

BANKING MATTERS

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BEHIND THE FRONTLINES

An inside perspective of one banker's heroic efforts to support his business customers

By Tom Unger, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA

Taking a look behind the frontlines of the banking teams who processed thousands of Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans, which the Small Business Administration rolled out in April, reveals stories of heroes of a different kind.

Businessman **Syed Ahmad** knew he needed help. Because of the pandemic, revenues dropped drastically at his 11 restaurants in Portland and his three in Dallas, Texas. Some of his 300 employees stopped showing up every day for work. Syed had no choice but to shutter some of his restaurants.

Luckily, Syed had a hero come to his rescue by the name of **Monald Sharma**, a Commercial Banking relationship manager at U.S. Bank in downtown Portland. Syed reached out to Monald and the two men worked to submit a PPP loan application in April.

"Monald made it easy for us," said Syed. "Whenever I needed a question answered, he was very helpful to me and the people in my office."

The PPP application was successful. Syed was able to reopen his restaurants. He was one of many U.S. Bank customers Monald initially helped obtain PPP funds.

32 Straight Hours

Behind the scenes, Monald had his own story of weathering the pandemic under extenuating circumstances. His wife, **Larissa**, works as an internal medicine doctor at St. Vincent, and they have two young children at home.

Monald had to balance homeschooling his children while working from home and processing high volumes of applications under extremely tight deadlines so that as many small businesses as possible could keep their doors open.

Larissa provided direct care to coronavirus patients, working 12- to 16-hour shifts. This required her to enter their house through a separate entrance after work every night and go through a rigorous cleaning process.

Despite the unique circumstances at home, Monald was tireless, working nights and weekends. At one point he stayed up 32 straight hours to submit PPP applications for his clients. At the end of the 32 hours, he had finished serving the PPP loan needs of all his customers and snuck in a four-hour nap.

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◀ *Monald and his family*

Shortly after alerting his manager that he was going to take a short break to nap, he was contacted by the national team leading PPP at U.S. Bank, tasked with submitting the last batch of applications for U.S. Bank customers in other parts of the nation. The quality and volume of his work had clearly not gone unnoticed.

"We all thought it would be a few hours until he responded since he was taking a much-needed break to rest, but he replied right away and jumped right back in," said U.S. Bank Market President **Stacey Dodson**.

There was a sense of urgency as the SBA was running low on PPP funds in the first round of funding.

"It was crunch time. The window was going to close pretty soon," Stacey said.

The clients' needs inspired Monald to work so hard on their behalf, he said. "These are employees. They have families. That's what really kept me going. I wanted to stay up as long as my body would allow me," said Monald.

"He simply did not give up," said Stacey.

When Stacey asked Monald where he was able to find the energy to keep working, he told her, "Clients are looking to us for an answer, and all we can offer is some hope. This is us trying to provide hope to all these people. If a PPP loan is what's going to provide hope to this business owner, then I'll do everything in my power to get it done."

To understand the foundation of Monald's work ethic, it helps to look at his roots.

Humble Beginnings

Monald's ancestors are from northern India but the family resettled on Fiji, an island country in the South Pacific Ocean. The family lived there for five generations before he was born.

Monald's father, **Babu Ram Sharma**, continued the family tradition of working as a sugar cane farmer. The family lived in a small, rural village of about 150 people.

"My upbringing was no running water, no electricity. Anywhere we needed to go – we had to walk. It was typical Third World country life with limited resources, if any," said Monald.

The family members used kerosene lamps to light their house, which had a tin roof, tin walls and concrete floors. They drew their water from a well and cooked their meals outdoors.

School was three miles away, meaning Monald and his two older brothers would walk six miles a day to get to and from school.

One of Monald's uncles, a diesel mechanic, had moved to Beaverton in 1970 where he married and settled down. The uncle urged his two brothers and sister to bring their families to America where life was better.

At age 15, Monald moved to Beaverton in 1999 with his parents and brothers (the other two families also relocated to America).

"We took the plunge. We started all over again," said Monald.

After seeing how hard his father worked as a farmer, Monald didn't mind leaving behind his homeland, school, friends and culture.

"At 15 years old, all you think about is a better future for yourself and your family," he said. "It was a pretty easy decision. We wanted a better life. I was never against the move."

A New Life

Despite no formal education, Monald's parents found employment. His father worked in hospitality at a Beaverton hotel (he died from a heart attack in 2010 at age 50).

His mother, **Manju Sharma**, got a job as a housekeeper at St. Vincent Hospital in Portland (she now works as a housekeeper at Emanuel Hospital in Portland).

