

Haider Dhanani

A Man of Many Actions

By Noor Bata

Haider Dhanani is a man of few words but many actions. Dhanani's life, even at the earliest of his adulthood, was dedicated to serving others, bridging the gap between individuals - whatever their differences-and helping immigrants come to Canada. He was born in Tanzania, East Africa in 1939, but later uprooted himself to Vancouver and shortly after Alberta, during the "*general nationalization program and expulsion of South Asians from Africa*". Arriving in Alberta with his daughter and wife Fatima helped Dhanani realize the impacts that cultural and ethnic gaps created between individuals.

Realizing the struggles that new immigrants faced, whether this was prejudice or the lack of support to help individuals uproot their lives in Canada, helped Dhanani carry out his work. Although his immigration to Canada was difficult, it was aided by the fact that he had acquired a post-secondary education (graduate of the University of Southampton) and his profession as an accountant. Unfortunately, this was not the case for other immigrants and which inspired him to take action to address challenges through his ongoing involvement in local and international campaigns, initiatives and charities. To increase his capacity to help others, he used his dedication to the Aga Khan (a religious leader, philanthropist and entrepreneur) to seek out resources and forums to help those marginalized individuals in his community. Setting an example not only for his children but also for those in the Ismaili community and overall society. Canadian politician Jim Dinning describes Dhanani perfectly; "*His devotion to duty was simply the price he paid to be here – to be Canadian. He gave so much because he had so much to give. So he did it.*"

Based on the encounters he had with those around him, it is clear that Haider Dhanani was a gem of a person. Dhanani described his ethics as being influenced by his faith in the Aga Khan; a Shia Imami Ismaili Muslim leader. Using his faith and belief system as guidance, he helped people through small steps in establishing themselves in Canada. Spreading acquired knowledge, building bridges and enacting peace were some ways he helped break the barriers of the stereotypes and racism that came along with being an ethnic minority and/or immigrant. Additionally, he did so through the contribution of time, knowledge and financial resources to improve the quality of life for many individuals. His goal was to foster a common understanding and help everyone harmonize. Through the rejection of stereotypes and racism, he helped immigrants be integrated into society. During the 20 years that Dhanani was established in Canada, he made a lasting impact through many forums part of the AKDN (Aga Khan Development Network) to increase capacity in society, art and development to name a few. As we can see, although Dhanani is not a well-known champion, his work that improved individuals' lives shows why he is a "*real-life champion*".

On December 19th, 1990 at the age of 51, Haider Dhanani passed away. All but what was left was his legacy and the individuals whose lives he impacted. Through his work as President of the Ismaili Council for the Prairies, Aga Khan Foundation Canada National Committee; Chairman, Refugee Settlement Committee Member, and Member of the Federal Board for Visible Minorities Member (to name a few) he helped people at a personal level. Putting aside his authority and ego he connected with individuals and for that, he forever will be remembered. *"Not all heroes wear capes"* and Dhanani was a perfect example of that. His legacy carries on through his wife and son and Bri-Mor Developments, their estate firm showing what Dhanani aspired himself and others to be.

Currently, society faces complex issues, whether they are the raging conflicts about the pandemic, ongoing racism and hate crimes or climate change. An issue that stood out to me was the ongoing Ukraine conflict. Due to preexisting political conflict, Russia has invaded Ukraine. Although Russian leader Vladimir Putin portrays this as a way to protect, serve and help his country, this issue has displaced over 10 million individuals, killed over 24 thousand, injured over 1.9 thousand and has caused a major financial deficit. *"It's very difficult to talk when you see what they've done here,"* stated Ukrainian leader Zelensky. Thus, the issue continues to spread and does not have any indication of stopping. This controversy not only has impacted Ukraine and its residents, but also the whole world.

