

# Remembering Loving, Encouraging Parents

## LAKSHMI DEVI & DEVRAJ SHARMA CHAIR IN OBSTETRICS, GYNECOLOGY & WOMEN'S HEALTH – JABSOM

Publish Date: November 6, 2014

In recognition of all that her parents did for her, Emeritus Professor Santosh Sharma, MD, generously endowed the Lakshmi Devi and Devraj Sharma Chair in Obstetrics, Gynecology and Women's Health at the UH Mānoa John A. Burns School of Medicine.

*Do not educate girls or they will be able to write home and complain after they are married.* That was a belief held by Dr. Santosh Sharma's maternal grandfather, a Brahmin and Sanskrit scholar who lived in northern India at the turn of the last century. "I wish he was alive. I could argue with him and change his mind," said Dr. Sharma.



Dr. Santosh Sharma



Devraj Sharma 1900-1978

Dr. Sharma's parents did not share her grandfather's belief. They were committed to her education and personal growth at a time when young women growing up in Kenya, Africa, had little access to higher education. Her father Devraj Sharma moved from India to Kenya as a young man and worked for the Kenya Uganda Railways and Harbors. Her mother Lakshmi joined him later. Together they raised eight children in Kisumu, Kenya, on the banks of Lake Victoria. Santosh was their third daughter.

"My parents made every effort to encourage me to do whatever I wanted to do," remembers Dr. Sharma. There was no high school for girls in Kisumu so her father convinced the authorities to allow her to attend the boys' school where she completed her high school education. When her father died, Dr. Sharma felt she had lost her greatest cheerleader.

Her mother Lakshmi Devi was the first girl born to a family with eight sons. Lakshmi's birth was celebrated until that joy turned to sorrow ten months later when her mother and brothers died in a plague epidemic. She was raised by her father and aunt with three other children who had lost parents too. Married at 11, she joined her husband in Kenya at 18.



With her parents' encouragement, Dr. Sharma was able to complete her medical degree and pursue a rewarding career as physician and physician-scientist in the field of obstetrics/gynecology. After medical school at BJ Medical College in Pune, India, she completed her training in the United Kingdom. She worked with the World Health Organization in Uganda for five years before coming to the U.S. where she served on the faculty at Howard University Freedman's Hospital in Washington, D.C until being recruited to the new UH medical school.

Lakshmi Devi Sharma 1906-1999

Dr. Sharma joined the John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) in 1974 as an Associate Professor in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology and was promoted to professor in 1978. Dr. Sharma retired from the faculty at JABSOM on December 30, 2005 after 31 years of service.

She hopes that the Lakshmi Devi and Devraj Sharma Chair will make it possible to recruit a physician, scientist, or physician-scientist with the strong research and teaching skills that can attract more funding to do more research, create opportunities to explore other areas in obstetrics and gynecology, gain greater prestige for JABSOM and ultimately improve women's healthcare.

"I am 80 now. I have no regrets. I have a wonderful life, and I'll share a story of how my mother influenced me. When I finished my medical school, I came home. My mother was sitting there casually and said, 'You know you are very fortunate,' and I agreed. She said, 'You know you have loving parents. Your mom and dad always loved you. You always had love, and you always had food to eat. You always had a place to sleep, and you also had the opportunity to get an education. Just remember someone up there is watching you use these blessings. Don't forget that.' I never have."

—Dr. Santosh Sharma

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