

# **From Pakistan to Goderich: A family finds home and builds community**

When Tahseen thinks about her childhood, she remembers an atmosphere of happiness and laughter, of playing in the streets with friends and family.

“Everyone knew their neighbours and there was always a big celebration during the holidays,” remembers. “That sense of the community and togetherness was so strong. I just miss that, those good old days.”

That desire for togetherness and the community is something that Tahseen has carried with her from Pakistan to Mississauga, Canada, first, and later to Goderich.

Since she and her husband Iqbal and their children moved to Huron County in 2021, the family have demonstrated those values with their new community.

## **Before migration**

Iqbal was the second born of six children to his parents who lived in Pakistan.

Iqbal was a serious student and finished university with a degree in electronics engineering. His career started in a textile factory that made yarn. There, he was responsible for maintaining and repairing the electronic equipment.

“Canada was not on my mind. But my late uncle moved here and we had a bond. He encouraged me to think about moving here,” Iqbal remembers.

Meanwhile, Tahseen, grew up in Lahore, a mega-city of 5 million at the time she left as a teenager.

She says her family, her parents and three siblings, decided to move to Canada after her uncle encouraged her mom to bring the family to Canada so the children could have a better future. Tahseen was 15 at the time.

“My uncle and his wife were very welcoming when we landed. We stayed with them for three months. We were so grateful for their hospitality,” Tahseen remembers. “They guided us, we didn’t feel lonely.”

After those initial few months, Tahseen and her family moved to Toronto, where she started high school. Later, Tahseen’s family moved to Brampton.

And then, the matchmaker came calling.

## **A proposal**

When Tahseen was 17, Iqbal’s uncle reached out to her parents.

He was curious. Would Tahseen be interested in marriage? Would she consider his nephew Iqbal?

Her parents suggested Tahseen focus on getting settled in Canada and continue her education, but consider the option.

"I spoke to him (Iqbal) on the phone. He seemed like a pretty nice guy. I said, yeah, I'm fine to continue with the proposal," she remembers.

Tahseen remembers her teacher's response when she mentioned marriage at age 18.

"They wanted to protect me and save me. But I just gave them the assurance that he was not 100 plus years old, he's not a billionaire they're getting me married to, he's a young fellow and we had a conversation. Even though it was an arranged marriage, I did have the right to say yes or no after I spoke to him," Tahseen says.

Reflecting back on her teachers' response, Tahseen says it was the first time that she felt that duplicity of identities – of being Canadian and Pakistani. In Pakistan, families are an essential component of making decisions. In Canada, there is concern for individual decision-making.

Nonetheless, Tahseen was determined to marry Iqbal and sponsor his application to come to Canada.

"The immigration lawyer told me you have to work to be a sponsor. But I had never worked. I couldn't find a job. I tried everywhere. It took me three months. My family was like, 'okay, we're not sponsoring him, this is it, end of the marriage'. I was like, 'no, you can't do that to me'. The only place I found a job was in a factory," Tahseen remembers.

Tahseen worked on a factory line for a company that made toiletry products.

"That first day when I came home, my feet were bruised and bleeding," Tahseen remembers. "But I worked hard and stayed with it."

Six months later, she had enough funds to sponsor Iqbal's visa application. Soon thereafter, he arrived. The couple married, and almost right away Tahseen became pregnant with the couple's eldest daughter. She focused on motherhood and left her job.

## **Employment**

Shortly after his arrival, Iqbal started working in a factory where doors and windows were built. He also took on a second job at a company delivering products.

"He would leave at 5am in the morning and come home at 11pm in the evening, everyday," Tahseen remembers. "He did that for one year."

Tahseen remembers that Iqbal barely had time with his family and was missing the early days with their daughter. She urged him to pair down to one job and improve his qualifications so he could get better paying jobs in Canada.

Iqbal enrolled and finished two courses: one as an electrician and the other in IT. That training created a pathway for a job in electronics repair at a warehouse. With his passion for technology and hard work, within a few short months he was leading a team of electronics repair folks.

At the same time, the couple had welcomed a second child – a son Anns.

However, when the 2008 recession hit, Iqbal lost his job. After applying for many jobs, he was successful in securing a job at a large technology company in Vancouver. The small family moved to Canada's west coast and Iqbal started a role as a product specialist who travelled across British Columbia.

"I decided to give up that job after six months because I was never home," Iqbal says.

The family moved back to GTA, and moved into a one-bedroom apartment with the children.

## **Entrepreneurship**

Iqbal admits he was always interested in running his own business.

Tahseen's brother, who worked in trucking, revealed opportunities within the courier business. Iqbal quickly jumped at the chance, purchased a vehicle and began sub-contracting from distributors.

"Her brother helped us with a loan and we started in 2010. We learned the business and expanded. We saw a gap and improved services," Iqbal says. "In 2013, we were able to buy another vehicle, and then another vehicle, until we reached seven vehicles in 2020."

In that business, Iqbal and Tahseen learned the importance of building relationships and expanded their horizons. While Tahseen managed clerical work and vehicle maintenance work at the office, Iqbal drove throughout Ontario to make deliveries.

"When I drove out of the GTA, I thought, wow, this is the heaven I was missing in my life. Everyday I drove another route. I discovered most of Ontario with this job – small and big towns. And that's when I saw Goderich for the first time too. Whenever I came there, I felt something different, it felt like my breath was taken away," Iqbal remembers.

