

Bhutanese learn for a better life



Soma Bharndari and Gita Khanal, both incoming juniors at Concord High School, work on their writing skills at the ESOL Summer Program on Thursday. MARK HAYWARD/Union Leader

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By MARK HAYWARD

New Hampshire Union Leader

MANCHESTER — No bicycle rides and ocean tides for 16 Bhutanese refugees this summer. Holding dreams of a college education, they're taking an intensive, six-week program designed to improve their academic skills.

SAT preparation, practice essays and skills development have filled most their days, punctuated by field trips or the appearance of a guest speaker.

Narayan Dhimal participated in last year at Central High School, he said. That entailed playing games and making friends.

The class is nothing compared to the summer school that

“This is learning and taking trips. It's better,” the high school junior said.

ESOL Summer Program is the brainchild of two Bhutanese refugees, Shyam Gautam and Bishnu Niroula, who are students at Manchester Community College and Americorps VISTA volunteers.

The two said the pilot program is an effort to fill in the gaps that refugee students have when they leave high school.

Niroula said many of the students excel in high school math and science. But they struggle with the English language.

“They speak English pretty good,” said Niroula about the teenagers, “but their writing is rough.”

A volunteer University of New Hampshire professor teaches the students. They also learn topics such as finances, event planning and public speaking. But writing is the biggest emphasis.

“It's going to be really hard,” said Muna Chouhan, 16, who will be a junior at Concord High School. She said she recently took an SAT practice test and received only two of 10 points in critical reading.

So she and her friends take SAT practice tests, and they squeeze new vocabulary words into their casual conversation.

The summer hasn't been all books and blackboards. The youth have taken field trips. They spent a few nights at University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, where they saw what college was like and also participated in seminars about Asian and Hindu culture.

And on Tuesday, they traveled to Boston, where they visited the Museum of Science, MIT and Harvard University. They funded the trip with money they raised picking and selling blueberries.

