

Solid Foundation

Ocala Magazine's Person of the Year —

Digvijay “Danny” Gaekwad

In 2018, Danny Gaekwad's new hotel, Hilton Garden Hotel, broke ground in downtown Ocala on the site of the former Ocala/ Marion County Chamber of Commerce. The new hotel, due to open in Jan 2020, will feature three restaurants, including a rooftop hotel for scenic views of downtown Ocala, and boutique shops on the ground level, which will forever change the face of downtown Ocala, and increase visitors making the already revamped downtown into a destination.

BY: JOHN SOTOMAYOR | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN JERNIGAN

Upon the foundation of one convenience store, Digvijay “Danny” Gaekwad built a real estate empire in North Central Florida. He turned the one store in Orlando into three, sold some, and used the money to invest upon more. He acquired more stores in Lake City. He was successful there, running eight stores between Lake City to Lake Butler. In the next eight years, he bought and sold a chain of 26 convenience stores throughout Florida.

That began 30 years ago. It was cheaper to acquire real estate property in rural areas such as he did, but much riskier to operate. Would he generate enough business to keep it going?

That was where and when he learned his most valuable lesson in business — if you are good to the community you do business in and help them grow, the community will pay you back with patronage of your businesses. He knew he would become involved in civic and board appointments, and build a strong relationship with local government and the local Chamber of Commerce. That he would give back through leadership and charitable contributions and events. First, he and his wife had to decide upon a city or town to build as their home base.

Before starting a family, Gaekwad fathered two sons, Karan and Kunal, he and his wife Manisha moved around quite a bit covering territory from Orlando and Lakeland, up to Lake City. Ocala was central, so became their ideal consideration for their base.

“We chose Ocala because it was the

ideal size we were looking for,” said Gaekwad, “It had the amenities of a big city, but not the density where one could get lost.”

Ocala welcomed Gaekwad from the beginning.

“My first day in Ocala, Chuck Cole’s company gave me a great lunch,” recalled Gaekwad. That relationship opened doors. He quickly established relationships, becoming good friends with City Council members and the mayor.

“I knew right then, this was where I wanted to build my home,” said Gaekwad. He made up his mind that Ocala would be the city he would make a lasting impact.

In 2018, Gaekwad broke ground in downtown Ocala on the site of the former Ocala/ Marion County Chamber of Commerce, and previously where the historic Ocala House Hotel once stood. The new hotel, Hilton Garden Hotel, is due to open in Jan 2020. It will feature three restaurants, including a rooftop hotel for scenic views of downtown Ocala, with 10 residential apartments on the second floor, and retail shops on the ground level, which will forever change the face of downtown Ocala. It will also increase visitors making the already revamped downtown into a destination. For this and for other contributions Gaekwad has made in 2018, he has been selected as *Ocala Magazine’s* Person of the Year.

GAEKWAD’S VISION

Born in Baroda, India, the son of a judge and the grandson of a Colonel in the Indian Army, Gae-

kwad loved his new home, Ocala. The schools were ideal for his sons, and the home they built for themselves was comfortable. The only thing that Gaekwad thought could be improved was the downtown area. It was the late 1980s-early 1990s and downtown Ocala was boarded up, the outcome of a poor economy. Having seen what was being done in The Villages — with culturally-driven plazas filled with sounds of music, the sights of artisans, and the smells of culinary restaurants, Gaekwad thought the same could and should be duplicated in downtown Ocala.

“I have always wanted a good downtown, where you could walk with your family for a relaxed good time,” said Gaekwad. “I imagined a place where I could go with friends or family and enjoy a cup of coffee, good food, nice music, these were my dream of downtown.”

Gaekwad’s ancestors ruled the city of Baroda, India for 260 years, developing Baroda to the metropolitan city it is today. Gaekwad knew when he arrived here, that he would contribute what he could to make Ocala a vibrant center for community life that he knew it could be. He had done so through a variety of successful entrepreneurship and civic appointments.

SUCCESSFUL BUSINESSMAN

Gaekwad’s flagship business is Danny Gaekwad Developing & Investments. That parent company, oversees his real estate investments and his other subsidiaries including NDS USA — a medical billing and transcrip-

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tion company, and his hospitality businesses: MGM Hotels, and DG Hospitality. MGM Hotels and DG Hospitality oversees the Holiday Inn and Suites Ocala Convention Center, and the Golden Spoon winning restaurant from 2010 — 2018, Sky Fine Dining, perched on the highest floor of the hotel, respectively.

Gaekwad has recently added a second hotel right next door to the Holiday Inn and Suites Ocala Convention Center, a new Holiday Inn Express Hotel. He has plans to build a Tru by Hilton in Gainesville, FL and in the process of building a new accelerator in downtown Orlando, which will house in Exchange building at the historic Church Street Station. The accelerator will host a program offering start-up businesses with the opportunity to present their business plan to venture capitalists to get investment funding, similar to the popular TV Show, *Shark Tank*. Gaekwad said he would love to introduce a similar program to Ocala.

