

Dr Kris Somers and the Krishna Somers Charitable Trust.

By any standards, a man who transcends even two cultures must be exceptional. The achievement of Krishna Somers was phenomenal. His roots were in India, his heart was in Africa, his mind was in Britain and America, and his feet finally came to rest in Perth, Western Australia.

Kris was born in Durban, South Africa, in a family of eight. He was a fourth-generation descendant of Indian sugar plantation labourers and, in his words, he and his siblings were raised in difficult days of poverty.

He was raised during the decades of legislated racial discrimination in Durban, attending schools segregated for Indians. His whole life was a dogged by prejudice and segregation.

Kris won a scholarship from Sastri College, Durban to the University of Witwatersrand from which he graduated as Craib Prizeman in 1950. Wits, as he affectionately called it, was the only university in the country at the time without racist admission policies.

To give you some idea of what Kris's days were like we would like to read some of his own words.

My own years at Medical School were my most formative years.

*As a South African of Indian origin I needed a permit issued by the Protector of Indian Immigrants, a **Certificate of Identity**, to enable me to travel from Natal and reside in the Transvaal during my student years. The permit had to be renewed every 6 months. The permit was withdrawn once I had finished my medical education.*

Lack of a permit also meant that I was unable to pursue internship in a province other than the province of my birth. Non-white state hospitals in the province of Natal still had white nursing staff and it would have been degrading for a white nurse to take instructions from a non-white doctor.

Upon graduation, Kris was unable to progress with his medical career. His words were: *"I found myself in the invidious position where I could never work or take further training because the teaching hospitals, which were government institutions, would not hire non-white doctors. It was just impossible".*

So, after his internship in Durban, he transferred to the Central Middlesex

Hospital in the UK then onto Great Ormond Street and the Royal Postgraduate Medical School.

By 1957 he was a Lecturer in the Department of Medicine, Makerere University, Uganda, rising steadily until he was appointed to a Personal Chair in Clinical Medicine in 1968. He established a productive program of research, publications and teaching. As the only medical school in East Africa, it attracted students from right across the region.

In 1962-63 a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship took him to the Cardiovascular Research Institute, University of California, San Francisco for training in Cardiovascular Physiology.

He finally fled Uganda in 1973 to escape the persecution of the notorious mad dictator Idi Amin. Kris was by now an international figure and authority on his prime interests **Endomyocardial Fibrosis** and **cardiovascular disease in warm climates**.

After a brief period as World Health Organisation consultant in training and development at the University of Papua and New Guinea in 1973-74, he finally called a halt to his changing international academic postings and settled as an Associate Professor of Medicine to the University of Western Australia and Physician to the Royal Perth Hospital from 1974 to 1989. He was elected Emeritus Consultant Physician to the Royal Perth Hospital in 1990.

The early years in Perth were difficult for Kris – that he felt lonely and displaced. No doubt this period reinforced his concern for migrants and refugees and led to his lifelong contributions to try to ease their sufferings.

He published about one hundred and thirty papers on cardiovascular topics. His special interest was **Endomyocardial Fibrosis** on which he was a world authority and innovator.

Kris acted as consultant to World Health Organisation on **cardiomyopathies** and medical training.

As a teacher Krishna Somers was held in great affection and respect. His students found him exacting but fair. He taught postgraduates and organised and supervised undergraduate and postgraduate curricula in Internal Medicine and Cardiology.

Kris had a particular love of Uganda and over the years Kris returned to South Africa and Uganda many times. He particularly enjoyed catching up with former students, many of whom now hold senior medical positions in various East African countries.

His personal experience of struggling to find a country influenced his decision to provide seed funding for a foundation focused on researching diasporas — the Krishna Somers Foundation at Murdoch University.

He believed immigration was inevitable. He said:

“People move for various reasons. For instance, Australia has been involved in a senseless and useless war in Iraq, and likewise in Afghanistan. So, we’re bound to create refugees from these countries. But I wouldn’t be blatantly critical of Australia’s attitudes towards immigration. Australia is very generous.”

Dr Somers died in October 2018 and in accordance with his will, the “Krishna Somers Charitable Trust was established”.

Before his death Dr Somers nominated 11 charities which would benefit from his estate and the Edmund Rice Centre WA was fortunate to be one of them.

The Centre has received quarterly distributions from the Trust since 2020 and the funds have been used to fund the many programs the ERCWA runs for migrants, refugees and vulnerable members of our society.

The influence of Kris Somers will continue to benefit our programs long after his death.

Editors Note: This short history of Kris Somers was taken from the eulogy delivered by his close friend and trustee of the Trust, Keith Platel at his funeral in 2018. You can read the full eulogy and learn more about Kris Sommers at <https://www.ercwa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Kris-Somers-Eulogy-KP.pdf>