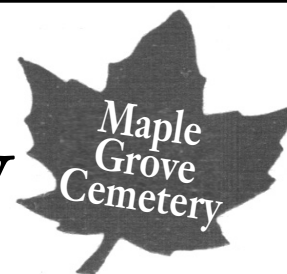


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Nepal's advocate sends info home

BY JESSICA LYONS

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Noticing rights inequalities in her home country of Nepal, Luna Ranjit has now made it her focus to address such issues through the organization Adhikaar.

Ranjit first came to the United States in the summer of 1996 to do her undergraduate work in Iowa. She later went to work in Washington, D.C. and then got her master's degree in New Jersey.

"By the time I graduated, I wanted to be involved in immigrant rights issues," said Ranjit, a resident of Jackson Heights.

Ranjit said that she has been interested in such issues, particularly women's issues, for a long time. She said that this has been influenced by seeing that "women's rights are not easily accepted" in Nepal.

"Constitutionally we're equal, but that's not the reality," she said.

When Ranjit came to New York, she got involved with a South Asian organization, working on rights issues. During that time, she noticed that there were no Nepalese represented at organization levels, although the community itself was growing. She also said that she saw that there were differences between the newer Nepali immigrants and those who had previously come to the United States.

Ranjit and a group of friends decided that they wanted to do something to assist the community, which she said lacked access to basic information and resources. Initially looking to develop it as a project as part of another organization, the group eventually decided to form a new organization. Adhikaar, which is women-led, was founded in 2005.

"We wanted to advocate on behalf of the Nepali community and empower the Nepali community by providing resources and information," said Ranjit, who also serves as Adhikaar's Executive Director.

While beginning as a group that raised awareness, Adhikaar also started doing an informal survey within the community, since Ranjit said there was really no existing data about the Nepalese. Through the findings of the survey, such as that more than half of the community does not have health insurance, Adhikaar began providing other services to meet their needs.

"There was a demand for more direct services as well, so we started responding to community needs," Ranjit said.

Adhikaar, which is based in Woodside, has expanded its services to include holding English classes, organizing free health fairs, conducting workshops, and translating materials and distributing them. They also assist people on an individual basis.

"I'm very proud of the team that has come together," Ranjit said. "We have an amazing board and core group of volunteers as well."

Ranjit said that Adhikaar is now conducting a formal survey of the Nepal community and hopes to complete it over the summer.

Along with her work with Adhikaar, Ranjit is also a board member of the American Nepal Friendship Society and the ethnic-based group Newanguthi.

Ranjit's goals for Adhikaar include having enough resources to meet a significant amount of the community's needs and raising awareness in order to prevent workers rights violations and human rights violations. She also said that she wants to be able "to facilitate other like-minded organizations to start and grow."

The team at Adhikaar has helped motivate Ranjit in her work. Another factor has been seeing injustices and hoping that she can make changes at least in some people's lives.

Ranjit said that the most rewarding part of her work has been "to be able to see other Nepali women, and some men, taking on leadership roles with Adhikaar and within other organizations."

For more information on Adhikaar, visit www.adhikaar.org. They can also be reached by calling 718-937-1177 or by e-mailing adhikaar@gmail.com.



THE QUEENS COURIER/Photo by Jessica Lyons

Luna Ranjit, co-founder and Executive Director of Adhikaar.

I'M VERY PROUD OF THE TEAM THAT HAS COME TOGETHER. WE HAVE AN AMAZING BOARD AND CORE GROUP OF VOLUNTEERS AS WELL.

LUNA RANJIT