

welcome

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Refugees from Bhutan find a home in the United States

Dambar Bahadur Bhujel was working as a customs inspector and living in a two-story frame house in his native Bhutan when the death threats began.

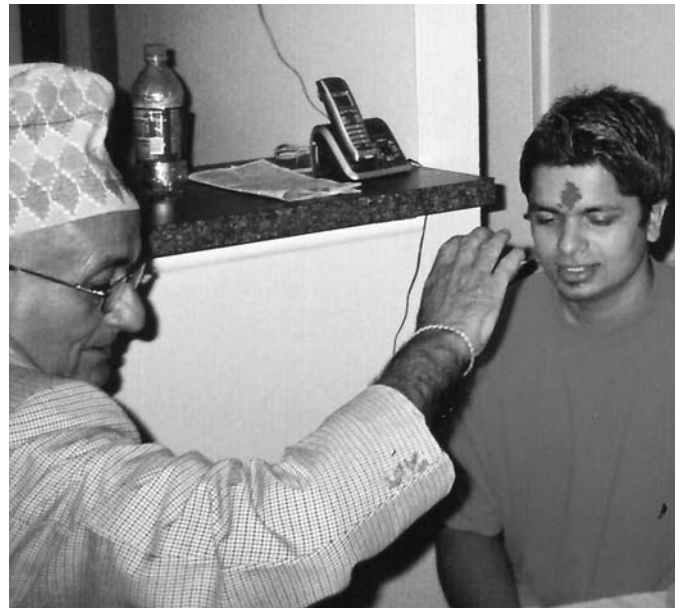
“Government authorities kept coming, saying, ‘Are you still here? Go! Otherwise we’ll put fire on your house.’ They were trying to kill us,” he said. “My daughter, son, wife and I ran away in the nighttime to Nepal.”

Mahdu Nepal was six years old when his family was forced to leave its small farming village in Bhutan. “My grandfather was principal of a Nepali school,” he said. “For teaching the Nepali language, he was put in jail 24 months. After that the police came to our home and threatened us. By force, we came to Nepal.”

Bhujel, Nepal and their families are Lhotsampas – ethnic Nepalis whose ancestors began immigrating to southern Bhutan in the late 1800s. As their numbers grew, the ruling Druk majority feared their position was being threatened and, in the 1980s, the government instituted “Bhutanization,” policies aimed at unifying Bhutan under Druk culture, religion and language.

As the Lhotsampas and smaller ethnic communities escalated their call for a more democratic political system, the Bhutanese government stepped up its persecution. It revoked ethnic Nepalis’ citizenship and civil rights and, in December 1990, forced tens of thousands to flee to refugee camps in eastern Nepal.

Since then, the refugees have been unable to return to Bhutan or to resettle permanently in Nepal. In response, the United States launched a program to



In Louisville, Praja Nepal marks his grandson Mahdu’s forehead with a sign of blessing during the Dussehra festival in October. This popular Hindu festival celebrates the triumph of good over evil. Photo courtesy KRM.

resettle large numbers of Bhutanese from the camps. Bhujel, Nepal and their families are among the more than 450 refugees from Bhutan who had arrived by the end of October for resettlement under Church World Service auspices, with hundreds more due in FY 2009.

Local CWS resettlement affiliates report that their Bhutanese clients are quick to find their way around their new cities and eager to start working.

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“Many of my clients attended college in the refugee camps and have work experience,” said Cori Veit, a caseworker at InterFaith Works of Central New York in Syracuse. “Quite a few were teachers; a young woman was studying to become an ambassador; a man worked as both a professor and engineer. Most are familiar with American culture, and what they don’t know they learn very quickly.”



Dambar Bahadur Bhujel, in Denver.

Many, especially the young adults, speak English fairly well, although Nepal and other Bhutanese said that because they studied British English, the American accent takes getting used to. “When I landed in New York, the language was so difficult,” he said.

“We stayed four or five hours in New York, then came to Louisville. The first week, it was difficult for me to survive. I didn’t understand any English for the first week. Now with Kentucky Refugee Ministries and my cosponsor, I understand. Now I am very happy to be here in the United States.”

Bhujel said the hardest thing about his new life in Denver is trying to find work, noting, “I can do hard work. I’m a quick learner. I’m cooperative and punctual.”

