

An unforgettable evening

Zohreh Ghahremani

Fundraising has never been my strong point. Having experienced some level of humiliation at previous attempts, I have a hard enough time asking for sponsorship, let alone organizing a fundraising event, no matter how worthy the cause may be. But last week, when I was asked to read my poem at such an event, I could not say no to a cause that involved ailing children.

Until recently, the name *MAHAK* had meant little to me. Yes, I knew the definition of the word in Persian, but so far had only referred to its poetic application in testing purity. It took a recent gathering at a friend's house to give that word its new meaning. I now see the unification of MAHAK and ISCC (International Society for Children with Cancer) as a window of hope for thousands of needy children, whose innocent eyes watch the dark cloud of cancer spreading over their heads. Without MAHAK they would have no access to treatment, but even if they did, the unfairness of poverty against the high cost of such treatment would impede their hopes.

Six hundred and fifty guests attended the event and it was organized in a most elegantly Fashion. Our popular and capable MCs – Ms. Shahrzad Ardalan and Mr. Houshang Touzie – outdid themselves as they opened the evening by bringing a smile to everyone's face and putting the audience at ease. After an eloquent speech by Mrs. Fereshteh Tavakoli, who reported an impressive data of MAHAK's accomplishments, a documentary was shown about the Cancer center in Iran and the children who had received successful

treatment. To say that the global accomplishments of ISCC and MAHAK are impressive would be a huge understatement. I left that event knowing that unless I joined and did my share to help, I would forever be haunted by the sad look I had seen in those children's eyes.

For many days to come I was unable to shake off the deep sorrow and finally, when I could no longer bear the thought of those children, I wrote about them. I absorbed their pain, hoped their hopes until one night, there came a moment when I became one with those kids. That was how I wrote my poem and why I agreed to read it before a crowd of six hundred and fifty. While reading that poem, my voice was no longer that of a middle-aged writer, it came out of a child's throat, a child who needed you, and me, and anyone who could reach out to them.

To be present at a fundraiser for such a worthy cause is an incredible experience. It is gratifying, uplifting, and even ethereal. Throughout that evening, that kind-hearted crowd had become one and its name was humanity. As the MC's began to gather and announce names of sponsors, the crowd cheered with each single donation. The room's charged atmosphere reminded me of the euphoria in the dance of the twirling dervish. This had to be how the dancers felt, each moment flying higher than the last, each step feeling closer to the beloved.

Up on the stage, the digital screen that had previously showed us MAHAK's cancer center was now lit with a collage of 250 innocent faces. I couldn't abandon the thought that these were real children, our own kids suffering far away and we were their last hope.

The crowd was asked to sponsor these little angels and to subsidize one child's treatment for a year. As each child found a sponsor, the computer clicked on his or her picture, changing the image into a lovely rose. The new squares were all part of a big picture, that of a field of roses. The promise of possibly viewing the entire field kept the audience going and slowly but surely, more flowers appeared on the screen.

By the time the entire symbolic field of roses had opened up, it was past midnight. It had taken my husband and I over an hour to reach Irvine and we needed to drive back before we ran out of energy. However, as some of the audience approached to tell me my poem had touched their hearts, their words gave me the needed vigor and I felt less and less tired.

On the drive back, I recalled a speech from a long time ago and the speaker's words now echoed with more clarity. "Don't ever think that what you do is not enough, or that your actions can never change the world. Just remember this: When you do nothing, you remain a zero, but as you make an effort, you become a number, no matter how small. And change can only come about when the numbers add up."

I am filled with pride for being an Iranian, proud of being human, but most of all, I feel proud for having changed my number and no longer being the big zero. We can all be a number, numbers that may someday add up and make the world a better place for all.

Zohreh Ghahremani is the author of *Sky of Red Poppies*, selected for 2012 as One Book, One San Diego.