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Entrepreneurial Roots Run Deep for Young WV Businessman

FAIRMONT - Entrepreneurship is a familiar word to Chirag Patel. He was just 5 years old when his parents, Pravin and Tara, relocated to West Virginia from New Jersey to open the Heldreth Motel and Restaurant in Kingwood. That small business venture has expanded to eight motels stretched over three states. His grandparents operated small businesses in Tanzania (Africa) and the Fiji Islands more than 50 years ago. Growing up the son and grandson of small business owners, and experiencing firsthand the rewards and benefits of small business ownership, Patel was destined to follow the same path.

Patel is currently President and Chief Executive Officer of DN American, an information technology company certified in the U.S. Small Business Administration's 8(a) Business Development and Small Disadvantaged Business programs. DN American is located at the West Virginia High Technology Park in Fairmont, W. Va.

During the short course of his entrepreneurial career, he has managed several small business concerns. "I actually started my first business, FITNETICS, LLC, a fitness center, soon after I graduated from West Virginia University in 1998," said Patel. "I majored in business management and couldn't wait to graduate and start my own business."

Asked why he chose a fitness center as his first business venture Patel replies, "Fitness had always been a hobby. If I could find the right location, I knew I could start a successful fitness facility. The Morgantown area was saturated with fitness centers at the time and Fairmont seemed like the logical location, especially the area around the I-79 high-tech corridor." Soon after opening FITNETICS he met and married his wife, Binita, who joined him in the day-to-day operations of the center.

Patel knew about the U.S. Small Business Administration's 8(a) Business Development Program from his internships during college at DN American, then owned by cousin Nash Patel. "I saw how the government contracting program helped DN American grow and as a result, I knew that's where I wanted to go," added Patel.

The SBA is a federal government agency that helps maintain and strengthen the nation's economy by aiding, counseling, assisting and protecting the interests of small business and by helping families and businesses recover from national disasters. The 8(a) program is an essential instrument for helping socially and economically disadvantaged entrepreneurs gain access to the economic mainstream of American society. The SBA has helped thousands of aspiring entrepreneurs over the years to gain a foothold in government contracting. Participation is divided into two phases over nine years: a four-year developmental stage and a five-year transitional stage.

Participants can receive sole-source contracts, up to a ceiling of \$3 million for goods and services and \$5 million for manufacturing. While SBA helps 8(a) firms build their competitive and institutional know-how, the agency also encourages them to participate in competitive acquisitions.

After certification in the 8(a) program, Patel turned the operations of FITNETICS over to his wife and concentrated his efforts on a new information technology business, Innovative Management and Technology Systems (IMTS). “I began marketing IMTS as an IT services company with the assistance from Nash at DN American,” said Patel. “That eventually led to a formal mentor-protégé agreement through the SBA’s 8(a) program. The agreement helped my business grow from one employee to 20 over the course of two years and led to two subcontracts through DN American with the Federal Bureau of Investigations and National Aeronautics and Space Administration.”

More contracts soon followed, including their first prime contract with NASA’s IV&V facility in Fairmont. “We decided to sell the fitness facility and concentrate our efforts on growing IMTS,” adds Patel. “SBA’s mentor-protégé program enabled me to grow my company by marketing and providing services to the federal government.”

His entrepreneurial efforts drew the attention of Vanessa Schoetz, affiliated services manager at the West Virginia High Technology Foundation, who nominated him as SBA’s 2005 Young Entrepreneur of the Year for West Virginia; he won. “Receiving the Young Entrepreneur award is a very important milestone in my early career,” Patel said. “I’m very grateful for the support I’ve received, especially from my colleagues at DN American, the SBA, the WVHTF, and most importantly, my family.”

Patel is not slowing down; in fact, he recently acquired DN American. “I will continue to operate under the DN American name,” he said. “I want to build on the successful legacy that has spanned the past 15 years.”

That company, which is comprised of 150 employees in six states, continues to grow. “Our vision is to continue expanding into other regions of the country,” he adds.

Although Patel has demonstrated the potential to grow, he does not plan to move the company out of the state. “West Virginia is a great place to live and raise a family,” states Patel. “We have great employees at DN American. They are supportive, really enjoy their work, and are like family. I am not even thinking about moving the company, just to grow it.”

For more information on the SBA and the resources available to assist small business, contact the West Virginia District Office at 800-767-8052 extension 8 or by email at wvinfo@sba.gov, or visit their web site at www.sba.gov/wv.