

Sunil Puri

**Interviewed July 19, 2007
By Holli Connell
Midway Village Museum**

Sunil Puri

Sunil Puri: Sound great?

Holli Connell: Yes sounds perfect actually

SP: Okay

HC: Well I'm going to ask you on the sheet some of the questions that you saw and we'll just start out with the easy ones right now for us to state who you are. Your name first and last.

SP: Sunil Puri. S-U-N-I-L. Last name is Puri, P-U-R-I.

HC: And are you married?

SP: Yes.

HC: And your wife's name?

SP: Janine Cannell Puri

HC: And do you have children?

SP: Yes, three. And they are Ashlin who's eleven, Chandin who is eight and Angelie my little girl who is five.

HC: Education. What is your educational background?

SP: I have a bachelor of science from Rockford College with a degree in accounting and I have continuing education for the last six years at Harvard Business School in executive business education.

HC: And where do you work?

SP: I work at First Rockford Group which is company I started in 1984, so I've been here for 23 years. It's a company I cofounded and have been the president for 23 years.

HC: How long have you been in this country?

SP: I have been in this country, I immigrated to this country in November 10th of 1979. However I'd been here the year prior, and two years prior, so I've been here now for 28 years.

HC: And where did you come from?

SP: I was born and raised in Bombay, India which is now called Mumbai. Which is on the western coast of Bombay, which is the largest city in India, it would be the New York of India,

which is the commercial capital of India. And I've been there for, I was there, when I came here I was just turned 19. Was 18 years old, actually I was still eighteen by the time I arrived in New York and by the time I got to Rockford. So I came here when I was 18 years old and it's been, came here.

I had a brother who lived here, half-brother who came to this country in 1960 when I was born. He married a girl from Beloit, Wisconsin during the Vietnam era when he was working at a defense plant. To not go to Vietnam, he ended up in a defense plant called Fairbanks Morse in Beloit, Wisconsin and met his wife who is still his wife. They got married in '71 so they been married 30 some years. And so he had lived, he's an engineer, and he had worked all over Iowa and other places and had just moved here.

So I left, I'm the youngest of six boys in my family including my oldest brother and I was, since my oldest brother never went back to India as he was supposed to come back and join the family business the others were never let out of the country. I was the first one. The other four in between never left the country. In fact some have never left the country yet. But I was kind of the rabble rouser, and also coming from a traditional Hindu Indian family, my chance to make a decision was never going to come. The hierarchy is such that with six boys the sixth one doesn't count and I didn't want to wish any of my siblings ill. So I just decided it was time for me to move on.

He had been here since I was born literally and I decided to travel. I had traveled extensively when I was 13. I traveled to Singapore and Hong Kong and . . . Singapore, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, India. I went on a cruise by myself when I was 13 years old. When I was 16 and 17, I traveled through Europe and I think it was 17 when I first came here. I think I was 17 years old when I first came to the US and traveled quite extensively from New York all the way down to Florida, you know and Boston, saw the East Coast. Came to the Midwest and went around these few states over here, Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois and stayed with my brother's in-laws at that time. And went back and a year later had the bug and decided I wasn't really gaining much at home with four older brothers in the business and it was time to go out on my own and if I was successful in India it would be probably credited to the family name anyway and the chances of being motivated were limited as to you get a lot of responsibility without any authority and it was just better to move on.

So I had \$142. I arrived in New York. I remember the Statue of Liberty although I was obviously not processed there at that time. Stayed in New York with a cousin, a distant cousin who still lives there, for about 5-6 days. He lived in an apartment with three other people and the four of them were gracious enough to give me a bed while one slept on the floor just to help the fellow immigrant to come in. Showed me the city, showed me the ropes. Loved it. And then literally took a Greyhound bus all the way from New York. I think it was a day and a half, and arrived here. And stayed with my brother for a little bit. He introduced me to some people and worked some odd man jobs.

