



## ZOROASTRIAN ASSOCIATION OF GREATER NEW YORK

# SPECIAL XVI NAZC 2012 NEWSLETTER



**“Our identity, existence, prosperity and survival depend of course on our understanding of our religion, but also on how we have evolved over the centuries in two completely different environments – one in relative freedom and the other in intolerable oppression. We are all the victims of our experiences.”**

It is with those words that Gev Nentin and Ferzin Patel, Co-Chairs of the XVI NAZC 2012 opened the event. The Congress involved the efforts of so many ZAGNY members in a plethora of ways. Be it in logistics, program design, technological innovations or vibrant dance on Saturday night.

## WHERE

As Ferzin said, “the four days of the Congress were for participants to choose and to take opportunities to enjoy the company of all your fellow Zarathushti’s who have come from different parts of the continent and world to enjoy our beautiful city with its exciting night life and theatre, and arts..”

Ensuring the seamless execution of the Congress fell to the Logistics Committee. Their first mandate: WHERE ?

The Logistics committee began the process of site selection in 2009. There were various criteria to consider in picking a hotel.

As Gev noted in his opening “We [had] a total count of 575 attending the Congress and 720 attending the banquet. We had to close down all registration several days before the deadline. This is not a boast but a regret that we could not accommodate everyone who wanted to attend. The safety and comfort of those who registered early was our priority.”

Our Congress venue had to have a suffi-

cient number of guest rooms that were competitively priced to accommodate the close to 600 registrants that were expected. It also had to have a room large enough to accommodate a banquet for over 700. Furthermore, the hotel also

true partners in this event.

Keeping these criteria in mind, the Logistics committee drew up a short list of venues and visited each one before narrowing the choice down to the Rye Town Hilton. Intense negotiations with the hotel followed, and in August 2010, a contract was signed.

## A WARM WELCOME



THE RECEPTION DESK WITH ZAGNY AND IZA VOLUNTEERS WELCOMING DELEGATES

had to have at least one room with the capacity to seat all participants in a classroom style setting.

NAZC 2012 was the first Zarathushti congress where real time audience response questionnaires were being used; an innovation that required tables equipped with easy access to clickers. Predicting a large number of attendees driving in from the tri-state area as well as from Boston, Toronto and Montreal, any venue picked also had to provide ample free parking. And, as with any event of this complexity and variety, the Logistics committee sought management that would be co-operative and flexible;

Each registrant was welcomed with a gift bag. True to our Zarathushti spirit we wanted to contribute to the lives of those with disabilities by providing an opportunity for them to be part of something special. We ordered our gift bags from the Helen Keller Institute for the Deaf and Blind in Mumbai. This was not only the first order the Institute had received from abroad but also one of the largest single order they have fulfilled to date. Individuals who were visiting India during the year transported the bags from Mumbai. These bags were filled with Parsi style snacks made by volunteers, along with Parsi and Iranian cookbooks. The Iranian cookbook was a



DR. TRITA PARSI DELIVERING THE KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT THE OPENING CEREMONY

community effort by IZA members who wrote the recipes, prepared the dishes, photographed them, designed the books and had them printed.

## BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

The Logistics Committee sought to streamline the online registration process while giving individuals a choice of various add-on options. Both online and hard copy registrations were available, in addition to the launch of a live website almost a year before the Congress. The inflow of registrations was monitored on a weekly basis. The Logistics Committee were met with an unexpected challenge. A Zarathushti Iranian website Berasad picked up the information and registration form from Facebook. Zarathushtis from Iran saw this as an opportunity to attend a gathering of Zarathushtis outside their country. A large number of registrations started coming in from Zarathushtis in Iran. Securing visas for these prospective participants entailed

THE DASTURJIS LED BY ZAGNY'S ERVAD PERVEZ PATEL LIGHT THE CEREMONIAL FIRE. AT LEFT IS OUR OWN ZAGNY AND IZA YOUTH TARA JAMSHIDIAN.



FLAG BEARERS AT THE OPENING CEREMONY. [L TO R]: ROHINTON CAMA, PAM SHROFF, FALI SHROFF.

writing letters to U.S. consulates and embassies all over the Middle East, Europe and India.

By the end of April 2012, the Logistics Committee had written close to one hundred letters. Sometimes in desperation they applied to multiple consulates

with the hope of getting an interview. Every available avenue to get a visa was explored, often at great expense and time, as they had to travel to the consulates for an interview only to be rejected. Despite all their perseverance and our best efforts only one couple of the almost 150 Zarathushtis in Iran who registered were able to attend the Congress.

## THE PROGRAM

“As the next 4 days will unveil relevant issues and the need for understanding how we can tackle these hard questions, the program themes and topics were masterfully created by the program committee”

It was not just themes and topics that the Program Committee grappled with, but also how to engage the wider community and participants. The Congress sought to





ZAGNY CHOIR SINGING KHUDAVIND KHAVIND MONAJAT AT THE OPENING.

be about dialogue and discussion, not diatribes and didactics.

The theme of the XVIth North American Zarathushti Congress was “Zarathushti Existence in the Contemporary World”. This theme was motivated by two considerations. First, the demographics of Zarathushtis would suggest that the community will shrink if we retain the traditional definition of Zarathushtis (viz. a Zarathushti is anyone born of two Zarathushti parents). Second, if we decide to broaden the definition of who is a Zarathushti, how far should we go, and what are the implications?

We also believed that it is not enough to merely survive. Our existence needs to be meaningful. Our community needs to evolve, not just numerically, but in terms of comprehension of the core principles and values of the religion. Zarathushtis of the future need to personify their beliefs in daily living. What do we need to do to realize this vision?

We wanted the XVIth North American Zarathushti Congress to explore these questions. To do so, we developed a framework of principles.

We wanted the exploration to be driven

not only by a few acknowledged scholars, but by the entire community. We wanted to create a genuinely inclusive environment in which different points of view could be expressed and evaluated. This would require that audience members listen with attention and respect views contrary to their own. It would also require that speakers and panelists be able to express not just what they believe but why they believe. No attempt would be made to force a consensus. Thus, an open and respectful dialogue on issues of far-reaching importance to the community was a hoped for legacy of this Congress.

We wanted to engage young Zarathushtis in shaping this Congress. We wanted to make them equal partners and give them freedom to create a vision for the youth.



YOUTH PARTICIPANTS AT THE ZARATHUSHTI CORE BELIEFS SESSION BEING CONDUCTED BY ERVAD SOLI DASTUR, SEEN BELOW.





PANELISTS DISCUSSING ZARATHUSHTI IDENTITY. SEEN AT THE PODIUM, DR. KEKI DADACHANJI, CHAIR OF THE PANEL, AND CHAIR OF THE PROGRAM COMMITTEE FOR THE XVI NAZC 2012

We wanted to fully integrate the Parsi and Irani communities as one Zarathushti community in creating a vision for this Congress, and in realizing that vision.

We wanted to create a legacy of actions that move the community forward in the directions identified at the Congress.

We recognized that religion has three dimensions: core beliefs, rituals, and congregation. We wanted the Congress to have tracks that addressed each of these dimensions.

We wanted to use varied formats to present various sessions. These would include lectures, panels, dramatizations, etc.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Involving the entire community in general, and the audience present at the Congress in particular, was achieved through various processes.

