

# An international explosion of words

by Rebecca Bell, dean of Community Relations & Special Events

The Midland College (MC) Cogdell Learning Center, located at 201 W. Florida, is more than just an extension of the main MC campus—it also serves as an international hub for learning. On most days, one can find people speaking three to four different languages within the walls of this unassuming building.

One of these languages is Chin, spoken by the Chin people of Burma, or Myanmar as the country was renamed by its military government in 1989. The Chin are found mainly in the Chin Hills of northwest Burma, a terrain that is similar to northern New Mexico and where Southeast Asia begins its ascent to Nepal and the Himalayas.

While this may seem like an idyllic geographic location, times are not so good for the Chin. In fact, due to extreme poverty and political oppression, the U.S. government has granted them political refugee status. During the past 15-20 years, many Chin have fled to North America by way of India, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Approximately five years ago, one such immigrant, Duh Luai, was hired by the Midland HEB store to manage its sushi bar. Luai soon became enamored with Midland, particularly its abundant employment opportunities and strong sense of the Christian faith. (With the exception of the Philippines, the Chin Hills has the highest rate of Christianity in Southeast Asia.) So, at the encouragement of HEB, Luai spread the word about Midland to his fellow Chin, and it wasn't long before others moved to Midland. In 2008, there were less than 60 Chin living in Midland. Today's estimates are over 600.

First Presbyterian Church in Midland has been one of the numerous faith-based organizations that have assisted the Chin's transition to Midland. Jeff McDonald, a member of First Presbyterian and MC's web editor, explained, "The Chin are very hard-working. They are here to pursue the 'American Dream.' After we initially helped them find community resources for living assistance, they took the 'bull by the horns' and started making their own way. They are purchasing vehicles and homes; their children are excelling in our school system; and we even had our first Chin to graduate from MC this past spring!"

Of course, the Chin's transition to life in Midland includes learning the English language, which has come with its own share of obstacles. In 2008, the Midland College English as a Second Language (ESL) program began teaching English to the Chin and soon discovered that English to Chin dictionaries were almost impossible to obtain. After a six-month search for a Chin dictionary, MC Dean of Adult and Developmental Education Lynda Webb obtained a photocopy dictionary for Cogdell's ESL classrooms. These bulky three-ring notebook dictionaries were the only resource available for the Chin learners.

In the fall of 2011, Peggy Wennerlind, a Midland Need to Read instructor at Cogdell, also encountered the Chin learners at the First Baptist Church's ESL class. After an exhaustive Internet search, Wennerlind was able to purchase 12 copies of the late Dr. Rev. David Van Bik's Chin to English dictionary from his son, a minister in Maryland, who, with great difficulty, occasionally brings them out of Myanmar. Then, In January 2012 Wennerlind found additional dictionaries by way of a broker in New York.

Wennerlind explained, "I had to send a check to New York before the books could ever be shipped out of Myanmar. Not only did it take months for these books to be delivered, but recently, when I attempted to get additional copies, they were no longer available."

Wennerlind continued with her quest for dictionaries, and her perseverance led to a retired Danish Lutheran minister named Johannes Lind who lives in a small fishing village in Denmark. Based on Van Bik's dictionary, Lind had produced an online "Danish to English to Chin" dictionary for the Burmese Chin Hakha living in Denmark.

Wennerlind said, "Reverend Lind was so gracious, and he allowed us to take the work he had done and go from there. Reverend Lind sent us the php file of his online dictionary. My son-in-law Chris is a computer engineer and has a website company in Lubbock called Web Plant Media. Chris was able to load the file to his web space. All he had to do was remove the Danish, and then we had an online English to Chin dictionary; however, there were still many key English words missing. For example, there was no English word for 'accident.'"



Peggy Wennerlind (second from left) stands with three of her Burmese Chin students during Midland's Chin National Day celebration in February 2012.

At the time that Wennerlind was attempting to assist her Chin students at Cogdell, Terrell Burgoon, a GED® instructor and computer lab technician at Casa de Amigos in Midland, was also struggling to teach English to the Chin who were enrolled in his GED® classes.

