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Talk of the Town

by Robin Roberts*

Krishnan Suthanthiran strolls through the town of Kitsault like he owns the place. He does. In January 2005, the 57-year-old head of Virginia-based Best Medical International, a biomedical engineering firm that specializes in medical devices to treat cancer, wrote a cheque for roughly \$7 million for the northwestern B.C. town. Up until then, Kitsault had sat empty for 23 years, a virtual ghost town after its potential as a mining centre crashed.

Although this remote region, 500 kilometres northwest of Vancouver, has a vast and varied history with mining operations from silver to magnesium, Amax Canada was the last to stake its fortunes on a molybdenum mine here in 1981. The company spent a year and roughly \$50 million to build 90 houses and 210 apartments, a 22,000 square foot shopping centre, recreational centre with swimming pool, school, hospital, post office, even a pub. Amax then recruited 400 miners and, at its height, Kitsault was home to some 1,200 residents, a bustling community in an idyllic setting on the sea, surrounded by mountains and forest. Plump salmon and king crab, left undisturbed for years to grow and multiply, crowded the inlet; curious grizzly bears and foxes, unaccustomed to humans, wandered into town occasionally to check out the activity or peer in basement windows. Then, suddenly, little more than a year later, the price of molybdenum, a metal used to harden steel, plummeted from a high of \$30 a pound to \$1.69. The mine closed down, the people packed up.

Decades passed with just two residents — a caretaker and his wife — who kept the lawns mowed in the summer and the heat on in the winter. You could have walked up to any house and stepped right in; owners left doors unlocked and the heat switched on. As a result, there's no mold in the bathrooms or cracks in the pipes from the icy northern winters. Crayon drawings are still tacked to the walls in the school and surgical equipment sits idle in the hospital. Even the glasses are stacked

neatly in the Maple Leaf Pub. Along the way, Kitsault fell into the hands of U.S. copper giant Phelps Dodge Corp., which put it up for sale in the fall of 2004.

So what possessed Suthanthiran to buy the place? No, the price of molybdenum has not rebounded; the biomedical mogul has no intention of reviving the area's mining history. His vision is for something much grander. "We've got a lot of ideas we're floating around now, something unique and different," says Suthanthiran over coffee in a downtown Vancouver hotel meeting room. A lot of ideas, indeed. He runs down his wish list: an artists' colony; a centre for film and music festivals; medical, environmental and scientific conventions; a nursing school; a wellness spa; education centre for unwed mothers. He doesn't seem terribly concerned that the town has no hotel or lodge to house the hoped-for attendees, citing the apartments and houses as sufficient accommodation.

Suthanthiran, in fact, doesn't seem terribly fazed by much, despite heading up many divisions of his multi-national company and his ambitious goal to raise \$1 billion to, in his words, "revolutionize education and health care." It's a long way from his humble beginnings in Dindigul, Southern India. One of six children born to a grocer and his wife, Suthanthiran was the only one of his siblings to graduate from the Catholic St. Mary's Higher Secondary School in Tamil Nadu. He'd long dreamed of college but his parents couldn't afford to send him. A friend's father, however, saw the potential in him and collected enough money from friends and neighbours to send him, at just 15, to

Hajee Karutha Rowther Howdia College, also in Tamil Nadu. For his undergraduate in engineering, he attended PSG College of Technology, run by Hindus. "Talk about a secular country!" he says of his multi-faith schooling.

In gratitude for his scholastic opportunities, Suthanthiran gave his hometown a school, a medical clinic and a water purification system. He also funds 100 annual scholarships, and journeys back once a year to see what else is needed. "I can't solve all the problems but I like to make some contribution, particularly in education," he says. "I believe that education is the most effective way to eliminate poverty and to promote peace."

At age 20, he continued his own education in 1969 with a post-graduate scholarship from Carleton University in Ottawa, where he earned his Masters in Aerospace Engineering. (Again, in gratitude, he's since donated substantial sums to Carleton, as well as an engineering scholarship.) "I just kind of fell into it," he says of engineering. "I just wanted to go to university, I didn't care [what I studied]. The math and the science professor were fighting each other to have me in their class. The math won over because I had high marks in math. I'm a logical person. You'll find the majority of Indians, especially from the south, are very logical, mathematically oriented; that's why you find a lot of them in computers. Computer programming is logical."

