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Paving a path to freedom in Lafayette

By Sharon K. Sobotta



Sunita Shastri (left) is pictured with her colleague Yuliana Lopez outside of The Child Day School in Moraga. The pair teach pre-kindergarten children. Photo provided

Lafayette Elementary School that The Child Day School in Moraga was seeking an assistant teacher.

"I'd been caring for my own children and neighborhood children for years so it made sense for me to apply," Shastri says. "I got the job and began working on my preschool teaching certification right away."

Shastri began her assistant teaching career in September 2019, bringing her youngest child to The Child Day School, where she worked, while relying on the help of fellow parents from Lafayette Elementary School for her older son's after school care.

Six months later, the lockdown began and Shastri was temporarily out of work and back in the struggle.

"When the lockdown began, my boys went without breakfast for two weeks," Shastri recalls. "I was too afraid to go out and was running out of groceries."

Thankfully, Shastri had connected with the Contra Costa County Family Justice Center, a center that provides wrap-around services for families in need, and with Narika, an organization that supports South Asian women impacted by domestic violence, months earlier as she began conceptualizing her way out of her marriage.

"(Through Narika) I was able to get a delivery of basic groceries to get us through," Shastri said. "And a few months later I was back at work."

Step by step, with a stable job that she loved, the help of community resources, a county attorney and a strong will, Shastri pieced her life in Lafayette together, claiming her independence for the sake of herself and her boys one bit at a time.

"I was in the U.S. for more than 12 years but never learned to drive," Shastri beamed as she pulled her license out of her wallet. "I decided to change that this summer. The joke is that I have no car, but I do have my driver's license. It was an important step for me becoming independent."

Shastri also filed for divorce earlier this year and is nearing the final stages.

"I'm happy with where I am today. I'm not aiming to be a millionaire, but I'm content. I have inner peace. I have my confidence back and I love my life."

When Sunita Shastri arrived in Lafayette four years ago in search of a better education for her boys, Shreyansh (9) and Hridhansh (6), she only dreamed of finding her own freedom.

Shastri had set aside her own aspirations of becoming a doctor in India to get married and move across the world to start a family. Once she got to California, Shastri's marriage began unraveling. As a stay-at-home mom who was financially dependent on her spouse, Shastri recalls feeling both isolated and trapped.

When her youngest child was old enough to start preschool, Shastri says she became relentless in her search for work.

"I was so desperate to find a job so I could get out of my abusive marriage," Shastri recalls. "I applied everywhere."

She applied for jobs as a dishwasher in restaurants, as a server in McDonald's and as a cashier in grocery stores.

"Everyone told me that because I was a stay-at-home mom and didn't have direct experience, I was not qualified."

Months before the pandemic lockdown began, Shastri found a new opportunity that her direct life experience had prepared her for. She learned through a parent at Lafayette Elementary School that The Child Day School in Moraga was seeking an assistant teacher.

Looking back, Shastri says the first step to finding freedom from an unhealthy relationship was about setting aside her own shame and pride and reaching out for help. She says she hopes other women, regardless of their socioeconomic situation or status will do the same.

"I was there once, feeling embarrassed to talk about the abuse. I was scared to leave, thinking I couldn't support my boys without money, but once I took my first step and then made up my mind, I learned it is possible," Shastri says.

Emile Delgado-Olsen, director of The Child Day School in Moraga, is Shastri's supervisor. Delgado-Olsen, who is also a parent of a fourth-grader at Lafayette Elementary School, says he knew when he interviewed Shastri in 2019 that she'd be a good fit for The Child Day School.

"She had the experience of caring for her own children and she was a person who had overcome her own struggles," Delgado-Olsen says. "I knew she could handle the job."

While Shastri says she'll always be grateful to Delgado-Olsen for taking a chance on hiring her for a job that gave her a purpose and a paycheck, Delgado-Olsen says watching Shastri's transformation over the past two years has been equally rewarding for him.

"It was a great experience to watch her grow and open up. I've watched her self-esteem build and it is fun to see that," Delgado-Olsen says. "She's a part of the family at The Child Day School. We love her."

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