And then through a lot of persistence got admitted to Rockford College which is what I really wanted to do. When I came to this country, and since this is going down in history, I've got to be careful, I came on a tourist visa. And at that time I really didn't have any intentions to do, I was

just going to basically leave home and figure out what the life was all about. I didn't know if I was going to be a student or not but after I came here I decided that was the right course, rather than just bumming around it was good to get some avocation, you know get some education and find eventually a job or do something over here.

So I came here with \$142 and a tourist visa and back then, and even now, if you had taken the SAT or an ACT you could not come on a tourist visa because they would know that you had intentions of coming here to study and a student visa was almost impossible to get from India because they also knew that most Indian students who came here did not go back. So immigration was extremely strict. So since I'd been here once before and gone back and they were okay with me coming back another time, I was, I went to Rockford College.

I will never forget they would not even give me an appointment because I didn't have my ACT or SAT, or. . .and sat outside President Norman Stewart's office for I think it was definitely over a week, about 10 days. Somebody would drop me off who used to work at Sundstrand's, a gentleman who was a neighbor and I would sit there and basically eat my lunch out of sandwiches whatever they gave me or are the pop machine and the snack machine and the secretary wouldn't even let me in the office because I was just a bother I would read the catalog and every piece of paper they had, literature the college had. And I would wait hoping the president would give me an appointment. And finally the second week he was tired of seeing me sitting out there and asked me to come in. He had been an archaeology major himself, so he had been a foreign student in Egypt a long time before that. Was a kind gentleman who let me in and wanted to know what my business was and I explained to him I wanted to go to school there. He said "Why didn't you apply?" I said "They won't let me." And he said "Why?" I explained to him and he said "Well you know because of our accreditation we can't admit you if you don't have all these things." And I said "Well just give me a shot and if I'm not any good after a semester I'll go." He said "Well, we can't do that." And I'll never forget telling him that I'd read in the catalog that they had a student teacher ratio of 10 students to every teacher. And I had walked around the campus and I hadn't found a single classroom that had less than 35 chairs. So it was not going to bother them. They already had their fixed costs done and their variable cost was nothing to have another kid sit in a chair and warm it up. And hopefully the deal was if I got a 3.5 GPA, you know a B+ average they would keep me. And I said "I'll work very hard to make sure I get that or better and that will only help the whole class and promote competition and everything else." And I'll never forget him, he was quite impressed and he called the vice president of finance and said, you know, listen to this kid. He knows all about variable cost and how we should save the college and get more students over here cause that's what we really need. So that's anyway how I got admitted.

Soon they found out that I didn't have a visa. And I'll never forget the college making a call to Senator Percy back then, he was a US Senator from Illinois, and going down to the federal building which I was just at recently and a good friend of mine Judge Kapala, Fred Kapala, was sworn in as a federal judge. That's the second time after 28 years I've been to that building. And I went there originally, I'll never forget it, Senator Percy was going to help me with immigration and get my visa changed from a tourist visa to a student visa and I remember him telling one of his staffers to go down to the Immigration Department and make sure it was taken care of and the person who took me along said "Boy, I know exactly what you're up to, no good. You know,

you knew what you were doing. Senator's just being too kind to you." And, but anyway, I got my visa. The reason I bring that story up is, you know, fast forwarding 22 years, January of 1992, I'm at the mall. I was a Democrat, Senator Percy was a Republican. Very nice senator and renowned and well-known from this area. We were at the mall in Washington for the swearing in of President Clinton and we were sitting up in the front area. And I was there with my wife and I realized that a couple rows behind us and not too far from us was Senator Percy sitting and then I realized he was with his daughter. And I remember going up to him and telling him, "Senator Percy, you have no clue who I am. And I met you one time back in 1979 and you helped me get my visa converted." And how grateful I am, and how much good you've done for many people especially me, and how many employees I had at the time, about 200 people and what that had meant to me and how it had changed my life, and how, you know, I had been able to participate in the American process because of that. And here we were sitting right at the ceremony of electing a, inaugurating a new president, and we were both equals sitting in the same section where there were lots and lots of people behind, we were probably in the 20th row. And I was very grateful to him and he was very gracious and shook my hand and sat down. I went back to my wife and about 20 minutes later his daughter came up to us with her tears in her eyes and said her dad was out there literally weeping how he had been so touched by what I had said. And he had been out of office at that time may be 6-8 years, and how many people were friendly to him only because of what he could do for them and how few had ever come back after all these years, unknown to him, and to thank them and how much that meant to him on that solemn day. Which was an important day to him too, even though it was another party. And she came up and that meant a lot to her and to me and to all of us and we were all just kind of blown away by what had happened. So that was just kind of a sidebar of, you don't appreciate that.

