

Shariq Mirza

All Walls Have Doors

In July 1991, Shariq “Sharick” Mirza came to America from Karachi, Pakistan with \$250 in his pocket. His maternal uncle, Sami Uddin Mirza, gave him the \$250 on the day he left for the US and played a key role in Sharick’s family support structure. His paternal uncle, Anwar Mirza, provided the fuel for Sharick’s rocket to escape the gravitational force with a trajectory toward anywhere he dreamed. Anwar purchased Sharick’s ticket to the US, gave him an old beater car and helped him pay for a semester of tuition at University of Houston and another semester at Houston Community College. Sharick spent the first month at an aunt’s place and then with the paternal uncle for four months. After that, Sharick was on his own – completely independent in a totally new world.

It was hardly an easy transition. At one point, Sharick found himself sleeping in his car in the heat of the Houston summer. He practically worked around the clock, attending school by day and hardly sleeping three hours a night. Some years he worked the graveyard shift at a local 7-Eleven, where he was held up at gunpoint more times than he can remember. “You know what they say in books and movies, that your life flashes before your eyes when you’re about to die?” asks Sharick. “All of that happened to me. It was like a movie started playing about my life. I knew I was going to die. This guy was holding a gun to my face, and I was calm. I was really calm. I had no sense of panic at all and was just thinking about my family.”

Around this time, Sharick also developed a hacking cough that never seemed to go away; much later, he discovered that the cough was merely a side effect of his severe exhaustion. The cough finally went away after four years when Sharick started his professional life.

“My plan was to be self-sufficient,” reflects

Sharick. “I had an aunt, uncle and cousins all over, and all of them were self-financed. Nobody gave them charity. All of them worked very hard, and I knew I would have to, too, once I got here. Every summer I used to lose 30 pounds because I would be working 100-hour weeks when I wasn’t in school. My mother would get very upset if she saw pictures of me!”

It took Sharick seven years to graduate from college. In that time, he transferred from the University of Houston to Southeastern Oklahoma State University where he completed his Bachelor of Science in Computer Information Systems. He wasn’t particularly drawn to computers at the time; instead, he chose his major with an eye toward survival. He knew computer technology was bound to be crucial to the future economy, and he set himself up for success by absorbing everything he could about the field.

It’s no wonder Sharick’s motto is “All Walls Have Doors,” meaning no matter what life throws

at you, it’s up to you to find a way through. Today, Sharick’s success would likely astonish his younger self. As Founder and CEO of Assurety Consulting & Solutions Inc., Sharick guides a 63-employee business that has helped transform government and industry for more than 18 years.

Assurety began in December 2003 as Sharick’s personal consulting firm, although he quickly began to expand and hire additional employees. His brother, Tariq Mirza, joined Assurety in 2006, and the brothers worked together to grow the company. His first client was IBM, but he diversified his income by contracting his brother to a previous employer, players in the mortgage industry and Emory University. “We were doing all kinds of things,” recalls Sharick. “Then, about eight years ago we decided we need to have a clearer message and strategy about what we do, and we started focusing on the postal,



parcel, ecommerce, and logistics industry. Now, our company leads the data governance for the entire postal and parcel industry. Anybody who's sending anything to your home -- whether it's Amazon, eBay, JC Penney or Bank of America -- those transactions happen through data specifications that Assurety manages today." Assurety's work is so game-changing that the Smithsonian Institution recognized the organization for their transformation of the entire US postal and parcel industry ecosystem. Among other things, Assurety solves complex business and technical problems and provides business consulting, technical and professional services, BI and analytics services to mid-size and large enterprises. Assurety also provides software solutions to automate and streamline workflows, optimize transportation efficiency, provide customer insights, address analytics and profiling, and postage optimization software to the commercial mailing and shipping industry.

As with most start-ups, it hasn't always been smooth-sailing for the firm. Several years back, the company lost a major contract unexpectedly; Assurety had been working sole-source with the USPS when their contracts went to compete. They partnered with IBM, as their work was combined with IBM's tasks, and they lost several tasks on price to a smaller firm. "That was a very stressful time for everyone," remembers Sharick. "But within three months, we were able to find work for 11 of the 13 people who had been on that contract. It was a risk to try to keep them all on our payroll, but I asked them to give me time and promised them I would find work for all of them. We lost money, but we kept nearly all of the employees. And it paid off. Within seven months, we got all of our work back. The small company that won on price could not deliver. So not only did we come back, we grew out of it and doubled the size of the company. Again, all walls have doors, and integrity is critical. My brother Tariq played a key role, and continues to play a key role with his relationships to work with me to win work. And that's why people were willing to help us because we showed goodwill and high integrity and had a legacy of solving their complex problems. People saw that and it has really paid off for us."

