



Fall 2012

Symbols of Joy

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Recommended Citation

Julian '07, Sarah Zeller (2012) "Symbols of Joy," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, 2002-2017: Vol. 21 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol21/iss3/6>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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Symbols of Joy

At the wedding of Mahera (Tapia) Khanshab '05, alumni celebrate traditions, both new and old.

Story by SARAH (ZELLER) JULIAN '07



Mahera Tapia Khanshab is surrounded by her bridesmaids; four of them are fellow IWU alumnae.

In the spirit of Illinois Wesleyan's commitment to diversity, classmates of Mahera Tapia Khanshab '05 got the opportunity to experience Indian culture firsthand when they attended a series of traditional celebrations for her wedding. Friends and family from around the world united to celebrate the union of Mahera and her husband Taha.

“Both Taha and I are of the same religion and same community, so I always knew that I would follow traditional ceremonies,” Mahera says. “I grew up with all these traditional customs, so I always wanted to fully embrace our culture for my wedding. I knew I wasn't going to wear a white dress.”

In fact, she wore several dresses — the ceremonies included eight separate functions in the tradition of the Dawoodi Bohra community. The ornate, handmade gowns were one of the many differences from typical American weddings, according to bridesmaid Denise Boban '05. “Mahera's dad explained to me that they are all brightly colored, as opposed to the typical white wedding dress, as a symbol of the joy and celebration of the occasion,” she says.

At the Pannau, a ceremony at the couple's mosque, the groom arrived riding a white horse as part of a wedding procession. “Prior to this event, us girls were a little nervous because we were wearing traditional Bohra attire we had borrowed from Mahera's mom and aunties, and we weren't sure if we were wearing them properly,” Denise recalls. But her fears vanished after arriving. “All of Mahera's Bohra family and friends were so friendly and welcoming, it became clear that it didn't matter whether we had tied our scarves correctly or not. What followed was a beautiful ceremony, with more colorful and ornate decorations and lovely traditional prayers and songs, in which Taha vowed to Mahera's family that he would be a good, loving husband to her.”

Ceremonies also included the Nikah, the actual wedding ceremony in the mosque; the Mehndi, where henna was applied over the course of four hours to the bride's hands and feet; the Vanne Tanne, a colorful food fight in Mahera's backyard; and two receptions, including one at Chicago's Navy Pier.

Laura Minerva '05 believes the events were truly unique. "More than any other wedding I've been to, I really felt a true unity at Mahera and Taha's wedding, and I felt incredibly welcome by her family and church community, even though I didn't always understand the customs and traditions," she says. "Her family members would often sit and explain each ceremony to the non-Muslim guests, and we left with a much better understanding of the culture."

The couple's reception at Navy Pier was the wedding's grand finale with 375 guests, including more than 20 alumni, attending. "The number of family members that flew in from all around the world was amazing," says Laura Jaskierski '05, who flew in from Washington, D.C. "There was a parade at the beginning of the reception to recognize the family members and their home countries."



Guests at her wedding reception at Chicago's Navy Pier participate in a Bollywood-style dance, choreographed by Laura Jaskierski '05.



Mahera decorated her forearms (shown above center) and feet with mehndi, or henna tattoos. She is circled by alumnae friends who tried their hand at the ancient practice.

Mahera had asked Laura Jaskierski to choreograph a Bollywood-style dance to perform for guests during the reception. Despite being unfamiliar with Bollywood dance, Laura Jaskierski learned moves by watching videos, then filmed herself performing the dance and sent the recording to friends across the country. Several of the women involved got together to practice in the weeks ahead of the big event. "It was a lot of work, but so much fun because it felt like a big reunion. Most of the girls involved in the dance were from Gulick Hall, and we've all remained very close, so it was a great excuse to get together, even if we felt a little silly," says Laura Minerva.

Though the ceremonies are now complete, the memories remain for those who participated. "Being a part of Mahera's wedding was pure joy, and it was such a great experience to learn about the Indian and Bohra Muslim traditions," says Denise.