You know, no different than fast forwarding to Fred Kapala's inauguration as a federal judge for life and there was Judge Stanley Roszkowski who's our retired federal judge from here, Dan's father. You know I know his son Dan who's an architect at Larson and Darby and I was, I so desperately decided I wanted to vote in the 1991 election I guess it would be, when President Clinton was running and John Cox was running and others were running from here, that I wanted to, and they used to only have an immigration ceremony once a year in this area. There were so few immigrants. So you applied for your thing and no matter when you got it you didn't become an immigrant until the judge swore you in once a year. And Judge Roszkowski swore me in at a private ceremony, so I could register to vote in time to be able to work for the election, in his chambers and talked about his father coming from Poland and how important that was to his father. And he shared with me his parents' pictures and the flag that his father was given when he got sworn in as a citizen. And how important that was to him and he gave me one, which I still have, on that day and I met him and he's 80 plus years old. After, literally after 20, 15, 17 years, whatever since 1990, 1991, at Judge Kapala's swearing in in the federal building after all these years. So you know this is sort of weaving all these stories of immigration and getting sworn in and how important, you know, that naturalization ceremony, which you know nobody really thinks of, and the Daughters of the American Revolution. So I had my private ceremony and then I went to the public one 3 - 4 months later which was also held at Memorial Hall and the Daughters of the American Revolution gave us a little flag each and had a little reception later on with coffee and cookies and stuff like that and my wife of course went to both of them and it was just an incredible time. And John Cox who is a good friend came to the second one and you know there was a congressman to come to congratulate us all. And you know these are

things that the average kid in Rockford whose world is limited from Wisconsin Dells to Woodfield Mall, who's never seen the world, who just takes this for granted, who doesn't know what this American flag's all about, leave alone its constitution or its capital or anything of that type you know.

As an immigrant you have no idea how much you appreciate what this country has to offer and, you know we, how open it is. People often talk about the various discriminations you know, sure there's discrimination. I'm sure the Swedes felt it from the English, and the Irish felt it from the English, and then the Italians came and they felt it, you know, and then the Poles came and they felt it and of course the Indians came and after us the Lao, and, you know. The Laotians and the Cambodians came and the Mexicans. There's always, that's going to be, that's just part of the process. What I can honestly tell you that if I, if my wife went to Bombay, my hometown where I was born, and bought 20 blocks on the main drive of Bombay as an American she would probably be discriminated against much more fiercely than I could ever even imagine being in this country. It's the same, people don't like change, they don't like difference. You know it is no different over there in India or anywhere else. Nobody likes, we wouldn't like somebody from New York coming and buying 20 blocks over here leave alone from India! I mean that's just human nature, that you know, your surrounding your neighborhood land is very dear. You know, we come from the earth and that is very important to people. So immigration is not, you know when people talk about discrimination it's all relative, it's all relative. We would do the same. I am totally off-track from what you are talking about

HC: You're not actually. We're getting to a point where I think that I'd like to ask this next question.

SP: Yes.

HC: You had said at 13 you traveled and then you came over here at 17. From 13 to 17 what did you do? How did you, did you have a job, what was your family businesses you said?