Suthanthiran's logical mind was drawn to medicine, however, and, after achieving his masters in engineering, enrolled in the University of Toronto's pre-med program.

His aversion to dissecting frogs in biology class, however, derailed that ambition. So he took time off to travel and ended up in Washington, D.C., where he met an oncologist looking for an engineer. The two teamed up to make medical devices and by 1977, Suthanthiran had established his own company specializing in radiation catheters to treat cancer, the disease that took his father back in India in his early sixties. Today, Suthanthiran's Best Medical International employs a staff of 130 at his headquarters in Virginia and 100 more in Europe. He has interests as well in India and is casting an eye to China.

For now, however, it's the little town of Kitsault that has captured his imagination. The prospect of re-establishing and repopulating the town would give even the savviest of investors night sweats. Not Suthanthiran. "Everybody makes it sound scary," he says. "Everything's scary for most people. You talk about buying a town and suddenly it's, 'There's a lot of rain and snow, it's in the northwest, there's transportation issues.' You could list all the issues and walk away from it. But I didn't grow up that way; I had to go through a lot of challenges."

Those challenges didn't end when he left his village in India; he had to adapt to a new culture, new language and new way of life first in Canada then in the U.S. As for what nationality he considers himself now, Suthanthiran, whose Tamil has turned rusty from lack of use, says, "I used to joke about it; when I go to India people think I'm too American, when I'm in America they say I'm not quite American. I'm a man without a country. In terms of philosophical thinking, I'm probably more American. It's that can-do attitude. The town of Kitsault had been for sale for 10-plus years and nobody was interested. Here I come along, I'm nobody but I buy it. Also, my thinking about giving and helping. Nothing against Canadians, but I think Americans are probably the biggest donors all over the world. When something goes wrong, they're out there first and that's often not promoted. Also, regarding how I treat people, I have the Indian values. My goal is to try to take the best of all cultures."

He's also taken the industriousness of all cultures, often working seven days a week, at the expense of a wife and family. "You always wonder about paths you take. I never had a social life or a personal life; I never got married. Sometimes I wonder

if I'm focusing [too much] on activities and not meeting someone. But that's the path I've been on for a long time. It might be nice to spend some time not doing anything so I can think calmly. But when I do that I'm like a kid in a candy store, I think about all the things I can do, and am doing. There are times I do feel challenged and wonder why I'm doing it, for what."

John Lovelace doesn't wonder. As the head of ATV Productions, an independent film and television company whose most notable programs include *Wings Over Canada*, *Discovering Great Towns*, *Drivers Seat* and *South Asian Focus*, Lovelace had shot footage of Kitsault and offered it to Suthanthiran as a corporate video. Suthanthiran not only bought the video, he bought the company. And it wasn't even up for sale.

"It was the furthest thing from my mind," says Lovelace of the unexpected offer from Suthanthiran last summer. "So I gave him a figure and he basically accepted it. When I dealt with him he was very straight up, and I love doing deals like that."

Lovelace had certain conditions of the sale. "I'd stay on for five years," he says of his role as CEO and senior producer. That wasn't a problem for the new owner. "He didn't want to do it if I wasn't going to be involved because he didn't know anything about it," recalls Lovelace. "That was fine for me. It gives me a safety valve. And certainly the finances are there; I don't have to worry about the day-to-day operation."

As for Suthanthiran's plans for Kitsault, Lovelace says, "He has a vision about what it could be and I don't know whether he's really sharing that vision. He's got many ideas. His passion and his dream, because he's an entrepreneur and a successful one, will evolve."

Lovelace says Suthanthiran has asked his advice and he's given his two cents' worth. "Krish has respect for people," says Lovelace when asked if he thinks his new boss listens to that advice. "I think anybody in business knows the truth when they hear it. A business person today following a dream has to listen to what other people are saying. But at the same time, only he knows where he's going to take it. He doesn't have the time to sit down and give all his reasoning to every single person he talks to; that would waste everybody's time. I think he knows what he's doing and I think he knows where he's headed but I don't think he shares that with

everybody. I know there's a master plan there because the man is very articulate and very intelligent."

