



ASHA for Women 2007 Fundraiser Gala: HOPE through Empowerment

Good evening. I am Nalini Rajguru, ASHA President this year. I would like to welcome you all to ASHA for Women's 2007 fundraiser gala. When we first decided to hold a fundraiser, none of us had any clue about where to start and how to go about it. All we knew that we wanted to do it, that we had to do it for the women and children who come to us for help. We wanted to give them hope, and we wanted to provide them with resources to empower them. But, we needed to figure out how to raise funds to achieve that goal. Ladies and gentlemen, I am very proud and happy to say that we have been very successful. And, I would like to welcome each and every one of you, our donors and sponsors, to be a part of this success. My special welcome to Neal Katyal, who agreed to be our keynote speaker tonight. My very warm welcome to our sponsors Savvas and Amy Savopoulos, the Law Firm of Caplin & Drysdale, Customer Value Partners, Dr. Prakash and Sunandini Ambegaonkar, Vasanti and Shrikrishna Athavale, Kam Tek Inc., Printec Inc., Bajaj Family Foundation, and the Khatkhate Family Trust.

Today, I want to say a few words about domestic violence. Domestic violence is not confined to a specific culture, region or country, or even to a particular group of women within a society. We have clients who are well educated and come from well to do families. In 2006, the United Nations Secretary General published an in-depth study entitled "Ending violence against women: from words to action", noting how "violence against women causes untold misery, cutting short lives and leaving countless women living in pain and fear in every country of the world. Violence against women has far reaching consequences for women and their children, and harms families across generations."

And this is why ASHA was created in 1989. Our founding sisters felt this dire need to reach out to those South Asian women and their children who were experiencing physical and emotional abuse. Away from their native country and family, these women and children felt lonely and helpless. ASHA volunteers wanted to give them hope. They wanted to empower them by guiding them towards resources they could rely on to feel safe, and be productive members of our society. In 2006, ASHA's dedicated volunteers contributed over 4,000 hours teaching life skills, such as how to open bank accounts and take public transportation. They drove them to safe shelters, helped fill out online job applications, translated legal documents, provided clothing, took them grocery shopping, and helped with childcare. In addition, ASHA volunteers provided the emotional support needed during the time when their client felt isolated, and because of language barriers, did not have friends or neighbors with whom to share her loneliness.

I would like to share a story with you. I call it my side walk story. About 3 years ago, I had a client who had to seek refuge in a shelter. Her husband had severely beaten her. She got a protective order against him. He was given 72 hours to leave the house and stay away from her.

Three days later, after finishing her work at 9 o'clock at night, the client went to the house, thinking that it would be safe to go back. When she reached the house, the lights were on and the husband's car was still parked in the driveway. She panicked, and not knowing what to do, called me. She was hysterical and didn't know where to go. She did not want to call the police, insisting that they would not understand her English. I tried to calm her down. Told her that I would call them, and she should go to another street and wait for me. I then called the police, described what was happening, and gave them her description and asked them to look for this distraught South Asian woman on a street in that neighborhood. When I reached there about twenty minutes later, the client started sobbing uncontrollably. In this foreign land, she was desperate and lonely. I quietly took her hand and we sat down on the side walk. I waited till she regained her composure. She had given the police the copy of her protective order. They went to the house to talk to the husband. It took them two hours to get him out of the house. All this while, the client and I sat on the side walk. It was almost midnight. I gently asked her what she wanted to do next – whether to go into the house after he left, or go back to the shelter. She said that she wanted to be strong, and wanted to go to her own house. At that moment I felt that I had achieved my goal – to provide her support, and give her enough encouragement. She felt strong enough to make her own decision and felt prepared to deal with the situation. And that is the essence of ASHA's service – we never tell them what to do. We never tell them to leave the house unless they are in imminent physical danger. We show them various options. We give them enough support and encouragement that they have hope and feel empowered to make their own decisions.

I am often asked how we measure success. I can stand here and give you statistics on how many inquiries we have received, and how many women and children we have served. But we measure our success differently. We are successful only when we are, first and foremost, able to take the client and her children to a safe place to live, and find her the right legal representation. We are successful when she completes her English classes that we paid for and encouraged her to attend. We are successful when she feels confident enough to go out and get a job, and when she becomes proficient at using a computer that we bought for her. We are successful when she takes driving lessons, paid for by ASHA, learns to drive and happily calls us to tell us that she drove her children to school by herself! We are successful when finally, she and her children are able to put the trauma of abuse behind them and become happy and productive members of our society.

ASHA has not achieved this success alone. Every single person present here today has had a hand in ASHA's achievements. All our donors and sponsors who generously contributed to ASHA, the attorneys at Caplin & Drysdale who have patiently waited for me to finish their projects at work because I have been too busy planning this event for ASHA, the government agencies where our volunteers and board members work, AOL, and organizations like WEAVE, Tahiri Justice Center, and South Asian Bar Association with whom ASHA collaborates. I would like to read a few lines from an email that I received from one of my clients just three days ago. We were able to find her a pro bono lawyer through SABA-DC. It reads - "Hi Lakshmi and Nalini. Wanted to give you an update.....On the immigration side, things have started looking up. I filed for an H1 visa early this month and yesterday I heard from Ajay at Hogan and Hartson that it has been approved..... I am so glad you directed me to the right lawyer...Thanks." This is ASHA's success – this is OUR success.

Thank you, and welcome again.