

Dr. Punitha S. William

COMMUNITY HEALTH CHAMPION

By Mikell Worley



Dr. Punitha S. William, chief medical officer and family practice physician at Hamilton Health Center in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, knew from the time she was a very young child growing up in India that she wanted to be a doctor. “One of my earliest memories was the sound of my baby brother’s wheezy breathing,” says Dr. William. Her brother suffered from Diphtheria. “He was struggling to get air, and even though I was only two years old, that sound is still embedded in me. It was a very traumatic experience and I desperately wanted to be able to help him. He was only six months old and my uncle, a physician, gave him penicillin shots but he was unable to save my brother. Years later, when I had my first daughter I would wake up frequently during the night to check on her breathing.

“My grandfather was a major influence [on my decision to enter] the medical profession. Following my brother’s death, my father, a civil engineer, [left in 1960 for work in the] United States, and my mom and I went to live with my grandfather in a village in India. My grandfather had studied to be a surgeon at Oxford in England and had returned to his community to practice medicine,” remembers Dr. William. “Years later he became concerned about a large amount of curable cases of blindness in India, so he returned to England to become an ophthalmologist to help his community in an additional capacity.”

Dr. William learned at a very early age that community health meant more than simply taking care of medical ailments. “My grandfather opened a clinic along the foothills of a mountain where he practiced outpatient surgery. Many patients came down from the mountain villages and had to travel significant distances. When their surgery was completed it was often too late to return until the next morning. My grandfather built an addition to his clinic to provide a place for them to sleep overnight. He also had a flexible payment plan. If patients were unable to afford services they paid their fees with baskets of fruit, flowers, chickens, and eggs.

“My grandfather took me to the clinic to watch him practice from the time I was three years old until I was five and a half. I thought he could work miracles – I remember running home to tell my mother, ‘Grandfather took someone’s eye out, cleaned it, and put it back!’”

Dr. William remembers a huge painting that hung on her grandfather's office wall. He used it to help his patients assess their vision. "There are tigers in India and being able to see them may be the difference between life and death. My grandfather used to refer to his painting and ask his patients if they could see the tiger. His example of an eye chart was much more motivating than the chart of letters we see in the optometrist's office."

Yet even in the comfort of her grandfather's home, Punitha felt deserted without her father. "I remember missing him terribly. I became very sick and my uncle, my father's brother who looked like him, came to visit and brought me a teddy bear. My fever disappeared immediately. I still have that bear. I don't have many things from my childhood, but I will always keep that teddy bear."

In March of 1963, when she was six years old, her father sent for his family to join him in Pittsburgh. "My father picked us up at the airport in New York City and we boarded a beautiful, big Greyhound bus, much more elegant than the buses in India, and began our journey to Western Pennsylvania. I saw snow for the first time! I remember sitting on the bus eating an apple, watching the snow fall, and finally being with my dad."

Punitha loved her new life in the United States. "I was finally with my dad. It was March and I was beginning school late in the year, but the teacher was beautiful and she smelled nice."

In 1966 Punitha was 8 years old when her sister was born. "That was the same year that my father decided we should return to India. My parents wanted me to go to a good school so I was enrolled in a Catholic school. The schools in India were much further ahead than those in the United States. Students were required to study another language, write cursive, and were more advanced in math. All of my spare time was spent being tutored so I could catch-up."

Punitha's baby sister was having problems adjusting after the move, so Punitha's mother took her back to her grandfather's village. "I was miserable. I missed my mom and my baby sister and all I did was study."

Fortunately, the hard work paid off and Punitha's studies were so advanced that she skipped fifth grade. Her mom and her sister returned, and she began to love being in India. However, her dad's job was political and he began to fall out of favor. At the same time he was fielding offers to return to Pennsylvania.

They left India in 1967, and settled in Harrisburg where her father took a job in the state government. Punitha continued to excel in school and graduated from Middletown High School in 1974. She had the highest SAT scores in her class and was actively recruited by a number

of colleges around the country. "Medicine was still being seen as a male profession but some of the more progressive schools were actively seeking female students to change the face of the medical profession."

Punitha chose to return to India to attend Christian Medical College and Hospital (University of Madras) in Vellore, India. From that school she earned a doctor of medicine degree in June of 1980. Afterward she worked as a medical instructor at the University of Madras from July of 1981 through December of 1983.

Punitha returned to the United States in 1984 where she continued teaching as a medical instructor at the Central Pennsylvania College in Summerdale. Dr. William completed her residency training at Harbor Hospital with the University of Maryland and at the Penn State-Hershey Medical Center. She spent some time in private practice before returning to the residency program at Norlando Medical Associates in Elizabethtown as an associate program director.

She and her husband, Robert William, have four beautiful daughters. Punitha credits her husband's support for her ability to continue to study, teach, and practice medicine while they raise their children.

Love of health and community eventually led her back to her roots of family practice, and on June 9, 2008, Punitha took the position of chief medical officer at Hamilton Health Center, where she recently celebrated her one-year anniversary. The Hamilton Health Center is a

non-profit community based health organization, and as a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) it provides comprehensive primary health, oral, mental health, and substance abuse services to persons in all stages of life.

Dr. William's vision for community health is directly in line with CEO Jeannine Peterson's vision for the Hamilton Health Center. "We want everyone to feel welcome and for Hamilton Health to be seen as a facility where everyone in the community can access high quality, health care regardless of health, education, or insurance status." You can learn more about Hamilton Health and their patient-centered health and social services at www.hamiltonhc.homestead.com. ❖



Mikell Worley is the founder and president of Mikell's Treasures. She has spent more than 20 years designing and delivering self-improvement trainings, has had several cover stories in various magazines, and recently illustrated her first children's book. She is an advocate for women and children.