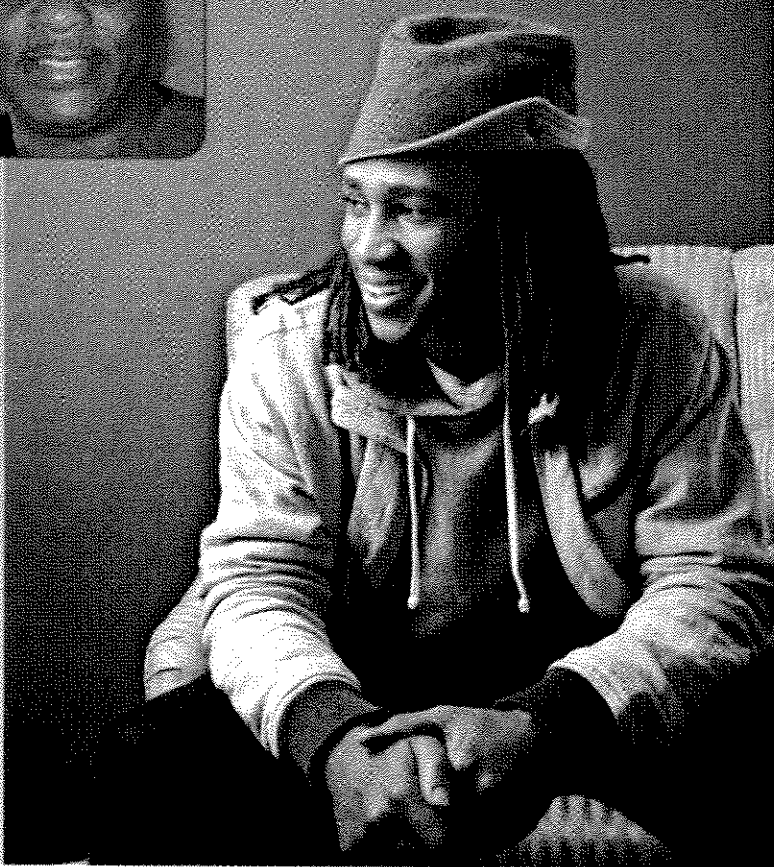
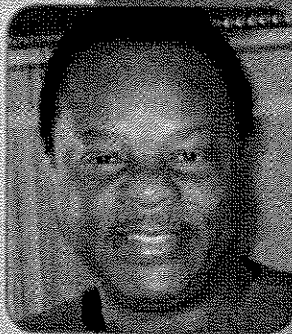


ALL IN THE FAMILY

Having grown up in the academy, second-generation scholars chart their own course to become their professor parents' academic peer.

BY LYDIA LUM



Even as a little girl, Dr. Nitasha Sharma aspired to become a college professor like her parents, whose careers let the family spend entire summers or longer in either her mother's native Brooklyn, N.Y., or her father's native India. She dreamed of long vacations as a grown-up and going home for lunch on weekdays. But during a stay in India when Sharma learned Hindi as a middle schooler, she realized how such travels fed intellectual growth and how her parents' work nourished the minds of their students.

Today, Sharma, an assistant professor of African American studies and Asian American studies at Northwestern University, is a member of countless two-generation U.S. academic families. In recent interviews with *Diverse*, grown children recalled how dinner-time chatter featured generous helpings of their parents' research and teaching, along with sides of university politics and activism. Parents didn't consciously steer their progeny into their professional spheres but welcomed them as colleagues, sometimes even becoming pedagogically influenced. Of course, so-called shop talk flavors the present-day conversations between both generations.

Sharma, a 2009 *Diverse* Emerging Scholar whose research examines relations between racial groups, including the influence of African-American-inspired hip hop culture on musicians of South Asian descent, has often related to her parents as their academic

peer. Her mother, Dr. Miriam Sharma, a longtime University of Hawaii professor of Asian studies, initiated a course about South Asians in England and their diaspora largely in response to her intrigue with her daughter's research. The two are as likely to attend conferences together or invite each other to serve as a discussion panelist as they are to have a mother-daughter phone chat.

Following parents into the academy is not without challenges, particularly when scholars are overshadowed by their more famous parents. And, sometimes, a boundary between parent and child is warranted — if only temporarily.

Dr. Emeterio Otero, executive dean at Monroe Community College's campus in downtown Rochester, N.Y., says that when his term on the institution's labor management team overlapped with that of his son Christopher as faculty union representative, the two

PHOTO COURTESY OF MORGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

More concerned with basketball and hip hop, as a teenager M.K. Asante rebuffed people's attempts to draw him into conversations about his father Dr. Molefi Asante's (inset) academic work. Today, he is an associate professor of creative writing and film at Morgan State University, agreed not to discuss work whenever they met for brunch along with other family. "We were clearly on opposite sides on hot topics like tenure, health insurance."

