

Global Woman of Vision: Sangita Sharma

This nutrition warrior has travelled the world helping populations live their best, healthiest lives.

BY LESLEY MACDONALD

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December 19, 2016

Sangita Sharma's career has taken her to countless places around the world, from Cameroon to Indonesia, from the Arctic to Jamaica, working with everyone from infants 0 to 24 months old to pregnant women to specific ethnicities in specific geographical locations. Now, she's the new chair of Aboriginal Health at the University of Alberta, and she works with organizations from the Amiskwaciy Academy to the Mennonite Centre to help figure out how to support different groups in the city by seeing where their diets can be improved. "All the organizations in Edmonton really take care of the most vulnerable peoples, but one thing we can contribute is to try to take better care of the food provided," says Sharma.

Sharma's childhood years had a formative impact on the way she looks at the world. She was born and raised in the United Kingdom by an Indian father and Austrian mother, alongside her four sisters, and diversity was always present. "From a very young age we were brought up to accept and embrace other cultures, other religions, other languages," says Sharma. She frequently travelled throughout Europe and back to visit her father's family in India, and after becoming fascinated by food and food rules in her undergraduate years, opted to pursue a PhD in international nutrition — and her passion for her field has never faded.

According to Sharma, sharing food is one of the best ways to get a sense of who a person is, and what a culture is like. "You absolutely are what you eat, and I think what's really interesting for me is it's not just about the nutrients, it's also about the value of foods," says Sharma. "If I would like to get to know you better, the best way I can get to know you better is to say hey, would you like to come to my house for dinner? Would you like to share some of my food?" That sense of community and sharing has been an integral part of her research, as she fully immerses herself in whatever population she's studying. When working in Cameroon, Sharma lived in a mud hut with no running water or electricity; she spent six months in Timor subsisting almost solely on rice, and learnt Indonesian to do her work in a rural area there. "When you're doing the work I do, you want to find out about the foods that people eat and the values around food. The best way is to actually live in the community," says Sharma.

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She's currently settled in Canada, a decision prompted by her passion for her research in the Canadian Arctic, but Sharma has overcome incredible obstacles in her international work — including having to literally flee from civil war. "I actually left with nothing. I just grabbed my laptop, I grabbed my wallet and my passport and the clothes on my back and that's all I had," says Sharma. "Because I've had all those different types of experiences I can put my feet in somebody else's shoes and I can feel what people are going through." Sharma's immersion in the developing countries she works in has also

led to several life-threatening illnesses over the years — yet another reason why she’s so passionate about health and what a difference quality treatment and education can make.

Sharma has achieved enormous successes and become a world-renowned expert in her field, securing funding and navigated the world of academia with grace. However, at the end of the day, her biggest priority is on making a difference. “It’s very important to make a difference because if you’ve been brought up with everything and you don’t make a difference and you have your PhD and write papers and grants, what’s it all for? “ says Sharma. “To me personally, it’s as important to make a difference for the vulnerable peoples that live in society, that don’t have the ability to make that difference themselves.”

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