



A Documentary by Meghna Damani
A Treasure Tower Films Production ©

Losing who you were, losing who you could become...

hearts suspended

PRESS KIT

The untold story of legal US immigrant spouses who are denied the basic human right to work, revealed through the filmmaker's personal struggles.

Directed, produced and edited by Meghna Damani



Synopsis

Hearts Suspended is a short autobiographical documentary that reveals how highly educated South Asian immigrant women struggle to survive in the United States on their H4 or dependent spouse visas, which deny them work authorization. Once independent, now completely dependent, they face loneliness, depression, loss of self-identity, strained marital relations and – in extreme cases – exploitation and abuse.

Through a unique expressionistic combination of visuals, monologue, verite footage and interviews, the film takes us on a journey into the director inner turmoil's, search for spiritual strength and eventual resolve to bring hope and political change for other women who are frozen in time because of the restrictive nature of this visa.

Synopsis (Short)

Hearts Suspended traces the filmmaker's personal journey as she reveals how educated South Asian immigrant women struggle with depression, loss of self-identity, strained marital relations and other issues in the US on H4 (dependent spouse) visas, which deny them work-authorization. Through turmoil emerge spiritual strength, resolve and hope for change.

Logline

The untold story of legal US immigrant spouses who are denied the basic human right to work, revealed through the filmmaker's personal struggles.

Tagline

LOSING WHO YOU WERE. LOSING WHO YOU COULD BECOME.



Statement

This film was born one afternoon in a coffee shop below my apartment in Jersey City, New Jersey. As I looked through the glass windows, at the Manhattan skyline with the Hudson river whispering to it gently, for a fraction of an instant I lost concept of time. I felt I was on Marine Drive in Bombay overlooking the jeweled skyline nicknamed as the 'Queen's necklace'. In that moment I knew that I was neither here nor there – I was truly suspended between the two countries, two realities and two identities – independent and dependent.

I was not complete in this country despite being here for 5 yrs because of my 'dependent spouse' visa status that did not allow me to work despite my Masters and 3 years of work experience. I could not understand this law. My spiritual practice of chanting 'Nam Myoho Renge Kyo' with the SGI (www.sgi.org) gave me strength to turn this humungous blank period of my life into something that creates value, for, I learnt, it is because of the very muck that the lotus blooms.

This film is a piece of my life that I hope will tell the story of the thousands of educated women like myself who come here every year as doctors, lawyers, architects, business professionals, artists, etc. and are forced to stay at home for an indefinite period of time. Many are abused, exploited or in just plain denial that they have lost the most precious years of their lives – irrevocably



Director's Bio

Meghna Damani grew up in Mumbai, India, where she did her master's in marketing. She worked at J Walter Thompson in Mumbai for two-and-a-half years in the Account Management Department on various Unilever accounts. Also a journalist and model, she came to the United States in 2002.

Unauthorized to work on her 'dependent spouse' visa, her struggles inspired her first film *Hearts Suspended*. She also finds expression through painting, photography and poetry. Meghna is fascinated by the blending cultures in New York, especially the South Asian American, and is keen on sharing their unique struggles, hopes, dreams, and victories through her films.

She believes that the purpose of art is to create harmony and she wishes to accomplish this in her films. A Documentary Film Graduate of the New School in Manhattan, she lives in Jersey City, NJ.

Director's Bio (Short)

Meghna grew up in Mumbai. She has a Masters in Marketing and has been a journalist, model and advertising executive at JWT. Unauthorized to work in the US since 2002, her struggles inspired her first film. A Documentary Film Graduate of the New School in Manhattan, she lives in Jersey City.

Main Characters

Shivali Shah

Shivali Shah is an attorney working on H-1B and H-4 issues since many years. She did her undergraduate studies at Columbia College, Columbia University. At Duke University, she received a J.D. from the School of Law and a Cft. from the Graduate Department of Women's Studies. She is a founding member of Kiran: Domestic Violence and Crisis Services for South Asians in North Carolina. She has done pro bono work for Sakhi (NY) since 1994 and Manavi (NJ). She has also volunteered with Family Violence Rape Crisis Center in Pittsboro, NC.

