

## REFUGEES: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

### Refugees Overcome Incredible Obstacles to Make New Home in Erie, Pennsylvania (Part One)

By Laura Reeck  
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*Editor's note: Following is the first of a four-part series on refugees and how they made a new home in America and Erie, Pennsylvania.*

#### **Introduction: *In Their Own Words***

Begun by the United Nations in 2000 to raise awareness about refugees and their rights, June 20 was World Refugee Day. And since 2001, June has been designated as refugee awareness month. According to the UN's 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion." Though not represented well in this original definition is fleeing a country because of a natural disaster or as a result of climate change, it is a group expected to increase dramatically in number in the next several years when future migration crises are expected to be tied to climate change, giving rise to climate refugees. The UN's High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that with the war in Ukraine, the number of forcibly displaced persons in the world has risen to 100 million for the first time in history (source [here](#)). Prior to that, in mid-2021, the UNHCR estimated there were 31 million refugees and asylum-seekers in the world, from among 84 million forcibly displaced persons (source [here](#)).

Over the next four days, this series will feature the stories and voices of refugees who arrived in Erie, Pennsylvania in an effort to raise awareness and understanding about asylum-seekers and refugees. Awarded the distinction of being a Certified [Welcoming City](#) in 2020 (at that time, one of 11 such cities in the United States), Erie has two volunteer agencies that assist refugees in resettlement: Catholic Charities and the U.S. Committee on Refugees and Immigrants-Erie (formerly known as the International Institute of Erie). Through the volunteer agencies, a refugee receives housing and a living allowance for a limited number of months. For example, a lone individual receives three months of assistance from Catholic Charities, and a family receives six months. After this point, newly arrived refugees must become largely self-sufficient and financially independent, which can be a daunting prospect for people having experienced persecution and possessing, in many cases, limited ability to communicate in English.

A significant increase in the number of refugees arriving in the United States has taken place in the past year as the resettlement program has “re-opened.” Numbers of refugees arriving in 2021 alone far outpaced the three previous years added together. In the case of Erie, at least [150 migrant children](#) arrived in Erie from Central America in spring 2021 as unaccompanied minors began arriving at the U.S-Mexico border, and together Catholic Charities and USCRI have resettled more than [460 Afghan refugees](#) through the Afghan Humanitarian Parole program, established in August 2021. The map below indicates that Erie received approximately 20 percent of all refugees received in Pennsylvania for the period 2002 to 2018, which has significantly diversified the population and brought additional vitality to the city. Among medium-sized cities receiving refugees, Erie stands out, particularly in terms of how the refugee population has halted population decline in the city and also led to the creation of small businesses as seen in the 2021 report [New Americans in Erie County](#). The recently created position of New American Liaison for the city of Erie, held by Niken Astari Carpenter, is a sign of Erie’s commitment to its significant and again growing refugee and New American resident population.

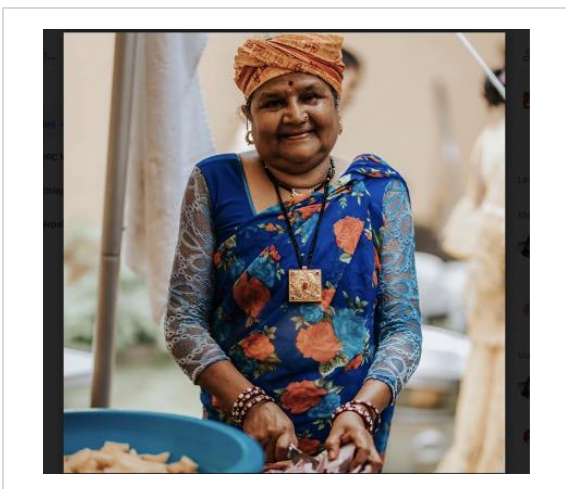
In March 2017, the Global Citizen Scholars Program at Allegheny College began a partnership with Catholic Charities, which initiated a number of meetings between students and refugees recently arrived in Erie. This included a student-led job session, home visits, and then a series of meetings in which the students began recording the stories of the refugees using an [oral history](#) question guide, or blueprint, provided by Catholic Charities. The program continued to meet and speak with newly arrived refugees into summer 2018, and over this time, members witnessed the dramatic changes taking place in the resettlement program and process.

By summer 2018, only Christian refugees were arriving as a result of the executive order signed by then-President Donald Trump, effectively stopping entrance in the United States of citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries. Trump's policies reversed Barack Obama-era promises, such as the United States receiving 10,000 Syrians fleeing the Syrian civil war and admitting up to 100,000 refugees per year. Under the Trump administration, the refugee resettlement program was significantly reduced both in its annual cap, and then, in consequence, in terms of its infrastructure and staffing: positions were eliminated, offices closed, as funding streams were cut off because so few refugees were being admitted to the United States. To rebuild those infrastructures, particularly while there is urgency with new refugee groups arriving, has been at once a challenge and also an opportunity to consider changes and transformations to the refugee resettlement program (see, for example, [Mathema and Carratala](#)).

The interviewees whose voices will be featured and amplified over the next week have come from a range of countries. Some were interviewed alone, some with a child, some as a family, some in small groups. They have come from Bhutan (via Nepal), Pakistan (via Bangladesh), Democratic Republic of Congo (via Uganda), Ethiopia/Eritrea (via Kenya) – all of them seeking refuge in a second country, whether living in an urban center or staying in a refugee camp (approximately [22 percent of refugees](#) live in refugee camps).

