# Couple from Bhutan find home, gain citizenship in Lancaster County

**LINDSEY BLEST Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, July 16, 2013 9:02 pm**

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Bishnu and Ganga Dhulal celebrate their U.S. citizenship.

On May 19, 2008, Ganga and Bishnu Dhulal entered the United States for the first time.

The young refugees from Bhutan, married with two children younger than age 4, were searching for safety and freedom from life in a refugee camp in Nepal.

The Dhulals were some of the first of 60,000 refugees the U.S. welcomed - and the very first Bhutanese refugees to be placed in Lancaster County.

Fast forward to June 2013. The Dhulals have lived in Lancaster for almost five years, secured jobs, bought a home and gained U.S. citizenship.

They're the first local Bhutanese refugees to do so.

The Dhulals' journey from their refugee camp to U.S. citizenship was arduous - but ultimately rewarding.

Ganga and Bishnu were born in Bhutan. Ganga's family traces its heritage to the 17th century, when a number of Nepalese were relocated to Bhutan.

In the 1990s, the Bhutanese government started a "cleansing" of more than 50 percent of the Nepalese who had settled in their country.

"They wanted everybody to be one people. They forced us to speak their own language, wear their own clothes, worship their own religion," Ganga said.

Bishnu moved to a refugee camp in Nepal in 1991 at age 15. That year, life hit its lowest point for the 8,500 refugees there.

The native Bhutanese were forced to go into nearby villages to beg for rice. Their houses were huts made of bamboo stakes, with small gaps between each house for walking paths.

Occupants faced issues such as flu, diarrhea, dysentery and a scarcity of water, Bishnu said.

The harsh heat in Nepal was unlike the conditions to which the Bhutanese were accustomed.

Bishnu recalled one day when at least 28 people died because of the heat - most of them children.

"Every day, every day, like every single day, people died," Bishnu said.

The camp, one of several in Nepal, was near the sandy bank of a river. The wind would pick up the sand and blow it into the tents and people's faces.

Bishnu had to clean her face before she could open her eyes in the morning.

After eight months of dire circumstances, the camp was moved away from the river.

"Life started to get better then," Bishnu said.

Ganga entered the camp in 1992 as a 22-year-old. He had just finished his high school education, and because he had good grades, he was eligible for a scholarship to study at a three-year program in India.

In 1998, Ganga and Bishnu met and were married through their cultural method of arrangement.

Because of Ganga's Nepalese heritage, they were able to move out of the camp and blend in with the people in Katmandu, the capital of Nepal.

Both worked as English teachers, having learned some English in their Bhutanese schooling - but it was illegal.

"Only the top of the institute knew that we were refugees. The rest of the people we would have to lie (to)," Bishnu said.

After a few years of working in Katmandu, word of the chance to escape Nepal traveled through the camps.

Ganga and Bishnu moved back to their original camp with hopes of being able to leave the country.

Those who wanted to leave had to fill out their forms in secret. Members of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, who had been administering the refugee camps, assigned eligible refugees their dates of departure.

Coming to the U.S. was "the best solution," Ganga said, although he did not understand where in the U.S. they were headed.

"Somebody said we were going to 'Pa.,'" Ganga said. "We didn't know what 'Pa.' was."

In May 2008, after much anticipation, the Dhulals boarded a plane for the U.S. with their 3-year-old daughter and 18-month-old son. They said they felt excitement rather than fear.

They recall the strange new things they encountered during their first days in the U.S., as they were introduced to seat belts, car seats, refrigerators and gas stoves.

Ganga's parents joined them in Lancaster on July 1 of that year. On July 2, Ganga started working at Dart in Leola.

Bishnu then completed her medical assistant training and began working as a nurse with Southeast Lancaster Medical Center at Brightside.

The couple first applied for citizenship in February. On May 31, both had their interviews, which included a series of civic and history questions.

"We memorized all of them," Ganga said.

They were nervous, but both Ganga and Bishnu passed their tests and were invited to final certificate ceremonies, Ganga on June 6 and Bishnu on June 21.

"It's really exciting because I never had a citizenship before in any countries," Bishnu said.

In Bhutan, citizenship cards are distributed to 16-year-olds - and Bishnu was forced to leave the country at age 15.

Their citizenship is another sign of the new life they have found in America.

"We are happy here," Ganga said. "We never hide our identity. We say we are Bhutanese."