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Crossing Lines, the documentary

Filmmaker's struggle for cultural identity begins with her Springfield childhood

By Amanda Robert



Indira Somani travels to India for the first time after her father's death in Crossing Lines.



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and the first Indian student at Owen Marsh Elementary School. In the '70s and '80s, Springfield wasn't as diverse as it is now, she recalls, and some of her classmates didn't even know there was a country called India. Instead, in their taunts, they mistook her for being Native American.

As she grew older, Somani delicately balanced between what she called her inside world — visiting family in India every six months, eating traditional food and seeing her mom, Shipra, wear saris — and her outside world. She struggled to maintain her relationship with her conservative father, Satyanarayan, as she joined in American traditions like the high school prom.

When she was 17, Somani spent the summer in India. During this visit she learned what it meant to be a practicing Hindu. She came back to Springfield, she says, wanting her friends to know she was Indian.

Somani, now a 38-year-old assistant journalism professor at Washington and Lee University in Virginia, recently co-produced a documentary called, *Crossing Lines*. The award-winning film delves into Somani's life as a second-generation Indian, how she discovered her roots and her struggle to stay connected after her father's death in October 2002. Plans to show the film in Springfield are in the works.

"It's a tribute to him and how much I learned from him," Somani says. "India was so important to him. He wanted to make sure his kids knew about India and understood India."

Satyanarayan Somani and his wife, Shipra, migrated to the United States and met as students in the early '60s. Somani's father was the first person in his family to leave India to pursue higher education; he became a medical professor and went on to teach at the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine. Her mother also earned an advanced degree, becoming a social worker.

Somani's father pushed her to take math and science classes at Springfield High School so she could later attend medical school. But her senior year English class changed her course. She was amazed by *Pride and Prejudice* and by the support her teacher, Mary Jane Peters, gave to her writing.

Somani graduated from SHS in 1988 and went to Knox College in Galesburg to study English (she eventually switched to an independent major focusing on media, race and gender). She spent a fall semester in Chicago, planning to intern for *India Tribune*, a weekly newspaper started in 1977 for South Asian families migrating to the U.S. Instead, she heard WBBM-TV, a CBS Chicago station, needed interns.

"I thought, 'TV, what's this? That's not me,'" Somani says. "But they hired me and placed me with a general assignment reporter and the political unit."

Somani found her niche in broadcast journalism as she helped cover Jim Edgar's run for governor and Paul Simon's run for the U.S. Senate in 1990. She earned a master's degree from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University and returned to Springfield to work as the morning show producer at WICS/News Channel 20.

Over the next 10 years, Somani produced the evening news in South Bend, Ind., and Norfolk, Va. She worked as a show and field producer for WJLA-TV, the ABC affiliate in Washington, D.C., where she contributed to an award-winning series that profiled the city's working women. She wrote and produced financial broadcasts for CNBC and produced "Early Today" for NBC in New York.

In 2002, Somani had just finished filming a documentary on the Indian Diaspora when her mother called to tell her that her father was in the hospital, suffering from an abdominal aortic aneurysm. She returned home; he died nine days later.

"I was in so much shock," Somani says. "I felt like I needed a change. I was trying to figure out what was the next move."

Somani spent the next six months traveling back and forth from New York to Springfield to be with her mom. She then moved to Washington, D.C., and was hired as an assistant professor of broadcast journalism at American University's School of Communication for the 2003-2004 year.

"I was in the right place at the right time," Somani says. "I came in with all of this TV experience, and I discovered that I really liked teaching."

"Mom thinks Dad's soul guided me to academia, since he was an academic," she adds.

She earned her Ph.D. from the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland in 2008. As she researched and taught classes, she also started work on Crossing Lines with Leena Jayaswal. The pair, both Indian women in their 30s, met at American University. Somani brought experience in picking sound-bites and writing scripts, while Jayaswal came from a background in documentaries.



Indira Somani looks at old photographs with her father's family in India.

They bought a camera and in 2004 traveled to India, where Somani visited and filmed her father's very traditional family. She worried about going to them as a single woman in her 30s, not fluent in the Hindi language, but she overcame those obstacles. She forged a new connection to the country through her relatives.

"I gave something back for once," Somani says in the film. "They had a chance to see my father through me."

Somani and Jayaswal finished the 30-minute documentary in 2007, and by 2008, it was distributed to public television stations by the National Educational Telecommunications Association and accepted into film festivals worldwide. The documentary has won several awards, including the Gracie Allen Award for "Outstanding Documentary — Short Format" from American Women in Radio and Television and the Best Documentary Award from the California Arts Association Digital Short Film Festival.

Somani and Jayaswal will continue to promote the documentary in screenings at the Heart of England International Film Festival in June, the University Film and Video Association Conference in New Orleans in August and the International Film Festival South Africa in November.

"We started out thinking it was only going to screen in South Asian film festivals," Somani says. "We thought it was going to be a story about me and my dad. It's a story about second-generation ethnic-Americans and their cultural identity."

For more information on the film, visit www.crossinglinesthefilm.com.

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