

Interviewee: Dar Ku
Interpreter: Paw Boe Wah, Dar Ku's daughter
Interviewer: Regina M. Edmonds
Date of Interview: May 27, 2017
Place: Dar Ku's residence, Worcester, MA
Transcriber: Regina M. Edmonds



Abstract: Throughout this interview Dar Ku's quiet courage and resilience shine through. Born in Burma, now called Myanmar, on July 25, 1969, Dar Ku and her family fled their home even as the Burmese soldiers threatened them with death if they tried to escape. Dar Ku recounts running for her life as soldiers terrified everyone fleeing by saying: "If you don't ... if you don't come back, we will kill you." Dar Ku and her family made the difficult journey to the Nu Poe Refugee Camp in Thailand, walking all the way with their three young children. She recounts how difficult this journey was by saying "It was the rainy time ... so it took three weeks to get to the camp," and at that time only one of her children was old enough to walk so the other two needed to be carried. Her fourth child was born approximately two years later in the refugee camp.

In discussing her flight from Burma it becomes clear how war tears families apart as individuals make varying decisions and scatter to different locations in their attempts to find safety. Dar Ku tells us, "Ah, during that time, no one, I mean every, everyone left the village and then the sister, I mean, like my sister and other little brother ... sister they went I mean they went to another place and the other went to another place and then ... I mean I and my family decided to go to the camp." While expressing a sense of wellbeing in her new life here in the U.S., Dar Ku confirms that at times she also does miss her home country.

A constant throughout the interview is Dar Ku's love of weaving and her skill in creating beautiful and colorful woven garments. She learned to weave from her mother and created woven works not only in her home village in Burma, but also in the refugee camp in Thailand, and now in the U.S. as well. As a member of RAW (Refugee Artisans of Worcester), founded by Joan Kariko and Ellen Ferrante, Dar Ku receives the materials she needs to continue her weaving and with the help of Joan and Ellen is able to sell some of her creations in the Worcester area, including at a festival held at Becker College on March 26, 2017. It seems that weaving has provided not only some financial support for Dar Ku and her family but that it also is a source of pleasure, pride, and comfort. Perhaps in a somewhat metaphorical sense, weaving symbolizes Dar Ku's success in intertwining the disparate threads of her life to create a beautiful whole.

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Interview Transcript

RE: Thank you again, thank you. Um, one thing I forgot to ask Paw Wah ... is your birthday...

DK: July 5, 1969

RE: July 5th.

DK: Yeah.

RE: 1969.

DK: ... 69.

RE: 1969 ... and where were you born?

DK: I was born in Burma.

RE: Is there a town or village?

DK: Yes, I was born in Burma in a small village.

RE: ... small village.

DK: (____)??? ... Perhaps she is stating the name of the village)

RE: You told me before, but I ask: Do you have children?

DK: Yes, I do.

RE: And what are their names?

DK: The first one, older, Par N Kyar, yeah, he my children ... Par N Kyar.

RE: ...your children...

DK: ... the second, Paw Boe Wah, and then third one, Lae Lo Wah...

RE: Lae Lo Wah

DK: ... and the last one Johnson Wah.

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RE: Ok. When we're all done I am going to write all of the names ... how old are your children?

DK: The older one, 27 ... 28.

RE: 28, oh he had a birthday (laughs).

DK: (laughs) 28 ... second one 25.

RE: 25.

DK: third one 22.

RE: 22.

DK: ... the, the last one 18, this month, in May ... 18 he was 18 year old.

RE: That's exciting ... yes. And are you married, or ...?

DK: Yes.

RE: Married. Did you ever have a different name?

DK: No.

RE: No, always Dar Ku.

DK: Yeah.

RE: Ok ... and your husband's name?

DK: Wahnay Beh.

RE: And can you spell that for me?

DK: Yes, (interpreter spells letter by letter) W A H ..

RE: (spells) W A H...

DK: (interpreter continues spelling) N A Y...

RE: (spells) NAY...

DK: (interpreter continues spelling) B E H...

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RE: (spelling) B E H ... ok. And can you tell me your mother's name?

DK: Naw Bleeh Gay.

(DK and interpreter discuss this question)

DK: My mother's name is Naw Bleeh Gay" ... how do ... how you in English (spells) N A W...

RE: (spells) N A W...

Interpreter: B L E E H G A Y.

