



ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

in Celebration of the
City of Sugar Land
60th Anniversary



CITY OF SUGAR LAND

Sunil "Sunny"
Sharma
President & CEO,
Sunbelt Medical



POLLICOFF: Sunny, what made you come to the United States of America?

SHARMA: I grew up in India and my dad was a District Medical and Health Officer working for government of Rajasthan (state). I have three brothers who all became doctors and my dad wanted me to become an engineer. When President Kennedy came to India, my dad took me to listen to him and I was mesmerized by his speech, specifically about "man going to the moon." After I finished my mechanical engineering degree, I started applying for Industrial Engineering Master's program which was deemed the best in the USA. I choose to go to Mississippi State University because of a very welcoming letter from the dean.

POLLICOFF: So what was your first impression of this country upon arrival?

SHARMA: The experience of leaving home for the first time was quite shocking and liberating. I grew up with a number of servants at home and everything was always prepared and arranged for me. From the time I got on the plane until the time I landed in New York, I was questioning my sanity. I did not eat meat and did not drink and did not like the airplane food at all. Upon landing, I went to a little restaurant and asked for a glass of water. A guy said, "There is a fountain out there." We learned English in the British schools; fountain means water gushing out of the ground. I wondered how you could drink water from a fountain! I looked around and didn't see a fountain. I went to another place where they were serving coffee and I asked if I could have a glass of water. He replied, "Well, there's a fountain over there" and pointed to the same wall. I stood there for a few minutes and a little girl came out and stuck her head into the little hole in the wall and water came out. I thought, "Oh, this is how they drink water." I go there and didn't know what to push! I placed my hands everywhere and finally I pushed the right button and the water went all over my face. I was totally drenched and quite embarrassed!

POLLICOFF: How was your experience at Mississippi State?

SHARMA: I was missing home and could not call home because in those days you had to book a phone call and wait for it to connect (which could be hours, sometimes days). There was no one to help me with my daily chores and there was no good food to eat. There was hardly anything vegetarian. I would order a hamburger without the meat and a few days later, learned that the same oil is used to cook French fries and chicken nuggets, hence mixing vegetarian and non-vegetarian. Not knowing, I had already become a non-vegetarian!

The first day on campus, I was walking to my class and someone would ask, “Hey, how are you doing?” And I would stop and reply, “I am fine and I’m from...” and before I could say the next word, they were gone. This happened with every person I encountered. Nobody wanted to wait and listen to my response. That happened the second day, and on the third day, I developed enough courage to stop somebody and ask, “Excuse me. You just asked me how I’m doing but as soon as I start saying something, nobody wants to wait and listen to me. They just keep walking. Is there something wrong with me?” He started laughing so hard and said, “Let’s sit down here for a minute.” We sat down on a little bench and he said, “This is just the way we say ‘hello’. There is nothing wrong with you.”

Another incident that I recall, at Mississippi State, almost got me into big trouble. I asked a newly made friend to go have a drink at a bar which was about twenty-five miles from the campus. He was hesitant and asked if I was sure that he could go with me. I had been to that place several times with other friends, so I did not see why he could not join me. With reservations he agreed, and we went. As we entered, the reception at the bar was quite chilling. All eyes were upon us. I asked my friend to sit down at the first empty table. I went to see the manager, who I knew. With a bit of anger, he looked at me and said “Sunny, what the hell are you doing? Please get your friend out of here as we do not want any trouble.” At that point I realized, my friend was the only African American and recalled that I had never seen any African Americans before at this place. Understanding the gravity of the situation, we left. On the way back, I apologized to him. He said, “Sunny, it’s not your fault. It’s not something you’ve done. You are new here and it’s just the way things are.” It was a shocking experience and I was much troubled by it.

After that incident, I was determined to bring about the awareness of different cultures, races, and religions. I was able to start an international club to have all students mingle and share their experiences with one another. We had many get together, including international dinners, dances, and cultural programs.

POLLICOFF: What else did you do while you were at Mississippi State?

