

# Tech entrepreneur turned small-town Texas values into a global social network

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The gig: Nirav Tolia, 45, is the co-founder and chief executive of Nextdoor, the neighborhood social network that lets people connect with their neighbors, share news, tips and sometimes gossip with their local community. The San Francisco-based 152-employee startup has raised \$210 million in venture capital funding and boasts more than 126,000 communities using its platform, covering more than 70 percent of U.S. neighborhoods.

Small-town life: The son of immigrant physicians from India, Tolia grew up in Odessa, Texas (the same Odessa from "Friday Night Lights"), where he attended Odessa Permian High School (yes, the same one from the book and movie). Rather than boring him, his small-town upbringing laid the groundwork for the startups he'd be drawn to in the future.

"There wasn't a lot of great scenery, there wasn't an ocean nearby, there were no mountains, there wasn't money, there wasn't art," Tolia said of his home town. "But there was a very supportive community of people that cared about each other. People relied on their neighbors, they believed in the golden rule, and those were just values and ethics you didn't take for granted."

American dream: Tolia didn't get a typical Odessa upbringing, though. His parents, who arrived in the U.S. in the 1970s with a few hundred dollars in their pockets, instilled in him a fearless ambition: If they could uproot their lives and move across oceans in pursuit of a better life, what couldn't he do?

"My father was someone who pushed me to be the best I could be," Tolia said. "He would say God has given you this potential - you have a duty to yourself to do the best that you can." So while his peers were applying to nearby colleges in their senior year of [high school](#), Tolia went out on a limb and applied to Stanford.

"I remember people in high school telling me, 'You're going to be so far away from home,' and I remember thinking, 'Yeah, but my parents went far away from home too.' So that was a tremendous gift my parents gave me: the gift of ambition, the gift of work ethic, of optimism."

Stanford: Fresh out of high school, becoming a physician made a lot of sense to Tolia - he saw it as a financially stable profession that was intellectually stimulating, while offering him the opportunity to change people's lives. But there was a problem: While at Stanford, he realized that he couldn't stand being in hospitals.

"I found a gap between what I perceived the practice of medicine to be and what I saw at Stanford," he said. "My head was telling me to be a doctor, but my heart was a little uncertain. Whenever I followed my heart and bolstered it with my head, it worked out pretty well." He continued taking pre-med courses, but ended up majoring in English literature instead.

The business of a cappella: Tolia credits his pre-med classes with teaching him to think critically, his English literature classes for teaching him to communicate effectively and his time in the all-male Stanford a cappella group, the Stanford Fleet Street Singers, for rounding things out. In addition to singing in the group, Tolia became its business manager after the previous manager graduated.

"I didn't have any mentorship, and there was no charter or goal," said Tolia, who at this point had zero business experience. "It was like

entrepreneurship today, which is you have a vision, and you try to shape that vision based on internal and external data."

Tolia booked gigs for the group, arranged for them to go on tour and raised funds to record an album. Determined to elevate the Fleet Street Singers to the same level as "the granddaddy of a cappella groups - the Yale Whiffenpoofs," he befriended the Whiffenpoof's business manager so he could learn from the best. And it's something he still does today, although not with a cappella. "Now I have a group of CEOs I meet with once a month to talk about things like this," he said.

**Yahoo and the Cowboys:** Tolia never thought of himself as a "computer guy." But as a rare Dallas Cowboys fan living in the city of the San Francisco 49ers, he became enamored with the internet when he realized that he could use it to connect with other Cowboys fans.

He joined Yahoo straight out of college as employee 73 and started at the bottom of the totem pole as a "surfer," spending his days categorizing websites (this was back when search engines were still human-built directories). "Working at Yahoo in the late '90s was like working at Google, Facebook, pick your best company, all rolled into one," Tolia said. "I realized I loved tech, I loved creating something from nothing. I became addicted to make people's lives better at scale."

**Striking out:** In 1999, shortly before the dot-com bust, Tolia decided to strike out on his own, leaving Yahoo at its height and co-founding the community review site Epinions.com. But few tech firms were able to weather the crash, and Epinions barely pulled through, shrinking its workforce from hundreds down to 20. An emergency round of funding came through when the company was weeks away from folding, and it was later sold to eBay for \$620 million.

Despite the startup's happy ending, Tolia said the experience of laying

off so many employees made him a much more conservative businessman. "Layoffs are the biggest failure of management because it's not being able to forecast where the company is going," Tolia said. "Even though those scars healed many years ago, they never go away."

Nextdoor: In Odessa, tight-knit communities were formed in person, with neighbors. On the internet, the world became so flat and accessible that it didn't seem to matter where people lived anymore. With Nextdoor, things have come "full circle," said Tolia, who noted that the platform is in many ways a natural part of his personal journey.

"Everything I've done in my career is about community," he said. "Odessa was about community. Fleet Street was about community. Epinions was an online community. Building these companies is about community."

Advice: "You want to surround yourself with people you like, trust and respect," Tolia said. "Like is all about having fun, respect is about learning and trust is about integrity - people who have your back in good times and bad."

Personal: Tolia lives in San Francisco with his wife Megha and three young sons.

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