

Interview with Alim Kassim

**Interviewed by Polly Sonifer
March 27, 1998**

PS: This is Polly Sonifer interviewing Alim Kassim on March 27, 1998. Hello. How are you today?

AK: Good.

PS: Good. Glad you could make it. Tell me a little bit about yourself, your name, where you were born, the day you were born, things like that.

AK: My name is Alim Kassim. I was born January 5, 1977, in Buffalo, Minnesota.

PS: And how did you come to be in Buffalo?

AK: I have no idea. I think my parents just came--when they moved down from Mankato, I guess they--I guess that's Mankato. They moved to Buffalo, Minnesota, with my sister, who was probably five at the time, and I was born there.

PS: What's your sister's name?

AK: Salima.

PS: What are your parents' names?

AK: Mansur is my dad, and Naseem is my mom.

PS: Tell me what you know about how they came to be in America. They are of Indian origin.

AK: Yes. I don't know how far back it goes. I know my parents were born in Kenya, and they came to the States because my dad went to school at Mankato.

PS: So they didn't know each other before in Africa?

AK: Yes, I think they did, yes.

PS: Did they come over together from Kenya?

AK: No. Mom went to school--they actually both also went to school in London before

that, and my dad went when he was like thirteen, and my mom went for college. So then it was totally different times. And I think they met, maybe, in London, actually, if I'm not mistaken.

PS: You don't know much about that.

AK: Not too much. I mean, I've heard it a couple of times, but don't keep it handy on the shelf or whatever.

PS: Do you know if theirs was an arranged marriage?

AK: No, it wasn't.

PS: Is that what was commonly done in the communities that they grew up in?

AK: Not from what I can remember. I think they were pretty much free to choose. So I know there were, at the time, arranged marriages, but not too much.

PS: When they came here, were they here with the intent to stay permanently?

AK: Yes.

PS: What were your parents doing at the time that you were born, for work or school or whatever?

AK: I believe my dad worked for a bank, and my mom was a nutritionist at the university.

PS: And you had this five-year-old sister.

AK: Yes. I don't remember much when I was young.

PS: Tell me about your home when you were a little kid, like four or five years old. What language did you speak at home?

AK: English all the time.

PS: And your parents never spoke anything else either?

AK: Yes, they spoke Kachhi. I don't know what off-branch of what it is. My parents know, actually, quite a few languages. I only know a little bit of Spanish.

PS: You know a little bit of Spanish?

AK: Just a little.

PS: Did you learn it from them?

AK: No.

PS: In school?

AK: Yes. Just the school thing.

PS: But you don't speak any Indian languages?

AK: No. I can understand a little bit. I can understand a lot of different languages, but I can't speak them. So if they talk to me in Kachhi, I know what they're saying, but I couldn't speak it.

PS: How is that for you, not to be able to answer them back in Kachhi?

AK: I don't know. It's kind of worked out. It's kind of different not being able to, but I don't know. My sister, both of us can't speak but we both know exactly when they're talking about us and what they're saying. [Laughter]

PS: Do they know that you know?

AK: Yes, they know.

PS: So when you were little and you lived in Brooklyn Park, was your mom working outside the home then?

AK: Yes. At that time she was. I'm thinking she was a nutritionist at the University of Minnesota.

PS: How did you get cared for during the day while she was at work?

AK: Probably a babysitter.

PS: Do you remember anything about that?

AK: My mom's aunt took care of me at home; later I went to a day care.

PS: Do you remember anything about that?

AK: No.

PS: Just a blank?

AK: Buffalo is all blank except for my birth, it being my birthplace. I don't remember anything.

PS: Do you know how old you were when you moved away from Buffalo?

AK: One. I moved into Stillwater when I was one.

PS: What do you remember about Stillwater?

AK: When I started school, probably, up to five.

PS: So you didn't go to a preschool or anything like that?

AK: Yes, I went to the half-day thing. I remember--God, I don't even know how old I was. I remember at the time meeting all my friends that I'd carry all the way through sixth grade on that first day. That's all I can remember, and riding the pink bus.

PS: A pink bus?

AK: It was called the "pink bus." They had little stickers in the window to help you identify which bus to take home. That's all I can remember.

PS: So you went off to school in Stillwater.

AK: Yes.

PS: Was your mom staying home at that time?

AK: Yes, I believe so.

PS: How was that?

AK: That was nice, coming home to see Mom.

PS: Did your family maintain any connection to Kenya at all? Did they have anybody there in Kenya that they corresponded with?

AK: Yes, there's family, relatives, people they keep in contact. My dad's father, my grandfather, is still over there. He lives over there by himself. And other family

members--I can't think of who offhand--but we keep in touch with them.

PS: So when the big purge came with Idi Amin, not everybody had to leave. Certain people didn't.

AK: I guess it was more the people who wanted to seek a better life and start businesses and make things better for their family, opportunity seekers.

PS: So your parents were opportunity seekers.

AK: Yes, and I guess on my trip to India which I took recently, I found out that my great-grandfather, he left India to go to Kenya. I might have still been living in India.

PS: How did that strike you?

AK: I don't know. It would be really different. I couldn't imagine it. I mean, growing up in Stillwater for nineteen years of my life, it's a total different contrast, but I'm sure I would have adapted and stuff like that, but it's just hard to picture myself.

PS: I believe it. So when you were a young kid growing up at home, what kind of values did your family stress to you? Are there any sayings you heard over and over again?

AK: "Do well in school. Try your best. Try as hard as you can. Try different things. Take hold while you can." They always seemed to stress things that were good for me. They always wanted the best.

PS: How did they communicate those values to you?

AK: Just by telling me, I guess.

PS: Were these discussions you had around the dinner table, or did they make a point every morning as you walked out the door, "Do your best in school, honey"?

AK: Some of that, every other day or something, you know, while I'm doing homework or after I got test results. Mainly then, after I got back tests or something like that, if I did good. "Keep doing well," and stuff like that.

PS: So they were reinforcing the positive things.

AK: Yes.

PS: If you missed the mark sometimes, how did they respond to that?

AK: Sometimes it was, "Try your best." Otherwise, it was, "Study harder next time. Put a little bit more effort into it, because we know you're capable."

PS: And you responded pretty well to that?

AK: Yes.

PS: So you were five or six when you went off to school in Stillwater. What was Stillwater like at the time, the school system?

AK: From what I remember, it was really good. I had some of the best teachers I've ever had in elementary school, still. I went to see some of my teachers a while back, and it was fun to talk with them.

PS: You went to see your old teachers?

AK: Yes, one of them. It was actually my sixth-grade teacher.

PS: How neat. When you started school, did you sense that you were like the other kids or a little bit different?

AK: I'm sure I felt maybe a little different. The first day, first leave Mom standing there at the door, you know, getting pulled apart. Then having to hang out with a new bunch of people I didn't know. I kind of felt like I wanted out of there, but I soon felt like I fit in fine, made best friends, and it was perfectly all right.

PS: Was there ever any teasing that happened?

