

## CROSSING THE CULTURE CHASM



John Everett / Chronicle

Teaching a creative writing class at Furr High School is just one of the myriad activities of writer/activist

Sehba Sarwar. She's also artistic director for Voices Breaking Boundaries, a driving force in her life.

### TEACHER-ACTIVIST PROVIDES FORUMS FOR WRITERS, POETS AND PERFORMERS

*I drive on the wrong side of the road,  
what's more I like it  
I drive left in Houston, right in Karachi  
I refuse to fit into a label  
South Asian, immigrant or native  
I am "all of the above."*

— Sehba Sarwar

By **BARBARA KARKABI**  
Houston Chronicle

Ask Sehba Sarwar about a typical day, and she will throw up her hands and laugh.

"I don't have one, and I love that," she said, looking around at the busy high school classroom where she teaches creative writing.

Though each day differs, they are all packed with activities — from performing at poetry readings and hosting a KPFT radio show to the class she teaches at Furr High School in Houston's East End.

Then there's her work as artistic director for Voices Breaking Boundaries, the group she helped found four years ago. These days, along with her personal writing, it is the driving force in her life, fueled by her passion and energy.

VBB, as she likes to call it, was born out of Sarwar's dream to provide a forum for writers, poets and performers crossing cultures and generations.

It was fueled by her own frustration and anger at

having things to say and nowhere to say them.

"The mainstream art scene is so monocultural," Sarwar said. "And Houston is not that way at all. I wanted to make something that is for everyone. I prefer the word 'intercultural' to multicultural because that has become such a buzzword."

Friends describe the 38-year-old as a committed writer/activist whose energy draws people to work with her and stay on for the long term.

It's a lesson she learned growing up in Pakistan, the child of parents who married across religious lines — her father was a Sunni Muslim and her mother a Shiite Muslim.

In high school, she was educated in the British tradition, studying writers such as Keats, Wordsworth and Shakespeare. All classics and wonderful writers, but nothing that spoke to Sarwar's own heritage.

Salman Rushdie's book *Midnight Children* was the beginning of an awakening for Sarwar.

"It was the first South Asian book I had ever read," Sarwar said. "But I really found my voice when I went to college at Mount Holyoke and had some amazing professors who opened me up to modern world literature and writers like Naghib Mahfuz (Egyptian) and Chinua Achebe (Nigerian)."

Reading those writers gave Sarwar the courage to write her own story.

Sarwar began a novel, but abandoned it for a while.

See **ACTIVIST** on Page 12E.

# Activist

Continued from Page 1E.

She finished it years later, and the novel, *Black Wings*, a story of family secrets and a young woman whose twin brother died in a mountain accident in Pakistan, is now in the hands of an agent.

"I think I had to live a little bit more," Sarwar said. "I had a desire and passion to write, but I also had the desire and passion to save the world. I was torn between politics and art. Now I don't try to separate them anymore."

After graduation, she returned to Pakistan for a year and worked for the *Evening Star*, an English-language daily newspaper that employed a number of female journalists.

She continued writing for the newspaper after moving to Austin to get her master's degree in public administration at the University of Texas. It was there that she met her future husband, René Saldivar, whose brother was a professor in the program.

The couple moved to Houston in the early '90s, and Sarwar began what she calls her "teaching and writing life," working with Writers in the Schools, at the Rice

School and Jones High School. She came to love the Menil Collection, the Rothko Chapel and the look that came into her students' eyes — Latino, African-American, Bosnian, South Asian and Ethiopian — when they walked through the doors.

Her quiet life came to an end when she experienced a return of what she thought were childhood nightmares. When they got worse, Sarwar went to a neurologist who told her she was having small seizures. Tests revealed an arteriovenous malformation (AVM) a life-threatening clump of veins in her brain close to her speech and memory functions.

"The two things that were threatened were my voice and my memory," Sarwar said. "I depend on both of those to write and perform. I can't imagine doing what I do without speaking."

Eventually, Sarwar had several surgeries and treatments that removed all but a tiny part of the dangerous veins. Slowly, her energy returned.

And so did her anger. In the fall of 1999, Sarwar was worried about Pakistani mullahs trying to force Taliban-like rules on the women of her country. She wrote a poem — *Nothing Lovely's Ever Going to Happen in My Life* — dedicated to her niece.

"I was just howling when I wrote it in a workshop taught by

Marv Hoffman," she said. "I was very emotional. Then I wondered: Where was I going to read it?"

She gathered four women friends, writers from different ethnic backgrounds, at coffee shops around the city.

At first, the group thought they would only have one reading. But it quickly grew into a series of two Sunday readings a month.

During the second season, music was added to liven up the readings, and a film festival was held at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. VBB's third season found the group performing at a variety of spaces around town, including *DiverseWorks*. That is now their home space, with a small office.

With groups like *Inprint*, *Arte Público Press*, *Nuestra Palabra* and *Project Row Houses*, Houston's literary scene is growing. Sarwar, who has been involved with all of those groups, feels VBB's addition increases the opportunities for writers and performers of all cultures and ages.

"I think Sehba is someone who is committed to peace and harmony in the world," said Jacsun Shah, one of the four co-founders. "So anything happening politically, VBB likes to have a voice and a presence with that."

The group's fourth season began last September with *Words for Peace*, readings from writers

such as Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye, a San Antonio resident, and Booker Prize winner Arundhati Roy. Local artists included novelists Farnoosh Moshiri and Bapsi Sidhwa, and poets Susan Bernstein and Chuck Jackson.

After a busy season of a dozen productions, VBB is ending with *Border Crossings: Films From South Asia*. The last run of films, May 29 and 30, will be shown at the Aurora Picture Show.

"Just think, it all began with one poem, and I don't even consider myself a poet," Sarwar said.

## Film information

Voices Breaking Boundaries events include six foreign films shown May 29 at the Aurora Picture Show, 800 Aurora St., and one on May 30.

At 7 p.m. three are scheduled: *Mela Basant Behar*, *Miro* and *Mann Ke Manjeere*. Another three are scheduled for 8:30 p.m.: *All the World's My Stage*, *Sunrise Radio* and *Babul*.

On May 30 at 6:30 p.m. the film *A Taste for a Place* will be shown at 6:30 p.m., followed by a dinner reception.

Individual movie ticket prices are \$5; the dinner is \$15. For information, call 713-228-2052 or go to [www.voicesbreakingboundaries.org](http://www.voicesbreakingboundaries.org).