SP: The family was in the, they had some factories in the yarn and textile business, yarn and thread and textile. It's an old family business. They're still there. Four brothers like I said still there, still part own most of the family businesses. After all these years my dad left it to all of us equally. And I went to school and I used to train under my father, go to the office every evening. And at age 16 in India you, actually it was 15 before I was even 16 years old, you passed 10th grade and that's kind of the equivalent of what would be the British O levels and then they have A levels. So in India the education system is 10 plus two plus three. So 10 you pass high school. Two is kind of like a junior college. And then three is your actual degree so it's 15 years rather than 16 years. So when I was 15, I passed 10th grade, I started working in a factory running one of the family factories basically being an apprentice under one of the old managers who had worked for the family for a long time and I did that and it was reasonably successful, but again I couldn't make any decisions it was always a brother who was above me who would make those decisions. And frankly I was just bored, I was just the rebel who was looking to get out and do it on my own because I realized what I was doing was having very little impact because there were too many layers that had to approve what I was going to try to accomplish so I just thought it was time to move on and that's what I chose to do. But I lived at home with my family and collected

stamps. I was quite, not only collected them but I worked for a dealer who you know, I would sort them, and I would stay up at night. And I have to add that I still have my stamp collection that besides my \$142 my security blanket was my English and Indian, the old British, and Indian stamp collections which was quite deep and just valued at about \$4 or \$5,000 back then. Probably, I don't know how much, maybe \$50,000 now and so I had, you know you couldn't take any money out of the country either. So you know I had a little catalog, you know a little book of stamps which I knew what the value was. But I made a lot of my money, you know, for my travels and things like that by getting lots of lots of stamps, what they call them lots you know maybe 20,000 of these from different eras and you sort through them and you know which one is good and bad and what's what and you literally spend hours and hours at night just kind of going through them and sorting them and part of the deal with the dealer was who would buy them in bulk and never had time to, he needed somebody with expertise, was you would get 10% of the value of what you created as your own and you would get to keep them. So I did that I and I was entrepreneurial in many ways back in India.

I was quite involved with student politics in India giving speeches to as many as 80,000 people at one time too. I was a vice president of a National Student's Union which was a student union called ABVP, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, that was ABVP and they had a national convention in Bangalore in I think '77 where I spoke. So I was very actively involved in politics back then and then came here and just kind of got down to knitting.

It was working at PA Peterson home at the front desk, occasionally cleaning bedpans downstairs but I worked there for 2 1/2 years at the front desk. Learned more from, frankly Swedish immigrants, that was a place for Swedish immigrants. Mr. Arnquist, Ray Arnquist, ... boy, I... Mr. Carlson who had, was one of the cofounders of Rockford Products whose daughter still is around. Dr. Swanson and his wife, his daughter's Mrs. Swanson. These were people who taught me more than I could ever learn at any college they had lived the depression, they didn't just read about it in a book, they had lived it, they had lost everything, moved into their garage and built it again. They were wonderful people who had so much to share and so much knowledge and wanted to talk and their families hardly visited them many of them. But I learned from, more from them than from frankly any college or any professor could ever teach me. They were kind, they were gentle, they had real life real experience. I must tell you that they were my family. When I graduated from college they took a, you know we all got along very well. I was quite, you know, got along well with them. I still have my suit downstairs in the basement. They, I think it was a collective total of about \$450 that they managed to raise when I graduated from college. Since I was a foreign student I had no student loans. I couldn't have them I couldn't get any aid or grants or loans or anything of the type so when I graduated I was truly free. I had a 1972 Monte Carlo which we paid \$250 for and spent \$400 in parts to get it going. I'll never forget you know you had to lift up the coupe, you know, you had to lift up because the hinge, the screw in the hinge was missing. My whole world fit in the back seat of my car when I left college to go in and live at 2917A Halstead with three girls and me. We shared a townhouse in Rockford. I got a job. But they had bought me two shirts, two ties, I don't have the shirts or ties, and a blue suit from JCPenney. A pinstriped blue suit and \$200. All that was 250 bucks and they gave me \$200 towards my first months rent deposit and that's how I started my life with the help of those people.