"We learned so much," Tahseen adds. "Living in those big cities, we got to meet so many new people, so many people from so many new cultures. We learned about their

values, and from that you change, you adapt what's good from their culture. We learned to expand perspective."

Tahseen and Iqbal found a new passion – travelling and tourism. Tahseen loved sharing information with neighbours and friends about great spots to visit in Ontario. Iqbal loved interacting with customers. The seeds were planted for their future career.

### **Family expands and heartache**

Iqbal and Tahseen added a third child when they returned to the GTA.

Tahseen became pregnant with the couple's fourth child. The baby did not survive due to a severe heart condition.

"Life is not full of laughter and great moments all the time. There's ups and downs. But what matters is that you stay together and you support each other through the ups and downs," Tahseen says.

Tahseen remembers that even though they faced hardship during that time, they were determined to support the people who worked for them and continued to maintain their business. Still, the loss took its toll and made the family reimagine their priorities.

"We started exploring other businesses, and started to search," Tahseen says. "He was interested in the gas station business. But I was always into hospitality. I love to host, I love to serve, I love to work with people."

### **Moving to Goderich**

When the pandemic hit, Iqbal and Tahseen saw their courier business boom, as essential goods needed to be delivered.

"We saw this as part of our way to help people during this time," Tahseen says.

During that time, Iqbal remembers travelling to Goderich to make a delivery, stopping at the beach and marvelling at the colour of the water.

He returned to Tahseen in Mississauga and asked her to consider a hotel in Huron County. They found a listing in Bayfield and went to look at the property.

When they arrived, the place had already sold, but the owners took Iqbal and Tahseen into their home and sent their children on a tour to see an eagle's nest nearby. Iqbal and Tahseen were immediately impressed with the Bayfield owner's warmth.

"The area was absolutely gorgeous. The owner was a wonderful woman. She called us two weeks after we got home, and told us about another hotel for private sale in

Goderich. She told us the owner wanted to retire. After the call, we just got in the car and went to see it,” Tahseen says. “We came and made a deal.

Tahseen said the retiring owner from the Bayfield hotel became their first friend in the area and took them under her wing, providing them insight into running a hospitality business.

“She told us that we were meant to do this work, to be doing the hotel business. She was very kind-hearted, she was like another mother to me,” Tahseen says.

The couple started to learn the rhythms of hotel life: marketing the hotel, booking stays, welcoming visitors at the front desk, cleaning rooms, doing laundry and making sure the rooms were in great condition.

Meanwhile, they continued to manage their distribution business remotely.

Iqbal and Tahseen’s children were enrolled in school and got to know how small towns operate. They remember with fondness Mayor John Grace coming to the hotel to welcome them and support them. They were thrilled to welcome many visitors exploring Goderich, working in the community short-term or visiting family.

“We were really busy at work,” Tahseen says, reflecting on their first year of business.

Their kindness and dedication to making their business a success didn’t go unnoticed. In the fall of 2022, Iqbal and Tahseen won the Tourism Goderich Hospitality Business and Business of the Year awards at the Huron Chamber of Commerce Awards. The following year they were awarded the Huron County Economic Development Employer of Choice award.

After, they sold their courier company and have continued to excel in the hospitality sector in the years since.

### **Community involvement**

When Iqbal, Tahseen and family arrived, the pandemic and its stay-at-home guidelines were still in effect. The couple worried the people in their new community felt isolated.

“The town felt quieter than expected. That’s what we noticed in the first year,” Tahseen says.

“That’s what made us to get involved in the community, we wanted to meet people, to help with charity, to let people get to know us,” Iqbal says. “We wanted to give back too, the more we got involved, the more we were able to give.”

Iqbal and Tahseen started by organizing a community dinner at the Mackay Centre for Seniors in 2022. They received tremendous support and a feeling of welcome from

the centre's executive director, Stephanie. They purchased food and provided a meal for more than 80 people for an Eid lunch. It was timed at the end of Ramadan, a time of fasting and reflecting on their faith.

"We are more than happy to serve our people in their retiring years. They served all of us before. In our South Asian community, our parents and elders are treated with lots of care and we serve them," Iqbal says. "They deserve to be treated very well."

The event was so popular that they were requested by many to repeat it. The request led to three more community dinners being organized annually, with other events being planned in the future.

Along with providing food and enabling people to connect with one another, Iqbal and Tahseen saw the dinners as a way to share their culture and religious principles with others.

"We also noticed that Goderich was missing diversity. While the community was very welcoming, there was a clear need for greater inclusivity and representation of different cultures and backgrounds," Tahseen shares.

Determined to broaden community involvement, Iqbal and Tahseen became involved in supporting Huron County's Multicultural Festival, the Celtic Festival and Huron County's Welcoming Week. Tahseen joined a group organizing food to be provided to people in need at little pantry boxes throughout the town. Tahseen also established a group for woman to share their experiences called Speak Your Heart.

"We've been giving back to the community and vice versa. We received support love and support. The experience has brought us not only belonging and joy, but also beautiful relationships to those around us. The response from the community was heartwarming, we were welcomed by many," Tahseen says.

For their hospitality, business approach and community involvement, Iqbal and Tahseen were nominated and selected to be the recipients of the I Am Huron award – a campaign that celebrates the successes and contributions of immigrants and newcomers to Canada.

"Life isn't always full of roses, but we are so grateful to live in this beautiful country that has give us so much," the couple say. "A huge thank you to our amazing parents for endless support and love over the years. We are especially grateful for the strong faith, values and sense of community togetherness they have passed down to us."