

CENTERVILLE- WASHINGTON

Neighbors

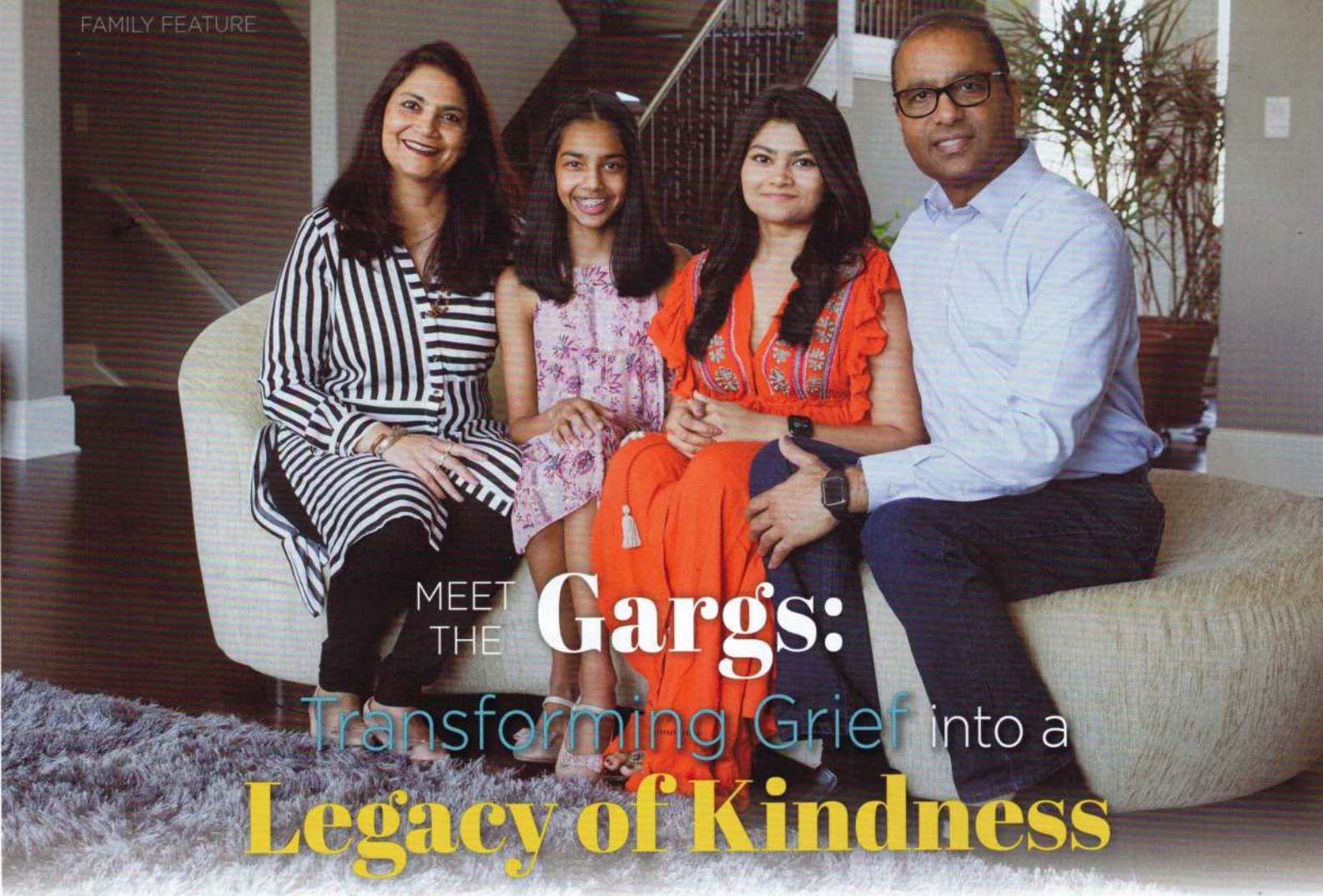
JUNE 2020

MEET THE **Gargs:**
Transforming Grief into a
Legacy of Kindness

PHOTO BY ASHLEY MAURO PHOTOGRAPHY



Best Version Media



MEET THE Gargs:

Transforming Grief into a Legacy of Kindness

If you be nice to them, they will be nice to you.”

