Alumni eCALS

Gift aims to build bridge to Madison for Bangladeshi scientists

There was no well-worn path leading the late Kamaluddin Ahmad to the University of Wisconsin-Madison's biochemistry department, but come he did. Born and raised in a family of modest means in Chittagong, Bangladesh, Ahmad excelled at the University of Dhaka and then traveled to Madison for his graduate studies, receiving his Ph.D. in 1949.

He then returned to Bangladesh, where he tackled some of the country's worst nutrition problems, founding and developing the University of Dhaka's biochemistry and pharmacy departments and its Institute of Nutrition and Food Science along the way.

Now, to honor his life and work, Ahmad's children have created the Kamaluddin Ahmad Distinguished Graduate Scholarship, an endowed fund that will allow promising young Bangladeshi scientists to follow in their father's footsteps.

"By endowing this fund, we want to make it possible for deserving students from Bangladesh of limited means to pursue their Ph.D. at (the UW-Madison) and then return to Bangladesh to teach and/or conduct research at local institutions," says Ishtiaq Ahmad, Kamaluddin Ahmad's eldest son. "We believe that a generation of biochemists trained in the most modern methods will contribute greatly to our society."

That's exactly what Kamaluddin Ahmad did. Upon returning to Bangladesh, he joined the University of Dhaka, where he initiated a variety of research projects that helped save or improve the lives of thousands of Bangladeshis. Early in his career, he discovered the antibiotic Ramnacin, and then developed numerous other plant-derived drugs to cure local diseases such as shigellosis, which causes diarrhea.

Ahmad also discovered that vitamin C can prevent - and in some instances cure - lathyrism, a neurological disorder causing paralysis that was plaguing certain pockets of the population from Bangladesh to Ethiopia, and that mega-doses of intravenous vitamin C can cure tetanus in infants. He also led the country's first nutrition survey and then initiated national campaigns to administer vitamin A to prevent blindness and

iodized salt to prevent goiter.

Ahmad considered his experience at the UW-Madison pivotal to his intellectual development, and it's easy to draw parallels between his work and the work of his UW-Madison mentors Conrad Elvehjem and Frank Strong, who together discovered that beriberi and pellagra are caused by single vitamin deficiencies. Throughout his career, Ahmad kept in touch with many of his professors and peers from his graduate school days, and in 1983, he returned to Madison to give an address at the biochemistry department's centennial celebration about his research and achievements in Bangladesh.

When Ahmad passed away in 2004, his children immediately began searching for an appropriate and meaningful way to honor his life. They eventually settled on the scholarship idea, and this past winter four of Ahmad's seven children - sons Ishtiaq, Nazir and Osman, and daughter Fawzia - and his granddaughter Maimuna visited the UW-Madison, meeting with Molly Jahn, dean of the UW-Madison College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, and Betty Craig, chair of the Department of Biochemistry, to finalize the details of the scholarship program.

"As a department, we're trying to reach out to other countries," says Craig. "This program will help us follow this broader principle - to make connections - and I think this benefits both the department and Bangladesh."

Under the scholarship program, one Bangladeshi scholar will be supported at a time, but the goal is to grow the program to the point where a new scholar is selected every three years, allowing the old and new scholarship recipients to overlap for a year or two on campus. The first Kamaluddin Ahmad scholar will matriculate in the fall of 2010.

"By establishing the Kamaluddin Ahmad Distinguished Graduate Scholarship, we recognize our father's affinity to Madison, and hope that others will be inspired to train at Wisconsin, and then put their talents to good use in Bangladesh," says Ishtiaq. "Wisconsin's biochemistry department is rated as one of the best in the world. Our ambition is to make biochemistry in Bangladesh synonymous with the University of Wisconsin."

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