

IBRAHIM: Good day and welcome to Our New Neighbors on WCNY Community FM. I'm Ibrahim Mohamed...

MARYNA: ...and I'm Maryna Bagovska. We are happy to again be co-hosting today's show.

IBRAHIM: Our New Neighbors is a monthly show all about how Central New York has become a main area for resettlement of immigrants and refugees from around the world. We went to tell the stories of this new neighbors who are making a great positive impact on our community.

MARYNA:

Our guest today is Monu Chhetri. Monu came to Syracuse in 2011 after spending 19 years in a refugee camp in Nepal. She will tell us more about that journey. But we also need to talk about the amazing work Monu has done as an immigrant who is also deaf. Monu is the founder of Deaf New Americans Advocacy Incorporated, and is doing some incredible work helping fellow deaf refugees in this region.

IBRAHIM: Monu will speak with us today with the help of her interpreter, Zenna Preli, who we also welcome to the show. Monu, thanks so much for being with us today.

MONU: Thank you.

IBRAHIM: I would like to ask, how was the process of coming to the United States?

MONU: Well, I was born in Bhutan and I was a little girl when we had to go to the refugee camp. And then I lived there as a teenager in Nepal in a refugee camp, and eventually wound up moving to America in 2011.

MARYNA: Did you stay there with your entire family or you were by yourself?

MONU: I was in the refugee camp and I lived with my mother and my sister and my father passed away in Bhutan, and I had a brother who passed away as well one year after we got to the refugee camp. And so I lived with three family members, my sister, myself and my mother.

MARYNA: And you spent 19 years of your life in refugee camp in Nepal. How was it? Can you share your experience?

MONU: Well, before I lived in the refugee camp, I had a home in Bhutan and my family lived there. We had property, we had resources. We had, you know, livestock. We were able to grow our food. We had a farm. My family was very self-sufficient. We had a lot of resources. We had money, we had financial stability, and we wanted to be able to carry that on and share and through generations. But then there was a war and all of the houses were burned in a fire, and there was no life left there for us anymore. There was nothing else for us. So we were forced to move to the refugee camp. So most of that's where my language and my culture and my traditions are actually more Nepal, because I was raised in the refugee camp mostly.

MARYNA: And how old were you when you moved to refugee camp?

MONU: I believe I was very young. I was still in diapers. I'm thinking that, you know, I was I was still very, very young.

IBRAHIM: Did you come with the with your family in the refugee camp in Nepal?

MONU: Yes. Yes. We came as a family and the three of us moved to the refugee camp. And we did leave, I did leave a sister in Bhutan, and she's actually still there today. Other family members moved with us to the camp as well.

INRAHIM: I don't know what happened. You mentioned something like a war. What caused the war that time and made you all migrate to and live in refugee camp in Nepal?

MONU: In Bhutan, there was a war that happened because there was an ethnic cleansing going on and the reason for that was the Lhotshampa people. Those were my people. We were in the southern part and then the individuals in the north, they used a different language called Dzongkha. There were those two groups and they wanted to have control over my people. They wanted us to join them and become their language. But we refused to. We already had our own cultures, our own tradition. We were a Nepali and they wanted to eradicate us. So that was what the war was about. And so we were forced to move to Nepal, to the camp because of that war and the situation that happened afterwards.

MARYNA: And can you share a little bit your experience of living in this refugee camp? Was it hard for you? Like, how was the food? I mean, did you have friends or you were isolated from everybody? Was it stressful for you?

MONU: Well, before we went to the refugee camp, we had a very comfortable life. We lived a very normal life. And then when the unrest happened and we were forced to flee for safety, we arrived in the refugee camp. And before the refugee camp was actually set up, we had a number of our people that were actually living on the river's edge and many of them died. There were people that died of starvation every day, and then the UNHCR set up the refugee camp and there were seven camps and, you know, similar to like we have here, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Albany, they were separate from one another, but yet still in the same area. And so we they were they were rows and rows of tents. And that's where we lived. And unfortunately, we lived struggling to survive all the time. Every day. We were trying to figure out what's going to happen tomorrow, how are we going to live. And the reason for that was when the rains came, we would get floods in the camp and sometimes there be fires that one time the fire came and destroyed our entire camp. So we had to reestablish ourselves again. We had to find finances to do that. And many deaf individuals struggled, especially, because you have to realize they didn't have any access to what was going on around them. No way to understand. There was no way to hear the noises around them. Many of them died in their home during the fire because there were no fire alarms. No one could alert them what was going on. And it started from when the fire started in one tent and spread throughout the

camp. And there was no way to alert the deaf individuals. So that was very tragic. That's one huge barrier.

