

The GIVERS *who keep on* GIVING

Since its inception more than 30 years ago, Gift of the Givers has provided life-saving aid to innumerable people in many countries around the world. The largest humanitarian aid organisation of African origin is still based in Pietermaritzburg, where Dr Imtiaz Sooliman and Zohra Ismail Sooliman started it in their small home in 1992.

In those early days, as a young wife raising five children – Sumaya, Muhammad Rayhaan, Saffiya, Saaleha and Samee’a – Zohra would jokingly call herself the ‘humanitarian widow’ as Imtiaz was on the front line in a war zone somewhere. ‘Never did I think we would reach the magnitude that we have reached now,’ she says. ‘At the time, we just thought it was a calling and we were doing our part. But as Imtiaz always says, “Nothing is done by us; it is done through us.”’

The Soolimans come from a similar background, one that emphasised caring for others – and not just as part of their religious upbringing. Their families lived by the principle of helping their

neighbours. Zohra’s family ran a general store, and would give food and groceries to families in need. Imtiaz’s grandfather and father also ran a store – and would discreetly allow destitute families to buy on tab (knowing they couldn’t settle it), or help with family funeral costs.

‘My mother moved to Durban after separating from my father,’ he says. ‘Even though she didn’t have much, she always taught me the importance of charity, even if you could only afford one food parcel for one family.’

The two met when Imtiaz, then a young medical student, helped to publish HISAF (High School Affairs), a newsletter for high school learners covering events, motivational content, study aid

guidance and religious education. They recruited high school students to contribute – and one of those students was then-17-year-old Zohra. After matriculating, she continued to help with HISAF and, at one meeting, asked to borrow a book from Imtiaz.

‘That evening, when I opened the book, I found an envelope,’ she says. Inside was a letter from Imtiaz. ‘And there, written in black and white, was a marriage proposal.’

Zohra replied that she planned to study at the University of Durban-Westville (now one of the campuses of the University of KwaZulu-Natal) before she’d even consider marriage. After a few discussions between the matriarchs of the two families, and the promise that Zohra would be

FROM THE OUTSIDE, WE ONLY SEE THE GOOD THAT THE GIFT OF THE GIVERS FOUNDATION DOES; WE GIVE LITTLE THOUGHT TO THE SACRIFICES DR IMTIAZ SOOLIMAN AND HIS WIFE ZOHRA HAVE HAD TO MAKE SO HE CAN BE ON THE FRONT LINE, SAVING LIVES.

BY CHARIS TORRANCE

'YOU WILL SERVE ALL PEOPLE OF ALL RACES, OF ALL RELIGIONS, OF ALL CLASSES...'

'At the time, we didn't realise that this would become a full-time job. We thought we'd do this one project and go back to our ordinary lives.'



Above: Imtiaz signs copies of his biography, written by Shafiq Morton. **Left:** Imtiaz and Zohra are tireless in their commitment to helping people wherever they are needed.

'After a religious ceremony, the Sufi teacher looked at me and it was as if something was talking through him. He said in Turkish, "My son, I'm not asking you; I am instructing you. You will form an organisation; the name will be Waqful Waqifin [translated as 'Gift of the Givers']. You will serve all people of all races, of all religions, of all colours, of all classes, of all political affiliations and of any geographical location, and you will serve them unconditionally.'"

Imtiaz's private practice was thriving, and they quickly started a family. It was after the birth of their fourth child, Saaleha, that he brought up the subject of going on the Hajj, the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

Every adult Muslim has to go on Hajj, if they can afford it, at least

decided it was time to finish what she'd started and enrolled

free to study, they were married in January 1984.

In the end, things worked out differently. After the couple returned from their honeymoon, Imtiaz's mother fell ill with breast cancer.

'Looking back, it makes sense why she insisted on us getting married sooner,' Zohra says. After seven weeks at university, she gave up her studies to take care of her mother-in-law. (In 2004, Zohra

at UKZN. Her part-time study journey was riveted with obstacles. Eventually, she graduated in May 2022 with a master's degree in counselling psychology.)

The story of how Gift of the Givers came about started with an Afrikaans man named William Miller. Based on their conversations, William encouraged Imtiaz and Zohra to travel to Turkey to meet his Sufi teacher in Istanbul.



