



LISA M. BOUCHER photo

Saini family members, of Fairfax, pose in the store. From left to right, are: Parkash, Surjit, Kunal, Geetanjali, Mareena (in back), Ravinder (in front), Shivram, and Karan.

Saini family

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were like, 'Dad where are the buildings?' We had no clue," said Geetanjali Saini, about the family's arrival.

"None of us kids even knew Vermont existed, you get stuck in the city, and you don't know what's out there, really," she added.

Geetanjali (ge-TAWN-juh-lee), or Geena as she has been called since arriving in Fairfax, and the rest of her family, Parkash (par-kawsh), her father, Ravinder (rah-vin-der), her mother, and Mareena and Shivram (shiv-rahm) her younger sister and brother, have all assimilated to life in the small town quite well in the last 10 years.

With a few small adjustments — with the exception of Mareena, employees and patrons of Nan's Mobile were unable to pronounce the unusual names and the family graciously took on nicknames that are easier for others to say.

"When I first came here, more people called me Peter than Parkash, now more people call me Parkash than Peter," said Parkash, clearly pleased that his chosen community has accepted him.

Adjustments

He had asked Pigeon, in advance, if he could come

up and pump gas for her to get to know the place a little before moving his family where they had no friends or family connections and knew nothing about the school or community. The former Mobil owner declined the request, but willingly stayed on to assist with the transition and continued as a bookkeeper for nine years — leaving in June, 2010.

The young family had been lived in Queens for approximately 11 years before moving to Vermont for a better life. Parkash had come to the U.S. from India in, early February, 1990. He recalls the day as one he will "never forget." He landed at JFK airport with only \$100 in his pocket and there was a light snow falling.

His wife, Ravinder, and youngest daughter, Geetanjali, came with him, while eldest daughter Ranjan (ron-jon) remained in India with his brother. He said they weren't sure what they were coming to and Ranjan was old enough to stay behind. She came to the U.S. few years later.

The following spring, in May 1991, Parkash's mother, Suhagwanti (soo-hawg-won-tee) came from India and moved into the same building in Queens. Suhagwanti has lived in Vermont since 2001, she's 89 now and an avid fan of "The Price is Right."

She watches it every day, though she doesn't understand English, according to Parkash, she says she "knows who wins."

The presence of this elder in the Saini household has kept their native tongue alive and fluent and has been the impetus for a very fluid bilingual existence among all members of the family. They freely move back and forth between English and their native language frequently in a single conversa-

tion. Geetanjali amazingly speaks without a trace of an accent in either language.

The entrepreneur operated a Dunkin Donuts franchise in Mid-town Manhattan and his growing family (Mareena and Shivram were born in the U.S.) lived in a high-rise in Queens, along with extended family members, which included Ravinder's seven sisters and families.

"All us kids did was go up and down, up and down," Geetanjali fondly recalls laughing about the antics of childhood with her cousins living in the same building. "There were 17 kids born at Elmer's hospital."

In 2004, Ravinder's sister Surjit (sir-JEET) and her children, Saveta, Amit, and Karan came to Vermont and began working in the store. All of the older children have graduated from Bellows Free Academy, Fairfax and gone on to college. Shivram has two more years and Karan, the youngest of the clan is in the eighth grade. The two families are so close; it's hard not to think of them as siblings.

Shivram, the first (and only) son was named Shivram Singh, after a Hindu God, a loosely held custom in India. Shiv (Shiva) and Ram (Rama), Singh is a commonly used last name in some religions.

"I had his name chosen before he was born," said Parkash. The family explained that while there are some naming customs in India, they are not mandatory.

It was of great importance to Parkash, after purchasing the store, that the community see him for what his is — a business owner with a strong work ethic who wants only what's best for his family and to help others.

He has often been seen pumping gas and asking

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Cookies

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Laura Walker and Scott Sewell.

You might not have heard of Walker, 52, or Sewell, 35, but if you've ever bought or nibbled Comfort Cookies, you've tasted their talent.

