

## **INTERVIEW OF MS. SHARDA SHENOY**

**RAGINI GOEL:** Good evening. Namaskar. This is Ragini Goel and I was just interviewing, Shobha Rao of Elegant Affairs. With me now is her sister Sharda Shenoy, who is also known as Poonam. Sharda just signed a waiver for AIA, so I am doing this on behalf of AIA. how are you Sharda?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** I am fine. Thank you Ragini.

**RAGINI GOEL:** I really appreciate you giving us time at this important evening for you because I know you and your sister are both leaving for India tomorrow. So, thanks a lot to take time out of your busy schedule. I do not know where to start because we were talking to Shobha and shed a little bit of light about your business and you guys started and what you have contributed to the community. Why don't you tell me in your own words how this idea of Elegant Affairs came about and what is the service you provide for the Indian community.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Well, Ragini, about 10 years back we prepared some decorations for an Arangetram.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Arangetram. Okay.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes, which is a dance recital. We prepared the decorations in such a way that people enjoyed our work. At the time we were thinking of opening a decorating business, but also wanted to act as coordinators: reserving the hall, showing people center pieces, decorations, the caterer and all of that, but somehow it did not work and later we just decided to focus on the decorations part. About 10 years back, when we started, there were hardly one or two decorators in this community. Shobha and I came from a very creative family. My father used to, when we were growing up, bring lots of flowers and ask us to decorate the house. My older sister is the talented one in our family. She used to prepare floral arrangements, take cooking classes, embroidery classes and all that. So we grew up looking up to her, all her talents and all that and always wanted to be equally talented one. She would also decorate the house like an interior designer. She did not have a degree or anything, but she was very talented. So then I graduated with home science and I always wanted to teach cooking and all that, but for some reason I did not pursue that. But about nine years back, when we started thinking about this event decorator business, Shobha also did floral design and we put two things together and with my husband's support we started Elegant Affairs.

**RAGINI GOEL:** I see.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** We started with four poles.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Four poles.

## **INTERVIEW OF MS. SHARDA SHENOY**

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes, and used them as as a mandap and decorated our first wedding, second wedding, and on and on. We did 100 weddings or so within two years. Now we do like 500 weddings per year.

**RAGINI GOEL:** 500 weddings?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yeah.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Oh my god!

**SHARDA SHENOY:** We do have very different, different styles of mandaps. We like to create every wedding as a different style, different theme, and all of that. We have really benefited from word of mouth and our reputation is very good. People really feel comfortable having us to do their events.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Yes.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** And this service is needed. You are the decorators, you decorate and do the flower arrangements and the hall.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Yes, and the sangeet, mehandi,garba

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Sangeet meaning the traditional Indian musical night.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Yes, before the wedding.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Before the wedding, we also do the henna pasting.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Yes. I have noticed, you guys will do the traditional seating on the floor.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** With elaborate carpets and pillows and mattresses, the lower sitting, the different ambience. We have very rich-looking fabrics. That is the latest one we have, then we have very traditional, very ethnic look bandani also Jaipuri style.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Bandani meaning the tie and dye.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes, then we did sangeet mehandi, basically it is like a mela style. It is a very casual affair. People basically come, they enjoy the ambience of the whole event.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Right.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Which requires sitting lower sitting then they have a decoration for the stalls, which is a kind of golgappa stalls and again different styles. And

## **INTERVIEW OF MS. SHARDA SHENOY**

sometimes they go with international theme also, which we do Chinese stall decoration, Mexican stall, and Italian style.

**RAGINI GOEL:** You did that too?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes, yes we do that also.

**RAGINI GOEL:** So you are trying to preserve Indian culture and its traditions and sort of spreading that because you are bringing the culture and traditions of India here for the new generation.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes.

**RAGINI GOEL:** And from what I have seen, these young kids growing up here go back to their roots when it comes time to celebrate the biggest event in their life with their wedding.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes

**RAGINI GOEL:** So you are a very important part of the most important day in their life.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes.

