

VANTAGE POINTS

Trio Talks Talent, Indiana Vision 2025

By **Symone C. Skrzycki**

RESOURCES: Amish Shah, Kem Krest Corporation, at www.kemkrest.com | Alissa Fricke, Thrive Marketing Strategies, at www.thrivemarketingstrategies.com | Chris White, The Times Media Co., at www.nwitimes.com

KEM KREST CORPORATION

Founded: 1979; approximately 200 employees

Elkhart-based Kem Krest manages and markets customer-branded parts and chemicals, from suppliers to dealership networks and production facilities, on behalf of original equipment manufacturers within the automotive, agriculture/industrial and defense industries. It operates nine facilities throughout the United States and Canada. Shah joined the company in 1996.

Q: How did your father's background as an entrepreneur influence your career?

"My father owned a company called Accra Pac, which was founded over 40 years ago. Kem Krest was a small subsidiary when I started. It was about a million-dollar company. Today, we have revenues in excess of \$250 million.

"My father definitely played a large role (in shaping my career), but a big piece of it was Elkhart. My father emigrated from India to Indiana. It was the typical immigrant story. He founded a business with a friend in a garage. Elkhart was the catalyst.

"It was great to have a father who was entrepreneurial. That was kind of the way of life for me – there was really no other option than entrepreneurship, but the community of Elkhart was significant in the development of my father's career and my career. We found that Elkhart was a place that was very supportive to the business community, and the business community was very supportive of one another."

Q: Describe your role at the Elkhart forum.

"My role was to talk about where I see things from a regional perspective. I think we can all agree that the economy has really turned around over the last several years. Elkhart County specifically is booming, primarily because of the RV industry. Some of my concerns are that 2009 or 2008 wasn't that long ago. During that timeframe, we talked a lot about diversification – how we need to bring more business and have a more diverse economy. But now that the RV industry has rebounded, efforts have really started to slow down. We think about things when we're in a time of tragedy, but when the tragedy is gone, we tend to forget about that.

"One of the biggest issues that came out (of the 2015 Report Card) was that there continues to be a talent shortage throughout the state, much less in our region. I mentioned at the forum that every city is boasting that they're the best place to live and have the best people. Through that, they try to incentivize new companies to move there. But that's the same old pitch everybody else is making.

How can Indiana become an even better place to live, work and raise a family? Finding the answers to that question is the mission of *Indiana Vision 2025*, the Indiana Chamber's economic development plan.

Created by a statewide task force of business and organizational leaders and released in 2012, *Indiana Vision 2025* revolves around four drivers (Outstanding Talent, Attractive Business Climate, Superior Infrastructure and Dynamic and Creative Culture) and 33 goals.

The *Indiana Vision 2025* Report Card, released every other year, measures progress. The 2015 edition was published in June and coincided with regional forums in six cities (Elkhart, Evansville, Fort Wayne, Indianapolis, Merrillville and Sellersburg). The events served as outlets to deliver results, gain local analysis from business and community leaders, and offer best practices in the critical area of Outstanding Talent.

BizVoice[®] recently asked three forum participants to share their insights regarding opportunities and obstacles in their regions:

- Amish Shah: president and CEO, Kem Krest Corporation, Elkhart
- Alissa Fricke: marketing consultant, Thrive Marketing Strategies, Evansville
- Chris White: publisher, The Times Media Co., Munster

"The bottom line of everything is impact – to our customers, our employees and our community," Amish Shah says regarding what inspires him at Kem Krest.



"(The question should be) what's our differentiator in our region and in our city? We – call it Elkhart County or the region we live in – need to do a better job of leveraging those assets we have here and coordinating those efforts. I think the Regional Cities Initiative is at least helping getting everybody around the table, but we need more leadership there, more focus on the end game, which is, 'What's the game plan? What's the blueprint for what we need to do to make this region a strong place where we can attract and retain talent?' It's a conversation that everybody's having across the country."

Q: Did any of the Report Card results surprise you?

"I don't know about surprising, but our postsecondary education attainment is still very low, and that's a bit concerning. Poverty remains an issue. We can look at data and say we're getting better, but realistically it's still an issue. When you see a high poverty rate, even though it's trending upwards, it's still not trending toward college education attainment. What to me that equates to is that we either don't have the types of jobs that require college or we're not promoting enough reasons to go to college."