### VIDEO INTERVIEWS:

In the two years preceding the Congress, the Program Committee interviewed a large number of Zarathushtis on video. The interviews were prompted by questions related to the theme of the Congress, but gave considerable latitude to the interviewees to express themselves. These interviews revealed the cross-section of opinions and feelings of Zarathushtis of different age-groups, genders, geographic locations, countries of origin, and belief-structures. Selected clips from these interviews introduced each track at the Congress. A complete archive of these interviews is available online.

### AUDIENCE RESPONSE

### QUESTIONS:

This Congress introduced the use of modern-day technology to obtain, organize and display audience opinions on various questions. Five-hundred electronic clickers were distributed at each session and audience members used these clickers to relay their opinion on each question. After everyone had expressed their views on a question, the dispersion of audience responses was instantly displayed on the screen. Typically audience response questions were presented at the beginning of a session, to capture audience opinions uninfluenced by presentations. A few of these questions were repeated at the end of the session to determine if the discussion had resulted in changed opinions.

Question and Answer: A traditional presentation is one where the speaker delivers a lecture followed by a few minutes for questions from the audience. At

ZAGNY'S DR. KAIKHASHROV IRANI ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE DURING THE NAVJOTE/SUDREH PUSHI CEREMONY SESSION.







**ZAGNY'S ERVAD KARL KHAMBATTA RECITING THE NAVJOTE PRAYERS IN ENGLISH. HE RECEIVED A STANDING OVATION FROM THE CROWD**

this Congress, we wanted to reverse the emphasis and devote a significant portion of time to audience questions. This changed order meant that the speakers and panelists did not control the scope of the discussion, and the audience was able to raise questions on a spectrum of issues. The format also provided an opportunity for audience members to make brief comments on the questions raised. The Program Committee recognized the risks inherent in such a process, but decided to try it nonetheless. To everyone's delight, the Congress

demonstrated that it is indeed possible to discuss divisive issues vigorously but respectfully.

The Logistics committee worked closely with the Program Committee to appropriately allocate space and accommodate the various events.

## MAJOR TRACKS

The program was divided into tracks, based on the dimensions of religion.

### CORE BELIEFS:

Survival requires evolving with the changing environment. However, there are some constants that should not change. These are the Zarathushti core beliefs and we wanted to remind ourselves of what those comprise. The Program Committee established some guidelines of how to present Zarathushti core beliefs at the Congress. The presentations had to be intellectually accessible. The presentations had to be based on undisputable sources. The presentation had to express that beliefs should translate to practice. Hence, each presentation was to include personal experiences of Zarathushtis practicing these core beliefs in daily living.

Ervad Dr. Soli Dastur presented the essence of Zarathushti core beliefs.

He involved six young Zarathushtis in his presentation. Anahita Dua, a young Zarathushti, discussed how she was guided in daily life by Zarathushti principles. The late Dr. Roda Patel devoted the last part of her life to the Gram Seva project. Her husband, Dr. Khushroo Patel, in a very touching tribute, remembered how Roda was led to this destiny by her



**DR. YUHAN VEVAINA DELIVERING THE KHORSHED JUNGALWALA MEMORIAL LECTURE AT THE XVI NAZC 2012.**

religious beliefs.

### ZARATHUSHTI IDENTITY:

The Zarathushti Identity session attempted to answer two questions: "What makes a person Zarathushti?" and "What do we need to do to ensure that the community progresses to a better future?"

This exploration would further address questions about religious education, the Navjote, conversion, places of worship, and other related topics. It was recog-

### THE CHILDREN'S PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS WITH THEIR TEACHERS.





THE SESSION ON PERSIAN HERITAGE SITES IN PROGRESS.



DINSHAW TAMBOLY SPEAKING AT THE SESSION ON POVERTY IN OUR COMMUNITIES ABROAD.

nized that people hold different views on these subjects, and this division often inhibits constructive discussion.

The intent was that on the day of the Congress, members of the audience would express passionately held beliefs and opinions, and explain why they hold those beliefs. This process would create an environment of understanding, even if a consensus could not be reached. This is an unorthodox approach. Congresses are expected to bring scholars who know the answers. Would giving the audience an equal voice not create chaos and lack of closure?

To overcome this concern, the Program Committee assembled a panel of eight Zarathushtis that would discuss and debate these questions in the year leading up to the Congress. The panel would be a microcosm of the community. This panel would describe their journey at the Congress. They would be the model of how understanding of opinions different from our own can be reached, and respect and friendship can prevail despite differences.

The Core Beliefs session started with a brief overview of demographics. The audience was then asked to respond to a number of questions using the clickers. The interest and engagement of the audience was palpable as results of how they responded to specific questions were displayed. The panel members then presented their journey over the past year. Finally the audience had the oppor-

tunity to ask questions and make brief comments. This audience established a gold-standard of how sensitive subjects should be debated with total understanding and respect. The energy of the audience was so intense that the session had to be extended into the lunch hour!

In answering one of the final questions, the audience responded that the process used in this session (focus-group to explore the issues, audience response technology to obtain and display audience opinions), with some enhancements, should serve as a model for future congresses.

## INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE: MOTIVATION, INSPIRATION, ACTION!

### THE TINY TOTS PROGRAM



The Intergenerational Dialogue session represented the vision of the youth. What motivates a young Zarathushti to engage with the religion and the community, and what alienates him/her? Young Zarathushtis described what motivated them. One of them was inspired to teach religion to children. The other was driven to organize a large-scale service project. The third became an ordained priest, and described how it affected him. The moderator navigated skillfully through audience questions.

Behind the scenes, a large proportion of the video interviewees and interviewers were young Zarathushtis. The youth were not an afterthought, but an integral part of this Congress. This session restored the faith of many that the religion and



the community are secure in the hands of our Zarathushti youth.

## THE NAVJOTE CEREMONY AND THE SUDREH PUSHI RITUAL:

Rituals are an important dimension of any religion. The Navjote ceremony is the central ritual of the Zarathushti religion. It is a declaration of faith, and a commitment to live by its principles. However, in practice, this spiritual dimension is often minimized or lost, and the ceremony reduced to a social event. The goal of this track was to restore and explore the true significance of this event.

This goal was accomplished in three steps. Ervad Dr. Jehan Bagli presented the meaning and significance of the Navjote ceremony.

Then Professor Kaikhosrov Irani reflected on the conversation he had with his father two days before he was going to have his Navjote performed, some eight decades earlier. He remembered the conversation vividly starting with his father asking him if he understood what was going to happen two days later. Little Kaikhosrov had some vague understanding. His father proceeded to explain to him that he was committing to live his life by the law of Asha, the natural order of the spiritual world. Professor Irani

then explained that he now understands what that meant, and gave some examples. Finally, Ervad Karl Khambatta performed the Kushti ritual, reciting the prayers in English. The long standing ovation was proof that the meaning of those words resonated with many who had recited these prayers countless times without full comprehension.

While the Congress participants were primarily Zarathushtis from North America, the Program Committee was cognizant of our place as part of the worldwide Zarathushti community. To that end, two sessions, relating to Iran and India were included.

## COMBATING POVERTY IN OUR COMMUNITY ABROAD:

Many Zarathushtis living in North America cannot comprehend the extent of poverty among Zarathushtis living in the villages of Gujarat. A panel comprised of Armene Modi, Priyanka Sinha and Dinshaw Tamboly, moderated by Kaizad Cama described the situation, and what has been done to alleviate some of it. The traditional response to the problem has been monetary donations.



