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AN INTERVIEW WITH HEMANT PATEL

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Hemant Patel on January 30, 2025, with Shaun Illingworth and...

Sachin Hosmane: ...Sachin Hosmane.

SI: Thank you so much for coming in today. We really appreciate it.

Hemant Patel: My pleasure, my pleasure.

SI: To begin, can you tell us where and when you were born?

HP: Bombay, India.

SI: What year?

HP: 14 August, 1958.

SI: What were your parents' names?

HP: Prabhudas Patel and Kumudben Patel.

SI: Starting with your father's side of the family, what do you know about where he came from, if the family moved around at all, that sort of thing?

HP: No, it is local migrations, because he came for study in Mumbai, being a science graduate. He was an entrepreneur. So, after [becoming] a science graduate, he did the plastic manufacturing business. He set up one factory, then, two factories and, totally, three factories.

His expertise was a packaging product line for the plastic blow-molded and injection-molded products, for the cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, drugs and chemical products, which [are] called blow-molded products, like what we have over here, a Tylenol bottle, shampoo bottle, Pantene shampoo bottles and like that.

So, he was called a packaging man, because he was supplying to all the multinationals in Bombay. There [was] a lot of manufacturing going on. So, it was a booming business in those days. So, he carried on that until I came from college [as a] graduate to help him in his business.

SI: Had there been any history of entrepreneurship in the family or was he the first to kind of...

HP: He was the first of a kind, because he inherited a farming and tobacco growing and trading business, in which it was interior to Maharashtra and Gujarat. So, he was in Mumbai. So, he wanted to start the manufacturing place, which is not ideally located inside [the] interior territory. So, he decided to be in Mumbai to start with the manufacturing of the plastic business. So, he inherited the tobacco trading and tobacco farmlands in acres, but he didn't go back there.

SI: Had the family been in that area for generations?

HP: Yes, yes, three generations to four generations in that area.

SI: Did he ever explain how he came to attend college, what led him to plastics, that sort of thing?

HP: Sure. Because he was having a science [education] and graduation with a major in chemistry and all that, he was more attracted towards the engineering aspects of anything, but he was a science graduate. His interest was to do the commercial activities. So, he found this [interest] when he was in [his] college days, [but] he never knew how to start it. So, he explored the retail market.

When [he studied the] retail market, he saw everything is packaged goods. So, he [became] attracted towards the packaging side. So, packaging containers require a lot of knowledge. So, he joined few institutes, design institute and all that--commercial product line designing, not a clothing line.

From that, he thought that manufacturing is the right way to go, particularly for plastic containers, which is a polymer molding. Then, it required decoration, the screen printing and labeling. So, he decided to go on that path by his own inspiration, by going to the retail point, but he went to the manufacturing side based on that.

SI: Did he ever mention if it was difficult to start a business then in India?

HP: Yes.

SI: Okay.

HP: Why India?--because Mumbai. Mumbai (Bombay) is a metropolitan city. Manufacturing takes place in the industrialized and commercial zone only. So, [he went] to look on the small-scale entrepreneurship, to look for a small-scale business venture. He had a limited budget. He never went to the bank; he never approached [a bank] for a loan.

So, [when it came to] how to put a capital plan together, it was like a mom-and-pop. So, he had his savings account and his few friends supported him, "Do it, do it, we are with you." So, he said, "But, my bottleneck is capital." They said, "Don't worry, go ahead. We are there for you."

So, they used to come when he started at a small scale and they showed him. They saw him, that he's operating, sometime [with] extra orders. He worked up to midnight, overnight, [would] tell workers to do the extended shift, with the facilities [for] tea, breakfast and all that thing. Everything worked out with the friends' support over the encouragement side.

So, capital was a bottleneck. Then, banks started seeing the deposit of the checks. He says, "Mr. Patel, why don't you borrow the money from us?" Mr. Patel says, "How?" So, they say, "Hypothecation and collateral of your machinery; we'll give you the liquid capital," which is called a line of credit.

That's how my dad grew up and expanded the same place with more machineries, more units. Units means expansion of the number of manufacturing [units]. [The] expansion [was] not [in] the same place; same place was small. So, after fifteen years, he got [his] first opportunity to expand it. He bought the land and he built a huge-sized plant. In that, I was involved [in a] big way. Until then, in my school days, I used to go to him, to help him in the night shift.

SI: Before we get into that, your mother was born in Nairobi.

HP: Nairobi.

SI: Yes. Tell us a little bit about her and her family.

HP: Sure. My mom's father (means my grandfather) was graduated from India and, at that time, [it] was British rule. India was not independent. So, Britishers [were] always looking for the educated graduates. They took my mom's dad and his brother (means uncle) to Nairobi and Mombasa as postmaster general, to handle the post office, and [the] other guy for banking operations.

Both got the opportunity to work with the customs, because, in those days, where [the] shipping business was going on for [the] Britishers, import-exports or logistics, so, they both [had] to be involved in [the] shipping side of that, because [he was the] post office postmaster and a lot of activities go through that.

So, my mom was studying there, along with her brother and sisters. So, she came into contact with her brother visiting Mumbai, because he was studying in university, came in contact with my dad. They visited Bombay. That's how my mom met my dad. She stayed in Mumbai after the marriage.

SI: Did she ever talk about life in Kenya?

HP: Yes. My mom's uncles and everybody, they were a total [of] eleven cousins. They all stayed in one big villa with a compound, common kitchen, same ladies cook the food for everybody. There's like a joint family system in India, but in Africa, also.

So, in that way, all her cousins--my mom's two real brothers, one is a lawyer and one is a pharmacist, another uncle's four sons are all doctors--they migrated to London and, from there, they migrated to America, because [of] Idi Amin things [that] happened in Africa. So, every Patel left with their belongings.

[Editor's Note: In August 1972, Ugandan dictator Idi Amin ordered the nation's Asian population to leave the country within ninety days.]

So, they were graduates. Some were fresh; some of my uncles were already with the family. So, they all relocated to London, because they [had] a second right of a citizen, being a British passport holder. So, they stayed in London while other [family members], my mom's uncle's

family, moved to California. They all are doctors. Today, they all are retired and their four grandkids all are doctors, too.

SI: Wow. Tell us a little bit about where you grew up and what your early life was like.

HP: Okay, I was born and brought up in Mumbai. I studied in a Mumbai high school, which is called a public school system over there. There is always private schools also, but very few goes there, as a privilege. Why public school?--because you live in the community. We have our own bungalow and apartments in Mumbai.

So, point number one was, it was going together and coming back together after tutorials, classes and sports activities. It was fun. Then, I graduated, going to the top of the rated colleges in Mumbai, which is N.M. College [of Commerce & Economics], a very reputable institute, who [had] all the faculties--engineering, culture, arts, commerce, homeopathy and, most importantly, management. So, that is the institute in which I graduated.

So, when I was doing [my education], I got an opportunity. After college hours, I had to help my dad in [the] plastic factory, but my dad gave me the role of marketing, [to] reach out to the marketing. I tried to do it--more, I tried to do--reach out to customers, which is all corporate clients.

They were looking for ideas, what novel ideas you have to change our existing product as well as your own product line. So, for a pharmaceutical container, [it] is always color, packaging, modification, beautifying and a little enhancement of their own product.

So, we'll use the Tylenol bottle, changes every two years to three years. [The] Tylenol name remains the same, but they change [the] color, schematics, blow out more or less, based on the retail exposure, whether it is in Walmart or CVS. Same thing, I learned that in my college days by working part-time.

That brought me back, how to be creative, that you have to have a design idea. Whenever you go to marketing, you have to have some novelty or uniqueness to knock [on] the door. [The] customer is not going to buy the same pen. They want to see how it is different. So, you offer multiples. When you do multiples, hardly one [will] get accepted. That, I learned in my college days.

So, in packaging, it is easy to create. Even [if] you're intelligent, talented and you have a design or molding department, [it is] not necessarily [that] the customer is going to accept. Why? They cannot risk and jeopardize [their] current product line, which is already eye-sighted by their client. He says, "Why should we risk [it] to change?"

So, you have to give [them] a one-plus-one point, that this will give [them] more exposure in the retail shelves or product lines or advertisements or billboards or something. So, that's how I created [the] compact size.

So, what happened, over two to three years, plastic raw material prices were getting changed. So, I reduced the size of the bottle, plastic containers, caps and everything, by compromising its thickness and weight. So, I can offer [it] at a cheaper rate, but at the same dimension; so, [the] illusion of the look, but [the] weight is less.

So, that gave them the cost economy, that, "I'm buying this to economize. So, this is costing five grams, this is costing three grams--[the] look is the same, [the] function is the same." So, what I did, I didn't compromise, because [the] packaging container has to pass through the drop stress test and a stress test [to see if it is] leakproof.

Any container, any liquid, any shampoo, any pharmaceutical container is required to be sealed in a certain temperature and environment, to be leakproof, all test (enterprises?), which I learned from the laboratory which was processing all that. So, they gave me the opportunity to stand there and watch it. So, that's how I learned that, "Don't try to develop the product which is going to fail at the end."

So, I was quality conscious from the beginning. That's what I did in my college four years, after the college hours, go to Dad's factory, go to the clients, go to my mold-making design department. That's how I was very quality conscious and creative.

SI: It sounds like your father gave you a lot of responsibility very early on.

HP: Yes. We are three brothers. So, my older brother was an engineer. So, he was taking care of the developing of a product and its molds and design specifications. So, sometime, half the time, he corrects me, that, "Don't go this far to get a price point product; it is not going to be viable. It looks cheap, but is not durable."

So, that was his inspiration to me, not to go aggressively for blind marketing, we call it, "Get the order any way." No, it is not possible. You will fail down the road; corporate rejects it in [the] thousands. Each trial order was ten thousand pieces, which runs for five hundred thousand pieces per year. So, you are risking [the] first ten thousand to get an aggressive order. You are done for [the] remaining five-hundred-thousand-piece order, because you failed. That's why.

We were local, Mumbai, one state, one city, but my clients [had] national branding. So, they sell nationally--so, transportation, risk. Everything should be having a little wear-and-tear on delivery, so, my product should be durable. That's what I learned, and that's what I created.

SI: How was it to work with other folks in the industry? You had to get them to respect you and your input about, in this case, the bottles and how they look. How, as a young person, were you able to do that?

HP: Competition and comparison. That gives you a lot of setbacks. Even though you are successful, [the] client is a god. So, when we sit across the table, of course, a relationship is built, being an existing vendor to them, correct?

They bring their lab people, they bring their marketing lab people and, most importantly, they bring their--what [do] we call it?--a finance guy, who puts the numbers [together], that, "Why [should I] buy from you?" So, the challenge comes on the negotiations table by that itself. The entire team liked the product, they want to write the orders, but, before that, the money man comes. I have to justify [the cost]; the price is not everything.

So, it's a unique example I'll give you. They were using glass bottles for the homeopathy products, so, glass bottles compared to I was offering the plastic bottles, which was [more] expensive than the glass bottles. So, they say, "Why [should I] buy a plastic bottle? Why [should I] change my product to plastic?"

So, I said, "My ten percent price [increase] is, down the road, cheaper than your current cost. This is justified." I said, "Look into the breakage which you get at the national level when you transport the glass bottle [from] one part of the country to the other part of the country, different states, in-transit loss, which is to be calculated with your product filled, already inside."