SHARMA: The Reserve Bank of India would only approve foreign exchange based upon the college dues for each semester and no extra money was allocated. A friend of mine, Johnny, suggested we go work for a company selling Bibles door-to-door. In order to supplement my other activities, I decided to go with this company called Thomas Nelson Publishing Company in Nashville. After one week of training, we were dropped in small towns in Alabama in batches of 20 students from all over the USA. I went door to door trying to sell these books but learned

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that almost everybody has one. After peddling for almost four days in the hot sun, I broke down and sat under a tree by myself questioning my sanity. My dad told me never to quit and that evening, I decided to use a different approach of contacting each household person who opened the door. To my surprise, when I didn’t talk about anything I was selling, almost everyone was very friendly and curious to know about me and my background. It was then I realized that the people are mostly very friendly and nice. It was how you approached them, how they perceived you, is how they received you. To my surprise, at the end of three months, I was the number one salesman among some 2,000 students. The company hired me every summer and promoted me to be a sales manager which included recruiting different students from different college campuses in the southwest. I would finish in the top ten salesman and sales manager every year. The company decided to apply for my permanent residency and asked me to move to Baton Rouge where I pursued my second master’s while still working part time.

POLLICOFF: What made you decide to come to Houston?

SHARMA: At LSU, Baton Rouge, I would study for two semesters and during the summer, I would work for Thomas Nelson. During the second year, I went to visit my friend Johnny who had graduated from Mississippi State and had moved to Houston, Texas and he suggested for me to transfer to University of Houston and find a full-time position. I had a lot of job offers from a lot of different companies, but I accepted a position at a brand-new department of management engineering at St. Joseph's Hospital.

In those days there were no HMOs, PPOs, or DRGs. You had insurance, got admitted to a hospital and could stay longer if your doctor allowed, with no questions asked. The cost was escalating tremendously every day, every year. So, the management decided to

use the principles of industrial engineering: how to manage the people, the space, and the technology. I started looking at cost containment in health care.

As an example, at St. Joseph's Hospital, they wanted to buy another CT scanner to keep up with the increasing patient load. CT scanners had just come out and were really expensive. I did a study of the department's procedure and patient throughput and recommended to hire a technician assistant instead of purchasing another scanner which extended the hours for doing the scans. The hours were from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm and changed to 7:00 am until 6:00 pm. With the additional person we were able to double the patient throughput. By having two people, we were also able to reduce patient time for the procedure by 30%.

I was very happy to be in healthcare and was quite excited to apply Industrial Engineering techniques in managing cost containment while improving efficiencies and productivity. Several of my studies were published in healthcare journals as well as in a Hospital Management Engineering textbook.

POLLICOFF: So when did you get married to Rashmi?

SHARMA: Every time I went to India, during the semester break to see my family, my dad would remind me that it was time for me to get married. Before my dad agreed to send me to the USA, he asked me to promise that I would marry the person of his choice, which I did. In 1977, I had an arranged marriage and I am very, very blessed and happy with the choice that our parents made. They did great! I am the proud husband of Rashmi Sharma, who also blessed me with three great boys (Sanjay, Rajan, & Roshan).

St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital/Texas Children's Hospital/Texas Heart Institute offered me a position to be the Director of Management Engineering and I worked with these three institutions until 1982. During which time I had the honor of hosting the President of India, Honorable Zail Singh at our hospital for open heart surgery. It was then we purchased our first home in Fondren Park and two of my oldest boys were born (Sanjay & Rajan) at St. Luke's. Rashmi would cook some Indian cuisine and we would take it to the President's suite in the evenings.

POLLICOFF: How and when did you start your own business?

SHARMA: A doctor from Caracas, Venezuela, brought in a patient who needed open-heart surgery. Dr. Cooley said, "Why did you wait so long to bring him here? If we had done a heart catheterization (cath) six months ago, he would not be in such a critical condition". And the cardiologist from Venezuela said, "We have a cath lab, however it is not working and has not worked for six months". Come to find out, the manufacturer was asking for too much money for a part to repair their cath lab. It was one part which I could find for a lesser price, but we could not sell it to them because it was under contract with the manufacturer. In those days, only manufacturers could repair their own medical equipment and there were very few alternatives. Their monopoly made cost of maintenance very high for medical equipment in healthcare facilities.



