



A Magazine of the Center for International Studies at the University of St. Thomas
Spring 2011

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Welcome

Welcome Message from the Editor

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Dear Friends of the Center for International Studies:

Spring 2011 is in full swing, and we already have several success stories to report. Dr. Rogelio Garcia-Contreras and the MicroCredit students have forged new ties to local communities in Mozambique, Malawi, and Tanzania.



Our Model United Nations team participated in the Harvard National Model UN, where it earned an honorable mention. Dr. Linda Pett-Conklin, who advises the team, is enormously proud of her students.

Professor Rick Sindelar and Yours Truly have appeared on radio and television shows to comment on the Middle Eastern uprisings; Dr. Stockton has grown into his role as Director of the Center; and Dr. Jose-Thota has organized a well-attended event on human trafficking.

Before you is a new issue of *Connections*. Do you think that professors teach and students learn? Think again. Since reading Jessica Reyna's piece "There are Enough Hours in the Day," this professor has been tracking her activities to find out where she loses time. Jessica's advice works! Dr. Ursula Münzel will share with you her impressions of Petersburg's Newskiy Prospect; and Faisal and Karen Nazir give you glimpses into the international romance that has made the Nazir family.

Please enjoy *Connections*, and keep in touch!

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Teachers

Ursula Münzel: St. Petersburg - A City of Style and Contradiction

Ursula Münzel is a native of Germany. In 1987, she received her Ph.D. in History from the University of Würzburg. Since then she and her husband, Rainer, a member of Germany's Foreign Service, have lived in many different countries. The couple came to Houston in 2005, when the German government appointed Rainer to the position of Consul General. Ursula worked for the German Foreign Ministry in Bonn and Berlin and for the Goethe Institute in Nairobi. She has taught at several universities, published two books and numerous articles and essays on international relations and diplomacy. In spring 2010, she became an adjunct professor at the Center for International Studies. The course she taught covered Europe after the fall of communism.



-- Essay by Ursula Münzel.

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For a long time I had wanted to see Russia's St. Petersburg during the "White Nights," the few weeks in June when the sun doesn't set until long after midnight and the air is filled with magic and excitement. In 2010, my husband and I fulfilled my dream and visited St. Petersburg. The city had sprung to life from the will of a sole mind, Czar Peter the Great, in the inhospitable marshes on the shore of the Baltic Sea in 1703.

A Czar in Search of Modernity

Peter, who had travelled extensively in Europe, had the vision and power to forcefully modernize the Russian empire, to open it to the West. He founded St. Petersburg as his new capital, leaving

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the “old Russian soul” behind in Moscow and opening this window to Europe. The architecture of the city reflects his idea of a new Russia: Only one single church – the Savior Church – features the onion-shaped dome the West identifies with this country. It was built 150 years after Peter’s death by one of his reactionary successors who did not share his vision. Ironically, this church, so atypical, almost antagonistic to St. Petersburg’s spirit, attracts busload after busload of tourists in search of the “authentic Russia.”



This statue of Peter the Great adorns the city’s Senate Square.

What is typical for St. Petersburg, setting it apart from the rest of the country? St. Petersburg features baroque and classical facades, every architectural style that was fashionable in pre-communist Central and Western Europe, a clear symmetrical layout of streets and canals. But Petersburg is not a sheer copy of Europe – it is a unique city in every respect, on the brink of two worlds, embracing both.

The Glamorous Newskiy Prospect

St. Petersburg’s heart is the glamorous *Newskiy Prospect*, the elegant main artery that stretches over a couple of miles and is framed by aristocratic palaces and churches. It rivals Paris’ *Champs Elysees* or Berlin’s *Unter den Linden* – just envision it on a much grander scale. Its highlight and endpoint is the fairy-tale winter pa-

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lace - the seat of the Russian czars, now home of the treasures of the Hermitage Museum - on the banks of the majestic *Neva* river.

On a sunny afternoon, right after our arrival, Rainer and I take our first stroll on the *Prospect*, starting from the old Grand Hotel Europe, which is located almost midway on the boulevard. We first walk down to the *Neva* River, then back up.

Our unfiltered impressions:

Reef-thin ladies on the highest heels the human eye has ever seen balancing past Gucci, Prada, Dior, Chanel stores... a veteran from the Afghan war in a shabby uniform kneeling on the tarmac and begging devotedly for alms ... an old lady with an intellectual face and impressive posture offering her crocheted caps almost condescendingly to the hurrying pedestrians ...sturdy *babushkas* - elderly women of peasant origin - selling ice cream and cold drinks, disregarding the icy wind which sweeps through the boulevard. Russians, like Poles, simply *love* ice cream which makes anyone else wonder, can't they get enough of the cold?

