

Testing the System

ONE OF THESE DAYS, RAJIV RAJU pronounced to himself – with all the certainty a 13-year-old boy can muster – I’ll make a difference. I’ll level the playing field. Yes, he thought, one of these days. Now five years later, he has proved to be a man of his word.

Even at Barrington High School, where academic celebrity is customary and often expected, Rajiv has carved new territory. When he walks down the hall between classes, fellow students who did not know him before are now likely to stop him and say hello. It’s good to be famous, if only briefly, and especially if the reason for fame is the right reason.

Thus, this is a story of how a young man’s self-revelation begets maturity and how that maturity often begets a benefit that never stops rippling through other people’s lives. This is not a story about being smart. It’s about what a person does with the smart.

Rajiv, the son of physicians Bhanumathi Raju and Subba Raju, is among the best students at Barrington High School, though the school no longer rates such things with the valedictorian process. But it wasn’t always so obvious. “I think Barrington High School is just right,” he said. “It’s not a joke academically. It’s not a place you can just slide through. I have to work, though it’s not grinding all the time. But I wasn’t always accustomed to being in the smart classes.”

There was a time that, by his own standard, Rajiv was an average kid with average intelligence heading in no particular direction. “I was in the middle school in average classes,” he recalled. “I found school boring. And I wasn’t being challenged. It just wasn’t happening for me. And then I did well on this one test. And then I started liking learning, and it all made sense. How if you score well on some tests, it determines which classes you have. How it’s not really how smart you are, but how many resources you have and what your attitude is. I saw so many kids who had so much potential, but thought school was a penitentiary.”

Rajiv has set himself free.

First, the most obvious mark of that escape. He



Siblings and co-authors Silpa and Rajiv Raju.

scored a perfect 36 on the American College Test, the bellwether exam that guards the door to American universities. Do well on it, and your future is prepared. Do poorly and the door squeaks closed. Only 500 American students among the 1.4 million who take the test every year can match that 36. He’s the fourth at Barrington in recent years to do it.

But in addition, he learned how to master the math, science, English and writing skill it demands. That is a more sophisticated understanding than merely answering the questions correctly. And then he learned how to teach others to do it, too.

To prove he understood the ACT, he and sister Silpa, a sophomore at Barrington, wrote the 130-page “Dissecting the ACT” and then the even deeper “Dissecting the ACT 2.0.” In less than a year, the \$10 book hit the No. 2 spot at Amazon.com for books of its kind. And the student testing and seminar industry is a \$400 million universe that does not treat amateurs kindly.

Rajiv’s profits from the first year, \$10,000, all went to buying his own book for free distribution to Chicago students. He’ll do the same thing this year. Then the next. And then as far as he can.

The book works because students who have used it score better. “One emailed me and said he

had been stuck in the 20s and then read the books and scored a 33,” Rajiv said.


Both Rajiv and Silpa had been motivated by the same observation. Some students had academic resources that others didn’t. That disparity, even more than intelligence and a yearning to learn, pushed some upward and left others out.

“Silpa and I had both seen seminars and tutoring programs and parents who’d spend hundreds, thousands on these things for students. It bothered both of us,” he said. “Some kids have the resources. Others don’t. But that doesn’t make it fair. It can’t be just about money or not money.”

So he leveled the playing field.

Next? Silpa is thinking of medical school or perhaps opera. She’s a soprano who can hit the F above C; sometimes she can break fine crystal glassware when that F gets to a G.

Rajiv is almost sure to head for pre-med, though not necessarily radiology (his dad’s field) or geriatrics (his mother’s specialty). “You can make a difference. I want that satisfaction.”

Yes, you can almost hear him thinking. One of these days I’ll level that playing field.  David Rutter is former senior editor at five newspapers, including the Lake County News-Sun.