

*The following is an excerpt from Golden Opportunity: Remarkable Careers That Began At McDonald's by Cody Teets.*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

*Imagine being plucked out of the world you know today and dropped into the middle of Mumbai, India, not knowing the language and living on a student's budget. That's about what Ajay Patel experienced coming to America from Mumbai at the age of eighteen. He looked and felt out of place, was bewildered by culture shock, and wanted to go home. Two people reached out to him just when he needed it – a neighbor and later the manager of a McDonald's. Today, he is an owner/operator in Louisiana with an only-in-America story to tell.*

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The culture of the company and the attitude of America is that where you came from doesn't define who you are.

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Becoming an American was a fluke. My family never intended me to come to America at all. It happened because I was the last member of my immediate family still living in India. My mother had died in Mumbai when I was fifteen. My sister was living in New Jersey. My father had been a chemical salesman but had gone to the States to help my brother get his citizenship papers. The process was taking longer than expected, and my father had been away almost two years.

My father was living with my brother, who was about to graduate from Oklahoma State. Then they planned to move to Louisiana where my brother's first job awaited. The family was scattered.

So my father decided, "Let's just bring Ajay here and see what happens."

What happened was that I – who grew up in the tropics – landed in New York in early 1977 without a coat, in the middle of one of the worst winters in history. I stayed with an uncle on Long Island while learning English and dreamed of home. The vision of America I had before – Elvis, sunlight on rolling farmland, everybody wealthy – was replaced by my new reality: a land where the sun never shone, the ice never melted, and foreigners were just barely tolerated.

Every weekday I trudged through chest-high snow for about half a mile to get to the first of three busses that took me to school and back. Then a stranger reached out.

Roger lived nearby and drove a Corvette. One day, as I was climbing over a hill of snow, he stopped and rolled down his window. "You know what? I work right near your school. If you want to go early, I'll take you and bring you back when you get done." The rest of that winter he picked me up and brought me back home many times. That was my first experience with the genuine America, where strangers open their hearts and help others. I often think about Roger to this day.

When spring finally arrived, I finished my high school requirements and English lessons and joined my father and brother in Lafayette, Louisiana. We were a family of bachelors.

A relative had helped me pay my school fees that winter, but I was going to have to come up with the money by August for my first semester at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette. My dad said, "Your brother is just starting out, and I don't have anything. So you're going to have to work to pay your tuition."

So off I went, walking down the main commercial street in Lafayette, stopping in every quick-service restaurant there was. In my broken English, I asked if they were hiring and filled out the applications that I was assured would be kept on file. I looked so different and my language skills were so rough that I knew I'd never get a call back.

I had been in eight or nine businesses and was becoming discouraged when I hit McDonald's. I handed my application to someone who took it immediately to the back and handed it to the manager. He was sitting behind a half wall. I watched him scan the page and then lean back in his chair to get a better look at me. He nodded.

"Okay, he wants to talk to you."

The manager came out from behind the counter and spoke with me for quite a while.

Finally, he said, "You don't speak very much English, do you?"

"Yeah, I know," I said, bracing for rejection.

"Suppose we put you in the back. Can you cook?"

I'd made an omelet once or twice, but that was it.

"Sure!"

"Okay, son. You've got yourself a job."

I practically ran all the way home and burst in shouting, "Dad, I got a job!" I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. All I knew was that my family insisted I earn a college degree and now I would have the money to get started.

Up until my first day at McDonald's, I'd been isolated from strangers by culture and language differences. Suddenly I had become part of a whole family unit. Everyone was welcoming. No one made me feel like an outsider. I was treated the same as everyone else.

Early on I discovered that when people wanted to take time off for a date or a concert, it was hard to find someone to cover their shifts. With no social life to interfere and tuition looming, I became the go-to guy for covering shifts. I loved being busy and making money, and it enhanced my reputation. The big break came when Don, the coolest dude in the restaurant and the guy all the girls liked, took me under his wing. He worked on the grill as well and began looking out for me, keeping me from making too many foolish mistakes. I wasn't cool, but it was cool having him for a friend.

A couple of months into my job, language was still a problem. Most of my coworkers were teenagers who had their own slang and regionalisms. I couldn't understand it all, so I made mistakes. Sometimes I produced more or less food than they had requested.

One day the manager took me in the back and said, “Unless you get a handle on this language barrier, I’m going to have to let you go.” I went back to work worried, and it must have showed. Don said, “Don’t worry about it, man. We’ll take care of it.” He started teaching me the slang I needed to catch up, and my job was saved.

When school started, I continued to work and continued to rack up the hours. But when I started bringing home Bs, Cs, and then a couple of Ds, my dad put his foot down. “Okay, from now on your brother will pay the tuition. You need to quit working and pay attention to your grades.”

There was no way I was giving up what I had at McDonald’s. My English was rapidly improving, I was starting to get promotions, and I had a social life. My dad issued an ultimatum: if my grades didn’t improve, I’d have to quit my job. So I worked harder on my studies, raised my grades, and was allowed to keep my job. It was a tough balancing act. I worked so much that it took me six years to earn my degree.

When I did finally graduate with a business management degree in 1984, I took three months of vacation to visit India and returned to a new position as a restaurant manager in the States. I married my wife, Bindu, in 1986. My entrepreneurial father-in-law suggested, “Why don’t you become a franchisee? There’s nothing like owning your own business.” I thought about it, but was hesitant because of the big financial investment involved. It was Bindu’s persistence that convinced me.

She believed I could do it, and every day she asked me, “Have you decided about becoming a franchisee? I think it’s a good idea. You should do it.” I finally bought my first franchise in 1992. Now I have seven restaurants in rural towns in southwest Louisiana and two of my three sons hope to become franchisees one day.

My proudest accomplishment is having been elected twice by all the franchisees in our seven-state region to represent them on the National Leadership Council. That is the owner/operator’s governing body that considers equipment, service systems, and profitability initiatives affecting all 14,000 restaurants. Considering how I began, this honor, more than any other recognition, illustrates what I like best about the culture of the company and the attitude of America: where you come from doesn’t define who you are.