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SNAPSHOT: Walgreens, Field of Honor welcome new citizen

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In John Steinbeck's 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, Tom Joad, a migrant Dust Bowl worker with no steady work, has briefly seen the valley of the Promised Land.

"Look," he said, "this ain't no lan' of milk an' honey like the preachers say."

When Steinbeck's red and gray countries of Oklahoma turned a chalky hue as the pale pink dust literally settled in Chapter One -- many readers removed rose-colored glasses. America had a new point of view.

On April 3, 1968, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. said in his last speech, "It's all right to talk about 'streets flowing with milk and honey.'"

But he also urged his Memphis audience to not stop there -- to go on realistically helping others obtain the basics like "three square meals a day."

Despite these strong reminders from spoken or hardcopy words held dear in American history -- and despite today's twittering and off-the-cuff tweets by a candid roster of celebrity commentators -- many newcomers to the United States bring their families and hopes of promise.

"I'm here for my kids, for their future -- that is why I work so hard," said Kamini Chandarana, who arrived four years ago from Mumbai after selling "everything in India, even a construction business -- we sold everything."

Chandarana found a full-time position at the Northbrook Walgreens. She enjoys greeting customers at the store entrance register.

"My port of entry was Michigan," explained Chandarana, chatting in the employee break room at shift's end.

Chandarana and her husband Parag, a civil engineer, relocated to suburban Des Plaines after he found a new job in Chicagoland.

They have two sons, Jai, 18, an Oakton Community College freshman, and Dhruv, 14, a Maine East High School freshman.

"It is hard here -- a lot of stress for work," she said. Chandarana's hands toyed with her reading glasses while focusing on her homeland once called Bombay.

"I didn't work in India, most of the women were housewives -- we stayed at home," Chandarana said. "I had a maid servant -- there was a lot of leisure time to socialize."

"It was fun, talking with all of the wives," she recalled.

"In the afternoon, I took a nap almost every day."

Her afternoons nowadays are spent working or rolling authentic roti-style kitchen tortillas by scratch which her servant used to make.

"No, today there is no time for a nap," she laughed.

"We make tortillas every day."

Despite rising fuel prices, her Walgreens benefits justify the work commute. Her husband has no health insurance through his overseas-based employer.

"We don't have health insurance in India," said Chandarana, who has never been treated at an American hospital. "But the medicines are cheaper in India."

Chandarana began learning English in school when she was 5 until early adulthood.

"It did help me -- that was a boon for me, otherwise it would have been very hard for me to get this job at Walgreens."

Chandarana said hello to employees who dropped by the break room which is still relatively new after the store's grand opening a year and four months ago.

"It's very neat and clean (in the U.S.) and the educational opportunities are so much more for my kids."

"That is my mission, that is my only dream, the American Dream -- it's like the land of milk and honey -- that is why we came here, but it is work, work, work," said Chandarana, resolutely tapping her reading glasses on the table.

"But it is worth it," she said, nodding.

"Initially, it was hard coming here -- but it is getting easier."

This month, Chandarana's family begins the U.S. citizenship process which requires testing and interviews. Her goal is dual citizenship by this summer.

To encourage Chandarana, the Northbrook Walgreens has pledged \$30 to sponsor a flag in her family's honor to be flown during Northbrook's Field of Honor May 26-30 at the Village Green.

Full-size American flags, all 1,901 of them, will commemorate Northbrook's 110th birthday while honoring names chosen by sponsors.

"We're very proud of Kamini and her family's pursuit for U.S. citizenship," said Marcus Anderson, store manager.

"The Northbrook Walgreens is known for supporting the community and by sponsoring this flag in the Chandarana family name, we hope to reinforce national patriotism on a local level," he said.

"Commemorating a new citizen by flying a flag in their honor is a special way to pay tribute to their accomplishment and to welcome them to their new country," said Judy Hughes, Northbrook Historical Society president.

"To be an American citizen means I can enjoy all of the benefits and rights," observed Chandarana.

"I can vote -- I think it would be good for me to be an American citizen."

But first -- time to make more dough. Reading glasses in hand, Chandarana went home to make dough for dinner tortillas to feed her hungry family of four.

For Field of Honor flag sponsorship, visit www.healingfield.org or www.northbrookhistory.org. Call (847) 498-3404.

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