

# U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack

Lynnette Harris

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Cultivate

## Ram Chaudhari: Quest for Learning Brings Global Success

By Lynnette Harris | March 22, 2023



*Ram Chaudhari and Heidi Wengreen.*

At the age of nine, Ramjibhai (Ram) Chaudhari left his remote Indian village north of Mumbai to get an education. Dindrol, his tiny village, lacked electricity, running water, sanitation infrastructure, and a school.

Though just a boy, Ram was strongly encouraged by his grandfather, who was head of the village, to attend the boarding school 35 minutes from his home. His grandfather couldn't read, write, or even sign his name. No one in his family had attended school in three generations, and his grandfather was passionate about the next generation getting an education. That was the starting point for Ram, and he left his village for what would become a lifelong quest for learning.

Ram was the only son in his family and was used to farming and working hard. At boarding school, he learned to cook, clean, and spin cotton to make his clothes. He cleaned streets for 2 cents an hour. And he learned to study.

His grandfather passed away before Ram graduated from high school, so he didn't get to share that milestone with him. But his deep respect for his grandfather's wishes spurred him on to college, and he attended the Anand Agricultural University 300 miles away. He studied nutrition and food sciences, a field that had always interested him, so he could help improve communities and lives. Ram was the top student in his class every year. He knew if he didn't study, he would have no future. After graduating with his bachelor's degree, he was offered a teaching position at the college, but he turned it down so he could move to a foreign country.

"I knew I wanted to study nutrition somewhere else," he said. "I went to the library and searched for schools. USU looked very good to me. I was accepted there with a small scholarship. It was a larger university, similar to the one back home, and looked like a nice, quiet, peaceful place. I didn't know anyone there, but they wanted me, and I was willing to work hard."

Ram had to save for a year to travel to the U.S. and was finally able to buy a one-way ticket for \$87 on a ship from Mumbai to San Francisco. He bunked at the bottom of the ship for the 37-day trip and arrived in the U.S. in 1967 with \$6 in his pocket. He didn't know English as he began his master's degree in food science.

"I studied so hard, and I cried some nights because many concepts were so difficult for me to comprehend," he said. "I got a \$200 stipend for 6 months, and I knew if I didn't maintain a B average, I wouldn't be able to stay at USU."

Ram took 16 credits his first semester in a competitive grad school in a new country where he didn't speak the language. He got all A's.

He continued to excel academically and earned his master's degree in food sciences in 1968. He felt fortunate to have outstanding professors and mentors, including Tony Ernstrom, Dee Morgan, and Gary Richardson. Beyond the classroom, Richardson's family accepted him as part of their own. Ram once broke his foot in the snow, and the Richardsons took care of him with compassion. He greatly admired their family values and appreciated their kindness, and he still considers them dear friends.

After completing his master's degree, Richardson encouraged Ram to continue in the food sciences program through a scholarship.

"It was a fantastic experience for me," he said. "I stayed and worked hard in a field I loved and earned my Ph.D. in

1972. I made many great connections with USU that have benefitted me throughout my life.”

Ram promised his mother that as soon as he finished his education, he would return to India to marry an Indian girl, and he kept his word. He met his wife, Panna, through a family friend, and they wrote letters regularly and talked on the phone when Ram could save for the \$1.27-a-minute phone call. After six months, they finally met one afternoon. They got married the following morning, and his mother was delighted with his choice. After a short honeymoon, he returned to his work in the U.S.

“Even though the marriage happened quickly, I wouldn’t change a thing,” he said. “Panna is my gift and my best friend. We have been the happiest people for over 50 years in good times and bad.”

Ram’s food science career began in the dairy division at Safeway, where he served as manager of new product development. He later joined Miles, Inc., as a research scientist. He then moved to German-based Milupa, an infant formula and baby food manufacturer. He was head of the technical department there and oversaw quality assurance, regulation, product development, and customer support/technical services.

Ram’s career was going well until Milupa surprisingly closed the operation. He was living in Connecticut at the time, and Panna and their baby boy, Romie, were in upstate New York while she worked on her Ph.D.

“I was on the top of my career, then it was gone,” he recalls. “We were in terrible shape financially. In addition, Panna’s brother was killed in a car accident, and her mother had passed away a year before. We had all that added to my job loss.

“But I’m stubborn, and I don’t give up. I believed in those products I had spent seven years of my life working on. I also felt I could do things to improve on them, and I didn’t want to leave that.”

Ram moved to New York to be with his wife and son. He had no job and no savings, but he had a desire to make a difference. He and a coworker met at Friendly’s Ice Cream in Troy. They talked at length and agreed they both had the right education and experience to start their own business. They signed a simple, one-page document right there. The two men felt they needed a third partner – someone with “grey hair” and experience. They found someone 20 years older than Ram who was a perfect fit.