Chris Shull, a Kentucky Refugee Ministries case manager, commented that the young adults “are not afraid to ask questions. They are starting to pay bills and are shopping not only

at the Indian market but at the Super Walmart. I think they are very brave!”

Affiliate staff remarked how community oriented the Bhutanese are. “They are eager to help each other and to meet everybody in the community,” Veit said. “They’re at each others’ apartments and cooking together.”

Mollie Murphy Dale, Associate Director for Refugee Services at

the Minnesota Council of Churches, marveled that her agency’s Bhutanese clients “invited us, along with all their mentors and volunteers and their anchor, to celebrate the Hindu festival of Dussehra with them.

“They’ve only been in this country such a short time,” she said, “but already they are able to command this diverse group of people who have been involved with them so far.”

Melineh Kano, Program Director of Interfaith Refugee & Immigration Ministries in Chicago, described a Bhutanese family’s grace under pressure when the mother fell too ill to continue on to Chicago from New York. She was rushed to a hospital, where doctors found and operated on a dangerously positioned brain tumor.

“For us to be able to receive her in Chicago, we had to arrange for a nursing home to accept her, and that was a huge challenge, since she had no Social Security number and was not yet an Illinois resident,” Kano said. “We negotiated with several until one agreed to take a leap of faith.”

After nearly a month in New York, the woman rejoined her family and is recovering in their presence. “Her family’s calmness has made it easy for us to help with this very complicated case,” Kano said.

Article references “Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal,” available at www.culturalorientation.net. ●

*Nar Maya Humagai makes tea for her family and some guests while her sons Prakash and Shailesh share an apple in the kitchen of their Minneapolis apartment. **Back cover:** Members of the Humagai family. **Photos by Saw Josiah.***



Urban, rural Kentucky churches share cosponsorship

The 200-year-old Ebenezer Presbyterian Church is nestled in the rolling hills of rural Kentucky, surrounded by cattle and sheep pastures and fields of grain and tobacco. First Alliance Church is in urban Louisville, walking distance from an apartment complex with a growing number of Bhutanese refugee residents.

Thanks to the patient networking of staff at Kentucky Refugee Ministries, a Church World Service affiliate, these two congregations have joined forces to cosponsor a Bhutanese family of five.

KRM Assistant Director Elizabeth Kaznak, an ordained Presbyterian minister, has known Ebenezer for many years. Since the 150-member congregation lost its pastor to cancer in January, she has been filling the pulpit.

“I have shared what KRM is and who the refugees are,” she said. Ebenezer’s members, most of them farmers, “have huge hearts. They love God and they want to serve.” They asked how they could help, especially since the church is more than 50 miles from Louisville and therefore outside KRM’s resettlement area.

Kaznak suggested they collect money and items for the soon-to-arrive Tamang family. “So that little country church did a huge drive, raising \$1,250 and an abundance of household goods.”

Meanwhile, KRM’s cosponsorship developer Lee Welsh was reaching



The Tamang family at Ebenezer Presbyterian Church. Photo by Diane Hall.

out to a member of First Alliance Church, a congregation of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, who had become involved with several recently arrived Bhutanese families.

“I heard about her through a cosponsor,” Welsh said. “She didn’t know about KRM or cosponsorship but was attracted to the Bhutanese and trying to help in any way she could. There was a lot of energy and caring there that just needed to be directed. I told her that a church outside Louisville was helping a family with their expenses, but there was a need for a congregational team to provide hands-on services.”

Welsh had met First Alliance’s Pastor Ken Toczysky earlier this year when he had accompanied a

fellow pastor to the airport to meet newly arriving Karen refugees. That facilitated her follow-up with the church, which pulled together a resettlement team and agreed to cosponsor the Tamang family.

About three weeks after the family’s arrival, Kaznak took them to meet Ebenezer’s members. “The church was delighted,” she said. “They had a huge potluck dinner, including a rice dish and lots of fresh fruit and vegetables.”

For their part, the refugees loved the country. Kaznak commented, “It was so peaceful to watch them outside the church, with cattle visible in all directions. In Nepal, cattle are sacred, and they were just amazed that we had so many sacred beasts near the church.” ●

Hospitality, sales classes boost refugee clients' employability

By Irene Wharry

"Housekeeping, may I help you?" This is just one of the many vocabulary words and phrases that refugees learn at hospitality training classes in Phoenix, Arizona.

