

The Home Funeral of Bhim Darjee

By Lee Webster, 2014

The newly assimilated Christian Nepali community of Concord, NH, was expecting their first death on American soil.

When the call came that Bhim had died, the young men who had arranged for her care were frightened and strangely exhilarated at the same time.

They knew what to do; we had been calling the city's cemetery official to arrange for the procession and burial, coordinating the transportation from home to church to burial with a sympathetic and support funeral director, and dealing with the hospice personnel who were new to the prospect of keeping a patient at home after pronouncing.

I'd met with Kamal and Rahul two weeks before in the Baptist Church that had agreed to host their small contingency of Christian refugees from Nepal, a tiny minority in their native country.

The minister of the church had arranged the meeting to discover how the community could marry their cultural needs with their American experience—and all on a shoestring. As they explained to me, they are “hire/fire” employees in America, and could not afford the funeral they had come to know from Hollywood movies. They were particularly attached to the idea of a procession with flags flying from the hood of a hearse à la ambassador of France. And darned if the funeral director didn't make it happen for them.

With much back and forth in their newly acquired English, it was decided with relief that they would indeed be able to care for “Mother” themselves. Hospice was informed that the family would be keeping her home until a church service could be arranged prior to burial.

I had brought a plain pine casket with me to the meeting to donate to the family, and we went to move it into the church after our lengthy planning session. As we stood in the parking lot about to unload it, Kamal began to express his relief and gratitude, beginning with, “Sometimes the water falls from my eyes from the kindness of Americans” and ending with deep bows and hugs all around. “Me, too,” said the minister. I was too choked up to speak.

As we continued to line up our support system, it became apparent that the hospice social worker was not comfortable with keeping Bhim home for the day that we had agreed on. In the end, the family prevailed, though not without some strong resistance from the agency and confusion for the family.

The city cemetery coordinator, on the other hand, bent over backwards to help. When she learned about the Nepali tradition of having the young men carry the body “from the home to the jungle,” she designated a newly developed area next to the woods as the future burial ground of the Nepali community. The total cost to the family for burial, due to Bhim having been on public assistance, was only \$50. Extraordinary effort and compassion made that happen.

The funeral director willing to help at a price the community could afford was over 40 minutes away, yet he came through with the paperwork and transportation support that the family was unable to conduct themselves, due to lack of vehicles and insufficient English to complete the death certificate. Charging a greatly reduced fee, they transported Bhim from home to the church for an hour-long ceremony before the procession and burial, respecting the needs and

customs of the family and community, and overlooking the usual restriction of an immediate burial.

When at last the call came at 5 p.m., Kamal said, "Sister, Bhim has died. Can you come now?" I loaded up some frozen and flat Techni-ice in a lunch cooler and drove to the low income housing unit where the parking area was filled with milling Nepali children and young men. I was greeted by a group and swept up a small stairway and into a small room roughly 12 x 20 feet, a combined living room and kitchen—and it was jammed wall-to-wall with about 35 women, children and men, rotating seats with those who were continuously arriving.

They parted for me and presented me to Bhim, to whom I bowed. I asked who was to be in charge of her care, and two young women were brought forward. They spoke no English, and I learned quickly how important—and surprisingly efficient most of the time—it was to use my hands to indicate what needed to be done.

Kamal told me that the hospice nurses had been there earlier in the day and bathed her, to which I felt great relief, as there was no way to clear the room for bathing and doing so with so many present was not possible. We settled on the job at hand—placing the ice and teaching the caretakers how to activate the new sheets.

I motioned for the bed to be moved slightly away from the wall in order to demonstrate how to roll the body to make room for ice, and when I came around the end of the bed, my foot struck a blue tarp. I looked up in question. Meeting my eyes, Kamal smiled and said, "Oh, yes, Sister. The hospice nurse said it would help with the smell." I looked down to see charcoal briquettes arranged all over the tarp. I knew then the depth of fear the hospice social worker had been trying to express.

I motioned for the people on the other side to roll Bhim and suddenly felt her body being levitated straight up two feet into the air. I began to chuckle as we placed the ice and gave the go-ahead to lower her back down. After all, she weighed about as much as a 5th grader.

I explained how to change out the ice and when, and asked what else they might want to do for her. Despite her having been bathed earlier, they felt the need to bathe her hands and face in a lavender-scented basin we prepared together. The women had already dressed Bhim in a cotton garment covered with a lovely shawl, and surrounded her head with numerous scarves. They proceeded to gently and lovingly stroke her hands and arms and forehead with soft scented cloths.

As I gathered up my things to leave, the young men surrounded me to walk out to my car, asking if I wouldn't need to stay with them. When I told them no, they were doing beautifully and didn't need me, they seemed hesitant and unsure. I understood their need for an authority, but I knew that they had that authority within themselves even if they didn't yet.

I asked what they would do as the evening progressed, and they told me that all the Nepalese, Christian and Buddhist, would continue to come throughout the night, and that they would all pray together in their own ways.

I told Kamal then that I knew they would be alright. All the work was over; all they had to do was be with Bhim and her family and their community. All they had to do was bear witness. They placed their hands together, smiled and bowed, and returned to their vigil.

Kamal and I have become email buddies, planning a church service and demonstration to educate members of their community about home care of their own dead. And the Baptist community that sponsors them is looking into setting up a shop for the young men to teach them how to build caskets for their members' use and to sell.

I learned a great deal about the many parts that go into creating the after-death care and ritual that matter, about the fears some have and how to overcome them, and about the power of attending and witnessing rather than doing. Bhim's death, the first in their new home, served as the model for these warm and caring people who now know that they have freedom and ability to care for their own from now on.