## **Interview with Suruchi Kelly**

## Interviewed by Polly Sonifer October 3, 1997, in Minneapolis, Minnesota

**PS:** This is Polly Sonifer interviewing Suruchi Kelly on October 3, 1997. Good morning, Suruchi. How are you?

SK: I'm good.

**PS:** Good. First of all, tell me a bit about yourself, your name, where you were born, when you were born, and what your family was like at the time you were born.

**SK:** My name now is Suruchi Kelly, but it was Suruchi Patankar. That was my maiden name before I got married. I was born in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, which is one of the more northern provinces in India, and I was born in 1968. My father was working there as a professor at IIT [Indian Institute of Technology], and they moved there shortly after he met and married my mother.

So we didn't spend a lot of time there, but when I was two years old, we moved to England. And so since I was born, I've lived in India, England, Canada, and now Minneapolis, and spent most of my childhood and adult life in Minneapolis.

**PS:** Tell me about your parents' names and what they do.

**SK:** My father's name is Suhas. My mother's name is Rajani. My father is still a professor in mechanical engineering, but now works at the University of Minnesota and has done so for about the last twenty-five years. He also started his own software consulting firm about eight, nine years ago, and so is really actively working at that.

My mother has had some part-time jobs on and off, more when we were children, but now she is working just as a homemaker and has a lot of social activities as well in town.

**PS:** Do you have siblings?

**SK:** Yes, I have one sister. She is twenty-three, and she, until recently, lived in San Francisco and moved out there to study Indian classical music. She plays tabla, which is Indian drum, and got very interested in that about five years ago, actually went out there as a camp counselor and was interested in taking lessons from Zakhir Hussain, who is the best tabla player in the world, other than his father, and decided that she wasn't coming back. She called my parents and said, "I'm moving out to California. Whether you support me or not, I'm getting a job and taking lessons here." So that caused some turmoil

in our family for a little while.

**PS:** How did your parents react to that?

**SK:** I think they were shocked, but after the initial shock, they admired her for sort of taking her own stand and deciding that she wanted to do what she wanted to do, despite the lack of financial security in the decision and being out on her own. But she was maybe eighteen years old or so when she did that. For a while they wanted her to still do something that was part of an academic institution, so she joined the San Francisco Institute of Art and took some art classes, but finally decided it was really taking away from the time she needed for her music. So she did that a couple of years and then went into a recording studio and worked there for a while. All along she kept taking lessons from Zakhir, and then about three, four years ago decided to go to India in the winters to take lessons from his father, because it's a little bit different the way he teaches as opposed to Zakhir. Zakhir incorporates more Western influences, and his father does more of the straight classical. Now I consider her as a very professional musician. She played at my wedding, and she does a lot of performing in San Francisco. So now she's home and is planning to actually use software to record her own music and come up with a CD.

**PS:** Home meaning here in Minneapolis?

**SK:** Right. So she just moved back last week and is going to stay here probably until the winter and then go back to India for some lessons again.

**PS:** What's your sister's name?

**SK:** Suphala.

**PS:** Which one of you was born first, you or Suphala?

**SK:** I was born first. She's five and a half years younger. She was born in Canada, in Waterloo. So she didn't really have much exposure to India, other than the visits that we've had back there. Until she was eighteen, she had a dual citizenship, and now she's a U.S. citizen.

**PS:** Are you a U.S. citizen?

**SK:** Yes. My father actually decided to get U.S. citizenship to bring my grandmother here after his father died. At that time we had the option if we wanted to become citizens or not, and I think just by being his children, being dependents, we ended up getting citizenship.

**PS:** So you never had to learn the Pledge of Allegiance?

**SK:** No, we didn't have to go through the rule book.

**PS:** You learned it anyway, though, I bet.

**SK:** Probably through school.

**PS:** Tell me about your parents' background in India. What do you know about their life there?

**SK:** Both of them grew up in very small towns. My mom's town was essentially a village. It's probably not even on the map, or maybe now it is, but it wasn't then. My dad's dad was kind of an authoritarian figure in the family. He was also a teacher. My dad has four sisters, and the household was very disciplined. But they lived in a small town. My dad probably studied all hours of the day. He got a scholarship to go to England and work with his professor in mechanical engineering, Dr. Spalding. Basically I think at that point it was only available to two or three people in the whole country, so it was a rigorous interview process, and he really made a name for himself by doing that.

My mother came from a small town. She has ten or eleven siblings, and they didn't really have the money to send everybody to college after high school. But even though their financial situation wasn't good, everyone has turned out to be, I would say, within at least a middle-class family or household right now. She, on her own, when she was eighteen years old, decided to go to Bombay. So she basically went from a place where there's no cars and no buses to a place that's really busy and metropolitan. She worked as a telephone operator for a while and then took some night classes in English and got herself a B.A. in English. She wanted to study, I think, sciences and math and wanted to do something applicable to that, but the money just didn't allow it. While she was there participating in university activities, particularly theater, she met my dad, because both of them were interested in theater and drama. So they would act as husband and wife in a lot of the plays, and that's how they met.

The way some of my dad's friends describe him, he was not flirtatious. He was actually very shy, wasn't interested in really meeting women, or at least didn't let anyone else know. So it was hard to tell for my mom whether he was actually interested or not. I guess, the way she tells the story, there were a lot of other men that potentially would have married her, but she was really in love with my dad. Despite the fact that his family wasn't all that hot on her marrying him because of her financial background, he still decided to marry her. So he went back to England to finish his education, came back and married her, and then they moved to Kanpur.

**PS:** So this was a love marriage.

**SK:** Yes, this was a love marriage. This was not anywhere near arranged, although my mom makes a point of telling me that she would not have married my father without her parents' permission. She went home and asked for their permission, and considering sort of the background they come from and their generation and the way they thought, they were really laid back. They, I think, pretty much gave freedom to their kids about anything they wanted to do, even the fact that my mom left the house at eighteen going to some place where there's probably a lot of crime, and who knows what would happen to her. They were very sort of hands-off about their kids. I think that was a good policy.

**PS:** Otherwise you wouldn't be here.

**SK:** Right. [Laughter]

**PS:** That's a fascinating story. Tell me about your childhood when you were a small child and you were in Kanpur. Do you remember anything about it?

**SK:** The first memories I have are from England, but the stories that my parents tell me about Kanpur, you might have to write this down, but they just remember little words that I would say. I spoke Hindi first, none of which I remember now, and that's mainly because UP speaks Hindi. Bombay speaks more Marathi, but my parents I think are most comfortable with Marathi. They would just remember me saying things like *kanda batata*, which means onions and potatoes, and it would be something that I would hear the local vegetable people, you know, walking around with the stuff on their head, yelling and screaming through the streets. So that's something that I picked up and would start saying at home. That's just something I think that they remember as tender memories. I don't really have any memories, actually, of India and being there as a little baby. I think it's because I was just too young.

**PS:** So when you were two, they moved to London?

SK: They moved to London, and that's where my first memories are, mostly, again, only of the street we lived on, of seeing Buckingham Palace once. My first best friend was Kathy Farmer. She lived in England, and we got really close to their family. I also had a woman who lived next door to us that I would call Grandma, even though she wasn't my grandma. She was English. Then I remember being chased around on a tricycle by a little boy who everybody told me had a crush on me. But otherwise, you know, that was the first place I spoke English. Memories of that are of my mother taking me to school. Actually, I think, no, I had a teacher come and pick me up at home and would drive me to school, and I just cried and cried and cried the first day that I was there, and so did my mother when she left me at the door. But that was the first time when I would come home speaking English, and my mom's English was probably pretty broken at that time. So she would correct me on something that she thought I was saying wrong, and I would start

telling her back, "No, I'm saying it right." That was kind of a weird feeling when parents don't know how to speak as well as you do in a language. So, other than that, I don't know if I can remember.

**PS:** Was that nursery school that you were going to?

**SK:** Yes, that was nursery school. I started kindergarten, I think, in Canada. Other than that, just remembering things like going to the candy store, and they had little candy cigarettes and little gold coins, chocolate coins that were wrapped up that we would always walk down to the store and get. And then passing this huge fenced-off area where there'd always be a dog barking, and it always smelled really bad.

