



Story BRAD CROUCH

# CHASING DREAMS

**SURVIVING IN A MALE-DOMINATED INDUSTRY TAKES SOME GRIT. LUCKILY, MEDICAL SPECIALIST AANCHAL GUPTA HAS PLENTY OF THAT**

**A**anchal Gupta is living the dream. A tough, “occasionally crazy” dream, a thoroughly modern multicultural dream, one her parents had – but definitely her own dream. One with steep learning curves, culture shocks, navigating “unconscious gender bias” and juggling family life, but with deeply satisfying rewards of restoring vision splendid. The high achieving medical specialist with a broad Aussie accent who migrated from India aged 10 – “I’m an Australian with an Indian background” – shrugged off hurdles which might slow a less determined professional.

The ophthalmologist specialising in laser vision correction surgery, corneal transplants and cataract surgery has just marked two years as only the second woman in the nation to open her own laser vision correction clinic, taking the huge plunge to open IVISION LASER at Dulwich in August 2022 while the nation was emerging from the Covid shake-up. While medical training took discipline, she lists the new skills it took to also become a small-business woman: finding suitable premises, lease agreements, hiring staff, fit-out, interior design, financials, tax issues, graphic design, specialist medical equipment, complex IT, budgets ... the list goes on. “It was nuts,” she recalls succinctly. But

“THERE IS A LOT OF TALK ABOUT UNCONSCIOUS GENDER BIAS BUT IT IS SO INGRAINED

worth the effort. Asked if she is “living the dream” with her new venture, she pauses, ponders, then smiles.

“I am living the dream in that I have full autonomy, have been able to set up the place as I envisaged it as a bespoke service provider with a high level of attention to detail, a real personal touch and surgical excellence,” she answers.

“I feel like my brand has shone through and that is important in my journey.”

New arrivals at her plush Dulwich premises, nervous with eye issues, will find soft music, calming artworks, and a soothingly welcome designer atmosphere with no hint of its inspiring backstory.

Vijay and Veena Gupta migrated to Adelaide from Meerut in India in 1991 when daughters Aanchal was 10 and Aakriti was a baby.

Veena was a high school maths and science teacher. Vijay a pharmaceutical distributor, with the classic migrant hope of seeking a better life for the children.

It was a culture shock for a young girl. Aanchal soon made friends and settled in, but it was not an easy transition. “It was a bit of a problem because you look different, you think different, you speak different because you have just arrived,” she says.

Sadly her father died in 1994 leaving the family in a rented home in Norwood.

Grieving mother Veena faced the difficult choice of returning to India or trying to raise her two young daughters here.

She managed to get some temporary relief teaching shifts, then eventually found contract teaching work, determinedly holding the family together.

“Mum did not even know how to drive, it was buses everywhere, but she is a strong person,” Aanchal says.

“It was very clear in her mind she was going to stay here for us. In India there are no opportunities for a widow and children of a widow, particularly girls.

“We would not have had the financial capacity to go to the best schools, the opportunity to pay our way into university, and it is not safe as well to some extent for three females.”

A school career counsellor told Aanchal she may not get into medicine so she applied for computer systems engineering in Adelaide – but when a school friend applied for medicine in Melbourne she thought she might as well “give it a try”.

“In Indian families, doing medicine is a really big deal – and it was in the back of my mind,” she says.

An invitation from Monash University followed with a merit scholarship to study medicine. Aanchal was mulling over specialising in dermatology but had been introduced to a family friend while in Melbourne who is an ophthalmologist, which planted a seed.

However, it did not seem a real option, with little exposure to the specialty during med school.

Aanchal’s mother insisted she return to Adelaide for her intern year, and after a rotation in emergency medicine she was due for a placement in dermatology when serendipity intervened.

She was instead told to go to neurology where patient numbers “were out of control”.

Efficiently helping get them to a manageable level, she earned the Intern of the



Ophthalmologist Dr Aanchal Gupta with her husband Dr Vikas Jasoria and their twin nine-year-old sons Kush and Kabir; at her IVISION LASER practice, main picture; and, below, in 2017.

Year Award for Excellence in Medicine. Grateful for her efforts, the registrar expressed his appreciation by inviting her to dinner with him and his wife, an ophthalmologist.

It was sounding more and more appealing to Aanchal who by now realised she wanted to do something that combined microsurgery and medicine.

“But there are only two (college training) positions in SA a year, and they get about 110 applicants, it’s highly competitive,” she says.

However, the seed was growing as her new female ophthalmologist friend helped with advice.

A year’s working holiday in the United Kingdom crystallised her future career plans.

“By that stage I was deadset on ophthalmology, I realised it was a way more interesting specialty than anything else I wanted to do,” she says.

She landed an unaccredited ophthalmology job at the RAH for two years, did a Masters in Medicine, research work, then finally gained the coveted ophthalmology specialist training spot, of four years training, followed by a year in Vancouver specialising in laser vision correction, corneal transplantation and cataract surgery which she says was “life changing”.

Aanchal is blunt when talking about the challenges as she pursued her vision in ophthalmology.

“It is very male dominated,” she says, noting

that in 2020 just 30 per cent of college fellows are women and few are in leadership roles.

“There is a lot of talk about unconscious gender bias but it is so ingrained in so many ways.

“It is changing, but slowly. There are not enough females being mentored into leadership positions and there are just not enough female mentors.”

Aanchal has sought to help fill that gap in a three-year mentoring stint as director of training on the SA training program.

She sits on the RANZCO College Council and the RANZCO branch committee as well as the World College of Refractive Surgery committee where she helps develop policies and procedures that encourage diversity, foster inclusion and support the next generation of female leaders in ophthalmology.

Through her roles, Aanchal is focused on creating pathways to leadership and providing mentorship opportunities for young women entering the profession, ensuring they feel empowered to step into positions of influence and innovation.

She says her Indian background was not an issue in ophthalmology training where competence is the key.

However, during her time at the RAH, where she still consults, she does recall a patient who “didn’t want to see me because I was an Indian”.

“I think he got told where to go,” she smiles with a hint of mischief.

She dedicated nine years to a private clinic, but a shift in management towards corporate, non-doctor ownership led to a divergence in values and philosophies.

It was time to take the plunge – and IVISION LASER was born.

She says it has been hard work, and “occasionally crazy” but worth it.

“We’ve been able to introduce state-of-the-art technology, pursue research and development to ensure the practice is providing medical care that is at the cutting edge,” she says.

All while ensuring plenty of time for the loves of her life, husband Vikas and twin nine-year-old sons Kush and Kabir.

In this modern supermum juggling act, Aanchal rises before dawn most mornings to do administration and research work before getting the boys ready for school.

The immense responsibility of being an eye surgeon, a small-business owner and a mother may be daunting but Aanchal clearly relishes a challenge.

The rewards are patients.

“In vision correction you are changing people’s lives so quickly, in a really significant way,” she says.

“People who, if they weren’t in their glasses would be legally blind, turn up after surgery having 20:20 vision – it is just the best day.

“It is the best feeling, that is what gives me a high and keeps me going. For me, it is all about the patients.”

From fixing sight clouded by cataracts to seeing happy patients discard their glasses after laser vision correction, Aanchal is proud of her work – and has sage advice for young women weighing up their career options.

“You have to follow your dreams,” she says.

“Don’t fight the system, just become better.

“Make yourself as competent as you can be so you are unstoppable.

“Don’t focus on what is not right, just keep going.” ■

“  
YOU ARE  
CHANGING  
PEOPLE’S LIVES  
SO QUICKLY,  
IN A REALLY  
SIGNIFICANT  
WAY

