

Interview with Satveer Chaudhary

**Interviewed by Polly Sonifer
March 27, 1997**

PS: This is Polly Sonifer, interviewing Satveer Chaudhary, on March 27, 1997. Hello, Satveer. How are you today?

SC: Very well, thank you.

PS: Good. I've got some questions here, and I'd like you to first tell me a little bit about yourself, where you were born, what your family was like at the time you were born, and so on.

SC: Well, I don't remember much about my family on the day I was born, but I was born in University of Minnesota Hospital and grew up in, starting out the first couple of years, we were in St. Paul, where my parents were--my dad was going to school and my mom was working. That was just three years after they came here, so in '69. And they--this is like Roots.

PS: Yes!

SC: And then after that, we lived in St. Anthony, and then when I was seven we moved to Fridley, and that's where we've been for the last twenty years. It's kind of been our permanent home.

PS: Are you the first born?

SC: First born.

PS: And do you have siblings?

SC: My younger brother, Ravi, is twenty-six, and my younger sister, Bala, is nineteen. My brother is a lieutenant in the air force, and he graduated from the Air Force Academy. My sister is at the University of Chicago. She's a sophomore, studying pre-med. And we all went to Columbia Heights High School.

PS: And your parents' names?

SC: Dr. S.P.S. and Raj.

PS: S.P.S. is his name?

SC: Surendra Pal Singh.

PS: And your mother's name is?

SC: Raj.

PS: Okay. What kind of work did your father or both your parents do when you were growing up?

SC: Dad was a veterinarian in India before he came here. When he first came here, he went to the University of Missouri in Columbia to get his master's, and then he started his Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota, St. Paul campus, but he quit that to join the USDA, where he's been a meat and poultry inspector since.

PS: Did he ever finish his Ph.D.?

SC: No. He's a doctor of veterinary medicine. And Mom was a lab technician at the University of Minnesota for the longest time, but then in the eighties she dropped that business and decided to start her own business, and so she's been importing and wholesaling costume jewelry and accessories. She's the sole proprietor.

PS: Is that jewelry from India?

SC: From all over, just costume jewelry, junk that women like to wear. [Laughter]

PS: We won't let your mother see you called it junk.

SC: She knows my feelings on it, and her response is, "It's not for you to judge," and that's true. As long as they buy it, that's what she cares about.

PS: What do you know about your parents' background in India?

SC: Dad was one of five brothers, and they were all born in Kasimpur Kedi in Haryana. However, I'm not sure precisely when, but my grandfather moved to Mathura, U.P., because he was the chief of police. That's where he was stationed there, and so that's where the family kind of ultimately settled. And now only one other brother is alive, and he lives in--I don't know where exactly he lives. But his other brother's family still lives there.

One brother died of--I think he had some pneumonia or something, diabetes for the longest time, so he died. One brother was actually murdered in some odd revenge-type killing which was actually meant for my cousin's police husband, but actually ended up

hitting my uncle. So their family is still there. And then another brother died in 1989 of lung cancer. He actually brought his family to the U.S., as well, in the early eighties, so my aunt and three cousins are here in Minneapolis, as well. I think that's that. So Dad's background dates back to in Haryana, and we're Jats by caste.

PS: In Jaipur?

SC: No. Our caste is Jat.

PS: Okay. We'll figure that one out later.

SC: And then Mom, Mom is also a Jat. Their family is Jat, but they're kind of from all around, and I don't know what the original roots are. Mom's dad was a major in the army in British India and fought in North Africa and all of that, but they finally settled in Rothak, which is Haryana technically, just outside of Delhi.

And she has three sisters, although she has one younger brother, and actually my present grandmother is not my mother's mother. My mother's mother, she was killed in some sort of construction accident there. Some wall fell on her or something like that. At least that's how my mom explained it. And so then my grandfather remarried. Well, that's been a long time ago. So she has one, two--well, maybe it's just two sisters and a little brother, I think. None of them came here, although the one has come to visit. A sister and her husband have come to visit.

That's the background in a nutshell, unless you have any other--

PS: No. Do you know why it is that your father decided to emigrate?

SC: Yes. I think just basic opportunity. He was able to, and so he did.

PS: So he already had his veterinarian degree in India?

SC: Yes.

PS: Was he already working as a vet?

SC: Yes, he was already--he had a practice.

PS: Were your parents married before they came here?

SC: Yes, but only for six months. Then they came over in '66.

PS: Had they had an arranged marriage?

SC: Yes. The story is somewhat like this. Dad's dad showed Dad some pictures, and apparently Dad wasn't interested in getting married or something like that. And then later on, he showed him the same pictures and noticed my mom again and was quite impressed with the way she looked, and then he went to go visit her.

PS: Your dad went to visit her?

SC: Yes, went to see her, and she was outside watering the lawn or something. So they came inside and they talked, and my dad talked with her father for a while. And then they finally were left alone, and the first thing my dad said to my mom was, "I play tennis," and my mom said, "I play tennis, too." [Laughter] That was it.

PS: So they decided to get married because they both played tennis?

SC: Yes, apparently.

PS: Well, that's easy.

SC: So naturally, both my brother and I, as well as my sister, play tennis.

PS: Of course. It's in the genes.

SC: That's right. And so that's how they got married.

PS: When you hear that story, how do you respond to that? What do you think about that?

SC: I think that's just kind of the way many arranged marriages happened. It is not something I would ever desire. I would be completely uncomfortable in that kind of situation. But I accept it because it worked out fine for them.

PS: When you look at your parents, do you perceive them as being happily married?

SC: Yes.

PS: Okay. Next I'd like to spend some time having you tell me about your early childhood years, like what language was spoken in your home when you were growing up, what kinds of foods did you eat, what was it like being a little kid in your family.

SC: Well, I spoke English. My parents encouraged English. As a result, they spoke Hindi, we spoke English, and that's a lot like it is today, where they speak in Hindi and we respond in English.

In retrospect, I don't think that was a good choice. Their thinking was that they wanted us to be fluent in English and wanted us to practice, but they didn't realize that of course we would be fluent in English regardless, because we spent eight to ten hours a day speaking English, and that what we really needed was the Hindi, to emphasize that. But that didn't happen to the extent that I probably would have liked, in retrospect. I understand Hindi, conversational Hindi, can speak it a little if I'm forced to, will probably pick it up quite well in India after a time, but don't read or write it.

PS: So you feel like you missed out on something that now you wish you'd gotten?

SC: Somewhat, yes. I think, given my education, I know that an additional language is just an invaluable skill to have, not only to one's character, but in practical circumstances. [Tape recorder turned off.]

Foodwise, we mainly ate Indian food, and the American food that my mom prepared was terrible. [Telephone interruption.] So as a result, we didn't like dinnertime very much.

PS: Did you cook American food for dinner?

SC: And Indian food, and so we got so much Indian food that we didn't like it, and the American food was macaroni and cheese and hot dogs and stuff.

PS: American kids love that.

SC: I know.

PS: I think it's dreadful myself.

SC: But in any case, she got much better. She cooks everything great now. After having gone to college and being away from home, then we appreciate the Indian food much more.

PS: But as a child, you weren't much of a fan?

SC: Uh-uh, not at all.

PS: What was it about the Indian food that you didn't like?

SC: I don't know. Maybe it was just a taste that took a while to acquire, or it just wasn't in the American norm. It was strange. It was strange to us.

This is kind of a deeper question, deeper issue about how my parents' culture became the

foreign culture in our lives, because we were the American culture most of the time. The Indian food, the Indian culture would last very little, a couple, three or four hours at the most, after we got home from school and went to bed around eight. I think what I've learned is that a lot of families differ. Ours was one where there were no proactive efforts to keep up the culture.

PS: The Indian culture?

SC: Yes.

