

upfront



In 2007, the Ontario Dental Association is celebrating its 140th anniversary. In recognition, *Ontario Dentist* will profile members throughout the year.

Dental Impressions



Cheryl Embrett



Starting Over

Dr. C.P. Giri talks about his early struggles to practise dentistry in Canada and the successful life that he enjoys today.

Photography: Geoff George Photography

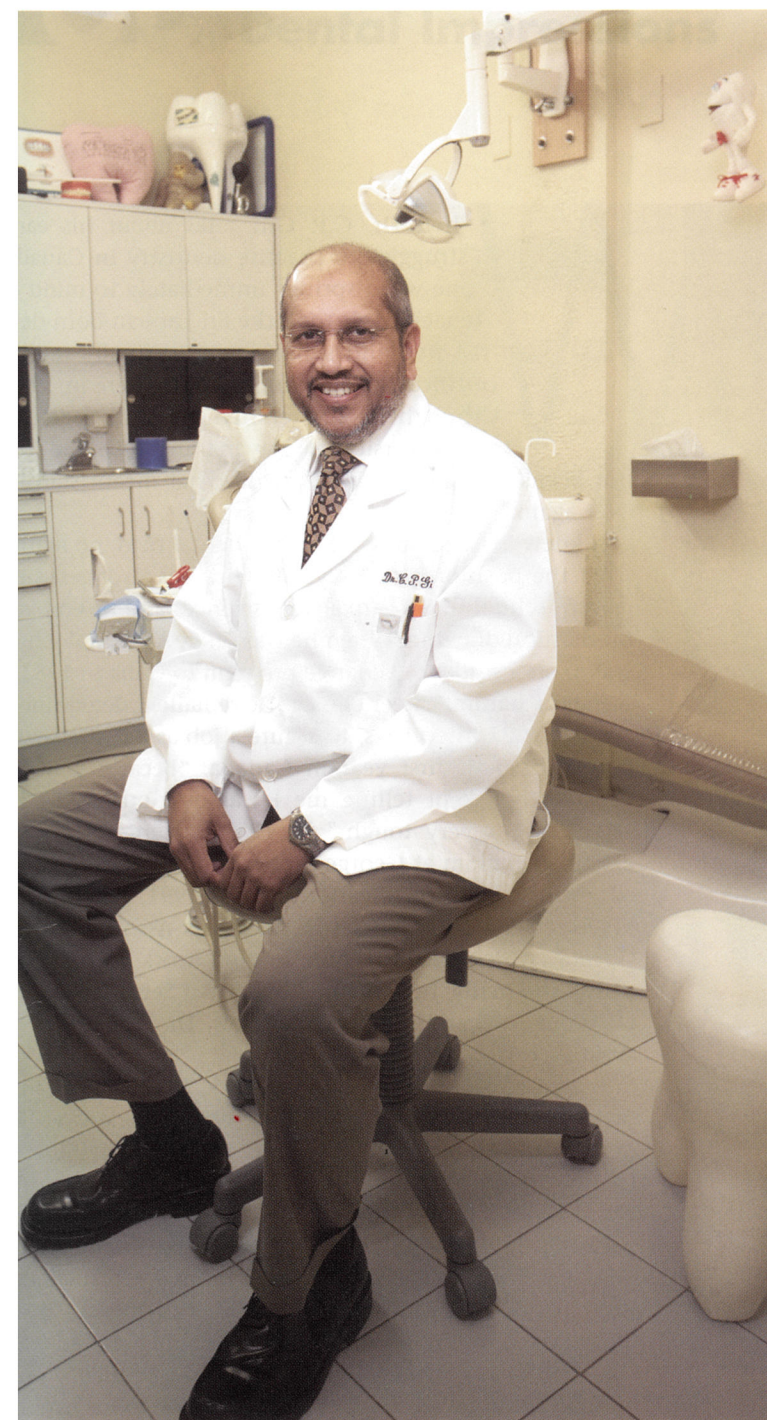
When Dr. C.P. Giri talks about his early struggles to practise dentistry in Canada, one word springs immediately to mind — tenacious. It took the Sri Lankan-born dentist five and a half years to finally receive certification after immigrating here in 1988. Although he had earned a dental degree at the University of Havana in Cuba, he was not licensed to practise in Canada. That meant starting over again.

"I knew I wanted to work in the dental field, no matter what the position was," says Dr. Giri. His strongest subjects in school in Sri Lanka were sciences and he enjoyed mechanical drawing. When he was offered a dental scholarship on a student exchange program to Cuba in 1982 it seemed a natural career choice. He remained determined, even after 27 interviews, to secure a job as a dental assistant during his first year in Canada. "Because I was a dentist, they kept telling me I was over-qualified," he says. "It was very tough." In 1989, he enrolled in an evening program at George Brown College in Toronto to obtain his HARP certification, and in 1991, he obtained his Ontario Dental Nurses & Assistants Association certificate, which enabled him to find work as a dental assistant. Finally, he was hired by Dr. Art Segal at his dental office in Scarborough, Ont. Now, Dr. Giri owns the practice.

"I sometimes wonder, looking back, how I did it," he says. At one point, he juggled four jobs — working at the dental office during the day, pumping gas at night, and then working as a security guard from midnight until 7 a.m. On weekends, he worked at a carpet cleaning company. "It helps if you have the right people around you," he says. That includes his wife, whom he met at the University of Havana where she was studying medicine and married upon arriving in Canada. They are both in the health-care field; she is currently in a residency program in internal medicine. He is very close to his parents

Dr. Giri (foreground) and staff in his Scarborough office: (left to right) Dr. Seshantri Viswasam, Rosy Romero, Rosana Nowrozi, Lena Trifunovski, Nikki Vosoghkah, and Sarah Bent.