I think one thing I attribute to my friend Kathy Farmer is that she would read me books all the time. I, when we moved to Canada, learned to read by myself because of her.

**PS:** Was she your age?

**SK:** She was a little bit older. She was maybe two, three years older. We lost touch for a long time, and I just got married in August, and I had sent her an invitation, and that was the first time I heard from her and got a picture of her and her new husband and new child. It was kind of neat.

We moved to Canada and stayed in a professor's home, who was on sabbatical, and he had a little shelf with a bunch of Dr. Seuss books. I remember pulling one of those out when we moved in and just starting to read the book. I remember that because I didn't learn to read in school. I'm pretty sure it's because she spent a lot of time with me when we were there.

**PS:** Did your mom read to you books that were in Marathi?

**SK:** Not that I remember. She made an effort when we were younger, both with my sister and I, to teach us songs that were in Marathi. We understood some of the words and not all of the words, but she wanted to make sure that we didn't lose that, I think because they spoke Marathi with me almost a hundred percent of the time until I hit second, third grade. They didn't really make any extra efforts to do anything to make sure I understood Marathi.

On the other hand, I didn't really learn to read and write until I was probably in fifth or sixth grade when there was a school started in Minneapolis where I think a lot of the parents wanted to try to get their kids to learn to read and write and, in general, learn more about Hindu religion and Indian culture. So I probably learned to read and write to a first-grade level and then kind of dropped the whole thing when I hit high school. So I've never really been fluent at that.

**PS:** Do you still consider yourself fluent in speaking Marathi?

**SK:** No. I can speak enough to communicate when I go back to India or if somebody's here that doesn't speak English, but it's not anywhere near fluent. I attribute that to a couple things: growing up in Minneapolis and not having very many other friends that were Indian when I was growing up. I think to some extent I was somewhat embarrassed of my background in my early high school years, but even towards the end, I think, you know, my mom pointed out how Smita Sane, who's one of the other girls my age that grew up here as well, wore a sari to her senior speech and talked about India and her trip to India. I remember not wanting to do that.

**PS:** Because?

**SK:** Because it would make me look different, and because I knew that people in this state didn't necessarily accept being Indian as something different that was good different. They were just so unaware of what it meant, that I didn't want to have to break that barrier or even have to approach the subject. So if anyone ever asked me, I would explain what it meant to be Indian or where I was from, and I'd always distinguish it from being Native American, because almost everybody would assume that you're American Indian. And so I would make that a point. So to some extent, I had a pride about who I was, but I don't think I had a daily awareness of it until I went to college.

When I hit college is when I met a lot of other Indian friends, and I started becoming more aware of it, what it means to be Indian and American. Now when my husband asks me, when I told you we were talking about changing my last name, he says, "One of the reasons I married you is not necessarily because you're Indian, but because you're more American." He said, "If you had come straight from India and I had met you, I don't know that we'd be married right now."

Now, of course, I'm fiercely Indian. I mean, yes, I am American, but I make a point of it that I'm from India and that that's a big part of me. And so I keep telling him, "You'd better get used to that."

**PS:** Tell me a little bit about why your parents moved from India to London and then from London to Canada.

**SK:** My father studied in London, before he got married, with this Professor Spalding, and after working at Kanpur IIT, he was offered a job with this professor. I think he worked as a Research Fellow and then he moved to Canada to join the university in Waterloo as a professor again, and then was offered a position in Minneapolis at University of Minnesota. Their mechanical engineering department is well known, and he wrote a lot of books, published a lot, taught a lot of short courses, and just taught

undergraduate and graduate students for twenty years. His name now in the field is so well known that around the world, if you mention his name, people know who he is, which is hard for me to believe because he's such a modest guy, but he's a very brilliant man.

**PS:** Great. You sound really proud of him.

**SK:** Yes, I am proud of my dad. I'm proud of both of my parents. I think coming here from another country and doing as well as they have is a huge accomplishment, and something you don't realize when you're younger. A lot of the conflicts that come up because they're so different from you, you kind of fight against, but you never really pay attention to actually how far they've come and how much they've changed and how flexible they're being. But they really do compromise a lot.

**PS:** When your family was living in all these different places, I'm assuming that you had extended family back in India yet at that time, right?

**SK:** Yes, we have a huge extended family, and mainly my mother's side, we almost always, when we go back, stay with her side. Not exclusively, we do spend some time with my father's side, but her side of the family sort of has this affection or compassion for people that I've never really seen in anyone else. I think it comes from being born into a large family and having to take care of each other. I don't know what the span of ages is in that family, but my youngest uncle is in his mid-thirties, and probably my oldest aunt is right now close to seventy, maybe, or maybe in her sixties.

So at any one time there were at least four or five kids in the house, and the older ones usually would be playing parental roles as well as being kids. It's probably because of the freedom I said that my grandparents gave them. They walked, what, the usual ten miles to school or something, and were on their own a lot, and even though there was no real chores in the house that they were told to do, there was always stuff to be done, and the house is amazing. If you had ever visited ten years ago, this was the coolest house. It's really "backward." There was well water in the back. The house was made out of a thatched roof and cow dung. The floors even now are kind of resurfaced every few days with cow dung, which I think is really disgusting, but, you know, when you're there, it smells clean. It doesn't smell bad at all when it dries. It's like clay.

When we would take a bath there, it would either be outside where you wrapped yourself up in a sari or something, or a few years later they built an indoor area out of stone where you still just took a bucket of water and stood there and bathed. There was a huge black cauldron with coconut husks for a fire that they would start every morning, and that would be the hot water supply. Then the whole thing was surrounded by just different trees and bushes. They had coconut trees, mango trees. They had a huge mango grove where my grandfather is buried now, his ashes, at least. And chile plants, and papaya,

jackfruit, everything they had. In fact, before I was born and before my mother was born, our ancestors, or my great-grandfather and before, used to own acres and acres of fields, and they were farmers. Now all of that has been sold off, I think, little by little.

My grandfather, I think he was a clerk, a custom clerk, so he didn't do as well, and he wasn't able to continue the farming aspect of his occupation, but the house itself is just something. If I could bring my husband back now and he could see what was there ten years ago, he would be really amazed. We would eat off of banana leaves, and all the food was prepared, again, in like a little area that was a fire. There was no refrigerator. Everything was kept in storage.

I grew up reading the *Little House on the Prairie* books, and this is the same. This is just the Indian version of it. Then in the same area, my grandfather had four or five brothers. So they would live just a fourth of a mile, a half a mile down the road in the same type of houses. So they were really close. They didn't move far away from each other, and they essentially took care of each other all in the same town and never really knew what it was like to be outside of there until they came to the United States to visit us.

My mother's brother, Subhash, he came to the United States as an engineer. My mom tells me that the reason that he was even able to come is because of the money that she earned when she was in Bombay, and quite a few of her other sisters--we only have two uncles on her side, and one of them was really young at that time, and so the family's decision sort of was to make sure that he got educated and was able to support the rest of the family after that. So when he came to India, he felt a big obligation to bring as many people there as he could, but also bring his parents. Surprisingly, I don't think they liked the United States very much.

**PS:** Did they stay?

**SK:** No. They came just to visit, and they stayed with him for a few months, and then they came back. One of the things that kind of is relevant to that is that my youngest uncle did not go back with them at that time. He was in the United States, again, trying to make enough money that once he was able to start his own family, he would be set. After my grandparents went back, my grandfather died almost within months. My Uncle Sanjay, who's the youngest, he felt very guilty about that, and now he spends most of his time taking care of my grandmother.

My grandmother developed diabetes later in life, had multiple strokes, and now it's really a kind of bad situation. She can't move most of her body, can't speak very well, and has a lot of pain. She understands everything that's going on. This is a woman who gave birth to eleven children, and she has never in her life just sat around and done nothing until these strokes. So because of the pain and because of just the helplessness, and because it's a small village and you can't bring in somebody to do nursing care on a daily basis, she is

really suffering. There isn't a good solution to that, but my youngest uncle, Sanjay, he is probably the closest to my grandparents out of all the kids, and he is spending the better part of his life right now taking care of her.

