

Living Vicariously

- Rajita Chennapragada

When I saw the call for articles for the TFAS 25th anniversary souvenir, I jumped at the opportunity to share my thoughts. After all, having grown up in the shadow of TFAS, I certainly should have something to say about my experiences. My father, the editor of Telugu Jyothi and former two-term president of TFAS, thought it would be nice to write about how cultural organizations have affected my life. This is when I just couldn't seem to get pen to paper. I was stuck.

I had written previous articles on this topic. Once as a child, I wrote about the great artists that I got an opportunity to see through attendance at TFAS programs. As I got into my teens, there was the more bitter text about how, as Indians, we somehow didn't respect each other and acted undisciplined at cultural programs. Later, while in college, I wrote that although I was far away from being mired in the cultural program experience, I ended up chairing international artistic events, even while away from home.

So what has changed that could make for an interesting article? Now that I am older and with kids of my own do I have a different perspective? My 8-year-old daughter once asked me what the TFAS logo symbolized. You know, the logo of the lotus with a young shoot growing out of the top. I told my daughter that this is supposed to mean that one generation is working through the organization to bring culture to the next generation. I think that may have been some of the larger purpose intended by the founders of TFAS and other such organizations. But have we fulfilled that purpose?

I know when I see an ad for an upcoming TFAS program, I have to think long and hard whether to use my precious weekend to attend. I think to myself, "I don't have time, my children don't know what they are missing, and, frankly, the preservation of Telugu culture is not something that is high on my priority list." But something ends up drawing me in. Is it the fact that my kids enjoy watching the variety of programs from amateur to professional? Is it the fact that I like the "undisciplined" nature of cultural programs, and now chalk it up to "flexibility" and "informality?" Or, do I simply feel obligated to go because I know some of the organizers?

The above factors certainly contribute to my attendance but mostly it is simply comfort – nothing profound. There is something about waltzing in at your leisure into a program that may or may not start on time, meeting old friends, eating good food, and

yes, watching a variety of programming. There is also a different flavor that was not there when I was a child. Today's Indian-American children seem more "comfortable in their own skin" so to speak. Being Indian and dressing up in Indian clothes has an appeal which it didn't when I was young. Our kids now have more opportunities to get involved in the arts through dance, music, and Telugu classes which have sprouted up in basements all over the tri-state area. They have more opportunities to actively participate and showcase their talents to a wide spectrum of not only other Indians, but non-Indians as well.

This then leads to a bigger question - could today's kids take a more active role in leading cultural organizations? I know this has certainly skipped over many in my generation. Often, my peers who are in their 30s and 40s who were raised here in the U.S., are steeped in careers and some of us have bittersweet memories of our previous involvements that we stay away and only criticize the leadership of cultural organizations.

I should only hope that there is a next group of people ready to take over leading. However, there needs to be some caveats. The lessons I learned through my involvement in cultural organizations is that the senior leaders should rail in the enthusiasm of younger folks and listen to their ideas. Let the younger leaders try out new, innovative, and sometimes daring concepts. Perhaps sticking to a strictly-timed program schedule, restricting rambling speeches, and treating all performers and audience members regardless of "status" as equal, is not so radical. We can't be stuck in the old ways and old habits, since some have worked and some have failed. This is even more so true for local groups like TFAS which can provide a forum for known and not so well known individuals right here in our community.

So, is it too late for me to once again get involved? Perhaps not! Maybe there is still hope that I may live vicariously through my children and more actively support the cultural organizations around me.

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