

ILLUMINATING

the Lives of Refugees Through Simple Acts of Kindness



Deepa Khanal (left) and Hemanta Adhikari

BY TERRA OSTERLING

Deepa Khanal, BS '21, was a high school student and participant in the Upward Bound program waiting for the bus at the UB South Campus train station when she spotted Hemanta Adhikari, BS '20. She knew Adhikari by sight from social media groups as a member of the local Nepalese community, so she approached to introduce herself. The two young women immediately bonded over academic interests and similar life goals, which included aspiring to careers in health care.

Emigrating from Nepal as children, choosing University at Buffalo for their education and pursuing paths in health care is not all the women have in common. Because both had lived in refugee camps before resettling in Western New York along with their families more than a decade ago, giving back is another value they have in common.

Parallel Paths to Care

Khanal's early experience with nurses was up close and personal shortly after arriving in the U.S. — her mother spent three months in the hospital following a car accident. During that time, she saw how nurses spend much of their time at their patients' bedsides, reassuring them and advocating for them.

"Nurses get to care for patients of all different cultures and backgrounds on their worst and best days, at their most vulnerable and during chronic illness, all to meet their needs holistically and restore functionality," Khanal said. "Seeing that inspired me."

A 2021 graduate of UB's traditional bachelor of science in nursing program, Khanal's goals include becoming a nurse practitioner and eventually opening her own clinic, perhaps in Nepal.

Her friend, Hemanta Adhikari, who is currently studying for the MCAT and aspires to be a cardiac surgeon, had a similar experience a year after her family settled in New York. Her father required surgery at Roswell Park and, at 11 years old, she shadowed his surgeon for six hours.

The women see endless opportunities in their chosen fields and say they are thriving now partly because they overcame challenging life situations. They are keenly aware that they were able to do so because of the sacrifices made by their parents, and because of the donations made by people across the world to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Empathy from Experience

When news broke last August of a major explosion at the port of Beirut, Lebanon, devastating an already vulnerable community of Syrian refugees, the women knew they had to do something.

"Ever since the pandemic started last year, we have been looking for ways to help people and give back," Khanal said.

They understand what it means to lack necessities and had already been helping in their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic by delivering groceries and teaching others about masking and social distancing.

The port explosion and subsequent fire in Beirut triggered something else for the women — memories of what a massive fire would mean in a refugee camp.

Their homes in the refugee camps of Nepal were built close together, lacked electricity, and were constructed with bamboo and plastic. Fires were a constant risk as residents used kerosene lamps and firepits for cooking. Major fires swept some camps, but smaller fires could also devastate communities for months, leaving people without adequate food and resources.

"All of us there were entirely dependent on the United Nations and the people who supported us by donating, so the explosion in Beirut brought back those memories," Khanal said. "We know what it is like to live in that situation, to have an event like that happen, and we knew there were not many resources to begin with."

The women quickly decided that since it was summer and they could not go anywhere due to the pandemic, that they would do something productive and raise money to donate to relief efforts for the Syrian refugees impacted by the blast in Beirut.

"Hemanta said to me, 'Let's do it! What are we waiting for?'" Khanal said.

"We wanted to make a difference with

our act of kindness, it's the least we could do because we know where they come from and what it's like," Adhikari added.

The women reached out to the GoFundMe platform for assistance in setting up the fundraiser so that the donations would pass directly to the UNHCR. Then it was up to them to get the word out, so they leveraged their networks of mentors, professors and friends.

"It amazed us how people who we were not personally connected to were reaching out, sharing our posts, and donating," Adhikari said.

Their fundraiser collected \$2,255 over four months in 2020. The funds went toward the UNHCR's efforts to provide humanitarian necessities of food, clothing, masks, shelter and

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medical care to the Syrian refugees who had already been displaced by civil war in their own country, were living through the COVID-19 pandemic and now faced further hardship due to the blast in Beirut.

Working as a team holds special meaning for Khanal and Adhikari. The women have been role models for each other throughout their time at University at Buffalo and the simultaneous challenges of providing support within their own families. They remember how they have been helped and remind each other that there is always light at the end of the tunnel. And they want others to be as inspired to help as they have been.

"That light always shines brighter when we start lending our hands to those in need, those who are in an urgent humanitarian crisis," Khanal said. "Once we start helping each other, we become that beacon of light in their darkest time."