**RAGINI GOEL:** And you help to accomplish the dream for them.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yeah, we have brides coming to us with certain ideas and we give them other ideas and try to fit their budget which is the most important thing when they come with wedding packages like decoration or flowers of anything. Everybody has certain priorities and you know, families would come and tell us, listen I have only a few thousand dollars for this whole event and we are trying to see what can look the most beautiful in that price range. So we try to put all of these things together for that memorable day. These kids are very well educated, and they are earning good money and when they grow up, the girls are basically looking for their dream weddings.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Yeah, for the bride it is their dream wedding.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes, I have a daughter and she always wants these things. For her it is a very natural feeling. I want this I want that. But you know there is a limit also for that.

**RAGINI GOEL:** I have noticed that besides being the coordinators for the weddings and events, I have also seen your decorations. Can you tell me about some of the Indian cultural events in Atlantic City.

## **INTERVIEW OF MS. SHARDA SHENOY**

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Tell me about that. This is a ways back.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** That was the beginning of our business. It was about nine years back where the Indian communities get together for this particular day and they would have a talent show and then evening entertainment and all of that. We had started advertising, putting out boards, putting some flowers and giving them cards and telling them that we do all kind of decorations. So Muslim families would come and ask about it as well as Hindu families. So basically we try to provide services to all kinds of communities: mixed marriages, and in all we have done dozens of weddings with the Jewish-Hindu culture together and it is a nice feeling you know. We have done South Indian, North Indians, Kashmiris and each one has a different style.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Yes, because when we talk of India, it is several cultures in India, several subcultures.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Every region has its own tradition.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes.

**RAGINI GOEL:** And you are able to incorporate all of that.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes, basically, when we sit with the families, like for example, Kashmiri families they have certain requirements when the groom arrives. Basically they ask for the rangoli, which is on the floor with very different designs like colorful designs with the patterns followed with decorations on the floor and basically the grooms stands on it and then the bride's mother would welcome him with aarti, tika, and you know all kinds of stuff. So we also learn a lot about different cultures as well.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Customs of different regions.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Customs, yes, Kashmiris and then Marwaris, you know Marwaris usually put the toran on the door which is where the baarat comes. On the gate they will put toran and the groom will come on the horse with a talwar and you know there is a sword in it.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Yes

**SHARDA SHENOY:** The groom will come on the horse with a little ceremonial dagger and then touch that toran.

**RAGINI GOEL:** And that toran is the decoration on the top of the door.



## INTERVIEW OF MS. SHARDA SHENOY

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes, he touches that, he has to

**RAGINI GOEL:** Why?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** That is their custom.

**RAGINI GOEL:** That he has arrived.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yeah maybe and in the Gujarati culture when the groom arrives basically they crush the clay pot on the floor and then he crushes it and then only he can move forward.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Then he moves forward.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes, yes, so those things you know we have never seen in our life before. And I want to learn about different cultures, different customs, and all that you know.

**RAGINI GOEL:** So from the people, you also learn.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** A lot.

**RAGINI GOEL:** What they want tells you about the customs.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes.

**RAGINI GOEL:** And you decorate and provide the necessary decorations for that.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Not only Hindu customs, but there are Muslim customs also.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Like what?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** The girl's side have a shaadi a day before Walima. Walima is given by the groom's side and shaadi is done by girl's side. The most interesting part is when the event takes place there is a partition in between and the girl's side would hire the female photographer and videographer and the boys' side will hire the male photographer and all that. So there are really different customs in each community.

**RAGINI GOEL:** So you are trying to help preserve those traditions and cultures.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes.

## INTERVIEW OF MS. SHARDA SHENOY

**RAGINI GOEL:** I remember seeing your arches somewhere in Atlantic City where Air India had a booth. How did that happen? What happened there? That is outside a wedding. Looks like you do other events too.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes, about nine years back when we were doing this booth, when we had a booth in Atlantic City.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Atlantic City.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Air India also had a booth next to us and they really admired our work and next thing you know we received a call from them.

**RAGINI GOEL:** The sales manager.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yeah, the sales manager and since then we were hired to do all of their booths. We have been to Philadelphia Conventions.