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With this experience, I learned that there is a great need in third world countries as well as within the USA to start an independent third-party service organization. So, this is when I decided to leave St. Luke's and with three other partners (all Americans) started a company called MEI, Medical Enterprise International.

We started repairing and selling medical equipment for a lot of hospitals and physicians but were not quite profitable. In spite of growth in revenue, our expenses were rising. In 1987 we sold the company to Systems Support Inc., in Plano, TX with the condition, that I consulted with them for two years. During this period, I was still thinking about how I could help third world countries in maintaining their equipment at a lower cost.

At the end of my contract, in 1989, I decided to start on my own and founded Sunbelt Medical Corporation which repairs medical equipment and sells new and refurbished medical equipment domestically and internationally. In spite of not having any sales force (by choice) and marketing, I am happy to say we have just celebrated our thirtieth year in business.

POLLICOFF: How did you end up in Sugar Land?

SHARMA: A little before I started Sunbelt Medical Corporation, we moved to Sugar Land (1988) because we were looking for a larger home with a good school district, and we were very impressed with the Sugar Creek Subdivision.

My boys were in private school in Westbury when we lived in Fondren Park. Upon moving, we felt very comfortable with them in public school. They all went to Dulles school system and Rashmi was helping in the PTO. My youngest son was born (Roshan) at St. Luke's in 1989 and we brought him home to Sugar Land. We loved the community and felt like this was our home. We have been here ever since.

POLLICOFF: Since you got here, the population has probably quadrupled. It's almost 120,000 with the latest annexation. What kinds of changes do you feel like you have seen in Sugar Land?

SHARMA: Sugar Land used to be a little sleepy town. Very laid back - do your own thing, everybody knows everybody. People used to say hello and walk around the neighborhood. There were very few families from other countries, including India, and were hardly any shopping facilities or international cuisine.

Over the years, through Fort Bend Economic Development Council and a strong city management, along with forward thinking council members & mayors, our city has grown to be a place of choice for many businesses and families. Businesses are growing, the quality of life is good, the management of the City is to be commended. There are many non-profit organizations which serve those who are not as fortunate as some of us are. There is hardly a week that goes by that you don't have three or four events going on. And most of them are charitable, progressive, youth or senior-oriented. Even in Rotary, we have four different clubs out here. Sugar Land has become a very promising and thriving business community. It is an all-encompassing and welcoming place to live.



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In the early years, there were not too many organizations and activities. I was a founding member of the Sugar Creek Rotary Club which started in 1985.

POLLICOFF: How did you become a founding member of that chapter?

A friend of mine, Steve Friedman drew me to Rotary. His wife, a real estate agent, sold us our home. He knocked on the door one day and said, "Let's go to the country club. There are some people I want you to meet and you'll love meeting them." That evening at Sugar Creek Country Club there were about 50 people discussing Rotary and why we should start a club. I liked the concept and the mission of Rotary and joined the Club. I was the only non-Caucasian to be in that group at that time. Even women were not allowed as members in Rotary. Six or seven years later that changed.

POLLICOFF: There was a Wives Auxiliary or something similar.

SHARMA: Yes, they could work as auxiliary but not as a member. But that changed, which I'm very happy about. Rotary is a global network that strives to build where people unite, take action, to create lasting change and make a difference in their communities and in themselves. Rotary values diversity and celebrates the contributions

of people of all backgrounds, regardless of their age, ethnicity, race, color, abilities, religion, social economic status, culture, sex, and sexual orientation.

POLLICOFF: You became a Governor? And please give some examples of the work that was done in and around Sugar Land?

SHARMA: Yes, the District Governor oversees over 3,000 members in some 64 clubs spread in 9 adjoining counties including Fort Bend and Harris County. It is an elected position and Rotary has existed in Houston over 90+ years and I was the first ever non-Caucasian to be elected. It is a three-year term and you start as a nominee, then Governor-elect, and then Governor. 2010-2011 was the year I was Governor and I visited every rotary club in all nine counties.

