

## diabetes champions

# Chef with type 1 takes diabetes knowledge to the South Asian community



Siva Swaminathan

Photos by: Chris McCallan Photography  
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**"I didn't want what happened to me to happen to anyone else."**

**This is how Siva Swaminathan of Toronto, Ontario, explains her motivation for getting involved as a volunteer with the Canadian Diabetes Association. Siva's personal experience of being diagnosed with type 1 diabetes was full of confusion and apprehension. But looking back, she now understands what made her first few months so difficult: a lack of information.**

Diagnosed as an adult, Siva struggled with poor health and weight loss for five months before her type 1 diabetes was correctly identified. "I fell through the cracks," she explains. "In summer 2005, a lab test revealed that my blood glucose levels were over 30 mmol/L. When the same test results came back a second time, my doctor still didn't believe I had diabetes, as I didn't fit the type 2 profile. By September, my weight was going down and I wasn't feeling well. He prescribed glyburide and told me to get a blood glucose monitor."

Siva's blood glucose levels remained high for several more months until she finally got in to see an endocrinologist. On November 14—World Diabetes Day—she was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. She now had a diagnosis, but still struggled for answers.

"My knowledge of diabetes was zero. For the first six months, I didn't know what to do. I had to adjust to five insulin injections per day," says Siva. "I eventually got up to speed with an insulin support group, and an endocrinologist who cared. I started to grasp the impact of meal planning and concepts like counting carbohydrates instead of calories, and the importance of low glycemic index foods."

Siva's professional training as a chef supported her new dietary adjustments. A former systems analyst, Siva left information technology behind in 2002 to train as a professional chef. Her studies and apprenticeships included time in Southern Germany, where she picked up healthy food preparation techniques like poaching, cooking with olive oil and using broths for flavour. Her apprenticeship in the kitchen, however, dates back to her girlhood in southern India when Siva's favourite hobby was learning and mimicking her grandmother's culinary secrets.

"Food is so important in South Asian culture—it's all about hospitality," explains Siva, who contributes her diverse cooking skills in support of many Canadian Diabetes Association activities. Siva is a member of the



Association's Food and Nutrition Policy Advisory subcommittee of the National Nutrition Committee, and she is helping to develop a South Asian adaptation of the Association's *Just the Basics* healthy eating primer (for more information see pg. 43). She is also part of the Women's College Hospital – Women's Health Community Advisory Panel.

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Along with fellow volunteer Ram Krishna—a successful businessman who has stayed healthy with diabetes for 25 years—Siva founded the Association's Greater Toronto Area South Asian chapter. Currently, Siva is the chair of the chapter's executive committee, a group that includes an endocrinologist, two dietitians, a medical resident, herself and Ram. Together, they are focused on bringing knowledge to the South Asian diabetes community in a culturally sensitive and relevant manner—no small challenge.

The South Asian chapter has a huge mandate with members spread throughout the Greater Toronto Area, from Scarborough to Brampton to Markham, reflecting many cultures, countries and religious backgrounds. In fact, Siva points out that at any given meeting at least half a dozen languages will be represented, which is why meetings are conducted in English.

"Our approach is to take the information into the communities where it's needed. At each session, we have three components to our presentation: medical, nutrition and lifestyle. All three work hand in hand," says Siva. "In the first year alone, we had six free meetings, and we've had anywhere from 50 to 130 people come out."



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The Canadian Diabetes Association officially recognized Siva's tireless efforts and the success of the South Asian chapter in 2009, when Siva was awarded the GTA Regional Volunteer of the Year Award.

"A good word to describe Siva is 'passionate,'" says Anne Le Quang, Public Programs and Services Coordinator. "She brings this quality in abundance to everything she does, from being chair of the South Asian chapter to teaching cooking classes at local community centres. Ever since her diagnosis, Siva has been using her culinary skills to help people with diabetes better manage their disease through healthy meal planning. She is truly a diabetes champion."

The Canadian Diabetes Association is not the only organization about which Siva is passionate, however. A true volunteer to the core, Siva has volunteered for many causes and events, such as the Toronto International Film Festival, Harbourfront Centre and the tsunami disaster relief efforts in 2005.

"My hometown was devastated—there was no question about going," says Siva. After raising close to \$6,000 from neighbours in three days, Siva headed for Nagapattinam in South India, where she spent three months providing grassroots support like sewing machines for widows, clothing for children, water carts for fishermen and money for orphanages.

"I wanted to go and do something—anything," says Siva. "And in a similar way, that's what motivates my involvement with the Canadian Diabetes Association. For me, the Association offers an opportunity to get involved, help someone and raise awareness. I hope that through my work another Siva doesn't have to go through what I did."