RE: OK (writes name as interpreter spells).

(Interpreter continues spelling, correcting RE) G A Y.

RE: And she was born in Burma.

DK: Yes.

RE: ... small village?

DK: Yes

RE: And your father's name?

DK: Par Maw Gay, Par Maw Gay.

(Interpreter spells) P A R...

RE: (spells) P A R...

(Interpreter spells) M A W ...

RE: (spells) M A W...

(Interpreter spells) G A Y.

RE: (spells) G A Y ... and same ... born in Burma, small village?

DK: Yes.

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RE: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

DK: Three brother, two sister.

RE: Three brothers, two sisters.

DK: Two brothers, they are passed away, just the one brother.

RE: Two brothers passed away. Are your sisters okay?

DK: Yeah, my sister ... one sister live ah Burma, one sister live ah Thailand.

RE: Ok, one Burma and one in Thailand. I bet you miss them. Do you miss them?

DK: Yeah [laughs].

RE: Are you in the middle or oldest or?

DK: Ah ... last one.

RE: You're the last one ...

DK: Yeah, my two sisters they are older than me.

RE: Brothers older?

DK: Yeah, the two brother older ... the one brother younger than me.

RE: Ok.

DK: And ...

RE: Let's see ... so you the youngest sister?

DK: Youngest sister.

RE: And two brothers younger than that ...

DK: One brother ...

RE: [simultaneously] One brother.

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Interpreter: One ... one younger, two older brothers ... the oldest one is a boy and the youngest one is also a boy.

RE: Ok, in Burma, what is your ethnic ...

DK: Karen.

RE: Karen ... like Paw Wah?

DK: Yeah, like Paw Wah.

RE: And what ... do you have a religion?

DK: Christian.

RE: And you are working at T. J. Maxx?

DK: Yeah, [I work at] T. J. Maxx .

RE: T. J. Maxx warehouse.

DK: Yeah, warehouse.

RE: And when did you come to Worcester?

DK: 2008.

RE: 2008. And this says "Did you go to school here?"

DK: Yes, Lutheran.

RE: Lutheran Social Service.

DK: ... to go to school Lutheran and then library.

RE: At the library ... great, wonderful. So now we'll just talk ...

DK: (laughs)

RE: ... all these papers are done. (laugh together) I know you are a beautiful weaver.

DK: Thank you.

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RE: Can you tell me where you learned to weave?

(DK and interpreter speak for some time)

DK: Ah ... my mother taught me.

RE: wonderful ... and you still weave here in America?

DK: Yeah and in the Thailand.

RE: Where do you find the beautiful cloth ... threads, where do you find ...?

(DK and interpreter speak for some time)

DK: Ah, she get it from Joan like a (_____???)

RE: So Joan and Ellen find them for you, excellent, wonderful ... and do you sell your work?

DK: Ah yes, she give it to Joan and Joan help her to sell it.

RE: Oh good, good... and do you meet the people you sell to or just give to Joan?

(DK and interpreter speak for some time together)

DK: Sometimes I see Joan and she go sell the scarf. Joan call me to go with her and we go together.

RE: Oh, ok ... together, yes. I'm sorry I missed you at the festival at Becker ... I was there ... I was looking for you (laughs). You were very busy that day.

Interpreter: Was it at Becker College?

RE: At Becker in Leicester, Joan and Ellen they were there were many works there and the students were talking ...

DK: Oh yeah, the Becker.

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

RE: That was a fun day, exciting.

DK: Yeah.

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RE: When you first came to America, what was it like for you?

(Interpreter and DK speak together for some time)

DK: When I first arrive here, every day's new for me ... and I have never see something like that before.

RE: Were you scared or happy or just ...

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

DK: I was confused, excited, nervous at the same time because I don't speak English.

RE: And everything is so different.

RE: (addressing interpreter directly) How about for you? You were 17

Interpreter: Ah yes, I was 17.

RE: And how did it feel to you?

Interpreter: Ah ... I can't recall it [laughs].

RE: ... you can't recall [laughs].

Interpreter: I was like surprised, like confused because like I said there were days ... like every day's different.

RE: Everyday was so different. Yes, yes, did people help you? Did Lutheran Social Service help you?

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

DK: Yeah, our social worker helped us go to hospital to get like an ID.

RE: Um hum, um hum, yes ... was there enough food for you?