It was such an honor to have Houston Mayor Parker, Harris County Judge Emmett, and Bellaire Mayor Siegel provided a proclamation by declaring June 10, 2010 as “Sunny Sharma Day.” Governor Rick Perry, Lt. Governor David Dewhurst, Sugar Land Mayor Jimmy Thompson, Harris County Judge Hebert, recognized and commanded the leadership and the work performed in our communities. In addition, I was chosen to be the “Rotarian of The Year” for my club and a couple of years later, I was honored to be selected as the “Rotarian of the Year” for our District 5890.

Our Sugar Land clubs worked on various projects. For example, we would go out during Christmas and take meals to individuals, families and homes. We would work with the fire department to install fire alarms in senior citizen homes. We would raise money serving in the Fort Bend Rainbow Room. We would include volunteers and students to clean the streets to keep “Sugar Land Beautiful”. We would donate money to Access Health and volunteer to provide school supplies and backpacks to students.

There was no safe place for children to go and celebrate Halloween. In the late 1990’s, our club started what used to be called Boo Bash, a Halloween carnival. Dean Hrbacek was the mayor at the time. We asked him if we could have a Halloween carnival at the community center on Matlage way. We built a little haunted house, had some fun games for children and our club served food and drinks. It was well received and became very successful. Since then, we have been doing it every year. When Town Square was built the city wanted to include more varieties of food and offered other restaurants to join in. We have almost 10,000 people attending now, and I think that’s the biggest tradition our Rotary club help started in Sugar Land.

POLLICOFF: Because the city adopted it after you created it and they’ve taken it over and it is now Halloween Town. I think that was the late 1990s, early 2000s. It’s a huge success and so much fun for the community. What were some of the other projects that your Rotary was involved in?

SHARMA We are blessed to have so many people who give back to the community. To raise funds for our charities, we decided that our Rotary club should honor a philanthropist and named it as the “Humanitarian of the Year Award”. We’ve honored James Patterson, Bob Brown, Dee Koch, the mayor and several more individuals. I am humbled to say that I have been a recipient also.

We also had many Rotary Friendship Exchanges which allowed people from different countries come and stay in our homes to learn about our culture and society. In return, Rotarians from here would visit their countries to have similar unique experiences. We also provided scholarships to three Kempner high school students towards their college.

Our club was instrumental in assisting with the Nicaragua Children of the Dump by having a school for kids to learn a vocational trade as well as providing a clinic where my company (Sunbelt Medical Corporation) donated medical equipment. In addition, we started a clinic in Guerra Mexico, where our Rotarians visit twice a year to provide cataract surgeries and dental procedures at no cost to the patients.



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During my year as District Governor of Rotary International, I visited Haiti immediately after the earthquake and learned that there was plenty of medical equipment but hardly any trained personnel to repair it. With the help of two other Rotarians and fundraising, I led a project where we started a medical equipment repair training program. At no cost to the Haitians, in three and a half years, we have been able to train forty-one Haitians in repairing basic medical equipment. To attract the students, to a two weeklong training module, we provided daily food and lodging free of charge. Each of these students were given basic tool sets and a laptop computer to keep for their work. At the end of this training course, we celebrated with a graduation ceremony and provided each of them with a Certificate of Completion. It was a priceless and memorable moment.

Dedication and commitment of Rotarians is being recognized by Rotary International every year by selecting only 50 Rotarians each year from 1.2 million members. Due to a number of various successful projects and ongoing passion to serve, I was pleasantly surprised and humbled when I was honored as the recipient of the RI's "Service Above Self Award."

In addition, the Trustees of the Rotary Foundations bestowed upon me, the "Citation for Meritorious Service" in recognition of outstanding service to the Rotary Foundation and embodiment of the motto "doing good in the world."

POLLICOFF: I also understand that you are involved with a few Chambers and an organization called Helping A Hero.

