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Shastri's foundation teaches

By INDIA New England Staff

LEXINGTON, Mass. - It was during a sabbatical to India that Vanita Shastri realized Indian children in the United States do not get enough education about their cultural heritage.

When she returned home last April, Shastri made it her full-time job to change that.

Along with her husband, Shekhar, she founded the Meru Education Foundation, which brings Indian languages, arts and culture to children and adults.

As the foundation's executive director, Shastri organized a day camp for children and evening lectures for adults. She brought in renowned scholars from India, such as Kapila Vatsyayan, founder and director of the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts.

Last summer, about 20 children attended Camp Meru, where they were introduced to subjects like Sanskrit and Hindi, theater, yoga and geography. Meanwhile, adults who went to Summit Meru took lessons on topics like classical Indian literature and music theory.

"We want to bring a sheer joy of learning about a very rich tradition," said Shastri, a political economist and educator with a doctorate from Cornell University.

Currently, Shastri and her foundation are working on an Indian culture curriculum for the public schools in her hometown of Lexington.

At the same time, Shastri maintains her politically active side. She recently became president of the Indian American Forum for Political Education.

Not long after she took over the post, an incident occurred that sent shockwaves through the tight-knit Indian-American community.

Three Indian students were attacked as they walked near the campus of the University of Massachusetts Lowell on a December evening. Three teenage assailants forced the students to kneel and called them children of Osama bin Laden.

Under Shastri's leadership, the political-education forum swiftly condemned the alleged hate crime and organized a rally for the victims that more than 300 people attended.

The group's reaction showed law enforcement officials and the public-at-large that the Indian community will not tolerate hate. Two of the attackers are now facing felony civil-rights charges.



Shastri