Religious Diversity

The *Prospect* boasts many houses of worship: the Armenian Church in blue and white; the green-domed Catholic Church; the Orthodox Kasan Cathedral, which imitates Rome's St. Peter, and is somehow out of place in this Russian environment. Then appears the Lutheran Church of St. Peter and Paul, the heart of the numerous and influential German community. The building suffered a particularly ignominious fate under the Communists: It was transformed into a swimming pool. Even decades later this desecration earns the Soviets the curse "*Verdammt Kommunisten!*"- German for "damned Communists"- from the custodian when he shows us an exhibition of the city's German past. So many houses of worship of different denominations are lined up in a row, in St. Petersburg's most prominent location. This fact alone tells us much about the tolerant spirit of a city that once granted a place to the industrious Germans or entrepreneurial Armenians.

Opposite of St. Peter and Paul sits the Stroganoff Palace, one of the numerous meticulously restored noble residences, a late Baroque dream in salmon and white, the former seat of the aristocratic family that became immortal not for its philanthropy but for lending its name to the famous beef dish. Its courtyard currently ac-

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commodates a sushi bar. Whoever the current owner of the Palace is has obviously adapted to the laws of capitalism.

Culture Triumphs over Communism and Capitalism

A temptation for every bibliophile is the *Dom Knigi*, the “House of Books,” a multi-level dorado of a bookstore. Its home is a glittery art nouveau building that the American sewing machine empire *Singer* had once built to house its Russian headquarters. Nowhere else have I seen so many people sitting and reading - books, real books, not just magazines or newspapers. The passion of the Russian people of past and present times for literature, for the arts is tangible everywhere. St. Petersburg’s theaters and opera houses are full - full of young people. They are nothing like the audiences of Western Europe and the U.S., where white would be the dominant hair color if hairdressers did not master the art of dying.

Nearby towers the Grand Hotel Europe with its impressive neo-baroque facade and art nouveau interior. Its bar is a hub for the upper crust: breathtakingly beautiful young girls with emotionless faces accompany sleek middle-aged businessmen with cold eyes and rude manners, who spend more for a night in this luxury palace than an academic receives as pension for a lifetime’s work.

Beyond the golden domes and the gorgeous facades of the palaces and mansions, whose perfect harmony of colors is disrupted by the bold green of the winter palace, sprawls the uniformity of the grey stone apartments of the Stalin era. Solidly built, they are sought after. With their high ceilings and generous layout they still exude an imperial air but hardly conceal the shabbiness of their courtyards and staircases.

A Stubborn People

St. Petersburg’s citizens seem to have inherited their founder’s determination and perseverance. During World War II, they resisted the siege of the German army for 871 days, losing one million of their own to hunger and freezing temperatures. But the Germans - no, the Nazis, as our young guide insists to call them - couldn’t bring the people of St. Petersburg to their knees. Meanwhile, the German war machine raged mercilessly through the countryside just outside the city. There, they destroyed the Peterhof Palace, a rival to the Palace of Versailles, the Pavlovsk Palace, Catherine’s Palace and numerous other architectural jewels. To our great surprise we find them restored to their old glory - by the commun-

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ists, of all people. Compare this to what happened to Berlin's City Palace: After allied bombs had struck the palace twice, East Germany's Communists demolished its remains and leveled them completely.

Clashes over Values

Thanks to a friend of Russian descent who met up with us in St. Petersburg, we encounter people from many walks of life. A smart, well-travelled businessman picks us up in his SUV and spends hours with us in a traffic jam where no one can move an inch. The reason for the traffic chaos: Two of the *Neva* bridges are closed for repair at the same time, and the city government did not bother to let the people know beforehand. This autocratic behavior prompts our companion to launch into a tirade against a bureaucracy that has been unchanged since Communist times and shows no respect for its citizens. He lived a comfortable life abroad. Now that he is back in his native country, he deplores the lack of freedom and of real democracy, as well as the pervasive corruption.

Then we meet a doctor who gave up his hospital career for a position in an American-owned medical supply company. His new private sector job pays so much better than caring for patients. He laments how much the educational system has deteriorated since the collapse of communism, how old values have eroded. In his view, "American money mentality" has taken over.

