

# The Wichita Eagle

SATURDAY, MAY 10, 2014

Kansas.com

75 CENTS

## Trees for Life will carry on founder's international legacy



Travis Heying/The Wichita Eagle

**Balbir Mathur is the founder of Trees for Life, which has planted about 200 million moringa trees in developing countries. He's retiring at the end of this year.**

By **RICK PLUMLEE**  
The Wichita Eagle

When he was an international businessman from Wichita, Balbir Mathur had clients who were among the most wealthy.

Since the early 1980s, his clients have been the poorest of the poor.

But don't bother asking if he feels much better about himself now.

"He's the most selfless person that I've ever met," former Wichita Mayor Bob Knight said. "It's not just once in a while; it's all the time."

Mathur has helped the poor through Trees For Life, a widely acclaimed nonprofit he founded in 1984 to address hunger in impoverished countries.

The group has since added other initiatives and is on the verge of launching a website to help teachers in impoverished nations who have had little if any training.

But Trees for Life will soon move forward without the man others have described as a humble visionary.

Mathur, 78, announced this week he will retire at the end of the year.

He'll remain in Wichita and be



Courtesy photo

**Children in Orissa, India, prepare to plant moringa trees.**

involved with Trees for Life "as needed," he said.

He's not changing who he is.

"It's like a singer," Mathur said. "When a singer retires, he's still a singer. I'll still be singing."

Just not officially with Trees for Life.

Empowering others so they can help themselves has been a consistent theme behind his efforts to assist the poor, say those who have worked alongside him.

He sees his stepping aside in the same way.

Mathur has intentionally created a diverse foundation for Trees for Life, one that was partially spurred by a fundraising effort by

an eighth-grade class at what was then Wilbur Junior High.

A steady funding source of millions of dollars comes all from donations – not tax dollars.

His staff includes nine experienced workers, including his wife, Treva. He has a cast of thousands of volunteers around the world.

The group's board has had such diverse membership as former U.S. Sen. George McGovern and actor Charlton Heston. Knight serves on the board, which is headed by Sister Tarcisia Roths, former president of Newman University.

Jed Fahey, a nutritional bio-

chemist and researcher at Johns Hopkins Medical School in Baltimore, has worked with Trees for Life for a decade.

Many of his efforts have centered on the moringa tree, a nutritionally rich tree that has become the centerpiece of Mathur's group in helping the poor in the drylands of Asia, Africa and South America.

For the educational piece, Mathur has brought on Shirley Lefever-Davis, interim dean for the College of Education at Wichita State University, and others.

"The song will be finished," Mathur said.

### 75 cents per lawn

Mathur, a native of India, came to the United States with little money at the age of 23 in 1958. He left his profitable business world in the early 1980s to begin a journey that led him to serving others.

His initial search began where many of us start – looking for power.

Mathur connected with William Graham, a Wichita oil and real estate investor who was on business in India. Being bold in developing connections would become a

hallmark of his work.

He wanted to learn how to market steel. More specifically, he said, "I wanted to find out why so many people in India were poor and others were so powerful.

"I came to the U.S. to find out what is the formula for power, why are some nations so powerful. I wanted to take that formula back to India."

He had grown up in a middle-class family that valued education.

"Poor people were our servants," he said.

He had earned a master's degree in India and planned to go to Harvard University, then use some of his contacts with Graham to gain a foothold in the business world.

Something went awry in getting his transcript to Harvard, so the Ivy League school asked him to push his application back a year. Meanwhile, he had been accepted at Wichita State University.

Mathur arrived in Wichita with \$6 and spent that on lodging on his first night.

Graham put him to work for 75 cents per lawn mowing grass.

At the same time, Mathur convinced the general manager at Innes to let him have a small space at the downtown department store so he could sell items from India.

After quickly writing letters home asking people to send him merchandise, Mathur soon had his first international business.

Mathur eventually landed a job with Genesco, a major player at the time in the nation's apparel industry. The company faced problems finding a source for sheep hides, which Mathur solved with an international consortium that led to Genesco quadrupling its income.

## A vision

He was traveling the world, making good money and raising a family in Wichita with wife Treva.

He was flying over the Mediterranean in the late 1970s when a thought came over him.

"It looks so small," he thought to himself. "I wonder what it looks like from a divine point of view."

At that moment something happened that "pulled me out of my body," he said. "I saw Earth as a speck, as if someone was asking me, 'What do you see?'"

He says the experience made him physically sick for the next two years. He could hardly walk.

He described a slight pain between two fingers on his right hand.

"A bubble emerged and traveled to my spine," Mathur said.

He said he is a deeply spiritual person, but he doesn't belong to any organized religion. Doctors had no answers, and blood tests didn't explain what had happened.

At the suggestion of a sister, he decided to fast. On the fifth day of the fasting, his body recovered.

"I have no understanding for that," Mathur said, "but I was



Courtesy photo

**A librarian hands out books to children in Masatepe, Nicaragua. Once the Nicaraguan villages build a library and train a librarian, Trees for Life provides the books.**

healed. I've been doing what I'm doing now ever since."

## 'One teaching two'

In the early 1980s, he traveled to villages in India planting fruit trees. He saw the hunger in the children.