**PS:** So has he married or anything?

**SK:** She feels even more guilty about that. He did get married to a girl who's local to that village, and he does have a son. When he's not around, his wife bears the responsibility of caring for my grandmother. But it's very awkward, because nobody else lives there now, and it used to be that there was always at least five or ten people in the house. So this is a huge burden for just a few people to be taking care of. So my aunts have talked about trying to move her to Bombay, at least, and find a good nursing home, or at least something to ease her pain. She doesn't want to go, though. She already feels like she's a burden, and she doesn't want to put that extra responsibility on anybody. So now it's not the most happy place to go to, but it used to be so much fun because obviously with all these aunts and uncles, we had a ton of cousins.

There would be this huge swing right out on there's like a little indoor porch off the house. It's a pretty big house. One of my memories of going there is twenty kids on that swing. It's called a *zhopala* in Marathi, and it's a huge swing. I mean, it can fit ten people just sitting, but we'd usually pile on about twenty and get the thing going so fast that somebody would always fall off and get stuck under it. But it was really a fun place to go with kids when we were younger.

One of my uncles, his name's Baba Ka Ka, he is actually probably a great-uncle by definition. He used to sit and smoke bidis, which are Indian cigarettes, basically. It's tobacco, but it's not the kind of cigarettes we have here. He used to sit on his--how do I describe this? He used to sit with his knees bent and kind of his back hunched over for hours out on that porch and play cards. So we all learned Indian card games that he would teach us how to cheat at, and, you know, basically while away the time, because at that time there was no TV there. There was nothing to do, but you always felt like there was something to do because there were so many kids around. So we'd play that until hours into the night, and then kids from these other houses of our relatives nearby would come play, and these kids are kids that didn't know any English, yet somehow we always had fun, even though we couldn't communicate very well. And those kids now probably still live in that same village and probably haven't been further out than some of the bigger cities, but I'm sure they haven't been to Bombay. But at that time, we all had something in common, so I think we really had fun.

**PS:** When you think about your early childhood years, were there any values that your family stressed?

SK: Education, and being educated, and being either a doctor, a lawyer, or engineer,

which is typical for Indian parents to want of their kids. In general, it's not that they didn't allow me to date, but they made it very clear that, at least in high school, that was something they didn't want me to do. I think it was because of their fear that one day I wouldn't be married to an Indian, and it wouldn't be an arranged marriage. Because theirs was a love marriage, my parents weren't as strict about me being arranged, but to some extent now in this country things are still somewhat arranged. It's just that you have more freedom to say no if you don't like the guy or the girl. The arrangement would be more one of convenience because it's just too hard to meet a lot of Indians when you live in this country, unless you have--

[Tape interruption]

**PS:** Say the last sentence, if you would, again.

**SK:** What an arranged marriage would be like in the United States would be where a friend of a friend's would suggest a name of some guy or girl, and then you would either get a picture or a phone call, and from there decide if that's somebody you wanted to meet.

So the things that I remember as being Indian values that were somewhat different from American values were that you need to be educated at all costs and preferably be a professional when you're done and go to the highest level of education possible, and then also that you marry an Indian. Because you don't want to lose your Indian values, you need to marry an Indian. In general, you don't want to lose your ability to speak the language, what little you might have at that point. So if you married an Indian, it should be somebody from your part of India and also of your religious background.

I think, not that I want to put my parents down, but they are racist in the sense that they would not tolerate me marrying a black American, and they would not tolerate me marrying a Muslim. I can understand where that comes from, and I can also understand that not only would it be hard for the two families to really interact, but also it would be hard for just me and my husband to not have to deal with the conflict of being from two very different religious backgrounds, or even cultural backgrounds. There would be a lot more clash there than with a Protestant or with somebody from, oh, I don't know, China, if I married. So, other than that, the values are probably about the same as those that I learned from growing up in this country.

**PS:** How did they communicate those values to you? How did you learn that that was what was expected of you?

**SK:** I think it mainly came from their expectations of what they wanted us to be, so it was never told to us that this is how you should act and this is where you should go to school, but they had expectations of us that somehow through body language and through

things that they would sort of imply, I knew that those were things that they wanted of me. But if I ever challenged them, I don't think that they would have disowned me or made my life miserable by taking away money or anything like that. I know that that's happened to some people in both situations.

As an example, my sister--I chose the ultimate doctoral or engineer route, and so I really didn't have any problems until, of course, the other value became in issue.

**PS:** Which was marrying a non-Indian.

**SK:** Right. But for my sister, her choice in career caused a lot of problems, and more not because my parents were kind of dictators about it. They tried to accommodate her need to become a musician, but at the same time, they were having trouble with the fact that there was no end point like there was with me. Once I was done with my residency, they knew I was set. There was no guarantee with her. And even now she's not financially independent, and that's a problem.

So I think that partially it has to do with coming from an Indian background, but it also has to do with coming from another country to this country and not knowing how things are going to end up. If we were born there and raised there, things probably would have just gone the usual way that they go in India. They wouldn't have really had to worry about us that much, and they would have had a lot of family there that they knew would take care of us if something happened to them.

Here it was different for them, and I think they have a need to fulfill that one way or another we're going to be okay on our own, that if we don't do it on our own, somebody else will take care of us, which kind of is there now. There is an Indian community here that's like family. We know just as well as they do that those people would take care of us if we needed help. But it's not the same as your blood relatives.

PS: How old were you when you moved from Canada to Minnesota?

**SK:** I was five. My sister was born when I was five, and they moved shortly afterwards.

**PS:** So you didn't live in Canada for very long.

**SK:** No, just maybe two, three years.

**PS:** So that when you entered the school system, it was here in Minnesota.

**SK:** Well actually, I was in school there because at age four they start children in kindergarten. Because I was five, I was still in first grade when I was there, and when we moved here what I remember is starting second grade. So I don't remember a whole lot

about school there. Again, I had another best friend when I was in Canada who lived next door and taught us how to eat celery with peanut butter in it, and just little things. It seemed like I had one best friend everywhere we went until I hit college. I had a best friend when I moved to Minneapolis, named Susan Scott, who basically taught me everything about being a little kid. She taught me how to ice skate, she taught me how to ride a bike. She took me up to her cabin and we went fishing, and, I don't know, I mean, everything in terms of being American sort of was introduced to me by her--not exclusively, there was a lot of other friends that I had, but she was my best friend. She would teach me the words to all the Top Forty songs. She wore contacts first. She read books that were banned in school, that I got to read because of her and things like that. And then when I went to a private school and she found out I was going, she absolutely wanted nothing more to do with me. She said, "If you're going to leave me at a public school, and if you're going to go to a private school, you're going to turn into a snob. So I don't want to hang around with you anymore." And the last of our friendship ended in sixth grade.

In my life, I've started over and over a lot of times. So each time is a little bit scary, but you end up meeting people and things work out fine. But going to a private school meant learning what Docksiders were and Izods were. I went to St. Paul Academy, and it was a very rigorous social scene. Most of the kids lived in White Bear and North Oaks, and their parents had gone to SPA together and they all knew each other. It was just a lot of old wealthy families that sent their kids there, not exclusively, because there's a couple friends of mine who came from backgrounds where their parents made less money than my parents did. But it wasn't so much a money thing as whether you were socially connected or not.

So I went there for six years, and then my sister followed, and things were very different when she was there as compared to when I was there.

**PS:** Different in what way?

**SK:** Her friends were more from families that were new, that had moved into the area, or didn't have that kind of social connection that sort of left everybody else out. So her experience was a lot different. At that time I think the school was trying to advertise itself as being more well-rounded in terms of different ethnic backgrounds. They approached her once for an advertisement in probably *Minneapolis-St. Paul* magazine or something, because she was Indian. She refused. She said, "The school is very homogeneous, and there isn't a lot of awareness of being from another ethnic background. So I'm not going to help you falsely advertise what you really aren't." So her experience going through high school was really different from mine. Mine, I think, was more keeping my Indianness to myself, and hers was more celebrating it, and it was more in vogue to do that when she was growing up than when I was, which is only a six-year difference.