"Everybody has different strengths and weaknesses, and if you put all those strengths together, you can do anything."

and his brother, whom he sponsored to bring here. There is also a large Tamil community in the greater Toronto area, the vast majority of whom arrived here in 1983 in the aftermath of the Colombo riots in Sri Lanka. "You always knew somebody who could help you," says Dr. Giri.

Given his previous education and experience, he soon found it frustrating working as a dental assistant — "you knew what to do but you couldn't do it" — and applied to dental hygiene programs across the country. "I decided on dental hygiene because to become a dentist at that time was so difficult," he says. The University of Manitoba shortlisted him for its two-year program, but in what turned out to be a prescient decision, he failed to make the final cut. "They told me they thought I'd end up as a dentist and the dental hygiene position might be wasted. I felt it was unfair at the time, but it helped and motivated me." It was at that point he decided to take the National Dental Examinations Board of Canada examination to become certified to practise dentistry in Canada.

Dr. Giri sailed through the practical part of the exams, but the written exams were a major barrier. While fluent in Tamil, Sinhalese and Spanish, his command of English, although he had studied it in school, was not as strong when he first arrived in Canada. "If you don't know the language well, you make mistakes," he says. He failed twice but says "perseverance and desperation" finally saw him through. "It was a nightmare," he says about the experience. However, he is justifiably proud of the fact that he has the distinction of being the first Cuban-trained dentist to receive the NDEB certification.

After receiving his certificate in January 1995, he spent three years as a dental associate with Dr. Segal. During this time he also worked with another dentist, Dr. P. Shoucri, as an associate. Eventually, in 1998, he bought Dr. Segal's practice. "I became the boss and my boss

became the associate dentist," he says proudly. "It worked out well for both of us." Dr. Giri's practice, which is located in a strip mall in Scarborough, Ont., now employs four associates and eight staff members. Approximately 40 to 50 percent of his patients are Tamil-speaking Sri Lankans and because he speaks fluent Spanish, he also attracts Spanish-speaking patients. Some of his patients have been with the practice since it first started in 1961.

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"I have one patient who is 87 years old and she drives in from London, Ont.," says Dr. Giri. "I try to discourage her visits in the winter, but she doesn't trust anyone else."

Dr. Giri provides advice, help and support to many of the foreign-trained dentists who arrive in Ontario looking for work. "It is very competitive," he says about the requirements for the newcomers. "They face many difficulties." He is proudest of the fact that several of the foreign-trained associates who have worked with him and he has mentored have since gone on to own their dental practices in Ontario.

In order to learn the business skills he needed to manage his new practice, Dr. Giri joined a mentoring program through the Toronto East Dental Society (he's now an executive committee member and contributing editor of its quarterly newsletter *Toronto Dentist*). "I was amazed at how they handled meetings and the decision-making process," he says. "I became hooked." Dr. Giri became a member of the Ontario Dental Association in 1995, and is currently a General Councillor. The experience he's gained through his participation with the ODA is valuable, he says. "You learn different approaches to issues and problems — how to co-ordinate and work together to get results." Dr. Giri, who describes himself as a team player, believes in strength in numbers: "If you don't have a group to look after you and raise a voice, you get nowhere."

Volunteering is also an important part of Dr. Giri's life. He is president of the Canadian Medical Dental Development Association (CMDDA), a non-profit organization of physicians and dentists of Sri Lankan descent. In March 2003, he went to Sri Lanka with a team of 10 CMDDA specialists to provide dental services to people in war-torn areas. "We set up a clinic with a generator, a dental compressor and an old chair," he says. "I saw 59 patients in one day." He also had a chance to visit with extended family and friends, most of whom he hadn't seen in 20 years. Dr. Giri found it very satisfying to be able to contribute and give something back to his homeland. "Volunteering gives me pleasure and it gives me energy as well," he says. "Everybody has different strengths and weaknesses, and if you put all those strengths together, you can do anything."

Besides running a busy dental practice, Dr. Giri has been a member of the medical staff in the department of dentistry at the Scarborough Hospital since 1996. His various memberships and fellowships include the CDA, Academy of Dentistry International and the Academy of General Dentistry. But he still manages to find time for personal interests. He enjoys tennis and began learning to play golf two years ago. Travelling is a passion; he's also a member of the FDI World Dental Federation and has been to international congresses in Germany, Singapore

and China. He is looking forward to the next conference in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, in October 2007 — especially since the current president of the FDI is Canadian.

Although he's accomplished much since coming to Canada, Dr. Giri still has a dream: to create a long-term care facility for the South Asian community. His father, who suffered a stroke three years ago, is currently in a residence located near his office. Dr. Giri's mother visits him daily and Dr. Giri goes at least twice a week and more often when a patient cancellation allows him to slip away for an hour. "Thanks to my mom's care, he is stable, but I feel guilty that I can't spend more time with him." Helping to alleviate that guilt is his work with others in the same situation as his dad. "There are a lot of older people who came here from Sri Lanka who have their own traditions, food and religion and they're finding it difficult in the nursing homes," Dr. Giri says. "I want to help bridge that gap." ■

Cheryl Embrett is a Toronto journalist who writes for national magazines and newspapers, including *Canadian Living*, *Today's Parent*, *Homemaker's* and *The Globe and Mail*.



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