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Profile / Pradnya Desh

Trading Places; Breaking the Mold

By **Cynthia Flash**

Pradnya Desh is a true woman of influence — locally, nationally and internationally. Over the past 17 years, Desh has impacted global and national trade and has helped local companies succeed in making their mark on the world.

From her office overlooking evergreen trees in suburban Bellevue, it may be difficult to imagine that Desh was once a CIA analyst. While she didn't work as a spy, she spent years analyzing the economic forces at work in foreign countries to help high-level U.S. government officials (from Cabinet members to presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush) understand how this economic data would impact the world. In this role, she helped explain and shape U.S. trade policy.

Then terrorists struck on Sept. 11, 2001. Based at CIA headquarters in Washington, D.C., Desh experienced the horror of those dark days in person. The day of the attack she and her team were evacuated out of the CIA for fear that the building could be a target. The next day she and her co-workers worked 24/7 monitoring the terrorist threat around the world, reporting and making recommendations to the director every few hours.

Their focus eventually shifted away from international trade to instead concentrate on the economy of Iraq. As Congress and President Bush debated whether to invade, Desh served on the team of CIA economic analysts who reviewed the economic impacts of such a decision.

Eventually, Desh tired of working on questions surrounding the war and saw an opportunity to change

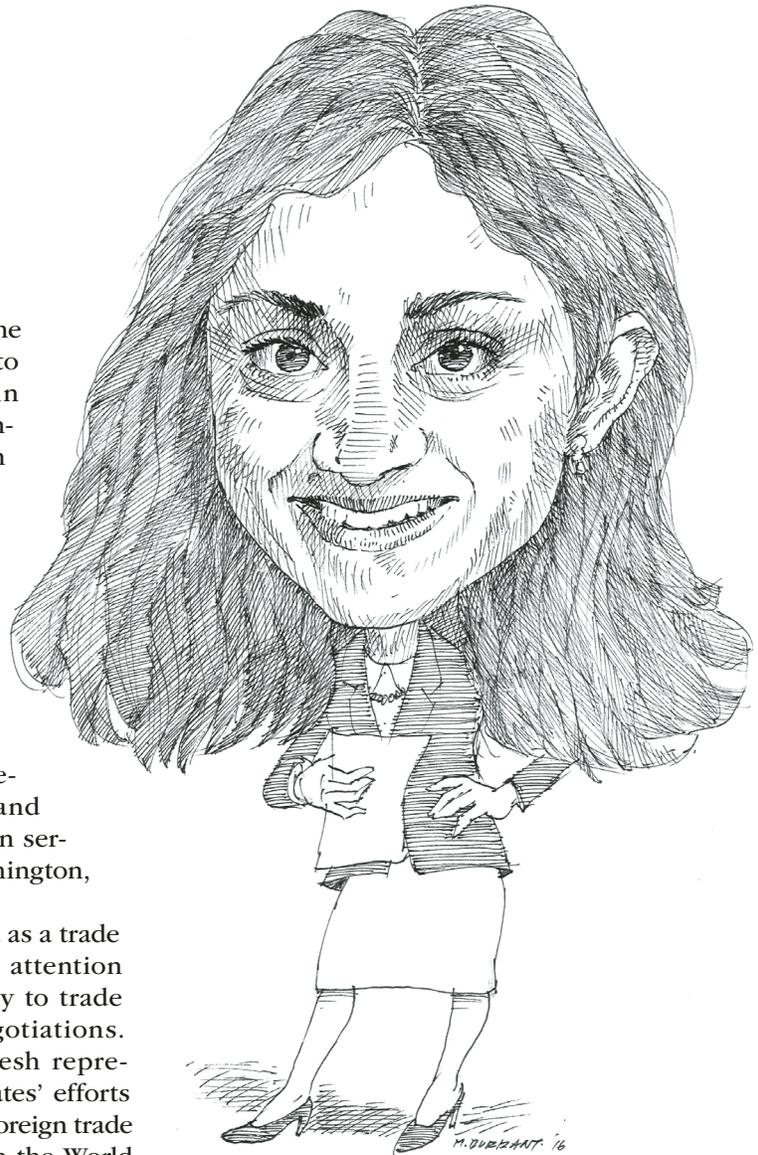
tacks. As a citizen of the world, Desh is able to communicate well in French, Marathi, Spanish and Russian, in addition to her native English. While attending law school at The Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law, she took the challenging foreign service exam and became a U.S. State Department diplomat and member of the foreign service stationed in Washington, D.C., and in Geneva.

There she worked as a trade attaché, turning her attention from economic policy to trade regulations and negotiations. While in Geneva, Desh represented the United States' efforts to influence U.S. and foreign trade policies, working with the World Trade Organization (WTO) and United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in discussions with foreign government officials to help integrate developing countries into the world trading system.

She worked with Peter Allgeier, U.S. ambassador to the WTO, to revamp trade-related financial and technical assistance to the least developed countries. She also represented the U.S. in trade policy reviews, which are comprehensive reviews of each WTO member's trade policies and

compliance with WTO rules.

"Even more than the superior quality of her analytical and written work, I most appreciated Pradnya's attitude," Allgeier wrote. "She was unfailingly upbeat, even in the face of very demanding work requirements. She was totally reliable in meeting deadlines with high quality work while handling multiple tasks. She always had a 'can do' response to requests, even when a matter was new to her. She was



universally liked and respected by her colleagues in the U.S. Mission and in the other WTO delegations. It was a joy to work with her.”