At this juncture, Assurety is looking to expand beyond postal logistics and ecommerce work, with an eye toward government contracting

for agencies' logistical needs. "We can solve complex logistics, fraud, marketing and operations problems in any industry. Hopefully, we're going through a rebirth," smiles Sharick.

Sharick comes by his commitment to integrity and hard work honestly. Growing up in Karachi, both of his parents served as role models for him and his younger brother. Sharick's father, Asif Mirza Baber, was a professor of philosophy and political science, and promoted an environment of intellectualism in the home. "I would say one of the biggest things he engrained in us was a lot of quotes from philosophers," reflects Sharick. "One of the biggest that he would repeat often was from Emmanuel Kant: 'There is nothing good in this world but goodwill toward others.'"

Sharick's father was smart, educated, wise, humble and highly respected in the community and was often found in the same starched white kurta-pajama. Before Sharick's birth, his father had the traumatic experience of being imprisoned in China on suspicion of being a CIA agent, and afterward suffered psychological problems including PTSD and schizophrenic episodes. As a young child, Sharick remembers that his father was too ill to work, and instead stayed home with his children. But that never lessened his sons' admiration for him.

"My father helped out the neighbors, the elderly and anyone he could help," Sharick relates. "He was incredibly principled. At one point he was offered a position as Minister of Communications, a position accompanied by a thousand acres of land by the newly elected government of Bhutto (PPP). It was offered to him because, as a student, he had already won two national student union elections on his own in Pakistan. He was one of the key founders of DSF (Democratic Students Federation). He led many changes for the students in the country including student discounts on public transportation and led the movement against the army dictatorship. He always spoke his mind, and they wanted to quiet him. He turned them down."

Those principles were the key lesson Sharick's father passed on to him. One time, Sharick found money on the ground and brought it home. His father walked with Sharick to where he found it and told him to leave it there explaining that the owner of the money would most likely return looking for it once he discovered

it was missing. It wasn't his money which meant it wasn't his to take. The experience stuck with Sharick throughout his life.

As Sharick got older, his father recovered sufficiently to begin teaching again, offering philosophy lessons to adults and returning to university. He went back to school at the age of 60 and earned a law degree which taught Sharick to never give up learning, but to continue to set goals for self-improvement and always look for the next step on both professional and personal levels.

In the meantime, his mother, Fozia Talat, had been the family breadwinner. She was something of an anomaly in that era, a college-educated woman in Pakistan. She had been lucky; her older sisters hadn't been allowed to pursue a higher education, but they advocated for her schooling to their older brothers and parents. After receiving her undergraduate degree, she demonstrated a natural knack for entrepreneurship, opening a school in Sharick's childhood home and charging tuition to neighborhood kids. Sharick attributes his business sense and entrepreneurial spirit to the example set by his mother. Among other things, she taught tailoring and oil painting. She was an accomplished artist, and Sharick considers the two paintings of hers hanging in his house among his most prized possessions.

He also keeps with him some of his father's diaries. His father journaled religiously, keeping a daily diary throughout his life. By the time he passed away, he left behind stacks of his writing about the fascinating life he'd lived. Unfortunately, some of the books were lost during the family's move from Pakistan. Sharick's father happened to pass away during a visit to the US, and his mother decided to stay with him which meant it was several years before Sharick could travel to retrieve his father's belongings from a storage unit. But those that he was able to preserve are priceless artifacts of his father's life.

Sharick grew up in a neighborhood that was largely migrants from India known as PECHS (Pakistan Employees Cooperative Housing Society). The atmosphere was intellectual; most of the residents were highly educated, professional and middle-class Muslims. The family home was always busy and was frequently packed with people. It was a three-story house with renters on the first floor, a teacher at St. Patrick School Master Bruno Lucas, and another Christian family (the

first floor was split into two apartments). His grandparents lived with his parents and brother on the middle floor, and an aunt and cousins on the third floor. The aunt's husband, Sharick's uncle, who was a high-ranking officer in the Air Force had been tragically killed outside the court during a trial in a politically-motivated murder, so the family moved in as was typical in Pakistan at the time. Having so many cousins and extended family around was usual for the time and place, but Sharick feels grateful to have grown up with so many great connections and the influence of his older cousins, many of whom ended up in America, as well. It was like growing up in a free Montessori school system.

"Growing up, our veranda would be full of kids in the afternoon, for my mom's school," smiles Sharick. "She was doing that since I can remember. They would come around 1 or 2 in the afternoon, and stay until 5 p.m. She would help them with homework, tutor them in math, English, science and help with whatever they needed. When she wasn't teaching, she would tailor and sell clothes." Her brothers and a paternal uncle helped out the family financially, too.

