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FORBES INDIA BRIEF
Every fortnight, exchange tales of the road with successful entrepreneurs

Deprived Children Will Rewrite the Rules

by Subroto Bagchi

Most great surgeons come from poor backgrounds. Dr. Devi Shetty believes that's what gives them the fire to stay focussed

Devi Shetty, one of India's foremost medical entrepreneurs, is an unlikely businessman. Partly because he is a businessman with a heart. The founder of Narayana Hrudayalaya heart hospital in Bangalore, sees the power of enterprise as a potentially game-changing input for making the world a healthy, and hence, a happier place. I am here to ask him about his views on healthcare, his thoughts on the power of the collective, professional achievement and visual thinking.

"Doc, you were a legend even before you built Narayana Hrudayalaya. Tell me about individual excellence and institution building. Why do a lot of competent people miss their intersection?"

"We have a large number of surgeons. Individually, they have the largest single experience in doing a surgical procedure in the world. Many have been with us for a very long time. They can walk out of the door anytime and get a better job and get better paid. But we have virtually zero attrition at the top. The reason is that they are aware that if they go out, they will not be able to do the things they en-

joy doing. There is a lot of difference between getting a job and money and enjoying what you do. Now, look at me. I have, with all their help, built this institution. It is very easy for me to say that I have created this and it's all me. You take me out of this institution and put me in a new position — I can bet that I will never be able to create what I have done. Because, for everything there is a time, a period — it can happen only in that era."

"Doc, whenever I meet you, you tell me about the relationship between greatness and early setbacks in shaping a life. Tell me more about it."

"I believe that in my own profession, the outstanding doctors of the future invariably come from a deprived background. I used to teach Karate when I was in medical college — that was my passion. I was totally focussed. Every six months we used to take a new batch. They were kids and some of them had phenomenal grace, movements and in the first one week, we knew that one day some of them could be the Black Belts. But most of them, in six months, dropped out. Kids with average skill and average grace and those who don't impress you in the first meeting, they were the ones to become the Black Belts and go on to win the contest.

"The world is filled with extremely talented people. It is very sad — they just waste away their talent and the people with average talent mostly climb to the top mainly because they have the fire in their belly. Ours is an extreme profession.

I am talking about the surgical profession that requires intense attention; we have to work 18-20 hours or else we do not reach there, and we continue to work like this for the rest of our lives. We take somebody to the operating room and if we muck up, we have a dead body on our hands. If you look at almost all the outstanding surgeons in this world, they are all children of a deprived background. All of them!

"You look at America — why America became a world leader and why they are struggling today. America was made into a superpower by the children of the Great Depression — children who were born during the Great Depression, children born and fed in soup kitchens — they have seen what reality is. The people of that era, when they were given some privileges, they always looked at it as a responsibility.

"Why I am optimistic that India will emerge as a leader is because the bulk of our children come from very deprived backgrounds. We only look at children from Bangalore or Delhi — these kids don't matter. The rules of the game are written, will be re-written, by children of a deprived background. They need an opportunity. You have to just give them the language of communication with the society outside and they will change the way."

"Tell me about the young surgeon who is already here, what is your advice to her?"

"One advice I give to my colleagues is that there is a great temptation to be a lone ranger. They feel that 'I have practiced, I have patients, I can be on my own, I can take my patients to 10 different nursing homes and earn my living'. But I always say that an elephant is the strongest animal because elephants have learnt to live in a herd. If one elephant drifts, it is called a rogue elephant. There is a lot we can learn from the elephant herd. When we work in a team we may not get everything we want but we also de-risk ourselves. The outside world is getting more and more hostile and difficult, so my recommendation for all youngsters is that first learn the art of working together — you may have

to make a lot of compromises. Unless they have that passion to make this world a better place to live in, you can give them anything you want, they are just going to trash it."

"Doc, reflect on your own capacity to think visually. They say a picture is worth a thousand words but a metaphor is worth a thousand pictures. When you talked about the elephant, the mind exactly knew what you were saying."

"Everyone thinks surgery is done by hands, right? And they give phenomenal credit to hands. Christiaan Barnard, the celebrated surgeon from South Africa — the man who did the world's first heart transplant — had rheumatoid arthritis at a very young age and he had the most crooked fingers. But he created some of the masterpieces in surgery. So the hand is just a tool — like a needle holder, like forceps — surgery is done in your brain. Everything you create, you create at two levels — first we visualise and then it happens in reality. So, we always think visually, I think you are right."

In front of me is the picture of a man who could have been selling fast food at an Udipi Hotel in Mumbai. That is what his father did to raise his nine children who grew up in Mangalore. Devi Shetty is the eighth child in the brood and the journey to become the living example of "doing well by doing good" has been a long, determined stride for this unlikely businessman. I want to sit with him longer but I must say goodbye now so that he can attend to matters of the heart that await him. ■

NAME
Devi Shetty

PROFILE
Founder, Narayana Hrudayalaya

FREE ADVICE

- Privilege comes with responsibility.
- Teamwork counts. The elephant is strong because it moves in a herd.

Photographs by Mallikarjun Katakol for Forbes India