Rockford's been very kind to me. This was 1982 in the depth of the recession. Horrible horrible time. We had 26 plus percent unemployment. If you think my accent is bad now you should have tried it back then. And I got a job on 7th St as a straight commission stockbroker. And you know imagine this 21-year-old pimple faced kid who's going to tell you in the middle of the deepest recession, you know, Mr. Johnson give me all your money, I'm so smart I'll invest it for you. But I was very lucky. I knew a lot of people from PA Peterson home and I was very fortunate to really be successful at that and so when I graduated from college I really had nothing and moved in with some people I knew from college who wanted to share an apartment. It was kind of an interesting experience. You know it was three girls and me. They had Three's Company back then as a TV show, we were Four's company and we had a good time. Eating pizza from Giuseppe's.

I was dating a girl up in, at the time, who was going to school in Madison and life was so much simpler. I mean literally \$10, I hate to admit this, but \$10 was all I had to spend on the weekend. Gas money, I'd go up to Madison, we'd buy a case of Blatt's light beer, \$.99 bags of potato chips from Logli's which used to be on N. 2nd St back at that time and beer was cheaper in Illinois than it was in Wisconsin for some reason. And we go up there and we would live off very little money and lots of fun and happiness and smiles and bright sunshine. You know the sun was shining in the middle of winter and we thought it was! And there was just nothing at that age to worry about. The whole world was ahead of us and we just did everything we could to take it in.

HC: One of the questions I have for you and you just mentioned your accent is, your family, did you speak English in India with your family?

SP: No, at home we spoke Hindi and Punjabi which is another Indian language, w Indian languages. But at school we were taught English so I mean it wasn't something we were very fluent at but enough that you could certainly converse. I came to Rockford College and I spent literally two years at the Learning Resource Center which was where they taught you comprehension and remedial reading which were subjects that were taught to foreign students and I took them all the way to the end. I think I still should have taken some more, I'm not very fast at reading. My kids, my kid in second grade is faster than me, my kid in fifth grade is far past me. My teacher is still around who I'm very proud to call my teacher and I honor her every time I see her which is Mary Ann Wham. You know and she was my teacher who taught me English at the Learning Resource Center and she is just a delightful wonderful lady and she was the most prettiest lady I'd ever seen in my life. She was as perfect as could be from a picture and she still is a beautiful lady. But she was just a doll. I mean she was just so gracious and kind to us and so sweet to us and taught us patiently, all foreign students. And there were a lot of foreign students at Rockford College at the time and we all played soccer...

HC: How many in your class?

SP: Well we had probably about 30 foreign students from probably 10 plus countries if not more. There was only one other from India who was a friend of mine, Aneil Aurora, who is now chairman of a big company in California, a big software company. He was CEO of Gateway computers before this, a graduate from Rockford... so I came here on a whim and a prayer and six months later I told Aneil who was my neighbor and good friend in India how the ropes were,

you know how to get over here so six months later we got him to come here on a tourist visa and got everything worked out for him and we graduated together, he was best man at my wedding, I was best man at his wedding and he is doing very well with a thousand plus employees in Arlo California, I just saw him a few weeks ago. Graduated from Rockford College and he's got two little girls, so we both got married a year apart. Like I said I was best man at his wedding. But Aneil came here and I had the system down so I just handed my jobs down to him you know and it was just down the food chain you know and he would just hand over the next jobs... but we both graduated the same day and, still a good friend after many many years.

HC: Well actually you have answered really most of the questions we have here except I do have to ask you. Reflection, which is the last part of this... you had told us an earlier story of meeting the president. I don't know if you would want to repeat that story that it's fabulous so. . .

SP: Good story.

