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International dancer Zaman performs at the renovated Indian Cultural Unit. "On Fridays, there's happy hour, and the guy comes to dance," says resident Ahamad Rasul, 62.

Relaunched unit caters to the Indian population in Nassau and Queens

HEALTH & CULTURE

BY KADIA GOBA
Special to Newsday

Ahamad Rasul enjoys the men and women belly-dancing performances. For Padma Sareen, it's about the mix of Bollywood films, and Kartar Kaur prefers the Indian-style daal and roti served at dinner. All three are residents at the newly relaunched Indian Cultural Unit at the Parker Jewish Institute for Health Care and Rehabilitation. The senior care facility is increasingly looking to accommodate the growing East and West Indian community in parts of Nassau and Queens.

The 42-bed annex at the Parker Jewish Institute mirrors

the robust Indian population throughout New Hyde Park, Bellerose, Queens Village, Lakeville and Herricks. There's a mix of first-timers and those who have transferred from other facilities. At least a handful of the 28 Indian residents say their experience is different from other facilities.

"On Fridays, there's happy hour, and the guy comes to dance," said Rasul, 62, who first came to Parker Jewish three years ago after brain surgery.

"And he plays Indian music," he added.

Kaur, on the other hand, responded differently to questions about her favorite pas-

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time at the facility, “[I like to] pray to God,” she said.

The 80-year-old Delhi native came to the United States 12 years ago to care for one of two ailing daughters. After increased difficulty in walking and physical therapy, Kaur resigned herself to assisted living. She came to Parker Jewish Center three months ago.

“Everything is Indian here,” she said, adding that her limited English made communicating difficult at other facilities.

Both cases are typical of residents at the center, which is described as a place equipped to handle specific cultural nuances, according to Sujata Seth, the unit’s marketing associate.

“It’s not just about the region, it’s about the languages, the foods and the dialects and when it comes to the religious parts also,” she said.

THE ORIGINS

The cultural center is the brainchild of Drs. Indravadan and Saroj Shah. The Great Neck couple saw a need to serve the growing senior community of Indian backgrounds that now lives in Nassau County.

Indian Americans are the second-largest single-race ancestry group outside of Chinese Americans, according to a 2017 American Community Survey.

“This was my dream come true,” said Saroj Shah, a retired obstetrician and gynecologist who practiced for more than 40 years throughout New York City.

Shah, 79, first recognized patients’ cultural needs were unmet when a friend’s mother went to stay at a long-term facility. Despite excellent care, the patient suffered from depression, according to Shah, who attributed the bouts to loneliness and lack of vegetarian dietary options.

“She was miserable,” Indravadan Shah said. “She did not have [Indian] food or anyone to talk to. Even the vegetarian lentil soup had chicken broth,” he added.

In 2014, Saroj Shah teamed up with her husband, 80, a retired general surgeon, and Dr. Ram Pardeshi, a psychiatrist, to pitch the idea of a culturally sensitive long-term-care facility. They solicited patient-care administrators from Brooklyn to Suffolk County. After a two-year hunt, the group found a home at Parker Jewish.



Kamal Bahri in his room at the renovated Indian Cultural Unit at Parker Jewish Institute for Health Care and Rehabilitation.

Giving a sense of home



The prayer room ensures that residents’ various religious preferences are met.

“For us physicians, it is very important that we treat the patient as a whole, as a human being,” said Saroj Shah. “So when their cultural needs — which is a big thing — and spiritual needs are satisfied, then they really get well soon.”

THE FACILITY

Parker Jewish, a century-old organization, first opened as a

homeless shelter for senior citizens in the early 1900s. By the 1940s, the organization moved to midtown Manhattan to accommodate New York City’s growing immigrant population, a mission not too distant from today.

Now, the 527-bed geriatric center sits on a 5-acre parcel of land at the Long Island-Queens border in New Hyde Park.

Initially, residents of the Indian Cultural Unit were scattered throughout the eight-story structure. In September 2018, the Shahs’ reopened the unit on the fourth floor solely dedicated to a unified cultural experience.