In the fall of 1983, Mathur spoke to Barbara Hubert's eighth-grade class at Wilbur about world hunger.

The students were so moved that they raised \$303 from a car wash. They told Mathur to go plant more fruit trees.

That was the start of Trees for Life. He and an Indian friend returned to India to deliver trees.

But they set a condition. Villagers were told they had to dig 3-by-3-foot holes and water the ground for several days so it would settle before the trees arrived.

"Once they took ownership," Mathur said, "caring for the trees wasn't a problem."

He also asked those receiving the trees to pass along the information to two other people and help them.

"The power of one teaching two," Mathur said.

That same power has been encouraged in every other initiative of Trees for Life.

Back home, the Wichita community and others rallied around the effort to buy more trees. Buttons were sold at Dillons. Millions of dollars were donated, Mathur said.

And 200 million trees have been planted through the group's efforts. Most of those have been moringa trees, whose leaves provide seven times the amount of vitamin C that oranges do, four times the amount of vitamin A compared with carrots, and four times as much calcium as milk.

The value of the moringa tree – its ability to thrive in dry conditions – had long been known to natives of those areas, said Fahey, the researcher at Johns Hopkins.

Every part of the tree is edible. The leaves have medicinal uses, and the seeds can be used to purify water.

But the Western medical community has been slow to acknowledge the tree's value, Fahey said.

"Balbir was one of three or four around the world who championed the tree," he said. "He used it as an example to show people

in developing countries who are poor and needed help how they could help themselves.

"He was sort of a Johnny Appleseed of the developing world."

## Taking ownership

Mathur had long known that education was also an important part of helping people in impoverished countries.

A man from India once reminded him there were only two ways children could escape poverty's vicious chain: death or education.

In the early 1990s, Trees for Life started an effort to get books in the hands of poor children in developing countries. More than 15 countries have received books from the group.

Mathur also expected those receiving the books to take ownership.

On a trip to Nicaragua, some women asked for a library.

"We'll provide you with your first supply of books," he told them, "but first you have to build a building and get someone trained to be a librarian."

Roths, the organization's board chair, who was on that trip, said: "It's never an outright gift, but it works. In a few years, we had libraries in 40 some villages.

"It was that kind of spreading the word and sharing with others that's the secret to his success."

## Teaching the teachers

Mathur also had seen teachers for poor students who knew very little about teaching.

"Most of them are working for as little as \$10 a month," Mathur said. "They are working as teachers because they can't get a job as house maids, which pays more."

Mathur takes the long view.

"I remember in the early years, I'd say, 'What's next?'" said Al Higdon, former owner of a Wichita advertising agency who has worked with Trees for Life. "And he'd say, 'What's next will come. It may be next year, it may be in 25 years. But it will come.'"

That's why Trees of Life has spent years – in part waiting on technology – to develop its plan to help the teachers.

Much of the work happens at Trees for Life's headquarters in Wichita, former Wichita elementary school Eugene Field, near

Meridian and St. Louis.

With the help of educators from Friends University, McPherson College, WSU and elsewhere, the plan will involve a website where teachers from developing countries can go and learn in their own language how to become better teachers, Mathur said.

The lessons come in short, simple segments with animation. A three-part training shows the three stages of preparing a lesson – introduction, new information and review.

"We've been testing them in different countries," Mathur said, "and it works immediately."

Teachers in the U.S. will model the lessons for those on the receiving end, WSU's Lefever-Davis said.

"The messages could be about how to develop a lesson or how to capture a student's attention," she said. "The lessons are very simple, but also very powerful."

Of course, Trees for Life could have just put all the information on a disc and shipped it to the countries. But that would skirt around the ownership piece, plus the instruction for each teacher to pass along the information to others, said Jeffrey Faus, a longtime staff member with the organization.

"It's taken time," Mathur said, "but we don't think in terms of deadlines. Our goals are for perfection. Whatever we do is done to perfection because it has to be replicated."

## Driven but patient

Mathur said he wouldn't be leaving if the education piece wasn't so close to being finished.

"I wouldn't even be thinking about it," Mathur said. "The timing couldn't be more perfect."

Younger leadership can come in with a better understanding of the new modes of communication, he said.

Mathur will leave quite a legacy, not just in work accomplished but impressions he's left with others.

"I don't know if you can be driven and patient at the same time," said Lefever-Davis, "but that's what he is.

"He knows what he wants to do, but he remains open to possibilities as they emerge."

Higdon said it is important that Trees for Life maintain the culture Mathur has established. "That's the hidden gem of the organization," he said.

Part of that gem is that Mathur is a servant to the poorest of the poor.

"That may sound disingenuous to some people," said Fahey, the Johns Hopkins researcher. "But you really have to believe it. He's the real deal."

Reach Rick Plumlee at 316-268-6660 or [rplumlee@wichtaeagle.com](mailto:rplumlee@wichtaeagle.com). Follow him on Twitter: @rickplumlee.



**Trees for Life**  
3006 W. St. Louis  
Wichita, KS 67203-5129  
[www.treesforlife.org](http://www.treesforlife.org)  
(316) 945-6929