

Mohammed Hanif: From Motherless Boy to Ambassador's Chef to Washington Entrepreneur

“It’s a rags to riches story,” says Mohammed Hanif’s friend Raj, who joined us for the interview.

These were the exact words that came to my mind as I listened to Hanif’s story. From a rough childhood in India — where he began working odd jobs to feed himself at the age of six — Hanif worked his way up through the ranks to become the personal chef to an Indian Ambassador.

Hanif is now the owner of the small but growing Salt and Pepper group of Indian restaurants in DC, with outlets in Shaw/Howard, Petworth, and Brightwood. Featuring his original recipes, fresh ingredients, authentic Indian spices, and a “lighter” style of cooking, Hanif’s restaurants are a welcome addition to their urban neighborhoods.

How did Hanif get from there to here?

He was born in 1965 in Shimla town, Himachal Pradesh province, in Northern India.

When he was six-years-old his father died; his mother remarried and went to live with her new husband, taking Hanif’s four-year-old sister and leaving the remaining six siblings (ranging in age from 6-14) to fend for themselves. The children had little more than a roof over their heads, and unscrupulous relatives were conspiring to take even that away. These distant kin had heard that the children were living alone, without the protection of an adult, and concluded they were an easy target.

Every day was a battle with hunger, and at one point the young



Hanif found himself on the curb outside his house, crying. A kind neighbor took pity on him, and offered to take him in and feed him in return for his doing odd jobs for the family.

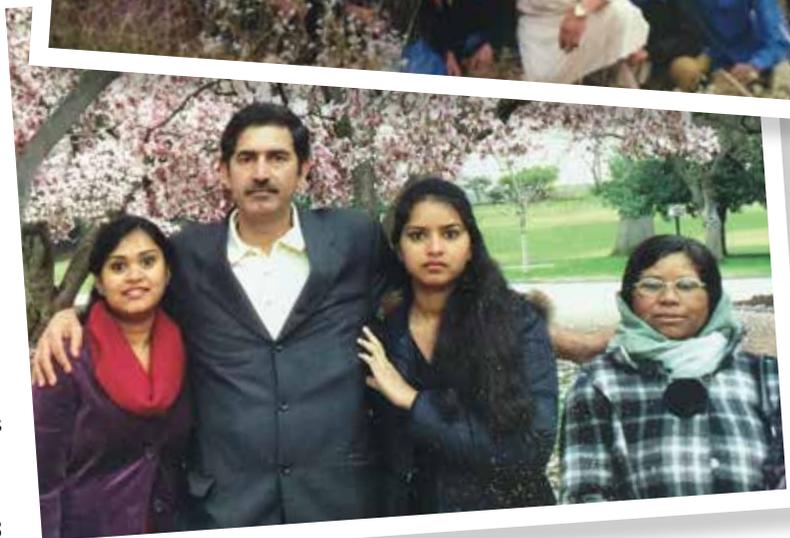
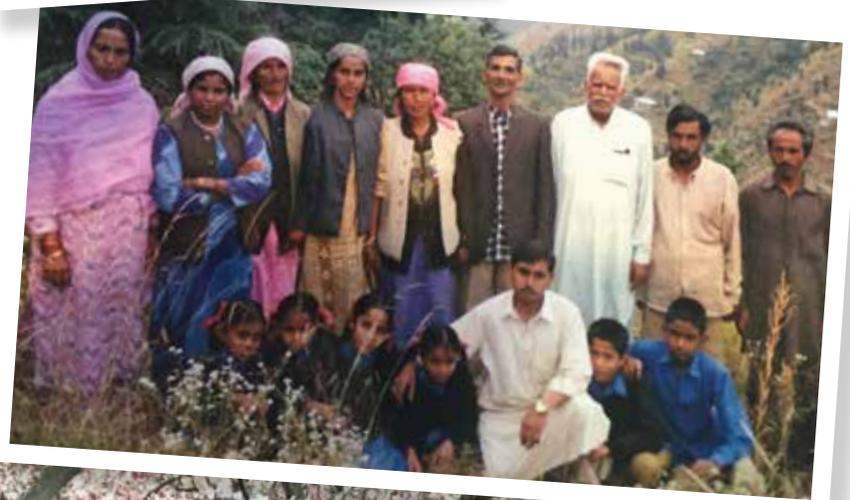
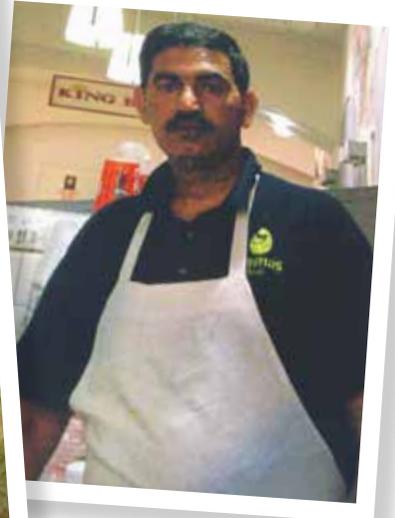
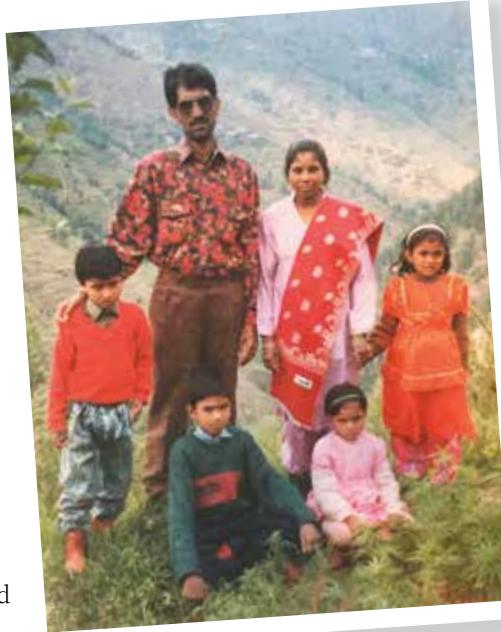
He lived with that neighbor for a few months, and she decided to send him to Delhi to work for her son, who had a child about the same age as Hanif. Hanif received about 50 cents per month working for that family, but he missed his siblings in Shimla, and returned home after about one year.

