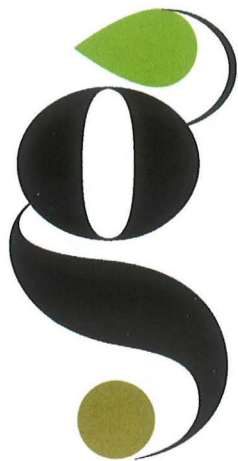




# THE GERMINATION PROJECT

*Sowing the Seeds of Change*  
by ALEX BRADEN





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You wouldn’t know it to look at him, but Ajay Raju was freaking out. Thunderous jock jams accompanying the gyrations of the Philadelphia 76ers dancers reverberated against the high walls and lofted ceiling of the Union League’s Lincoln Hall, which happened to be packed to the gills with a who’s who of Philadelphia society. At the front of the auditorium was Senator Bob Casey, having taken the stage following a rousing pep talk to the assembled throng from Sixers coach Brett Brown. It was Casey’s job to welcome an elite cadre of bright and bright-eyed teenagers, about to be drafted into the Germination Project, a new leadership incubator with lofty plans for the city and high expectations for its young Fellows. In a makeshift war room adjacent to all the action, an assistant with a headset had just whispered to Raju that the official Draft Day team jerseys—the very emblem of the occasion—were nowhere to be found. The evening thus far had been a master class in carefully organized quasi-chaos, but now it all seemed about to unravel.

“I was a little panicked,” admits Raju, two months later and quite at ease in his well-appointed Dilworth Paxson office on the 34th Floor of Centre Square East, the yellow eye of City Hall’s clock tower peering in through his window, “but I sure wasn’t about to show it. What’s Eddie Murphy’s line in *Trading Places*?” he wonders rhetorically, having memorized virtually every bit of dialogue in the classic Philadelphia rags to riches comedy. “‘Karate man bruises on the inside.’” [Full disclosure: I have worked with Raju for the past eight years and have heard him quote *Trading Places* many times. At length.] “That was me,” he continues. “We’d put this whole event together like a perfectly tailored suit, and one bad stitch was about to rip the whole thing apart at the crotch.”

But let’s back up. Thirty years ago, Ajay Raju didn’t run a storied Philadelphia law firm, manage a venture fund or helm a philanthropic foundation. In 1984, he was a 14-year-old immigrant from Bhopal, India, newly settled with his parents and younger brother in the reaches of

Northeast Philly. Like a typical immigrant kid, he didn’t have connections or resources to leverage. But—and also like a typical immigrant kid—he possessed an innate sense of drive that was lost neither in transit nor translation. At George Washington High School, he made the track team as a sprinter and was surprised at the ready supply of adulation heaped on athletes, while the academic stars were simply declared nerds and relegated to their appropriate caste. In India, just the opposite had been true. Sports were generally regarded as a scholastic afterthought, and the nerds were exalted as the cool kids. “It struck me as backward,” says Raju. “Why was everyone so fixated on how well a kid could throw a ball down a field or how fast he could run around a big oval? It seemed to me the better investment was in those smart, ambitious kids who’d most likely be our bosses one day.” He pauses. “Not that I minded getting attention as an athlete.”

Eventually, the realities of human physiology led Raju to conclude his





pursuit of a career in cleats.

Graduating from Temple University's Beasley School of Law in 1996, Raju set about building his business and his brand. As he became increasingly enmeshed in Philadelphia's civic society, Raju grew ever more vexed by the institutional dysfunction he encountered and its sclerotic effect on progress. "I wondered how it was that this city, literally the crucible of modern western democracy, could have veered so dramatically off track," says Raju. "As a newcomer, I'd embraced Philly's historical mythology—the Constitution, Ben Franklin, the Liberty Bell, all of it. But now that I'd gotten a closer look into the problems that had been plaguing us for decades, it was hard not to despair at the thought that

Philadelphia's greatness was an artifact of the past." What bothered Raju about Philadelphia's current condition was the same laundry list of ills cited in so many criticisms of modern American urban centers: a stubbornly abysmal poverty rate, a chronically underfunded and underperforming public school system, persistently high incidences of violent crime, homelessness, unemployment and public health issues.

"I was less interested in figuring out where we'd gone wrong than in finding a new path forward," Raju emphasizes. "But it was clear to me that the obstacles in Philadelphia's way wouldn't be overcome with a piece of legislation or a wheelbarrow full of money. What we really needed was long-term stewardship;

and for that, we'd need an ecosystem to cultivate these stewards, these leaders, to instill in them a commitment to serve the city. There's never been a shortage of great minds to come out of Philly; the problem has always been convincing them to stay here."

