

'Success to me is achieving goals I set for myself'

DEVASISH RAY

FRANK Islam is a name synonymous with success, more success and achievements. Islam, a successful Indian American who came from a wealthy environment from Aligarh, India, was not exactly born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

In 1994, Frank Islam bought QSS, a support services organization in information technology and aerospace engineering and very quickly established a growth of an unbelievable 55,000 percent, which made it the largest individual-owned company in the United States.

In January 2008, Frank Islam saw that the merger acquisition market was perfect and sold his company for a whopping \$300 million to former presidential candidate and businessman Ross Perot. Islam, a proud alumnus of the Aligarh Muslim University is busy today with his new company FII Investments and is also showing interest in diagnostic imaging centers like the one he purchased in Orlando with a 164-slice CT scan.

To get an insight into the world of Frank Islam, Newsline talked with him in his lavish office in the upscale Tyson's Corner business area in Virginia.

Excerpts.

■ How would you describe yourself?

There's an old proverb that summarizes it well: "I am like a wave; I exist only so long as I continue moving forward." That sums it up—I am a man who likes to do something always, moving myself forward, whether through continuing to educate myself, by trying to impact the world around me in a positive way via philanthropy, or by being an entrepreneur and trying to push the envelope of achievement.

I would describe my approach to any endeavor as one of "cautious pragmatism". Of course, as an entrepreneur, I am willing to take risks and embark on new paths, but in doing so I want to make sure any proposition makes sense, is clearly focused on an objective and is grounded in reality. Whether an initiative relates to business or philanthropy or politics, all of which interest me, it will take my time and attention and effort. There are many, many opportunities to do many things in each of these areas, so it is important to me to choose things that will have an impact.

■ What specific goals, including those related to your occupation, have you established for your life?

In all things, my main goal is to be happy. I think that if you lose focus on what's really important—happiness—then what's the point? So I approach everything from this standpoint. In business, I chose to build a business that I enjoyed and I will continue to choose to do things that interest me. I have always surrounded myself with good people and never let the culture and tone of my company get diluted in the interest of making a few extra dollars or taking shortcuts. If people enjoy what they do and the people with whom they work—success is much

more achievable. As I said previously, I want my efforts to have an impact, so when I see things that are not right with the world, I want to fix what I can. I am involved in both politics and philanthropy, which are two major change agents. The saying goes that the person who gives is usually happier than the person who receives. And of course in my personal life, being married to my lovely wife Debbie makes me happy. Keep in mind that pursuing happiness is

However, I am not done. I intend to continue doing things that interest me and have an impact so I will continue down the path and may refine or redefine my career.

■ What specific goals have you established for yourself after selling your company?

My goals are still driven by the same things as before I sold my company. One reason I sold my company was so that I could learn

sense business practices and managed to not get sucked into the flavors of the day, like Dot-Com companies or some of the other technology oriented companies. When I say common sense, I mean that you need to ask yourself, "What does the customer want," "how can I deliver it," "how do I keep them happy" and "what is likely to be their next need." Then, you have to budget carefully and plan for as many contingencies as

cian, or a successful businessman, to name a few, and each are equally admirable. I think the common denominator among successful people, though, is that they think in terms of "I can, I will, I am" as opposed to "would have, could have, should have, and won't."

■ What has been your most rewarding accomplishment?

As you go through life, everyone hopefully accomplishes many things, and I am no exception. Your accomplishments vary in size, some are dependent on previous accomplishments and some are less evident than others. So for me, it is not a single accomplishment that is important, but the accumulation of what I have achieved to this point in my life and the impact I have had, and hopefully I will continue to have, on others in this world.

■ What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?

I think it's in my genes. I have always been motivated to do things—whatever the activity because I just enjoy life. I don't like to sit still. I guess I am motivated because it's my natural state of being.

■ What does "success" mean to you?

Success begins and ends with the individual and not with what other people may try to define as success.

■ What does "failure" mean to you?

