

## A LEGACY OF STUDENT SUCCESS: Mathematics and Computer Sciences Professor Retires After 39 Years

After nearly four decades at Mercy College, having enriched the lives of thousands of students and introduced innovative programs and grants that transformed the Department of Mathematics and Computer Sciences, Professor Nagaraj Rao, Ph.D., retired at the end of August 2022. He and his wife Rukmini are planning to move to Austin, Texas, to live closer to their son and three grandsons. "I've lived in New York for over 30 years, and I think it's time for a change," said Rao.

Over the span of his 39 years at Mercy, Rao has served as department chair, interim dean, program director, innovator and "rainmaker," bringing in a significant number of federal grants and other funding. "I never felt the stress of these things. I did them because I enjoyed them," he said. "My time at Mercy was filled with opportunities to collaborate, teach, travel and attend conferences. It was a lot of joy and a lot of work."

Born in India into a family with nine children, Rao dreamed of becoming a pilot in the Indian Air Force. "My father disapproved, so instead I became a math professor," he said, omitting, in his understated style, the hard work and academic achievements that got him there. Arriving at Mercy with a bachelor's and master's degree, he went back to school twice, earning a second master's degree in computer sciences and a doctorate in applied mathematical sciences.

Rao joined Mercy College as an assistant professor in 1983. Within the next decade, he was awarded tenure and elected chair of the Department of Mathematics and Computer Sciences, serving until 2019. With characteristic candor he said, "The department was in trouble. We were losing students to the dot-com bubble, and we needed new programs and better support for students. Math and computer science are difficult subjects. My most important work at Mercy has centered around serving those students."

Some of that work included Rao understanding the burdens Mercy students shouldered outside of the classroom, and how best to serve their unique needs. For example, he learned quickly that many students had family and job responsibilities in addition to their studies and gained respect for their determination to obtain a

college degree.

In 2014, he was appointed interim dean of the School of Liberal Arts. As a leader, Rao encouraged best practices and developed a host of innovative programs, including SmartMath, the cybersecurity program, and Mercy's five-year BS/MS program in math education. In addition to co-authoring a textbook on Java programming, he kept busy serving on grant review committees and in numerous other academic and administrative roles.

Among his most significant achievements was helping Mercy win a grant from the Gates Foundation to develop innovative educational programs in math and computer science. Other grants helped Mercy promote STEM education programs, including the College's prestigious Minority Science and Engineering Improvement Program and Mathematical Modeling at Mercy College (M3C), a summer program for high school students.

"He has a real knack for helping students who excel academically but are economically disadvantaged, and helping them achieve their potential," said David Wang, M.S. '11, Ed.D., associate professor and chair of the Department of Mathematics and Computer Sciences. "If I look at all the grants

he brought in and all the projects he launched with that funding, I'd say his number one contribution was applying his efforts to supporting Mercy students."

With his keen eye for talented educators, Rao hired many members of the math faculty, including Wang and Charles Li, Ph.D., associate professor of mathematics. It seems fitting that Li will become the new M3C program director after not only serving as Rao's co-director, but also graduating from the program when he was a high school student.

Rao's new chapter will not represent a complete departure from teaching. "I have an idea for how I might help underserved students in math and other subjects, maybe developing new programs for schools that don't have them," he said.

That almost sounds like a man who's not retiring. "When I told my wife I was retiring, she said, 'Why, when you're still so active?' Then I asked my kids. None of them said I should retire. In fact, they all said no. So, we'll have to see," he said.