**PS:** So what kinds of friendships did you form while you were at St. Paul Academy?

**SK:** Let's see. My first friend was Missy Fox, and the way we met was that we both had fathers that worked as professors at the U, so we took the same bus. For a while, my dad used to drive me back and forth, but there's no bus system that went out to New Brighton, and that's where we lived when I was in seventh grade. So she and I made friends pretty quickly. After that, I think all of my friends changed from year to year. By eleventh grade is when we probably had the largest group. There was probably fifteen to twenty of us that would always hang out and do things together. But high school is not a place where I made any long-lasting friendships.

The one person that I still keep in touch with is Roxanne Snyder [phonetic], and she was sort of pretty, smart, you know, played the average number of sports and in general was a high achiever, and she ended up becoming an accountant working for St. Paul Companies and now has stopped working and has a child and lives in Woodbury. She was very Minnesotan. She had no intention of ever moving from the state, and I don't know how much she was really aware of what my life was like being Indian, but she was always interested. She came over. She'd always try Indian food when she was there. She'd always ask questions about what it was like to be Indian. But in general, our friendship was two girls from Minnesota, and I probably spent more time at her house than she spent at mine, mainly because she lived really close to the school. So we'd do a lot of after-school things together. So friendships in high school weren't as close, I think, as college.

**PS:** How important was it to you in high school that your friends understand what it meant to be Indian?

**SK:** Not very important at all. Maybe it was really important, but what I remember is kind of cloudy, anyway. I didn't pay much attention to being Indian. I mean, there were a lot of other things to pay attention to, because I know that I was also a high achiever, and that was somewhat my parents' pressure and also somewhat my own. They wanted me to get, as much as possible, straight As in school, take all the advanced placement courses and tests, but I also wanted to play sports, and I had interest in piano, which I pursued for about ten years, and just as much as possible do other things in my life that kept me, not well-rounded for college resumes, but more because I had that need to do other things. And in general, even though I've become a doctor, I think my interests still lie in athletics and the arts, much more so than in what I do on a daily basis. So I didn't have much time to think about anything else.

Like I told you, there was this Hindu school that was started up, which I guess I didn't learn a whole lot from, and it was more probably geared toward grade-school children more than it was children that were older. I also don't remember any youth organizations that were offered through the temple or that were really set up, but I'm sure that they

existed. But at that time in my life, it just wasn't something that was a priority to me.

**PS:** Which temple did your parents go to?

**SK:** I think it's on Polk Street in Columbia Heights. It's a church that was renovated into a temple, so it has in the stained glass on the front, has a big "OM" sign. It looks like a church from the outside, but the inside has been redone with a lot of idols of different gods, and I think they did a good job.

**PS:** What's it called?

**SK:** I knew you were going to ask me that, and I don't remember the name of it.

**PS:** Hindu Mandir?

**SK:** Yes, but *mandir* means temple. So I mean it's just a generic name. There's only one in the state.

**PS:** Gita Ashram is also Hindu.

**SK:** Yes, but the temple that I remember, the most that I would really go there would be at Diwali time and Ganpati, which are two of the bigger holidays in India. Then on Sundays somebody would hold a puja which we'd sometimes be invited to. That was about the most exposure I had to the temple. Dr. Sane was a big part of making that temple something that was understandable to children, because he would always speak from the scriptures in English so that we could understand. He'd tell a lot of stories, because in Indian mythology there's a lot of stories, and there's even like cartoon magazines that people would bring from India and have them in a small library at the temple for us to read so that we understood all the different stories about the gods or prophets. Well, they're not really prophets, but holy people.

So Dr. Sane I remember from the temple, and I also remember from a Hindu camp that was set up when I was in high school that they would hold, I think it was upstate Wisconsin. It was a camp where they combined a lot of athletics and social activities with some religious activities. So there'd be a prayer in the morning and in the evening, and there would be a storytelling time where either Dr. Sane or somebody else would sit and talk about some of these religious stories. That was a good way of learning about your religion, but it also brought together the Indian kids in the community, which I think, out of the two, ended up being the biggest benefit of having that camp. That way, even after the camp was over, you still sort of kept in touch with those same kids, and it just brought them closer together.

PS: So did you feel like you had some friendships with other Indian kids because of

those activities?

**SK:** Because of those activities, but also because our parents had a lot of dinner parties which they would sort of drag us to and that we were pretty bored there, and there wasn't a whole lot else to do than watch TV and play together. So most of our friendships came out of that.

One of my good friends, Rashmi Shirole, she lived on the same road I did when we lived in New Brighton. For a lot of grade school and even probably some early part of high school, she and I would spend a lot of time together, partially because my mom worked and her mom worked, but even just because of the proximity of our homes. But, again, we didn't do anything really Indian. We spoke in English together, and all the games we would play would be just normal kid games that people play in the States. So it was nice having an Indian friend, but at that point in my life, I don't think I looked to her as being somebody that I needed to sort of stay familiar with my background. But one thing is true, every Indian person you meet, when you're Indian, you become immediately closer to, I think, not because you necessarily verbalize anything that you have in common, but you just know that they understand a part of you that nobody here can understand. And so I know I had that with her.

Other than her, I had some other friends, but more just acquaintances through my family. Ram Gada's daughter Lisa and his son Ketan I knew, but I don't think, other than school activities, we really did a whole lot together. So that's why I think this camp is something--it's still going on now, and I think the kids that go to it are still really excited about it. I went back as a camp counselor, and it's just a nice way to bring people of different ages but of the same cultural background together.

**PS:** What's that camp called?

**SK:** The Hindu Mandir camp. We used to just call it temple camp. It was also something that, you know, the Jewish temple and the church would have their Sunday school or their--I don't know what the Jewish temple would have, but I know that my friends always had something that was associated with their religion where they had a whole other group of friends. I remember going to a church service once, or a Sunday school class with one of my friends--I think it was Susan--and feeling really awkward there when they started saying the Lord's Prayer. Of course I'd heard it before, but I didn't have it memorized; of course, they all did. People knew when I was sitting there and I couldn't say it that I didn't know it, and just feeling really awkward. So this is something that we had that was sort of an equivalent where I could feel comfortable, and they would teach us the prayers. We didn't know them since we were really young, but they would teach us the prayers to say, and we would be able to say them by the end of the week. Of course, Dr. Sane, at my wedding, wanted me to say one of them with him, which, of course, I don't remember anymore. But at the time it was just something you had.

**PS:** So was your family highly involved in the spiritual community?

**SK:** No, and mainly because my father is not at all religious, and I have to say either am I. I consider being spiritual something different from being religious, because you're not affiliated with any one religion. Both my parents do yoga and meditate, and in that way I think they're very spiritual, but my father doesn't really believe in any one type of a god. He certainly doesn't believe in the multiple reincarnations of Hindu gods. He believes that somewhere down the road historically either somebody made it up or that they existed in a human form where probably they were all holy people and legend picked up their stories, and that's what became the stories we know now. But other than sort of a superconsciousness, he doesn't believe that there necessarily had to be something that explains why we're here and something to depend on. More than anything, I think, it's that he doesn't feel that he needs to look to god when a crisis occurs in his life. He takes care of that on his own, and he feels that it's a crutch for most people, and that blind faith is not something that he prescribes to. And for whatever reasons, it makes a lot of sense to me, and I can't say that I really believe in god either, which is very different from some of our other relatives. For example, even my mother, she can't say, "Yes, I believe in god," or no, but when it comes right down to it, I know she does. When there are times that she's in need, I'm sure that she prays to god and hopes that god will take care of her.

