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Dr. Joia Mukherjee wants to become a singer, but only after solving public health problems overseas. (Wendy Maeda/Globe Staff)

INFECTIOUS DISEASE EXPERT JOIA MUKHERJEE | MEETING THE MINDS

She battles disease, poverty in developing countries

By Billy Baker, Globe Correspondent | June 2, 2008

Dr. Joia Mukherjee really wants to be a singer. That, she has already decided, will be her second career, and she just has to finish her first career, this minor business of "getting all the world's HIV and poverty squared away," before she can get started in earnest.

"I brought a karaoke machine to Haiti last week," Mukherjee said recently in her office on Huntington Avenue, though her smile turns into a smirk when she notes that she never got to use it. She was too busy saving lives as the medical director for Partners in Health, a Boston-based organization dedicated to fighting poverty and healthcare inequality in impoverished countries.

In one single hour in Haiti, she said, the organization saved the lives of five children who would have died of malnutrition had they not been there to feed them some specially fortified peanut butter. Karaoke had to wait, though her face brightens again when she adds that she did get to lead a song for the president of Haiti.

Mukherjee is almost impossibly laid back as she tells such stories, a quality that, she says, is often maddening for her staff.

"It drives people crazy to see how low-key I am," she said. Her temperament is constant - playful, curious or, in her words, "quirky" - whether she's talking about fighting malaria or how unfair it is that she's too old, at 44, to be on "American Idol."

"Whenever I see her," said Jack Bryant, a former dean of the school of public health at Columbia University who has been doing work in Haiti for decades, "she has this intriguing quality of being both light-hearted and profound. She's an important person in the field of international health and development, but at the same time she doesn't grumble all the time."

Mukherjee says that she can be so pleasant about the unpleasant because the fight has been with her so long that it's just a part of who she is now. In 1972, when she was an 8-year-old girl growing up in suburban Long Island, her family took her to India. Her father, from Bangladesh, is a refugee from the India-Pakistan partition in the mid-50s (her mother is Irish-Catholic with red hair and freckles), and they arrived in the country at a time of great turmoil, when Bangladesh was separating from Pakistan and millions of people were being displaced.

She saw the squalid conditions of poverty. She saw kids her own age dying in the street. She saw people with leprosy. And she was outraged.

"I think children have a strong sense of social injustice," she said, "and I was never the same kid after that."

In the eighth grade, she read a Nelson Mandela speech that pointed to poverty as the root of the world's problems and decided, then and there, that would be her cause. When the AIDS epidemic broke during her college years, she realized it would disproportionately affect the poor, and she went to medical school intent on working on diseases of poverty. She spent six months in Kenya during her medical training, and, after that, she found it hard to work in the United States.

"I saw 50 kids die of malnutrition in Kenya, and came back and worked on a kid's heart transplant. I was glad to help the [American] child, and he deserved it, but it was all this work for one when a few dollars could have saved many. After that, I decided that the US had enough doctors and didn't need me."

Mukherjee, who is also on the staff at Brigham and Women's Hospital and an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School, now spends 75 percent of her time traveling abroad with her karaoke machine and her 22-month-old son, Che, as she helps to supervise Partners' efforts in 10 countries. The single mother trains local staff and works with governments to help establish national health networks, all with the goal of pushing forth the belief that healthcare is a basic human right.

"Every day there feels like there's an enormous amount of unfinished work," she says - a deep statement that she delivers, as is her fashion, with a whimsical smile on her face. "Once you've seen what's out there, it's impossible not to do this work. If I didn't, I'd be clinically depressed. It's how I sleep at night."

And should she ever solve these inequality issues and get her chance in the music industry, Mukherjee already has a high-profile "buddy" who will be there to help her. On the bulletin board in her office, she has a letter haphazardly pegged up.

It's signed: "Your fan, Bono."

Fact sheet

Hometown: Huntington, N.Y.; lives in Brookline.

Education: She earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan in 1985, where she studied chemistry and molecular biology; graduated from medical school at the University of Minnesota in 1992.

Family: Her son, Che (named for Che Guevara), is 22 months old and has been in 21 countries with his mom (and he'll add two more passport stamps in the coming months).

Hobbies: In addition to singing, Mukherjee loves to cook dinner parties at her home for 40 to 50 guests, and enjoys hiking - which she said is a good thing because her work often requires her to trek for hours in the blazing sun to get to a remote location.