

Veteran journalist helps incarcerated find their voice

By Melissa Manno

When veteran journalist and professor Shaheen Pasha talks to her best friend over the phone, life almost feels normal. Time goes by swiftly as they share stories and listen to each other's voice, narrating life since they last spoke.

But it's still a shock to Pasha when the line is disrupted with a 60-second warning from an operator and the conversation, along with her false sense of normalcy, is brought to a rushed end.

These weekly Tariq MaQbool conversations have been going on for more than 18 years now, but not in her wildest imagination could Pasha have predicted that the first call – about MaQbool, but not from him – would change her life and career forever.

It was the end of her shift at the Jersey City, New Jersey, office of Dow Jones, where she worked as a stock market reporter. Pasha had just wrapped up writing her column when she received a phone call: MaQbool had been arrested for murder. He would end up being sentenced to 150 years in prison without parole.

It was MaQbool's younger brother, Adeel, who told her that MaQbool was found guilty – one of three men convicted of murdering two men found in a burning SUV in Jersey City in 2002.

Pasha, who is now 43, describes that call as being like a nuclear bomb, changing everything with its wrath.

“Until you actually become part of that world where someone you love is incarcerated, you don’t know what that means,” Pasha said. “That day never leaves you.”

Although living in two different worlds, Pasha’s friendship with MaQbool remained strong through the years. They talked often. He shared stories of life behind bars, from the cafeteria menus to conversations with new inmates.

When she finally went to visit him at the New Jersey State Prison in Trenton four years later, she saw the lonely reality of his newfound life.

“The psychological damage it does to not have any sort of outlet or form of expression haunted me,” Pasha said. “I felt helpless, like there was nothing I could do but watch someone I care about wither away inside.”

Life goes on

For the next two decades, following that initial call, Pasha’s career as a journalist flourished and so too did her personal life, as she became a wife and mother of three.

But she continued to look back on that 2002 phone call – and she has taken the pain of that grim news and redirected it into advocacy.

In 2020, Pasha and Yukari Kane, a veteran journalist and adjunct lecturer at Northwestern University, launched the Prison Journalism Project, a nonprofit initiative designed to equip prison inmates with journalism skills and provide a platform to tell their stories.

As part of the project, they launched a website last April that has now published almost 300 stories from 140 prison inmates across 27 states.

The stories deal with everything from the worsening COVID-19 situation to how incarcerated individuals celebrate holidays. But they all share one thing: the ability to bring readers inside prison walls to get a glimpse of the inmates’ reality.

One of the project's contributing writers, Steve Brooks, was recently honored for commentary by the Society of Professional Journalists Northern California for his commentary titled "The Hidden Heroes Forgotten Inside" (<https://prisonjournalismproject.org/pjp-stories/hidden-heroes-forgotten-inside>) about criminal justice in the state.

When Brooks was 22, he was arrested for a series of violent home break-ins and sentenced to life in prison at San Quentin State Prison. Now, at 48, Brooks is a contributing writer for the San Quentin News and the Prison Journalism Project.

"Steve was one of our first guys and wrote those pieces for us when we were just starting out and didn't even have a website set up," Pasha said. "It was a huge deal for us because it was the first time we were acknowledged as a newsroom. I'm so proud of the project but more than that, I'm so proud of Steve because he deserves it."

Besides offering a creative outlet for people like Brooks, the Prison Journalism Project allows Pasha to use her passion for journalism to encourage change in the criminal justice system.

Always a journalist

While other little girls pretended their hairbrushes were microphones and dreamed of becoming pop stars, Shaheen Pasha stood in front of her mirror reporting live from Moscow. She didn't actually know where Moscow was, just that it sounded important and seemed like a good place for a journalist — which, at age 5, Pasha decided she would one day be.

This aspiration was heightened during her youth, growing up the daughter of Pakistani immigrants and deeply poor in what she describes as a "rough area" of Brooklyn.

“A lot of my classmates were going to juvey or getting pregnant, and I just remember thinking, ‘This isn’t the world I see on TV. There’s so much more out there,’” said Pasha. “I wanted to escape it — to see the world and bring those stories I saw back to my neighborhood because I felt like it made the world bigger.”

Her parents came to New York from Pakistan in 1976, the year before she was born, inspired by her father’s ambition and her mother’s career as a medical tech that allowed her to get a work visa.

Pasha spent much of her early childhood living in Borough Park, Brooklyn, where her family felt the reality of poverty and once escaped homelessness with the help of a generous neighbor opening her home.

At 11, Pasha moved to Brooklyn’s East New York, which she described as being “very poor and full of crime.”

Pasha said her family found community in the close-knit, yet widely scattered network of Pakistani immigrant families in her neighborhood and throughout New York’s five boroughs.

