

Is Eau Claire truly a safe city for immigrants?

By Adam Nardin | December 18, 2023 | 11:59 PM CST

Danish Duggal, a Pakistani immigrant living in Eau Claire, goes about his life like any other resident. He works at a local business, spends time at the park, and returns home to his wife and kid at the end of every day.

Despite Duggal being a United States Citizen, not a day goes by where he is not a target of harassment.

“I get told to go return to my country when I’m out with my family,” Duggal said. “They do not even know what country I am from. They tell me India or Saudi Arabia wants me back. Every day I hear this.”

Duggal gets angry every time, but doesn’t feel like he can fight back without putting his or his family’s lives in danger.

“What is even the point of telling them off?” Duggal said. “I stand up for myself and it proves stereotypes correct. They will say I am just an angry foreigner. That or they kill my child.”

Duggal and his wife moved to the United States when they were 21 and 20 respectively. They had initially moved in hopes of finding a new and safe place to raise a family, but fear that nowhere is truly safe.

“America is much safer than Pakistan for us, I will say that,” Duggal said. “But that does not mean it is safe. I was told by a white man that if I walked in this neighborhood near my street again, he would blow my brains out with a shotgun.”

Eric Wilson, Deputy Attorney General for the Wisconsin Department of Justice, said that the state of Wisconsin is seeing an “increase of hate crime statistics” over the last couple years.

“Hate crimes are crimes committed against people based on prejudices like religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or anything along those lines,” Wilson said. “2022 had 152 hate crimes, with about 72 of them being race related. 2021 saw 115 if I recall correctly. 69 of them were race related.”

The increase in hate crimes begs the question of whether or not Eau Claire is a safe city to live in for immigrants or people of color.

“Eau Claire is not a big contributor to the hate crime statistics compared to cities like Milwaukee, but any city of reasonable size is going to have problems,” Wilson added.

When asked about ways the department is looking to make Wisconsin safer, Wilson said they were “always looking into things.”

“It’s not as easy as passing a law and hate crimes suddenly ending,” Wilson said. “Our department has done an incredible job when it comes to policing and catching criminals, but there really is no way to stop hate crimes entirely. As for next year, we are investing more in training and policing, which should help us catch early signs more often.”

Tami McLaughlin, a director for the organization World Relief that plans to resettle 75 refugees in Eau Claire in 2024, has a different approach on the ways to reduce race related incidents in Wisconsin.

“Education is always the most important thing,” McLaughlin said. “I believe the city could have more public forums for refugees and people of color to share their experiences. Hearing about what others have gone through is a very humbling experience, and can help create a more respectful environment.”

The news that World Relief would be resettling refugees in Eau Claire spurred many protests in Eau Claire since their announcement on October 20, 2023. Some of these protests have over 100 attendees.

“Refugees, and in many cases other immigrants as well, are leaving their countries for their safety and wellbeing,” McLaughlin said. “They see protestors and think that the city isn’t safe and that they aren’t welcome here. If they can’t find safety where they are from, and they can’t find safety here, then where are they supposed to feel safe?”

Protests of the incoming refugees are often organized by the Republican Party of Eau Claire County. Chairman of the Republican Party Scott Bolstad said the protests were not against the people, but the idea.

“Not only are they using our taxpayer dollars, but we don’t need more people in the city,” Bolstad said. “I’m sure most of the immigrants coming to Eau Claire are good people. I’m sure some of them are also criminals. I don’t want to take that chance of more crime in our city.”

When asked where immigrants are supposed to go to feel safe, Bolstad agreed that there truly is nowhere safe for immigrants to go.

“I’m sure California would love to have them, although their crime is also through the roof,” Bolstad said. “I know they want to feel safe, but safety is a huge concern for current citizens also.”

Safety is a common concern among all in the city of Eau Claire, whether an immigrant or someone who has lived there their entire life. Duggal only hopes that conditions improve and people from around the world can feel safe in the community.

“I don’t feel safe, but I will not feel that anywhere,” Duggal said. “I will try to provide my child with a safer existence than I have seen in my lifetime.