

Mr Chancellor,

Today we are honouring Umme Imam. Executive Director of the Angelou Centre in Newcastle for her contribution to the rights of women from Black and Minority Ethnic groups. Hers is a story of determination, of caring, of vision and of good old fashioned “rolling your sleeves up and getting stuck in”. In this hall, 52 years ago, Dr Martin Luther King was awarded the same honorary degree of Doctor of Civil Law. He once said that life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?' Umme Imam is someone who has answered that question in full. Our university has a strong and lasting commitment to social justice and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. That makes the conferring of this Honorary Degree particularly important to us.

Umme’s story began in Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh in Northern India. She was the eldest of four children and was brought up in the happiest of family environments living with her extended family. As a child she was one of seven cousins living together. We can only imagine the noise! The abiding sense of family, of community and of the value of strong bonds and mutual support set the scene for the future for her. Perhaps most importantly, her father saw empowerment of his daughters as an essential thing to do, a natural thing to do, a normal thing to do. That this was an extraordinarily enlightened world view, and one that was far from normal in India in the 1970s was to come home to her before too long, and to change the direction of her life.

Umme was educated at Loreto Convent in Lucknow; a school she was later to teach at herself after university. Perhaps an early example of giving back to the community in return for the help she had herself received? Loreto Convent

is a school for girls with a long history, dating back in Lucknow to 1872. The school aims include “striving for moral growth and not just academic excellence” and being “responsive to the needs of all those around us”. What is perhaps most striking is that this is a catholic foundation which catered for girls of all faiths. Umme’s faith is strong and in the Shia branch of Islam. Her school life was therefore a time when she was again steeped in a world of tolerance and support to succeed in a conservative world where unchecked tradition could so easily stifle.

Umme’s time as a teacher was not, however, without its challenges. She really struggled with an unruly child who wouldn’t follow-instructions becoming the talk of the staff room. Unfortunately it was her own sister!

Her world changed completely when she moved to the North-East of England in the late 1980s to enter into what has been a long and happy marriage. The phrase “culture shock” is perhaps over-used. In the case of Umme arriving in 1980s England there is no other way to describe it. What shocked her was that all the things that she held so dear from her upbringing no longer held true for an Indian woman in the North-East 30 years ago. There was of course the racism, both overt and insidious, and a lack of opportunity for women. As a BAME woman she felt invisible if she was lucky. There was, however, something more. The world her father had created where girls were to be supported to be themselves, to be successful in their own right, was one that simply didn’t exist in the community she was joining. A world of conservative, elderly male community leaders where women were second class citizens. Where women were unheard. Her perfect future was an illusion. She asked herself “what have I done?”

There is a famous saying “If not us, who: If not now, when?” Faced with her crushing disappointment, with the only other conceivable option being to return to India, she answered those questions with a resounding “us” and “now”. If there was no community structure for women in the same situation as herself then she would have to create it and then fight for it, and this she did. First this was through the Roshni community group which brought together a group of BAME women to support and fight for basic rights. Later, and in a sad reflection of the times, the Panah refuge for BAME women experiencing domestic abuse.

At this point her career changed direction again. She became an academic, taking a post as Lecturer in Youth and Community Studies at Durham University (for those of you who weren't aware apparently there is a small university in Durham). Education had been a force in her life and an important way to right the wrongs of the world she had joined was through educating the world to be different. Life, however, can set its own challenges and it was in 1999 during her time in Durham that ill-health struck with Umme developing throat cancer; a cruel condition which through the impact of both the disease and its treatment on her voice meant she was no longer able to lecture. To her, however, this was just fate because there was another important job to do; the Angelou Centre.

During her time in academia some of the progress made in earlier years with Roshni and Panah had slowed down. There was still a need for empowerment and support for women in her community. Somewhere along the line the spirit of what she had tried to do before had been lost; too many rules, not enough empowerment. So she returned to her previous world. The rest is history.

The Angelou centre for which she is Executive Director and “human dynamo” is a unique structure. It is a building, an organisation, a community, an ethos. If people have nowhere to go that allows them to continue their life then you create it. If women who have lived their lives in very closed communities are suddenly faced with managing their own finances then you help them so they can be independent in the future. If women haven’t got the skill sets to compete in the job market to become self-supporting you set up and deliver accredited teaching courses. It’s simple really. You just roll your sleeves up. When what is needed is a national campaign to change thinking and policy then that is what you run. However, when what is needed is someone to hold your hand because you have reached crisis point that is also what you do. Maya Angelou herself said “whatever you want to do, if you want to be great at it, you have to love it and be able to make sacrifices for it”. That rather says it all. Umme’s much loved daughter Aliza recalls, on her last night at home before going to medical school, spending that night at the Angelou Centre with her mother comforting a distressed woman. Medical students are taught a lot about caring. Aliza knew all about it before she even started her course.

Umme’s faith has been an enormous influence on her life and she has been on pilgrimage to Iraq several times. Her family is also hugely important to her. She loves the tranquillity of the Lake District, of Ullswater and Windermere. In India she was a basketball champion but has now rather retired from that. She has one guilty secret which is that she loves Indian Soaps. Her daughter said her mother would kill her telling me that. I sincerely hope that isn’t the case!

To be Public Orator is a huge privilege. I meet many people who have made an enormous contribution to society. I also get to talk to the people who know them. I have never come across, in all these conversations, the level of respect,

## UMME IMAM: DCL

admiration and, yes, love that I heard for Umme. She touches the lives of everyone. The stories I heard were all very human, very humble stories. The people she has helped come back and help others in the Angelou Centre. She has helped to develop the careers of the next generation of people who will follow in her footsteps and ensure that the work continues when it is time for her to pass the baton on. The sign of a true leader.

Umme is a very modest person. She doesn't seek the limelight, except where it can help the cause. She doesn't seek personal recognition because she doesn't want to take sole credit for the work of many people. My sources, however, tell me that she is secretly very proud indeed to be receiving this Honorary Degree. Well so she should be. Mr Chancellor, for her outstanding contributions to the rights and lives of women in our community I present to you Ms Umme Imam for the award of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

*Citation by David Jones, Public Orator*

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