

ARISE Podcast 087 DEAF New Americans Advocacy, Inc.

Host: Tania Anderson, CEO ARISE

Guest: Monu Chhetri, Founder and CEO of DEAF New American Advocacy, Inc.

Tania 0:07

Welcome to the ARISE Podcast. I'm Tania Anderson, CEO of ARISE. And it's my pleasure to have with me today, Monu Chhetri, who is the founder and CEO of DEAF New American Advocacy, Inc. Welcome, Monu.

Monu 0:23

Thank you so much for having me here today. I appreciate it.

Tania 0:26

Absolutely. And for audiences I'm just going to explain that Monu is a DEAF New American and we are using for this podcast or her American Sign Language interpreter Zenna, who is interpreting what I say to Monu. And then Monu is speaking back to Zenna and Zenna is actually voicing Monu's answers. So, we haven't done this before, but I'm really excited about having Monu here because you are a dynamo in our community. So, let's just start with a thumbnail about your organization. What does DEAF New American Advocacy do? What's your mission? What are some of your programs?

Monu1:09

Well, the DEAF New American Advocacy organization is we provide services to individuals who are DEAF or have disability disabilities that are refugees or immigrants or asylum seekers. Those are the three categories we really specialize in, and our community. We have a small staff, and our staff, we're all insiders, we were raised in the same situation. So, the individuals that come here, and our goal is to provide services in a way that's culturally appropriate that follows the norms of the other cultures and people's individual desires. And we serve a variety of people young to old, different countries, and we really make sure that we value their what they value, and one of our goals is to make sure that our culture continues to be passed on to the next generations. So, our surfaces are very unique. One of our big goals is to make sure that services are provided without barriers without limits. A lot of the things that are traditionally seen in service care, we try to put those away and

instead work with people one on one so they can accomplish what they want to accomplish in a culturally appropriate way.

Tania 2:25

That sounds very similar to ARISE's philosophy with the independent living philosophy in terms of respecting the power of the person with the disability and letting them direct the services in a very individualized way actually.

Monu 2:43

Exactly.

Tania

Yeah, yes. And can you give me some more specific examples of the kinds of services you might provide to somebody?

Monu 2:52

Well, our programs and services are all set up to support individuals. We have a youth program, and we have a space that's safe for women. And we have the farm that we run. So that's just some of a variety of groups that we make sure that we serve. Some examples of those programs would be providing advocacy for DEAF New Americans, perhaps they have paperwork that needs to be reviewed or they need to go to a specific appointment, or maybe there's something legal going on, issues in regards to their health and their wellness. And then we work with young people. We have a variety of programs. Currently we have an agreement or a mentorship program with Syracuse University, and our children, their parents are often language deprived, so when they go to public school in America, there's quite a disconnect there. So, we help to provide tutoring services to help the children be able to be successful. During the wintertime when our farm is closed, many of the women are basically isolated. They don't really leave the house often so what we do is we provide an area for them to come together. We can chat with each other. We provide sewing classes, and we sit around and discuss how we're going to plan the farm for next year. There's a variety of things we do with the women and so another program that we have is the farm that we're currently working on. It's summertime so of course this farm is very busy. And so, a lot of our individuals go to the farm our culture is very much rooted in agriculture. They feel a such a deep connection with the land and it's really important that we pass on that connection to future generations, many individuals that are DEAF or have other disabilities, they arrive here in the United States or other countries, and immediately they're very isolated. So our hope is that with this this farm that we have, they're able to grow their own food. They're able to get out of the house and socialize they're able to sell the vegetables and use that money for other things and also growing vegetables with their children provides an activity where they both can enjoy each other. And we know that there's

no farms that we know of that are accessible for people that are DEAF or disabled. And so we want to make that happen.

We are working on making the farm accessible for people that have mobility issues. And this year, we have three programs that really spotlight one is more DEAF individuals and other individuals having their own plots on the farm, programs for our children, and programs for what we call our wise people. Our senior citizens. They grew up on the farms, they grew up farming. That's what they did. But when they arrived here in the United States, their culture is very different. They don't use they don't watch television. They don't they're never on their cell phones. And what they value is hard work and the land they taught us their traditions. They taught us our culture and so we want to be able to have them come to our farm and enjoy that time in their lives and also help us pass these traditions on to our young people, and they have the opportunity to be out in the fresh air and grow fresh vegetables. So, it's a wonderful opportunity for everybody.

And then one more that I'd like to add is we are hard our farm. We did not have any opportunity when we were first consumers. We didn't have any transportation. But we were so fortunate the Community Foundation really gave us the start to be able to do this farm by providing us with the finances to purchase a van. Without transportation, we never would have gotten off the ground. So, we're very thankful for the Community Foundation of their original support. We have all the dreams and the visions but without community support and especially the Community Foundation, we would never have gotten off the ground so we're very grateful for that.

Tania 6:51

Wow. That is that's a lot that you're doing Monu and I have to split them back up a little bit. I do want to talk more about the farm but in terms of the populations that you're serving, of course, there's a culture in terms of the DEAF culture, but there's also the culture in terms of the various places where people are coming from when they come here to Central New York. What are some of those other countries or other regions?

