

Interview with Rajiv Shah

Interviewed by Polly Sonifer
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PS: This is Polly Sonifer interviewing Rajiv Shah on August 22, 1997. Good morning.

RS: Good morning. How are you?

PS: Good. Let's start out with the basics, Rajiv. Tell me a little bit about your family, when you were born, and all those kind of things.

RS: I was born May 28, 1972, in Kampala, Uganda. I have one brother, Ronak, and my parents, Ramanik and Sushila. I was third generation on my mother's side to be born in Uganda, so my grandfather, my mother, and her family, obviously, were all born there. My father moved there when he was younger, maybe twenty or something, and that's where they met. So we lived there until 1972, when Idi Amin kicked all the East Indians out of Uganda.

PS: You were just a little baby then.

RS: Yes, I was three months old, so, of course, I don't have many memories of it, but lots of pictures. We still have a lot of artifacts, if you want to call it that, from there. My parents' recollections that have been passed on, not until recently. For many years, it wasn't a very talked-about thing. My brother and I have learned a lot about East Africa, and our family, and everything there, basically since we started college. Before college we knew some stuff, not a lot.

So we lived there, and from there we moved to London, and lived there for five years. Then from London, we moved to Winnipeg in Manitoba, in Canada, and lived there for five years. Then in 1981, I think, we moved to Minnesota, and we've been stuck here ever since.

PS: Stuck? [Laughter]

RS: It's cold.

PS: It is cold.

RS: Of course, it is much warmer here than it was in Winnipeg, because Winnipeg is cold.

PS: Very cold. So you're sort of a citizen of the world.

RS: In some respects, yes, if you think about it. I don't know if they did naturalized citizenship in Uganda, but we were naturalized there. But when we moved, I think it was a British colony, so we have British passports, we are British citizens. Then when Idi Amin kicked everyone out, the British government accepted those people, so we have the British citizenship. When we moved to Canada, we were naturalized Canadians, and I actually just became a U.S. citizen last year.

PS: Well, that was a smart move.

RS: It's kind of nice, because even when we were permanent residents, you got to go through the easy lines versus the long lines. Going there, you just flash your British passport, "Oh, you're a citizen, go through this line." If you're coming back, "Oh, you're a permanent resident, or a citizen, you can go through this line." So it saves a lot of time.

PS: What does your father do? How he is able to find work in all these different places and so on?

RS: He is a CPA. He started in Uganda. The story I tell, and I don't know if I'm right or wrong in this, he was Idi Amin's accountant, and I don't know if he was his direct accountant or what. I know he was on various Commissions of Inquiry appointed by the Federal government of Uganda and recommended various actions for the benefit of the country. Milton Obote was the prime minister before Idi Amin, and my father and knew him well. When Obote was in power, most of the ministers, and various top people in the community were my dad's clients. So he had a pretty big office there, and a lot of employees and things like that, and he was doing pretty well. When Obote was overthrown, my father still had a lot of ministers of the new regime, Idi Amin's regime, as his clients. I don't think he was a government employee. He was obviously in private industry, but his clients were ministers and other select people and businesses.

When we left Uganda, he was a CPA, so he had the credentials and the education, so he was able to find work everywhere that we went.

PS: Had he been born in India?

RS: He was born in India, in Porbandar, and then his family moved to Burma when he was seven, I think, seven or eight, when he was a kid. Then from Burma, I think, he returned to India during World War II, and then went to Uganda. His family remained in India. So all of his family is in India.

PS: Still?

RS: Still. My mother's family, they left India three generations earlier. Only one of her sisters lives there, everyone else lives in either the United States or Great Britain. She has like uncles and stuff in India, but the immediate family is all not there.

Anyway, since my dad was credentialed and educated, he was able to find work. I think connections probably helped a little bit, too.

PS: Did he tend to work for people in the Indian community in these different places, were those his clients, like in London or in Winnipeg?

RS: I know nothing about his work.

PS: You were pretty little then.

