

The making of an American family

*One man's
dedication made all
the difference for
Bhutanese refugees
adapting to
U.S. culture*

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Steve Sieg, a middle school science teacher, looked down at his mobile phone. It was Thanksgiving 2009, and it was late.

"What is Black Friday? Explain this," he remembered the text message reading.

The message was from a member of the Chhetri family (pronounced "Cheh-tree"). They had been guests at his Northeast Portland home earlier that day, joining his family in the backyard for what would be the first of many holidays spent together.

As Steve looked at his phone, he thought the Chhetris must have gone home, turned on their TV and seen commercials for the many Black Friday sales the following day.

"They thought, in their minds, that it was a holiday that was very special, like Christmas," he reminisced.

He promptly texted back, explaining Black Friday is just a bunch of hype – it wasn't like the Thanksgiving holiday they celebrated earlier that evening.

But to the Chhetris, who had lived for 16 years in a refugee camp before moving to Portland one year earlier, Black Friday was an American tradition. They wanted to embrace it.

Before they were evicted from their country in 1991, Ram and Purni Chhetri were vegetable farmers, growing pumpkins, beans and chilies in a rural area of the Sarpang district of southern Bhutan, a small country of less than 1 million people, nestled between India and China.

"I knew very little about Bhutan," Steve said. "It was like this shining place to go and meditate that travel magazines built up."

It wasn't until he met the Chhetris that he learned about Bhutan's ethnic cleansing in the 1990s, when more



Sumitra Chhetri when she was living in a refugee camp in Nepal.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CHHETRI FAMILY

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