HC: Were you... at a private meeting...

SP: Oh, oh you know, talking about citizenship, which is kind of, you know, very personal private thing, many people become citizens right away. Some don't and I became a citizen in I believe 1991. And so I could vote in the presidential election, or may be it was late 90 early 1991. It was, it was quite, you know quite an interesting experience. I talked about Judge Roszkowski but anyway, fast forwarding to 2000. I had been close to President Clinton specially relating to US Indian affairs, and Janine and I always asked him to visit India because at the time President Clinton went to India in 2000 the last US president to visit the largest democracy in the world, from the oldest democracy of the world, was President Jimmy Carter in 1978 when he went to visit his mother who was a Peace Corps volunteer in India. So for 22 years we had not visited India, a US president had not and then we wonder why we are misunderstood in this world.

So I had been really pounding away on that and finally in the last year of his presidency President Clinton decided to go to India and I was honored. It was truly an honor to be picked as the only Indian American at that time, there was well over a couple, maybe, at least a million if not more, a couple million Indians living in this country. People of Indian descent. And he asked me to come advise him the day before. I went with him on the trip but the day before to the White House and I'll never forget it was St. Patrick's Day because there were lots of Irish kids waiting for a meeting to be done. They were waiting outside, they were having a ceremony and so would've been March. So we, I'll never forget going to the White House we were in the Roosevelt Room where he had several members of his cabinet and various callers from various think tanks have been assembled to give him his last-minute advice on what his policy statements were going to be in India etc. and I was certainly participating in that, the end of which he asked me to wait and I was not quite sure if I'd said something out of line that I was being asked to wait.

But I did. And Sandy Berger, Madeleine Albright, and John Podesta, that was his Chief of Staff, and National Security Adviser and Secretary of State and him, they asked me if I could wait and then they asked me to come into a door which was right next to the Roosevelt Room or the

Cabinet room as they call it, which was the Oval Office and I'd been there a couple three times before for a bill signing and I've seen the office and but this time it was me who was the center of attention and I remember sinking into the couch, honest to goodness I thought I was on the floor, and just holding onto the side of the couch because I was so scared of what was going on and after the niceties were done President Clinton looked me right in the eye, right between my eyes, and wanted to reinforce that I, and his words were "you are about to give advice to your Commander in Chief, the President of your country," and then he looked me right in the eyes and asked me if I was a citizen? To which of course I responded I was and he asked me how long and I said "Well I'd been a citizen at that point for about 10 years. That I had just recently felt that I had truly embraced the country and become truly a citizen only three years prior to that and then went on to explain to him that I was visiting India and my mother had sent me out on an errand one-day in the middle of the afternoon, while I was coming back and not too far from the family home was the state legislature in Maharashtra called [Setchavalia] and this was a place where there was protest held quite often because of the center of politics and I was walking back and I remember a demonstration of some kind going on and I always was curious about politics and decided to walk right up to the front and try to figure out who they were demonstrating about and that's when I saw the demonstrators put fire, light a fire to our American flag. It was an anti-American demonstration and seeing my flag burned in front of my eyes was the moment of decision for me, it was the defining moment in my life about being an American citizen. I truly felt that day that that was my flag, that was my home, my children, my country. America was where they had given me everything I had, they had defended me, they had taught me everything I knew at that time and that was my flag that had been burned and I never forget coming home that day, you know, a few minutes later and telling my mother very emotionally that I was not ever going to say I'd come home to India anymore because this wasn't home for me. My home was in America and I was just coming to visit her and I truly became a citizen that day. After relating the story quite emotionally even today as back then, the president I'll never forget looked me right in the eye and said "Boy, Sunil, that's a story I would tell," and laughed about it and he did repeat it when he went on the trip to India. So that was kind of my day of reckoning so to speak when I think I became an American citizen. Thank you.

HC: Well thank you.

SP: Thank you for taking the time. Sorry to make you wait.

HC: No not at all.