Christopher Otero-Piersante is an associate professor of English at an MCC campus on the edge of Rochester. When advocating for faculty, Christopher "was so passionate, transparent and so far to the left on all the issues that no one accused him of being unduly influenced by me," Emeterio says. "And I told my colleagues of our agreement to not discuss work outside of work. I also recused myself entirely from the negotiating team. That would've been a nightmare."

While recounting details of that three-year period, he sounded more like a nail-biting parent than a put-upon administrator, though. "Chris held the flag high for faculty, no doubt. I worried that if he ever wants to become a dean, his words as union rep could become a problem. But he did what he thought was best."

Christopher still invites Emeterio to faculty parties at his home. "It's purely social. The faculty see me as a human, and I get a chance to hear about pedagogy and their passions, their heartaches. My son has helped me bridge the gap between teachers and the administration, and I became a better administrator because of it."

Home Training

M.K. Asante, an associate professor of creative writing and film at Morgan State University, credits his multitasking abilities and multiple creative outlets to watching, throughout his childhood, his Temple University professor parents juggle their interests in scholarship, art and community activism. His father, Dr. Molefi Kete Asante, is a professor of African American studies whose views on Afrocentricity — the idea that people descended from Africans should view themselves as agents rather than as objects on the fringes of Europe — have been debated and dissected by academicians for decades. His mother, Dr. Kariamu Welsh, professor of dance, created Umfundalai, a dance technique combining elements of traditional African dance with African-American dance forms.

"The academic life isn't just on campus; it's about grassroots work and a professor's relationship with community," says M.K., a critically acclaimed filmmaker. As a teenager he dabbled in writing and when he started considering a career that merged writing with film and teaching, he looked to his parents as examples of the proverbial Renaissance people.

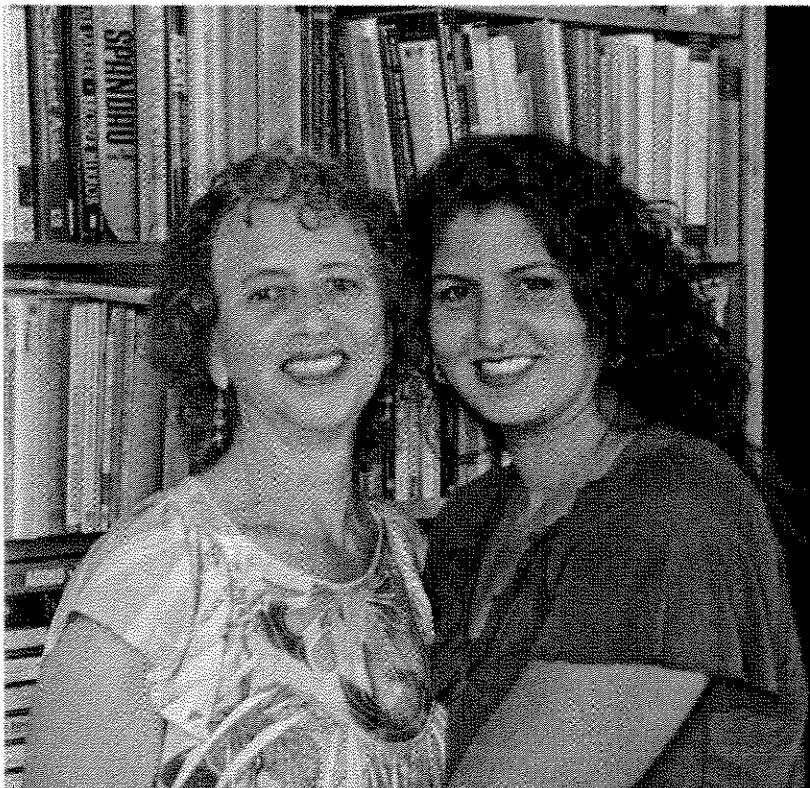
Meanwhile, Nitasha Sharma was captivated by childhood dinner table chatter that was infused with news of whatever her University of Hawaii professor parents were doing at any given time to brew and spice the young ethnic studies program and nationwide movement. Her mother Miriam researches South Asian gender issues, agrarian relations and colonialism and her late father, Dr. Jagdish Sharma, taught history. The professors ranted about academic departmental politics too. "I wondered what talk about race

discrimination and gender discrimination was doing to Nitasha," Miriam recalls.

Similarly, union obligations during various stretches of time caused Miriam to remain on campus late, night after night, going home long after Jagdish had put Nitasha to bed.

But rather than consider her mother's absences as absolute negatives, Nitasha accepted it as necessity. "It actually gave me insight into work struggles."

Nitasha grew to understand how the family's travels to far-flung places like Japan, Singapore and South Korea informed her parents' teaching and scholarship. She enrolled at the University of California, Santa Cruz, certain of an academic career for herself, although uncertain of what discipline. Finding the racial climate on campus stifling compared to the more multicultural Hawaii, Nitasha studied hip hop and culture as a refuge. She went on to become an anthropologist like Miriam. Nitasha's parents were un-



Raised by professor parents, Dr. Nitasha Sharma as a child came to appreciate the "freedoms an academic life offered." The Northwestern University professor is pictured here with her mother, Dr. Miriam Sharma, a professor at the University of Hawaii.

official mentors, her father an unofficial editor of journal articles. "He was so attentive he would know what page I was on. I would always have to tell him to go away," Nitasha says fondly of her father.

