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Border Mail, Albury-Wodonga

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 Welcoming
Australia

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Arms opened for refugees 10 years ago

Bhutanese arrival anniversary

**ELLEN
EBSARY**
News Focus



ON ONE wall of Tulshi Guragai's living room, there are certificates from La Trobe University. On the other are paintings of Hindu deities.

Just as two cultures have equal pride of place in this Wodonga home, so too do they in Mr Guragai's heart.

His past and his future – a young boy displaced from his home, now a professional and father of two – have merged to form his identity.

Mr Guragai is grateful to call Albury-Wodonga home, a sentiment shared by 1500 Bhutanese people living here – who are celebrating 10 years of settlement this month.

That decade has very quickly flown by, but Mr Guragai remembers his 20 years in a Nepalese refugee camp and early life in Bhutan like it was yesterday.

“Our ethnic group migrated from Nepal to Bhutan many generations ago. My

grandfather was born in Bhutan, and so were my father and I,” he said.

“We lived there for many generations in harmony – our language, Nepali, was taught with Dzongkha – but in the 1980s there was a government policy that discriminated against minorities.

“There was ethnic cleansing that drove out more than 100,000 people.”

Nepali-speaking Bhutanese were considered a threat to Bhutan's identity, and Mr Guragai, his parents and six siblings fled their home in fear of persecution.

“I was four and I remember being in this big truck with all our family members in the middle of the night and being curious why my parents were so upset,” he said.

“The army killed a lot of prisoners, and we heard stories from other people in the refugee camps about

prisoners sleeping in pools of urine and having horrible conditions.

“Luckily my family was spared.”

Mr Guragai said conditions were harsh in the camp – with 500 grams of rice allocated for a fortnight – but improved when the UNHCR became involved.

“We saw people dying almost every day from preventable diseases like diarrhoea,” he said.

“There was a big storm that came once and we were trying to hold onto the plastic, but our roof blew away.

“Life started to get a bit better in the 1990s. Those who were educated started teaching and we had bamboo toilets close to our house and made a small veggie garden.

“You didn't know where your life was heading, but you didn't give up and hoped life would get better.”

Mr Guragai's family first



learned they could be resettled in Australia in 2005 but did not arrive in Albury until January, 2009.

“Our parents were worried because they didn’t have any skills, but we thought we would get a country and even though it would be a struggle, we could work together like we did at the camp,” he said.

A NEW BEGINNING

Coming to Australia was the first time the Guragai family had been on a plane.

It was too for Teju Chouhan, who was among the first group of 22 Bhutanese refugees to arrive in Albury, on October 8, 2008.

Eight countries had committed to resettling the majority of refugees living in Nepalese camps and in Australia, they would be sent across the country, with large groups going to Adelaide and Tasmania.

The Border was among the more regional areas, and the Multicultural Council of Wagga Wagga and St Vincent de Paul Society were funded by the Department of Social Services to co-ordinate resettlement.

Mr Chouhan said those first few months in Australia were challenging.

“You didn’t have a bank account in the camp, you didn’t have welfare systems, you didn’t have to drive – owning a car was a luxury back home, but it’s a necessity here,” he said.

“There was a lot to take in.”

After attending a Federation of Ethnic Communities Council conference in Shepparton the year after he

arrived, the former journalist began conversations about a local group.

“We had a round-table meeting in Wodonga with representation from local councils and service providers, and had strong backing,” Mr Chouhan said.

“This culminated with the election of the inaugural board, which I was proud

to be the inaugural chair of in 2014.”

The Albury-Wodonga Ethnic Communities Council, located at Gateway Health Wodonga, has grown from strength to strength.

This week the council was granted just under \$380,000 over three years by the federal government for further community activities. The Albury Wodonga Volunteer Resource Bureau also received funding.

Mr Chouhan said in all its activities, AWECC

wanted to be respectful of Australia’s first peoples, and was also eager to learn from long-standing migrant communities.

“We’re working closely with the German Austrian Australian Club,” he said.

“There’s a long history of migration here and we can learn so much from the experiences of Bonegilla.

“Albury-Wodonga is often spoken about as being a model for settlement and this has not happened because of a few individuals –



JOINED: The annual 'Walk Together' celebrates multiculturalism and last Saturday, the event celebrated 10 years of Bhutanese settlement on the Border. **Picture: MARK JESSER**

collectively as a community we have achieved this."

Refugees have run festivals, fundraised (including \$3500 for fire-affected communities in 2009), established a radio program and driven projects including a community garden on the banks of the Murray that is now shared with other migrant groups including the African and Indian communities.

No settlement could be perfect, and there are still

challenges to work through.

Adapting to Australian life is more difficult for the elderly, and Tika Poudyel founded a local branch of the Bhutanese Australian Community Support Group last year in part to assist them.

"We have been doing monthly activities targeting the elderly, so they aren't isolated," he said.

"Many of them have limited or no English at all, health issues and trauma. They left everything behind

in Bhutan."

The number of Bhutanese people on the Border has grown steadily over the years, with the majority coming from 2010 onwards.

The 2016 Census identified in both Indi and Farrer, Nepali is the fourth most spoken language other than English. Nationally, 5950 people were recorded as being born in Bhutan compared to 63 in 2011.