**RAGINI GOEL:** \_\_\_\_\_ conventions.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** \_\_\_\_\_ conventions and when we do all the convention decoration and when we do all the convention decoration for Air India The Government of India Tourism is a big part of the decoration because here in this country the Government of India Tourism plays a big part in the tourism events. Annually, they celebrate two to three events. One was in Chicago. One happened recently in Las Vegas and usually they have it in a local area. What we do for them is that we create India décor like a temple look or different pillars and all of that, so all at the convention all other countries participate.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Oh! Really? It's international.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** It's international and our booth always stands out with a really colorful ambience. We put burgundy, gold, ivory and it really looks nice. We do it for Air India and the Government of India Tourism. Air India is one of the biggest organizations.

**RAGINI GOEL:** A large organization that is for sure.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** They started hiring us about six years back. For six years we have been doing the decorations for the street festival in South Street Sea Port.

**RAGINI GOEL:** South Street Sea Port there has been a festival every year.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Well, we arrive at the Seaport at 3'o clock in the morning and we decorate all kinds of tents, the stages, dinner decoration, and everything in a very

## **INTERVIEW OF MS. SHARDA SHENOY**

traditional way. They have a Ram Darbar where we put the mandap. It's really nice feeling because we are doing this for the community.

**RAGINI GOEL:** I have noticed your decorations. That's a very big festival at South Street Seaport. You had a big Diwali, although it's around the Dussera time because of the weather. Did you do decorate the Air India booth there?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes, we were independently hired by Air India.

**RAGINI GOEL:** It is always gorgeous.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yeah. It's really one of the biggest booth that we decorate; over 20 feet. It is really nicely decorated and people always feel something special when they see it.

**RAGINI GOEL:** They're a big sponsor of the South Street Seaport Diwali Festival also.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yeah.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Air India and AIA. And then how about the main stage there for the cultural program. Did you also do that?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes, we do decorations for all of the stages and mehendi tents.

**RAGINI GOEL:** There is a tent for mehendi?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes and they recently started yoga. So we decorate that area.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Oh! Yes. I saw it this time. It was right on the river front. The yoga place is very calm. I think you guys grasped the theme there because I went there and attended that yoga class.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Oh! You did. This year we do something special for 9/11 victims. That was donated by AIA and we did all fresh flower platforms with candles and all that. It really looks nice.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Was that done by you in the recent tribute to 9/11 victims?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes.

**RAGINI GOEL:** I was admiring that for the longest time.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Really?

## **INTERVIEW OF MS. SHARDA SHENOY**

**RAGINI GOEL:** And all the people were gathering there to pay their tributes.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes.

**RAGINI GOEL:** You guys did it?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes. What happened was that they wanted to have something like that for 9/11 victims and we thought let's contribute that so we did it. It was a really nice set up with an American flag and Indian flag. Then we had a kalash in metal.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Kalash being one of the symbols of Indian culture.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes. You know everybody felt that it was the main part of that event that day.

**RAGINI GOEL:** I noticed it had burgundy and gold flowers.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Mostly it was all white.

**RAGINI GOEL:** And mostly white.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yeah.

**RAGINI GOEL:** White signifying purity and grace in this case. So you guys are there all day?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes, we basically went there from 3'o clock in the morning until midnight.

**RAGINI GOEL:** I have seen you guys with boundless enthusiasm and energy. What is the secret of your success?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Well we both put our heart in it, Ragini. Everything is art. We try our best to make things seem as beautiful and elaborate as possible.

**RAGINI GOEL:** That means you just put your heart into it and you take pride in what you do.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes, that's the secret of this business.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Do you think your children will follow in your footsteps in what you are doing?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** I do not think so, but they always have supported us, especially my husband who plays a big part in our success.

## **INTERVIEW OF MS. SHARDA SHENOY**

**RAGINI GOEL:** In what way?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Well when we started our business he used to come and give us support.

**RAGINI GOEL:** When did you really need him?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** To drive the truck.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Really?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes, he also cut the flowers because we started in our basement and Shobha's husband would also help her to put the water in the buckets, filling the buckets, and all that.

**RAGINI GOEL:** My god.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** I still remember cutting 3,000 carnations for a mandap and it was not a simple thing to do. We really worked hard. I remember Ravi was working five days in the city and he would help us on Saturday and Sunday day and night.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Your husband, Ravi.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes. But you know they never complain. Shobha's husband is also the same way.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Never complained because you guys were working weekends for long hours.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes.

