small children still spend one morning helping with child care for every four mornings that they are able to be in class. While most of the neighbor students now drive cars to class, some still walk or bike from town.

Jubilee is not the only place where residents of Comer are coming together with their new refugee neighbors in the classroom. Recently, volunteers at Comer Baptist Church and Comer United Methodist Church began offering classes to help refugees prepare for the U.S. citizenship exam. Pastor Hugh Hendrickson of the United Methodist Church is teaching one of the classes. “I was looking for a tangible way to help,” he said. “It’s been a blessing to me.” When asked what he thinks the Karen and Karenni bring to the community of Comer, Pastor Hugh talked about feeling a sense of new life in the town. “People said they were so blessed by the refugees singing at our Good Friday Service,” he remembered. “You don’t expect, when you come to Comer, that you’re going to meet the world.”

Baw Baw and her husband Hei Nay Htoo were among the first Karen families to move to Comer. Baw Baw has attended Jubilee English classes since they were first opened to neighbor students, taking breaks from classes only when her fifth and sixth children were born. When asked why the English classes are important to her, Baw Baw used access to medical care as an example. “When I arrived in the U.S., I could not speak English,” she said. “I speak English little by little from the Jubilee School. A couple years ago, I cannot go the children’s doctor by myself. I need someone’s help every time. See? Very different. [Now] when I go to Athens Regional [Hospital], they don’t call the interpreter. They know I speak English.”

Baw Baw and Hei Nay Htoo are among the refugee friends that we look to as models of hard work, kindness, and hospitality.
One day two years ago, Baw Baw walked to Jubilee from her house a mile and a half away, her youngest child on her back and her four older children walking in a line behind her. She was going to see Aisha, a woman living at the Welcome Center, to bring Aisha back to her home for a visit. Baw Baw and Aisha are both refugees from Burma, but their backgrounds are about as different as they can be. Baw Baw is Karen, from the eastern side of the country; Aisha is ethnic Bengali, from the western side. Baw Baw grew up in the refugee camps in the Thailand jungle; Aisha spent her life in towns and cities. Baw Baw is Christian; Aisha is Muslim. When asked to remember that day, Baw Baw said, “At that time I’m not able to drive; many people need to walk back and forth. When they [Aisha’s family] met me they were very happy. They called me very good friend. I showed them where to buy rice cooker; I showed them where is the grass you can eat. They loved it! They took it home to cook with fish.”

At the end of their visit, Baw Baw walked Aisha back to Jubilee and then walked home again. There are many Karen people nearby whom Baw Baw can spend time with, but she walked 6 miles that day to show hospitality to a woman from a different ethnic group, with a different culture and a different religion. As we continue to serve new refugees through our residential program, neighbor students like Baw Baw not only help to welcome new arrivals; they also help to remind the rest of us what these acts of hospitality can look like.

Every Sunday at Jubilee, we are blessed to hear the gospel of Jesus celebrated in many different languages, through scripture readings, prayers, stories, and songs. Even when the language is not our own, we can often understand the meaning. On the day of Pentecost, the gospel was given the power to transcend barriers of language and culture; we can feel that when we worship with Christians from around the world. We feel that, too, as our lives are entwined with the lives of our neighbors here in Comer. We are blessed to see the gospel of Jesus — transcending cultural and linguistic differences — in the hospitality of neighbors like Baw Baw, in the generosity of the local volunteers teaching citizenship classes, in the singing of the Karen choir on Good Friday, in the dedication of students studying English and in the dedication of their teachers. There are many ways in which our new neighbors are a gift to our community, but this is one for which we are especially thankful.

from the people of Jubilee

Who we are

Jubilee Partners is an intentional Christian service community in north Georgia. Our primary ministry is offering hospitality to newly arrived refugees. We are a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization; donations are thus tax-deductible. Your donations and support of our work are most appreciated.

Jubilee Partners
Box 68, Comer, GA 30629, 706-783-5131
www.jubileepartners.org

Mostly they teach...and teach, but one spring day volunteers Kate, Jessica and Joel hiked at Anna Ruby Falls.
EASTER 2015 ...worship at sunrise, awesome singing and preaching, 6 baptisms, crowds at the breakfast feast, an outing to play in the river nearby, new friends and old friends in many languages...
Resurrection Sunday morning saw a full moon setting before the sun rose. Worship warmed us as the sun’s rays shone through the flowered cross. “He is Risen!” Masemo and Aimee sang out across the Cross Field while little Daniel slept on.