Phoenix is the destination for almost 10 million visitors each year who come for conventions and to enjoy the weather, golf, nature and other attractions. Hotels are in frequent contact with the employment specialists of the city's four refugee resettlement agencies looking for qualified and motivated employees.

Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest (LSS-SW), the Church World Service affiliate in Phoenix, runs the English Language Training program (ELT) for all refugees residing in Maricopa County, Arizona. The ELT program since its inception in 2006 has served over 950 clients from all four voluntary refugee resettlement agencies in Phoenix.

Towel-folding contest.



Learning U.S. currency.

The ELT program has over 20 classes in 10 different locations offering English classes for beginners to level 3, citizenship preparation classes, and resume writing assistance. The program is productive and the clients are successfully learning English in order to become self-sufficient.

The program had met its goal as an English program, but the clients still needed more help learning detailed vocabulary for employment. From this need a two-week training class, designed to instruct vocabulary and phrases using practical experience, was born.

The classes are taught in English with no translation provided. The students are taught the necessary vocabulary with the help of actual items used by room and laundry attendants on a daily basis. The use of props helps the students correlate the vocabulary word to the task so that they may find employment even though they are not proficient in English.

The client is able to work while continuing to attend ELT classes in their free time. In the words of one successful graduate, Ganga Baral from Bhutan, "We enjoyed the class and it was helpful to us. Learning vocabulary that we will use at work everyday made us feel more confident."

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Seven clients from two different resettlement agencies got jobs within three weeks after completing the first hospitality training class, in August. Three of those clients were hired on the spot without interviews because they had graduated from the hospitality class.

The classes not only produced the hoped for results as far as numbers, but the students also met and made friends with clients from different resettlement agencies and cultures. Seeing the clients interact with each other and become friends made the classes all the more successful.

A sales associate training class recently has been added for those clients interested in working in department stores. The clients learn vocabulary dealing with credit cards, applications, clothing sizes, directions and phrases used during a regular business day.



Learning about work schedules.

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Phoenix, Arizona. Contact her at iwharry@phxinternet.net; phone (602) 248-4400 ext. 116. ●



The first graduating class. All photos by Irene Wharry.

Columbus weathers suspension of most Somali arrivals

For more than seven years, Somali refugee family reunification cases (“P-3s”) constituted 85 percent of the resettlement program at Community Refugee & Immigration Services (CRIS), the Church World Service affiliate in Columbus, Ohio.

Last year (FY 2007), CRIS helped 729 Somali P-3s resettle to Columbus, and had expected to assist 900 more this year. But in April, the agency had to face the sudden loss of most of its caseload when the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) suspended Somali P-3 arrivals in order to institute DNA testing to verify family relationships case by case.

CRIS Director Angela Plummer said she understands and supports the USRAP’s move, but acknowledged that the impact on her agency has been enormous. “I knew we would need to diversify our caseload once Somali refugees in Columbus got all their eligible relatives here – several years from now,” she said. “Instead, the Somali ‘pipeline’ stopped abruptly.”

How has CRIS weathered the loss? For one thing, CWS quickly helped CRIS find a new caseload – primarily Iraqi refugees. That helped CRIS reach a total of 204 arrivals in FY 2008 (Oct. 1, 2007-Sept. 30, 2008), including 162 Somalis who had arrived before April. CRIS’s FY 2007 arrivals totaled 825.

“The good news for us is we are a larger agency with 80 staff and various funding sources,” Plummer said. “The bad news is that the precipitous drop in caseload left at least a \$125,000 hole in the budget.”

A year ago, refugee resettlement was one-third of CRIS’s budget and had 11 staff. Now it’s a smaller percentage and has the equivalent of three full-time paid staff, plus “two wonderful social work interns.”

“We did the very best we could to save staff,” Plummer said. “Five positions were eliminated through attrition and transfers. Three resettlement staff were laid off.”

CRIS’s FY 2009 resettlement goal is 215, including 50 “P-3s” and 165 “free cases” – people who don’t already have family in the United States. As such, they need

more agency and community support than P-3s, who already have families here to help them.

“We can’t manage 500 free case individuals,” Plummer said. “I feel we can comfortably handle 200 to 250 people. We want to do it well. I think we will have a mix of Iraqi and Bhutanese free cases in FY 2009. Especially as we receive new groups, we want to build the reputation that our agency is very helpful.”

