International Mountain Day Builds Friendship between Families in Utah and Pakistan

When I started at Utah Valley University (UVU), I intended to get in and get out as fast as I could. Keeping my head down, not get involved in anything because as a mother of four and the manager and owner of a small business here in Utah, I did not have time for anything extra. Little did I know what my future would hold. Early in my junior year, my peers from Utah International Mountain Forum (UIMF), a coalition of student clubs at UVU asked me to get involved with extra-curricular activities, like an international conference in 2015 and I instantly said “no.” Eventually, I said I could help a little and then I was put in charge of cultural events during the conference. I had almost completed that task when I was asked to take over the Education panel. I spent maybe a week trying to get the panel in order when I was informed by the UIMF leaders that I was being promoted to executive secretary of the conference. The prospect of this frightened me deeply. Unsure how I would balance everything, I still charged full steam ahead.

It was because of this one event, that my life has forever been impacted. I met ambassadors from all over the world, became friends with the international NGOs, like Days for Girls CEO Celeste Mergens, among others and most importantly now have two Pakistani daughters.

During the conference, titled “Women of the Mountains” our family housed Noorani Barkat, who at the time was in Texas working on her Masters in Agriculture. She submitted a paper regarding the Education of Women in Pakistan. Together, with the help of my colleague Tony Medina, who was in charge of the logistics and protocol during the conference, we were able to get her to Utah: Tony paid from his own pocket for her air travel from Texas to Utah and I hosted Noorani with my family. We had many deep discussions about culture, traditions and even religion. It was much to both our and her surprise that we found we had more in common than we thought regarding religion (we being Latter Day Saints and she being Muslim). We taught her to make American pizza from scratch (we got Turkey pepperoni) and she taught our youngest son how to cook authentic Pakistani chicken korahi from scratch.

Fast forward six months, and the UIMF team started to plan for the 2016 International Mountain Day on December 2nd 2016. It was dedicated to the cultural exchanges between mountain communities to promote sustainable mountain development agenda around the world. I remembered the film submission about Kalash tribe in Pakistan of Ms. Mehak Asad for the conference, whom we were unable to bring in 2015 due to limited funds. I discussed with other UIMF members the possibility of bringing her to Utah to present the film, very appropriate for the celebration. After the approval of the idea, I immediately reached out to Mehak. Within seconds she responded and was on board. With a generous donation from Dr. Michelle Taylor’s office at UVU, we were able to bring Mehak to Utah. Again, our family hosted an international guest. As with Noorani, a great cultural exchange took place.

Our 10-year-old daughter Judy and I went to Salt Lake International airport to pick up Mehak. It was funny, when we stepped into a store to get something to drink, Mehak walked right past us. I said to my daughter “I am pretty sure that is her, we should go find her.” Judy wasn’t so sure, but away we went to find Mehak. She almost bumped into us, when I said “Mehak?” Of course, it was her, and it was an automatic connection. On the way home, she mentioned how she was expecting
something much different. Upon further discussion, several days later, we learned that in Pakistan, the media portrays the United States in such a light that many think that we are all very ill-mannered individuals, and she was thankful that we were nothing like how the Pakistani media portrayed Americans. It was an interesting discussion as we talked about how the American media tend to portray Pakistan in an ill-mannered fashion as well.

Mehak came early to experience an American Thanksgiving. It was her first time eating turkey, and she had her fill! She was able to experience a bit of Christmas as well. She loved the lights and symbols. Mehak even helped our family decorate the Christmas tree and our house!

Mehak had prepared to bring traditional Pakistani clothing for the entire our family. The clothing Judy is wearing, Mehak’s mother made especially for her. She was so excited that the dress was made special for her. Two of our boys Handen and Brayten were happy to model their Pakistani clothing as well.
Mehak (in yellow dress) with the majority of the Torsak extended family at the Salt Lake City, Utah

For Thanksgiving, many of my husband Kenneth’s family came to celebrate. As part of that celebration all of us went to Salt Lake City to see the Christmas lights at Temple Square. We toured around the city enjoying the sights as well as the Church (LDS) History Museum and the world-famous Tabernacle. Mehak is now officially part of the Torsak family, and she wanted a family picture! She tracked someone down to take a family picture.

Mehak has fun with Judy Torsak and her classmates at Lakeview Elementary School in Provo, UT
Mehak went to school with Judy and experienced 5th grade in Utah......In Portuguese. Mehak joked that she didn't understand a thing because it was in Portuguese but she loved how interested the kids were, and how fun it was to share her culture with them.

She was going to cook for us, but wanted a very particular kind of rice. We drove to Salt Lake City to look in the Asian markets there, we didn't find what she was looking for, but as we drove home we drove past an "Indian/Pakistani" market and she screamed...."Mommy there was a Pakistani market, turn around" Scared me when she screamed but man the market was so awesome!!!
On Thanksgiving morning, Mehak and I took a drive around Utah Lake. She decided that we should wear Pakistani clothing. She was impressed at how beautiful the lake was and the snow-capped mountains.
There really is no good way to appropriately articulate the experiences Utah Valley University has afforded me. I will be always grateful for that. It is a unique place that allows students to learn from books and professors as well as world class hands-on experiences, and UVU is truly an institution of engaged learning.

Both Noorani and Mehak call me mommy, and they forever hold a special place in our family!

*Deann Torsak, executive secretary of the Fourth International Women of the Mountains Conference*