



# SOOD & SOOD

Computer science brings true love to **Sara and Sanjay Sood** as they move from here to HERE and here again.

**IN FALL OF 2002**, during the first week of graduate school classes, Sara Owsley, a recent graduate of DePauw University, was setting up her office at 1890 Maple Avenue, then home to Northwestern Engineering's computer science department.

Then, Sanjay Sood walked in. At that moment a conversation began that would last a lifetime, lead to marriage and children, and actually influence the future of computer science.

Sara Owsley Sood is now Chookaszian Family Teaching Professor in the Department of Computer Science at the McCormick School of Engineering. Sanjay Sood is vice president of the Unit of Highly Automated Driving at HERE Technologies, which earned him a spot on *Crain's 40 Under 40*.

## **A VERY NORTHWESTERN FIRST DATE**

When Sanjay, a recent Northwestern grad from Downers Grove, Illinois, first met Sara, a native of Louisville, Kentucky, 16 years ago, he recalls, "I thought she was smart and funny. She was from the South with a little bit of an accent. I was amazed by this woman who was a math major but picked up computer science later."

Unlike Sanjay and many others in their 20-person cohort, Sara was relatively new to coding. During her junior year in college, her life-long ambition to become a math teacher shifted when a professor advised her to take a computer science class to stave off the boredom of her math studies.

That interaction with a faculty member helped Sara realize she wanted to teach at the college level. “I never would have found CS otherwise,” she says. “My professor really guided me. I wanted to have that type of impact.”

So, when Sara met Sanjay, she was intrigued but a little intimidated.

“Sanjay was part of a group of guys in McCormick’s Intelligent Information Lab who had a lot of experience in coding. They were cool. They were into Chicago’s band scene. They already were a crew,” she says. “And I was one of the few women in the cohort.”

But, by week’s end, Sanjay and Sara went on their first date—a lecture on campus by Judd A. and Marjorie Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences Professor Gary Galbreath about moon bears, followed by a field hockey game and dinner at a Chinese restaurant.

“It was a very Northwestern-style date,” Sanjay says.

That evening quickly led to three more dates. “We definitely knew ‘this is it’ right away,” Sara says. The duo became almost inseparable, taking all the same classes and buying a South Evanston condo together.

Sara switched advisers to work with Kris Hammond, Bill and Cathy Osborn Professor of Computer Science, who focuses on artificial intelligence and mentored Sanjay as an undergrad. “That’s where all the fun was,” Sara says.

Throughout graduate school, the couple’s work intertwined on several projects, including a sentiment analysis system that was trained on product reviews. “Writing code together was a fairly traumatic time in our relationship,” Sanjay says. “We were looking over each other’s shoulders and trying to be super nice to each other while trying to get work done. It was a little tricky.”

It was also very productive. Sara’s thesis project, called Buzz, led to Sanjay’s first job out of grad school. Buzz mined the web for interesting, emotional blog stories. Then, a text-to-speech engine and 3D rendering created theatrical performance pieces enacted by avatars. The project was set up as an exhibit at The Second City, Chicago’s fabled improvisational comedy club.

Sanjay finished his program a quarter earlier than Sara, just as the Intelligent Information Laboratory received seed money from AT&T to launch a project. The lab chose Buzz, creating BuzzLabs.

“We ended up taking the guts of what Sara had done for Buzz and brought in professional designers and developers to build technology to create thousands of high-fidelity virtual performances,” says Sanjay, who served as chief technology officer for about a year.

## CALIFORNIA DREAM

Sanjay and Sara married in June 2007. After Sara graduated, she landed her dream job—assistant professor of computer science at Pomona College in Claremont, California, near Los Angeles. “I wanted to be at a small liberal arts school where I could focus on teaching,” she says. “It was exactly what I wanted to do.”

Sanjay moved with her to Southern California but took a job as chief technology officer at a San Francisco startup called Allvoices,

which licensed InfoLab technology from Northwestern. For three years, he commuted to Northern California each work week.

“We lived in that pretty town near LA where Sara could focus on being an awesome teacher,” Sanjay says. It worked. Sara earned the liberal arts college’s Wig Distinguished Professor Award for Excellence in Teaching.

“I loved Pomona College,” Sara says. “I was tenured. I had 20 to 40 students, and I felt I was having impact—teaching, researching, and doing service.”

By 2010, just before their first child was born, Sanjay was over the 400-mile commute. Through his connections at BuzzLabs, he landed the job as chief data architect at AT&T Interactive near Los Angeles. Eventually, he moved up to senior vice president of successor company YP, running the 200-person team that developed a successful website and mobile app offering information from the US consumer Yellow Pages.

## MIDWEST IS BEST

But in 2014, with two children and the desire for a third, the couple felt a tug to return to the Midwest and their families. “LA was not where we wanted to raise our kids,” Sara says. “And, I wanted to focus on only teaching.”

A recruiter called Sanjay about a job in Chicago at HERE Technologies, a billion-dollar tech company that creates location software, services, and content used by the likes of Facebook, Microsoft, SAP, and almost every global auto company. He accepted the job.

Meanwhile, Sara talked to universities around town, and ultimately was offered a position as an associate professor of instruction at Northwestern with a sole mission of teaching. “It is the perfect job for me,” she says.

The opportunity came just as a tsunami of interest hit the Department of Computer Science, with hundreds of students flooding into undergraduate courses that once had attracted only a few dozen. “Northwestern quickly realized it needed to scale up its program,” Sara says.

She credits Dean Julio M. Ottino with raising the profile of teaching computer science by giving her the first named position for a nontenured person in the McCormick School of Engineering. “He understands how important CS is to the future,” Sara says.

Meanwhile, Sanjay’s work has evolved along with the technology. He now leads a team of more than 300 at HERE working to develop systems that allow automated cars to navigate roads and their obstacles—critical developments for safe and smooth rides.

Both alumni, it seems, are influencing the future of computer science professionally and at home. Their two oldest children, Lincoln, 8, and William, 5, already are coding. Their youngest, Amara, is just 3.

“I would love for our kids to go to Northwestern when it comes time for college,” Sanjay says. “You can get a great foundational education and a great start on life.”

JULIANNE HILL