So, then, they challenged me, "Mr. Patel, you proved it, that two rupees is cheaper than one rupee." You understand me, rupees? [It is like saying], "Two dollars is cheaper than one dollar." I said, "There you go. It saves [on] your handling cost." That's how I was a winner in justifying [changes], because I collected the data [on] the glass bottle breakage.

So, that is my mental math, [which] helped me to negotiate with the team of experts. One is a buyer, one is an owner of the company, second one is a lab technician who does the testing and, third and [most] important, a finance guy. To divine all those four to get one purchase order was a huge challenge at that early age. [For] none of the meetings, my dad comes with me. He said, "Go, learn yourself and show me the order." That was one.

SI: Had you always been brought up to think of yourself as going into the family business or were there other avenues that you considered?

HP: Yes. What happened is that my dad, when my younger brother also got graduated, one year after me, my dad says, "What do you want to do? You three in the same business? We have potential," he saw, "[that] we have three factories." He said, "You go specialty wise--one handles the production, one handles the marketing, one develops something based on the growth," right?

So, in those days, my younger brother got into the PVC pipe, which is used in construction for conduit pipes. So, we installed a secondary production line to supply, to the farming [industry] and farmers, the continuous irrigation pipes. So, that plant was set up in a huge building which my dad set up. So, my younger brother decided to go for that, but he decided [on] being an engineer, continue with the production.

So, I thought materials are invented [overseas], because, in those days, plastic was coming in healthcare, pharma and packaging together in India. So, I decided to go overseas and learn more about that, so, to learn that everything is a polymer and [the] science behind that.

So, we were a founding member of the All-India Plastic Manufacturers Association. So, my dad went to Switzerland and Germany to learn and understand what are the new polymers and plastic containers [on] the packaging side. So, big companies are there--Philips, Dow, DuPont, all those manufacturers--make the different kind of resins.

So, on this table, you can see all the plastics are there.

SI: Yes.

HP: Plastic, everything is--this is Bakelite, this is a polymer, this is molded, injection molding. This is Bakelite. "Why [are] you using [that]?" I know each material very well. So, I studied that in polymers. This is metal sheeted, coated. This is injection molded.

So, you tell me [about a object], I can tell you the brief of the polymer breakdown of each--your keyboards are made with the recycled polypropylenes. So, I want to show you what polymer studies required when you faced the development as well as a client. You can throw anything [at me].

So, I came to America after two years of [work at] my factory, Dad's factory. I looked into polymer science and packaging engineering. So, [the] surprise of my life is that packaging as a concept, beyond the containers which we are making, there is more to that. So, I saw in the retail stores the transparent plastics displayed in that, which [are] small bottles, small eyeliners displayed within the plastics, on the store shelf, everything in Manhattan, everywhere.

So, I thought, "Who does that?" So, in those days, the factories in America were in Rhode Island and Jersey City. So, I knocked [on] their door, being [that I was] studying polymers and packaging engineering. Surprisingly, they welcomed me nicely. I would tell you, the factory in Jersey City was owned by Ralph Lauren's brother. Can you believe, Ralph Lauren, clothing guy, and his brother owns a plastic packaging company?

Wholeheartedly, he gave me full liberty [to explore the plant]. So, I went to that at lunchtime and the production manager showed me everything. So, then, [the] production manager--in those days, they [had] their group--they pointed out one cosmetics company who makes the containers for Revlon and L'Oreal. So, that factory was in Edison and Piscataway. So, they send me for a scheduled [appointment] with the production department.

I landed in Edison, in those days, in 1981 and '84, twice, and that company's name was Parkway Containers. It is still there. They were making three-shift production for the Revlon cosmetic containers. So, it looks like a replica of my Bombay factory, but in a larger scale, sophisticated plant, automations. So, that difference, I saw it, but, then, I learned.

So, I started exporting by buying the tools and molds from here and exporting [them] to India for my brother's factory. That's how I got the opportunity to be in this country as a development [person]. So, that's how [the] polymer and packaging engineering background gave me a big exposure over here. I started doing that in America.

SI: At first, you were going back and forth.

HP: Of course. We had to do it, because, see, I was visiting as a student and academic, then, did the trading. So, trading was allowed in those days. These immigration [procedures] and everything was nothing. You'd get the green card [as a] multinational executive right away, not a big deal. So, I got an opportunity for that, also.

So, when I was going to [the] Rhode Island factory, they were doing little moldings, injection molding of everything. So, you see, this is injection molding of a small part. This is assembled-- you understand this.

SI: A typical pen.

HP: A typical pen, but they were making a mass production of some links. So, in their break time, I was sitting in their cafeteria with the owners. He said, "Do you know, Mr. Patel, what that [is]?" I said, "It's links." He said, "Yes, links, but used for what?" and the material was different. I said, "If I do it, it breaks." He said, "Yes, it is purposely made like that, to make the jewelry out of that." I said, "Really? How?" and he showed me.

So, for example, these are the links, a metallic component. I intentionally wore this piece today to show you that this piece is casted by putting the alloy into that. So, same way, they were making the bracelet links for Macy's and JCPenney's jewelry.

So, I said, "Where do you sell this?" He said, "We have jewelry customers." I said, "Where are they?" So, they were in Rhode Island, they were in Manhattan. So, I said, "Can I visit them?" He said, "No, jewelry is a restricted area to go. One of these days, we will visit you." "No problem."

I started working with that company. All of a sudden, after one year to six months, the family decided to shut off their plant, because [the] second generation was not interested. So, they say, "Someone is buying our factory, [the] Rhode Island factory." I said, "Okay."

The person who was buying the entire plant was a jewelry guy from Manhattan. So, I said, "Whenever you negotiate finally, please recommend me," [so that] I will have an opportunity to look into that, manufacturing to marketing.

That company guy asked there, "Who is handling all these things for you?" So, the outgoing owner says, "Mr. Patel knows about that, if you would like to talk to them." He said, "We'd love to." They gave me the opportunity. I started handling their jewelry manufacturing, everything.

It took me two years to go to the [next] level. It reminded me of my dad, who told me, "Do the factory, but go to the marketing." That company did that to me. The new owners, within two years, he said, "We have to do sales." I said, "Yes, I will do it." I started going to Home Shopping [Network], Sears, QVC, Macy's, Fortunoff, in those days, for small, small orders.

Walmart, in those days, was not on the East Coast at all. When I went to Walmart for [my] first appointment, they give you a morning, seven-thirty appointment. To go from here to Walmart [corporate headquarters], there was no direct flight from New Jersey or JFK, take a flight to St. Louis or Dallas and, from there, you go to Bentonville, [Arkansas].

When you go [to] Bentonville--I did rather nicely--there was no hotel to stay other than a Ramada Inn and a Days Inn. I'm talking [the] '90s.

SI: Yes.

HP: Today, [if] you go, Hilton, Marriott, everything is there, the Sam Walton Parkway is there, because they're a giant corporation.

So, my first appointment, I'm sitting in the morning, going to [the] Ramada, having my first coffee, paying the thirty-five cents, a dollar. The guy's giving me change. With that, when I park my rental car, I look for a space. I put my vanity over there and take [my things], paying the cashier in the Walmart cafeteria.

The other guy, with a truck, next to me, wearing construction shoes, cowboy kind of shoes, standing next to me in the line, he ordered his coffee. The waiter is giving me [my] change back. By that time, he's greeted me, I greeted him, shake hands, "Good morning," like that. He took his coffee and went there. I'm sitting there, waiting for my change. The guy said, "Do you know him?" I said, "No." He himself was Sam Walton [founder of Walmart].

SI: Wow.

HP: My buyers' appointment went there. My buyers told me, "You're selling very high-end jewelry. This is too high for us." I said, "This is basic, [what] I'm selling in America, ten carat, cheap quality." He said, "You're selling [that], but our market is this." Walmart is educating me that, "Our average customer is eighteen thousand dollars per year family income. What [do] you have to offer in jewelry to them?"

I scratched my head. I said, "Eighteen thousand [dollars] of family [income] (living in the middle, interior of?) America? Life is a different quality." So, I said, "What [can I] make it?" He said, "When is your flight there?" I said, "Tonight." He said, "Go, stop by one of the Walmarts and see it."

I went there. They [had] something to show me, but, definitely, it was not my cup of coffee. I went to one Walmart; I saw their jewelry display. It was a showcase between the tire tubes and sports goods section. Jewelry, they sell jewelry, acrylic stand with hanging chains and religious charms. That was their jewelry department.

So, definitely, you learned something from the customer to become successful. How [can I] take a second appointment unless I have a product like that, correct?

SI: Yes.

HP: It took me two months. In those days, [it] was the fax--[the] Internet was not there, fax. So, I faxed, one day, the picture. He said, "Okay, send us the product." I sent them the charms. She said, "Oh, our clients will love it." So, I said, "Okay, well, what kind of client [do] you have?" He said, "Mostly truck drivers," Walmart telling me. I said, "Okay, I'll make it."

So, I made the religious crosses--first order of five thousand pieces, second order was twenty thousand pieces, third order was a hundred thousand pieces. It reminds me of my dad's plastic business, [laughter] remember those days? So, I think I'm on the track to success. It's the way I am in my personality as an entrepreneur, creative, marketing, whichever.

So, that company made me the CEO of the company and I handled [marketing?], because they already [had] a sales team originally. So, they take part in trade shows. So, [the] first trade show was coming in 1988 in Las Vegas. So, everybody was given a booth and customers' appointments. So, in that, I met many customers.

So, in those kinds of shows, you meet, really, the regional group companies. Some [have] ten stores, some [have] twenty stores. They call it small-chain stores. So, they knock [on] your door to see that; they don't have a buying budget, but they want to see the merchandise. So, I'd give [them] the spectrum collection of a ring, an earring, a pendant, bracelets and everything.

My sales team was happy and they started handling it, really, originally. So, then, I started [selling], coordinated within one year to three years, from Miami to Boston to California to Atlanta. We put our sales team covering that, because, still, it was fax, no Internet. So, [how did I do] that?--traveling. [The] traveling salesman was the core in those days.

Then, we came up with the flyer, booklets, to take it, because you can't ship that [much jewelry]. There's a risk of robbery and burglary, because a traveling salesman lives in the huddles when they travel. So, that way, a catalog presentation was done and everything is done [that way]. So, that was how I ended up [moving] from plastics to jewelry.

SI: What was the name of the jewelry company?

HP: Diastar, Inc.

SI: Okay.

HP: That is closed now. In 2006 or 2004, they closed it. They [went] global. So, I'll tell you how they [went] global in twenty years, bad news, but good news. By the time '95, '97 comes, a lot of overseas companies started coming here to bid for collaborations. So, our company [was] not interested in collaboration, but we decided to set up an overseas plant, because [the] [George H. W.] Bush government opened NAFTA [the North American Free Trade Agreement], and then, opened the preferential duty countries, [such] as India.

So, we decided to set up an export-oriented unit in Mumbai. So, my boss says, "Hey, you're from India." I flew down to India. We bought the whole lot and we built brand-new factories over there. So, a problem comes--the manufacturing skill in India.

So, we shipped the machinery from here. Being a brand-new plant, you cannot afford new machineries. So, going back to Rhode Island, Providence, so many factories were for sale. I didn't know [that] until [the] Chinese started bidding for those machineries. So, [the] first time I went for the bank auction (they call it a liquidation auction), so very few machines left for me to buy.

