

News

A multi-faceted professor



Picture: ANTHONY McMILLAN

PROFESSOR Karthigasen Govender at Howard College.

He modestly suggests his wife is probably better known than he is. **Greg Ardé** reports.

TALL, slim, and friendly faced, 35-year-old Professor Karthigasen Govender rocks gently in the comfortable chair behind his desk in Natal University's impressive Howard College building.

You could say his entire demeanour suggests he's resting on his laurels.

But, his wife Suria has danced with President Nelson Mandela, and as a speech and drama lecturer at the University of Durban-Westville, he modestly suggests she's probably better known than he is.

Professor Govender, who was recently appointed, along with fellow KwaZulu-Natalian Professor Charles Dlamini, as one of the first

members of South Africa's Human Rights Commission is fast becoming a name in the hallowed halls of legal academia.

Admitted as a London barrister, or the English equivalent of an advocate, at the tender age of 21, he has an impressive string of scholarly successes — not bad for the son of a store owner who spent his childhood in a flat in Durban's Prince Edward Street.

He recalls his training in England with some reverence, and the times he was expected to lunch with judges while studying to become a barrister, as daunting.

But, all-in-all, he says it was a lesson in good discipline and hard work.

Professor Govender's achievements, abbreviated, include: an LLB from the University of London, and one from NU — summa cum laude. He also won the prestigious moot court contest in 1986 and was awarded a Fullbright scholarship to Michigan University in the US where he was awarded a masters in law.

His final degree had a heavy

bias in favour of constitutional law, and his current full-time job is as the head of NU's department of public law.

The Howard College office is crammed with law books, not surprising, he remarks with a smile, that he should have turned out as studious as he did.

"I think I played one soccer game in my childhood. The small school I went to was in the middle of town and didn't have a sports-ground. Every year we had athletics competitions and they walked us to the turf club and back, which I think was the sum total of my exercise."

Now the professor and father of son Yesh, 9, and daughter Tarcia-Rasa, 6, goes to gym twice a week and jogs. He says his family is his recreation, although he's grateful for a very helpful wife and extended support system, because "I really should spend more time with them".

A possible reason Professor Govender is often stretched for time is his multi-faceted legal work which sees him as an adviser to

KwaZulu-Natal's constitutional committee, lecturer, junior counsel with the Durban Bar, and now a member of the fledgling HRC on a seven-year stint.

He is also a member of KwaZulu-Natal's Town and Regional Planning Commission, and acts as a mediator.

The 11-member HRC was inaugurated in Pretoria last week and will act as a public watchdog over the Government. Another of its roles will be to foster a culture of human rights in a country where this has been sorely neglected.

"I see it as a unique opportunity to make a difference," Professor Govender says, his hands moving while he speaks.

"I am honoured and a little humbled that it may be a task beyond my capabilities. It's really not often that one gets a chance to shape things."

The yellow markers dotting the numerous law books lining his office walls indicate frequent use. He is enlivened by the law. "Look at those books behind you," he points enthusiastically.