A Russian Fate

Our last evening is unforgettable. Countess Elena Gontsharova has invited our friends and us for dinner. After crossing a neglected courtyard, we climb up a filthy, foul-smelling staircase in one of the grey Stalinist buildings. Then we enter an apartment which - despite worn-out old furniture - radiates the ambiance of a by-gone era. The salon is dominated by an almost life-size painting of an elegant lady in a white evening gown. Her black hair towers over a face that expresses determination and a strong will. It is the portrait of our hostess' grandmother, a lauded singer and pianist. A fearless lady, she survived the communist October Revolution of 1917, fought the communists to get her father out of prison, endured the brutal German blockade of World War II. After the war she rolled up her sleeves without lament and set out to grow potatoes and vegetables in her small courtyard.

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From left to right: Rainer Münzel, the countess, two friends, and Ursula Münzel.

Like grandmother, like granddaughter: Countess Elena is full of life and without a shred of self-pity. After some encouragement, she laconically tells her story, documenting the toll a revolution, two world wars, and Stalin's paranoia took of her family and her city. Finally she pulls out a thick volume. It lists the victims that Stalin produced in Leningrad in just one single year - 1938. She explains his strategy: One year he targeted the mailmen, the next one the clerks; then it was the turn of the railroad workers. No one could feel safe. The dictator's method of spreading terror was perfect.

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After a lifetime's work as an engineer, Elena commands a pension so small that at age 82 she still has to work for her living. But she doesn't complain.

How did the countess feel after the fall of communism? "We were not successful under the Communist regime, nor do we flourish in the capitalist world. We were not raised for either system; we are intellectuals. I am happy to continue the life I had with my husband: books, conversations, entertaining interesting guests like you."

Of course she has cooked the multi-course dinner that is presented to us. And I mistake the abundance of appetizers for the whole dinner, not knowing that a proper Russian meal consists of numerous courses, and at the minimum includes a delicious soup, *piroggi* (Russian-style empanadas), a meat dish, dessert, wine, champagne, and of course vodka. The vodka she serves is homemade from a secret family recipe and has a delicious orange flavor.

At long last we bid the countess farewell. Guiding us back to the hallway, she smiles and remarks in French, the language that we had used to communicate: "*C'est l'histoire russe, tragique et comique, c'est la vie.*" This is Russia's history, tragic and comic; that's what life is like. □

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Learners

Jessica Reyna:

There *are* Enough Hours in the Day - Strategies for Balancing Work, School, and Life

*Jessica Reyna just turned 23. She lives in Houston and graduated from UST in December of 2010 with her bachelor's degree in international studies and a minor in general business. She currently works as business manager for J&S Matus Motorsports Inc., a company that hosts motorsports events. Jessica had no previous experience before she was hired there. Today she helps J&S Matus Motorsports Inc. grow their biannual *Texas Mile* event into an international sensation. Jessica wrote this essay when she was still a UST student.*



-- *Essay by Jessica Reyna.*

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Starting college, you are filled with anticipation of how the next four or five years of your life will unfold; how much you will learn; and how many new friends you will make. To pay your bills and have some money on the side, you get a job. Before long, you have multiple commitments on your plate. How do you juggle them all and still make good grades?

I was in the same situation most of you face as you move through your undergraduate years. My college career began in the fall of 2006. Shortly thereafter, I took on a part-time job as chief of registration for J&S Matus Motorsports Inc, thinking that it would get me through those tough financial times. It accomplished that, but pretty soon, it turned into full-time employment and my title changed to business manager, leaving me up to my ears in study and work. Where others would easily have become overwhelmed, I managed my multiple duties efficiently.

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Some deadlines I met early, most others, right on time. But I never missed a due date, nor did I ever pull an infamous “all-nighter.” Now I am a senior. With graduation around the corner, I am proud to say that I have always maintained an A/ B average as an International Studies Major with a Minor in General Business.

Because my success at juggling work, study, and personal life baffles everyone - even my professors - I'd like to share my strategies with you.

1) Set Priorities

For the first strategy, I recommend that you consciously set your life priorities and carefully examine what it takes to realize them. Between age 7 and 14, I was a gymnast who trained seriously to join the Olympic team. Being a competitive gymnast requires a lot of practice, and the first thing you must learn if you are serious about the sport is discipline, the ability to set goals for your life and pursue them without allowing distractions to intrude. I spent at least five hours per day in the gym. Skipping practice was not an option. And it never occurred to me in the first place, since I loved the sport and had developed a routine around it. To pursue my dream of being a medalist, I sacrificed time with friends and sometimes even with family.

These Olympic ambitions did not quite materialize, but as I look back at those years I can honestly say that they taught me how to set priorities and go after them. This was truly a life lesson. Today I use this skill to make sure I succeed in school and in work.

