

The Desai Foundation:

Empowering Communities to Dream Beyond

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While growing up in a small village in Gujarat, India, without electricity or running water, Samir Desai found time to dream while feeding the buffalo each morning. Decades later, Samir has empowered his two daughters and women across the globe to “dream beyond” – the slogan of the public Desai Foundation founded by Executive Director Samir, his wife Nilima, and his two daughters Moha and Megha in 1997. Its mission: to empower women and children through community programming to elevate health and livelihood in the U.S. and India.

“We’re trying to give people a stepping stone for their health and their ability to earn a living so that they have that space to dream beyond,” said Megha Desai, the foundation’s director since 2006. “Once you dream beyond, you can pull yourself out of any circumstance.”

Family Values

Samir Desai started by giving his daughters space to dream. As a technology entrepreneur in the United States searching for ways to connect with colleagues, Samir decided to learn about American football. He spent every Sunday watching the game with his youngest daughter, Megha. Today, they often talk about life goals using football analogies. “Dad often says his aspiration is to be the center, and I’m the quarterback,” said Megha, who will become the foundation’s president in January. “He wants to protect the quarterback – taking all the hits so that I can do what I need to do to think and succeed.”

Samir also conceived the Desai Foundation as a way to reflect his family’s priorities and values and to pass them down to future generations. On a family vacation to Lima, Peru, just before Samir sold his successful technology business, the family climbed Machu Picchu. During the hike, they discussed priorities. “We were in one of the cradles of civilization, talking about what family, legacy and evolution was all about,” said Megha.

Through the creation of a family foundation, the Desais were able to establish a vehicle for sharing and passing down important family values. Megha’s sister Moha was about to start her career in healthcare and wanted to focus on health issues. Her mother Nilima is a singer and dancer who taught her daughters about culture through arts. Her father Samir made a career in technology and prioritized education. And Megha had a knack for developing communities.

“It was through conversations about values that our foundation was created,” Megha said. “We started a community of people who cared about health, education and culture.”

Facing Challenges

With growth and a new focus, the foundation faced many challenges, especially as it transitioned from a private foundation into a public charity in 2014.

“We were a little naive about the switch,” said Megha. “There were foundational things in our organization that we had not thought through.” Keeping the family name in the new title, for instance, made fundraising more difficult, as donors were less willing to write large checks. “We’re not trying to raise millions of dollars; we’re trying to raise the money that we need to accomplish our goals,” she added.

Learning the art of fundraising was also difficult, as well as having to report program data in a new way for the first time, including what data to collect and what data to share, she said.

A more personal hurdle was that promoting the foundation publicly also meant developing a confident public persona. “When we transitioned to a public foundation, suddenly I was the face of our organization. This was



Young 11th- and 12th-grade girls who attend the Desai Foundation's state-of-the-art Lok Vidhyalay Higher Secondary School for Math and Science in Untdi, Gujarat. Untdi is a small village that serves nearly 750 students in the surrounding 11 villages.

not a role I was used to. That persona also came with a possible stigma of having a family foundation, which comes with other hurdles," Megha said. Despite being a public foundation, the perception can still be that she has taken over the family foundation without merit, which is far from the case.

"That's been a real personal journey for me," she added. "I had to truly internalize the difference between promoting myself and promoting the organization."

A Focus on Women

As the Desai Foundation transitioned from a private family organization to a public charity in 2014, it also shifted priorities. "We had to have some difficult conversations about where we are spending our energy," Megha said. The family decided to divert funds away from cultural programming to focus more specifically on empowering women and children – although it still uses cultural events as a way of promoting other initiatives.

The focus on women evolved as the family asked questions about how the programs they supported were really working on the ground. By listening to the answers, they realized that women and children were the most willing to change and adapt to new ways of doing things. "We realized that in order to truly make change at a community development level, it has to start with the women," Megha said. "We were lucky enough to be right on that bet."

Megha says that United Nations data now shows that 90% of the money earned by women in local areas is invested back into their communities, which also multiplies the foundation's investment. A vocational sewing class funded by the Desai Foundation in India, for example, may cost \$1,000 to teach 40 women the skills to win jobs that earn about \$45 a month in salaries. Over the course of a year, that results in \$16,000 in salaries for the women who take the jobs, of which 90% is reinvested in communities. "That's more kids in school, more mouths being fed and more health screening and medical appointments being attended," said Megha. "That is why we focus on women."



Women attending sewing classes in Talangpur, Gujarat, where the Desai Foundation partners with local factories to ensure women who want jobs can get them.

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Megha Desai, the Desai Foundation's director since 2006, will become president in early 2017.

Battling Stigmas

Another key program that merges the Desai Foundation's Eastern and Western influences is its Sanitary Napkin Program in India, where just 12% of women use feminine hygiene products. Menstruation is such a stigma in some rural areas that 13-year-old girls drop out of school because they have no sanitary napkins.

The foundation's Sanitary Napkin Program functions like the classic U.S. "Avon lady" program: The foundation employs local women who sell sanitary products door-to-door, and women can purchase them in the privacy of their homes.

"It's my favorite program for so many reasons because we've figured out a way to solve three problems," Megha said. "One, we're providing jobs. Two, we're providing a product that is needed, not accessible, expensive and taboo. And three, we're providing these women with a little dignity."

To battle stigmas, sales reps are also providing education to rural women about menstruation and proper hygiene. "The program is exciting to me because it's for women by women," Megha said.

Sowing Seeds

The vocational sewing class and "Avon lady" sanitary napkin program are just two examples of how Samir and Megha, both entrepreneurs, are empowering others to start their own ventures.

The Desai Foundation also partners with the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) to develop a student-run community volunteer program. It's modeled after Columbia University's Community Impact program, which both Megha and her sister Moha participated in as students.

Samir also helped found TiE-Boston in 1997, an organization that provides education, mentorship, networking and funding opportunities for entrepreneurs. TiE "is a great metaphor for the way that my dad likes to structure things and leave his legacy," said Megha, whose father began bringing her to TiE meetings at a young age.

In both cases, Samir helped sow seeds of entrepreneurship, but he also liked to step back to give credit to the people doing the actual hands-on work. In all of their efforts, the Desais take little credit, often ceding the spotlight to partner organizations. "That, to me, is what sustainable community development is," Megha added.

"Our mission is nuanced and is not as straightforward as building wells or distributing shoes. It's a complex balance of providing opportunity, education and health so that the people we serve can live sustainable, productive and healthy lives both in India and in the U.S.," said Megha at a recent women's health event.

At the heart of the Desai Foundation's model is helping people living in a community to come up with solutions for the community. "We fundamentally believe that you cannot make change in a community unless you know the community," Megha said.

Too often young heirs inherit money with no sense or context of where it came from. It appears the Desai family is trying to build a different type of legacy. Their legacy is not about their name. Their legacy is about their values. ☺



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