

Person of the Week

Murali Krishnamurthy: Give a gift of vision

By Hiral Dholakia-Dave

For the last six years, the Sankara Eye Foundation (SEF), USA has raised funds to construct four super specialty eye care institutions in Guntur (AP), Bangalore, Shimoga (Karnataka) and Anand (Gujarat). The next hospitals will be in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. Today, Sankara Eye Care Institutions (SECI) manage 8 hospitals providing 99% success rate for cataract surgeries and projected to perform more than 100,000 free eye surgeries in 2009. The mission of SEF and SECI is to eradicate curable blindness all over India by the year 2020 and to provide completely free of charge quality eye care to the rural poor with a goal of "1 Million free eye surgeries per year" by year 2020. To achieve this goal, the organization intends to establish at least 20 state-of-the-art hospitals in India.

The credit of extending the noble work done by Dr. Ramani and Dr. Radha Ramani - who started the Sankara Eye Hospital in Coimbatore in 1977 offering community eye care - goes to Murali Krishnamurthy and his brother K. Sridharan.

Speaking with *The South Asian Times*, Mr. Murali Krishnamurthy elaborates on the SEF's inception and its ambitious project - Vision 20/20 by year 2020.

What inspired the formation of the Sankara Eye Foundation?

My uncle Mr. P. Balasubramaniam was a volunteer (he passed away last year) of the Sankara Eye Hospital, Coimbatore and he was after me and my brother K. Sridharan since 1996 to start the Sankara Eye Foundation, USA to help their work in India. He said that as it only costs Rs. 1,000 or so for an eye surgery, we could do a lot of good work if we start supporting them. I was very reluctant as our lives were already busy with work in the Silicon Valley, children and my singing career. I am a founder of the Bay Area Light Music group Pallavi and we are doing four or five shows per year to raise funds for other charities, which was taking up a lot of our time. Things changed after my brother visited Coimbatore in 1998 and visited the hospital. He called me and told me "Murali, you may not have a good idea about charity hospitals in India but this is very different. Dr. Ramani and Dr. Radha Ramani started this in 1977 and divine work is happening there and we must support them."

When Sridharan came back to San Jose, we met his neighbor Mr. Ahmad Khushnood, CPA and from Pakistan and they did the paper work and we were established as a 501 c-3 non-profit on May 21, 1998. In the first year we just hand wrote to 100 of our friends and raised \$8,000 or but in 1999 we organized our first fundraiser by our music group Pallavi at the Foothill College in Los Altos on April 3, 1999 and it was a houseful show of 930 people and we raised over \$17,000



*Sankara Eye Foundation founder,
Murali Krishnamurthy*

and no looking back since then.

Please tell us about the Vision 20/20 project. How has it developed so far?

One of our volunteers Rajiv Chamraj came up with our big vision of Vision 20/20 by 2020, meaning to eradicate curable blindness in India by 2020 by building at least one Sankara Eye Hospital per state by 2020 and perform around one million procedures per year by 2020. Vision 20/20 by 2020 is the driving force behind whatever we have collectively achieved so far. Thanks to our dedicated volunteers (700+) all over the country and solid support from our donors (over 35,000) all over the country, our progress has been phenomenal - from one hospital and 8,000 surgeries per year to 100,000 FREE eye surgeries per year in 2009. We raise around \$3M per year and if start raising \$6M or \$7M per year then we can do much more. It will happen and I am very confident about that.

What is SEF currently focusing on?

Focus-Punjab and Focus-Uttar Pradesh. Due to the initiative of our friend and supporter Mr. Jessie Singh, two acres of prime land has been leased to us at very subsidized rates in Ludhiana and we need to raise around \$3M to complete this hospital by the end of 2011. Out of the \$3M, we need to raise at least a \$1M or more by June 2010 so that the hospital construction can start. 40-50 girls will be recruited from Punjab and trained at Coimbatore or Bangalore for 18 months to serve as para-medical staff of the Sankara Eye Hospital, Ludhiana.

We are now looking for three or four acres of land in Kanpur to build our Sankara Eye Hospital, Kanpur.

What efforts are on to create more awareness about the cause in the US?

We are very active and well known in the San Francisco Bay Area and we want to



SEF Bay Area volunteers

repeat this success in the New York/New Jersey/Pennsylvania area, Southern California and Seattle, Washington. We are looking for volunteers in these areas to organize Booths, fund-raising events etc. We will also be doing a targeted marketing in these areas.

Your message for SATimes readers...

We are very sincerely committed to Vision 20/20 by 2020 and we invite you, wherever you are, to join this awesome movement and let us, together, eradicate curable blindness in India by 2020. Our current Focus is Punjab and we invite volunteers and donors to join the Focus-Punjab project. For just \$1,000, you can become a Founding donor of the Punjab Hospital and can have the name of a beloved one on the Hospital 'Wall of Founders'. If an individual or an organization raises \$100K or more, they will become our 'Partners-in-Service' and will be prominently recognized at the hospital. I am hoping and dreaming that someone will call me and tell me "Murali, here is my million dollars for the Punjab Hospital, just complete it as fast as possible and serve our visually handicapped poor even faster." A million dollar donor will be recognized on the hospital and their name will go on the front of the

hospital along with the hospital name.

Please call me at 408-425-1268 or eMail me at murali777@gmail.com and let us eradicate curable blindness.

Awards

- 2009, SECI, India won the prestigious "FICCI Healthcare Excellence Award" for "Best Community Driven Healthcare Program" presented by Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) in partnership with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.
- In 2008, SECI received highest honors and received the India NGO Awards for community eye care - for efficient management of resources, good governance practices, transparency and accountability.
- SECI also won the Diabetic Retinopathy Project Award from The Asian Hospital Management Awards that honors hospitals that carry out best practices in hospital management in Asia.
- SEF, US has received the top 4 Star rating from Charity Navigator, an independent evaluator of charitable organization in the US that provides financial evaluation of American Charities.



Sankara Eye Hospital, Anand, Gujarat