2) Get a Planner and Use It

Perhaps the most effective way of navigating through piles of work and study is to get organized. This way, you know exactly what you have to accomplish when and where, and you can figure out how you want to do it.

The best technique is to get a calendar or planner. This allows you to write things down in a place that you consistently visit, and that way, you are reminded of the assignments that lie ahead. With all of the things that a student must get done, it is inevitable that you forget a task unless you write it down. Once you have your calendar, be sure to enter all your school assignments as well as your work tasks and deadlines.

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3) Communicate with Your Employer

As soon as you have put everything in your calendar, start talking to your employer. Open communication with your boss is really important for maintaining a trusting work relationship. I have been fortunate to have two supervisors, Shannon and Jay, who are very understanding when it comes to my school work. But they would not be able to give me the room I need if I did not inform them of important dates well ahead of time.

When an important school test is coming up, make sure you allocate the appropriate amount of study time. This may mean that you need a day off from work or a different shift time. In that case, let your boss know early so that he or she can plan ahead.

What works well for me is sharing the calendar I maintain in my Outlook account with my two bosses. I invite them to view all my important dates, including test dates, final dates, and paper due dates. This helps them understand when I will be busiest and when I will need time for myself.



The cars of J&S Matus Motorsports and members of the race team.

An important rule of thumb is that you show your employer that you respect the needs of his business. If you are asking your supervisor to be flexible with you, you must reciprocate this kindness and be flexible as well. And of course, it helps if your employer sees that you take your job seriously and complete your tasks with diligence.

From time to time, your supervisor may be unable to make concessions to your school work. In that case, you need to schedule study sessions whenever possible and perhaps give up some of your personal time.

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4) Eliminate Distractions

Another important skill I have learned is time maximization. I often complain that there are not enough hours in the day. But in reality there is sufficient time. You simply have to learn how to use it wisely. A good way to do this is to start to track what you do and how much of your time it takes up. Do this for a week. Once you have a good log of your activities, examine it carefully to figure out where you are losing time.

In today's Internet world there are many ways of distracting yourself: facebook, Myspace, Twitter, blogs, youtube, e-mail and chatting. When you minimize the use of these distractions, you begin to maximize your time. Set yourself limits or boundaries and make sure you have done everything you needed to accomplish, before you wander off into facebook land. As you keep these distractions at bay, they can turn into a great motivation to do your work, because now, Twitter and facebook become an activity to which you can look forward.

Of course, there are other diversions that have nothing to do with the Internet. One of them is television. I recommend that you keep yourself from watching television or playing video games especially when you are working on an important assignment for work or school. You should also carefully think about invitations to go out with friends. Sure, you need fun time. But make sure that your school and work responsibilities come first. This brings me to my next point.

5) Rank Your Tasks

Earlier, I told you to set priorities for your life. Now, I ask that you set priorities that are much more specific. They involve the numerous tasks that pose competing demands on your time.

Quite often, tasks that seem to pile up on your plate at once have actually different due dates or different levels of urgency. Some things must be taken care of today while others can wait until tomorrow. To tell what's urgent from what can wait, I recommend that every day, you list your tasks and rank them by level of urgency. This allows you to plan things, and before you know it, your life becomes more manageable and easy.

Creating such "to do lists" has a marvelous effect on me: I feel less anxious and overwhelmed, and I can clearly observe my

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own progress. Looking at my list and checking off completed tasks, gives me a sense of accomplishment. That feeling in turn motivates me to get more things done so I can get that good feeling of accomplishment back! Yes, accomplishment can be a bit addictive...

In ranking your tasks and recording their completion, you can also to prove to your boss that you are worth your pay check, because you have your eyes on the ball. This puts you at ease and makes your boss content. As a result you are both happy, and your working relationship flourishes.

6) Create a Routine

Routines help you be more efficient and effective in your school and work, because they aid you in knowing what is in store for you every day. This may sound very boring. But believe me, I am not a boring person at all. With respect to work and school, routine is good, for when you get things done early and fast and on time you will have more free time to do things that are a lot more fun. And here's the good news: once you properly implement strategies Two through Four, routine will come naturally.

7) Have a Personal Life

My last tip is to always make time for a personal life. After all you are a college student, and what would college be like without great friends and few parties? You have to make time to do things that are enjoyable to you so that the demands of work and school do not overwhelm you.

