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photos also provided by

INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE



**OPPOSITE PAGE** Hansal Monger, grandson of B.B.Rai. Also Bhutanese. Parents and adult children are sometimes sent to different countries because not all can be accommodated but this family was able to stay together. **TOP** Asha Monger, Hansal's mother & B.B.'s daughter. **TOP RIGHT** Japhet Sinzumusi & Christine Nitwibuke, Burundian couple from Tanzania. They met and married after arriving in Abilene.

**P**icture yourself walking. Walking for days, probably weeks, carrying everything you own and trying to feed and protect your family until you can reach a place of safety. That picture may give you a small snapshot of the experience of millions of people who are forced to leave their homes in order to save their lives due to issues of race, religion, nationality and political persecution. One by one, family by family, some of those millions find a home in Abilene thanks to the work of the International Rescue Committee's local staff and volunteers.

The first annual Harm to Home Walk, held in June of 2010, celebrated the accomplishments of IRC in settling refugees here in Abilene with homes, jobs and support networks. A walk format for the event seemed appropriate because so many refugees walk so many miles to reach a place of safety. Both refugees and Abilene community members participated.

The Walk began in the First Baptist Church parking lot where participants had the opportunity to make a donation and received a bottle of water and a map of the activities. Stations included traditional dance as well as music and art from around the world. Love and Care Ministries hosted ethnic foods provided by local caterers and restaurants. Abilene residents from Bhutan demonstrated their national dances at Vera Minter Memorial Park. Cockerell Gallery displayed Faces of Refugees, an exhibit of photographic portraits by Greg Kendall Ball. Refugees also told their stories at the First Baptist Church, many surrounded by Abilene church members and volunteers there to offer support.

Santa Kami told his story that day. "There was revolution in Bhutan," he says, "between the government of Bhutan and the Nepalese origin people. The government did not allow the



**BELOW (L-R)** Lazare Boulingui-Goma, Congo Brazzaville. M. B. Rai, one of the first Bhutanese refugees to arrive in the US, along with his wife and two children. Prakash Acharya, Bhutanese from Nepal. The local IRC office has helped more than 1,000 refugees settle in Abilene since 2003. Daina Jurika-Owen joined the IRC staff shortly after the office opened and helped welcome the first group of refugees from Liberia who arrived in January of 2004. That group was quickly followed in February by refugees from Liberia, Congo-Brazzaville, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Colombia. Daina is originally from Latvia and understands the challenges of a drastic change in culture and location.

people to stay in Bhutan so we fled to Nepal. “

Santa and his family arrived in Nepal when he was sixteen years old. They found safety but difficult living conditions. “Life in the refugee camp was very miserable,” Santa says. “House is bamboo. Roof is thatch. No electricity. No toilet.”

At the beginning of 2011 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated 10.4 million people were refugees needing assistance. Add to that number an additional 4.7 million people already living in sixty camps overseen by the United Nations and the figures become overwhelming.

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Refugees have come to Abilene from Burundi, Cameroon, Rwanda, Bhutan, Iraq, Colombia, Cuba and many other countries. Some move on to larger cities but many choose to make their homes here.

Daina says, “Santa has accomplished quite a few things since he arrived in the US. He has



only been here a short time but he and his family are well adjusted to American life. It's not easy to make such a drastic change."

During the eighteen years Santa and his family lived as refugees in Nepal he became a teacher of health and environment to students up to grade ten. While there he married Tara, who worked as a seamstress. Their two daughters Srizana, now sixteen, and Sabina, now twelve, were born there.

Talks went on between the Bhutanese government and the Nepalese, "but our problem was not solved," Santa says. "Several countries like the United States of America, Denmark, the Netherlands, Canada and New Zealand were willing to take refugees who were in the camps. I was the first person to choose America. I chose America because I heard in the paper that it is a big country where work is available, different kinds of work, and there is freedom."

Santa says of Dr. Bob Lockhart, an IRC volunteer, he says, "He is not like a volunteer. He is like my parents. Last year, he took me everywhere, to the grocery store, to the health department. He even took Tara to work on Sundays."

The local office of IRC is one of twenty-two offices across the nation, headquartered in New York City. In 1933, Albert Einstein suggested the initiation of an American branch of the European-based International Relief Association (IRA) to assist Germans suffering under Hitler. The organization works today in over forty countries to provide needed medical care, clean water, and other valuable assistance in addition to helping refugees find long-term solutions to their loss of home.

The President, in conjunction with Congress, determines how many refugees can enter the United States each year. For 2011 that cap is 80,000. That number is broken down into various totals per geographic area. An additional 3,000



refugees can be added to the cap of a particular area if needed and unused admissions can also be transferred to other areas.

Kathy Clark Frayje came to Abilene by way of Australia, where she underwent a Masters of International Relations through a Rotary World Peace Fellowship at the University of Queensland. Prior to coming, she worked with the Red Cross, both in America and in Sweden. She is closer to her origins now, though, having been born in Oklahoma City. She leads the local IRC staff of thirteen and a cadre of around fifty volunteers.

"The Abilene community is very supportive," Kathy says. "That is vital in helping refugees overcome the hurdles of adjusting to a new culture."





Santa and his family have lived in the U.S. for only two years but they are comfortable with American life. Santa and Tara both work at Abilene Regional Medical Center. Srijana is a sophomore at Cooper High School and Sabina attends Ward Elementary. Both girls participated in the dancing events at the Harm to Home walk.

They have benefitted from the English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at Southern Hills Church of Christ. "Mike Schweikhard was my ESL teacher," says Santa, "and he taught me how to drive." The family now owns a car, which Tara is

also learning to drive and Srijana hopes to get her license soon after instruction from her dad.

The local IRC office continues to expand its services. New Civics classes, provided by a grant from U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services are being offered to help prepare refugees for the citizenship test. Classes are free and are hosted by Mission Abilene.

Supplemental Services, for those who have been in Abilene no more than three years, focus on life skills such as parenting, financial literacy, home safety & maintenance, health & nutrition

and accessing community resources. Also, Daina Jurika-Owen has recently become an accredited representative for Immigration Services and can assist all legal immigrants with filing immigration forms for a nominal fee.

Santa and Tara acknowledge the drastic changes in their lives, but they have a positive outlook. "We are happy," they both say about their jobs and their situation. "IRC managed everything for us. IRC is a very helpful organization."

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