

## **Promoting Diversity in the Courts: Vishnu Priya, 1/10/22**

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, news and insights from the New York Courts. I'm John Caher.

In today's Diversity Dialogue segment, we're pleased and honored to have an opportunity to chat with Vishnu Priya, principal applications programmer in the court systems' Division of Technology.

Vishnu is a native of India, who came to United States in 2001, with a bachelor's degree in electrical and electronics engineering. She earned a master's in information science at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. Vishnu came to work for the court system shortly after graduating from RPI and has been a member of the court family ever since.

Vishnu, thank you for coming on the program. Let's start at a very good place, the beginning. Tell me, if you would, about your childhood, where you grew up, what your parents did, who or what inspired you.

Vishnu Priya: Thank you, John, firstly, for having me here and for giving me the opportunity to share my story.

Well, starting at the beginning, I grew up in Chennai, which is a seaside city in Southern India. I had a typical childhood, but one thing that's different from here is, I grew up in a large extended family of eight people in my house.

My mom was a chemistry lecturer before she was married to my father. My dad owned a business that manufactured these one-off research-based projects, rocket ship parts for the launch of the rocket or mining conveyor belts or weather radar. So, always been immersed in the sciences a little bit. My brother is also in the sciences and engineering. He's a mechanical engineer.

John Caher: What would you like native born Americans to know about life in India and the Indian people?

Vishnu Priya: It's slower paced. Life in India is not laid back to the extent where it's completely not time-based, but it's a little slower. There's more of a focus on communities' involvement in your upbringing or your life. There's no one definition for the people or India itself. We're a conglomerate of

these different, diverse religions and cultures and languages that all form this one country called India but are very, very different from area to region to state. We speak different languages, dress differently, celebrate different things, eat different foods. So, everything about our lives is as diverse as the people. It's a very diverse place with a deep history, of thousands of years. We've had Mughals invade us. We've had the British colonialism. So, we have a lot of influences that add to the richness of the people and the culture.

John Caher: Now, your customs and traditions, are they different, depending on which region you're from or are there common traditions?

Vishnu Priya: There are some, also, obviously dependent on the religions you practice. We have a lot of religions in India. The major religion is Hinduism. So, there are a common theme and thread of festivals that every Hindu celebrates. But within that band of Hinduism, there's also subsets that celebrate different things, that do things a little differently, that eat different foods or that focus on different aspects of the festival itself. Where I grew up, they have a harvest festival, which we didn't celebrate in the place I'm from originally. They just do things a little differently. It's very nuanced.

John Caher: My guess is that, with your parents' background, you may have developed an interest in technology fairly young. Is that right?

Vishnu Priya: Yes. Being immersed in it day in and day out and because my dad owned his own business, there was no separation. He would bring it home. It wasn't a job for him. That was what he did. So, there was a lot of discussion at home about all his projects, or he'd be pouring over all his drafts and drawings at home. So, I'd see him do his work.

He even gave my brother and I a jet engine to pull apart, when we were like 10 or 12. We were very thrilled to pull it apart, but got only halfway through putting it back together again! So yes, I was immersed in the sciences and technology and engineering from an early age.

John Caher: Now, what about your mother? Was mainstream India welcoming, receptive to women in technology at that time?

Vishnu Priya: India's always been very forward thinking in that regard. We've had lots of scientists, even in the early 1900s. So, we've had some physicists and scientists who were women. It's not discouraged, but not commonplace.

John Caher: It sounds like you grew up in a wonderful place, with lots of opportunities. So, what brought you to the United States?

Vishnu Priya: Well, I wanted to come here to get my master's degree. Most people know that the U.S. is renowned worldwide for the quality in higher education, especially within the sciences and technology fields. I wanted to get my master's degree here. So, I came here.

John Caher: Did you intend to stay here, or was your initial plan to study here and go back home?

Vishnu Priya: I intended to stay here because there's better opportunity. There's more choices for careers, more freedom. There's more equality. Also, I met my fiancé, and I decided I want to make my home here. So, I decided I'd stay here.

John Caher: So you graduate from RPI, a topnotch technical institute, with a master's degree and you need a job. What in the world made you think of the court system of all places?

Vishnu Priya: Well, it wasn't the first thing that popped into my head when I was looking for a job after graduating. I went the traditional route. I looked in the more mainstream technology shops, like Microsoft or wherever else, that make software. So, those were my focus for a while. But then my fiancé, he also works for the court system and he's a programmer. And he said, "Hey, there's an open position. Do you want to apply for it? You should give it a shot."

He'd always spoken highly of the courts as a workplace and the quality and the type of work he did. So, I decided I'd give it a try and I got in, and here we are almost 20 years later.

John Caher: What exactly do you do? What does a principal applications programmer for the court system actually do?

