

THE JOURNEY

by Daniela Diaz Soto

Poonam Sethi & Mangal Behal A strong friendship that builds community

The story of Poonam Sethi and Mangal Behal began with separate journeys that eventually converged to impact their lives and the community profoundly.

Originally from Mumbai, Poonam arrived in New Zealand in 2013 after marrying her husband, who had fallen in love with the country during a holiday and studied here since 2010 while they were still dating.

Adjusting to the Kiwi way of life proved challenging for her. Having grown up in a densely populated metropolis, Queenstown's isolation and cultural differences were stark. "I remember crying a lot during the nights because my husband had night shifts," she recalls. "I always lived with many people around me, so when I came here, I sometimes felt lonely."

Poonam struggled to find work due to visa restrictions. Back in India, she earned a Bachelor of Commerce degree at The Bhopal School of Social Sciences and worked at the prestigious Taj Hotel, one of India's oldest hotels with 120 years of history. "When you come from another country, you must prove yourself many times. In some jobs, they told me I had too much experience," she explains.

Her luck changed when she met Mangal, who was working in the reception of a local hotel. Their shared Indian background forged a connection, and they became fast friends. Although Mangal didn't have a job for her then, he promised to keep an eye out for opportunities. "He didn't give me the job," she says, laughing.

Originally from Banjar, Mangal arrived in NZ in 2008 to study English. His initial plan was to join his friends in Australia, but due to visa restrictions, he chose NZ instead. It was a decision that would alter the course of his life.

Before moving to NZ, Mangal had worked as a manager at Vodafone in India and also graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce degree from Punjab Education Board in 2007.

He found a job as a night manager in a hotel in Auckland a couple of months after he arrived, which would later lead him to Queenstown in 2012, when he was offered a multi-faceted role in managing Lodge Apartments.

"I was doing reception, housekeeping, maintenance, gardening, everything between the three staff members that moved here. From 2012 until now, I'm still managing that place," he says proudly.

Months after Poonam and Mangal crossed paths in 2013, Poonam's job search eventually led to a position sponsored by Noel Leeming, marking



a turning point in her journey. Along with a few other Indian friends, they formed a tight-knit community, finding solace in the shared bond of their homeland's traditions.

In 2015, they decided to organise the Diwali celebration for the Indian community in St Peter's Anglican Church, where 70 people joined the festival. The event's success inspired them to continue the festival in Queenstown, with more than 200 participants in the 2016 celebration at the Memorial Centre. That same year, Poonam got her residency, and soon after, she started to work at the Council as a Governance and Official Information Advisor.

Their vision for the festival was to create a platform for newcomers, especially regarding integration. With guidance from Jeet Suchdev, the founder of Bhartiya Samaj Charitable Trust, they officially registered their community trust in 2017. His mentorship provided them with the knowledge and resources needed to navigate the complex landscape of community support.

Their Diwali celebrations, starting small and growing significantly over the years, were enjoyed by more than 1500 people in 2022. This year, they expect the same success in the Queenstown Event Centre on 28 October.

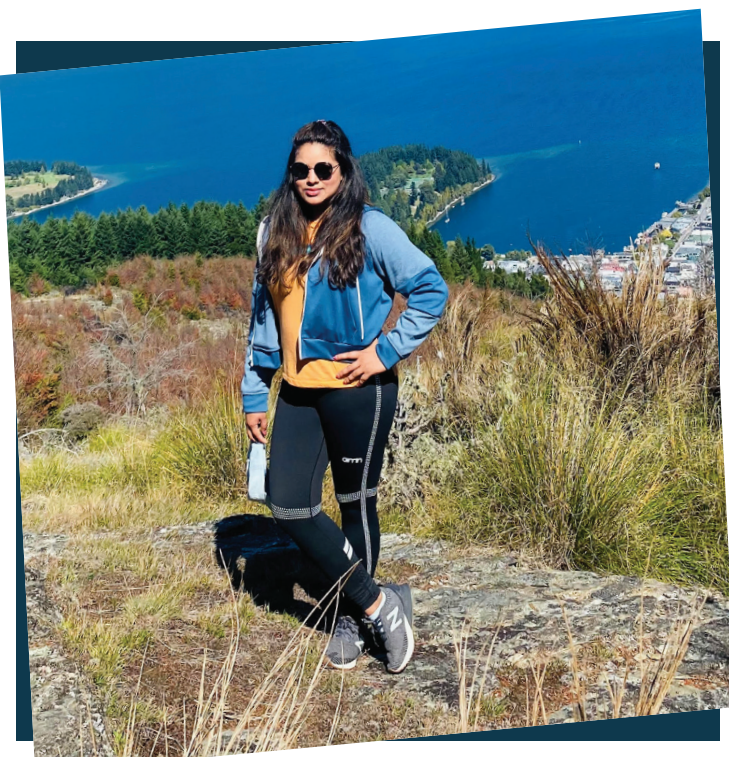
Poonam explains: "At that time, we didn't know how big the Indian community was. We were a group of friends involved and wanted to do something for the new migrants."

In the same line, Mangal affirms that "sometimes it's hard because I'm managing four places now. So apart from that, we are doing all this. It's hard, but it's always enjoyable."

In the meantime, the friendship remained so strong that they felt like family. Poonam even introduced Mangal to his now-wife and organised his wedding in 2022.

As their community trust expanded, they extended their efforts beyond festivals to organise workshops on mental health, meditation, and activities for children and seniors. Poonam and Mangal recognised the importance of their mission, ensuring that newcomers would always have a sense of belonging.

Their story is a testament to the power of friendship and the profound impact a small group of dedicated individuals can have in forging a welcoming and inclusive society for all



The QLDC Welcoming Communities initiative brings together local government councils and communities to make the places we love more welcoming for everyone and to provide support for newcomers choosing to make the Queenstown Lakes District their home.

For more info, visit www.qldc.govt.nz/welcoming-communities