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## “Spreading our Wings” Gala Raises \$60,000 to Benefit Daya Survivors

By KALYANI GIRI

HOUSTON: Over 350 from this city’s diverse communities gathered to fete and lend support to Daya when the non-profit organization hosted its 15th Anniversary Celebration and Annual Fundraiser Gala at the Chateau Crystale on April 3. The themed event, *Spreading Our Wings*, raked in \$60,000 to benefit Daya’s ongoing mission in helping survivors of domestic violence rebuild their lives. The funds included a donation of \$7,500 from the organization’s major benefactor, the Indo American Charity Foundation, and from pledges and a silent auction. Unique this year was the real life survivors of abuse who courageously came forward to share with the audience, their personal stories of terror and ultimate triumph. Dignitaries attending were Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee who delivered the keynote speech, Consul General of India Hon. Sanjiv Arora, Harris County Judge Steven Kirkland, and Fort Bend County District Attorney John Healey.

“Tonight is a celebration of the strength of our survivors, of the joy we feel in building happy, peaceful families, of the surprising ways in which friends and strangers reach out to help those in need,” said Nihat Ahmed, President of Daya. “Tonight is also a celebration of how our community has carried Daya from inception to the pillar of the community it is today.”

Ahmed also announced Daya’s recent acquisition of a four-bedroom transitional home, Harmony House, which was procured last year for \$200,000, with \$60,000 from the organization’s operational reserves and a bank loan of \$140,000. The house that can accommodate up to ten people at a time is in an undisclosed location to ensure the safety of Daya’s clients. With community support, Daya hopes to own the house free and clear by the end of this year. Unlike mainstream shelters that offer a room for only one month, Harmony House will be the safe haven for women leaving homes of abuse, where they can begin the healing process and reconfigure their lives for up to six months.

Two women who were saved by Daya’s timely intervention related the corrosive effects of spousal abuse. Both remained anonymous for their own safety.

“I was burning in the fire of abuse and cruelty for 13 years,” said one survivor. “I had no family

here, or friends and no work permit. I had no access to documents, money, or car. I made the move in 2009 because of my two children. He had threatened to take my kids away.”

She called Daya and for the first time, she felt that she wasn’t alone, she confided. The organization helped her turn her life around and today, she has a good job and is studying part time.

Congresswoman Jackson Lee in her keynote address congratulated Daya, complimented the organization on adopting a stance of zero tolerance towards the perpetrators of crimes against women and children, and exhorted the community to continue to stand behind the visionary organization with funding and support.

Sesh Bala, the sole male on Daya’s Board of Directors and the treasurer, delivered the facts and figures. But even before he began, he couldn’t resist bringing up India’s recent victory in the 2011 ICC Cricket World Cup and drew laughter as he joked about cricket terminology. Daya employs three fulltime staff; Amber Riaz, the Community Development Coordinator, Nusrat Ameen, who is the Client Advocate and Transitional House Coordinator, and Vyoma Majumdar, the Client Services Coordinator. The organization has 12 active board members and six advisory board members. There are over 150 volunteers that help



Daya President Nihat Ahmed receiving a Proclamation from Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee  
Photos: Shamim Syed

with Daya’s various projects. Over the past five years, Daya has seen exponential growth with client calls to the Daya hotline increasing from 1700 in 2005, to 4300 in 2010. The number of clients served also doubled from 113 in 2005, to 229 last year. The budget in the last few years increased from \$25,000

to \$280,000. The organization has a network of 27 attorneys in this city and in Dallas that offer pro bono or reduced cost services in family law and immigration to clients. Through extensive outreach programs Daya has made its presence known to a variety of ethnic communities, and at churches,

mosques, temples, hospitals, and law enforcement agencies.

This year the organization honored two individuals and three agencies for furthering Daya’s mission; Indrani Goradia who holds motivational “Live a Brighter Life” workshops for clients, and Officer Muzaffar Siddiqi of the Houston Police Department who liaises closely with Daya and the South Asian community. The Tahirih Justice Center, Lone Star Legal Aid, and the Simmons Foundation were also awardees at the event.

Introducing revelry to the evening was fusion music ensemble Moodafaruka, who along with belly dancers and Flamenco artistes entertained guests during dinner.

“It takes a lot of people to make an organization work successfully,” said Lakshmy Parameswaran, who was present at the inception of Daya. “I may take some credit for being one of the first set of founders in starting it, but one cannot carry it for 15 years without the help of a lot of wonderful people. I’d like to see Daya become a self-sufficient independent agency like United Way. That it survives and thrives on its own as a vital and important agency like those in the mainstream,” added Parameswaran.

For further information about Daya, visit [www.dayahouston.org](http://www.dayahouston.org). The helpline number is (713) 981 7645.



The Daya Board of Directors with Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee and the Consul General of India Sanjiv Arora and his wife Chhaya.