

By Catherine McCorkle

PASS IT ON:

For Sarita Gopal, MD, MCP '88; Residency, MCP '92, her job as an obstetrician/gynecologist is a calling; she is passionate about the level of care she provides to her patients. Since she believes the physician's obligation to take care of people extends beyond the doctor's office, her fellow alums and future generations of physicians have benefited from her professional generosity as well. Gopal thinks it is essential for a physician to "pass it on."

Gopal arrived at the Medical College of Pennsylvania from Pittsburgh after hearing a friend, Marcela Böhm-Vélez, MD '81, rave about her own experience. "I thought, '[MCP] sounds wonderful.'" Once there, Gopal realized that she wanted to pursue obstetrics/gynecology, though she tried to dissuade herself from it at first. "It's hard to have a life, and have a family, and be an ob/gyn," she says. Her significant other, now her husband, reassured her. If obstetrics was her calling, he said, "We can make this work."

Make it work they have. Gopal has been at the same practice in Fairfax, Virginia,

since completing her residency, and she and her husband have two children. "It has been fabulous," she says of the past 20-plus years.

Gopal's colleagues at Greenbriar Ob/Gyn and Inova Fair Oaks Hospital, where she has held several leadership positions, recognize her skills, and *Washingtonian Magazine* has listed her as a top doctor. Still, the opinion that matters most to Gopal is that of her patients.

"I love that I've known [patients] for 20 years," she says. Because of their relationship, Gopal feels her patients ultimately appreciate her advice, even when they receive direction they would prefer not to follow. "It comes down to a question of whether [patients] trust you enough," she says. "They know you have their best interest at heart. My favorite thing is that my patients know I do. They know what I'm about."

Gopal cherishes her time at MCP, praising both the professional wisdom passed on by the instructors and the environment of personal empowerment. The "big picture" was always in focus,

no matter what the specific course or lesson, Gopal says. Her instructors kept the real world and the patient at the forefront of their message.

She remembers a pharmacology professor mentioning that Tagamet, which had to be taken daily, cost more than \$1 a pill. The professor, Charles Puglia, PhD, emphasized to his students that there would be a real person taking the drug; they had to think about how this would affect the patient's life, even from a financial perspective. "I don't think that's something you would have gotten anywhere else," Gopal observes.

She recalls a similar experience during her residency at MCP. When Gopal was performing her first C-section, her instructor, Dorothy Barbo, MD, said to her, "Make sure you make that line straight. That woman's going to live with that scar for the rest of her life." This ethos prevailed throughout medical school and residency. "There was never a loss of focus on the patient," Gopal attests.

Gopal also appreciates the lived example of so many of her instructors.

Savaria Photography





Sarita Gopal was recognized by Dean Daniel V. Schidlow, MD, for organizing her class's 25th reunion.

SARITA GOPAL

MD,
MCP '88,
RESIDENCY '92

"The best part [of MCP] was having so many women around who had done things," she says. For instance, she remembers that Doris Bartuska, MD (WMC '54), a revered endocrinologist, had six children. "There wasn't ever this question of whether you could have a family and a career," Gopal explains. The attitude was, "Of course you can."

In line with those role models, Gopal became the first female president of the medical staff at Inova Fair Oaks Hospital. She notes that another MCP alum, Mary Schmidt, MD '84, is the first female president of the medical staff at Inova Fairfax Hospital, also in Virginia.

Gopal expresses one regret from her time at MCP: "I wish I had spent more time with my friends there," she says. "These people are really cool!" In that vein, last year she volunteered to coordinate her

25th reunion.

For their reunion, the MCP Class of 1988 created an endowed scholarship for the College of Medicine. Although they fell short of their dollar goal, Gopal is confident they will reach it this year. She understands that some classmates may be unsure about giving since they feel more strongly affiliated with MCP than with Drexel. "The point is to try and help the next generation of physicians," Gopal says. "We can't do it for MCP, so let's go ahead and do it for students at Drexel."

Gopal believes that giving through the endowed scholarship is important for two reasons. First, it is a way to honor the professors "that we loved, and who inspired us and got us through." Second, it is a way to encourage the next generation.

"We want physicians to graduate and take care of us when we get old. So we

have to help them. It's hard to do it. You need to be the role model. You need to be the financial support. You need to be the emotional support. Intrinsic to being a physician is to pass it on."

According to her mother, Gopal became interested in becoming a physician at the age of 11, when her grandfather died. The girl was "very frustrated" by his death, believing that if her grandfather had had better access to doctors, he would have lived. Her mother identifies that painful experience as the moment Gopal "decided to go into medicine and fix things."

Gopal herself says, "I feel like it was such a gift to be able to go into medicine." At the same time, she acknowledges, the life of a physician can be difficult. This is why it is so important, particularly at this stage of her career, to give back and pass it on.



Classmates from 1988 enjoy each other's company at their 25th reunion (l-r): Drs. Leslie Sude, Jean Drew, Todd Lefkoe, Diane Gottlieb, Jeni Orr, David Wertheim, Sarita Gopal, James Dean, Diana Morgenstern, Patty Van Devander, and David Steinman.