For the past several years, she has been conducting research on H-1B and H-4 visa holders through the H Visa Survey (www.hvisasurvey.org). Her work on behalf of H-4 and H-1B visa holders has been covered by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Washington Post, and National Public Radio (NPR), and India Abroad. She has also been an advocate on behalf of battered women on dependent spouse visas such as the H-4 visa. Her advocacy efforts directly led to the inclusion of a provision granting work authorization to battered H-4 visa holders in the 2005 version of the Violence Against Women Act.

She is an advisor to HForum, a social and political non-profit organization for H-1B and H-4 visa holders in the US and to the National Organization for Software and Technology Workers (www.nostops.org), a non-profit organization that provides information and resources to H-1B visa holders from India. She is a member of the South Asian Journalist Association and winner of a 2006 SAJA Award for Outstanding Commentary / Editorial / Op-Ed piece for her piece "South Asian Americans in the American South," in the Southern Exposure Journal which covers the accessibility of social services for South Asians in the Southern U.S.

Abhijeet Jhaveri

Abhijeet Jhaveri is Meghna Damani's husband. Abhijeet came to the US from Mumbai, India, to pursue a Masters in Business Administration at Penn State University and currently works for ValueMomentum, Inc. – a software services and solutions firm catering to the Insurance and Lending industries. Abhijeet is passionate about traveling and aspires to travel the globe.

Rachna Mehra

Rachna is on the H4 visa. She came here in 2003 after marriage to her sweetheart Vikram Mehra, In India she worked with Innovation Ads as a Search Marketing Coordinator in Mumbai after which she worked at IL&FS for three years as she always dreamt of being a financial consultant and has an undying penchant for numbers,

Unable to work in the US she went through a tremendous struggle and eventually went back to school and did her Masters in Marketing and International Business from Baruch CUNY. She interned for a company that agreed to file for her work visa, however due to a technical error she had to revert to an H4 visa. Rachna currently lives in Newport, NJ and is eagerly awaiting her employment authorization

Vikram Mehra

Vikram Mehra came to the US in 2001 for his Masters in Finance and started his CFA simultaneously. He started his career in the US with JP Morgan Chase and is passionate about the Indian stock market, started investing in stocks when he was in college. He is presently working with Deutsche Bank as a Financial Analyst.

Crew

Additional Camera

Erin Clarke

Erin Clarke is a Canadian artist and filmmaker who began working with video and digital image-making in the mid-nineties. Erin has created low-tech animations, video art and a short documentary titled 'Woman With Cats'. Experimental, wistful and whimsical, her work has been exhibited in Toronto and New York and she was awarded a Toronto Animated Image Society prize. Erin Clarke studied at the Ontario College of Art & Design, Polytechnic University and The New School. She holds Bachelor and Masters degrees in Fine Art and Integrated Digital Media and is currently pursuing a MFA in Documentary Media at Ryerson University.

Margaret Galbraith

Margaret made her directorial debut with *Krums*. In 1997, she was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to study the Argentine women's movement and spent a year in Buenos Aires. She also worked for a number of years in the fields of legal defense and community development, assisting immigrants from many different cultures including Latin America, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

She is currently in production on a follow-up story to *Krums*. Other works in progress include *When I Grow Up*, a personal documentary that examines familial and cultural pressures around career and motherhood, and a short 16mm documentary about an old neighborhood barbershop.

Music

Siddharth Malik

Siddharth is an experimentalist guitarist who enjoys incorporating elements of Indian classical, Indian folk, flamenco and jazz in his music by sometimes playing instruments modified and invented by him. A self-taught musician, Siddharth explores various world music forms & believes that music should be as free as the spirit, forms of improvisation no different from conversations. His compositions were a part of Best Of MySpace compilation selected by music critics and he opened the evening for Indian Ocean, a band from India, at their 2007 NY city sold-out concert. When he is not busy with his other passions, physics and spending time with nature in the wild, he can be found with his guitar & vocals in various venues in NY city getting everyone's feet tapping to fusion grooves or Rock n Roll! Siddharth also indulges in painting & poetry.



Credits

DIRECTOR / PRODUCER / EDITOR: Meghna Damani

ADDITIONAL CAMERA: Erin Clarke, Margaret Galbraith

MUSIC: Siddharth Malik

SUBJECTS: Meghna Damani, Shivali Shah, Abhijeet Jhaveri, Rachna Mehra, Vikram Mehra,

TRAILER: Deepti Paul

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