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Dr.-Raywat-Deonandan

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By **RON FANFAIR**

For someone who never intended to be a university lecturer, Dr. Raywat Deonandan has done a great job of engaging his students.

The University of Ottawa Interdisciplinary School of Health assistant professor was recently honoured for excellence in instruction with the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) Teaching Award.

He was among five educators in the province to receive the prestigious award established 43 years ago.

“To be recognized by OCUFA which represents all the unions and faculty associations of professors in Ontario is to be granted acknowledgement by my peers,” said Dr. Deonandan who has been teaching in the nation’s capital since July 2008. “I see my work as a university professor as serving the students, the taxpayers and residents of Ontario who ultimately pay for our educational infrastructure, the employers and institutions in society who will eventually rely on my students and my peers. To be recognized by one of those stakeholder groups, based in large part on the testimonials of my students, is frankly validation for the work I do. It means that my philosophy and methods, while unusual in some eyes, are nevertheless acknowledged to be effective.”

While working as a chief scientist with the federal government, Deonandan yielded to the suggestion to become a professor.

“I was told that it would be a useful asset, so I applied for a position mostly for marketing purposes,” he said. “I was living in Ottawa, so the University of Ottawa was the rational choice. It was never my intent to be an academic, teacher or full-time researcher. But I was stunned by how much I enjoyed the teaching aspects of the job. Though I stumbled into being a professor which is my primary job, I continue to love almost every aspect of it.

“What I like about this place are its students. They come to me wide-eyed and looking for guidance. I think we have a bit of a crisis in modern education where we no longer have genuine mentors and senior people who look out for students’ education as well as their larger life questions. My vision of a professor is of someone who is not just supposed to teach a class a particular subject. It is supposed to be someone who helps a charge move through the formal educational phase of life.”

Completing three degrees at the University of Toronto where he was the Physiology Undergraduate Society founder and co-president, Deonandan graduated with a PhD in epidemiology and biostatistics from the University of Western Ontario in 2000.

He said the nine years at U of T has profoundly shaped his life.

“I was lucky,” he said. “I couldn’t afford to leave Toronto to go to university, so I was able to live with my parents and save money. I was fortunate that the only university I could really afford to attend happened to be a world-class institution. Without exaggeration, I learned more in four years of my undergraduate studies at the U of T than I have at any other point in my life and I want my students to have that same experience. In the first week of my arrival there, one of the professors in my department – John Polanyi – won the Nobel Prize for physics. Later that year, one of the graduate students in the same department discovered a supernova and was put on the cover of *Time* magazine. I thought this was the normal experience of every university student.”

A Harbourfront Centre Board member for the last eight years and president of his own consulting firm that provides services in epidemiology, biostatistics, writing, policy development, database design and management and other products related to population health research, Deonandan said that being a science student back then was a cold and lonely experience.

“It wasn’t until I decided to maximize my opportunities that things started to blossom for me,” he said. “That’s something that I encourage my students to follow. I joined every extracurricular learning experience I could fit into my schedule because I realized that this would be the only time in my life when I had the flexibility to be exposed to so much. Despite being a physics major, I studied things like archery, swimming, massage, journalistic writing, fencing, gymnastics and yoga.”

Deonandan also pursued martial arts studies, learning 12 combat styles and securing a black belt in Shotokan karate.

“From that experience, it was not the physicality that left its impact, but the psychological impact,” the youngest of five children said. “The discipline learned from enduring discomfort while striving for expressive perfection

is a life skill that informs the rest of one's life.”

As a teenager, Deonandan started writing short stories that garnered publications in nine countries in five languages. His first book, an anthology of short stories about the Indo-Caribbean Diaspora titled *Sweet Like Saltwater* won the 2000 Guyana Book Prize for Best First Work.

Deonandan's first novel, *Divine Elemental*, was published 13 years ago and he just finished writing a textbook on determinants of health.

When asked how he combines his passion for teaching and writing, Deonandan said he doesn't see a distinction between a writer, scientist or teacher.

“To my mind, all actions in this life are steps down a path of exploration,” he said. “When I write, I learn. When I teach, I learn. At a certain point, we each move beyond learning about the factual universe and dedicate ourselves to learning about our true selves and our place in the universe. To be a good teacher, I believe you must know yourself. Similarly, to be a good artist or writer, you must know yourself. The personal purpose of art, I believe, is to understand the self. To write for others is to access the true selves of an audience, to reach them in the heart of their innermost identities. In this way, deep and robust teaching is no different from serious and heartfelt artistic expression, the type I strive to achieve as a writer.”

Migrating from Guyana at a young age, Deonandan dedicated the award to his parents, Walter and Sursati Deonandan.

“They are both intelligent people who are engaged with the world,” he said. “But due to harsh economic realities and personal misfortunes, they were denied formal education when they were young. Yet, they never failed to remind their five children that education is the most valuable asset in the modern world and the surest way out of poverty. We all have pursued higher education and two of us are university professors. That's not bad for a couple who literally scratched their way out of bare poverty.”

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