

ROYALTY AT HOME



A FILM BY ZOBAYER JOTI
FEATURING SURESH THIAGARAJAN & RAMANI THIAGARAJAN

Logline

An Indian-American couple's unwavering faith and boundless hospitality transform a modest home in Syracuse into a sanctuary that has nurtured hundreds of international students over four decades, sparking a global network of compassion and human connection.

Synopsis

This documentary centers on Suraj and Ramani, an Indian-American couple in their seventies who, for more than four decades, have quietly opened their home to international students arriving in Syracuse. What began as informal hospitality grew into a lifelong commitment: shared meals, holiday gatherings, emergency support, mentorship, and a sense of family for students far from home. Their house functions as an unofficial sanctuary, where strangers arrive as students and leave as lifelong kin.



Extended Synopsis

The film unfolds primarily in and around their home, using the present day as a lens to reflect on the past. Through intimate interviews, everyday observations, and stories from former students now living across the world, the documentary traces how this sustained practice of welcome shaped not only the lives of the students, but also the couple's own family, faith, and sense of purpose. Archival photographs, letters, and memories help bridge decades of experience without relying on heavy exposition.

Rather than framing this as a program or institution, the film focuses on lived practice. It asks how care, repeated over time, becomes legacy. By staying close to moments of cooking, conversation, prayer, and quiet reflection, the documentary reveals how one ordinary home became a global point of connection, belonging, and continuity.



Technical Info

Title: Royalty at Home

Project Type: Short Documentary

Runtime: 6 minutes 17 seconds

Production Year: 2025

Camera: Canon C70

Production Budget: 100 USD

Country of Origin: USA

Language: English

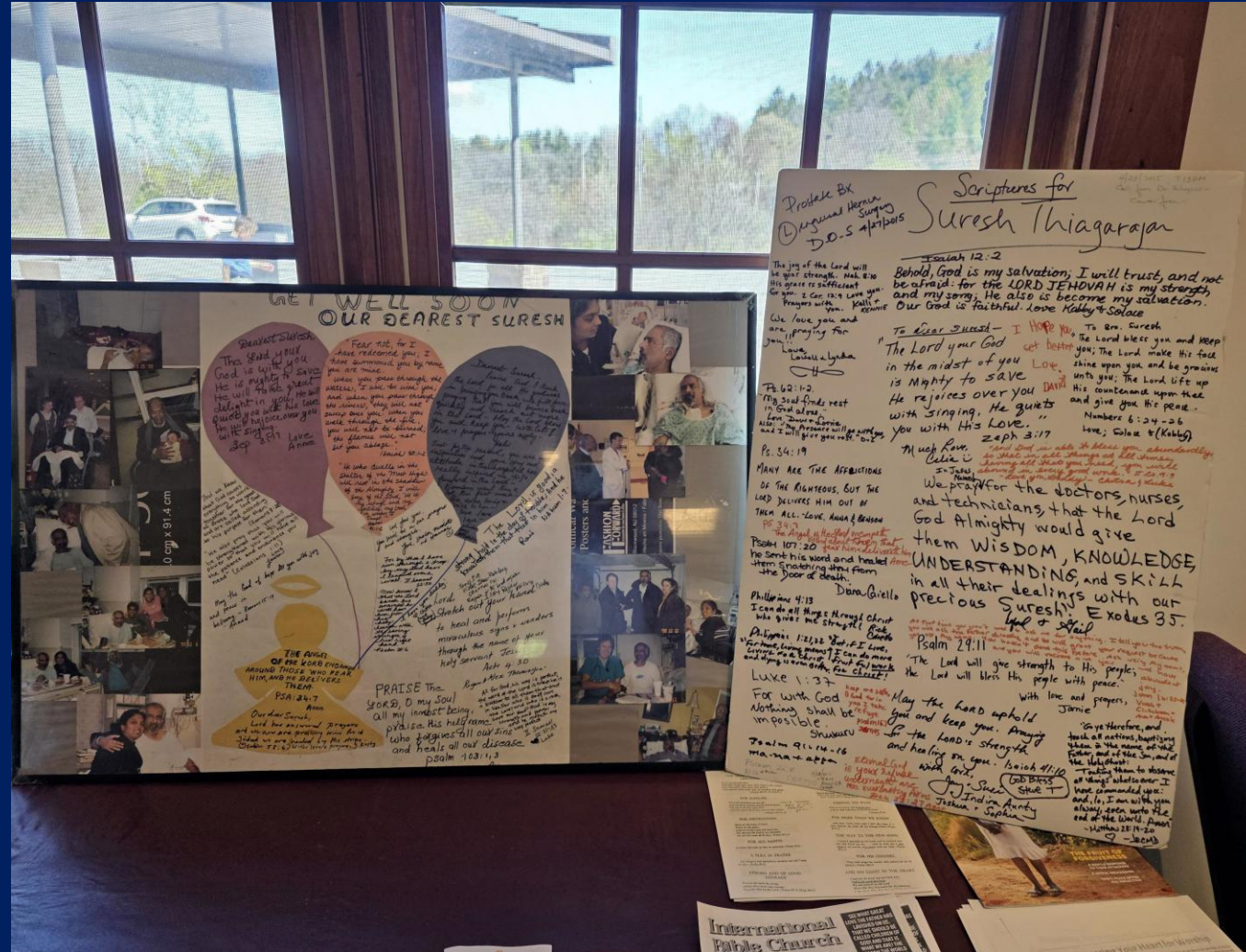
Shooting Format: Digital (1920 x1080)