On the outside, Pasha’s life mirrored that of her Pakistani counterparts. But for much of her childhood she grappled with concealing a family secret: her father’s mental illness. In their community, Pasha said her father’s diagnosis of schizophrenia would make many view him as “a lunatic, dangerous or low-class.”

“A lot of Pakistanis don’t see it as a physical ailment or chemical imbalance you cannot control, but rather that there’s something inherently weak about you that gives into the darkness,” Pasha said. “Some even see it as a curse, believing you’ve opened yourself up to a *jinn*, which is the religious word for a demon-like entity.”

With marriage being such a valued part of traditional Pakistani culture, Pasha said her family feared the news of his ailment would leave her and her siblings without suitors.

“Who is going to marry you if they believe your family blood is bad and you’re cursed?” Pasha said. “No one is going to accept you into their family, invite you over or even touch you, because they see it as contagious.”

Spending so much of her youth covering up an impactful part of her life took its toll, however. Pasha said she struggled with the idea that society could hold such disgust for her father, a man she admired.

“That experience has made me much more empathetic to people who have challenges and makes me understand how trauma does hurt people and how the impacts can be felt decades later,” Pasha said. “I never saw him as broken. I always saw the beauty within him.”

Pasha said her father’s condition never got in the way of their relationship, adding that every day at 6:30 p.m., they would watch World News Tonight with Peter Jennings. Pasha said she cherishes those moments with her father, who died about a decade ago, and realizes how they played a pivotal role in her dream of becoming a journalist.

Pasha became heavily involved with her high school newspaper and upon graduation decided to pursue a degree in communications at Pace University in New York City. She completed internships along the way with organizations such as MTV, CNBC and Forbes.

Following graduation, Pasha enrolled in the graduate program at Columbia Journalism School.

When dreaming of a career as a journalist, Pasha envisioned herself in front of a camera, breaking news to a global audience. But after completing her master’s degree in 2000, she dove into digital and print journalism and capitalized on writing breaking news instead of broadcasting

it. Her first job post-graduation was with Dow Jones Newswires, where she worked as a reporting assistant and published daily stock market commentaries.

On the side, she searched for freelance jobs for extra money. That led to yet another life-changing phone call. In October 2000 she applied for a freelance position with ThinkIndia, a startup digital publication based in San Jose, California, that covered the South Asian community in the United States. She was interviewed by the publication's associate editor, Din Suleman.

It turned out that the typical phone call job interview eventually became a blossoming romance.

Suleman, who is also Pakistani, said that although he only heard her voice, he immediately knew he found someone special in Pasha.

The two finally met in person in November, when Suleman flew from his home in San Jose to spend time with Pasha in New York. He explored the city with Pasha on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, met her family on Saturday and got down on one knee on Sunday. They eloped in March 2001.

Din said one of the things that attracted him to Pasha was how deeply she cared about the plight of her friend, MaQbool.

“To see someone so close to you end up in prison for heinous charges is a shock to the system and for a long time she struggled with the reality that he'd probably never get out,” Suleman said. “A lot of people in her position might want to wash their hands of it or see the situation as hopeless, but Shaheen is so full of empathy and caring for others that she couldn't.”

Life continues to change

In 2003, living in New Jersey, Pasha gave birth to daughter Imaani. Soon after, she became the banking and insurance reporter for Dow Jones, where she was featured as a daily on-air correspondent for CNBC Asia and wrote a series of stories on a bid-rigging scandal in the insurance industry.

When Pasha landed a job with CNN in 2005, she became one of the lead reporters covering what at the time was one of the biggest stories in the U.S. – the corruption trial of bankrupt energy company Enron Corporation.

Pasha delivered on-air breaking news reports and was featured on *The Nancy Grace Show*.

Even though she was enjoying success, Pasha harbored dreams of working internationally. When she was 5, she had told her mother that she wanted to live in Egypt. Those visions became reality in 2007 — the same year she gave birth to her son Adam — when she accepted a job as a journalism professor at the American University in Cairo.

Moving to a foreign country while managing a family was anything but easy. Suleman had left his reporting job at The Star-Ledger in Newark and struggled at first to find a position in Cairo. He eventually found a job as a national affairs reporter for The National, an English-language newspaper in Abu Dhabi.

The United Arab Emirates clearly wasn't Egypt, but it wasn't that long a distance to Cairo, where his wife and daughter were living with the help of a nanny.

Despite the challenges, Suleman said the original move to relocate the family to Egypt was “the right detour to take” because it allowed Pasha to follow her dream. He was eventually able to get a job at the same university as Pasha, reunifying the family.

As she continued teaching, Pasha said she began to realize that she couldn't help Egyptian students learn about journalism without getting firsthand experience herself reporting in the Middle East.

This led to her and her family's move to Dubai in 2010 as she became an Islamic finance correspondent for Thomson Reuters. This role required Pasha to cover regional economic trends throughout the Middle East, which she said allowed her to gain an even deeper knowledge of the Islamic finance industry.

