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Lasting impressions

After being born poor in India, one father's hard work, ambition and dedication leaves daughter with sense of pride

By **INDIRA SOMANI**

Every year on Father's Day, my family goes to the movies. It was one of my dad's favorite activities.

On Oct. 29, my father unexpectedly passed away in Springfield. He had been a professor of pharmacology and toxicology with Southern Illinois University School of Medicine for 28 years.

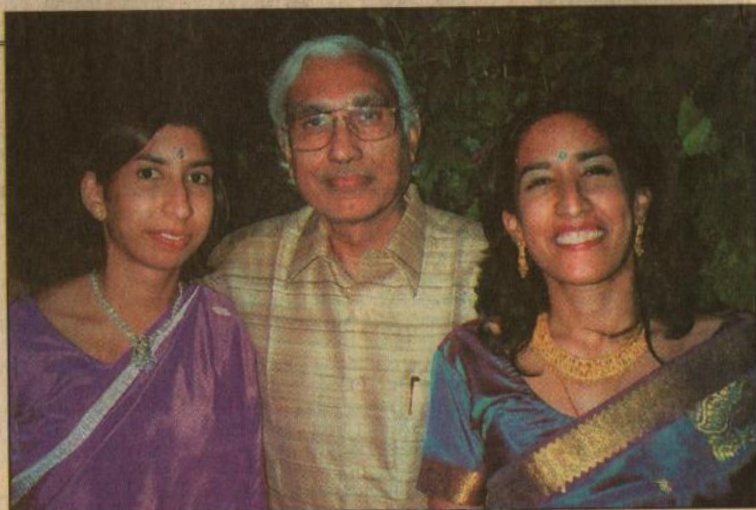
He died of an abdominal aortic aneurysm. These past few months have led me to reflect on the values my father left with me and the vision he had for the future.

Satyanarayan Motilal "Satu" Somani was born in 1937 in a remote village called Hingoli in central India. I visited Hingoli once; some homes lacked electricity, so people used lanterns.

Dad was the eighth child in a family of 10 children. Six died prematurely or at a very young age. When Dad was 7, his father died after a long illness and left the family in extreme poverty. Dad could not even afford a pair of shoes or a ball to play with; instead, he made a ball out of rags.

Dad believed in studying hard. His vision to rise from poverty through academics earned him a fellowship in pharmaceutical chemistry to Duquesne University in Pittsburgh in 1961.

Like most immigrants in the 1960s, he pictured coming to a land of opportunity. He thought India had it bad with the way the British treated Indians until he came to this country when segregation



Photograph courtesy of Indira Somani

Sheila, Satu and Indira Somani at an Indian wedding in 2002.

existed.

Dad told me stories about how the bus driver was confused by his skin color and wasn't sure where he should sit since Dad was neither black nor white. Dad ended up sitting in the middle of the bus, but he was appalled by the division between blacks and whites.

In 1964 my father met my mother, a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh. They were married Nov. 5, 1966. They had a traditional Hindu wedding but not the typical Indian arranged

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marriage. Theirs was a courtship of two years.

Dad once told me that their first date was going to see "The Sound of Music." They moved to England soon after marriage where my father completed his doctorate in pharmacology at Liverpool University in 1969, when my parents were deciding where to live: England or the United States.

At that time, Indians in England were referred to as "colored" and treated as second-class citizens. My parents hated the way Indians were treated in England and chose the United States to live and raise a family.

From 1971-74, Dad taught at the University of Pittsburgh. During that time he co-founded the first Hindu temple in Pittsburgh and was the brainchild of the Sri Venkateswara Temple. Dad went door to door to the homes of all the Indians in Pittsburgh, raising money to fund the construction of the temple. My parents even took out a second mortgage on their home to help with the financing, and Dad supervised the construction of the temple.

Dad's vision was simple: He wanted to help build the Indian community in this country. As a devout Hindu, he saw the temple as a way of bringing Indians together. He often said those were the best years of his life.

In 1974 my parents moved to Springfield. The School of Medi-

cine was opening, and Dad joined as an associate professor, later becoming a full professor. As the Indian community grew in Springfield, there was never a consensus among the Indians to build a temple. I think this hurt my father the most, and he began directing his energy elsewhere to organizations such as the Indian Political Action Committee, Asian Scientists of Indian Origin in America and Maheshwari Marwardis of North America.

Dad was dedicated to his research. He would spend countless hours in the lab doing experiments — day, night and even weekends. During his university career he authored four books and wrote numerous research articles with grants from various organizations.

In 1997, Dad testified before Congress that the Gulf War syndrome might be a delayed neurotoxic effect of low-level chemical agents. As a scientist, he really understood the effects of sarin, mustard gas and other nerve agents on the human body — valuable research in today's political climate.

Dad also studied ways that "ayurveda," or traditional Indian healing, could enhance modern medicine.

Given Dad's ambitions, he was still a dedicated family man. Since he grew up without a father, he played an active role in his daughters' upbringing. Dad came to every piano recital, as many tennis tournaments as possible, and was always there to help with homework.

I remember struggling through chemistry at Springfield High School, and Dad would stay up with me to study for a test. If I didn't do well, I was easily discouraged, but he would lift my confidence.

Dad hoped that my sister or I would become a doctor, but neither of us followed that path. I went into journalism. While Dad thought it would be a difficult field to break into because 10 years ago there were hardly any Indians in newsrooms, he also had faith in me that taught me to believe in myself.

What I will remember most about my father is how he was driven to help others. He was always hiring Indian post-doctoral students and researchers. He sought opportunities so that SIU could sponsor visas for scientists from India to do research in his lab and for minority students to obtain admission into medical school. In 1981, he established a scholarship program called the Tulsabai Somani Education Trust in his hometown of Hingoli to help needy students achieve higher education.

By 1999, my father established

a sister relationship between SIU School of Medicine and the University of Health Sciences in Andhra Pradesh, India. He sought to implement SIU's core philosophy of problem-based learning curriculum in Indian medical schools. Just last fall, three of his students were able to continue his legacy by visiting six cities in India and presenting problem-based learning to the local medical students.

My father's drive, ambition, sense of community and faith left the greatest impact on me. He truly believed in hard work and never took anything for granted. Sometimes I have to ask myself how someone from such modest means could have such vision for the future. He was 65 years old and was still working at the time of his death.

This year, had my father been alive, the movie we would have chosen this year probably would have been "The Matrix Reloaded."

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