SC: Religionwise, as well. There would be the satsangs and the geetas [phonetic], the geets at various people's homes. This was much before the Hindu Mandir was created. And we would have no interest in that, nor was there any kind of interest spurred within us regarding religion and what was going on. That was more traditional religious education amongst any culture. You just kind of sit and listen, and eventually you will absorb it and appreciate it.

PS: But it just wasn't talked about much in your family?

SC: No.

PS: Would you say that your parents were practicing Hindus?

SC: Yes.

PS: But that didn't seem to affect you in any way?

SC: No. We would run around as kids and play games and stuff. We didn't pay attention at all. And then it wasn't until high school, I think, when people started asking me about my religion, and I couldn't give them an answer. So I started questioning it myself, because we were not told anything about our religion, what anything meant.

PS: And it was all conducted in Hindi?

SC: It was all in Hindi, to boot. So not only was it not explained to us, we couldn't even pick up what was being said. But yet we were expected to be there and absorb it and understand.

I don't want to portray my parents as rearing us irresponsibly. I just think that was definitely a missed boat. But in any case, all three of us took it upon ourselves to know what Hinduism was.

PS: And how did you find it out? Once you decided that this was something you wanted

to know, how did you educate yourself?

SC: I just read the Geeta.

PS: An English version of it?

SC: Yes. And for some reason, I understood everything. It was perfectly plain. And asked questions here and there. Most of the people I asked questions to weren't very helpful.

PS: And who were you asking them to?

SC: Leaders here and there, leaders in the Mandir, the Hindu Mandir. They weren't very helpful at all. They didn't seem to understand my questions.

PS: So they gave you, just would say, "I don't know," or did they explain something--

SC: They would give an explanation that didn't answer the question, or something that was hypocritical.

PS: Okay.

SC: My religion, I'm a Hindu, but I'm more philosophical and practical than I am ceremonial and ritual, whereas both of my parents are kind of the opposite.

PS: So back to your early childhood years.

SC: As I eat a slice a pepperoni pizza.

PS: And drink Coca-Cola. [Laughter] Not exactly devout in that way.

Did any extended family members live in your household when you were a child?

SC: Yes. When my uncle first came to the U.S., he stayed with us. And then his family came, and they all stayed with us.

PS: What was that like?

SC: We didn't get along one bit with our cousins.

PS: How old were you then?

SC: Sixth grade, so I think we were ten or eleven, something like that.

PS: So prior to that time, you were pretty much a nuclear family, and then all of a sudden there's all these cousins and uncle and aunt.

SC: Yes. We had no idea what it was like to have a cousin. We had visited India. Our cousins were there. They treated us well. But we just didn't know how it was to live with your cousins, and so I think that resulted in some friction.

PS: How long did they live with you?

SC: Oh, just only a few months or so.

PS: Did they move out because it wasn't working or because they had other opportunity?

SC: Well, I think it was just basically time. A house can only get so big, so I think it was time for them. Plus, my uncle was working at the U of M on the St. Paul campus, so they wanted to move closer to that.

PS: Tell me what it was like with your brothers and sisters, your brother and sister.

SC: Well, much of my childhood was without my sister, because she wasn't born until I was eight. So it was just me and my brother, and we fought, mainly. [Laughter]

PS: All right.

SC: Why we fought, we can leave that to a psychiatrist. But now we get along fine. And then with my sister, I think we were very protective of her. I did my best to rear her in my own image.

PS: You reared her?

SC: No, but I did my best to.

PS: You felt like you were parenting her because you were eight years older?

SC: No, just because I wanted to. You know, older brother, that type of thing. I didn't have any parental responsibilities, per se. But what I meant is, I wanted her to be more like me than my brother.

PS: Oh, so there was some competition for who was going to have the bigger influence on her?

SC: Oh, probably. But anyway, she was very smart and decided to take the best of both

of us, and now she's better than the both of us combined. Whether it's grades or athletics or intellect or artistic ability, creativity, all of that, she just plucked it out from our personalities and inserted them into her own.

PS: So you did a pretty good job.

SC: Yes, she took none of my bad habits, which was good.

PS: When you were growing up, with whom did your family socialize?

SC: Mainly Indian friends in the Twin Cities.

PS: And how did your family get connected up with those people?

SC: Just mainly through networking and families and families of families and friends of families. And also, my dad and another fellow founded the Midwest chapter of the American Jat Association and so created a network of Jats within the Midwest, and so there were several Jat families that we have associated with in the Twin Cities and then their friends. And so it was just kind of a growing network ever since they got here.

PS: Now, the Jat caste, I'm not real familiar with how the castes line up. Brahmin is the top, and most of the people who came over were Brahmins, right?

SC: Yes.

PS: So is it unusual that your dad was here as a Jat?

SC: Yes, I suppose.

PS: Okay.

SC: But again, Jats are a little--we used to be a warrior class and then became more landowning, agriculture. So it wasn't impossible for Jats to get an education, get a good education, a good degree, and apply for a higher degree in the U.S.

PS: So it was not that hard to come by other Jat families here?

SC: It's still hard. The population is small, but it exists nonetheless.

PS: And there is a distinction that the Jats wouldn't associate socially with the Brahmins?

SC: No. It's just a matter of getting together as Jats once in a while, not a matter of social segregation, not at all.

One thing I've observed is that the various--first of all, there doesn't seem to be the caste delineation here. If there is a delineation, it's one along regional and cultural boundaries, Gujarati Association. There's a Jat Association. Although Jat is not necessarily regional, it's somewhat regional, from Haryana. And the Tamil Association and the Bengali Association, for example.

So it's not caste. The intention is more regional, cultural, the language. So I think that's good. And there's definitely not a segregation, as there might be in India. Everyone socializes with one another. We're all Hindu, so we meet at the Mandir. There is just no segregation along those lines. There are associations where they congregate amongst one another, have gatherings here and there, picnics, Gujarati annual picnic or something like that, but nothing exclusive.

PS: So the places where your family would feel most comfortable associating would be with the Jat Association and the Gujarati?

SC: No. Just general, they associated with the Indians, and then a sub society was your region or your state.

PS: Which region did they hang out with?

SC: Well, we're Jats. We're from Haryana.

PS: Okay. Is that a region?

SC: Haryana is the state.

PS: Oh, okay. Was there a Haryana association?

SC: No, there's not a Haryana association. The people from Haryana are generally called Jats.

PS: Because that's their caste?

SC: Yes. There's a little bit of a difference.

PS: All right. I think I understand the distinction, then.

SC: There's no rhyme or reason to why we are not Haryanis instead of Jats. It's just not a distinction. It's a Jat.

So socializing was mainly with other Indians here. And especially since there was such a

small population of Indians in the early seventies, the regions really didn't matter. And if there was a language difference between Gujarati, Hindi, or Bengali or whatever, there was never a problem because everybody came here to go to school and knew English anyway. So that was never a problem. But, I mean, it was not exclusively among Indians. There were plenty of American friends, too, from work.

PS: So they did socialize with those people?

SC: Yes. Work and school, people they knew through that, I would say mainly. Maybe some neighbors.

PS: And who did you play with when you were little?

SC: I played mainly with the other American kids, I would have to say.

PS: So you didn't have a lot of interest in playing with the Indian kids?

SC: Oh, it wasn't a question of interest. There weren't many around. At our age, there just were hardly any. There were so few families to begin with. I think my parents might have had me and my brother fairly soon after they arrived.

PS: So you were some of the youngest--or the oldest.

SC: Yes, that's right, especially in Minnesota. I'm hard-pressed to think of another Indian born in Minnesota, raised in Minnesota, who's older than me. It's really kind of strange. I mean, that's first generation to a T.

PS: When you think back on your early childhood years, what values did your family stress to you?

SC: Education.

PS: And how did they communicate that?

SC: You will study.

PS: Pretty straightforward, huh? How often did they communicate these values about education?