Monald enrolled at Beaverton High School but spoke little English at that point.

"I was good at school. I enjoyed learning and being competitive. So I did well, but the language barrier was always there," he recalled.

While still in high school, Sharma worked at the same hotel as his dad and then landed an internship at Washington Mutual.

"I thought it would be cool to leave school early and work at a branch inside Fred Meyer," he said. "I was a teller throughout high school."

Monald enrolled at Portland State University. He continued working while in college and became a personal banker. Washington Mutual collapsed in 2008 and JPMorgan Chase purchased its assets.

Starting A Family

Monald graduated from PSU in 2009 with a Bachelor of Science degree and became a business banker at Chase.

"Life took off from there," he said.

Monald had met his future wife, Larissa, while both were participating in the Washington Mutual intern program. Her parents had immigrated from the Soviet Union, but she was born in Portland. They married in 2011.

While Monald continued his career in banking, Larissa studied medicine. She enrolled in a medical school in Omaha, prompting a move by the young couple and their then six-month-old daughter to Nebraska in 2013.

Chase didn't have any locations in Omaha, so Monald joined Wells Fargo. He worked in a Business Banking business development role there for two and a half years.

Later, his former Wells Fargo manager successfully recruited Monald to take a Commercial Banking job at U.S. Bank in Omaha.

Coming Home

Monald and Larissa had planned to return to Portland one day. The return was facilitated when Larissa landed a residency at Providence St. Vincent Medical Center in Portland in 2017. Monald felt strongly about staying with U.S. Bank and inquired about open positions in Portland. That's how Stacey and **Greg Rickman**, U.S. Bank Oregon Commercial Banking Division manager, came to meet Monald.

"I heard that Monald was a dynamic, smart, accomplished young banker with a keen ability to connect on a human level and that we would be lucky to have him on our team," said Stacey, who interviewed Monald and decided very quickly he would make a great addition to the Portland commercial banking team.

It didn't take long for Monald's performance to impress his Oregon clients and coworkers.

"Monald is incredibly generous with his time for his coworkers, clients and management, very much a team player," said Greg, adding that he is committed to customer service, anticipates needs and proactively communicates with customers.

"It is sincerely a pleasure to have him on my team. He really exemplifies the characteristics we're looking for in our employees," said Greg.

Stacey described Monald as a person of great character whose humility and grace draw in others.

"There's not an ounce of arrogance in him. He quietly goes about his business and takes care of things," said Stacey. "Yet when we

get our team together and share how we're getting things done, when he speaks up everyone in the room listens. He has wisdom to share. He has a thoughtful, measured approach to our business. People listen and learn from him."

"He has a genuine caring heart. He puts the client central to everything he's doing. He listens. He cares. He looks to deliver the very best ideas to help the client deal with the issues they're facing. He's a person who spends more time listening than talking. I think that's a rare trait these days ... I hope someday he has my job. I think that would be awesome."

Monald downplayed his efforts during the first two phases of the PPP program.

"I had an opportunity to help business owners. I had energy and drive and used it for the right cause," he said. "It was a great success for the bank as a whole. That felt good. I felt like I played my part."

A Family of Heroes

The pandemic has revealed other members of Monald's family as heroes. In addition to his wife working with virus patients in the hospital, his mother volunteers to work extra hours to clean rooms on hospital floors that housed virus patients.

"She didn't shy away. I was really proud of her for doing that," he said.

He was also inspired by his wife's perseverance during what has been a particularly challenging time for healthcare workers.

"My wife has worked hard all her life, especially during this time. She went above and beyond in helping her patients. Knowing she has family at home, she managed through that very well," he said.

Larissa also worked on a clinic project that involved screening for social determinants of health and connecting patients to resources.

"This was a three-year project addressing patients' needs beyond immediate medical care, that provides for the social factors that impact patients' whole health," said Monald.

Continues to Impress

Monald's customer, Syed, continues to also be impressed by Monald.

"Whenever we have an issue, he's always there to help us out," Syed said. "His customer service is very good. The guy is available any time, after hours and on weekends. It's very rare to find that. I hope U.S. Bank can hire more people like Monald who are thoroughly customer-driven. He treats them like a guest and is always there for them. If he doesn't have an answer, he will get it for you."

"I love that guy very much and all my team does also," Syed added. "If he can't do something for you, he will tell you. He doesn't waste your time. He doesn't give you false hope for anything. But if he can do something, he will go for it more than 100%." ■

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