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## Renu Khator: Blazing the Trail

SPOTLIGHT — BY [BROWNGIRLMAG](#) ON JUNE 29, 2010 AT 8:00 AM

by **Komal Thakkar** – *George Washington University*

In January 2008, Dr. Renu Khator became the thirteenth president of the University of Houston and the eighth chancellor of the University of Houston System. She joined a handful of female presidents of major universities and is the *first South Asian* president of a major university in the country.

Dr. Khator is certainly an inspiring woman for the South Asian community to be proud of. I had the privilege to interview her recently on behalf of BG. She took the time to answer my questions about her current position, the criticism and obstacles she faces, and the role of her Indian heritage in her life.

**What exactly does the position of President of University of Houston and Chancellor of the University of Houston System entail? Can you describe a typical day at work?**

As chancellor, I oversee the University of Houston System, which includes four separate universities – the University of Houston (UH), the University of Houston-Clear Lake, the University of Houston-Downtown and the University of Houston-Victoria. Each of these is a distinct institution, not just branch campuses, with its own president. In addition to being chancellor, I also serve as president of UH, the largest university in our UH System with 37,000 students.

Describing a “typical” day is hard because this job is so multi-faceted. You are the CEO of a large business – the UH System has a \$3 billion impact on the area’s economy each year – and the chief educational administrator and a student advocate and a major fundraiser and a cheerleader and a community leader. I wear many hats – and that’s what makes this position so demanding and so satisfying. So ... a “typical” day might start with early morning meetings with some of my vice presidents and other administration leaders, followed by my observing a class, followed by giving a luncheon speech to a civic organization then visiting with an international dignitary visiting our campus followed by an hour or two returning phone calls and e-mails and performing other office work then attending some sort of social or athletic event – sometimes both – during the evening. Back home, I will probably spend some time catching up on university-related reading.

**How do you develop a relationship with the student body to ensure that you are addressing their concerns and remaining aware of the issues that they are being faced with at the University?**

From my very first day at the university, I have made it clear that Student Success is my top priority and everything my administration does must support that commitment. I think my official policies



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reflect that. But it's also important to establish a personal connection, which is a challenge with a student body as large as ours. I make it a point to maintain a relationship with our leaders in the student government association and other prominent student organizations as well as make myself available to the student newspaper. Beyond that, I visit a number of classes each semester – and drop in at places like the coffee shops and restaurants, the bookstore and the residence halls.

**I am sure that a position of such magnitude and influence also comes with a lot of critics. How do you go about handling the criticism that you must deal with on a regular basis.**

Criticism is unavoidable. If you are not getting any, you are not doing anything. If it is constructive criticism, I try to make good use of it. If it is destructive, I try to ignore it. The challenge, of course, is recognizing the difference.

**What are some of the most unexpected obstacles you have been faced with and the greatest challenges you have had to overcome in order to reach the position you are in today?**

One unexpected obstacle, if you can call it that, was my own reluctance to recognize my early aspirations to become a leader. Giving myself permission to follow my ambition was not easy. As for the greatest challenges I had to overcome... well, as an immigrant woman, I always have known that I had to work harder to climb the ladder.

**In your article, *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling*, you write about self-imposed barriers and the limits and misconceptions that sometimes come with Asian cultural heritage. Has your Indian upbringing ever given you an advantage at any point? Have you ever felt that you needed to resort to the values, traditions, and lessons from your youth to get you through a certain situation?**

Always! I have always viewed my Indian heritage as an advantage and have always used my values and lessons to form my leadership and management style. The biggest mistake people make is to either hide or deny their own heritage. People often label my leadership style as inclusive, people-oriented and consensus-building. I believe it is the result of watching my mother navigate through multiple players in a joint family and eventually accomplish her agenda. As examples of my pride in my heritage: I frequently use stories from Indian history and quotes and poems from Indian authors. My fashion style is also a fusion of Indian and American styles.

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Dr. Khator with her husband, Suresh Khator.

South Asian culture obviously places a large emphasis on family values, and many times an individual's identity is greatly distinguished by their relationships and who they are to other people. As a mother, do you feel as though your children have contributed to your success? Are there certain lessons that they have taught you that have helped you along your journey?

My daughters are a big part of my life, both personally and professionally. It always felt like we were all part of a team with each of us pushing others to achieve their maximum potential. Today, they are my soul mates and brainstorming buddies when it comes to difficult situations. They have certainly helped me grow socially and culturally. They truly are my eyes when it comes to seeing the world of today's youth. Their pride in me is an inspiration in itself.

If you could give one piece of advice to young South Asian-American women about anything, what would it be?

If you are going to dream – and everybody should dream – dream big. If a teenage immigrant girl in an arranged marriage with no knowledge of English can become president of a major American university, who is to say you can't achieve what you set out to do as well?

What is your favorite or most memorable experience you have had while being University President and University Chancellor?



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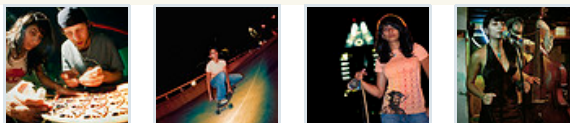


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I'm pleased to say there are so many to choose from, it's a difficult question. Certainly the investiture ceremony, which celebrated my appointment as president, is one of them. Another was the voters of Texas approving an amendment that will make funding available for UH to become a Tier One, nationally competitive research university. Watching the proud faces of 7,000 students being awarded their degrees at our latest commencement exercise was thrilling. And, I must confess, UH being ranked in the country's Top 25 football teams last season was very special, too.

**You are a role model for scores of people of all different backgrounds. In your article, [An Ode to my Mother](#), you graciously credit your mother for your success. Apart from your mother, do you have any other role models that have taught you valuable lessons to help you become the person you are today?**

Without a doubt, my husband, Suresh, has been a beacon of wisdom and the architect of my career. Beyond that, I have also received important guidance and support from my mentors in the academic arena. I don't think you can underestimate the benefits of having a mentor.

**The magnitude of your position and the rigorous schedule it involves probably do not allow for much free time, but when you do have the occasional moment to yourself, what do you enjoy doing?**

Practicing yoga. Keeping up with my family and friends. Just taking a walk around the neighborhood. Cooking, when that's possible. As you say, there's not much free time –fortunately, I find that most of what I do professionally is also very satisfying personally.

If you would like to read the full articles referred to in the interview, follow the links below:

Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: [http://www.uh.edu/president/about/articles/pdf-files/Khator\\_ACE\\_bambooceiling.pdf](http://www.uh.edu/president/about/articles/pdf-files/Khator_ACE_bambooceiling.pdf).

Mother's Day Special: An Ode to my Mother:

<http://getahead.rediff.com/report/2010/may/08/renu-khator-an-ode-to-my-mother.htm>.

\*\*correction to last post. Dr. Khator is not the first female president of a university in Texas. There have been a few before her. However, she joins a handful of amazing women who run universities across the US.

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**Sneha**

JUNE 29, 2010 AT 9:42 PM

This article is AMAZING! Probably one of the best subjects BG has interviewed.

Great job, Komal – I'm so proud to be a part of a community like this!

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**Komal**

JULY 1, 2010 AT 2:54 AM

Thank you so much Sneha! I'm so glad you enjoyed it. I was honored to be able to interview her.



**Priya**

JULY 5, 2010 AT 6:30 AM

LOVE THIS. Basically what Sneha said.

This article really is a great example of a good role model within our community.

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