SC: Just very often, daily, weekly basis. They were very involved--this was something I think which they were involved in and that they just didn't expect us to do on our own totally. They were involved with the teachers and met with the teachers and the conferences and got to know them. So they were definitely involved with our education,

although I would not say they were involved with our academics.

PS: Tell me the distinction there.

SC: Well, they were involved with the school and getting to know the teachers and making sure that we were doing what we were supposed to do, but when it came to helping us with our homework and things like that, we were just expected to do it on our own.

PS: And you were able to do that?

SC: Oh, yes. There was nothing we didn't get if we didn't try.

PS: And they just kept after you to get it on your own?

SC: Yes. And Mom and Dad did read to all of us very early on. They did that quite a bit.

PS: In English?

SC: Yes, read us books when we were little, before we could read, so that helped.

PS: But the communication of those values was very, very direct, "You will study." Is that the phrase you heard?

SC: Yes.

PS: That's just burned into your memory, huh?

SC: Oh, yes.

PS: And it must have worked, huh?

SC: Yes. Well, I don't know how much it worked. Maybe it's just the way I would have turned out anyway, but I tended to react the opposite way of where I was pushed.

PS: Tell me how that works.

SC: Well, the more I was pushed to study, the less I would.

PS: Ah.

SC: So I had a baseline academics, and I had a base value of education, for education, but when it came to studying, I was never very disciplined. My brother was different, and so

was my sister.

PS: Personality quirk.

SC: Right.

PS: Were there any other values that your family stressed that you can remember?

SC: I do remember my dad emphasizing the way in which women and girls should be treated.

PS: And how was that?

SC: With respect. I remember my sister was very little and sitting on the floor and I just kind of walked over her, and I got yelled at for that because it was disrespectful.

PS: So the message was, be respectful to women.

SC: Oh, yes.

PS: And did you find yourself as a child resisting that one, too?

SC: [Laughter] Touché.

PS: You were kind of a perverse little boy, huh? [Laughter]

SC: No, I think that one was helpful.

PS: That one did sink in?

SC: Yes. It wasn't anything that was ramrodded. I think that was the point. If it was ramrodded, then I definitely reacted the other way.

I don't think we were involved with--I don't think my parents appreciated the extracurriculars that we were involved in, especially the extent of the extracurriculars. I was--the same with my brother, too--was involved in everything, sports and theater and music, all of that, and it was a drain on our academics, as well, that's for sure. But I'm not so sure I would have compensated that time with book work.

PS: Can you tell me about going into the school system in the United States. Did you feel different from your peers, and in what ways? What was those early school years like, grade school and so on?

SC: I never felt different until I got to middle school. I was always generally a very confident kid all the way through elementary school, and then I think it was a combination of my growth spurt and turning out to look kind of geeky and awkward, and combining that with the cruelty of other kids, especially in middle school, that's where some of the cultural prejudice towards me started.

PS: And in elementary school, you fit in?

SC: I never really had problems, no. Fit in very well. No one really ever questioned why--in elementary school, no kid ever questioned, really, why I had a different name than someone else. Once in a while, there'd be a racial conflict, just not until middle school and high school, where kids become more cognizant of differences and the biases that their parents showed at home came out in them.

So there was a lot of teasing through middle school and high school about my name and the way I looked, and I think that had an important effect on me. I think it made me more introspective, whether I was rationalizing the differences, whether I was maybe rationalizing some fault that I had. Whatever a kid goes through to explain or think away hardships, that's what I did during that time.

PS: What were the common taunts that kids would throw at you?

SC: Mainly centered around my name.

PS: What was the taunt? What would they say?

SC: Oh, just making just bastardizations of the name. Teachers, too.

PS: On purpose, teachers taunted you?

SC: Yes.

PS: How?

SC: Just kind of maybe the coach would call me "Saturday Cadberry" and would make up nicknames for me that were easier for him to pronounce, and so some of the other kids picked up on that.

PS: So the coach was actually being a poor role model.

SC: Towards me, yes.

PS: Did he do that to other kids, too? Just you?

SC: Well, yes, I was the only one. I mean, racially speaking, I was the only one he did that to.

PS: Did he pick on other kids for other reasons?

SC: Oh, here and there.

PS: Because their ears stuck out or they were too tall or too short or something?

SC: Yes. I think that put me on guard, more on guard than I was before, and expressing myself, performing, whether in theater. [Telephone interruption.]

High school was a mix of several things. It was a mix of what I just described and a mix of extracurriculars, in which I think I was driven to do better, because I think I had some feelings of mediocrity, and whether it was in theater or sports, and also of a mix of various friendships. I didn't form really strong friendships until the end of high school, when I had known people for several years. Until then, I'd always been in different circles, where it was the teammate circle or the drama circle or student council circle, different circles, and I don't know why that is.

PS: You found it easier to join groups than one-on-one friendships?

SC: Well, I had one-on-one friendships, but just in general the circles I was in varied. I didn't have one that I stayed in.

And then the other thing in high school was my first girlfriend.

PS: Oh, yes? Tell me about that.

SC: That's a very interesting story, because she was another Indian. At first, it was her parents who didn't like the fact that we were dating, and then when my parents found out that her parents didn't like that, then they didn't like it either. So then after a while we were kind of banned from seeing one another, and in retrospect, it was a big quandary, but when you're there, there's no quandary. What are you going to do? You care about each other. We're going to see each other, of course. I mean, that's just a given. So we went behind our parents' backs for at least a year. I'm sure they knew and didn't say anything, but the point is that they preferred it that way.

PS: They preferred you deceive them?

SC: Yes.

PS: Because?

SC: Because then they didn't have to confront the situation. It embodied the clash of cultures .

PS: Say more about that.

SC: My parents encouraged the traditional marriage method. They were still locked in the Indian lifestyles, and they didn't have any foresight with me. I was the first. I was the groundbreaker. This is the first they encountered, and they expected me to have an arranged marriage, for some reason. But for whatever reason they did, and I had a girlfriend, which was not allowed, apparently. I did know about it. They'd always talk about not dating and not getting involved with American women and they were bad. But this was an Indian girl who had grown up here. So I think they didn't have a big problem with it until her parents had a problem with it, and their decision was the predictable one, and that was to separate the two of us. They're from old-school India. Apparently it works. It worked then. But in the United States, there's just a different culture. You can't stop this. It's a combination of courtship and individualism that would not allow us to be apart, as well as mutual rebellion. So forget about it, those three things. So we went behind their back for a year.

PS: How old were you at the time?

SC: Sixteen. Fifteen, sixteen. Sixteen. And I'm sure they knew, but I think that's the way they preferred it. That was the middle ground.

PS: So they did their thing by taking a stance.

SC: Yes.

PS: And then they ignored it so that you could do your thing by doing it anyway.

SC: Right.

PS: Okay. Interesting collusion.

SC: Very.

PS: Whatever happened with this young lady?

SC: Oh, we broke up for different reasons, so that was nothing [unclear].

PS: And where did you meet this young lady? At your school?

SC: Oh, no, the Hindu Mandir, the youth group. We had formed a youth group.

PS: I bet they really regretted having gone to the Hindu Mandir. [Laughter]

SC: You see, these things tend to backfire on you if you're not careful. Be careful what you ask for. You just might get it.

PS: Right. When you were a kid, did you get invited to other kids' houses pretty readily and did they come to your house to socialize and play?

SC: When I was a kid, yes. In elementary school, lots of sleepovers, slumber parties.

PS: So you got invited, as well as inviting?

SC: Yes.

PS: Was it ever a problem when kids came to your house and your parents were having this weird food or wearing odd clothes or speaking Hindi to each other?

