

Remembering their passion for life

BLERTA CELA

DHAKA is still reeling from the tragedy that hit the heart of the city on the night of July 1. The unprecedented terror attack is a direct threat to what Bangladesh stands for; a threat to human rights, diversity and women rights. I spent three years in Bangladesh. What impressed me most is how kind and open people are to foreigners of every nationality. Sure, one would inevitably be faced with the occasional stares in the streets due to the difference in appearances; they were stares of curiosity rather than apprehension. When I would go for my morning run, or to get coffee from the Holey Bakery which was right next to my house, people in the streets would always greet me with a big smile and a good morning. Never in a million years could I have imagined the fate that would befall my favourite Holey within a few months of my leaving Dhaka. Amidst the traffic congestion, the hot summer days and the concrete jungle that is Dhaka, a handful of unique places exist like Holey Bakery – with a view of the lake, green grass and lawn chairs, and where the constant smell of fresh bread and pasta was a true luxury. Sadat, a good friend and owner of the restaurant, created the space based on the European concept of an open kitchen where one could see where the magic was truly made.

These three women did not need the approval of others to feel content in themselves; rather they made people around them feel happier. They had the whole world in front of them and would have chosen to do so many things in their lives, like fierce rays of the sun spreading light and creating love wherever they went. They loved Dhaka, Bangladesh and its people and made this unique city their home. Their motto in life was "be happy...enjoy life to the fullest."



Ishrat Akhond



Nadia Benedetti



Claudia D'Antona

I lost three close friends in the attack – they were three independent and passionate women.

The first was my beautiful friend Nadia Benedetti. We celebrated her birthday at Holey Bakery in September – where she invited a wonderful group of people – including Marco Tondat, her business partner, who also lost his life that night. He was a fun loving young Italian guy full of energy. I got to know Nadia over a period of one year, too short a time to know such a marvelous person. From the moment I met her, I fell in love with her simplicity, honesty and sincerity. She was extremely elegant, a beauty both inside and out. She was the woman I want to become – she had her own business, travelled around the world – from London to New York to Dhaka- and she had her own bed and breakfast in Bali. Apart from cappuccinos, she loved great pasta, pizza and paella. She was very generous and genuinely cared for people. One could immediately feel that she was very content in the small pleasures of her life, travels and work. Most importantly, she was a truly independent woman if I ever saw one – who did not need men nor luxury for happiness - but true friendship and good food. As we had our morning runs together – often cheating, and walking instead of running – we talked about everything, the world, people and different places we had seen - we shared a mutual love of travelling.

My second friend, Claudia D'Antona, hosted the most amazing dinners, which I will never forget. I had the opportunity to

spend Christmas at her house - she did the whole thing right – from the hats, the carol songs, the presents through to an Italian Christmas dinner. She brought nearly everything from Italy, including *panettone*. The group of people around the table was also very diverse and Claudia was extremely attentive – in spite of hosting a big dinner, she told me right at the beginning, "Let me get things in order so that we *'chiacherriamo'* - chat." One day, I introduced her to a British friend of mine and he was charmed, saying, "What a stylish woman." From the way she dressed, talked and even stood - her presence enchanted people around her. I saw Claudia at so many dinners, events, concerts – she was always at the heart of the party – fully dressed up for the occasion, with lots of class and energy. But within this poised and elegant woman, what impressed me most was her ability to bring people together for a worthy cause. Claudia was involved in so many things around the community – including organising sales for jewellery and art pieces made by the women in Bangladesh and in fundraising for Italian doctors who came to Dhaka to help the poor people. She married her love two years ago at the Italian embassy in Dhaka – a truly independent woman of style and glamour who brought joy and kindness to everyone around her.

My other talented friend, Ishrat Akhond, was one of the most unique Bangladeshi women. As soon as I arrived to Dhaka, an Italian friend of mine, Massimo, took me to

her art exhibition in Gulshan. Through this exhibition, Ishrat personified all I knew about Bangladeshi women – strong, kind, joyful and courageous. She loved Dhaka, and was so proud to tell me all about her beautiful country and people, speaking so fondly of films, poets, artists, singers, food, rickshaw drivers. She admired creativity and loved stories of passion. She admired Bangladeshis who showed respect towards women and other people in the world. What impressed me the most about Ishrat was that she was undoubtedly the happiest person I have ever met and she had a unique ability to spread her love and optimism. She made my day everyday with her daily postings and hashtags of "happiness, delightful Dhaka, Laugh, Live, Love."

She had so much faith in her country and people. Just a few of Ishrat's postings on Facebook that I loved reading:

"I am happy today because it has always been a pleasure to meet our great painters/poets/singers! On the other day I had the pleasure to be with Maestro Murtaja Baseer... The best part of meeting him is not only his extraordinary work but experiencing the sheer modesty. And how amazingly one can treat women with much respect, and grace all the way..."

