



Asian Leaders Network Hosts Waco's First-ever Diwali Festival By Stephy Mahoney | Reporter

On Wednesday, Nov. 6, the [Asian Leaders Network](#) held its first Waco Diwali Festival at Bridge Street Farmer's Market, bringing together local families to celebrate the festival of lights as it is observed across India and South Asia.

According to the Asian Leaders Network, the nonprofit organization was established in the summer of 2022 in Waco.

Rajesh Solanki, graphic design artist for the ALN Diwali Festival, said his connection to his culture inspired his work on the event.

"I have been drawing for as long as I can remember," Rajesh said. "But I've taken my art seriously in the last seven or eight years."

Solanki said that his passion for drawing developed organically from an interest in graphic design, childhood influences and a love for anime.

"I love comics. ... I watched a lot of animated shows growing up, like Spider-Man and Batman," Solanki said.

Solanki's wife and Diwali co-organizer Brandi Solanki said one of the biggest goals for the event was to "make a space for South Asians to feel valued and seen."

According to Brandi Solanki, South Asian communities are often overlooked, even at other Asian cultural events.

The festival featured a “vibrant variety” of activities, including cultural performances from a cappella and dance groups, family-friendly festivities, more than 15 vendors and arts and crafts.

“We want people who may have never experienced Indian culture in Waco to come here and experience and learn something new,” Brandi Solanki said.

According to Brandi Solanki, ALN hosts these events to help connect the community across cultures. The organization continues to grow, with new ideas and events emerging as it becomes more established.

“In March or April, Jaja [Chen] — the president of ALN — and I began discussing what our next event could be and how it could highlight South Asian culture,” Brandi Solanki said.

ALN also maintains a free, accessible list of [Asian-owned businesses](#) to showcase the diversity and achievements of the community.

One of the groups in attendance was UTD Laksh which is an Indian dance organization that competes at the collegiate level. Dallas Sophomore Sindhya Atturu was one of the performers.

“We are part of a competitive dance league called DDN [[Desi Dance Network](#)] that competes in folk dance, classical Indian dance, Bhangra and South Asian hip-hop,” Atturu said. “We have people who have been dancing their entire lives, and some who just started... It’s a skill like any other. You have to practice to get good.”

In terms of experience, Atturu said the [UTD Laksh](#) team accepts dancers from all skill levels.

“Our fall semester is largely for training. We learn all of our choreography for competitions in the spring semester,” Atturu said. “We have nearly 100 students audition for the team every year.”