One of our uncles is actually writing a book on religion and why he believes there is a god. He's just as educated as my dad and just as much of a common-sense thinker, and yet he believes that god exists. Another one of my uncles goes to India. I can't remember his full name, but Swamiji is the person that they go and visit. This is somebody who has sort of an ashram in India, and you can go there and wait for years on end before he sort of lets you in the door and lights the flame in your soul, which is the way it's described in Marathi. Once that's happened, he basically has control over you. He will appear to you in your dreams. In the daytime, he'll appear to you, but he'll also take care of you. When something goes wrong in your life, he knows about it, and he can do something about it. That's the way it's described to me. In that uncle's house, his kids, his wife, everybody has visited the Swamiji, and he's part of their life. There's a huge picture of him up in their house. When they have a meal, they put a plate down for him. That's something I can't even imagine.

**PS:** Because?

**SK:** Because, for one, I don't believe in a god, and I also don't believe that somebody else can show you the way to having that godlike feeling. That probably comes from my dad, too. So there's a wide spectrum in our family of what people believe.

**PS:** So do you personally meditate and do yoga?

**SK:** I was when I was in college doing it. I haven't been doing it now at all, and that's mainly because of laziness and also because I don't think I got that feeling that my dad gets when he meditates. That's something that he says, you know, you need to practice. The more you do, the more you get the feeling. It's a very peaceful contented feeling, but you need to do it every day. He said once you get to that point, it'll be something you can't live without, and you'll want to do on a daily basis and it won't become a chore for you. But you need to make the time for that in your day if you're going to start doing it. So I don't think I ever got to that point.

**PS:** You talked a little bit about dating. Obviously at this point you're married, and it's to a person who is, I'm assuming, Caucasian?

SK: Yes.

**PS:** Can you tell me about how you and he met, and what that was like?

**SK:** He was, I don't know, probably the fourth or fifth boyfriend down the road. An interesting thing is that he works for my dad's software consulting firm, and he was there for a year before I even met him, because I was in Boston studying medicine still. When I came here for my residency was the first time I met him. He doesn't remember the first day I met him, but he was basically in the office at the first desk, and I walked in to see my dad, and my dad said, "There's somebody new in the company," and introduced me. I remember him having a really firm handshake and huge smile and just this all-American guy. I mean, there's just something about him that as soon as you meet him--I've been to Europe, and I know what Europeans think of American tourists, and he's the kind of guy that would just show up there and be loud and kind of obnoxious, and they would hate him immediately.

I sort of had my concerns about him when we met. He was part of this company. Most of the people in the company were very low-key and sort of reserved people, and he was the first guy that sort of came in and caused some chaos. I told my dad, I said, "You know, this guy, I don't know if you should trust him. Just watch him carefully." Because I always think of my dad as someone sort of naive and innocent and gullible, and I don't want him to ever get hurt. So I didn't really like him when I first met him.

**PS:** What's his name?

**SK:** Pat Kelly. Anyway, so after that, he had a boat and waterskied, and that was something I had just started learning to do. My dad asked him, basically, "Would you ever take Suruchi out waterskiing?" And so I think he was sort of reluctant, but, you know, he didn't show that to my dad. He was dating someone at the time, so they were always out in the boat. I brought a friend of mine, and we went out for a day with them. I remember something going wrong with the engine, and he just blew up because he was

very protective of his boat. For someone that young to even own a boat, he didn't want a scratch on it. So I was thinking this is not somebody that I'd ever want to get involved with. But at the same time, he was attractive, and when he was in a good mood, he was a great person. He made sure that we had a good time that day, and despite my being such a bad waterskier back then, he still was very patient with me.

By Thanksgiving that year, there was a company party that we both went to, and by then he had broken up with his girlfriend. We were talking probably about nothing important, and he said, "Well, maybe we should get together this weekend sometime. Why don't you give me a call at the office." And so I called him that week, and we went out with four or five other people. I remember after dinner we went to this club, The Lounge, and sat there, and I know because my dad was his boss, that he didn't want to make any overt reference to dating me. But he did say, "Well, I have these friends at the health club that I think maybe you would be really interested in and I'd like you to meet sometime." And then he said, "Well, why don't we go out for dinner. It would be just a platonic thing, but maybe we could just have dinner sometime."

I knew right away then that he was interested, because nobody says stuff like that otherwise. So after that, we started seeing each other pretty frequently. Both of us lived at home, and so the only time we really spent together was dinner and a movie, dinner and a movie. It was getting cold by then, so there wasn't waterskiing time left. Then by Christmas we were dating, so it wasn't that we were just friends. There was another company party at my parents' house this time. There was a party I had been invited to which I left a little early for, and he was going to join me later because we hadn't really brought it up with my parents. At that party, my mom knew something was up. So she must have asked--well, actually, she did ask him that day before he left. In front of everyone, he said he had to be somewhere, but to her, privately, he said, "Suruchi and I are dating, and she's actually waiting for me right now, and that's where we're going, just so you know."

I guess this was late enough into my life that I wasn't afraid of telling my parents, but I just knew it would be complicated and more so because he was working for my dad than anything else. So we just didn't bring it up right away. But that's kind of how they found out about it. They didn't really have much of a response. I don't know if that's because they didn't know how to respond. This wasn't the first time I had a boyfriend. It's certainly not the first American boyfriend. The first American boyfriend was when I was a freshman in college, and that was a huge shock to my parents. But this time around, they actually liked Pat a lot, and they knew him a year before I knew him. My dad would come home telling me stories about him every single day. I'd get to the point I was sick of them. So that was something I already had on my side. But I knew that in my mom's heart she was disappointed that if this was going to be the guy that I married, she was never going to see her daughter marry an Indian. But they never pressured me one way or the other, and Pat and I continued to date for another year or so before we decided that we

wanted to get married. Ironically, the problem came from his family, rather than my family.

**PS:** And what was that?

**SK:** They, even to this day, don't accept the fact that he's married to me. When we were dating and I would visit at his house or something, they were very friendly. They said a lot of good things about me, which, according to him, his mother has never said a nice word about any girl that he's ever dated until he met me. But the minute he brought up the word "marriage," they completely were against it. Partially their reasons were because I was not Christian and because I wasn't a white American. But I think when it comes right down to it, those aren't the real reasons. I think nobody was going to be good enough for him. But my being Indian is really just an excuse. You know, they may--

## [Tape interruption]

**SK:** Like I said, Pat's parents, as soon as they heard that we wanted to get married, were completely against the relationship, and that's never changed. We waited and waited, thinking, well, maybe they'll change their mind, and they didn't. By April this year, my mom was saying, "I want to have an engagement ceremony for you two, and when should I plan that?" I think by then Pat had given up hope that there was going to be any difference. And also by last summer, I moved into an apartment, and Pat moved in with me, and so there was a lot less contact with his mother and his father. The little contact there was, they only had negative things to say about him and about me. So we decided to get engaged around that time.

Since then, they've sort of been out of our lives. There's just a few things really that keep Pat tied to them, but he doesn't really want anything to do with them unless they apologize to me and my family and they accept me into their family. I don't see that happening. But it's weird. I thought that this would be something that would really devastate me, and I know that it bothers him a lot, but it hasn't. Mainly I think it's because, number one, he accepts me for being Indian and being from somewhere else, but also he never once faltered in his decision that he would sort of keep away from his family until they were accepting of both of us. So it's not something where he goes back for Christmas or Thanksgiving, you know, and sees them separately from me. That would have really been a problem, not only just for me, but once we have kids, that would have been a huge problem. It would have been something like a divorce at those times. They would have loved it, his parents would have, I'm sure, because then they would have gotten everything they wanted without me in the picture.

Recently, a month after our marriage, another friend of mine in Canada married an Indian who's not from her part of India, and within a month of their wedding, the marriage was called off, and it's because of his family not accepting her, but more so because the man

she was going to marry couldn't deal with his feelings for both his family and for her. He didn't know how to separate out his actions, and I think that was a good choice, even though it was a month before their wedding, for her to decide not to get into that, because ,ci Phase 2 that's too much conflict. You have to know what you want and then walk away from it and not look back.

**PS:** So did Pat's family come to the wedding?

SK: No.

**PS:** None of them, not his siblings or anybody?

SK: Because of their negative stand, they weren't even invited. He did go back and forth on wanting to invite them, but they just never, ever made a move towards an apology or towards wanting to be part of the wedding. So what we did is there's another couple about their age who Pat's grown up with, and they were really excited for us. I've met them. We both like each other a lot, and we asked them if they could stand in as his surrogate parents, and they did so, and they did a really good job of it.

