

Interview with Nirupama Misra

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

PS: This is Polly Sonifer, interviewing Niru Misra, on June 27, 1997. Hi, Niru.

NM: Hi.

PS: How are you doing today?

NM: I'm doing well.

PS: We'll just be having a dialogue. I'll be asking you questions, and you can just go off and tell any stories you want to say, things you remember, any opinions that you have. Everything's fair.

NM: Okay.

PS: First of all, tell me a bit about where you were born, what your family was like when you were born, details like that.

NM: I was born in India. My father was actually already here in the United States when I was born, and when he left India, I don't think he knew that my mother was expecting. The first two years of my life, I lived in India, and my father was here in graduate school. I was born in 1957. In 1959, just about the time I turned two, my mother and I came over, and my father had found work, a job that he was invited to take here in the States, and although at the time I don't think his intent was to stay here for long at all, he did want to stay for a while, I think, at that point. So we came and joined him in New York City, and lived there. I have some very vague kind of images in my mind of that. I remember sitting with my mother near the Statue of Liberty, for example, but really, no context other than that.

Then Honeywell, here in the Twin Cities, offered him a job soon after that, and so we moved to Minneapolis. From there I have quite a bit of memory of my childhood, from probably about age three on.

PS: And your parents' names are?

NM: My father is Sudhansu Misra and my mother is Induprava Misra.

PS: Do you have any siblings?

NM: No. I am an only child.

PS: Do you remember anything at all about being a child in India, being a toddler?

NM: No, I don't. I've heard lots of stories, but I really don't have any memory of being there that young. We lived mostly with my mother's family, since my father was here, and then I think for a short time stayed with my father's side of the family. In India there's the joint family, so there are large homes, large families. I have many, many cousins, lots of aunts and uncles, and because we have stayed in touch and gone back to India frequently, I feel very close to them, but those first couple of years I don't remember at all.

PS: What do you know about the circumstances of how your parents met and married? Do you know that story?

NM: I think it was a very traditional arranged marriage, and who actually helped bring the families together, I don't know, but my father's family is from a very central part of Orissa, and my mother's family is from an area in the northern part of Orissa, and considered a little more maybe out of the way, you know, of the normal, of the maybe more popular or typical parts of the state. So I don't know how much contact their families had had prior to this marriage, but they were married. In India, I think marriage involves a lot more than just a husband and wife coming together; partly it's about bringing two families together and expanding the family in that way. So I think that was a very big part of what the wedding was about.

PS: Had your parents known each other for a long time before they married?

NM: No. I don't think so. I think they probably met once, maybe.

PS: They're still married now, right?

NM: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

PS: And your perception of their marriage is what?

NM: Very solid. Very solid. My perception of arranged marriages, in general, I think, is that there are some very positive things about it. To me, I think because I have lived with that concept for so long and explored it for so long, it doesn't seem alien to me. I think arranged marriages were probably very popular throughout the world maybe a hundred, two hundred years ago, and I think they're still popular in certain parts of the world. They've evolved. I think that idea that marriages are arranged before the couple even gets to know each other at all is fading, but I think marriages are still commonly arranged in

lots of parts of the world, and I think there is a very positive aspect to that.

PS: Can you say what that is?

NM: I think one of the strengths I see in it is that it does what I talked about earlier, that it brings two families together. So by the time the couple is married, they have a tremendous support system. Both families, in the ideal circumstances, are working very hard at protecting this couple, at making things work out for them. They're looking out for their interest, so there's this enormous network that's trying to hold this couple together, and providing them support and help where they need it. I can see what happens when you give that up, like we have in this culture. We don't have the support system. So couples are often very much on their own, and the struggles in marriage are intense, they're huge. So sometimes I look at my cousins in India and I think, "Well, they're--," and not that I don't have a lot of support in my marriage, but in general, I think our counterparts in India versus my generation here in the U.S., marriages are more solid and children are raised in a very secure environment, which is not always the case here.

PS: So when you moved to Minneapolis, what was Minneapolis like for you and your family?

NM: I have really good memories of my early childhood. We lived in northeast Minneapolis, just a couple of blocks away from St. Anthony Village, and very strong sense of community, lots of kids. I think probably everybody around my age in the U.S. talks about their childhood with kind of a sense of nostalgia that there wasn't a fear of wandering around neighborhoods. You went out in the morning in the summer and you were gone until your parents called you back in, whenever that was, to eat. Lots of children around that we played with, and I think for that reason, being an only child, it never struck me that I was missing something, because I had very good friends throughout my life, that I've been fortunate that way. I still have some of those friends to this day, that I had when I was three.

PS: You grew up in a neighborhood that was primarily white?

NM: Entirely. Entirely.

PS: And did you ever sense any teasing because you were not white?

NM: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yes.

PS: Tell me what that was like.

NM: Well, it was not fun. It was awful. I'm trying to remember. Our street had a number of families with children my age, on both sides of the street. Up a block were a couple

families--and this was actually a fairly middle-class neighborhood, and I would say even largely working-class neighborhood. But up the street was a family that I remember that had, I don't know, just a bunch of boys. That's what I remember. I don't know how many. And a couple of them were just awful, just awful, and I just remember fearing them, hating them, just knowing that I was going to be teased and horrible things were going to be said, and that there wasn't really anything that I was going to be able to do about it. But I think I also had a very solid sense that I had friends who didn't care about that and who supported me through that.

PS: What kinds of horrible things did the boys taunt you with? Was it related to being Indian, or being brown, or being a girl?

NM: I don't there was any concept of being Indian. I do remember, actually, as a matter of fact, that "Indian" meant American Indian to them, and I remember I just thought, "These kids are so stupid," because they would come up to me a lot of times and raise their hand and say, "How." And I don't know if you remember, but that was kind of the stereotypical image of [American] Indians, with the chief in the headdress, and this ridiculous language. And so that was often how I was approached.

Then I think there was some taunting about color. But I think that, by and large, most of the kids were very kind and accepting. The school I went to, the elementary school, and I went through sixth grade there, didn't have at that time a single non-white child. I don't even think it probably had a Jewish child. I mean, I think these were WASPs right down the board. The Catholics went to the Catholic school, and everybody else, and that was it.

PS: So you went to public school?

NM: Yes.

PS: How was your experience in school? Was school fun for you?

NM: School was fun for me. I really enjoyed school. I guess because it was contact with other kids. I was a pretty good student, so I enjoyed the classwork. Generally, I think I was well liked by people. And at that point in my life, I think I just felt very much like I pretty much blended in. I knew that there were differences between our family and every other family in the neighborhood. My parents, it's their wisdom and their personalities that are remarkable, but they made a tremendous effort, I think, to just belong and to get along with people and be part of the neighborhood, and I look back at that and I think for both my parents, my mother in particular, that was a tremendous challenge. I think I am one of the first Indian children raised here in the Twin Cities, so there was no peer group, and my mother had a very small peer group. It was her and maybe one or two other women.

PS: Indian women?

NM: Yes. So her education to American society came largely from non-Indians, which is not the case anymore. I think Indian women who come here now, there's quite a community here now that supports them and helps them through the transitions, and India is also much more Westernized now, so I think the transition is not as huge. But at that point I think what both my parents must have went through, they must have had to think long and hard sometimes.

PS: When you were a young child, what language was spoken in your home?

NM: I think we probably spoke Oriya at home, because I speak Oriya fluently. I remember a phase where they would talk to me in Oriya, and I would answer in English, and I think that's pretty typical of a lot of Indian homes. But because we went to India very often, it kept me refreshed in the language, and so I feel comfortable using it, and always have.

PS: What kind of food did they cook at home?

NM: We've always had Indian food.

PS: And how was that for you? Was that okay?

NM: Yes. Indian food was always my preference. I think it was odd for me when I had friends over. Some of my friends liked Indian food. That, you have to remember, was back in the early sixties. I mean, Italian was ethnic. [Laughter] That was doing something pretty racy back then. And I do remember some pretty unpleasant experiences with friends who just remarked how much they hated Indian food, and I knew that they never really tried it or gave it a chance. It was just the alien nature of it scared them, and so it's easy to just respond that you don't like it and be done with it.

PS: Did you make an effort not to invite those kids to your house, or how did you handle that as a young child?

NM: I don't think I ever thought about it that way. Once again, because of the nature of the neighborhood and the way my parents were, there was not a question about just not being part of everything. I don't know, actually, looking back on it, that the children that I think of as being very friendly and supportive, if you asked them how it was for them, being a friend of mine, maybe to them I was an outsider. I don't know. But I never perceived that.

PS: So if some kid came over who didn't like Indian food, would your mom make them a peanut butter sandwich instead, or did they just not eat?

NM: I don't remember my mother fixing something else. Maybe she did, but I think it was just, "Well, sorry." And it didn't happen often, you know, it really didn't. And I had friends who loved Indian food, so I think that was the way I remember it. I don't know. It's interesting though. Now, with my children, I find when they have their friends over--we eat Indian food on a daily basis, but when they invite friends over, I don't cook Indian food. So there must be something in my mind that says, "Let's just not expose them to this problem. Let's just not deal with it. Let's just pretend we're like every other family in the neighborhood." Although my daughters have taught each of their friends how to put on a sari. And I'm sure all of their friends have tasted some Indian food at our house.

