

“McGill invested in me so I am investing in McGill”

Ram Panda, MEng'71, MBA'77, is a successful businessman and a committed McGill alumnus, but he was very much a stranger in a strange land when he came to Montreal from India in 1968.



“It was a whole new universe,” he says, not only in terms of starting graduate studies in Electrical Engineering, but also coping with a new culture and the Quebec winter.

“I was very fortunate, however, to work with Professor Eric Adler, PhD'66, a kind man who helped me obtain both a scholarship and a position as a teaching assistant. My parents couldn't afford to help me, so without that assistance I wouldn't have made it through grad school.”

Panda's gratitude to McGill and Quebec is enormous. “The hospitality I experienced and the level of acceptance I encountered helped me to settle down quickly and integrate easily into Canadian life,” he says. “I loved the country. I told myself, ‘This is the place to be’.”

About a year after completing his studies Panda and a friend saw a business opportunity. The mini-computer revolution had enabled smaller companies to go digital. There was a dearth of software to run on the newly affordable machines, however, so the young entrepreneurs created Planmatics, which offered standardized software packages for industry.

Eye on the future

The company eventually focused on metals, pioneering algorithms and methods to facilitate processing and distribution, thereby helping distributors reduce waste and increase profits. The firm has been the dominant vendor in the U.S. since the mid-'80s, and in 2000, renamed Invera Inc., it took on the European market. Today Panda is President of Invera and the firm does business worldwide.

Panda says that the roots of his success can be traced back to the discipline and grounding he received at university. “That's what allowed us to build a company that's big enough today to give substantial tax revenue back to the public treasury. It gives me great satisfaction to look at the leverage that was created by the small amount of money I received as a student. We have returned so much more to society.”

While Panda enjoys looking back on his McGill years, he also has a clear eye on the future.

“I come from a country where people are happy if they can cover the basics of food and housing. But most of us in the developed world have much more than we need,” he says.

“We use immense quantities of resources to enjoy things today, but not to build things that will last for the next 100 years, and this approach comes at a great expense to the earth.”

Panda is committed to reducing his own ecological footprint, carpooling to work and using public transit regularly. But he wanted to do more to contribute to a long-term solution.

Giving back is key

“That led me to places of learning, especially universities, because they have the means to stimulate change in society. They have reservoirs of knowledge and the intellectual resources to create new knowledge, as well as international networks that connect researchers,” he says. “So it was an easy choice: McGill had invested in me, so I would invest in McGill.”

And invest he has. For years, Panda has maintained a regular routine of annual giving for general funding in the Faculty of Engineering, stressing the importance of helping the Faculty to maintain its ongoing programs.

And since 2007, he has donated time and energy as a member of Engineering’s Faculty Advisory Board, where he articulated his concern for sustainability in engineering practices and then joined with alumnus Lorne Trottier, BEng’70, MEng’73, DSc’06, in providing funding to create the Institute for Sustainability in Engineering and Design (ISEAD). You can read more about ISEAD in the Fall 2010 issue of the Dean’s Report.

Giving back to society is central to Panda’s philosophy. “The concept of supporting important causes has to be inculcated in the next generation,” he says.

“I tell my kids, ‘If you do well in life, don’t forget your obligations to society.’ We can each do something, however small, to help to ensure future generations live in a healthy world. If enough people contribute to the effort, I believe we can make a difference.”

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