A PROTOTYPE OF THE CYRUS CYLINDER BEING PRESENTED AT THE FEZANA SESSION

The panel recommended that people from North America, especially young Zarathushtis, spend time in these areas, working on specific projects. Such engagement would create a deeper bond between Zarathushtis in North America and India, with participants becoming ambassadors of understanding and goodwill between the two countries. Zarathushti associations across North America were encouraged to sponsor young Zarathushtis for summer projects to address poverty among Zarathushtis in Gujarat.

## PRESERVING PERSIAN HERITAGE:

Many historical and pilgrimage sites in

ROSHEEN KABRAJI PRESENTING THE WORK OF PARZOR



DINSHA AND FARROKH MISTREE RE-CAPPING THE CONGRESS PROCEEDINGS AT THE RETROSPECTIVE SESSION.



Iran are in a state of neglect and deterioration. This session gave a detailed understanding and visual representation of the current situation. The speakers also reviewed the current renovation and restoration activities related to Zarathushti pilgrimage sites in Iran.

## SPECIALIZED SESSIONS

Aside from the main panel sessions every day there were three other specialized sessions during the Congress.

### ZARATHUSHTI EMPIRES: COMMON THEMES AND CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES,

This was a one hour history lesson covering the history of the three Zarathushti Empires which ruled over Iran and its surrounding areas for over 2000 years. The course was given by Daulat Kotval and Dr. Xerxes Kotval, history teachers at the ZAGNY religion classes. This was attended by over 60 people of all ages above 12. IWe had underestimated the interest in this subject and the session was full to standing room capacity with over 60 attendees of all ages, some as young as 12 years.

### BASIC COURSE ON THE ZARATHUSHTI RELIGION:

This one and a half hour course was designed for those who wanted an introduction to the Zarathushti Religion, either because they never had a formal education in the religion or they wanted to brush up on their knowledge. The course was given by Sarosh Collector of ZAH, who has been a long time religion class teacher at ZAH. The course dealt with the basic tenets of the religion with emphasis on the concept of the Amesh Spentas, which forms the basis of the doctrine of Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds. The course also dealt with the Zarathushti ideas of heaven and hell which influenced the Abrahamic faiths as they came into contact with the Zarathushti religion. The course was attended by about 25 people.

### EFFECTIVELY TEACHING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

This was a workshop designed to teach



A MOMENT OF SILENCE OBSERVED IN MEMORY OF THE PASSING AWAY OF ARBAB MEHRABAN ZARTOSHTY

Religion class teachers to teach effectively. A majority of religion class teachers are not trained formally as teachers and need to learn the basic principles of teaching. This workshop was given by Daraius Bharucha, a religion class teacher who teaches history in high school and has a Bachelor of Education and is presently the president of ZSO. The course dealt with models of religious education, their pros and cons and the one best suited for religious education for Zarathushtis. This was followed by a hands-on workshop where teachers working in small groups learnt how to create a lesson plan and how to present it. At the end of the course they were able to share their lesson plans so as to actually have a few that were classroom-ready. The course was attended by about 25 teachers and prospective teachers. Feedback from the attendees was extremely positive with a consensus that this session should be a part of future congresses.

FEZANA PRESIDENT BOMI PATEL WITH ALL FIVE PAST FEZANA PRESIDENTS CUTTING A CAKE AT THE FEZANA 25TH ANNIVERSARY GALA DINNER AT THE XVI NAZC 2012.



### CHILDREN'S PROGRAMS

Both adults and children were able to fully partake of the Congress' many offerings.

Babysitting services were provided for children five years and under, with Hasina Master and Kamal Merchant, assisted by Armaity Patel, decorating a playroom and providing loving care.

Pearl Satarawala and Vehishta Kaikobad organized and conducted a very successful Children's Program for children





**WINNERS OF THE FEZANA 2012 AWARDS WITH MS. NIRUPAMA RAO, AMBASSADOR OF INDIA TO THE UNITED STATES.**

5-12 years of age. Some of the older children also attended a few of the regular sessions depending on the topics that sparked their interest.

## THE RETROSPECTIVE:

The Program Committee wanted the Congress to end on a note of self-reflection combined with momentum to go forward. In keeping with one of the framework principles, the retrospective was put together in an audience-centric manner. After each session, audience members were requested to fill out forms expressing their views about the session and this feedback was used in the retrospective conducted by Dr. Farrokh Mistree and Dinsha Mistree. They noted that congresses should not be solitary events that occur every other year; but instead be milestones in a continuous journey. To that end, the retrospective

**K-VON DURING HIS STANDUP COMEDY ACT AT THE FRIDAY NIGHT ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAM**



identified activities that should progress between this Congress and the next. The prime movers of these activities would be ZAGNY (the host of this Congress), ZAC (the host of the next congress), FEZANA, and various Zarathushti associations over North America. How these various organizations should work together to move these initiatives forward remains to be determined.

## THE LEGACY:

Milestones need to be remembered. History enables us to measure progress. Every North American Zarathushti Congress is a milestone, and how its proceedings are preserved and communicated is important. We have video recordings of interviews done prior to the Congress. We have summaries of how the audience at this Congress responded to the questions asked (using the audience response technology) to the questions asked. We have video recordings of all sessions. Most of this material will be online and be available to Zarathushtis anywhere. This is a legacy of this Congress.

## NEXT STEPS

The Congress identified a number of activities to pursue further. A good summarization of these can be found in the video of the retrospective. Some of these activities found immediate sponsors. ZAGNY, for example, committed to contribute to building housing and

sponsoring young Zarathushtis to work on projects to address poverty issue in Gujarat. Others should be processed between this Congress and the next.

## FEZANA

The Congress organizers were delighted that FEZANA had chosen to celebrate its Silver Jubilee and also to hold its AGM during the Congress. The Logistics Committee worked very closely with FEZANA to ensure the successful implementation of these events.

### NAHID DASHTAKI WRITES:

As Secretary of FEZANA, I found myself very lucky to not only be a participant but an organizer in the 25th anniversary celebrations, which took place in Rye, New York on August 2, 2012. The FEZANA Silver Jubilee Anniversary was quite a celebration. It was not only a celebration of longevity but also of grand accomplishment by a community that chooses to progress. From the sweat of our forefathers, this organization has managed to grow and prosper for a quar-



**DARAIUS BHARUCHA SPEAKING AT THE SESSION ON EFFECTIVE TEACHING OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION. BELOW IS A SHOT OF THE VENDOR MARKET**



ter of a century – and by the looks of it, much, much further.

The evening started with the Master of Ceremonies opening up the festivities with excitement and comedy to a crowd of members from associations all over North America. Amongst those in attendance were all the past presidents of FEZANA. These individuals have had the privilege of leading the North American Community of FEZANA into the future. All present and past presidents of FEZANA gathered around a large cake, celebrating the 25th anniversary, for a photo opportunity. With smiles and laughs, photos were taken before the events of the evening progressed.

For those in attendance, there was delightful entertainment. With three performances throughout the evening, the NOMAD Dancing Group, was a pleasure to watch perform. The colors of their costumes, the grace of their movements, and the lively music were enough to get everyone clapping and dancing in their seats. Each dance was more wonderful than the one before.