In addition, the people with whom you choose to spend your free time are an important support network for you. My friends and family pick me up when I am down, help me get through the stress when things feel impossible, and they keep me smiling. In my humble opinion, life without love and laughter is no life at all. In the end, you should find happiness and meaning in all that you are doing. Clear priorities for your life, a few strategies for managing your day, and a healthy balance between work and play will help you realize all that. □

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Graduates

Class Notes

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We asked our graduates to submit their class notes. See below what they have had to say.

Students Who Graduated in 2010

Monica Aleman (BA, International Development)

Monica is now working for the non-profit [Neighborhood Centers Inc.](#) and has a part-time job with [Be Bilingual](#), where she teaches Spanish to men and women in the oil industry. On the side, she serves as the District 5890 Rotaract Representative for Rotary Club International and helps out with the UST MicroCredit Program. In the future, she plans to pursue an MBA.



Whitney Baggett (BA, International Studies)

After graduation, Whitney spent several months teaching English as a second language in South Korea. Her next goal is to earn a master's degree in International Relations, preferably at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in the Netherlands, where she has been accepted into the Culture, Organization, and Management Program. In the long run, Whitney would like to work for the United Nations.

Maurielle Balczon (BA, International Development)

In addition to her major in International Development, Maurielle completed minors in Economics, Finance and Spanish. She is a member of numerous organizations and societies, among others the Bacchus & Gamma Peer Education Network and the World Affairs Council of Houston. She is currently the Client Connections Manager at [Wayne O'Neill & Associates, LLP](#), a consultancy that teaches companies how to grow their business.

Graduates

Michael Black (BA, International Studies and International Development)

Even though Michael gained a global perspective at UST, he wanted to stay close to his family. He found employment with Landmark Graphics, a subsidiary of Halliburton, where he is a market researcher for the upstream petro-technical software marketing division. The position allows him to apply his interdisciplinary background to the oil and gas market and learn how it really works.



Esther Damlarkaya (BA, International Studies)

Esther is a partner in a Global Competitive Intelligence firm named [GCI360](#), where she provides economic intelligence to the energy sector. She has recently received a full scholarship to study International Business at Boston University. Later on, she would like to pursue a Ph.D. in Leadership at Columbia University. Esther is a multilingual talent, for she speaks English, Spanish, French and Turkish. She is married and has home-schooled her two sons.

Mahrukh Syed Nasir (BA, International Studies)

Originally from Pakistan, Mahrukh is an American citizen, married to a mechanical engineer, and has two children. She came to UST after completing her associate's degree in Liberal Arts at CyFair Lone Star College. Currently, she is pursuing her Master in Liberal Arts at UST and interning at the non-profit organization APAHA (Asian Pacific American Heritage Association). Mahrukh has been offered a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship, which will assist her in a one-year study abroad program. After completing her graduate degree, she wants to work for the State Department or an international organization.

Graduates



Miguel Salcedo (BA, International Studies)
Miguel values the time he spent at the Center for International Studies very much. In his opinion, it has determined who he is and where he is going. After graduation, he went to South Korea, where he taught English as a second language. In the near future, he will move to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in order to earn a graduate degree in Economics at the Pontificia Universidade Catolica. Eventually, he would like to become a professor. It is, in his view, a life plan for which International Studies has really prepared him.

Jennifer Trimmer (BA, International Studies and Communications)
Since her graduation, Jennifer has been working part-time in the community-based initiatives branch for Neighborhood Centers Inc. Among others, her work involves teaching creative dancing to children of age groups 7-9 and 9-14. Jennifer, who is an accomplished belly dancer, appreciates this opportunity to work with young people. For those who want to see Jennifer dance, her troupe Shunyata Belly Dance regularly appears in the Foundation Room at the House of Blues. Her future plans? Jennifer wants to save up money and move to Buenos Aires, where she will work towards a degree in Dance Movement Therapy.

Alexandria Ward (BA, International Studies)
Alexandria is currently an English Assistant in La Roche sur Yon, France. She works at two middle schools, helping students from ages 11 to 14 with their English. As yet, she has not figured out what she will do with the rest of her life. There are a few criteria that her dream job would have to meet: It should be fulfilling and allow her to give back to the world. Who knows, perhaps she will return to school and study some more?

Graduates

Earlier Alumni



Kate Dillon Levin (BA, International Studies, 2007)

Kate wrote to us, "On December 21st, 6:48 p.m. I gave birth to my first baby boy, Lucas Dillon Levin. My husband Gabe and I are in awe of and utterly in love with our adorable, sweet boy."

