

A Long Road: Reynolds grad searched far for a career before returning here, starting a theater

By Laura Giovanelli | Journal Reporter Published December 4, 2009



The seats are in. Both screens are up, and the contractors have gone through gallons of black paint.

Bit by bit, Lawren Desai's dream of a downtown movie theater, Aperture Cinema, is coming together.

She's had lots of help. From her husband, who mans and writes the cinema's blog. From her father, Rence Callahan, whose architecture firm she hired to rework their old building on Fourth Street from cubicles and offices into a cinema.

Desai, 33, is not the first to think that a downtown movie theater would be a good idea -- remember Unity Place, the \$87 million downtown development, a partnership between UNC School of the Arts and Krispy Kreme that included an IMAX theater?

But there was a time when Desai didn't want to be here, when she longed for bigger places.

After she graduated from Reynolds High School in 1994, she headed to Philadelphia. She wanted to get away to a big city. She said she would never come back.

Desai has always loved cities, Callahan said. "She's always had this yearning for the big city and urban life. She said that Philly was too small. Then L.A. was too small. So she went to New York."

There's a photo of her as a kid, Callahan recalled, taken during her first time in New York. She's standing in Times Square with the biggest smile on her face.

"It was like an electric experience," Callahan said.

Along the way, Desai hunted for a career. She went to college at the University of Pennsylvania, thinking she might go to law school. Then she worked for a lawyer and hated it.

She loved history, though, and stories. In high school she turned an oral presentation into a documentary on Golda Meir, Israel's prime minister. "Horrible," she cringes, recalling the production values.

One movie she watched over and over was *The Power of One*, a 1992 movie set in South Africa. It wasn't a popular film. It wasn't a true story, even though it was historical. But something about it struck Desai -- this idea of telling history and reaching a wide audience through film.

In Los Angeles, she took a summer course in film production at the University of California. She landed internships with production companies on Sony and Warner Brothers lots, and she spent her free time reading screenplays and watching the classics -- *Casablanca*, *Citizen Kane*. If I'm going to do this, she thought, I should really watch films and learn.

She applied for and was accepted into a graduate program at the University of Southern California.

Practicality sank in -- film school wasn't cheap. Graduates are not assured of jobs.

"At that point it had been a year, and I had no money, so I ended up coming back to Winston with the intention of working here and living at home and saving up money," Desai said.

She worked as an assistant for Dale Pollock, who was then the dean of UNCSCA's film school, for about a year.

She also made a short, silent film, *Moving Day*, about a high-school student from the city moving to the 'burbs. Desai then

headed to New York to try to break her way into film through a job instead of school. No luck. So in order to stay in New York, she took a job in marketing and merchandising for Jaeger-LeCoultre, a luxury Swiss watchmaker. She also got to travel.

By 2002, she was ready to go back to school. She returned to Winston-Salem again, applying to Wake Forest University's MBA program. She met her husband, Jigar, there.

When she graduated, Desai got a job with Novartis, a pharmaceutical company, as a financial-marketing analyst. But she didn't go back to work after her son, Jake, was born. He's now 2.

Still, she wanted to do something. Working for a company made her appreciate the freedom of being her own boss, though she liked spending time with Jake, too.

So running an independent movie theater? It's like everything has led Desai to this moment -- business school, her love of urban bustle, that Golda Meir video.

She wrote a business plan and put together \$500,000 in start-up costs. She visited other independent movie theaters across the state -- the Rialto and the Colony in Raleigh, the Cameo in Fayetteville. She went to the Toronto Film Festival to shop for films. RiverRun International Film Festival moved its offices from the West End and is subleasing office space from the theater.

Now, suddenly, Desai is weeks away from the curtain going up on Aperture at 311 W. Fourth St.

The plan is to open in early January. It will have two theaters, 161 seats and a concession stand for grown-ups (it will have beer and wine).

And Desai hopes that she'll be able to bring one of the pleasures of living in a city -- a cinema that shows carefully curated art-house films -- to her hometown.

"I feel like we have three big multiplexes here and a lot of times they're showing the same things," Desai said. "And I wanted to bring back the old-school, movie-going experience that I had growing up. I think that's kind of missing now, going to a movie in a small place ... it's kind of like a shared experience. Sometimes in a large stadium theater that's lost."

It's still a risk, especially in a weak economy. Opening an independent anything is not necessarily opening up a gold mine.

"This isn't the kind of theater that's going to show the next *Incredible Hulk* or something," said Andrew Rodgers, RiverRun's executive director.

"This is the kind of movie theater that will stay open as long as people support it. Lawren and her team are going to have to work to put together an interesting mix of films. It's on her to prove herself to the community first. Then it's on the community to show they want it here."

But Desai has been able to ignore naysayers, Rodgers said. "She's kind of the definition of calm, cool and collected," he said. "Everywhere I go people ask about this theater, people who six months ago, nine months ago, they were saying, 'This is a doomed idea that's never going to get off the ground.'"

"You need someone willing to ignore the noise."

lgiovanelli@wsjournal.com