"I am happy today with such a lovely morning. As they say one tree can start a forest. One smile can begin a friendship. One hand can lift a soul. One word can frame the goal. One candle can wipe out darkness. One laugh can conquer gloom. One touch can show you care. One life can make the difference, be that one day today!"

Ishrat was always for diversity and had so much admiration for people from other countries. She fought for women's rights, justice and equality. She was a strong fierce Bangladeshi who would usually say that "I am not looking for the other half because I am not a half myself – I am whole." And she was so right.

These three women did not need the approval of others to feel content in themselves; rather they made people around them feel happier. They had the whole world in front of them and would have chosen to do so many things in their lives, like fierce rays of the sun spreading light and creating love wherever they went. They loved Dhaka, Bangladesh and its people and made this unique city their home. Their motto in life was "be happy...enjoy life to the fullest." They lost their lives while they were doing just that - enjoying life to the fullest in the best bakery in town – eating pasta, paella and pizza and making memories with friends. Nadia, Claudia and Ishrat embody powerful, independent women who always brought out the best in people. For them and so many other innocents who lost their lives at the Holey bakery and elsewhere every day, we must bring out the best in ourselves and work together to bring about tolerance and change. This is the legacy of these fabulous women – it is what they wanted and we owe it to them.

The writer is Head of Partnerships, Results and Resource Management, UNDP Bangladesh.

Love in the time of war



AMITAVA KAR

THERE are two kinds of virtues, the resume virtues and the eulogy virtues. The former are the skills that one brings to a job interview. The latter are talked about at one's funeral - whether you were kind, brave, honest and faithful. Were you

capable of deep love?

Pakistan's Abdul Sattar Edhi, the humanitarian, had the eulogy virtues. A slight and courteous man with unfashionable spectacles, alternating between his two sets of clothes, he was no one to notice on the street. Yet over six decades, ever since he opened his first clinic and a one-man ambulance service in Karachi in 1951, after the death of his mother, his selflessness held international attention. His family had migrated from the Indian state of Gujarat to the newly created Pakistan after the partition of India in 1947.

He never finished school. The world of suffering became his tutor. "Social welfare was my vocation, I had to free it," he said in his autobiography, *A Mirror to the Blind*. He worried that social progress had not matched the world's material and technological advances. "People have become educated," he said, "but have yet to become human."

Today his organisation, the Edhi Foundation, is a relied-upon social safety net running a nationwide network of ambulances, 24-hour emergency services, orphanages, women's shelters, blood banks, soup kitchens and homes for abandoned infants. It also provides technical education to the disadvantaged, religious education for street children, consultation on family planning and maternity services, as well as free legal aid, financial and medical support to prisoners and the handicapped.

The Edhi foundation has provided aid in every international emergency from the civil war in Lebanon to the United States after Hurricane Katrina. And at home, he personally drove one of his ambulances and showed up to transport the injured or wash the dead until his health no longer allowed it. "When my ambulance takes a wounded person who is in pain to the hospital, when people reach the hospital, I find peace in knowing I helped an injured person who was in pain," he told Reuters in an interview in 2013. To Edhi, who that person was did not matter. He saw charity as a central tenet of his faith. As he memorably put it, "Humanitarian work loses its

significance when you discriminate between the needy."

Revered by many as Maulana Edhi, he passed away at the age of 88 on Friday night, after being ill for several years followed by a kidney failure. In June, he declined an offer by former president Asif Ali Zardari for treatment abroad, insisting on getting it done in Pakistan, particularly in a government hospital.

tiny; he would often sleep outside it, in case people needed help at night.

His devotion earned him numerous awards at home and abroad. He was also nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize several times, according to *The Dawn*. "There's so much craftiness and cunning and lying in the world," Edhi told National Public Radio in 2009. "I feel happy that God made me different from the



Edhi with Geeta, a mute and deaf Indian girl who strayed into Pakistan more than a decade ago, after which, Edhi took her under his care. She returned to India last year.

A famously ascetic figure, Edhi had no desire for worldly belongings. He slept in a sparsely equipped room in Karachi, often listening to recordings of verses from the Holy Quran on a battered, old tape recorder. He never bought a house for his children. His initial office was

others. I helped the most oppressed."

Widely admired for intractable integrity, Sattar only accepted private donations refusing government offers of support. He won respect from people from all strata of society so much so that a temporary truce would be declared when he and his ambulance arrived at the scene of a fight.

Edhi's final wish was for any of his usable organs to be donated. But age and frailty meant only the cornea could be transplanted. And so they were into two blind persons after his death. Was he capable of deep love? You bet. He had the hands to help others, the feet to hasten to the poor and needy, the eyes to see misery and want and the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of his fellow human beings.

With Abdul Sattar Edhi, human nature, often groping and flailing in mysteries of its own, rose to the occasion.

He had the hands to help others, the feet to hasten to the poor and needy, the eyes to see misery and want and the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of his fellow human beings.

The writer is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.



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