SHARMA: Yes, I am on the Board of World Chamber of Commerce of Texas and currently serving as its Chairman. Our goal is to connect various local and Bilateral Chamber in promoting trade in our local and international communities. By connecting various chambers and through networking with diplomat and consul core, we empower businesses to open new channels of business. We also work with various NGO's and charitable organizations to encourage social responsibilities and corporations.

I was also elected to be the Chairman for a most recently formed Texas West Africa Chamber of Commerce, which fosters opportunities for businesses in West Africa. Almost 25 years ago my company built a 100-bed hospital in Guinea, a country in West Africa, by providing 100% refurbished equipment for almost 20 cents on a dollar.

I was invited to serve on the board of Helping a Hero organization that builds special needs homes for the veterans with double and triple amputations. We raise funds and receive in kind donations from builders and construction companies and have built over 100 homes in various cities around the country in last ten years. Each veteran family has a small stake as a homeowner and receives some assistance from the VA as well. I currently serve as the Vice Chairman of this fine organization.

POLLICOFF: You also worked with the Fort Bend American Heart Association, the Indo-American Forum of Fort Bend, and the Sister Cities of Houston.

SHARMA: Yes. I was involved with the Board of West Fort Bend American Heart Association. During the year, I served as president and we had a "Sweetheart Ball," as our fund raiser which raised the most amount of money that year.



Since the last few years, another organization has started celebrating the Diwali-Dussehra Festival at Constellation Field which attracts more than 10,000 people.

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I was a founding member and a trustee of the Indo-American Forum. This was derived from a group of six people coming together who felt there is a need to communicate with the community's different cultures and share our culture. And we started having annual Navratri and Diwali celebrations. Since the last few years, another organization has started celebrating the Diwali-Dussehra Festival at Constellation Field which attracts more than 10,000 people.

POLLICOFF: I'm not familiar with Dussehra.

SHARMA: According to a Hindu Indian religious book, "Ramayan". A king named Ravan kidnapped Sita, spouse of Lord Rama. After a war, Lord Rama killed Ravan. An effigy of Ravan is made and burned with fireworks to celebrate. Since then, Dussehra became a celebration of Good over Evil. This is followed by Diwali where we decorate our home with lights, exchange gifts. Last year, we were honored to have Governor Abbott as our chief guest along with Congressman Pete Olson.

POLLICOFF: What is your involvement with the Sister Cities of Houston?

SHARMA: In late 1999, a friend of mine, Ellen Goldberg and I, met some people from the UAE at the Offshore Technology conference.

With a few more business leaders, we decided to start a sister city relationship between Houston and Abu Dhabi.

Sister Cities program was started by President Eisenhower to promote "Citizen to Citizen Diplomacy" between two cities of different countries. Mayor Brown, the mayor of Houston, an African American, myself - a Hindu, and a Jew took a trade delegation to a Muslim country to sign an agreement between two cities. It was quite an accomplishment to bring about our different religions and cultures together.

We currently have 18 Sister Cities under the umbrella of Sister Cities of Houston (SCH) and I have been on the board of SCH for a few years. I also served as President of Houston Abu Dhabi Sister City Association (HASCA) for five years. During my terms, HASCA hosted breakfast for the UAE Delegates attending the Offshore Technology Conference.

Earlier this year, we brought a Sister Cities International Convention to Houston and had over 700 in attendance from all over the world.

In addition, we had 140 students from different countries at Rice University for a three-day leadership event, for which I was honored to be an Emcee. We were truly honored to have President George W. Bush, as our guest at the gala for the closing ceremony.

Former District Attorney Bob Hebert and Safari Texas owner, Allison Wen have developed some relationships between Sugar Land and a city from China. I recently communicated with our current Mayor Joe Zimmerman, to explore developing this concept further.

POLLICOFF: Tell me a little more about the multi-cultural committee for the city. You were one of the founding members of that group, invited by the City Manager and the Mayor. Why do you think something like that was needed?

SHARMA: The mayor and city council members got me involved in the multi-cultural task force which focused on diversity

and how our city can benefit by such inclusion. There was also a committee formed for high school students. My oldest son (Sanjay) was on one of those leadership teams. It was a great program which brought unity and taught leadership to our younger generation.