So, I asked [for] that name--that guy's name was David Gold. David Gold was the best auctioneer of industrial machineries in Rhode Island. I said, "David, how [does] it go?" He said, "Patel, buy whatever you want to buy. Nothing is left." I said, "Okay."

One day, there was no auction and I went to David's office. He opened the whole warehouse for me, again, loaded with a lot of machineries. So, I called the engineer. He said, "From where [did] all this lot come?" He said, "It's going to China for automatic manufacturing." I said, "Really? They bought [all of it]?" "Yes."

Within three months, [the] machinery goes in a ship. Within six months of that, David Gold is invited to China in a corporate jet, with the red-carpet treatment, with a band and everything at that airport and [the] factory with greetings, with a Chinese cultural dance and everything. A ribbon cutting happened. David Gold showed me all these things on his VCR.

I said, "This is my dream then. I should do it." I told David, "Anytime more machinery comes, call me." He gets many offers. I kept my engineers ready, because we already bought the land over there. [The] building was about to get ready in Bombay. I started looking for the engineers who [could] give me an appraisal of a functioning machine, not a broken-down machine. David says, "You buy as it varies," because people tested it. I hired two engineers, certified it.

I shipped three boats of the machinery from Brooklyn and Newark ports to set up a new plant. I set up a state-of-the-art factory in Bombay. Why?--because, still, India was coming [up and becoming] competitive by proper piece cost and diamonds are all from India, [for] many years. So, I said, "Let us do that."

So, running this factory parallel to that, we expanded that. Within two years, we were the third-largest exporter of jewelry from Bombay to America, but only one hitch came--nothing was easy. I had to deploy my New York factory skilled staff to train--polishing, diamond setting, finishing, quality control--there. That cost me hotel accommodations for one month. [They had to] come back, because they got homesick. So, I had to bring them back home, and then, go there.

So, they were shifted between [Bombay and] the rotating cycle of the skilled work [at] 47th Street and Fifth Avenue. So, all those people helped me a lot to get the technology transfer which is a human skill to the technology transfer [which] is software and hardware. Programming of the computer, in those days, was a hand skill.

So, what do you polish? From [an] American point of view--sometime, it is [in] India--twenty-two-karat, eighteen-karat jewelry, you have seen that color. So, [to achieve] that, it was not easy for me. So, I learned alloying and metallurgy, how to get the twenty-four karat bank gold from a Swiss bank, from a Republic Bank account [on] Fifth Avenue, ten-kilo, five-kilo bars, and how to change to ten-karat and fourteen-karat by an alloying method.

So, I took that training in United Precious Metals in Boston, Massachusetts, in their lab. Why [did] they give me the training?--because I was giving [them] all my entire factories' residual collected dust to do, refine them.

So, per year, I used to recover three kilos [of] fine gold from [the] entire factory per year, from the garbage, trash burning; even [as] my employees leave, they have to shake their head into a little tray. It looks like dust, but, [on a] yearly basis, it was three kilos [of] fine gold. So, that's our relationship. So, they [did] me a favor to allow [me] in their plant. So, everything is inside you to learn and make it happen. So, I did that [the] same way.

SI: In the beginning, you were looking at a lower end line targeted towards Walmart. How did that change over time?

HP: Retail stores, at retail trade shows, come with the parameters. Some people will say, "Oh, this is not my taste." So, I ask, "What [can I] give you so [that] you can buy from me?" So, they show me a picture of their store sample, which is laying with them. So, I said, "Oh, this is higher end." That's how I got Zales and (Helzberg?), Jared stores, in the mall.

Then, that's how I entered into the bridal category, because bridals is a semi-mount. A bridal ring is always opened from the center; [any] side diamonds are already set. Why open in [the] center?--because [the] bride and groom decide the budget of what they want to do [for] the center stone, based on the budget. Everybody talks fancy, but, when [the] pocket comes, they have to compromise. So, that's the reason I entered into the bridal range and I started selling to Zales.

[The] higher end comes when the customer is there. Otherwise, it's a waste of effort, because you can have a collection of the [higher end] line, but hardly five pieces sell (or five thousand sell). [The] samples are [then] so many, which you have to sell as an individual sale. So, we keep the trunk show to liquidate those individual pieces.

No wholesaler will buy one piece. They need to see one piece to order ten pieces. They need to see ten samples to sell a hundred thousand pieces. So, when we got the reorder--good question, you asked me why it did work--when I get a hundred-thousand-piece order, it's a span of one year. I have to ship eight thousand per month.

So, we make five master samples, approved by the quality control of the customers. Two samples stay in their vault, two samples live with my vault, because of the manufacturing to production, matching the quality.

One sample is with their QC manager, who comes to visit the site. If they see the production work in process, he'll bring out that sample. We call that sample an (empire?) sample. Everything should match that. All these five samples are barcoded by the company when it is originally issued. So, you cannot compromise with that. So, [the] higher end goes up to that level.

SI: All this is happening over the course of--you have it listed on here...

HP: '84 to '97.

SI: Okay.

HP: In 2002, I started my own company, because, in-between fires, I worked for another company, which is a sightholder. You know [what a] sightholder means? The diamond comes from the mines, South Africa mines, okay. It is done by De Beers. They call it DTC, Diamond Trading Corporation.

[In the] world, only one company has a diamond mine. That company digs up the mine and brings the rocks of the diamonds [to] London. They are in the vault. All over the world, people bid for that. So, who can bid for that?--only sightholders.

So, sightholders all over the world are very limited. They should have millions of dollars [in] cash with a bank line. When you bid for that, you should have [the] money ready. So, each sight costs forty million to fifty million and ten bidders. So, five hundred million in one lot, it goes [for]. So, from India, there are seven, in those days. Now, it is seventeen, while from Belgium, only four and, from Russia and Canada, there are two, in those days. So, [for] the DTC sightholders, diamonds and everything come on the table.

So, the way you questioned me, I started working with the DTC sightholders' company, who were in Manhattan. They wanted to go into jewelry manufacturing. Why?--DTC insisted that, "Now, we should be 'B2B.' Diamonds should go direct to [the] retailer, not to the middleman. That way, we can control the price, we can monopolize the product, we can control the entire supply chain line."

So, they were scratching their head. I said, "Do one thing--I will do the contract shop in Manhattan, Long Island City and Rutherford. You set up a manufacturing plant in Bombay." He said, "Here is a ticket, go." So, I set up a second factory in Mumbai in 2002 and that is for DTC sightholders.

We started retailing for them all over America, for Walmart, everything, client base [the] same, but, in that, DTC required one important thing, "What is your brand name?" So, we created the brand called Noor, N-O-O-R, Noor. *Noor* means "shining;" you know that.

So, he said, "What is [the] uniqueness of [your] brand name?" You bring a perfume, "What is [the] uniqueness of this perfume?" Polo, Ralph Lauren, shirt or tie, "What is the uniqueness in that? Show us why it is a hundred dollars more than a regular J.C. Penney shirt?"

So, I created [the] brand name Noor with the help of my designer. So, we launched the entire Noor collection line by hiring the bank meeting room in Times Square and invited Sam's Club, Costco--they were growing retailers, Costco, Sam's Club--J.C. Penney, Macy's and Zales. All attended and they all gave a prototype order of certain things.

Now, when [dealing with] these big (ego?) retailers, one style should not go to others; these styles should not go to others. I learned that [in a] big way, why I'm telling you, [from] Rolex Watch. I go to the Switzerland show, [for the] last twenty-five years. Rolex has their own booth. In February and April, they do the Basel Jewelry Show--Google it.

In that, Rolex does appointments only and they show the product line. So, a Macy's buyer goes there. If they select this line, this line, this line, it is locked for them for an entire year. So, Macy's has to come give the commitment for that entire product line for an entire [year]. So, Rolex has a parallel line ready for another retailer, another retailer.

So, that, I did [the] same for my Noor product line. If Zales buys this, the line is locked; this line has gone to Sam's Club, this is locked. So, I did the branding. That company became a winner. In [the] first year, they got six million dollars [in] Noor brand name orders.

So, [the] second year came, 2004, "What else [can] you do?" DTC always does their appraisal and evolution, comparing you with a competitor. Now, we being a beginner in jewelry for the sightholders, you cannot compare, but they set a high bar. So, in 2004, I knocked [on] the door of Amazon. Amazon gave me quantity orders, four re-orders--I liked it.

One thing, payment and everything is no problem in 2004 with Amazon. Christmas Day comes, there is a reorder [based] on their data that, "This is selling good, this is selling good, this is not selling." Christmas week, we are expecting reorders to go booming. I keep my staff on there working.

You know [the] EDI [electronic data interchange] system of the orders?--order rejected, order stop, partial order, ship only this. Two-thirds [of my] inventory [was] dead. January 1st, all orders [were] canceled and they gave me the balance payment on the 15th January--no ethics, no honesty.

Because we took [those] aggressive, big orders--my other competitors and business people knew that--everybody lined up in Amazon to get more and more orders. I'm the first one [to] stop going to Amazon. What [am I] going to do with that two-thirds inventory? I'm answerable to Bombay's bank, with whom I have to pay thirty days' payment at six-and-a-half percent and seventy-five cents surcharge on their customs. I ended up paying eighty percent on arrival, I have to pay three million dollars; I end up [with] a quarter-million-dollar upfront payment. So, [the] business maths doesn't match.

SI: Yes.

HP: So, I took the inventory back, I took the goods back. I liquidated it and I started doing closeout business. All the (Jews?) do a very good closeout business by putting [it] online; I was not online. It was not my domain. It is a full-time business on the cyber line. So, a big fish sometimes hurts you big-time.

So, going back to the DTC line, 2004 comes, Noor becomes a prototype everywhere--only those five stores, five brands. My boss asked me, "What do you have in [that is] new?" So, in those days, one state in America, [maybe] three states, approved the LBGT weddings, marriage, legalized. I said, "Let us make the jewelry for [the] LBGT community." We made the full series for gay and lesbian weddings. We launched that in an upcoming Las Vegas show in 2005 by putting [out] models, [going to] shows and invited the same buyers.

We launched in Bellagio--no, not Bellagio, next to Treasure Island. Which one was that? I forgot it--Mirage. Huge success, all buyers liked it. You require a concept to market it. So, it was successful. We got [our] first trial orders, reorders.

Then, 2006 or '07, I quit the company to start on my own. Since those days, I am on my own with the product development and marketing only--nothing to do with the mass manufacturing, because you have a question, but I don't want to answer. I'll give you [the] question, "How [do] you meet this many demands, this many pieces, in a small factory?" So, I outsource in Hong Kong, Bangkok and Mexico.

So, I fly down to Mexico, give my product, mold only. They do the casting only. We do setting, finishing here, because [the] quality control is taken care of in Manhattan. That is our obligation. That inspector comes there. Same way, Hong Kong makes the [pieces at] double the speed than the Mumbai factory.

Now, I'll tell you why. When we have a [holiday] season over here, our November flyer breaks and [the] December order comes and January is [the] slow season. Same time, India is at the (Dussehra?), (Ganda Patino?), (Navratri?) and Happy New Year. They also go for holidays--so, [the] delivery doesn't come on time--India's festivities, I'm talking about, India's cultural festivals, India's New Year and all that, same delivery. If we [are] late by one delivery, we get a five-thousand-dollar fine by [the] client.