As for Kitsault, Lovelace, who, as the producer and pilot for *Wings Over Canada*, has flown into the town twice, says, "It's a great area up there. I love the whole coast. I've been all over Canada and I can subjectively say my passion is B.C.'s west coast, from Port McNeill right up to Prince Rupert and beyond, into Kitsault. It's got everything a person could want."

Except people. Krishnan Suthanthiran had hoped to open the doors to his very own utopia early next year, but accepts it will take a little longer than anticipated. "It's going to take two years from now, longer than we thought," he says, citing the rising Canadian dollar and increased manufacturing and construction costs. One aspect he doesn't have to worry about, though, is the local Nisga'a people, who occupy the Nass River Valley where Kitsault is located, and that's because of his aforementioned respect for others.

"They're wonderful people," says Suthanthiran of the native community. "We're doing more and more relationship building. I've had dinner with the B.C. chief, and he and I were going to meet with Premier Campbell in the first week of June. This is not like a piece of furniture that you put in a truck and take away. Whatever we do ultimately has to help the community. The goal is to make them part of the team and to make the culture part of the entertainment picture."

As busy as he is, Suthanthiran has no intention of being an absentee owner. He'll have a home in Kitsault, which he plans to rename Chandra Krishnan after his parents, and will be actively involved in organizing festivals and conferences. "My interest is in scientific conferences, so I plan to select about 100 people and have a conference, focus on issues, how to simplify the technology and make it available to everybody. There are so many subspecialties in medicine it would be easy for me to get 100 people to come and focus on the future of medicine. I'm hoping Kitsault will have a clinic that will focus on early breast cancer, prostate and cardiac problems. Prevention is key to surviving these diseases."

Even though his father died of colon cancer, Suthanthiran is not overly preoccupied with the chance he's susceptible to the same disease. "It's not something I'm always thinking about. I eat fairly well,

although I do need to lose some weight. Travel is not good for a healthy diet or healthy living.” Suthanthiran has a cook in Virginia who makes him vegetarian meals and he hopes to open a South Indian vegetarian restaurant in his new town. When he comes to Vancouver, though, he dines at Annapurna, his favourite restaurant, with friends and associates like Roxanne Davies, who runs Go Consult, a company that trains unemployed business professionals in consulting. “Annapurna reminds Krish of his home cooking, what he remembers as a kid because the food was very simple and tasty,” she says.

Davies says she met Suthanthiran when she was working for a consumer health group, researching cancer treatments. “I saw this hospital in Switzerland called the Bircher-Benner Clinic in Zurich,” she recalls. “It really appealed to me because it was the best of both models: scientific medicine as well as alternative medicine. The picture on the brochure looked just like Vancouver so I kept it for years, and had in the back of my mind that I would love to help establish a centre of excellence for cancer treatment here in Vancouver.” When she read that Suthanthiran had bought Kitsault, “a fragile, beautiful little

town on the edge of the rainforest, with absolutely pristine air, I thought, why not? So I took a chance and wrote Krish with my ideas and he called me. Ever since then we’ve been in communication.”

Davies has visited the town twice and is convinced, “The future of Kitsault is going to be really exciting; it’s going to be a unique centre in the world,” she says. Still, she marvels at Suthanthiran’s quick decision to purchase the town. “I have a hard time choosing a pair of shoes,” she says with a laugh. “But he’s a self-made man and he’s also got a heart, which is an interesting combination. He really wants to have an ongoing relationship with the First Nations and bring them onside so they can benefit from the development there. He brings many, many wonderful talents to the table. I think he’s a unique individual. He wants to be called Joe Average but he’s far from average.”

As puzzling as his plan may seem to the average observer — buy a town, invite artists, scientists and single moms, give the moms free room and board while educating them, and at the same time work on the cure for cancer — it all makes sense to Suthanthiran. “I’m where I am today because a lot of people helped me and it’s my turn to help others,” he says. “There are times when you do anything to survive. Then you have a comfortable life, and when you have comfort and security, you do everything else for pride. I’m not doing things for personal pride and joy; it brings me happiness to make others happy, particularly children. You don’t have to do much to make them happy.”