DK: Well, yeah, our first night arrive here we got only juice and some bread, and then the next day the caseworker came and they took us to the supermarket and to get food.

RE: So many things in the supermarket, (everyone laughs) even I get ... what to pick, what to pick.

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DK: We never, we never saw big store in my country ... in our country.

RE: Yeah, yeah. So you have been here nine, nine years ... and are you ... do you feel happy here or do you miss Burma?

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

DK: Yeah, I do miss my country sometimes but if I compare now and when I first day arrive ... I like ... I like ... I like it here.

RE: It's so cold here sometimes, yes? (laughs) Did that ... did the cold surprise you?

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time and then they laugh)

RE: Coats and mittens and ... (laughs) did you have warm ... did you come in winter or summer?

DK: Ah, ah, August.

RE: August.

DK: August 26th.

RE: August 26th ... so it was warm for a little while.

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

RE: And how was your journey here?

(DK and interpreter speak together for quite some time)

DK: I mean before, before, it was very hard, and then, as the time passed by and I meet people like Joan and (_____???) name of second person, unclear) ... and that they help me so after like I am getting better, ah yeah, everything is ... and right now is ... good.

RE: Good, yeah ... that's good. You ... things must have been very dangerous in Burma to make this long journey.

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

DK: Ahh, no, it, it wasn't dangerous because I mean I came from (_____???) for the camp and then to the US like they help me fly, they help me with everything. So I have like a no trouble.

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RE: Oh, good.

DK: Which is good. I wasn't came direct from Burma but from refugee camp in Thailand ... from a refugee camp in Thailand to here, yes.

RE: And the name of the refugee camp? Did you remember?

DK: Yes, Nu Poe, Nu Poe Camp.

(Interpreter spells the name of the camp) Yes, Nu Poe Camp, N U

RE: M U..

Interpreter: No, N U.

RE: N U.

Interpreter: (continues spelling) POE ... yeah, No Poe Camp

RE: ... in Thailand.

DK: Yeah, in Thailand.

RE: How long did you live in the refugee camp?

DK: Twelve years.

RE: Twelve years, wow.

(DK and the interpreter speak together for some time)

DK: Yeah, it was twelve years ... ah yes ... we arrived there around 1997 ... yeah, and then we left in 2008.

RE: Was it hard to live in the refugee camp?

DK: Oh yeah, yes.

RE: Did you meet your husband there or ...?

DK: No.

(DK and the interpreter speak together for some time)

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DK: It was in Burma.

RE: ... in Burma.

DK: When I arrive in camp I already had three children.

RE: Three children, ah ... so not the little one .

DK: Yeah.

RE: He was born in the refugee camp. And how did your husband and you decide to leave Burma?

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time. Interpreter asks for clarification of the question)

Interpreter: To leave Burma or ...?

RE: (clarifying) Why did they decide to leave? What was happening in Burma?

(DK and interpreter speak together for quite some time)

DK: Yeah, during that time because of the war.

RE: ... because of war.

DK: Yeah, and then there was killing and yeah, fighting...

RE: ... fighting in the village...

DK ... and we were scared and then we came to the refugee camp.

RE: Wow, so did you run?

DK: Yeah, we run.

(unclear interchange among RE, DK, and the interpreter)

RE: Wow, were you scared then?

DK: Yeah, we were so scared of the soldiers, the Burmese soldiers.

RE: And you had the three children ... were you carrying them or could they walk?

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DK: One can walk and the other two ... I need to carry.

RE: To carry, wow ... how far? (DK speaks for some time to the interpreter)

DK: Ah, it was a rainy time so it took us like three weeks to get to the camp.

RE: Three weeks walking, wow ...

DK: And then we stop by in some village.

RE: Um hum ... and in those villages did they help you and give you some food?

DK: Yes, the villagers really helped us.

RE: Wow ... this is so amazing ... your struggle and journey.

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

RE: Your brothers and sisters stayed, but you left. Why?

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

DK: Ah, during that time, no one, I mean everyone left the village and then the sister, I mean, like my sister and other little brother ... sister they went I mean they went to another place and the other went to another place and then ... I mean I and my family decided to go to the camp.

RE: Camp ... so everyone was running in different directions.

DK: Yes, everyone in the village and after a few months ... like six months, eight months the people came back to the village.

RE: When it stopped?

DK: Yeah

RE: Did the soldiers burn the village?

