

ARTS & LIFE

Portrait of courage

Brian Cameron's book on Dr. Jamshid Aidun takes readers on a 'healing journey' **G1**



Portrait of a man of courage and humility

JEFF MAHONEY

Brian Cameron's book opens with a powerful thrust into (as the expression goes) "the middle of things," in media res, for our Latin-speaking readers, and, for his embattled "hero," oh, what things to be in the middle of.

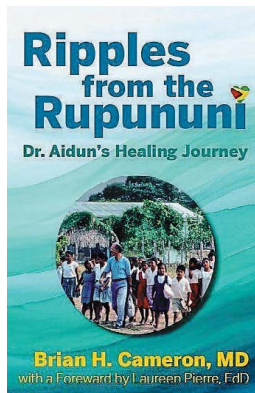
Not only the middle of the hero's own story and his own life, but also, as a stranger in a strange land (a Canadian surgeon in the interior of Guyana), in the middle of a makeshift hospital. In the thick of a medical emergency, submerged in circumstances beyond his control.

He was to help deliver the child of a woman who'd been delivered to him, in a bullock cart over a bumpy dirt road. But the woman and child were in the shadow of imminent death. The baby was stuck sideways, transversely, in the birth canal.

No electricity, no running water (these were sporadic in that part of Guyana). No time. Getting her to the nearest properly equipped hospital would take too long.

Just Dr. Jamshid Aidun, a midwife with 18 months medical training, the patient and her baby, and nothing for Aidun and the midwife to fall back on but their own desperate compassion.

Cameron's book, "Ripples from the Rupununi: Dr. Aidun's Healing Journey," is non-fiction. But the author in many places evinces a novelist's intuition for drawing out the human drama in situations; for es-



BLAIR CAMERON

"Ripples from the Rupununi: Dr. Aidun's Healing Journey," published by Friesen Press, is available at friesenpress.com and many area bookstores.

tablishing geographical/social setting and character in vivid fullness; for clarifying complex and high stakes developments with mounting energy and narrative drive.

The Rupununi region in Guyana is a place full of diversity and challenge, of natural strength and human fragility. Unlike any other place, it is full of those things in its very own way.

"It is mostly savannah, but partly rain forest, and there are harpy eagles there and jaguars," Cameron tells me. It has several Indigenous

peoples, coexisting with other major population groups — East Indian, African slave descendants, Europeans.

Aidun, a Baha'i (as is Cameron, who is also a doctor, a pediatric surgeon, retired), arrived in Guyana at a crossroads in his life in 1992.

Aidun, now 96 and living in Toronto, was born in Iran, where the Baha'is face terrible persecution. By fortune he got the chance to study medicine, first in India, then in Pakistan. He became a surgeon, practising in the U.S. for a short time before he was invited to take a job in Winnipeg, followed soon by another in Brandon, Man., where he stayed for 20 years, becoming top surgeon there.

He and his wife, Gol, raised three children, but tragically in the 1980s, on a trip to India Gol was killed in a train accident. Aidun's soul was thrown into an agitation of turmoil. He was visited by night terrors.

After continuing his practice for two years, in the vacuum of Gol's absence, he was approached by a fellow doctor and asked if he'd help with a health teaching project run by the Baha'i community — in Guyana. They were in desperate need of volunteers.

He went, and thus began a defining chapter in Aidun's life. It helped him heal. He stayed for two years but returned and this time to the isolation and poverty of Rupununi, where the book's opening scene happens. And it was that incident

SEE RIPPLES, G2

Dr. Brian Cameron with Dr. Jamshid Aidun at the recent book launch in Dundas for "Ripples from the Rupununi: Dr. Aidun's Healing Journey."

BLAIR CAMERON

Ripples

CONTINUED FROM G1

that steeled him to stay many more years, during which he helped transform the health, hospital and surgery profile of a troubled nation.

“He would say that as long as people in the villages were struggling like that, he could not leave,” says Cameron, whose father Gordon, now 99, was Hamilton’s first pediatric surgeon.

Cameron’s book is a fascinating odyssey of triumph, frustration, patience, sadness, compassion, glee, humour and the hope that comes with gradual but entrenched improvement.

Cameron himself, starting in the 1990s, visited Guyana many times, as did other doctors, surgeons, professionals, educators of all stripes, working mainly through the Baha’i Community Health Partnership there, which Aidun led.

The book, full of interviews and side stories, is a portrait of a man of courage and humility who quietly compelled, by example, a transformation into being, through collective effort.

The pregnant woman? Aidun followed the midwife’s lead and together they managed to realign the child and performed a breech birth. “This was not some great saviour” model of aid, says Cameron, who calls his first chapter “The Humble Doctor.”

Learner and teacher in Aidun’s practice — and that of those who followed him — continuously interchange roles. The Guyanese are now teaching themselves and send many medical students to McMaster and beyond to return to continue building health there.

“It is part of the Baha’i faith,” says Cameron, “that we are each called to make a difference.” The difference Aidun made inspired others to make their own. The ripples of the title. But ripples get ironed out if not pushing out yet more ripples and hence the book, says Cameron.

He chose now to write it, because he’s retired. Also because Guyana, once the second poorest nation in the western hemisphere, is now a petrostate and one of the fastest growing economies in the world.

After all, we may be many rivers but are we not one world? The book helps put us in the watershed of the Rupununi and each in the family-shed of the other. When one struggles, how can their sisters and brothers leave?

It’s a beautiful book, a beautiful story, one for our times.