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Wednesday, April 25, 2007

Volunteer, 72, believes in working toward a cause

Montgomery Works worker an activist for life
 by Danny Jacobs | Staff Writer
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Vidya Sinha has said that her husband of 40 years, Prasiddh, is more active in retirement than when he was working.

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But for Prasiddh Sinha, a 72-year-old and grandfather of four, his job at Montgomery Works, involvement with the Eastern Montgomery Regional Services Center and speaking up on issues of importance to him and his community are a continuation of a lifelong mission.

"It's my instinct to help others," he said. "When problems come up, I take them up."

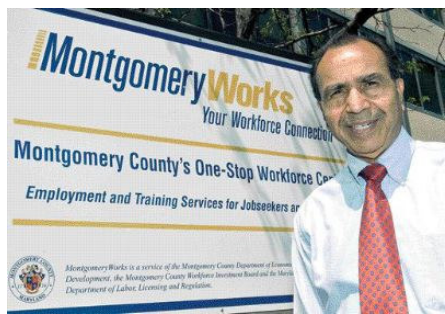
Sinha's activism began in his native India, where he worked with Indian Airlines for 37 years, rising from an entry-level job to a senior manager in human resources when he retired in 1992. His daily interactions with eight unions and trade associations taught him how each group was integral to the airline's success and how important it was to work together toward a solution when a problem arose.

Daughter Shefali Sinha remembers her father coming home late from work and spending time with his family before heading out to work on community problems.

"He cannot sit back and take social injustice," she said from California, where she is a computer engineer with an independent consulting practice.

One of his causes began in 1981 and continues to this day. Some Indian Airlines employees were having problems paying rent for apartments through the Delhi Development Authority, a government housing agency, which it accused of illegally raising prices. Sinha took up their cause and founded the Self-Financing Residents Welfare Association, which now has 600 members. Sinha's group filed suit against the housing authority, and after 21 years and two separate appearances before India's highest court, the tenants won a refund plus interest. Sinha remains president of the group, handling its business largely through e-mail.

Sinha immigrated to the United States in 2002, though he had been visiting since 1985, when his daughter began going to college at the University of Toledo. After a year in California, Sinha and his wife moved to Maryland with their son, Pankaj, a managing consultant for IBM. They live in



Brian Lewis/The Gazette
 Silver Spring resident Prasiddh Sinha, posing for a picture at Montgomery Works in Wheaton where he works, has made activism and community involvement a lifelong goal.

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Silver Spring.

Sinha did outreach work with Indian groups while in California, and was looking for a similar job in Maryland. Last year, he joined the Senior Community Service Employment Program, run by the Jewish Council for the Aging of Greater Washington. The program offers paid, on-the-job training for qualified Montgomery County residents age 55 and older at nonprofits or county government agencies. The goal of the program is to give seniors the skills to join the unsubsidized workforce, director Harriet Shapiro said.

Shapiro has received nothing but positive reviews of Sinha from his employers. "He'll be one of our success stories," she said.

Program participants spend one year at a host training site; in Sinha's case, it was the Eastern Montgomery Regional Services Center, where he started as a senior aide in February 2006. There, he helped organize, manage and run a variety of the center's events and programs, including community forums, East County Citizens Advisory Board meetings, luncheons and workshops, as well as represented the center at community events.

"He's a real gem for us," said Anise Key Brown, the director of the center. "He works from sunup to sundown."

By October, Sinha had become such a part of the center he was named an associate member of the advisory board. Though he cannot vote, Sinha attends board meetings and events, often offering input. During a January budget forum with County Executive Isiah Leggett (D), for example, Sinha asked what the county was doing about housing and jobs for low-income seniors.

Two weeks ago, with his host training complete, Sinha was assigned to Montgomery Works in Wheaton, where he assists job seekers and handles computer problems.

"He's very friendly and very reliable," said Barbara Rodriguez, labor exchange administrator for the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation and Sinha's boss at Montgomery Works.

Despite his new job, Sinha still volunteers at the services center for special events and is a weekly presence at the Thursday citizenship preparation classes.

Last week, he attended a transportation forum on a proposed new Ride On Transit route and asked about the possibility of weekend hours after people were talking to him about the need for it. He also continues to work for more affordable health care for low-income seniors.

"My dad is a person who never wants to retire," Pankaj Sinha said. "He's really an inspiration."

"Whatever he can do for others without disturbing his family life he will do," added Vidya Sinha.

For his part, Prasiddh Sinha, quiet but outgoing, remains humble. "Whatever I did, I did it with due dedication and sincerity."

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A photograph of a middle-aged man with short, light-colored hair, smiling warmly. He is wearing a light-colored, possibly yellow or cream, V-neck sweater over a white collared shirt. He is seated at a desk, looking towards the right of the frame. In his right hand, he holds a credit card. A computer monitor is visible in the foreground, and a small vase with yellow flowers sits on the desk to his right. The background is a plain, light color.