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Reaching Out to Help India's Homeless Women
by Cara Latham

Growing up in India, where 40 percent of the homeless are inflicted with mental illness, Hema Venkatramanan recalls visiting her grandmother as a child and seeing a particularly disturbing sight: a man who lived across the street was literally kept in chains. "It's taboo," says Venkatramanan. "What if somebody finds out there is a person in your house who is mentally ill?"

The negative stereotypes that can be brought upon a family caring for a mentally ill relative discourages the family from seeking help, escalating the problem, Venkatramanan says. "I started realizing that as a kid, we do certain things because adults say so, and it's not always the right thing," she said.

Her discomfort led her to Banyan — an organization that rescues and rehabilitates homeless women dealing with mental illness in India. Not only has she donated money and time to the cause, she has started her own nonprofit organization, Friends of the Banyan, which raises money and awareness for the cause in the United States.

And she will be organizing the nonprofit's first area fundraiser at 7 p.m. at Dutch Neck Presbyterian Church on Saturday, May 22.

In 1993, while Venkatramanan was still living in India, she heard about two college girls who decided to take the first strides toward the cause. According to Venkatramanan, they saw a "naked woman running on the streets, and no one was trying to help her." They housed her, cleaned her up, provided help, and did everything they could. "That was a defining moment for both of them, and they decided they needed to do more."

They dropped out of college and started the Banyan in one of their homes — defying all the typical standards placed on Indian women, who are expected to graduate college, get married, and settle down. "It was a shock to their parents."

While Venkatramanan wanted to help them, she had some life changes of her own: she got married, moved to West Windsor in 1994, and started a new life. An executive consultant for a bank in New York, she lives with her husband, Valapet Badri, who works for a hedge fund; two children, Rohith, 10, a student at Village, and Jahnvi, 8, a student at Dutch Neck; her mother; and the family's dog, Scamper.

All the while, however, she kept thinking about Banyan. Despite her busy work and family life, she managed to find time to get involved with Manavi, a New Brunswick-based organization that helps women dealing with domestic abuse. However, she says, "I just didn't get the satisfaction. I thought I could do more, and the Banyan came back to my mind."

She reached out and became involved with the Banyan, which has rescued and rehabilitated thousands of women to date. Currently, the organization houses about 400 homeless and

mentally ill women. Most are bipolar or schizophrenic.

As she became more involved, she started encountering the difficulties the organization was having — mostly with funding. While the organization receives some funding from sources in India, it was not enough to house, feed, and provide the expensive medication used to combat mental illness. “They continue to fall short,” she said.

In 2008 she got the idea to open a support organization in the United States. She runs the organization with two other people — one in Texas and one in Denver. The organization’s first fundraiser in Texas collected over \$7,000, which will go a long way back in India. The second small-scale fundraiser is planned for Saturday, May 22 at Dutch Neck Presbyterian Church, and so far, Venkatramanan has confirmation from 50 people who will attend.

Word of mouth has been what has worked so far: she was able to find a DJ and a professional singer to perform at the upcoming fundraiser. She will have the event catered.

She says she was inspired by her father, a senior manager with the Indian Railways, who died in 2000. “He believed in helping people,” she said. “He always told me to look at people who did not have as much as I did and to look at how much suffering they were going through.”

She says she hopes to take the organization on full-time later in life upon retirement. With regard to the Friends of the Banyan fundraiser, she said she hopes people will be encouraged to donate to causes dedicated to helping mental illness, whether for Banyan or not.

Venkatramanan is also looking for medical professionals who want to donate their time to visit India to help the Banyan. Also, she will be collecting clothing and medical supplies to donate to the Banyan, including adult diapers. About 75 percent of the women at the Banyan have bladder problems, and they are so ill, they do not even realize it.

She is not expecting, or requiring, that people donate a certain amount during the fundraiser. “I feel we don’t give enough attention to mental health issues,” and she just wants to spread awareness, she said.

Starting the Friends of the Banyan was a way for Venkatramanan to become more involved than she had been. “I don’t just want to write a check,” she says. “I wanted to do something more.”

For more information, log on to www.thebanyan.org or www.fotb-usa.org, or E-mail Venkatramanan at fotb.usa@gmail.com.

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