As a kid, Sharick loved playing sports with the other neighborhood children. Most of it wasn't formalized; it was simply kicking the soccer ball around. But Sharick had a talent for both soccer and cricket, and went on to play both in school. He also won high jump titles and became a champion table tennis player. To this day, he plays semi-professional table tennis at local clubs, including at a Maryland table tennis club that is ranked No. 1 in America.

Sharick had an enjoyable childhood, but he still knew he wanted to get out of Karachi. As he put it, he needed to find the door in the wall. His desire to come to America drove him to achieve in school, earn high grades and prepare for a move abroad. An older cousin, Imran Khan, visited Karachi during that time. He still lives in San Jose, is a nuclear scientist by profession and works on nuclear physics, astrophysics, cosmology and inner-core geology as a theorist. He was a role model for most of the kids in the family, a super-genius individual. He gave Sharick 1,200 rupees to take a computer science course, and encouraged him to pursue the field.

Despite considering schools in Australia and the UK, Sharick ultimately chose to attend The University of Houston because he knew he could

rely on family in the area as he got on his feet. Still, Sharick was quickly supporting himself on his minimum wage jobs. "It was credit cards and \$5 and \$6/hour jobs that got me through school as an international student," nods Sharick. "I think I lost a lot of my life expectancy during those years!"

The punishing schedule meant it took longer than usual to finish his degree, but he finally graduated in 1997. By then, he'd already been working at Microsoft for two years in Dallas, which meant he regularly commuted between Dallas and Oklahoma. After graduation, he relocated to Roanoke, Virginia, where he accepted a job at Hollins University as a Programmer/Analyst.

Unsurprisingly, he had heard about the opportunity through another cousin, Kamran Khan, who was the CIO there, and mentioned the job opening to him. Sharick looked into the opportunity and decided to apply. "What I liked about Hollins University was that they had the most advanced technology but didn't have personnel to manage it," describes Sharick. "During my two years there I rarely went home on the weekends. Rather, I worked hard and learned everything I could." Within six months, Sharick was promoted to Project Manager because many folks left Hollins in a short window.

After two years in Roanoke, Sharick decided to make a move to Northern Virginia, where he accepted a role at Conquest Systems. He recalls choosing Conquest because, again, they had the most developed data mining technology in the field. There, he met his most important career mentor, Ron Clark. Ron was known for being abrasive and hard to work with, but for some reason the two of them hit it off. Sharick attributes it to his work habit— that of someone who didn't mind being challenged as long as it meant learning—and with what he was taught to respect his elders.

"He beat everybody up," laughs Sharick, describing Ron's conservative and old-school management style. "But unlike most people, I would go to him willing to take his abuse, which I considered golden nuggets. But because I wanted to learn from him he accepted me more than most. I learned things from Ron that I would never learn in school or at work from anyone. He was highly experienced in management, leadership, and soft skills."

Around the time of his move to Northern

Virginia, Sharick also married his wife, Sarah. The marriage was arranged by the couples' families, and the match has turned out to be a happy one. "She's an extremely loyal person," describes Sharick. "She doesn't care about material things, homes, cars; that's not her priority. She is committed to me, our kids and the relationships that are important to her. That comes through every single day, in every single thing she does. Family is a lot more important to both of us than business. I have learned from her that small things and time with kids and family is more important than anything else.

She also supports Sharick's adventurous side. He recalls that on the couple's 15th wedding anniversary, he took Sarah out for a surprise in Ocean City, Maryland. She realized they were heading toward the airport and surmised they were travelling somewhere. As it turned out, Sharick had gotten tickets for them to go skydiving. "They started giving us things to sign, and she asks, 'What's this?!'" laughs Sharick. "Then she realized we're going to jump from a plane. She panicked at first, but then she jumped, and now she says it was the best thing she has ever done. And she wants to do it again. So we're planning to do it again."

Sharick, like his father, stresses the importance of goodwill as a leader. "I like to trust people," he reflects. "I'm more of a hands-off manager. I rely on people to get their jobs done instead of doing their jobs for them. I'm focused on developing systems and routines and giving people the opportunity to learn."

To young people entering the working world today, Sharick advises continual learning. "We die when we stop learning," he emphasizes. "Read a lot of books and find a mentor. The only way to grow is to continue reading books. Find the profession that will continue to interest you 10, 20 or 30 years from now. Never give up on your learning and remember: all walls have doors. If you come up against a wall, create your own door. You should never be stopped by a wall."

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