Sound Format: Stereo

Aspect Ratio: 16:9

Film Color: Color

Student Project: Syracuse University



Director's Statement

Royalty at Home is my first-ever film, but its emotional language comes from the same place as my photography: a deep interest in ordinary people whose lives reveal larger truths about community, belonging, sacrifice, and human dignity.

The film follows Suresh and Ramani Thiagarajan, an Indian-American couple in Syracuse whose modest home has become a place of refuge for generations of international students. For more than four decades, they have opened their doors to strangers and treated them as family. What began as hospitality has grown into a living network of care that crosses countries, religions, languages, and cultures. Their home is not an institution, a program, or a formal service. It is something quieter and more powerful: a practice of love repeated over time.

I was drawn to this story because I am not outside of it. I have known Suresh and Ramani personally, and I have experienced the warmth of the community they have built. As an international student living far from home, I understand how loneliness can exist silently beneath achievement, education, and ambition. University life often celebrates performance, but it might not always see the emotional displacement that comes with migration. In their home, I found a different kind of success, one measured not by wealth or status, but by the number of people who have been seen, fed, remembered, and loved.

I am a photographer by training and by instinct. Nonfiction video was new territory for me. But when the opportunity came to make a solo documentary for the first time in my life, I did not hesitate. Some stories demand a form that moves, that breathes, that lets a person's voice fill a room. This was one of them. Making this film pushed me into a new language. I had to think not only about framing and composition, but also about voice, rhythm, silence, movement, interview structure, audio, and the emotional architecture of editing. That challenge became part of the film's meaning for me. I did not want the camera to simply record information. I wanted it to witness a way of life.

Director's Statement (Continued)

Visually, I approached the film with closeness and restraint. I was interested in hands preparing food, people gathering around tables, quiet conversations, prayer, laughter, old photographs, and the small details that make a house feel lived in. I wanted the film to feel warm, natural, and human rather than polished or overly constructed. The structure follows memory more than argument, moving through arrival, welcome, struggle, celebration, and legacy. In that sense, the film unfolds like a shared meal: stories overlap, emotions surface gradually, and meaning accumulates through presence.

At its heart, *Royalty at Home* is about the radical power of care. It asks what happens when two people choose, again and again, to make room for others. It also asks us to rethink the meaning of family. Family, in this film, is not limited to bloodline or nationality. It is created through attention, sacrifice, faith, and the willingness to keep one's door open.

I hope the film leaves viewers with a simple but urgent question: how much of what we call home is really about the people we choose to let in?



Md Zobayer Hossain Joati, also known as **Zobayer Joti**, is a Bangladeshi Photographer based in Syracuse, New York. His work focuses on various social crises, gender equality, cultural norms, and underrepresented communities, comprising intimate human stories that investigate social and cultural challenges and their emotional dimensions.