So, over twenty years, I learned that you should have a parallel production facility, where [your] calendar doesn't hit with their holidays. So, Mexico and Hong Kong, I used to fly down there. Sometime, I'd fly twice a week, Monday returning back to Newark, Friday back to Bombay and Hong Kong. So, that kind of work, I did.

So, [for the] last fifteen years, I have my own independent marketing company, consulting company, consulting only for designs and product line, and marketing only through using my own sales team, region-wise, those who know me, because [of] my contacts with the buyers, so that I [can utilize those contacts].

SI: It sounds like you're able to roll all these contacts along from one concern to the next.

HP: That is correct. When my first [child], my one daughter only, she [was] born, they knew I took off when she was in delivery. She was in [the] hospital. I flew down seven days after that. So, this is (Himinbail?). So, all the buyers and the CEO of the company know I work hard for them. So, that is my asset over twenty years also, everyone [knows], "They are committed to solve [problems for] us."

So, in competition and comparison, price is everything, but relationship is also everything. So, my salesmen and contacts--right now, many CEOs are the owners of the companies for midsize jewelry retailers--they all give me the business.

SI: I want to go back a bit and talk about when you came to the US. What year did you actually move over from India to the US?

HP: Permanent?

SI: Yes.

HP: '84.

SI: 1984, okay.

HP: '81 to '84 were back and forth, for plastics and everything; '84 to '88, complete training, done and everything; from '88, fully in the jewelry until now.

SI: Where were you living once you moved here after '84?

HP: Oh, '84, first, I moved to Manhattan, and then, New Jersey.

SI: Where did you move to in New Jersey?

HP: First, I was in North Bergen, Boulevard East, across the water, because commuting to Manhattan was one bus ride. When I was in New York City, I didn't get a car. In New Jersey, I needed a car. So, that's how. Then, from there, I moved to Edison and, from Edison, I moved to Monroe.

SI: What about finding a community here? Was there an Indian American community that you could be a part of in the early 1980s?

HP: Yes.

SI: Okay.

HP: In '80, no; in '91, '92, '95. I was always active [in] temple activities or something, but not "religious religiously." So, this Edison BAPS [Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha] Temple bought the warehouse and they became a temple. Today, you

can see, in Edison, a huge temple. That was a warehouse [they] bought, purchased as a warehouse. So, it was right behind my house, behind my apartment.

So, in my apartment/condominium association, I was the vice president of [the] homeowners' association. So, all were known to me in the monthly meetings. So, in my evening walk, I met a couple of elderly people. So, he said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I live there, this and there." So, I was single. I was not married in those days. They come to [my] home.

So, in [the] weekend, they go to [the] temple. So, they [said], "Come with us." I go there. The founders started knowing me. Their annual event [was] coming up. So, I said, "Okay, I will volunteer myself." So, that's how they come to know that Mr. Patel is a homeowners' association vice president of such a big community.

So, a huge thing happened. My mom was visiting me, was staying [at my] home. One day, someone knocked [at] my door, "Mr. Patel, you are so-and-so, I'm So-and-So. I'm a candidate for Edison Council," this and that. I said, "No problem, come." He said, "You are a board member. So, we need help to help [our] campaign," this and that. I was talking to them.

Next day, he came with the Mayor of Edison to my home, with the huge data of the 350-voters list. I said, "Where do you need my help?" He said, "In this campaign," this and that. So, I helped them by [holding] a little meet-and-greet at my home, between only known friends, not to bother someone [outside] by a political agenda. So, many people helped and supported. Then, [the] Mayor won also [the] election in those days.

So, then, my next-door neighbor was the manager of the Ray Catena car dealer. I used to take my car for servicing in Ray Catena. So, he said, "Mr. Patel, there's a new model of Mercedes [that] came--you want to trade-[in for] it?" I said, "No, I'm not in the market for trading." So, [the] manager says, "Come, come, one of these days."

So, I stopped by to Ray Catena--[the] Mayor was there. So, Ray Catena's owner [and the] Mayor invited me to the (Metuchen?) Country Club, for a treat, because I helped him in his campaign. He said, "He's a good guy, he's a good guy," and we became friends. Then, it was all Democratic Party activities and everything.

Nothing to do with that, but I moved to Monroe, I formed the nonprofit organization which is called [the] India-US Forum of Monroe Township. I wrote in [that] I'm a president of that. Why I did it--my daughter born--I did it to encourage student mentoring, public speaking and, most importantly, humanitarian activities.

So, my daughter, when she entered the middle school, I encouraged her. She was on my foot path and, totally, she's a replica of my dad and me. She does all the humanitarian work. She does more than required for her college.

[The] day before yesterday was her college final year's first day, final semester, first day. I got a letter in the mail [at] my home. My daughter is [in her] first class of the day. I open the mail--she's in the dean's list.

I'm reading it and my wife started crying as a surprise. I called Vinisha. She didn't answer. She texts me back, "I'm in a meeting." I said, "You had a class? What kind of meeting [did] you have?" She said, "Dad, I'm in the meeting with the Stanford University Dean."

I said, "Call me back whenever you are free. I want to give you good news." We were excited, because we got a dean's letter, "This is the dean's letter for the dean's list for biology science college." She called me at the break time, "Vinisha, we got this letter. Congratulations." "Oh, you got a letter? Why?" I said, "Why? Vinisha, it's a good, proud moment for us."

"Dad, this is the third time I'm getting [it]." I said, "Why [have you] not been informed?" "Dad, [the] previous two years also, I was on the dean's list, you don't know?" I said, "Nobody wrote me a letter." She said, "Dad, they put [it] on the Instagram and they send me the email." So, I said, "Vinisha, you never tell me." So, that is my child.

So, that is why, I'm telling you, we encourage the Township students to do humanitarian work, contribute your personal service and, in our culture, help the needy people, food donations and everything, which you do with RISE and everything.

We've got a total [of] seven proclamations or eight proclamations for that. Two weeks back, the state honored me and my organization with a state resolution signed by [the] Senate Majority Leader and [the] Speaker of the House, even though we didn't ask, even though we don't know both of them, because someone is watching us, from a far distance, our activities.

So, we keep, once a year, a student-volunteers appreciation lunch. So, our year begins, we do that. In that, [our] Senator came, [our] Assemblyman came, by invitation, by confirming that, "We can come," or not. They brought that resolution and the RISE Chairman came from Hightstown and they gave us their thing. I have copies of all this in here. So, [the] point is that when you are a silent worker, a silent humanitarian, a lot of things come with that. Someone is watching you from a far distance.

So, in my town, I contributed towards community causes by four pillars, we call it--education, culture, humanitarian and, most importantly, civic engagement. So, that's how, in my community, by moving to Monroe, I did it, which I did a prototype in [the] Edison area.

When I was in Manhattan and North Bergen, we used to go by bus, right? So, we few were very single. Very few of our group friends were married. So, those who were married were staying in an apartment. We were commuting on the bus.

So, whenever I get down in the Port Authority, I see homeless [people], I see people without shelter, Anglos and everything. So, whenever a Thanksgiving sale comes, we few friends buy in the sale a comforter, a muffler, hand gloves, and carry one each time and give it to them, outside the Port Authority. So, one day, the cop and security says, "You guys are doing this, but you're encouraging them to be here all the time." I say, "What is my fault? It is out of my heart. I can't see them suffering."

So, after two, three years, when I go in [on] the bus, I go inside, there is a bagel shop. So, I take one small bagel and coffee. So, that young girl [at the cashier says], known to each other of us, "Thank you, thank you."

So, two, three times, I sit by the far distance, by the wall, the beggar stands there. So, two times, I order the same two [items]. She said, "Why?" I said, "For them." So, I picked [up] two and gave it to them. By the time, a third is getting ready for me. After one week, their manager came to me, "Sir, sir, don't do [that] here. Then, they don't go away from here." No, this is my problem, how to help others.

In those days, you are young. Humanitarian [activity], it is inside our conscious, "How do you help? To invite them to my home?" "No." "To talk to the Mayor, police?" "No." So, I had an opportunity in my town to feed the hungry. [If] you live anywhere, you see that, how many hungry people are there; so, how to find data [is] very difficult.

So, why I did this is very emotional. My daughter was in middle school, in the cafeteria. They sit in the break time, right? So, within twenty minutes, they are to finish their lunch and go. So, my daughter takes the weekly lunch from home and, sometime, from the cafeteria, she buys.

After two, three months, she says, "Dad, there is one girl or two girls who are [not eating]." So, I said, "Okay, can I help?" So, I went to the Superintendent to ask for prepayment of the lunch money. My Superintendent says, "You cannot do that." I said, "Can you give me two, three names, so that I can contribute their full lunch money for an entire year?" [He] says, "We cannot disclose. There is a law (that is, a requirement). Each school district is different."

So, I said, "Okay." I then told my daughter what I did. So, I told Vinisha, "What to do with this?" She said, "Dad, come one day in the line. Those girls are standing doing nothing. They go hungry." So, I tried to inquire by the Principal. So, [the] Principal [said], "Don't disclose everything, and there are broken family students."

I said, "What and how?" "Something [at the] personal level; people don't disclose." I said, "I want to help. That's why." He said, "One has a divorce case, a custody problem, but suffering [financially]. One has a father being jailed for some violations, drugs related, so, Mom got a restraining order, but not divorced. So, those kids are disturbed and don't have enough money to buy the lunch." I said, "What about their tuition and what about their fees and everything?"

They cannot work in my grocery stores, connections I have with the supermarket in my town, only one supermarket in the town. They say, "We cannot hire [them] unless they're high schoolers."

So, I told my daughter. So, my daughter is very touchy. She will go out of [her] way to do it. So, when she wanted to celebrate her sweet sixteen, I asked, months before, (or I'll tell you, I kept the money on the side with my wife) to tell her that [she can do] whatever she wants to do, [like have a] little party for her friends. [The] sweet sixteen came and she kept, the house party only, within the budget, within her own friends.

With the money I had, she said, "Dad, give me some. I want to treat those two girls in a pizza place, who are my friends from [the] last three years." I said, "Okay, I'd love to." She took her friends' sibling in the car--they invited her--didn't tell her that, "We are treating you." She said, "It is because [of] my birthday." I said, "Vinisha, why did [you say that]?" She said, "Dad, two weeks back was their birthday, too." I said, "Okay, do it, good."

So, how it happened and why it happened--we do Special Olympic fundraising for disabled students in my town. We did a cricket tournament and donated twenty-seven hundred dollars by doing [the] cricket tournament.

So, in our town, there was a cricket ground, but it was fully occupied [by] the league tournament schedule. So, I requested [a meeting with the] Plainsboro Mayor. Mayor says, "Okay, we will give you [for] one day our cricket field." We went there, did it. My daughter and everybody's a volunteer.

My god, that special needs student who participated in [the] Olympics two weeks before, in our town, she brought [home] four gold and one silver medal. I have videos and everything. My daughter congratulated her, Senator came, Mayor came. Everybody came. We're shocked [by] this good performance of the handicapped student, special needs student. We invited [the] special needs Olympic chairman. He was there.

All of a sudden, my daughter was invited to give a speech. Oh, my God, my daughter lectured everybody about how many [go through] hunger, how many [are] special needs. Then, she mentioned this case, that, "In my school cafeteria, there are students who stay hungry. People, we have so much discrimination, they even don't wave a hand toward her, don't say hello to her, even though they are their classmates." Everybody clapped and cheered them on.

