Promoting the power of immigrant dreams, Councilman Satpal Sidhu puts a public face on Whatcom County’s increasingly integrated Sikh population.
E HAS THIS habit, quite endearing, of slipping the word into conversation — especially when discussing truths that Americans once held to be self-evident. Almost always, Satpal Singh Sidhu delivers it with a nodding head and a warm smile, after mentioning a principle with which no reasonable person would quibble.

“Right?”

Government is a proven way to organize societies, and ideally exists for the betterment of all. Right?

Consensus is critical to democracy, and is best achieved through calm dialogue. Right?

All people, even those who choose to wear turbans or some other non-trucker-hat head covering, are created equal. Right?

Only a few years ago, before the current Whatcom County Council member and Sikh community leader became an elected official, the word was offered as a simple affirmation of what he assumed most people embraced. We all have contrasting opinions, but 30 years of living in America as a brown-skinned immigrant taught Sidhu that we still agree on a basic framework — the rule of law.

Now, with racial violence in American streets, and the nation’s love-hate history with immigration swinging, in some corners, again toward the latter, even optimists such as Sidhu must concede that it has become more of an open question.

But on balance, for Sidhu’s Punjabi immigrant brothers and sisters — and other nonwhites — America remains a land of opportunity.

Right?

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BY RON JUDD • PHOTOS BY MIKE SIEGEL
GUY FOR THE JOB

says hard work and strong character always win
THE RIGHT GUY FOR THE JOB

Sidhu in his council seat at the Whatcom County Courthouse.

THESE DAYS, Sidhu, 67, can be forgiven for feeling less than certain. And he's not alone. In the farmlands around Lynden, the November 2016 election of Donald Trump sparked fear in a quietly cohesive community of several thousand immigrants from Punjab, India. Many are farmers who quietly grow berries smack dab in decidedly conservative, rural Whatcom County.

It is, by any measure, Trump Country. In May 2016, when the upstart presidential candidate rolled into Lynden for a campaign rally organized by local pol Doug Ericksen, he passed by Sikh-owned berry fields on both sides of the road.

It's doubtful Trump — or anyone else — would have noticed. Sikhs have thrived here for the past several decades by working hard, being smart — and avoiding political strife, Sidhu says. This is the same way they have succeeded in countless other places in the world for centuries, he notes, citing earlier immigration waves from India to East Africa.

"The whites were fighting with blacks; the blacks hated the whites; and we are the browns in the middle," he says. "Nobody pays any attention to us. And we are not about to go and rock the boat."

Sikhs "just want to work hard at whatever they are doing," Sidhu says. "Just exactly like here: They came to Whatcom County, knew it was a white-dominated agricultural area, and proved very successful, and very cohesive."

Just like that, Dhaliwals were living peacefully across the cattle fence from Zylstras — completely unbeknown to most of the non-census-studying world.

In a single generation, Sidhu's people have become the dominant force in the nation's largest raspberry- and blueberry-producing region. They did so by capitalizing on opportunity. First-generation farmers purchased small parcels of available dairy land, capitalizing on that fading business. Working together to finance expansion — and share resources such as farm equipment, an important principle in the Sikh religion — Punjabi farmers have grown those farms into thriving businesses.

More than 100 Sikh farmers, many now working alongside their college-educated children, produce more than half the massive berry crop from the fertile soils along the Nooksack River.

Whatcom's East Indian Sikhs — roughly 4,000 people in a predominantly white county of about 200,000 — qualify by any standard as an American immigration success story.

"We may be in a minority, but we know how to live as a minority," says Sidhu, noting that Sikhs have always been a minority population, even in their home country of India. "These people remember that as a minority, your character and your hard work always win. This is not a surprise to us. We are resilient. We find a way to do things. But we always remember."

WHAT SIDHU and his people remember about settling in Whatcom County is something many would rather forget. Like other Asian immigrants, the first Punjabis in Whatcom County came at the turn of the 20th century
Sidhu shares a laugh with Michael Russell, left, chief of facilities, in the lobby of the Whatcom County Courthouse in Bellingham.

to work in the bustling sawmill/cannery port of Bellingham.

There, a small group of Sikhs was tolerated as laborers, and viewed as an exotic curiosity, until their numbers grew to around 200, and they were seen as a threat.

In September 1907, a gang of about 500 local thugs raided the homes of Sikh workers and ran them out of what now is Bellingham’s Lettered Streets neighborhood, according to newspaper accounts.

Bellingham’s “Sikh Riots” had been largely forgotten until 2006, when local university professor Paul Englesberg decided to dive into local archives.

Among other things, his project resulted in a short documentary, “We Are Not Strangers,” financed by Guru Nanak Gursikh Temple, the Lynden-area hub of the county’s Sikh community.

