Interview with Lisa Gada Norton

Interviewed by Polly Sonifer
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PS: This is Polly Sonifer interviewing Lisa Gada on November 7, 1997. How are you doing?

LG: Good.

PS: Good. Thanks for this.

LG: No problem.

PS: First of all, tell me about yourself, your name, where you were born, the date of your birth, general information about how your family was when you were born.

LG: My full name is Lisa Ram Gada. I was born in St. Paul. My parents lived in an apartment when I was born, 2-24-69. My mom had just come here. She'd only been here two years when she had me, so she was new to the United States. My dad had been here probably four or five years more, with school.

PS: What do you know about how your parents met, how they came to get married?

LG: As most Indians, they were arranged. Very typical in India, really the only way, especially back then. My dad was here for school, and when he felt it was the right time, and a lot of that, obviously, had to do with how much school he had left or financial and that kind of thing because he was still sending money back to his family. He went back to India and went through the arrangement process, eventually picked my mom, and they got married.

PS: When you think about your parents having an arranged marriage, what does that bring to your mind?

LG: Well, it's funny because it's so much a part of my parents' history that I don't look at as "Oh, my God." But I know that, with the way I was raised and that kind of thing, that is not something that would have to happen to me.

PS: It wouldn't have to happen?

LG: No. Unless I wanted it to, unless I told my parents, "You can find some suitors for me, and then I will take the ball." But, from a very young age, I can always remember

them just always giving me the choice, because my mom, even back then--she was the youngest of five; her parents were older because she was the youngest--they gave her a choice. And for women, that wasn't something that they were given back then. My mom could say no or yes to whoever she wanted. She was not forced to marry whoever her father wanted. So, with that being the case for her, there was no way she'd ever force me to do anything like that. I was lucky.

PS: How do you see your parents marriage? They've been married how many years now?

LG: Gosh, it's been thirty years now. 1967, so I'm twenty-eight. Thirty years, yes. It was just thirty years this year, as a matter of fact. I'm really lucky because I saw not the most typical relationship. I don't know other Indian couples, their marriage, you know, to detail. But the one thing from the surface you can see is there's a lot more equality in that relationship. My mother was never forced to have to be a housemother; it was her choice to stay home and raise us. It was very important to her to have our Indian culture, and so that's why she chose to stay home. She was educated. She had degrees. I mean, she could have done all that.

They're very equal. I've grown up in a very equal, friendly--they're friends. They really enjoy each other. They're not the same by any means. They have their--you know, as any couple does, but they balanced each other very well, and I came from a very secure, balanced good relationship, and that was my role model.

PS: So, from your perspective, you see that their arranged marriage worked for them.

LG: Absolutely.

PS: Can you tell me about what you know and understand about your parents' background in India?

LG: Because that kind of stuff was so important to my mother, I grew up with stories of their pasts as if they were my own. Stories were definitely handed down to me. I know about my dad. He grew up in a small town. They were very poor. My grandfather was sick. My dad was the eldest of my grandmother. He had a first wife and they had a first son, but he was quite a bit older. So he was kind of already out of the household. So my father was the oldest of all his siblings, and very poor. My grandmother pretty much had to raise that family because my grandfather was sick. My dad and my uncle were sent to boarding school, and they noticed and realized that my father was very intelligent, very smart, so the family made the sacrifice to send him to continue with school, and everyone else went back to the family and helped support the family. So my dad's been on his own most of his life.

So then he went, obviously, to boarding school, high school. In their small town, I think

it only went up to sixth grade, so at sixth grade, my dad and his brother were sent to boarding school. My uncle finished, I believe, high school, and then he went back. My dad went further, went to college, went to engineering school in India and then came here for his master's.

My mom lived in Bombay proper. She was the youngest of four, so she was the fifth, quite a bit younger, didn't expect her. But she was the princess. She was always very special to my grandparents because they were a lot more relaxed by the time she came. When the other kids were little, my grandfather's brother died, and he promised him that he'd take care of his family. So they had a total of ten kids in his house.

So before my mom, and then when she was really little, it was a houseful. My grandmother was always working. Had my mother been born at that time, she probably wouldn't have had as much attention, the kind like she did have by the time she was born. So, by the time she was born, everyone was kind of older and that kind of thing, and so she was really was very close to her parents and was basically alone with them in the house for most of her life.

So she had a very different lifestyle than my father, a lot more money. There were lean times, but she was a lot more comfortable and that kind of thing than my father. She went to school, college, and then a couple years later got married to my father and came here.

PS: What did your mother major in or study in college?

LG: I believe it was sociology. I believe she started law school, but then she got married and came here and decided not to pursue that.

PS: That was fairly unusual in her generation for a woman to go to law school.

LG: Oh, absolutely. I love this part about my history. My grandparents were married--gosh, at twelve, whatever, second-grade level of high school, my grandparents. But they were the most--they are. My grandmother's passed away. My grandfather's still alive. They're the most forward people. They gave my mother freedom, not the extent we have in this country, but freedom for India, for a woman, is a really big deal, and she was given every freedom. She was taught, if you want to go to school, you get to go to school. Her other siblings didn't get that, different times. You know, different. They all got married young. So my mom really was special, and she really got a different life than her siblings. So, yes, she got to go to school, and educated, absolutely.

PS: It's neat that you know all that.

LG: Yes, it was really important to my mom. I grew up with these stories. I could, in my sleep, just regurgitate it all for you.

PS: When you were growing up, did you like hearing them?

LG: Oh, I loved it. It really meant a lot to me, because I was always sad in that I didn't have my big "Brady Bunch" family here. I really loved going to India for that fact that all my relatives are there, and there's only the four of us here. So, for me, it was like a story from far away. It was really our life, our history.

PS: Tell me about what it was like for you when you were very, very young, before you went to school. What language did you speak at home? What was life like? You were the first-born.

LG: I'm the oldest. I picked up languages very quickly. My parents always spoke actually Kutchi, which is a dialect. Kutchi is a dialect, so you speak it, but there's no script for it. And so therefore we write Gujarati. And we're part of the state of Gujarat. Technically we are Gujarati, but we're from a part of Gujarat in the north that's called Kutch, and therefore that's where the dialect came from. So growing up, when I was very little, my mom spoke Kutchi, and I picked it up at about a year and a half. She took me to India when I was a year and a half, and I was fluent.

PS: You were also speaking English at a year and a half?

LG: Yes. So I kind of picked it up really quickly. I mean, probably not full sentences at the age of two, but I've been speaking since I can remember. The stories my mother tells me is at year and a half, two-years old, that trip really helped it even more. So I've been bilingual most all my life, basically.

PS: Did you learn how to write?

LG: Yes. My mom was part of a bunch of people who started a school here called SILC, School of Indian Languages and Culture. I was one of the first kids there, and so I'd been learning. I already knew how to speak, so I learned to read and write, I think as young as like ten. So I'm still probably in a fifth-, sixth-grade level in writing, but I can still at least write letters to my relatives, and I can read if I need to. So, yes, that's something both my brother and I were part of growing up.

PS: When you said that Gujarati is a different language from Kutchi, if you hear someone speaking Gujarati, can you understand them?

LG: I understand Gujarati as well, and I was going to tell you part of the thing is I mix Gujarati and Kutchi together. A lot of our Gujarati friends, they'll hear my mom and dad speak, and they can kind of make out what they're saying because they're related. But it's still a dialect. You know how you have dialects and it changes. So, actually, I know

Kutchi, Gujarati, and English.

PS: There are some New Yorkers that I can't understand. [Laughter]

LG: Exactly. Or Jersey. Exactly, exactly.

PS: You have a sibling, right?

LG: Yes, a younger brother.

PS: And how much younger is he?

LG: He's five and a half years younger than me.

PS: And his name is?

LG: Ketan. He was born in '74, so five and a half years younger. So I was really an only child for a long, long time. It was a little unusual. He is graduating this December from St. Thomas.

PS: Pretty exciting.

LG: Yes.

PS: You said your mother took you to India when you were a year and a half old. Did you make other trips to India?

LG: Yes. When I was younger, before I got to high school, we went about every two years, every year and a half. We made very frequent trips. As I said, it was very important to my mother that we know what India was, we knew our relatives, we could communicate with them, we felt a part of our heritage. Those were important to her, so when I was younger, we'd go for three months at a time, every two years. My mom would just talk to the school and take all my books, and my uncle would teach me while we were in India. I'd still get the schooling, but they always thought the experience was more educational. So I was always able to leave when we were younger.

PS: What school did you attend?

