



A Woman's Best Friend - SAKHI Celebrates Twenty Years with a Gala in NYC

Published: Mon, Oct 5, 2009



Posted by: E. Nina Rothe



Amidst the bevy of galas and benefits that seem to regularly fill the social calendars of all who live in or around NYC come Autumn, the Sakhi Twentieth Anniversary Benefit Gala stood out as the true achiever of an important mission. Held at the Prince George's Ballroom in Midtown this past Friday, October 2nd, the night brought together the largest concentration of people of substance I have ever encountered at this type of event. Gone were the empty talks, missing were the mindless celebrities and very conspicuously absent those causes that seem to benefit only the few individuals organizing the party. All to be replaced by mindful conversations, world-renowned personalities with great minds and a truly important mission: abolishing abuse directed at women. Why, even the media table was a great place of conversation, sharing and understanding. SAKHI is truly a woman's best friend and from their intelligent board to their lavish banquet, it distinguished itself as what it claims to be: a force to be reckoned with and a strong, meaningful institution.



The evening started with a cocktail hour and for yours truly, loads of people-watching fun. The dresses and saris were extraordinary and the decor of the hall beautiful and feminine chic, with plentiful peach roses sprinkled about. I took a leisurely walk around the tables displaying all the items for the silent auction and was impressed by what was on offer. Among the highlights were a pair of tickets for the opening night Red Carpet celebration of the MIAAC Film Festival, a dress with matching clutch by Sir Alistair Rai - a personal favorite designer, since my interview with its strong and passionate creator Kiran Rai - and a pair of photographs by Dinesh Khanna, including one haunting image of Jain Nuns walking a country road in search of alms.

Then I delighted in a teaser taste of Devi's food - the famously delicious NYC eatery was catering the whole event - in the form of some little bites and I admit that the cauliflower and tiny samosas were divine. I worked my way to the table of items on display for the upcoming live auction and noticed a coveted dinner for six with filmmaker Mira Nair at Devi's, a pair of courtside seats to the 2010 US Open, a 'She's Got the Look!' package which included a Reem Acra gown, Ganjam Jewels and a hairstyle by Butterfly Studios and a 'Breakfast at Tiffany's' package for twelve, which sounded simply lovely to an Audrey Hepburn fan like me! Imagine treating your closest friends to such a lavish breakfast, surrounded by diamonds and glitter! Needless to mention that all items went way beyond my proposed maximum bids and thankfully so, to benefit such a wonderful institution.



Dinner was served in the Ballroom and while we enjoyed the delicious food by Devi, we were also treated to a short film explaining Sakhi's mission and their achievement through the decades. The informative testimonial even featured my friend Reshma Patel, who is on their benefit committee and turned me on to their worthwhile cause. This year's Gala also marked the exit of current Sakhi Executive Director Purvi Shah, who has been a force to be reckoned with and a wonderful inspiration to all women during the past seven years at her post. I was fortunate to get an exclusive insight into the wonderful work Sakhi has been performing in the Desi community throughout New York and Ms. Shah's wonderful warmth and care, from a woman I shall refer to as 'Cinderella' for anonymity, one of Sakhi's success stories. But more on this later...

Hostess Bhavna Toor, who has been involved with Sakhi since 2001, did the honors as Mistress of Ceremonies and introduced the various speakers who all brought personal tales of courage and resolve to the audience. Honored Speaker Mira Nair told of her first involvement with Sakhi, through her friend Tula Goenka, the cofounder of the organization. She joked 'I gave a 300 dollar check to a woman who did not have a checking account' and continued 'Life is short. Seize the moment and get involved, and if you don't have the time to personally get involved then send a check'. Nair's typical wisdom shined throughout her speech but the highlight for me was when she said 'We waste so much energy in thinking that we must meet our own needs before we can reach out to others.' So true, in fact we can always come up with an excuse to postpone helping others... But truly there is no better time than the present!



The positive and impressively pretty Purvi Shah mentioned her loving parents in her speech and how she 'would not be here without them'. She also urged those in attendance to find the 'power to make a difference but also the power to be different' and continued 'We haven't won the battle yet. The real celebration is the aspiration to make the world one without abuse.' She was followed by the divinely elegant actress Reshma Shetty, who quoted Mahatma Gandhi - on the day that marked his 140th birthday - with 'Be the change you want to see in the world'. When we were served our Mango Panna Cotta dessert, surrounded by such beauty and strength, the evening felt like a resoundingly perfect success. Of course, dancing to the beats of DJ Rekha playing Bollywood standards and old favorites till the wee hours of the morning didn't hurt the party either!

As an aside, the great mission of the organization is never far from their view. Unlike most social benefits, this gala included a large number of women who have been helped throughout the years by Sakhi. As I looked around the room, the tables were equally divided among those who dressed in designer saris and tuxedos, and those who wore their survivors' courage and resolute along with their best fineries. It was an image that impressed me more than any written pamphlet or inspired speech ever could. It demonstrated the true honesty of this inspirational movement. Of course, as Sakhi truly is a 'woman friend' - the literal meaning of the word - it would make sure that this would be an actual Girls' Night Out, for all involved, especially those directly touched by the evils of abuse.



And now to the Cinderella story I promised you. While I people-watched before dinner, I noticed a petite, pretty woman in jeans and a corduroy jacket doing the same. I approached her and asked what her involvement with Sakhi was. 'I was helped by them four years ago, when my husband was physically abusing me. The precinct referred me to Sakhi.' She admitted, timidly. She proceeded to share her whole story with me, shyly at first and then increasingly more confident in tone and demeanor. While her parents were not supportive during the whole ordeal - because of that age-old 'What will people think' issue that so many are plagued with - she and her seven-year old son now live with them. She has learned to forgive their lack of support, they understand her ordeal just a little bit more each day. Her abuser has gotten 'exactly the woman he deserves', someone older, more wealthy and who keeps him on a tight leash. He has gone back to his country for good. And as for Cinderella... She is now remarried, to a man who pined for her all through their youth as friends and never married. She is awaiting his arrival in the US, after his Visa issues get sorted out and positively glowed while saying 'I am a very lucky woman' which nearly floored me. Lucky? After all she has been through! Well, I would personally call it courage, but of course if we believe that luck is the result of many years of hard work, then Cinderella IS lucky. Lucky to be alive and lucky to have found a true friend in Sakhi. And lucky to have found her Prince Charming at last.

For more information about this momentous organization, go to Sakhi.org.

Photos copyright Preston Merchant - presented courtesy of SAKHI