

Big Town Big Dreams

STORIES ABOUT IMMIGRANT NEW YORKERS WHO MAKE THIS TOWN THE GREAT PLACE IT IS



Siblings Qurrat Ann and Obaid Kadwani launched eyeBLINK five years ago to support multicultural theater. Photo by Mariela Lombard

'It was tiring to see plays that only cater to one race'

By HEATHER ROBINSON

“When I was growing up, I wore flip-flops, and I got a lot of put downs,” says Obaid Kadwani. “It’s an Indian thing. But now everybody wears them.”

His sister, Qurrat Ann Kadwani, pipes in: “Being an immigrant wasn’t so fashionable; there weren’t a lot of Indian people in [our] school.”

With these formative anecdotes to drive them, the Kadwani siblings of Pelham Parkway in the Bronx are a force in promoting multicultural understanding.

Together they founded eyeBLINK, a nonprofit organization that uses cultural and arts programming to fight stereotypes and promote social change.

They chose the name to reflect their joy in bringing festive experiences to others.

“We called it eyeBLINK to signify that the success of these worthy projects is so sweet, it feels like time flew by and it happened in just an eyeblink,” says 30-something-year-old Obaid Kadwani, the group’s business manager.

Fed up with what they saw as the homogeneous casting of plays in the city, the Kadwanis — who are also actors and ca-

ble TV talk show hosts on Namaste America, a South Asian TV network — created the organization in 2003.

“It was tiring to see plays that only cater to one race,” says 20-something Qurrat Kadwani, who is eyeBLINK’s artistic director.

While its main purpose is supporting minority artists and multicultural theater, its mission has expanded to include special events.

In June, for instance, eyeBLINK organized its second Pizza for the Hungry: A Smile Brings Hope, a project that delivered 15,000 slices to clients at 13 homeless shelters and food kitchens in four states: New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts and Oklahoma.

“They’ve done this for two years in a row and proven themselves to be standup folks,” says Joe Little, public relations manager for the New York City Rescue Mission in lower Manhattan, one of the shelters that participates in the program.

Dr. Avraham Henoch, a family medicine practitioner in Riverdale, the Bronx,

and one of eyeBLINK’s main contributors, praises the organization’s unique dual-purpose mission.

“Through the years, I’ve donated to [the Kadwanis’] theater projects; they’d bring in people of many ethnicities to act in her plays,” he says. “This recent [pizza] project helps people who are down on their luck.”

For the pizza parties, eyeBLINK enlists entertainers to sing and play guitar, keyboard or African drums.

Domino’s Pizza is a major sponsor; the Kadwanis talk with clients and help serve.

On a recent afternoon at New York City Rescue Mission, the stylish siblings spoke about their creative projects and their background.

Born in the Indian city of Bombay, they were children when their family moved to New York.

“Our mom was a teacher in the New York City public schools, and she was into multiculti programming before it was fashionable,” says Obaid Kadwani.

Through eyeBLINK’s theater division, the siblings select plays they feel will give viewers broadening experiences

and then produce them.

They are currently producing a show called “The Women of the Mahabharata,” which tells the story of an ancient Indian war. Its cast is multicultural and its themes universal, according to Qurrat Kadwani.

“It’s topical, because it deals with a war, with who suffered,” she says.

She performs in the play along with other professional actors. It will be off-off Broadway at the Roy Arias Theatre 2 on Ninth Ave. between 43rd and 44th Sts. from Oct. 9-26. Tickets are available at www.eyebblink.org.

The group is setting aside 100 seats each week for the homeless, underprivileged children and the “working poor who might not be able to afford basics like food and shelter and also luxuries like theater tickets,” says Obaid Kadwani.

As part of a project called “American Colors,” eyeBlink also chooses classic, well-known plays, such as “A Doll’s House” by Henrik Ibsen, divides the play into two or three sections and assigns a separate director to cast each one with actors of different races and ethnicities.

The point is that the characters’ dilemmas transcend race.

“We’re highlighting race in order to do away with it,” explains Qurrat Kadwani.

Twice a year, eyeBLINK stages free readings featuring a new play by an emerging minority playwright. “Playwrights need to see their work performed, and we wanted to give them a forum,” she says.

The organization also annually awards the William J. Carabano scholarship, providing two NYU students with \$1,500 each.

It also has a dance division, Rhythms, that produces shows combining forms from different cultures. Within one show, for example, the audience might see African dance, Indian dance, ballet, tap, South Asian dance and Irish clogging.

“It’s a forum for choreographers to showcase their works,” says Obaid Kadwani. “Sometimes they collaborate, and audiences can see how similar these forms are.”

“The point is, we are not so different from someone who lived thousands of years before us, or who lives thousands of miles away from us.”

Do you know an immigrant New Yorker who achieved his or her dream in our great city? E-mail Maitte Junco at BigTown@nydailynews.com