

Growing up with TFAS

- Usha Kidambi

At the recent fund-raising event held at Royal Albert Palace in support of the upcoming celebrations there were many references to the initiation of Telugu Fine Arts Society, 25 years ago. It is hard to believe that so much time has passed and even harder to believe that I was a young girl who was present at the first TFAS program.

My memories of TFAS include jamming our cars with microphones, large vessels of sambar, pulihora, vadas, and various kooralu, rice cookers, coffee pots, banners, stage decorations, and other paraphernalia to support the festival we were about to celebrate, the before-the-program meetings, and the late night after-the program discussions. I remember the numerous artists that stayed in our homes that we shuttled to malls, New York City attractions, and the airports to receive them and see them off. I also remember my parents printing out program itineraries, hosting dinner meetings, bundling Telugu Jyothis into sacks for the post office, and setting up coffee pots, serving sambar and annaalu at the functions, often ruining their pattu cheerlu in the process, and lots of sleepless nights in preparation of the programs. Reading this, anyone may question one's sanity in taking on this type of responsibility in addition to full-time jobs. For my parents and the other TFAS founders, there is only one answer to this question: their drive and passion to maintain and inculcate Telugu culture and language to the next generation was paramount.

When I was younger, I enjoyed attending TFAS programs as this was my social outlet. I had my social circle of friends, and we had similar parents with matching ideals so we felt that we had a place to fit. I had numerous opportunities to perform dance, sing, act in plays, and enjoyed all of these experiences. I also had the wonderful opportunity to interact with artists who stayed in our homes such as Vempati Chinna Satyam's troupe (the dancers were a little older than us and it was actually fun to see the vast cultural differences between their exposures in life and what we had experienced here), Mandolin Srinivas, Shobha Naidu's dance troupe, SP Balasubramanian and SP Sailija and the musicians that accompanied them, to name a few. I would go willingly to every TFAS program and actually enjoyed the programs.

My feelings changed, however, once I reached high school. I had enormous pressure to study well (as any Telugu kid), to continue to perform music and dance, to speak in Telugu, and I started to feel

somewhat isolated. There was very little understanding from my parents as to why I did not want to attend a TFAS program (even if I had mid-terms starting the next week), and for why I wanted to stay home. Two primary reasons for not wanting to attend were at the forefront: 1) I could never sit and watch all of the struggles my parents went through during these programs and I felt obligated to help, as other TFAS committee member children did also, to support our parents. Hence, at programs, I collected garbage, lifted food off of the floor, made sure dressing rooms were cleaned up, loaded the car, swept the stage, operated the curtains, and helped with serving dinner, and 2) I started to change as a person. I felt that I received my bolus of Telugu culture that would last me for two lifetimes and wanted to spend more time with my American friends. I wanted to do things that normal teenagers did and was exhausted with my guilt for wanting to defy my parents.

However, what I did not realize at that time was that the overwhelming reason for my change in personality was that I was struggling with who I was. Although I loved the high school I went to and did very well socially, I still questioned who I really was – it was as if I could not identify with any part of me – the Andhra part or the American part and I constantly felt pulled in two different directions – at home with the pervasiveness of Telugu language, culture, and food, and at school with the pressures of American friends, choices I had to make, and lines in the sand which I had to draw. This was a challenging time for me and, looking back, I am able to see that this was quite normal. The questioning of the sense of self and who we really are really helps us evolve, to change, to grow, and to mature. However, it was not without a lot of sleepless nights and angst. For many years, I did not attend a single TFAS event, justifying that I had done my duty during all of the years (and there were many) that my parents were so deeply involved.

