

OPERATING THEATER



Rahmi Mowjood '94 combines medical training and thespian aspirations to activate volunteerism in other physicians.

BY OLIVER LIBAW (POM '94)

WITH EYEBROW COCKED AND CAMERAS ROLLING, a wild expression distorts the face of Dr. Rahmi Mowjood '94 as he implores, "We just don't have time!"

After a dramatic pause, friend and collaborator Carl Strecker (POM '94) calls "Cut!" and the cast and crew of Strecker's short film dissolve into laughter. Mowjood, a physician on the faculty of Western University of Health Sciences medical school in Pomona and a skilled actor, has just wrapped a scene in Strecker's latest project: a parody of the Fox Network drama *24*.

"Rahmi is the only person I know who can both quote *Henry V* and diagnose a torn rotator cuff," says Strecker.

Building on a dual pre-med/theater major (he was the lead in the 5-C production of *Richard III* and directed a student production of *Julius Caesar*), Mowjood completed his medical training at the College of Osteopathic Medicine of the Pacific while still making time to teach elementary school children and study classical acting in London. He also interspersed stints as a voice-over artist for cartoons, acted in radio dramas, and frequently helped Claremont buddies like Strecker with theater and film projects.

One of his most sobering accounts on film happened in the wake of last year's South Asia tsunami, when Mowjood called for Strecker's help in recording the efforts of U.S. physicians flown into Southeast Asia for medical relief. Strecker obliged, producing a 90-minute documentary under the working title *Inshallah*, Arabic for "God willing." For Mowjood, it was the second of two medical trips to the ravaged area. Both visits—the first just a week after the deadly wave hit—were to his native Sri Lanka.

Seeing as many as 100 patients a day, Mowjood worked alongside other physicians to treat everything from infectious diseases to post-traumatic stress disorder. While the long hours proved grueling in the heat and humidity of the Sri Lankan summer, Mowjood says

he was most troubled by the length of time that survivors were living in makeshift camps without sanitation and with minimal running water. "And also," he says, "with potentially no hope for a resolution to their living situation."

Although raised in Southern California, Mowjood says, "I owe so much of my life to Sri Lanka."

The rewards of the work there have been two-fold: the enthusiasm and fervor with which medical volunteers have returned to help, and the fated meeting of his now-wife, Hafsa Mahroof, a lawyer and family friend. Of the first, Mowjood says medical students are not only interested in returning to Sri Lanka, but to other places in the world.

"Cultivating the seed of volunteerism in people is not easy," says Mowjood, who, through the Alumni Mentoring Café, has kept in close touch with his alma mater, old friends, and pre-med students, including one undergraduate who shadowed him during work at a free clinic in San Bernardino. He also volunteers his medical skills at high school football games, and sometimes serves as the stadium physician for the Anaheim Angels. "Discovering that incoming medical students want to continue this type of work is personally very gratifying."

On meeting Mahroof, he says their friendship developed profoundly and quickly during his second visit, and the couple married just two days before his return to the United States.

Mowjood doesn't much differentiate between the value of volunteering locally or across the globe. On the heels of yet another national tragedy—the painful recollections of 9/11—he found himself entrenched in history in another way. "The people who hijacked those planes also hijacked my faith," says Mowjood, who now works with the Muslim Public Affairs Council. "My goal is to tell people that Muslim Americans are part of the solution, not part of the problem."

And if *Inshallah* happens to inspire others to the ranks of similar humanitarian aid, so much the better. His hopes for the documentary, should it make the film festival circuit in coming weeks and months, is to raise awareness.

"Get it sold and let people see it," he says. "For me that would be great."

Oliver Libaw is a senior producer at ABCNews.com.



Mowjood, left, with Strecker and crew in Sri Lanka. A film buff and trained actor, Mowjood once turned down an offer from a theatrical agent in order to study medicine. "It was a tough decision," he says. "But I had been given the opportunity to go to medical school and I didn't want to waste it."