

## Overcoming Obstacles

Littleton woman makes dreams come true after leaving her home country

By Paige Ingram, Staff Writer

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Motivational speaker and employment trainer Buna Dahal, who has been blind since birth, laughs Feb. 16 in her home in Centennial.

Buna Dahal left her native Nepal in 1981 at 17 years old to pursue her dreams.

"I knew there was probably only one chance for me to come to the U.S. and brighten my life. I had this thirst to learn," she said, sitting in her apartment near the Littleton and Centennial city line.

"When I left Nepal I told my family, 'Don't expect [me] to return to Nepal in a year.' I was not going to return until I established myself in the U.S."

That time has come. Dahal now owns her own company, Dynamic Buna, through which she provides employment training and motivational speaking.

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"Empowerment is so critical," she said. "People can have the skills and the knowledge, but if they don't have belief, it goes nowhere. It doesn't bloom into beautiful roses."

Dahal's journey came with obstacles. She was born blind and came to the United States not knowing English. However, she hesitates to call that condition a hindrance.

"No doubt sight is precious, but to me it doesn't bother me," she said.

"Every morning when I wake up I think, 'I wish I could sleep in another five minutes,' not 'oh, I wish I could see.'"

It's this attitude that led to her former job at the Colorado Center for the Blind, said her former boss, Julie Deden, director of Colorado Center for the Blind.

"She is very motivated. For her first day as a student here she went rock climbing," Deden said. "She has a lot of passion for what she does. We look for people here at the center that are excited about what they are doing every day. Buna is a very good role model for other blind people, that people will look up to."

Before attending the center for training, and then working in various capacities for the Littleton location, Dahal went to school. Her first U.S. classes were at the Overbrook School for the Blind in Philadelphia, on a scholarship given to a handful of students worldwide.

From there it was on to a community college outside of Chicago for two years, during which she was supported by

her aunt and uncle who lived in the area. After that she started applying for more scholarships, including one to Columbia University in New York City.

The application for the award required U.S. citizenship, but Dahal called the vice president of the school to protest.

"At first I thought I didn't have a chance, but I realized I was working as hard as anyone else," she said. "It should be merit based, not residence based."

The vice president told her to include her thoughts about the residential requirement in her application, and a few weeks later she was awarded the scholarship, one of three offered that year.

"I had no idea what would happen, but I knew I had done my part," she said.

Two years later, armed with a journalism degree, she came to the center in Littleton with the goal of one day promoting advocacy.

The center gave her more confidence in herself, she said, and more skills to reach the level of success she desired.

"I was a child who was never expected to light a physical candle," she said, explaining when she learned that task at the center. "It's learning how to light my life's candle, how to make that light brighter every day."

Part of that is traveling, something Dahal said she tries to do as much as possible. So far, her passport includes stamps from Hawaii and India, a trip she took with her family in 2006, her first time spending time with them since leaving. Together, they visited Taj Mahal, a dream Dahal always had.

Dahal is not finished bettering her life. She is working on a master's degree in leadership management and leadership project management at Regis University.

"I believe in community development," she said. "I believe in making a difference in people's lives, because when we help others we make our community better."

That idea is manifested through her role on the board of directors with Colorado Center for the Blind and the Steering Committee for Littleton Immigration Integration Initiative.

In four years, Dahal plans on taking another role with the Initiative, earning her U.S. citizenship.

"I can't wait. I want to be an American citizen," she said. "All my life I have never been able to vote and I want to share that with the world - how does it feel to have that full power of democracy."

Dahal credits this country and its people as leading to her state in life.

"I'm grateful to my family who fully believed in me and I'm grateful to the American people. They gave me a chance and respected my desire for success."

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