Failure means not pursuing things that you don't believe in or you don't enjoy. You get one chance at life and if you blow it by not being true to yourself, then that is failure. Failure also means inaction. There are people who will sit and ponder all day about whether they should cross the room and they're others who just get up and walk across it. Failure is often a self-inflicted state of being.

■ What major problem have you encountered and how did you deal with it?

I have encountered lots of problems throughout my life and career. The best way to deal with problems is to face them. No point in avoiding the facts or the situation. I learned early on that it's not about winning or being right all the time—it's about finding solutions that work. A firm and direct approach to problems is best and if you happen to get an outcome that you don't like, don't dwell on it. Move on and focus on the next challenge and learn from your mistakes.

■ Where do you go from here?

I plan on building the FI Investment Group to become a world-class financial investment firm. We will be making direct investments, as well as forming debt, equity and hedge funds with like-minded investors, which will leverage my internally generated cash, as well as my experiences in business. I plan on giving back to the world through my foundation and a charity as well as participating in many civic and community organizations. Hopefully, through all of these endeavors, I will have an opportunity to continue to learn, enjoy myself and make an impact. And most of all, I



Islam with actress Meryl Streep (second from right) and other guests

what even our founding fathers' considered to be the ultimate goal. But understand that the pursuit of happiness is not always easy, but a choice that requires effort and, the recognition is not always in an ending, but often in the journey.

But if you want specific goals rather than my own philosophy—I'd say that I always wanted to create a great company where people would be proud to work, and if it made money, even better. I also always wanted to help people who didn't have the same opportunities that I have. And I wanted to learn as much as I can about everything.

■ How did your college experience prepare you for a business career?

My college experience provided me with some tools and a foundation upon which to build a career. Of course, learning doesn't stop when you finish school and I learned a significant amount as I progressed through my career, all of which has provided me with more tools and a stronger foundation with which to continue to do things that I enjoy and which will hopefully have a positive impact.

■ At what point did you choose this career?

Your "career" tends to be defined by what you have done, rather than what you intend to do, therefore I don't think there is ever a specific point where you "choose" a career. It evolves over time as you try things and accomplish things and learn through the process. Hopefully this leads you down path that allows you to make maximum use of your talents and enjoy what you are doing. Looking back, I think I found a good path and did reasonably well,

and experience new things and spend time doing things I enjoy and, hopefully continue to make a contribution to society. Right now, I am working on creating a new kind of company—an investment firm, which will be called FI Investment Group through which I plan to stay active in the business community. I have established a foundation and a charity so that I can provide some assistance to those who need help. And I have become more actively involved in the political process, and supporting many candidates for election, which I hope will have an impact on the direction of our country, and possibly the world.

■ What did it take to attain your goals, and what steps did you take toward attaining them?

The most important thing in achieving your goals is to develop a well thought-out plan and stay fo-



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cused on executing it. They say that the whole world steps aside for the man who knows where he is going. It's easy to get distracted by the latest buzz, but if you keep a laser focus on what you are trying to accomplish, you will get there. So, for example, in building QSS, like everything else, I created a plan and then stuck to it. I followed common-

you can. Same thing goes for other goals, though maybe the questions you ask are a little different and you are budgeting time and energy instead of money.

■ What do you think it takes to be successful in this career?

I have tried to synthesize what it takes to be successful as an entrepreneur in the technology sector in a guidebook that I am preparing, called the *ICT Executives Business Guidebook*. In that guidebook, I talk about what kind of planning you need to do, how to go about marketing, and how to position yourself to customers. At the core of all of it is just common sense—find the need in the market, develop a solution, and deliver it effectively and efficiently. Ultimately, it comes down to providing value to your customer. And of course, you will make mistakes—but you have to learn from them and do it better next time. Generally, the same things are necessary to be successful in any career, but it takes effort, perseverance and focus.

■ How do you determine or evaluate success?

Everyone has a different definition of success. As I said, success to me is achieving the goals I set for myself, enjoying what I do and learning from the experience. It's very much an individual phenomenon since different people set different goals and enjoy different things. You can be a successful painter, a successful teacher, a successful politi-