



**Doh Paw '23**

discovers her strength to overcome obstacles and finds a supportive LEAD community.

# Finding Her Way

Doh Paw '23 wanted to attend college out of state so she could live on campus and escape family responsibilities. She had been translating her parents' conversations with doctors, nurses, and lawyers since the age of 12 and wanted to walk away from that role.

The night she planned to send her deposit in, she couldn't do it. Her family needed her to drive, translate, and write letters. She couldn't abandon them. She felt she was holding herself back when, instead, she sent her deposit to the University of Hartford, a five-minute drive from her family's Hartford apartment.







"Now, I would not go anywhere else," says Doh, a sophomore. "If I transferred, I wouldn't have the opportunities I have at the University of Hartford with LEAD, Helping Hawk Service Scholars, and my professors. I picked it because it was close to home. I was shocked to find how much I like the school. Even though I commute every day, I am still able to experience college life, work, and help my family."

Doh, a member of the LEAD Class of 2023, was born and lived the first eight years of her life in Mae La, a refugee camp in Thailand near the Burma border, along with her parents and four siblings. Her mother never went to school and can't read or write; her father dropped out of school after the second grade. After leaving the refugee camp, her family was resettled in the United States and sent to Georgia, where they lived for about two months. She and her brother were the only non-white students in school, she as a third grader and he as a fourth grader. Her classmates hid her backpack daily; but she followed her teacher like a duck follows its mother.

"I was so scared," she says, her eyes welling up at the memory. "I didn't know how to speak a word of English. She was my only comfort besides my brother." School in the refugee camp was held in a space with a dirt floor, and students returned to their home to eat lunch. The American school was so different; she wished she had had a translator.

Friends from the refugee camp helped them move to Hartford, where there were others who spoke their native Karen language. The Karen are an ethnic group from Burma. Volunteers from the Cathedral of St. Joseph provided food, clothing, and other support to help the family get settled. Her father worked at Dunkin' Donuts and her mother stayed home to care for the family's five children (Doh's youngest sister was born in Georgia). Although classmates at her Hartford elementary school called her

Chinese, it didn't bother her because she made friends with other Karen students.

"In Hartford, I was still getting judged, but I didn't feel alone," she says.

Her life improved even more when she began attending Grace Academy, an independent, interfaith, tuition-free middle school for girls from Hartford. She had friends, played sports, and enjoyed school until, when she was 13, a commercial vehicle rear-ended her father's car and he suffered serious injuries that caused permanent back pain and disability. Not only did the family lose its only source of income; Doh, more fluent in English than her older brother, became the family translator, a role she started in middle school and continues to this day.

"When he got into the car accident, everything just fell apart. There was no income. Everyone was so stressed out. He was in so much pain," Doh says. A month after the accident, her sister was diagnosed with epilepsy and remained in the ICU for a month. A few months later, her mother developed a chronic case of gout, causing her to miss work for weeks at a time.

There was a lawsuit against the company that owned the vehicle involved in her father's accident.

Doh had to miss school to translate for her parents with the law office and hospital staff, sometimes only getting three or four hours of sleep in order to keep up with schoolwork.

"As a young kid, you would never expect to be in a lawyer's office. I couldn't act like it was hard. I had to be like an adult," says Doh, now 20. "I wasn't ready for it. I was angry at my parents for putting me in that position. Going through that, it made me so much more mature; at the same time, it's a terrible memory."

The teachers at Grace Academy supported her even more following her father's accident, which occurred in the second half of seventh grade.

"There's not a day I forget about them," Doh says. "Everything I do I trace back to Grace Academy."



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One teacher, Natalia Piperi, stepped into a maternal role to support her while her parents' focus turned to her sister. Doh missed a great deal of eighth grade and felt overwhelmed; she began losing interest in school—in even going to school, she says. Another teacher told her about an all-girls high school, Mercy High in Middletown, Connecticut.

"I was eager to go to an all-girls school because I wanted to continue that bonding. I loved the sisterhood and how I was treated at Grace Academy," she says.

Others have guided and supported Doh in her journey as well. A woman with whom she volunteers at her church, the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Hartford, took her to tour colleges and helped her with her applications. When she sees Doh struggling, she encourages her that life will get better, God is with her and all the challenges she endures make her stronger.





While attending an event where guests included donors and Grace Academy alumnae, Glandina Morris, assistant director of The Women's Advancement Initiative, told Doh about the LEAD program at the University of Hartford and invited her to apply.

"Going to the University of Hartford, I never thought I'd find myself in a sisterhood," she says. She made friends in the LEAD program quickly. She met confident, brave, smart young women she looks up to and wants to emulate.

"Inside me, I get so scared. I get so nervous you could hear it in my voice. That's something I know that LEAD could help me with—to get up there, give a speech and have confidence in myself," Doh says. "I'm still working on it. ... I want that leadership. I know I can be a leader; I just need someone to help push me, to help me become the strong woman I want to be."

She's internalized the LEAD program's message to take every opportunity that comes along, to take risks and move forward. Her best friend, who is also in the LEAD program, taught her the term "paralegal" and Doh realized that was what she wanted to become. The paralegal in her parents' lawyer's office had been so helpful, kind, and knowledgeable that she wants to do that work, potentially to help immigrants like her family. Many people have supported her and her family through health, financial, and emotional challenges, she says, so she wants to pay it forward.

"Even though I'm still going through a hard time, I feel I can share with others who also need it. We were just strangers to them. They came into our lives and gave us so much," she says, her voice cracking, "I don't have to know you to help you." **W**

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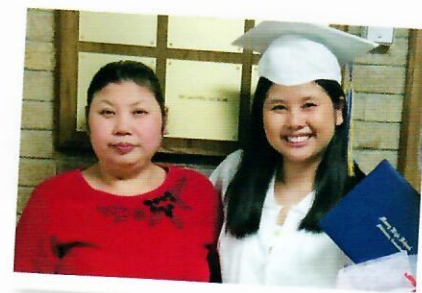
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**Above:** Doh with her mom, Aye Mu, at her high school graduation.  
**Inset:** Doh attending her sister's first communion.