CWS encourages its affiliates to enlist faith community involvement with newly resettled refugees. Some congregations help with selected tasks such as English tutoring and job interview preparation. Others commit to “cosponsor” a refugee family, which entails providing logistical and social assistance for three months.

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*New Fellowship American Baptist Church in Columbus hosted a “back to school” event with activities and free school supplies for children. Emma Rollenhagen and other members of Jacob’s Porch Lutheran Church at Ohio State University, cosponsor of the Sanat family from Iraq, attended with Tabarak, 5, and her brother Abdulazeez, 9, who got to try on a visiting firefighter’s gear. **Photo by Beth Romig.***



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“We’ve already had a lot of church involvement,” Plummer said. “In FY 2008, 24 churches significantly helped 28 family and individual cases. But we rarely needed formal cosponsors, because with Somalis, most of the time the family wanted to be the ones to help. Churches took on important, but smaller supplemental roles.”

As CRIS now will receive more free cases than family reunification cases, it is urging local churches and mosques to be cosponsors.

While CRIS has restabilized its refugee resettlement program, there are more challenges ahead.

For the moment, a big weekly task is gone: helping Somali clients complete the extensive Affidavits of Relationship (AORs) required to petition for family members still overseas to rejoin them. Plummer, who also is an immigration attorney, used to spend all day every Thursday reviewing and notarizing AORs.

But now CRIS’s clients have thousands of AORs pending – some awaiting the result of DNA testing and others sitting elsewhere in the long, deliberative application process. Because of the Somali P-3 program’s suspension, all those applications soon will be returned to CRIS.

“It could be three years of AORs that come back to us to redo,” Plummer said. “Just getting hold of people to have them come in will be difficult. It takes several hours to do each AOR.



The Somali Elders of Ohio present Angela Plummer with a community service award, during CRIS’s October board meeting. Photo by Michael McGrew.

This changes people’s lives more than a college application.”

In addition, CRIS recently received a list 17 pages long of people overseas who need to be contacted for DNA testing with help from their U.S. relatives, all CRIS clients. CRIS will get the job done – but just how isn’t immediately apparent, she said.

Plummer also reflected on what the changes of the past months have meant for her personally.

“It’s a loss to move away from familiar territory,” she said. “I understand the Somali community’s issues. I even know the geography of Somalia in detail! And I am glad to have helped such a volume of people resettle and improve their lives over the past seven years.

“At the same time, it’s exciting to work with some new groups and learn about other cultures, like the Bhutanese caste system, and how far is Babylon from Baghdad. And with the smaller number of families

we’re resettling, I am even in tune with ‘so-and-so’s little girl got an A in spelling.’ I am enjoying this chance to slow down and get to know the families.”

A postscript: Of all CWS’s 34 resettlement affiliates, CRIS unquestionably has been the hardest hit by the suspension of the Somali P-3 program. But also affected significantly has been the Minnesota Council of Churches Refugee Services, where Somali family reunification accounted for about 75 percent of the caseload, said Director Rachele King.

MCC Refugee Services is projecting about 200 arrivals in FY 2009, around half of what it originally expected in FY 2008. Some of the lost caseload will be made up by Karen Burmese, Bhutanese and Iraqis coming to resettle near relatives. And because King’s agency, like CRIS, offers a diversity of programs, she was able to avoid laying off any resettlement staff by reallocating them internally. ●



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**Cover story –
Bhutanese refugees
find a home in the
United States**

welcome

Andrew Fuys is new CWS Durable Solutions program officer



Andrew Fuys.

Andrew Fuys joined the CWS/IRP team in August as a program officer for the Durable Solutions for Displaced Persons (DSDP) initiative, which seeks to strengthen the protection of forcibly displaced persons and expand development opportunities to displaced people around the world. “I am excited to be working with CWS on the DSDP initiative,” he said, “and am proud to join an organization that places the rights of migrants, refugees and other forcibly displaced persons at the center of its mission.”

Fuys brings 12 years’ experience working on international development programs with the United Nations, NGOs and community-based organizations. Most recently, he worked for five years with the International Land Coalition, a global network that supports community organizing around land rights. A native New Yorker, he has worked and lived in California and Washington, D.C., and in China, Indonesia and Italy. He is an active advocate of immigrants’ rights and humane immigration reform, including extension to gay and lesbian couples the same rights available to others under U.S. immigration law. “My own family is affected directly, as my partner is from Mexico and we have family members on both sides of the border,” Fuys noted. ●

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