If that was not enough, the night was then filled with the talented voice of Ziba Colah playing with the GENERATION ONE band which travelled all the way out from Texas to perform that night. Within two songs they had the whole room up and dancing, which did not end until the early hours of the morning.

At the close of the evening, as I was walking away from a celebration that

**ADI TAMBOLY REGALING THE CROWD AT THE FRIDAY NIGHT ENTERTAINMENT**



commemorated 25 years of prosperity and progress in a community full of life and passion, I knew that this was just a drop in the bucket of the amazing things yet to come from FEZANA. If in these first 25 years we have been able to accomplish this much, just think of the amazing things we all are able to in the next 25 years. All the best FEZANA!

## THE EXHIBIT ROOM

Two years of preparation came to fruition at the Congress, as the Exhibit Committee brought all the elements of the Exhibit room together. A host of volunteers worked as a team to convert a hotel conference room into a mini museum. During the Congress, many local youth, dressed in traditional attire, took turns to volunteer to welcome guests and address their questions.

The Exhibit room had large panels of pictures and commentary across the length of two walls, one representing our history titled “From Then” and the other titled “to Now” representing the Zarathushti community in North America today. Four showcases contained glittering silver Ses and vases, antiquities and elements of home décor on loan from community members. Large pieces of art were interspersed along the edges of the room, with the circular ‘Theorama’ (prints By M. F. Hussain showing the landscape of religions) in the middle. A set of exquisitely dressed Mannequins depicted the Navjote Ceremony. This display of a boy Navjotee, a Mobed in full Jamo, the parents wearing Dagli and Gara sari, and the adorable little sister in topi, sapats and Jhabla, was the focal point of the exhibit. The beautiful Persian picture plates, urns and vases, and the large wooden plate on display were described as ‘eye catching’ and ‘fabulous’. The Haft Sin display and exquisite Persian artifacts drew great interest, and some attendees even inquired as to whether any of the items on display were available for sale. At the heart of the room was the model of the proposed New York Darbe Mehr structure

One gentleman stood watching the DVD

compilation for so long that volunteers rushed to bring him a chair. The compilation provided a delightful soundtrack for the room, yet did not overwhelm attendees. Many guests revisited the exhibit, telling volunteers that there was so much material they wanted to return in order to spend more time reading through the panels, or enjoying the books on display. The Exhibit room was very well attended and well-received and many suggested that it should be made into a permanent exhibit at one of our community Darbe Mehirs.

The Exhibit room was not only a reminder of our rich heritage, but also a way to bring people together. While still setting up the Exhibit Room, two young men knocked on the door, attracted by the signage outside, and the mannequin dressed in beautiful Persian clothing. They were disheartened when told the room was not yet open to the public, and were allowed a sneak peek. Instead of a quick walk through, they spent some time on each aspect of the exhibit and discussed many elements with great interest. They were cousins, one from New York and the other from Iran – the exhibit had allowed them to connect their experiences and share a common heritage, even though they experience very different daily lives. We could not have hoped for a better outcome, than to help youth like these to connect with their heritage, as they join together to build a promising future for our community.

## THE FEZANA COMMUNITY AWARDS

*(extracted from the FEZANA Journal)*

The FEZANA Community awards were held at the Congress and hosted by Navroz Gandhi and Shehernaz Joshi Verahrami co-chairs of the FEZANA Awards Committee. Before beginning the ceremony Navroz Gandhi introduced Mrs. Nirupama Rao, Ambassador of India to the United States since September 2011,



who, along with FEZANA's president, Bomi Patel, handed out the FEZANA Awards

There are seven FEZANA award categories and each category has a set of criteria with points ascribed to each criterion. Sponsors for a nominee are asked to submit a maximum of six pages advocating their choice and explaining how the nominee meets these criteria, and judges base their decision solely on this write up and nothing else.

This year 32 nominations for the seven award categories were received. Nominations were received from a variety of Zarathushti associations, communities and individuals. Each award category was judged by four individuals and these individuals were neither a member of the association submitting a nomination for that particular award category, nor were they related to a nominee in that category. Gender and age ratio was maintained for the judges. The judges were anonymous, and their identity was not known even by fellow judges for the same category. Given this construct, there was a tie for the "Excellence in Business or Profession" award category. Of note was that three of the eight award recipients were priests within our communities. However women made up less than one third of the nominees which was rather surprising given our demographics.

The award ceremony showcased the substantial talent and accomplishments of our community. The recipients (listed below) are an inspiration to many.



THE EXHIBIT ROOM

Shirin Nariman Dastoor Outstanding Young Zarathushti Student Award: Ervad Bahrom F. Firozgary

Mehraban Zartoshty Outstanding Young Zarathushti Award: Narius K. Dastur

North American Mobeds Council Community Service Award: Ervad Zerkxis Z. Bhandara

Dinshaw Framroze Joshi Excellence in Performing Arts, Painting or Literature Award: Rohinton Mistry

Jamshed and Shirin Guzdar Excellence in Business or Profession Award: Dr. Firdaus S. Dhabar & Dr. Shahrokh Khanizadeh

Jamshed Pavri Humanitarian Service Award: Freyez K. Shroff

Rohinton Rivetna Outstanding Zarathushti Award: Firdosh Mehta

Special NAMC Award: Ervad Pervez Patel

## TECHNOLOGY & AUDIO VISUALS

XVI NAZC 2012 shall be remembered for a few first's when it comes to the use of technology. In keeping with the times and catering to the youth of our community, social media played a big part in all of the Congress activities. A dedicated Facebook page and ZAGNY's twitter accounts gave regular updates leading up to and during the Congress.

A very active and updated website was the main point of contact for registrants from all over the world. For the very first time for a Zarathushti Congress worldwide all registration was online. People registered themselves and made payment through credit cards all without the need to mail in forms and checks.

Regular email newsletters to over 2200 Zarathushtis all over the world, kept people abreast of what was developing pre-Congress.

ZAGNY's youtube channel broadcast intro sequences into sessions that were being held at the Congress. All the Congress proceedings were recorded in its entirety and for the very first time ever for a Zarathushti Congress these proceedings are in the process of being uploaded online for the viewing pleasure of one and all around the world.

Another first was the audience response system implemented at the Congress. There was no more of the "raise your hands" to a question put forth to the audience.

## OFF TO NEW YORK CITY FOR A NIGHT OF PARTYING AND FUN.













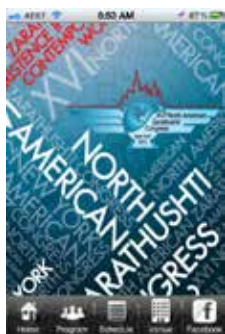


CONGRESS ATTENDEES AT THE GALA BANQUET NIGHT.

Everyone in the audience had a clicker which registered their answer to a question displayed on one of the three Jumbotron screens in the main assembly hall. The answers were the first scientific polls conducted at a Zarathushti event of this nature. The FEZANA Journal and Parsiana, two leading publications of the community, have used the data collected in very interesting ways to highlight the current state of the North American Zarathushti Community.

Also a first for any Zarathushti Congress anywhere in the world; was the introduction of the NAZC App. This was developed in-house by ZAGNY and launched two months before the Congress. Available for iPhones, iPads, Android, Blackberry and Windows devices, this app allowed people to have the Congress in the “palm of their hands.” Be it the schedule, venue changes or sharing their pictures of the Congress in real-time, the app added another dimension in the interactions between the attendees and the event.

