

Model UN prepared her for **A LIFE OF SERVICE**



By Michael Knepler

Photos by Bill Tiernan

Shamina Singh '91 travels the globe to advance social good for Mastercard.

Her experience as secretary general at Old Dominion University's Model United Nations provided the perfect training.

"Model UN helped me think about policy from all the different sides and from all the different interests," she says. "The victory was not in domination. You were judged on consensus-building and how you got along with other delegates. It was an interesting proxy for how I engage today."

Based in New

York, Singh, 50, is executive vice president of sustainability at Mastercard, where she is also founder and president of Mastercard's Center for Inclusive Growth. The center, created in 2013, is the philanthropic hub that leverages such company resources as people, technology and data to reduce economic inequality and improve communities worldwide.

"There are about 1.75 billion people today who are completely excluded from the global financial system, which means they can't do a lot of things that you and I take for granted, like buying an airline ticket online or getting a small business loan," Singh says. "Having the humility to understand what they actually want versus what we think they need is essential when designing programs for inclusive economic growth."

Inclusiveness has become a popular buzzword in recent years. But Singh grew up in a household that lived it.

Singh with her parents at their home in Chesapeake.



Her parents, Dr. Amarjit and Jagdish Singh, immigrants from India, are well known in Hampton Roads for their community involvement and human rights activism. Their home in the Western Branch area of Chesapeake was nicknamed “The Global Village,” or “The GV” for short, because a diverse array of people – from Shamina’s childhood friends to international students at ODU – visited for meals or just to hang out.

The Singhs also helped organize multicultural and international activities for students at Old Dominion, which became an “anchor” for their family, Shamina recalls. With that upbringing, she felt part of the ODU community long before she enrolled there.

In addition, a sister, Tuni Singh ’83 (profiled in spring 2017), participated in Model UN and other leadership activities, including as emcee at one of Old Dominion’s annual tributes to the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. “Seeing her in action made me think, ‘Wow, look what happens when you can inspire a crowd with words,’” Shamina says. Tuni died of cancer in November.

At ODU, Shamina majored in political science with a certificate in women’s studies and began to envision a career advocating for social justice. She volunteered in political campaigns, including for L. Douglas Wilder, who became the nation’s first elected African American governor. Singh also participated in events such as the March for Women’s Lives in Washington.

Singh’s interest in activism and academics took her to Texas, where she worked on the gubernatorial campaign of Ann Richards and completed a master’s degree in public administration at the University of Texas at Austin.

Next came jobs in Washington, including positions with a large labor union and two federal agencies.

In 2002, Singh went back to Texas to work on the U.S. Senate candidacy of Ron Kirk, a Dallas mayor who had been state secretary of state under Richards. Kirk lost, but Singh met Ashley Bell, who was also working on Kirk’s campaign. They married in 2007.

“Ashley is from Arkansas, and I’m from southern Virginia,” Singh says. “We were both raised in small towns, so we have a very similar sensibility about people, about connection to community, connection to family and connection to faith.”

Singh returned to Washington to serve as an aide to Rep. Nancy Pelosi, then the minority leader for Democrats in the House, whom Singh describes as “one of the smartest and most dedicated people I’ve ever met.”

A few years later, Singh ventured into the private sector, working first on global economic development for Citi, an international financial services company, and then as vice president for government and public affairs for Nike.

She met Ajay Banga, a Citi executive who would become president and CEO of Mastercard, in 2010. He recruited Singh in 2013 to launch the Center for Inclusive Growth.

“Ajay and the board had a really strong view about combining profitability with purpose and with social impact as part of the strategy of the company,” she says.

Singh also promotes social justice outside Mastercard.

Singh with Emmanuel Tuyisenge in his factory in Kigali, Rwanda.



In 2015, President Barack Obama appointed her to the Corporation for National and Community Service, a federal agency that supports several nationwide volunteer initiatives, including AmeriCorps and VISTA. Her term concluded in December.

“I have come to really understand the power of public service,” says Singh, who chaired the board for three years. “People want to know what they can do to make a difference.”

Singh’s far-flung travel has not diminished her appreciation for her local roots. She stays connected with ODU, often speaking to students in women’s studies.

On visits to her parents, she first drives out of her way from Norfolk International Airport “to see the university again and what’s happening there” before heading for Chesapeake.

From her parents’ home, she drives a few blocks to the Dunkin’ doughnut shop where she held her first job as a teenager. She orders coffee and doughnut holes and tells employees she worked there 35 years ago.

And she always leaves a big tip.

Michael Knepler is a freelance writer in Norfolk.

THE WAY IT IS WITH NETWORKING

Shamina Singh preaches the value of networking and mentorship. That’s how she landed one of her first jobs, as executive assistant to musician-songwriter Bruce Hornsby in Williamsburg.

Singh had been working at a Williamsburg center for children with learning difficulties. Hornsby’s wife, Kathy, served on the board. Other board members told her that Singh would be a good fit for the job with Hornsby. Then Singh got the offer.

Learn how Shamina Singh’s journey inspired one ODU student at www.odu.edu/monarchmag