SC: No. Like I said, when we were in elementary school, there was just never a problem. They might have talked about it. I think, you know, the friends I had, they always have them check the parents. Our parents always got along, and so there was no problem. If my friend mentioned it to his parents that such and such is a little strange, they would give him an appropriate explanation to it. So there was never a problem with acceptance. I think when my American friends came over, my mom tended to serve American food.

PS: So she was sensitive to that?

SC: Yes, I think so.

PS: And did that shift for you when you got to be in middle school and high school?

SC: Yes. Well, we grow out of the slumber parties then. I couldn't drive. I really, I had no role models to base my social activities on. Or maybe I was just plain disliked by my peers.

PS: Hard to say. There is something real strong in middle school about fitting in.

SC: Yes.

PS: And if you can't fit in because your hair's the wrong color or your skin's the wrong color, what do you do about that?

SC: It's possible maybe I was just a plain dork, regardless of my name or skin color.

PS: When you were with other Indian kids when you were in middle school and high school, did you fit in with them?

SC: Yes.

PS: So it wasn't just that you were a dork in general.

SC: Yes, probably not. Thanks for bringing that up. I feel a lot better. [Laughter]

PS: I'll send you my therapy bill. Were there any advantages that you found to being an Indian, during the time that you were growing up, with your peers?

SC: Yes.

PS: And what were those?

SC: I think in the end I did appreciate it. I didn't mind being unique. I think that was--I want to pause your tape. [Tape recorder turned off.]

My ability to remain open-minded on a lot of issues having to rest squarely with the fact that I grew up in a different culture throughout elementary school [unclear] a broader perspective of the world, the way other people lived.

PS: And how has that helped you?

SC: I'm definitely the better politician and public policy maker because of that. That's not to say that there aren't other open-minded people, but I think my ability to be open-minded comes from that. [Interruption in recording.]

I was just saying that my ability to remain open-minded towards other people, other cultures, and as a public policy maker issues and policies, I think, sits squarely with the fact that I grew up a minority. And other people are open-minded, and may be open-minded for different reasons, but I think that's the reason I'm able to be that way. I think that made a difference.

PS: Was there a point in high school when you felt like you got more acceptance or certain things that you did or something that shifted in you when you felt more accepted in high school?

SC: Yes, I think there was a definite shift towards the end of high school, especially

senior year. I think I filled out a little and wore cooler clothes. I think I also learned, as well, became more secure with myself and who I associated with and knew that even if at the bottom line I was alone, that I still felt good about myself, and that may very well have carried over, may very well have shown through. I think confidence had a lot to do with making friends.

PS: So by the senior year of high school, it was much easier to make friends and feel accepted?

SC: Yes.

PS: And you mentioned you were in drama and in sports and on student council.

SC: Yes.

PS: Can you say some more about each of those activities?

SC: Sports, not much to talk about. We ran around and played a game.

PS: What sport did you play?

SC: Oh, right. I actually played football for the first two years and basketball for the first two years, and then I played tennis for four years.

PS: And this was at public school?

SC: Public school, Columbia Heights High School.

PS: Columbia?

SC: Yes. But then I tore a ligament in my knee, and I think that actually helped me get into drama more, because I didn't play football or basketball.

PS: What did you do in drama?

SC: Oh, plays.

PS: Were you the actor?

SC: I was a actor. I was actor, stage manager. I did various things. But I preferred to be on stage. It was a lot of fun, made a lot of close friendships that way in drama.

PS: Did you notice differences in the kind of kids that went out for sports versus the kind

of kids that were involved in drama?

SC: Definitely.

PS: What was the difference you saw?

SC: There is definitely more, there were more superficial kids in sports. However, there were definitely more what I would now characterize as psychologically disturbed people in drama. [Laughter]

PS: So where did you fit in?

SC: I'm happy to report that I fit somewhere in between.

PS: And then you were involved in student council, as well?

SC: Yes.

PS: What was that like?

SC: That was very interesting. That was a time when I realized some of my abilities, some of my talents in organizing, getting things done, the power of "argument." But at that time, I still had wanted to be a doctor. I still didn't know at that point that there is legitimate career outside of medicine, engineering, and teaching.

PS: How did you come to have that mind-set that that's what was a real career?

SC: From my parents. They wanted me to be a doctor or an engineer. That's all they said, all I was told. I didn't know that there were really any other careers out there. As far as I knew, if you weren't a doctor or an engineer, you might as well have been holding a tin cup out on a street corner.

PS: All right. So those were the only occupations available to you?

SC: Occupations that equaled success. The rest were mediocre.

PS: Okay. That's a pretty strong message, isn't it?

SC: It's a very strong message, and I'm very clear that that was the message we got. It wasn't until college, I think, that I realized that there were actually other careers out there that one could enter and actually be considered a success in. One of them was the law, and now politics. [Tape recorder turned off.]

The next portion doesn't have a lot to do with being Indian growing up here, but it was what got started me in politics, and that was, one of my high school teachers who required us to do twenty-four hours of political work, and we all had to bring in one political speaker a day. There was a communist who came in to speak to our class, and everybody disagreed with him. And later that day during lunch, my teacher came up and asked me what I thought about it, and I said I thought that we were on two different levels. He said that that was very good of me to observe that about politics and that he felt that I had a future.

PS: In politics?

SC: Yes.

PS: Who was that teacher?

SC: Jack Gause.

PS: And he was a--

SC: He was a wrestling coach and a social studies teacher at Heights, long since retired. But that kind of got the ball rolling. I volunteered in a campaign, the first campaign of a state representative by the name of Alice Johnson, and she won. She was our representative, and after some redistricting, she was not our representative. She moved a little north. But ten years later, I went and spoke to the same high school class that she spoke at at Heights, and now I'm serving with her in the legislature.

PS: I bet that feels good.

SC: Yes, it's kind of neat. But college really changed my mind on a career. First of all, I was away from parental influences.

PS: Where did you go to college?

SC: St. Olaf College. And I'd gone there--I went to St. Olaf to become a doctor. I had wanted to be a doctor since the third grade.

PS: Medical doctor?

SC: Yes. I wanted to be a cardiologist in the third grade, and my teacher asked, "What is a cardiologist?" I said, "A cardiologist is a heart doctor," and she said, "Oh."

But in any case, I took chemistry and wasn't very good at it in college. I was involved with social issues, student senate, lots of extracurriculars. I was completely distracted

from academics, but I was getting so much more from what I was doing outside the classroom. So then by the end of freshman year, I had decided to become pre-law.

PS: This was freshman year of college?

SC: Yes. And political science.

PS: How did that go over in your family?

SC: Fine. I had told them, and it was not a spur-of-the-moment decision for me. It was very hard, because I was giving up something solid for something much more subjective, and I had no idea, first of all, what that could mean. I didn't know that it was not that big of a deal.

PS: To go from pre-law to pre-med, or pre-med to pre-law.

SC: Yes. I'm sorry, I should rephrase that. I didn't realize that was no big deal to forego being a doctor or an engineer, something technical.

PS: And your parents were pretty accepting of that when you finally told them?

SC: In the end, yes.

PS: Did they initially?

SC: No. I had plenty of reasons for changing by that point. I had struggled with it on my own, and it didn't really matter at that point what they thought.

So college was very good to be away. It was very good for me. Not good for my grades, but it was good for me.

PS: What was college like? Tell me more about what that was like.

SC: More of the same, some of the same things in high school. Not the teasing or anything like that, but different circles, lots of different circles.

PS: So in college you were involved in lots of different social circles and activity circles?

SC: Yes.

PS: Which ones were those?

SC: Student senate, theater, various social concerns groups, South African concerns,

environmental concerns. I organized an anti-CIA protest. Just your true college liberal. It was great.

PS: And you were in a leadership capacity there.

SC: Yes.

PS: And embracing that.

