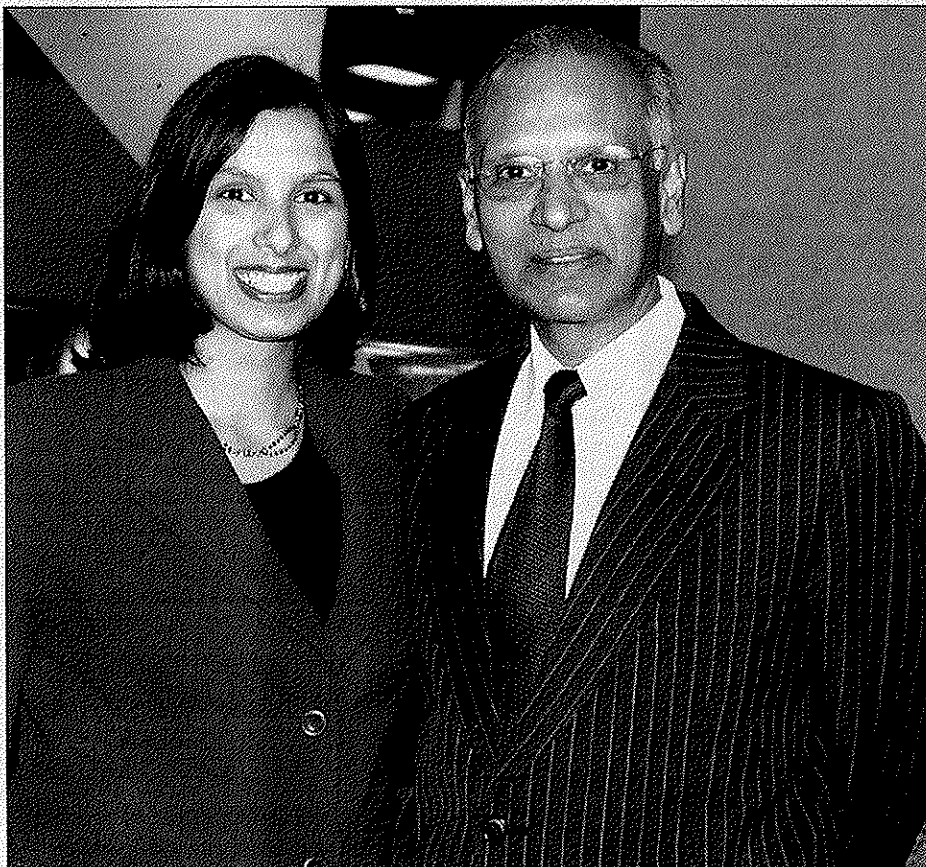


Sonali Verma to run for office



■ Sonali Verma with her father Rajnikanta Verma, former Indian high commissioner to Canada

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AJIT JAIN
in Toronto

Sonali Verma, 32, and the daughter of a former Indian high commissioner to Canada Rajnikanta Verma, officially entered the race for Toronto City Ward 1 Councillor's office on May 24.

Verma was accompanied by her father, her husband Vikash Jain, and a few friends when she signed her papers and deposited the \$100 fee that each candidate for the City Council must pay.

Rajnikanta Verma, who finished his assignment in 2002, happened to be in Toronto for the soon to be wedding of his younger daughter, who also lives here.

"I am very, very happy that Sonali is on her way to becoming the Councillor for Ward 1," he told India Abroad.

In her campaign card, Sonali writes 'Ward One Number One!' implying that if she's elected Councillor, she would make Ward One the best in terms how it should be governed.

"Yes, if Sonali is elected, under her leadership Ward One will become Number one!" Verma said optimistically. "It's a tradition in our family - my great grand father was chairman of Ghazipur (UP) municipality in 1880s. My grand father was the Justice, my father was the chief justice and I was in diplomatic post. So, it's a long tradition of public service in our family and Sonali is following on that tradition by becoming a candidate for the City Council. She gives 100 percent to whatever she does."

Ward 1 has a diverse population, with a number of South Asians and other visible minority immigrants. Of a total of 62,710 voters, 8,195 have Punjabi as their mother tongue, while 1,070 come from Urdu speaking families. Shafiq Qadri, a South Asian, is Liberal Member of Ontario Legislature from the same area. The current councillor is Suzan Hall, 63, formerly a public school board trustee. She is contesting for the second term.

Verma is the president of the local residents' association, and sings as a soprano with the Harmony Singers, one of Etobicoke's longest-running community choirs.

"Law and order is a major issue in Ward 1," she said. Verma said the real trigger for contesting was when the City allocated million dollar for development of parks and "lot of that money has gone to one particular park that's used by a few people. We don't see many people use this park. Most of these people in this area are well to do who have huge backyards and swimming pools. Across the road there's a community center used by large number of poor children whose parents can barely afford to feed them. No money has been given to the park there which is in high density area of James Town where there's a real need for outlet of the energy of these poor children. They have been neglected."

"I see all these things that need to be done," she said. "I can see the potential. The area that covers Ward 1 is beautiful. There's Humber River. There are ravines and all kinds of things. Yet the beauty is marred by garbage in the streets. There's poor decision making as to where funding ought to go. Property values have declined. Schools are in bad shape. The area is crime-infested. So much work can be done in this Ward."

Toronto Police last week arrested large number of people allegedly involved in criminal activities, selling drugs, etc. "I think we made a good start with these Police arrests," said Sonali. "But so much more has to be done. We have to get to the root of the problem. Otherwise new gang leaders will spring up to replace those who have just been arrested. We need to have social programs that change the way people think. There are young disillusioned teenagers who feel like they belong nowhere. So, we have to make social programs widely available and make these young people understand it's worthwhile staying in the school. We need mentoring programs."

So far there's one South Asian councillor - Khalid Usman - in the City of Marham.

There are 44 councillors in Toronto with three-year terms. However, the provincial government is now bringing in new legislation to increase that to four years, the same as the members of the provincial legislature.