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COMMUNITY



Life on the road: Sonia Dhillon-Marty shows one of the mobile pavilions designed during last year's Community Week. | GIANNI SIMONE

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With one eye on the future, globe-trotter builds a foundation for change

by [GIANNI SIMONE](#)

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Some people are content with their lot in life and never dare stray too far from the path laid out for them. Others, like Sonia Dhillon-Marty, are always looking for ways to improve themselves and the world around them. Having lived in Punjab, California, London and Tokyo and set herself one huge goal after another, the 51-year-old multitalented businesswoman is now trying to make a difference through her Tokyo-based Dhillon-Marty Foundation.

Born to a liberal father — an executive with the Punjab State Cooperative Agricultural Development Bank — and conservative mother in northwest India, Dhillon-Marty went on to major in fine arts at the Government College for Women, Ludhiana, before an arranged marriage at 19 led her to America with her husband, who worked in IT.

“When I moved to the Silicon Valley in 1982, I heard about all these people who had started with nothing and had become billionaires because their ideas had been so successful,” she says. “In California I also learned there are no limits to what you can do, provided you have both the ability and the stamina to do it.

“I enrolled at Santa Clara University and, having a strong background in math, I was tempted to try new things, but having an art degree I was afraid of trying something different. Then my professor said I could pursue any subject I wanted, regardless of my degree. That sense of freedom was truly liberating. Back in India I had studied art not only because of my inclinations but also because my mother didn’t want me to pursue male-oriented subjects I was interested in, like engineering or physics.”

Dhillon-Marty did an MBA in finance and then studied two more years to become a public accountant. She also filed for a divorce.

“I’ve always been a motivated person, always trying to excel in what I did, and I found in my father a lot of support, while my mother worried more about social customs,” she says. “All my life I’ve tried to be myself in spite of social pressure. There were times when I had to adjust myself to the current social mores, and even when I joined my husband in America I wanted to make our marriage work, but I just couldn’t. Maybe in India it would have worked because of the environment surrounding us, but as soon as I got to California I felt like escaping, and Silicon Valley even provided me the means to escape,” she says, laughing.

Dhillon-Marty went on to work for a number of companies before settling at Cisco.

“In the six years I was with them the company grew so much — the original 1,000 employees became 60,000,” she recalls. “When you see all this energy unfolding, you believe you can do anything.”

On a business trip to Paris, Dhillon-Marty met French investment banker Hugo-Lancelot Marty, who would soon become the man of her life.

“While we were dating he was working in Tokyo, but all the while I insisted on being independent. I didn’t want even romance to slow down my career,” she laughs. At that time, she was still living in California.

“You see, in India I was told I shouldn’t do boys’ stuff even if I had the inclination and interest to pursue them, and the second time I didn’t want anything to get between me and my aspirations.”

After getting married they lived in London for a couple of years, after which they moved to Tokyo and had two children.

In 2011 her father died. It was a life-changing event for Dhillon-Marty, and it set the stage for the establishment of her foundation, which she now runs pretty much full-time.

“Not only was I overwhelmed by grief for losing my father earlier than I’d thought, but he had taught me so much, and I wanted to put those things into practice,” she explains. “That was in January, and two months later 3/11 happened. Those two things triggered me to say, ‘OK, I’m going to do something social.’”

“Too many people only live for the present, or they focus too much on money, but I wanted to tell these people that they should also leave a better world for their children, and quality of life is not only about money. If a place is safe and schools work properly, you actually need less money to make a better life for yourself and your children. So we need better social infrastructure in order to keep human behavior in balance with one’s personal needs and social dynamics. This is an ongoing struggle as people must be constantly reminded that our personal good must coincide with society’s good. Unfortunately most people don’t reflect on this.”

Dhillon-Marty had 3/11 in mind when she tackled one of her first projects: redesigning an abandoned school in Ogatsu town, in Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture.

“The school was falling apart but, being built on higher grounds, was spared by the tsunami that destroyed Ishinomaki,” she says. “We held a workshop in the area and decided to resurrect the place and turn it into a community center.”

Dhillon-Marty hopes that the new five-story structure currently being built will be used to showcase Tohoku’s traditional carpentry and contribute to the development of healthier building strategies.

“Most foundations work on existing problems. I want to look into the future,” she says. “This probably comes from my business background, and what my father taught me, but I’m always thinking about what society needs next, so I began to collaborate with universities because students have ideas and goals they want to achieve — plus they are still very idealistic.”

This approach culminated last October in Community Week, which saw 45 students and scholars from 16 countries, representing 10 universities, work around the concept of “material equilibrium.” Focusing on sustainable living and other socio-environmental issues, the participants explored ways to live in harmony with the land.

“The project was inspired by *mikoshi* (portable Shinto shrines) and hermit poet Kamo no Chomei’s hut,” Dhillon-Marty explains. “They designed several mobile pavilions that are meant to function as an artists’ studio and living environment, as well as a communication space and exploration vehicle.”

“Taking the inspiration from Ise Shrine, the material and building techniques are such that they lend to continuous renewal and are in equilibrium with the nature that provides the resources.”

Asked about her relationship with Japan, Dhillon-Marty is pragmatic.

“I was raised in India and have lived in the U.S. and Japan. Because I have experienced different societies, I tend to go beyond them,” she says. “I live for myself and try to navigate the different environments as best as I can.

“I actually appreciate many things about Japan,” she adds. “I often judge a place according to how well things work, and the Japanese of course are efficient and do get things done. In other countries you need connections, but here as long as you follow the paperwork, you get what you want. The process can be tedious but it’s transparent and, in the end, less exhausting.”

Dhillon-Marty is adamant that she never tries to fit in.

“That’s something I learned in India. I simply bring my contribution to a certain situation, according to my abilities, and I never compromise on my values. I work well with the Japanese. They are very serious and diligent, and follow things well, while I’m more of a risk taker, so we complement each other well.”

Speaking of Japan and focusing, as ever, on the future, Dhillon-Marty’s thoughts are now turning to the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo.

“I’m currently thinking about what we can do to increase tourism to the countryside. The student-designed mobile pavilions, for example, could be used to invite international scholars who would visit different parts of Japan from now until 2020. We could further develop the project by inviting people to do performances, write poetry about these regions, et cetera,” she enthuses. “Eventually, when people visit Japan, they won’t only come to Tokyo or Kyoto but will go to that small village in Yamagata Prefecture because they have the best sake brewery in the country.”

Dhillon-Marty Foundation: www.dhillonmarty.org.