PS: Interesting. Do you remember any values that your family stressed when you were a young child?

NM: I don't remember my parents ever consciously sitting me down and saying, "Here's our belief system." And I don't remember them sitting me down and saying, "Here's what our religion teaches." But I think just through the way they lived, and we lived together, I think those were more the cultural values that I picked up. I certainly have a sense that honesty is a tremendously big trait to my parents, and humility. I don't think my parents, either one of them, are people who are looking for attention for what they have accomplished or done. Certainly, I think, a sense of respect for people. I think that's been a very, very big quality in our family.

PS: So they never vocalized these, but you just saw them living that?

NM: Yes. I can't remember a specific time when these things were said, but just knowing that that was what was expected. I suppose it's through the day-to-day occurrences that you don't necessarily remember, but that through the process of learning as a child, that this is what's important in our way of life.

PS: Were there any admonitions like "Look people in the eye," or, "Sit up straight," or, "Eat all the food on your plate," or anything like that, that you heard over and over?

NM: No, no, no. I think it was more the bigger picture things. I don't remember my parents spending a lot of time on "Clean your plate," or "Clean your closet," or "Pick up your socks."

PS: Or "Study hard in school."

NM: Well, study hard in school, I don't know, that was just inbred from birth, I think. That's, I think, a very strong thing that I have a tremendous respect for in Indian culture, is the value on knowledge, on learning. Somehow, I think that's just something we understand, that this is where you put your energy as a child, and this is completely

expected of you.

PS: And so you conformed without any rebellion in that?

NM: Yes. Plus I think it wasn't hard for me to do that. I think it was kind of fun. It was, looking back on it, maybe a real easy way to get acceptance, that I was always the one that people looked to for help with their homework, or help to do something at school or, "We'll go to her because she's really smart." And smart was not necessarily talked about as being a good thing, but I think it was still a way of getting acceptance from teachers, and therefore being part of the community.

PS: Were there any advantages that you found to being Indian, or being different?

NM: In terms of lifelong skills, I think it's been such a blessing to have two cultures, and, yes, absolutely, absolutely. I wish it's something that every kid could have, a little bit of this experience, because it teaches you so much. There are so many things I take for granted that I realize most of the people I know have no connection to: the ability to see things thoroughly, in two different ways; to see them through one set of eyes, and then see them through another set of eyes, and realize you're seeing two different things. Knowing that that's going on all the time gives you, I think, a tremendous understanding of the diversity of the world and the need for tolerance and the need to hear people through and try to understand them, and I think the ability to be conversant in two different cultures, sometimes it's very isolating, because I often feel like nobody understands this, nobody sees this the way I do.

I think it was easier for Indian kids who have been raised here ten years after me. There was a little "boomlet" started at that point. It's easier, I'm guessing, because they probably had two or three counterparts to talk to about it, or maybe twenty. Now there are just so many kids going through this. But for me, it was always just me, and especially not having brothers and sisters, I didn't even have a family to go back to, to talk about it. But it's a tremendous gift, I think, to have two sets of things to draw from, and I think it's made me better professionally. I think it's made me better interpersonally. I think it's given me a lot of skills.

PS: So when things would happen when you were a child, like the boys down the street would tease you, did you take that to your parents? Did you talk to them about what was happening?

NM: Yes, I'm sure I did. I remember later on in school when I went to junior high, going to them, because there was, I think, more trouble at that point in my life. I think they were very sympathetic, and my guess is, they must have felt terrible about it. Now being an adult with my children, I can just imagine how they felt. But also I think because of the way my parents are, and because of the circumstances, they realized that, "Well, you

can't change this. It's going to be up to you to deal with this."

PS: So how did they teach you to do that?

NM: I think there was a lot of coaching me on how to ignore that, not just that you just ignore it like it never happened, but ignoring it in a way that doesn't strengthen that other person, that strengthens yourself. You have to internally go through a process where you think, "Yeah, that kid really is dumb for not knowing that I'm not Native American, I'm from India, and why do I want to deal with someone that stupid anyway?" So, you know, in a way, it's a process where I think you start this process that goes on in many different ways of putting yourself a little bit above someone else. In a way, that's what all of that is, who's on top, and it's a way of internally processing the, "Well, in reality, I'm on top."

PS: Because you're smarter than him, and you know more than him about cultures.

NM: Yes, and I'm just not going to indulge him.

PS: You're not going to sink to his level.

NM: Right.

PS: Very good. I'm impressed. So you said that more families started to come after yours. Your family was one of the first to be here. When more families started to come on, how did you see the Indian community forming, and what role did your family take in the formation of the Indian community in Twin Cities?

NM: I remember the real early days being when it was my family and a few others, and there were lots of students here, bachelors. Our house was one of the houses where the students came to hang out on weekends. I remember often coming home, and there'd be someone sleeping on the couch, or my mother would be cooking dinner for ten people. So there were always people coming and going, and they were all uncles to me, and so I was very close to all of them, and they'd play with me, and very affectionate relationships.

As the community started to expand, to me it was kind of a bittersweet thing. There was a lot of fun. The parties got bigger. But I was also still usually about the only kid. Later on, there were--well, I guess there were children, because there were couples who had children who came and were students at the university, and then went back to India, so there were kids who came and went. But there were never more than, I would say, four or five at a gathering of maybe fifteen or twenty couples. Looking back, I see that as the community has grown, it started dividing up into regional groups, or religious groups, or whatever kind of groups. I look back on those early days with just great fondness, when it didn't matter that we spoke different languages back home, or that there were maybe

some real differences between us. I think my parents just welcomed all these people, and I think it was such a joy to just have someone from India around, and it was such a mutual thing that everybody just got along. At least, that's how I perceived it as a child. You know, I remember it being a very fun time.

PS: Whereas, if in India, you'd gotten that same group of people together, and they hadn't immigrated, they would--

NM: Maybe not have. Today people are so much socially wrapped up within, you know, the Oriyas handle their social group generally with the Oriyas, the Bengalis with the Bengalis, the Gujuratis with the Gujuratis. Not that it's exclusive, but predominantly, that's the way it is. The community is so much bigger now, too, that people don't know each other. There's a lot more sense, I think, of separation and formality in the social interactions.

PS: Do you remember any of the young students who used to come over to your home, who are now leaders in the local community?

NM: Yes. A lot of those students have left the Twin Cities. They went elsewhere. Most of them have. I think the Gangulis have stayed here in the Twin Cities, and I remember when he was a student at the university, and before he was married, and then I think just about the time he got married, my family moved to Florida, very soon after that, or right around that time. But I do remember when he was a student at the U.

PS: And do you keep in touch with him yet?

NM: Yes. There was a house down by the St. Paul campus. I remember this woman very fondly--Mrs. Peterson. She was like my grandmother here. A Danish woman, she was an immigrant from Denmark, and she ran a boardinghouse just a block off Raymond Avenue. All her boarders were students from India, and that was where we had our New Year's Eve parties, and a lot of social interaction between their house and our house. Probably one of the most wonderful women that the Indian community has encountered here, back in that phase. I think I heard a few years ago that out of her boardinghouse--and she took care of these students like they were her most cherished sons, I mean, she just nurtured them--I heard there were something like forty-five Ph.Ds that came out of her home.

PS: Wow.

NM: So I often think that our community owes her a lot.

PS: Yes. But your family did a lot of that, too, a lot of that nurturing.

NM: I think so, yes. I think my parents did a lot of that.

PS: What age were you when your family moved to Florida?

NM: It was kind of an interesting move. We moved to Florida, and then two months later, we went on an extended trip to India, and I spent nine months in India, and then I came back and finished ninth grade there. So I was eleven when we left the Twin Cities.

PS: So just starting junior high?

NM: Actually, I was finishing junior high, because I had started school a year early, and then I skipped seventh grade, so I was always two years younger than my counterparts at school.

PS: Wow. Watch out for her. She's smart! [Laughter]

NM: [Laughter] Yeah, I guess.

PS: So you said junior high was tougher, or different. There were different problems or more problems in junior high. Could you say something about those?

NM: I think it had to do with this kind of turbulent period, just in not being as settled. I skipped seventh grade, so I went from sixth grade in an elementary school where I knew everybody and had lots of friends, and then when I skipped seventh grade, where I would have started junior high, I ended up starting into eighth grade, and most of my friends were not too happy with me about that, so I lost a lot of my friends there.

Of course, a lot of the kids in the class I was entering were pretty wary of me, because here was--I mean, can you imagine? I look back on it and I think, "Boy, the rumors that must have been going around," because here was this kid who looked different from anybody they had probably ever seen, and was, by the way, two years younger than everybody she's going to school with. So I must have been seen as just this freak.

PS: And were you small anyway?

NM: Yes, I'm sure. I was the smallest kid in my class in sixth grade, so I'm sure by the time I hit eighth grade, yes. This was at Northeast Junior High School, which at that time, you know, there was no busing program, and Northeast was an all-white community. In fact, I remember going downtown when I was probably about six or seven with some friends, and them saying, "Look, there's a colored person," and pointing to this person across the street, and it was years later that I look back on that and realized what they were talking about, because I was looking around for someone who was all different colors. I mean, that's how protected the Twin Cities was from any diversity.