I came home, I said, "Vinisha..." and that Senator's group videorecorded the whole speech. Next day, he says, "Hemant, your daughter was amazing. Then, you guys put a very nice event together for a simple reason, to show the community." I said, "Yes, we did it for [the] community, very simple." We work hard with our personal time. We put the three teams, eleven games to (rummage?), with our own money, trophies and everything, shields and plaques and everything. You play cricket?

SI: No.

HP: No, okay, but this overt message goes across--that is my asset, that is my goodwill. I can tap my own shoulder for that, more or less. [laughter]

SI: This started in Edison.

HP: Edison to Monroe, yes, Edison at the basic level, because of the temple activities and campaign help and all that.

SI: What year, roughly, was it when you started?

HP: This in Edison?

SI: Yes.

HP: '97.

SI: Along the way, are there other stories that stand out in your memory in terms of giving back to the community or working with the community?

HP: Many.

SI: Okay.

HP: For example, in Monroe, sitting [at] home, one friend--in Monroe, also, I'm the homeowners' association vice president for twelve years. [The] builder gave it, builder left it, then, [the] whole headache is on you to manage [the] long-term financing, capital plan and, most importantly, improvements.

They give [you] basic landscaping--flower ideas, irrigation, sprinkler system is up to you. So, everything is done, but I know my interest is in management. So, I executed [the plan], planned the budget, all my board members supported it.

So, eleven years, I did it. Every year is an election. Whenever I contest [run for office], nobody contests against me, because you're doing good. So, eleven different board members change in a rotating cycle. So, I had an opportunity [to work] with the eleven dynamics [of different] people. They were all having a heart for the community, for [the] homeowners' association.

So, being that way, even [when the] new homeowner comes, also, they know me, because what [was] different than others [that] I did? I started hosting at my home, so [that] it's less walking distance, "But, please do come. Please participate. I'm not here forever. Someone has to take my place. Someone has to learn how to conduct the business." So, that [is] my whole idea, but nobody contests.

A point happened that two new homeowners came. They were the CEOs of their own company, millions of dollars. He came to my home to give me good news, "Hemant, I've got a baby boy." I said, "Congratulations," this and that, this and that; okay, fine. Within two days of that news, [the] week after was Super Bowl weekend.

So, we meet for Super Bowl weekend at my home. He said, "No, I won't be able to [come]. I'm in Arizona," [for] something, a business meeting. "So, I will not be coming in the weekend because I have a Monday meeting." I said, "Okay, no problem."

All of a sudden, this is an incident--early morning, seven AM, I am getting a call from that guy's wife. "My mom fell down in the bathroom." I said, "Really? What happened?" She said, "This and this happened." I said, "No good. Let me come." I ran to her house. She [had] a new baby. She had stitches; [the] doctor [would not] allow her to drive.

I said, "Don't move--I'll take your mom." [The] mom is collapsed like that. I said, "Did you call a doctor?" She said, "No. She says, 'Don't call,' and she says, 'I'm fine, I'm fine.'" I said, "No, no, mama, I'm taking you." I put her in the front seat, reclined it and rushed to the Princeton Hospital emergency room.

[The] doctor says, "She [had] a heart attack." I said, "Sir, take it, take it. This is her card. This is her medications and, in the car, she was doing only [Mr. Patel indicates that she was noncommunicative], nothing more than that." "Okay, call [the family]."

So, her aunt, her cousin's wife, lives in Edison. I called her. I said, "Can you come straight to the hospital?" [They] said, "No problem." She came, being woman to woman. She was taken for the observations and everything, stabilized and everything.

This lady [was] calling me, "How is my mom?" I said, "She's fine. Why?" "Oh, no, I want to know." She started crying. I said, "Why are you crying?" I said, "No, she was not good when it happened." "Hemant, you're lying to me." I said, "Yes, I'm lying to you, because [the] doctor said she had a mild heart attack."

She collapsed. I said, "Don't scream, take care of your newborn," four-days-old baby. I said, "Don't drive." She didn't call me. This lady's inside; I'm sitting outside. That Edison lady came. I said, "Can I go now? [You know] what to do, because you release me and I can go. I don't want to [just] leave in this situation."

I called my friend in Arizona. I said, "Hey, your mother-in-law is in this situation." So, he called his brother-in-law in Hillsborough. They all coordinated and came to [the] hospital after two hours. [The relative in] Hillsborough's parents drove down to the lady's house, my friend's house, took care of the newborn and this mother, crying, [was] coming. I said, "You are not supposed to move also, because of your delivery."

That's [the] humanitarian approach. I did it; same thing happened, many times, in my community, in my area, where I ran. So, two weeks back also, the bad thing happened--good thing happened, bad means for that family. I'm sitting there and one guy announced that, "We have a great humanitarian here," this and that. He announced that, "Mr. Patel came to our rescue. Otherwise, I never [saw] any stranger [that] can help anybody in this situation."

I tried to [remember] the help I did [for] him. I remembered what I helped them [with]; in the same way, I called the ambulance, I went with them, out of [the] blue. That incident was very shocking--I don't want to disclose that, but it happened in Monroe, also. So, it was a public forum and he announced that, "Without that, this would've been not possible, how he helped two seniors, elderly parents and all that."

So, out of this one unique thing, when [the] pandemic happened and lockdown, we, as an organization, [were] all sitting home, working from home. Seniors cannot go [places] because masks [were] not available. So, we, as an organization, started buying the grocery lists [for]

seniors who are not having mobility, a car or anything--take their list, shop it, pay by their credit card and started delivering.

So, it started for one week. My wife and daughter says, "You are going to bring COVID to the house. Don't do it." We discussed with the retail stores that, "Take online phone orders from this many seniors only, Monroe zip code, and we will deliver [for] free." So, we, as [the] founding members committee, [the] entire committee worked for that. We all started work from home [in the] afternoon, one to two, break time.

We used to rotate it. Each day, one group takes the voluntary hours, voluntary opportunity, put the food in the Tesla, Porsche, Mercedes and deliver [it] to the senior's house. What are blessings to us? Those seniors living in our town, in [the] senior adult communities, their kids from Texas, Pennsylvania, California, [were] calling us, "Mr. Patel, you took care of my parents, thank you. What [can I] give you?" I said, "Nothing."

After three days, [it] was pouring rain, we delivered. That senior lady [was] standing outside with a cup of coffee or tea, masala tea or something, to [say] thank you [to] us. That's a blessing--unconditional help, don't expect returns. So, [those are] all the good things we did for needy people in crisis.

SI: How else did the pandemic affect your efforts? We'll start with the humanitarian field.

HP: Humanitarian, we didn't back down. We didn't back down. What we did with the grocery stores, we tied up [our efforts]. So, they [were] also scared that, "Mr. Patel, you're suggesting [this to] us, but our staff shortage is also working [against us]." I said, "Don't worry, allow we three volunteers to work there, so that we will process the order."

So, I can show you the pictures in the retail store's back room. They gave us access to their computer. Me, my other two colleagues, [we] started working on processing only those orders coming through the IFM by putting a remark, pick the cart, lift the orders and put [the] cart on the side, and telling them that we are on the way at one o'clock to three o'clock. I have the pictures of those.

So, we offloaded their burden because they were favoring us, because they had restricted hours. Remember, they cannot start early and everything [due to the] pandemic situation and everything.

So, our mayor also honored one of our volunteers, because what was a requirement of that time was plasma donation. So, we coordinated with the Red Cross and they [said], "Each hospital has to get approval from the Red Cross before the plasma donation things happen." It was a little different to us. We don't want to violate any protocol systems or codes. I said, "Okay, [the] doctors' group [will] tell us and we'll do it."

So, Raritan Medical Center and one [other] medical center coordinated with our volunteers, including St. Peter's, and we did that work. So, plasma donation was a big initiative. We didn't

back down. Then, we gave that data to our mayor. So, the Mayor signed the proclamation for our volunteer for that one.

SI: How did the pandemic affect your business?

HP: [In a] big way, because what happened? See, economically, retailers got affected--no walk-in customers, so, lack of confidence and scary. So, I have to tell you, interior America was less affected than the Northeast. [The] Northeast [was] affected badly because, very quickly, they reacted. They should have [had] patience, but mom-and-pop--I'm talking mom-and-pop and wholesalers, not the corporate chains, like QVC, Home Shopping, Macy's--they were on that path.

Mom-and-pop group, slow down; they were to liquidate for six months their old inventory. Something they custom-sized and [bought as a] product line, they cannot return back to us. So, it is laying dead in their vault. They have to push hard to liquidate their cash. They're waiting for the promotions and the seasons.

So, [an] entire year [had] gone [by] with a very flat chart, for [the] jewelry business. For hoteliers, it worked good. Both the hotels [were] fairly [responsive], because both locations are highway side. One is downtown, one is highway side.

SI: That was something you were telling us about before we started recording. Do you want to talk about the hotels?

HP: Yes, hotel is the same. [The] hotel, I came [by] the way I've shown you, the entrepreneurship. It is still my investment. So, my senior partners--now, why this? I'm telling you, luxury (brands?) like Hilton and Marriott, that property needs to be managed through a professional management company, hospitality management company.

So, our senior partners [have] their own management company. It is assigned to them. We don't need to go to them for monitoring or a night audit. We get the guest report monthly. Customer complains whether your laundry was good or bad, [the] area was not clean, [their] pillow was stinky--no, that is zero complaints for our properties. So, that property management company charged the professional fees, but they have their eyes on every code of conduct signed in the franchise agreement.

So, now, based on Hilton and Marriott, Holiday Inn also set up their standards to meet their standards. [The] only headache [that] came to the Holiday Inn and Hampton is [the] free breakfast [was] increased three times. Before, it was only cereal, milk, fruit and one of the cookies and muffins. Now, they want a hot breakfast included, from [the] last nine years.

So, that cost [comes out of] the room occupancy charges. It is free. So, that comes now, headache, to put the customer satisfaction rating high. This is knowledge to you, too. One word Holiday Inn came up with, yes--breakfast-area-certified staff.

So, [the] room cleaning lady, we have cross-trained them, because [the] rooms are vacated after eleven to two. We want to employ the same staff [in the] morning, so [that] they get more money as hourly rates. So, we trained a few ladies to come early and handle the breakfast from six-thirty to nine-thirty. They get more, same staff. [Corporate says], "No."

So, we did cross-training. The girl and mother and daughter team was good at that. I put them [up], upgraded them, [got] their training, certified three hours, by going to Washington, DC, in the IHG Group, International Hotel Group certified program, get two certificates. I want to show you their certificate, also.

Nonsense--you know how to serve the breakfast, you know how to serve the bagel and coffee, in your own dining table if I come to your home? [Corporate said], "No, it should be this way, that way." Then, we keep the property clean, so, we keep the breakfast area also clean. "No, the certificate should be hanging there, so [that the] customer gets impressed." Can you believe this?

So, they created a headache for us. So, instead of one person, we trained two people. What if someone gets sick in the morning? This is [the] Northeast--[what] if someone gets stuck in the traffic or snow or [bad] weather?

SI: Yes.

HP: We did it. So, now, they're certified [for] breakfast, in charge, do everything very [pictorially]. It should have been noticeable. If three guests are there or thirty guests are there, you should be noticeable, that, "Oh, you're sure cleaning and maintaining (close energy?)." Come on, man, customers are not stupid.