As our city was growing, we were seeing people from different cultures, colors, backgrounds, and beliefs. The concept was to bring all these people together so we could understand and appreciate our diversity and difference by making each other aware of our beliefs, values, and traditions. We all have hopes and fears, ambitions, positive and negative attitudes, jealousy, greed, and as well as the desire to give back to others. How we share those human traits depends upon how we mingle with each other and what we can do together. At the end of the day, we all put our pants on, one leg at a time. As one person, you can do a lot - together, we can do a lot more. Miracle happens when we unite.

POLLICOFF: So education, awareness, and mutual respect.

SHARMA: Exactly. That was the whole purpose. I think you described it very well.

POLLICOFF: But it is also very critical that a city be able to reach out and to provide service to people of different cultural backgrounds. Flash back to your experience in Mississippi where you had no idea what something means or what someone is talking about. Some of the places people have emigrated from, the systems were different and so there was a lack of trust, say, of law enforcement, for example. That task force was integral in helping the city form policies and ways to reach out to the community.

SHARMA: Absolutely. By understanding each other's difference and sharing various perspectives allows us to search for common solutions while appreciating diversity. I think the Fort Bend Chamber of Commerce has also been very instrumental in providing diversity. The George Foundation's Dee Koch started a program called Excellence for Nonprofit Leadership that teaches people how to be on a non-profit board. I went through this program.



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Most recently, when Jimmy Thompson was Mayor, the Sugar Land Legacy Foundation was formed. I think that is a beautiful way to promote the passions of the people. It also allows us to leave behind a legacy, whether it is for our organization, our family member, or passion that we have. Also beautifying the city parks with different sculptures, with the help of donations, as well as the city maintaining them, is a public/private partnership that allows us to not only enhance a place but also have a meaning behind it. For example, a friend of ours had a son who was an avid skater and he passed away at a very young age. They donated the money to create a skate park which is being used by many young people today.

There are a lot of folks who have children who are special needs kids. They feel reluctant to go in the park or public places with their family members because they cannot really use the park properly. It was really a hindrance. Sugar Land Legacy raised almost \$450,000 to put together a special needs park. It is a Universally Accessible Playground at First Colony Park. With the help of former Council Member Don Olson, the Jabez Foundation, the Fort Bend Junior Service League, area Rotary clubs, the George Foundation, Minute Maid and many more, this playground was built. It provides a safe place to play for special needs children alongside with their friends and family.

<http://sugarlandlegacy.org/SugarLandUniversallyAccessiblePlayground.asp>

POLLICOFF: As you have pointed out, the Sugar Land Legacy Foundation is a 501(c)3 that was founded in 2010. Were you a founding member?

SHARMA: Yes. Gene Reed was the first president. I've been president for over five years now. Our core values are to provide an avenue so people can not only leave a legacy but also identify their passion. If you build a monument in your own home, only you and your family can use it. But if you build a monument in the city, the public can use it. Not only does it exemplify your giving-back nature, it also exemplifies your caring for the whole community.

I think the city of Sugar Land has been very progressive. If you look at the mix of the city council, it is so diversified. That is so good to see, and it is critical. We have to share whether we are Muslim or Hindu or Chinese because that's how we are identified. This should not be viewed as something different or weird because we want to maintain our heritage, our diversity, and our culture. If I don't say I'm Hindu and where I come from, then how would you know what Hindus do? How do you know what culture we have? How do you know what festivals we have? And what kind of food we eat?

I think you talk about diversity not because you are somebody superior or inferior; but because we are all human beings. By bringing this variety to our life, it adds more to our knowledge, widens our horizons, and allows one to become a better person and more accepting with more appreciation for one another.

POLLICOFF: The Legacy Foundation is also able to provide that sort of all-encompassing community service, in areas that the city really can't.