PS: And they were actually referring to an African-American?

NM: Of course. I mean, a colored person, I'm sure that's what they saw and were pointing out to me.

PS: When you would see an African-American, what went through your mind?

NM: You know, I don't remember seeing any.

PS: But your friends pointed one out.

NM: Yes. Like I said, I don't remember seeing a black person. I remember looking up and down the street, looking for someone who was all--

PS: Who was purple, orange, and--

NM: Yes. It was the way in which they said this, like, wow, you know, this is really outrageous, and then thinking, "What is a colored person?" [Laughter] It was amazing, when I look back on it. So anyway, starting in eighth grade, it was a tough time, and I think--

[Tape interruption]

PS: So you went from this small, protected little grade school into--

NM: Into a bigger junior high, in eighth grade. And I think just having a bigger group of kids, our part of Northeast, where I went to elementary school, had some of the influence from Honeywell, because it was near the Honeywell office, so there was kind of a mix of education levels and incomes, but by junior high, had picked up a broader part of Northeast Minneapolis and more of maybe the working class and not as much emphasis on education. So it was a little bit rougher, and it was probably the beginning of that process of having to sort out, "Okay, there are different types of people, and some of them you're going to get along with, and some, you just aren't." I think that was where that awareness started.

So I went through eighth grade there. Then we moved to Florida, spent a month or two there, and then we went to India for nine months, and so I came back at the very end of ninth grade, just for like the last three, four weeks of ninth grade, in Florida, in the South. So there were so many changes that took place in that two-year period.

PS: Did you go to school in India?

NM: No, I had a tutor. We took textbooks along, and really the only subject that the tutor was really able to keep me going in was in math. I think the other subjects, the textbooks were--everything was taught so differently than they were used to in India, so I must have read through the books or something. But worked very intently on math, and had a great time with that, just loved it, and then came back and finished ninth grade in a completely, completely alien environment. [Laughter]

PS: Was your father working while he was in India?

NM: Well, no, he had taken vacation time there. He didn't stay that long. He stayed, I think, maybe two or three months, and then he went back. By then we lived in Florida, so he went back to work there. My mother and I stayed.

PS: And whose family did you stay with that time?

NM: Kind of back and forth. Probably mostly during that extended period with her family, but it was probably close to half and half, I guess.

PS: What was it like socially for you to be in India? I am assuming you hadn't spent that big a time in India previously.

NM: Up to that trip, I hadn't. The beginning of that trip was really frightening for me, because I remember when we arrived, we stayed in my father's family home, which is this huge house, and huge family. There were dozens of kids my age, all my cousins. It seemed like dozens. It was maybe about a dozen at that time. I remember arriving there and thinking, "Gee, I thought I knew Oriya pretty well," and realizing I wasn't really all that sure of the things they were saying to me. When I look back on it, I realize we had arrived in Calcutta and stayed with some relatives there for a few days, and they were speaking Bengali, which is very close to Oriya, but not the same. Probably I wasn't aware of that, and I was thinking, "Gosh, I don't know this language as well as I thought." But then when we got to my father's home, it started getting easier.

The first couple of days were really hard, because I think they were incredibly curious about me. In India, there's this very natural sort of way that people are with you, and it's not the way people are with you here, and it's a little uneasy at first. You know, you feel like your space is being a little invaded.

PS: Because they're standing closer?

NM: They're standing close, and they will just stand and look at you. They will just look at you, and not expect you to talk, or not expect themselves to say anything, but just be together. It's something that I have since learned to become very comfortable with, and I really actually have learned to appreciate that tremendously as a way of just being able to

be with someone without any pressure of interaction. But it's a cultural thing that doesn't happen much here. At the time I remember thinking, in my head, I was screaming, "Leave me alone!" or "What do you want?" And I couldn't say it. Eventually, I got over it, but it was a period of adjustment, certainly.

PS: Did you find differences in the way kids played together, or what they talked about?

NM: Yes. We just went to India last winter, and I see with my children now, taking them, and they're playing with my cousins' children now, and in the same place I played with my cousins, and it's not that different now than it was twenty years ago for me, or thirty years ago for me. The play is more--it's just old-fashioned play, I guess, is the best way to put it. It doesn't involve a lot of toys and props, and children are much sweeter, I think, in India, much sweeter. It's one of the reasons I would love to go back and raise my children there. The children are not hardened yet, and they're very generous with each other. I remember how much that impressed me when I went there as an eleven-year-old, that here were these kids, and I remember thinking, they don't have nearly as many toys as I have, they don't have anywhere near as much of anything as I have, and yet whatever they got, they were giving it to me. Just that generosity and that very deep sense of affection, and that sense that I think I was really hungry for at that point in my life, that I belonged with them. I was just one of their sisters. In India, we don't have a word for "cousin." The word is "sister" or "brother" and the relationship is very much the same, and so they just kind of wrapped their arms around me, and ever since then, I have just been one of them.

PS: Were you special because you'd come from America?

NM: Yes. Oh, yes.

PS: Did they share more readily with you than they did with each other?

NM: I think they shared with me to some extent because I was the guest in a way. I mean, they wanted to make me feel comfortable, but there is more sharing, and there is more just getting along. Just getting along in a big house with a lot of people, I guess that's what you have to do, and those are the skills that parents raise their children with.

PS: So they're just taught to be more cooperative.

NM: I think so. There's a lot of fighting and teasing and all of that sibling stuff that goes on, but there is a very tremendous sense of "We are part of a family." I think in America, we have, as our building bricks of society, the individual. In India, I think the bricks of society are the family. So I think there's that sense in growing up as a child there, that you are part of something very solid and very important, and upholding it is part of your life.

PS: And you don't have that sense in American culture?

NM: I don't. I too often feel that my friends here are quick to criticize their parents and their siblings over things that, in their shoes, they would have done the same thing. I think it's that sense of being the individual. It's me that has to then deal with the world, not, it's me with the support of my family that deals with the world. There are certainly some down sides to that, too, like I said, the screaming that was going on in my head of "Leave me alone." I mean, that's the flip side of it, is sometimes you just want to be left alone, or sometimes you need more room. Sometimes you need to explore a little further than your family might let you.

PS: So there's tradeoff.

NM: Oh, yes. Yes.

PS: So you spent this nine months in India, and then you came back and were in Florida for a couple of weeks to finish school. What happened after that?

NM: I think it was about three or four weeks. Well, that was just like landing in a new planet. It was so bizarre to me, because I think if I had come back to Minnesota, where I had had all my childhood up to then, I would have had something to relate to, but coming back to this new neighborhood, new school, you know, the Southern drawl that most of the kids had--and this was in the Tampa Bay area, in Clearwater, Florida, so it's heavily influenced by a Northern migration, it's not Deep South, by any means, it's south Florida, but still a lot of influence of the South.

Again, I had that same experience, there was a girl who turned out to be in my class who lived a couple houses away, and she came over. Her father worked with my father, so it was a natural, right? Well, we went for a walk. This was maybe a few days after I had gotten back. She started telling me about this movie that she had seen. It turned out to be, "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie." I don't know if you remember that movie, but anyway, I swear, I could not figure out what she was saying. I mean, she could have been speaking pure gibberish. I just couldn't understand her. I had no idea what language she was speaking. It's the strangest experience to come back--you know, I had been looking forward to coming back and thinking, "Well, you know, it'll be like home again," and all of that, and then coming back and finding myself feeling completely out of it. Fortunately, that was toward the end of the school year, and I had the summer to recuperate and kind of get my bearings, so by the time I started high school in the fall, I was back to being just fine. But, boy, that was a tough summer.

PS: So you went on to do high school in Florida. How did that go?

NM: Well, it was a good experience. It's not one I think I would want to do again, but it

was a good experience. I had lots of friends, and was involved in lots of activities and did well at school. But it's also Florida, which I think didn't have enough to offer children, or high school kids. There was kind of school and the beach and that was it.

I think my parents were constantly looking for ways to get me more involved in other things, and given that I was always two years younger than my friends, they were old enough to get jobs when I wasn't. They were old enough to get drivers' licenses when I wasn't. My father and mother put a lot of emphasis on volunteer work, so I spent my summers doing lots of volunteer work, which was such a great thing. It was just such a blessing that they thought through that and gave me that.

PS: What sorts of things did you do?

NM: Mostly I worked with children, for an organization called UPARC (Upper Pinellas Association for Retarded Children). It was the county organization dealing with retarded children, and these were children who had all sorts of handicaps, and very young children that I worked with, mostly preschoolers. Actually, some of them were older, but had so many handicaps, you would have thought they were preschoolers. It was hard work and it was heartbreaking sometimes, and really difficult to get up for in the morning, but really rewarding, too, and just an experience I'm glad that my parents kind of pushed me through.

PS: Did your mother work outside the home?