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

DK: Ahh, the soldier was ... It was like they burned our house but they knew, they knew there's gonna be a war so the soldier came to our village and then they stayed in our village and then they elect to do this or that, yeah.

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RE: So you knew?

DK: Yes, yes.

RE: ... this is dangerous ... this is

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

DK: I mean, when they arrive at the village and the children knew it, so everyone left the village.

RE: Everyone left ...

DK: And then they, the soldier they, they call back the villagers and they say, "If you don't ... if you don't come back, we will kill you," and then somebody said they were afraid that they would come back to the village.

RE: Wow, wow and your husband also wanted to go to the refugee camp.

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

DK: In 87, in 1987 the village ... the soldier came to our village and then ... and then my family we decided to ... [Given the current ages of the children it seems as though the family must have fled Burma in 1997, not 1987].

RE: ... to go

DK: Yeah, to go

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

DK: And then my sister, my other sister go to the Thailand and then the, the other sister went to another village [laughs]

RE: ... another village

DK: Yeah, they moved to another village.

RE: Um hum ... what happened to your mother and father?

DK: Ahh, my father died long ago when I was five.

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RE: Ahh, ok ...

DK: My mother she, I mean when I left, she stayed with my other sister.

RE: Oh, okay, so everyone ran ... fled ... but everyone was safe?

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

DK: Yeah, everyone who stayed ...

(RE: Shall we turn it over? Interpreter: Do we need to stop it. RE: Yeah, let's just stop it. Interpreter: This one? RE: We'll do play right here)

RE: Have you had a chance to go back to Burma ever?

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

DK: You mean in here or in the refugee camp?

RE: Well, first refugee camp and then once you're here.

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

DK: Before I left to America, I got a chance to visit once, but I was a little scared ... afraid.

RE: Of course, of course , yeah.

DK: I went to my village, it is one, is one like, it is one near the city ... it was close to the border.

RE: Close to the border ... ah ha, so you sort of came in and visited to see your sister or brother?

DK: Yeah.

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

DK: Yes, that's not in the same village but another village ... different village.

RE: Different village ... that was safer, it was safer.

RE: [speaks directly to the interpreter] Do you remember being in the refugee camp?

Interpreter: Ah, yes, I think I, yeah, I think I remember a little ... but not in Myanmar ... I was born in Myanmar but I never been there. [laughs]

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RE: You've never been to Myanmar.

Interpreter: I was five when I left the village.

RE: Five when you left the village.

Interpreter: So I know nothing.

RE: You don't remember ... well maybe that's good because it was scary.

Interpreter: Yeah, maybe.

RE: Do you hope someday you could go back to visit?

DK: Yeah ... if I ... yeah I wish I could go back.

RE: ... for a visit?

DK: Yeah for a visit.

RE: It's so expensive though .

RE: [speaks directly to the interpreter] Would you like to visit do you think?

Interpreter: Yeah, I am thinking yes ... I think, yeah, I wanna visit very soon before I get old [laughs].

RE: [to interpreter] You're not old [laughs].

RE: Do you want to tell me a little about your children?

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

Interpreter: She does not understand, like about what? Other questions?

RE: Yeah ... what they are doing now, or what it was like for them to be in this country.

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

DK: Ah, I think it's good to bring my kids here like for education and for the health. So like if they want to know more education, they can have a chance to do it.

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RE: Yes, yes that is true, yes and that's a very good thing. And have they, we're talking about ... have your children done well in school? All four do very well?

(DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

DK: My older son when he got here he was 18 so he didn't get a chance to go to the high school and then a I think, last year he get a GED. [General Equivalency Diploma]

RE: Oh, good, good, oh good, that's good.

DK: This semester he decided to go to Quinsigamond [Community College].

RE: Quinsigamond, yes. What is ... so he got his GED, went to Quinsigamond. What does he study?

DK: Ah ... I can't explain it (everyone laughs and DK and interpreter speak together for some time)

DK: And the youngest son he going to graduate like next month, next month then he was so good at the Quinsigamond too ...

RE: ... great, great

DK: ... for the two years and then he's thinking about transfer to another college.

RE: Another college after that ... [speaks directly to the interpreter] And how about you ... what are you doing? [everyone laughs]

Interpreter: Ahh me ... I'm just waiting around like I don't know what I am going to do so right now I'm drop out of college yeah and then ...