Little by little, my mom told every one of her friends the situation, so that it wasn't awkward during the engagement and it wasn't awkward during the wedding. There were people from out of town that, as far as I know, didn't bring this up. They may have assumed that the Sheldons were his parents, but it wasn't something that ruined the wedding, because it could have. We were also worried that they may try to show up uninvited and just cause a complete scene at the wedding, which didn't happen, thankfully.

**PS:** That's quite a story. So did you have an Indian wedding?

**SK:** We did. Initially, when we weren't sure about his parents, we were thinking of having a Christian wedding and an Indian wedding. Then it just seemed useless to have the Christian wedding, and we decided to go with an Indian ceremony in my parents' back yard and just have a regular reception downtown at the Hilton. It was interesting, because I think in the beginning Pat was saying, "Oh, I want to learn Marathi, and I can't wait to visit India," and this and that. His only exposure to Indians is probably from this company that he works in. I don't think he really knows any other Indian people. He likes everybody that he works with, but as more time went on, I think he started feeling that we were invading too much of his space and he would be expected to do things, like what I wanted him to wear was Indian garb at the wedding, and he was very adamant about wearing a tuxedo. Finally he gave in and said, "All right. I'll wear one." We needed a tailor to actually come up with it, and he put that off long enough that he didn't have to actually have one made, because by then it was too late. So he ended up wearing his tuxedo.

Another thing is this turmeric powder, we call it halad, that we put on people's forehead, and that's a religious ceremony, essentially. Even in India, just the tikli or bindi that Indian women wear, he has some negative connotation associated with it. In his experience, that's something that's just too different for him to accept, and so he didn't want me to wear that. So, of course, that's something in our tradition that's just fundamental and we can't not do. So I would wear it just for the purpose of an actual religious activity, and then I would take it off. So we made compromises like that for the wedding. The music that we played, he thought sounded really whiny, and he doesn't like the sound of religious Indian music, and so we tried to taper it down to something that didn't sound so whiny.

But in the end, he even now will say that we basically did what we wanted and there wasn't enough compromise from our end, because his idea of what the ceremony would have been would have been some blend of the two cultures. The way I saw the blend would mean bringing in Christian traditions. His blend was cutting out as much of what was Indian just as much as what was Christian, so it would be really generic. I had no desire to do that. So it got kind of tense down to the last month before the wedding, and I think it also was getting closer to the idea that his parents actually weren't going to be there.

He had a lot of friends invited from his side, but other than that, nothing about the wedding really pertained to him is the way he perceived it. So that's something that was just a learning process over the last year. I guess I kind of assumed that his acceptance to marry me would mean his acceptance of my whole background, and wanting to learn Marathi now isn't such an enthusiastic thing from his end. Going to India is something he'll do, but he's extremely worried about bad hygiene and getting gastroenteritis and the whole works, and seeing all the poverty. I think he's hoping to see the things about India that are good, but he's dreading the stuff that he knows is bad. So his acceptance is going to be a little different from other people.

My cousin in [Washington] D.C. got married to an American, and he's converted to Hinduism. He wants to learn the language, and he's just very into the whole idea of being Indian. I didn't expect Pat would be, necessarily, but it would have been a lot easier. But that's okay. I mean, I can't really call myself a Hindu, so having him convert wouldn't do me any good. The way we raise our children is something we still have to discuss, but at least what we've agreed upon now is that we want to leave both options open for them so that they can be as much American as Indian, or as much Christian as Hindu. They should have enough exposure to make the choices. It's strange, because I ask Pat abouthe's from Irish and German background--I say, "Don't you ever want to go back to Ireland or Germany and look up your roots?" And he has no interest. He said, "Oh, Ireland's just full of a bunch of drunks." And Germany, he doesn't have any relatives that he knows of there. He just doesn't have that urge to go back and find out. I really wish

that there was enough traceable evidence in my family to go back and really trace my roots, which I can't do. Even a medical history would be nice to know what diseases I'm going to be vulnerable to and things like that, but it's just not written down anywhere.

**PS:** Are there enough people around that you can ask?

**SK:** Not really, because the ones that may have known probably no longer are alive. My cousin in D.C. at one time went back, I think, with a tape recorder, and her Marathi is better than mine, and she, I think, talked to all the people of my grandparents' generation to get somewhat of an oral history from them. I don't know whatever happened to that, but there isn't anything in the way of letters. I just don't know how literate people were in that generation to really go back and figure out where everybody lived and what they did and how many kids they had.

**PS:** So you've gone back to India a couple times now, right?

**SK:** We used to go every three years after we moved to Minneapolis. The longest trip was probably in sixth grade, when we went for three months. Surprisingly, all my teachers were supportive. They would give me homework assignments that I'd had to finish by the time I got back, but they were pretty long trips then. Now they're, of course, shorter, and we all go separately, at separate times. It used to be more fun because my cousins were younger and had a lot more free time. Now they're married and live all over the place.

The trip itself, I can't say was always the most fun. Traveling in India is horrendous. Everyone goes on strike, or the car breaks down, or the trip is on a bus for eighteen hours where the bathrooms are in such bad condition, you don't want to go, and just things like that. But I do have a lot of good memories of, like I said, my grandmother's, my mother's mother's house, and just all the cousins that I have.

Those times when I was younger, my parents would shuttle us to visit all these people that they were close to that were either their parents' generation or their own generation, and I really didn't have much interest in seeing. A lot of times it was because those people would make references to how my Marathi wasn't good enough, or that I didn't preserve my mother tongue, or that I, in general, didn't pay enough attention to being Indian, which is surprising, because my Marathi was probably the best it was back then. But I think in some ways people were resentful that we had moved away from India and not come back or not given anything back. I'm sure that my father's father thought that. He refused to ever come and visit us in the United States, and then his health became bad enough that was the excuse, which is, you know, that's totally valid.

So those kind of people, the older generation, I didn't have much interest in going back to see. Now that I'm older, if they were still there, or if I was able to interact with them as

easily, there's a lot of things I have to say to them. There's a lot of things I'd want to know from them, but I think it's just too late to do that now.

**PS:** Your grandmother is here now, your father's mother?

**SK:** No, she's still in India. She came to visit also that time when he got citizenship, but she went back because probably the same reason. People are from India, and they like India, and it's just not the same here. One of the things my mom will forever feel is that you get kind of isolated when you're here. In India, your neighbors are like your family. I mean, you can stop by any time. There isn't much in the way of privacy, and people do things for each other without expecting much back. And that kind of closeness she never found with any of her neighbors here. Even within the Indian community, it's there, but not with everybody. People from India come here, they notice that as a negative point. There's a lot of great things about coming here, but that's one of those things that not everybody can live without. So both my parents, mostly my mom, talks about moving back after my dad retires and wanting to live there.

**PS:** Do you think they will?

**SK:** They probably--I don't know. If it were up to my mom, yes, right away. If it's up to my dad, I don't know that he'd want to move back. It depends on what he kind of wants to do with his life when he retires, and he doesn't have any intention of retiring soon. So I'm not really sure what they're going to do. I think, if they stay here, they're going to want to live near us, either with my sister or with me, probably not in our homes, but in the same city.

**PS:** I haven't asked you much yet about college. You said there was a big shift that happened in college for you because you were around more Indian people. That was in your undergraduate, I'm assuming?

**SK:** Yes, that was in my undergraduate. Immediately I went into a six-year program that was a combined-degree program for medicine. That way, after your undergraduate degree, you didn't need to reapply and interview for medical school; you went to the same school.

**PS:** What school were you at?

**SK:** Boston University. Even within the program, a third were Indian, a third were other Asian, and a third were American. So right there I met a lot of Indians. Then just because B.U. is out on the East Coast and there's just a lot more Indians there in general, I would meet Indians, and I probably started to seek out more Indian friends. It was a huge school, so that wasn't hard at all. There was a very active Indian Association there, which actually, when we were freshmen, started out officially with maybe only fifteen people.