This simple fact highlights the physical and geographical complexity of a refugee's journey to a new home country. The interviews followed a similar, largely chronological ordering: life previous to seeking asylum, circumstances and reasons for fleeing a home country, the route taken to flee, the process of seeking asylum, family separation and reunification, and arrival in Erie, and hopes for the future.

Sound clips from the interviews have been included in each case, so that the refugees' voices are heard, and they tell their stories in their own words.



*A former Bhutanese national attends a wedding ceremony in Erie.  
(Photo by Maitham Basha-Agha)*

*Ferki Ferati, President of the Jefferson Educational Society, is originally from Kosovo.  
(Photo by Maitham Basha-Agha)*

### **In their Own Words, Part I**

Here is the first of their stories, one which focuses on daily life and living conditions in a refugee camp. A Bhutanese man, who had lived in a camp in Nepal for most of his life – from the age of six until his early 30s, speaks about arriving at the camp and growing up there. He had been in Erie only for six months at the time of the interview and requested the assistance of an interpreter.



*Image (source [here](#)) indicates Bhutan in green and Nepal in orange.*

#### [\[Audio clip 1, Arriving in the camp\]](#)

Each oral history interview has its own internal logic and unfolding. Even when the guiding questions are the same and presented in chronological order for the telling of a life history, interviews do not follow the same course or development. It is not advisable, in fact impossible, to impose an order on or to deny unfolding thoughts, memories, and emotions; across the interviews, sometimes interviewees recounted the same event or situation several times, adding details or small points of correction as they went, other times orienting their own life story around other people in their family group. In this interview, though many years had elapsed since he came to the United States, the interpreter for the interviewee, Mukti Subedi, began telling his own life history that centers on his having spent 16 years in a Bhutanese refugee camp in Nepal and having been among the first Bhutanese to leave the camps for resettlement in the United States.

Both the interviewee and Mukti Subedi focus on having few memories from their childhood before joining refugee camps in the early 1990s as well as the challenge in accessing basic resources in the camp, such as water, medicine, and education

for children. As Mukhti Subedi explains, there was “no plan in place” in the early 1990s when a significant group of ethnic-Nepali Bhutanese arrived in Bhutan seeking refuge, no infrastructure or organization in the camps. This means that individual families had to build their dwellings of small huts and sustain them through the rainy season. The huts had no beds, no toilets, and plastic roofs that would often leak, “I remember ... I’m just adding, there I remember using an umbrella in my bedroom, in my bed,” adds Mukti Subedi. Here he describes some of the health conditions in the camp.

[\[Audio clip 2, Health conditions in the camp\]](#)

Very early on in the interview, Mukti Subedi became the lone person to respond to questions. Over the course of the interview, he took the place of the interviewee. One thing to remember is that Mukti Subedi was describing conditions he experienced 20 years ago, while the interviewee had just arrived from a refugee camp; the latter qualifies his existence there as “terrible” and laments the fact that he was unable to get an education in the camp. In this respect and others, he and Mukti Subedi had divergent experiences. As regards relations both inside the camp and with the Nepali living outside the camp, Mukti Subedi qualifies them, from his time there, as essentially harmonious and respecting:

[\[Audio clip 3, Normalization inside the camps; external relations outside\]](#)

For his part, Mukti Subedi explains he was fortunate in the time he spent in the camp because he was able to get an education thanks to dedicated teachers working with limited supplies and infrastructure. Though their parents may have been illiterate, the refugee children in the camps went to school: “No kids were skipping the school, no kids were skipping school. Everybody would go to school, no matter what.”

Clearly in evidence here is the human element of people helping people, people caring for other people, and how it counterbalances the precarious living conditions that defined the camps. One recurring theme in this interview is how people in very difficult circumstances normalize their settings to survive. In other words, the human desire for sanctuary and making a home, even if in a temporary location with poor conditions, remains intact and motivational, demonstrating at the same time human resilience and determination.

## NOTEBOOK

- Out of concern for anonymity, none of the photos in this series feature interviewees, but they do feature people who arrived in Erie, Pennsylvania as refugees and became New Americans. Rights to the photos belong to Maitham Basha-Agha and are a part of his "Rust

Belt New Americans: A Showcase of Erie’s Refugee Population,” as featured in the *Erie Reader*.

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- Those interested in making a donation or volunteering in support of the refugee community in Erie may contact [Catholic Charities](#) at (814) 456-2091 or [USCRI-Erie](#) at [info@uscri-erie.org](mailto:info@uscri-erie.org).
- Please contact Laura Reeck at [laurareeck@gmail.com](mailto:laurareeck@gmail.com) if you would like access to the full transcribed interview.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Laura Reeck** is Professor of French and International Studies at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania. She co-founded the Global Citizen Scholars Program with Professor of Community and Justice Studies Dave Roncolato. Through that program, and in partnership with Catholic Charities, they completed a series of oral history interviews with recently arrived refugees in Erie, Pennsylvania. Her research focuses on immigrant communities and cultural production in contemporary France. Dr. Reeck’s publications include *Writerly Identities in Beur Fiction and Beyond* (2011) and she co-edited *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France* (2018).

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