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SHARMA: Exactly, the city has limited time and resources. At no cost to the city, people from the community can come up with solutions that benefit both. That is something I haven't talked much about yet. I was just elected as chairman of the World Chamber of Commerce. There are two types of Chambers: a local chamber such as the Fort Bend Chamber, and bi-lateral Chambers which are between countries, such as the Indo-American Chamber of Commerce. I am a founding member of that chamber also and it has had twenty years of success. It is an amazing organization that has brought so much business to this region. (India is becoming more important). Prime Minister Modi is coming to Houston in September of 2019 and President Trump is going to be joining him. One of the things the World Chamber of Commerce is going to do next year is pick some local chambers and some bi-lateral chambers and recognize the best among them annually for the job they do in their own communities. We are also going to be recognizing business and community leaders who exemplify the social responsibility by giving back to the community.

POLLICOFF: Do you consider the change in leadership over the years and the Legacy Foundation are truly a reflection of how the city has grown?

SHARMA: Yes. Very much. For reasons such as diversity, passion of people and dynamic need of our ever-changing population. It is important to have a partnership where sustainability can be maintained by the City. Anyone can build a monument but if nobody takes care of it, it will deteriorate. So, having this partnership is critical. We have a few projects on the table right now. A physician group has donated money to provide exercise equipment for senior citizens so they can have a place to work out and exercise. We must make sure that our seniors are properly educated in the safe use of these machines to minimize any injuries. Another proposed project is building a larger animal shelter. These are all examples of private/public partnerships. If it is only public, then it raises taxes; which isn't good. When you bring the private into it, it becomes "our" project.

More importantly, in my opinion, this brings more unity to the whole community and creates a higher level of friendship and fellowship.

POLLICOFF: You mentioned sculpture and public art throughout the city, the beautiful Veteran's Memorial monument at Sugar Land Memorial Park, the skate park, and there are also some trails I think you were involved in building.

SHARMA: Yes, the Eldridge park trail was the very first one built so people could jog and run. The Veteran's Memorial is another example where one of our board members, Mr. Reed, assisted in building a beautiful Veteran's Memorial. We also started the Brick Paver Engraving project which honors (or in remembrance of) a military service person.

With the help of the cities park and recreation department, we have been able to install many sculptures such as selfie, guitar player, astronaut, etc., throughout the city in strategic locations which adds to the beautification of Sugar Land.

We are also working on beautifying the plaza in front of the Smart Financial Center.

POLLICOFF: We are very lucky that Sugar Land continues to be one of the best cities in the country.

SHARMA: Yes, I think we are the most united in diversity, hence, in my opinion, are the best city in the country. I feel that there are so many things we can do if we put our heads together. And Sugar Land has been a true blessing and I am honored to call it home. In the words of Dorothy, "There is no place like home" and home is Sugar Land. The people are amazing, the shopping is great, and we have the best restaurants, with a wide variety of food from many cultures. Above all, the quality of life in Sugar Land continues to improve.

For example, we also have the largest "Holi" function done by Indian groups. Approximately 10,000 people come to play at the Holi cultural event. It is sometimes called the "Festival of Love." This is a day where people come together to forgive all resentments and ill will against each other. We exchange colors (dry and wet) and apply to each other's faces and clothes. It is a festival to share and enjoy, as we show one another love and respect.

Another example, Mayor Annise Parker asked four of our Sister Cities, who are related to Muslim cities, to form a committee for the Mayor's Annual Iftar dinner. We brought all the sister cities together and various Muslim communities. This was a challenge because there are over 50 of them. Iftar is held at sunset to break the day long fast during Ramadan. Over 1,800 people in Houston attend this event which is held once a year free of charge. This, of course was with a lot of support from the Sugar Land community, specially the Ismaili Community, which has been a big contributor.

I was the chair of this event for the year which was Mayor Parker's last year and was able to have the honor of the Consul General of India and Pakistan attend along with other Consul Generals. Mayor Parker was so happy to see such a unity in our communities, as we all were one united family sharing bread together.

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POLLICOFF: Of all the things that you have contributed to this city, what are you most proud of?

