

ENGINEERING MINNESOTA

Coming To America

FOREIGN BORN
ENGINEERS
REFLECT ON
THE CHALLENGE
AND OPPORTUNITY



Dennis Kim, P. E.



Naeem
Qureshi,
P. E.



Lalith
Galagedera,
P. E.



Sirish Samba, P. E.



Lewis Ng, P. E.

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COVER STORY

Coming To America

Foreign Engineers Have Intriguing Tales To Tell

For certain, almost all foreign engineers who come to Minnesota have interesting stories to tell. There is no shortage of intriguing tales for those who fit the description of, "a stranger in a strange land."

Interestingly, there are times when a stranger can have an advantage. Mike Rechtman, P. E., is a civil engineer who came to the United States from the Soviet Union 35 years ago. He now works for the Metropolitan Council. He acknowledges his lack of familiarity with American customs became profitable during a performance review when he was working with the then Lundquist, Wilmar, Schultz & Martin (now LKPB) consulting firm in St. Paul.

Firm partner Ron Wilmar, P. E., told Rechtman he was doing very well and was going to get a 50-cents-an-hour pay increase. Rechtman remained silent. Wilmar continued talking and added Rechtman actually would be receiving a pay boost of a dollar-an-hour. Years later, Rechtman said he never knew he was suppose to respond to the good news. "That was the very first time," he said, "I ever understood the significance of the American saying, 'Silence is golden.'"

His experience is somewhat different from that of another engineer who came to the United States from Iran. That "stranger" observed the main complaint he heard from engineering colleagues before destruction of New York's Twin Towers September 11, 2001 was they had trouble understanding him when he spoke. After 9/11, he joked, "They were afraid I was going to blow them up."

A check with other foreign-born engineers who work in Minnesota reveals there is no shortage of anecdotes regarding their adventures as well as the reasons they wound up in the Gopher state. On a recent very cold January day, Pakistan native Naaem Queshi, P. E., president of Brooklyn Center-based Progressive Consulting Engineers, attributed his presence in Minnesota to "stupidity" and lamented he was far better at math than geography. "The most important advice I give to any foreign engineer," he joked, "is to be aware of the weather. Before I came to the United States, I had never seen snow fall. I have now."

Queshi's adjustment to Minnesota life was somewhat easier because his brother had preceded him. That brother would go on to become city engineer and eventually city manager for Fridley.

Queshi's Minnesota work experience started with the city of Minneapolis department of public works. While in that job, he was able to save the \$30,000 he felt he needed to start Progressive Consulting. He acknowledges the risk of opening the firm was not as risky as one might assume. "My boss with the public works department said I could have my old job back if my new adventure

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Rechtman



Galagedera



Samba

did not work out,” he admitted. Qureshi pointed out there is no shortcut or unique secret for success. “I would tell any engineer, whether foreign-born or not, the key to success,” he said, “is to be prepared. That advice works in every country.”

Engineering Minnesota contacted several foreign-born engineers regarding their experience of adapting to a “strange land.” A strong consensus was they were attracted to America by the opportunity it provided for achievement. Many of the engineers interviewed have their own firm or are heading a consulting firm.

Korean Dennis Kim, president of EVS, Inc. in Eden Prairie, acknowledges that heading his own firm came about more by accident than design. Korean colleges did not offer graduate degrees so Kim came to the United States to study aeronautical engineering at the University of Minnesota with the goal of obtaining a Master’s degree. But following graduation in 1971, the aeronautical market was nearly non-existent so Kim chose to switch disciplines and accepted a civil engineering scholarship. Following graduate school, he worked for the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources as well as a state water resources commission.

He returned to Minnesota and joined Enviroscience, Inc., which would become EVS. He eventually moved into ownership. “You have to be technically competent to be successful,” he observed, “but you also have to be able to develop a good relationship with clients. I learned if clients believed I could do the job, they didn’t care where I came from.”

Hong Kong-native Lewis Ng, P. E., planned to return home after attending the University of Wisconsin and then graduate school at the University of Minnesota. That plan got altered when he was offered a job with Twin City Testing. Ng eventually wound up starting Building Consulting Group in Minneapolis during 1995. “Initially, I had no intention of having my own firm,” he explained. “When I started, I focused entirely on the engineering side. But as I eventually became a department head, I was required to learn the business side. Such knowledge evolved quickly.” When Twin City Testing was sold in the late 1980s, Ng worked for firms such as STS and Walker Parking Consultants before starting Building Consulting Group.

The presence in Minnesota of Siresh Samba, P. E., president of Minnetonka-based Sambatek, was motivated more by purpose than geography. A native of India, he was able to witness the important role engineers can play when a civil engineer from the United Kingdom came to where he lived in India. The engineer built a dam ending flooding that had cause considerable death and damage. “I saw how engineering skill can improve the lives of many people,” Samba said. “That has been my motivation since then. In Minnesota,” he pointed out, “I am now responsible for over 100 employees and their families. My goal is to provide everyone with a very good standard of living. So far, things have worked out very well. Accomplishments of the firm have far exceeded my expectation.” Samba began working with the firm in 1992 when it was known as McCombs Frank Roos and Associates.

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Lalith Galagerada, P. E., is another foreign-born engineer who came to the United States with a different perspective. A native of Sri Lanka, his father was a very successful industrialist in that country. Galagedera acknowledges he felt pressure to reach the same level of success. Part of his preparation included attending school in England. While there, his father died. “That was shock,” said Gallagerdara, who has siblings living in Sri Lanka. “In a way, my father’s death created my freedom. Pressure to match his performance was reduced. I didn’t have to become an engineer. I could have become a truck driver if I wanted.”

Galagerada chose to stay in engineering and eventually come to America. “The United States offers the best opportunity for any engineer who is ambitious and willing to work hard,” he said. “I liked it here very much. I was 15,000 miles from home. I think the realization that I was now on my own far from home made me a stronger person. I learned to rely on myself.”

That reliance took him to the University of West Virginia where he obtained a civil engineering degree and then to Virginia Tech for a Master’s degree in civil engineering. His professional career involved working for several engineering firms before he arrived in Minnesota.

Galagedera recently joined TAIT Associates, a Santa Ana, California-based firm that opened an office in Bismarck, North Dakota that will focus on transportation, infrastructure and land development near the Bakken oil field. He works from that location. “This will be an excellent opportunity for me,” said Galagedera, who still lives in suburban Plymouth. He commutes to Bismarck returning to Minnesota on weekends. He said the plan is to eventually increase the firm’s presence in Minnesota and other Upper Midwest states.

Jim Meusey



Ng



Qureshi



Kim