Philippe Nassif (BA, International Studies, 2007)

Philippe misses his days at Tiller. Luckily, he gets to relive them on a daily basis. After graduating from the Center for International Studies he took up a brief internship in Washington, DC, where he did development and conflict resolution work with a non-governmental organization. In the winter of 2009, he graduated from St. Mary's University in San Antonio. Afterwards, he moved back to Houston for a six-month stint to help set up Mayor Annise Parker's Office of International Affairs; then he accepted a position as an advance associate for the Executive Office of President Barack Obama at the White House. At present, Philippe holds a position at the [Center for American Progress](#), where he researches ways to help people of color. □

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Friends

Faisal and Karen Nazir: A 1980s International Romance, UST-Style

Both Faisal and Karen Nazir are alumni of the University of St. Thomas. She graduated with a B.B.A. in Accounting (magna cum laude) in 1988; he received his B.A. in Business Administration and Economics in 1990, then moved on to run 42 convenience stores in the Houston area. Now he is the president and CEO of Energy Efficiency and Sustainability Consultants and the owner of Hüper Optik USA. Karen and Faisal became a couple in the 1980s, have kept in touch with UST alumni ever since, and helped the Center for International Studies organize lectures. Below, they tell Connections about the international romance that made the Nazir family.



-- Interview by Nivien Saleh.

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Connections: How did you come to the University of St. Thomas?

Faisal N.: By accident. I was born in Pakistan. At the age of eight, my parents sent me to boarding school in England. They wanted me to be a doctor, but my high school grades were not high enough to get me into British medical school. In reality, the rejection was a blessing in disguise, because I had always wanted to engage in commerce and dreamt of going to business school in America.

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An uncle of mine lived in Houston and ran a convenience store on the corner of West Alabama and San Jacinto. In 1986, after my high school graduation, he sponsored me to become a student at Rice University. Alas, the admissions window for their summer program had just closed. And so my uncle pointed east on West Alabama and said that he knew of a “small university” down the road. He suggested that I enroll there while waiting for an opportunity to transfer to Rice. That is how I learned of the University of St. Thomas.

Faisal N.: At first, UST was not what I sought in a university. The academic mall that we know today did not yet exist; the campus was small and lacked a defined perimeter. But as the summer session progressed, I became integrated into a group of international students. They came from Ireland, Brazil, Panama, Mexico, Pakistan, Honduras, England, and other countries, and made me feel so welcome that I decided to stay. Business administration and economics became my double major and philosophy my minor. I also took some international studies courses.

Karen Reinvents Herself

Connections: Karen, how did you get to the University of St. Thomas?

Karen N.: I come from a Catholic family from Manvel, a small town of 3,000 south of Houston. My original plan was to go to the local community college. But my mother, who worked at Manvel’s Sacred Heart Catholic Church, had a huge influence on me. Sacred Heart Church had always had Basilian priests as their pastors, and through them we became familiar with the University of St. Thomas. My mother persuaded me to visit the UST campus. In contrast to Faisal, I fell in love with it immediately.

Connections: What attracted you to the campus?

Karen N.: It was close to home, and the small student population gave it an intimacy that was comforting. On the other hand, it allowed undergraduates some independence, because they could live on campus. When I visited UST, I sensed the opportunity to reinvent myself, leave my high school persona behind and become the kind of individual that I wanted to be. I matriculated in the fall of 1984, moved into the dorm and eventually became a resident assistant.

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Connections: What did you choose for a major?

Karen N.: My goal was to teach small children at the elementary school level. I majored in education for approximately two years. Then I took an accounting course, which turned out to be an enjoyable challenge. It motivated me to become an accounting major.

First Encounter: Boy Meets Girl

Connections: So at about the time when Faisal began to pursue a business degree, you switched majors to accounting. Was it only a matter of time until the two of you would meet?

Karen N.: Yes. UST was such a small community, and the students at the dorms found out very quickly who the new arrivals were, even if they, like Faisal, did not live on campus.

Connections: How did you become acquainted?

Faisal N.: Since UST was a very small campus community, we knew of each other very soon after I became a student. At first, Karen and I simply exchanged brief pleasantries when our paths crossed. On weekends, she came to watch our soccer games. And when we started a rugby team, which was sponsored by the Black Lab restaurant on Montrose, she came to watch those games as well. One day I limped to class because I had torn a ligament during practice. Karen saw me and asked with great concern what had happened. That was our first conversation.

