

# American Dream

It took him almost a decade to figure out the elusive secret of drycleaning, but Ray Rangwala, owner of The Cleaning Store in Glendale, CA, eventually discovered it.

"The secret to drycleaning is that there is no secret," he said. "You start off using the cleanest solvent. You hire the best people. Then, you add a lot of good old-fashioned elbow grease, along with all of your skills. Charge a fair price for your service. Then, you inspect and reinspect each garment thoroughly. Lastly, make sure that you do this with pride."

While it sounds simple enough to him now, there was a time when Ray strongly believed that money couldn't be made in the drycleaning industry, despite what he was told almost 17 years ago when he bought The Cleaning Store with his father.

"The salesman told us you put the clothes in the machine, take them out, and the dollars would come out along with the clothes. The money would flow, basically," he laughed.

Money certainly never flowed for the Rangwala family in their hometown of Bombay, India. "India is a poor country so you have to work hard just to stay in the same place," Ray recalled. "At the time, I didn't know how bad it was so it didn't really affect me much."

At a young age, Ray learned English in school and by reading *Reader's Digest* magazines. Ray's father, a lifelong painting contractor with his own business, always hoped his son would have a future outside of India.

The little extra money that the family managed to save was spent on traveling to other countries. Ray first experienced America when he was eleven. He visited Boston for six weeks and was immediately fascinated.

When he was 17, Ray and his brother, Bill, moved to America, intending to save enough money to bring their parents over someday. Ray attended college in Bethlehem, PA, and later studied at Penn State University.

"I didn't know what I was going to do with my life," he recalled. "I was going to college and none of those things interested me. The thing that fascinated me the most was marketing."

Though Ray never graduated, he gained knowledge that would be useful to him later in life. He soon grew tired of Pennsylvania's cold weather, so he and his brother headed to California hoping to make their fortunes there.

Ray enrolled in marketing classes at California State University while he spent his evenings holding down several jobs, including one for a Safeway grocery store where he met Cindy, his wife of 17 years. "She was a cashier and I was a box boy," he said.

In their spare time, Ray and Bill investigated business opportunities. "We were looking for a business to get my parents involved in because my dad was getting sick and there was nobody to take care of my parents because me and my brother were both here," Ray explained. "So, it was better that my parents come here. And, you know, all of us had the American Dream."

After Ray and Bill found a turn-key drycleaning plant in 1995, Ray's parents moved to America. Originally, Ray only intended on helping his father long enough for him to get the business running smoothly. Things didn't work out that way; the business barely ran at all.

Shortly after earning his operator's license, Ray still felt that he needed more experience. He didn't feel ready, but he didn't have a choice. "Suddenly, everybody was looking at me saying, 'What do we do?'" Ray said. "I was spotting the clothes and damaging them left and right. I didn't know when to stop. It was trial and error. I did it the hard way, basically, writing checks every time I made a mistake."

working long 12-hour days with no relief in sight. "If say, ten years ago you called me and asked what kind of work I did, I'd be adamant about telling you how good of a job I was doing," he said. "Thinking about what I used to do then, I know I was doing a horrible job, but nobody could tell me otherwise."

The first simple change that Ray implemented in his plant was some inexpensive cleaning and remodeling. "My store started looking prettier, and, automatically, my business went up," he said.

Next, Ray used better soap and started a marketing program that did not use coupons. He also offered his

Now that his business is doing well, Ray has drastically cut back on his hours to enable him to pursue other interests. In addition to being an active CCA member, he serves on the board of directors for the Greater Los Angeles Dry Cleaners Association.

He is also active in several charitable projects. Most notably, he has directed many youth projects for the Glendale Rotary Club. "Most of my business comes from my community," he said. "I love to give back to it."

One of the group's pet projects is helping Estado 29, an orphanage in Mexico which houses 55 children. Most recently, Ray began looking for a used washer and dryer to meet the

Web site address:  
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# Ray Rangwala

Ray's early business philosophy was to save costs no matter what. He and his father bought cheap soap and equipment and offered discount dollar drycleaning to save customers money.

"Back home, one Indian rupee is like a dollar, except right now it's almost worth \$45 or something," Ray said. "We worked hard, but for us, a dollar was so important that we did everything at the lowest dollar level. We thought, 'How can you charge \$2?' because \$2 meant a lot of money to us. We were penny wise and pound foolish."

For the Rangwalas, the American Dream had become an American Nightmare. Ray worked constantly, but had no money to show for it. For ten years, the family struggled just to keep the business open.

Unfortunately, the daily stress began to take its toll. "My dad had a major heart attack, probably caused by not being able to meet payroll and worrying," Ray said. "He had a quadruple bypass."

Shortly after, Ray's parents turned the business over to him and left to sell their apartment in India in 1997. They both believed that money could not be made in the drycleaning industry, but they wanted Ray to prove them wrong.

Looking back, it's much easier for Ray to see the problem. "In retrospect, I was not doing a great job. I was doing a decent job of putting my heart into it, but putting your heart into it when you don't know what you're doing doesn't help," he said.

At the time, the problem was almost impossible for Ray to see while he was

customers a six-part promise, which included: always using pure distilled solvent; keeping clothes odor-free; being environmentally responsible; pre-spotting each and every garment; no broken buttons; and all clothes will be ready on time.

Lastly, Ray asked himself a tough question: how could he do a better job of cleaning clothes without raising his prices? The answer turned out to be fairly simple.

"I knew my answer was to charge more and do a perfect job rather than charge less and do a lousy job. I started competing on quality rather than on price because the price conscious people were only loyal to the price," he said.

Ray's new strategy worked perfectly. "From that day, when my parents went to India, until today, business has gone up at least 15-20% every year," he added.

During that time, The Cleaning Store was recognized by the California Cleaners Association in 2001-2002 as the "Drycleaner of the Year" in the state of California. The plant also won "Glendale's Best Cleaners" awards in 2000, 2001 and 2002 in annual readers' polls taken by the *Glendale News Press*.

Ray's store, which cleans costumes for the Pasadena Shakespeare Company, the Noise Within and the Glendale Center Theater, has certainly come a long way over the years. As much as he enjoys having esteemed customers and earning public recognition, the real reward for Ray has been to show his parents that the drycleaning business can be successful.

orphanage's cleaning needs. He finds the work very rewarding. "If I ever were to retire from this business, I'm going to run an orphanage," he said.

Ray and Cindy have adopted an orphan of their own; their daughter Sarah is seven. The couple has also raised Cindy's son, Russell. He is now a U.S. Marine.

The demands of parenting haven't been easy, especially since Cindy works as a detective on assault cases for the L.A.P.D. "She doesn't help me in collecting the damn checks when they bounce," Ray joked.

Having more time to raise Sarah has made Ray realize just how much his life has changed in the past five years. "It was tough with Russell because I was working 12 hours a day so I could never raise him the way I'm raising my daughter now," he said. "All the things I'm doing with her, I never did with my son because I was too busy working."

"I can now say that drycleaning is a great business," he continued. "At one time, it was horrible because I was competing on price and it was miserable because I couldn't stand out from the crowd. I hate to see other people going in the same boat. I was there once, too."

Now, Ray hopes that he can help other cleaners in a similar situation who have yet to learn that there is no secret to drycleaning. "It's not easy, but I know how to do it. All you have to do is do a great job and the customers will line up outside the door," he explained. "You have to work hard, charge a decent price and do it right. It's not a secret. It's a given."