MARYNA: It sounds very scary and traumatizing.

MONU: Yeah, we were very terrified. We were very traumatized by that and also the lack of access. So it's very difficult, you know, to remember that memory now. It still impacts us all.

MARYNA: Yes. And you mentioned that you stayed with your family in tents. Did you have regular beds there or you were sleeping on the ground? Because I cannot imagine spending like 19 years of your life sleeping on the ground.

MONU: Well, we either slept outside during the summer because it was so hot and then that we or we would be in the tents and we would sleep with friends, you know, right next to each other. We didn't have any beds. We just had a mat. There wasn't any cushion of under time. It was just like a light mat of sorts, like you would use at the beach. And we would sleep together during the summer. We'd sleep outside because of the heat, and in the winter, we would sleep in the tents themselves. So yeah, because again, there was no air conditioning, no fans, none of the comforts that we have here. There was no electricity. We had no access to electricity.

IBRAHIM: Yeah, I have experience. I remember when I worked with internally displaced people and what you have just mentioned it, like people living in tents. And one time I remember I came across an old lady because we were doing a survey and when I met with this lady and she told me I haven't eaten like two days and, I was wondering how she didn't have access to food because of corruption and all that. So I understand what you went through those days. And the other question I want to connect in on this is that, how long did it take for the UNHCR to bring you here?

MONU: That while I was there for 19 years. But the process of actually coming here to the United States that I believe my daughter had already been born, she was a few days old when I actually signed the paperwork, and then it was about a year and a half before we actually got here. So by the time we filled out the paperwork to actually come into the United States, it was about 18 months. And that was a long process. They had they did a lot of screenings of the different individuals that were coming over.

MARYNA: Monu, I have another question, too. Were you born deaf?

MONU: Yes, I was. I was born deaf.

IBRAHIM: I don't know, as I was reading your profile and the work you're doing here in Syracuse with your organization, I don't know how you met it because I see so many refugees here finding difficulties in navigating the system. So how was it when you came? When you reach here in Syracuse?

MONU: Well, when I arrived here in Syracuse, I was very isolated. I was isolated for many months. And I started to realize that I have strengths and I have passions, and I want to be able to support the people that I lived with. When I was in the refugee camp. I actually advocated for the people in my refugee camp, and I was absolutely fortunate. I was I was fortunate to go to India to actually get education. And when I got there, that helped me to see the world and created me a passion to serve other deaf people and people with disabilities. And so I worked there. And when I got to the United States, it was totally different. I was completely isolated. I couldn't do anything, and you know family members often really oppress deaf individuals. They look down on them and they say that they can't do anything. Often they just keep them very isolated. That's the history of deafness and deaf people are frequently overlooked. People don't even notice that they exist. Family members keep them isolated.

MARYNA: Yes, and I have to tell you, I'm truly impressed with how strong you are. As very often people, they could just give up and say, that's it, I have a disability. Like people, you know, they look at you and they say, we are sorry and that's it. They just ignore you. Yes, you're as you mentioned, you are totally isolated from society. But for you, it was a challenge. So you made this step and you're not just absolutely a successful woman and you build career, but you are helping to so many people.

IBRAHIM: Who have the same issue.

MARYNA: Yes, absolutely. So you're you inspire, you give hope and support and help. That's amazing. Incredible. Can you please share with us your experience working and helping people like you?

