



Left to right, Gita Lamichhane, Damber Khadka and Raj Rai sort peppers. Photo by Michelle Gabel | Central Current

PEOPLE

# Deaf New Americans find community at Asha Laaya 'Farm of Hope'

At Asha Laaya, Deaf New Americans plant crops, sell them at farmers markets and build community.



by Yolanda Stewart  
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*Editor's note: Monu Chhetri spoke with Central Current through American Sign Language interpreter Zenna Preli.*

Mangali Ghising pushed a wheelbarrow carrying vegetables to the wash station at Asha Laaya, also known as the Farm of Hope. She lifted bundles of radishes from the wheelbarrow, carefully washing the vegetables in a plastic drum filled with water. The other farmers remained focused on their personal tasks.

Ghising and her 26-year-old son Bir Ghising, who is Deaf, work on the farm four days each week. They are both refugees from Bhutan. About a year ago, the nonprofit Deaf New Americans Advocacy and its CEO Monu Chhetri helped found the farm.

Asha Laaya is a communal space for Deaf New Americans and allies to plant and harvest produce used in their cultural recipes.

“Having a farm has many good benefits because a lot of the Deaf new Americans are very isolated, but then when they come here, they’re outdoors, they’ve got the fresh air, they feel connected to the land,” Chhetri said. “The individuals are able to grow their own vegetables and they are also able to have a lot of their culture maintained in this garden.”

The farm is located on a flat one-acre plot in Kirkville. It derives its name from “asha,” a Nepali word meaning hope, and “laaya”, the Burmese word for farm. In all, the farm has 12 Deaf volunteers and others who are hearing. Some of the Deaf farmers’ family members also volunteer.

This October marked the farm’s one-year anniversary. Chhetri — who was born in Bhutan, later became a Nepali refugee and is also Deaf — founded Deaf New Americans Advocacy in 2012, the year after she arrived in the United States.

Chhetri and many of the farmers can trace a similar path to Asha Laaya: They were born in Burma, Bhutan, Nepal, Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea, Kenya, Congo, and Thailand, among other places, lived portions of their lives in refugee camps and eventually settled in Central New York.

“The Deaf new American community here, there’s several different cultures representative and we work very hard to support each other,” Chhetri said.



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The farm is split into two sections: one for crops to be sold at the Central New York Regional Farmers Market and local Asian Markets, and the other for Deaf volunteers to plant their own crops, which they are allowed to sell or keep.

On a recent visit, Chhetri walked through the farm, passing rows of fall crops. She kneeled and picked up saags, gourds, dills, potatoes, corn, eggplants, hot peppers, cabbages, daikon rashes and green pumpkins. She named a use for each as she passed them.

Green pumpkin fronds sell for \$10 per pound, the equivalent of the cost of steak, Chhetri said.

“Chicken is cheaper than the pumpkin fronds,” said Chhetri.

While the Deaf volunteers are not employees, Chhetri said each volunteer is assigned two rows for planting and harvesting. They then earn money at the end of the season from the produce sold.

Damber Khadka, the Asha Laaya farm manager, helps sell produce at the farmers market. Asha Laaya sells produce at the regional market every Saturday. On Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays, the farm sells to local Asian markets.

Khadka is hearing and can more easily communicate with patrons. He was born in Nepal to refugee parents from Bhutan. His farming experience extends to his childhood.

Not all goods are sold, however. Ghising and her son often take some produce home. Other vegetables are put into a “blessing box” for refugees in need.



Farm manager Damber Khadka brings vegetables to the wash station. Photo by Michelle Gabel | Central Current

“If people need food from our community, we want to be able to support them and help them,” Chhetri said. “We understand what it is to be hungry because we grew up experiencing hunger.”

## 'We're developing a model'

Growing the farm has come with barriers, and the farmers have learned lessons over the last year.

One of their largest challenges was having to construct a water system, which they did for the first time. The water station installation was erected by [Madison County Cornell Cooperative Extension](#).

Farmers had to adjust to the soil, which was sandy relative to the soil in Nepal. Even the type of manure the farmers are accustomed to using had to change. In Nepal the farmers used cow manure. Here, they use chicken manure.

Chhetri said the planting seasons are colder and shorter in Central New York, whereas planting could be done all year in Nepal. Here, the farmers are limited to six months of planting, she said.

When Chhetri and others began planting, they learned they could not always teach by speaking or signing. They often had to show volunteers how to plant.

Funding and lease restrictions have limited some of the planting techniques the volunteers at Asha Laaya can use. They lack tunnels and coolers to protect and preserve crops from bad weather.

They have used up the acre the farm is located on and are already looking for more space elsewhere, Chhetri said.

Still a new organization, the Asha Laaya volunteers often reinvest the money from sales at the farmers market to pay for necessities like the Asha Laaya's van insurance, gas and seeds.

Chhetri said they dealt with some of the challenges by preserving practices they learned in Nepal.

“When we were in Nepal – where we all grew up – we didn't have any fancy ladders that you purchase at Home Depot, so we'd have to go get sticks and cut them down and build our own ladders,” Chhetri said.



Monu Chhetri, the founder of Deaf New Americans Advocacy Inc., and Devi Karki communicate through sign language. Photo by Michelle Gabel | Central Current

But in the challenges, Chhetri believes they've found a blueprint in the farm to help refugee communities. Jay Regmi, a co-founder of the farm, spent time this fall in his homeland of Nepal.

He studied farmlands and soil alongside nine students and two professors from the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. He helped teach students about Nepali culture, soil and farmlands.

Chhetri would like to someday establish two farms in Nepal for Deaf people in refugee camps to empower and create future opportunities for them.

“What we're doing, we're developing a model,” Chhetri said. “We don't have the skills in written and reading English, instead we have to use our previous education.”

## Culture and camaraderie

When Chhetri and the organization created Asha Laaya, they knew people needed more support than just the farm.

They used a grant from the Central New York Community Foundation to buy a van to transport volunteers to Kirkville. They created schedules to accommodate volunteers' day jobs.

Many of the Deaf New Americans had not been taught sign language and lacked formal education, creating barriers when the farm started, Chhetri said. Since then, they've started a tutoring program for Deaf Nepalis and their hearing children so parents can learn more about their child's schooling.

On a fall day, Chhetri was signing with Devi Karaki, a Deaf farmer and refugee from Bhutan. Out of habit, Chhetri turned to sign with Khadka, who is hearing and does not yet know sign language.

She stopped and laughed. She's grown so used to signing with others on the farm that she forgot Khadka is still learning.

Over the last year, the 12 volunteers and the farm staff have built camaraderie and community.

"She was displaced from her house and when she's there she feels so disconnected from everything," Chhetri said of Karaki. "When she comes here, she feels like she's home again."

Over the next year, Chhetri hopes to grow the organization's capacity to serve more people and plant more crops. She's seen the potential the farm has for Deaf New Americans and she wants to be able to replicate that experience for others.

"We know how to support them best. They trust us because we're from the same culture," Chhetri said. "Everything is all tied into culture."



Farm manager Damber Khadka, right, his brother, Suroj Khadka, thank Zach Zelif, of Syracuse, and Sunju Raybeck, of Albany, at the CNY Regional Market. Photo by Michelle Gabel | Central Current

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by **Yolanda Stewart**

January 3, 2024



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