AK: Not that I can remember at all.

PS: You just always fit in pretty easy?

AK: Yes.

PS: And you were very fluent in English, so that wasn't a problem?

AK: Yes.

PS: How about the food at school? Was that an issue? Was it real different from what you were accustomed to eating at home?

AK: A little bit. School mainly served pizza, all the American foods. At home I had a little bit of Indian food. Most of the time we have half Indian, half American, or whatever

ethnic cuisines. So it was pretty similar.

PS: So that wasn't a big deal for you either.

AK: No.

PS: Sounds like it was a piece of cake.

AK: Yes.

PS: Were there any other Indian kids in the school system?

AK: I think later when I got into junior high, but not in elementary, nobody.

PS: How was that for you?

AK: I didn't know at the time.

PS: Didn't even notice it?

AK: No.

PS: Not a big deal?

AK: I was just a kid.

PS: Well, some kids are very conscious of it.

AK: I know.

PS: And they would get teased.

AK: I'm not even sure that I knew that I was Indian back then.

PS: So who were your best friends in grade school?

AK: Ian Olson is one I can remember offhand. I met him the first day, I think, and we were best friends until he had to leave town, to New Jersey or somewhere, then we lost touch. That was one of them. Some other people, I can't even think of their names. He was probably the one I hung out with the most in elementary.

PS: When did you start having an awareness that you were Indian? You said it didn't happen during grade school.

AK: It's something I never thought about. The African side that my parents--that was in my mind, but I'm not sure that I was Indian--it probably hit me probably when I did a little report or something, you know, on the country, something like that. Probably became aware of it then. I think I can remember it was like maybe seventh grade, sitting in one of my classes, and this girl asked me what nationality am I. I'm like, "What do you mean?" And she was like, "Where are your ancestors from?" I'm like, "My parents are from Africa and my grandparents, I think, are from Africa or India or something." So when I went home, I think, and I asked. I think that's when I found out. They said, "You're one-hundred percent Indian blood." That's probably when.

PS: So before that, they just didn't talk about it?

AK: I think they did.

PS: You just didn't catch it for some reason.

AK: Yes. Nothing that was important at the time.

PS: When you think back about how your house was arranged, were there things that were Indian that you just took for granted? Were there pictures from India or Indian artwork, or did they play Indian music? The Indian food, you said, was there. Did they wear Indian clothes?

AK: The music and the clothes and the food are some of the Indian things. Later on I'm not sure, not too much Indian. We have some Indian art now, but from what I remember, it was more a little American and African, more, artifacts and stuff.

PS: So the culture that you got passed along in your home was a mixture of American and African and Indian.

AK: Yes.

PS: And it was pretty seamlessly delivered? As a child, you didn't know that's African art and that's Indian art; it was just there?

AK: Yes. Something on the shelf.

PS: When your friends would come over to play, would they ever comment that your house was different?

AK: Like, "Cool house." Because it's really odd-shaped. That's the first thing people used to say. I mean, that's what stuck with them, I guess. No one ever really looked at the art.

None of my friends were really into that. I don't think I was at the time either.

PS: Did your parents ever serve Indian food when your friends came over?

AK: Later on.

PS: How did that go over?

AK: A couple of people liked it. Not many people do. It's a different flavor, you know. A lot of American friends, they try it, but it doesn't go over too well with them.

PS: Did you have any feelings about your parents serving Indian food to your friends?

AK: No.

PS: Didn't care one way or the other?

AK: No. If they wanted to try it, they were welcome to it.

PS: So you never felt embarrassed, like, "Don't serve that tonight. My friend is coming"?

AK: No.

PS: Pretty laid back, huh?

AK: Yes.

PS: I bet you were an easy kid to raise.

AK: I think that's what my mom said. I think she said I didn't cry much at all. I think I was a good kid or something like that.

PS: In seventh grade, you said, was when you started getting aware that you knew about the Africa connection, but you started getting more aware of India.

AK: Yes, who I was, I'd say seventh grade, from that one class.

PS: Are you aware that there was any kind of a process that you went through to learn more about what it meant to be Indian or your roots?

AK: Did I go through a process?

PS: Yes. Do you remember feeling more curious at certain times?

AK: Oh, yes.

PS: How did you find out about things? Who did you ask?

AK: I first went to my parents, I think probably that week or something, and asked them, "What am I?" They told me this little story, how they came, and what our background is, where my grandparents were born, and stuff like that. Then when I got together with other family members and my grandparents, I'd ask them, and slowly piece everything together, put the family tree together.

PS: How did you get access to your grandparents? Where were they living at the time?

AK: At the time--they moved all over the place. I think when I was younger, they were in Texas, in Austin, Texas, so we'd go down maybe once a year in the summer and visit them, or they'd come up. Most of the time my dad would drive my sister and me down, like thirteen hours, sleep most of it.

PS: You did; he didn't.

AK: Yes, he'd drive it straight.

PS: So when you were hanging out with your grandparents, what was that like?

AK: I loved it, hanging out with my grandparents, the funnest thing ever. Still are.

PS: Tell me more about what you would do with them.

AK: God, I can't even think of all the things. I can't remember specific things, but they were so friendly and warm and just fun to be with. I always enjoyed going to my grandparents'. Especially one thing I think was the food I liked eating that my grandmother made, and she'd make Indian. I didn't know what things were called, but I liked eating it. [Laughter]

PS: And you and your sister would both go down there?

AK: Yes.

PS: How long would you say?

AK: Probably like--God, I can't even remember. Maybe a couple of weeks.

PS: Then your dad would come back and get you?

AK: I think then he got into insurance at the time or something, and he'd do like appointments down there or something, get in touch with the agency down there.

PS: So he would work and just stay there?

AK: Yes, from what I remember about it.

PS: And you'd just hang out with your grandparents and go to the zoo and go to the park, things like that?

AK: Yes, do some different things, I can't remember what.

PS: But they were all activities?

AK: Yes.

PS: When you wanted to ask them about Indian things, what kinds of stuff were the first things you wanted to know? Did they have picture books that you looked through?

AK: I can't remember doing that when I was in Texas. Things I learned in Texas. I think my grandmother had started to teach me the *dua*, like from our religion, is the prayer, and she'd always start, every time we came down, she'd have me start to learn that. She pulled me kind of into the religious side of who we are. She got me started on that.

PS: So she would teach you the *dua*, and then you would say it with her?

AK: Yes. We'd have to say it every day, and I got to learn all the six parts.

PS: How was that?

AK: It was weird.

PS: Weird. Say more about that.

AK: To me, I'm like, "Why do I have to?" She says, "This is who you are." I can't say, "You're not this." So I learned it, memorized the little six parts, and used to say it every day, evening prayer and sometimes she'd ask me to say it once I knew it. I think she had my sister do the same, I'm sure. I think she does it for all the little kids in the family, all the cousins.

PS: You didn't learn any of that from your own parents?

AK: Later on, a little bit, but mainly from my grandma. She started it.