NM: My mother had always, even when I was in elementary school, had been pursuing education. She had a degree from India, which, when she came to the United States, was not recognized, and so while we lived here when I was young, in the Twin Cities, she got her bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota, and then when we moved to Florida, she got her graduate degree. So she was always going to school, and then doing the associated jobs that go with being in grad school or whatever.

She was always the only mother among my acquaintances that wasn't a home-based parent, which is really interesting, because when I was in elementary school here in Minneapolis, it was considered not such a great thing that your mother was not home. It was a neighborhood where it was very traditional to have a mother at home. In those days, every family had one car, and the dad took that to go to work, so everybody was at home all the time. My mother was one of the two or three exceptions. The other was another woman who was doing the same thing as her, and then the other was a woman who was divorced, on top of working, so not a good reputation in those days. When you look on it, I mean, I sometimes wonder about the nostalgia people have for that era, because it was pretty restrictive.

Then after my mother finished graduate school, she worked, so that, I think, fostered

some independence in me and gave me an added respect for education, and that women need to get out and do things.

PS: So you got out and did things.

NM: Yes.

PS: So you graduated from high school in Florida?

NM: In Florida. And I went to the University of Florida.

PS: Did you date while you were in high school at all?

NM: No.

PS: Because?

NM: You know, there were just so many things working against me, I guess. I think there was a family thing. It was never discussed in our family, but I just understood that this was not part of what was acceptable to my parents. Not that I wouldn't have maybe wanted to. But the other things I had working against me was, again, I was in a school--my friends were all white, and it was a real trying thing, because I think that was fine, as long as I was with girls and with boys who were just buddies, but there was, I think, this untalked about, but understood thing that the male-female relationship couldn't go further. Again, there was a Southern influence. Clearwater, at that time, was a community where there was a lot of social class structure, and high school certainly, I think, emphasizes those sorts of things. Plus, I was two years younger than everyone. But actually, I think later in high school I did date a little bit, group dating and some things that I passed off to my parents as just a friend and I are going somewhere.

PS: And it would be a boy?

NM: Yes.

PS: And were there romantic overtones? Did you hold hands or kiss or any of that stuff?

NM: Yes.

PS: But you couldn't tell your parents?

NM: No.

PS: Because what would have happened?

NM: I don't know. I think it would have been just difficult for them, really difficult.

PS: So you didn't tell them because you didn't want to hurt them?

NM: Yes. I don't think I understood, even now, what the consequences would have been. I don't think it would have been rage, but I think it would have been pain.

PS: For them?

NM: Yes. So why get into that?

PS: Good point. So you weren't around the Twin Cities when SILC was being formed here, the School of Indian Language and Culture?

NM: No.

PS: So you don't know anything about that.

NM: And SILC formed when I was older anyway. I wouldn't have been in that age group.

PS: Was your family involved in a religious community of any sort while you were growing up? Was there any one to belong to?

NM: No. There were no temples in the Twin Cities, and there were none in Florida. My father was always really active with--at that time, when I was real little, it was called the Indo-American Association, and it was just the group of Indians who lived here, and he was real active in that group of people.

When we moved to Florida--now there are just tons and tons of Indians in Florida, but at that time there were very, very few... It was back to where we started with in Minneapolis ten years ago, or ten years prior to that. So my dad was the one who kind of started getting connected with the few Indian families that were there, and it was the same sort of model. They weren't students because we weren't right in a college area, but they were young families from as far as a hundred miles apart, and he was the one who kind of organized gatherings, and there were maybe thirty of us altogether, including students and families. Now that's grown and I think become well established.

PS: So were there some Indian children in that group that you become friends with?

NM: No. [Laughter]

PS: There were no children?

NM: No, because once again, by that time I was in high school and college, and the kids, the couple of kids that were there, interestingly, yes, the one that would have been closest in age to me now lives here in the Twin Cities and we stay in touch a little bit. He and his wife are here. But he's still, I would say, eight to ten years younger than me.

PS: So you were always the trailblazer.

NM: I guess. [Laughter]

PS: Did you ever have an after-school job, or did you just keep doing volunteer work?

NM: Not until I graduated. I turned sixteen about two weeks before I graduated from high school, and you had to be sixteen to get a job, so that summer I had a job.

PS: What did you do?

NM: I worked at the big department store in the area.

PS: As a clerk?

NM: Yes. It was like a Dayton's type thing. I don't know what the exact title is for that, but clerk maybe sounds right.

PS: You ran a cash register?

NM: Yes, and I continued to do volunteer work, and worked in the hospital. I was very involved in lots of other activities with school, so I was doing things with the German Club. Gosh, I think there were like easily eight or ten groups I belonged to. I don't know.

PS: You were busy.

NM: Yes. I think just trying to get away from school and the beach, that thing, trying to find some other avenues.

PS: Going back to skipping seventh grade. Whose idea was it that you should do that?

NM: The school's. I think it came about because my parents were planning this extended trip, and so what they did, if I remember right, was they went to the school and said, "She's going to be starting this year, but next year she's going to be gone for a year," so they were thinking ahead, and they were thinking, "What can we do to prepare her for being gone, and how can we get ready?" I think that was the approach. Then they kind of

looked at my records or whatever they look at, and I think my sixth grade teacher, along with the junior high administrators, whatever, just came up with this idea of, "Well, why don't we have her go into eighth grade."

The strategy was, I would go into eighth grade, take eighth grade, probably would not be able to keep up, that it was this big jump, there may be some problems with doing that, but then if I was gone a year, it had something to do with then repeating that grade while I was gone or something. So that it wouldn't be a problem to have skipped a grade. So somehow I was supposed to end up back where I belonged.

PS: You didn't fall behind?

NM: Not at all. I don't know, it's part of what I think about our educational system; it just doesn't work real well. In fact, even though I had spent a year in India and came back for the last two or three weeks of ninth grade, I was there long enough to take the final exams, and aced them all, and I don't think it was because I'm that brilliant. I think it was just because we don't expect enough, and are so surprised when people do somehow look for something more.

PS: So you got out of high school, and did what?

NM: Went to the University of Florida, which was in Gainesville, about 150 miles or so away from where my parents were. Did another interesting thing. I think there still are these tests available, they're called the CLEP tests, where you can take these exams and get college credit if you score a certain level. I ended up getting a year's worth of college credit, so I started into my second year of college, in honors-level courses, at age sixteen. That was probably a mistake, because I think I could have used that year again just to get some bearings and not have to jump into what turned out to be the first time in my life where I think I faced an academic struggle and, at the same time, trying to learn to balance my own checkbook, and budget my own money, and how do you deal with your roommate has friends over at eleven o'clock and you've got a chemistry exam the next day, and are you going to blow it off or not, all those things that you have to go through, and that are really fun to go through. I mean, that's part of the fun of, I think, going away to college. But I think I had this added pressure, looking back on it, I think that's maybe one of the few things I would have changed, but continued to do okay.

I stayed in Florida, at the University of Florida, for three years. In my third year, it became pretty clear to me that I needed to get out of there. University of Florida at that time had an incredible reputation as a party town, even nationally, and it was, and it wasn't doing me a lot of good.

PS: Did you party with them or not?

NM: More than I should have.

PS: So you did get into that social scene in a new way, in a big way?

NM: Yes. I think I was always very social, but this was a time when you were on your own and you didn't have to worry about somebody saying what time to be home, everything was in walking distance on a small college campus, small town, college town sort of environment. It was a good experience. I have a lot of fond memories of those days, and very close friends from those days, very, very close friends, that are still very, very close friends. But I started to realize that, "Well, now I have to get back to thinking about what is it I'm doing with my life, because life isn't going to end here, and there's more to be done. Let's get out there and figure this out." And also the type of work I was interested in was just not being offered at the University of Florida back then. And by that time my father was transferred back to Minneapolis.

PS: Did he work for Honeywell this whole time?

NM: Yes, the whole time. So they were back here. So I applied to the University of Minnesota and, I think, a couple other places, and decided to come back here. So I finished my undergraduate degree here at the U, and then went to graduate school here, and finished all that here.

PS: What was your undergraduate degree in?

NM: Microbiology.

PS: And your graduate degree was?

NM: Microbiology.

PS: Right through.

NM: In those days, microbiology was very medical. The microbiology department was housed in the medical school, and all the research was predominantly medical-type research, and I was not as interested in that. I had started to get much more interested in the environmental sciences. There were no environmental science departments in those days, so I ended up through the College of Agriculture, doing environmental microbiology in graduate school, and at that time, my advisor even told me, "Don't do environmental work, because there's no money in it." Can you believe that? [Laughter]

PS: Times change.

NM: Times change. So, again, I think I was kind of on the early wave of that.

PS: You've been a trailblazer all your life.

NM: I guess I have. I guess so. Yes. Sometimes it's a lonely thing. There are times I really wish I had a peer group. In graduate school, I was one of maybe three women in the department, and there were no women faculty. There were women secretaries, and that was it. I think I was the second woman to get a graduate degree there, and then I started working. I worked for a while after graduate school for Ashland Oil. Was the only woman in sight, other than the secretaries.

PS: Were you also the only woman of color in these settings?

NM: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

PS: Always?

NM: Oh, yes.

PS: Were there ever any men of color?

NM: In graduate school there were foreign students. There was, and there still is, a professor who's from India there, in that department.