Back then, one of my cherished rituals was to cook for friends. Every week, I tore the recipe section from the *Houston Post* and tried out a new dish. One week, Beef Stroganoff was on the menu. I invited Karen and a few of her friends to join the group. She came, we had fun, and I put in a bid for a one-on-one date. When she said yes, I picked the longest movie I could find. It was *Scarface*. And so we began to see each other regularly.

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The University of St. Thomas rugby team. Faisal is third from left.

Surmounting the Cross-Cultural Divide

Connections: Faisal, you are Muslim and Karen, you are Catholic. How did those religious differences play into your relationship?

Faisal N.: Both of us came from orthodox families with different visions for the future of their offspring. I had seven aunts on my mother's side. As is customary in their part of the world, they were actively looking to find me a Pakistani bride.

I myself never planned to marry outside my culture. Dating an outsider was fine, but in the end, I was going to stay in my own religious and ethnic community. If each of us had sat down, consciously mapped out life 10 years down the road and taken all factors into consideration, the cultural difference would certainly have prevented us from dating. But you know what? We did not plan. We just enjoyed our time together and were barely aware that our relationship grew deeper and deeper.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

Connections: How did your parents respond to your romance?

Karen N.: My family was quite concerned about the cultural and religious differences but also open-minded and welcoming. As

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soon as Faisal and I began dating, I brought him home. Faisal's secret is his great charm. He can speak to anyone and make them feel special. So when he came to Manvel, he fit right in, and everyone quickly grew to love him.

Faisal N.: It took me much longer than Karen to bring the family into the picture, even though my parents had moved to Houston and could easily have met with her. In Pakistan, casual dating is frowned upon. Therefore I was only going to introduce a girl to my parents if I planned to marry her. That is why they only met Karen when I graduated from UST, because by then, it had become clear to us that we wanted to get married.

Karen N.: Yes, a few days before the ceremony, Faisal told his parents that he would bring a friend - me - to his graduation dinner.

Faisal N.: In my culture, we speak in code. Since I had never introduced a woman to my parents, they understood full well that "bringing a friend to dinner" was code for "bringing a woman who might possibly become my fiancée."

Karen N.: I was nervous about how Faisal's parents would receive me. During his graduation, I observed his family from afar. At dinner time, we finally met. They treated me very graciously.

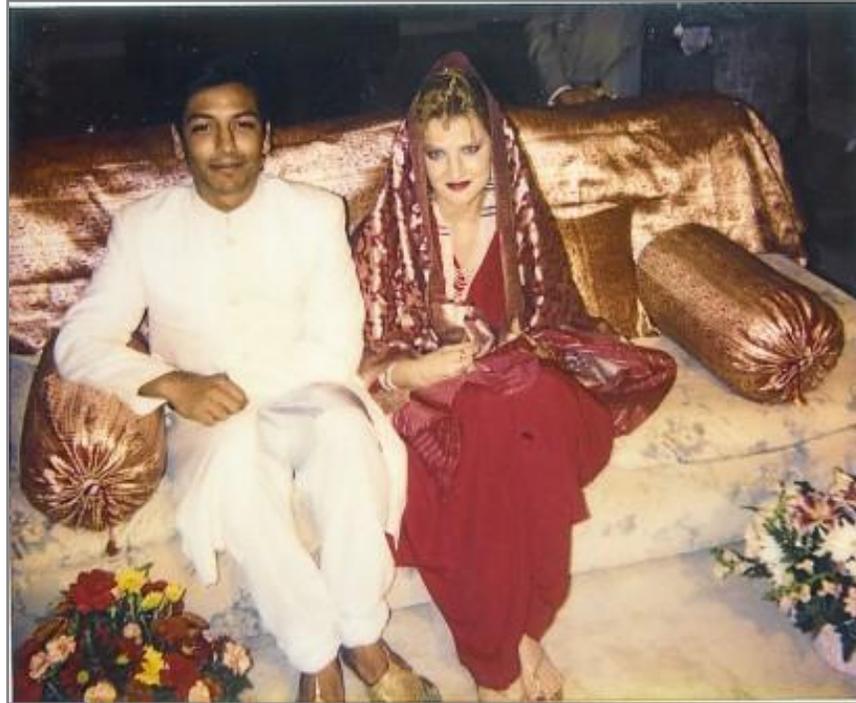
Three Weddings (No Funeral)

Connections: How did your parents react when it became clear that you wanted to become engaged?

Faisal N.: I asked my mother to approve my marriage plans. She then convinced my father, who gave his consent, too. Both had great trust in my decisions, because I had lived away from home since age eight and acted very responsibly throughout. Once my parents were on board, they began with the arrangements for a traditional Pakistani wedding.

