

PURSuing PASSIONS



PLAYING INSTRUMENTS, BATTLING ABUSE, MAKING ART, SHAPING MUSIC, CREATING DRAMA, SAVING ANIMALS...THESE AREN'T TYPICAL PROFESSIONS. BUT THE SIX DESIS PROFILED HERE AREN'T TYPICAL. WHEN THEY REACHED THE PROVERBIAL FORK IN THE ROAD, THERE WAS LITTLE DOUBT ABOUT WHICH PATH THEY WANTED TO FOLLOW. FOR THEM, MAKING A LIVING IS NO DIFFERENT FROM LIVING THEIR DREAM.

BY BAISAKHI ROY

In a fast-changing world, career choices will never be the same again. Unconventional jobs, far removed from the usual 9-to-5 grind, can be fun and soul-satisfying. It can also mean a lot of hard work, learning to forge your own way, and discovering strengths you never knew you had. These six young men and women tell us what it takes to be different—and how to make it work.



Unaiza preparing an exhibition in the Kingdom of Brunei.

HER ARTISTIC ABILITIES ASIDE, UNAIZA WAS INSTRUMENTAL IN ASSISTING WITH THE RELOCATION AND SETTLEMENT OF A REFUGEE FAMILY FROM SYRIA IN HER NEIGHBORHOOD.

Life took an interesting turn when Unaiza chanced upon an interesting Master's program in the *Metro* newspaper while taking the subway (or the "tube" as it is known in London). "The course, a Master's in Visual Islamic Art, was being offered at a curiously named place in the East End of London, called The Prince's School of Traditional Arts. It sounded quite highbrow to be frank," she laughs. Unaiza, though always artistically inclined, had never taken a formal art degree and decided to just go for it. Her choice of genre was a challenging and rare one—the illumination of manuscripts.

"Illumination is a very specific skill. It's about the art of the book itself—the binding, handwriting, calligraphy, and so on," she explains. "Illumination is about decorating the writing and adorning the picture books with patterns in order to illustrate the stories. I focus on the decorative element of the book: the title, margin, top and bottom of page. I want to distill what I know to make it more accessible to people who have little or no knowledge of such a specialized art form." Inspired by scholar Martin Lings, the author of *The Quranic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination*, Unaiza sought out a classically trained teacher in Turkey who taught illumination at Istanbul's Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University.

After coming to Canada in 2011, she started scouting out local markets and art shows in Toronto to get a feel of the arts scene in the city. "I set up my own classes," she says. "I got together six to eight elementary school students and gave them an immersive experience in the arts. For example, one session would be Persian miniature painting or Ottoman art.

We would sit on the floor and do drawing exercises. I did art sessions in schools, birthday parties, and events at community centers."

Unaiza has some interesting projects in her resume, including offering courses at the famed Aga Khan Museum in Toronto on the floral forms decorating manuscripts in the museum's permanent collection, and a collaborative exhibit called *Bullets to Butterflies* (inspired by Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai).

Her artistic abilities aside, Unaiza was instrumental in assisting with the relocation and settlement of a refugee family from Syria in her neighborhood. "The images out of Syria—families fleeing their country and being rendered homeless—were really disturbing. My friends and I thought we are living such comfortable lives and I don't know how these people are managing, given the things they are facing. We decided we couldn't just watch this without doing something," she says.

Her advice to fledgling artists? "Find other artists and exchange ideas—you will be amazed at the amount of information you can find."

A RISING MAESTRO

SAMEER PATEL

Associate Conductor, San Diego Symphony

Sameer Patel credits his love for music to his parents. "When I was in the fifth grade my parents decided to enroll me in piano lessons, and in middle school I played in a band," he says. "This wasn't a standard expectation for the other Indian kids in our community, but my parents believed this was an important part of a well-rounded education. I didn't enjoy practicing at first, but in time I got better, and it wasn't until high school that I developed a real passion for music." Hailed as one of America's most exciting young conductors, Sameer is associate conductor with the San Diego Symphony. He's a recipient of the 2016 and 2017 Solti Foundation U.S. Career Assistance Awards.

High school was a turning point for Sameer. With the aid of some excellent teachers who encouraged him to pursue his passion, he blossomed, eventually attending Interlochen, the internationally renowned music camp in Michigan. He went on to the well-regarded University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he was part of their top-ranked conducting program and stayed on to do his Master's degree in orchestral conducting. His studies also took him across Europe where he took international master classes with some of the

>>

“THE BEST MOMENTS I HAVE EXPERIENCED AS A CONDUCTOR ARE WHEN EVERYBODY ON STAGE KNOWS THAT TOGETHER WE HAVE PULLED OFF A GREAT PERFORMANCE AND YOU CAN FEEL THE INTENSE REACTION FROM THE AUDIENCE.”

great conductors of our time—Gianandrea Noseda (Music Director of the National Symphony Orchestra), Daniele Gatti (Chief Conductor of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Amsterdam), and the late Kurt Masur (former Music Director of the New York Philharmonic)—which opened up his eyes and ears to different perspectives and musical traditions.

The most enjoyable part of conducting? “Audiences rarely have a chance to see little more than the performance, and at that point much of the work of a conductor has already been accomplished in study and rehearsal. “The best moments I have experienced as a conductor are when everybody on stage knows that *together* we have pulled off a great performance and you can feel the intense reaction from the audience.” You can see their shining eyes and you know this great music has found a way to move, touch, and inspire them,” he says.

Sameer has some sage advice for youngsters planning to take up conducting as a career. “From a formal standpoint, I would encourage young musicians with an interest in conducting to seriously study an instrument and to pursue conducting studies in a program that will get them in front of an ensemble as much as possible. Additionally, they should observe orchestra rehearsals often, as one can learn a lot by seeing how the best conductors and orchestras work together to make music.

“I also believe it’s fundamentally important to develop a spirit of curiosity about learning and about life. Music shouldn’t exist in a bubble, and I encourage young musicians to read great books,



Sameer Patel

travel, learn about art and history, study languages, and of course to be open to people and to the world around them. And above all, don’t be in a hurry. There’s a lot to learn and there’s a reason the greatest conductors in the world today are in their 80s!” he says.

ACTION MAN MOSES DAS

Actor

Moses Das took his kindergarten stage by storm as none other than the godfather of soul, James Brown. “I remember having a cardboard cutout of a guitar and trying to do a split pretending to play the guitar at the same time,” says the Atlanta native. “I think the moment I caught the acting bug again was in 2012 when I started to do roles in films and television shows as an extra.”

Moses had a typical childhood, steeped in the multicultural experiences that make Atlanta so unique. He also had a penchant for sports and took up tennis in a big way. “I’ve been playing competitively since I was 12; my parents supported me by taking me to tennis tournaments and such. They knew eventually that playing tennis would get me a tennis scholarship for college. I didn’t get into acting in film and television until about 2012, and they were excited for me,” he says. Moses even completed an MBA in sports management, but

>>