In 2012, she launched "ALB The Brief," a legal magazine published by Thomson Reuters that analyzed the business of law in the Middle East. Shortly following the launch, Reuters named her the acting regional editor for the magazine's sister publications ALB North Asia and ALB China, requiring her to run three magazines globally.

Now that her career revolved around the legal industry, Pasha said she was often confronted with issues regarding criminal justice, such as the disparities between how white-collar criminals were treated while incarcerated in comparison to others.

Although working abroad was a dream come true for Pasha, raising a family in the Middle East presented challenges she didn't anticipate.

When her daughter began school in Cairo, educators reached out to inform Pasha that her daughter had special needs. Due to the school's status as a private institution, there was no mandate to provide aid to special needs children. This led to Pasha and her family's move back to the U.S. in 2012 to provide her daughter with a more inclusive education that she said American public schools offered.

Upon her return to the U.S., Pasha was hired as an assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts, while her husband took on an editing job with the Wharton Business School. In 2014, their son Daniyal was born.

Living in Amherst, Pasha said for the first time in her life she had time on her side.

The Prison Journalism Project idea is born

As she was teaching at UMass and enjoying her family, Pasha kept thinking about a conversation she had with MaQbool years prior, when he said, “Everyone has a story in here. You should hear them.”

MaQbool revealed to Pasha how little she knew about life inside prison walls and the stories of those living there. She realized that if she, someone with an incarcerated loved one, knew so little, then the majority of Americans were completely in the dark.

“There’s this whole world of 2.3 million people in prisons, the size of a small country,” Pasha said. “How do you have an entire country with no journalism coming out of it besides outside reporters only seeing what the government allows them to?”

Pasha said this realization was “the lightbulb that went off and told me this is what I’m supposed to do with the rest of my life.”

She began brainstorming how she could use her skills as a journalist and a professor to bring change to the prison system. Hampshire County Jail in Massachusetts gave her that answer.

Pasha reached out the jail’s education administrators and inquired about becoming a volunteer teacher and working with inmates. At first, the officials were thrilled — that is, Pasha said, until they heard the course she intended to teach was journalism. Pasha said this negative

reaction was due to the “contentious, antagonistic relationship” that often exists between correctional institutions and news organizations.

“There’s a lot happening behind the walls that they don’t want to be shown on the outside, and as journalists, we are all about burning everything down and uncovering corruption,” Pasha said. “Places like prisons and jails are very opaque and don’t want people in its business while journalists’ very job is to be in people’s business.”

Pasha decided to modify her approach. “Media writing,” she called it: a course focused on nonfiction story writing, interview skills and media knowledge. It was the very essence of an introduction to journalism class, simply rebranded.

“The class was a success,” Pasha said. “The guys loved it. They loved knowing their stories were worthy of something and loved learning ways to make their experiences into something people could read.”

This experience led Pasha to team up with a colleague and create a college course that brought students into the jail where they partnered up to do explanatory journalism — with the incarcerated individuals reporting on the inside and the college students reporting on the outside.

The results, Pasha said, were not only inspiring but impressive. Stories gave insight to critical issues for many incarcerated individuals — from the challenges of parenting behind bars to the struggles of being issued incorrect mental health medication.

Prison administrators also saw firsthand the positive impact Pasha had on the inmates involved, and they began to trust her endeavors in the classroom.

In 2018, she was awarded a Nieman Visiting Fellowship at Harvard University, which enabled her to study how to jumpstart a nationwide initiative and teach journalism inside prisons.

One of the publications she researched was the San Quentin News, an award-winning prisoner newspaper in California that employs roughly 15 incarcerated men.

When Pasha met one of the publication's professional advisors, Yukari Kane, Pasha said there were "instant fireworks," and the Prison Journalism Project idea was hatched.

"We were both teaching journalism education in prisons in different parts of the country but coming at it with the same perspectives and motivations," Kane said. "It made sense to partner so we could create something bigger and start this nationwide journalism education program that could be used more broadly."

Kane said the Prison Journalism Project provides the public with a perspective that is largely missing in the media.

"There's a lot of really good journalism and investigative reporting on criminal justice issues, but most of the voices are from outside reporters and journalists," Kane said. "We feel that there's this massive piece missing, which is the inside perspective."

Now, as the program's co-founder and co-executive director alongside Pasha, Kane said she's been thrilled by the support from both the journalism industry and prison education sector.

"The best thing is when an amazing story comes in by a writer who's had virtually no experiences with writing, and it's about something that you didn't have a clue about," Kane said.

"It just confirms our beliefs that there are journalistic stories like these that need to be read."

She reflected on a story written by Ralph Kayden, an inmate who collects stamps in prison. He wrote about how although he lost many personal possessions before coming to prison, his family saved his mint condition stamp collection and have slowly sent parts of it back to him, which he uses to send mail outside — ensuring that the stamp he uses matches the recipient's interests.