PS: At the U of M?

NM: Yes. But most Indians tend to go into engineering and medical sciences, so those departments were heavily loaded, but at that time, and this was back in mid-seventies, there weren't a lot in the agricultural sciences, or even in the biological sciences, which is where my love was. I was pretty passionate about wanting to do this type of work, and not finding an avenue to pursue it in. For me, in terms of searching out a profession, it would have been much easier to have come along ten years later, and there would have been all sorts of opportunities. It worked out just great, but not as easily, I think.

PS: What was college like for you socially, once you got to the U of M?

NM: I had good experiences. I've always tended, especially after coming to the U here, to gravitate toward people who have worked either internationally or who have grown up internationally. A lot of my friends have been not Indian, but French, Egyptian, Mexican, Colombian, Ecuadorian, all over the place.

PS: Have there been some white Americans who have traveled a lot as well?

NM: Oh, yes.

PS: So you just find that that group of people is a natural fit for you socially?

NM: Yes. That, I think, is where I feel the most comfortable. I feel more comfortable in an international group than I do in either a mainstream American group or an immigrant Indian group. That's probably because I really appreciate people who are of varied cultural backgrounds. They choose to look out at the world and search out differences and learn about them rather than holding on too strongly to traditions they fear they may lose.

PS: You're married now.

NM: Yes.

PS: Why don't you tell me a little bit about how you met your mate, and what that was like.

NM: Brian and I met at the University of Florida. He was just part of a large circle--well, not a large circle, but a pretty good circle, of very close friends. The first year that I had gotten to know these people, I don't know, I don't remember him being there, but then I remember meeting him and he was always just a very gentle, thoughtful person and, interestingly, I think really looked up to by this group of friends that I--

[Tape interruption]

PS: Go ahead.

NM: So, Brian was just, I think, looked up to by a lot of people, but, you know, in a very soft-spoken sort of a way. I think people just kind of counted on him when they needed a shoulder or someone to look for advice to. And I just admired that in him. So over time we just became very good friends, and that just stayed for a long time. I think we were close friends first, and for a lengthy period of time. When I had made the decision to leave the University of Florida, he had kind of come to the same conclusion for himself. [Telephone interruption.]

PS: So you were just friends?

NM: Yes. So he had come to the same conclusion and was actually looking at going to the northwestern part of the United States. We just started talking, and he was also interested in getting out of the South, and Florida, and started looking into the University of Minnesota, and so we both ended up here. He came here a few months after I did. We continued to be close friends for years, and then well after we both finished and graduate school was done, and we both were working, that was when we got married. So it was a

period of about eight years that we knew each other.

PS: And did you date other people during that time?

NM: Well, once we were here in Minnesota, no. No. At that point, I think it was, you know, a pretty serious relationship. Prior to that, yes, a little bit.

PS: So you did date other people while you were in Florida?

NM: Yes.

PS: And what was that like for you, dating?

NM: Boy, it seems so long ago now. You know, it was fun at the time and it was kind of the way life was, and I think it was a very natural thing, but I think there was always some sense of discomfort with it, maybe not at the time, but in looking back on it. You know, it's just not part of the tradition that I grew up with. When I was younger, I just completely rejected the idea of arranged marriages. I hadn't thought through some of the values of it, and I certainly wouldn't have been a candidate. I had very, very independent thinking patterns. I was not going to be manipulated by anybody to do anything that I didn't want to do. But, you know, I also think I wasn't part of a culture. I hadn't grown up with a culture that knew how to handle this. So I do remember thinking at the time that, "Boy, you know, this is a real odd way to go about trying to find someone you're going to marry."

PS: Dating life?

NM: Yeah. I mean, I remember trying to think through this, and thinking, "This just, it's so hit and miss, and it's so--" And especially now, looking back on it. It's so much a matter of how much maturity can you have completely on your own, at age twenty or whatever, to know what you're going to face in life, and how many challenges there are ahead of you, and what sort of skills you're going to need, and what sort of skills you're going to need from another person. So I think some of those ideas were just in very rudimentary form, kind of running through my head. It was more dating was just a fun thing. It wasn't in pursuit of someone to marry.

PS: Did you ever have explicit conversations with your parents about arranged marriage?

NM: Not until much later, and I think they always knew that this was not something that was going to work for me. But, you know, again, because there haven't been many test cases ahead of me, it was a very difficult time. And, you know, it goes back to that same thing where I didn't want to hurt them, and I knew that not marrying into the Indian community was going to be very difficult, because we come from a very traditional

family, and in Indian traditional families, there are so many rules that hold up this gigantic structure of joint family. And, you know, these rules are, I suppose, very old, and they've weathered a lot of storms and they've proven themselves to be effective. And here's this kind of upstart eighteen-year-old kind of ready to knock it all aside and say, "nuh-uh, not for me."

I knew that I wasn't trying to be that. I wasn't trying to just take all these traditions and cast them aside, but I also knew that I didn't grow up with them. You know, one of the things my parents did in raising me was they raised me in an American culture. We were always part of the community we lived in. My father did not, as I do think happens sometimes in some families, raise me in a way--and my mother, too--where I was immersed in Indian culture. I wasn't. I was very much a part of a larger culture.

So I think they just understood that there were going to have to be adaptations made here. But I think we both knew it was going to be a struggle, and conversation about it was really hard. It was real hard. I think the challenges for immigrants to raise children here are tremendous, just tremendous. While children have this dual culture, you know, again, that thing I talked about earlier, where you can see a situation from two completely different perspectives, I think in some ways it's harder for the parents' generation to do that.

PS: It's harder for them to gain two perspectives?

NM: Yes. I mean, I think they, as adults, had to adapt a new perspective, but that only goes so far. And so I felt very much that there were certain areas they just didn't understand. They couldn't take that next step, and I knew they never could. You know, it just wasn't going to happen.

So, you know, finally we just realized that--I was twenty-seven when I got married, and my dad decided, "Well, that's old enough. You don't have to wait any longer to try to work this out. You need to go on with life."

My mother, you know, operates very much from the heart, and I think from her heart she knew what had to happen. My father is a very--he has a tremendous ability to--he's got a very strong heart, but a tremendous ability, I think, to put the rational need ahead of the emotional need. And so he did that, and it was something that I know was real hard for him, and a big gift he gave me. And my mother, too. You know, I think they both had to take a huge step that wasn't easy.

PS: So when they first met Brian and got to know him, how did that go? How did you tell them, "This is the man I love," or "This is the man I'm seriously dating?" How did that go?

NM: It was hard to even say that. You know, the word--in India, especially back twenty years ago, "love marriages," there's a term among Indians, especially here in America, marriages that are not arranged are called "love marriages." They used to be. I don't know how common that term is anymore. And it's almost like a--it's like not a good term. It's not a respectable marriage. That's how I remember it, anyway, being used. So I felt like I was carrying that weight with me, too, and so I had to try to find a way to talk about this and deal with this outside of that context, because to me it was very demeaning to have anybody label this as a "love marriage." So, you know, the conversations just were very hard. One of the problems with having two cultures is in trying to translate one to the other. It often comes out sounding disrespectful to one or silly to the other, even when you don't intend it that way.

And I think it was just--you know, I remember Brian and I had so many conversations about, "This is just going to take time, and we've got time. We can give it time. And let's do what we need to do for your parents," was how Brian approached it, and we just gave it lots and lots of time. And eventually it was fine.

But, you know, it's something that I think even today, kids that are of that age, of Indian parents, are going to struggle with, because--you know, I remember, before the Indian community even knew I was seeing Brian, I would go to Indian gatherings and people would say things. I would hear them say things like--I remember a person who I had a fair amount of respect for, still do, and his daughter at the time was five, and I remember him saying, in a circle of people sitting around talking, and I'm sitting there, and he said, "If my daughter ever married an American, I would kill her." And that was the attitude, and it still is.

I mean, I think parents have learned because of watching people like me and other people who have very good, successful marriages, that it's not the end of the world, but I think deep in people's hearts there is still a very strong sense of, "We want our children to marry within the Indian community." And I don't blame them. I mean, there's so much security in that, and so much comfort in thinking that's the way it's going to be. But on the other hand, I hope that at least things like that don't get said to children anymore, because it's really damaging and very scary.

PS: How about from Brian's family? Was there any resistance there?

NM: Yes, that was the other side of the story. Brian is actually the son of an immigrant, too. His mother is from Sweden, and his father is first generation. His parents were from Sweden and Ireland. Brian's father was very ill when we met and throughout our friendship in the early years. And that's, in fact, where Brian was--the year I started at the University of Florida, he had gone home to be with his family and take some classes where they were. His father had a heart condition that came from a disease earlier in his life, and was told by the doctors that he just wasn't going to live very long. Brian's father

was, you know, very--I met him once for about five minutes, but from all the stories I've heard of him, I think a very charming, good-hearted man, but a racist. [Laughter] Brian knew that as long as his father was alive, this would just not be something he could swallow, would be our marriage. And so actually, when Brian was here in graduate school, he took another six months or so off, just before his father died, and went down to Florida and stayed with him, and then his father died. In a way, you know, that was kind of a green light, that our future could go ahead.