After finishing his Bachelor of Science in engineering, his passion for photography led him to a Professional Diploma in photography from Counter Foto in Bangladesh. Later, Joati completed a Master of Science (MS) degree in Multimedia, Photography and Design at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University, as the inaugural Alexia Scholar and as a research assistant for The Alexia Foundation. He is a member of VII Community, National Press Photographers' Association (NPPA) an Up-Next member of Diversify Photo, an alumnus of the prestigious Foundry Photojournalism Workshop and the Eddie Adams Workshop.

His long-term project on the martial arts communities in Bangladesh, named "We Live to Fight" made him the first Bangladeshi photographer to win The Alexia Student Grant 2023 and one of the four finalists in The W. Eugene Smith Student Grant 2021. Limited edition prints from this project have been acquired by prominent art collectors in India. His other awards, grants and publications include Courier International, POY Asia, Inception Grant Solo Show, Sharjah Art Foundation, Pingyao International Photography Festival, Der Greif, Zeke Magazine and many others.

Beyond photography, Joti loves playing guitar, beatboxing, badminton, biking and traveling the world.



Photo Credit: Surya Vaidy

Main Characters



Ramani Thiagarajan

Retired Registered Nurse

SUNY Upstate University Hospital

Suresh Thiagarajan

Former Christian Chaplain

Syracuse University



Film Crew

Director, Producer, Camera, Sound and Editor:

Md Zobayer Hossain Joati

Mentor:

Professor Milton Santiago

S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications

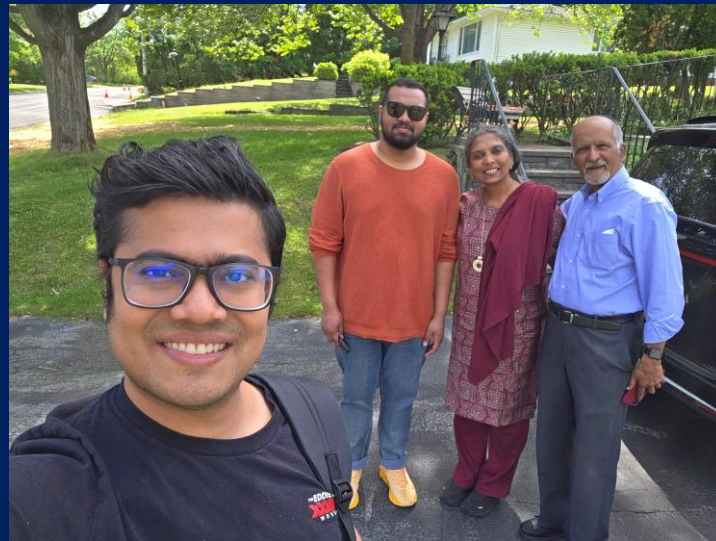
Syracuse University

Photo Credit:

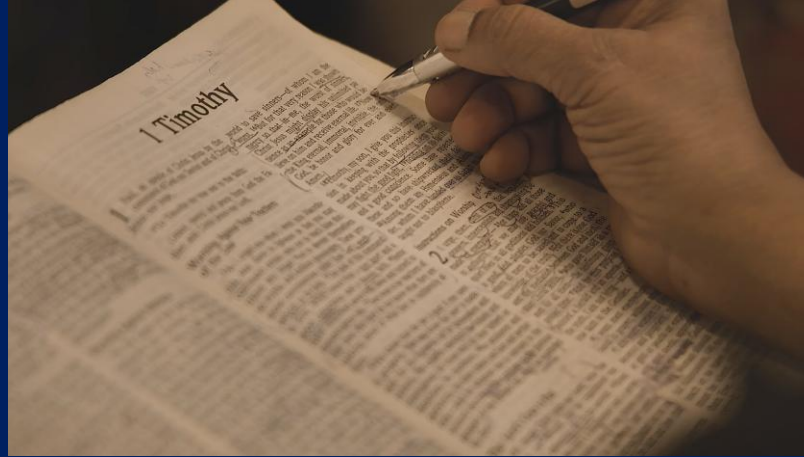
Gregory Heisler



Behind The Scene



Stills from the Film



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Link to the Materials:

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