MONU: Well, my experience came from my own journey. When I arrived here in the United States, I faced so many challenges, so many struggles, so many frustrations. And I had to figure out how to get through the system. So here I was, I had these struggles and challenges and I met people in my community were as well. So I knew that I had to roll up my sleeves and get going and so the deaf, we set up a deaf New American group that met informally in my apartment, my apartment in the north side where I lived at that time. We would meet in our living room. I would find deaf individuals and had them come meet to my home. For example, when we were in the refugee camp, the deaf people gathered together. We were used to that. We had a space to gather together and so I knew we wanted to replicate that here in the United States, have a place to talk about our struggles and who we are and what was going on. So I started to notice deaf people here and what they needed, and what was happening to them in society. So I realized that they were isolated and they were left at home alone. So I decided I need to help them. I need to help them break out of that. When I first got here, I didn't think they were any deaf New Americans. I thought they were, you know, they, they just lived with their families. They depended on their families and they had no language access. But then I started to find people and invite them into my living room. And I wanted to provide a communication model so that they could get what it is they needed, the challenges that I had, I decided to meet and help them get through the process.

MARYNA: And do you know approximately how many deaf people today live in Syracuse?

MONU: Well, we believe there's about 50 deaf New Americans in Syracuse, but we're still finding some new people. We're getting referrals from doctor's offices and different places. Different organizations will indicate that someone is here. They found that the deaf New American and then they get referred to me.

IBRAHIM: Can you tell us a little more background of the organization?

MONU: Our organization really started on the streets when we met deaf New Americans. We would bring them in. We would knock on doors. We would collect them together. We became an informal group. And so it wasn't anything really formal until two years ago. We established a not-for-profit. We had been working together for ten years and finally we set up an official organization. We had already been set up. We've been providing these services to these individuals, but now we wanted to have it something official like the American system uses. And so two years ago, we established the Deaf New American Advocacy Corporation. And we have a variety of programs. One thing we have is a place, a safe place for deaf New American women. And what we're doing is during the winter time, the deaf New American women, if they're isolated, we bring them together and we are going to work on some projects: sewing, we want to do some sewing of clothing, have activities so, you know, things that are related to our culture, how we were raised. We want to keep our culture and encourage that. And so that's a safe place for them. And also we want to have a group for CODAS, which is children of deaf adults. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, we're currently providing a tutoring program for them. It's like 5 to 7 or excuse me, 6 to 8. And what we arrive at 5:00, the kids get there at 6, so 6 to 8 that we give tutoring to the children of deaf parents. And we're working in cooperation with Syracuse University. That's in regard to their humanities program. They have to do an engagement project. So we're doing that and they're working with the children. The students are volunteering to do tutoring for the deaf for the CODA children.

MARYNA: That sounds like an absolutely incredible idea. And actually, you're almost answering my next question that I wanted to ask because you mentioned that your daughter, she was born not a long time before you moved here to the U.S.A. So she was raised here. How old is she right now?

MONU: She's 14.

MARYNA: She's 14, so a teenager. That's amazing.

MONU: In December she'll be 15. Wow, next month. Didn't realize how time flies. Went so fast.

MARYNA: She's not deaf, yes? As far as I understood?

MONU: She's hearing, she's a CODA, child of deaf adults. But she is hearing.

MARYNA: So she can communicate with you and she's helping. Is she also, like, involved and assisting you?

MONU: Well, she does sign. Yeah, she does sign. And she does help in many ways.

IBRAHIM: You really doing a great job. And we really appreciate you. I don't know if I have to ask you this or if you want to talk about...do you think you faced challenges when you came up with this organization, are you still facing challenges?

MARYNA: You mentioned that you were frustrated, like upset with the system in the beginning because, yeah, it was hard for you.