PS: So his mother wasn't racist?

NM: No, I don't think so. His mother and I have a wonderful relationship, and I think his father and I would have developed a good relationship, too, if I had ever gotten to know him, but I think there was a wall there for him, is the impression I've had. Whereas Brian's mother, I think, is just a very open-minded, very tolerant person. She's also a very practical person. She takes what is placed in front of her and deals with it, so she has adapted to this very nicely.

PS: So when you got married, what was the marriage like? What is Brian's spiritual persuasion?

NM: He's, I suppose, as Hindu as I am. We're not religious people, in that we don't go to the temple and we aren't even members, but we're involved with a meditation center. Brian is on the board of directors there. I think our approach to spirituality is that we specifically don't want to get immersed in the Hindu religious practices right now, but we're raising our kids to do yoga and to meditate and to have a sense of an inner journey, and the world inside them being as big as the world outside them, or bigger. So I think we're trying to deal more with it on the level of what are the values that you need to have, and what are the things you need to place in your life as important, and not so much the dogma of "We believe this and not that." So, yeah, in that way, we're very compatible.

PS: So what kind of marriage ceremony did you have?

NM: We had a Vedic wedding ceremony, and it was beautiful. It was performed by then Dr. Arya, who was the director of the Meditation Center. It was a wonderful ceremony, and it was, I would guess, about half and half, members of the Indian community who attended and members of the non-Indian community. I think it worked really well. It was a nice ceremony.

PS: And how long ago was that now?

NM: That was in '84, so thirteen years this next week.

PS: So tell me what life has been like since then.

NM: Well, let's see. I was working at the Pollution Control Agency when we got married, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. Brian was working, and still is, at the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. Both of us were very, very career oriented, me probably more so than anybody for a couple of miles around. Really got very involved in my work and enjoyed it a lot, did a lot of work in some of the early days of hazardous waste clean-ups in Minnesota. Again, I was one of the first women in the department, and the first woman of color in the department.

PS: So you filled a lot of categories for their equal opportunity.

NM: Yes, yes. And I think, hopefully, encouraged them to do more. Now there's tremendous representation by women in the Pollution Control Agency. But struggled a lot professionally with several biases, things that are never overt. I always worked in very controversial areas, and because when there's big money involved, people will wage some pretty hefty battles. So I learned a lot. I was pretty green and naive when I was dealing with that, and remember lots of situations where I think people sat down across the table from me and either thought I was going to be a pushover, or maybe were even slightly borderline offended. Maybe "offended" is not the right word. Dubious about my abilities.

PS: Because you were a small dark woman who couldn't possibly know her stuff?

NM: Yes. You know, I had a site up in northern Minnesota. I won't even mention the town. A small town where their drinking water had been contaminated by hazardous waste, and we had to go in with emergency water supply, and then we had to go in and figure out what was the source of the contamination and what were we going to do about it. It was all under a fairly new Super Fund law, and, you know, this was, in a way, kind of a test case, to see how was this law going to work and how was the state going to implement it. The community was, of course, very, very scared. So in walks this--I got to be known by the director of the agency as "five-foot-nuthin"--in walks this five-foot-nothing woman from India. I guess if I was in their shoes, I would have thought, "What is this? Give me someone who can do the job." And I'm sure that the perception of minorities, and the perception of things like equal opportunity, this is someone who got the job because of the color of her skin and her gender, not because she has any ability. It's something that I often get pretty outraged about, but you have to deal with it, so I did.

It worked out well. I mean, I think I fought harder for them, or as hard, than anybody else would have. There's just story after story after story like that. After a while, we hired a woman to fill one of the jobs where--more the technical end, where we examine the wells and do testing, and that sort of thing--and her mother was Indonesian, and so she looked a lot like I did, you know, darker skin, black hair. She and I worked on a couple of sites together, and there were definitely some responses that were challenging.

PS: Tell me more about how those were challenging. Describe more of them.

NM: I think it was--there were so many different ways. You never know what it's going to be this time. You know, sometimes it's somebody taking you aside, and saying, "They're questioning what you're doing." And then you realize, they're not really questioning what you're doing; they're just kind of harassing you about what you're doing. And then you have to decide, "Okay, now what category do I assess this from? I mean, do I see this as this person doesn't trust me because of my background, or because they don't trust me for some other reason?" And you have to kind of work this out and somehow find a way to gain this person's trust.

Other ways. I worked on a site down in southern Minnesota, probably one of the worst hazardous waste enforcement programs we've had in Minnesota, and it was a site that people throughout the agency knew was a problem, and nobody wanted to deal with it. I was brand new there, and thought, "Why aren't they dealing with this?" And so I just took it upon myself to go down there, and was just thunderstruck by what I saw.

I mean, this was a plating company. I don't know if you know anything about metal plating, but it's a very dirty business and it produces a fair amount of hazardous waste, and quite toxic. This place was like from a Dickens novel. I mean, there were just vats and canisters of hazardous materials all over the place, no protective anything. I mean, it was so blatantly in violation of every regulation. So we went down there again, we did some sampling, and I took a senior member of the staff with me. From then on, every time I went down there, he was always with me. No, in fact, he was with me from the very beginning, because I think they knew I was pretty green.

Well, this went into a huge court battle. We went through board meetings and public hearings, and it was on the front page of the paper, and the accusation by the company and their attorney, who was a former director of the Pollution Control Agency, was that I harassed them. The amazing part of it was, I treated these--there were two brothers who owned this facilities--and I treated them as kindly as possible. In negotiations internally where we talked about what are we going to do, I was always kind of the voice trying to moderate how far we were going to go in dealing with them. I know I never dealt with them in any other way but professional. I think it was pretty clear by the administration even, within the PCA, that they were picking on me because they saw me as a target, and their allegations against me personally were because they figured they could turn me into this outsider.

PS: Oh, that the PCA wouldn't back you up, wouldn't support you?

NM: Partly that. Yes, and that the courts wouldn't, and that they could create this impression. And they never attacked the fact that I had no seniority there. They never

attacked my credentials or any of that. Some of that, I think, was open for discussion, the fact that I'd only been there six months. They never attacked any of that side of it. It was always just my personality. That was interesting. There were times of [unclear] because it went on for so long, and it got so personal and so ugly.

PS: And they didn't attack the other white man?

NM: No, and that was the other part of it. You know, here was this six-foot-three, blond-haired, blue-eyed, hefty guy, who was easily much more intimidating than I was, and they never touched him. So, you know, that's another way, is I think people are surprised when they see an Indian woman who is (a) capable of doing her job; and (b) isn't going to back down. I think they are threatened by that.

So anyway, that was one way. I think there were lots of times when I felt very personally attacked, or things that I don't think were personal issues, that were legal issues, or that were policy issues, and people didn't choose to go out and deal with the policy end of it or the legal end of it. They chose to give me a hard time of it, which I didn't see happening to other people.

PS: Even other women?

NM: No. No. And I think, if anything, I just grew more and more cautious, as a result of these things. So I was always being more and more careful, and to the point where sometimes I questioned my abilities, you know, being that cautious. So, yeah, I think professionally there have been some challenges to it.

PS: And how long did you work at the PCA?

NM: About ten, eleven years. Maybe about ten years.

PS: And what led to your retirement?

NM: Well, when Asha was born, our first daughter, I took a leave of absence for a year and a half, and then they asked me to come back to the PCA in a management position, which was in a new program and in an area that I was really interested in, so I said, "Okay." And at that point, Brian took a leave of absence from his job and did some part-time work with the DNR, Department of Natural Resources, and did some consulting work, did some graduate studies, and stayed home with Asha. That was his main thing. And I managed this huge program for a couple of years.

And then when Jaya was born, when she was about to be born, then I decided it was time to leave that. Actually, I have been on a leave of absence until about last year, so they kind of gave me a nice long leash to play with, but I decided I was just going to try to

stay flexible for the sake of the kids.

PS: So at this point, tell me what work you're doing.

NM: Well, now I'm doing very kind of intermittent projects when they come up, sometimes with environmental groups, sometimes with consulting companies. I work as a subcontractor with different kinds of programs. All environmental issues now, for the most part. It's interesting to me that, you know, I think when I started, even in college, and even in high school, I always saw myself as someone who was very career oriented, because my mother, you know, I think, had been that role model for me, at a time when other women weren't. I always, I think, felt very much against the idea of women have to stay home and take care of the kids. And so it's very interesting to me now that that's what I have chosen as my focus for the last five years, and I'm glad that I've seen that there's a value to that, and I'm glad that I have the confidence, and enough of my professional life behind me that I can do this now.

PS: Yes, you're lucky there.

NM: Yes, yes. I feel that I am uniquely qualified to raise my daughters. Why throw away all this experience of having two cultures? I guess I feel it's valuable to try to pass some of it on to the people I love most.

PS: So what are you finding, raising children in this culture? Are there things that stand out?