By the time I left B.U., which was eight years later, there were about 500 Indians in the Association.

I also got exposed to bharat natyam dance, which is one form of Indian classical dance, through a teacher that taught in Boston. Her name is Nina Gulati [phonetic]. That became something for me that I could pursue, like Suphala pursues her tabala. That was completely Indian, I mean, something that I knew I could do better than the American people in my class because of growing up in an Indian household and having exposure to other Indians. There are certain gestures and facial expressions that are Indian, that you would watch an American student in my class, and they just couldn't copy as easily because they had never seen it before until then. And then also watching people in my class that had been taking lessons for years, since they were really young, the kind of thing I would have wanted to do if I grew up in a city that had a really active Indian community, and seeing sort of where they had come.

Bharat natyam dance is just a beautiful form of art, which a few times in the Twin Cities I had seen a professional dancer come from India, so that was sort of my attraction to taking the lessons, and then because of the India Association at B.U., there would be a lot of Diwali performances or Indian festivals where there'd be opportunities to actually perform the dance. It was fun. Again, it was something athletic and the dancing was very rigorous. When you did it right, it was very hard.

**PS:** So what was it that shifted in you that made you suddenly be interested in hanging out with these Indians, whereas in high school it was like, well, it was boring, and you were not into it? What shifted inside of you?

**SK:** I think just seeing that there is a similarity you have with somebody else that I had never seen before. My Indians friends in Minnesota were more American than Indian, and that just never really came through as strongly. When I went to Boston, you know, first of it wasn't just--in fact, there were no Marathi friends; they were all from Gujarat or Punjab or South India, and a lot of them spoke their native languages with each other.

**PS:** So these were people who were coming directly from India?

SK: Yes.

**PS:** They weren't Indian Americans like yourself.

**SK:** Oh, no, they were Indian Americans. Most of them actually were Indian Americans. But because of the places they grew up, they had enough exposure and enough incentive to keep their language intact that they continued to be fluent, even in college. In college, I didn't have anybody to speak Marathi with because I didn't have any Marathi friends, but Hindi was probably the most popularly spoken language. And in general, we still all

spoke English together because that was the common language. But I was impressed by how many people actually knew Hindi and would speak Hindi when they found somebody else that spoke it. There were a lot of people who came straight from India, usually from more wealthy families. B.U. is kind of an international school. People sent their kids from all over the place. It wasn't academically known for anything, really, but it was sort of one of the schools to send your kids to if you were from another country.

So I don't really know actually what it was that changed inside me, but all of a sudden, you know, it was something to be proud of. It didn't occur to me until I came back to Minnesota that I had changed, and that I was so different actually from people here, and that for ten years of my life I had just ignored--I mean, it really feels like an awakening, because not at the time that it happens, but when you look back and realize that you didn't pay attention to this part of yourself for years, and then all these things fall into place that you realize were going on that you weren't in fact aware of. Like I was saying, you know, not wanting to speak in Marathi because I was kind of embarrassed of it, or not wanting to wear a sari or a salwar kami or any Indian clothes in front of other people. At my engagement, some of my American friends were there, and they wanted to wear saris, and they did. At the wedding they wore saris. To me, it made me feel good that they wanted to take part in my culture rather than the other way around, me being embarrassed of wearing something.

**PS:** So these were your American friends that were wearing Indian clothes, wearing saris at the wedding?

SK: Yes.

**PS:** What was medical school like for you?

SK: Really hard. Like I said, my primary interest in life has not been the science and math. I can't say that my parents pushed me into medical school, it was a decision I made by myself, but going through the motions of it, a lot of people are excited about, and I guess for me it was just more an accomplishment to make it through. And so it was really hard. Just as in college I had better friends than I had in high school, I think my closest friendships, in particular, one, my maid of honor in the wedding, Roxana Mavai, she was my best friend in medical school, and we did absolutely everything together, and she's from Iran. Actually, when I first met her was in a histology class, and I looked over my microscope at her and I thought for sure she was Indian. And for a while after I met her, I thought she was Indian, until it came up. She said, "No, I'm actually from Iran." She has similar cultural identity--I shouldn't say problems, but just issues that I have. She grew up in Iran, lived in Germany for a little while, lived in Madrid for a little while, and then her family moved here. They live in Canada in Vancouver now. But she ended up at medical school at B.U. We became really close friends.

**PS:** Do you keep in touch with her?

**SK:** Yes. She was at the wedding, and she's now going to probably marry a guy from Spain, so she'll be moving to Spain by next year.

**PS:** And when was your wedding?

**SK:** The wedding was August 2nd, this year. The wedding was truly--it was probably one of the happiest moments in my parents' life and definitely in mine. All but our photographer, everything else went perfectly. I think we're just really happy with the way it turned out.

The reception was basically an American reception, except for the fact that my sister did a tabla solo. But the Indian ceremony was harder to plan because we've only been to a few other Indian weddings, and even those where it's a mixed marriage, and so it wasn't a traditional Indian ceremony. We didn't necessarily want ours to be, but we wanted ours to be very tasteful. There were things we had seen at other people's weddings that we didn't like and we didn't want to happen. I don't want to mention any specifics, but, you know, I've seen about five or ten of them now, and I think it's yery hard to do in this country.

In India, I saw a recent wedding. My cousin Priti got married, and she had just a hugely elaborate wedding. Those kind of things are possible there because labor is cheap, first of all. Second of all, things are expected. She had a huge mural probably two stories high made all out of flowers of Lord Ganesha--they were actually probably made out of roses--behind where she sat with her husband at her reception. The food was all catered by the best Indian restaurants. She had a garland, because we use flower garlands as part of the ceremony, made out of jasmine flowers that were made into sort of a net and then filled with rose petals on the inside. I mean, that's something we could not even imagine having done here.

Another ceremony that happens before the wedding is called a mendhi ceremony, where they paint the hands with henna, and not only the bride's hands, but all the women that are in the sort of bridal party or at the wedding. She was able to get five to ten women who could do that, that she hired. And so everybody had that done one day. Just sort of the extent to which you can celebrate the wedding in India, you can't do here at all. Probably you can in places, like I said, like Chicago or L.A., but not in Minnesota, and I wasn't going anywhere else to get married.

But I think given what we had, what resources we had available, our wedding turned out probably as best as it could have. I could not have expected it to be anything better. It really was fun.

**PS:** And you just got back from your honeymoon.

SK: Yes.

**PS:** Which was to?

SK: We went to Hawaii. I'd been there before with Roxana a couple of times, and Pat hadn't been there. We had taken a few vacations together in Tahiti and Colorado, and those had gone so badly, partially because that was the early part of our relationship when we didn't know each other well, and also because Tahiti's a very boring place unless you're able to island-hop a lot. So we were kind of leery about going anywhere on the vacation where it was not going to be guaranteed fun. Part of that was we didn't want to go to a place then where it was so culturally different or the language that was spoken was different that we might potentially have problems because this was the honeymoon, so it had to go well. And it did. He loved both Maui and the Big Island. We both like to do a lot of outdoor water activities, and that's what we did the whole time we were there, a lot of diving and windsurfing and just playing in the water.

**PS:** You're part fish now.

**SK:** Yes, I think we both are.

**PS:** What kind of future do you envision for yourself? When you think about your life ten years from now, what does it look like?

**SK:** Definitely having at least one or two kids. I may or may not still be a doctor. It's something that, now that I've come this far, I want to continue at and develop a practice and see how things go. I think medicine is a very admirable profession to be in. However it might not be the one for me that makes me a hundred percent satisfied. So I might be doing something completely different, and since I haven't had a chance to pursue it, I don't know what it will be. Probably to that point, Pat's parents still won't be involved in our life. I'll probably still visit India relatively frequently. I don't think I'll ever live in India because it's just too different for me now, but I'll probably be living in a warmer climate by then. Financially I'll probably be well off just because of the profession I've chosen.