MONU: Yeah. When we finally decided to set up our organization, many of our friends said, what on earth are you doing? I thought, well, I want to start an organization. Just like all the American organizations. They said, this can be really hard. I said, okay, well, it's a challenge. I'll deal with it. And so there were many hurdles. Definitely. One of the biggest challenges is the legal process, because we grew up in our culture completely different. We didn't have all these legal loopholes we had to jump through. But American system, heavily, you have to follow the law, which was new for us. So that was one challenge. But I'm really glad that I've learned about that. Our organization receives support, first of all, from the Community Foundation, and they provided us with a coach on a virtual platform, and that has been one of our saving graces. He's really helped us to go through the myriad of processes that need to happen to set up for not for profit. So we get support from the Community Foundation. They also gave us our first big grant. That enabled us to purchase a van and that was really the beginning of our program. That way we have a farm and we are able to now bring deaf New Americans to the farm. Without the van we would not have been able to start our program. On the farm we grow our cultural foods, our cultural vegetables in the summer, wow, that's a hotbed of activity. We grow, we collect vegetables, we've sold them at the farmer's market and we also bring them out to the community. We know where our community is, so we make sure that the vegetables are available there. We understand hunger. We've been there. We want to help our people. And another thing is we also donate like to the blessing box. And it's wonderful to see people growing their own food. And we've had people have great health benefits from being able to be out on the farm. Some individuals with diabetes working on the farm help that to disappear. People that are having mental health challenges from isolation, out on the farm they're not isolated. They can communicate and they can they work hard. They work really hard. But their health problems have gone down and their mental health has gone up with the opportunity to socialize, for people to use their language. We also recently had about 50 individuals from Canada and other parts of the United States, 50 deaf individuals come to our farm so that they could view that and try to figure out how to set up a program that is similar. So we're hoping that our model of our farm and how we set it up, we'll be able to share with other communities so that they can have that same benefit. We're the first deaf New American run farm that we know of.

MARYNA: Monu, thank you so much. I want to tell you that what other people may see as disability, as weakness, as problem, as disease, you turned into your life's mission. So you are transforming lives of so many people so they may feel and actually what you mentioned right now, it sounds incredible. You know, you helping with this farm idea. I do totally agree that it's definitely beneficial for health, for our physical health, for mental health, for like emotional health. People feel happy. So that's great. And it's really, it's inspiring. So thank you so much. And can you tell us maybe like the address or where can we find, like listeners if they want to, maybe just to help, to support, to be more involved in your mission, in your work? That's amazing work that you do for others. How they can contact you?

MONU: You can go to our website which is [www dot Deaf New American dot org](http://www.deafnewamerican.org) (<https://www.deafnewamerican.org/>), or you can send me an email which is [office at Deaf New American dot org](mailto:office@deafnewamerican.org) (office@deafnewamerican.org). So both of those are ways to reach out to us and I'd be happy to meet with anyone and discuss our programs and help them to understand in any way we'd love some support. That would be great.

IBRAHIM: I would like to ask you one more question. What advice would you like to give to your fellow people with disabilities? And also not only people who are going to listen to you today from the deaf community, but also other refugees in Syracuse, New York?

MONU: Well, if they meet a deaf individual or an individual with a disability, be open, invite us in, invite us to a safe space and reach out to us. And we would love to come and meet with people and explain more about our vision. We'd like to be able to support other individuals like I'm doing now. So if you see someone who is deaf or has a disability, don't be afraid. Reach out, you know, and let someone know if they're deaf or have a disability, that they're not alone. They can do whatever they want to do. Hearing people and people with or without disabilities or deaf people are equal. Don't give up. Just keep working hard. You can do whatever you set your mind to.

MARYNA: Yes, I agree. You are just different. You know, if you if we are not the same it makes us stronger, you know, we can be a good team together and support and encourage. Is there anything else you want to share with our listeners?

MONU: Well, I'd like people to know that deaf individuals, we are here and we're the same as you are. We have our own language. And I want you to remember something very important. This sentence. Nothing about us without us. When you make decisions about access, when you make decisions about health care, when you make assumptions related to individuals that are deaf or have disabilities, bring in people that are deaf or have those disabilities, talk to them directly. Help them be a bridge to you so you can understand about their experiences. It's very important that you provide us with the right tools to be able to get through life appropriately. It's very important to talk to the people that you want to serve. If we have the right tools, we can do anything just the same as other people can.

MARYNA: You are unstoppable, Unstoppable. Monu Chhetri and interpreter Zenna Preli. thank you both very much for being with us today and for sharing Monu's story with our listeners.

IBRAHIM: You have been listening to Our New Neighbors on WCNY Community FM. To listen again to this show, and any of our other original local programming, go to WCNY dot org slash Community FM (<http://www.wcny.org/communityfm>). I'm Ibrahim Muhammad, thanks for listening. Monu Chhetri Gentry and Zenna, thank you so much.