NM: I find that I go back to--you know, my older daughter looks very Indian. She has dark hair, and her skin's a little darker. My younger daughter has kind of--in fact, when she was really young, a year or two old, her hair was blonde, and her eyes were blue until she was about a year old. I remember when I'd take her out, I remember, you know, I'm sure people didn't think she was my daughter. And I thought about Brian, and when he used to take Asha out, and people didn't think she was his daughter, so it's kind of fun. Her skin's starting to develop a little more color in it. She'll always be, I think, very fair, though, from an Indian viewpoint. And her hair's getting darker.

But it's been such an education raising them, and it's been so much fun, but it really has made me stop and think about what I want for them, and how am I going to try to get them through these years so that they have intact a sense of their heritage. And, you know, for me, it's a difficult task that I don't go too far in one direction or the other, because I try to think, six, seven generations down the road, how is all this going to matter? Because I think the fact that my father and mother came here, and never really intended to settle here, and now here we are.

You know, the lineage is going to proceed here in America, probably, and what is it

going to mean to have Indian heritage? I know some families have a very strong sense of, "We want our children to be as Indian as possible," even though they're here in America. I guess what I want for my children is that they have a very strong sense of their heritage, and are able to draw from it some very, very valuable things, but it is going to have to be tempered by the fact that this is where they live, and this is where they're growing up. I want them to be very well versed in this culture, because I think that's going to be a tremendous source of strength, and if they miss it, it's gone. It's not going to be easy, I think. I think children who are having to deal too much with their Indian-ness are going to have a harder time in the mainstream. I think that it is more important for them to have the strengths and the confidence of having more than one culture than having any one culture that they cling to.

PS: Are you teaching them to speak Oriya?

NM: Oriya.

PS: Oriya. Excuse me.

NM: Yes. Yes. Asha spoke Oriya before she spoke English, and once she started in first grade, then my influence over her was not as big, I think, and I didn't have as much time with her. So now she falls into English as her first language, but she's still very fluent. And when we went to India last winter, she was just fine. Jaya never--I wouldn't say Oriya was ever her first language, but she has, you know--

[Tape interruption]

PS: So how do you teach them? How are you raising them to be bilingual? Do you say everything twice? How is it that you're teaching them? Do you and Brian speak?

NM: Brian doesn't speak Oriya, unfortunately. Well, you know, I was home full time until Asha was a year and a half, so I spoke to her in Oriya all the time, and when I'd read her books, I would translate in my head into Oriya. So I'd be looking at the book, and there would be the picture, but she would hear it all in Oriya. So she just grew up speaking Oriya, and because she wasn't in day care, you know, she didn't have a lot of English influence.

PS: But Brian talked to her in English.

NM: Yes, but Brian knew enough to be able to babytalk his way through, and it was probably when she was about two years old that she started teaching Brian how to say things. But it's certainly been more of a challenge after the second one came along, because by the time she came along, Asha was already very well versed in English, and when she had friends over, there was more English. So there was a lot more English in

our home. So now, I don't know. My parents are in town, which helps, so between the three of us, they see an Oriya environment. We have a few friends with whom they hear me speaking Oriya with all the time. Oriya is a very fun language. In some ways it seems a lot more affectionate and funnier than English. I think Asha and Jaya are just naturally drawn to it. So it's a natural part of their world. And then I think by far the biggest asset is when they can go to India and spend some time there, and then they just have to do it.

PS: So how often do you go to India with them?

NM: Not as often as we'd like. We've been averaging about every three and a half, four years, which I feel pretty fortunate about, because it's not easy now with two kids. And, you know, we toy with the idea that we'd like to spend an extended period of time there. We'll see. I don't know.

PS: What are the barriers that come up when you think about doing that?

NM: School, work. I mean, I'm sure all those questions my parents faced when they decided we were going to spend an extended time there. I have the advantage of being able to look back at my life and know what the adjustments are going to be and what the points are that I'm going to have to be careful with them. You know, there's one generation of experience here.

But certainly, raising them has taught me so much more about my heritage and I've been much more interested in the mythology, the stories. I've been much more careful about trying to look at what are the important things that I want to teach them, and what am I willing to let go. And, you know, I realize that somewhere down the road, language is not going to be maintained. It just isn't. You know, maybe it'll go one more generation, maybe two, but it's not going to go seven or eight. So that makes me realize that, well, then I have to look at language as an issue that pertains to what is the value of it in their personal lives, not in what is the value of a language.

So, you know, that's kind of how I have to pick apart every single thing, is, first of all, is it something that is part of an ancient heritage that I want to continue on, because I am now the link. I'm the one who has to make the decision whether to take it from my parents and pass it on to my children. And if I choose not to, it's probably going to stop here.

So, you know, every decision has to be carefully looked at. I guess the side of this that I've come down on is that, you know, the arts, I want to just expose them to the arts as much as possible, because that's where a lot of our culture is embedded. So both the kids take South Indian dance classes, and through that, they're learning a lot about music and stories and mythology. So they're taking the dance classes, and we're making an effort to take them to as many of the arts events, expose them to that as much as we can. There are

so many fun things in Indian culture. The holidays, the food, the way we eat, the way we all talk at once sometimes, and the way we just love being together – these are all things that children are just drawn to. They end up feeling very loved in this culture, and that keeps them connected. Certainly want them to be able to think of India as something close to a home, you know, maybe like a summer cabin that's really far away. [Laughter] I mean, I want them to feel that sort of relationship with it, and so far they do.

And then there's the spiritual side. I think both Brian and I, you know, certainly that's our direction, is more toward the Eastern philosophies, and so we're trying to pass that on, because I think that would be a terrible thing for future generations to lose touch with. You know, I hope through this the critical elements get passed on, and then it'll be their turn in another twenty years, to make these decisions and see what's important, and maybe they will have picked up a couple other things that they'll want to add to it.

So, I don't know, it's just going to be very interesting to see what happens many generations down the road. Maybe we can learn some lessons from the immigrants that have come before us, to see, well--you know, Brian's family, for example, you know, he grew up hearing Swedish spoken at home, but none of the kids speak it, and they wish they did.

PS: So have you made attempts to go to Sweden as often as you go to India?

NM: Well, no. [Laughter] And that's interesting, because we've talked about why are we so much more tied to the Indian side, and I think it's because Indians have this very, very strong tradition of lineage and connection. You know, while I think Brian's mother and I'm sure his father did, too, have a strong sense of connection with their heritage, even now when Brian's mother's visiting or when we visit her, I don't sense the deep, deep need in her that I've sensed in me, to maintain the connection, and I don't know why that is. Maybe it's because the United States is not that different from Sweden.

PS: Or because she blends in. She probably didn't get teased about being Swedish.

NM: Yes. Or maybe--exactly--maybe some of those trials and tribulations had the effect of connecting me a little closer to wanting, to looking at what I am and having to figure out its value. Maybe. I don't know. But I do think that there's something in our culture that we have this sense of lineage and of heritage, and of ancient--you know, I feel connected to things, I feel directly connected to things three generations ago. I mean, to me, that doesn't seem like going back very far. But, you know, even in wedding ceremonies, or certain other ceremonies, they will recite the lineage of your family.

PS: So you know it?

NM: Well, I don't know it, but I--

PS: But you've heard it.

NM: If I was growing up very traditionally, I would know it, and I've heard it. Yeah, that's a big part of, I think, our sense of time.

PS: So you've pondered spending an extended time in India, but you wouldn't actually emigrate and live permanently in India?

NM: No. I'm actually still an Indian citizen. When my parents became American citizens, I chose to wait. They tried to convince me otherwise, but I--one of my independent streaks coming out again. I wanted it to be my decision, and I have really gone back and forth, because there, in the past, up until recently, have been advantages. If you want to go back and work in India, it helps to be an Indian citizen. And I did have hopes and ideals of eventually doing, of maybe doing that.

The last several times we've gone back to India, you know, there are certainly opportunities in the environmental sciences to go to India and make a dent, but what Brian and I are finding is that the bureaucracy is just so gnarled, and so difficult to break through, that it would be draining. And it's very, very sad. You know, it's really sad, because there's so much to be done, and it's getting to be very desperate in many parts of India now. And it is the environmental issues that are going to cause downfalls. We talked to a lot of people in our last trip who are working in the environmental areas there, and they're all looking for ways to get out, because they just don't feel like they can do anything.

PS: So why would you want to go in--

NM: So why would we want to go in?

PS: --when everybody else wants to escape?

NM: Yes, yes. So maybe we'll have to explore some more creative ways of making an impact. See what happens. I don't know.

PS: And going to Sweden isn't an option either?

NM: It might be. It might be. I'm still holding that one out as a possibility.

PS: Do you have any concerns about the changes in immigration law, that you might be exported against your will at some point?

NM: Because I'm not a citizen?

PS: Yes.

NM: Well, I think I am probably going to become a citizen very soon. I think that's a decision I've made now because of the changes, partly because of the changes, but also because I think now I am vested here. You know, once you have children, I think things change in so many ways, so many ways. And I realize, my husband, my parents, my children, are all American citizens and this is my home, and I think it's probably a good thing that I kept my citizenship this long, because it did what I wanted it to do. It made me examine why do I belong here and what makes me belong here.