THRIVE MARKETING STRATEGIES

Founded: 2014; one employee (plus an intern)

Alissa Fricke established Thrive Marketing Strategies. The company works with small businesses in the Evansville area and on various community projects. Among its diverse clients are a family farm, financial advisor practice, fire protection provider and facial plastic surgeon.

Q: How would you describe the entrepreneurial environment in Evansville?

“It’s very welcoming. We have so many opportunities where I’m based. I think the issue is communicating the opportunities. I’m part of the Innovation Station co-working space in our downtown area. That has been a great experience for me not only to help me in my business and have other people to bounce ideas off of, but also to get inspired by the things that other people are doing.”

Q: Describe your role at the Evansville forum.

“I was on a panel with two other folks. We talked about some of the positive things happening in the region. I had a lot to share on that. I was asked, ‘As a business owner, are there some areas that have been really troublesome for me such as getting started or maybe some areas that can hold people back from business?’ What I shared was that I’ve had so many opportunities. But maybe if there’s a shortcoming, it’s letting people know about the opportunities.”

“The forum was a neat experience. It’s encouraging to know that the progressive, positive things happening here in Southwest Indiana fit into the vision for the state. It’s really great to see what successes other communities are having too.”

Q: Did any of the Report Card results surprise you?

“Attracting talent – that (*Indiana Vision 2025*) driver is big to me. (The state ranked a lowly 47th on the Kauffman Index of Entrepreneurial Activity.). Everyone is pushing for that in their individual cities or states, but we didn’t grow on that end in Indiana as much as I thought.”

“The postsecondary attainment rankings (which continue to lag,



Growing up, Alissa Fricke never imagined herself as an entrepreneur. She credits remarkable mentors with setting her on the path to success.

with ranks of 45th in associate degrees and 42nd in bachelor degrees) were surprising to me. That definitely should be an area of emphasis as we think about the brain drain. I don’t think everybody needs a college education – but as a whole, those numbers need to be higher for us to compete and to keep those people in Southwest Indiana hopefully and in Indiana in general after they do graduate.

“A lot of the goals around the country and in Indiana that people are setting revolve around attracting and retaining Millennials (Fricke is part of this age group), but I’m OK with the ‘non-talented’ Millennials going somewhere else. To me, it’s about getting talented people. I don’t care if you’re young or old. I want the passionate, talented people to stay here – whoever they are.”

THE TIMES MEDIA CO.

Publishes The Times of Northwest Indiana; founded: 1906; approximately 350 employees; White joined the company in 2013. Headquartered in Munster, *The Times of Northwest Indiana* also maintains offices in Crown Point, Valparaiso and Portage. It serves Lake, Porter and parts of LaPorte counties, as well as the southeast Chicago suburbs.

Q: How does *The Times* act as a regional voice for economic development?

“We’re the dominant news source in the region and we take that role very seriously. I fell in love with Northwest Indiana when I moved here two years ago. I see unlimited potential for what we can be, but we seem to be mired by our past. If I can do nothing other than provide an optimistic look and help celebrate those people who are working to make this area into what it should be – and are having success – then I’m doing my job.”

Q: Did any of the Report Card results surprise you?

“I don’t want to focus on the negative, but there were three measures for small business, and I was shocked to find that we had lost ground on all three of them: the Small Business Policy Index, Kauffman Entrepreneurial Index and the amount of venture capital invested. Small businesses employ more people than all of the Fortune 500. Those big employers in the future are the people starting out now, and

it’s a lot easier to help someone start than it is to recruit them after they’ve gotten off the ground. I was surprised there hadn’t been more focus placed in that area.”

Q: What is one of the issues explored in the Report Card that hits home?

“One that really excites me is working on the Outstanding Talent side to move our population ahead on the educational curve – whether that’s being certified in a skill or getting their college degrees and then having a job when they graduate right here. I think that’s the highest and best use of anything we can do.”

“We’ve got a great university system. I spoke at the Purdue Calumet graduation in December (2014) and the sad part was knowing that half of the people who were walking across the stage should have been carrying their suitcase. They weren’t going to be here a year from now. To deliver a message that, ‘We need you here,’ falls on deaf ears when there aren’t jobs in their field. That’s key.”



Publisher Chris White provides Gary Community School students with a tour of *The Times*.