

Parma Chai &

The Out of the Blue Community Arts Gallery

By Aisha Catena

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You may have bumped into her dancing at a party in Boston’s Chinatown, or performing in Allston, perhaps you studied with her at MIT or she was your beloved high school teacher – if you haven’t already met Parma Chai, a Boston cultural icon, you can currently find her at the Somerville Armory, working hard to keep the “Parma Chai Out of The Blue Community Arts Gallery” (OOTB) alive.

At her work desk, Chai sits surrounded by pictures of her beloved students from Medford High and intricate pieces of art. Her hair is dark and curly, her eyes sparkle with excitement, and she talks to people as if she has an ultimate belief in their capacity to keep up with her spontaneously random, yet brilliant, train of thought. Outside of the office, you may see her with sparkly eyeshadow, red lipstick, violin in hand, and lips parted as she belts out anything from Indian-American fusion to funk tunes.

Prior to even turning 18, Chai lived in a variety of places including India, Vermont, and Washington state. “I’ve lived around and I’m used to transition,” she says. As a first-generation

Indian-American, Chai describes with pride that she has “the immigrant parents that did not become the conventional doctors,” and appreciates the unique family culture that created— one that does not conform to norms. “I like to be different,” Chai says.

After graduating from high school, Chai attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where she concentrated on Neuropsychology and Business Management. She then continued to work for AmeriCorps, mentor foster youth, and volunteer at Greenpeace – “you know, because I love animals,” Chai explained with a laugh. Although Chai liked doing this sort of community work, she was definitely concerned about not applying her MIT degree. “Let’s be honest, right, I was going further into MIT loan debt – which I’m still paying off,” she said. Chai became a registered math teacher for 5th-12th grade 2008 and has been teaching ever since. For the past 10 years, she has been tutoring her students for standardized testing.

Chai’s resilience and hard work ethic can be tied to her continued work in education, where she experienced various trials and triumphs. From 2009-2010, she was just a few years out of college, she taught at an extremely reputable all-boys school in Concord, MA. There, she had to deal with distinct racism. “I was able to overcome that by just saying, ‘I got it, I’ve got to work even harder.’”

In the last decade, Chai began collaborating with OOTB gallery, where she has held an instrumental role in the organizations’ formation. About thirty years ago, OOTB was based in Chinatown, where the gallery would host house parties, display works of art by local artists and

create connections within the Boston arts scene. Twenty-six years ago the gallery relocated to Central Square. After this, it moved to various other locations – hopping around Boston with the fluidity that was necessary when inhabiting an ever-evolving city. Although Chai was part of the gallery’s administration for years before, she truly got involved around six years ago, while it was housed in Mass Avenue in Boston.

During these transition periods and location changes, the gallery began to struggle. Rent was high and it was not being paid. At the time, OOTB was run by its founder Tom Tipton. Chai describes the founder with great affection as “my very good friend and hero... Tom Tipton is a really great people guy, everybody loves him. He's kind of like the grandfather of local Arts... but he didn’t have any business background, so the gallery got into trouble.”

Prior to this period, Chai had been somewhat involved in OOTB, organizing fundraisers and doing all sorts of smaller things, but at this point in time, she realized she needed to get involved at a “hardcore level,” and become somewhat of a self-appointed CEO. “How do you become a CEO and CFO when there's no money?” Chai asks and bursts into laughter. But she figured it out. People had stopped volunteering, and they needed to start making money. “I helped to make sure rental spaces were paid for, artists switched up their works, and generated a working rental agreement with the landlord,” wrote Chai in *The Somerville Times*. “Long term, a small business like the Gallery had its difficulties keeping up with increasing rents right on Mass Ave., so it eventually was gentrified out of Central Square.”

This historic moment is when Chai's dedication to the Gallery became blatantly apparent – as it was being gentrified out of one location, Chai brought it into her own home in Medford, MA, where OOTB returned to its original culture of art parties, small shows, paint nights, and entertainment. To do this, Chai got rid of much of her own furniture, accumulated folding tables, and other essentials to transform her own home and “keep local art alive.”

At this point in time, Chai was personally funding the entire operation, running the business aspect of the gallery, and teaching 40-80 hours a week. “It was really bad... I started having superficial skin issues,” she says. But it was at this low point that things began to look up for Chai and the gallery. Right before the pandemic, people began to book shows – attracted to Chai's “crazy curation” tactics and wondrous grouping of artists. Nevertheless, the amount of personal money Chai was investing in the gallery was unaffordable – she had to invest \$7500 simply to close down the Allston location.

In July, during the heat of the pandemic, Chai moved the OOTB Gallery into the Somerville Armory. “I'm privileged, on the positive side, to have basically decided in a game of chess, as a survival method, to come into the armory as a living workspace,” Chai said. The Parma Chai OOTB Community Arts Gallery has four floors – one of which is Chai's living space. The gallery is now considered a nonprofit and goes under the umbrella of education and performance, which is very beneficial – it allows it to receive donations and creates the interdisciplinary community culture Chai was seeking. In the gallery, Chai hosts standardized test tutoring, music classes, and other community events.

Strength and wisdom radiate from Chai as she exists in her own cultural bubble of business, art and education. “It's very important for us women of color to continue to pull up more boundaries for ourselves because we will be attacked,” she said. “Being boss (even if being boss means no money) is going to be a problem... You need to create a hard shield around you... You can't totally break yourself from being open, you can only put up whatever guards... As I move forward as a woman of color, I do want to be a little bit more guarded about who I take in...” Despite those challenges, art propels Chai and the gallery. “If you do not put forth your very best effort, you will not succeed! But if you keep trying, and the art still moves you, the possibilities are endless!” Chai wrote in an email conversation.

Chai has learned during this decade-long process, a lot of which is focused on balancing business, art, and the personal. But that has not kept her from allowing OOTB to shine its way in various spots throughout Boston: at the Middle East Nightclub in Cambridge, in Allston, in Somerville, and more. “I'm very obsessed with expanding art,” Chai says. Throughout it all, that seems like a value she will not give up. Chai wants to stay strong in her mission of inclusivity and community whilst expanding and building the gallery into a long-term infrastructure. Although the morality and values of the Gallery have not been given up, a lot has still been taken from Chai in this process. “I've sacrificed a lot,” Chai says in a serious tone as she looks back on her career. A few seconds later, she smiles – as if positively reflecting on who the sacrifices led her to become.

