

Interview with Raj Manhas

October 31, 2008

University of Washington and FIUTS alumnus Raj Manhas arrived in Seattle from his home country of India in the fall of 1973 to study Industrial Engineering at the UW. Raj earned his Masters in 1975 and has been a prominent Seattle citizen since. He worked for many years in banking, for the City of Seattle, and served as Superintendent of Seattle Public Schools from 2003 until 2007. This past spring, as Executive Director of Seeds of Compassion, Raj led the efforts in organizing a 5-day gathering focused on early learning and compassion for young children, which brought the Honorable Dalai Lama to Seattle. Raj Manhas will give the keynote address at the FIUTS 60th Anniversary Gala Dinner on November 8.

A week before the event, FIUTS Homestay & Community Relations Coordinator Alicia van der Veen chatted with Raj about his time at the UW, the impact FIUTS has made on his life, and why he believes the work of promoting international understanding is so important.

Alicia: Thank you for speaking with us today, Raj, and being a part of the FIUTS 60th Anniversary Celebrations!

Raj: You are very welcome, it is my pleasure.

Alicia: I understand you participated in the FIUTS Homestay program when you were a student. Can you tell me about that experience?

Raj: It was a great feeling, as soon as I arrived, being connected with a host family. I had the letter they had sent me, with a photo of themselves. I was leaving India at a very different time -phone systems weren't the kind we have now, this was so long ago. I didn't know how I would connect with this person at the airport. I was so new, and I didn't know anybody. The woman working at United went out of her way and looked [my host family] up in the phone book and called them. My hosts, Bill Lewis and his wife, told her to help me get on the airporter bus downtown, where they picked me up. It was such a great feeling, that feeling that 'there is someone here to pick me up, when I don't know anyone in Seattle.' I stayed with them a few days until, together, we figured out my housing. They took me around town, and organized a wonderful gathering where a lot of friends of theirs came an excellent dinner... in general, they were so wonderful, and so great to me. They made sure I found a room with some other Indian and international students, who were all connected with FIUTS and other student cultural associations.

Alicia: What else do you remember about FIUTS? What other activities did you participate in?

Raj: I remember Camp Waskowitz [during orientation] – one of the most memorable experiences I have. I was new, and I didn't know many people. FIUTS took us foreign students [to camp] for a couple of days. [In the beginning] You kind of feel lonely, and uncertain about the future, and the language barrier.... now India is very different, everyone speaks English, but in those days, I could read and write but I was not as comfortable speaking. But being with all of these foreign students together, as FIUTS provided us cultural programs; I made some friends that became lifelong friends.

Alicia: So do you stay in touch with friends you made at FIUTS?

Raj: Yes, speaking of international understanding, as we talk about it, Pakistan and India had a lot of problems, and growing up in India, I didn't know any Muslims - there weren't any living in our area. When India was divided to create Pakistan, my family moved from the other side which became Pakistan - one of the most difficult divisions of the world, a lot of migration. I was born after, on the Indian side, so I had no experience with Muslims. At camp, I looked at a particular fellow, and he looked like me, so I talked to him in Punjabi, assuming he was from there [the Punjab region of India] as well, and he spoke back, asked me where I was from – it was coincidence that when my family left, they moved from that particular area he was from. 'I am from that place too,' I responded, meaning my family. In reality it became a joke between him and I, and we became close friends. We came to understand, does it really matter what side we came from?

Another friend from Pakistan, Rana – we shared the same language, food, culture – we were pretty much the same just the religion was different. He returned to Pakistan, and has told me, when he had gatherings at his home, when someone would say something negative about India, he would stop them right there, and say, "You know, you are saying something about a country of someone I met in Seattle, and I cannot allow this to happen." He told me that when this happens, "Your face, your image, and our time together come right in front of me." He now lives in LA and when he visits Pakistan, he visits a Sikh [my religion] shrine there and tells me, "Every time I go, I visit that place because of you." Personally this is very emotional to me, the friends made through this organization, these connections.

Alicia: What great stories. Why do you think the work FIUTS does so valuable?

Raj: It is an organization that provides the comfort and support a person needs when they are in a foreign land and everything is new: the food, the culture, the language. It is like a lifeline, and for most of the new students it provided us a feeling of warmth and comfort. Along with the host families, they became our home away from home. FIUTS and the other international student associations were our home, our place of shelter whenever we needed help. It is absolutely a heartfelt feeling I have even today, after 35 years. You don't forget those times you really need help, and people say, "Don't worry," with a smile, "We are here to help." It's that generosity of the American spirit that is really remarkable, and it has been promoted more with the help of FIUTS.

Alicia: Can you tell me what value you see FIUTS bringing to the Seattle community?

Raj: Over the years Seattle has become quite an international place with Microsoft, Boeing, Amazon, Starbucks - people from all over the world, and we do business all over the world. FIUTS was way ahead of its time to think about these issues; that we are one world, that we need to stay connected and understand each other. To think about how much the work FIUTS did is impacting our business dealings, is very difficult to quantify. I think Seattle has benefitted tremendously from people who have gone through the UW with the help of FIUTS. They have become great supporters of this region and of the UW, locally and wherever they go. The whole region has benefitted.

Alicia: Thank you, Raj.