

## *ShaktiSeva , celebrating Navaratri --- Utsav Seva series.....*

Festivals or 'utsavs' bring to life some of the stories from our epics, 'puranas' and express their spiritual significance in a joyous way by bringing people together amidst celebrations. Dharmic traditions encourage 'seva' during these times. So the proposal of "Utsav Seva" by Ms. Anju Bhargava, the founder of HASC, encouraging community service during the period of celebrations by all Hindu Dharmic Americans appealed to me and being the Americorps VISTA member in Wichita ,KS , I wanted to make it a reality and showcase it to the mainstream community. The success of Yoga Seva in the months of August and September encouraged me to start thinking on Shakti Seva during Navaratri, which is a Hindu festival symbolizing feminine strength and value enrichment within oneself.

It all started with the idea that was floated to have a group of successful women to come and share their personal stories of challenges and successes for the community women to hear and get empowered. My sharing instincts gave me the idea to make it into an inter-faith forum so that women of many faiths can come and share their stories.

Going along with the three deities Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswathi, I was planning to invite a teacher, a financial planner and a city administrator, representing the three areas that symbolically represents the three female deities. So I started my search for speakers. My good friend Suparna (Sue), a financial planner was the first one to confirm. Then my good friend Marcey, who is the Mayor of Goddard was eager to share her story and so were Jaya

and Bushra, both entrepreneurs. My search for somebody in academics culminated with Dr. Gordon who was the Chair for the Center for Women's Studies. I was quite happy that five women from the community have agreed to participate in ShaktiSeva event. My young adult daughter gave me a bright idea that I should add a little glamour to the event and try and invite her friend Lauren who is Miss Kansas 2010. I jumped on that idea, got on Facebook and requested to be Lauren's friend who I have known since her childhood. Lauren was quick to respond and connect me with her manager who confirmed the date and time .But there was a fee involved and we had zero funds with HASC. A good person volunteered to sponsor the event and bang, that's it ! All set ! I was on top of the world .....

I called Soumya, my 'ever ready and pleasant' volunteer and Anju and excitedly shared my joy. Soumya started getting excited and was a great listener to all my ranting and raving. Anju was probably cursing her bad luck to deal with me when she was ready to hit the sack !!!!:))☺

Within 24 hrs.the flyers designed by Soumya were ready ; we wanted to get the venue fixed before we started the publicity

Initial publicity started in the form of emails sent to many individuals and organizations to pass on in their 'mass email" system. Women's Crisis center in Wichita got the email and followed up with a telephone call so that it will be an empowering moment for the women in crisis. All over Kansas, we were liberally advertising our event and were hoping for a great turn out. The same month we were nationally bringing the awareness of breast

cancer and domestic abuse. Navarathri was an ideal time to convey our seva message.

I was surprised to receive a telephone call from DR. Alan De Souza, a professor at WSU, who wanted my permission to upload the flyer on the University website. I was overjoyed and thanked him for his help. I felt reassured that anything done with good faith and intention will be guided by the grace of the Almighty, as rightly repeated by my spiritual gurus.

Two days before the event, I got nightmares. Does the hall have a sound system? I called Sreedhar—the student who had helped me to book the hall; he was in Las Vegas. Our good friend Dr. Madhavan came to my rescue. As a faculty member, he made arrangements for the sound system and the digital camera to record the program. I contacted my volunteers and there were two who readily came up to take pictures. Thanks to Satya and Tarun ! All set and waiting for the Sunday, Oct 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

So I thought!!!! One day before, I was thinking aloud with my husband on the flow of the event. He is a great inspirer who has conducted many events professionally and his guidance was divinely. I had no clue how the hall looked like and what furniture is available. In any case, I packed three table covers, got a center piece of the flags of India and USA and two small vases with small flowers. As a backdrop, I took an artificial garland from India, called “THORANAM”. I packed a lot of cookies, in case the volunteers or participants got hungry and bought a lot of water bottles.

I had forgotten about the speech that I should give. So I sat down , calmed my mind and started writing. Once I finished, my husband heard it all and okayed it. Now I felt ready. I thanked God for all the energy and inspiration and prayed that all should go well. It will and it did !!!!!!!:)☺

The Secretary of American Hindu Students' Association, Abhishek Bajaj opened the event by welcoming everybody. I gave an introduction about HASC and invited the “Shocker Shakthis”, a Bollywood dance group in WSU to kick off the event with a dance item of theirs. It was sheer coincidence that the group is called “Shakthis” and I felt compelled to think that they will do a number. There were 6 participants who did a superb job. Following their dance Soumya Bhatt took over as the emcee for the event.

She welcomed the first speaker Ms. Lauren Werhan, Ms. Kansas 2010. She was a student at Wichita State University, who has taken a break from school for a year to accommodate her busy schedule. She spoke about her challenges and struggles that she had to face to reach where she is today. She was a home schooled kid and following Christianity for her faith.

Ms. Jaya Narsai, an entrepreneur managing her own Laundromat and also attending to her husband's aged parents is a Hindu community leader and women's club president. Her upbringing in Africa, her arranged marriage, migration to the US, raising her two children were very interesting success stories. Dr. Deborah Gordon, who is a professor at the Center for Women's studies gave her challenges in her career.

Another entrepreneur Ms. Bushra Sayeed's story as a young bride coming to this country with her physician husband after her arranged marriage to this stranger was very touching and memorable. Her struggles to adapt to this new environment which seemed like a totally new world in front of her after living a sheltered and protected life with her parents in a traditional Muslim household in India brought tears in many eyes. Her determination to raise her daughter as a free thinking, independent and a warm person taught her lots of patience, perseverance and a prayerful attitude. Many Muslim women in the audience could identify themselves with her challenges and made them feel stronger that they were not alone in these struggles.

Marcey Gregory was raised in a single parent home by her mother had to face many hardships and sacrifices. All these made her a strong woman, who has raised two sons, helped her husband's business succeed and also got elected as the mayor of Goddard, a small town west of Wichita. After 30 years, she has gone back to college to pursue her studies and get her degree.

Last but not the least, my good friend Suparna Tirukonda was born in India, grew up in Chicago, married a nice young man from India, has two teenaged children and is a financial planner. She is a great volunteer in the Hindu temple and runs the HINDUISM classes for the children in the community. Her growing up in two cultures confused her many a time wondering where she would fit in well. Due to her good nature and a balanced personality, she is respected and liked by the youth in the community.

Our enthusiastic volunteer Lakshmi Ravi distributed certificates of appreciation to all the participants and another earnest volunteer Pallavi Satsangi gave a vote of thanks to wrap up the event.

All the audience gave an unforgettable round of applause and cheered to have more events like this in the community.

This Shakti Seva had a great impact on me personally and also on all the women who were present there. We brought about the importance of Navartri, highlighted the social and cultural significance to the community. This is an event which will not be forgotten for many years to come!!!!