#### NAZC 2012 APP



Technology was used during the sessions throughout the Congress. A speaker who could not attend was “Skyped” in from Mumbai, half way

around the world. The audience were encouraged to tweet questions to the panelists while the session was in progress. Regular twitter updates encouraged a parallel discussion while the Congress was in session.

At the venue itself; the audio visual set up was flawless. The Congress conscientiously raised the bar in terms of coordinated presentations amongst the dozens of speakers. Video presentations were widely used to illustrate thoughts and ideas. The Banquet night performances were supported by top notch sound and lights that would have made a Broadway production proud. All this was done within budgetary constraints and utilizing the resources available to us to the fullest.

## SOCIAL EVENTS

Time sure flies when one is having fun and our past one and a half year journey is a testament to that as it has gone by in a blink of an eye. The memories and friendships we have created and the fun times we’ve had will last forever. While the Congress did put a lot on our already full plates, it also gave our vibrant community a wonderful excuse to spend more time with current friends and make new ones.

The journey began back in summer of 2010 when the Social Committee (SC) took shape and members volunteered and committed enthusiastically to this venture. Many of the volunteers had not attended a congress previously but that did not deter them for they knew what it meant to have and show others a good time. Big plans were made to attend the XVth NAZC in Houston, but for some of us it was not meant to be as the 2010 blizzard led to cancellation of our flights.

Over the course of the first year, the Social Committee worked on a series of fundraisers---Dandiya Raas night, gara raffle, online auction and Jamva Chalaji gala---all events raised a modest sum but more importantly allowed us to get to know one another better, learnt strengths and working styles, and get warmed up for the real thing.

The Social Committee was charged with planning the entertainment for all four days of the Congress. A lot of deliberation and thought went into the planning stages. From the very onset, members were passionate about showcasing our own community’s talent. Yes, bringing in famous icons like Shiamak Davar or Boman Irani would have had the star power, but for us it was all about working with our very local gifted youth. Many of our kids had been taking music/dance/voice lessons for years. Some of them, having been raised in bi-cultural interfaith marriages, were versatile in varied genres of dance and other art forms. As Gev Nentin noted in his opening speech, “a key difference between this Congress and the one 14 years ago is how much our youth have participated in the development of our program and social events”. The Social Committee was a shining example of this.

After months and months of practice, August 2012 was finally here, and to the Hilton we arrived with some trepidations but mainly excitement in our hearts to finally witness our very first Z Congress (for some of us), and to showcase our community and put on a show like never before.





DASTURJIS FROM ALL OVER NORTH AMERICA GATHER BEFORE THE PROCESSION OF PRIESTS AT THE OPENING CEREMONY.

## THE OPENING CEREMONY

This session had been planned with a religious theme in mind. Once the hall lights were dimmed, the powerful music of our soprano, Tara Jamshidian and accompanying pianist, Neville Dusaj to Parizad Irani's, "Zarathushtra," resonated through the room, our revered priests walked down the center aisle onto the stage with divas in their hands. The effect was a chilling one giving the audience goose bumps and eager anticipation of things to follow.

After the short Atash Niyaesh, the audience joined in to recite the "Aa Airyema Ishyo" prayer following the words on the jumbotrons. The religious theme continued as the Z-choir, dressed in their garas and daglis, sang a traditional Parsi monajat, Khudavind Khavind O Parvardegar (with words slightly altered to go with

the morning ceremony) and a Persian hymn "Khan Ashem Vohu". Next marched in our proud flag bearers Rohinton Cama, Pam Shroff and Fali Shroff carrying the American, Canadian and the Congress flags respectively to a live drum roll.

Hearing the American and Canadian national anthems sung so beautifully by Tara Jamshidian and Zal Shroff gave everyone a great sense of pride and patriotism and reminded us of how incredibly fortunate we all are to live in two of the most beautiful, prosperous, and free countries on earth. The opening ceremony concluded with a touching military tribute to heart-tugging music "Here's to the Heroes," put together by Maharukh Cama and Shiroy Ranji in honor of our Zarathushtis who have brought pride and honor to the community and country.

## FRIDAY EVENING

With so many of our guests interested in visiting NYC, Friday was a half-day session and arrangements had been made for buses to bring our guests to NYC. Several sightseeing options had been put together. ZAGNY youth had arranged for a fun evening at a bar for the young adults which lasted till 1:00 am. Precautionary arrangements were made to ensure no one would be left behind in the city. Over one hundred individuals enjoyed visiting Manhattan.

For the ones who chose to stay back, the evening entertainment segment featured, K-Von a Persian-American stand-up comedian. "Tanx-God" the audience was able to connect to his cultural humorous observations, as did the teens and

### THE OPENING CEREMONY IN PROGRESS WITH THE PRIESTS PROCESSION ON STAGE





THE INTERGENERATIONAL PANEL PARTICIPANTS ALONG WITH THE MODERATORS AND THE PROGRAM COMMITTEE MEMBERS OF XVI NAZC 2012

tweens who could also relate to the funny clashes in culture and could identify with him. Our emcee for the evening, Viraf Ghadiali, then introduced Dr. Adi Tamboli who rocked the night with his popular one-man orchestra performance. Nozer Buchia was a great trooper singing along as the audience regaled on the nostalgic old Hindi melodies and danced to those tunes way past midnight.

## THE GRAND GALA

Finally came the night that we all had been eagerly anticipating for the past one and a half years. The performers came to the green room to get ready. The energy in the room was amazing! Out in the main hall, volunteers were ushering guests to their assigned tables. The choreographers gave the group members one last pep talk, thanking them for their hard work and dedication and told them to go out and shine!

As proud hosts from New York and with the event being held a hop skip and jump away from NYC, the cultural mecca of the world, the banquet night theme was to take our audience on an unforgettable virtual hop-on-hop-off tour of New York City. With the help of our emcees Adil Mistry and Freya Motafaram, this customized fully guided tour was envisioned to provide a total Big Apple experience and included special performances dedicated to some of New York City's greatest landmarks and neighborhoods.

The cultural tour started at the Darbe Mehr where the children spend so much time together. We wanted to convey that despite living in this modern society, we Zarathushtis have retained our traditional

values. This "old meets new" concept was portrayed through a fusion dance with traditional classical and modern contemporary moves and the audience loved it! The next stop was Carnegie Hall stop where little 7 year old Sarosh Mistry wowed the audience with a brilliant violin performance with Neville Dusaj accompanying him on the piano. The next stop was Great Neck, LI where Iranian-Zarathushti clusters are prominent. The Persian performers had chosen a historic dance of Baba Karam—an artistic tribute to Laats/Jahels who emerged in the late 1920s all over Iran. At the Radio City stop, our ballerinas mesmerized the audience in their adorable lil' pink tutus. The Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center stop was where soprano Tara Jamshidian and tenor Zal Shroff's strong vocals and stunning performance to "All I Ask of You" from the Phantom of the Opera left a lasting impression. At our Wall Street stop, our dancing duo Natasha Dusaj and Spenta Bamji, tapped surreptitiously to a clapping, cheering audience to Michael Jackson's "Working Day and Night." Accompanying them were the live props who played the Wall Street executives joining in the dance with their chic moves. The hilarious bawaji humor at the Late Show with Darius Letterwalla and Pes

Shaffer had the audience in stitches as Cyrus Nentin and Neville Commissariat counted down the Top 10 from the home office in Persepolis Persia. The Jackson Heights stop was another big hit where we had a triple medley with the youngsters performing a Punjabi Dhamaaka, the moms aka "dandaiya divas" did a dandiya-raas, and then both groups got together for the final "Jai Ho" finale. At the Spanish Harlem stop, Shirin Kumaana Wadia and her partner ignited the stage with their hot salsa and merengue moves leaving the audience wanting more. And finally since no trip to NYC would be complete without catching a Broadway show, the last stop on our tour took the audience to Broadway, where they were treated to performances from three popular shows of all times "Annie", "Grease" and "HairSpray." It started out with Neville Manilow Sinatra Dusaj providing a remarkably convincing lip syncing rendition of "Give my regards to Broadway" as our dancers took stage and ending with "New York New York" as our million dollar choreographer quartet featured the Rockettes' signature eye-high kicks with the audience of 700+ clapping, whistling, cheering them on ending in a roaring applause and a standing ovation.