Karen N.: Even though my family loved Faisal, they worried about my marrying into an unknown culture. They took me aside and shared their concerns with me. But I remained steadfast, and they accepted my decision. Ultimately, they had faith in me. The

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Faisal and Karen at their *nikah* (Pakistani wedding ceremony)

wedding came in three versions: there was a Catholic wedding, a Pakistani ceremony, and a civil ceremony. All of which happened in 1991.

Gender Stereotypes?

Connections: In Pakistan, the traditional gender view is that the man earns a living while the woman oversees the household. How did you two negotiate those gender expectations once the knot was tied?

Faisal N.: Those gender views really did not exist in my family. My mother was the matriarch of 13 brothers and sisters, even though she is only about 4 feet ten. She is a powerful and energetic woman, and so are my aunts. They have a good level of education, being either medical doctors or holding bachelor's degrees. And I myself wanted a real partner in life.

When at the beginning of our marriage, Karen worked as a certified public accountant (CPA) for Grant Thornton and earned more than I, it was no problem for us. Eventually, my earning power increased as I ran more and more convenience stores. Between 1986 and 1998, we had about 42 units. My business was taking off.

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A Relationship Falls on Hard Times

Connections: What were the major challenges that you encountered in your marriage?

Faisal N.: We faced the normal challenges that a relationship faces when one of the partners tries to make a living for the family, while the other gives life and sustenance to children. In 1994 and 1995, our daughters were born. Karen did not want to continue working as a CPA, and she stayed home, focusing her attention on rearing the children.

Add to this the fact that I had always had inordinately high expectations about myself. I viewed myself as the provider for wife, children, and parents; the fixer of problems in the extended family. The business I ran was very stressful. For 360 days out of the year, I worked from 7 am until 11 pm. When the business went through a lean period, I felt like a failure, and even more so when my mother fell ill and I was incapable of eliminating her suffering. The stress from these days took a toll on the marriage.

As a result of all the pressure that bore down on me and my unreflective way of handling it, the relationship between Karen and I became strained. The same was true for my relationship with my parents. The years from 2001 to 2006, when I lived life in the fast lane with a wife and two young children at home, were difficult.

Truth or Consequences

Connections: Karen, throughout those trying years, what held you both together?

Karen N.: Even though Faisal and I experienced tough times, I believed in the values and the deep love that we shared. I knew that eventually, they would pull us through. Also, the fact that we have two daughters helped me maintain our relationship.

Faisal N.: For a while, the four of us were on a superfast train that threatened to run us over. It seemed that we had finally reached a breaking point, and that finally woke me up.

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The Bright Side of Things

Connections: Today, the four of you are a loving family who care about one another deeply. How did you make it from a near break-up to this point?

Faisal N.: I spent 18 months re-evaluating the pace at which I was living and re-examining my priorities in life. That led me to return to my family values. It is true, we went through rough times, but on the bright side, they have had the effect of turning me into a far more self-conscious, thoughtful and emotionally honest person. Today, the relationship between Karen and me is as good as it has ever been. In the next three years, our children will be off at college. Both Karen and I celebrate and cherish the time we have with them.

Connections: How have you dealt with the considerable professional pressure that has been at the root of your difficulties?

Faisal N.: The business stress is still there. But I have since learned to accept that I am only human and can therefore give myself permission not to be perfect. At work, I have learned to let go of things that are beyond my control. With respect to my family, I can now feel good hugging my mother and keeping her company, even though I cannot cure her. Karen and the girls are great sources of strength for me.

A Bi-cultural Approach to Parenting

Connections: What are some of your aspirations?

Faisal N.: Both Karen and I have an abiding interest in spirituality. We have come from two different orthodox environments. As a bicultural couple, we have had to find a spiritual community that valued both my Muslim heritage and Karen's Christian roots. Today, we have assimilated into receiving inspiration from many different traditions. That binds us together. We can pick up the Bible or the Qur'an or the Vedas and find meaning that we share with one another. We have eased into a place that is truly ours.

Karen N.: This attitude informs our parenting. Here, our main aspiration is to share in our daughters' lives as consciously as we can and to give them love.

All caring parents try to offer their children a home that nourishes them spiritually, physically, intellectually, and emotionally.

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Our home values two cultural traditions equally. What we can give our daughters is pride of being both Texan and Pakistani. It may sound odd, but the two identities do not have to be mutually exclusive. Our wish for our children is that they will learn to navigate the world with the same love and openness with which Faisal's parents approached me, and my family approached Faisal. After all, love is universal.□

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