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How Bhutanese refugee family achieved home ownership within seven years of arrival

Suman Chhetri as told to Rosamund Burton

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I came with my family to Australia seven years ago and now we own our own home.

I am 34 years old and was born in southern Bhutan. My family were part of the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese community, known as Lhotshampas. My father was a businessman and we had a farm.

Perceiving the Nepalese culture and language as a threat to the unity of Bhutan, in the 1980s the government decreed that all citizens wear Bhutan national dress and speak the national language. My father took part in demonstrations against the new laws and advocated for human rights and democracy. Often the army came to our house to try to arrest him, so he left the country. One night seven months later, in 1991, my mother, grandfather, sisters, brother and I walked across the border to India. I was nine.

I spent 19 years in a refugee camp in Nepal. Initially there wasn't enough food, we walked 20 minutes to get water from the river, and everyday people were dying of malaria, cholera or typhoid. More than 100,000 Lhotshampas left Bhutan in the 1990s, and most went to refugee camps in Nepal.

The resettlement process started in 2008. My wife, Goma, and I came with my sister to Australia in 2010. My parents, brother and grandfather, who died a year after he arrived, joined us six months later.

We were brought from Sydney Airport to a serviced apartment in Blacktown. It had a washing machine, a microwave and a toaster, but we didn't know how to use them. There were some vegetables in the fridge, and western food we'd never seen before. We didn't open a tin of sardines for two weeks, because we had no idea what was inside it. A settlement organisation helped us set up bank accounts and register with Centrelink and Medicare. The other Bhutanese families already settled in Sydney assisted us. A boy I taught in the camp stayed with us for several days and helped me buy a mobile phone.

Then we moved into a unit. The rent was \$800 a fortnight, including water and electricity. We each received \$424 from Centrelink a fortnight, so between three of us we had \$472 to live on. It was hard to manage because of the cost of living. We walked rather than taking public transport, so we could save \$1.50.

I began doing programs with STARTTS, a service for trauma survivors and refugees. Then I facilitated programs for newly arrived refugees.

In 2012, I started working 15 hours a week, earning \$15 an hour, as a cleaner, while I studied civil construction at TAFE. As a refugee, I had acquired a Bachelor of Science, but I didn't know the pathways to work were so different here. When I completed my advanced diploma in civil construction I couldn't get a job, because everyone asked for local experience. So, I started an engineering degree, but then heard

it was hard to get an engineering job, so switched course, and did a three-year nursing degree at the University of Western Sydney.

In 2013, Goma began working as a childcare educator and I started working for Western Sydney Local Health as a community mental health nurse in 2016. My brother had found work soon after he arrived. We were paying \$475 a week for a four-bedroom house, and now we thought about buying our own place.

We bought our four-bedroom house in January 2017. The house was more than \$700,000. My wife and my savings were pooled with my brother's to put down a 10 per cent deposit. Goma and I live here with our two children, aged 6 and 2, my parents and brother. The mortgage is more than \$3000 a month, but three of us work, and my parents get a pension, so also contribute.

We don't spend much on takeaway food and we cook and eat at home. We go out once or maybe twice a month. When we take the children out we try to do things that don't cost much money.

My parents lost everything in Bhutan, and it makes them proud to have a house. We are happy and have a sense of belonging here.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/money/how-bhutanese-refugee-family-achieved-home-ownership-within-seven-years-of-arrival-20171204-gzyn98.html>

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