RE: Right now you are in college?

Interpreter: Ah no, I dropped out.

RE: Oh, you dropped out ... ok.

Interpreter: Yeah, the, the I mean, illiterate, I mean like ... I don't know ... I don't know what I am going to do.

RE: You don't know what you're interested in ...

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Interpreter: Yeah.

RE: Sure, sure.

(DK speaks to the interpreter)

Interpreter: That's right.

RE: You could be an interpreter

Interpreter: I wish I could [laughs] .

RE: I think you could ... I don't know ... I don't know enough about how you study that, but I have a friend who is an interpreter for Spanish.

Interpreter: Oh.

RE: ... but I could ask him ... if you were interested I could ask him how do you ... what school do you go to ... to learn the different things. Do you want me to do that?

Interpreter: Ah, [laughs] I don't know. I don't really know, like I'm not sure. I'm thinking about going back to school, but I don't know when but I'm kinda (_____???) like still thinking about it.

RE: You're? Say that again?

Interpreter: Like I'm still thinking about what to do.

RE: You still need to think about it. It is hard to know what to do. I think it is very hard and you are so beautiful with your speech.

Interpreter: Thank you.

RE: Well, I will ask him and I'll write it in a note and if you are interested, fine, and if not, just tear it up [laughs].

Interpreter: Ok, yeah, ok.

RE: So the oldest son is at Quinsigamond and the second son is at Quinsigamond

Interpreter: No, the youngest son .

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RE: ... the youngest.

DK: The second son he already graduated from high school, but he's working now.

Interpreter: He's just like me, he has no idea what he's going to do. We graduate the same year.

RE: Oh, the same year, ok, ok. Yeah it's very hard to know what to do and college costs so much money that you want to know what you wanna do before ...

Interpreter: Yeah, if you know, if you know what you want to do before you started, so it would be easier.

RE: Right, right. Well, I think you have many talents so you should believe in yourself, ok?

Interpreter: Yeah, that's why everybody tell me that.

RE: Good ... and I can see it right away.

DK: Ah, I want my children to go to the good school, but like I didn't have much money and so we both work, I mean me and my husband working and there was ... and there was no ... the money that we got we pay off the bills.

RE: Yeah, it is very expensive, very hard in this country to have enough money for every, everyone ... well not everyone but for many, many people ...

(DK speaks for some time)

DK: If you have a job so you can get like anything you want, right? Like what kind of food you like so you can eat like any food you want ... in my country so like there is no wars and even if ... even if you have like a house you do get enough like food.

RE: So even if ... so even back in Pak ... in Burma even if you have house ... a house

DK: a house....

RE: ... it is still a struggle.

DK: Like ah, like we do farm and we get rice

RE: ... rice....

DK: ... to get money.

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RE: Right, right ... so you can grow some food and maybe sell a little rice but not a lot.

RE: Tell me more about your weaving ... do you love to do this?

DK: Yes.

(DK speaks for some time about this)

DK: When I was back in my village I was weaving and then go to work like to the farm. And then again when I was in refugee camp, there was like no work and is ... is ... is very hard to find job so I was weaving and then I get a little money so I can live there and that changes ...

RE: Well, it is very beautiful ... I love the colors.

DK: [pointing to the garments she is wearing] This one is done by machine, but the top is done by hand.

RE: Ah, isn't that beautiful and I see pretty colors all around the top. Is there anything else you want to tell me?

(DK speaks for quite some time)

DK: Ah, the weaving thing. I love doing the weaving. When I first arrived in America I also do weaving and then go to school at the same time. I love doing weaving and there I would keep doing ... doing it.

RE: It is very beautiful, very beautiful. Before we stop are there ... anything else ... so I would know you better?

(DK speaks for some time)

DK: She ... she wanted to thank you for coming and because she never ... like I say ... never get, like never see anyone ... like a woman like you and she ... she wanted to thank you for that

RE: Well ohh, thank you, thank you. No ... I ah I was a college teacher for a long time ... and I always love learning about the whole world ... and I love meeting people from different parts of the world ... so I am honored that you would feel safe enough to talk to me.

DK: (smiles and goes to get a traditional blouse which DK gives RE as a gift)

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RE: (speaking to the interpreter) So let me thank you also and we could turn off the tape and thank you, thank you ... Sorry, I'll just do stop.

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