LG: 621, Mounds View. I think it's called Mounds View District. I can't even remember anymore. I think it is Mounds View, 621.

PS: That's separate from St. Paul?

LG: Yes, New Brighton.

PS: Tell me about what life was like when you were really a little kid, in your household. What kind of food did you eat?

LG: Indian food. Mom always made Indian food. It's funny, because I don't remember much up to five and a half. I see pictures, and I can kind of piece it together, but I really remember everything starting when my little brother was born. Before that, the feeling was always I was a happy child. I was very mischievous. I always hear the stories about that, very playful, outgoing. I'd walk up to people and just talk away. Yes, I was a happy child, active. And then all of a sudden, I think I feel like I grew up at five and a half, because I had this little doll that I could play with. I was old enough to, you know, a child that I understood that this was a baby, and I was excited about it. He was like my little baby. My mom and I and Ketan, my brother, always say, I was like his second mother. And I was. I mean, those first years, I was so protective, and it was like I felt like his mom.

So I really remember actual things happening at five and a half. Before that, I have feelings, I knew I was happy and that kind of stuff, very fun, and I had all the attention. They adored me. I was one of the only kids in our community. I was one of the older ones, and everyone else was a bachelor, so I got a ton of attention--all the Indian men that were here now all live here, a lot of them. They were all bachelors. So I was always just the entertainment everywhere, lots of attention, just lots of love and, you know, happy childhood.

PS: Do you think you were spoiled?

LG: I'm sure I was. I mean even now my fiancé will tell me, "You're spoiled." But I think what he means by spoiled is that life's been good. We had a great life. My dad and mom are able to provide us with everything we ever needed, or even more than what we needed. But they also taught us the value. My dad, coming from such poor beginnings, he's never gone away from his simpleness. Even though he's financially just fine, he's worked really hard to do so. You'd never know that he's a man who's monetarily successful. He's a very simple person, and, hence, that's how we grew up. So I was never, you know, given a car at sixteen, or I didn't have designer clothes and stuff. So, that way I don't feel I was spoiled. I was very well taken care of, and I never felt I didn't have things. But as far as quality of life, I was definitely spoiled. I had a great life and still do.

PS: What values did you see your family stressing throughout your childhood? What, either verbally or nonverbally, did they communicate to you as important?

LG: I would say the most important was probably honesty and integrity. It's funny what you mentioned this. Our culture, the Indian culture, my mom really stressed a lot, and

through that, through the life of India and how India is influenced by its religion, that's really how I was taught. Morality was very strict. Honesty, integrity. You don't lie. Parts of Jainism were really incorporated into how we were brought up, very strict. Compared to the standards of where we lived in this country, my parents were very strict. But comparing to other Indian people as I got older, they were strict, but yet they allowed me to have the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them, as well as use my mind to make choices and figure out solutions.

So they were strict because it was different from this outside world where we lived in the Western world, but they still really empowered me to be an independent thinker. It's not very typical for women, daughters, or whatever in the Indian heritage. There's definite standards, or there was, that kind of thing. They never made me think that I wasn't equal to my brother. They never treated us differently.

PS: So you see the Indian culture as making women somehow less than men?

LG: I just think it was the socialization. I mean, you got married. You didn't necessarily have an education. You went and got married, and you did all the domestic things. They didn't put any parameters on me. If I was interested in baseball, they let me play, but if I also wanted to bake cookies, they'd let me do that. They didn't put any gender roles on us. I just think they're a little stronger. I think there are gender roles in every society. I think our culture, it's older, so, a little more predominant. But my dad just was never like that. He never imposed it on my mother. So I grew up with a lot of choice to be who I wanted to be and what came naturally to me.

PS: When you went to school, how did that go for you? What was grade school like?

LG: It was tough.

PS: In what way?

LG: Back then, segregation was still happening, and the myths were just coming to an end, you know, early seventies. There were still a lot of racial things. Day to day, I didn't feel too much. As I got older, it was easier. When I was younger, I had problems with the neighborhood kids. They called attention to my race, and made me feel bad. It was probably the toughest time of my life, not understanding it and going home crying. Why are they making fun of me? Why am I different? I don't want to be different. Why are we a problem? You know, things like that, that I don't know how my parents even got through it.

But, unfortunately, it was brought to my attention with my neighborhood kids, what they didn't know, what their parents didn't understand. "Different" wasn't embraced back then.

PS: So what kind of things did they taunt you with?

LG: "Blackie," or, "You're not like us."

PS: Those were the words they'd say?

LG: "Blackie." You bet. Gosh, what else? "Oh, your color of your skin is the color of poop." You know, I mean, just really hurtful things just because I'm different. It was hard, because, for the longest time, we all played very nicely before we knew about that kind of stuff. And then all of a sudden, after years of playing with these kids and never having problems, all of a sudden we got to school age, which is like first, second grade or whatever, it got that way. I just couldn't understand it. I was a very outgoing child, very sensitive, very giving. It really, really tore me apart. I didn't understand it.

PS: How did you make sense of it?

LG: I didn't. Instead, I was a very insecure young child. Then I got glasses right away. So, all these things, my early years, unfortunately, I didn't feel like I completely fit in to school and stuff, you know, and that's why my parents really had us heavily involved in the Indian community. I was a star with the Indian community. I really dug into my heritage and really that's where I found my strength and kind of got over the insecurities, just being really good and being a part of the Indian community where I fit in.

PS: Who were your friends? Did you have any friends?

LG: I had friends. I definitely had friends. A couple of neighborhood girls that didn't fall into it, but it was a love/hate relationship. One day they'd be my friend; the next day they'd give me a hard time. They'd exclude me from things. So it was real up and down. I had like three or four friends I think, four, five--three or four friends growing up. So I still played and had fun.

It's like I knew that I was unhappy and it was a tough time, but I don't feel unhappy completely. I don't look back at that time and remember it being just awful. I got through school. I had fun in school. I had no problem making friends. But it was those few people that--so I disassociated myself with them and made new friends at school and stayed away from the neighborhood, where I found people that didn't find that to be a problem.

PS: Did friends come over to your house sometimes?

LG: Yes. They actually loved it. My mom would make puri, which is Indian bread. I mean, yes, they did. They appreciate--I had friends who actually liked my Indian things. I'd take them to Diwali, and they'd dress up in my clothes. Yes. So I did find what I needed, and I disassociated myself with the bad element. But it left an imprint.

PS: It's hard stuff for a little kid to understand.

LG: Absolutely.

PS: Not to even make sense of it. I'm assuming then most of the other kids where you went to school were white.

LG: Yes.

PS: Were there any other kids of color?

LG: Oh, gosh, I'm trying to think. There were probably, throughout the whole K through six, probably maybe a handful, not even.

PS: And mostly who did you hang out with?

LG: It was all Caucasian.

PS: So you didn't find yourself seeking out the other children of color to make friends with?

LG: Now looking back, I don't remember who was there. I don't remember there being any.

PS: They just weren't there.

LG: I was older. New Brighton has a lot of Indian people, but at the time I was in school, I was one of the older ones, and so there weren't none of them now, as I went into high school. My brother went through the system, and a lot more Indian kids were there, or other ethnic groups. But as far as our community, I don't remember any being there. I don't even remember other ethnic people. I'm sure there was, but I don't remember.

PS: Were there any advantages to being Indian that you found while you were in school?

LG: As far as when I was in school with those people?

PS: Yes.

LG: No, it's something that kept me from being in a popular group. Part of that was my choice. I couldn't live that lifestyle. My parents were too strict. I couldn't do some of the things that the popular kids got to do, because my parents were a lot stricter. So I just didn't even rebel, even, because the little freedom I had, I didn't want to lose it. So I hung

with people in the not-so-popular group. As most kids in high school will say, you feel better about yourself if you know guys like you and things like that. I don't feel that, in our high school, the non-Caucasian people even thought to look to me. I was friends with many girls and boys, but I was never girlfriend or like material.
So, a lot of insecurity. I think growing up as a girl, Indian girl, I was insecure. I was definitely insecure. It carried through to probably my sophomore year.

PS: Of high school?

LG: High school, you bet.

PS: And what changed that?

LG: Unfortunately, the first thing was the fact that I got contacts and my appearance changed. I was at that gawky age when my parents were still dressing me, and I had glasses, and that's really tough. Looks are everything when you're young in school, you're judged by that. So, I think, contacts. But then more and more, as soon as I got my license, and I found my niches in school and with people and my personality, I realized people like me. I have a great personality. So I focused on the good things, and I carved out a life for myself and that stuff didn't bother me. A part of it, I think that came through with how important I felt with my Indian community. My family was very, very involved. People thought very highly of me in our community, and I think that helped, too. I just realized, "I don't care what you think. This is who I am, and I kind of like it." So it started there. It just didn't happen overnight. I remember, you know, tenth grade, end of tenth grade, kind of going, "Hmm. I'm okay. Guys do think I'm cute."

