

**Refugee Transitions' "World of Difference Benefit Luncheon"**  
**The City Club – San Francisco**  
**November 3, 2010**  
**Volunteer Speech: Mari Loria**

I've been a psychotherapist for many years. About a year ago I made a resolution to do something new and different, to work with people in a way I had never done, to learn some new skills and to open myself up to learning from people who come from a world I don't know.

I found RT and their model is a perfect fit for me. One-on-one tutoring. Recognizing that the relationship is crucial to making learning possible, especially when people are in crisis or huge change. After some initial training I was matched with a wonderful family, the Gurungs, two parents and three kids (ranging in ages from 7 to 22). They are originally from Bhutan, and are Nepali by ethnicity. They had lived for 15 years in a refugee camp in Nepal, being blocked from being citizens either in Bhutan or Nepal. In Spring 2009 they arrived in Oakland and we began working together the following Fall. My student is the mother in this family. Her name is Far Maya. She is the only family member who did not speak any English, and who does not read or write in her native Nepali as well, as she had never been to school. Also, she is shy, her husband explained to me, in her native language as well. I felt very welcomed into the Gurung family, being warmly received by each family member.

The RT training I received prepared me to begin my lessons focusing where Far Maya was- in her home, doing her familiar tasks. I used dollhouse furniture and dolls, picture books, and magazines. I soon realized that she was interested in learning to read and write in English as well as speak, so we began to make simple books together that were all focused on subject matter that she knew and cared about. Another key concept from my training was the importance of introducing new words and concepts SLOWLY, in small bite-size bits, using lots of repetition, and doing this in fun and varied ways. I made up games and projects, acted things out, and used LOTS of pictures. Far Maya's vocabulary has grown- food, money, home, school, illness, weather, what is everyone doing, where is everyone going, likes and dislikes- are all topics she can begin to talk about. She still does not feel confident to try her English in most situations out in the world, and that is something we will continue to work on.

Far has also attended some community English classes, which have been difficult for her as they are filled with people at very different skill levels. One on one learning with someone she can grow to trust and meet with in her own home is perfect for her as she is more willing and able to speak and try the more comfortable she feels.

I have grown tremendously through my ongoing relationship with the Gurung family. They have welcomed my family into their holiday rituals, tried to teach us how to make momos, gone on excursions as families together to parks and museums, and enriched my life in immeasurable ways. I feel very lucky to have them in my life.