After four years with the State Department, Desh became pregnant with her third child. She told her husband that it was his turn to put his career first. He ended up with job offers at both Microsoft and Amazon. And with those offers in hand, the family moved to the Puget Sound region, somewhere neither Desh nor her husband had ever been before.

In a new place with three children at home, Desh decided it was time to get back to work. Rather than looking for work at a large established firm, she instead dove right into the private legal profession. She founded Desh International & Business Law in Bellevue in 2011 as a way to bring her international government and business experience to companies.

As managing partner, Desh has grown the company to 10 employees, including nine attorneys who advise companies on business/corporate law, including contracts, employment, regulatory matters, corporate governance, litigation, immigration, intellectual property, international business, and international trade. She and her team help the community by assisting startup to mid-sized companies with legal services.

Having witnessed the impact that trade can have on nations, Desh’s goal with her firm is to work with companies that aspire to change the world. She and her team are doing just that by helping clients navigate the global marketplace in areas of trade, international transactions and arbitration, negotiations, and entering new markets.

Desh said she believes in the ability of the market to bring about positive results with solid legal planning, clear goals and effective business practices. As a diplomat and legal adviser to companies, she has focused her career on promoting economic development by helping companies grow. On behalf of clients, she has advised on a range of international trade and business matters, including distribution in China, customs matters in India, anti-competitive practices in Korea, and medical device filing in Brazil.

Desh grew up in Dublin, Georgia, a small town where her parents settled after they were recruited to the United States from India as young physicians. As an Indian woman, Desh has broken the mold of most law firms,

building a woman-owned, diverse firm in an industry traditionally dominated by white men.

The firm has grown steadily with year-over-year revenue doubling. Desh has instituted a culture of helping her team members improve themselves so that they can in turn help more people. She leads by example and inspires everyone in the firm to work hard while remaining upbeat and positive every day.

“She’s very inspirational. She’s very creative, always trying to raise the profile of the firm and to think of ways to help us as attorneys and individuals,” said Candace Wilkerson, property law senior counsel at Desh. “She wants to make this the best firm possible and believes in the model of helping our firm save the world.”

Desh is creative and charismatic. The entire firm this year participated in a Tough Mudder obstacle course competition in Whistler, B.C., not only pushing the lawyers out of their suits and ties, but out of their comfort zones as well. “She’s extremely personable and well liked and can accomplish things that more abrasive people may not be able to do,” Wilkerson said. “And she’s tremendously positive all the time.”

Led by Desh, the firm embodies a belief that economic growth and development often result from business collaboration and trade between countries. Desh and her team seek to expand opportunities for people worldwide by actively participating in the liberalization of international markets and by helping businesses succeed in the global marketplace.

Her vast experience and professional reputation serve as inspiration in the industry. She collaborates with cutting-edge companies that want to improve the world, helping them achieve their goals. She is a frequent speaker at various conferences and events around the region, selflessly sharing her knowledge and inspiring others in the industry.

In September 2015, Desh joined Gov. Jay Inslee’s nine-day trade mission to Korea and Japan, where she and other delegates met with top-level business and government leaders to deepen economic ties between Washington and the two countries. The group worked to promote trade and collaborate on areas including aerospace, wine, emergency preparedness and climate change.

Three years earlier, Desh had joined Gov. Christine Gregoire’s trade mission to India and Korea as well. This is proof

of her high standing in the areas of international trade and business, and demonstrates her world view regarding the power of business to promote cooperation and respect between people and cultures.

Although she has lived in the Pacific Northwest for only eight years, Desh has immersed herself in the community, taking on leadership roles that extend beyond the firm. Part of the culture of the firm is to help communities grow and thrive locally and internationally.

Desh also encourages her team to volunteer at the decision-making and service-provider levels of organizations. The firm works on a pro bono basis at local legal clinics for low-income clients, covering a wide range of matters. Firm members tutor at-risk students and many of the attorneys serve on law school alumni committees and nonprofit boards.

Personally, Desh contributes to numerous philanthropic organizations, including serving as a member of the boards of the World Trade Center Tacoma, the Washington Council on International Trade, and Music Works Northwest, as well as previously serving as president of the Seattle Chapter of Upaya Social Ventures. She is active in her church, Bellevue First Presbyterian, and in her children’s schools.

She has a huge heart and is always willing to help. She is often approached by parents in the community who want her to inspire their children with her leadership and experience. This demonstrates her reputation as a mentor in the community, which looks to her for inspiration. She leads through example, with charisma that makes others want to follow in her footsteps and improve themselves. She also has a wealth of experience and knowledge that she shares with others freely.

Pradnya Desh simply inspires those she works with, taking the time to offer advice and help them build their practice areas and clients. She also isn’t afraid to help with personal matters. And every summer she organizes a team-building retreat for the firm.

“She’s very dedicated to helping us find the best methods to help all of us thrive,” Wilkerson said. “A lot of people would do that for the sake of making as much money as possible, but she truly seems to care about the people she works with.” ■

Cynthia Flash owns Flash Media Services, a media consulting firm in Bellevue. Desh International & Business Law is her client.