No Sikhs were killed or badly injured in the riots. But all were forced to flee into what amounted to protective custody in the city jail until the mob dispersed. Most left town and never returned. Afterward, immigration restrictions and the lingering bad blood made the county mostly off-limits to Sikh immigrants for decades.

While largely forgotten by whites, memories of the riot lived long among Sikhs. When he first moved to the region, Sidhu’s father-in-law warned him about walking the streets at night in Bellingham.

Englesberg says his research documenting the vilification of a group of peaceful workers based exclusively on race reinforced similarities to modern xenophobia and overt racism against ethnic groups, based on ignorance and fear.

“The same stereotypes and assumptions or prejudices leak over from previous minority groups,” he says. “A lot of the rhetoric about the Punjabis (described as ‘invading hordes of Hindoos’ in local newspapers) was very similar to what was said about the Chinese many years before. Some of that was similar to what was said about Native Americans. People think that they know something about these people. But they’re just taking their past prejudices and fears and laying them on another group.”
THE RIGHT GUY FOR THE JOB

Sidhu puts on a head covering before entering the Sikh temple near Lynden, where Sidhu and other Sikhs have worked to gain "reconciliation" in a region where Sikhs were run out of their Bellingham homes in 1907.

THIS WORRIED, but did not intimidate, Sidhu and his wife, Hannandir, when they moved from British Columbia to Whatcom three decades ago. As immigrants and dual citizens of the United States and Canada, they share a unique perspective on America, the ideal, versus America,warts and all.

Most of what Sidhu knew about America as a young man was learned in Indian schools, where the United States was depicted as a land of boundless opportunity.

"I can tell you that when I came to America, I knew more about America than Americans did," he says with a chuckle. What impressed him most, as a young, aspiring engineer: Americans seemed to plan, in the economic and political realms, 20 to 40 years in the future.

And the country shone because of its rare focus on governing by rule of law. Most people born on U.S. soil cannot appreciate the unusual gift of living in a nation with a constitution, Sidhu says.

"When you come from the outside and look in, you say, 'Oh my God! What a difference! The strength of America was, and is, that you can like spaghetti, or you can like steak. But there are laws here. If you work within those laws, you can be anything.'"

Sidhu worked as an engineer from Alberta to California before finally settling down in Whatcom, where he was employed in the refining industry at Cherry Point — still an economic mainstay of the county. He later became a dean at Bellingham Technical College, and later ran a Bellingham solar-energy business.

Today, he works as a trade consultant, attempting to forge relationships between county farmers and India. He also owns and operates, along with his wife and one of his sons, The Spice Hut, a Bellingham tea and spice shop.

Sidhu's children, now grown, were the first Sikhs to attend schools in the Meridian School District outside Bellingham, and were embraced, he says. They have been shocked to see the overt racism now sometimes inflicted upon others who adhere to their Sikh religion, often because they are mistaken for Muslims in a country where many associate Islam with terrorism.

Sikh immigrants, after overcoming some early problems accessing farm markets, have lived comfortably in Whatcom County, Sidhu says. Even so, the fevered rhetoric of Trump's campaign — coupled with the president's immigration stances after his election — has heightened anxieties. It also has generated new fears in a younger generation that assumed overt racism, as manifested in things such as the World War II internment of Japanese citizens, was something in America's past.

Sidhu, a Democrat, credits Whatcom County Sheriff Bill Elfo with helping to calm those nerves — and sending a strong message that ethnic harassment will not be tolerated here.

"He's given his personal cellphone number, and said, 'Look, not just because you're a council member, but for the community, if you hear or see anything, speak up about it,'" Sidhu says. "The other thing is, the farmers have created good rapport with the existing farmers. All of this has been quite positive."

PAINTING SIDHU and his family, of course, into the corner of some mental Norman Rockwell image of the Great American Melting Pot would be dishonest. While his community has integrated both financially and culturally in a new homeland, Sidhu's childhood image of America's vaunted equality doesn't match with what he sees as modern political reality.

He believes his adopted nation's standing as a beacon of opportunity is under threat. The nationalist political
movement fueling the election of Trump is an obvious concern. But long before that, Sidhu was lamenting what he calls a singular focus on corporate profits as a driver of U.S. politics, at the expense of general public progress. America, he says, now equates fame and riches with success. And while he believes classic capitalism is a powerful incentive for economic growth, the "counterbalance" should be what that growth does for society, not just stockholders, he says. Unlike most of us, he has chosen to respond to his own worries by doing something other than bitch about them on Facebook.