So, now that I have a career, a 7-year old son, my own life, and the ability to make my own decisions, what has drawn me back to TFAS? Of course, I think about my own son and exposing him to Telugu language and culture, however, I also remember how I felt growing up as an integral part of TFAS and want to make sure we have a dialogue and openness and a compromise as he gets older. I love when I see talented kids perform – TFAS provides this opportunity and we are indeed fortunate to have committee members who

are truly sacrificing their personal time and are making a choice to drive Telugu culture forward. However, to be candid, for those like me who grew up here, we feel a bit disconnected with some of the programs that TFAS has been recently promoting such as all of the actors and actresses – we cannot identify with these “superstars” and, as such, our willingness to attend these programs becomes a question of what experience will we gain by attending TFAS events. If the goal is for the next generation to carry this organization forward, then perhaps TFAS needs to address some of the needs that we, who have grown up here, would like to experience including philanthropic support of Andhra organizations or organizations here in the US, providing academic or cultural scholarships for kids here to study in India, offering incentives for high school students to come and support TFAS programs, conducting focus groups or lectures to help in these times of economic crisis, offering support services for former or current TFAS members in times of need, etc. These are just a sampling of ideas.

The last piece of candid brainstorming that I would like to offer is this: the number one turn-off for those who grew up here in attending TFAS programs is the disorganization and chaos that seems to permeate all programs despite well-intentioned efforts. For many years, as my parents conducted these programs, I kept asking myself, “Why are we so disorganized DESPITE the extremely hard-working efforts of individuals who are sacrificing their lives in support of this organization? Why are we always late to start and late to finish programs?” For many years, I chalked this up to TFAS being a volunteer-run organization and with, despite having a decent core committee, only the select few that are willing to work, so how much can the select few accomplish? I had a little bit of an eye opening experience this past weekend and suddenly, I had some answers for what may work in alleviating these issues and I would ask your patience in allowing me to describe this in additional detail.

This past weekend, we attended the Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana program. This program is 1 ½ weeks long, with Carnatic music and classical dance competitions, with very famous artists (who judge the competitions) giving concerts and dance programs, and a week-long dance workshop. The program, itself, in my opinion, is enormous in scope and very complicated to conduct. I witnessed four days and was impressed with the caliber of children that competed and thoroughly enjoyed the concerts, and I am planning a trip to the program again next year.

However, in keeping in line with our Indian programs, every program was behind schedule, people brought food into the auditorium when told not to, venues were locked when they should have been left open, and complaints by the attendees were abundant. Sounds like a TFAS program to me! My solution for this is twofold- one is a quick fix and the other will take more time: 1) every TFAS program needs to be run by a project manager. This person or team of two project managers will manage everything from timing of the acts to the program budget. I’m not referring to a bunch of people running around at the last minute to throw a program together, which often happens. I am referring to giving the responsibility to a small team to PLAN for a program. Project managers can have professional certifications or this team can consist of an adult and two high school students who are willing to take on the challenge and receive community service credit at their high school for conducting the program, and 2) we need to respect each other and the organization. Demanding respect, by scaring the audience into compliance, may work for the short-term (if it works at all), but the long-term approach needs to be earning respect by starting programs on time, being incredibly organized, and providing a quality program with something in it for every member. It seems that we forget the basic principles of courtesy and quality during these programs and we need to find a way, by serving as a model, to inculcate the “thank you s”, the “excuse me s”, and the behavior that we so easily achieve at American programs, here at TFAS.

In conclusion, what TFAS has to offer is plenty – programs can be designed with something in it for everyone. We need to work closer with our membership to find out what will sustain TFAS’s growth, how TFAS can appeal across generations of Telugus, and who will take on the responsibility to drive this great organization forward. Will I continue to support TFAS? Absolutely! But, will I also continue to expect greater things from TFAS? You bet.

Usha Kidambi has grown up here and was a member of TFAS since its inception. She has had the opportunity to see this organization evolve through the years and actively participate in many cultural programs.

Usha has a Master's joint degree in Biochemistry from Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and Rutgers University. She has a certification in Project Management (PMP-certified) and currently works as a Project Manager in drug development at a large Pharma company. She currently resides in NJ with her husband, Shyam Perangur, son, Srinaath, and her mother, Prabha Raghunathan.