

Update from the Bhutanese Refugees from Nepal

Confusing title... It may lead you to ask, where is our family from exactly? In short, almost all refugees from Bhutan are ethnic Nepalis who were living in Southern Bhutan until they were expelled from their homes about 20 years ago. Since that time they have been living in refugee camps in Northern Nepal. They have been unable to return to Bhutan or settle permanently in Nepal. Starting about three years ago, Madison and several other communities in the US began welcoming them with open arms. Learn more at: www.bhutanese-refugees.com

In mid-January, we learned of our family assignment and began collecting the apartment items that were committed during Advent and Christmas. A few weeks later we welcomed the Subba family to Madison. The preparation for their arrival and furnishing the apartment were a bit challenging due to the weather. We were able to start moving items into the apartment on February 1st which happened to be the same day we started to get record snowfall and high winds. We got a few loads moved before it got too bad and then fortunately with no one out on the 2nd, the roads were nice and clear for moving more items on the 3rd. With their large suburban and trailer, Kathy Wiggins, her husband, and sons made the moving go pretty quickly. With the items moved in, Jessica Flowers, Karen Gussert, and Pete and Erin Chandransu worked up to the very last minute to get it put together. The end result was a very warm and carefully put together home. Thanks once again to all who got their items to the church or made for pick-up at their homes so streamlined. This collaborative effort was very much appreciated by the Outreach board and our family.

The Subbas arrived on the 3rd, getting into the Madison airport shortly after 10pm. Robin Craig and Jessica Flowers were there to meet the family, along with the LSS volunteer coordinator Rebekah, and their case manager Mohammed. It was a very special treat to also get to meet several refugees who had been living in Madison for a few months and were also there to greet the family. One of the young men is studying to be a nursing assistant at MATC and his nephew is a student at West High. They shared stories of a recent organized sledding outing that they had enjoyed immensely. They admitted liking the cold weather because the region of Nepal where the camps were in is very hot. After checking all the paperwork and putting in a description for their lost duffle bag, we left the airport around 11:30pm. Tek, his wife Sancha, and their young daughter Jessica rode with Jessica Flowers. Their niece Suk and nephew Sha rode with Rebekah. The ethnic greeters rode with us and directed us back to their apartment, where they had prepared a meal for the family. It often takes more than 48 hrs to get here without much food along the way because the refugees are not accustomed to our Western types of food. Their typical diet is composed of lots of a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, beans, rice, and fish. This first meal is a very important part of the welcoming and rejuvenating them from their long travels. Using Outreach dedicated funds, we also "furnished" the apartment with enough culturally appropriate food items to hopefully last at least a week.

On the Sunday following their arrival, Jessica stopped by with her young daughter Gwen, who is about the same age as the family's daughter Jessica. Fortunately, the family's bag with all their belongings had arrived by that time. The girls enjoyed playing together while the rest of the family watched intently as Jessica got the TV and digital converter box set-up. The first channel that came into view was a ski jumping competition. Quite a fitting introduction to American television given the magnitude of snow outside. Later that day the Packers victory in the Super Bowl was televised...another monumental occasion for Wisconsinites.

The family arrived at quite an interesting time politically for the state of Wisconsin. The teacher walkouts and protests at the capitol were just starting to take shape. Robin took this as a great opportunity

to get her daughters involved with the family while their school classes were cancelled. Sophie brought her yearbook from West High. There were two young men visiting the family who were also students at West and they all enjoyed looking through the yearbook. The students have started a Nepali club at West. On another visit, Tek and Robin looked at maps of Wisconsin and the US, as Tek has family living in Ohio and Pennsylvania. His brother plans to make a trip to Madison soon to visit them. The family requested to visit the state capitol, so Robin and Sophie took them down one Saturday. Protests at the capitol were in full swing on this day. The visit was combined with a trip to the International Festival at the Overture Center which was enjoyed by all. <10% of refugees from Nepal are Christians, however Robin learned that the Subba family had attended Christian services in Nepal and were interested in attending a Christian church in Madison. Robin invited them to attend services at First Congregational. We welcomed them on March 20th, and have been seeing them in church regularly since.

2011 has been a busy year so far for new refugee arrivals. Within the same three week time frame that our family arrived, 36 other refugees also arrived in Madison. Thus, 75% of the expected arrivals for the year were already here within just a few months! Some of the extra items from our congregation went to these individuals as many did not have a welcoming committee. Many of these individuals still do not have cultural mentors. The LSS staff, case managers, and already settled refugees try to do what they can, but it is really most welcoming to have a personal connection and invitation to do activities with members from the community. Cultural mentors meet once or twice a week with their family/individual. Mentors will have a brief training to go over the mentor guidebook and they will receive an activity workbook with 12 weeks of suggested activities. If you are interested in volunteering, call LSS at 608-250-2671 or speak with First Congregational members Robin Craig or Pat Howarth-Burns about their experiences as mentors.

A Google Group has been set-up, and a support group for volunteers and welcoming committees is also forming and plans to meet monthly. If you would like to find out more, send a message to outreach@firstcongmadison.org

Thanks again for being involved in giving such a wonderful gift of welcoming!

Current mentor- Robin Craig and Outreach members: Jessica Flowers, Karen Gussert, Kathy Wiggins, Cheryl Bentley, Pete and Erin Chandrangsu