

# ONE WOMAN'S INSPIRED JOURNEY TO CREATE AURAT HEALTH SERVICES

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They say every passion stems from something that tugs at our heart. My passion for healthcare came from caring for an uncle who had Schizophrenia. All his life he lived with us in our home and loved us like his children. I dedicate all my efforts to his memory.

**From where my healthcare journey began.** It all began in Pakistan in 1990. After completing a Bachelors degree in Psychology, I had a compelling desire to observe emotional variations in people's behaviour. This led to working alongside young children living with compromised mental and physical capabilities and later to pursuing a Masters of Science degree in Psychology. What was truly rewarding early on in my journey was having the opportunity to apply my learnings to practice. I initially worked in local hospitals where I helped people recover from addictive disorders then transitioned to the not-for-profit healthcare sector where I worked with an organization responsible for delivering Pakistan's largest family planning project. Working together with a team of researchers, doctors and nurses, I studied the low incidence and patterns of contraceptive usage exploring how we could educate individuals, especially in rural areas where literacy levels are dauntingly low, in proper use of contraception. While doing so, our team also pioneered a study on the spread of HIV/AIDS in Pakistan. Here is where I hit the frontlines like never before. Having identified long distance truck drivers as being at highest risk for HIV/AIDS given their long absences from home and ease of access to sex-trade workers alongside highways, we launched our efforts to educate sex-trade workers in safe and proper contraceptive practices. It was this experience that opened my eyes to the realm of a woman's health, wellbeing and empowerment – and what an experience it was.

**Experiences of a qualified immigrant:** In 1998 the great Canadian Maple Leaf welcomed me to this promising land. I was among the many immigrants who brought with them credible education and work experience that was not given consideration for employment. It didn't take me long to figure out that volunteering was the only opportunity that would allow me to apply my knowledge and talents. Even then, it took me several months and a relocation to Montreal just to find the right volunteer opportunity where I gave of my time freely as if I were at a full-time job. Five months later I returned to Mississauga and, with a 'Canadian' reference now on my resume, I was able to secure a job at a community service organization. While I was far from pursuing my passion for working in healthcare I was on the right track for improving my understanding of the community and all facets of the community service industry. This experience broadened my horizons and provided opportunities to not only explore the community and social service sector but also learn the 'what, who, why, where and how's' of this sector.

Two and a half years later I chose to move from full-time employment to a 4-month contract position at United Way, an agency which fundraises and funds the community sector. I had two goals in mind: 1) learn more about fundraising and funding, and 2) secure a job in the community healthcare sector. By the end of the contract, I achieved both.

**My passion's first sparkle of hope:** In 2002 I put my foot in the door of community healthcare with a position at Victorian Order of Nurses where I initiated and implemented a project to provide social rehabilitative services to seniors living with mental illnesses. This excellent opportunity not only allowed me to apply my education and experience but also confirmed suspicions that in order to progress further, Canadian education credentials were necessary. Although it was a tough reality to come to terms with, my decision to pursue further education was the best one possible because it only continued to fuel my passion. In 2004 I sought the advice of leaders in the healthcare industry, researched the possibility of entering healthcare related post-graduation programs and resigned from full-time employment to re-enter university after a gap of 14 years! There were days that I questioned my decision, but never with regret. In 2006 I received a Masters of Health Sciences in Health Administration and went on to obtain the only certification that Canada offers for healthcare professionals – the designation of a Certified Health Executive.

**Fueling the passion:** Two months after graduation the Spring of 2006 brought good weather and a position at a hospital in Toronto. Leaving Peel and its communities, and admittedly the South Asian communities in particular, was heart wrenching but I was grateful, as always, for the opportunity to get back into pure healthcare. At the back of my mind and in my heart, I knew it would not be long before I would return to doing what I knew I could do best – bring ‘community and healthcare’ together.

In 2006 the province of Ontario announced the creation of the Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs). For me their mandate intersected my passion with their one chief objective: serve to provide better healthcare for local communities. I decided the LHIN in Mississauga or Brampton was the place where I would work because that is the area I knew and it housed the majority of the South Asian population. Eight years in the Canadian workforce had broadened my knowledge of the challenges and opportunities South Asian communities faced. Somewhere in the recesses of my mind I thought “hmmmm . . . if only I could focus on the wellbeing and empowerment of South Asian women”. With just that thought, the seed of Aurat Health Services was sown.

**Passion becomes a flame:** I wanted to do something . . . something that would help South Asian women, that would empower them, that would enable them to utilize the health and community resources and services available across the GTA, that would enable me to tell the groups of women I saw everywhere in Brampton, Malton and Mississauga that there was a place for them – just for them. A place where they could walk in dressed in their traditional clothes, speak their own language, hear their own music in the background, see pictures that were familiar to them, sit on the sofa or a mattress, eat their own food with their hands if they wished . . . and not feel conscious, out of place or inferior. A place where they could gain education and awareness about health and well-being for themselves and their families. A place where they could access services and resources as and when it

suits them. A place where they could talk about their concerns without being shamed or labelled, a place that would respect and celebrate them for being a South Asian woman. That is what I intended on doing in early 2009.

For almost three years I contributed to the efforts of the LHIN and gained health system-wide knowledge. This opportunity helped me to fully understand how the system functions: from funding to planning to service delivery for communities at local levels. It exposed me further to the South Asian community, their challenges around healthcare service delivery and access and the system's ability to meet their needs. After a year on the job, my mind started to turn - and quickly! How do I pursue what I want to do most? Knowing the system well enough by that point, I realized my only route was to create a not-for-profit organization dedicated to South Asian women's well-being and empowerment.

Up till now what I was doing was continuing to learn. I never stopped asking questions, turned a new page every now and then, kept my focus and, most of all my passion, alive. I did not do this alone - for my life has been influenced and inspired by a few women and it is to them that I am eternally grateful. The journey has not ended - it has only just begun for Aurat Health Services.

I invite you to take the next leg of this journey with me.

*Samina Talat*

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