

From Family Tragedy to Entrepreneurial Triumph

At Choice Hotels, we are proud to help families build generational wealth through franchised hotel businesses that are often passed down from generation to generation, from mothers and fathers to sons and daughters. No one exemplifies that spirit of family entrepreneurship more than third-generation hotel owner Bijal Patel. His journey as a hotelier was sparked by family tragedy, but it led Bijal to take the family business and his family's legacy to even greater heights.

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"The way my mom raised us as kids was always [to] be the best person that you can be, always put your best effort forward, and also always help people," says Bijal. "Which is why I think, even though she entered the hotel industry by marriage, it was kind of a match made in heaven for her because, really, the heart that she had was the heart of hospitality."

Bijal's mom, Sandhya, moved from London to Ben Lomand, California, in the Santa Cruz Mountains, to be with her husband, Umesh, who owned an Econo Lodge there that had been passed down to him by his parents.

"The way that my parents both operated the hotel — it was really, truly a partnership where they worked together," Bijal explains.

In 2005, when Bijal was in high school, Sandhya was elected the first female minority president of the Econo Lodge Franchisees Association of America (ELFA).

"She was a true advocate for all the members. She was a great mentor [and] teacher," says Econo Lodge owner Katen Patel (no relation). "Because of her, I believe that I'm at the level that I'm at. She was someone that believed in me more than myself."

Shortly after Sandhya was elected, tragedy struck.

"She was suddenly diagnosed with pancreatic cancer," recalls Bijal. "And after a 14-month battle, which was really tough on her and us as a family, she ended up losing her battle. Overnight, my father lost not only his life partner but his business partner."

It was then, at the age of 18, that Bijal joined the family business.

"I started looking for resources, and I started helping other hoteliers — very similar to her journey," Bijal says. "I've truly tried to embody the spirit of the type of hotelier that she was. But I think it was a little humbling to realize that, so many years later, her name is still one that is recognized with respect."

There's no doubt that Sandhya would have been extremely proud to see all that her son has achieved: overseeing the conversion of his family's Econo Lodge to the [Quality Inn & Suites Santa Cruz Mountains](#), earning a degree in Business Administration from California Polytechnic State University, and in 2020, at the age of 30, becoming the youngest-ever chairman of the California Hotel & Lodging Association (CHLA). Today, Bijal serves as CEO of his family's hospitality company, which owns and operates a portfolio of hotels and other assets.

"I have been able to successfully grow with the tools and the foundation that I inherited from my parents

and my grandparents, which is kind of running parallel to what my parents' legacy was — and more specifically, what my mom's legacy is," Bijal explains.

And what a proud legacy of hoteling it is.

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