

**Parliament Hill Panelist:
for the Era 21 Networking Breakfast for Young Canadians**

Michael Bhardwaj

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Good morning everyone.

First off, I'd like to thank Senator Vivienne Poy for inviting me to be on this panel. I'd also like to thank JDEC and the Ottawa Asian Heritage Month Society. It's a great honour to be speaking with all of these young, bright and wide awake faces this morning.

So I do a show called In Town and Out which can be heard every Saturday morning between 6am and 9am on CBC Radio One. Hands up...how many people here sleep through my show?

Well, if you don't know me from there...chances are you may have heard this
WEATHER.

I'm also a weather man, a news reader, an arts reporter and a producer at the station. One of many hats I've worn over the years, which have also included - and I don't mean to brag - field biologist, camp counsellor, environmental educator and ice cream cake decorator.

Now...you may have noticed that I'm Asian. South East Asian. Well...South-East Asian-Canadian, right? And when it comes to Asian-Canadian, being an ice cream cake decorator is far from where you're supposed to be.

So..hands up, how many people here want to be a doctor, lawyer or engineer?

Okay...hands up, how many people here have parents who want them to become a doctor, lawyer or engineer?

Welcome to my club.

Because that has been the expectation hanging over my head for the past 31 years, more or less.

So a brief backgrounder....my parents knew each other for about three weeks before they were hitched. Such is the reality of arranged marriages in India in the early 1970s.

They didn't stick around for very long, though.

Suman and Yash Paul Bhardwaj immigrated to Canada a few months after getting married, found jobs and settled in glorious, wonderful, beautiful Pickering, Ontario.

A few years later, along came my older sister, Ella who we don't need to talk about this morning.

And then a couple of years after that...voila. Me. And that's all we really need to talk about this morning, right?

One of the stories that my mom loves to tell is that when my Dad first saw me all swaddled up in one of those incubator things, he said..."**THAT IS MY SON! HE IS GOING TO MAKE ME A MILLIONAIRE!**"

And look at me now. Not so much a millionaire at all.

Which is fine, I think. I mean, I'd happily have millions of dollars if anyone was willing to offer, but I'm not going to sweat it.

But the reason he was saying such a thing is from the moment I was born, there was an expectation hanging over my head.

The expectation to work hard, succeed by becoming a doctor, marry a beautiful and preferably rich girl, have more successful kids and then take care of my parents as they aged.

In other words, my life was etched out before I even had a chance to weigh in with my own thoughts or opinions or ideas.

Now, in a place like India such ideas are common and most kids fall into line and march according to their parents orders.

But the rules changed when my parents came here.

And according to this new game, you could cash in on the privileges of living in a free and fair and diverse society.

But in return you had to live a life that was open to - and tolerant of - freedom and diversity.

Which means that you can hope your kid becomes a doctor, lawyer or engineer...but ultimately they will grow up and have a hand in their own destiny.

I can tell you ... this wasn't an easy hill to climb.

There were many fights, many harsh words and many severe ultimatums delivered when it was clear that I wasn't going to follow their idea of success.

Now...I don't want to sound like too much of a brat here. Because all of our parents care about us and want to see us do well.

And I think that is especially true of immigrant parents who had to make sacrifices so that their kids could live a better life.

They had to work long hours and midnight shifts.

They had to pinch pennies for their own needs or desires so I could have a Nintendo.

They had to do all of these things so that the playing field was even for their kids in this new country.

But when their kids are on that field, I think it's important to recognize that the field is wide...that there are a lot of options, a lot of choices and a lot of outcomes that would suit us just fine.

And that's where the diversity side of things kicks in for me.

I marched along to the doctor tune until second year university. I was enrolled in the life sciences program at Queen's, which is a fancy way of saying pre-med.

But then I took a genetics course, and things tilted all of a sudden.

I was fascinated by this field, fascinated by the idea that the combination of environment, genetics and chance offered up all of the diversity we see around us today and through time past.

So I switched over to biology, specialized in plant genetics and in my fourth year published an article in the American Journal of Botany called "Functional Analysis of Synchronous Dichogamy in Flowering Rush (*Butomus Umbellatus*)"

I know...your eyes are glazing over.

Mine too. Because that's about the time that I realized I was a really bad biologist.

So I bailed.

I went to Australia for a year where I worked in field biology, studying birds up in the rainforest on the north east coast. I then drove across the country for a few months and spent some time working in the national parks system there.

When I came back though, I had a hard time figuring out what I was going to do next.

Because, that heavy expectation to succeed was still hanging over my head, and I didn't want to disappoint my parents.

But by now, it was pretty much confirmed that I wasn't going to be a doctor or a biologist.

So what next?

Well...I happened to go to a lecture delivered by Bob MacDonald...the Quirks and Quarks guy. And before he dove into his spiel about carbon emissions and green house gases, he talked about this new program in the school of journalism at Carleton University that focused in on science journalism.

And that is when the light bulb went off.

I knew that I wanted to be in a job where I could help communicate the complexities and marvels of science and medicine to the broader public.

I sailed through the Masters program doing all the science stories I could and then landed with an internship at CBC Radio here in Ottawa.

And I haven't looked back since.

What I mean by that, is I've finally found the one thing I know I'm meant to do. I'm meant to tell stories, share experiences and communicate the wide variety of culture that we have in this region.

Suddenly, it all made sense. It all fit.

But I would have never found this one thing had I not tried out - and FAILED - at a bunch of different things. Doctor, environmental educator, cake decorator.

I needed to suck at all of those things so that I could shine where I am.

But the thing is...I'm still not a doctor, lawyer or engineer.

But by now, I know my parents are proud of me.

Because they have seen just how much harder it has been to figure out my own path, my own identity and my own place in this country.

Much harder than it ever was for them growing up in a country where your fate and destiny were decided before you were born.

And it's because I tried and failed and tried and sucked and tried again...that they can say they've got a fair and free and diverse and successful kid.

And that means the world to them.

But I'll be honest...it helps that I have my own postcard now.

Because it means they can write to all of their siblings and nieces and nephews in India to brag about how they've got the STAR in the family. So take that!

So...to boil it all down for you guys here today.

I know you've got a huge amount of pressure on your shoulders.

I know your parents expect the world of you because you are everything they wish they could have become.

And I know they want to see you become a successful doctor or lawyer or engineer or whatever.

But I know this as well: you've got it in you to figure it out for yourself.

There is a world of opportunity and diversity in this country that is yours for the taking.

As long as you're willing to work hard - stumble - pick yourself up - and make it.

That's what I did...and now I've got a postcard!