PS: So then after that, were you "dateable"?

LG: I had people ask me out, and I snuck around to go on dates so my parents wouldn't know, but I never really had a boyfriend because it was just too difficult at home. I hadn't broken the barrier yet with my parents.

PS: Had they strictly expressly forbid you to date?

LG: Never. Never forbid it, but I just knew.

PS: That it wasn't okay.

LG: I think they had said, like, you know, "You really need to concentrate on school. You can't go on dates." Yes, I guess they did. I knew it without a doubt in my mind that it's not something they understood, or wanted. So I did my share of sneaking around, meeting boys out, which we all laugh about now. But back then it was, I think, part of my process of feeling good about myself, too, to know that people did like me that way. But

you hear about people, "Oh, I had a boyfriend when I was in the tenth grade," or ninth grade or in sixth grade. Never did that. I couldn't do that. I couldn't have boys calling me. I couldn't go anywhere. Very supervised, up until I got my license.

PS: And then?

LG: Then I had freedom. [Laughter] And that's where I really, truly started to develop myself.

PS: How did it weigh on your mind that you were deceiving your parents? How did you work that out so that it was okay to sneak around?

LG: I felt justified because they don't know. They have no idea how hard it was. They don't know what it means to fit in. They're parents. I'm not doing anything totally bad, you know. It's really easy to justify. I'm sad to say I got good at it, because there were just some things I felt they just didn't get because they didn't grow up here, and they wouldn't know anyway.

PS: So, in retrospect, do you think that those things were true?

LG: That they didn't know?

PS: Yes.

LG: Yes. They were pretty shocked when I told them. They didn't grow up here. They didn't know the extent of what kids really do. To them, it was just what they heard as statistics, but they couldn't believe it was really that bad.

PS: Or that it would be their daughter doing it.

LG: Yes. But it was really harmless. I think about other kids and really what they did. I was responsible enough that I didn't get into drinking at all in high school. Dating, I'd go out here and there, but never a serious person. I never had to worry about sexuality at all. You know, maybe a kiss here and there, but that's part of growing up, I think, is learning how to kiss. [Laughter]

PS: Definitely. [Laughter]

LG: But I had really strong parameters myself. I wasn't ready. I felt so naive because I was so, to a degree, sheltered, that I was just kind of sticking my hands out to kind of see, you know, what it's like in that little bit that I did in high school, which is probably a good thing because I think it would have been culture shock to go to college if I hadn't gotten a little bit.

PS: You said that you were involved in SILC. What kind of friendships did you have with the other kids at SILC?

LG: The community's pretty strong. There was always a group of us that we'd grown up with each other from day one, and I'm still friends with them. Two of them are actually my best friends.

PS: Who are these people?

LG: Reena Patel and Bina Vachhani. We didn't really hook up with each other truly or we really formed a friendship till ninth grade. But Reena Patel and her family and my family, we've been friends since fourth, fifth grade, you know, third, fourth, our families. We didn't bond really 'til ninth grade, the three of us. And so up until those two, I didn't really have a best friend that was Indian either. We always saw these kids every weekend, and we always played together when our parents got together, but I didn't form deep friendships that, outside of our parents, we'd get together and do anything. I'm not sure why. We'd meet every Friday, Saturday night anyway. There was just always so many kids that I guess we didn't--school friends were enough during the week, and on the weekends I saw them anyway.

PS: And then in ninth grade was when you started really feeling connected to these other two girls?

LG: Yes. We'd always done Thanksgiving at Bina's parents' house. It was kind of our tradition for Thanksgiving, there'd be like five or six families. They were the same families every year, and we've carried that through until now. All of a sudden, we'd been doing this a year or so already, two years already, and we just were there because we had to be there. We liked each other and stuff, but we didn't bond or anything.

It was weird. I remember being in the bedroom, and we were just sitting there, and we just totally started talking about the problems we were having at school. We realized we were all having the same one, the whole racial thing, and it just connected us. Someone understands. Someone's going through the same thing. I'm not the only one. And that is what bonded us right there, and then from that moment on, we were best friends.

PS: Then you start talking in the middle of the week and getting together?

LG: We'd do things, you bet, because by then that next year Bina was the first one to get a license, and so then we got together more often and the friendship truly started.

PS: And now you're still friends with them?

LG: Yes. They're both in my wedding.

PS: Oh, great.

LG: Yes.

PS: You said that your parents were Jain?

LG: Yes.

PS: Were they practicing? What was it like growing up in the religious values?

LG: I didn't grow up with a lot of ritualistic parts of our religion. For whatever reasons, my parents came here from India and they didn't practice the ritualistic. So when I was growing up, I was taught more the philosophical end of Jainism, which is a lot of our morality. You were asking me what were you raised, what was important. Well, you can check it out as you look at the principles of Jainism, which is everything tied into one: morality, what's right and wrong, how to live your life, God, everything, you know. But I almost feel like it was so philosophical, that it was almost educational. There wasn't a church here. There wasn't a temple. So it's not like I could go and actually pray--you know, unfortunately in this country, we don't have structured religion here because it's the minority. It's a very, very small minority [unclear].

So, for me growing up, everything that most people get from their religion, I got from everything. I got from my heritage, from my culture, which was all tied together through the stories my mother told me. All that taught me my religion and my morality and my how to live my life type of thing. So I don't feel, when I was growing up, we were practicing. It was taught to me, and I was supposed to live by it, but it wasn't going to church, praying to the deity or whatever.

PS: So there weren't meditation practices or anything? There was no sacred book that your parents read or shared with you?

LG: No. I read Indian stories of the different--I learned about Jainism and Hinduism through the children's books that they gave me. I was an avid reader when I was little. I would read anything I could get my hands on. So I learned more and more about my culture and Hinduism and Jainism through the comic books telling about the epics and Bhagavad Gita and Mahabharata, and all those things. And that's where it even lent itself even more and more to where I came from. But it's also tied together.
I don't feel I lacked religious background, because it was so evident in every story and everything I was taught.

PS: So you did have these little comic books available.

LG: Yes, and it taught me the story of why we believe what we believe.

PS: But they were the Hindu epics?

LG: There were Hindu ones and there were also Jain ones.

PS: How did your parents come by having those? Were they in English?

LG: Yes. We'd go to India and get them. We went so often, and we could always get them. We could get all the stuff we needed. I always had enough Indian things around me that it was never far away. It was a part of my life.

PS: When you would go back to India for these three-month spells of time every couple years, then did your parents practice the religious ritual part of it?

LG: Then we'd go to temple. My dad's side is very religious. So we'd go to the temple. So I understood what it was, and I knew why we did it. There was actually temples there, and it was really cool. It was all marble, and I just loved it. I would sit there with my grandmother, and we'd pray and meditate. So I knew what it was. I understood when we came here, we didn't have that here to do that. I didn't question it.

PS: So it was pretty special to be able to go over to the temples.

LG: Yes, it made me feel even more and more like I fit in there, you know, that I truly fit in in India.

PS: Was there always a question when you went back to India whether you fit?

LG: Well people always knew just walking down the street that we weren't living there, just by the way we walked, or whatever. I didn't even have to open my mouth, and people knew I was from America, or from somewhere not in India.

PS: And how would they know that?

LG: I don't know. Whenever I went to India, I'd always dress in Indian clothes. I'd act Indian. I'd talk. I could talk. I don't know if it was the way we carried ourselves, or we're a lighter skin, or the style of my hair. But people still, to this day, they'll know that I'm not Indian. I mean, I'm not living in India. It is the weirdest thing. They just know.

PS: When you see Indian people here in the United States, can you pick out which ones were raised here and which ones are here fresh?

LG: Yes.

PS: And what is it for you that gives that away?

LG: I think kids who've grown up here are very Westernized, especially in Minnesota, our Indian culture has very much embraced our Minnesotaness as well. We don't live in pockets of people. We don't just hang with each other. We're very integrated into our wider community. And so we're very Westernized. I'm an American, and if you were to talk to me on the phone or see me dressed, you would have no doubt that I'm American. Yes, the hair color and the skin color's different, but I don't have an accent or whatever. But even just by appearance alone, they don't look like they've grown up in the Western world. The fashion's a little bit different. The hairstyle's a little bit different. I just can tell. I can tell who's from here and who's not.