SC: Right. Definitely. But then the other thing that I got involved in, which I do think was relevant, is a multicultural concerns group. I became very deeply involved with those issues of multiculturalism and what it is to be a minority and our place in society and what we need to do to solve the problem and what wasn't being done on campus and what wasn't being done in society, and all these questions I started to answer, with the help of others, and made some more Indian friendships, I think, that I hadn't had since early high school, which was also good, and with other minorities, finding there was a common bond, just because we were minority meant we had a common bond. I think that happened for the first time, not just by a fluke or the way, the circles my parents ran in.

PS: And the minorities that you associated with at St. Olaf were foreign-born or U.S.-born minorities?

SC: Both.

PS: And what kinds of differences or distinctions did you notice that brought you all together?

SC: Well, we were all concerned with the overemphasis of the Norwegian culture at St. Olaf. [Laughter]

PS: Yah, sure. You bet ya.

SC: Yes. It really seems funny now, and people laugh at all those silly Norwegians at St. Olaf, but we really believed that that was not the way education should be. One should not exalt one's culture over another, and which we believed was happening.

And then involved with other activist groups. We had a big protest because condoms were not allowed on campus. We had a big protest on tuition increases. Lots of activism. Great stuff.

PS: And you were in leadership capacities for much of that?

SC: Yes.

PS: How was that for you, stepping up and being the leader?

SC: It was natural. I had done a little bit here and there in high school, so it was not a problem. One of the reasons it wasn't a problem is because St. Olaf was kind of a small pond and there was a lack of activism there, and so it was a challenge, but doable. They needed people to help and I wanted to help, and that's just a dangerous combination.
[Laughter]

PS: It doesn't sound dangerous to me. It sounds like a wonderful opportunity you took advantage of.

SC: Those were the first two years. I spent a year in England on the junior year abroad program. That was a very important--probably one of the best years of my life. I'm still comparing 1989-90 to 1996-1997, which one's better. So far, I don't know. That was the year I was abroad and the year I was elected first.

But it was just amazing. I spent a month in India during that time, spent a month in South Africa. The rest of the time was in England, traveling, and that was very important. I learned a lot about being an Indian in a different country. That was a fascinating dynamic.

PS: Tell me about that.

SC: You'll love this. I'm not an Indian in England. I'm an American. I'm not an American in America. I'm Indian. But I'm not an Indian in India. I'm an American.

PS: And what were you in South Africa?

SC: I'm an American in South Africa.

PS: So did the other Indians in India and in South Africa, how did they perceive you?

SC: Fine. In South Africa, you're asking?

PS: Well, in England there are a lot of Indians.

SC: They were accepting, but I was still an American to them.

PS: Were they English Indians?

SC: Yes.

PS: So they were second generation, growing up in England?

SC: Yes.

PS: What did they perceive themselves as?

SC: British. Indian whatever you go it, Anglo-Indos or Indo-Saxons or whatever. Whatever they're called there.

PS: So how did you make sense of all that in your head?

SC: I tried not to.

PS: But obviously you've gleaned something out of it. What's the lesson that you got?

SC: I don't know what the lesson is yet. I think that I was more of an American outside of America than I was here.

PS: Ah. What does that tell you, then?

SC: I don't know. I still believe that the United States is the most diverse and least prejudiced of all countries, but I think it says something for one's upbringing, as well, because the Indians in England or South Africa cannot necessarily be blamed for thinking I was an American. I had all the mannerisms, the kind of the brash, aggressive demeanor that they expected from Americans, you know, the accent, that type of thing. So it was as much--or should I say it was as little a commentary on America as it was on the way I was raised.

PS: So your parents did a pretty good job raising you as an American?

SC: Well, yes. But that only occurred by default. They didn't need to do anything to raise me as an American, because I was submerged in the culture eight, ten, twelve hours a day.

PS: When you were in India, what were you doing while you were there in India?

SC: Having just a great time visiting family. They just made me feel so at home. I felt at home. It was the mother country. It was fabulous.

PS: So you were with relatives?

SC: Yes. A bit of politics here and there, too. Some relatives were involved in politics. Not relatives, but some Jats were involved with politics. It's just a common bond, even in

India, if you're a Jat, because we only really come from that small portion of India.

So Chaudhary Bhagwan Singh's son had just been elected to parliament, and I guess we had known Chaudhary Charan Singh's, his daughter or something like that. There was some mingling. Chaudhary Charan Singh, he was prime minister for a little while. And they were all part of one party and then we had some friends who were part of another party, so they took me around to their meetings. It was a time of great upheaval. The Gandhi dynasty had just fallen. V.P. Singh was elected, and it was just a new time in India. Very interesting to be there. So some of it was spent doing the political thing, going to rallies and things like that, but most of it was spent with family. That was nice.

PS: Had you been with those family before?

SC: Yes. Four years earlier our whole family went there. But it was the first time I was there alone.

PS: Being like a grownup.

SC: Yes.

PS: Did that make a big difference in how you were perceived?

SC: Yes. I much prefer being there alone. First of all, when we were there with our family, I did not have incentive to speak Hindi. Nothing was forcing me to do that. When I was there alone, I did. Secondly, I could be much more myself with relatives than if my family was there, and I could have a lot more fun.

PS: Did you find age peers that you could hang out with?

SC: Yes. So that was nice.

PS: So that was a whole month you spent in India?

SC: Yes. It wasn't very long. Many Americans have spent a longer time in India than I have. But it was still very good for me. And the interesting thing is, is really kind of how bitter I came back to England after that trip.

PS: Bitter about what?

SC: Bitter about the English and of Western culture in general. Didn't like it one bit.

PS: Say more.

SC: I remember shortly after--there's two examples. One is, I was wearing some of the Indian garb walking down the street in England, which is not that strange there. And I was walking by, and some--well, I don't know, the English equivalent of a redneck said, "Hey, it's Gandhi." And I just remember that.

And then this other thing is that, I had a college girlfriend at the time. She was not Indian. She was Iowan. She had come to England to visit. In fact, she had gotten a work visa. And I was glad. That was good for me. But while I was gone, she had gone through a feminist immersion, and I, being in India, had gone through a chauvinistic immersion.

PS: Oh. So?

SC: So there were problems. So that was interesting.

PS: So what happened?

SC: Oh, I mean, we fought a lot and resolved it in the end.

PS: And then broke up?

SC: No, we didn't, just resolved it in the end. We broke up later on, but for different reasons. But I do think that was--our differences on that hold true today, but the differences are one of misunderstanding than anything, I think misunderstanding of what Indian culture means. I think maybe I still have a misunderstanding of what American culture is.

I think I've left the impression that I am totally Americanized. That's not true. There are a lot of times when I'm not sure what to do because of my lack of experience. One example, funerals. Everybody says the Lord's Prayer. I have no idea what it is, the Lord's Prayer. They all have it memorized from childhood. Another example, I'm the best man at my friend's wedding. I don't know what a best man's role is. These things are passed down through tradition. You go to weddings as a kid and you see what the best men do and you do those things. My first time being a best man. So I dropped the ball a couple of times here and there. At the wedding, the wedding toast is supposed to be very short. Indian wedding's toast is supposed to be very long.

PS: Which one did you do?

SC: I did, of course, the very long one. It was not very well received, especially compounded in a crowd that did not have a very good attention span to begin with. [Laughter] So that was that.

So there are definitely times where I'd feel out of it. In high school, I definitely felt out of

it when my peers were all going through confirmation. They were doing their lock-ins and their youth church group camp-outs and bonding sessions, and I don't get confirmed. They're all making new friends and all that type of thing. So that was interesting.

PS: And you're going to Hindu Mandir.

SC: Yes. That might have prompted us to start our youth group. That might have helped. So as you can tell, it's just the whole first-generation American thing is just a mixed bag. There's very little rhyme or reason.

