Economic Opportunity Award

Award criteria: The recipient in this category may be an organization or individual who seeks to improve the quality of life for citizens in economically challenged areas through economic incentive programs. The recipient has demonstrated accomplishments in one or more of the following areas: workforce training development programs; upgrading skills of existing workforce; infrastructure improvements; creation of community partnerships; housing assistance programs; energy efficiency programs; environmental programs; encouragement of new business startups; or ability to take advantage of State and federal aid to provide economic opportunity.

Sheryl Rajbhandari
Cincinnati

Sheryl Rajbhandari is the founder and Executive Director of Heartfelt Tidbits, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting refugees and recent immigrants living in Southwestern Ohio by facilitating integration and self-sufficiency though education, cultural, and employment-enhancing programming.

Rajbhandari founded the organization in 2008 to fill gaps left by the short-term aid of refugee resettlement agencies. Recognizing the transition to the United States can take much longer, her goal was to offer a ‘longer welcome’ to Cincinnati by helping refugees a ‘tidbit’ at a time.

Understanding that economic stability is one of the major factors that helps integration, Rajbhandari offers numerous forms of assistance from job readiness to community gardening and sewing classes.

The sewing program offers immigrants and refugees a platform to sell their work, but also gives them a sewing machine that can help them support themselves and their families. The job readiness program is unique to every individual, focusing on cultural understanding and training about U.S. expectations for seeking employment.

Her nominator noted that Rajbhandari’s programming has helped refugees and other immigrants to attain higher education and start their own businesses. Her rental assistance also has helped families stay in their homes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“One of the major facets of Dr. King’s work was eliminating poverty, because he understood the insidious nature of how poverty affects everyone, no matter their race, culture, or background. Sheryl Rajbhandari’s commitment to helping immigrants and refugees become economically independent speaks to Dr. King’s principle that those who have the opportunity and privilege should not be sitting back while others go hungry.”

Calling her impact far-reaching, her nominator said Rajbhandari demonstrates “how impact happens through conversation and storytelling.”

“She has not only served as a mentor for me, but for the many individuals that she comes into contact with every day.”