

Never ‘Another November’ at iBASEt

By Chris Casacchia



Wife, Son Defend vs. Enemies Foreign and Domestic

The Poonian’s story is filled with loss, heartbreak, perseverance and success.

Legacy: Amrik’s business vision lives on through wife, Ladeira, and son, Naveen

The family traces its roots to India’s northern villages of Punjab and the Caribbean island of Trinidad. Stateside it’s overcome hostile investors, internal company rebellions, and the death of their patriarch.

Amrik Singh Poonian established consultancy Telecom Solutions Inc. in 1986 in his Mission Viejo home, a few years after moving to Orange County from Houston. He had emigrated to the U.S. from Ottawa, Canada.

"He always had the urge to do something more, something better," his son, Naveen, says. "He wanted to be his own boss." Amrik started the consulting business while working as a sales engineer in the Southern California office of Digital Equipment Corp. name. He consulted for several companies after leaving Digital, including McDonnell Douglas in the heart of one of the nation's largest manufacturing hubs of aerospace giants and defense contractors.

At the time, the company was having trouble meeting delivery schedules on its multibillion-dollar contract to manufacture Boeing's C-1 military transport aircraft for the U.S. Air Force. The initial visit to McDonnell Douglas' busy production floor in Long Beach left a lasting impression. He noticed the endless paper trails and manual-based systems that dominated work flow and assembly, and proposed to create a software system that delivered electronic work instructions to shop floor operators.

Personal and business computers were just coming into vogue, and Amrik saw an opportunity to streamline and manage the manufacturing process. He charmed some McDonnell Douglas employees to join his upstart without a product or business model, and hired a few software developers. Some of the early employees are still with the company.

"He was a very charismatic guy. He was very well-respected. Everyone loved him," Naveen says. McDonnell Douglas bought his pitch. The \$5 million contract paid for the company's headquarters in Lake Forest and a party for employees to celebrate the deal. "That's how the product literally started," Naveen says.

The software, then called Shopfloor 2000, helped shave \$100 million in costs over the duration of the C-17 program, according to Air Force estimates.

The McDonnell Douglas work led to contracts with the likes of Parker Aerospace, Northrup Grumman and other large manufacturers. The business, growing and adding customers, attracted a \$3 million investment from venture capitalist ECG. Telecom Solutions employed more than 50 and was generating \$6 million in annual sales when the company lost its visionary.

Now the Matriarch

Amrik died of a heart attack on Nov. 3, 1998, sending the family and business into a tailspin. He was 50. Naveen was a 16-year-old junior at Santa Margarita High School at the time. His mother, Ladeira, was an obstetric nurse.

"Somebody had to take over the company because so many people were working for my husband," Ladeira told the Business Journal. "The only person feasible at that time was me. I knew my husband would want me to do that."

Ladeira, an immigrant from Trinidad, left her 28-year career in nursing and became chief executive and majority shareholder of the company, a novice in the boardroom and in a male-dominated industry.

Her ascension sparked a power struggle among executives and investors. She quickly learned she had inherited a company that was overextended and burning through cash amid a hiring push—losing up to \$750,000 a month.

"She had no grieving time because they wanted to throw her out from the get-go," Naveen says. "She was absolutely in love with my father. He was her rock." Ladeira needed someone she could trust to keep the company from going under and turned to Amrik's right-hand man, Vic Sial, who was promoted from chief financial officer to president, ousting his predecessor.

The venture capital firm, which had taken a life insurance policy out on Amrik, was bought out after Ladeira sold the company's headquarters.

"Once we bought out the VCs we were able to bring the culture back," Naveen says. "A lot of people were going to leave if we didn't do that."

Within a year of Amrik's death, Ladeira rebranded the company as iBASEt and renamed its flagship product Solumina. The software maker endured some choppy years through the dot.com bust, the Y2K computing scare, and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The management team restructured the company, and Ladeira didn't take a salary for some time. The tumult settled, and iBASEt started winning back business.

"In 2003 the company began a turnaround," Ladeira says. Two years later Naveen joined as an intern, working on IT and quality assurance under the guidance of Sial. "It was really an opportunity to learn how the business was run," says Naveen, who rose through the ranks through the years. Most of his days now are spent crafting strategy and execution and working with other executives to fine-tune departments.

Relaunch

Companywide employment has grown to 200, about 80 workers in Lake Forest. The software maker has an outfit in Toulouse, France, home to the country's noted Aerospace Valley, where some 500 aerospace engineering firms operate, including Airbus, Air France Industries and Dassault Aviation. Its software has more than 40 Fortune 100 customers.

Solumina sells to Gulfstream business jets, the maker of the G500, G600 and G650. Pratt & Whitney uses it to manufacture engines and for maintenance, repair and operations on them. The software has seen strong demand in the space, medical and nuclear sectors. It's used in Boeing GPS satellites, TRW military satellites, Motorola Iridium Constellation and for operations at Kennedy Space Center, including booster recovery, parachute rebuilds, shuttle mission modification and preparation, and vertical stack assembly and launch. NASA used Solumina for Space Station replenishment and the Constellation program at Marshall and Kennedy space centers. Long Beach-based Virgin Orbit recently used its software to support booster assembly.

iBASEt hopes to hit \$21 million in sales this year, which would be a 20% increase from last year. A decade ago revenues neared \$40 million before the recession took root. "Our goal is manageable growth" says Naveen, who was promoted to chief operating officer in September. "It was time to take more of a leadership position," he says.

Amrik's vision for the business crafted decades ago lives on through his wife and son. "The company was a huge piece of who he was and what he was," Naveen says. Ladeira is not one for interviews—though her reflections are deep and personal. Amrik is in her thoughts and in actions, particularly as the anniversary of his death comes and goes.

"I don't think he would have wanted me to give up," she says. "He gave his life for this company." A succession plan is under way, and Ladeira has been grooming Naveen for years to take over the company.



"I'm very proud of him, and at some stage he'll be ready."