RS: Yes, but even now he doesn't talk about it. As a CPA, you have to be pretty private, and he's very private, very confidential. You can tell him anything and he won't tell anyone. So I have no idea who his clients are. I'm sure he has some Indian clients, but I would say the majority probably aren't.

PS: So it's a good thing I'm not interviewing him. [Laughter]

RS: Yes, because otherwise it'd be like, "You can't talk about that. Sorry, no comment." [Laughter]

PS: Regarding your parents, you said they met each other in Uganda. Was theirs an arranged marriage or a love marriage?

RS: Arranged.

PS: What do you know about that?

RS: All I know is that they were married August 17, 1969, and I really don't know the details of it. I know that my mom was the oldest person in her family, or oldest child, and they were a pretty wealthy family. My father was the only person from his family in Uganda. Someone introduced them, set them up, and twenty-eight years later, they're still together, so it must have worked.

PS: From your perception, when you look at their marriage and look at other people's marriages, do you think that their arranged marriage has worked pretty well for them?

RS: I'd say, yes, for the most part. They balance each other, so it's pretty good.

PS: In what way do they balance?

RS: My mom's much more social. My dad used to be more social, but as he gets older, he's more crotchety. But they get along pretty well, so I think that it's worked out. With most Indian arranged marriages, you don't know what's going on anyway. You don't see divorce very much, and if people don't get along, they put on a good front, so you don't know what's going on.

PS: Why do you suppose they put on that front?

RS: I would think more to save face in the community. You don't want to admit that your marriage doesn't work. I think a lot of the Indian community, especially first generation, appearance matters a lot. Granted, they're struggling, and they had to struggle to get to where they are, and part of that is you have to succeed in every aspect of life. You don't want to look like you have any sort of weak links. That's my impression. People talk and gossip, and you don't want to be the fodder. That's my guess.

PS: So if you were going to take just an educated guess about what percentage of the arranged marriages of your parents' generation here in Minnesota are happy, what would you guess?

RS: Are happy?

PS: Yes, that they really love each other, really have a strong connection, or whatever, how we would define a good marriage, or how you would define a good marriage, rather than just a front. What percentage, would you guess, really are truly happy, and which percentage are just putting on?

RS: I can only speak for the Gujarati community, because I don't really know anyone else, but I would say 80 to 90 percent are happy. So it's not like a huge group that's fronting, but there are those people who do. You hear stuff here and there, from the kids, they go, "My parents do this." I'm like, "Well, so do everyone else's parents." It's everyone's perception of what is bad. Some kids might think, "Oh, my parents yell at each other all the time and that's really bad." But some people get along best that way. It's so relative, you can't really say one way or the other. My opinion of what might be a good marriage might be totally different from somebody else's. But in my opinion, 80 to 90 percent have to be pretty good, because the people who are here, no one's going to waste their time, I don't think. I would hope. But then again, after twenty-five, thirty years, what are you going to do?

PS: Just stay married?

RS: Yes.

PS: So you were immigrating all the time. Can you tell me a little bit about your early childhood years? Maybe the first five years when you were in London, was it?

RS: Yes.

PS: You were the first-born, right?

RS: No, second. As far as London, obviously, in the first three years of my life, I don't remember, because you just don't; tabula rasa. I remember that we lived in London. The only memories I really have about London are taking trains to school, to my nursery school, and I used to love taking trains. So that's the only thing I really remember. I remember I had a terrible babysitter. She was from hell. I've forgot her name. My mom knows the story pretty well. But she was from hell. I think her name was Mrs. Mendez or something, but she traumatized me. [Laughter]

PS: What did she do, specifically?

RS: I have no idea. She didn't traumatize me. I must not have liked her, because the story goes that my parents used to send food with me, or whatever, and she wouldn't give it to me, and I'd come home, and I would just eat anything in sight, because she'd give my food to other people. So then when my parents found out, obviously, they changed my babysitter to another person, who was really good, and I have no idea what her name is.