SHARMA: When I was on the board of the American Heart Association, we raised money for education, research and awareness. One year I was the top bidder for the naming right of a park in Avalon. I named the park after my dad as he was very fond of families and picnics. I had the honor of placing a Rotary pin on the lapel of President George Bush (Sr) and Vice President Dan Quail at a reception at President Bush's residence in Houston. Rashmi and I are fond of the Bush family and especially Barbara Bush. I used her quote "At the end of your life, you will never regret not having passed one more test, not winning one more verdict or not closing one more deal. You will regret time not spent with a husband, a friend, a child or a parent," which is still engraved on the plaque that is installed at the park.

I live in a city where you have an opportunity to name something after a family member; I think that's probably the biggest personal gratification that I have had. Hence my appreciation for Sugar Land Legacy Foundation.

To serve on Sugar Land Legacy Foundation as a President, is an honor and a privilege, that I take very seriously. However, I feel we haven't even scratched the surface. I would love to see a place where kids can come play, elderly can sit down or walk, and the younger generation can be with their kids and their parents. A place where all children of God can come together to worship, to share a meal, to have fun, to discuss family and business matters and to support each other irrespective of our backgrounds.

I feel very proud to be a Sugar Lander, irrespective of whether you are Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, non-religious, Jewish, or any other denomination. There is a place where you can say, we practice our own diversity, we share our values and we compromise to accommodate each other so we can all live in peace and harmony and prosper together. These efforts bring the world closer to focus on creating a world where we can live in peace and harmony.

When I spoke to the University of Texas at Dallas about conflict between India and Pakistan, I told them there was no conflict between Hindus and Muslims from India and Pakistan in Sugar Land, or in Houston. The conflict exists between the government and the politicians in those two countries.

Another area of pride, is my association with Rotary International. Through our Rotary clubs in the Houston areas we host 24-26 students a year, from different countries. We also send the same number of high school students to other countries every year. There was a young lady we hosted at my house from Sweden, named Madeline. She went to school with my boys, lived in my house, and called me- Dad, and Rashmi- Mom.

My dad passed away and my mother has been living with us for over 37 years. Rashmi takes care of all her meals, tea and her prayer preparation, and dinner. Rashmi gives my mother a 30-45 minute massage every day. We both wanted my mother to be very comfortable and have the similar amenities that she had back in

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Sunil "Sunny"
Sharma

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India. As our custom, before I leave home, I would touch my mother's feet to get her blessings and would repeat the same when I returned.

Every morning Madeline would see me touch my mother's feet. One day she said, "Dad, why do you touch your mom's feet every time you come home and every time you leave?" I said, "It's the tradition of the family. You touch our elder's feet and they put their hand on your head, which makes a circle. The blessings and energy flowing from them comes to rejuvenate you." Madeline stayed with us for about three months and went home after the year was over.

We have stayed in touch with Madeline and a few years ago she called us and said, "Dad, you would not believe this...I'm engaged to be married!" And I replied, "I'm so happy for you, Madeline. Congratulations!" She said, "Oh no, that's not the story. The guy is Indian, and his last name is Sharma too. I met him at school, and he told me that his parents would have to approve of our marriage, or he could not marry me. Knowing you, and what I learned from, I believed that is probably

the case and he is not just pulling my chain. When his parents came to the airport in Sweden, both of us were there to pick them up. The first thing I did was touch his mom's feet. She immediately got tears in her eyes, grabbed me, and said, 'You are my daughter-in-law.' So thank you very much, Dad, for what you helped me with."

It is such a heart-warming experience and still resonates with me how our cultures can be influencing one another in a positive way, if we just take the time to learn.

POLLICOFF: On every one of your emails you have a favorite saying about leading with your heart. Tell me what that is.

SHARMA: "Lead with your heart, Manage with your Head, and Give with your Hands"

As a Rotarian, I have been honored to represent Rotary International Presidents on their behalf at different district conference throughout the world to countries such as India, Jamaica, Mexico and within the USA. When I speak at these conferences, after my main message, I always want to leave a thought behind. The basic meaning of my quote is as follows: it is important to lead with your heart; as it means your intentions are pure and you are passionate. You must be smart enough to use your head to manage it and turn it into reality using the available resources. As you do both, take action with your hands to give back to your communities as charity begins at home.

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