Finally, as our Congress Co-Chairs Gev Nentin and Ferzin Patel came up to thank the performers and just when the

CYRUS MEHTA (R) PERFORMS AT THE ZAGNY PHILHARMONIC ALONG WITH DAUGHTER IYANAH, (L) WHO AT 6 WAS THE YOUNGEST MEMBER OF THE ORCHESTRA.





onlookers thought it was all over, came the grand finale surprise element...the very first performance ever of a Z-flash mob to the Party Rock Anthem with special inputs from "I'm Bawa and I know it.". Participants from the audience and back-stage flooded the stage and dance floor. This number was even more meaningful since many of our out of town guests had sportingly agreed to join in by viewing a video link and learning the steps. The energy and those dazzling smiles were a sure indication that all participants had fun and it did not really matter if they were in exact sync. The full-of-gusto audience was very receptive to the performers who in turn fed off the crowd's energy, and we couldn't have asked for a more engaging, passionate, enthusiastic and larger than life audience. What a way to end the evening! Following the banquet dinner, DJ Magic Mike rocked the house and the dancing and merriment continued until the hotel staff literally pushed us out.

## THE CLOSING CEREMONY

After partying hard and lingering on to chat with buddies from all over until the wee hours of the morning, it was amazing to see our closing ceremony musicians come in bright and cheerful by 7:30 am for one last rehearsal. By popular demand, we had once again brought in our ZAGNY Philharmonic Orchestra (they had performed at our Congress back in



THE CROWD PARTYING INTO THE NIGHT AT THE GALA BANQUET.

1998), to provide a musical extravaganza under the able conductorship of Piroozi Cooper-Wittlin. Anyone who could play an instrument and wanted to take part was able to perform and no one was turned away. Our youngest member, five year old Iyanah Mehta, played with her father Cyrus Mehta. It was indeed lovely to see many of the performers from our previous Congress enthralled the audience once again twelve years later with that same commitment and enthusiasm as they played again...this time with their spouses and children! And the icing on the cake was the wonderful audience that joined in singing the Parsi national anthem "Chaiye Hame Zarhosti" and the Irani patriotic song "Ei Iran" for the grand finale.

And then, like a dream it was all over, leaving behind wonderful memories and precious friendships that will last a lifetime. We look forward to more fun times and reminiscing about old times at our Congress After-Party celebration!

## IT IS ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

Events like this are made possible by tireless efforts of individuals, Zarathush-tis and non-Zarathushtis alike. Some of them are seen on the stage, the others remain anonymous. We are grateful to them for their dedication.

THE ZAGNY PHILHARMONIC IN FULL FLOW AT THE CONCLUDING SESSION OF THE CONGRESS





ZIBA COLAH & GENERATION ONE BAND FROM HOUSTON ROCKING THE PARTY AT FEZANA'S 25TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS.

We thank speakers and panelists who guided us and contributed to this Congress. And we salute the Congress participants for not just being observers, but protagonists, and for doing it with class. They all contributed to the great success of the XVIth North American Zarathushti Congress.

## WHAT THE NAZC 2012 MEANT TO ME: ZAGNY YOUTH RESPOND

### NEVILLE DUSAJ:

This summer's North American Zarathushti Congress was an amazing experience for me, culturally, educationally, and socially, especially as a youth who was involved in organizing the Congress. Although I had attended the Youth Congress in Vancouver last year, the experience was completely different when I was working to make the event happen. One group who I worked extensively with was the social committee, which put together many of the non-informational events, like the opening and closing ceremonies, and

the banquet night. While arranging the performances, it was a unique cultural learning experience for all as we combined our traditional Zoroastrian art forms with a variety of other media, like American dance and classical orchestral instruments. In this way, I felt it perfectly paralleled the theme of the Congress, the existence of Zarathushtis in the contemporary world.

Additionally, even though I have been close friends with many other Zarathushti youth in the ZAGNY community, this whole experience brought us much closer together than we ever had been before. Prior to this event, I saw these friends maybe once per month in the religion classes. However, with the meetings and practices and other events that led up to the Congress, our bonds with each other grew so much stronger. I feel this will be especially important as we youth slowly begin to take charge within our own communities, and it will lead to the success of many more events like this to come, just as the tightness and cohesiveness of the older generation has allowed them to work together so well. Furthermore, throughout the whole process, and during the Congress itself I befriended so many new amazing people in the community. And I feel in that way I know I have experienced what these congresses are all about: bringing together all the Zarathushtis from all backgrounds and uniting them, which is especially important for our sparsely populated community throughout the world.

ZAGNY YOUTH NEVILLE DUSAJ PERFORMING ON THE PIANO AT THE GALA BANQUET NIGHT ENTERTAINMENT.





Beyond the Zarathushti aspect of the Congress, participating in this congress has taught me so many new things and expanded my horizons. Even though I have two left feet, the choreographers of the show were able to convince me to learn a dance, and though I have played piano for years, I have never arranged my own songs before. I even learned how to sing like Barry Manilow and Frank Sinatra! (In all seriousness, I can still hardly believe people thought I was singing). Another wonderful experience was to have the opportunity to perform side by side with my mom and my grandparents (I played the piano accompaniment as they sang the Parsi and Irani songs). My grandma and pa would listen as I was arranging the music and give me feedback and I am glad I got this opportunity to spend some quality time with them.

The most rewarding feeling was being at the Congress itself, and seeing the hard work put in over the last two years finally come to fruition. Prior to the XVI NAZC 2012, I had never been involved with the organization of an event on this scale. Yet being involved showed me the amount of effort truly needed to bring together so many people so successfully. Those of you who have helped to host congresses yourselves will know the type of work I'm talking about as well as the feeling of satisfaction when things run smoothly and you can see how much everyone else is enjoying it. All in all, the incredible experience I've had with the 2012 North American Zarathushti Congress has motivated me to be an active member of the global Zarathushti community for the rest of my life.

