



Ram Talluri

PHOTO BY JOB CONGER

# A franchise with its ups and downs

by Job Conger

Ram Talluri is CEO and managing director of Lead IT Corporation, an international company which has recently announced plans to open two Sky Zone franchises. Sky Zone is a California firm which has patented “the first all-trampoline walled playing court” concept and currently operates 170 such courts, including two already in Illinois (Aurora and Elmhurst). Talluri plans to open one on Springfield’s far west side, at 3454 Liberty Dr., in the second week of April. If all goes as planned, a smaller Bloomington Sky Zone will also be open before the end of 2016. The trampoline courts are the latest international entrepreneurial machinations of a software engineer who emigrated from Hyderabad, India, to Springfield in 2001.

Hyderabad, population 6.8 million, is the fourth-largest city in India. Talluri recently recalled how professional success was never a concern for him but his future was. “I was a state government employee in India,” he said. “I wanted to become a businessman and I had a lot of dreams. I came here alone with all my dreams and \$115 in my pocket.” Soon after, he began contracting jobs with the state of Illinois at \$20 per hour and worked as a contractor with several state agencies. “I realized I had (significant skills) that could be marketed.” He also realized during that time “that I do not like to work; I wanted to become an entrepreneur.”

He took the first step by launching an IT staffing company. “I rented an office in Fairhills Mall for \$200 a month with a table, a computer and a phone.” The business grew, initially with successful bids for state contracts, then with private industry, eventually servicing General Electric and Enterprise Rent-A-Car. “Enterprise is my

biggest client,” he said. “We have more than 40 employees working there.”

Today, Lead IT employs 600 people, including 200 in Hyderabad along with offices in Chicago; Albany, New York; and Vancouver, Canada. Talluri also owns Ram Innovations LLC (real estate), Hut7, Charger hotels, SRT Movie House (film production) and the new Ram Entertainment – which he launched in connection with his plans for his two Illinois Sky Zones – and more. Gross billing for all his companies in 2015 was \$100 million.

Talluri oversees all of his successes from his headquarters in suite 210 at 1999 Wabash Ave. while maintaining a major presence in Hyderabad. The Springfield office employs eight, not including the CEO. Surprisingly, perhaps, when asked if he travels the intercontinental distances with a business jet such as a Grumman Gulfstream or Bombardier Global Express, he replied that he owns no business aircraft. “I prefer to travel on commercial airlines because I do not like a lot of luxury in my life. I prefer to fly like most of the people I know.”

How did an IT specialist connect to a trampoline franchise? “There are not many things here in Springfield for kids to do,” he says. “My kids, when there is no school, they ask me to take them to St. Louis or Chicago. I hear the same thing from a lot of families.”

Talluri expects to employ 60 at the Springfield Sky Zone and 50 in Bloomington. His plan is to hire mostly kids who are attending college in order help further their education. “In my heart, I wanted to give something back to Springfield because it has given so much to me,” he said. □

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