I think, you know, that's just one of those experience for all of us who come from, at least Indian heritage, probably many other backgrounds, and settle here, and are seen as minorities and immigrants and whatever. It's a challenge for us to feel like we belong here, and it's an odd thing to say. I mean, sometimes I really resent having to say that. You know, I think I've contributed to this place more than the average U.S. citizen, and have fought a lot of battles for people here, and yet, you know, to constantly be questioned. So it's something that I still just sometimes get angry about. But on the other hand, you know, you go on. This is home, and you make it home.

PS: So are there any aspects about being a first-generation person that you find especially pleasant?

NM: You know, again, I think the skills it's given me are just incredible. The skills and--you know, most of my friends are not Indian, and yet when I talk to them about things, I feel like I bring something to them that they have no awareness of, that there are things that I can draw from that they just have no inkling about. And, you know, so it's such a precious thing to have, and you know, I have spoken to groups.

I have been real involved with the India Association in the past, and now we have this Indian women's group that I'm chairing, and so I'm sometimes invited to go speak places on--you know, when they do their diversity program, and they need someone to speak. So one of the things I tell people is, especially in professional settings, if you choose to interview a person who comes from another background, who has another culture besides an American culture, who has two cultures, you're getting like two people. You are getting so much more than you are when you hire somebody who has one set of perspectives and skills. You're hiring someone who has the ability to draw skills in the areas of understanding, of listening, of tolerance, and these are not things you can ever teach someone. You just can't, a grown-up age, teach someone that.

The ability to see things from different perspectives is in many, many professions a tremendous skill. You know, even in the sciences, it's a tremendous skill, and I do think it's why so many of us who are given opportunity, and have two cultures, do really well. It's because we just have so much more to draw from. And, you know, that's just one

thing I keep trying to point out to people, is you're getting a lot more out of people like this, and so don't see them as a liability. Maybe it might take you a little longer to carry on a conversation, maybe it makes you think harder, but, you know, consider that an opportunity, too.

PS: You were the president of the India Association of Minnesota?

NM: Yes.

PS: And are you still involved with them?

NM: Well, not so much with--I'm involved with them, in that I'm chairing this women's group, which is part of the India Association, and that's where most of my energy is going right now. It's a new organization. We've only been around a couple of years, and it's really interesting. It's fascinating. Because, you know, again, my peer group, in terms of age, in the Indian community, are all immigrant generation.

PS: So they're much older than you?

NM: No. Many of them are about my age, but completely different in experience and completely different in outlook and needs. So, again, I feel like I'm caught in this little place where I have to be listening to what they're saying, but then also looking out for these people who are twenty-five now, and who I know are right on my heels, and, boy, they have a lot of needs, too. And I don't know, I'm still struggling with how to get the two sides to see each other clearly. I mean, I think both sides are looking out for each other, which is wonderful, but, you know, it really wasn't until I was married and had children that I started realizing certain things and seeing certain things. So I think a lot of those twenty-somethings that are out there, it's going to be a while before they really have to make some important decisions.

PS: Yes, or at least get to the place of perspective that you have now, being forty.

Was there anything that you wanted to talk about that I haven't asked you about yet? We probably have ten minutes left on the tape.

NM: You want to hit pause, and let me think? [Tape recorder turned off.]

Yes, I am finding, being the chair of this women's group that I'm--you know, right now, this is my area of focus, and I think that the challenges for Indian women, or women who have Indian heritage, are different from those for men, and I think it's something our community needs to look at.

I don't think that every family is going to make the same decision. I know that families

are aware of issues pertaining to dating and to marriage, and I think there have been a lot of efforts at dialogue on this, but I don't think that the dialogue has gone very far. Somehow I think we have to get a little bit further into the depth of why we really have to look out for the girls. We really have to look out for them, because the boys will succeed, they'll do fine. This society is hungry for what we cultivate in our boys, but what we cultivate in our girls is not always as strong and is not always as confident as it needs to be, to not just get beaten up out there.

PS: Which qualities are valued in girls?

NM: Well, you know, it goes back to--some of the things I've learned from what I told you earlier, that women, Indian women, you know, when you're sitting across the table from fifteen attorneys from the fifteen top corporations in Minnesota, they just assume you're going to be a pushover. That's a pretty dramatic example, but those sorts of examples crop up every day. After you are out of high school and out of college, and you're a little bit older, the groups and the friends and all those things that kind of held you into this identity become broader, and you have to rely much more on your own identity.

In general, I think American culture has done a disservice to girls, as most cultures have, but to Indian girls in particular, you know, you've got two strikes against you. Fortunately, we come from a community that has tremendous resources in terms of education and wealth and etc., but--

PS: The two strikes being gender and color?

NM: And color. And religion is another one, because, you know, actually, growing up, I always felt that not being Christian was a huge handicap for me. In Florida when I had Cuban friends, they were Christian, and it made it easier for them somehow.

So anyway, there's all these little setbacks you have where you're not as conversant, maybe, or not as--just, you know, snap your fingers, you're part of us. You're just not as included. And, I think, you know, as I have gotten older, I've found that I've looked more to my heritage, and I think I'm finding that that's true of a lot of people. So somehow we have to really pay attention to building in these girls a pride, not in the pop culture of our heritage, not in the movie, filmy stuff, and not in physical appearances. But there is a strength that Indian women have that is tremendous, and the grace, I think, that they have that's tremendous. And to try to look very carefully at those strengths and nurture them in our daughters, I just feel very strongly about that. I try to constantly make references to Indira Gandhi. Even if you don't like her politically, it is important just to show that there are women who have done this and they have succeeded. They faced lots of adversity, but didn't shy away from it. You've got to be able to stand up to the adversity. So, you know, right now, at this point in my life, I think that is part of my mission, is to try to find a way

to bring in our community a little more effort of focusing on our daughters.

PS: Are you finding the community is open to that?

NM: Yes. I think our community is facing a lot of--you know, we're a very busy group of people, and there's a lot of concern for our children, but I think it's hard just to get people to take the time and the energy to commit to it. But I think that there is interest, and hopefully it will come about. You know, hopefully my daughters will just be that much further ahead.

PS: Do you take your children to SILC?

NM: No, I don't. I actually have shied away a little from the group-think sort of thing with the kids, I guess partly because I feel pretty confident that I have an understanding of what they need to be exposed to. Part of what I just said about our daughters, I think one of the ways that we've kind of deceived ourselves into thinking we're nurturing our daughters is by exposing them to a lot of pop culture, and I think that's actually very destructive for them. I just think there's too many images that demean women, and actually kind of erode their self-esteem and their strength. And I'm not saying SILC does that. Please don't--

PS: That was going to be my next question.

NM: No, no, no, no. I think SILC does a wonderful job. Where I think we've had to make a decision, is how much time--you know, it's part of this issue of how much do you invest in what areas. And, you know, you can't do it all, so you've got to pick and choose. And so for now, I think they're getting a good education on Indian history and the academic side of it, at home and at school, because we've really pushed for that at their school, by the way. But the advantages of the time we would have to spend at SILC, and the tradeoff of what we would have to give up to do that has been part of why we--just made the decision that we're going to put the time in ourselves in other ways.

I guess that the idea came up of the pop culture because I know there are a lot of groups, youth groups, and I don't think SILC is one of them, actually, but there are many others that kind of play to that a little bit. Parents are comfortable with it, because they think their children are hanging around with other Indian kids and that must be a good thing, and I'm not sure it always is.

We have put a lot of time and energy into doing more direct education of our children's friends regarding Indian culture. We have found that by exposing their friends to things about India they then have a circle of friends that are supportive of their Indian-ness. We do lots of activities at their schools and all their friends have celebrated Dewali and Holi. To us this has been much more valuable and critical to their pride in their heritage than

trying to keep them shielded from the greater society and immersed in an Indian sub-culture.

PS: So your circle of friends, where do you draw your circle of friends from?

NM: Largely from people I've worked with, just people I have found common ground with, all over, through groups I've been involved with.

PS: Like the Zen Center?

NM: The Meditation Center, yes, and through other volunteer groups I've worked with. Our friends come from many, many different areas, and largely, I find we have friends who have lived in other countries at some point in their lives. And also my parents. I feel very lucky to have them as a regular part of my life and especially in the lives of my children. They continue to enrich our lives in many ways.

PS: So if somebody says, "Niru, who are you?" what do you tell them?

NM: I am a person who is having a lot of fun, and very interested in raising my family in a very challenging situation, and who thinks real hard about things, sometimes too hard, maybe; who has learned that there are phases to life, and that what I did ten years ago doesn't have to be what I'm going to do ten years from now. Today I'm a person who just turned forty and who feels pretty proud of that, who feels pretty youthful for forty, and who has been very fortunate in many, many ways.

PS: You just turned forty a month ago?

NM: Yes.

PS: Exciting.

NM: Yes.

PS: Any other things that you would use to describe yourself, words you'd describe yourself as?

NM: Words. No, I've probably given you enough words by now. Somewhere in there you'll find them. [Laughter]

PS: Is there anything else that you want to say? We've got just probably a minute or two left.

NM: I'm pretty well tapped out. I'm sure, I mean, there's twenty things I would love to

add, but I feel like we've covered a lot.

PS: Great. Well, thank you for your time today.

NM: Thank you very much.

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