



# Namaste, y'all

**A British-born Sikh who leads the International Storytelling Center in Tennessee, Kiran Singh Sirah believes spinning tales can foster world peace**

**I**n August 2017, a small group of white supremacists planned to stage a Confederate rally in Knoxville, Tennessee. It had been two weeks since violence erupted at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, and people's anger had not cooled.

When Kiran Singh Sirah checked his Facebook feed, he found much boasting about going to the rally to "beat up Nazis." Unimpressed, he posted a long and persuasive comment urging a different kind of action. "Channel that anger and figure out your own best alternative-non-violent means, skill set, talent to contribute to a better world," he wrote. "Activism also means writing, telling or collecting stories, mobilizing, working on policy, offering a service, writing a letter, getting educated, educating oneself, being part of a community garden."

In the blustery, knee-jerk world of Facebook, this proposal sounded a lot less sexy. It also sounded like a lot more work. One commenter snapped, "Well, if you don't want to go, we'll fight your fight for you."

by **Jeff Ruby** | photography by **Ian Curcio**

Sirah, who has 26 stitches on his face from multiple attacks during his childhood in southern England — the earliest at age five when a neo-Nazi knocked him from his bike — did not much care for that response. “I can defend myself,” he told the commenter. “And if you’re willing to take an oath of non-violence, I will stand on the frontline with you. Even if they beat you up, I will join you.” His words did not appear to sway anyone.

A few days later, Sirah made the 107-mile trek from his home in Johnson City, Tennessee, to Knoxville. But while 3,000 protesters amassed to counter a group of roughly 35 nationalists at a Confederate memorial, Sirah attended an alternative interfaith rally that celebrated diversity.

“It was a great event,” he said, “the perfect response to the other rally,” at which, it turns out, there was not a single act of violence. “At the very least, you’ve got to know you’ve done the right thing yourself.”

**A**sk Kiran Singh Sirah how he’s doing, and he will tell you. Honestly. Deeply. Lengthily. Every human interaction is a sacred thing to him, a chance to know another person on this earth. To hear their story. And his insatiable curiosity draws people in. “Kiran doesn’t do small talk,” says one friend. “He comes up to you and says, ‘How’s your soul?’ And he really wants to know.”

As president of the nonprofit International Storytelling Center in the small Appalachian town of Jonesborough, Tennessee, Sirah, 42, is constantly talking. Whether at the Library of Congress, at the Kennedy Center, or in a bar over a couple of beers, the goal is always the same: to get people to listen, not necessarily to him, but to one another. Because in Sirah’s world, listening — really, honestly listening — leads to understanding, understanding leads to connection, and connection leads to peace. “Storytelling is not meant to be a sound bite,” he says. “It’s not 140 characters. It’s about filling the completeness of who we were and what we can be, and it can help us to change the world.”

When Sirah talks about storytelling, he doesn’t just mean Grandma spinning yarns from her rocking chair. Nor is it necessarily the open mics, slam poetry competitions, and slew of spoken-word podcasts. It’s all of the above and everything else. To Sirah, storytelling encompasses everything about who we are, what we believe, where we’ve been, and where we want to go.

Take Sirah’s story. The son of a Kenyan-born mother and an Indian-born father, he grew up in the coastal town of Eastbourne, England, where his family landed after being forced at gunpoint to flee their home in Uganda. As a member of the only Sikh family in Eastbourne, Sirah immersed himself in the cultures of other religions. His mother — who took him to synagogues, mosques, and churches of all denominations — once made him clean the hundreds of pairs of shoes congregants had left outside a Sikh temple in London. “She was teaching me the act of *seva*, which is community service,” he says. “I learned that as long as you are serving society, then you are doing good.”

When the 9/11 terrorist attacks happened, Sirah was a student and slam poet living in a hippie commune in Edinburgh, Scotland. “That was the moment I woke up and realized I was a citizen of the world,” he says. He began to organize festivals, including a diverse, faith-based gathering for 6,000 people at the National Museum of Scotland. He wrote in his blog: “Coptic Christians



sang songs of resurrection in Arabic. Sikhs wore the Scottish Sikh tartan and performed traditional bhangra with bagpipes. Jewish Scots performed music that combined the Scottish Celtic and klezmer traditions.” In other words, each group told its stories.