**RAGINI GOEL:** That's support in itself.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes that is.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Understanding, it takes a lot of understanding.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** It is you know because on weekends we sleep only a couple of hours and basically give up socializing. I do not see my friends and families on weekends so that's a big part of our sacrifice.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Yes it is, because for any success it takes a lot of hard work and sacrifice.

## INTERVIEW OF MS. SHARDA SHENOY

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes.

**RAGINI GOEL:** And what your sister, Shobha, was telling me and what you are telling me is how you started and today you have made it where I feel you have made an impact in the Indian community and also in spreading Indian culture. And creating interest in it because there are so many intercultural weddings also happening

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes. We do a lot of community events, which is charity work also.

**RAGINI GOEL:** You do.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes

**RAGINI GOEL:** Tell me about your charity events.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Well Hindu Samaj of Bergen County celebrates all kind of special days like Ganesh Chaturthi, Janmastami, Navratri, and all that. We always contribute our decorations to them. There are community events where whenever they need anything we give them discounted price, which are very reasonable. Rutgers students come here often as well.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Students from Rutgers University?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes. They always celebrate Diwali festival at Rutgers and we always give them decorations. We always give it to them at very reasonable prices. We give them statues on a complimentary basis and a couple of things they pay such as flowers and all since they cost us. There are other community organizations like Swami Narayan Temple and all that. We have been sending them decorations and we have done a good deal of flower work there.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Yes, I have noticed that when AIA New Jersey chapter has its youth award ceremony you contribute there as well.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Renu Agarwal mentioned it. I was complementing the decorations and we had a meeting after the awards ceremony. She said that these decorations were donated by Elegant Affairs and that you guys have been big supporters of the community. I guess you guys did not charge us for that.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Ha ha.

**RAGINI GOEL:** We never have a big budget.

## **INTERVIEW OF MS. SHARDA SHENOY**

**SHARDA SHENOY:** No, we understand very well. It is nice to do it because we are away from India and we really want to do something for it. We just did a March of Dimes event the other day, for example.

**RAGINI GOEL:** March of Dimes, what did you do for the March of Dimes?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** We decorated the stage and the cocktail area and all of that. So, it was done totally with an Indian flavor you know.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Flavor.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Flavor. We do it for different organization such as, of course, AIA being one of the bigger ones.

**RAGINI GOEL:** All right. Hmm hmm. Was it local in New Jersey?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** No it was in Philadelphia.

**RAGINI GOEL:** In Philadelphia.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** No. Actually, it was in South Jersey, sorry. It was in South Jersey.

**RAGINI GOEL:** So, it was in our state of New Jersey.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yeah yes. Then we also did it for the Jain Convention also in Mahwah Sheraton.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Hmm hmm.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** That was a youth convention that happened last July 2002.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Hmm hmm.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** And we donated some of our decoration for the event.

**RAGINI GOEL:** And your efforts, of course.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** And when the Jain Convention is in other states, we provide the decoration as well. Such as when it was in Philadelphia.

**RAGINI GOEL:** You go to Philadelphia.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes.

## **INTERVIEW OF MS. SHARDA SHENOY**

**RAGINI GOEL:** And how far do you guys travel?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** For weddings? Well, we have gone to the Virgin Islands and as far as Detroit, Cleveland, Louisiana and Florida.

**RAGINI GOEL:** All over the place.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Carrying your goods and wares and decorations?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes, we usually take refrigerated truck to house the flowers.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Refrigerated trucks with flowers.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes. Hmm hmm.

**RAGINI GOEL:** So, you don't fly?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** We often fly, but the trucks must be driven by our helpers and the drivers.

**RAGINI GOEL:** That's a big job to coordinate.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes and we often hire local people there to help us.

**RAGINI GOEL:** It takes a lot of coordination and organization.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes. It is like working 24 hours a day, basically. Because out of state wedding really need lots of attention, because these areas are totally new for us.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Well.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** It is not convenient to go back and forth, you know like then we have done weddings in Louisville, Kentucky and New Jersey in the same weekend.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Okay, so you have gone all over the place.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes.

