

# Student nurse speaks out on stigma of mental illness ahead of national awards final

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A groundbreaking student nurse is appealing to more South Asian women to join her in the profession after being named a finalist in a leading UK awards scheme.

Shahnaz Akhter, 50, who is in her third year of a mental health nursing degree at the University of Wolverhampton, has been shortlisted as Student Nurse of the Year in the Nursing Times awards, to be held in London later this month.

With just 1.5 per cent of UK nurses being Muslim and 0.5 per cent being of South Asian heritage, Shahnaz is the only Muslim woman on her course and aims to boost those numbers.

She was put forward for the award by lecturer Kasim Bashir Raja because of her “hard work, dedication and passion to support her colleagues and the university”.

It also comes after Shahnaz, who is employed by the University of Wolverhampton Students’ Union as a School Rep for nursing, jointly founded a nursing society for students.

She aims to add a safe space and sense of belonging for student nurses, to discuss issues and concerns.

Backed by Student Union CEO Nirmla Devi MBE, she said she wanted to share her journey to nursing as part of its Black History Year.

Shahnaz, from Wolverhampton, said it was imperative to speak out as South Asian women remain at-risk for suicide. South Asian people were reported as being significantly more likely to have depressive symptoms in figures from 2015 and in 2021 it was reported that South Asian people are less likely to access mental health support due to stigma and a lack of awareness.

The nursing society enables students to give each other advice, share experiences, make friends, and have fun. Shahnaz said it was a safe space for people with the same passion to come together to support one another and is hopeful she, along with her peers, has created a legacy that will continue to support future nurses at the University of Wolverhampton.

In addition, Shahnaz supports people across the Black Country to provide more accessible general health and wellbeing support to those with language barriers.

Volunteering at health events across the region, Shahnaz visits mosques and temples to carry out health checks, raise awareness of the importance of physical activity and healthy eating and provide mental health support to the community.

Shahnaz, a mum of three and grandmother of one, said: “When I was 16, I dreamt of becoming a midwife but there were no role models. I left school with no qualifications. Through married life and motherhood, my priorities changed and I suffered with both peri-natal and post-natal depression.

“I began to have a burning desire to help other mums. Women were losing themselves, their identities and their positive mental health as their domestic roles took precedence and sometimes problematic relationships saw them isolated off from other relatives and friends. This is a lonely place to be, and depression is rife. I had never heard of peri-natal depression and then, having suffered myself, felt compelled to help others.

“But I had no idea where to turn to make my dream of helping a reality. A school-mum friend worked for a health trust and asked me to become a volunteer. I started to support women from the South Asian community as I had hoped.”

“My own confidence grew and a turning point came when an anti- domestic violence programme I was involved with won an award. I had always been passionate about the NHS and by 2017, with my family grown up, I knew there was light at the end of the tunnel.

"I want mums who feel emotionally locked away in our community to know you can move on from your past. You don't have to suffer in silence. You don't need to be afraid, your well-being is a priority and there are people who can help.

"Health professionals are here to help you. I have always wanted to inspire and be inspired. I know now it's okay to not be okay. I am honoured to be a school rep and to be shortlisted for an award. They say 'if you can't see it, become it,' I hope by being seen, I can inspire other women too."

Nirmla Devi MBE added: "Shahnaz is an exceptional woman who has worked hard to overcome many barriers to get to this position. She recently established the Nursing Society which gives a voice to her fellow students. I attended their launch event in January, and it was a truly inspiring occasion where students and staff got together to share their stories, their work and support each other. Shahnaz herself is an inspiring woman who has a clear vision, compassion for her fellow students, excellent organisational skills and the strength and ability to provide effective challenge and drive positive change. The SU is proud to employ Shahnaz as one of our student employees.

"As part of our Black History Year we wanted to highlight lived experience from some of our exceptional voices from different communities. We are grateful to Shahnaz for speaking so eloquently about mental health difficulties and empowering more nurses to follow in her footsteps."

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Issued by Linda Aitchison from Nurture Media. Call 07867 420803 or email [linda@nurturemedia.co.uk](mailto:linda@nurturemedia.co.uk)

Shahnaz can be contacted on 07841602262 or via email at [ssakhter43@gmail.com](mailto:ssakhter43@gmail.com)