



LEADER BY DESIGN

Interview Rhema Nantham Images Tim Hamilton

As with all successful careers, there is a moment that marks the upward turning point. For Paul Patel, this was in the form of refurbishing a New Zealand landmark – Vogel House. He worked with Prime Minister and Lady Muldoon to completely upgrade the official residence in Wellington, a job that was a stepping stone for his career.

Through the Vogel House project, Paul demonstrated his versatility as a designer and project manager. Today, this skill is the key to his business success, and is especially useful when long-term planning with the schools that are the majority of his clients.

Born in Dannevirke, Paul is a successful Gujarati designer who is proud of his culture, but he calls Manawatu home. His legacy in Palmerston North is one that has affected an entire community.

Paul's grandparents first arrived in Dannevirke from the Gujarat state in India in 1917. They opened a fruit shop, Shires, in 1924 and the family's business is still an ongoing success.

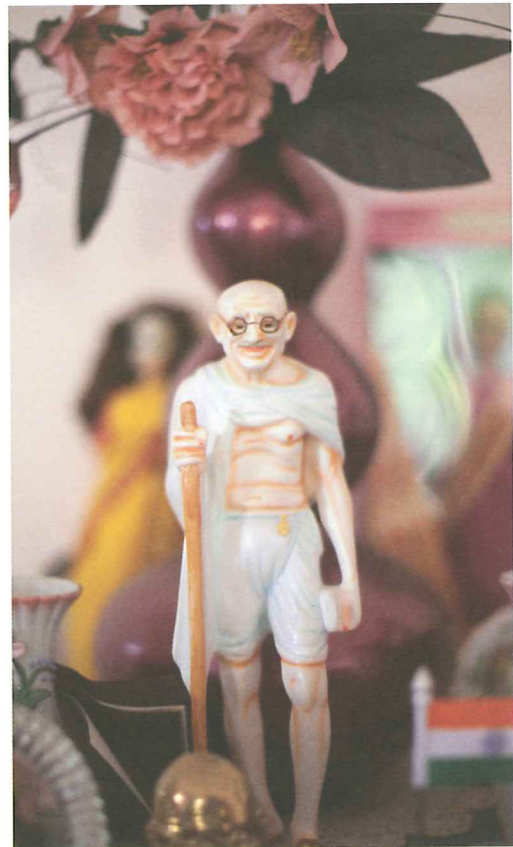
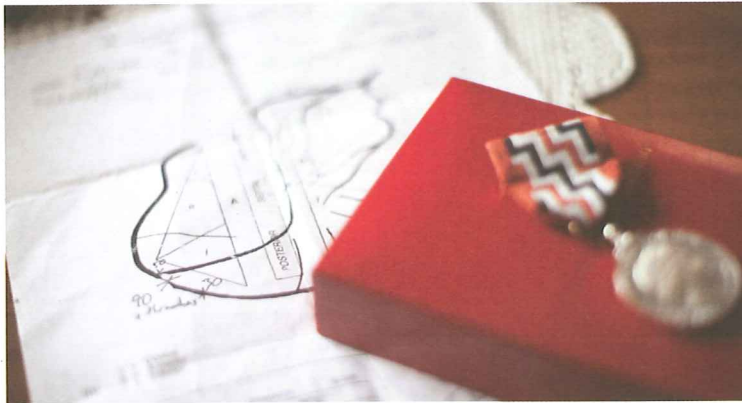
After many years of working in the Ministry of Works and Development in Wellington, Paul's heart was getting heavy. "Coming from a big family of three sisters and six brothers, I just wanted to go home.

"Back then, the term CV was not heard of, so I wrote to every single firm in Palmerston North and told them the truth. I am homesick and just want to come home and work," Paul confesses. After rejection after rejection, Paul finally got an offer from the Ministry of Education that would enable him to work in its Palmerston North office, so in 1976 he settled permanently in the city.

Although Paul was a very sociable and busy bachelor, he decided to get married and settle down to continue the Patel name. "I made the decision myself and I chose to return to India to get married," Paul admits. He found himself a homebred Gujarati girl and they got married in 1981. Today, Paul and his wife have two adult daughters, Nikita who is a teacher in England, and Umesha who is a banking advisor with BNZ. Paul enjoys balancing his family life with his extensive community involvement.

Having worked in the public sector for many years, when threats of redundancy were being rumoured, Paul and a senior architect in the Ministry of Education decided to leave and open a private architecture firm together.

In June 2005 the Patels had an alarming month, as Paul suffered a serious heart attack. During his recovery Paul realised that he needed a break, a sense of freedom and



flexibility. "I went into the office and told my partner that I was thinking of leaving. Then I said, no, I am leaving."

Paul now has an office at home, and although he still has as much work as before, he has found a greater sense of personal satisfaction. He enjoys being in control and has flexibility, whilst honing more than just his designer qualities.

Paul Patel is a familiar name among architects and designers, particularly due to his work as the national delegate for Architectural Designers of New Zealand, but he is even better known amongst the Palmerston North community. As the President of the Central Districts Indian Association (CDIA) since 1981, a representative on the Manawatu Multicultural Council and chair of multiple committees for the New Zealand Indian Central Association, Paul is a household name.

When Paul first returned to Palmerston North, he was part of the Manawatu Darts Association and became President with a lifelong membership. When the Indian women's cricket team visited, he organised and hosted the dinner. The positive response from this experience gave Paul confidence, and was the start of his journey to building a remarkable reputation in the community and earning credible respect across a wide range of local cultural groups.

Paul credits discovering his inner leader to his primary

school years: "I was the type of leader who was the voice for the people." He started multiple clubs and later on in high school was named as school captain. Surprisingly, despite his convincing leadership, "I am very shy, it is my one main downside".

Having been the President of CDIA for more than 30 years, "I am looking to shoulder tap someone to take over". His biggest worry is the future of native cultures; not just the Indian culture, but those of all the ethnicities present in Palmerston North. "What is going to happen to culture?" he asks.

In 2010 Paul returned to Vogel House to receive the Queen's Service Medal for his community work and attended the awards dinner. "I could still remember every detail of the house. They told me that they would give me a tour even though I knew every corner of the house," Paul recalls. Walking around the house, Paul reminisced over the sleepless nights it took to finish the drawings of the design, watching the construction and seeing the reality of his design emerge. Today, Vogel House stands as a proud legacy to Paul's talent.

As a man of confidence and exceptional leadership calibre, Paul Patel is a humble soul who has not changed his core beliefs. His key piece of advice, to others and himself, is simply to "take a breath every now and then".