The stories you've heard, there are probably a few common threads, but they're probably different. They are probably others who were raised in a very proactive Indian culture, especially with language and religion, and that could be totally different with others. They might have followed through with the dating thing. They might have not had a problem listening to their parents. Whereas I did. So I don't know if there is a common lesson to learn from being the first-generation American.

PS: I just want your story right now.

SC: Yes.

PS: Tell me a little bit more about what it was like being in South Africa. What were you doing there?

SC: Like I said earlier, I had been involved with a lot of social concern groups and anti-apartheid and Amnesty International and Southern African Concerns at St. Olaf, especially because St. Olaf is a Lutheran college and the country of Namibia had a lot of Lutheran influence in it, being a former German colony. And so one of the things we had arranged while at Olaf was a panel discussion of Rotary exchanges from South Africa, so we got to know them, and their South Africans, in general, are very hospitable. They said, "Come on over anytime. Here's the address," blah, blah, blah.

I just filled out a visa in anticipation, before I went to England, that I might go to South Africa, and so I just ended up going. They set up the itinerary, and just had a just amazing month, just an amazing month. Saw the first Independence Day of Namibia, met Desmond Tutu there, rented a car from Cape Town, drove up the coast, went on a safari. I went and volunteered at kind of a refugee camp when there was a lot of violence going on. Nelson Mandela came to our refugee camp. I got to meet him.

PS: Wow.

SC: I was alone, so a lot of thinking, lot of thinking.

PS: Now, how did you hook up with various people to get into all these?

SC: They left me their names and addresses. There was just like a main contact, and they just kind of gave me all these ideas and itinerary and friends and family that I could stay with.

PS: So you just stayed with people all over the country?

SC: Yes, mainly stayed with people. There was hotels here and there. Yes.

PS: That's wonderful.

SC: There are more Indians in the province of Natal than there are whites. A lot of Indians in South Africa, and the Indians there, I learned, were in a very precarious position.

PS: How so?

SC: Because they are not white, but they have achieved a fairly high economic status, as they have in many other countries. And to tell you the truth, many of them have not done their part against the apartheid government, so a lot of resentment has been bred against them.

PS: By whom?

SC: By the blacks.

PS: So they're straddling that line between being not quite white, but definitely not black, and they've got it better than the blacks, but not as good as the whites.

SC: Yes, exactly. And I think in some of those townships I was probably in more danger than whites were, being an Indian.

PS: Even though they perceived you as American?

SC: Well, I mean, they couldn't see my passport.

PS: Oh, okay, just walking through.

SC: Yes.

PS: Once you started talking, they would know you were American.

SC: Probably, yes. Hopefully, before they got out their machetes. Some terrible things were going on there, just massacres.

PS: Were you close to any of that?

SC: Yes.

PS: Want to talk about that?

SC: Well, I didn't actually witness any of it, but at the refugee camps, the people who were left homeless, you know, all came there and had their various stories, and it was just the whole terrible mix of intertribal family revenge, mob mentality, and racial tensions.

PS: So it was mostly blacks doing violence to other blacks?

SC: Only.

PS: Only blacks doing violence to other blacks.

SC: Yes. If you're white, you're safe.

PS: And if you're white, you don't do violence to the blacks? They just hurt each other?

SC: That was pretty much how it was at that time, yes. And, you know, the whites were fine with that. They just let them destroy one another.

PS: Wow. What an opportunity.

SC: Yes. It was a very good opportunity to witness truly international struggle.

PS: So by then you were a junior in college, and you spent the whole year traveling about.

SC: Yep.

PS: And then what after that? You went back to St. Olaf?

SC: Yes. Senior year just had a very, I intentionally had a very superficial year. Just had fun, that was it.

PS: Okay.

SC: Nothing really to speak of senior year, just kind of muddled through.

PS: And you graduated with what? What degree?

SC: Political science, B-plus average, 3.3.

PS: And then your intention was to do what with that?

SC: Oh, I didn't know. I was pretty sure I was going to go to law school, but I just wasn't motivated to apply.

PS: That'll keep you out.

SC: Yes. I just didn't get around to it, and I thought, "Well, maybe if I can't even motivate myself to apply, then I probably shouldn't go."

So I waited around. I had an internship in Senator Kennedy's office, went there that summer, came back, worked on a couple campaigns here in Minnesota, and then went to law school, and continued on with the politics throughout.

PS: Where did you go to law school?

SC: At the U of M.

PS: And you finished that?

SC: Yes.

PS: When did you graduate from law school?

SC: '95. And two weeks after law school got out, our [state] representative here resigned. And so there was a special election, quick, month-long, and I just threw my hat in the ring, and I didn't even make it through primary, lost the first time.

But the Republican ultimately won, so that was my cue that in '96, where there will be a high Democratic vote turnout, there would at least be an endorsement process, time to door knock, the time is right for me to jump in. And none of the people who ran against me in the primary were running again against the Republican incumbent.

I had a bit of an endorsement competition. It wasn't too bad. And just door knocked all summer, after I got the endorsement, and then won in '96.

PS: So you ran as a Democrat and you were elected. How did that feel?

SC: Oh, I don't know. Others were pretty excited. I was excited. I was grateful. I was thrilled. But I was fairly calm, I think, because I had been involved with politics for so long that I was pretty sure I knew what to do to win, and that in the end it was just somewhat clinical, the win was clinical. It was kind of academic. We did this and this and this and we won, of course. We had all our ducks in a row. We took into account all the external factors. We did our work. And it really wasn't that big of a surprise in the end. It seems to have been a surprise to everyone else. [Laughter]

PS: Because?

SC: Well, I mean, those who were not involved with the campaign or didn't know anything about Columbia Heights or Fridley or didn't know anything about me thought, "How is this Satveer Chaudhary going to beat a Skip Carlson?" Probably the best name one could have in Minnesota politics, Skip Carlson.

PS: Why is that the best name?

SC: It combines with Skip Humphrey with Arne Carlson.

PS: Oh, okay.

SC: Yes.

PS: Was Skip Carlson well-known?

SC: No. He had only been in office a year.

PS: Okay. This was the Republican person who had gotten elected?

SC: Yes.

PS: So you defeated him in the regular election?

SC: Yes, and handily. So that's what the big thing was. A lot of the political operatives outside of the district felt that our community was too prejudiced to elect me, when, in fact, I'd grown up here. It's a Polish immigrant community, so they'd be remiss if they didn't have a representative with a long name with a Y at the end. It just made sense.

PS: So you think some people probably perceived you as Polish because your name ends in Y?

SC: No. I just think they probably--they're not so adverse to long names as other communities might be. We've had a long tradition of long names in Columbia Heights.

Our last representative was Simoneau; Mayor Sturdevant; Nawroki. Lots of weird names. In fact, most of them have been kind of weird.

The point is that political pundits didn't know that. People outside the district didn't know that. They didn't think an Indian could win, and that just made me work harder.

PS: Did you have the active support of the Indian community in your campaign?

SC: Yes.

PS: And how did they support you?

SC: With volunteers and fund-raising. In 1994--this is a very important political thing. We formed the Minnesota Asian-Indian Democratic Association, and we became a charter of the DFL party and did a lot of organizing in the '94 campaign for candidates, and I think that really elevated our status in the political circles. In fact, it created our status. People didn't know, in the DFL, who Indians were, outside of me. They didn't know who we were, what we stood for, and in six months we took care of all of those concerns.

PS: Is there a sizable group of Democrats within the Indian community?

SC: Oh, yes.

PS: Most of them, would you say?

SC: It's hard to tell. I think a fair guess would say half and half, but we just never know. It would be interesting to take a poll sometime. I think many Indians also consider themselves Independents. There has been an unfortunate mentality of Indians being above politics, and myself, my dad, people like Ram Gada, have worked to eradicate that feeling, that politics is not only important to our community, but is absolutely critical, and I think we've gone a long way towards that. We've gotten a lot of Indians involved in politics. Two, three, four years ago, who would ever think that Indians would be volunteering on campaigns, actually giving their time to a political end? And, of course, two, three years ago, who would ever thought that we'd have an actual elected official in a place in the Midwest, not L.A. or New York or Chicago, but in the Midwest? So there are a lot of misunderstandings that were allayed with my elected, misunderstandings about Columbia Heights and Fridley, misunderstandings about my abilities, misunderstandings about Minnesota.