If Dhanani was alive today he would see how collaboration with the Canadian government could help resolve this issue. Whether this is by helping bring Ukrainians to Canada or talking to other government officials to help address the invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, he would help other former USSR nations to work together toward a common and constructive/helpful goal, which would involve helping the Ukrainians while protecting their nations. Dhanani was a minority who overcame adversity and helped others to do so as well. He was intentional about his goals and was ahead of his time with his ideologies. A great representative of my religious and cultural community in the early stages of Canadian migration. If it was not for this idol, my family may not even be where they are today-well established and living in Canada.

As aspiring activists, it is often easier to discuss making change rather than participating in change-making. One of my biggest personal goals has been to move away from being an "armchair activist", and to actively foster development and change in a variety of ways. Looking to Dhanani as inspiration, I have created sustainable change in my community and within my peers through organizations such as Girl Guides of Canada, the World Partnership Walk, a year-long Leadership program at my school, the Ismaili Volunteer Corps (IVC), the Youth and Philanthropy Initiative (YPI) and the LOOP Arts Sculpture program. As a Girl Guide, I have been able to express my opinions on current issues as well as fund-raise for them based on where I see need in my community. Alongside this, I can actively support POCs and women. With the badges I earn and facilitate as a Girl Guide (such as the Famous Five badge) I have also been able to empower young girls and teach them about how women have contributed to society and established themselves after being marginalized for many years. Through the World Partnership Walk, I have fundraised hundreds of dollars in aid to help alleviate poverty across the world through the AKDN. Part of the Leadership program at my school as well as the Ismaili Volunteer Corps. I have been able to take on leadership roles in my community such as being a JV (Junior Volunteers) Team Lead for the IVC. The goal in partaking in YPI was to find a pressing issue in

my community that was important to me, intending to win \$5,000 for the charity. My charity was Little Warriors, a local charity dedicated to addressing, advocating and preventing child sexual abuse. Through this initiative, I was able to advocate for this issue in my community as well as spread awareness regarding it. Lastly, the LOOP Arts program has allowed me to learn about indigenous roots and create an art piece about them, all as a part of my path to truth and reconciliation. *“One person at a time you can change the world.”*- Dr. Steve Maraboli once said.

I will continue to inspire change in my community by serving alongside the Aga Khan institutions, whether this is by continuing as a volunteer for the Ismaili Volunteer Corps. or helping with ongoing initiatives such as the World Partnership Walk. Starting with awareness by way of my art and writing, as I have done in the past with three murals across my city (about diversity, Indigenous representation and social connection during a pandemic). Overall, I would like to start grassroots initiatives to address the current issues in my community that I have the volunteer experience to address.

A perfect example of a *“Real Champion”*, Dhanani has paved the way for minorities and immigrants in Canada. He helped and established minority communities in Canada, with his dedication of time and knowledge. Real-life experience affected his work, making him genuine. Now when visiting my Grandfather’s grave, I know who the man who lay next to him by the name of *“Haider Dhanani”* really is. *“Haider had an overriding belief that supporting his fellow man, helping everyone grow and prosper to the best of their ability, was not just a calling but an obligation. He was one of the early leaders in the important bridge-building across many cultures and faiths that was beginning to take shape in Calgary and Alberta at the time. Through his gentle yet strong persuasiveness, he became a role model for community leaders that came after him, both within the Ismaili community and in other multicultural communities in Calgary.”* (Former Mayor of Calgary).

References

Haider Dhanani (1939–1990) – Alberta Champions Society. (2019–2022). Alberta Champions. Geraadpleegd op 29 maart 2022, van <https://albertachampions.org/Champions/haider-dhanani-1939-1990/>

Bri-mor Developments. (1988–2022). *Welcome to Bri-mor Developments.* Geraadpleegd op 28 maart 2022, van <http://bri-mor.com/>

Ismailimail, V. A. P. B. (2019, 8 juni). *Monument at Spruce Meadows Honours Alberta Leaders.* Ismailimail. Geraadpleegd op 29 maart 2022, van <https://ismailimail.blog/2019/06/08/monument-at-spruce-meadows-honours-alberta-leaders/>