

Knock on wood

Pakistani immigrants Muhammad and Shaheen Amir had some bad luck as young entrepreneurs in Vancouver. But they've climbed to the top of B.C.'s lumber industry.

By Margaret Jetelina

If Muhammad Amir had been asked what the difference between softwood and hardwood was when he first arrived in Vancouver, he would have shrugged. "I didn't even know the difference between a spruce, a pine and a fir," Amir says with a chuckle.

It seems odd then that the Pakistani immigrant would end up in B.C.'s lumber industry after emigrating from Dubai, United Arab Emirates. "The steamship line I was working for in Dubai carried lumber from British Columbia into the Middle East. That was the connection I had [to the in-

times, but he never stopped reaching for that next toehold.

In his first couple of days in Vancouver, he experienced his first blow. He had been expecting to get a job with the Vancouver office of

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started a lumber export business on the side in 1990. "I still had a lot of connections in the Middle East and we started exporting lumber there."

Within a year, he quit his day job.

"After the downfall of Kuwait, they needed a lot of wood, a lot of plywood. That was the turning point for our business. We worked 18 to 20 hours a day," he explains. "The phone wouldn't stop."

In 1995, exporting took a downturn. "I always had at the back of my mind that I should do something locally, domestically. I realized I should try to set up a mill myself," he says. "But my technical know-how was almost zero."

So he did some market research. "I looked at the stats and found that there had been growth for the last five years," he says. "So we started knocking doors to get some money."

He got a loan, but was still short of the quarter of a million dollars he needed to start the mill. Amir decided to take a gamble — he maxed out his credit lines, depleted his savings and even borrowed money from a friend. He bought some equipment and set up shop in a 7,000 square-foot facility.

"I did not know what the equipment was when I was buying it," he reveals with a hearty laugh. "With all honesty, I did not know which side the lumber was going to go on."

Turning serious, Amir starts to talk about the biggest challenge he and his wife had yet to face.

"No sooner did we set up the mill, Shaheen was diagnosed with cancer," Amir says. "On the business front, we were on the verge of bankruptcy. We came to a stage where we owed people money and we couldn't even produce."

Amir wasn't prepared to go down without a fight. Neither was Shaheen.

"I realized I still have to continue working. I can't let whatever I have go and quit in the middle by using the excuse that my wife has cancer," he says. They also had a young son to support.

"We were not going to quit. I had to pull myself together and make a game plan." He soon landed a couple of accounts, and at the end of the first year the company even made money.

Shaheen also came out fighting. "My

husband was dealing with many problems associated with any newly started business. So, at home, I tried to keep it easy for him as much as possible," she says. "I wore the prettiest wig and dressed up very well to avoid looking sick. I drove alone for my radiation sessions and, as soon as the treatment was over, I started going to our lumber mill to help out."

Knock on wood: An expression that is commonly said aloud when knocking on something wooden to ensure continued good luck or to ward off bad luck.

After two surgeries, including the removal of her lymph nodes, chemotherapy and radiation, her diagnosis was looking good.

And things continued to brighten on the business front.

"We decided to move to a bigger facility, from 7,000 to 26,000 square feet. That was a gamble I had to do. I had to increase my production so that I could really fight the competition and produce at a cheaper price," he says. "My younger brother, who has been shoulder to shoulder with me since starting the mill, was a little concerned. 'Are you sure we'll do it?' he asked. I said, 'No guts, no glory.'"

The risk paid off. "Our operation started to go up and up," he says. "I think as long as you have the will to fight, you are always going to win."

Knock on wood. ♣



Muhammad Amir on site at SPF Precut Lumber in Port Moody.



Shaheen and Muhammad Amir.

dustry]," he explains.

And, really, what could be more British Columbian than forestry?

Today, Amir's Port Moody-based lumber remanufacturing mill, SPF Precut Lumber, is one of the biggest manufacturers and exporters to the United States of pre-cut pallet stock and dog-ear fencing.

"We ship on average five to seven truckloads of lumber every day. We definitely have the major market share," he says.

On the way up in his climb to success, Amir did lose his footing a few

the Dubai steamship line. "But when I landed here, I was told they would be shutting down their operations on the West Coast."

Looking for a career change, he thought about real estate. Or the lumber industry.

Wood won out over houses, and he found a job.

"We were living in a basement suite and I realized that the amount of money I was making was just hand to mouth," he says.

So he and his wife, Shaheen, leased a typewriter and a fax machine and