

## **Passion, fatherly wisdom have helped entrepreneur Naveen Seth succeed in several industries**

Thirty years after he arrived in Canada from India barely able to speak English, serial entrepreneur Naveen Seth traces the roots of his thriving business career to lessons his father taught him when he was a teenager.

Seth, CEO and owner of the rapidly growing La Prep chain of bistro-style restaurants, was 15 years old when he began helping his father out after school at the successful textile company he ran in Punjab, India.

He'd monitor production at the plant and report back to his father on new orders coming in and product that needed to be shipped out. He branched out into other parts of the business – wholesale operations, sales, the retail shop. In the evenings at the family dinner table, Seth's father would talk about business and encourage him to set priorities and talk about how he should go about making them happen.

“My father was a fantastic teacher,” Seth said. “He always tried to explain how things work in business in a conversational way, rather than by lecturing you. Those lessons are still there in the back of my mind as I run my own companies.”

Seth had to lean on what he'd learned when tragedy struck and his father was killed in a traffic accident. At the age of 21, the job of running the family textile business in the immediate aftermath of his father's death and then winding it down fell to Seth.

The following year – on April 1, 1988 – he immigrated in Canada, where two of his elder sisters lived, to start a new life in a new country. The day after he arrived in Ottawa, Seth began managing a convenience store his sister owned.

As he crammed to learn English, Seth also studied the convenience store business. It wasn't the textile industry, but many of the same business principles applied. About half a year after his arrival, Seth bought a failing convenience store for \$25,000 and set his sights on turning it around. He made numerous improvements and changes to bring in more customers. Eight months later he sold the store for four times what he had paid for it.

Seth followed the same pattern with an additional three stores, buying them at low prices, figuring out what needed to change for them to operate successfully and then selling them quickly for a profit.

But it was an opportunity in the IT sector where Seth struck it really big for the first time.

Though he had honed his business skills over the years since he'd moved to Canada, Seth had no experience in IT when he was first approached by his brother-in-law about going into

business together in the field. Seth's brother-in-law, a computer engineer who had worked in Norway, was also living in Ottawa and had identified a need for IT training centres in Canada.

"It was difficult at first because I had no background in IT, but I spent the next few months shadowing him and soaking up everything I could learn about IT and computers," Seth said.

Six months after they opened their IT training centre, they were so busy they had to expand. They got even busier when they struck on the idea of developing computer-based training modules so students could learn at their own speed from any location — a common practice now, but it was innovative at the time.

Within two years, Seth and his brother-in-law had 35 software engineers working for them in Canada. Through persistence — verging on stubbornness — Seth was also able to attract the attention of a major U.S. marketing firm to use their services. Landing the business took Seth 47 phone calls before the U.S. firm's CEO finally returned his call and gave him the time to make his pitch. The firm ended up liking Seth's company so much that they purchased it for themselves in a \$6-million deal.

Throughout his work life, Seth had always felt a strong passion for food — something else his father had instilled in him. After nearly a decade in the IT business, Seth decided to shift gears and set his sights on the food industry.

"Every Friday during my last two years in IT we used to bring in chefs from the top Indian restaurants in Ottawa to cook for our staff. That really got my passion for food burning again," Seth said.

He studied what was then called the Café Supreme chain, which has since been rebranded as La Prep. He convinced the chain's owner to allow him to buy the rights for Southern Ontario as a master franchisor and opened his first store in 1999 in Toronto beside St. Lawrence Market.

But Seth quickly ran into problems. The location was far too large and expensive to maintain. He had difficulties with his landlord. He battled against mixed branding. Not enough customers came through the door. He shut the restaurant down after one year, losing approximately \$500,000 in what Seth calls the most-expensive lesson he has ever learned. Most importantly, he decided stand-alone locations wouldn't work for the chain and they would do better in places where there was already heavy foot traffic, such as malls and office towers.

Seth put the lessons he learned through the restaurant's failure to the test in 2001 when he opened his second location in Erin Mills Town Centre. It was a hit, followed by a steady list of new locations in the years after — all of them successes. Last year Seth bought out the previous ownership group and became the chain's owner. Today, La Prep has 50 locations across the country and Seth aims to double that number within the next four years.

Two years ago, Seth also launched a separate restaurant concept – a unique Indian street food eatery based in Mississauga. Inspired by many of the traditional Indian dishes Seth’s father introduced to him during road trips and outings, Chaska offers a rich menu beyond what can be commonly found at mainstream Indian eateries.

The concept is proving to be another hit. Seth has secured four new locations to open Chaska in downtown Toronto in 2019, starting with one at the Atrium on Bay in January.

No matter what field he has worked in – textiles, retail, IT or the food service industry – the one common denominator for Seth has been a passion to learn and a drive to succeed, traits he learned early from his father.

“I think he would be proud. He wanted me to do well,” Seth said.