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Clemson professor, solar energy proponent honored by White House

By Amy Clarke Burns
Greenville NewsMay 12, 2014

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Rajendra Singh

CLEMSON UNIVERSITY

CLEMSON, SC — Sometimes the honor you’re receiving is so big, it’s almost unbelievable.

When Clemson professor Rajendra Singh received a call telling him he’d been named a White House Champion of Change for his work on solar energy, he immediately called his wife.

“She said, ‘It’s a prank call. Don’t believe that the White House has called you,’” he said with a laugh.
But the call was real and so was the honor for Singh, who said the exposure is helping him accomplish goals he’s had for three decades.

“‘I’m going to do the same thing which I’m going to do before, but now everybody’s going to listen to me,’” he said. “‘What we wanted to do in 1980 is happening now.’”

Singh, a native of India, said he spent his first 12 years of life without electricity. It created in him a drive to bring one of modern life’s basic conveniences to the more than 1 billion people on the planet who still don’t have access.

“I’m born in a culture where we worship the sun right from birth because that’s the source of energy,” he said. “That energy can do everything for everybody now.”

Champions of Change is a White House program that recognizes individuals making a difference in their communities. Singh was honored along with nine others also focused on increasing access to solar energy.

Singh said he first became interested in solar energy around the time he came to the U.S. to continue his advanced studies.

It was 1973 and the oil embargo led to long lines and shortages at gas pumps.

“I knew oil is not the best friend. We need to look for sun,” he said.

Singh, the D. Houser Banks Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering and director of Clemson’s Center of Silicon Nanoelectronics, framed his interest in solar as an exploding economic opportunity for South Carolina.

“Everybody wants jobs. Everybody wants job security. Everybody wants energy,” he said. “Education is the biggest thing. We need to educate our regulators. We need to educate our legislators. We need to educate our governor. It’s job creation, economic prosperity.”

The U.S. is at a turning point, he said, when market forces are making solar energy an ever more appealing option.

“You don’t pay the price for the fuel. Fuel is free. It’d just be the hardware, and that hardware cost is going down,” he said. “The business model will change.”

Singh said he wants South Carolina to be at the forefront of the market, leading the nation and the world in manufacturing components that will help bring affordable energy to local homes and businesses and to every corner of the world.