PS: So Minnesota is the best place to be a minority running for office?

SC: Absolutely, because the fact that I was an Indian or had a long name or brown skin

or thinning hairline was irrelevant to many of the people in this district, a significant portion. It was the fact that I was a Democrat, period, that was good enough for many of them.

PS: So they were voting along party lines?

SC: Absolutely. A lot of operatives didn't know that, but there was all these subjective things that one needed to know about our district. But then when you look at the hard numbers, this is a Democratic district. And so that's what I meant by kind of a clinical campaign.

There were so many fears and prejudices that the political operatives and the political wannabes thought they were imposing upon us, and they were just superimposing their own prejudices on our community under the guise of political analysis.

I think the biggest challenge was keeping focus on what we needed to do, keeping all of that external stuff out of mind. That was probably the biggest challenge, keeping focus. But if we kept focus, then we were going to win in the end. I think there were some uncertainties with how big of a turnout there was going to be, but at the very least, I was not as out of the race or a long shot as a lot of people thought. The possibility of my election was very real.

And so that importance there is, it just cracks the myth of an Indian or Asian being able to get elected. It cracks the myth that Indians shouldn't be involved with politics. We should be, and we are. In 1996 especially, with all the welfare reforms and the moves against illegal immigrants, it was critical for us to be involved, and we were, not only with mine, but we held a large fund-raiser for [Senator Paul] Wellstone and the other congressman. And the Republicans are doing the same. It's not just Democratic. An Indian Republican could run in a just as staunchly Republican district and probably win.

PS: Tell me what it's like now being at the legislature. This is your first season?

SC: Yep, first session.

PS: What are some impressions, or what's it been like for you?

SC: It's been a thrill a minute. It's been a thrill a minute.

PS: Say more.

SC: So much has happened. I think the biggest thing is--I'll show you. [Tape recorder turned off.]

. . . thing at work and the next day reading about it.

PS: In the newspaper.

SC: Every day.

PS: What you do gets in the paper?

SC: Yes. "Teen Driver Bill Gathers Momentum," headline on the Metro State. I'm the chief author of that in the House, that bill. "House Committee Okays Lower Blood Alcohol Limits for Drivers." That's my bill.

PS: Cool.

SC: "St. Louis County Split." I voted on that two days ago. That has been the most dramatic--I don't know what one would call it. It's the impact that I had that has been--it's just the impact that has just been, I think, the greatest part about this job.

PS: So what you do really makes a difference?

SC: Yes.

PS: In a lot of people's lives.

SC: Yes. And so it's hard to, again, keep a balance. How do you keep your eye on the ball and make sure you're taking care of the needs of people without being a stuffy legislator? How do you keep a sense of humor in all that? It's pretty important stuff we're doing. If you run across a stuffy legislator it's because they take their job very seriously. I take my job very seriously. I just don't take myself very seriously. [Laughter]

So Indians in politics has been very important, and I think my role as a legislator, as an Asian and as an Indian legislator, is to highlight the important issues, but more importantly, to convince my colleagues to do that. I don't represent, really, I don't technically represent that many Indians in Columbia Heights and Fridley, but the representative in New Brighton or Bloomington does. And so my job is to get those representatives to care about Indians' concerns, and I think that's where I could be most effective. The same thing the other Asian groups, Hmong or Japanese or Chinese or whatever.

PS: So at this point, are you the only minority legislator?

SC: No, there's four of us, I think, total.

PS: And who are the others?

SC: Richard Jefferson from North Minneapolis.

PS: And he's African-American?

SC: Yes. And Edwina Garcia from Richfield.

PS: She's Hispanic?

SC: Yes. And Carlos Mariani, South St. Paul.

PS: And he is?

SC: He's Hispanic, too. So four of us.

PS: Do you find that there's a special bond between the four of you as minority legislators or not?

SC: No. Not yet, at least. There hasn't been so far. Or maybe the bond is so strong that it goes without saying or special notice.

PS: What would you call that bond about?

SC: I don't know. I really haven't noticed it yet.

PS: Oh, okay.

SC: I think we can all learn from one another. I can learn about Hispanic issues from them. That's valuable. I can learn about African-American issues from Jefferson. That's valuable. They can learn about Asian issues. I think that's very important.

Last week the legislature held its first joint meeting, joint committee meeting to interact with the tribal communities, Native American communities, and I was on the committee, the Local Government committee, and I announced that I'm proud to be the only Indian legislator in the legislature, which they thought was funny. So maybe there's an at first comical, but in the end some nexus that I can also provide for the Native American community here, too.

PS: So you're going to cross over to the Native American Indian, too, right?

SC: Where appropriate.

PS: Okay. [Laughter] What kind of political future do you envision for yourself?

SC: Well, I think I would be a liar if I said that, with all the campaigns I've worked on, I didn't think of myself in the same position as the candidate--U.S. Congress or U.S. Senate or state representative. So if a good opportunity comes up some day, I'll be happy to consider it. But right now, I have to really concentrate on representing the district I do now, do a good job here.

PS: So you could see yourself continuing to be a politician? That's your career path?

SC: I hope not.

PS: No?

SC: But that's kind of the way it's looking, isn't it?

PS: Oh, okay. You can always be defeated, you know.

SC: Yes. Well, see, that's the main thing. You can't rely on it too much, although the unfortunate thing is that it's the job I've enjoyed most my whole life.

PS: Did you actually practice law?

SC: No. I had some clerkships, county attorney's office, attorney general, did some tax work and some clinical work, but never licensed, regular caseload for a long time.

PS: So you see yourself being a politician as your career?

SC: I hope not. I hope I find a healthy interest.

PS: Like what else comes to mind when you think--

SC: I don't know.

PS: No?

SC: I don't know. Maybe just some way to use some of the talents of being a legislator. Maybe a public affairs consultant or media or something like that. Who knows? This is just the finest job. Thinking up another job makes me depressed, which is not a good thing.

SC: To have had your dream job at twenty-seven makes the rest of your life look pale?

SC: I suppose.

PS: Okay. A couple of questions about the future. You're not married at this point.

SC: No.

PS: When you think about the future, do you imagine yourself being married?

SC: Yes.

PS: And how would that likely happen for you? You've indicated you don't think it would be arranged.

SC: Well, the thing about an arranged marriage is that there are different degrees of arranged marriages. One can be set up, meaning introduced, to a girl or boy, or like in the case of my cousin, you can see your wife for the first time on the day of your wedding. Or you can be somewhere in between, like my parents. So that needs to be clarified. There's no one thing about arranged marriages.

But I just don't see myself actively seeking out a bride for marriage's sake. I just don't think that's me. I've thought about it, but, I mean, if I haven't done it by now, I doubt I'm going to do it, do that type of thing. I'll probably get married. I'm sure I'll find the right woman.

PS: So how will it happen?

SC: I don't know.

PS: You'll just walk in a door somewhere and fall in love?

SC: I think probably that's how it will happen in the end. Or there may be some prompting by outside forces.

PS: Such as?

SC: I don't know.

PS: How do your parents feel about you being unmarried at this age?

SC: Well, they're frantic, to say the least.

PS: They are? Okay.

SC: Yes.

PS: Because in their mind you're too old?

SC: Well, yes, especially since my brother just got married in November. He's a year younger than me. He's married, and I'm older than him and I'm not. I'm losing hair by the hour. So they're pretty frantic about this type of thing, about this issue. I must say, it does grate on my nerves.