**RAGINI GOEL:** What do you feel has been your contribution to the community and the society? What has given you the most pleasure in doing this?



## **INTERVIEW OF MS. SHARDA SHENOY**

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Well, first off, my clients. It's really a very touching feeling Ragini because when we do the decoration and really make the clients happy, they come and hug us and they thank us and all of that. That's the most enjoyable moment.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Most joyful moment for you.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes, one client told me the other day, "Sharda, it is a blessing for our community that somebody is here to fulfill our children's dream." How sweet! I was really touched Ragini because of course there is a cost, and people realize that this is a business, but with our clients they always feel very comfortable with us like a family.

**RAGINI GOEL:** They felt that you are a blessing to have.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes.

**RAGINI GOEL:** You so nicely said to fulfill the child's dreams being in a foreign land, and foreign culture you are able to bring their traditions and customs here.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Right, I remember that one wedding was for the Patel family. The Patel family had a very large wedding, 700 people or 800 people. The girl had very limited funds for the wedding decorations and with her budget we really created such a beautiful ambience so the father took the stage during the reception and he said thanks to Elegant Affairs because we really made his daughter's day.

**RAGINI GOEL:** They really made his daughter's day.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yeah.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** I mean we really don't expect all this but when it really comes from the heart it really touches you know. Then you forget about your pains and tiredness, and then you look forward to do another one.

**RAGINI GOEL:** That makes your job worthwhile.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes, yes.

**RAGINI GOEL:** That is so sweetly said and I can relate to what you are saying.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** It is a blessing that we started this and I really thank God for that. You know this something that he really gave us to contribute to the community. I never thought ten years back that we will start something like this Ragini and we will be a very big part of the community. Today we know so many people. Everybody knows Elegant Affairs. We work with all of the topmost people clientele such as the AAPI convention, all the physicians they know us very well and when it comes to community events or

## INTERVIEW OF MS. SHARDA SHENOY

fundraising everything, we try to contribute what we have and it is really a nice feeling that we could do that you know.

**RAGINI GOEL:** So you feel that you have made a difference through your talent and efforts and providing the Indian community with a service that did not exist before.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes.

**RAGINI GOEL:** What would be your message to the coming generation whom you work with a lot; say that crowd in their 20s or early 30s. You work with these brides and bridegrooms. What would you like to say for them or the generation coming after that?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Well, the generation here is growing, even they are very modern in thinking and very modern in such a way you know, they always take with them their own traditions and cultures. I have seen that when the bride comes in and says my Mom likes this and I really want to have that, but then the reception is my choice you know. So you know, I always have a blessing for them that they are nice kids, highly educated, and one thing we learn from working with the young generation is that they are very passionate. You know you can see they are highly, highly educated Ragini. We have doctors, physicians and lawyers. We see hundreds of brides. We have done weddings for physicians, lawyers and I am really proud of them that they really stand out. Even in terms of wedding, they really like to go with what their family wants. They are more independent, of course. You know you cannot tell them what to do but they are more understanding. They basically know how the culture is.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Well yes and they are very respectful of their parent's feelings.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Yes exactly.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Because I remember my son had his wedding and asked me Ma what should we do? What kind of mandap should we get and a lot of it was their wanting to preserve culture and tradition. It was like Ma would like this. I give immense credit to our kids and of course you guys in helping to sort of translate those dreams into a reality in doing what you are doing.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** And we try our best.

**RAGINI GOEL:** I thank you very much.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Oh you are welcome.

**RAGINI GOEL:** Anything else you would like to say?

**SHARDA SHENOY:** We would like to thank you and Renu and your organization. It is really nice that you are putting these things together.

## **INTERVIEW OF MS. SHARDA SHENOY**

**RAGINI GOEL:** Yes, Renu is of course working very hard with the rest of us. This project has become a passion for her. And we were happy to get these grants from the historical commission to be doing this and I really appreciate your time and effort.

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Oh you are welcome.

**RAGINI GOEL:** You have a good trip, a lovely trip now that you are leaving for India tomorrow, your home and country of origin. To say it in Hindi “Apka safar accha rahe.”

**SHARDA SHENOY:** Thank you.