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## **Retired U of L Professor, Trailblazer Lauded**

**Siddique Malik Guest Columnist**

No sooner did the person introducing her to the audience invite her to speak than the audience that included lawyers, judges and activists stood up and clapped. The standing ovation continued until she reached the lectern and started speaking.

She is Riffat Hassan, a University of Louisville professor emerita. The event was the annual dinner gala marking the sixth anniversary of the International Action Network for Gender Equity and Law (IANGEL), a California-based organization of lawyers committed to furthering women's rights worldwide.

At this event held on April 25 at the Marines' Memorial Club in San Francisco, Dr. Hassan received IANGEL's 2019 Amel Zenoune-Zouani rights and leadership award. I was in the audience. I couldn't miss the sight of a Louisvillian with a passion for human rights being honored by an international organization committed to gender equality. My other motivation: Like me, she was born in Pakistan.

Hassan's struggle for self-actualization began at an early age. Realizing the prevalent socio-cultural norms were poised against her, she became a rebel. Imagine the courage, vision and cerebral energy of a young girl who took this stand over 60 years ago in a country that even today is replete with patriarchy. In her speech at the gala, Hassan said, "the spirit of Amel challenges all women to fight for their fundamental rights and not give up or give in even in the toughest of times."

Hassan has taught university courses on, Islam and other religions, literature, politics and foreign policy. Her trailblazing scholarly work on feminist theology in Islamic tradition stimulated further academic research on the subject. It also motivated her to present her findings at various fora around the world. Three

years ago, she founded The Salaam Network, a Louisville-based group of scholars and thinkers dedicated to knowledge-based, interfaith camaraderie.

IANGEL's founder and president, Nancy Newman, asked Hassan to join IANGEL's advisory board; she accepted the offer. The duo is now working on a project to establish a mechanism of pro bono legal aid for women in Pakistan. Hassan's past experience in running women liberation programs in Pakistan, Afghanistan and other countries will definitely be an asset in this much-needed project. In Pakistan and other misogyny-afflicted countries, women face general adversity and condescension. For example, a woman who reports having been raped or a woman who remarries after having gone through a divorce can be arrested for fornication.

Newman is a passionate leader. During her fact-laden speech at the gala, she sang the 1970 Malvina Reynolds song "There's a Bottom Below" inviting the audience to join in, which it did. She said that "it could well be the anthem of our times." However, her actions speak louder than her words — sung or spoken. IANGEL played an active role in the 63rd United Nations Commission on the Status of Women conference held recently in New York City. The IANGEL delegation held a parallel event on "how volunteer lawyers support efforts advocating for equality in social protections."

The San Francisco gala's keynote speaker was Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini, the founder and executive director of the International Civil Society Action Network, a Washington, D.C. based organization committed to peace, gender equality, and other great causes. Her speech emphasized the importance of peace-building efforts for society's overall well-being.

Toward the gala's end, Marcelle Dronkers and friends gave a performance of "Our Time" from the musical "Merrily We Roll Along." That accentuated the gala's theme, "The Future is Ours." The present is indeed the conduit to the future.

At the gala, I met Swarnima Shrestha, a young lady from Nepal. She is a co-founder of the Snowyak Foundation, which supports education programs for marginalized children in Nepal's remote regions. She is now in America on an Atlas Corps fellowship at IANGEL. She was in IANGEL's Commission on the

Status of Women delegation. Society must prepare young people especially young women-for initiating and leading much-needed revolutions of human dignity and women's rights worldwide. Obviously, IANGEL is cognizant of this crucial aspect of the mission it espouses.

Read more about the gala at IANGEL.org. And please donate your time and or money to IANGEL, The Salaam Network and International Civil Society Action Network. They are 501(c)(3) tax-exempt, nonprofit organizations. Yes, "the future is ours." But those striving to secure it for us need and deserve our support.

*Siddique Malik is an observer of international and sociopolitical affairs. Follow him @TheSummerOf1787.*