

Peace through Planning ... A Story of

Written by Karen Carlson

Photography by James Hawker

Vidya Sawhney gazes at a photograph of her late husband, Devindra, known as “David,” while sharing stories of their 43 years together. The pain of his sudden death in 2005 is still evident in her eyes a year and a half later. Yet from her loss, Mrs. Sawhney has found a way to honor her husband and give hope for a cure for the heart disease that separated them.

Mr. and Mrs. Sawhney were both born and raised in India and sought a life outside their home country. David studied electrical engineering in London, and Vidya studied in the United States in New Hampshire, earning a master’s degree in psychology.

Their sisters thought they’d make a good match. After they married, the couple debated whether to reside in England or the United States. “I wanted to come back to the States,” says Mrs. Sawhney, who had dreams of finishing her Ph.D. in psychology. “Everybody was so friendly in America. I was itching to work, and David was itching to travel.”

America fit the outgoing nature of the Sawhneys. Mrs. Sawhney is warm and welcoming, much like she describes her late husband, who was an electrical engineer at Franklin Life Insurance. “He was a happy person. He was full of life. He had a friendly personality and a good sense of humor. He taught me social values. He was the best possible husband.”

With family in Springfield, the Sawhneys settled into a modest home on the west side of Springfield and 30 years later, Mrs. Sawhney, who retired from the state of Illinois as a disability examiner, still lives there. Although they had no children, “David made friends with strangers,” Mrs. Sawhney says, and she maintains ties with friends in Springfield and family in the United States and India.

The couple loved to travel. Together they saw England, Scotland, China,



Vidya Sawhney holds a portrait of her late husband, David. Mrs. Sawhney has established a planned estate gift to benefit heart disease research. “I’m glad to know that my hard work and David’s hard work will help humanity,” she says.

Japan and Hawaii, to name just a few destinations.

In his later years, Mr. Sawhney developed heart disease and diabetes. “But he had great will power,” his wife says. “People would tell him he could have a few sweets, but he refused. He took care of himself.” She says his doctors marveled at his progress.

In 2005, after getting clearance from his doctors to travel, the couple returned to India for a visit. They were having a wonderful time, Mrs. Sawhney says. Mr. Sawhney felt good and happy. The couple was talking about ideas for a future trip to Alaska. On the morning of Nov. 18, 2005, after breakfast, Mr. Sawhney wanted to see the railway station, which had greatly improved since the time they lived there. At the station, he suddenly collapsed.

Doctors tried to help, but Mr. Sawhney did not recover. “He had said he wanted

to die in India, but he was optimistic and feeling good the whole trip,” his wife says, still clearly incredulous at the suddenness of his death.

Since the loss of her husband, Mrs. Sawhney has begun to get some affairs in order and think of what to do with the assets she and her husband had worked so hard for all their lives. “I was going to give the money to my nieces and nephews, but my niece said, ‘Everybody’s doing well. We are working. Why don’t you give it to a university?’” Mrs. Sawhney had never considered that, but it seemed like a good idea. “My niece suggested Harvard. I said, ‘Why Harvard when we have our own university here?’”

She began talking about SIU School of Medicine with her friend, Shipra Somani, wife of the late Satu Somani, Ph.D., SIU professor of pharmacology. Mrs. Somani has established a scholarship in her husband’s memory and sug-

Love and Hope

gested a similar idea to her friend. The Devindra and Vidya Sawhney endowment has been established to benefit heart disease research. "We've seen the growth of SIU over the years," Mrs. Sawhney says. "It has developed beautifully."

SIU School of Medicine Dean and Provost J. Kevin Dorsey, M.D., Ph.D., says gifts such as the Sawhneys' help the School grow. "This gift helps us evolve into a comprehensive tertiary care center that not only provides specialized medical care for the region but also makes a significant contribution to the body of new knowledge through research," he notes.

Mrs. Sawhney hopes the endowment will help grow the research being done in heart disease. "David suffered quite a bit," Mrs. Sawhney says of her husband's illness. "With research, we can do better and help humanity get better."

SIU is grateful for the planned gift. "The University and the School of Medicine relish our relationship with the Sawhney family. Mrs. Sawhney's desire to establish this endowment represents an enduring tribute to her husband's life and contributions," says Jeff Lorber, associate vice chancellor for Institutional Advancement. "It's been a pleasure coordinating efforts with the SIU School of Medicine to make Mrs. Sawhney's wishes come to fruition. We hope to continue our relationship and encourage other alumni and friends of the University to demonstrate support in a similar fashion."

Today, Mrs. Sawhney keeps busy, volunteering for St. John's Hospital, taking a water aerobics class at FitClub three times a week, and maintaining close ties with her friends in Springfield.

Securing the endowment has helped bring her peace of mind. "I'm more satisfied now that when I go out of this world, our money will be used for a good purpose," she says. "We worked hard all our lives. I'm glad to know that my hard work and David's hard work will help humanity." ●●●

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"Denim & Diamonds would not be possible without the generous support of sponsors such as SmithBarney," says Patsy Wappell, SCCI marketing development specialist. "Their involvement illustrates a genuine commitment to the



SimmonsCooper Cancer Institute at SIU and its mission to improve cancer care to the people of central and southern Illinois."

The event proceeds will be used to develop additional state-of-the-art cancer research labs planned for the third floor of the SCCI building under construction.

"These laboratories will enable the recruitment of new faculty to Springfield whose expertise as clinician-scientists will help to make new cancer discoveries at SIU," noted SCCI Director K. Thomas Robbins, M.D. "With \$1 million needed to complete the five labs, there is need for additional civic-minded businesses to step forth in support of cancer research."

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