Vishnu Priya: Most of the programmers' series of jobs at the court systems, we write the systems that the courts use for their day-to-day operations. We also deploy the websites that the public would use and internal systems that the administrators use for their day-to-day operations and for decision making. So, a principal applications programmer is more like the senior level developer who has a team of developers. They make the technical architecture decisions, or they set the direction for their team on how to deploy projects or implement complex pieces of code. So, the principal

applications programmer is a very seasoned developer who makes design decisions and helps their team solve problems.

John Caher: Now that sounds kind of abstract, but I also know that you were the technical lead for the statewide domestic violence system, and also helped develop the order of protection module for criminal and family court use. Is that an example of how technology really helps people in the courts in a very, very tangible and possibly even lifesaving way?

Vishnu Priya: Oh, that is good example of the work we do and how it facilitates and enhances the court's functions and operations. We not only write the systems that collect the data about the case, but with the orders of protection, the system uses those pieces of data to do complex calculations, which we then disseminate to our partners and our consumers.

In the case of the orders of protection, our partner and consumer would be the police departments that enforce these orders of protection, which are critical to people's lives. We also have the FBI and the NICS registry as a consumer. They get firearm purchase prohibitors from the data we collect, that we then calculate to figure out if a certain person cannot purchase a firearm. There's a lot of work we do, not just collecting the case information, but we also calculate these numbers or indicators, and we feed them to different consumers.

John Caher: Now, it seems like the stakes are very, very, very high because without that information, I don't know what the court system would do. I don't know what the police would do. It sounds like this really could be a life or death matter.

Vishnu Priya: Yes. It's a very critical, 24-hour a day systems that needs to stay up. So, there's a lot on the line. We just have to make sure our systems are up 24/7. It's pretty nerve wracking but rewarding because you're helping people.

John Caher: Sure. I can see that. Now, much of the time, I think you folks maybe are in the background. The last couple of years, you've been very, very much in the foreground because of the pandemic and our need to rely very, very quickly and very, very thoroughly on technology. How has the pandemic changed your professional life?

Vishnu Priya: What the pandemic changed is how we, as the courts overall, operate and function. The courts are a very in-person business. The litigants and people come to the courthouses. So, the Division of Technology and

everyone involved, the whole court system had to flip and pivot once the pandemic basically shut us down. We had to figure out a way to take those in-person operations and make them remote.

We did a lot of work to get our infrastructure in place and our judges trained. And attorneys who aren't court employees, they needed training too. So, we spent a lot of our efforts at DoT, helping to get people up to speed on how to do these operations remotely.

It also added lot of new types of work for us at DoT, on remote filings and providing those type of features to the users and the courts.

John Caher: Now, I know the last couple years, you've been focusing on data and business intelligence. For the uninitiated, like me, what exactly does that mean?

Vishnu Priya: I've had more of an interest in the data side. I mean, we do have a large volume and large collection of data, being the courts. That goes back a long time, as well. On decisions, on filings, on anything you can think of that the courts handle, we have the data.

So, at the BI [Business Intelligence] team, which is a fairly recent addition to DoT, we are tasked with basically taking the data from these disparate systems that we have, that collect case data. We try to collate them and put them together in a centralized warehouse or a data mart so that we can then report with that data.

So, we write reports for court operations. We write reports for court administration. This helps them with their day-to-day business and decision making. Where is more funding needed? If the administrators need to know, they can look at the numbers and figure out which parts need more attention. With court operations, they can see their caseload data on a day-to-day basis. We also help with the statistics and the research side. Court research needs a specific data set for whatever research they're trying to accomplish. We give them that. So, we do a lot with the data.

John Caher: Basically, you can't have a fact-based operation without facts and you provide the facts.

Vishnu Priya: Yes, we do.

John Caher: Now, there's a lot of talk in the court system about diversity and the court system's commitment to providing opportunities for people across the spectrum. Has that been your experience?

Vishnu Priya: Yes. Since the start, at the beginning, almost 20 years ago, I was one of the few, I guess, "persons of color" here, but people were very welcoming. I never felt like I was treated differently. It makes for a good workplace and a good environment to grow and to just be yourself. Everyone at DoT has always been that way. I have no reason to believe otherwise, because I've been treated that way.

John Caher: That's good to hear. Now, if you were talking to the graduating class at RPI, would you encourage technology students to consider a career in the courts?

Vishnu Priya: Yes. Especially if you have a degree in technology, but you lean towards public service or you want to help people, this is a good place to have a career where you could have an impact on people's lives, or just in general, serving the public.

There's many opportunities. We have programming jobs. We have help desk jobs because you need to help the courts. So, if you're more of a people person, you can find a career in that niche. We have a vast, statewide network. You could have a job in networking. So, we have a lot of opportunities for a technology career in the courts.

John Caher: Well, that's good to hear. Vishnu, thank you for all you do to keep us up and running every day, and thank you for coming on the program.

Vishnu Priya: Thank you for having me.