RESETTLE, REMEMBER, RESTART

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Imagine that you are living a normal life in your home country. You have a job and family, and consider yourself to be fairly successful. However, because of your political views or religion, you suddenly find the authorities at your door telling you that if you do not leave your country you will be killed. You flee in the middle of the night to nearby Nepal and are forced to live in refugee camps. Due to the unstable economy in Nepal, you cannot find work and remain in the refugee camps. Years go by, you still cannot return to Bhutan, and you remain helpless – even hopeless – in Nepal. An opportunity arises for you to go to the United States. Although you don’t know the language, and have no idea what a normal life there would be like, you take the chance to permanently resettle and begin anew.

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Sewa International, a non-profit based in Houston, Texas, helps to serve the Bhutanese refugee community by providing refugees with a variety of programs to help them assimilate into America. These programs include community empowerment, family services, children’s activities, and public health. I applied to work with Sewa as a Get Inspired Houston (GIH) intern working on the Refugee Empowerment Project. Working with a refugee community is very important to me because I want to gain experience with a disadvantaged community whose primary language is not English. Although I could have worked with a non-refugee population that met these requirements, the welfare of refugee communities is of great importance to me and Houston is the largest destination for refugee resettlement in the U.S.

Throughout the summer, I will be working on many public health and family services initiatives to help the refugee community thrive. Interns at Sewa are expected to be proactive from the outset – for example by taking on leadership roles in existing initiatives and creating new ones. We have already developed plans to create a health needs assessment for the refugee community, hold three health camps, and have a series of immunization drives throughout the summer. By hosting these events, we hope to address the direct health needs of the refugee community. My experiences at Brandeis as an HSSP and Sociology major have already been immensely helpful in my internship. I have the ability to analyze a community’s health needs and recognize that culture and community play a big role in those needs. Over the next several weeks, I hope to learn more about public health implementation through my internship at Sewa.
In addition to the immediate health needs of the community, we have come to understand that there is a more fundamental need to strengthen the social fabric of the community itself as well as its relations beyond the community. Most refugees that Sewa works with live in the Los Arcos apartment complex in southwest Houston. The area is filled with crime and is not the safest place to live (or even pass through). The apartment complex houses over 160 Bhutanese refugee families, but also houses refugees from other countries as well as non-refugees living in Houston. The Bhutanese refugees are socially isolated from other ethnic groups living in the apartments and most are distrustful – even fearful – of their non-Bhutanese neighbors, some of whom may be involved in gang-related activity. This distrust and fear prevents the Bhutanese refugees from building relationships with their neighbors. As a result, the elderly and unemployed stay inside all day by themselves, which causes depression and isolation. Without social interaction, they do not learn English and cannot develop skills necessary to find employment. As a result, they remain impoverished and their health deteriorates.