PS: Tell me about your family's ancestral religion. Tell me what that is.

AK: I have not a clue. I mean, I know my parents [are] Muslim, my grandparents are Muslim, and I'm not sure about my great-grandparents. I want to say Hindu, but I don't think that's right. I think they must have been Muslim, too. I can't remember. I don't know too much about that.

PS: What other things did you learn about your family history from your grandmother?

AK: What other things?

PS: Or your grandfather as well.

AK: Like certain events?

PS: Did they talk about what it was like in Africa or why they went to Africa?

AK: No, not really. I mean, they were there and they'd share stories of what it was like maybe growing up there, little things that happened to them. Like a while ago my grandfather was up here, I learned that he was stung by African killer bees and my uncle was with him and they had to take refuge in a car or something. Little fun stories like that. I think my great-grandfather was like a--I don't know, he transported goods from the coast to all the villages, and they'd have to go through the jungle. One night they came and set up camp, all the porters set up camp, and he went to bathe in the river and set his pistol on the shore, and he went out for a swim, and a crocodile grabbed his leg, and he tried to pry--I don't know. He stuck his elbow in there in attempt to pry his leg open, but then he had him by the arm and leg. Somehow the story goes that he swam to shore, which was like, I don't know, maybe ten to fifty yards away, grabbed his pistol, and he shot the croc.

PS: [Laughter] Do you believe it?

AK: Yes, because my mom--yes, I believe it for sure because my mom used to tell me stories about when she was growing up, all the little kids and my mom, her cousins, when my great-grandfather was over at their house or whatever, they'd always stick their fingers in the little holes in his legs left by the crocodile.

PS: So he has scars to prove this one.

AK: Yes.

PS: Okay. And his arm was okay?

AK: Yes, from what I remember. I think it was just the legs had little chunks missing.

PS: Oh, that's an exciting story.

AK: Yes.

PS: I bet you loved hearing that.

AK: I love to tell that one. It's like people don't believe it. I can't say that I totally can back it up, but--

PS: But he does have holes in his legs.

AK: Yes.

PS: Wow, that's exciting. What other stories do you remember?

AK: Those are probably the two that really stick in my head. There are other stories. I used to talk a lot with my mom, and she told me about her growing up and things she used to do when she was younger, my age in school. I think they had a lot of--nothing was paved back then, from what I remember.

PS: Paved?

AK: Yes, like roads and stuff. So I mean, the school was outside and they'd run outside in the dirt and play around and eat mangoes and passion fruit.

PS: So she grew up in India.

AK: No, in Kenya!

PS: Does your dad ever tell you any of those stories?

AK: Not too much. I haven't heard too much from my dad's side, what it was like for him growing up. I did get a chance in '84 to go visit Kenya, but that's also vague.

PS: It's vague?

AK: Yes.

PS: You don't remember much? How old were you then?

AK: Seven. I do remember like one thing. My dad had a bird, and I think his name was Cusackoo. I think it was a parrot, a gray parrot or something like that, and I think I saw that bird. I'm not too sure. But I think I did get to see where my dad grew up, if I'm not mistaken.

PS: But at seven you don't remember a whole lot about that trip.

AK: No.

PS: Your whole family went?

AK: Yes. My dad joined us. My mom, my sister, and I left first and went to London and then to Africa, and back to London. I think my dad joined us later, if I'm not mistaken. I don't know where.

PS: How long did you stay?

AK: Probably those couple of weeks, I think.

PS: Who did you stay with while you were there?

AK: In Kenya?

PS: Yes.

AK: I think my grandfather's brother. I don't remember his name. I get it mixed up. I think he has six brothers or something, or five other brothers including him, or something like that. I think we stayed with him. And then some other friends my parents knew. I don't remember their names either. But we knew people we stayed with. There was also family or friends there.

PS: Did you know about the School of Indian Language and Culture that was here in the Twin Cities, the SILC school?

AK: I've heard of it.

PS: You heard about it. You never went to it?

AK: No.

PS: Then I won't ask you about that. Tell me about your family's involvement in the religious community. You said your family is Muslim. When they first came here, was

there a Muslim community for them to join?

AK: Not that they knew of. Actually, my parents founded the mosque here, and they used to actually hold it out at their house. I think it was Brooklyn Park at the time. A couple of them that were here came over, and the mosque started in the house. The thing grew and the community grew, and they had to get a bigger space. Now it's located in St. Anthony in some building.

PS: How big is it now?

AK: The community is about maybe 100, 150 people.

PS: Is that primarily Indians or Muslims from anywhere?

AK: Actually, all the same people that African--the same kind of--I don't know how I can say it. Same kind of situation that my parents had back then. All those people could relate to that, so they were all the same. They all spoke Kachhi.

PS: So were the services conducted in Kachhi?

AK: No.

PS: What language?

AK: Arabic. All the prayers were said in Arabic.

PS: Did you go to that mosque with your family?

AK: Yes, when I was smaller, younger.

PS: Tell me what that was like.

AK: I didn't like it too much.

PS: Because?

AK: I don't know. The religious thing never struck me as fun. It was fun to go hang out with the other kids and stuff like that, the social part of it, but the religious part of it, it's something I never clicked with very easy. I just did it because I had to, and it's still like that.

PS: So do you go now with your parents?

AK: No. I stopped going probably two years ago, maybe more than that. There are problems in every community and people don't get along in the community or something, and all the little things built up, and I said, "This isn't any fun for me. I'm not getting anything out of the prayers. I just go there because I have to." Mainly I'd complain that I'd just go, be picking lint off my socks or something, you know, or off the carpet, because I didn't understand what the prayers were all about. The *dua*'s in Arabic, but then other parts of the speaking and stuff, when they're calling people up to do prayers, I don't know what language that is. I know the name, but I can't think of it.

PS: But it's not a language you understand?

AK: Not too much of that, from what I remember.

PS: So it was a real barrier for you that it wasn't conducted in English.

AK: Yes, but that's the way things were. They had English translations and at the time had a couple of different versions of it, but we went to mission classes, which supposedly taught us all about our religion, I guess, and I didn't seem to get anything out of that either. They taught us more of the *dua* then, so I knew some of it from my grandma already, and then they'd teach us other little songs.

PS: When they were teaching, were they teaching you the mechanics of it, like, "Bow over like this and say this word, and do this with your hands"? Or were they teaching you the meaning behind it?

AK: A little bit of both. They'd say, "We have to do this," or, "Do this something," and other things, you know.

[Tape interruption]

PS: So they were teaching you the mechanics. Say more about that.

AK: Like I mentioned, they'd teach us what little--you know, to bow or whatever at a certain time during the prayer or in pronunciation of the prayer, something like that, just make sure we knew stuff.

PS: So for you it was just going through the motions?

AK: Yes.

PS: It didn't have any particular significance?