PS: Even if they were wearing Western clothes?

LG: Yes. The guys are really easy to tell. Sometimes the girls can be tougher.

PS: And what is so easy about the men?

LG: I think the women just tend to be a little bit more fashionable. Even if they've only been here a couple months, fashion is just something that they get into, and they're just a little more in tune with what's going on. And sometimes the men don't.

PS: So they'll get the haircut sooner.

LG: Exactly. They'll try to assimilate quicker.

PS: What was it like when you were a teenager in high school? What kinds of things were you involved with? What was your thinking about schooling, friendships?

LG: In high school, I played volleyball as a sport. It's the only sport I did. Then I was also involved with choir. There was a special pops group that was with that, that we had performances, and we'd travel around, and we had costumes and things like that. I did that, and that took up a lot of my time. A lot of my peer group in high school was through the choir, through the musical end of it.

Then as far as schooling, there was never a question that I wouldn't go to school. There was never a question I wouldn't get higher education. It wasn't even an option. Education is the highest thing in our household. In most Indian's households, education is number one.

PS: At least to the Indians that have emigrated here?

LG: Absolutely.

PS: Is it the same in India?

LG: Probably not. Most people, like most of my family, they had businesses. So the minute the kids got out of high school, a lot of them went right into the business, didn't even go to college.

PS: Of your relatives in India?

LG: Yes. A lot of them would go to college, but they wouldn't use it. They'd just go right into the family business. So it's still very much family-oriented there.

PS: Do you see some tradeoffs that they're making?

LG: In India?

PS: Yes.

LG: I don't think so. I don't think they know. My family, they're not worldly, in India, so I don't think they know the extent of what other opportunities are out there. The family's the most important unit there, and they're very bound together, and you have the whole joint-family-system thing. They're very happy and they're living a good life. Not one of our relatives have said, "Oh, we want to come to America. Sponsor us." We've been trying to get them to come here. They have a great life in India, and they just don't want to come here.

PS: That's on both sides, your mother and your father's sides?

LG: My mom's side's older. All her siblings are older, and so their kids are already married and have kids. So, no, they've already left. They've already had their life there. My dad's side's got more kids my age and my brother's age, so they're the ones that probably could have come over, and they just have no desire to. They're doing very well there. They're successful. They have businesses in India.

PS: What kind of businesses are they running?

LG: My uncle, my dad's brother, most of the family is in the garment district. They have shops where they sell clothing and fabric and saris and things like that, both sides.

PS: So they make them and sell them?

LG: My mom's side, they have factories where they actually make them, and they sell them to the retail end. My dad's side is a retail shop. They have a sari shop. They have a fabric shop, because tailoring is still very big in India. So you pick out your fabric, and then you go get it stitched. So they're both in the industry, but they're two ends of it. One's the factory; one's the retail end.

PS: So they're into clothes.

LG: Yes, I get a lot of great clothes, absolutely.

PS: Tell me more about what it was like when you would go to India to visit. Who did you stay with? How did you pick up on the rules about how to act? What was it like?

LG: Growing up, I think, no matter how Western our parents are or our mothers who raise us, we still underlying understand, at least I did, that along with going to India a lot, that there's a certain level of submissive of women. You can see it blatantly in India. The wives feed their husbands. If they want water, they go get it for them. Unfortunately, that's the way it is.

When I went to India, I never questioned. I never made fun of their rituals or their traditions. I did it. I became an Indian. I became an Indian girl. If my father asked for water, I'd go get it. If my grandfather asked for water, I'd go get it. I didn't separate myself.

PS: Even though here you wouldn't do that.

LG: Not necessarily. Out of consideration, of course, if my dad asked for water, I'm going to. But I know he doesn't expect it. In India, there's a respect level for the men that you just know. You just know. I mean, to this day, as independent as I am right now, I would still go back and do that same lifestyle because I have respect for their traditions. It's not something I live by here. I would never expect my fiancé to--you know, I would never be with someone who expected me to be in the kitchen. That's something I have fought my whole life, is that domesticity.

PS: You fought it?

LG: Oh, I'm a tomboy through and through. My mom tried to get me in that kitchen so many times, and I refused, because I was fighting that. No one's going to expect me to do women's work if I don't want to do it, because I was brought up and taught that I can do whatever I want. If I don't want to play with dolls, I don't have to. So I was a handful. My poor parents.

PS: So when you would go to India and start acting like an Indian girl, how did that feel

inside for you?

LG: It didn't feel wrong. I respect and loved my culture too much. Just empathy. "This is the way they do things. I'm not here to judge how they do things. And I'm just here for a little bit. It'll make my grandparents very happy that I blend in so well." Then I'd go home and live my life. I blended in very well. It was my goal to be one with them, because I loved going there, and I loved being part of the family, and I craved it and I loved it. So, there's no point in being a sore thumb and being a brat about it. I loved the fact that there's ten people living in a two-bedroom place. I loved that we were all on top of each other. I loved having my family around. I loved it. It's what I didn't have here.

PS: So when it was bedtime and there were ten of you there, it was just kids in one room, grownups in the other?

LG: Actually, you just spread they're like sleeping bags. They're a little thicker. They're like little mattresses, futon mattresses, and you just spread them all out on the floor. It could be [arranged so that] it's my grandfather here one day. The next day my mom could be next to me, my dad. We just wherever you slept, you slept. It was such a feeling of family togetherness for me. I loved it. A lot of other kids would tell me, "You did that? You went to the bathroom in the Indian style of sundas [phonetic]?"

I'm like, "Yes."

PS: Tell me what that is.

LG: In India, they didn't have toilets and plumbing in the olden days--I mean, when I was little. It's tiled all around, but it's like a peanut-shaped hole, and you had to squat to go to the bathroom. You had to squat to go. My grandmother lived in a building earlier on, an old building that my mother grew up in, it's called the chali [phonetic] system. Chali system means you all have apartments on the floor, but there's one main bathroom. And it got dirty with all those people. It'd be brown, and it smells a little bad.

PS: So people would miss the little hole sometimes.

LG: Yes.

PS: And there wasn't any water to wash it away.

LG: Well, you'd have a bucket, and people kind of did it, but just from people walking around and not constant cleaning of it, it was just muddy water on the tiles so it looked like BM, and, as a little kid, I used to hate it. Up until I was very old, I'd take my mother with me because I was afraid I'd fall in. And as I'd squat, she'd stand there, I'd hang onto her. I'd sink my head into her sari so I couldn't smell anything. It was awful. And other

kids would never stay at that grandparents' house. Other friends I knew never would because they couldn't stand it. Well, I would never do that to my grandparents. This is their home, and I will live there. I was very much that way. I loved everything about it. That's who I was. That's where I came from, and that's all I had growing up, because I didn't quite fit in here. I felt bad here sometimes that that's where I came from. Yes, it wasn't the greatest. And, yes, I'd groan about it. For the longest time, when I was little, I would not go to the bathroom for days until we went to my uncle's house, you know, so it wasn't always the greatest, but I wouldn't complain about it. I wouldn't say, "I refuse to stay at my grandmother's house."

I lived like them because I wanted to be with them, you know. My brother and I were both very adjusting kids. We didn't make stinks about it. A lot of kids went. They'd make their parents stay in a hotel, you know. When you're with your family, why? And I give a lot of that credit to my mother. She didn't make it a foreign thing to us. She made it as normal as our life as we lived here.

PS: What a trip.

LG: Yes. I don't even feel like it's different. It's just another aspect of my life. It's not anything weird to me. It never has been, even as a kid. It's never been weird. It's just other type of my life that every now and then I have to live. But it's not weird. It's just a part of me.

PS: Were there any other aspects of going there? How did your cousins receive you, or how did your aunts and uncles receive you? Were there any particular memories that stand out as particularly sweet time?

LG: They were all sweet, never bad memories. No one ever made me feel bad. They just loved the fact that Ketan and I could go there and communicate, and we wanted to be like them and be with them and didn't compare it to the United States and complain about how gross it was there or how dirty or the poverty or anything. We went there, and we wanted to be there. If anything, they always bragged about us to other people they knew who had family from the U.S., and how they'd tell them horror stories about how that family came from America to there and just turned their lives upside down. And my relatives were always like, "Gosh, I can't imagine that. Ours comes, and life as usual. They blend right in." So it's a feeling of accomplishment for me that I wasn't like that, that I loved it, that it was just part of my life.

PS: So when you were holding onto your mother's arms and crying into her sari, you never let on to Grandma that that was how you were feeling when you went to the bathroom?

