Arthur J Pais

Dr Vadrevu K Raju has received many honors for his humanitarian work in saving the eyes of the poor not only in India but half a dozen countries ranging from Iraq to America – but he himself is an ophthalmologist, who earned his doctorate in pharmaceutical studies from Rutgers University this year and began working for a major company, and who presented his first pay check to the Eye Foundation of America that Raju started in 1979, was transcendent.

It was in 1979 that Muddula had corneal transplants to both eyes, at the age of 2. His family had travelled to Morgantown, West Virginia, Raju’s home for more than three decades. The surgery was free and most of the other expenses were also born by Raju – now, it was time for Muddula to pay him back.

“You feel blessed when something like this happens,” he said, referring to Muddula’s gesture.

Muddula, who attended a fundraiser for the Eye Foundation of America last year which raised $750,000, declared: “If it wasn’t the foundation, I would not be here. I would not be talking to you. I would have been blind.” Raju, who is a big advocate of early treatment for eye problems in children, has saved many over the past three decades. “If you catch a child in the first week or first few months of life and do these surgeries, less than an hour’s operation under anaesthesia, you give them 75 years plus,” Raju, who has travelled to more than 50 countries to help people with defective vision, said.

He not only sees hundreds of patients in a day, but also teaches other eye doctors. Ask about his annual vacation, and Raju – the father of an ophthalmologist daughter and investment banker son – finds difficulty in recalling when last he had one. He has forgone many vacations to work and do these surgeries. “If you catch a patient in the first week or first few months of life, you give them 75 years plus,” he says. “This is not a job for me; it has never been a job,” she says. “He does his work with passion and he enjoys it. His enthusiasm and passion are infectious.”

The many awards Raju has received include the American Academy of Ophthalmology’s Outstanding Humanitarian Service Award for his contributions to the medical profession; the Distinguished Community Service Award given by American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin (AAPI); and the Martin Luther King award from West Virginia University. He has been teaching since 1976.

In addition to his busy practice and philanthropy, Raju, who specializes in corneal and refractive surgery, loves teaching. “Whether I am in a classroom at a university or teaching a group of doctors, I feel I am giving out more than medical knowledge,” he says. He is currently a clinical professor of ophthalmology at West Virginia University, where he has been teaching since 1976. “I teach the students to treat patients in mobile medical teams to trek to developing countries to treat patients in mobile eye camps or clinics.”

Raju’s camps are funded through donations by philanthropists and American pharmaceutical companies. Physicians donate their services without receiving fees. Raju estimates that he has spent over half-million-dollars plus in sophisticated equipment, with the objective of providing world-class eye care to the needy.

He talks about how in India he has to be far more resourceful and alert than in America. In India, for cataract surgery, the average age patient age is 70; but in India and developing nations, Raju says that he performs cataract surgery on many more children, due to such causes as infection, vitamin deficiencies and birth defects.

Each day when I get up, I remind myself that I should make a difference,” the soft-spoken Raju says. He told a newspaper recently: “Every morning, I wake up and start the day by saying Good morning, God, rather than Good God ... morning.”

From his West Virginia base, Raju conducts approximately 25 corneal transplants annually; 300 to 400 cataract surgeries; and handles 7000 to 8000 patient visits, the local newspaper The Dominion Post has written.

Doctors in America have too many comforts, he complains. “There is an emptiness in many of us, there is also an intellectual poverty,” he says. “Some of this can be relieved by voluntary service. We have so much potential to help others – and in doing so, we may be helping ourselves much more than others.”

Part of the reason he is conscious of the need for humility in whatever he does is because of the Gandhian influence on him. He loves to read books with spiritual input, he says.

In profiling him, a local newspaper wrote ‘Raju has performed over 15,000 volunteer operations in India and restored vision (74 per cent were non-paid) in his spare time.’ For the past two decades, he has assembled medical teams to trek to developing countries to treat patients in mobile eye camps or clinics.

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A lot of his charity work is helped by some of his former patients, and in a spectacular case by young entrepreneur Jay Reddy. “When Jay was studying at the university, he had come to me for a check up,” Raju recollects. “I don’t usually take money from students. I ask them to make a small contribution to my charitable work.”

Jay Reddy never forgot the gesture; in the intervening years he has contributed over $250,000 to Raju’s charities.

Raju says he feels fulfilled thanks to his association with the Eye Relief Project, in which he travels periodically to India and other developing countries to volunteer his surgical services and teach advances in ophthalmology. In