After graduating from Wolverhampton and Newcastle universities with multiple degrees, Sirah spent nearly seven years as the learning and access curator at the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow, where he created programs on human rights and led an African-based exhibition/community partnership. He also hosted anti-sectarian debates with gang members and former members of paramilitary groups. His résumé lists numerous acts of social justice and conflict resolution, painting the picture of an indefatigable global humanitarian. In 2011, Sirah moved to North Carolina, where he attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s department of American studies folklore program through a Rotary Peace Fellowship. His master’s thesis, “A Stone in the Brook,” explored notions of home as expressed in the life stories of men he met at a local shelter. (For more about Sirah’s Rotary Peace Fellowship, see “Building Peace by Degrees,” page 50.)

On 3 November 2012, Sirah was slated to speak at Rotary Day at the United Nations. Days earlier, Hurricane Sandy had flooded New York. Much of Manhattan had gone dark, but as Sirah wandered the city the night before his appearance, he saw cafés welcoming people of all cultures, who talked through the night by candlelight. He incorporated their tales into his speech, “Telling Stories That Matter.”

“Many people are of the belief that discrimination against people is wrong,” he told a crowd of 1,300 at the UN. “However, discriminating *between* people, looking at how we are all different and belong to unique stories, is an intelligent approach to developing ... a world based on mutual respect and discourse — and one without conflict.”

**A**round that time, the International Storytelling Center was in transition. A modest non-profit organization, ISC had evolved over five decades from a grassroots organization into a genuine cultural movement that hosted folklorists at a 3-acre campus devoted solely to the art of storytelling. Its annual



National Storytelling Festival, which began in 1973 with a wagon and a bunch of hay bales parked beside the Jonesborough courthouse, had ballooned into an enormous three-day celebration that drew visitors from all 50 states and several continents. The festival, which doubled the town’s population every October, had basically revived Jonesborough, which renamed itself the “storytelling capital of the world.” Despite those suc-

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cesses, ISC had filed for bankruptcy on the last day of 2010, and it wasn’t until June 2012 that those financial difficulties were finally resolved.

Now the board needed to find a replacement for its retiring founder, a gregarious former journalism teacher named Jimmy Neil Smith. It wanted someone with international experience who could expand ISC’s reach. Someone who could capitalize on the spoken-word renaissance that had been turned into a widespread



professional industry by the likes of *This American Life* and *The Moth Radio Hour*. Someone dynamic and enthusiastic, with their own story to tell. Say, a charismatic, poetry-slamming British-born Sikh with ties to East Africa, India, and Scotland.

Sirah was hired as president of ISC in 2013. “As the vetting process wore on, his positive energy, his power as a communicator, and his sheer enthusiasm for the power of story impressed us just as much as his credentials,” says William Kennedy, then the chairman of the board of governors. The board’s only misgiving initially was that Sirah might be too serious for the job.

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His early days at ISC were an adjustment, in a town where he was once again a brown face among predominantly white ones — and this time with a different accent. “It took some getting used to, the fact that I was the person in charge of this event whose attendees were mostly white,” he says. “Everyone seemed to know who I was, but I had no idea who most of them were.” His

intense approach initially clashed with the laid-back Tennessee culture. “Kiran is very straightforward about what he wants, which isn’t always the case in Appalachia,” says periodic ISC teller-in-residence Elizabeth Ellis. “But he has more of a global vision.”

Since Sirah’s arrival, ISC has exploded. It has established partnerships with countless organizations, including the Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation, Google Cultural Institute, and Dollywood, Dolly Parton’s entertainment company in nearby Pigeon Forge. It has landed grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and garnered philanthropic support from Silicon Valley. And perhaps most notable was Telling Stories That Matter, ISC’s free downloadable toolkit that teaches educators and business leaders how to collect, share, and present stories as a way to build community. Created in collaboration with Partners for Democratic Change (now known as PartnersGlobal), it’s currently used in 18 countries. All this while ISC’s staff of 12 put in the less glamorous work of developing sensible approaches to spending and smarter revenue models.