Gaekwad's current real estate holdings include hotels, golf courses, restaurants, campgrounds, automated car washes and commercial retail throughout Florida. A 350-acre Gaekwad's Villages Mixed-Use Development is in the process of developing 1,100 residential lots, 300 apartments and a four-acre commercial site at The Villages, one of the fastest growing communities in the United States.

Gaekwad's multi-purpose development, Hilton Garden Hotel in downtown Ocala will be a game-changer. Not only will it have high-end, comfortable rooms to rent, but will have 10 residential units on the second floor, retail shops on the ground floor, another 7,000 square-foot space for retail shopping on a higher floor, and three restaurants within the hotel, including one on the top floor, offering the best views in Downtown Ocala.

"In the future, I would like to add an apartment complex adding to the Ocala skyline, visible from 441, and a grocery store," said Gaekwad. "Like a Trader Joe's or Fresh Market."

For now, Gaekwad envisions the Hilton Garden Hotel taking on an iconic role and presence as its predecessor, the historic Ocala House Hotel once did.

IMPACTFUL CIVIC APPOINTMENTS

Over the past 30 years, Gaekwad served on the

boards of numerous public, private and non-profit organizations. Since 2009, Gaekwad has been a member of the board of directors of Enterprise Florida Inc, a public-private partnership between Florida's businesses and government leaders, and is the principal economic development organization for Florida. Its mission, according to their website, is to "expand and diversify the state's economy through job creation."

"Governor Scott gave us a goal of 1 million jobs, not an easy task," said Gaekwad. By our seventh year, we reach 700,000 jobs. BY the eight year, we reached 1.4 million jobs. I am proud to serve on that team."

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Gaekwad is also currently an executive board member and Finance Chair of Visit Florida, the official tourism marketing corporation of the state.

"We had a goal of 100 million tourists, and we reached that," said Gaekwad. "The best year we had prior was 2007, with 80 million tourists. Our new goal is 120 million tourists. I am very proud to serve on that team as well."

Gaekwad currently serves the board of director of Florida Chamber of Commerce. In the past, Gaekwad served on several other boards, including former Chairman, Marion County Visitor and Convention Bureau, former Chairman, Marion County Tourism Development Council, former Vice Chairman, Marion County Planning and Zoning Commissioner, former board member, Space Florida, the agency responsible for aerospace economic development in Florida, and former board member, Independence National Bank.

ACCOLADES

Gaekwad was vacationing in India in January 2018 when he got a call at 1 A.M. from Governor Rick Scott. It would have been 3 P.M. in Florida.

"He said to me, 'I know you are on vacation however I could not wait to tell you, that I have appointed you to the UCF Board of Trustees, do you accept?'" said Gaekwad. "I thought 'why would I not accept?' I replied 'I would be honored sir, absolutely.'"

In February 2018, Gaekwad was ap-

pointed by Gov. Rick Scott to the Board of Trustees of University of Central Florida.

These calls had become a regular occurrence over time.

Over the years, Gaekwad's companies have created thousands of jobs in Florida and other parts of the United States. His companies contributed hundreds of millions of dollars to the economy. In 2016, Gov. Rick Scott awarded Gaekwad with the "One Million Jobs" certificate of appreciation for his contribution "in helping Florida job creators add 1 million jobs between December 2010 and December 2015."

Other awards and recognitions at the local, state and national levels for his accomplishments in business, and community services include:

Asian American Hotel Owners Association Chairman's Awards (AAHOA is the largest trade group of hotel owners in the world. Its 20,000 members own every second hotel in the United States)

- Lion of the Year Award
- Leaders Leader Award, Marion County
- Community Service Award from the Federation of Indian Seniors Association of North America (August 2017)
- Pride of India Award 2017
- Glorious India Chairman's Award 2017
- In November 2018, he was honored by the National Federation of Indian American Associations in Washington D.C. with the Business & Entrepreneurship award.
- In late November 2018, Gaekwad was listed among the 45 advisors Governor-Elect Ron DeSantis appointed to the Transition Advisory Committee on the Economy.
- In December 2018, Gaekwad received the news he was selected as *Ocala Magazine's* Person of the Year.

"I am honored and humbled by this," said Gaekwad upon hearing the news of his selection.

"God and Ocala have been very good to me," said Gaekwad. "This is the reason I reinvest back into Ocala."

Indeed, Gaekwad's gift of reinvestment will surely leave a lasting impact on the city. His buildings and his leadership contributions serve as his legacy to the city he and his wife years ago chose to call home. **Om**