AK: Yes, being with kids. Sometimes it was fun to be around. Sometimes I was excited,

not really excited, but I'd always know there'd be some kids there for me to play with. So it was kind of nice. Thinking back on it and growing up for a little part in that community, there were about ten of us kids or so. Most of them were my sister's age and older, a couple years older or something, like another girl that was my age at the time, so we used to hang out and do stuff.

PS: Did the other kids feel the same about the mission classes and things as you did?

AK: I don't think so. I think, from what I know, those people are still active in the community. I think it probably did more good for them. I'm sure they got something more out of it than I did.

PS: For some reason it just didn't stick?

AK: Yes.

PS: Who were the people that your family socialized with?

AK: In the community?

PS: Well, anyplace. I mean, did you have neighbors that you hung out with? What was your social life for your family like?

AK: A lot of people in the community at the time.

PS: The community meaning the mosque?

AK: At the mosque, yes. A couple of family members. Had uncles. I think my dad's brother, my uncle, was around the Cities. A lot of neighbors, my neighborhood. A lot of friends that they had. I used to see when I was young, I'd meet all sorts of different people coming to the house. My parents had a lot of friends, still do, all different types, religions, and it's kind of cool to see everybody's different. It was fun to always meet someone new.

PS: How did you interact with all those people that came through your house? Did the people stay at your house or just visit in the evening?

AK: Mainly all the family members, you know, would stay with--you know, if it were neighbors or my dad's clients or just friends that they had, just get together for dinner and chatting kind of thing, and I'd meet them at that time, just talk to them a little bit.

PS: So you didn't get to be real close to any of these people?

AK: No.

PS: They just kind of were coming and going.

AK: Yes.

PS: And you were doing your own thing.

AK: Yes. We were kind of known for--like when I was growing up, actually, one of our neighbors was kind of saying we should put a little sign up on the door saying "The Kassim Inn," because we'd get so many people coming through. We still do. We always have a lot of people coming to our house, stay with us. But it's fun.

PS: So you really liked that. Your family was very social.

AK: Yes. Even when we're not social, it's pretty quiet. But it's nice to get those breaks.

PS: When there's nobody around.

AK: Yes, no little kids running around.

PS: So we're up to high school, junior high. Was high school and junior high different for you in any way than grade school was?

AK: Yes. Junior high was a big change, because kindergarten through sixth was all in one building for me, and now I had to move to a new building. Our high school was actually seventh through ninth grade, and I had to take a new bus and new everything. I think we still have a picture at home of my getting on the bus my first day of seventh grade or something like that. And it was really different, because we had lockers now instead of tote trays, and a different building. It was kind of different. It was two buildings with a tunnel under the road. So it was like a little east and west building, multi-level. It was totally like what you'd see on TV now, you know, the lockers, all the different classrooms and different teachers instead of having one main homeroom teacher and having different subjects. It was a whole different--

PS: It's a different social scene in junior high, isn't it?

AK: Yes. It's like people already knew people, you know, from elementary. I knew a couple of people, but when I went to like math class or something, it was like all new faces. Maybe I knew like one, and that was really scary at first, but, then I'd had those same math friends, those same people in math class all the way up through high school. That's when I first really met all the people I would say was through high school.

PS: So the grade school friends kind of passed away after a while, but the high school friends started in junior high.

AK: Yes, most. About half of them.

PS: They just stayed with you.

AK: Because the other half came from different junior highs.

PS: And that was when you first got this shock that you were Indian, was in junior high?

AK: Yes, later on in seventh grade.

PS: Was there ever any time in junior high or in high school when you were aware that you were different, that your name wasn't Olsen or Johnson, that you had this other ethnicity?

AK: It stuck out. You know, they'd announce my name, and I'd hear all different sorts of pronunciation--Alim or Alum or, you know, and I'd always get it messed up so. You know, people would sometimes get curious and ask me. But I never had a problem with it or anything.

PS: Did it make you feel kind of special in any way?

AK: Just that tad bit different, you know.

PS: Just a tad bit different, not a whole lot?

AK: Yes, because I wasn't American, you know. Most everybody in there was American.

PS: Had your family actually become American citizens?

AK: Yes.

PS: So you were officially American.

AK: Yes, officially.

PS: But you weren't white American.

AK: Yes, and I didn't feel it, either, because the background I had growing up and the environment I had at home, it just seemed like I'd go to friends' houses and it was totally different. I mean, everyone's going to have their totally different environment, but ours

had a little cultural thing thrown into it. Other people had more the Nordic kind of background. So they're all Norwegian or Swedish, and we had all this African background. So it was kind of different in that respect.

PS: So when you thought about your background, you felt African more so than Indian?

AK: I don't know. I just felt different. I don't know what, exactly. I felt more one thing than another, but I had trouble all through junior high, probably up 'til high school, trying to figure out who I was. I think everybody has that.

PS: Oh, yes. Everybody does.

AK: My cousin and I kind of figured since we had the same background, I just decided that I'd be one-third American, one-third African, and one-third Indian.

PS: That's handy.

AK: Yes. So, I mean, that way I don't lose a piece of the African in me or the American.

PS: And how did you decide which third of you to be what?

AK: I don't know. What do you mean, like which part?

PS: Well, you said, "I'm one-third African." Was it the way you ate that was African, or the way you dressed, or the way you carried yourself, or the way you believed the world was? How did you decide which parts of you were affected by which chosen cultures?

AK: I guess being Indian came from when I learned that my great-grandparents were from India, and all the Indian food that we had. So that part of me was Indian. The American part was the schooling, you know, the friends, doing all the American things. We left out African. My parents being from Africa, having all the little African trinkets around the house, and the trip to Africa. I mean, they lived there, so that's a part of them, so it's a little part of me, too. So that's how, I guess, all the parts fit together.

PS: When did you come to that decision, that you were going to be one third, one third, one third?

AK: That was actually a couple of years back. It's pretty recent. It was hard trying to figure out--you know. I guess I knew what I was, but it was so different. Because when I got into high school, I was one of the few minorities, I think, in the school. But I don't know. I can't remember much.

PS: So there was never any negative consequence of being a minority in Stillwater?

AK: No, I never felt any. I was treated pretty normally. I do remember a couple of incidents when some--I don't know, we've had some like exchange students from other countries come in. Sometimes they'd get teased, or--

PS: The exchange student would get teased?

AK: Sometimes. People would get their general teasing anyway.

PS: But what you get teased about differs from who you are, right?

AK: Yes. I got teased because I had glasses or I was shorter.

PS: You didn't get teased for having black hair or anything?

AK: Oh, no. Nothing like that. People are pretty accepting.

PS: Some kids don't get accepted like that.

AK: Yes.

PS: Some kids have reported that they got teased a lot or they were called "nigger" or things like that. You never experienced anything like that, no overt prejudice?

AK: No.

PS: Interesting. How about dating? Did you date in high school?

AK: No. I still haven't.

PS: Still haven't? Okay. Were there any values in your family that were communicated to you about dating, that that's not something you should be doing?

AK: No.

PS: It would have been fine?

AK: Yes.

PS: But you just--what? What's happened that you don't?