Above: Phume Mathonsi, Abigail Capsy, Zohra and Imtiaz Sooliman, Hlengiwe Nkwanyana and Lia Shabalala.

once in their lifetime. Most make it in their later years. At the time, Imtiaz was 30 and Zohra was 28. She was sceptical at first because of the new baby, but she knew if they were able to go they had to do it.

During their pilgrimage, Zohra and Imtiaz had no access to English news, but they could catch words in Arabic during the dawn and evening prayers, and understood that the imam was praying for the people of Bosnia. As an epic journey of any Muslim's life, the Hajj is a time for soul searching and reflection. 'We didn't realise it at the time, but we had both independently decided then and there to serve God's creation,' Zohra says. 'Back home, when we learnt of the atrocities of the Bosnian War, we made a pledge to help the people of Bosnia.'

Imtiaz left to deliver aid and Zohra stayed at home. She wanted to be an anchor in their children's lives, and someone had to oversee the

logistics. She put her studies on hold, became an early childhood educator and also ran her own pre-school.

'At the time, we didn't realise that this would become a full-time job,' she says. 'We thought we'd do this one project and go back to our ordinary lives.'

But Gift of the Givers kept getting bigger. Their work in Bosnia spanned three years, until July 1995, with Zohra handling the logistics and taking care of their home life while Imtiaz worked on the ground, going wherever help was needed. As a result, his medical practice suffered. Zohra said to him that he had to make a choice: either come back to his practice, or give it up to work solely on Gift of the Givers. Imtiaz closed his practice and sold their second car.

Since then, Gift of the Givers has delivered more than R4.5 billion worth in aid and assisted people in 45 countries.

Balancing family life and Gift of the Givers has been a challenge for Imtiaz. He has had to steal moments to be with his family, sometimes taking the children to school in the morning because it might be the only time he'd be able to see them that day. And often, when he *was* home, he wouldn't be fully there, he admits. 'I'd be on the phone dealing with the next crisis. It's still difficult to find that balance.'

Imtiaz recalls the Sufi teacher instructing him to give one third to himself, one third to his family and one third to the work. 'But I told him that everything I have goes into the work.'

Zohra remembers how, in the '90s, it felt like every country was



Gift of the Givers has distributed millions of food parcels, both around the world and here in South Africa. Imtiaz warns of extreme food shortages in parts of our country.

at war. There were no cellphones; Imtiaz phoned them on the landline as often as he could, but there were occasions when his family wouldn't hear from him for days. 'Whenever we heard the SABC TV news opening music, Saffiya, who was then just 5, would gather everyone

in the room, hoping we'd be able to spot Imtiaz in one of the reports.' 'It took a toll on my personal and professional life,' Imtiaz says. 'It was hard,' Zohra agrees, 'but we all had to realise that this is what it was going to take to do the work that Imtiaz does.'

She found a role she could take up from home, running the Gift of the Givers Careline. 'In the '90s, there was still very much a stigma not only around mental health but also around sharing your personal problems,' says Zohra, who felt they also needed to address the many psychological challenges South Africans were facing. In 1997, Careline launched its telephonic counselling service. Today, Careline's services include face-to-face counselling (and virtual sessions in response to Covid-19), training

for counsellors, support groups, community outreach, employment assistance programmes, trauma debriefing and more.

Though Zohra says they still don't get much time with Imtiaz, they make the most of what they get. And, of course, they also try to make time for their children – and now grandchildren – who all live close to home. They've made a promise to try to enjoy at least one holiday a year together as a family.

'We call it a tested life,' Imtiaz says. 'Man has been created for tests, and your best test is to see how you can help other people.'

At any given moment, Gift of the Givers has multiple projects on the go, whether it's alleviating hunger, providing water in water-scarce areas, assisting with access to health care, improving education for the disadvantaged, or working with Careline. That's when they aren't addressing a crisis or a natural disaster, like the flooding in KwaZulu-Natal in April 2022 that left families destitute and schools in ruin, or the ever-approaching Day Zero in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropole. They also work in Zimbabwe, Malawi, Somali, Yemen, Syria, Palestine and anywhere else they are needed.

With everything happening in the world right now, it must be hard not to feel discouraged. Yet, even though Zohra and Imtiaz see the worst of it up close, they remain filled with hope. 'You don't have to work with an organisation to make a difference' Zohra says. 'You can start in your home, with your neighbours and in your community. Even in the smallest of ways, we can make a better world. Find those small blessings in your life that you are grateful for, and you will start seeing the hope and the good all around you.' ❖

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