In this narrative, Kayden explained how stamp collecting fulfills his life in a California State Prison. Kane said the piece demonstrates the power journalism can play in changing people's perceptions of those inside prisons.

Around the same time Pasha met Kane, she also conducted an interview with one of the San Quentin News' top journalists, John Lennon. She told him about her vision for the Prison Journalism Project.

Lennon said while his initial reaction was that it would be difficult to pull off, he is happy that Pasha and Kane proved him wrong.

Now, as he serves 28 years-to-life at the Sullivan Correctional Facility in Fallsburg, New York, for murder and selling drugs, Lennon works as one of the project's advisers while documenting life in a maximum-security prison. He describes the project as a powerful tool to create change.

"It's Shaheen's loyalty and dedication to service that has made this project come to life," Lennon said. "She never turned her back on someone she once loved. And yet, she's a wife, a mother of three, a professor and runs this project with Yukari. She's a machine, but she's helped me understand the importance of service."

Pasha and Kane have used The Prison Journalism Project to help inmates write about and publish what it's like to be incarcerated during a pandemic. The submissions can be found on <https://prisonjournalismproject.org/>.

"It's a humanitarian crisis by any count," Pasha said. "The mismanagement of the pandemic is basically giving a life sentence to people who aren't in prison to die."

Pasha said prisoners are afraid to tell fellow inmates or prison officials that they're feeling sick because they'll be put into solitary confinement.

“We are not solitary creatures,” Pasha said. “If you leave someone in a small cell in the dark where they can’t interact with other human beings or go outside for more than one hour a day, you’re ensuring that their mental health is going to suffer.”

She reflected on the experiences of a formerly incarcerated man she now works with who spent three years in solitary and spent much of his time talking to roaches. She said he’s out of prison now and can’t kill roaches, because in solitary confinement roaches were his friends.

There are stories on the website on a variety of contemporary issues, such as Black Lives Matter and the 2020 presidential election.

The project has gone beyond working with inmates to write articles. Pasha and Kane are developing a textbook and curriculum to use in immersive courses.

Pasha left UMass after six years and took a job as an assistant teaching professor at Penn State. Within her first year, she laid the groundwork for a course at Penn State, where students will go inside prisons and work directly with inmates.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put the course on hold, but Pasha has continued to find ways to educate journalism students about the lives of incarcerated individual. She’s teaching a course called “The Media and Uncovering Stories of Mass Incarceration,” which explores how traditional media covers people in prison.

Penn State junior Rachel Rubin, who was in the class last fall, said she was impressed by Pasha’s wittiness, intelligence and devotion to her students.

“She fostered a perfect environment for learning and developing as a person,” Rubin said. “The class wasn’t just about writing stories. She taught us how journalism can help people communicate and how important it is to relate to those who are different than us.”

Giving prison inmates a means to express themselves remains Pasha’s overarching goal.

One of the Prison Journalism Project's contributing writers is MaQbool, Pasha's friend whose incarceration 18 years ago help to inspire the program. In an email, he described the start of the Prison Journalism Project as being "a very happy moment."

"Police, prosecutors, judges, lawyers and media speak," MaQbool said. "People who we have never even met provide intricate analysis of our psyche. You have no idea how emasculating and suffocating that ordeal is. And it doesn't end there, it starts anew behind prison walls, where not only us, but our voices are held captive as well."

MaQbool said the Prison Journalism Project provides an avenue for incarcerated people "to finally speak, to tell our stories and truths and to be actually heard for a change."

As he continues to serve his life sentence, he said this project provides him not only with an expressive outlet but the ability to define himself.

"I am proud of what the project stands for and represents," MaQbool said. "Writing is cathartic and to be able to tell your own story provides some semblance of solace. But providing a voice to the condemned isn't easy. It reflects courage."

When asked how he would describe Pasha, MaQbool couldn't resist the opportunity to mess with his best friend, calling her "a destroyer of Pakistani cuisine."

While Pasha pointed out that MaQbool has never actually tried her cooking and that "if he has the chance to, he'll be eating his words," she also emphasized that these jabs display the two's playful relationship.

Speaking more seriously, though, MaQbool described his friendship with Pasha by sharing a quote from Oprah Winfrey: "Lots of people want to ride with you in the limo, but what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down."

It's been almost two decades since Pasha and MaQbool were able to meet face to face without the constraints of time limits and barred doors — and yet, despite Pasha becoming an accomplished journalist, professor, advocate, wife and mother of three, MaQbool said she's also managed to keep the title of best friend.

“To me loyalty is one of the highest & the most noble of traits. It reflects a person's humanity,” MaQbool said. “Shaheen Pasha is a living breathing symbol of humanity.”