## SPENTA BAMJI

Being a choreographer for the NAZC was the least I could do to give back to ZAGNY when considering the amount of knowledge and numerous friendships I have gained throughout my childhood. This form of volunteering gave me so much more than I had ever expected. Each practice meant sharing my dancing techniques and routines with not only munchkins but teenagers my age who

were more than accepting to try new things. Yes, we all faced several ups and downs regardless of the years of dance experience each individual had, yet, the idea of dancers and non-dancers coming together was one of the highlights for me being a choreographer. I watched as each person progressed and gave 110% effort into everything they were doing. The younger children especially were always thrilled to show us their weeks of dedication and improvement. To me that was the greatest reward I could have received. When the Gala Night finally came, everyone's nerves were running on edge and the pressure to give a great performance was on. Nothing meant more to me than having all the dancers comfort and support each other through every performance given. The end result was everything we had hoped for plus more; in spite of the little mistakes, we all pulled together and put on an exceptional show. As the children of ZAGNY we demonstrated how we sincerely care about our community and would do anything to help it progress. I can now only hope that there will be another opportunity for us children to reunite and share the same fun we had at each practice.

## TINA DUKANDAR

This was my second time attending a Zarathushti Congress, but first time in helping to organize one. The time, effort, and preparation to be part of the Social Committee were worth it. Being the only choreographer trained in Classical Indian and Bollywood dancing, preparing the music and



THE NOMAD DANCERS PERFORMED AT FEZANA'S 25TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS.

coming up with dance steps for volunteers who have never learned Indian dancing was challenging. We began with a group of seventeen volunteers with no Indian dance experience and were able to become a group of seventeen dancers that were able to synchronize dance steps in a short period of time. I am glad my stubborn nature refused to change any "hard" steps requested since I knew and believed that with two years of practice, hand-foot coordination would be nearly perfect. Head of the Social Committee, Khursheed Aunty was a delight to work with thanks to her patience in coordinating the numerous practices and always considering my busy schedule as a student in college. She was always extremely clear as to what she wanted

PIROOZI COOPER-WITTLIN CONDUCTING THE ZAGNY PHILHARMONIC DURING THE CLOSING CEREMONY.



from the songs, dances, and costumes. I will admit I miss the stress that came with her numerous emails, phone calls, and text messages to have me lengthen or shorten the songs, and not to mention the trips around New Jersey to find the perfect Bollywood outfits. I miss the practices, the Committee meetings, and the last minute preparations, but I am happy to know that I have the opportunity to work with these people again through other events.

## ZARINA E. BAMJI

Being a part of the Social Committee, as a choreographer, for the North American Zoroastrian Congress 2012, was an absolute blessing to me. Being my first NAZC, and only attending one youth congress in the past, I had no idea what to expect from any aspect, especially the banquet night since I was too young to remember the last NAZC we held. These amazing groups of people really lightened up my life in letting me let loose, get in touch with myself, and get to know a whole new variety of people. The amount of teamwork and effort we all put in is incredible; so many long nights and differences later, we really pulled through as a unified team.

After two years of hard work, stress, sweat, tears, and some minor broken bones, the banquet night turned out to be fabulous. The kids that, at one time, I just taught their religious class, turned out to be extremely graceful, and also

very powerful, ballerinas and dancers! They are all so multitasking, and just an absolute wonder to work with.

Being a choreographer for this night is something I'm going to carry down with me for as long as I know. The meaning of the word "proud" was not evident to me until I found myself tearing up backstage after each performance. Watching the video of the banquet night brought many more than just a few tears to my eyes, as well. We've all created so many everlasting memories with each other, and a strong bond as dancers.

Spenta's talents never ceased to amaze me in the past, and I was beyond impressed with all of the hard work she and Natasha put in with these kids while I couldn't be there. We all got to try new things for this night and step out of our comfort zones in doing so, but in the end, we all had each other to lean on for help and support along the way. All of the "Dandiya Divas" did an outstanding job, as well! As Mary Anne Rodmacher stated, "at first glance it may appear too hard. Look again; always look again." We all did just that. We did it!

In conclusion, I just want to give a special thanks to everyone for being so supportive, and behind each of these dancers 100%. All of the parents should be extremely proud of themselves and their kids for being a part of such a memorable night. Also, thanks to my mom, Tehnaz, and Khursheed for doing so much preparation for each of us dancers, and putting up with all of our stress, as

well as your own! You're amazing!!

## NATASHA DUSAJ

Having been a dancer all my life, I am used to choreographing my dances but it was so much fun to do so with my other ZAGNY friends and help create an entire performance that would be entertaining and worthy for the banquet night. Some of the songs that we wanted were rejected by my mom and the other adults for they wanted us to pick numbers that the bawaji crowd would be familiar with. I enjoyed working with all the kids but since many had never danced before this experience taught me patience, a quality I realized I did not have much of. We had to be away for a week for my national dance competition in Myrtle Beach, SC and since it was only a few days before the Congress, there was a whole lot of juggling involved but in the end it all worked out.

Even though I knew the kids from ZAGNY, the dance and orchestra practices made us get to know each other better. All our hard work paid off since everyone seemed to enjoy the entertainment segments on each day. This very first congress experience was a lot of fun and I enjoyed meeting other Z youth from all over. I am looking forward to going to CA next year!

## SOME OTHER RESPONSES:

THE TORCH BEING PASSED ON TO ZOROASTRIAN ASSOCIATION OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES, THE HOSTS OF THE XVII NAZC.



We did not get to spend much time with our daughter on this trip to the US, for if she was not busy with her Professional responsibilities, she was either on a conference call or was at the Darbe Mehr involved with the Congress practices. However, having been able to sing the Parsi monajat with our daughter and others as our grandson played the accompaniment on piano was a proud moment for us. Little did we know when we taught her the "Khudavind Khavind" monajat over 40 years ago, that not only would she remember the words and



the tune but would also teach it when raising our grandchildren in America. We would also like to thank all the wonderful friends at ZAGNY for the love and affection shown to us. We will forever cherish these wonderful memories. Love and tandarosti to all.

**- PILOO AND PHIROZ NAVDER**

Dear Khursheed,

Jehangir and I truly enjoyed being part of the flash mob. The minute Dixie mentioned that this “hush hush activity” was for the flash mob planning, I just jumped for joy - always wanted to be part of a flash mob! All your communication keeping us updated was very helpful. Your focus and your dedication for this event was evident in your energy.

A special thanks to Natasha “twinkle toes” Dusaj, and Neville “Sinatra/Gershwin” Dusaj for all your help. You must be one proud mom and rightfully so!

We are home in California now, ready to jump into the rat race, but with fond memories of the past week.

Best wishes always,

**-ANNAHITA & JEHANGIR JASAVALA**

## LOOK FORWARD TO THE NEXT NAZC IN LA!

**BY SHAZNEEN GANDHI**

That the XVI North American Zoroastrian Congress 2012 was a success should not be surprising to anyone who is familiar with the New York area Zoroastrian community: the event’s organizers had been working on it since the day they learned that they would be hosts. I know because a lot of our friends and family were involved with the Congress, and in the last few months leading up to it, it seemed impossible to converse with them on any other subject. They took pride in their involvement. Their invest-



**ZAGNY’S DANCING DIVAS PERFORMING AT THE GALA BANQUET NIGHT ENTERTAINMENT SEGMENT.**

ment of creativity and hard work showed in every aspect of the event. They owned it!

The experience of the Congress is different for everyone. My husband and I had been skeptical of the benefits of attending the Congress, given our lack of desire to engage in controversial subjects. We also expected that there would be a lot of seniors, and a younger (single) crowd that can’t resist NYC, who we - folks in the middle “with young kids” - would have little in common with. We also

wondered whether it would be worth it to pay the big bucks for it as the needs of our children - a two and a four year old - would surely limit our participation.

