

A Sense of Community

- Vasudha Bhatnagar

I recently met up with a high school classmate who relocated from Parsippany, NJ to Phoenix, where my family and I live now. We met over coffee and while reminiscing about growing up, she remembered that I used to have all these places to go to over the weekends - family parties in Morristown, Indian functions in Piscataway, and a variety of other events that required dressing up in Indian clothes and heading out for the day. She was intrigued by my mysterious “double life” of being a local American kid during the weekdays, and an Indian kid on the weekends, a set-up very common amongst my Indo-American generation.

As the conversation drifted from where we were then to where we are now, she asked me if my family was involved in the Indian community in Phoenix. I paused and said with some degree of embarrassment, “Not really...”. I suppose I could have made up some excuse like our lives are too busy or the Indian community in Phoenix is not that visible or their activities are not very accessible, but none of that is correct; the truth is, that since I did not grow up here, I did not feel the same natural sense of belonging to the Indian community as I would have if we lived in NJ. One force behind that earlier feeling of community came from our involvement in the Telugu Fine Arts Society.

When I was younger, I probably did not fully realize the importance of TFAS, an organization with a goal to preserve Indian culture in America. My sense of belonging to a Telugu community was strengthened through the events that TFAS organized. There were the holiday celebrations like Ugadi and Deepavali showcasing local talent and food from the “Telugu Aunty Network”. I recall the professional musicians and dancers that came from India to perform. I especially remember an entire dance troupe that stayed in our house around the time of their show - I admittedly had a difficult time sharing that experience with my classmates on Monday morning, but it proved to be a unique one! Then there was published literature in Telugu Jyothi, and once in a while when the mood struck, our family would contribute our own writings, often our personal reflections of Indians in America.

With family and a close circle of friends that were strongly involved in TFAS from its inception, the opportunity to be a part of it all and to passively soak in the culture seemed effortless. This fact I am appreciating many years later, on the other side of the country, where I have to actively seek out what is

going on in the surrounding Telugu community, rather than it being constant in my environment.

I would like to congratulate TFAS on 25 years of building a strong Telugu community and creating a solid foundation for future generations. You have provided a venue to celebrate the fine arts and have encouraged involvement from members of all ages. Good luck over the next 25 years!

Vasudha Bhatnagar was born and raised as a “Bhavaraju” in Parsippany, New Jersey. After college and medical school in Pennsylvania, she headed out west to Phoenix, Arizona and is currently a Pediatrician. She lives with her husband, Anuj, and two children Kishan, 3, and Kalyani, 1.

Vasudha has contributed articles to Telugu Jyothi for many years including to the “Step in Right Direction” youth section.

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Going through Memory Lanes

I wish the future generations to keep this trend to preserve our culture and traditions.

Note: You may see more details of TFAS in the 1980’s compared to the 1990’s and 2000’s. The reason is two fold: Not many people who came during the influx in 1990’s would know how this organization came into existence. The intent is to give some glimpses of the initial years. The second reason is my association was curtailed in the 1990’s since most my time during that period was spent as a trustee of Sri Venkateswara Temple, Bridgewater, NJ.

Sankara Rao hails from Kadapa district in Andhra Pradesh. After doing BE (Electrical) he joined Bhilai Steel Plant as a Construction Engineer in 1965. He was married to Madhavi, from Madras, in 1966 and migrated to USA in 1974. They have a daughter, Sunitha, and a son, Sapan Kumar, both physicians and settled in upstate New York. . He is fond of Carnatic music, played veena and produced and acted in Telugu stage dramas.

He initiated a Telugu school in 1981 in Bergen County. Sankara Rao was the member of the first TFAS committee, one of the founding trustees of the Sri Venkateswara Temple, in Bridgewater and served as the cultural chair person.

Sankara Rao and Madhavi started the HELP Foundation (www.helpfoundation.org) in 1994 and have been serving 125 orphan and destitute children since then in India. After working for twenty years at AT&T, he retired in 2006 and spends most of his time with the HELP Foundation now. He can be contacted at polepalle@yahoo.com