

Going out with the Going out Guru

Her strappy black sandals clicking against the cracked sidewalks of D.C.'s up-and-coming 14th Street, Lavanya Ramanathan can list recommendations to the area's restaurants and bars with as much ease as spouting off her telephone number. Making her way to her favorite pastry shop, Bulletin, she is greeted by the manager and asked if she would like her usual: a homemade shortbread pop tart with strawberry filling and rainbow sprinkles that she helped make famous. From there, she heads to G, the newest Michael Isabella restaurant, and orders the roasted cauliflower sandwich while her fingers move feverishly against her iPhone, securing last minute tickets to a sold out comedy show.

"I wouldn't say I consider myself a 'going out guru,'" said Ramanathan, 34, using her pastry-less hand to point out her favorite cocktail bars, "I see myself as someone who explains this world to people."

Sporting an oversized tribal print sweater, which she refers to as her tent, and skinny black jeans, if Ramanathan looks like being trendy is her job, that is because it is. As a reporter for the Washington Post's Going Out Guide for the past four years, Ramanathan's job is to keep up with what's in style in D.C. But while trends change by the season, her old-school outlook on journalism, dedication towards diversity, strong Indian background and deep love for her family will never go out of style.

The world Ramanathan strives to expose seems to be a whirlwind. In an average week, the 5-foot-4 petite journalist spends her weekdays working 45 to 50 hours in the Post's main office and her weeknights and weekends researching her beat throughout the capital.

“People are always like, ‘it must be so awesome getting to go out as your job,’ and I mean yeah, it’s great, but sometimes we just want to do our laundry!” Ramanathan said weaving through the maze of cubicles leading up to the Weekend department.

Ramanathan’s desk is tucked away in a tessellation of cubicles that sprawl across the Post’s gigantic office floor. While most of the spaces are characterized by movie posters, foam fingers, family photos and even a floor to ceiling ‘Gosling Wall’ wrapped around a pillar near the Style section, Ramanathan’s workspace is surprisingly devoid of decoration. The desk’s tabletop can hardly be seen under stacks of newspaper and her computer’s desktop is lined with rows of file icons. To do lists and post it notes line the inner walls of her cubicle, but hidden behind an email receipt of a concert ticket tacked against the wall, she reveals a black and white photograph of her ex-boyfriend.

“I’m not a very sentimental person,” Ramanathan said. “I think people expect my desk to be a lot cooler, but I just don’t take the time.”

But when it comes to her stories, Ramanathan says she takes the time to make sure everything she puts out is perfect. She helps with every headline and works with design to pick every photograph. She swears by her dislike for the use of first person in articles and her inability to understand Twitter. In these ways she considers herself to be an old-school journalist.

“No matter what, I will always call myself a *print* journalist,” she said, flipping proudly through the articles on her desk.

Ramanathan picks up a newspaper at the top of the stack next to her computer, as she is scanning through there is no questioning her passion for her craft. She points out her favorite page designs and her 2013 Free Fest music festival article and graphic that spans across two full pages. But she will just as happily click through her online slideshow of “40 Foods Every

Washingtonian Should Try” and laugh about how gaining the eight pounds writing the article was “so worth it.”

As she browses through the Post’s Fall Dining Guide, Ramanathan stops at an article on a local Korean restaurant. The full-page picture features a group of Korean and Indian millennials, laughing and conversing while meats and rice cook on an open hot plate.

“When I started journalism, I promised myself that I would always come at it with a perspective of a person of color,” Ramanathan said, admiring the spread calling it her favorite in the guide. “I would say being Indian affects what I do. It’s a big part of who I am. I can’t ignore where I come from or the people I know.”

Ramanathan, an only child of a mother who is one of nine siblings, and a father who is one of 10 siblings, was born and raised in Montgomery Co., Md. She recalls her heritage as having a strong influence on her childhood, from her strict vegetarianism, which she still follows today, to her memories of being picked on for the color of her skin. But even so, she says her family members, especially all thirty of her cousins in the U.S., are the strongest influence in her life.

“Those are my people, my cousins are my best friends” Ramanathan said, flashing a wide smile when asked about her family. She can hardly contain her excitement as she talks about receiving a text from her cousin during an interview that read “Baby :).” “I was just super over the moon, I hardly made it through that interview.”

Alongside family, Ramanathan says her love for journalism is something she has carried with her through her entire life. Over her 6-inch sandwich, she reminisces about asking for Rolling Stone and Spin Magazine for holidays and reading them from cover to cover. “I sort of geeked out,” she said bashfully.

But it was not until high school that the reporter remembers dedicating herself to writing.

“I remember dropping out of calculus in high school and everyone was like ‘you’re going to fail in life’ and I was like ‘nope, I’ll just be a writer,’” she said, adding the sass of a high school girl to her recollection of the memory.

One year later, she joined University of Texas’ class of 1999, studying journalism and film. In 2000, after graduating, she wanted to move to do something crazy, so she moved to New York City. With the money she had saved up, Ramanathan moved into a new city and started a new job at a publishing agency. A year and a half later, she packed her life into two suitcases and moved to Chicago to attend her dream school: Northwestern University’s journalism program.

After finishing school she scored a job through a diversity program at Newsday, where she spent one year working in the New York office and one year working in Florida at the Orlando Seminal.

A year in Orlando was more than enough for Ramanathan. She hated the city and wanted to be back near her family. Thinking it was a far reach, she decided to apply to be a copy editor for the Washington Post’s Metro section, and to her surprise she landed the job in 2004.

“During my time as a copy editor, I was writing for a little bit and I was good at it,” Ramanathan said as she stopped her tour of the office by the copy editing section. “So when the position opened for a going out columnist I jumped on it.”

That was in 2006. Since then, Ramanathan has been making a name for herself in the world of both print and broadcast journalism. Today, when she is not reporting for the Post, she is working as a correspondent for a weekend segment on NBC 4. Her work with the news station has left an impression that stands out among the rest.

“Lavanya is the kind of person who is easy to be around but is still serious about her work,” Matt Glassman, NBC’s assistant news director said in a phone interview. “A lot of times in this business you meet a lot of people with a very Type A personality, but she is a calming, smart, focused force that is methodical in the way she approaches her stories. I think the world of her.”

Beyond her professional relationships, Ramanathan proves to hold a lasting impression on others in her life. Just ask Matty Taylor, a guitar player from local band “The Tennis System,” standing in head to toe black leather with platform black suede boots. But his intimidating wall falls as he speaks of his best friend and former girlfriend.

“She is one of the most amazing people I know,” Taylor, 29, said as he stopped strumming on his guitar to talk about the reporter. The two ended their relationship after Taylor moved to LA to follow his dream to make it in the music industry. “She inspires me daily to push myself harder in order to feel accomplished.”

As Ramanathan continues to push herself in her career, she says that she has bigger plans for the future. Over the next few years, she plans to get back into news reporting. Her eyes widen as she describes her hopes to take her love for trends and apply it to a larger scale. She describes her ideal future to be one where she explores trends that go beyond fashion and food and instead are geared more towards demographics, real estate or social issues.

“As fun as this job is, it has an expiration date,” Ramanathan said as she neared the end of the trendy blocks of 14th Street. “I can’t be 40 writing about what all the hip young kids are doing and I want to write more hard hitting articles. But for the meantime, I love what I do, and it really never feels like a job.”