“We all had tremendous faith that we could do it,” he said. “We felt that unless you try something, you don’t know how good you will be.”

Ram and his partners shared the same concerns about companies selling nutrients, but not being judicious about quality control. They were especially concerned about baby food because they saw babies who were getting sick.

“How would I feel if that was my baby?” he asked. “We wanted to do everything possible to ensure the product met health requirements so babies everywhere were safe and healthy. We wanted to protect people from bad products.”

Their company, Fortitech, was born in 1986 out of a garage. The other two partners had money to put into it; Ram did not, so he borrowed his share. For three years, the men drove 300 or 400 miles at a time, in a car that wasn’t always reliable, to meet with potential customers.

“We couldn’t fly because we had no money. We shared one hotel room when we traveled. We couldn’t afford McDonald’s. We didn’t have a paycheck. We couldn’t even give gifts at Christmas or on birthdays. But we were crazy, kind of out-of-the-box thinking people who had something new to offer.”

They finally got a bank to back them – Norstar Bank, now Bank of America.

“We said, ‘If you trust us, you will never regret this in your life.’ They believed us.”

Panna had been working in immunology for a company in New York as their business was launching. She soon became part of their team.

Together, the Chaudharis and their partners forged cutting-edge research and became world leaders in developing nutrient systems for the food, beverage, infant nutrition, and dietary supplement industries.

“People thought a husband and wife could not work together,” Ram said. “But she was so wonderful, and we surprised everyone! She was in charge of global product development. I was in charge of new product presentations worldwide.”

Business picked up quickly after just a few years, and it never stopped. They had a solid team. “We never had an issue with who did what, never pointed fingers,” he said. “We each made mistakes, but nobody questioned that. We were all very sensitive about that.”

From 1988 to 1990, Fortitech was in Inc. Magazine's list of the 500 fastest-growing companies in America. Ram became a sought-after authority on food fortification and manufacturing and was a member of multiple professional organizations. He was widely published in nutrition trade and scientific journals.

"We had so much fun making our products available worldwide," he said. "We traveled to 80 countries and had factories around the world."

Their customers included Beechnut, SlimFast, Bristol Myers, Abbott, Nestle, Coca-Cola, Kraft, Pepsi, Power Bar, Gerber, and Dannon, among others. Their company was based in Schenectady, New York, with production sites in New York, California, Brazil, Malaysia, Denmark, and Poland, and sales offices in China and Mexico.

"The last factory we did was in India," he said. "I got to give back to the country where I was born and raised. That gives me great joy."

With approximately 600 employees, the partners sold their company in 2012 for nearly \$700 million.

"It was the right time for us," he said. "We were getting older. We had a good life. There is a right time to end, and it was then. We made the buyers promise to keep all 600 employees because they are part of the company family, and they did."

The Chaudharis are now enjoying retirement in Laguna Niguel, California. They live as humbly as ever, still flying economy class and occasionally upgrading with sky miles.

"You can have a big place, but it will only collect dust," he said. "It's not just for show. You need human beings to enjoy life."

Ram enjoys going for walks, Panna enjoys playing bridge, and they love going on cruises and socializing. They have also participated in philanthropic work that supports eye health, hospitals, and scholarship programs for students. Their son Romie manages their assets and works in real estate, manufacturing, and investing in the L.A. area.

"Romie and his wife and baby live in Santa Monica, so we see them often," he said. "Being a grandparent is the best! It brings us such joy!"

Ram said because of USU, he is where he is today.

"Without USU, I don't think I had any chance at all. I met some wonderful people in professors Ernstrom, Morgan,

and Richardson. They were so good to me personally and such good mentors, all of them. I really enjoyed the USU community."

Ram believes the key to success is giving it all you have.

"Whatever job I did, my family taught me to do it as if I was the owner of the company. My first job was working at McDonald's for 60 cents an hour, and I worked as if I was the owner. Not that I am so special, but my family instilled in me to give it all I had."

When asked what advice he would pass on to USU students, Ram said to go with your gut feeling, work hard, and stay in harmony. Failure is not an option.

"USU is a wonderful place to get your education. It's a great community. Don't give up because of adversity, no matter what it is."

The Chaudharis received a Distinguished Service Award from USU at Founders Day last April for their significant impact on USU, their communities, and the world.

They created a generous endowment in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources to give scholarships to students studying nutrition and food sciences. They desired to give back to ensure the success of future generations of Aggie food scientists.

"Giving is the greatest thing, in my opinion," Ram said. "If it is for a good cause, don't hesitate, and don't expect anything in return. As long as I am alive, I want to continue giving. And God bless those who benefit from it."

## CONTACT

Lynnette Harris  
[lynnette.harris@usu.edu](mailto:lynnette.harris@usu.edu)



Watch [Youtube interview](#) with Chaudhari.