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14-Year-Old Jersey Kid Invented Email, Seeks Innovative Ideas

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Shiva Ayyadurai as a teen and today.

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“One day, electronic mail, like Edison’s bulb, may also permeate and pervade our daily lives... Volumes of written work, for example, shall become obsolete.”

These words were part of a scholarship essay written back in 1981 but they could not be truer today.

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The author of the essay was Shiva Ayyadurai, a 14-year-old kid living in New Jersey at the time. He wasn’t just any kid though. Ayyadurai was the kid who invented email.

Born in India, Ayyadurai and his parents came over to the United States and settled in Patterson, New Jersey in 1970. “They were not your typical immigrants.” Ayyadurai said. His mom was a mathematician and his dad worked as a chemical engineer.

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“They came for adventure.”

It’s not surprising that the kid that wrote the 50,000 lines of code to create email would have parents with a background in science and technology. However, the person he looked up to the most was his grandmother.



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Visiting his grandparents back in India he recalls being captivated by his grandmother's ability to heal people using alternative medicine.

"As a kid I was fascinated and always wanted to be a healer like this." Dr. Ayyadurai, now 50 explained that his grandmother was a Shaman and could look at someone's face and know what was going on inside their body.

Although computer programming isn't the same field as medicine, Ayyadurai found that like his grandmother's skill for studying facial expressions, he too had a knack for patterns that would lead him down the road of coding.

Ayyadurai was at the top of his class at Livingston high school in Newark and excelled at math. In high school "people try to put you in boxes," but Ayyadurai was both academic and athletic.

Ayyadurai was one of 40 students accepted to a program at the Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences of NYU that would teach him 8 different programming languages. Later he would use this knowledge to create the code for email with fortran language.

Soon after that Ayyadurai started a co-op of sorts at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ). In the morning he would begin his day at Livingston high and then travel 30 miles to work at a medical university.

Surrounded by medical professionals, Ayyadurai was finally working in a field that he was passionate about. However, Dr. Leslie Michelson, a physicist there had other plans for the young colleague.

Offices throughout the country including UMDNJ's 3 campuses were using the inter-office mail system to communicate with each other. This meant that secretaries were typing up memos using typewriters and then manually placing the letters into tubes to be sent through to people within the same office.

Since Ayyadurai's knowledge of computer coding, Michelson gave him the task of making an electronic version of the system.

This wasn't like some teacher giving a student a school project. Michelson never once treated Ayyadurai as a child.

"I will treat you the same as everyone," Ayyadurai recalls of Michelson's instructions.

Ayyadurai set off to study the inter-office mail system as it were so he could create the best possible electronic version.

The inbox and outbox of email were real life bins that memorandums would be placed in and the paper clip icon someone has to click to attach a file was no more than a real paperclip to hold the papers together.

Ayyadurai led a seminar for 200 doctors at UMDNJ's campus to explain his



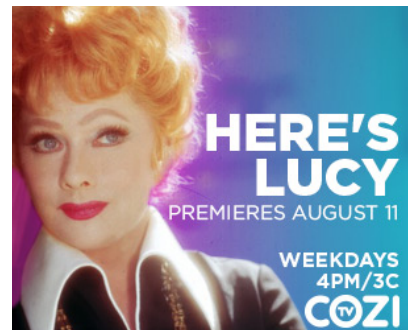
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invention. He remembers some being skeptical of the new email system and content with the laborious manual system that was in place. Luckily, innovation won over and email was invented in 1978, and was later copyrighted on August 30, 1982.

The internet was just in the beginning stages at that time but that was fine. No one had to dial up or sign into a Wi-Fi network because an internet connection was not required for this type of email.

Although the coding was complicated Ayyadurai understood that the application he would create needed to be easy to use.

“Email for me and you.”

Ayyadurai was able to make his mark on the world because people older than him didn't underestimate him.

Teens today are likewise on the pulse of new technology. Many have invented smartphone apps like Alissa Chavez from New Mexico who last month invented a phone alarm to prevent parents from leaving kids in hot cars.

Philo Farnsworth was another kid inventor. At just 14 the boy from Idaho invented television back in 1922. “A lot of great innovation is coming out of Newark...Idaho. That's what the American spirit is all about.”

To continue this spirit of innovation Ayyadurai launched Innovation Programs, a grant program that supports youth initiative.

[This year's application](#) is open to teenagers ages 14-18 that have an innovative idea or concept. Six students from the United States as well as six international students will be selected.

Applications are being accepted until Monday August 18 and winners will be announced on the anniversary of “email” on August 30.

To think that Ayyadurai graduated created email before he ever graduated from MIT, before he even graduated from high school is encouragement enough for teens to apply and carry on the spirit of innovation.

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