LG: They knew I didn't like it. They knew it was hard for us. First couple times we had

to do it, I was just so grossed out, and I would dry-heave a little bit, that we made another solution, you know. Mother and the mother instinct took care of it for us. We got to go to the bathroom in a pot in our area, and then she would take it over and dump it out. That's a mother for you. We'd do whatever, but I would never not stay there.

PS: And that was an okay compromise with Grandma? She was all right with that?

LG: Oh, yes. Grandma was fine. Grandma didn't like it either. They all didn't like the challa system, but it just is what it is. I didn't have too many years. I think, growing up, we were only there maybe two, three times when we went she was there. But then by the time I was old enough, they had moved to the suburbs anyway, and so they weren't in that house anyway.

PS: And this is on your father's side of the family?

LG: My mom's side. The challa system, my grandmother, yes, my maternal grandmother.

PS: Did you ever go to Indian movies?

LG: Yes, when we were younger, in India, we always did. My parents never used to bring them home here. They weren't big Hindi movie people. When I was little, we used to go quite a bit. Hindi I didn't quite understand, so it was really hard. I was like, "Okay, what did they say?" Everyone hated taking me, you know. But as we got older, we just never did it. I haven't seen a Hindi movie in probably twenty years. And no loss. [Laughter] The same triangle over and over again. I don't need to spend three hours watching it.

PS: The singing is what always gets to me in all the Hindi movies.

LG: I know. It's pretty interesting.

PS: You said that when you were little, kids would tease you, they would call you "Blackie." Were there any other cases or instances that you recall that you would now, in looking back, say, "That was discrimination. I was experiencing discrimination"?

LG: I think it was very indirect. Other than that little time when I was little, never blatantly have I had it. I was very lucky. As I got older, the things I did and the people I was with, never blatant, ever. Indirectly every now and then, I've been like, "I wonder if that had anything to do with it." But I don't know.

PS: Can you describe a situation where you wonder whether you were being discriminated against?

LG: I think, in school, trying out for certain parts and stuff in plays and stuff. A couple of times, I was more qualified, I thought, and everyone thought so. And because usually the roles are white roles, at that time we weren't very visionary that other people can play parts, you know. So, indirectly here and there. Nothing that I, as an older person, I let get to me. It was so indirect. It floated into my head, and I'm like, hey, whatever. I was secure enough by then that I'm just like "Whatever. It wasn't meant to be."

PS: So then you went to college.

LG: Yes.

PS: Was that right after high school?

LG: Yes.

PS: What was that like?

LG: That was Lisa in a candy store going, "Oh, my God, I have no parents around me. I can do whatever I want." I do want to mention, though, like my junior and senior year, I started telling my parents, "I'm going to a dance." Guys would come pick me up, and I broke them in a little bit because they trusted me. So they became a little more lenient, and I could do more things. I went to prom. I went to dances. I went to parties all the time. You know, weekends I got to do a lot more. It was great. I didn't feel as confined as I did in my early years.

So, by the time I went to college, I had had more freedom. So it wasn't like I was going nuts and I just couldn't wait to dive in and go nuts. I think college is where I grew up and where Lisa became Lisa. Everything I am today was formed in 1987 when I went to college.

PS: Where did you go?

LG: I went to University of Wisconsin-Madison. I was unique. I was beautiful. I was getting a lot of attention because I wasn't like everyone else. People are educated. People enjoyed learning about new cultures. I was interesting. I have a very outgoing personality, too, and just the whole package. The security just became more confirmed and more stable, and I started forming who I was, and I had strong opinions, and that strength of character came in in college. It's really where I found myself. It was really enlightening, really. That's where I just reaffirmed my culture even more so.

PS: Were there any other Indian people?

LG: Oh, Madison was filled with ethnic people. It was fabulous.

PS: How did you form friendships there? Who were your friends there? How did you get connected?

LG: First, when you first go, it's usually your dorm people. Those were the people I partied with or went out with. Once you kind of got used to the scene and you were kind of accepted, and you got groups of people you hung out with and stuff. Then I started actually going and choosing my friends, you know. So I had a ton of people. Everyone knew me. I'd walk anywhere, and I was just a really outgoing person. For the first time in my life, I was well known. I was popular, in a sense, had a good time. I let my social wings kind of--you know, it was just a new beginning. I could be everything I was, and I didn't have to worry about the color of my skin or people judging me. It was accepted. It was okay. People who didn't, who still had problems with that, you'd never encounter. You'd never be friends with them. It was like a bigger world, not stuck by the parameters of high school.

PS: What did you study?

LG: Marketing and advertising.

PS: How was that?

LG: It was good. I did have a little too much fun.

PS: What does that mean?

LG: It means my grades slipped. Absolutely. I had my fun. And then I decided to transfer to Marquette my last two years. So I took five years. I went three years to Madison, two years to Marquette, because I wanted a smaller atmosphere, and I really wanted to hone down into it and finish the actual school of the school you're in, the business school where marketing is, get a better education, because I was still one of, you know, 500 in a classroom. I was realizing, yes, the social part of Madison was fabulous, but I'd had two years of it, three years of it by the time I left. I'm ready to really concentrate on school now. So I went to Marquette and finished up there and really became a bookworm, because I'd had my fun, you know. Probably wasn't the smartest thing to do, but at least I recovered from it. Too many people, a lot of people don't recover from having a great time in college, you know. I came to my senses. I didn't have to change my major. A lot of people were dropping their business or their whatever and going into sociology or psychology or something easy to get through at the undergrad level. I knew I didn't want to do that. I wanted to be in marketing. I knew that was where I needed to be.

PS: How did you come to know that as your career?

LG: Well, in the Indian community, I'm sure you've heard most people are either engineers, doctors, lawyers, something professional or in the sciences. I didn't have math or science aptitude at all. I wasn't a typical Indian child. That was part of my insecurity growing up. I knew wasn't smart in the Indian standard. That was something really tough, because my two best friends, Reena and Bina, were both going to go into engineering. That's part of why I chose Madison. Nothing against them, but I just needed to find myself away from these ingredients of what is an Indian person, and I had to find who I was. So I always knew it would be something more people-oriented, and I found I'm fairly creative. I can't draw, so I couldn't be an artist. But I loved commercials. And I just knew marketing and advertising was the right way to go.

PS: So there you were finally settled in the fourth year of college.

LG: At Marquette.

PS: Are there other things about college that made a big impression on you? Did you date a lot?

LG: I had a serious boyfriend through most of my college. I met him when I was twenty, and we dated 'til I was twenty-five. He was at Madison with me, and then we both--part of it was when I chose Marquette and didn't come back here to St. Thomas or something because he was in Milwaukee. We both thought we'd marry each other and, you know, one of those relationships. And then I graduated, and I came back here because this is where we wanted to settle, and he still had a year left. That's just where it didn't work out. We just grew kind of apart and then moved on.

So, before I met him, yes, I dated a lot. Nothing more than a date here and there, nothing serious. Then I met him, and that was my really serious boyfriend.

PS: And you were with him for five years.

LG: Yes.

PS: Was he American, or was he white?

LG: Yes.

PS: How did that go over with your parents?

LG: As I said, my parents never said I had to have an arranged marriage. I was scared to tell them. We started dating, and I didn't tell them 'til six months later because I wanted to make sure, too. Back then we knew that we wanted to be with each other, so we knew I had to do it.

Once they got over the initial shock--and they're very open-minded people, they're very educated in their thinking and how they raised us--they accepted it. They did. From that point on, our families would get together. We'd come visit my family. He'd stay with us at our house. I mean, our families became families. That was hard with the breakup. It was really hard, because our families had known each other, too. His family was like mine, and mine was like his.

So my parents' bottom-line criteria is they want me to be happy. Of course, they'd love it to be an Indian person. But obviously it still hasn't happened.

PS: So you're getting married fairly soon now. Tell me about that.

LG: December.

PS: Tell me about how you met this fellow.

LG: I came back from college, and I got involved with a sport and recreation group here in town, in Minneapolis, where you play co-ed sports, and then afterwards it's like a social thing, too. So you meet a lot of people that are post-college that live here, that you can still have a big friend group and meet people without having to do the bar scene, basically, is what it is, you know, to meet people. I was involved with that, and we had mutual friends and eventually we met, and we were friends for about a year, and then we started dating.

PS: What's his name?

LG: His name is Thomas Norton, and he grew up in Minnetonka. He's from here as well. We got engaged last December, and we're getting married this December.

PS: And how is it with him?

