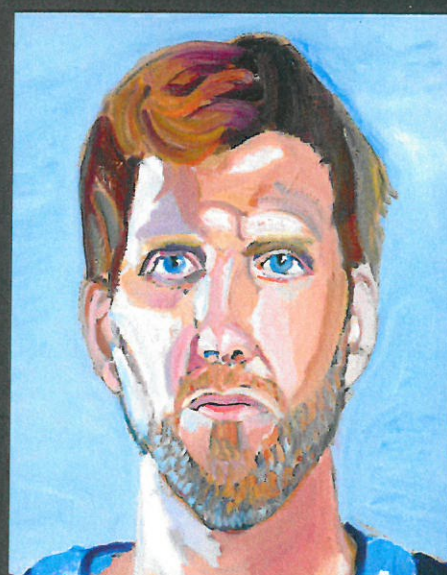
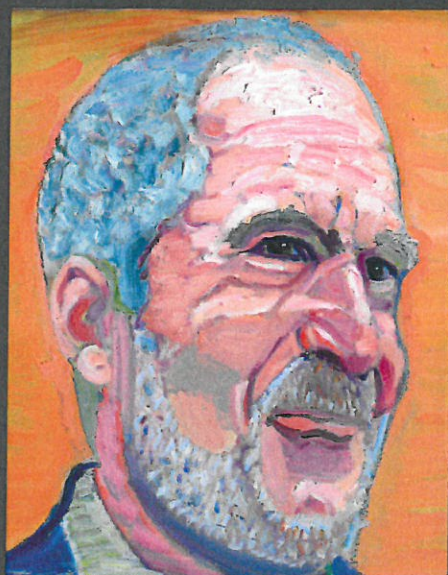
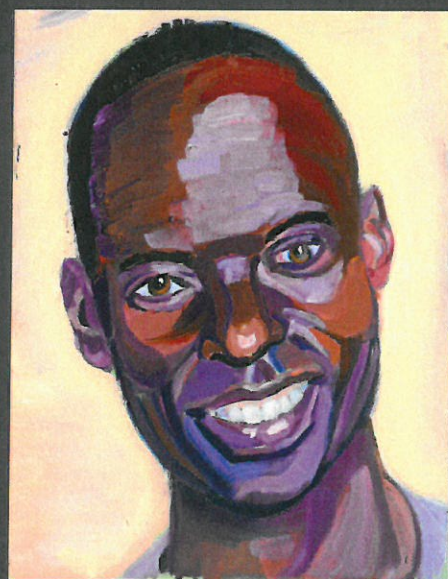


# OUT OF MANY, ONE

PORTRAITS OF  
AMERICA'S IMMIGRANTS

GEORGE W. BUSH





## SUMERA HAQUE

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“We worked hard, but America has provided us security and opportunities since we landed here. We are living examples of the American dream.”





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AT A PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP SCHOLARS EVENT in 2019, Sumera Haque stood up in front of the group, thanked me for my immigration policies, and told a story from 2004. "At the hearing for our asylum, the judge asked us to come forward. She said, 'If we allow you to stay here, promise me you will serve women here and around the world.' I said, 'I promise.' My boys were twelve and nine at the time. The judge said to them, 'Promise me that like your mother, you will both work hard.' My boys said, 'Yes, ma'am.' And the judge said, 'You're not going back to Pakistan. Welcome to America.'"

In the years since then, Sumera and her boys have kept their word, and America is better for it.

Sumera grew up in Pakistan and got married while she was in medical school. The day after the wedding, she discovered that her husband was not only a heroin addict but a brutal bully. When he hit her that day, it was the first in a series of daily mental and physical abuses. She stayed in the marriage for seven years for the sake of her children and because of the cultural stigma of being a single woman in Pakistan. "I left him in 1997 when I saw him doing drugs in front of my sons," she says. When she confronted her husband, he went into a rage that put Sumera in a hospital.

She was no stranger to hospitals. Her mother had been diagnosed with a brain tumor when Sumera was in the seventh grade, which inspired her to pursue a career in neurosurgery. "I wanted to save lives and prevent the suffering that my mother endured," she said. She entered another marriage, this time to a Pakistani man who worked at the World Bank in Washington, DC. Sumera moved to the United States in 1999 and earned a master's in public health at George Washington University to complement the medical degree she had gotten in Pakistan. "I came here thinking that now I have security and peace of mind," she explains. "But my second husband mentally tortured me, saying I only married him for financial reasons, and he refused to legally adopt my sons."

In December 2002, her husband planned a "family vacation" back to Pakistan. Once they were there, he disappeared with the passports of Sumera and her two sons and filed for divorce. She felt deceived, trapped, and afraid.

With help from a friend, Sumera and her boys returned to the United States in January 2003, only to be denied reentry at Dulles airport. Fortunately, a lawyer named Debi Sanders approached them at that moment. She explained that she was there with the CAIR Coalition, a group that gives legal aid to immigrants.

Debi told Sumera that she had the right to apply for asylum—which the judge later granted—and connected Sumera with a prestigious law firm that took on her case pro bono. “Every day, women like Debi embrace women in trouble like me,” Sumera says. “They are empowering other women and their children whose destinies would have been destroyed if left at the mercy of their abusers. They are changing the world.”

As Sumera built a new life in our nation’s capital, she never forgot the commitment she made at her asylum hearing, she never forgot the friend who helped her return, and she never forgot the friends, family, and strangers—people like Debi Sanders—who helped her along the way. She leads Johns Hopkins Women’s Health Center in Washington, DC, to meet the health care needs of women. As director, Sumera has established the center as a leader in academic training and teaching for other women’s centers in developing countries around the world. She also serves on the US-Pakistan Women’s Council and volunteers with organizations that support battered women and immigrants.

“I am most proud of raising my two beautiful sons as feminists,” she says. “Yes, we worked hard, but America has provided us security and opportunities since we landed here. We are living examples of the American dream.” Her younger son graduated from George Washington University and is pursuing his MBA from the University of Maryland while working in cancer research at Johns Hopkins Medicine. And her eldest, a University of Maryland graduate, works for a nonprofit in the UAE that expands educational opportunities in developing countries.

As I painted Sumera, I tried to capture her pride in her sons, her joy in her work, and her gratitude for our country. America is only as strong as the strength of its citizens, and we are fortunate that Sumera Haque is one of us.