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The New Face of North Omaha, 2018: Our Asian/Karen Neighbors, Part 1

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Black Votes Matter
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Black Lives, Black Poverty and Black Votes Matter

The New Face of North Omaha, 2018: Our Asian/Karen Neighbors Part I

On September 21, 2018, I, along with many others, were shocked and dismayed at the disgraceful handling of 500 of our fellow North Omaha neighbors, the Asian ethnic group Karen. These wonderful, loving people, come from an area sandwiched between Thailand and Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. Their plight is tragic because they have been victims of ethnic genocide and warfare in their own country, forced to become refugees in Thailand, in mostly isolated and overcrowded and otherwise horrible conditions. Over 400,000 Karen people are homeless, and with a few exceptions, no access to clean water, electricity, clothing and proper shelter. Most recently they are being forced to leave by the Thailand government. In the last 35 years, more than 500,000 have been resettled in the United States. Which brings us to our neighbors, located throughout the city, but mostly in north Omaha at Yale Court, formerly known as the Tommy Rose Garden Apartments. In part II, I will try to contrast their refugee status with others, who are not refugees of color, and see what we find. In Part I, I am sharing an exclusive discussion that I had on September 27, with one of my university students, who lived in Yale Court, with family, and has friends and family that lived there and were evicted. So, I am sharing Part I, my interview or discussion. In Part II, we will uncover where fault lies in their treatment and provide suggested solutions going forward. The fault is partially the performance of yet another slum lord, but there are other factors that involve agencies designated to help. To protect her privacy, the student's name has been withheld.

Interview with Karen student and Preston Love, Jr.

PRESTON: How old are you? STUDENT: 21 years old. PRESTON: Where were you born? STUDENT: A refugee camp in Thailand. PRESTON: How long have you been in this country? STUDENT: 6 years. PRESTON: Do you hold a green card? STUDENT: Yes.

PRESTON: The turmoil and genocide, people being killed. To escape the problem, people set up refugee camps in Thailand. Then Thailand said too much, go back to your country. But they can't go back. Did you come with family? STUDENT: Yes. PRESTON: Did you leave family there? STUDENT: No. My family was in Pennsylvania. Was working with Pastor Nayklay. They have an Omaha organization here. We came here where there are more Karen people PRESTON: So now you're here. You moved there first? STUDENT: No, we lived at 48th street. It was no different, but at least it only two to three days when you called them to come and fix stuff. PRESTON: But you had friends over there? STUDENT: No, but we have the same culture. PRESTON: So, what do you know about that place? STUDENT: People choose to live there because it was cheap. At first, I thought the owner was nice, because he let the people plant vegetables. But for me, it felt like a refugee camp, just here. Most of the people left because they had complaints and started disliking the place because of the conditions but could not communicate the problems because of the language. PRESTON: Is there an agency that helps pay for the rent? STUDENT: When we first came, the first three months, they paid for us. PRESTON: Not Omaha housing authority? STUDENT: No. They would help find the jobs. People would go to meat companies, so they could get a job there. When they start working, there is no more help. PRESTON: How did you happen to be in the

university. What was your schooling? STUDENT: We don't have good schools. I studied and learned when I came here. It was really hard. In one year, I was able to pick up English, I know some Burmese some Tai and some Korean. I graduated from Benson in Omaha. I got a Buffett scholarship. I am majoring in criminal justice. PRESTON: The landlord said he lived there. I asked him, "You got bed bugs?" He said no. STUDENT: You have to wake up and kill the bed bugs. My dad went and bought the medicine (probably means insecticide), but they would go away for a few weeks and come back. PRESTON: You live with your mom? STUDENT: I live with my mom and dad. We live with our parents, even if you're married.

PRESTON: Were any of the landlords trying to get any sexual favors? STUDENT: I have no idea. They want to live peacefully. That's their culture. If he had, they are not going to say that. They don't want to bring it up. PRESTON: Is there anything else you want to comment on? STUDENT: For the Korean people, I don't know how they vote here. I have to get my citizenship. PRESTON: How many are citizens? STUDENT: Less than 10%. The children, some of them were born here, so they are already citizens. PRESTON: Are you in touch with any who were put out? STUDENT: Yes. My sponsor got a lot of donation stuff. My sister took a lot of pictures. One of the reasons they worry is that we may do something wrong. When we first got here, they said was you have to be scared of the police. So, when we saw the police, we were scared. If the police stop you on the freeway, they will search everything. That's why I am studying criminal justice, because I know that's not right. One of the church members had the offering, and one of the lights was broken and the police stopped him, they searched the car. He had the money for the offering and was taking it to the bank, they saw the money, they took him to the police station. It made me wonder why all this happens. Note: The interview provided much, much, more information, but space does not allow us to provide it all. Tune in next issue for Part II.

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