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Scientist Goes Mad for Philanthropy and Teaching

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PRESS RELEASE

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SCIENTIST GOES MAD FOR PHILANTHROPY AND TEACHING

Memorial Sloan Kettering scientist brings graduate-level research opportunities to underprivileged students; launches 10th Year of NSF-funded Harlem Children Society.

NEW YORK, 25 June 2010 – Memorial Sloan Kettering molecular geneticist, Dr. Sat Bhattacharya, has set out to bring serious science to poor and minority students of New York. Working with a handful of volunteers in a tiny, cluttered office on the Upper East Side, Dr. Sat, president of Rockefeller University’s prestigious Sigma Xi chapter, calls high schools around the city asking principals and science teachers to recommend promising students who qualify for free lunch. He pairs these students with renowned scientists at leading research institutions who serve as mentors during summer and after school internships in their labs.

This year’s Harlem Children Society students – some from families torn apart by incarceration, others first generation immigrants from countries as far flung as Ghana and Guyana – will meet their mentors for the first time at an induction ceremony at NYU’s Kimmel Center on July 7. The students will celebrate their accomplishments in two hallmark events: the HCS Science Boat Cruise in August and the Harlem Science Parade & Street Fair & Festival on October 2nd.

One student who is returning to the program this year is Sumaiya Tasneem. An immigrant from Bangladesh, Sumaiya’s father died of cancer less than three years after the family arrived in the United States. The family was left struggling, but Sumaiya was motivated by her father’s death to pursue a career in science. She learned about Harlem Children Society in high school and was placed, through Dr. Sat, in an internship with Dr. Stavrova Sofou, a leading cancer researcher at NYU-Polytech. Under the guidance of Dr. Sofou and her graduate students, Sumaiya conducted hands-on research in cancer drug delivery systems, studying the effect of doxorubicin liposomes on breast cancer cells. Sumaiya returned to work with Dr. Sofou for three summers and developed a sophisticated understanding of the research. She recently completed her first year on a full scholarship in CUNY’s Macaulay Honors College pre-med program.

Dr. Sat’s goal for Harlem Children Society is to encourage many more students like Sumaiya to pursue a career in the sciences. Dr. Sat came to the US from India in 1993 and was struck by the economic disparity he saw in this land of plenty: “At MSK there were scientists from all over the world, but there were almost no minorities,” says Dr. Sat. He felt that the disparity was just as much about economics as color: “If students are economically deprived, it’s very hard for them to get

that opportunity.”

In 2000 Dr. Sat, who at the time was conducting cutting edge research in micro-metastasis and genetically-targeted chemotherapy, decided he would try a different kind of experiment: this time with young minds. He brought three students to work in his lab, setting them on a course of study that would change their lives: all three of those students are now doctors.

What began with a handful of students in Dr. Sat’s laboratory has expanded to serve almost 400 students annually. 2000 students have completed the program – 66% are black and Hispanic and 80% are first and second generation immigrants. One hundred percent of Dr. Sat’s students have gone on to college and many have continued on to graduate school.

Dr. Sat meanwhile is a scientist who has gone mad for philanthropy. While holding a full time position at MSK, he almost single-handedly runs Harlem Children Society. “Five hours of sleep is a luxury for me,” says Dr. Sat who conducts all student interviews himself and checks on his young researchers throughout the summer. Although Harlem Children Society receives funding from the National Science Foundation, Dr. Sat spends thousands of dollars of his own money each year to cover excess costs. “It is hard to find the time to fundraise,” he says.

And yet, Dr. Sat insists: “It is a very simple program with very little overhead. All you need is a student willing to learn and a scientist willing to guide and teach. My hope is that by creating something local, we are putting a big idea into motion.”

Already, Dr. Sat’s local idea is moving around the country and the globe. He has pilot programs in locations across the U.S. and abroad. Last week, one of his former students traveled to her family’s home in Egypt. At the request of Dr. Sat, she will reach out to students and scientists. By the end of the summer, one more chapter of Harlem Children Society may already be underway.

Three important upcoming Harlem Children Society events to keep in mind:

- Harlem Children Society induction ceremony: July 7, 1:30pm, NYU’s Kimmel Center, 60 Washington Square South. Students meet their mentors for the first time; Nobel Laureate Sidney Altman delivers speech. Awards are presented to the 2010 HCS mentor, parent and educator of the year. A large screen displays simultaneous transmissions from HCS induction ceremonies around the globe.
- HCS summer boat cruise in mid-August. Students, parents and mentors gather for a festive cruise around Manhattan. Students present creative interpretations of their research.
- The 2nd Annual Harlem Science Parade & 7th Street Fair & Festival on October 2nd. Students march through Harlem carrying posters displaying their research and explaining their work to onlookers. Monitors transmitting broadcasts of simultaneous HCS science parades around the country and the globe are a central showpiece of the event.

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