AK: I don't know. I'd asked some people, you know, but they said no or they were already seeing somebody, and then, since like high school started in tenth grade, I was

there in tenth grade, moved into the new building, eleventh grade, and then I left after that year and started community college in the summer to try post secondary, to see what it would be like and prep me for the fall, for the next year. So then I began university--I took fall, that fall quarter, after eleventh grade I went to Lakewood Community College after taking some summer classes there. And then winter quarter I transferred over to the university and finished off my requirements for high school there.

PS: So you did the post secondary option.

AK: Yes. It gave me double credit.

PS: So you didn't actually go to your senior year in high school.

AK: No. I kind of regret it, but I'm, for the most part, really happy that I did, because high school was kind of a joke in the sense that it's just go to class, do your stuff, and you're done. Things seemed to me a lot of--people were very involved with sports, a lot of people I knew, and I wasn't. I was more a musician, artsy, so I'd focus on music, whereas a lot of people would be involved in after-school sports or clubs. I never got into that. I'd stop by a couple times during senior year and check in with the counselor, talk to a teacher or something. I'd be glad I wasn't there, because I'd be stuck in a building. I guess they locked people in because people would escape and run off to McDonald's or whatever, so they'd lock the door during lunch hour, and you'd be locked in, pretty much, for the day. Whereas I'm at the university, had a car, and I can go wherever I want, go to my class, but then I can go wherever I want. I had a little more freedom, even though I wouldn't run around. But I had that little extra freedom that felt good not having to check in with teachers or get passes. I guess that's where I started becoming responsible for myself a lot during that time.

PS: So that's a pretty unusual path, isn't it? Not many kids do that.

AK: Not many people do it. You hear about it, but I don't think a lot of people take advantage of it. It's like they stick around, become the best in the high school, the most active, and people get awarded from, like, the high school basketball tournaments or academic all-stars and get really involved. Some people get really involved in high school. I didn't. Most I got all through my schooling, I just started band in fifth grade and I've continued all the way through eleventh grade, and then I stopped doing the school band thing and did stuff on my own. All that time I was doing stuff with bands on my own, anyway.

PS: What's your instrument?

AK: Drums. I still play that.

PS: When you think about your circle of friends right now, are they kids that you knew from high school, or are they people that you met other--

AK: I have very few--since high school and after leaving senior year, I lost touch with a lot of people. I mean, I tried E-mailing them once in a while, but, you know, it's like, "Oh, let's get together." "Okay." But nothing's ever happened. And it's like we've changed so much that nothing's really in common, and we're going our separate ways. So I don't have too many friends from high school, maybe two or three that I can still call up or something, but a couple of people I've met in university, mainly, just pretty much people I meet in classes and I get to know them. The university's pretty cool in that sense, diverse. You see every kind.

PS: So if you want to go do something on a Saturday night, you call up a friend from the university?

AK: Most of the time I hang out with friends from Stillwater.

PS: So high school friends yet.

AK: No. Actually, the friend I hang out with, I met him at like the second job I ever had, a Little Caesar's Pizza. My neighbor who was a good friend of mine, we grew up together, and he worked at Little Caesar's, said, "Hey, you should get a job here." So I end up getting a job there. And he introduced me to my friend Brian. He was like, "You should talk to Brian, because he likes metal, too. He likes that heavy music." And that's how we clicked right off the bat. Music is what tied us together. We both love heavy metal.

PS: Do you play in a band?

AK: Not right now. I did. I played in--I even got kicked out of one, not last November, but November before.

PS: You got kicked out of the band?

AK: Yes.

PS: Say more about that, if you will.

AK: I think it's because I was nineteen at the time and they were twenty-six, twenty-eight, and like twenty-two or something. So the age difference, experience. They said my feet weren't fast enough because the music they played required like double-kick drums, two bass drums, and I had just started pretty much, a couple of years back, just with the double pedal, and they wanted me to go out and buy the second bass drum, so I'd have to

operate a two feet--it's a totally different feeling, so they said, you know, my feet weren't really up to speed. I have a feeling it was just personality clashes. I was still in school. All of them were working, and after high school they quit and were pursuing--you know, the singer was a tattoo artist. One guy works odd jobs and another guy works in a factory.

I came up to a weird decision in my life pretty much at that--when I joined that band, it was like since I'd always stuck with music, either I was going to become a professional musician or continue with school, and I tried to merge both as far as I could. My parents said--everyone in my family would say, "Music's not going to put food on your table if you don't make it." You know, people try and struggle for so long, but this band was one that I auditioned for. They're pretty well known in the Cities, and they've opened up for a lot of heavy metal bands that I've listened to. They've opened for them and met them and talked with them. So being in that band was like probably the highlight of my drumming career. It was really fun.

PS: Are you comfortable telling me the name of that band?

AK: Cromlech.

PS: Cromlech?

AK: C-R-O-M-L-E-C-H. Oh, yeah, I'm proud to say I've been in the band. It was a really fun experience. Actually, I got to play two shows with them. The first show we opened, it was like twelve different bands that night. We were the one to open for the headlining band, which was Grave, a national touring band from Sweden. So I got to meet the drummer for that band and talk with him a little. I've always loved, you know, being in that atmosphere. I enjoy playing. It just gives me an adrenaline rush. It was my first show, actually. I had played like high school auditoriums or little stages or stuff, and now it was a real club. It was my first. It was Mirage nightclub, which is now closed, but that was where that first show was. And then the second show, we headlined ourselves and had a couple other bands open up for us.

PS: But this was a fairly short career. How long did you play with them?

AK: Six months. Got in June, and I was like out, you know, before I knew it. It actually happened when I--I had to go away for my sister's wedding, which was in that November, and I left on a Friday, and things were kind of--tension had kind of built up in the band. So I'd gone away for Friday, Saturday, would be back Sunday. Got back. Got a call saying, "We need to talk." It was one of the band members. I said "What? Am I out?" And he says, "Yes." You know, he couldn't even really tell me. I had figured, but it happened, of all times, the weekend I go to my sister's wedding, and I find out in a couple of days that I'm gone, that I'm out.

PS: What a disappointment.

AK: Yes.

PS: How did you cope with that?

AK: It was hard. I totally gave up. I haven't joined a band since. I mean, there's no one I think can compare. They were just very talented. They were some of the best musicians I've played with. I vowed from then to work on my skills, and that's all I've been doing since I've been out.

PS: Which skills?

AK: The feet.

PS: So you're working on the drumming.

AK: Oh, yes. Ever since then. That kind of made me mad, and now the music I listen to is a lot of double-kick drumming, and it's just constant driving, and I love it. It's very hard to play, especially for me, so I do every kind of exercise that I can on the bass drums, but it's hard. I try. I'm still not happy with the speed I can play.

PS: So what's your goal with your drumming? To get back into a band?

AK: I don't think that I'll join another band right now. That's where that path kind of took off. Music stopped right there, you know, leave it on a good note kind of thing, sort of a good note. So I've been happy going to school and just coming home sometimes and playing along with the CDs. I just really found something. My friend introduced me to it. So I pop in the CD, and I'm playing with my favorite bands.