Then we went back, when I was five, I think we had just moved to Winnipeg, and my mother and I went back, and we saw her on a bus, or something, and she was trying to be nice to me. Even at age five I was like, "I'm not talking to her." Because I'm kind of stubborn at times, and even then I refused to say hello, and so I just didn't. So that's one of my memories.

I know we had a pretty nice house, and we had rose gardens in front, and my brother and I used to run around this little courtyard thing and chase each other around the rosebushes. When I think of London, I can only really think of pictures, I can't think of actual scenes. I remember running around the house, hanging out with my aunts. My aunt got married at our house in 1975 or '76, and that was pretty fun, from what I hear.

We went back to London in 1988, so I was sixteen, and I haven't been back since. It's almost ten years since I've been back. Everyone kept saying, "You were such a terror." I'm like, "Okay, I was two; I'm supposed to be." So I must have been a real pain in the butt, because that's the first thing everyone was saying, "Oh, my God, you were such a terrible child. You used to run around and do this." As far as I'm concerned, that's great, that's what kids should do. So I was like, "Whatever. That's your opinion." You want kids to sit and be quiet, they're not real kids. Then maybe that's my defense mechanism coming out and rationalizing my behavior, but the way I look at it, I've turned out all

right, so that's fine.

PS: What language did your parents speak in the house?

RS: I would guess initially it was Gujarati, but then, over time, English, and now it's a combination of both. They will speak to us in Gujarati, and we'll answer in English.

PS: Is that how it's always been?

RS: Maybe when I was younger I spoke it, I don't really speak it anymore, unless I have to with somebody who doesn't speak English.

PS: You chose not to answer them in Gujarati because?

RS: Because I can't.

PS: Because you don't know the words?

RS: I know the words, but it would take too long for me to process the syntax. I can understand it very well, but for me to process and spit out the words in the right forms, I can't do that, and I don't understand why. It's practice, and if I had a couple of drinks, I'd probably be able to do a lot better, because you don't think so much. But I think that it's just, for me, anyway, it's hard to process. It's the same thing with any language. With Spanish I'm the other way. Spanish, I can speak it better, but understanding is different, and reading it I'm okay. So I don't know, I think it's just practice.

PS: When you were a small child living in London, did your parents socialize with other Indians in the Indian community there, or with other British people, or who was your social connection?

RS: My guess is, since we had a lot of relatives, we probably socialized with our relatives, and then other Indians. I know our neighbors were English, and they were good friends. They used to babysit us or something. I think mostly Indians is my guess, but, again, that part, I was so young, I don't really remember.

PS: Was your mom working while you were there?

RS: In England?

PS: Yes.

RS: Yes.

PS: What does she do?

RS: She's a catalog librarian at Macalester College.

PS: While she was in London what was she doing?

RS: She was in school, she was getting what's the equivalent of the master's of library science. I think it's called the associate degree in England. I don't know, but it's the equivalent of the MLS here. When we got kicked out of Uganda, her family, as with most wealthier families, the girls don't work. They're educated, but once you get married, you're a housewife--not a housewife, but you stay at home, you have luncheons, you know that kind of thing. Because you have tons of servants, you don't really have to lift a finger.

But with her, when we left, we arrived in London with a really nice house and some furniture, but no money, because all the accounts had been frozen.

PS: Did they ever get unfrozen?

RS: I have no idea.

PS: So you were allowed to take what, your personal belongings and that was it?

RS: Not even all of them. I don't know how. I think because of my dad's position, we were able to do a lot more than other people may have. Some of my aunts, two of my mom's sisters, for some reason--well, they were unmarried, so they weren't letting them on the planes to leave initially. I don't know why, but they didn't want unmarried women to leave, but off the bat, they're letting married women and kids go, and old people go. But for some reason they couldn't get out, and their passports wouldn't be stamped or something. So they went from the airfield to find my dad, and my dad brought them back and immediately got them on a plane. So they didn't have a chance to get anything; they left with the clothes they had. I mean, it's such a melodramatic story. It's weird, I can't imagine having to do that. I mean, these people had lived there for years, twenty-five years, thirty years, however old they were then, and then having to just leave. Luckily, my parents had the house in London, so I think everyone started off there.

