

**In the Heartland**  
**Unfinished Business**

**By Bishop Richard Pates**  
**Bishop of Des Moines**

Stephen and Ester Kim came to the U.S. partly to escape religious and ethnic prejudice in their native Myanmar, formerly known as Burma.

There, their future looked bleak. Here, they could embrace hope and a deep desire to improve their lives. They came with simple goals – obtain work, raise a family, practice their faith and be faithful to the admirable values residing in their hearts – desires that are shared by people everywhere.

Stephen and Ester eventually came to Des Moines. Without the support of family or local contacts, they each worked two jobs to eventually purchase a home, provide a strong Christian education for their children and achieve the American dream.

But their goals were shattered on April 21 when Stephen was mercilessly shot and killed as he waited in the 35<sup>th</sup> block of University Avenue, in the heart of Des Moines, to pick up Ester from work. His three sons were sitting patiently in the back seat.

The tragedy tainted the event of April 30 when the couple's oldest son, Joseph, made his first communion at St. Ambrose Cathedral in downtown Des Moines. The occasion was long anticipated by Stephen and Ester and their two younger children. On the occasion, Joseph asked his mother, "Is Daddy going to be here?"

The lives of Ester and the three boys will be forever changed. There will always be this voice, and the ripple effect extends to the church and school communities, even to the fabric of our

civic wholeness. The Burmese community is without a witness and voice that had been a backbone in their development as a permanent fixture in Des Moines.

The response of the community could not have been more sensitive and compassionate in outreach to the family. The Ethnic Minorities of Burma Advocacy and Resource Center (EMBARC) along with Stephen's former employers stepped forward to provide for physical need and ameliorate emotional pain.

Holy Family School led by Principal Martin Flaherty, where the two older Kim children attend school, addressed the needs of all the school children in the face of this devastating reality nearly impossible for them to comprehend.

Father Ambrose Daniel, associate pastor and director of the immigrant and refugee communities at St. Ambrose Cathedral, reached out to bring spiritual comfort to the Kim family and the Burmese contingent. From personal experience, I know how important religion was to Stephen.

The beautiful funeral service at St. Pius X Church in Urbandale on May 6, allowed the Kim family, friends, and community to grieve deeply. Such rituals and beliefs help us to move on, in this case with an expression of gratitude for the gift of Stephen, and the belief that he now enjoys eternal life.

As a community, however, we need to ask, was this act of violence inevitable? Our state legislature recently enacted legislation that will lead to the greater proliferation of guns. For hunters and those who can handle these weapons responsibly these new laws are in accord with an interpretation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment of our U.S. Constitution.

But has the Legislature finished its work? One of the principal responsibilities of government is to provide security, to enable its citizens to lead peaceful lives. Stephen, like many of our immigrant ancestors, came to the United States at great risk and much deprivation precisely for this opportunity.

Stephen's killing and that of Des Moines Police Sergeant Tony Beminiio and Urbandale Police Officer Justin Martin are the prominent homicides among the 25 in the city of Des Moines in the past 16 months. Guns were the weapons used in most of these cases. They were in the hands of irresponsible users. Lives and families have been shattered as a consequence.

So often, when tragedies take beloved lives, family and friend survivors take action to prevent or limit the likelihood of repetition. Shouldn't we ask our legislators that in securing the Second Amendment they also take steps to ensure that these weapons are exclusively in the hands of responsible citizens?

It is only then that safety and security are more greatly assured and that lives of innocent people continue enriching our society. Isn't our business, and the Legislature's, unfinished?