Ultimately, we decided to go because we wanted to see old friends. We stayed, participated and enjoyed it because the Congress accommodated many of our needs. Here are a few reasons why the New York Congress was a worthwhile endeavor for us, and why we are looking forward to the next Congress in Los Angeles:

**ZAGNY YOUTH SAROSH MISTRY AT A SOLO VIOLIN PERFORMANCE DURING THE GALA BANQUET NIGHT ENTERTAINMENT.**





**IZA YOUTH TARA JAMSHIDIAN SINGING THE KHAN ASHEMVOHU AT THE OPENING CEREMONY**

Everything, for us, is possible only if our children are taken care of. The Congress offered a superb program for children 5 years and older, which our daughter loved. They also offered a playroom, with babysitting by experienced ZAGNY members, which our two year old enjoyed. With our children occupied and cared for, we were able to attend all the sessions and we happily found many other couples like us, with kids in tow.

In his keynote address, which aptly followed a tribute to all Zoroastrians who have served in the military, Dr. Trita Parsi asked the audience to consider how much better the world would be if international relations were conducted in accordance with Zarathustra's teachings, rather than those of Niccolò Machiavelli. How inspiring to think of Zoroastrianism, not just as an ancient philosophy that a small handful of people follow, but rather as a philosophy that can, and should, be implemented to make the world a better place today. Dr. Parsi made you feel proud to be a follower of Zarathustra. This was such an unusual keynote address that it grabbed your attention and made you think this wasn't like all the other Congresses. What else did they have in store for us?

The program did not disappoint. The

relevance of the Zoroastrian ethic in today's world – on a personal, corporate, and political level – was a theme that ran through many of the sessions. The discussions were relevant to our daily life as Zarathushtris, and not merely theological discussions about controversial issues.

The whole event had a youthful, current vibe. From the participation of many young panelists, to the use of technology to get real-time feedback from the audience, to the flash mob planned in secret, and the entertainment orchestrated by youth and including very young ZAGNY members, the Congress energized participants of all ages.

In other words, there was not a single boring minute at the New York Congress. And because we expect nothing less from ZAC, we are looking forward to the next one!

## **NAZC 2012 – AN OUTSIDER'S VIEW**

**BY MEHERNAAZ SHOVIR IRANI**

**“Lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime,  
And, departing, leave behind us  
Footprints on the sand of time;**

**Footprints, that perhaps another,  
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,  
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,  
Seeing, shall take heart again.**

**Let us then be up and doing,  
With a heart for any fate;  
Still achieving, still pursuing,  
Learn to labor and to wait.”**

I grew up reading these words cut out and placed under the glass of my grandfather's desk in his home in Mumbai. I never understood what they conveyed, just memorized them over an entire childhood of playing at that desk. I think I understand their import now. I believe that surely the Co-Chairs of the NAZC 2012 must have read these very words by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow before they bid for this Congress.

Only then could they have shaped and organized the spectacular XVI North American Zarathushti Congress 2012. To take the heritage of our religion and community, of its great men and women and present it to our contemporary world is a formidable task. But for sure ZAGNY upped; and did; and achieved; and pursued; and have left behind footprints. Not in sand, these; not the kind to get washed away with the tide. These are here to stay.

I was excited about coming to my favourite city in the world. I was excited because I would see so many Zarathushtris from this part of the world, in NYC. I was getting sneak peeks into the creation of an event this size and it had piqued my interest. Of course it was also to participate in and support the life and times of my brother, Arzan and sister-in-law Shirrin, in the community here. But all this excitement faded when I came to the Congress. Nothing prepared me for the delight of experiencing the event itself.

I live in Mumbai and therefore being an American Zarathushti is something I don't know anything about. I will say this... it's a different world. The Congress gave me a snapshot of what Zarathushtris living in North America do in their respective communities. I saw how spirituality and scriptures are a part of life but do not dominate such that the transition from Zarathushti to American and vice versa, when required, is effortless. The co-existence is sublime.

The Congress was progressive, I heard. It wasn't, I heard. It wasn't spiritual. Oh no, it was. All kinds of opinions, all kinds of perspectives. An immense amount of deep thought and hard work and a whole lot of fun. My favourite part of the Congress was something I haven't seen at any previous event nor heard of from friends who've attended other events. It was that most of the panelists here weren't scholars and intellectuals we would be in awe of. The general rhetoric wasn't intellectual, it was inclusive. Most of the people who presented were ordinary people doing extraordinary things and sharing those experiences with us. A lot of them weren't even doing extraordinary



things, just living their lives following the principles of the faith. That to me is the big difference when I say it's a different world.

I saw from these five days that being ritualistic, though required, is not essential in the bigger scheme of things. I don't have to go to an agiary every day to be a good Zarathushti. If I live by the guiding principles of the faith, if I am a good person, help in the service of my community at home and abroad and strive towards the ubiquitous humata hukhata huvarashta, I think I'm good to go. That's a far cry from what is expected back home (which nevertheless I don't do). Being able to make the choice to connect to my faith in a manner that raises me up is what this Congress has made me strive for.

This Congress showcased all the colors of the rainbow. There was spirituality, rituals, history, culture, technology, service, skill and jaw-dropping talent. There was also laughter and a lot of thinking. Friendships were created or nurtured. There was pulao dal at a sit down lunch in a suburban NY Hilton. And there was the whole song and dance about all the song and dance. Every evening was a delight for every age group. And all home-grown!!! Yes, I'm including K-Von in this. The entertainment for the Gala Dinner was remarkable. This kind of talent can only succeed if its conjoined with dedication and hard work and that was all on display. My other favourite part, of course, was the ZAGNY Philharmonic Orchestra. I had never seen so much Zarathushti talent, from the tiniest little girl to the veterans with their instruments in one place creating such beautiful music. And that rendition of "Chahiye Hame Zarthosti"!!! That I will always cherish as a special memory. I was honoured to be present and listening.

In all this I cannot but express my greatest gratitude to ZAGNY and everyone involved in making this event "very huge shoes to fill for future congresses". I saw the work that went in first hand and it wasn't just about the hard work here. The organisers set about the event so that the participant's experience was

elevated in every possible sense. The potency of their zeal to be memorable hosts permeated everything they did. Everything was thought of. Who expected home-made bhakra and chevda in their goodie bags, right? We are a community of go-getters, of people who move with the times and all the technology used at the Congress is proof of that and is surely something every one of us is still talking about. And every other aspect too was flawless including staying on schedule. I guess putting up such events is tough but raising the bar like ZAGNY did is something else entirely.

As I returned home to get on with my life, I took away a few things from this Congress. I found for myself an avenue to explore my spirituality, the seed of purpose and service was planted in me and it gave me friends. At the Closing Ceremony Mr. Gev Nentin, Co-Chair of the NAZC 2012 Committee, in his speech said that if we had come here to seek something, he hoped we had found it.

I did. And I'm a better person for it.

This is a special issue of the ZAGNY Newsletter covering the XVI NAZC 2012. The Congress was hosted by ZAGNY in partnership with IZA from August 02 - 05 2012.

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#### CO-CHAIRS GEV AND FERZIN CALLING THE CONGRESS TO A CLOSE.





SHEROO KANGA

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