PS: So at this point you live with your folks yet.

AK: Yes. Live in the basement.

PS: You have a lot of privacy, then?

AK: Yes, a lot more.

PS: Are you more of a tenant? Do you pay rent or anything?

AK: Not yet.

PS: You think you will?

AK: If I stick around after I graduate, I'm sure I'll have to. My sister offered for me to move down where she is, in San Clemente, California, because they might get a new place, and they said, "You can rent it out, feel what it's like to live out on your own." I said, "I'll see." I don't like California that much. So, yes, right now I'm just living at home. It's good, you know, coming home to somewhere I'm comfortable at least, can study or whatever, relax. I could never have seen myself living on campus. I didn't even live on there for the first year at all, so I don't know what dorm life's like. I missed out on the social part, but otherwise I'm glad I didn't go to the dorms.

PS: Tell me about what college is like for you. What are you studying?

AK: I'm studying chemistry. Before I went into college, I decided--it was kind of weird. I went through, like everybody does, I switched majors a bunch of times, in my mind, at least. Started out in chemical engineering, then I researched into computer science. I looked into mechanical engineering, biomedical. It felt like the Institute of Technology's programs were so limited because they're all engineering-based, and I didn't see anything really that I liked or that really clicked in my mind. So I kept trying different things, and it kind of hurt me GPA-wise, trying out stuff I didn't really have a clue. I even tried out, geology thinking that'd be fun, to play with rocks and stuff. It wasn't all what it was cracked up to be, but I found myself pulled back into chemistry despite its difficulty at the time for me. It's something that I've always had fun with. I always hate the classes I have and maybe the curriculum, but I've always liked the whole subject.

PS: What is it about chemistry that's fascinating?

AK: I have no idea. I have not a clue. Something's pulling me back to it all the time, even though I may get Cs on tests and stuff or, you know, I don't do so well on a quiz or I bomb a quiz or something like that. I get really frustrated and stressed out, but I'm happy in chemistry somehow. I don't know that element that keeps pulling me back.

PS: So at this point what level are you, a junior?

AK: Yes.

PS: So you've got one more year left.

AK: Yes.

PS: What do you imagine is going to happen after that?

AK: I just started talking about that with my mom, actually. I'm probably going to do the job-hunting thing. I'd like to eventually move to the other side of the Cities, maybe like

Eden Prairie or Shakopee. I think I decided I wanted to stay in Minnesota, had debated going down to Arizona and was looking at going to Flagstaff.

PS: What's in Flagstaff?

AK: Nothing.

PS: Oh, just sounds like a nice place?

AK: Yes. I mean, I visited there, so I know what it's like. It just seemed like it had all I wanted. Outdoorsy. I'm a totally outdoorsy person. But I went on the net, found what kind of jobs they had down there, and E-mailed a couple of people in Flagstaff, you know, "What's the job market like for chemistry?" and they said there's not much. So I kind of ruled that out. Then it left me looking at Phoenix or something. That's not really the kind of scenery I wanted or that kind of life. I wanted to be nature-oriented. So I said, I'm going to miss fishing. There's tons of lakes here. There's always nice country around, so I'll probably stick around here.

PS: Eden Prairie and Shakopee area, what's the draw to go there?

AK: I just like the country. It's scenic, relaxing.

PS: Stillwater is country. Why not stay in Stillwater?

AK: I like Stillwater, too, but I don't think there's any good housing. I could stay with my parents, I suppose, rent or something, but I've got to grow up.

PS: So you're ready to do that?

AK: Yes. I think I'd better learn how.

PS: There is a time.

AK: Yes. It'll be hard for me, because, I mean, I never did the dorm thing. I've never flown away to a different college. Every day I see my parents. I mean, I'm sure I'd be a different person away from them.

PS: Yes. It'll be a big change for you.

AK: I'd have some different habits, I'm sure.

PS: You were saying earlier in this interview that you went to India. Was it in the last year?

AK: Yes, before fall quarter of this year.

PS: Tell me about that trip.

AK: It was a pretty fun trip. We flew from here to Seattle.

PS: "We" who?

AK: My mom and I. It was just my mom and I. We went there because she had just started her new business, the clothing business, so we were going over there to check out some of the new stuff and build up relations with all the people she'd be doing business with and meet the people and see their businesses. But we went from here to Seattle. Then we flew up from Seattle to Hong Kong. Hong Kong was a blast for me. I loved it. I'd go back any day. We were there for two days, so it was really quick. And we met up with my uncle. Actually, my little five-year-old cousin was with us, actually, that time. My uncle had left him with us because he had to go back to Thailand early. So my little cousin came with us on the flight, and we met with my uncle, and my cousin went back with my uncle to Bangkok.

Then we took off from there to go to India, and we were in India about ten days. We went to--first, I think, it was New Delhi. Then we went to Jaipur and then on, I think, to the Golden Triangle of something, saw all the sights. My mom had been to all this area before with my grandparents a couple of years back, so she knew all the sites she wanted me to see. She went along with me, and I got to see everything, cottage industries that specialized in inlaying of precious stones, which was really neat. They'd make them really paper thin, and they'd use little slivers, you know, like in chess boards or teacups or statues or whatever. So you could see them making stuff right there. At the grinding machines where they grind the stones, you could see their fingers were dry and cracked and a little bloody because they were working on such small pieces. It was cool to see how that was made. They sell like jewelry, cottage industries, clothing, textiles. Those were the main ones we saw.

And then we saw the Taj Mahal and Agra and Red Fort, all the famous sites. It's fun, the history. I like the history in India. It's pretty appealing.

PS: Had you studied that previously?

AK: No.

PS: So this was all new to you?

AK: Yes. I bought a book that the guide suggested. It was on Hinduism, and what I liked

about it was I wanted to find out about more of these gods, because they seemed really cool to me, in a sense, how they were portrayed and the little pictures that I'd see of them or paintings. The book has like images of what they were like and then descriptions of what they stand for, and I thought that was really cool. I enjoyed having that. That's pretty cool.

PS: That's Hindu.

AK: Yes, something totally unrelated, but I find it pretty fascinating, their history and stuff like that.

PS: Did you follow up on any things that were related to Islam in India?

AK: No.

PS: There just wasn't much?

AK: Nothing that I--I'm sure there are a couple of people, but, no, I didn't follow up on it.

PS: Did you know Indian people there that you visited as well in India, any relatives?

AK: Yes, my mom's friend's sister. She was located in--where else we went--also to Bombay and--what's the other city?

PS: Calcutta?

AK: Stopped there on the way out, but that was just a stopover. Maybe it is Bombay I'm guessing. Yes, I think that's where we met my mom's friend's sister and her family, and then we had dinner at their place one night or their son's or daughter's place. I can't remember. So it was pretty nice.

PS: Did you mostly stay in hotels?

AK: Yes.

PS: So you were more going like a tourist in India.