So, this is a hospitality experience coming as a [result of your] franchise agreement, but, beyond that, drilling your wallet. Honestly, I'm talking like a businessman now, that where they drill the wallet [is], when [he] room is ninety-nine dollars to 129, [the] same standard applies. In reverse, I have to use this word, how they screw [the] client, which is you, me and him, we have a rewards point program, remember?

SI: Yes.

HP: Hilton Honors, IGH. How [do] they cash it out?--by drilling our wallet. You get a free room after a thousand points. "Oh, give them free [accommodations], they're in Hilton Honors." We have to compromise [on] that. They pay us only twenty dollars for a hundred-dollar room. You get it because you're [in the] loyalty program.

SI: It all comes out of your pocket.

HP: Yes. So, we filed a lawsuit now. So, we've won this lawsuit against [the] Choice Group of Hotels. So, Comfort, Quality, all those are the crooks, but Holiday Inn compromised. So, now, we are going against Hilton and Marriott--what to do, how far they will go? You want to see how far they go? Why you're talking orders? I'm talking businessman. You'll scare.

[Say] you have a business, 7-11, Dunkin Donuts, or Subway sandwich, correct? You pay with a credit card. I own the Subway sandwich. I take a loan from [my] bank for my furniture, kitchen equipment and everything. Small-term loans, small, a hundred thousand, bank will give me finance and they will tell me, "Credit card swiping, also, we offer, so, use from our company."

So, credit card swiping unit, I have to use them, correct? Correct, yes; no, no more, no more-- Hilton, Marriott says, "You have to use, compulsory, Chase," because they did a tie with them. Can you believe, at the national level, all Hiltons, Marriotts and Holiday Inns started using, from [the] last three years they're using, Chase credit card swiping app and unit?

How much [of a] percentage [are] those three franchises making from the hoteliers? What was your problem if you're using our [machines]? They found out, the volume, [how] each transaction goes, how much they can make by a fraction of the one/tenth of a percentage.

Why [are] their eyes different? You are in the hospitality guest service [industry] for overnight sleeping, right? [The] customer goes there (guest goes there) to sleep there, not to see too much.

Now, another headache started. The EV [electric vehicle] motor vehicle charging stations, we are supposed to put it [in]. Each town charged ten thousand to twenty thousand for each contractor, the specialty [equipment], underground, secured. More EVs are there beyond Tesla, so, it should be a universal charger system. [The] franchise says, "No, we want a percentage into that also." Man, it is my parking lot.

SI: Yes.

HP: No. Are they in the hospitality business or, pardon my language, [the] Mafia business? Sorry, you write whatever you want to write in your essay, but I'm telling you honestly, because you asked me as an entrepreneur or a businessman.

SI: Yes, it's interesting to see such conflict between the franchise and franchisee.

HP: Revenue loss, businessmen have revenue loss. We think that you pay for guest service and you're fine. What is this?

SI: How many hotels do you own?

HP: Hotels?

SI: Yes.

HP: Two.

SI: Two.

HP: One Hilton, one Marriott.

SI: Both of them are doing similar things.

HP: Yes, or, at the Hilton Garden Inn, which has 114 units with the twenty suites. We start [from] a single bed to a double bed and handicap access, but with the restaurant, business facilities and meeting rooms, gym and swimming pool, [it can be a] headache to maintain. People, half the guests don't use those services and we have to keep it, because it is in Carolina, while Spring Hill Suites is all suites, no problem with that.

SI: You've also been involved in different activities in Monroe, in terms of serving on boards.

HP: Many boards.

SI: Tell us a little bit about that.

HP: Yes, [for] Middlesex County, I'm the Vice Chairman of the Planning Board for all the twenty-five towns. I park my car where I always park every month. I'm the Affordable Housing Board member [in] Trenton for my town, for the Affordable Housing Boards. To make the veterans' housing is a separate project.

So, [for the] first time in our town, we made the veterans' housing, first building coming up with eighty houses. It [was] ready last month. We are starting leasing from next month onward. [It] depends on each applicant. Even though [the] demand is for two hundred to four hundred applicants, depends by criteria, income base and need base, how many approved, all will be gone within [the] first blink of the eye. So, that is what I [do]. Then, in my town, I'm a Planning Board member, Mayor's representative in the town, for Mr. Steve Dalina.

[Editor's Note: Stephen Dalina has served as Mayor of Monroe Township, New Jersey, since January 2021.]

I'm the Founder and President of the India-US Forum of Monroe Township, a nonprofit organization, which we [have done] for many years. With that, we are tied up with the county commissioners, county cultural art commission, which is [in the] next building, that I also come once a month for the meetings.

We are encouraged to do a lot of cultural, art and history events. So, now, I know you are part of all this history. When we do the next history event, we'll invite you or your student [for the] opportunity.

What we try to do [that is] different than others, a small thing, we come to Monroe or you come to [live] in Edison, you come to live in Hightstown, from Manhattan--you like [the] town, you came, you stay five years, ten years. You still don't know why you like Hightstown. Schools are good, crime rate is low.

So, we brought the historian of the town [in] to do the presentation, [with] our own money. We did the presentation. We did the slideshow presentation and [shared] our town's history. We come to know how many racial riots happened in the town in eighty, ninety-five years back.

What was the history of Thompson Park Lake--you know Thompson Park? Thompson Park is a tourist park. 115 years back, it was a nudist beach. So, before that, the people's revolution happened and they kicked out all those hippies and nudists from the Spotswood and Helmetta area. So, we shared that fact by slide shows.

Then, veterans of World War II who went there, some soldiers never came back. Then, their family found out that, when they went for [the] war, they got frozen in the cold. They died [in] the cold. Their dead body came after months and months, when they [were dug] up from the buried snow.

So, he had a girlfriend in those days before he [went] in. So, [the] girlfriend had a picture before leaving. That picture, we shared. So, we were trying to track that girlfriend [down], who is now a ninety-five-year-old. So, she's available to talk, but not available to remain present.

So, we did [those] kind of things, which, if it's of interest to you, we'll invite you. So, we are planning what new things we can put [on] again. We want to see that, but that is this year we'll do it. Just recently, in December, we did that one.

So, why I did all these things [was] to be [able to] value the town in which you're moving. So, I didn't invite old people who are staying there from [the] last fifty years. I invited all the new people who [are] buying 1.1 million to 1.7 million houses. I said, "Do you know why you're in this town?" "Hey, hey, man, why are you asking me?" I said, "Come, come, and really know the value, why you are in the town."

So, all that's sitting in the library. Last question was from me to the historian, that [I said], "Let each one tell you which street they live [on] and you tell him or her what was there before their house was built." So, first row, second row, everybody's a PhD, doctor, engineer, NASA-retired scientist.

He said that, "Where you live was a buried dead body of the township criminal whom they killed in one night because he was overnight drunk." "Oh, my god." "Huge farms; in those days, our town was without one policeman, eighty years back, our town, not a one policeman. The history was, you got a drunkard and you do things. An internal fight happened and you kill [him], boom, boom, like that. So, that's the history." That guy's, "Oh, really, I live in that one?" I say, "Yes, that's the farm you live in."

So, [it is] worth sharing the fact--where, today, the banks are there, what was there before? Where, today, the small shopping [area is] spread out, there was a base socializing bar or sports bar was there, like that. How many horses died when one ranch burnt out in the night? like that, but that's worth sharing, why we are in the town, what [the] town brings today to [the] value and everything.

So, I'm presenting or talking a little free minded to you. You can narrate whichever [way] you like. That is your extraordinary skill and subject, and question me [on] anything.

[The] second thing, a very interesting thing we did, which was restricted to us, but, even though, we did aggressively in the town, you know the flood [that] happened in Rossmoor, with 129 homes? We jumped [on] it right away, the next day. [The] Red Cross stopped us, said, "You cannot do it. You cannot reach out to the people to give [them] the food." I said, "Okay, we'll do [it] voluntary." "No."

[Editor's Note: In late August 2021, Tropical Storm Henri caused flooding that damaged more than 170 households in Monroe, primarily in the Rossmoor community.]

I'm scratching my head with my two group members, sitting outside Roma Deli by the Rossmoor security gate. I saw people taking out their wet carpet, clothes are useless. You have seen that. I have pictures of everything. Washing machine, drying machine, everything gone. How [can you] live without a drying and washing machine in a retired community?

So, we went again inside. We asked them, "Did you have lunch?" "No." They were so depressed to answer us, also. We went outside, we bought two big pies of pizza, carried it in and said, "Guys, start eating." They took one of each, with a soda bottle and everything. Next day, we went there, piles and piles and mountains of mad and smelly things, different. It's [the] same street at the end.

One lady [was] sitting [there]. Her daughter drove down from some far distance, trying to take her. I said, "How long [will you] be here?" She said, "Until we collect some of the inside clothes." [The] master bedroom didn't get wet. So, she was picking up her clothes and putting her in the nearest hotel.

I said, "You want food?" "Oh, I'm staying in this hotel." I said, "Which hotel?" so, outside on Cranbury Road, some hotel she mentioned. I said, "Stay there. I [will] come in the evening." In the evening, I took a sandwich, a bar, crackers and some food, chips, and delivered it. Her daughter was there. She cried, "You guys are there."

I said, "Man, we can't see such a stuck situation." Of course, help is there, but without food, elderly people? Tomorrow, [if] it happened to my mom and dad, what [would I] be doing ten thousand miles away, five thousand miles away, a thousand miles away?

Now, we broadcasted that [our] fund is available to help, we, under my name and [the] group's name, incoming phone call. In [the] Rossmoor Clubhouse, where we meet all the time for [meetings], they kept an open house for affected families. I went there. Police were there, fire marshals were there, EMS was there, township engineers were there. All know me, "Hey, Mr. Patel."

I said, "Everyone over here, I want to give them a gift card for ShopRite or grocery stores or Dunkin Donuts." Then, I said, "They lost their cars, also. They lost their cars. How the hell [are they] going to go to Dunkin Donuts or Subway? They need physical groceries. Now, stupid idea, grocery--they don't have a cooking range working [in the] house." I said, "Let us do food donation only again. We have fifty-seven hundred dollars."

I'm sitting on my deck, coming from Rossmoor. They refused to give me the list of the affected families because they have a protocol, that [the] library will do the list. I said, "No problem, I'll go to the library." Sitting on the deck, I called [the] police chief who was there. He said, "Mr. Patel, this is my number." I said, "I'm sending you the spreadsheet with the names to know. Starting today, [in the] evening, I want to deliver the food packets." "Okay, yes."

By the time I'm looking for food packets, no homeowner was there, [the] next morning, to identify which house I have to give [them to], because everybody left. [The] Red Cross was still distributing food. They have a bunch of food, but nobody there to deliver [it]. I said, "Now, you are talking to me." So, I went to the library to get the telephone number of a contact person.

Can you believe [this]? I called [the] first lady. She said, "Okay, I'll meet you on the road by a traffic light." I said, "Meet me by the parking lot." She met me in the parking lot. I gave her the 250-dollar check. She was a teacher of my daughter, middle school teacher. She was hesitant to take the check from me. I said, "No, no, take it, where you are. Let me know."

She says, "My entire house is gone, flooded," and she's not from Rossmoor, she's [from] the back of Monroe. So, five different areas got affected, all over the town. Her entire house [was] gone. So, I said, "Tell me whichever way I can help you."