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TRUE TO CULTURE

Speaking Nepali at home is one of the ways the Guragai family honour their cultural roots.

Mr Guragai and his wife Anu Paudel are raising three-year-old Adrina and two-year-old Liam with exposure to their heritage, while embracing Australian life. “It can be difficult for people to catch my name - I tell them it’s ‘Tool’ as in tools and ‘She’ - but it will be much easier for Liam,” he said.

“We’re not as religious as my parents, and it’s up to our kids to decide how they want to live.

“We hope to go back to

visit Bhutan, but we can’t at the moment.”

Mr Guragai graduated with his Master of Social Work from La Trobe Albury-Wodonga in 2014 and is currently working with Wellways.

“Our main work is supporting people with complex mental health challenges,” he said.

“When I talk with my clients, I say ‘You don’t need too many things to be happy, and if today is not a good day, tomorrow might be better’.

“For 20 years we went through a miserable time and now we have come here and have a new life.

“We can’t thank the local community enough and all the people who assisted us to build our life and we strive everyday to contribute something back.”

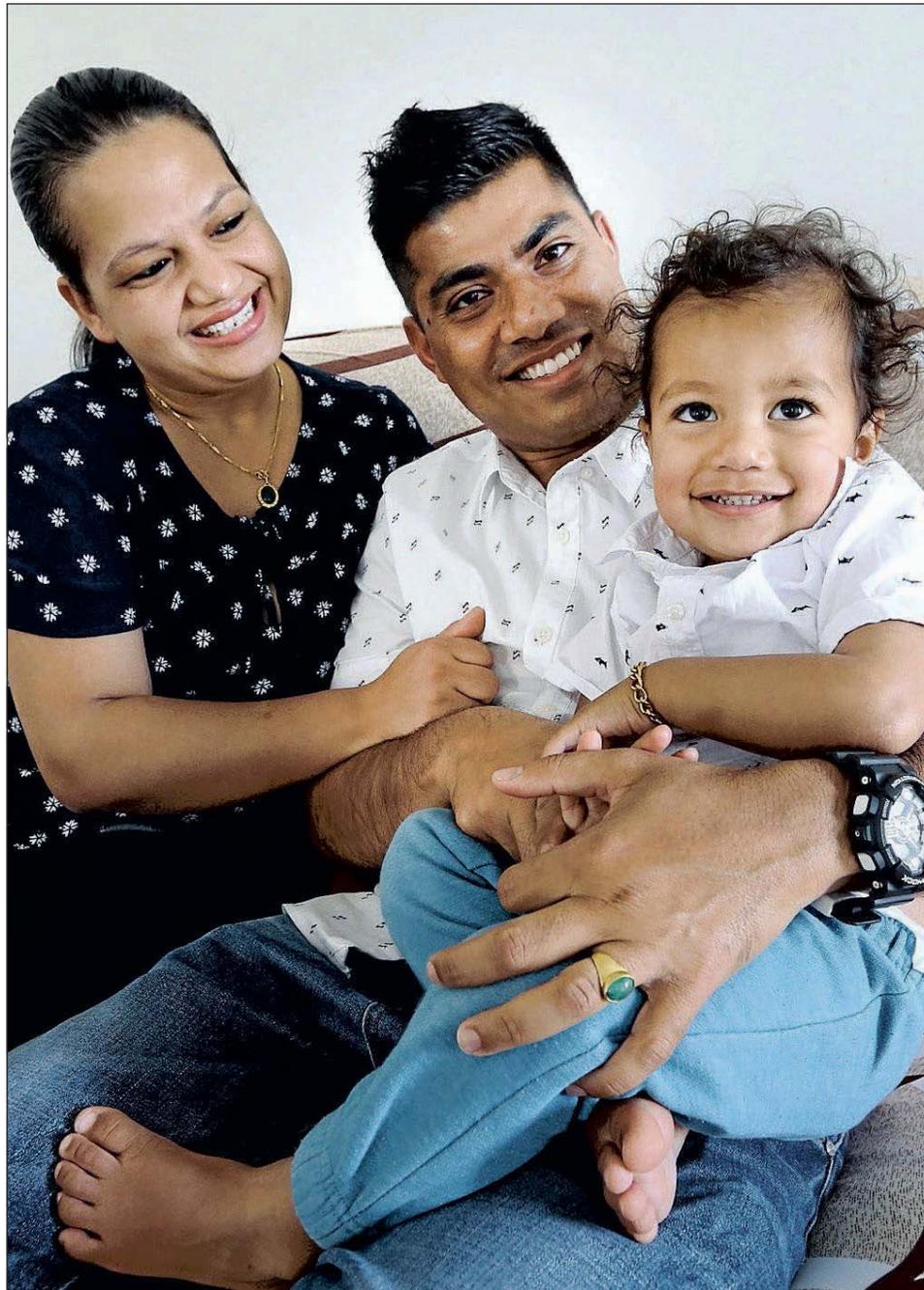


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FAMILY: Anu Paudel, her husband Tulshi Guragai, and their son Liam Guragai, 2, live in Wodonga and celebrate both their cultures at home. **Picture:** KYLIE ESLER