PS: What does?

SC: Their pushing me to get married. They have this girl or that. It's funny at first, but when they start talking about it in front of others and how it's such a bad thing that I'm not married, in front of me, in front of others, then it becomes tasteless.

PS: Sort of like them pushing you to study hard.

SC: Right. See, there you have it. That's exactly it. It'll probably have the opposite reaction.

PS: So they should start encouraging you to be single, and in two weeks you'll be married. Just joking.

SC: You may have an idea. You may have an idea there. You're not that off base, let me tell you. Sometimes it works that way. And it's too bad that they don't realize that, because you're probably right.

PS: Do you date anybody these days?

SC: Not these days.

PS: Just don't have time or not interested?

SC: No. Well, time has been a problem, but here and there I do. Nothing steady.

PS: And they're mostly women that you meet where? Are they Indian women or white women?

SC: Here, and just friends of friends, mostly American.

PS: Would your parents be okay if you married an American woman, a white American woman?

SC: Probably not at first, but I think down the road they would be forced to accept it, and they would.

PS: When you imagine yourself ten years from now, what kind of picture do you have for yourself at thirty-seven? What's your life going to be like? Where are you going to live? What are you going to do for work? Will you have kids? What kind of house? What's your picture of you in ten years?

SC: I have purposely tried not to think of myself in ten years. I just have no concept. I try to live. I try to have goals. I have some long-term goals, but I don't picture myself. I did that a long time ago, and it never works out that way in the end. I'm much more curious about how I am than of how I'm going to be. So I don't have a real clear picture. I may be settled down in a white picket fence house. I may be climbing Kilimanjaro. Who knows?

PS: And to you, it doesn't much matter which one happens?

SC: No. I think I would like to do both in my life, I know that. But what sequence I'll be doing it in is another question. I like the variety. I like the idea of settling down, but not too settled down.

PS: And do you envision yourself going to India a lot? Ever? Visiting or living there?

SC: I do. I've not been there in a long time, since 1990, and I need to go. I think maybe this coming late fall would be a good time.

PS: And what would you do there?

SC: Just visit. Probably just sit around. Maybe see some sights, but the part I enjoyed most about India is visiting with relatives and just having a good time.

PS: And there's still a few there?

SC: They're all there, yes.

PS: Cousins?

SC: Pretty much, yes.

PS: How many times did you go to India when you were a child?

SC: Only once to speak of, when I was four. I barely remember that. And then the next time was in high school.

PS: When you were about fifteen, sixteen?

SC: Yes, sixteen. That was very good. So really, I've been there only twice to speak of.

PS: And then when you were in college, you went for a month. So you've actually been there three times.

SC: Yes.

PS: Has your family gone back more often?

SC: Yes.

PS: And you didn't go along?

SC: Their last big trip was in '93. They went for a month or two, and I had to take some summer classes during law school or else I would have gone.

PS: Or else you would have?

SC: Or else I would have joined them.

PS: Oh, okay.

SC: Every couple years, either my mom or dad goes, if someone gets married or something like that, that they have to go. So I think my turn is next, definitely.

PS: To go back?

SC: Yes.

PS: Some of these things you've already answered. Oh, here's a nice one. Which of the values that your parents instilled in you will you continue to embrace and hold dear in your own life?

SC: I think the value of education. That was very important. I think I'll raise my kids the same way, with some modifications.

They did instill in us kind of a sense of loyalty. Loyalty, I think, was very important. It was never talked about, but it was always there. You don't talk bad about another family member in front of anyone else, ever. If you have something to say, you always say it in private. You always stick up for your friends. I notice that they do that. And it doesn't matter how pissed they are at one another, they'll always defend the other person in front

of a third party.

PS: So there's a loyalty to family that's really strong?

SC: Yes, and friends. Always help friends. Hospitality, that's another one. So I think those things I have now and will continue on.

PS: How about your vision for yourself in the future in terms of your inner spiritual life. You said you're not very ceremonially Hindu.

SC: Yes. I hope someday I'll be more ceremonial. I think that's important. I think that's a part that I lack.

PS: And how would you access that?

SC: Well, there's many ways. Parents, the Mandir. Hindi is also very easy to learn.

PS: The language?

SC: Yes, especially since I have some knowledge of it. The alphabet, that's very easy. So I hope to do that.

PS: Kind of in closing, some summary questions. Are there any aspects of being the first U.S.-born generation which you find especially difficult or especially pleasant? You touched on a few of those already, so you don't need to repeat those. But are there any other things that are particularly hard or particularly sweet?

SC: Well, the hard part is the identity. It's hard to define what an Indian-American is, if you really want to think about it.

PS: Do you think about it?

SC: Not anymore.

PS: But you used to?

SC: Yes. I kind of just determined that whatever I am is what I am. I'm an Indian-American. She's an Indian-American. We're probably different, just like any other person is. We have some commonalities. Our parents came from India and brought us up a certain way, and no sense in judging it. We're still both Indian-Americans. Sometimes a person can think themselves crazy about an issue, so I don't anymore.

PS: So you didn't actually resolve it. You just stopped thinking about it.

SC: Right. I'm going bald as it is. I just can't afford that type of brain activity. It's too stressful.

PS: Okay.

SC: So I think resolving that cultural clash is difficult. I think how I'm going to raise my kids is a difficult prospect to think about.

PS: In what way?

SC: Because since I lack the knowledge of culture that my parents do, I'm afraid of passing on even less to my kids, and that diffusion scares me. I don't like that idea one bit. I want to maintain the culture. It's what makes us unique and rich and what we identify with. But then again, what do we identify with? See, you go in circles.

PS: Do you like watch Indian movies and things like that?

SC: Yes.

PS: You do?

SC: Yes.

PS: And you like them?

SC: Some of them. Just like any other movie, there are good ones, bad ones.

So that's the difficult part. And then the easy part is, the pleasant part is, I think, because I'm the first. I think that part is kind of inherently pleasant to being the first American from my family, as a culture. It's a uniqueness and a bit of responsibility, too.

PS: So you were actually a citizen before your parents were.

SC: Yes, exactly.

PS: And you could become the U.S. president because you were born in the U.S.

SC: Right.

PS: Do you aspire to that?

SC: Why not? This country needs a Hindu president.

PS: That's right.

SC: We haven't had one for a long time.

PS: So being the first born, even though it was difficult, it also has a sweetness?

SC: Yes.

PS: What's that sweetness about?

SC: Well, the sweetness is the uniqueness of it, I think being the first to break the ground, the curiosity of what's next, the discovery.

PS: And you like that trailblazing? That appeals to you?

SC: Yes. It does now.

PS: It didn't as a child quite as much?

SC: Well, there were a lot of conflicts with my parents, as we talked about earlier, that I bore the major brunt of, and my brother and sister learned lessons from me. Their rooms are always clean. No matter what dinner was served to them, they always ate it and complimented my mom on it.

PS: So when somebody asks you now to describe yourself, what do you say? Who are you?

SC: I don't know. Do you want to pause it? It doesn't seem right to answer that question with a series of traits and characteristics, because many others would share those same characteristics, but they wouldn't be me. So I think who am I can just be just defined by the fact that I grew up as me in a set of particular circumstances and reacted a particular way to various things, and now people can see the end result for what they want. I'm a son, a public servant, a brother. So in the end, it's a pretty difficult question to answer. I'll probably have to work on that, and I'll tell you in the next project.

PS: Okay. Anything else that you want to add that I haven't asked you about?

SC: No.

PS: No? I really appreciate your time today.

SC: I don't know what I'm going to do now. I'm going to just sit and think about these

things.

PS: I wrecked your whole night, right? [Laughter]

SC: No. I just hope it sounded coherent.

PS: It'll be fine. It'll be fine. Thanks a lot.

SC: No problem. It was actually quite fun.

PS: Good.

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