AK: Yes.

PS: So tell me some of the things that you learned from being on that trip. You said it had a big effect on your life.

AK: I think it did. I got to see what the other side of my heritage is, you know. It's kind

of neat. Like I said, I really liked the history part. I got a lot out of that. It was overwhelming, actually, but to see and to hear about--going to actual places, and they're so well preserved compared to some of the stuff we have in the States here. So it was really nice to see all that kind of stuff.

PS: Did it give you a bigger sense of what it means to be Indian or not really?

AK: I don't know. I don't think I got anything like that.

PS: So you didn't have any particular sense of, "This is my homeland," or, "This is my heritage. I come from this long line of noble people," or anything like that?

AK: No, I didn't feel like that too much, but, you know, I did recognize that I'm--I'm willing to admit that I'm from there, and I can say I'm from--now I know where I'm from, which area. I think it's Gujarat. So I found that out. I don't think we got to go through there, but we talked about it a little bit. I wasn't too familiar with all the names. I mean, it was a total learning experience for me, seeing the people and how they live, what they eat.

PS: Were there any things that were shocking to you?

AK: You know, the first thing that really shocked me was the level of poverty of a lot of people. It's hard to see through that, but it's easy to see past that and get involved in the history part, because we'd have guides through the cities that we went through, so it was nice because they'd tell us everything. But there'd always be people, a couple of people, that had leprosy, coming up to me, "Please help," and it was kind of scary for me because you don't see a lot of that stuff in the States.

PS: Did you give them anything, the beggars?

AK: No.

PS: How did you respond?

AK: We'd walk away, because a lot of them would keep pestering. I felt kind of uncomfortable, but I felt sorry for them, I really did, but I didn't feel comfortable at all, not knowing--I mean, I was all immunized and stuff before I came, and I didn't want to get anything. I remember one guy, even, on crutches who had leprosy, and he had like a mini-hand. It was really sad, but he ended up--like we were walking down the street with the guide, and he was following us all the way, and he's coming on crutches. I just kind of got in the car real quick because I was uncomfortable. I'd never been around that kind of stuff before. It was kind of scary.

PS: What did the guide or your mom say to do? Did you talk about it afterwards?

AK: Yes. The guides specifically say, "You've got to be careful of people who come ask you for money because they're really trickers or thieves or whatever. So it's better, when they ask for money, to give them food." They say they'll buy food, but, you know, they just want other things, I'm sure. The best thing, they said, was to give them food, but we never had any. We never carried any.

PS: So the people who have leprosy you think are pretending to have leprosy?

AK: No. I mean, they had it, but a lot of the other people who'd come up to us, like there would be little five-year-old kids carrying their brother or sister or babies, "Please give us money." You feel so sorry for them, but the guide suggested, "If you want to give them something, give them food instead." When you'd get to an intersection a lot of times, depending on what city you were in, people would come up to you all the time because I look different. I mean, I kind of look white, but a little bit Indian. I felt like I stuck out, because Indians, you know, have a little darker skin tone, and I don't. So I easily stuck out. I'd get eyed a lot everywhere I went. They could pinpoint me as a tourist, not knowing what the heck I'm doing.

PS: How was the language thing in India for you? Could you understand?

AK: Yes. A lot of people spoke English. It was pretty common with guides, and other people I met.

PS: If they were speaking something other than English, if you overheard a conversation on a bus or something, could you understand it?

AK: No.

PS: How was that for you?

AK: It was fine. No big deal. Surprisingly, a lot of people in India spoke English.

PS: Let's go back to the dating thing. You said you haven't dated yet.

AK: No.

PS: You have this real small circle of friends.

AK: Yes. That's probably where I miss out socially. I try to stay on campus more and do things. This last quarter I got to meet a couple of girls in the chemistry lab, of all places. I never really got a chance in high school to talk to girls, because they'd huddle on the

girls' side, huddle on the guys' side, so I never got to interact with a lot of girls. It was mainly just the guys. You know, I never had the courage to talk.

PS: Kind of shy?

AK: Yes. I'm shy, definitely. So I really built up my confidence this last quarter, especially talking with this one girl, and we got together and did problem sets, and then the other girls working around me and other guys. So it was really fun.

PS: Do you get more shy around girls than around guys?

AK: Oh, yes. A natural nervous tendency.

PS: When you think about your future, do you think that you'll marry some day?

AK: I think so. I hope to. I haven't really thought about it. I'll see what happens.

PS: When you think about your life maybe five years from now, what kind of visions come for you about what your life--

AK: What do I see?

PS: Yes. If you could make it just right five years from now, what would your life be like?

AK: Possibly married, working, hopefully have a house and a nice car. Maybe I'd fulfill my dream of getting all the things I want, like a boat so I could go fishing, and get all the nice things I want, getting all the things that I don't have now that I've been wanting. Then I think I'd be pretty happy at that point.

PS: How about when you think about yourself ten years from now? You're twenty-one now?

AK: Yes.

PS: At thirty-one, what do you think your life will look like?

AK: I have no idea.

PS: Oh, just take a wild guess. If you could make it just perfect.

AK: Taking a guess, for sure married at that point, possibly kids, which would be different. God, I don't know where I'd really be.

PS: What kind of job do you think you'd be doing?

AK: Something chemistry-related, I'm hoping. We'll see what happens. Yes, I've never really--I never think too far down the line, because, you know, I like to just look at maybe a year at a time or two years at the most. But I think about my future, you know, like I've been thinking about where I want to move after I graduate, that kind of future, what I want to do at that point, but I've never thought ten years down the line. It's something to think about.

PS: But you can pretty easily imagine being married and working?

AK: I think so.

PS: Would you be living in the United States?

AK: Yes.

PS: You never thought about living in any other country, like going back to Kenya or going to India to live or work?

AK: No.

PS: So you're staying in the United States?

AK: Most likely. I've thought about overseas, you know, maybe, like maybe Europe at one point, I had thought. After visiting Thailand, going around Asia somewhere, but then I thought about how much traveling do I really want to do, and then I'd have to learn new languages and a whole new ball game. I don't know if I want to really get stuck in overseas life. I don't know. It'd be so different, growing up here, having all the U.S. schooling. You know, schooling is a lot different, so I'd feel kind of different. You know, they'd have different standards, and would I be able to meet them? A lot of stuff to worry about if I did that, so I said I'd just stick around here and go visit there on vacation.

PS: When you think about the values that you have in your life right now, are there any values that you feel that you got from your parents that you want to really continue to embrace in your life, things that are real important to you, that you can see you clearly got or learned from your parents?

AK: Getting a good education. I don't know, just a lot of the basic life values, you know, being kind or saving money.

PS: Saving money?

AK: Yes. Like all the kind of things that will help you down the road, just general knowledge kind of things.

PS: Are there any values from your parents that you specifically don't embrace or don't want to continue?

AK: That I can think of, no.

PS: You said that the practice of Islam doesn't appeal to you very much.