LG: For the first time in my life, I feel like--we both feel like adults. We're getting married. We're talking about kids. We're talking about our cultures. This is all stuff we've always worked out before we got to the serious moment in our relationship, but it's great. He fits me. He understands my culture and knows that's a huge part of me. A lot of my thinking process and a lot of how I come to conclusions and the liberal that I am is because of my background, because of my culture, part of my dad. It's who I am: the very giving, the very welfarish type of thing. I'm a liberal. I know I am. And he's a conservative. [Laughter] But I guess opposites attract. He said he's always dated liberal women, and I've gone for more conservative men as well. It's just one of those things. We're just a really good team.

We're having an Indian ceremony only, his choice not to have a Christian ceremony. We're going to go to India soon, and he accepts my culture wholeheartedly. I couldn't be with someone that didn't accept, because it's like not accepting a part of me. That's always been the part that my parents feel good about, that they know I would never be with someone that wasn't right, that didn't accept that. It's not something I'm willing to compromise on. Indian culture is going to be just as strong for my kids as it was for me.

[Tape interruption]

PS: You were saying that your culture is such a part of you.

LG: Yes, it's not something I'd ever give up, and so when Thomas and I started getting serious--we were friends first, so that really helped, because you talk freely with each other and you let each other know, not pertaining to him, but, "Oh, I would never put up with that." You learn about each other and you respect each other, and you don't have any walls. So we got to know each other on no pretenses. It was honest, and it was because we were friends and we liked being with each other. He knew how important my culture was. I mean, he'd come to things with me. So when we started dating, actually, the hard part was over, I mean in the sense of having to tell him about, "This is what I expect," because we already knew from each other. So it was meant to be. We fought it a lot just because of not being sure, whatever, and crossing over that friendship line. We know without a doubt we're right for each other.

PS: Congratulations.

LG: Thank you.

PS: Tell me about what's planned for the wedding. It's coming up real soon.

LG: Coming very soon. It's going to be at the First Trust Center, an Indian ceremony, traditional.

PS: Describe for me the qualities that are going to be part of the traditional Indian ceremony.

LG: Well, like in the Christian tradition, you have an altar, we're up on a stage, and there's a mandap. It's like four posts that are connected together. The four posts represent the earth, the four directions of the Earth. There's a fire in the middle that signifies the purity. I actually didn't know 100 percent of what the ceremony meant until I started writing the program, and it's very significant. It's very cool. It's not a religious ceremony that much, like a Christian ceremony is. It's all about being one and committing yourself to each other, which is very similar, but it's completely different than a Christian ceremony.

PS: Say more about that.

LG: You make rounds around the fire. Thomas and I will take seven steps around the fire together, and it signifies different stages for the future, and how you come in together, and you're one with the Earth, and your commitment to each other. There is a little religion. You do pray for blessings and things like that, and forgiveness for things you might have done that might not have been right, but other than as blatant as can be, I mean, the Christian ceremony is very based on the Bible. Ours is not. It's more secular-based than anything. There is elements of religious things in there. Eastern religions are more about the elements around you and being one with the universe versus the Christian tradition, and so it's very much about your place in the Earth and the two of you and how you are a part of that. I'm not sure I'm saying it's one hundred percent right, but it's pretty cool.

PS: Will it be conducted in English?

LG: Yes.

PS: Would you say that this is a Hindu ceremony or Jain?

LG: Hindu.

PS: Hindu and Jain are close enough?

LG: Yes. They all come from the same--they're all vines off of the same tradition, basically. Jainism is more strict and conservative than Hinduism.

PS: Part of what I understand about Hindu ceremonies is that the women get their fingers painted with henna.

LG: Yes, mehendi.

PS: What's that called?

LG: Mehendi.

PS: Are you going to have that done?

LG: Yes.

PS: Are there particular clothes that you'll wear?

LG: Yes. My mom and my dad went to India this last spring and got all my wedding clothes, all Thomas' wedding clothes, all the different ceremonial things we'll need. So we have everything straight from India. It's going to be very traditional, with a little flair to it. We're going to do a reading from the Bible there to incorporate. We're going to do the unity candle to incorporate some of the Christian things as well.

PS: How does Thomas's family feel about that?

LG: I think they're a little sad. His grandmother and mother are pretty strong in Catholicism, but Thomas made the decision and they respect that. They have a very cool relationship. His mother is his friend now. She's no longer the mother role because he's an adult, and she accepted that he didn't want one.

PS: You said earlier that you've been talking about children and things like that. When you think about how to raise your children together, how will you do the religious tradition part with them?

LG: It seems to be the hot topic of the time right now. I by no means am kidding myself. It's not going to be easy. It's going to be very tough. But fundamentally, when Thomas and I talk about what religion means to us and how it affects our daily life, and how we use it and what it means to us, we're exactly the same. It is the structures of the religions that the humans have kind of put to it that divide us, because it's the structures that are saying this and that. But how each of us have used religion in our lives and what it means to us and all that, we're exactly the same. So at least our fundamental beliefs are the same.

Now, obviously, he does believe in Jesus and the Bible and things like that, and I don't believe it in the same way he does. So there's going to be that problem. But I think, as I was raised with the philosophical end of religion, I think you can teach that, too, because if you get back to the original message of what religion tries to tell you, Jesus, Mohammed, Mahavira, Buddha, what all these people tried to say is kind of the same thing: love, respect, honesty, love thy neighbor, love yourself. Everyone's saying the same darn thing. And I'm hoping that that's what we can teach our children and still let them enjoy both traditions. I know it's going to be difficult. It's really difficult because the Western religions, the Christian religions have such a strong structure. Unfortunately, the Indian ones here don't have that. So it's really easy for the kids to fall into Christianity, not Jainism, but Thomas and I are committed that that won't happen. He's committed to me that it will not be one-sided, and I'm committed to him that it won't be one-sided.

We're going to take the good and positive of both and bring them together, because I'm a product of East and West. As much as I wasn't raised in a Christian background, living in this country, you can't help but not understand and see that around you, and a lot of my

belief system has been taken, little bits from the Christian tradition, from here, you know. That's what I mean, it's a personal relationship that I have with God, and no religion can tell me that that's wrong, because it keeps me going. It's one that allowed me to have a faith, you know. So I'm really strong in my convictions of what's important, but someone might say that I'm not strong in my religion.

PS: So on Sunday morning, you don't go to Hindu mandir or Kadash [phonetic]. You just have no purpose in being there.

LG: I don't.

PS: But what's inside is what counts for you?

LG: Yes.

PS: So on Sunday mornings with Thomas, what do you do?

LG: We've gone to church. I've gone to church with him a couple of times. I do go to the one there on occasion. It's not like I absolutely will not go, but I was never raised to do something every Sunday. Instead, my thinking is very much every day.

PS: When you think about your personal future, which of the values that your parents had do you think you'll just continue to embrace wholeheartedly?

LG: I think a lot of them. I think the thing that has been taught to me most through my culture and my parents and our heritage and just in general is the consideration of life and the respect. I think it's really easy to get caught up in yourself and forget about everything else, and just live your life every day realizing that, even in your thoughts, you shouldn't think bad thoughts. I know that sounds really righteous. We all have bad thoughts about people. But that's the hardest thing. That is the test. That is "hear no evil, see no evil, do no evil." That, really kind of quickly in a very, very generic way, sums up Jainism.

I try to live my life every day, and that is to be true to myself and to everyone around me. Things like jealousy and anger and all that doesn't do anything, and those are the vices you need to get away from and to live your life, a pure life. It's good because it's healthy for you and the people around you. And with that comes honesty and integrity and morality, but it's also tied together. If I were to say just honesty is the most important thing, but honesty is tied to so many other things, and it's kind of a domino effect. It's a lifestyle.

I want to teach my kids that my parents taught me, is to respect and love everything around you. And that's very, very much Jainism, I guess. But that's the thing they taught me, sensitivity to others and never get so caught up in your own life that you deserve

anything. No one deserves anything; you earn it.

PS: There's a lot of other strictures in Jainism about what you eat.

LG: Yes, vegetarianism is a very big one.

PS: Do you practice vegetarian eating?

LG: Not one hundred percent.

PS: But some? And how do you do that?

LG: It's really hard. It's something only now in the adult life that I struggle with, because growing up because of the way things were back then, vegetarian wasn't a big thing. There wasn't a lot to eat. My parents didn't want us to feel different. We were allowed to eat meat when we were younger, because school lunches were such a problem. Because I was going through all those difficult times and feeling so ostracized already, my parents didn't want to add to it by making me even more different by packing Indian food. So, unfortunately, I grew up at a very young age eating meat, and I didn't develop the true beliefs behind it at all.

