

What Shapes Us

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Dave Patel is the Associate Dean for Student and External Affairs at the Huntsman School of Business, and a remarkable leader. We are celebrating his 10th year at the Huntsman School. Having gotten to know him, I often wanted to have him share his story with a wider audience. This School would not be the same without Dean Patel.

— Douglas D. Anderson, Dean

Dean Anderson: **Dave, you are a first-generation immigrant. What prompted your parents to immigrate to America? Was it difficult for them to leave India?**

Dave Patel: Neither of my parents had formal schooling beyond high school. My dad lost his eyesight when I was a little over a year old, so life in 1970's India was a struggle. Our home was a rented room in someone's house. That was our living room, bedrooms, kitchen. But I went to St. Xavier's, the top ranked school in the state, at great sacrifice to my parents. The school was run by Jesuit priests from Portugal, and it was just an incredible place, with high academic



expectations but an immensely
environment.

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Looking back, I realize my parents were hugely entrepreneurial, trying all sorts of things to make ends meet, like making and selling soap, selling textbooks, and tutoring students. But it was a daily grind. Like a lot of immigrants, they saw the US, while being foreign in every sense of the word, as an opportunity to become more, and to provide a much better environment for their only child. We had little materially, but it was a rich life filled with family and friends.

I was ten when we moved, and I was not really aware of what my parents left behind. In hindsight, I am sure it was incredibly difficult. My mom went from being an award-winning schoolteacher in India to a minimum wage assembly line job within a week of arriving in Salt Lake. My dad took two different buses each way, every day, to go to work at the Utah Center for the Blind. That left an indelible impression on me. And unlike today, when you can Zoom and Facetime 24/7 for free practically anywhere in the world, back then even phone calls to family back in India were rare. And yet they both believed unequivocally that they made the right decision.

DA: How did the early years in the US inform your life?

DP: My uncle had come to Utah around 1970 for school and work, and so we ended up in Salt Lake City. I was on a little league baseball team within a week or so of being in the US because my cousin, who was a really good baseball player, took me along for tryouts when all I knew was cricket. I learned English at Twin Peaks Elementary School. I was a Boy Scout, tried lots of sports, and worked at Arctic Circle flipping burgers during high school. Whatever challenges there were from being different, from not looking like every other kid in the neighborhood or in the school—remember, we're talking about late '70's and early '80's Utah, they were vastly outweighed by so many good people helping with small and big things along the way. I was so blessed to have many amazing people, from teachers and coaches, to friends and parents of friends, accept me into their lives. I learned from them and from my parents to treat people as individuals, and that relationships matter.

DA: How and why did you choose to attend Utah State?

DP: I was in the pre-med honors program at the University of Utah my freshman year, primarily because they gave me money, which was critical. But I discovered that I had zero aptitude for organic chemistry, and so it was a miserable year. After hearing great things about USU from high school friends who'd come here, I made I think my first adult decision and transferred. I loved USU from the start, from living in Mountain View Tower, walking on to the track team, being elected a student body officer, and even getting bad grades and changing my major three times. I made lifelong friends, and count teachers like Carolyn Rhodes, Randy Simmons, and Ross Peterson as amongst my greatest influences because they cared about me enough to challenge me.

DA: You and your wife, Jen, also an Aggie, had great careers going in Washington, DC. In fact, you worked for several years for the Secretary of Defense. And then you came back home. What took you to DC, and how was the transition back to Logan?

DP: I went to DC after graduating from USU and worked on Capitol Hill, putting to good use what Randy Simmons had taught me about taking large amounts of information and quickly distilling it into concise language. That skill served me well again and again, including writing memos from the SECDEF to POTUS. I learned a whole lot about leadership and building high-performing teams at the DoD. Jen went to law school at Georgetown, and then worked for a couple of large law firms. DC was such a huge learning opportunity, working alongside some really talented and dedicated people. We were there for 15 years, and the people we met and the experiences and opportunities we had there were life changing. Those experiences are also why I encourage students to get out of Cache Valley, out of Utah, when they graduate.

We all eventually return to the mothership though, right! Honestly, I didn't see a return to Utah in the future when we were in DC, and now, after having been back for ten plus years, coming back makes perfect sense. Cache Valley is just a great place to raise a family and to carve out a fulfilling life. At one point in DC, I had a 90-minute commute each way, and now, I can see my house from my office. Can't beat that!

Utah State is my fourth employer. At every jump in my career, I've gone into a complete unknown, with no background in that industry. Being here is a bit different in that I went to school here and knew the place from that perspective. I love being surrounded by so much talent, from the incredibly capable and dedicated faculty and staff, to the fresh faces who cycle through, and the greater Aggie community that gives in so many ways. A university is all about building the future, so working in this environment is very fulfilling.

DA: As you look out at the next 10 years, what are your hopes for the school?

DP: As anyone who's been in my office knows, I keep a printout of an email from Jon Huntsman taped to the wall next to my computer. In that email, from 2014, JMH challenged us to build the Huntsman School into one of the "top 3 or 4 schools in the country." Not one of the best, or world class, or best in Utah. I may not be here when we get there, but I believe we can get there. The note is a daily reminder that everything we do ties to that big, hairy, audacious goal.

A top school is about impact on lives, not magazine rankings. Utah State retains the qualities that enabled this directionless college student to discover my place in the world, and I hope we continue to create and provide such opportunities for students.

DA: What does it mean to you to be a citizen of the United States of America?

DP: My story is one of possibilities. There are thousands of such stories. The idea of America is very powerful, especially for immigrants. That idea may be questioned from time to time, internally and externally. But I am a big believer that the perfect is the enemy of the good. The preamble to the Constitution says it right up front, "in order to form a more perfect union." That's a call to action and remains so. I find myself getting caught up from time to time in the thick of thin things, bemoaning the shortcomings of this or that. But the big picture is that my family came here with a few suitcases and not much else, and this place, and this people, enabled us to thrive. There is much work to do, but I am long on the United States of America.