Then, when the store lady says, "Mr. Patel, I heard that you're giving the money," I said, "Money, but they don't have food. That's the reason I'm giving you money." So, we donated [to] close to twenty-nine families, two to three hundred dollars at a time. One lady came with her husband with the oxygen pipe. This is situation, your heart goes out.

So, that, also, we did [in a] big way. We got a proclamation for that from the Mayor, because [the] Mayor found out what great [things] we are doing, because I took the lady--what do you call that?--leased from the library. So, [the] Mayor monitors that.

So, then, seniors of Monroe, Rossmoor--now, this is great news, but you might not be knowing [it]--Rossmoor has two hundred-plus seniors who cannot move. They are [on] bed rest. They don't have a car. They, maximum, [can] come in good weather with a car outside and go back. So, there is a lady in the town who started "Soup for Rossmoor Seniors." I said, "I assure you [your] monthly grocery, no problem." She shopped.

She started with fifty soups per week. Today, she's making 250 soups per week, but, for that, she needed someone to deliver. So, [we] created the base of the seniors who can drive for this lady and identified those two hundred to give the soup. So, whenever there is a grocery shortage, she tells me, "I need this many carrots, this many broccoli, this many this, that." I get the list. I'll do it silently. We make one call and we make [it] [snaps fingers] happen.

With this, I want to connect one question of the past [to the] pandemic. Pandemic happened. We call EMS, because ambulance and police were getting called [by] how many people affected; in senior [residences], we're the first priority. So, [the] EMS director says, "Mr. Patel, thank you very much for your call." She started crying. I say, "Eileen, what happened?" I know her from [the] last twenty-five years.

She said, "Mr. Patel, all of our EMS crews don't have a professional mask, which goes with each trip, because every time we use [one], we have to throw it out. It comes to a hundred dollars each," the EMS people wear for their own [protection]. I said, "Really?" They said, "Yes."

I said, "Can I manage the phone?" "I appreciate [it], it is allowed," me calling my group, IFM--still, I'm talking IFM--made a call, within over ten minutes, fifty-seven hundred dollars.

Police chief found out--don't disclose this to anybody.

SI: Do you want to record it or take it out?

HP: No, take it, I'll tell you. You edit it, whatever you want to do. This is a fact I'm telling you, "Don't do this. Don't do this." I said, "Why?" He said, "Otherwise, other taxpayers will think that we don't have enough funds to support our EMS. Please, stop this right away." Because they know me from twenty years, I have to honor that. We don't want [any] misinterpretation, because your enemy, your opposition, [might] politicize it, such an effort. I clicked it off, button off, no funds available. We cashed it out. Being a nonprofit, we cut the check.

Third day, we went to [deliver food], by taking the appointment at the EMS, pasta plates, you know naan, you know chicken, Indian food, all three trays. I have a picture of that. I said, "Bring your whole stuff. We are coming there with the check." We did that--opportunity, momentum, provided you are ready for that and we are ready for that.

SI: You mentioned a few people, but how large is the group?

HP: Our IFM?

SI: Yes.

HP: The founding members are five, but the network of the people [is] 780.

SI: Oh, wow.

HP: Including students and mothers. I want to tell you one more example. You can edit whichever you want to.

SI: Sure.

HP: I'm a free talker. I was in Bombay, April 2023, urgent, because my mother was on her deathbed. I run there; I am there. My mother passed away on [the] 1st of May. I'm sitting home, got a call from here, from someone who didn't know that I am in India. I am listening to him. You know cricket?

SI: Yes.

HP: Cricket game? He's a player, cricket player, in the town. So, in the morning, he played cricket. Afternoon, he came home by finishing his cricket game. He has a small kid, young wife--chest pain, collapsed and died. So, all youngsters, [Mr. Patel imitates yelling].

Now, they are a stranger to the town. They just moved two years back, known to the people, social group, in the same townhouse community. They don't have a fund, money. From India, I made a call to my friend, "Let us do the donation drive."

So, his wife and one relative came. He says, "We don't have money to transport the body to India. We want a funeral in India." You know how much it cost, you know how much is the procedures, to go through the Consulate to everywhere, and you need a body to be [prepared], have a funeral director to handle everything, by global paper of each country. We manage it. I know all the funeral directors in the entire county.

From India, I made a call, [had a] fund donation started [by] evening time. Morning time, we needed more funds, more funds; by that evening, forty thousand dollars collected, with that kind of a campaign, for that lady.

My mayor says, "Hemant, I want to send a condolence letter." I said, "Mayor, I'm coming [home] within three weeks. We'll look [then]. Right now, she's heading to [his] funeral, to India. Wait, [give] her a moment, wait." By the time I came back in three weeks, [the] Mayor says, "We should send a letter of sympathy." I said, "Yes, send a letter of sympathy." They send it. I said to our group, "Where [do] we stand today?" [the] contribution [had] gone [to] a hundred thousand dollars.

SI: Wow.

HP: Nonstop; God bless her, what to do, but she lost her man. That one, we initiated it with one phone call ten thousand miles away. Why not?

SI: You mentioned the planning boards, both at the county level and the local level.

HP: Yes.

SI: What are the challenges that you face on both the local and county level in that role?

HP: Most of the things, before even we [are] involved, we should know each application. [The] Planning Board works by the professionals' recommendations and engineering. It's like an applicant applies, for many reasons--to get a variance, to get approval, to put in an expansion, for zoning and coding. What happens in that, professionals are always there to recommend and guide, and you have to vote accordingly.

You're an independent thinker--nobody can influence your vote and nobody can pressure you for that. So, you do your due diligence with your general knowledge. So, for that, I have to pass the exam of the board member. So, before that, there is a training of three hours; no, five hours'

training. That training, you finish and you get certified, [so that you] understand what a resolution stands for, what a variance stands for.

Each variance is related to each applicant in many ways. Someone [may] want a driveway to be on this side. Then, [their] neighbor's approval [is] required. Someone [may] want frontage with a walkway. Then, [the] entire corridor of the front road applies. If that applies to the straight road or wetland or [the] Department of Environmental [Protection], all these require [permissions].

You cannot [just] be a regular citizen, to get your input, "Oh, he should get [this], he should get [that]." No, no, it's not aggressiveness; (merits?) of the case [are] different. So, [the] problem is understanding the applicant first, then, their professionals, and then, need and wants. "If it's needed, do it; if it is a headache, then, reject it." That is [the] Planning Board, but it comes [from] a lot of recommendations.

Suppose there is an intersection and they want to build a Taco Bell, but on the other side is already a TD Bank. The traffic light and way, right and left turn, is already there; Taco Bell required the drive-through, but, lately, banks also need the drive-through. You understand? So, how [are you] going to do that?

So, you have to go for the easement. An easement means you have to have a traffic study report first. That's the calculations. So, what is the traffic study? [The] commercial establishment will get that traffic study on their own. This is a seven days' operation. Banks work Monday through Friday, but, now, in [the] drive-through, also, they put the auto teller--remember ATM and all the things? So, we don't expect five customers per day, is not part of the calculations.

Lately, if you see, in the modern [era], last ten years, these kind of things come in a mega development, Home Depot, then, Stop & Shop, then, Taco Bell on one corner, so [that] both the exits are with the drive-through of the Taco Bell, McDonald's or bank. Why?--to balance it, to include it in the traffic study report.

So, it's easy for the Planning Board to approve it. You can visualize that. In Hightstown, being an old, historic town, you don't have that potential, correct, but, if you go [to] East Windsor, other side, if you go [to] Monroe, other side, a new development has that requirement to meet and [the] developer knows that part.

So, applicants are changing [in a] big way, but, when housing comes, you have to ask the students growth advisory also for that [information]. You have to calculate, "What is [the] burden on the school district for that?" but we are concerned with the property and traffic only, which is [the] sewer system, municipal amenities and infrastructure.

This is a small example. Suppose Route 1--you go Route 1, right?--towards Princeton, one corridor is coming where eight hundred houses are coming and one overpass is coming, okay. [The] builder/developer has to give an exit/entry ramp, access to that, a traffic light required on the local road, county road or state road, which a state road means Route 1.

So, those things are meet with a two hundred-foot setback line. So, if you go through Princeton, every property is within two hundred feet behind (inside from) Route 1, whether it is a marketplace or anything, whether Wegmans is there, whether Home Depot is there. Why?--to meet the water [requirements for] flood and excessive rainfall, Mother Nature, water.

So, a flooding situation can be a flooding situation--what is called a flooding situation in New Jersey, as per the water rainfall study, one-inch-per-hour rain speed for five hours in a row is called a flood. So, in one night, we are sleeping and waking up, you never know it is a flood in [the] whole night.

If the one-inch speed per hour [is met], one inch water for five hours in a row, [it] is a flood. You don't know what ramp will be tied or what driveway is blocked; you never know. Your own community driveway may be flooded, because that much stormwater drain management is calculated based on [that rubric].

So, [the] Planning Board requires a lot of education and knowledge, being ordinary citizens, but I have an interest in all these things, being a land developer and all that. So, it is definitely my interest. So, I worked with the three different mayors' administrations. So, this is my third mayor's administration I'm working [with]; we're under the different BAs, business administrators.

So, they know Hemant Patel is valuable by each vote or input in the vote bank, and other towns might [also] be knowing me. So, only five or six positions are open for commissioners of the county to vote and every mayor has their own favorite person, but, when my renewal comes, nobody put any other person in the county also with me or ahead of me.

On the contrary, January is always a reorganization month. So, two weeks back was a reorganization. I was offered the chairmanship of the Planning Board of the county. I said, "Man, don't give [it to] me. I won't be able to contribute that much time and I'm not here to take the cap that, 'Oh, I'm a chairman, I'm a chairman.' I can contribute even [as an] ordinary person also, whatever my capacity is there."

So, they changed the resolution before the reorg meeting. Then, instead of, "Hemant Patel remain the same," I said, "Yes, change it." Same way, it happened when I was parking the car. He said, "Mr. Patel, [the] resolution is this, that we are nominating you? You're nominated." I said, "No, no, change it."

Same parking lot, I was there and I walked through the Bayard Street building and took the oath over there. So, I'm there for many years; even in my town, also, I'm there from 2015 on the different boards and everything.

SI: Is there anything that we skipped over that you think we should talk about?

HP: On this part of what I gave you in writing, I know [the] space [was] not there, so, I didn't write it.

SI: Why don't I pause for a second?

[RECORDING PAUSED]

SI: We were talking a little bit about your family. We want to put that on.

HP: Yes, okay. My wife is a hospitality certified manager for the Hilton brands and Hilton group of companies. She worked in her Florida location and, since she's married to me, she's back to New Jersey.

My daughter, born here in New Jersey, she's first finishing her college final year. She has applied in medical colleges all over the Tri-State [Area]. One of them is Rutgers, Robert Wood Johnson and NJMS [New Jersey Medical School]; let us see how she gets the opportunity to be a student of this kind of institute, to pursue her medical professional career.

SI: That's pretty remarkable. It sounds like the traditions from your father and your mother have been passed down to your child.

HP: Yes, that's true, that's true.

SI: Entrepreneurship and hard study.

HP: Yes. So, one, because this is [the] last word I'm catching [for] you, from [the] last seven years, she formed her own mentoring company. So, my daughter, Vinisha, beyond the education, she's so much a believer in mentoring students and preparing them for public speaking, social service, civic engagement.

Her main goal is to prepare the students for college preparedness, applications, essay writing, and give them the path for college admissions and [addressing the] changing era about different university and colleges standards.

