

# The Asian Reporter

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**MY TURN**

■ **Dmae Roberts**



## Advocate & activist Som Nath Subedi

Often on social media one can follow a person's life story without actually having met them. A good example of this is Som Nath Subedi, who wrote a post on Facebook last year mentioning he had received negative comments about his opinion piece in *The Seattle Times* that illustrated why America needs its immigrant and refugee communities.

Som wrote about his experience as a Nepali-speaking Bhutanese who was forcefully evicted from Bhutan more than 25 years ago, then made a case in support of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), also known as the DREAM Act. The act protects Dreamers, undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States by their parents when they were children.



Som Nath Subedi. (Photo/Tiago Denczuk)

Som arrived in the U.S. with little more than "\$10 and a plastic bag" and rose to become a community organizer and vital member of Portland's immigrant and refugee community. I recently interviewed Som and asked him about his life in America.

Som said when he was a child, the King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, declared a policy of "one nation, one people." Despite promoting Bhutan as "the last Shangri-La," the king expelled more than one-sixth of the Nepali-Bhutanese people, who simply wanted to keep their language and culture, starting in 1991. Som does not remember his exact age, but he knows he was in elementary school when his family was forced out of Bhutan with no time "to plan or to pack." "Every Nepali-speaking Bhutanese person had to leave immediately," he said.

While growing into adulthood at a refugee camp in Nepal, Som became a refugee advocate for the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese. "I fought to repatriate myself and the other Bhutanese refugees back to Bhutan. I organized protests, rallies, and sit-ins. I also wrote articles to pressure Bhutan, India, and Nepal to solve their problems." But Som said all the efforts failed.

When his family arrived in Portland in 2008 as refugees, he found serious issues affecting the Bhutanese community, where basic living needs were not being met.

"I remember forming a youth organization in August of 2009 to mobilize the manpower and resources needed for the community," Som said about the Group of Bhutanese Youth in Oregon.

After that experience, Som worked for a local

organization as a case manager helping other immigrants and refugees until 2015. He is no longer a case manager, but he is still a volunteer advocate and activist for the Bhutanese community in Portland. He also is a volunteer delegate for Oregon in the Refugee Congress, a national lobbying and activist group that has delegates in each state to help advocate for their local communities.

Som said he was inspired to write the opinion piece in *The Seattle Times* because "many people who grew up in America are surprised when they find out I'm a refugee." Or that they had "refugees living alongside them in their communities." So for his 10th anniversary of arriving in America from a refugee camp, he told his life story as a way to urge people "to give other refugee and immigrant individuals and groups the same chance I had to integrate into America."

Though there were many positive comments, for a short while there were negative derogatory comments, including a post from a commenter called BeachBoy, who was "rankled" that "white, straight males with good grades" would be passed over to bring in "M'boogie-batootie, a transgender illegal alien from Lower Armpitistan."

There were other negative comments that were later deleted, Som said. He mentioned that he's used to rude and unhappy comments from previous opinion letters advocating for immigrants and refugees published in *The Oregonian*.

"This never discouraged or dragged me down," he said. "It never kept me from writing my next opinion piece or agreeing to another interview. I always try to embrace what comes next. I work hard to address the curiosity that underlies the comments left by uninformed minds and hearts."

What does drag Som down, though, is the current anti-immigrant and refugee policies of the Trump administration, which reduce the number of refugees to America from 110,000 to 45,000 during the 2018 fiscal year. As Som continues to work with Bhutanese, Burmese, Somali, and other new-arrival refugee groups, he will also continue to advocate for the Dreamers.

"America is the only home they know. They are the future of this country. DACA protects about a million Dreamers from being deported from their jobs, colleges, friends, and families. They are part of the American story. They belong here," he said.