

Matt Harpalani, 24, went from working in a bank to dressing bankers.



“I used to cash checks all day—so boring. Now there are headaches, but paperwork isn’t so bad when it’s your own business.”

The banker turned... custom tailor

“I’ve always wanted to work with clothes,” says Matt Harpalani, 24. His grandfather worked in the textile business in India, and when his father, Bob, emigrated to Houston in the ‘70s, he set up a successful custom-tailoring shop. But whenever Matt expressed interest in the family business, his father told him to get an education instead. “My dad wanted me to have a better life than he had. He felt this was a dying business and I wouldn’t make good money doing it,” Matt says. Succumbing to his father’s

wishes, Matt earned an economics degree from the University of Houston in 2006, while working as a bank teller. “I hate repetition, and it was the same thing over and over,” he says, sighing. “I cashed checks all day. It was so boring.”

Finally, Matt couldn’t ignore his tailoring dreams any longer and appealed to his uncle, who in turn convinced Matt’s father to relent. Sort of. Because business was slowing in Houston, his dad told him he had to move to New York, where the market for custom-made suits was better. “I agreed. I wanted to move to New York, and everyone who works for my dad says he’s really stern,” Matt says. Four months

later, in October 2006, Matt used his savings to pay the rent on an apartment in Rego Park, Queens, where some of his relatives lived, and began his 70-minute commute to Wall Street Custom Clothiers at Fulton and Nassau Streets. As an apprentice there, he worked unpaid six days a week, fetching coffee and making deliveries for his father’s friend, owner Kris Ramani. “I was his personal errand boy. I felt like Anne Hathaway in *The Devil Wears Prada*,” he says, shaking his head.

Matt already had basic sewing skills learned in high school home economics classes, and eventually he gained the older man’s trust—Kris would demonstrate a skill, like adjusting a sleeve, then allow Matt to do it, watching him and correcting his mistakes. Matt soon became proficient in measuring customers and tailoring sleeves, then pants, shirts and full suits.

But four months into the apprenticeship, Kris announced his retirement—it was time for Matt to go out on his own. In April 2007, with seed money from his father, Matt started Imparali Custom Tailors in a third-floor suite at Fifth Avenue and 49th St. “I’m building word-of-mouth with customers from Lehman Brothers and Morgan Stanley. I eventually want a storefront business, like Duncan Quinn or Lord Willy’s,” Matt says, referring to bespoke shops in Nolita that specialize in putting a modern twist on suits. “I want to blend the old school with the modern.”

Matt now has three tailors working for him, and his suits, which start at \$700, can be delivered in about six weeks. Their quality, he believes, matches—and even exceeds—that of the “big guys” in New York. “I love the customer interaction and working with my hands,” Matt says. “Yes, there are headaches, but even paperwork isn’t so bad when it’s your own business.” He is so focused on keeping up with demand that he’s in the office seven days a week. (Sundays are often the only day his banker clients have time to come in.)

Matt would eventually like to expand to multiple stores, but for now, he’s happy where he is, working his way out of a \$100,000 debt. “It’s finally clicking,” Matt says. “I think my dad is proud of me, but he will never say it. He wants me to stay humble.”