



# INTERNATIONAL THE NEWS

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## Aiming to alleviate (intellectual) poverty

Monday, January 07, 2008  
By Aroosa Masroor



Karachi

Perplexed and annoyed by conservative criticism of class divide, social entrepreneur and activist Sabeen Mahmud is one of the few concerned Karachiites who do more than just talk or crib. Born and raised in Karachi, Mahmud is the founder of The Second Floor (t2f), a coffeehouse (featuring a bookshop), which since its opening in May last year, has attracted the attention of thousands of locals across the city who had been longing for a space that allows creative expression to flourish. Popularly known as t2f, it is more than just a coffee house. A series of lectures by prominent citizens and activities are also held at the coffeehouse to encourage an

intelligent discourse.

Within months of its opening, Mahmud's initiative was acknowledged by all her visitors who wanted more than 'just coffee' — an engaging conversation, which the 33-year old believes is the need of the hour. However, Mahmud is more than just a peace activist. She is a graphic designer, and technology consultant having ample experience in the field of graphic designing. She has designed websites for various NGOs and has had the opportunity to design the website of renowned intellectual Eqbal Ahmed and designed CDs on the life and work of distinguished Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz as well, who is also her inspiration. Mahmud is also an active member of Peoples Resistance - a civil society movement formed to support the ongoing struggle for democracy and independence of judiciary.

Mahmud acquired the skill of graphic designing while she was still a school student. Recalling her unpleasant experience with one of her computer teachers at Karachi Grammar School, of which she remained a student from Kindergarten to O-levels only, she explained how a conflict with the teacher led her to join an independent computer institute for training on the subject. 'My computer teacher at the school made the subject computer studies seem so boring. It was when I joined a private computer institute that I got interested in graphic designing and realised it was not as dull as made out to be at school,' says Mahmud. She also found motivation to continue in this field after working with a famous graphic designer, Zaheer Kidvai while working with him. Kidvai became her mentor and taught her about profession and went on to become her business partner as well.

Sabeen later co-founded b.i.t.s., an Interactive Media and Technology Consulting firm, in 2000 with Kidvai and seven years later set up 'The Second Floor'.

During the entire meeting there seemed nothing superficial about her. From her simple attire to a modest attitude, Mahmud continued to recall her experiences that made her the woman she is today. Coming from a middle-class family and adhering to her strong family values, she revealed how she found it difficult to cope with her school mates who were mostly from elite families. 'I used to live in KDA that time and had to travel through public transport or on a motorbike with my father too, while my friends had their cars and drivers to pick them up. I always felt I was not one of them which is why it was difficult to relate to them,' she says.

Having seen both sides of the bridge, she claims Mahmud, she came to understand why there was a class divide among people of the same city. 'It annoys me how people in this city are judged according to their area of residence. It is the geographical location of your house that is used as a determinant to judge your

personality, she says disapprovingly.

We need to get rid of stereotypes and talk. Why should we discriminate against the elite? questions Mahmud adding that her target audience at the coffee house is the elite who needs to be told about the real issues of this country. After having studied at KGS, I felt this segment of the society has been living in a bubble that they should come out of and they should be as much aware about the politics of their country and the real people as much as the common man living in a low-income neighbourhood of Karachi is. It is after inspiring them that we can go on to educate the underprivileged in the real sense of the word.

Mahmud was never academically inclined either and believes that education at school dulls one's imagination. Mahmud's parents, especially her mother who is an educationist, always supported her decisions and sent her to Kinnaird College, Lahore, when she chose to leave KGS after her conflict with the teacher and also realising she could not take any more of the superficiality among the students anymore that made her uncomfortable. She continued to study in Lahore since the political situation in the early 90s was not stable in Karachi and it was difficult for her to continue her studies here. It was a difficult time because I had to shift from one city to another and shifted from a co-ed school to an all-girls school, but it was a good learning experience.

For a curious person like her, who was eager to learn more about the changing world with each passing day and with her keen interest in communication design, she chose to learn about the profession through experience rather than school books. Perhaps that is why her first project of Peace-Niche was to provide a platform for people from various backgrounds who would share their experiences and inspire people. We need new heroes for inspiration, she says and later continues: We are a diverse nation and I have felt we need to celebrate this diversity.

However, being a single child living with a divorced parent, Mahmud finds it difficult to make ends meet but is proud of what she is doing. Since it is a non-profit organization, t2f generates funds only through donations (and the coffee shop), which is later utilised for the payment of the staff members and the rent. I haven't had a salary for a year so you can imagine how I am surviving, she laughs. However, she adds, she is also working for an organisation South Asian Foundation and the nominal amount she earns through that job is sufficient for her. Mahmud says the right kind of support needed for her project is not available yet and there are not enough sponsors in the corporate world to support her idea either. But Mahmud is committed to her project and has high plans for students of performing arts as well and being the optimistic lady she is, she is sure to achieve her goal soon.

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