

2006 Alumni Award of Distinction

Dr. Sheila Singh '90

While pursuing her studies, Dr. Sheila Singh was told repeatedly that neurosurgery was no place for a woman who also desired to have a family. Rather than ignoring this advice, Dr. Singh went about exploring her suitability for the demanding field. Now a decade later Dr. Singh has completed her long journey to become a neurosurgeon. She has a husband and two sons - and international recognition as a cancer researcher. Upon receiving her Alumni Award of Distinction on September 15, Dr. Singh inspired students by sharing her own journey from HSC student to neurosurgeon.



While still at HSC, she was fascinated by the brain and how it related to the different skills and personalities of her classmates. Beyond an established interest in medicine, Dr. Singh loved the arts and recalled fond memories of the art-music fusion classes of teachers John McGuirk and Doug Moore. Today, the 33-year old doctor sees a link between the creativity she enjoyed at HSC and that which now influences her research.

She completed her four years of neurosurgery residency and then started a PhD in the molecular biology of brain tumours. Together with her mentor, Dr. Peter Dirks, they discovered a population of stem cells within brain tumours that drive the tumours' growth. Their finding has provided a new direction in brain cancer research.

Dr. Singh managed to match all of her innate strengths to her interest in the brain. Even the delicacy she possesses and her petite size contributed to her finding a home in pediatric neurosurgery. As one of only a handful of women in Canada who work in the field, she takes inspiration from the inner strength of her patients and their families.

"I see the unconditional love of parents whose sick children will demand of them a lifetime of sacrifice," she explains. "I want my work to help them because they have really taught me how precious all children are."

Today, as a researcher and pediatric neurosurgeon, Dr. Singh is also an inspiration for a new generation of students at Hillfield Strathallan College.

"Often the most useful things you can learn are outside your direct field of study, so being open-minded, eager to learn and curious about everything you encounter will always help you."

Dr. Sheila Singh

For those students who are struggling to find their own place in the world, Dr. Singh advised them to simply revel in the process of self-discovery while enjoying the broad, supportive learning environment of HSC.

Early in her studies, Dr. Singh's experience with two five-year-old boys caused her to add another dimension to her neurosurgery goal. Both boys were named Christopher, and both had the same type of brain tumour. Only one survived. To Dr. Singh, the randomness of that child's death was a call to balance her surgical career with research.