PS: The true beliefs behind what?

LG: Why people are vegetarian, why Jains are vegetarian, and that is to respect all life forms. It's something that I struggle with.

PS: Is Thomas a vegetarian?

LG: No.

PS: So when you cook and eat now, what kinds of foods do you have now?

LG: We eat both. We have Indian food, we have American food.

PS: Who cooks the Indian food?

LG: I do.

PS: You do?

LG: Little bit. I'm still working on it. I'm still not a master chef at all, by any means. But, slowly and surely, I'm starting to cook. On the whole, in general, I'm starting to cook. That's the difference. I fought that for a long time. So in the last year, you become more

domestic, get married, start thinking about that kind of stuff. He loves Indian food, too, and so we go to Indian restaurants all the time, and it's definitely going to be part of our household, both traditions. I guess when you marry someone of not your background, you have to accept it's 50-50 with everything. Not one is more important unless the other one doesn't care. So, unfortunately with me, I never grew up vegetarian.

PS: Fortunately, did you say? Unfortunately?

LG: I'm not sure if it's unfortunate or fortunate. Of course my parents would like me to be a vegetarian.

PS: Have they communicated that directly?

LG: Oh, absolutely.

PS: And how do they say it?

LG: "You should be a vegetarian."

PS: Just real straightforward.

LG: You bet.

PS: And how do you respond?

LG: "I've never been a vegetarian. I've never been strictly vegetarian. I'm sorry."

PS: And then she leaves you alone?

LG: Sure.

PS: After a while.

LG: It's there. It's there. This is a major belief system of Jainism, so it's a difficult situation.

PS: And your parents practice it?

LG: Yes, they do.

PS: Very strictly?

LG: Yes, they do.

PS: Tell me about what you're doing for work now. You graduated with a degree in marketing.

LG: Marketing. Advertising.

PS: What was your first job?

LG: My first job was with a creative agency, an advertising agency, as an assistant account executive.

PS: Which agency is that?

LG: It was called Ultra Creative. And after six months they lost an account, and I was laid off. Very rude awakening to my industry, unfortunately. Then I got a job as a marketing assistant with Life Touch Portrait Studios. So I went to the corporate world, loved that job. Then I got an opportunity to be in new business development, in new products, for a company called Cy DeCosse Inc, in marketing. Then I worked for another agency.

PS: For which one?

LG: Another agency called Strategy Four. And that one went bankrupt. [Laughter] Agencies are a tough business. As we all know, clients come in and out. These were small ones, and that's why it was a little worse. Then after that, I was at McCracken Brooks, which is where I was at until I moved to Salt Lake City with Thomas.

PS: How is it you went to Salt Lake City?

LG: He got a job offer from a customer of his to come out to Salt Lake. It was a very generous offer. It was a very big career move, and he wanted to take it. That was last year, and that's where we discussed our future. We realized we wanted to be together, and I had to make a decision, do I go. We got engaged, and I went.

At the time I was in between--it was when Strategy Four had gone bankrupt, and I was out of a job. We were at each other's apartments all the time anyway, and I didn't have any money or anything. His solution was, "Why pay two rents when we're together all the time anyway, and one's just going to waste? I'll be able to help you out." We were over at each other's house all the time anyway. They didn't know that. I don't know, because with my boyfriend in college, I don't know if they just didn't think about it, or they didn't want to, they didn't understand or realize. But I just came out and told them, and they weren't happy about it, but my parents are wonderful because they have not probably agreed with a lot of my decisions, but, no matter what, they support me. They voice their opinion.

They may even stay mad at me for a period of time, but they will never cut me off. They will never walk away from me. They will love me unconditionally with no strings attached. And I knew I hurt them. It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do is to see my dad's face. But I also have to be true to myself.

That is, I would say, one of the biggest struggles I think first-generation kids of any ethnic group have, because being of a generation, of your parents being the first ones from a very strong culture base, which a lot of these people are when they come, we live this duality. We live this strong duality that's it's so hard. I don't think I'm a bad person because I lived with my boyfriend, but the way they make it sound, they make you feel that way. It is a struggle, but I've learned that I have to be true to myself because I get pulled in too many directions. I'm not making me or my boyfriend happy, and I'm not making my parents happy. So in the long run, what's the most important thing? My future. I explained that to them, and they agreed with me. They're just still like, "We just...ah!" I'm like, "I know. I'm sorry, but--"

PS: Did it help when you became formally engaged?

LG: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. You know, then everything's okay. [Laughter]

PS: Was it really okay?

LG: No, it probably wasn't, but it's just it's done, and it's been this way for such a long time. They don't even question it now. Everyone's comfortable here. They come here all the time. It's not a big deal anymore. It was just the first month or so it was tough. But then, see, we went to Salt Lake City right away, so it wasn't in their face. My parents are very--in their minds, there was no point in making the situation tense when there's nothing they can do about it. They're wonderful people that way. I know I've upset them. I know it wasn't what they would want. But I also love the fact that they realize that, too, and they know that I'm going to do what I'm going to do. And it's better to have a wonderful relationship with each other because I'm still the same person, and we still have our strong relationship. They're just happy everything worked out that I did get engaged. I think that's the biggest thing is, you know, living with all these people, and what if you break up again? They don't understand that "more than one boyfriend" type of thing.

PS: So did you live with your other boyfriend, too?

LG: No.

PS: But you were intimate with him? Did they understand that?

LG: I don't think they understand that, no. I don't think sexuality is anything we'll ever

talk intimately about.

PS: So they just don't know that part.

LG: I think they follow this, what they don't know doesn't hurt them.

PS: When you think about your future here, your personal future, what kinds of things do you see for yourself? What's your vision of your career path, your marriage, your home, your kids, and your whatever? What's your spirituality? What are your friendships like? What's your life like as you look five or ten years into the future?

LG: Family is the most important, and, therefore, we want kids. Quality of life is very important. The lesson we learned the most in Salt Lake City is it's not how much money you have, it's not how many things you have; it's the quality of life, and quality of life has to do with your friends and family, really. We have learned that lesson. The main thing we've learned from this thing, the strongest thing in our lives. Therefore, our family life and our life outside of work is the most important thing. We work in order to have this. We're both very motivated people. We're very driven.

I'm a very independent woman. I consider myself a Nineties woman, but--and this is where my culture comes into play--when I have my kids, if I can financially, I would stay home with them their first three years of life. And my career's not that important--I mean, my kids come first. Now, if that's going to happen or not, I don't know. We're both in agreement that that's what we'd love to do. Family comes first.

Career-wise, my dad's an entrepreneur. I've always had it in me. In five years, I hope to own my own business. That's something I've always had. My dad and I have always talked about it. So that's something that we're both striving for.

My relationships are really important to me, friendships. It's really what makes life. We're entering such a wonderful time in our life. It's like what we all strive for is to find that mate, to find that family, have some good nights with friends, you know, dinner and a nice bottle of wine. We just did that last night. It was fabulous. That's really important to me. Life. Living life to the fullest and not taking advantage of things, and not getting hung up on the stress and the money. It's going to happen. We know that, but make the best of it.

So, quality of life is really important, and with that I really believe in giving my kids every opportunity, and with our situation, every opportunity means both sides of the coin. Indian culture, you have to be very interactive with it. That's how you're going to learn it. I'd like to be able to take my kids to India every three, four years. That's really important to me. I want them to be able to read and write and talk. I want them to go to India and not be totally so Americanized, so many generations removed already, that they're like,

"Oh, yeah, this is where my relatives are from, but I don't know anybody." It's something that's really important that's been passed down from my mother to me that I want to pass down, because I can't control the generations after.

I know our line, my line, the Gada, Lisa Gada line is going to eventually fall into the melting pot, and they might just go, "Yeah, my ancestors a long time ago are from India." There's nothing I can do about that. But I can do my part and at least pass it on.

PS: You're one link in the chain, and you're conscious of being a link.

LG: Yes. Then I can only do my best and hope my kids find it just as important.

PS: How will you teach them the language?

LG: We have SILC still.

PS: So would you speak to them in Gujarati?

LG: I will do my best. I'm at such a sixth-grade level that I'm not 100 percent kosher either, and that's the grandparents' role My parents are going to play a very important role in the socialization of them understanding Indian. I'm hoping my mom will even do day-care with them, and that she will teach them. They need to be with them, and they need to hear it constantly. When they're babies is when it happens, because I picked it up, you know, at a year and a half. So my parents are going to play a very, very important role.

