

Orangeville council candidate devastated as racism rears its ugly head during campaign



By Mike Pickford

An Orangeville council candidate has been left to pick up the pieces of her campaign after being devastated by numerous racial attacks over the past few weeks.

After being approached by the Citizen to comment on rumours she had been the target of racial abuse following her decision to run for a position on Orangeville council, Simran Bhamu reluctantly opened up to this reporter. She recounted dozens of racially motivated attacks she has been on the receiving end of, both online through social media and in person while campaigning, since filing her nomination papers on May 1.

‘It all started with a few messages on social media, coming in from fake or anonymous accounts saying I shouldn’t be running, or I don’t know what the issues are in town,’ Ms. Bhamu told the Citizen. ‘Then it sort of evolved and started to get nasty until, eventually, they focused on the colour of my skin and my cultural background.’

Ms. Bhamu is a Canadian citizen, receiving her citizenship in 2014. She has lived in Canada for eight years after emigrating, with her husband, from India. The couple have lived in their home in the Rolling Hills area for four years.

After taking time away from her career to focus on raising her young child, now four-years-old, Simran made the decision last year to become even more involved in the community, deciding she would make a run for Orangeville council.

Since announcing, she notes that the majority of local residents she has approached have been more than welcoming, listening to her thoughts and ideas and wishing her well with her campaign. Approximately two weeks into that campaign, things started to change for Simran. After engaging in what seemed like a positive discussion with a local resident about her platform, things quickly turned nasty.

‘The first incident that really affected me came when I knocked on a door in town and talked to a gentleman about my ideas. He listened to my platform for 20 minutes, then he said ‘I have a suggestion for you. Why don’t you go back to your own country’,’ Ms. Bhamu said. ‘I had my four-year-old son out with me at that time. I had to explain to him what that man meant, what he said.’ She added, ‘What he said really stuck with my son. He started asking me what it is to be brown, why that man focused on something like that. That really impacted me. I don’t want my son to ever get the feeling that this is not his country, that he is not Canadian.’ Since then, Simran has knocked on approximately 200 doors throughout the community. She says she has received a further six racial attacks in person. It has taken such a toll that Ms. Bhamu says she has reconsidered her entire approach to her campaign, choosing not to knock on people’s doors and focusing instead on meeting people at local events and engaging through social media. But, another part of the problem, Simran has found, is that every time she puts up a post on her Facebook account, she gets another flurry of messages to her inbox, most of them containing some form of racial abuse. Most of the comments and quotes shown to this reporter were not fit for publication. But it’s not all being done in private. Simran notes there have been several instances where comments have been made on public forums, including local media outlet’s social media platforms, that have gone unmoderated and, largely, unnoticed.

She has received ?recommendations? from people who claim to be trying to help her, stating she needs to recruit ?more white people? to assist with her campaign. She has been criticized, in her own words, for the number of ?brown? people that comment on her posts, photos and videos, offering encouragement as she continues with her campaign.

?It's got to the point now where I feel my campaign isn't even about my merits, or about what I could bring to this community. Instead, it feels like I'm having to prove that I'm equal to other candidates and that I actually am eligible to do this,? Ms. Bhamu said. ?This is the first time I've ever had to face racism. I've lived in Canada for eight years. It's horrible.?

While the attacks have clearly taken its toll on Ms. Bhamu on a personal level, and even impacted the way she is going about campaigning in town, she says she will not let them stop her from achieving her ultimate goal ? winning a seat on Orangeville's next council.

?If anything, these comments, these attacks have spurred me on even more. There are people in town who support me and wish well for me, that is what I'm focusing on. The attacks have certainly been in the minority and they have not changed my opinions on Orangeville as a community. This is a beautiful place that I am extremely fortunate to call home,? Ms. Bhamu said.

She concluded, ?I just hope to be able to move forward in a positive way, without being judged because of the colour of my skin. I believe I am the best candidate in this upcoming election. I want people to judge me on my merits and based on my platform, not just because I'm a woman, not because I'm young and not because I'm brown. Those things do not define me as a person and they shouldn't define me as a candidate in this upcoming election.