Monu 7:20

Well, the DEAF world is a very small world. And when we began to meet different DEAF people that have come over to the United States, we would meet them on the streets, in the stores, in the laundry, as we're walking to an appointment. And so, for all of us, English would be a second or third or fourth language. And so, when we met these DEAF individuals from variety of countries, even though our sign language may not have been the same, we shared the same experience of being refugees, and living in refugee camps. And we may not know exactly their sign language, but we know their experience. And when we all came together as a group, that we figured out a way to communicate. People often ask that question what how do you communicate with people from other cultures? Well, you know, we from 2012 people started meeting in my living room when we found them they would come together in my living room, and we figured out a way to communicate we might modeled a very transparent way of communicating even though people are from different countries. We've made it work and we understand each other. So, we have individuals from Burma,

Nepal, Bhutan, Africa. There's a variety of individuals in our area, which is wonderful. Morocco, Venezuela, where again, we have a lot of international people here in our area and and there's always stuff people in that population.

Tania 8:50

That it's so fascinating, and it makes so much sense to me that the DEAF culture element would be an overriding factor that would bring you together. It's really, really fascinating. And I was wondering, how many people are you are you serving in any particular year because that's a vast group.

Monu

I think we have roughly 50 people that identify as DEAF New Americans, there are still people that are isolated that we don't know about. We continue to get referrals from doctors' offices and other places that put individuals in touch with us.

Tania 9:29

So, I think you mentioned that you have the experience of coming to Central New York from another place. Do you want to tell us a little bit about your particular story?

Monu 9:42

Well, my experience was when I arrived here in the United States, I knew absolutely nothing. I really didn't have any understanding or dreams or vision about what that would be like, you know, like most of the DEAF refugees their family said we're leaving, and they went with no real knowledge about where they were going to go the families would make the decision. So, when I arrived here, it was a complete cultural shock. It was very beautiful, but the people were very different and the culture is very different. And when we when we arrived here, I saw this white stuff on the ground. It was I thought, well, why don't maybe there's some kind of Christmas festival going on. We arrived here in flip flops and T shirts and we had never seen snow before. It was a total culture shock, the community that people, but I had when I got here I was immediately isolated. I never found any other DEAF people. I basically was left at home and never exposed outside of my own family group.

At that time, no one had Deafness on their radar when they're providing services to the to the people that were arriving here as new Americans. So, when I arrived here, I had already brought with me skills that I developed in the refugee camp as a leader in my own camp, but when I got here, I eventually realized I needed to use those skills. I arrived in 2011. But then in 2012, that's when I started to say something needs to happen. We need to find people that that need services. And one by one I started to find this group of DEAF, New Americans, and so I became a leader in that community.

Often, we're very isolated and so we're able to break out of that isolation. So now we have a DEAF run, DEAF refugee run, a not for profit organization, and the farm and we've got so much that we want to use as a model for other DEAF New American communities all over the United States and across the world.

Tania

Wow. That's a fascinating story. Just two quick follow up questions and what country did you come from and how old were you when you came here?

Monu 11:45

Well, I was born in Bhutan. And then we moved to a refugee camp in Nepal at that time it was in diapers. I don't even have any memory of where I was born. And we came here in 2011. And I was I think 21 I'm not sure I got to do the math. One of these days. I was young. I was young. I was this young skinny lady. And yeah.

There weren't any dresses I could find to fit me in here because everything was too big for me. Right fit in them now!

Tania 12:19

Well, you've you may have grown at in age where you've certainly grown as a leader too and I can say that firsthand. You had mentioned the Central New York Community Foundation and that's one of the reasons that we're working together because there's a really great project that the Community Foundation has put together, bringing disability rights organizations like ARISE and like you together in a series of events. And so, I want to talk specifically about the event that you have coming up on July 27 as part of that series, can you tell me what's going to be going on?

Monu 12:57

I'd be happy too. July 27, we are well last year. We did a small program in regards to the farm. And we've grown so much since then. We had a one-acre plot but now we have a much larger farm, much more space to spread out and do even more programs. And so, we want community leaders to come and see what's going on at the farm. See what we're doing, see how the food is grown. And we want to be able to do this this this workshop will be about farm knowledge, but also DEAF culture and farm knowledge and DEAF culture will really be what this particular workshop is about.

And of course, the goal is always Nothing About Us Without Us. So, we'd love people to come to this workshop and learn more about this amazing community. We will be cooking plants from the vegetables we pick right fresh out of that garden that will be cooking and sharing those with people so there'll be another opportunity to enjoy our culture and our people.

Tania 14:00

Wonderful and so this is sort of like in an open house but also hands on learning and instruction of observing and being immersed in your work.

Monu 14:10

Yeah, exactly.

Tania14:11

And the farm, please tell us where the farm is located.

Monu 14:16

Well, the farm is located at 7691 Bridgeport-Kirkville Road and that's in Kirkville. And the zip code is 13082.

Tania 14:31

Great. And the hours of the open house on the 27th are what?

Monu 14:35

The hours are five to eight.

Tania14:37

Great and if people want more information, where should they look on your website.

Monu14:44

Our website is www.DEAFnewamerican.org. You can also look under Asha Laaya Farm, which is the name of our farm.

Tania 14:56

OK. And then we've also got a link on our website at ariseinc.org to our pages are linked. These particular events are also linked so folks can either go to DEAFnewamerican.org or ariseinc.org, to find out more.

Monu 15:14

Yes indeed.

Tania15:16

So, I know you have many more events planned and I please Monu will you come back and tell us more about the work that you're doing. I want to know about how the harvest is going when we can connect in the fall and I just thank you for filling this really important gap in our community to make sure that everyone is completely welcomed in our community and that all people with disabilities their voices are heard and their dreams are realized. You're doing wonderful work Monu, I really appreciate you.

Monu 15:49

Thank you so much for having me.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>