

Lokvani Talks To Gauri Chandana

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Gauri Chandna serves as founder and CEO of ATFS and is responsible for all aspects of planning, operations and management. Gauri started ATFS out of her passion to provide a unique service to the community. Her experience and knowledge comes from her various project management assignments that she had while working as a Consultant in software companies. Leveraging her engineering background, Gauri has been instrumental in providing knowledge management, ERP, and e-business solutions to her clients. Building quality solutions and training people on any new releases have both been her strengths. Along the way she discovered that her passion has been teaching and motivating people.

Along with building business solutions, she has managed computer learning centers in her past. Gauri's pleasant personality and analyzing capabilities blend very well in providing a relaxed yet growth-oriented environment to kids. Her positive enthusiasm has now been instrumental in taking this venture beyond her own expectations.

In addition to Aadhaarshila, Gauri is very actively involved in several community activities targeted towards betterment of the next generation.

She talked to Lokvani about her life, her passion for teaching and shared her insights on creating the right environment for children to thrive

What motivated you to quit a career in the software business especially when you were successful and moving up the career ladder?

I think it was a decision motivated by work-life-balance issues. I was working as a project manager in a company called "Database Publishing". I was very good at what I did. At a time when the company was going through lay-offs, I was getting promotions. Unfortunately to be successful I had to put in long hours. My husband also has a very busy career.

After my son was born, like other working couples, we sent him to daycare and at times my parents were here to take care of him. But there came a time when the stress of the travel and work was getting so much that I felt I was missing out on life. I also felt I was not spending enough time with my son. On Dec 31st 2001 (New Year's Eve) I made a decision to quit my job. My family was very surprised that I took this step since I was really very into my career. We actually cancelled our New Year's Eve party to talk about my decision. It was the best thing I did. By God's grace things have turned out well.

What motivated you to enter the tutoring business?

As a child I did not enjoy math very much. When I was in tenth grade, I got a tutor for math and she was personally responsible for not only improving my math skills but also improving my study habits and improving my confidence. That experience taught me that given the right teacher, students can learn and enjoy different subjects and really grow. After I quit my job, as I was wondering what to do next, the idea of tutoring really appealed to me. I felt I could make a difference in children's lives. I started with tutoring the son of a friend. I


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enjoyed it so much that I decided to start Aadhaarshila – The Foundation Stone (ATFS).

ATFS has grown since that first student. Could you describe the various programs you offer?

We started ATFS in my basement. It has grown so much in the past three years that we now have a new building. We hope to move into the new building in July. We provide after school homework help programs, accelerated learning programs for talented students, private one-on-one tutoring and summer camps. We work with K-12 students. We provide training in math science and language arts. We also have remote learning programs. We have contests that motivate children to work hard and reward them for the effort.

How would you describe the ATFS philosophy?

We at ATFS believe a well set foundation stone makes a strong house. Translated to education - A good understanding of each subject is the foundation that builds a strong base to get good grades, succeed in tests and make your dreams come true. But our goal is not just to improve understanding of subjects but to create skills that could be useful for the rest of your life.

Could you describe the teaching methodology that you use?

Personalized training is at the core of our teaching. When we take on a new student, we assess the student's current situation. We work with the student and parents to understand their goals. We then recommend the best fit program. Some students are struggling with their current work. Others would like new challenges. It is our goal to provide individualized instructions to suit the needs of each student.

How do you measure success?

We are constantly monitoring progress. Success to me is to make sure that the child is very motivated to learn. I also want to see that they are putting in the effort. If these two things happen, grades improve automatically. I never think of grades as an end goal in itself. I would like the child to have good study habits. I would like them to have an urge to succeed in life.

How does your program compare to other programs like Kumon?

Like Kumon we also have a structure to our teaching. But unlike many other programs like Kumon we have a lot of flexibility built into our structure that allows for personalization of our curriculum. We believe this is key to success.

We try to understand the student and provide different kinds of training depending on the student. For example in math often if you see only the four math operations, you may not be able to easily apply it to word problems. We make sure that children see different kinds of problems and different approaches to solving the problem. We work very hard to make sure the child is not bored.

Your training and experience is in engineering and project management. How did you gain experience to run a tutoring center?

I started with math tutoring. I knew the content but I had to work hard to understand the curriculum that is taught in schools. In the beginning I used to go to the library and prepare for nearly five hours for a two hour class. I try to learn as much as I can about the methods used in schools to teach. Since this

is my passion, it is easy to learn.

I treat every child as a project and techniques used in the industry to ensure success for projects came in handy to ensure the child's success. My industry experience also came in very handy to run the ATFS business.

It has been a learning experience and I have loved every minute of it.

It seems that you are now busier running ATFS than you were in your previous career. Has the work-life balance improved considerably?

I do work very hard. But two things have happened. One, I am doing something that I feel very passionate about which is working with children and creating a good environment for them to study and grow. I consider this a community service. Second, my time is under my control. I am able to be with my son a lot. I do not have any commute time. My son is also meeting very talented children, which is a very positive thing for him. So even though I am working hard, I am enjoying every moment and I feel that I do have the right work-life balance. I feel I am able to be a good mother to my son.

Based on your experience teaching, what advice do you have for Indian American parents?

Parents need to understand that there is a culture gap between the parents and kids. They need to first understand who they are as individuals. They need to be very confident about their own abilities and be very proud of their own accomplishments.

They then need to put some effort to understand their child. Parents need to speak to children in a congenial manner so that children really understand their policies and expectations. It is important that the children understand that what the parents are saying is not just for the sake of establishing authority but rather for the benefit of the child. Parents should be very proud of their children and make sure their child knows it.

Parents must evaluate Indian and American values and tradition. They must put some thought into what blend of values and traditions they would like to adopt and clearly articulate it to your child.

What advice do you have for women who may be going through the stress that you went through while working out the work-life balance?

I strongly believe that everyone should enjoy every moment of their life. Working on things that we enjoy and believe in can create that enjoyment. Often we are focused on accumulating wealth. I believe that while the end is important the process to get there is more important. If we do not enjoy the path, life can be stressful and painful. Many may not have the option to quit their job even if they hate it. But if people can quit things they do not like and move into areas they enjoy, life will be a joy.

I think it is important to try to make every single day a rewarding experience. If the individual is happy, there is happiness in the family. If there is happiness in the family there is happiness in the society.

I would also recommend that one should try to help others in society for it is a very rewarding experience.

Lokvani wishes you the best of luck in all your endeavours.

Thank you.

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