For nearly five years, Walker and Sewell have single — er, double — handedly baked, packaged, labeled, delivered and shipped 30 varieties of Comfort Cookies from home. They moved their operation to Bank Street in April, after a stint in North Ferrisburgh.

The husband and wife team live up to the shiny golden label on each cookie: "Food made naturally to soothe the soul." During the baking process — and they bake every ... single ... day — they watch "Pride and Prejudice" on Sewell's Hewlett Packard laptop.

Reciting the dialogue to each other is as key to their cookies as flour, butter, and sugar. "Pride and Prejudice" helps them get in the moment and stay there.

"When Ms. Bennett gets together with Mr. Darcy, it's just — ahhh," Walker said this week, during a tour of Comfort Cookies' in-home operation. "It's the emotions that you're feeling at that moment that go into what you're cooking."

The birth of Comfort Cookies happened in Orange County, N.Y. Walker was working as a licensed educator, but she always held a part-time job — from bank teller to English proficiency tester for immigrants — to supplement her work at private schools.

Sewell was a self-employed computer technician when he and Walker became curious about selling and marketing her baked goods, especially her cookies.

Sewell had promised himself he would not work in the food industry again, after spending his first career in it while living in Florida.

"Apparently, I forgot about it," he joked this week.

The couple obtained their home manufacturer's license in New York and set their sights on Asheville, N.C., after a visit there left them astounded. On the second trip? They changed their mind.

"It wasn't what we thought it was going to be," Walker recalled. "And we had a lot of friends telling us we would fit in Vermont, that we would love it here. So we listened to them, and they were right."

During their 18 months in Vermont, Comfort Cookies has earned space on the shelves of 25 stores, north to south, including five in St. Albans City and Town. Ninety percent of



EMERSON LYNN, St. Albans Messenger

Laura Walker and Scott Sewell, of Comfort Cookies, in their Bank Street home and kitchen.

their sales are in Vermont. Walker and Sewell moved to St. Albans after Northeast Kingdom merchants convinced them that northwestern Vermont was the hub of state commerce.

"And so we saw the name — 'St. Albans,'" Walker said. "And we knew just by the name that it was a place we could live and do business."

Their Bank Street kitchen — and an adjoining room — is a bakery. Huge plastic storage bags filled with chocolate chips, walnuts and other cookie accessories rest on their counters. Mixing cups, beaters, bowls and utensils mingle with large silver cookie trays. They have two ovens, two refrigerators, and a work environment marked by an odor that smells like Christmas year-round.

They use another room, off the dining area, for all their boxes, labels, packaging and shipping supplies.

Twice already this year, a state health inspector has visited their home, to be sure they are complying with their at-home manufacturing license.

"They need to make sure the dry ingredients are stored the right way, that the eggs are kept at the right temperature,

things like that," Sewell explained. "It's all part of the process."

On average, Walker and Sewell bake 1,400 cookies weekly, at a retail cost of \$2 each, although that total surged to 3,000 weekly during the holiday season. (Yes, they take orders off their Web site (www.comfortcookiesinc.com).

Comfort Cookies have no preservatives and loyally contain Vermont-based products: Cabot Butter, King Arthur Flour, Shadow Farm Eggs, and Barry Callebaut chocolate — manufactured in the St. Albans Town Industrial Park, off Route 7 South.

On average, Walker and Sewell utilize about 100 pounds of flour, 36 pounds of butter, and 15 dozen eggs in a week. Sugar varies, depending on the cookie.

Last week, Walker put about 700 miles on her car, delivering Comfort Cookies to stores between her part-time work as a transportation monitor for Chittenden County schools.

Walker's grown son, Trevor, 24, helps with bagging and labeling — a sign that perhaps it's time to mull an employee or two. Not yet, Walker said. She

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Tron Legacy (F-R) PG 3:30, 7:20, 10:00
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