The center has a \$1.2 million budget, draws 26,000 visitors per year, and has an annual regional economic impact of \$7.6 million, which includes roughly 111 full- and part-time jobs. “Kiran is helping the International Storytelling Center extend its reach further both nationally and internationally,” says Thelma Kidd, chairwoman of ISC’s board of directors. “Storytelling is, indeed, worldwide and cross-cultural — and Kiran is a natural connector with people and organizations who share our belief in the power of story to change people’s lives.”

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iran Singh Sirah is on his porch swing, beer in hand, lazy eastern Tennessee sun sinking behind the oak trees. The rustic porch is decorated with a Union Jack and pink Christmas lights. His car, a 2015 Subaru Forester with a bumper sticker that reads “Love Thy Neighbor (No Exceptions),” is parked out front.

The conversation crackles as it drifts from philosophy to ex-girlfriends to soccer to Sirah’s obsessions with Tupperware and elephants. One second he’s making grand proclamations about *StoryVault*, the podcast ISC has launched with the Library of Congress (“It’s important to listen to each other’s stories if you want to un-

derstand that this country is one of the greatest experiments the world has ever known"); the next he's playing the didgeridoo and showing you his paintings. It's impossible not to be amazed by his energy. "You ever been to a drum circle?" he asks. "There's one later in Founders Park. It's great."

By now, Sirah has been in Tennessee for more than five years and become a familiar figure around town. "Kiran has great ideas, but he's also authentic, and people respond to that," says Susan O'Connor, ISC's director of programs. "And his energy and enthusiasm make it easy for anyone who meets him to believe in what we do."

In November 2017, Sirah was honored as one of Rotary's "People of Action: Champions of Peace" at Rotary Day at the United Nations in Geneva. Wearing a kilt with the Sikh tartan, he charmed attendees with a multicultural greeting — "Namaste, y'all" — and, at a breakout session, won over the Rotaract-heavy crowd with a rhyming rap called "The Chip on My Shoulder."

But Sirah is just as proud of being named Mister Biscuit at Knoxville's International Biscuit Festival, a title he earned by beatboxing and balancing a buttermilk biscuit on his head while wearing that same kilt. It's safe to say he has officially integrated Southern culture into his worldview. And Appalachia has accepted him, and celebrated him, exactly as he is.

Sirah further cemented that Tennessee-Rotary connection last year when he joined the Rotary Club of Johnson City Morning. "I joined that one because it offered an e-club membership, which suits my busy travel schedule," he explains. "Plus the president of the club, Mina McVeigh, is my neighbor, and she is cool beans."

Seated on his porch, Sirah is telling a tale about his neighbors, liberals on this side and conservatives on that one — how they all got together for a birthday party a few nights earlier and everyone got along just fine — when he suddenly gets philosophical. "I came to this country 6½ years ago with a mission to influence foreign policy. I had no idea I'd end up in the mountains. I also had no idea that I'd fall in love with the people." He strokes his chin. "I understand a different side of America that's not about your accent, or your flag, or your allegiance."

When asked about the future of storytelling, Sirah perks up. It's on the verge of another explosion, he says, appealing to young people the way the slam poetry movement has — and the current political climate has served as a wake-up call that empowers those who have not

historically had a voice. "We are in one of the most beautiful times in the history of this nation, because we can mobilize and bring people together," he says. "It could be a revolution, a velvet revolution. We can bring balance to

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the world and understand each other on an equal plane. And storytelling is the one force that each and every one of us on the planet can contribute. We can bring the planet toward destruction, or we can contribute toward peace."

He drains the last of his beer. "Now how about that drum circle? You still interested?" ■

*The chief contributing dining critic at Chicago magazine, Jeff Ruby is the author of the children's book Penelope March Is Melting.*