He took exception to a *Washington Post* reporter who characterized him as stingy because he doesn’t don expensive watches, own a car or dine in ritzy restaurants. “Every dollar I earn and save could help somebody, so from that perspective, people mistake me for being frugal or cheap. I don’t do things for the sake of making people think I’m rich. I’m not flashy, I don’t drive a fancy car to say, ‘See me, I’m rich.’ That’s not me. I can be comfortable in a regular, good, safe car. I look at it in terms of value. I’m not going to pay \$100,000 when I can pay \$40,000 and get the same value. I live a comfortable life.”

As for whether that life will include a pristine town in northwestern B.C., Suthanthiran says, “We’ll see in another two years if I’ve made a big mistake with Kitsault. Only time will tell.”

TV With A New Focus

When Krishnan Suthanthiran took ownership of ATV Productions in June 2005, his plan was to use the company’s multi-media facilities to help with his ultimate goal to raise US\$1 billion to revolutionize health-care training and education. “One of the toughest parts for John [Lovelace] was that he didn’t know me or how I’d operate the company; whether he’d still have the freedom to produce the programs he wants,” says Suthanthiran, who immediately set up an offshoot company called Best Entertainment to facilitate international distribution of the company’s films and TV shows. “He’s still there doing all the shows they do.”

Along with one more. Suthanthiran and Lovelace quickly became collaborators on a number of ideas, including the new TV program *South Asian Focus*, which launched in May on Omni. While other South Asian broadcasts are dominated by religion and spirituality, the two partners were more interested in a broader mix of news and current affairs.

“We wanted a more accessible show, not a show about just the South Asian community,” says series producer Veenoo Dewan. “I strive to make it more cross-cultural in nature, so we cover topics that have a broader appeal, so there will always be something of interest in every show for Caucasians, Asians, whatever.”

Dewan, a producer with the BBC in London for 10 years before arriving in Vancouver six years ago, cites examples of recent shows that reflect his vision. “One was a look at Islam through the eyes of younger Muslims and converts,” he says. “They were incredibly well spoken, incredibly articulate compared to what’s usually out there. This is the voice of moderation, tolerance and intelligence. I think viewers can relate to that younger perspective rather than a bunch of old men espousing the Koran. We also did a couple of stories on a woman who’s in a mixed marriage — she’s of Hindu background and her husband is Catholic — plus she started an organic baby food company. That’s a story that would be of interest to everyone. We also did stories on a French Canadian Caucasian who’s been studying the art of Indian classical dance for 25 years, and has become an expert both here and in India. We’re looking at how people of all ethnicities are influenced by the traditions and religious beliefs and spirituality of the east. We’re not a typical South Asian entertainment show that just looks at the culture through the eyes of Bollywood films or song and dance.”

He’s proud of his “young, good-looking, intelligent team” of on-air hosts Salma Dinani and Dean Atwal, as well as the show’s professional editors, script writers and camera people. He’s also grateful for the deep pockets and latitude of ATV. “We’ve got good resources to rely on, so it’s a very slick-looking show, production values are extremely high. ATV gives us a lot of autonomy, and a lot of leeway to leave us to get on with it.” □

* **Robin Roberts** lives in Vancouver, B.C., where she was a travel editor for 10 years, and an entertainment editor for five years. Since 2001, she has been an independent writer, covering travel, entertainment, health and business for a variety of magazines and newspapers across North America, including *People Magazine*, *Gourmet*, *Mclean's*, *Reader's Digest*, *the Globe and Mail* and *TV Guide*, where she is a columnist and feature writer.





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Chandra Krishnan
Kitsault
heaven on earth

Inspired by the cone of a majestic British Columbia coniferous tree, which germinates from a seed into a giant, the identity for Chandra Krishnan Kitsault represents the spirit of limitless possibilities that serve as the very foundation of the community's revitalization.

Within the cone are symbols reflecting the many elements embodied by Chandra Krishnan Kitsault: education, health, nature, the environment, and Aboriginal heritage.



Nature respect & explore



Culture create & discover



Wellness embrace health



Learning be inspired



Adventure play outdoors



Community interact



Chandra Krishnan
Kitsault
heaven on earth

