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JEWISH WOMEN'S FOUNDATION / HOSTS SOUTH HILLS EVENT

‘Humanity at its best’: Groups that aid immigrants lauded at JWF event

“We wanted to shine a light on the positive aspects and richness these communities bring.”

By DAVID RULLO
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Stacey Reibach moderated JWF’s “A Nation of Immigrants: Humanity at its Best” at Temple Emanuel of South Hills. (Photo by David Rullo)

Suranjana Parsai was born in a Nepali refugee camp after her parents were forced to flee their native Bhutan due to religious and ethnic persecution. The 15-year-old Baldwin Whitehall High School student came to America in 2010.

It was the South Hills Interfaith Movement that provided needed resources to Parsai and her family when they arrived in the States.

“I was in their Head Start preschool program,” Parsai said. “Since I was in kindergarten, SHIM provided free book bags and school supplies for me and all my siblings. A couple of times a month, my family went to food banks hosted by SHIM and were able to get food we otherwise wouldn’t have been able to afford.”

Parsai recounted her family’s experiences at an April 2 event at Temple Emanuel of South Hills.

“A Nation of Immigrants: Humanity at its Best,” hosted by the Jewish Women’s Foundation of Pittsburgh, highlighted JWF’s partnerships with three organizations: SHIM, Open Field and Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh.

The program celebrated the organizations, all of which have received funding from JWF for gender-focused programs, JWF Executive Director Judy Greenwald Cohen said.

JWF leaders were happy to hold an event in the South Hills, the home of one of the organization's co-chairs, Barbara Rosenberger, who is a member of Temple Emanuel.

"We are so pleased to be here and to bring this to our community," Rosenberger told those in attendance.

Rosenberger thanked JWF's other partners for the event: Beth El Congregation of the South Hills, the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, JCC's Center for Loving Kindness and Jewish Family and Community Services.

JWF's members wanted to build a program around immigrants because "there has been a great deal of negativity around the issue of immigrants and refugees," Rosenberger said. "We wanted to shine a light on the positive aspects and richness these communities bring."

Moderated by Stacey Reibach, the evening provided an opportunity to learn more about each of the groups JWF has supported.

Founded in 2012, BCAP is a nonprofit based in Brentwood that assists the Bhutanese, Burmese and other refugees transitioning to life in Pittsburgh, according to BCAP Executive Director Khara Timsina.

The organization has grown since its founding, Timsina said, and even recently helped its first Russian immigrant who moved to Mt. Lebanon.
Timsina attended the event as an audience member, preferring to allow BCAP representatives Benu Rijal and Lila Adhikari to address the crowd.
Rijal came to the United States in 2010 after living in a refugee camp.

"It was a life-changing situation but an extremely hard situation for us," she said.

Despite the challenges, her son, she said with pride, recently graduated from the University of Pittsburgh and is now a mechanical engineer at SpaceX. Her daughter is also doing well in the States.

Born in Nepal, Adhikari moved to Pittsburgh with her husband.

Open Field founder and CEO Justin Forzano explained that his organization's mission is to improve the lives and futures of youth through sports.

"Through soccer, we connect with young people, the world's favorite game, and work to run programs that promote life skills, leadership and girls' empowerment, which is how we connected to JWF," he said.

Open Field, he said, has a program with the Community College of Allegheny County. Two years ago, the organization started a club team for men there, and this year it's launching a women's team.

"The idea is to use the club team as a magnet and support mechanism to help young people get their associate degree," Forzano said. "In a couple of weeks, we're launching a high school soccer league that helps bridge the gap between high school and college or trade school or the workforce."

Forzano was joined by Nateso Salivaire, a 16-year-old high school student whose parents are from the Democratic Republic of Congo. He was born in Burundi, where his family lived as refugees before coming to the United States in 2020.

Masoka Wilondja shared the stage with both Forzano and Salivaire. Like Salivaire, she attends Brashear High School and has been in the States since 2018, the same year she began participating in activities sponsored by Open Field.

SHIM, an organization created in 1968 by a rabbi, priest and minister to provide food, clothing and social services to people in need in Pittsburgh's southern suburbs, was represented by Director of Programs Courtney Macurak.

The nonprofit hosts six food pantry distributions at three locations each month, benefiting more than 8,000 individuals, half of whom are immigrants and refugees, Macurak said. It also operates a utility assistance program and provides back-to-school supplies for approximately 1,700 kids.

SHIM's Family Support program aids mostly young families through homelessness programs, parenting classes and other services, as well as hosting homework and enrichment programming.

"Our vision," Macurak said, "is to see an inclusive community where everyone has the opportunity to thrive."

Each of the speakers spoke of their individual and family stories, coming to the States and the help provided by the organizations they represented. The youth discussed their hopes for the future now that they are living in the United States.

Salivaire said that he hoped to be an athlete.

"If I can't make it as an athlete, I'd like to be a pilot," he told the audience.

Parsai said has yet to decide on a career path, ending the formal part of the evening on a high note, telling those in attendance: "There's a lot of options ahead of me. I'm thriving everywhere. That's what they tell me. I think I have a bright future."

Founded in 2000, JWF's primary work is giving grants to organizations that create social change for self-identified women and girls in both the Jewish and general communities, primarily in Allegheny County. Since 2003, JWF has invested more than $1.8 million in the community. **PJC**

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