

Sheetal Sheth, on Giving Back

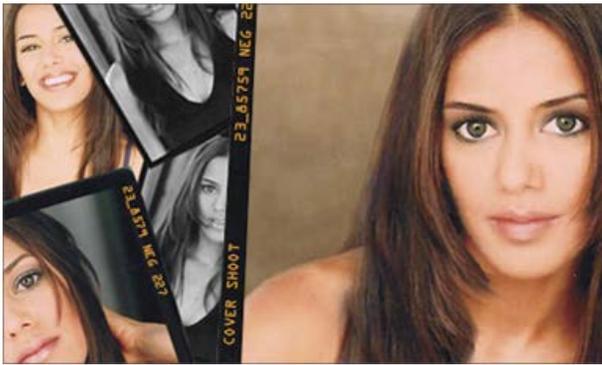
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In the midst of these chaotic times, few people can find the hours to manage their own lives efficiently, let alone the lives of others. Personal goals tend to take over while character building and fulfilling pleasures, such as volunteering and community service, sit on the backburner of “someday, when I have time.”



Meet Sheetal Sheth, the quintessential young South Asian woman in her ability to excel in all aspects of life, but not so typical in that she's a Hollywood girl. Arising from the successful artist breeding ground of Tisch School of the Arts at NYU, Sheth's resume flaunts an impressive list of

Photos by Lesley Bohm

roles including some in festival award winning movies such as ABCD, American Chai, and the upcoming film **Dancing in Twilight** with co-star Kal Penn.

Discovering her love for acting in high school, Sheth immersed herself in developing her talent but was careful not to lose site of what was important to her, namely her role in the community. Old habits don't go away easily, so she kept up her volunteering roles through the early years of her career and her passion for helping others ensues to this day.

In light of her admirable fervor for motivating herself and others to participate in community building projects, Sapna decided that Sheth has far more in-teresting things to teach us about than simply her acting career. We found that she is, indeed, more than just a pretty-faced Hollywood cover-model-slash- actress; she's a role model with a message. Rather, many messages.

SAPNA: What sparked your interest in community service and your first foray into it?

Sheetal: My parents always placed a big emphasis on community and growing up we were so involved in our local temple; that type of life was the only one I knew, and more importantly, felt we had a duty to be a part of. Therefore, it extended into anything that I came into contact with whether it be something that came out of middle or high school or college, etc. I honestly feel like being born in this country is like winning the lottery, ESPECIALLY being South Asian. Not being grateful for that or not somehow offering a bit of oneself in return is a shame.

SAPNA: What are some of the community service projects you have worked on? Was there one in particular that touched you the most?

Sheetal: I would say two in particular—being president of my local temple's youth association when I was a teenager was extremely significant on many levels, especially since it was during a very formative time in my life. Then, being chosen for Americorps, which was a program that President Clinton initiated—almost like a domestic peace

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corps with branches in different states offering different services dependent on the environment and society's needs. I was able to help teach high school in the lower east side of Manhattan that suffered from the worst of the cuts in funding: enormous class sizes, burnt out teachers, and so forth. There were a handful of us with an arts/drama back-ground, and in a nutshell, we would come up with inventive lesson plans and ideas to teach subjects or extracurricular activities that students were lacking interest in. I was involved in that for over three years while I was in college.

SAPNA: Do you find that being an actress and being in Hollywood has decreased the amount of time you can spend on these projects?

Sheetal: Sometimes. I am saddened by the fact that I am not as able to do as much as I would like to or have in the past for the sheer reason that people really need you around and depend on you being there for everything. Where my career is right now, unfortunately, I do not really get to dictate my schedule and am in and out of town a lot. To be a consistent presence, which a lot of the kids desperately want, isn't as possible right now. Therefore, I haven't been a part of as many projects as I would like. I hope that this will change, I know that it will...

SAPNA: Can you share some experiences with the people that you've met while participating on these projects?

Sheetal: There are so many stories that I could share, it's so hard to pinpoint. The kids that I worked with at Seward Park High School were bright, creative and so passionate; it was tough seeing what I saw on a regular basis. We were all around the same age at the time, give or take a couple of years, and I found myself frustrated with these victims of circumstance, environment, and apathy. But I am so much the better for it, as those kids taught me countless lessons of life, heart, and fortitude everyday. I was also able to meet Hillary Clinton who came down to our school on National Service Day. I was able to spend some time talking to her and was mesmerized with the dynamic person she is.

SAPNA: What reasons would you give other people to get involved?

Sheetal: It's going to be different for everyone and all I can say for sure is that the more you see, the more you won't be able to ignore and it will become a part of who you are. Whatever we choose to do, in whatever capacity, will be valued and is necessary and important.

SAPNA: There seems to be a high correlation of big name Hollywood stars involved in humanitarian services around the world (Angelina Jolie with refugees, Brad Pitt with HIV in South Africa, etc.). Obviously, fame and money make it easier for these people to become so prominent in the field of making a change, but what do you believe pushes them to spend their time on such matters when they could be enjoying their money elsewhere?

Sheetal: With the insane deification we have of celebrities, it would be a tragedy for them NOT to be involved. How can anyone with a heart and any semblance of awareness not want to be a part of something greater than themselves? And moreover, knowing the impact and value one can have, right or not, I believe it comes hand in hand with the success.

SAPNA: So that we can keep our eyes out as your career grows, can you briefly tell us what you're working on now and where Sapna readers can hope to see you in the future? Dancing in Twilight is coming out soon, can you tell us about it?

Sheetal: Dancing in Twilight is a dark story about love and how one deals with loss and hope. It also stars Kal Penn, Erick Avari, and Mimi Rogers. I just finished working with Albert Brooks in his new untitled comedy for **SONY**. That should be out at the end of this year and I'm very excited about it—working with such a legend so early in my career was a gift.

SAPNA: Any last words for Sapna girls?

Sheetal: BE PASSIONATE ABOUT SOMETHING! Define success for yourselves and remember that it will be different for everyone. Follow that trajectory and always live with integrity. We have women who have died for us to allow for our lives. We need to

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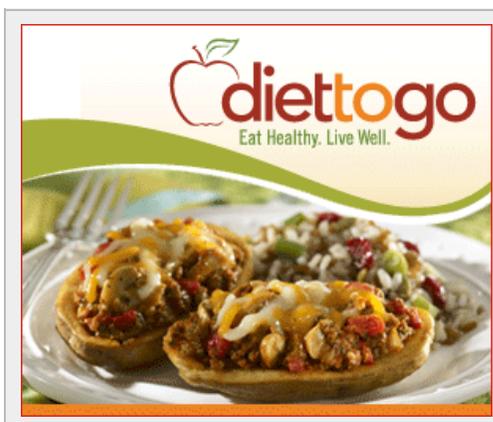
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— INTERVIEW BY *Saira Doja*

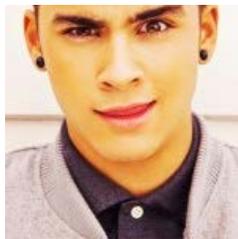
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