PS: What was your purpose in moving back to the Twin Cities?

LG: The job didn't turn out. They misrepresented the job. We never would have moved with the little bit that it became, versus what they told us. But, secondly, we just didn't like it either. So it worked out well that his old company hired him back and promoted him and that kind of stuff. So it worked out perfect for us.

PS: And you're starting a new job.

LG: I will be soon, yes.

PS: And where is that?

LG: Probably McCracken Brooks. It hasn't been signed, sealed, and delivered yet, but we're still negotiating. It's my old company.

PS: So they were happy to have you back as well?

LG: Yes. Unfortunately, it's a numbers game with the end of the year coming around. They might have a freeze 'til January because of the bottom line. So we're still kind of negotiating. They have to get an approval from corporate. They just got bought out by a bigger company, so it's not just them making the decisions anymore. So kind of on hold a little bit.

PS: Might be kind of a nice space while you're getting married.

LG: It's really the best timing, because I can concentrate on the wedding and stuff, but financially it's a little bit of a strain right now with the new house and everything. So I'm looking at other options right now to do some temp things and things like that. I don't think I'll find a job 'til the beginning of the year. I think right now everyone's kind of showing them their books and trying to make as much of a profit as they can. Adding a salary isn't going to do that.

PS: Would you ever consider living in India?

LG: Once upon a time I would have for sure, when I was younger. But as I've gotten older, I've become the woman that I am, I don't think so. The opportunities just aren't there that I'm used to and what I want out of my life. It's just a different lifestyle.

PS: Has Thomas been to India with you?

LG: No. We're going to hopefully take him this next year.

PS: Where are you going on your honeymoon?

LG: Don't know yet.

PS: India?

LG: Well, that's originally what the plan was, but it doesn't look like it's going to work out that way. So we're going to book something else.

PS: You can get bonus frequent flyer miles now.

LG: I know. It's fabulous.

PS: I'd like to go. I don't think I'll make it either.

Here's some reflective questions, as if nothing I've asked you so far is reflective, right. But are there any aspects of being the first-born-U.S. generation which you find, both

sides, particularly difficult or particularly pleasant? You could address this in kind of a general way, but I just want you to reflect specifically on that question.

LG: I think it was difficult. I think it was difficult being the oldest first generation, as well as a girl. My parents were much stricter, I mean especially with a girl. They were just so strict. Then by the time my brother came along five and a half years later, and then once I was done and he went through high school, they were different parents. They were more laid back. As with any second child, I think parents are more relaxed. But the fact that he was a boy, too. They didn't treat us differently as far as what we could do and all that. But you worry more about a girl. And now that I'm hitting that point where I'm going to be a parent eventually, I understand that. You shouldn't hinder them from the opportunities because of the sex, but you do worry about your daughter more, you know.

They're so much more laid back. I saw him going through high school. They had to know where I was every second, whereas I call up on a Friday night, "Where's Ketan?" "I don't know." Not that they didn't care, but they're just so much more relaxed. They realized being that way doesn't help them or their child. But that's with any second child. I know that. But I think being a girl first, too, and then my mom just being new to this country, it was very different.

PS: Were there any things that were particularly pleasant or any gifts or benefits that you feel you got out of being the first generation?

LG: I got the best of both worlds. As difficult as it was growing up, it's because our country was going through turmoil as well with the whole ethnic, segregation thing. But I'm unique. I know my heritage. So many people here don't know. They know generations ago they were English and Scottish and Scandinavian and this and that, but they don't know. They don't have any ties. I still have that. My life is, I feel, enriched because I have both. I just am so lucky. I feel very lucky.

PS: Yes. So you've got a gift.

LG: Yes.

PS: Are there any other observations or thoughts, as we've been talking here, that have come for you that I haven't asked you about yet or any things you wanted to tell those future generations who might be reading this someday?

LG: I think the biggest thing is, and I see a difference now with the kids growing up, they're more sure of themselves. They're not having some of those gawky problems we had or discrimination issues now, because the world is getting more educated. So I think it's going to get better and better. Especially Indians have a different light than some other ethnic groups.

PS: In what way?

LG: Well, in Minnesota, most Indians are professionals. It's a socioeconomic. It's the education level. If anyone makes a snide or prejudiced remark, it's usually, "Oh, [unclear]," or, "Oh, yes, my doctor's Indian. There's a shock." You know. But even though they're still stereotypes, they're positive ones. We're not holding up people. I don't even want to get real judgmental like that or stereotypical, but, on the whole, in Minnesota, we're very lucky. I see it getting easier for other kids, and I'm really glad. The only thing I'd say is, being different is good. It makes you unique. You're unique in a mass of just sameness. And if you're having trouble with your identity and who you are, and you're starting to hate things, look to it because you'll find it. It gives you strength of character to have that and to accept it than fight it, because you're only denying yourself. That's the biggest hump I got over. I embraced it instead of fought it and ignored it and didn't want to do anything Indian.

PS: And it made you--

LG: It made me stronger. It made me who I am.

PS: And you came to have pride.

LG: Definite pride, and pride is so important, I think.

PS: If somebody says, "Describe yourself. Who are you?" what's your reply? What's your response?

LG: I would describe myself with descriptive words as a strong, assertive Indian-American woman. And I feel Indian-American. I don't feel just American. I don't feel just Indian. I'm really, really two halves sewn together, because a lot of my thinking and a lot of my ways of thinking and doing things is very much a root of my Indian heritage through my parents, but a lot of my other ways of growing up here and other thinking is very liberal and very American, you know, very Western. I'm Indo-American. I just feel very half and half. I'm strong, and I feel like I've taken positive from both sides and meshed them pretty well.

PS: If you were going to give advice to some other young person like yourself who's maybe ten years younger about how to do that meshing, what would you encourage them to do so that they could get to the place where they feel that pride that you feel?

LG: I think the most important thing is to listen to your parents and their opinions, but they're opinions. Too many of us are pressured by our parents because we want to please them and we know they'd be really disappointed. But you really need to look inside you

and find out what is important to you. Is religion important, is culture? Where are your convictions of both worlds? Then let them form together, and that's who you are. You can't be your mom's opinion. You can't be your dad's opinion. You can't be what you think the society thinks. Can't be anything. It's got to be truly what you believe. So much of us just try too much to please everyone. I have always tried to please everyone, and part of that was losing myself. So, I really looked, and what was important to me? What are my convictions? What do I want out of my life? And that's where I formed me. I knew what to look for in a mate, in my life, in my future, in everything. Just be brutally honest with yourself. And it's okay if you feel a certain way about something. That's okay. But be honest with yourself.

PS: About whether you like or don't like it?

LG: Yes.

PS: You were referring earlier to when you would go there and you would start fetching water for the men when they asked for it and things like that. If you went back there now, you would still do that, even though that's not a value--

LG: It's out of respect. It's not so much a value. I don't look at it as them not being treated with equality. I look at it as this is out of respect of my elders. And that's a really important trait that we've always been taught in Indian culture, respect for your elders. If my grandmother or my grandfather asked my brother to get water, he'd have to do it, too. It's out of respect of your elders. There is more men, too. The wives tend to serve their husbands. Okay. But, for me, it is accepting their culture and their way of life. This is their way of life. I have my way of life, and I'd hope when they come to my home, they'd respect my way of life. So I've never taken offense to it. It's my way of showing them I love them and respect them and accept them, even though I may not agree with them. I can do it. It doesn't take away anything from me to do something nice for someone.

PS: Have any of your relatives from India visited you here?

LG: Yes, both sets of grandparents did many years ago when I was really little, in the seventies. My dad's two brothers and their wives came when I was in high school. Most recently I have now a first cousin who's in Boston with his wife. But other than that, everyone's still out there.

PS: They just don't come to visit?

LG: They haven't visited. It's really expensive, too.

PS: Is it more expensive for them to come here?

LG: Yes, because the conversion of rupees to dollars is more than dollars to rupees. And so for them, it's double expensive.

PS: And you don't think any of them will ever emigrate?

LG: I don't think anyone will emigrate. I know my cousins my age will probably come eventually and visit me in my house like my parents' siblings did in their house.

PS: And do you keep in touch with them, you write to them, or call them?

LG: I haven't been as good at writing, but I still talk. Whenever my parents talk to them on the phone, I'm usually home, and I'll usually try to make it home, and we'll talk. It's not a day-to-day keep in touch. It's too difficult that far away.

PS: Anything else that you want to talk about that I haven't asked you about?

LG: I don't think so.

PS: Thank you so much for your time today.

LG: Thank you. This has been fun.

PS: Good. Great.