In 2014, local Democratic Party officials convinced him to run for a 42nd District seat in the state Legislature, which he lost by about 5 percentage points to favored Republican Luanne Van Werven. In March 2015, a resignation created an opening on the Whatcom County Council, which Sidhu was appointed to fill. The following fall, he was elected to a full term by a margin of less than 1 percent over a Republican former council member.

While it barely made news outside Whatcom, the historical impact of that event is difficult to overstate, says Todd Donovan, a Western Washington University political scientist who won a seat on the county council in the same election. "It's clearly very impressive that this county elected a guy named Satpal Sidhu," Donovan says. "Not just given the history of this place 100 years ago, but..."
A former engineer, Sidhu currently works as a trade consultant, building relationships between county farmers and India. He and his family also own The Spice Hut in Bellingham.

because of the contemporary challenges anyone from a visibly distinct minority community has running for public office.”

Donovan and Sidhu are among a bloc of progressives elected in the midst of a controversy over a coal-shipping terminal proposed for construction alongside refineries and other heavy industries at Cherry Point, near Ferndale. The terminal project was effectively killed last year — at least for now — because of staunch opposition from the neighboring Lummi Nation.

But arguments over the coal port exposed a broad community rift over the future of heavy industry. A May public hearing on a council proposal to study the county’s ability to influence crude-oil rail shipping and other matters at Cherry Point drew lines of residents that spilled out the doors of council chambers.

The crowd was split. Sidhu listened patiently to hours of testimony, but later lamented that many were parroting talking points issued by business boosters or environmental groups.

“The most active people are always a minority,” Sidhu says. “They are the most vocal; they show up. But as a council member you cannot form an opinion just because there are 10 people in front of you. That’s an easy trap.”
Siddhu has spent his time on the council attempting to live up to promises to reintroduce civil political dialogue — and to listen to all comers. He tries to avoid public spats with critics, preferring instead to invite them to meet for coffee. Some accept; others think it’s a gimmick. Siddhu finds that sadly amusing. “People know only slogans; they don’t want to have discussions.” He tries to bring the same approach to other local hot-button issues, including water rights (the State Supreme Court ruling known as the Hirst Decision, throwing the permit system for wells on private property into disarray, grew from a Whatcom case), housing costs and other growth-related problems.

His patient role on the council, many locals say, has burnished his place as a community leader, particularly among minority groups. This can put Siddhu in unusual political territory that would make most politicians squirm. In August, the death of a migrant Mexican farmworker in a blueberry field near Everson led to the walkout of dozens of temporary workers, who camped out to protest working conditions.

In the ensuing scramble to determine the workers’ fate, Siddhu immediately found himself a middleman: The events not only played out in his district, but the farm owners themselves were Punjabi immigrants from California. (“Ironic, right?” Siddhu asks.)

He didn’t know the owners, but contacted them and asked for assurances that the workers would be taken care of. It was the right thing to do, he said, but he also feared a backlash against local Sikhs if the migrant workers didn’t receive assistance. He was assured they would.

It is a role he didn’t anticipate, but embraces.

His public status has also fueled momentum for another approaching landmark moment in Bellingham’s history — a long-overdue act of civic acknowledgment of mistreatment of early immigrants. As other monuments around the United States are coming down, Whatcom County is erecting a new one: an “Arch of Healing and Reconciliation” to honor past mistreatment not only of the Sikhs, but of immigrant Japanese and Chinese workers, as well.

The arch, modeled in a fashion after the Gateway of India built a century ago in Bombay, now Mumbai, was conceived long ago in haphazard drawings, as sort of a crazy dream by an engineer named Satpal Singh Siddhu. It will be erected across from Bellingham City Hall by April.

Siddhu beams with pride at the very notion — progress for the concept of immigration, even during darker times. The arch will stand as a testament to the power of unleashing immigrant dreams.

“I think that America is a unique country,” Siddhu stresses. “A lot of Americans may not know this, but they get the best of the world. They always have. The future of America depends on immigrants.”

Most of that is beyond his reach, he knows. So Siddhu remains focused on what he not only thinks, but believes he can change: his own small part of the world, in Washington state’s upper-left corner. He already has announced plans to run for re-election in 2019.

“I am totally enjoying it,” he says of his public roles, which he doesn’t need, but clearly wants. “I’m at that stage of life where I’m not aggressive, in the sense that I rarely get mad, or miserable.”

It’s a natural outgrowth of his upbeat personal philosophy, born of his own struggles and successes, as an immigrant in a land that sometimes values immigrants, sometimes doesn’t. He offers it to the rest of us, no strings attached.

“I’m saying that, maybe you can’t change the whole world. But you can change just this much and say, ‘OK, I’m happy.’ You know: If you can do a little good, it still can be great.”

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