Parental Pride

Naturally, the campus itself has always been central for children of such two-generation families. An MCC administrator since 1982, Emeterio Otero recalls an adolescent Christopher running up and down campus halls and playing in empty classrooms at times when he had to work late.

Some of the childhood campus hijinks are tough to live down.



Whittier College transfer admissions counselor Gabriel Chabrán, pictured here with his father, longtime Whittier Spanish professor Rafael Chabrán, has a hard time living down his childhood campus hijinx.

Gabriel Chabrán, a 28-year-old transfer admissions counselor at Whittier College in California, enjoys socializing after-hours with colleagues. But occasionally, he lacks a comeback during good-natured trash talk. Because his father, Dr. Rafael Chabrán, is a longtime professor of Spanish there, "some of my co-workers remember me as a teenager, skateboarding, doing goofy kid stuff," Gabriel says. "They remind me of that when they want the upper hand."

There are rare moments in which Gabriel feels 8 years old. Because the school enrolls only 1,500 students, he encounters familiar people constantly — including his father. Several times, Gabriel has been chatting with a visiting professor or new school employee who doesn't know Rafael when the latter spots them, grins broadly and strolls over to say "hello." As soon as Rafael introduces himself, he clasps Gabriel's shoulders, announcing, "This is my son!"

"He says this out of pride, and I don't mind at all," Gabriel says. "But I do feel my ears turn red."

Nitasha had similar moments as a graduate student when she was introduced in casual conversation by senior scholars as "Miriam Sharma's daughter." And M.K. recalls plenty of times as a teenager when academicians pulled him aside on campus at Temple "to ask some obscure question about my dad's views. I told them to talk to him. My world was basketball and hip-hop."

Yet over time, the reputations of the younger generation can rival that of their famous parents. M.K. recalls a passerby stopping him and his father and launching into conversation. The passerby had recognized M.K. from TV interviews promoting his films. When a friend of the passerby joined them, the latter introduced the senior Asante as merely "M.K.'s dad."

"Dad was tickled," the younger Asante says.

But the family name can also become a source of consternation for the children of two-generation academic families. Indeed, several families declined to be interviewed for this article, citing difficulties the children have had with scholars who don't take them seriously despite their accomplishments. While Nitasha has never encountered such challenges herself, she hopes her peers in other families don't take them too personally. "It might be scholarly politics. Someone uses a family name against someone because it's

A few other family ties:

— The late Dr. Lisle Carter Jr., the first president of the University of the District of Columbia, is the father of Stephen Carter, the Cromwell Professor of Law at Yale University.

— Chris Edley Jr., dean of Boalt Hall Law school at the University of California-Berkeley, is the son of the late Chris Edley, the former president of the United Negro College Fund.

— The late Dr. John Hope Franklin, James B. Duke Professor emeritus at Duke University, is the father of Dr. John W. Franklin, a Smithsonian Institute historian and anthropologist.

— Dr. William B. Harvey, former vice president for diversity at the University of Virginia, is the father of Dr. Adia Harvey Wingfield, an assistant professor of sociology at Georgia State University.

— Dr. Melvin Ramey, retired chair of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at the University of California-Davis, and Felicenne Ramey, dean emerita of the College of Business Administration at California State University-Sacramento, are parents of Daina Ramey Berry, an associate professor of history at the University of Texas-Austin and a *Diverse Emerging Scholar*.

— Dr. Cecilia Rouse, Wells Professor of Economics at Princeton University, is the sister of Dr. Carolyn Rouse, an anthropologist and professor at Princeton.

— Dr. Alfredo G. de los Santos Jr., a research professor at the Hispanic Research Center at Arizona State University, is the father of Dr. Gerardo E. de los Santos, the president and chief executive officer of the League for Innovation in the Community College.

— Dr. Claude Steele, provost of Columbia University, is the brother of Dr. Shelby Steele, the Oster Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institute at Stanford University.

— Dr. Michael R. Winston, a former historian at Howard University, is the father of Dr. Cynthia Winston, a psychology professor at Howard and a *Diverse Emerging Scholar*.

— By Diverse Staff

the first thing he can grab. We all have and will have rejections and criticisms of our work, regardless of who we are, or aren't."

She learned plenty about navigating through stormy academic waters from not only her parents, but also from senior scholars she approached long ago simply by saying, "I'm Jagdish's and Miriam's daughter. Would you help me?" Still, it's comforting to confide in his parents, M.K. says. He and his father each gained tenure and published their first books before age 30. Because most faculty don't reach those milestones when they're so young, they have sometimes aired petty jealousies within earshot of one of the Asantes. "Dad has reminded me to focus on my work and let that speak for itself." ■

PHOTO COURTESY OF WHITTIER COLLEGE