AK: Yes, that's probably one. Yes. I forgot about that. Yes, religion. Like I mentioned before, it never clicked with me. I might contact someone in the community, which will be down the road or meet up with someone, but I don't see myself going to the mosque. I believe that if you really want to pray, you don't have to go to this building in this city. You can pray out in nature by a lake if you want.

PS: But do you do that?

AK: No.

PS: It's just not important to you right now.

AK: Yes. I mean, I don't know.

PS: Do you have any Indian friends that you hang out with?

AK: Yes. I actually had a couple that I met at the university. They're all university friends that I have. I met two new ones just last quarter. I knew another guy from before. I've met more Indian people at the university.

PS: Are they people who grew up in India or grew up here?

AK: Grew up here like me, but a little different backgrounds.

PS: Are they from Hindu families?

AK: Yes.

PS: Is that a difference between you?

AK: That's probably the major difference.

PS: And how does that difference express itself?

AK: I find that when we're together, when they meet up with a couple of their friends, they're speaking their native language, a little tighter bond. Then if I look at me and my community, I don't have that clique, because there weren't many kids to start off with. They're all grown up. Like I said, they're older, like my sister, so they're all off in different places. Now it's a whole new generation. I haven't been in a while, so I've kind of lost that side of it.

PS: So you feel you kind of don't fit in a lot of places, right?

AK: Yes. It's a different kind of feeling, but I've become used to it. I know that I'm Indian. I accept that. I don't think that's anything that pushes us apart as friends or anything.

PS: It's just a difference. It's a tension.

AK: Yes.

PS: The group of you that I'm interviewing right now are what I'm calling the first U.S.-born generation. Can you see any aspects of being that first U.S. generation that you find particularly difficult? And on the other side, anything that you find particularly of benefit or pleasant or wonderful gift about it? Could you speak to both sides of that question?

AK: The positive side of being the first-born?

PS: Yes.

AK: I don't know. Looking at it, I guess I'd say I'm happy growing up with the education I received in the U.S. and life I had. I don't know. Negative effects or stuff that I wouldn't want to--

PS: Or anything that was difficult about it. Like when you look at your other friends in Stillwater, maybe, who are the Johnsons, and they've been U.S. families forever--or not forever but 150 years, you know, are there any things that you had to cope with or struggle with or figure out that they didn't have to just because their family had been in the U.S. for a long time?

AK: There wasn't much to figure out, because, you know, my parents were the first here. So being the first born, I mean, there wasn't really anything for me to trace back on. A lot of other people had family trees, they were in the area for so long, like you mentioned, but for me it was different. I had to look back to a different country, actually like two different countries. So it was really different in that way.

PS: That's about the hardest part of it?

AK: Yes. I think that was probably the hardest.

PS: And this aspect of figuring out who you were, when you got to deciding you were one-third American and one-third Indian and one-third African.

AK: I just put that together to satisfy all parts of me so that everything's equal. I had a friend in high school, he had figured out he was like one sixty-fourth Native American or something. I'm like, "Okay." So I just said one third, one third, one third. It covers all of me, even parts.

PS: Are there any other things that you want to tell me about yourself or your life that you think might be important to somebody who listens to this or reads this oral history some day? That's the open-ended question.

AK: I think it's all been covered.

PS: The last question is, if somebody says to you, "Who are you?" some person that you meet, and they're like, "So tell me about yourself. Who are you?" when you think to describe yourself to a person who doesn't know you at all, what are the things that you use to describe yourself in any aspect of who you are?

AK: When I've been asked that in the past, that's always a troubling question because you never know where to begin, what do they really want to hear, like where are my ancestors from or where were you born? I always ask them up front, you know, "Well, what do you mean?" But usually I tell them my parents were born in Africa, and I go through the process, and it always ends up tracing back to India. My great-grandparents were born there, I'm assuming.

PS: But when they're not digging for anything specific, if somebody just says, "So, who are you?" what do you tell them?

AK: I don't know.

PS: You don't know?

AK: Yes, like I say, I always have to ask, "Well, in what terms do you want to know who I am?" So I always ask them questions back to find out what they want to know and then answer more specifically, like I said, where my parents grew up, or if they want to know what it was like for me growing up like you do, or whatever.

PS: But just as in general who you are, if somebody says, "Who are you?"

AK: Like what are you all about more?

PS: Yes. Who are you as a person? What's your identity? How do you identify yourself? Are you a drummer? Are you a student? Are you a Hindu? Are you a Muslim?

AK: I play a lot of different roles.

PS: If I say to you, "Who are you?" what's the first thing that pops into your mind about who you are?

AK: That's a tough question.

PS: Yes, but it's worth thinking about.

AK: Yes. God, who am I? That's probably the toughest question I've ever had. You know, the first things that come to mind, right off the bat, I'm a student, you know. I'm Indian. I'm an American citizen. I'm a musician. I'm an outdoorsman. I guess who I am is like a lot of little different people or little different roles, I'd say. Little roles from life. So I'm just a little bit of something, and that makes up me. I'm a lot of little--does that make sense?

PS: Yes. That's great. Sorry to end with the hardest question.

AK: Yes. That's all right. That is a tough question.

PS: Most of us actually spend most of our life trying to figure it out.

AK: Yes. That's like a lifelong question. I don't even know if my grandparents could answer that.

PS: I think in some cultures people are just given an identity. You are your father's child, and that makes you this, and you're going to become a minister, or--

AK: Some people are set in the role, and they have to be. "You are going to work at the family business."

PS: Right. And little girls get scripted, "You're going to marry So-and-so because you've been engaged to them since you were eight years old, and you're going to have babies, and you're going to be a good girl." And so they've got this all laid out for them.

AK: Yes. That's probably the thing, being first born in America. It seems like, from what

I've heard, there's a lot more freedom and opportunities than what my parents' friends had. So I think that's one of the things that I'm maybe--not realizing until I took the trip and how much freedom I had and opportunities that I've taken advantage of.

PS: But it also gives you a lot more responsibility, because you get to define who you are a lot more than some folks.

AK: Yes.

PS: Which is pretty awesome.

AK: And that's why there's so many diverse people in the United States. I saw a lot of the same type of people, looking back at India. There isn't much of a middle class. Everyone was pretty--well, I guess you could say it was middle class, but everybody was pretty much all equal, you know, was working or trying to, or struggling. So it's really a contrast in class, rich or poor kind of--more situation. And here, it's like you're responsible for your own actions, and you are what you make yourself, kind of. What do I want to be? You've got to build your own character with all these opportunities.

PS: Right. Big responsibility. Awesome.

AK: I never really thought of it as a responsibility, but I guess it is. I guess some people have an idea of what they'd like to be like then. You know, if I want to work on getting rid of a habit or something, you know, I have a goal and then maybe I can work towards that, and I guess responsibility. I never really thought about it as a responsibility.

PS: I really appreciate you taking out the time to come down and talk with me today. It's been a real pleasure.

AK: Thank you. It was no problem.

PS: Good. Thanks.