

Quietly courageous

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The lives and stories of Canadian family physicians never cease to amaze me. Adashnee Pather is a family physician who lives and works in Winkler, Man. I first met Dr Pather a couple of months ago at the Manitoba College of Family Physicians Annual Scientific Assembly. What I learned in that first meeting compelled me to go on a road trip to Winkler to hear more of her story.

Dr Pather's great-great-grandparents were brought from India to South Africa as indentured labourers in 1860. Dr Pather attended the Nelson R. Mandela School of Medicine in Durban, South Africa, during the struggle against apartheid.

In 1998, she and her physician husband, Ganesan Abbu, made the difficult decision to move to Canada with their 2 small children. I struggle to imagine the extraordinary cultural shift, moving from Durban, a multiracial city of 4 million people where they had extended family on both sides, to Winkler, a small, rural, predominantly Mennonite town where they did not know a soul.

Dr Pather credits her colleagues and the community of Winkler for making them feel so welcome. She and her husband relate stories of how they were so busy with their careers and young family and how community members would reach out to support them with simple, meaningful gestures like sharing food or helping out with yard work. A key person was their neighbour Dianne Heinrichs. Dr Pather says, "She was the most significant person in our transition to Canada. She taught me Canadian. Simple stuff like helping sew gym bags and Halloween costumes and showing me the ropes around figure skating and hockey. She is my Canadian big sister and a second mum to my kids."

I asked Dr Pather how she kept her world together with 2 small children, then a third, a busy husband, and her own career. She said that she had to tailor her practice profile to accommodate her responsibilities at home. She is grateful to her colleagues, who were extremely supportive in enabling a modified schedule. Her daily clinic hours were from 10 AM to 3:30 PM and she chose obstetrics over emergency medicine because the hours were more flexible. For almost 20 years she was routinely on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for her own obstetric patients. She delivered more than 100 babies per year. Today, one of her greatest professional thrills is to see the tiny babies she delivered become fully grown adults.

Among her many colleagues, Dr Pather pays special tribute to Dr V.C. Jacob, a generalist-specialist who has

been in Winkler since 1968. His practice included general, orthopedic, plastic, and vascular surgery, as well as obstetrics and gynecology. Dr Jacob is an excellent role model who inspires all of his colleagues. "When we called him, he would come. That was so important for the practice of emergency care and obstetrics."

Dr Pather now pays it forward. She works to welcome the next wave of new arrivals to her community by organizing events that promote cultural integration. She has organized a fashion show highlighting traditional Indian dress and a Diwali fundraiser to support a women's shelter in Winkler. She uses these events to encourage cultural sharing between the new arrivals and the more established community members.

Dr Pather's story is remarkable in itself but this story is also about Winkler. When Dr Pather arrived with her husband in 1998, Winkler had 5 doctors. It is now home to 42 doctors! The community has recruited dozens of Canadian and international medical graduates, enticing them to make Winkler home. As with many such stories, the keys to success are multifactorial. First, the local health care board bought the clinic and equipped it well, including with electronic medical records, more than 20 years ago. Each doctor is given an equal opportunity when he or she joins the practice. The clinic has become a teaching practice, giving exposure to more and more family medical residents and medical students, so learners can get a taste for the good life in Winkler. Finally, they have a mix of funding models, with both contract and fee-for-service opportunities. Winkler is a case study of a successful model for rural Canada. It embodies many of the actions identified in the Rural Road Map for Action¹—willing, skilled physicians, strong collegial support, the importance of generalism even among other specialists, an attractive business model, a thriving educational program, and an actively welcoming community. As we see in Winkler, there are many components, but when they are all there, it is a recipe for success.

I thank Dr Pather for sharing her story with me. She is one example of the many quietly courageous family physicians with strong commitments to their families, their communities, and their profession who make our country better. 🌟

Reference

1. Advancing Rural Family Medicine: the Canadian Collaborative Taskforce. *The rural road map for action: directions*. Mississauga, ON: College of Family Physicians of Canada; 2017. Available from: www.cfpc.ca/uploadedFiles/Directories/Committees_List/Rural%20Road%20Map%20Directions%20ENG.pdf. Accessed 2019 Jul 5.

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