
Smita Shah

By Erica Schlaikjer
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35 *President, Spaan Technology Inc.*

Smita Shah is a self-proclaimed math geek. As a fifth-grader in west suburban Willowbrook, she sat with friends in the back of class converting word problems into algebraic equations.

"I was such a dorky little person," she says.

Instead of track and field, Ms. Shah ran "math relays" in high school, racing to fill in parts of long equations and pass them off to team members at the University of Chicago Laboratory School, where she helped win numerous statewide competitions.

"I saved all the ribbons and medals," she says.

She shows the same drive today as president of Spaan Technology, a Chicago technology and project management firm she founded in 1998 after earning a master's degree in civil and environmental engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

But instead of math problems, she solves engineering riddles — whether it's how to upgrade electrical systems for the Chicago Public Schools or design traffic signals for the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority. In the past 10 years, her company has grown to 50 employees and \$10 million in annual revenue. Last year, it was No. 1,821 on *Inc.* magazine's list of the 5,000 fastest-growing private companies.

Though "festive" is not typically a word associated with electrical engineering, drainage and hydrology, Ms. Shah uses it to describe many of her projects, including relocating Commonwealth Edison Co.'s call center in Oak Brook in the middle of a blackout, inspecting a \$510-million renovation to the Chicago Transit Authority's Blue Line and consulting on upgrades to plumbing and fixtures in U.S. Sen. Barack Obama's Chicago office.

"I like doing it all because it keeps me entertained," she says.

Her firm also is part of a \$14-million joint venture to design electrical systems for lighting and navigation aids for a new runway scheduled to open Nov. 20. as part of O'Hare International Airport's \$6.6-billion expansion.

"She can come across as a very tough negotiator," says Allen Pomerance, director of aviation projects for A. Epstein & Sons International Inc., Ms. Shah's partner in the O'Hare project. "She doesn't put up with mediocrity."

It wasn't always easy landing big projects. In the early years, she struggled to make payroll. And being an Indian-American woman, she says, "the room for error is very small" in the engineering and construction industries.

It helps that she moves easily in many circles — from construction sites to political events to society galas. After college, she interned in the White House Office of the Chief of Staff, where she answered phones and filed paperwork two doors down from President Bill Clinton's office.



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Two years later, the Illinois Democratic Party appointed her its youngest delegate at the 1996 Democratic National Convention.

Since then, she's served on the Rules Committee and Platform Committee at the 2004 and 2008 conventions, deciding issues such as whether to reinstate Florida's or Michigan's delegates at this year's convention despite those states breaking party rules by holding their primaries before Feb. 5.

She also organizes programs for the Illinois chapter of the American Society of Civil Engineers, sits on Steppenwolf Theatre Company's Auxiliary Council and heads the Delhi Sister Cities International Program, where she has helped coordinate trade missions to India for Mayor Richard M. Daley and American Airlines.

Last year, Ms. Shah joined the ranks of notables such as Ronald Reagan, William Rehnquist, Rosa Parks and Frank Sinatra when she was awarded the Ellis Island Medal of Honor, sponsored by the National Ethnic Coalition of Organizations, a New York non-profit that recognizes those who have "changed the fabric of America."

As the daughter of immigrants, Ms. Shah exemplifies the American dream that anything is possible if you put your mind to it, says NECO's chairman, Nasser Kazeminy.

"She has been a scholar, business leader and role model," Mr. Kazeminy says. "She's building bridges of understanding."



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