SI: What from your own background have you wanted to pass down to your child, both culturally and value-wise?

HP: Good question. [laughter] Based on my path, if I see this from my dad to me, I will definitely expect that from my daughter, whom I see [as a] replica of the family features, genes. Definitely, she's on that path for humanitarian service, community persons and education, believing in the education standards.

SH: The judo point was actually very interesting, that you did judo in college.

HP: Yes.

SH: Do you feel like doing that gave you a certain mentality in the business world as an entrepreneur? Did it teach you any lessons?

HP: Yes. Judo shows you, teaches you, first thing when I learned from my teacher was discipline and [to] use the judo skill only in self-defense and not in attacking. So, an important part of this kind of sports/athletic activity is discipline and well-controlled behavior.

SI: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

HP: No, that's fine.

SI: For today, we will conclude this session. We'll produce the transcript and maybe there will be more stuff that we'll have questions about. We can either do a second session or you can just add it to the transcript, but, for now, thank you very much, I really appreciate it. It's been great.

HP: No problem, thank you very much.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

HP: Okay. I'm a member of the GOPIO [Global Organization of People of Indian Origin] organization and [have been] affiliated with them since it [was] conceived in 1989. The core members are still, today, the same.

We have a good membership worldwide, to open up Indian families and Indian people's representation and presence in each country by participating in event activities with the core conventions, seminars, and delegations, because it gives your presence as identity by your profession, by work field, by community service and your achievements.

We started this in '89 [for] the reason [that] in those days [there were] Dotbuster attacks on South Asian women in the remote and isolated [areas]. It [was] biased criminally by targeting Indian women and men. So, it started in Jersey City, New Jersey, and Jackson Heights, New York.

[Editor's Note: Established in Jersey City, the Dotbusters hate group targeted Indian and especially Hindu Americans between 1975 and 1993 in New Jersey and New York.]

So, we did that (awareness [raising actions]) to bring [this issue to the] attention of law enforcement and elected officials of each town and county. We were well responded [to by those entities]. It took years and years to clear the air. That's how our consulates and embassy supported our organization, by attending the events, giving us the representation and listening to our core issue.

Based on this, we kept many annual conventions. Recently, in 2024, we did that convention in New Jersey, in Royal Albert Hall. Now, we [have] started the different chapters, which [are] called [the] North Jersey Chapter, [the] Central Jersey Chapter and, very soon, we are starting the South Jersey Chapter, all the way to Atlantic City. Currently, we have a California Chapter, Paris, Australia, Brisbane, everywhere. We have a global presence and it is well-responded. Last month, we had a convention in Australia. We had [conventions] in Paris, in Fiji and Guyana.

SI: It has been very successful at bringing your concerns to law enforcement and local and state government.

HP: Correct, everywhere. Particularly, the presence means what? We don't want any popularity. We want to participate and we want to be recognized by understanding the issue. One of the core issues is [the] green card waiting list in immigration and, most importantly, [how] interviews [are] backed up in the respective consulates of different countries.

So, we took the delegations to Capitol Hill twice in [the] last two years. They heard our concerns and they are working on [expediting it] without any further delay. [Also, we seek to address] mixing up the illegal immigration with the legal immigration, because we are here from three generations, Indians (Americans) are here from [the] last three generations.

The main issue we brought up is Hinduism, because Hinduism [is] totally misunderstood [when] compared to the South Asian [population]. South Asia consists of seven countries or eight countries, while Hinduism is only for Indians, [those] believing in Hinduism. So, that is a religion, but it is totally misunderstood, with the biased attacks on the Hindu temples, Sikh temples, Jain temples, Swaminarayan temples. So, all these issues have been addressed to the law enforcement and community leaders and elected officials.

Thank you, that brought up things.

SI: Yes. Have you ever been in any situations where you felt you were biased against?

HP: No, thank God, no, because I'm very open-minded. I'm always accessible for a dialogue. Dialogue can bring the conclusion. We can have a dialogue with different viewpoints, with your opposition, but you can win that on a neutral ground rather than an aggressive ground.

SI: Thank you very much.

HP: One more thing next.

SI: I'll turn it off.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

SI: We were going to talk about one more initiative.

HP: Domestic violence and substance abuse. We, as an organization, thought to do something in this area of the community's concerns. We came up with [the] idea to do a presentation and seminar. A lot of resistance [came] from the people whom we talk [with], but, as an organization, we were determined to do it.

We did it very successfully. Why [do] I count [it as a] success?--because [of] the cases [that] came after that. I don't want to disclose the names, but I want to give the cases.

I got a call in the early morning, after the seminar. We did a very professional presentation, in the presence of the FBI, in the presence of law enforcement, in the presence of a PhD, a doctorate in this area, in the presence of psychiatric treatment, a doctor's presentation, in this one from the Princeton area.

A few months after that, early morning, a police alert came--a girl is missing. A girl is missing. I [was] surprised that a community like Monroe got this kind of thing. Within two hours, I got multiple calls, personally, that, "Mr. Patel, do you know (Heman?)? Do you know (Heman?)? They need help." Now, I don't know who means "they;" nobody knows whose daughter is missing.

Within three hours, because [the] police alert was there, nothing [was] found until [the] afternoon--I thought, because, weeks before, was [the] Monroe school prom, anything can happen, as per protocol, as per the event, party. We don't know. In the afternoon, out of [the] blue, because of my community [outreach], I called someone.

That person says, "Yes, she's my daughter. She's missing." Immediately, I said, "[Can] I come to your home, any problem?" He said, "No, [you are] most welcome." I called my IFM two group members, one lady, one man, because I was going to a stranger's home, [not a] familiar home or we don't know the temperament, [their] sensitivity and emotions.

[I] knock [on] the door--Mother, Father and elder sister [are] sitting quietly. I started asking [questions]. Out of [the] blue, they slowly and steadily [start] telling [us] everything that they reported to [the] police since she's missing last night. Nothing got me the clue, that, "Why?" [Her being] missing is [the] effect, but "why" is a question mark.

They are telling [us] everything, but [they were] hesitant to tell the [whole] truth. All of a sudden, one of the female members said, from them, that, "The boy used to come to our house. His is from out of state. [They were] not known [to] each other. They know each other only on-the-line, through the Internet. She invited him to attend the prom. The prom is a signing permit system, that you can bring one person," blah, blah, blah.

[I said], "But, since she's missing, what is missing from the house?" They didn't say nothing, but the dad said that, "I'm missing the checks of my business office from the table." So, I said, "Did you report this?" He said, "No." I said, "Why?" He said, "No, in case..." I said, "He's a criminal." He said, "No, then, my daughter will be in trouble."

I said, "[Your] daughter is in trouble. How [do] you know [your] daughter is not in trouble now? [The] point is, let us help law enforcement. It is a police alert all over the county, Amber Alert." He said, "What should I do?" I said, "Report this part. Did you report this part?" He said, "No." I said, "Then, this is a crime."

Second thing, he told me that his bank called him today, that, "Some stranger came to cash your checks." I said, "Really? Even though you are not alert, please leave me alone and report [that] to the police."

That day, my wife was getting ready to go to a wedding. So, I said, "Guys, talk through the same [things] for law enforcement, again, add the additional complaint. It may help you, not hurt you," blah, blah, blah. I went to the wedding. He did the right thing. I came back from the wedding at twelve in the night--no news. All of a sudden, early morning, the news came.

They found the missing girl, [in] some other town's shopping center parking lot, sleeping in the car, in a trashy condition car. [The] point is that community awareness [can help], [the] point is be clear, [the] point is be close to your family and kids.

Now comes, "What happened?" That girl [had] already got the admission in college. [Her] parents [were] concerned with their career. High school was to be done within three weeks.

Now, I [will] tell you the part two of the same case. [After the] girl came [home], everything is quiet in the town. One evening, I'm driving back, after seven days or ten days. I got an urgent call from a friend of my organization, "Mr. Patel, can you give me the telephone number of that family?" I said, "Why?" "Don't ask why; give me now." I said, "Okay, here is [the] number." I hung up. He called that family and he called me back.

"Do you know why I called you?" I said, "Why?" He said, "[The] entire town's high schoolers got the text message that, 'Before I leave, I want to say goodbye to everyone,'" that prom group. So, my friend's daughter was also in the high school and this was the talk of the town.

So, dangerously, I said, "If that is the case, let me call, too." So, I called the parents. So, [the] parents say, "Yes, yes, I'm on the way, Hemant, but what happened?" I said, "Do you know that your daughter sent this kind of message all over the town to the youngsters?" "Oh." I said, "Don't [say], 'Oh'--run."

He ran [around the] house and [the] girl was not found in the house. [Their] car was there. They [were] scared. They looked around and she was heading towards the Turnpike ramp to commit suicide.

SI: Oh, wow.

HP: Thank God, my matter is over here.

SI: Yes.

HP: [Offering another example], a young couple, lovely family, every day meets the kids at the bus stop. I'm sitting [at] home. I've got a friend who has retail stores and an IT business in the town. He called me, "Hemant, you're available? I need to talk to you for two minutes."

I said, "What happened?" He said, "I need help [with] the police, because my friend's neighbor got arrested." I said, "Arrested? A person like you [has] a friend who got arrested?" He said, "Yes, because his wife called 911." I said, "Man, what happened?"

He said that they both, husband [and] wife, argued, ended up in a big argument. [The] police came and arrested the man in handcuffs. I said, "Really?" He said, "Yes, but the problem was, their kids were also there." I said, "That sets a bad example. What happened--so, he did it?" He said, "Argument."

I said, "I cannot [get] involved. [Let] law enforcement do their job, but any personal things, love to share, but, definitely, something is [more] serious than that." He said, "You don't mind if I tell the lady to call you?" I said, "No problem." She called me; not to disclose, that they [did] fight, argued and, out of anger and aggressiveness, both did a little push-and-pull, with the kids in front of them, because they both were crying."

[She said], "I called to control the situation, to 911, but [the] police came and saw the situation and arrested him. So, can you help me to take the case back?" I said, "No, you filed a complaint. You go and explain." "No, [the] police says they were arrested, so, they are to present it in front of the judge." I said, "There you go, there you go. Every 911 [call], in cases like this, has consequences and [their] procedure needs to be followed. So, talk to the lawyer."

[She said], "Oh, no, I don't want to call a lawyer. Otherwise, we will be on the record." I said, "Anyway you are on the record. Every 911 [call] is on the record, [even if] it is a friendly blind call, but it is identified who called." So, she said, "No, we are a love marriage. We love each other. Out of this anger, this happened."

I said, "Tell everything tomorrow to the judge. Where are your kids?" She said, "[My] kid is here." I said, "What happened to the kids?" She says, "Nothing. They were crying." I said, "No, there is more than this. What did [the] cop ask?" "No cop asked the kids or cops looked at the kids."

Second day, evening, the lady calls me, "That cop filed a complaint case, presented in front of the judge, but [the] Social Service Department is coming to see us." I said, "Yes, that is the system of this country. Whenever a child's welfare is endangered, you will be questioned."

"What should I do?" I said, "Be honest, to tell them everything. Be honest, to ask for the help and be honest, clear, or take the counseling between husband and wife to maintain your cordial relationship." I did this because that was [what] I learned from our seminar which we presented.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Sachin Hosmane 3/1/2025
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 6/17/2025
Reviewed by Hemant Patel 7/23/2025