Multimillionaire Carleton grad buys his own B.C. town

Engineer son of an Indian grocer believes education can end poverty

BY NECO COCKBURN

Luck, hard work and a few good people turned a poor Indian student into a multimillionaire businessman.

Now, the same good fortune that took Krishnan Suthanthiran from India to Carleton University — and eventually the U.S. — has given him his own town.

Yes, his own town. Mr. Suthanthiran recently closed the deal on Kitsault, an abandoned northern B.C. community that went on the market for $7 million in September.

He had no such dream before a business trip last fall to Halifax, where he noticed a newspaper report that Kitsault was for sale. Four months later, he is mulling over the possibility of creating a movie studio, tourism facility and environmental research facility in the town.

"It was not planned. Things just happened," Mr. Suthanthiran said in a phone interview from Salt Lake City, Utah, where he was travelling on business. He said he had been struck by the area's beauty.

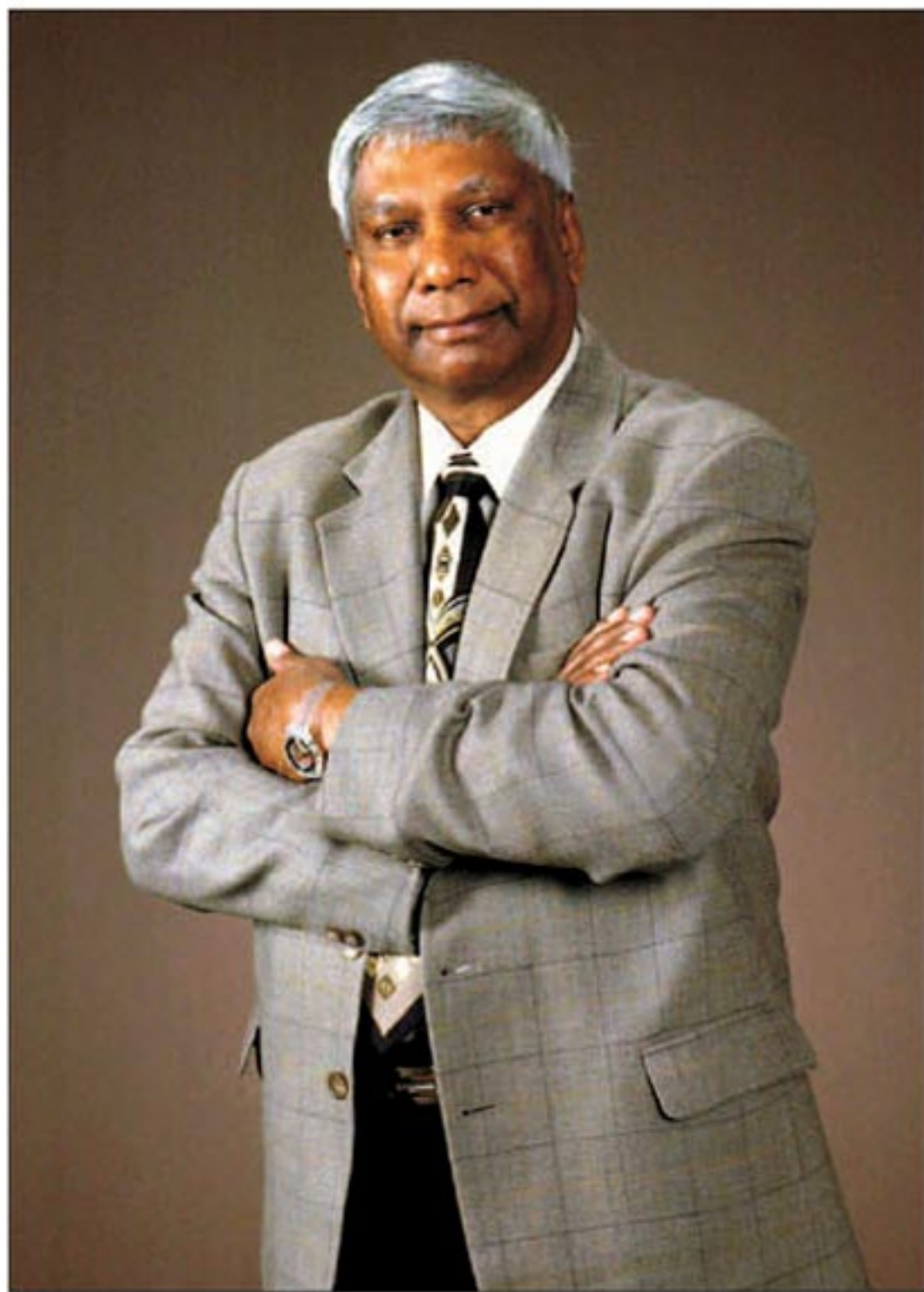"If I had not read that article that day, I would not have known anything about it."

