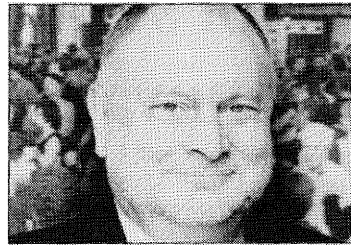


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Grandad's fight against caste system inspires fundraiser for Indian village

Nick Lees



The stabbing death of his grandfather, fighting India's caste system, has made Dr. Ashwani Singh passionate about raising funds to help an Indian village without water or electricity.

Singh and his wife, Kendyl, threw a party Saturday at the River Cree Resort and Casino to help with schooling, a hospital and a planned dairy.

"My grandfather, Durga Shankar Prasad Singh, was murdered in 1970 in the village of Dalippur, which is about 100 kilometres from Patna, the capital of Bihar in northeast India," says Singh.

"He was an outspoken writer from a wealthy family and built a tiny boys high school there the 1935, partly to make sure his three sons received a good education.

"He was twice imprisoned by the British after using the high school's printing press to publish material the British didn't like. Once, he was tied to a chair and forced to watch the school being burned down. He later rebuilt it."

It was his grandfather's stance on the caste system that led to his death.

"Sadly, even though the caste system has been banned by legislation, it is still very strong in rural areas," says Singh.

He grew up in India until the age of five. In 1966, his father, Dr. S.P. Singh, moved to Montreal to teach at McGill University.

"We later moved to Edmonton and my father taught at the U of A," says Singh.

"But every four years, he would take a sabbatical and we'd go back to India to learn the language and customs."

In 1998, professor Singh and his brothers established The Society for Development in the Third World Countries, a registered Canadian society.

"We built two elementary schools, a girls' high school and a small hospital," says Singh. "An elementary girls' school was essential to provide the feeder to the girls' high school. But another elementary boys' school also was needed to bring the children of the poor and untouchable castes, as well as Muslim families, into the education system."

The society has been innovative in bringing girls of poor, untouchable caste and minorities, especially Muslims, into the schools.

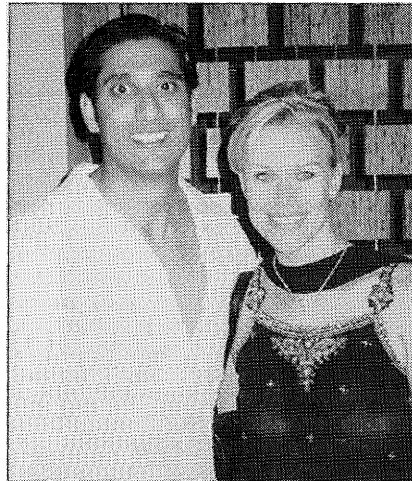
"It's impossible to quickly change a system that has been in place for thousands of years, but we believe we are making progress," says Singh.

"We pay all students a stipend for coming to school. With money coming in, parents don't feel they have to send their children to work."

Students with the highest marks are also awarded scholarships.

"Enrolment has increased rapidly, with more than 1,000 students in the three schools," says Singh. "The best news is that all sections of society are starting to send their children to school."

Students are provided with school uniforms and there is no cost for books.



CHERYL SMITH

Dr. Ashwani Singh and his wife Kendyl

"A small hospital provides free health-care services," says Singh. "Our society pays for the doctor's salary.

"Our next project is to build a dairy to make the community more self-sufficient."

Generous help

The party Saturday night netted more than \$50,000, the sum needed annually for the upkeep of the schools, the students' stipends and the teachers' salaries.

Singh, who, after working in general and sports medicine for 10 years, now owns CosMedics, a clinic providing non-surgical cosmetic treatments.

"I invited my friends and colleagues to the party," says the doctor. "They responded by bidding generously on auction items."

Nicole and Phil Stephens, dentist Dr. Jose and Mike Magathon, and a lawyer who declined to give his name, each paid \$5,000 to dine in the Singh home.

"Kendyl has been to Dalippur three times," says Singh. "It was the first time many people had seen a white person."

A Wayne Gretzky print donated by cancer survivor Steven Csorba was snapped up by Dennis and Lise Laliberte of New West Travel for \$3,500.

A dinner offered spontaneously by New Asian Village restaurateur Harmeet Kapur sold for \$1,700 after former Oiler Doug Hicks, Kendyl Singh, fitness gurus Marjorie O'Connor and Paul Plakas, and former Eskimo Tom Towns stepped up to host it.

Don't delay, pay today

Lots of e-mails (mainly chatty) Sunday, berating me for a column on the English defeating the French in the World Rugby Cup semifinal. All said they were planning to watch the game on a tape-delay. And I shouldn't have mentioned the score.

There should never be any delay in announcing England has beaten France. This war has been going on for more than 1,000 years. The English haven't had such a significant win since Trafalgar or Waterloo.

Lawyer Bill Hurlburt pointed out I had dropped the letter "r" from "accursed" in quoting from Shakespeare's *Henry V*: "And gentlemen in England now a-bed shall think themselves accursed they were not here." Guilty as "accused." Take me to the tower.

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