For Raju, the moment for action was now. He points to a confluence of encouraging data, which, set against the dismal backdrop of the aforementioned indicators, suggest a hopeful moment ripe for the seizing. "Eight billion dollars in major property developments around Philly, an ascendant arts scene to rival anything in Europe, thriving institutions of higher learning; the list goes on," says Raju, sounding like a salesman for the city, which, of course, he is. "If there



wasn't an undercurrent of hope for what Philadelphia might become, we wouldn't be seeing these big bets on business, population and culture here."

The sense that Philadelphia is at a tipping point had been preoccupying Raju for a while, but it was a conversation with his daughter Madison, then a freshman at the Baldwin School, that made him realize what he could try to do about it. "Madison and I were talking about the virtues of grit and the vices of privilege and what it means to be really dedicated to a purpose," Raju recalls. "She could have dismissed my perspective as just another when-I-was-your-age lecture from an immigrant dad, but instead she pointed out to me that kids are capable of understanding these concepts, in some cases with more clarity, and certainly with less cynicism, than adults. Madison helped me conclude that if the purpose at hand is sustainable progress for our region, then we ought to be fostering that purpose in the kids who can achieve it over the course of their lives. These are the seeds that we build the ecosystem around."

And from that revelation, the Germination Project emerged. Established with a foundational grant from the Pamela and Ajay Raju Foundation, the Germination Project's stated purpose is to be a "catalytic investment" in Philadelphia's future. By

striving to identify, nurture, encourage and connect the brightest young people around—from their high school years through their careers—to commit themselves to the greater civic good, the Germination Project seeks nothing less than to establish a self-sustaining ecosystem to transform Philadelphia.

By January of 2015, 10 high schools representing a cross-section of Philadelphia's public, parochial, charter and suburban education systems had been chosen to participate in the Germination Project's pilot program. Each school's administrators were tasked with nominating candidates from among their 10th-grade classes to apply for admission as student Fellows. Dozens of capable students submitted application packages consisting of transcripts, personal statements and letters of recommendation for consideration by the Germination Project's selection committee.

Meanwhile, Raju tore through his Rolodex seeking collaborators for the new endeavor. "It was critical that any institutional partner of the Germination Project share our philosophical mindset," he says. "We needed them to view this as the beginning of a decades-long investment where returns would be measured longitudinally." Raju quickly managed to secure the buy-in of a wide

range of businesses, nonprofits and educational institutions; chief among these were the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton Social Impact Initiative and the Philadelphia 76ers organization.

Raju and his fellow Foundation trustees delegated to Wharton the design of the Germination Project's Leadership Boot Camp, an intensive ongoing program of experiential leadership and social entrepreneurship training held at the University of Pennsylvania. Further collaborations between the Germination Project and Wharton include a business plan competition aimed at injecting entrepreneurial energy—and \$100,000 in seed money—into the region's next generation of small-business leaders. With the Philadelphia 76ers, an organization Raju describes as "just as focused on securing a successful future as we are," Germination Project Fellows will coordinate a variety of community outreach and development initiatives. The Sixers had also offered to supply the glitz for the Germination Project's Draft Day Benefit Gala. Which brings us back to those jerseys.

In mid-April of 2015, having pored over countless compelling applications and conducted multiple rounds of interviews with finalists, the Germination Project's selection committee chose 15



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students to matriculate into its inaugural class. The program's launch was to be held in the lavish mode of a high school prom multiplied by an NBA draft ceremony. Needless to say, it was a first for the Union League. But before all that, the Fellows needed threads. Boyds stepped in. "As much as the Union League or City Hall itself, Boyds is a landmark and an institution in Philadelphia," says Raju. "Boyds has been dressing the best in class for generations, but I also thought that it was meaningful here, with a group of kids from a variety of circumstances, to dispel notions of class distinction," Raju adds. "Basketball superstars would be dressed to the nines for an event like this, so why shouldn't our superstar future leaders get the same treatment?"

Into the spotlight they stepped.

The night of the Draft Day Gala, a warm June breeze ushered the Fellows and their hundreds of new supporters and benefactors from Broad Street into the Union League. A stirring short video introduced the Germination Project to the assembled guests, as butlered hors d'oeuvres and strategically placed cheesesteak stations kept them all fed. A live band got the crowd dancing before official events had even begun. Coach Brown offered an exhortation to the Fellows as they lined up in the wings to be announced as "picks" in the Germination Project draft, at which point each would climb the stage to be received and to receive an official Philadelphia 76ers jersey customized with his or her name and the Germination Project logo. Mere moments before the first Fellow's name

was called, another of Raju's headset-clad aides slid into the war room with the newfound jerseys. In a lightning round of covert hot potato, the jerseys were delivered to the podium, and in turn to each Fellow, beaming before the cheers of the crowd. Off to the side, Raju breathed a barely perceptible sigh. Karate man was relieved.

The Germination Project Fellows danced with their families and friends, new and old alike, late into the evening. Ahead of them lay their own futures, and the future they'd secure for Philadelphia.



[www.germinationproject.com](http://www.germinationproject.com)