Such uncanny opportunities have been plentiful for the 55-year-old. Decades after graduating from Carleton, Mr. Suthanthiran remains grateful to the university — to which he has made substantial donations — for giving him a chance to further his education. It almost didn't happen.

As one of six children born to a grocery store owner and his wife in Dindigul, a district in southern India, a young Mr. Suthanthiran was a keen student, the only child in his family to graduate from high school.

After graduation, the young man started working in his father's store because college tuition was too expensive. One day, a friend's father dropped in.

"I used to tutor his son. He didn't like the idea that I wasn't going to college," Mr. Suthanthiran recalled.

The man collected money from friends and wrote a letter to the head of a school. Mr. Suthanthiran met with professors and was accepted.

He graduated and moved to Ottawa in 1969 to undertake a masters degree in engineering at Carleton.

"He had a huge culture shock," said Richard Kind, his former professor and thesis supervisor. "He was a quiet, unassuming young man who made it very plain that he was willing to work very hard."

Mr. Suthanthiran recalled his delight at the university's underground tunnel system, which kept him out of the cold during the two years of his studies. He ate cheese and hot pepper pizza "every night for more than a year," because it was the only vegetarian meal he could get delivered. Money, however, remained an obstacle.

"I made it plain to him that if he worked hard, I could support him from my research grant," said Mr. Kind.

Mr. Suthanthiran has not forgotten that help. He established an endowment at the university, last year providing the first Krishnan Suthanthiran and Richard Kind Scholarship in Mechanical/Aerospace Engineering. He has made other financial donations toward equipment purchases at the university.

"I appreciate the opportunity to study that Carleton gave me," said Mr. Suthanthiran.

"Education is the one way that you can eliminate poverty. You need to make education affordable so that everyone who wants, and is capable of a higher education, can get one."

Mr. Suthanthiran has also donated money to schools in India, and six months ago bought a water purification system for a school in his former community.

The media attention over his recent purchase has been a bit of a surprise to a man who prefers a low-key approach to his philanthropic and business endeavours.

In 1977, he founded Best Medical International, a Virginia-based company that specializes in oncology and radiology products. He had moved to the U.S. years earlier to work for an oncologist after taking pre-med courses at the University of Toronto.

Real estate investments caught Mr. Suthanthiran's eye about 30 years ago, and he now owns numerous commercial and residential properties in Maryland and Virginia.

Krishnan Suthanthiran was in Halifax on business last fall when the idea came to him to buy the town.

The B.C. coastal town of Kitsault closed when the molybdenum mine was shut in the early 1980s.

Town: 'We are fools or ... brilliant'

"We often take on projects that other people just ignore or don't want, partly because we're willing to be patient," he said.

Patience is just what he may need with his new venture: Kitsault Resort Ltd. now owns a remote area founded as a mining town in the late 1970s.

The deserted town sits about 140 kilometres north of Prince Rupert. Its last residents left in 1983 after the mine was closed, due to a plunge in molybdenum prices. Molybdenum is used in steel and other alloys. The former mining town has been abandoned since the mine closed in the early 1980s.

The purchase included 130 hectares of land, a long stretch of oceanfront, about 300 homes and apartments, a shopping mall, recreation centre, gym, swimming pool, library, curling rink and paved roads.

The company plans to spend the next few months working with the government and First Nations people in the area to determine Kitsault's direction.

"It's an interesting challenge," said Mr. Suthanthiran. "We want to create — in one to two years — a vibrant economy. People will forget about the ghosts and look at it as a beautiful part of British Columbia and Canada.

"Only time will tell whether we are fools or we are brilliant."