Along the walls hang large pieces of Indian artwork. In the communal area, where residents gather for entertain-

ment, sits a tin carving of a peacock atop a piano. The peacock was named India’s national bird in the 1960s and represents grace, pride and beauty, according to staff.

At happy hour, it’s not unusual to see a henna artist. And the upbeat, classical or Indo-Western fusion tunes complement belly dancer Zuman’s moves.

The unit’s menu boasts Indian cuisine, including basmati rice, chickpeas and potato with puri roti (an unleavened, deep-fried bread), daal makhani (a creamy mixture of lentil and kidney beans mixed with spices and butter from the Punjab region of India) and more. Indian masala tea is served every morning alongside a hot or cold breakfast.

“Culturally speaking, in general, people tend to like to eat the food that they’re accustomed to,” said Dr. Tara Lieberman, associate chief, Geriatrics and Palliative Care Medicine, at Northwell Health. “What we find is when a patient goes to a facility that isn’t in tune with what they’ve been eating in the past, they tend not to eat.”

The health care staff is



Henna artist Sonam embellishes the hand of Certified Nursing Assistant Natasha Soskey at Parker Jewish Institute for Health Care and Rehabilitation.



Architect Hemant Sheth volunteers his time to sing at the renovated Indian Cultural Unit.

mostly Indian or of Indian descent and can speak the languages and dialects of the residents, including Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi and Punjabi.

Enrollment was at 21 Indian residents when the facility first moved to the fourth floor. Within months, the bed count doubled.

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

This innovative approach to senior care is increasingly common. Health professionals agree that the trend to provide culturally sensitive long-term facilities continues to grow.

“I think that geriatric care can be very complicated, especially those who don’t speak English and may need someone who can speak their language to communicate their needs,” said Lieberman, adding that the practice is growing within assisted-living communities.

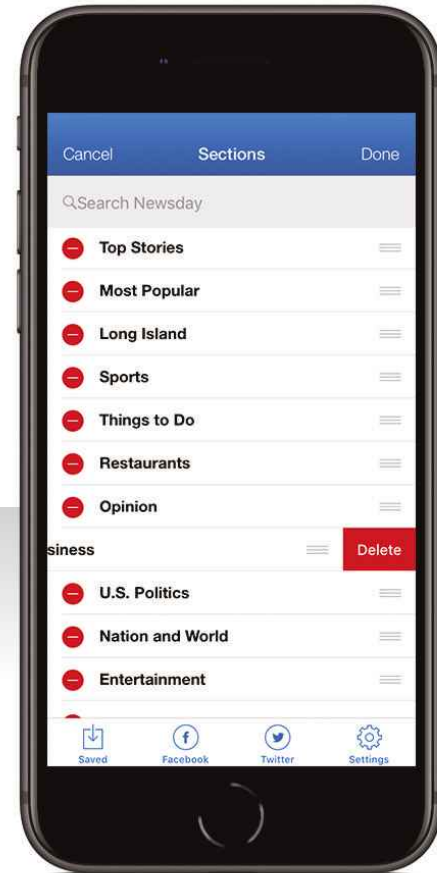
Lieberman said patients who become frail and debilitated often find it difficult to use translator phones. Therefore, providers that speak the same language can streamline medical care.

“There’s a camaraderie among the patients and staff,” said Linda Kaufman, Parker Jewish’s director of social work. “I think it’s been very helpful for the residents to feel calmer and more secure in their environment because they’re among their own culture.”

There’s also a need to ensure religious preferences are met. All residents have access to a prayer room, which features, among others, a sculpture of Lord Ganesh. But for residents like Padma Sareen, who prefers to recite mantras while holding devotional beads, the sight of “Dr. Sai [Veeramachaneni],” a visiting cardiologist who doles out food offerings and plays bhajans (spiritual songs), is just as comforting.

“I tried to bring in a Sikh from a local gurdwara [a place of worship for Sikhs], I mean, I had residents who cried upon seeing him,” said Sujata Seth. “I tell you, these seniors from my community, give them the right food and spirituality, and they’ll be happy souls.”

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