

Valuing All the Experiences

SARITA SINGH, MD, MCP '89

By Catherine McCorkle



Alumna Sarita Singh (center) was honored with a scholarship created in her name by her husband. At the presentation were Drs. Donna Russo, interim vice dean for education, and D. Walter Cohen, chancellor emeritus, who was chancellor of MCP when Singh was a student.

In literature, the term *mise en abyme* refers to a story-within-a-story. For psychiatrist Sarita Singh, MD, MCP '89, the story of Dr. Anandibai Joshi, who graduated 103 years before her, is now linked with her professional journey and embedded in her legacy. To celebrate Dr. Singh's birthday, her husband, Raj Maheshwari, created a scholarship in her name. As soon as she learned this, Singh asked that Joshi's name be added to the scholarship. That Singh, a successful physician in her own right, connected her family's gift with Joshi, speaks volumes about her regard for the history of the College and her deep admiration for a 19th-century medical student from India.

Singh came to the Medical College of Pennsylvania at a relatively young age. She was accepted into an affiliated program with Lehigh University that allowed one to enter medical school after completing just two years of undergraduate work. Her family, immigrants to America, especially valued work and education; the accelerated program was a tremendous opportunity.

At MCP, Singh particularly enjoyed its "diversity of people" and "warm and welcoming environment." Considering she made her decision to enter medical school as a high-schooler, Singh noticed that many of her peers entered school much later, often after pursuing careers. "I was fascinated by being able to be with people who've had such different paths," she says.

This same attentiveness to people and their life journeys is apparent in Singh's profession as well. Besides seeing patients through her private psychiatric practice in Manhattan, Singh also works with children and young adults in foster care and with graduate students at the counseling center of Columbia University's medical campus. Singh says it has been "really interesting to come full circle, and now be giving therapy [as] a psychiatrist for people in training to become health care providers."

Singh trained in several therapeutic modalities, including psychoanalysis, deepening her education to better serve her patients. "I've really been able to benefit from the different approaches in psychiatry, and to have the flexibility to do the different things I was interested in," she observes. Her continued work with students in health professions has also made her particularly cognizant of her own professional journey.

Singh's husband, Raj Maheshwari, appreciates Singh's commitment to helping others through psychiatry. He speaks admiringly of her hard work and conscientiousness. "She

loves being a doctor," he says. He also credits MCP with giving his wife the opportunity and foundation to become a physician. For Singh's 50th birthday this year, he wanted to do something special.

Unaware of an elaborate scheme involving the College of Medicine, MCP alumni and Singh's family, Singh was in Philadelphia on a Friday this spring. She was to have dinner with friends — MCP alums — who decided to visit the campus. When they were offered what appeared to be an impromptu tour, Singh stepped off an elevator to be greeted by her entire family, including her three children, friends from MCP days, and colleagues from New York *who traveled on a Friday*, as Singh incredulously notes, to be there to celebrate her life.

Maheshwari had established a scholarship in his wife's name. He wanted a celebration that would endure beyond one night; in the scholarship, he created a gift that extends beyond one person, let alone one night. Singh says the whole event was "beautifully done" by the College and her family. It was "absolutely incredible and very moving."

As part of the reception, Singh and her family toured the College's Legacy Center, where she learned about an Indian woman who studied medicine in the 1800s: Dr. Anandibai Joshi. Singh was so moved by Joshi's story that she changed the name of her scholarship. It is officially The Sarita Singh and Family Scholarship in Honor of Dr. Anandibai Joshi.

Born in India in 1865, Joshi became a bride at the age of 9. When she was 14, she had a child, but the child died after 10 days. Joshi, distraught, believed that the child would have lived with better medical care, so she decided to become a doctor. With the full support of her husband, she sailed for America at age 19 to attend the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania, graduating in 1886. She returned to India to teach and practice before dying, too young, of tuberculosis.

"It's great for people to know [Joshi's story], to be able to appreciate what an incredible place MCP has been," Singh attests. She reveals that she is coming to a point where, "I really appreciate both my own history, [and] the history of

the medical school, how it ties in so much to my day-to-day work of helping people understand their experiences, their history, and *valuing* all those experiences, both the difficult ones as well as the gifts."

Singh's psychiatric work with medical students makes the scholarship particularly significant. "I see a lot of health care providers while they're in school," she says, "and the cost of education, and the sacrifice it takes, and seeing how tough it is for people to get out there — I think it's great to be able to help in this way."

Maheshwari similarly acknowledges the challenges facing medical students. While the scholarship addresses the financial burden, it also "lets people know we appreciate them choosing a very difficult, very tireless, very committed profession." Aside from the financial gift, he says, the scholarship is a way of saying, "Hang in there. There are a lot of people supporting you, even if you don't really know them, even if you haven't heard of them."

The scholarship was also, for Maheshwari and Singh, a way of saying thank you to the College.

"MCP and Drexel helped my wife — and my family, by default — very much," Maheshwari reflects. "There was no better way [to acknowledge that] than this small gesture."

While calling the scholarship a small gesture may be an understatement, Singh truly appreciates what it means for her, as well as for the College. "It was such a statement of my husband and my family," she says. "When you do this work day to day, sometimes you sort of forget how meaningful it really is. Although I feel it individually, each day — how meaningful the work is — you don't realize anybody else really recognizes it."

Including Joshi, and her story, in the scholarship is another way of recognizing and honoring that legacy of healing as well. As a psychiatrist, Singh is aware of how one's history, one's own experience, can be a source of strength and hope. Other people's stories can have that power, too. "I feel grateful every day," she says, "both for being able to work with the patients I get to [work with], and for how interesting it is and how much it enriches my own life."

More than 30 friends and family members came to the Queen Lane Campus to surprise and celebrate Sarita Singh on the occasion of her 50th birthday. Her husband, Raj Maheshwari (far right), honored Singh by creating a scholarship in her name.

