

## Roma Majumdar

My name is Roma Majumdar. I was asked to say a few things about Maitri - the organization that was formed about 28 years ago. I was one of the 5 women who formed and started this organization. I was raised in a big family; we were seven sisters and two brothers, and the brothers were much older than me. My father was an engineer, and mother was a housewife. I was raised in a very strict, disciplined family, but we were told that girls can do whatever they decide. So all of us, we knew that we had to be in college, and we had to graduate from college. My mother, though, a housewife, was a very strong-minded person, she started a women's organization in Jamshedpur, which was called Mahila Shamiti (Women's Club). The main function of the club was to educate women and children of low income families. The club met almost every week to provide these services. The activities of the club left an impression on my young mind.



I graduated from college with history and economics. After college I was teaching in a high school for a while. Then I got married and immigrated to Canada. After spending 3 years in Montreal, we came to California. At that point, I was a young mother with a 1 year old son. We did not know anybody here. In the 1970s there were not many Indian families. I was busy learning driving and other things to make my life a little easier in this country. When my son started school, I started working and I worked for a company called Spectra physics in the purchasing department for a while and then also in the accounting department. At that time, I made some American friends but not too many Indian friends. By late 1980s I made some Indian friends and I met Chitra Devakaruni who was teaching English in Foothill De Anza college. I also met some of her friends at that time.

We started MAITRI in 1991. The idea came from Chitra Divakaruni who is an author, a poet and a writer. The five of us who started MAITRI, were all living within short distances. Chitra Divakaruni, Anjali Dujari, Jaya Chatterjee, Medha Joshi, and myself. One evening in Feb 1991, Chitra called some of her friends, including me to discuss something important. So, when we met the next evening, she said that amongst her female Indian students she sensed some tension and fear. Two of these girls expressed their fear and shame. Two of them said they were not treated well by their husbands and were asked to leave US and go back to their parents. Slowly Chitra realized that they were experiencing some violent behavior by their husbands. She thought if we could start an organization to help these newcomers that might help these people who are not familiar with the US system and customs. None of us had any clear idea what was happening to these young girls. They had no relatives in this country, they are not familiar with immigration and visa rules, they don't know whom to ask for help. So we thought we can start a hotline to answer the questions these girls might have. So that night we all contributed some money and bought with it an answering machine which we set it up at Chitra's house. Those days, in early 90s, computer was not available to all. So, we made handwritten small posters and were putting in the windows of Indian grocery stores. We slowly started getting phone calls. 5 of us were picking up calls and with our limited knowledge started to answer questions; Soon after that, all 5 of us started attending Training for Domestic Violence Victims Advocate offered by Support Network (Currently known as YWCA of Silicon Valley) in Mountain View. After we got our training, we felt confident and learnt how to ask questions. Anjali Dujari took care of Maitri's non-profit registration procedure. Within a year



Medha Joshi had to leave to move to Texas. Jaya also left because of her work pressure. In the meantime some new volunteers joined the organization. We were about 8-10 members at that time. We did our first fundraising event and made about \$300. We were trying to talk to friends about the problems in our community but nobody was accepting the fact that domestic violence existed in our community. It took 15 years to finally convince them that it always existed. We did not want to admit, that's all. Our kitchen Table hotline service expanded over the years and now Maitri offers crisis intervention, legal advocacy, transitional housing and many additional services to clients.

From the very beginning we decided not to be part of any political or religious group. We thought first we should serve the people of India, or rather, Southeast Asian Women, because Support Network is a mainstream organization and our women, our girls were coming from India. They're not familiar U.S.A. system, how it works, how their immigration works. We thought that we will be more helpful if we can approach them. So that is why we started, first with Indian women but then slowly we were getting calls from migrants from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh. So that's how we started to work with South Asian women.

I wish we got more help from the community when we were just struggling to exist. The community at the beginning was not very friendly to us; they thought that Indian community never had any domestic violence problem. But I am glad that finally they are recognizing that all the young people coming abroad, they are sometimes not in good hands. I'm happy that finally it took only 25 years to recognize us, that we are really contributing to the society, by helping all these women who really need help, and who are becoming successful in their lives. They're also contributing to their community. So I'm really proud of it.

*MAITRI volunteers are very dedicated, and they're very hard-working. And one of the things in MAITRI is we never believed in hierarchy; we never fought for power. We always thought each person has a definitely unique quality that she can contribute to the society or to the organization. And I think that's the main reason that the volunteers are contributing and supporting MAITRI in such a big way. We are now 45-50 members strong, stronger than ever. Our paid staff are very sincere about their jobs. Our President, Sonia Pelia, who joined Maitri right after we started, along with other Board members are guiding Maitri in a very productive and successful way.*

*I think MAITRI will thrive many more years if the next generation also gets involved and contributes, in a sense contributes their support and energy and their willingness to help other women. We are also involving men and boys in our organization, and I hope more men will come forward to help our organization and to help themselves also. I hope Maitri will be around to help women to help themselves for many more years.*