In terms of my kids, I know it's going to be my responsibility to make sure that they maintain their Indian identity. It's going to be that much harder because, for me, I've lost some of it. That's inevitable. Every immigrant population will have this problem, but it's going to be the burden on me to make sure that if I want them to learn the language, it's going to be through me and my voice, and hopefully my husband's. If they pick up any dance or music or historical interest in India, it's going to be through me, at least initially, and then from there they may want to go and spend five years or the rest of their life in India studying something or another. But that would be one of my major goals.

**PS:** When you think about yourself in the future socially, what kind of social life do you imagine yourself having?

**SK:** I think that I'll still have a lot of Indian friends, even though in Minnesota right now we don't really have that many. But if ever there's the opportunity to make friends with other Indians, I'll probably seek that out wherever we go. But those Indians will most likely be like me, where they've been raised here, and when we invite them over for dinner or whatever, they'll probably speak in English with us. It's very unlikely that we'll be speaking any other language together. And probably it won't be like the type of social interaction my parents had. That was more a need to be together because that was their only way of holding together an Indian community or their identity with their country. For me, it won't be anything like that. There might be activities that we're involved in, probably not religious, that are exclusively Indian social activities, like Diwali or those type of holidays, we'll still probably participate in to some extent, but I don't think there will be anything that's exclusively Indian that I'll do. Again, like I seek out Indian friends, I'll seek out Indian performances, like if the bharat natyam dance is available. It may be that when I'm at a point where my career hasn't taken over my whole world, I may want to try to bring that to the place that I live in and actually be an organizer of those kind of activities, but right now in my life, I don't think there's room for that.

**PS:** You said professionally you're not sure whether you'll still be being a doctor. At this point you've just finished your residency?

SK: Yes.

**PS:** And you're looking for what kind of work as a doctor?

**SK:** I'm going to be an internist, so that's basically adult general medicine. I would most of the time work in a clinic, and, when I take call, be in a hospital. But otherwise, that is my idea of what doctors were like fifty years ago, except that they made house calls.

**PS:** So are you expecting that that will be fairly easy to find?

**SK:** Yes. I've already got some offers now. We probably will stay here, at least for a few years, and buy a house, and then maybe move on from here.

**PS:** And Pat still works for your dad?

**SK:** Yes. He's very happy in the company right now. The company itself, I don't know how much longer it will be around. It has its ups and downs. Sometimes they're doing really well and sometimes they're not. I don't think he plans to work there forever, even if the company survives. He probably wants to start his own business sometime in the next

ten years. So if he had to say where he'd be in ten years, he'd be running his own business.

**PS:** Are there any aspects of being the first U.S.-raised generation which you find especially difficult? And on the other side of it, things that you find especially pleasant or nice? Just give me both sides of that coin, if you will.

SK: The most concrete difficulty on a daily basis that I notice, until I changed my last name, I would have to spell Patankar every single time I was paged to the hospital, and this is for three years now that I've been there. It's not that they didn't know who I was, but I would say, you know, "This is Dr. Patankar (stress on first syllable)," answering a page. They would ask me a couple times to repeat myself, and then they would say, "Oh, Dr. Patankar (stress on second syllable). Okay." So there are certain things that, you know, it's not really an insult, but people don't--I don't know if they can't, but it appears they don't take the time to properly learn my last name. I don't know if that reflects anything about what they in general think about people from other countries, but now that I've changed my last name to Kelly, and I say, "My name is Suruchi Kelly," it's already happened in the last month that people call me Kelly and assume my first name is Kelly and that my last name is Suruchi. On a day when I might not have had a whole lot of sleep and might be kind of irritable, that will really make me mad. But otherwise, not huge difficulties.

It's sort of hard to separate whether there's any discrimination against my being from another country, or whether it's just from being a woman. In general, I fit all the minority stereotypes. As a doctor, a young female physician from another country is probably the absolute worst you could be. Being an older male Caucasian physician is the most secure type of a physician I think most patients look at. So I feel like in that sense I have to prove myself more, or I have to justify my existence as a doctor more. I'll probably have to do it a lot of times in my practice in the future.

My mom was just talking to me the other day and was saying how Dr. Sane--there were times when a patient would actually see him and refuse to be seen by him after he found out that he was not Caucasian. He just took that with a grain of salt and said, "Well, that's fine." But I don't know that I'll have such overt discrimination towards myself, maybe. Pat talks about moving to Texas and South Carolina, and I have absolutely no interest. I don't think it even occurs to him, or at least he doesn't know the impact it would have on me to move there. I don't think he understands that racism the way people describe it in the media is very overt. I don't think I was discriminated against when I grew up here, but after going to the East Coast and talking to people there, they said, "You know, you might have been discriminated against and not even realized it, and it's because you never even thought of yourself as different because you concentrated on being the same."

Now that I've been back, again, I've bumped into more Indians who've had the experience

of being discriminated against here in Minneapolis, but I myself don't pick up on it. It's probably a little bit of denial. Why do you want to go through life every day paranoid, thinking people are against you? But on the other hand, I don't deny that it probably exists. I remember talking to a nurse before I put my resume out, and she said, "Boy, you should just change your name to Plain Jane, because they're going to see your name on that resume and that's the first thing they're going to see, and they're probably going to throw it out in half the cases." Now, no one's done that as far as I know yet, and I've gotten offers, and after they've actually seen who I am, things haven't changed from there either. In general medicine there's probably a lot more Asians than in a lot of other career paths. So I don't think there's quite as much discrimination.

I did pick a specialty where the "old boys' club" doesn't exist anymore, but I was very interested in orthopedics for a while, and, again, I don't know if it's because of my cultural background or being a woman or what, but there I felt extremely intimidated. I am sure that there was all kinds of discrimination going on. I mean, it was very overt. There was one female orthopedist at the University of Minnesota's Department of Orthopedics. In the middle of a conference, there'd be references to a patient with a knee injury and how she must have been on the floor doing all kinds of housework, and that's how she got her injury. This female physician would not let anything go. She immediately had a response back. I really admired that, but at the same time I thought this is not an environment I want to be part of. She was Caucasian. I don't know what would have happened if I would have pursued orthopedics, but it would have been hell, a hell that might have been worth it at the end, but it would have been hell.

**PS:** So what are the sweet things about being Indian American? Do you see any benefits that you got from being this first generation?

**SK:** They're not tangible benefits really in terms of work or who you are in the public eye, and because it's now politically correct to become aware of ethnic groups in general, I guess I don't have to really pay attention to it on a daily basis because it's in my face, on TV, and in advertisements all over the place constantly. But I do feel that having two different backgrounds, although there's some conflict, is really an asset, and that unless you have that, you probably can never understand what that's like, because I have a whole other world that's available to me to access for my values or for just my daily thoughts that a person without that won't ever know, won't ever have that access.

So it's not really something you can explain, but one of the benefits would be that you have this group of friends who you immediately have a familiar feeling with, that nobody else has. I meet another Indian at work or I meet another Indian moving to a new place, and immediately there's a connection that I wouldn't have with anybody else. It's hard to say whether that's because I'm Indian or because I'm from some other country, because Indianness in general means sort of this closeness that you don't see in other cultural groups. There's nothing formal about being Indian.

There's a lot of bad things about what happens when Indians in a population like New York or New Jersey come together. There's a lot of gossiping and back-stabbing and that kind of thing, and in that way I'm glad I didn't grow up in one of those areas. There's also a lot of pressures to get married or have a certain type of job or particularly be married in an arranged setting to someone from your part of India. So I didn't have any exposure to that kind of thing, which was really nice. But just that feeling that your friends are like family is something that I think is not uniquely Indian, but not everybody has that.

**PS:** Is there anything that I didn't ask you about that you think is important to share in this oral history?

**SK:** No. There probably is, but--

PS: Then the very last question is always sort of open-ended. You can do whatever you like with this, but if someone asked you to describe yourself, what do you say?

**SK:** What do I say? I don't know. I guess I'm a product of, more than anything, my parents and my environment, but where I come from is directly related to what my parents have taught me and how they've raised me. So if you want to see who I am, you can look at my family. They wouldn't agree with that, but deep down, if you want to see wo culture of the second of th who I am, that's where it comes from. Everything externally comes from growing up here. So I guess I'm a person of two cultures, not one being any more important than the