The neighbor soon found him another job in Delhi, this time working for her sister Nilima Chawala. This job (which included various household tasks, including cooking) was a better fit and Hanif remained there until he was about 18 or 19 years old. He married at age 19, and he and his young wife lived together in his employer’s home for a brief time. Hanif’s first child was born in 1987, when he was 22, and four more children followed over the years.

Hanif’s employers tried to teach him various career skills — tailoring, driving — but the early years of his professional life were marked by a series of short term jobs (cab/truck/bus driver, hotel cleaner, etc.) and the inability to make a decent living and support his family.

Fast forward to age 35. Hanif had returned to Shimla with his wife and children. His former employer from Delhi came to

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see him, and when she asked how he was doing, he told her his woes. He asked her to help him get a job with the Indian government (which, as he could see it, was the only practical route to an overseas job, which was his goal).

She obliged with an introduction to an Indian Ambassador who was looking for a personal cook. Hanif auditioned for the job and was selected. The Ambassador sent Hanif to train for six months at a 5-star hotel

The food truck featured Hanif's signature Northern Indian cuisine, but because the facilities in the truck were inadequate for cooking, Hanif made everything at home ... an exhausting ritual that led him to the conclusion it was time to open his own restaurant.

in Delhi, where he learned to prepare a variety of international cuisines.

In December 2000 Hanif traveled to Europe to join the Ambassador – commencing what would end up being a ten-year separation from his family. “And that,” says Raj, “is what you call sacrifice.”

Hanif speaks with extreme fondness about the Ambassador, who always treated him like a family member. He worked for nearly four years in Europe, and then accompanied him to Washington DC when he was appointed Deputy Chief of Mission at the Indian Embassy. The Ambassador left DC for personal reasons, and was assigned to a new post in Afghanistan. Hanif remained in Washington.

He began working for the now-defunct Punjab Dhaba in Arlington as head chef; Punjab food is similar to that of Hanif's home province (Himachal Pradesh), as they are neighboring provinces in Northern India. Punjab Dhaba agreed to sponsor him for a green card and commenced the labor certification process, ultimately getting a labor certification approved for Hanif. But he was unhappy there, and left after a year and a half.

When he left Punjab Dhaba Hanif called the Indian Ambassador's chauffeur, who gave him a place to stay and introduced him to the

Head of Operations at the Embassy. He was offered him a job cooking in the staff cafeteria where he worked for about four years.

In the meantime the much beloved, but also now shuttered, Aditi Restaurant in Georgetown agreed to sponsor Hanif for a green card and he finally became a U.S. Legal Permanent Resident in 2009.

In December 2010 – ten years after his international adventure began – Hanif was finally reunited

with part of his family (his wife and three daughters) in Washington.

Meanwhile, Hanif began operating a food truck called Salt & Pepper. The food truck featured Hanif's signature Northern Indian cuisine – but because the facilities in the truck were inadequate for cooking, Hanif made everything at home and brought it to the truck – an exhausting ritual that led him to the conclusion it was time to open his own restaurant.

And so, that is exactly what he did. The first Salt and Pepper Grill in Shaw/ Howard opened in 2012, and the whole Salt and Pepper operation is truly a family business. Hanif's daughters as well as his sons, who arrived in 2012 and 2015, respectively, all work in the restaurants.

If you are looking for authentic Northern Indian cuisine in an unassuming setting with a side of true Indian hospitality, you should look no further than Salt and Pepper Grill.

BECKI L. YOUNG, co-founder of Hammond Young Immigration, is a business immigration attorney with 20 years of experience in the field. She has represented more than 100 of the world's most prominent hotels and restaurants, and facilitated the sponsorship of foreign professionals, trainees, interns and individuals of “extraordinary ability.” Ms. Young is an active member of the American Immigration Lawyers Association. She can be reached at 301-917-6900 or byoung@hyimmigration.com.

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