"I contacted Terrell to let him know about the online dictionary," said Wennerlind. "When I told him about the missing English words, Terrell suggested that he and I add those words, so he started with the 'A's' and I started with the 'Zs.' Johannes Lind, a master of many languages and words, joined us in the typing, and we all soon met in the middle. By March 2012, we had added about 30 percent more English words."

In June 2012, audio files were added to the online dictionary, and this fall, the Van Bik English to Chin Hakha Dictionary is available not only at Cogdell and Casa de Amigos, but also all over the world: [www.chin-dictionary.com](http://www.chin-dictionary.com)

Burgoon said, "It's too early to tell if the new online dictionary is making a difference in the Chin's grasp of English because we didn't have classes over the summer; but, judging by the looks on my Chin students' faces, I am expecting a huge increase in their ability to understand, speak and read English."

According to Google Analytics, a free service that generates detailed statistics about visitors to a website, the online dictionary is getting far more "hits" than just by those Chin living in Midland. U.S. educational entities accessing the new online dictionary include the Dallas County Community College District, the Kentucky Department of Education and the San Diego County Department of Education. In addition, foreign educational organizations, such as the Education Department of Western Australia, are also accessing the dictionary. Wennerlind stated that since school started, the use of the dictionary is now up to almost 2,000 people in a 30-day period. Forty percent of those people accessing the site are doing so with mobile devices.

Standing in the Cogdell computer lab, Wennerlind's face lights up with a huge smile as she reflects on this special project: "I can't believe how this happened. So many wonderful people have stepped up to assist. I truly believe it is God-ordained and meant to be!"

## Community Programs Continuing Education

Come Join the Fun on

### Saturday, October 6

THREE classes. ONE day. Pick your favorite!

## 1 Instant Guitar

If you have always wanted to learn how to play the guitar but are never able to find the time for lessons, you will want to mark your calendar. Craig Coffman will be teaching his very popular class, *Instant Guitar for Hopelessly Busy Adults and Teens*.

This ONE-TIME, 2 ½ hour class will teach you the basics about playing chords on the guitar so that you can start having fun right away playing your favorite songs. You don't need to know anything at all about music or the guitar to attend the class. This is designed for the absolute beginner!

**Instant Guitar - 3:00 - 5:30 p.m., \$30**

## 2 Fabulous Faux Walls

Have you ever wanted to have professional looking faux-painted walls, but just couldn't afford to have it done? Fear no more! You can do it yourself and it's not as hard as you think. Linda Coffman will be teaching her very popular class, *Fabulous Faux for Boring Walls*.

The class is taught in two parts! Part 1 covers the basic looks—classic, tuscan, and metallics. Part 2 of the class, takes off from Part 1 and combines her approach with more popular designs such as suede, rustic and modern.

**Fabulous Faux - Part 1 - 9:30 a.m. - 12:00 noon, \$30**  
**Fabulous Faux - Part 2 - 1:00 - 3:30 p.m., \$30**  
**All day Fab Faux (Part 1 & 2), \$50**

## 3 Instant Piano

Your former piano teacher might not approve, but thousands have learned the secret of how to play piano without reading music. Contrary to popular belief, playing by ear is a very easily learned skill based primarily on some simple knowledge about chords and melodies. If you've ever wondered how it's done, join us as Craig Coffman presents the nationally renowned *Instant Piano Workshop*.

The workshop is taught in two separate parts. Part 1 - *Instant Piano for Busy People* - covers the basics of playing the piano using the chord method. Part 2 - *How to Play Piano By Ear* builds on the information taught in the first session and teaches the secrets of how to play without the use of any written music.

**Instant Piano - Part 1 - 8:30 - 11:30 a.m., \$30**  
**How to Play Piano by Ear - Part 2 - 12:15 - 2:45 p.m., \$30**  
**All day Piano (Part 1 & 2), \$50**

**For more information and to register, please call MC Community Programs at 432-685-4518 or visit [www.midland.edu/cpce](http://www.midland.edu/cpce)**

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## The RibSpeaks OUT

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**FREE & Open to the Public!**  
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For more information, contact Rebecca Bell at  
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