

## Osgoode Hall Law School Alumni Profile



## Peace Prize Nominee Remembers Life on the Streets

Each morning when Mark Persaud, '91, LLM '01, enters his closet to get dressed, he sees a simple blue shirt hanging there – a reminder of his humble beginnings in Canada when he arrived in 1983 as a political refugee from Guyana.

The mere \$80.59 he was allowed to take out of Guyana evaporated in no time. “Then all I had was the clothes I was wearing – and that blue shirt is what I have left of them,” says soft-spoken Persaud, who explains he ended up on the streets of Toronto when he was told he could not take a job or receive social assistance until his refugee status was processed.

How Persaud managed to overcome colossal hardships to become CEO of the Canadian International Peace Project (CIPP) and become nominated for many awards, including the prestigious 2006 Seoul Peace Prize, reads almost like a work of fiction – except that it is true.

That part of Persaud’s story begins in 1983 when family members were either still in Guyana or in the United States, and he was spending the winter on the streets. Then the Scott Mission, a Toronto-based Christian organization that helps the destitute, embraced him and found him shelter, food and clothing.

Full of gratitude, Persaud says, “I wanted to give back.” And give back he did in the years to follow, volunteering countless hours with a wide variety of groups. He helped the homeless, he advocated for visible minorities and he assisted at foodbanks. Perhaps one of his most outstanding achievements as a volunteer was to found the first comprehensive organization for helping refugee claimants in Toronto, and then setting up and running a residence for some of them.

Eventually, the day came when Persaud was allowed to take paid work. “Then I thought, if I went through law school it would equip me with the skills to be a more effective social justice advocate. I was extremely impressed with lawyers I’d met through legal aid agencies.” So he headed to Osgoode.

During his law career, Persaud held several positions, including prosecutor with the Department of Justice and counsel to the RCMP. I enjoyed my career as a lawyer,” says Persaud. “I saw it as a form of public service.”

But the backlash toward many immigrants following 9/11 had a profound impact on him, prompting him to step away from litigation and turn, instead, toward peace. So, in late 2001, Persaud founded the secular, non-partisan organization CIPP, which grew from faith-based groups, a school and a peace organization. With the goal of reaching out to people of all religions and nations, he began by spearheading the rebuilding of a mosque in Afghanistan that had been a casualty of the civil war in that country.

“Now there are children in that mosque who are taking literacy classes. This is an illustration of how ordinary people who are motivated to make a contribution can work in unison and accomplish something.” Persaud and the CIPP are working continuously to foster peace, security and development. Now the Somali government is seeking his assistance.

A Somali government minister met with Persaud personally and then with governors from CIPP, asking for assistance on a number of issues. He wanted to explore the possibility of having a Canadian Special Envoy to Somalia who would advise the Canadian government on how it could assist Somalia.

“The Somali government also asked if Canada would be able to help train security personnel for the transitional government,” adds Persaud, who also talked about other roles the organization has played, including holding discussions with Parliamentary officials from Malaysia who wanted to learn about legislation policies that impact on multiculturalism in Canada.

Persaud’s work aiding others and promoting peace has attracted the admiration of many prominent people, such as Assembly of First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine and Ontario PC leader John Tory – not to mention the Seoul Peace Prize committee. Not surprisingly, despite garnering international recognition, Persaud remains typically humble. He still remembers his beginnings.

**He still has his old, blue shirt.**

**Source: by Cathy Carlyle, CONTINUUM, Osgoode Hall Law School of York University ALUMNI MAGAZINE, Winter, 2007, Volume XXXVI, Number 7**