The simple, yet profound words of a little girl reflect the kindness and joy shown in her short life; and they represent the legacy of warmth and laughter that she continues to inspire, long after her abrupt passing.

On a hot July afternoon in 2006, Yukta Garg was killed in a car accident as she was leaving the Washington Township Recreation Center after summer camp. She was 6 years old.

In the midst of their grief, Hemant and Arti Garg created the Yukta Garg Memorial Foundation (www.ygmf.org). Over the years the organization has raised more than \$50,000 through an annual Bollywood concert and built three playgrounds at the Rec Center. Within these sanctuaries are reminders of Yukta's life, including her handwriting on the walls, her artwork and images of her favorite butterflies.

“John Lennon said, ‘Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans,’” Hemant said. “In an instant—one phone call in one moment—our present and our future abruptly changed.

“Everyone has a story, and chapters within that story. How you respond to the most sorrowful chapters helps shape who you are in even the

best of times,” he added. “No family should have to endure the loss of a child. Early in our grieving, we felt moved to keep Yukta’s memory alive by forming an organization that would bring happiness to children and families.”

Hemant and Arti moved from their native India to the Dayton area in 1998. The information technology professionals eventually settled in Washington Township with Yukta and her older sister, Ishita, who was 10 when the accident happened. Navya Garg, Hemant and Arti’s youngest child, was born a year after Yukta’s death.

“We saw an outpouring of love and support from the entire community,” Arti said about the funeral, which was attended by 500. “Strangers walked in and gave us a hug. The kindness and sympathy we were shown remained vivid in our minds, and we wanted to contribute something in return that would benefit the community for years to come.”

The foundation was not Hemant and Arti’s first initiative to help families. A few weeks after Yukta was laid to rest, her parents launched an online petition to get a traffic light, a reduced speed limit and other improvements to the site of the accident at the SR 725 and Garnet Drive intersection. They secured 1,817 signatures and presented them to the Ohio Department of Transportation, which had rejected multiple

petitions requesting a traffic light at that location. Eventual improvements included a right turn only lane at Garnet Drive and at the SR 725 entrance to the Rec Center.

“Although the emotional pain of losing Yukta is lasting, it would be even worse if another preventable injury or death occurred near the same traffic spot, if we had chosen to do nothing as a result of her death,” Hemant explained.

Yukta was a vivacious girl who loved to dance and sing, and she was fond of butterflies, which sparked the idea for the Butterfly Playground at Countryside Park. That was the first to be designed and installed. It was followed by the Nature Sounds Playground, which reflects her love of music and includes six large outdoor instruments behind the Rec Center.

In 2019, the Preschool Playground celebrated its grand opening in the Rec West building. The play space is protected from the elements, but offers an outdoor feeling.

“We wanted to relate Yukta’s memory to happy things and what she used to love,” Arti said. “When we see kids playing, making friends and making their own sweet memories, we see Yukta, and we know that would make her happy.”

To raise funds for the foundation, celebrate their Indian heritage, and bring together



STORY BY JEFF LOUDERBACK
PHOTOS BY ASHLEY MAURO PHOTOGRAPHY

musicians and performers from the community, the Gargs host an annual Bollywood gala at the Rec Center, a place the couple finds comforting because it was beloved by Yukta.

The Gargs direct all aspects of the three-hour galas, from booking acts to designing graphics, renting equipment and coordinating audiovisuals. Hemant and Ishita perform a father-daughter duet every year.

"The gala is for the community and by the community," Hemant said. "If you are a singer or performer from any culture, you are welcome. The language of music has no barriers."

Over the last year, the Gargs have been honored as Citizens of the Year by the Ohio Parks and Recreation Association. They also received the Montgomery County Township Association's Community Impact Award.

"We feel humble and full of gratitude when we hear from people who tell us we've turned something tragic into something impactful," Hemant said. "They've told us it inspires them to look at themselves and see what they can do in their lives to spread positivity where they live. When many people do that, kindness spreads and the community benefits."

Yukta's memory remains in the laughter of children at the playgrounds, the bonds strengthened between families, and the song and dance of every Bollywood gala.

"If you be nice to them, they will be nice to you."



Photo courtesy of Washington Township Recreation Center

Ribbon cutting at the Rec West Preschool Playground