PS: So they already owned that home in London?

RS: Yes, for some reason they bought the house the year before.

PS: Interesting. Do you think maybe your dad knew what was coming down?

RS: No, I think my mom knew, because in 1971 the Israelis were kicked out.

PS: Did Idi Amin just go through and do one ethnic group at a time and oust them?

RS: I think so. He was very pro-African, as he should be, it's an African country, but the infrastructure and the education of most of the Africans was not there. The Israelis who were there, I don't know what they did, but he removed them in '71, and he said everyone was taking advantage of the Africans. Then in 1972, the East Indians, who were mainly the business owners, shopkeepers, small business, and this and that, who had built infrastructure, he said, "All right, you must leave."

PS: "And I'll keep your infrastructure."

RS: Which failed miserably. The guy's an idiot.

PS: He was just eliminating the ethnic groups one at a time.

RS: One by one.

PS: Did somebody else leave in '73?

RS: Well, no. Then he started his own ethnic cleansing, if you will. He killed a quarter-million Africans. Anyone who was against him, he killed. He might have killed more than a quarter-million, who knows. He wasn't the nicest guy in the world. There's a movie called "Amin," and you just see, basically, "I don't like you, so you get shot in the head." His reign of terror, and you kind of do or die.

I once asked my father, "Why would you even do this?" He said, "It's do or die. You don't have a choice."

PS: Have any of your family been back to Uganda?

RS: My aunt and uncle tried to go last year, but they were charging the most unreasonable rates. They were in Kenya, in South Africa, and I think they wanted 1,000 U.S. dollars. I mean, total black market, cash or something, to cross the border and come back or something. Then my other uncle and aunt are there, they're in Africa right now. They come back next week. I think they went to Uganda, so they're going to see it. I think eventually I'd like to go and see it. We were invited back when Obote came back to power, and, of course, my father said, "No, we're not going there. We'll get killed."

PS: So your father is really fearful of going?

RS: Not anymore. Back then, yes, because it was right after Amin had been overthrown, and Obote had come back, and the fighting was going on amongst other tribes. Now it's

stabilized. Now they've started giving back properties to Ugandans, and I don't know if we've applied or not for our properties. There was an article in the *New York Times* about it, about a year or two years ago, and how some families are going back. There was this Indian woman at the embassy, Ugandan Embassy, in Washington, who is coordinating it all. So I'm sure my family has been in touch with her. But since I don't pay attention, I don't know.

PS: So you don't have a whole lot of real vivid memories about London?

RS: I liked it. I know I had fun.

PS: Do you remember anything about the move to Winnipeg, or why that was undertaken?

RS: Why is because the weather was bad for my father. He's asthmatic, so the weather in London wasn't good. He was president of the Round Table in Uganda, and so the Canadian Rotary sponsored our family. We were the only family, I guess, that they had sponsored to come over to Canada. There was a statute of limitations on the offer, so right before it ended, my father went. He spent a year there setting up, and then we came after he had set up. So that's why we lived there.

PS: Did he open a private practice again there?

RS: No, he worked for one of those big CPA firms.

PS: What was life like in Winnipeg for you?

RS: Winnipeg was fun. That's where I first started going to school, like pre-kindergarten. What do they call it? Nursery school. Actually, my oldest friend I met when we moved there. It was funny, because we moved into an apartment building, and there was a pool, and my brother and I were watching from our balcony. This was right when we moved in. We met this family, I don't know how we knew them, but we met this family, and we were all watching these people, and this guy was chasing this other guy around the pool, and then threw him in the water. In British accents, my brother and I, we were like, "Oh, my God, that guy threw the boy in the water," and just going on and on with this British accent.

I remember maybe three or four years later, we were talking to these same kids who were with us, and they're like, "Yeah, we remember when you came and you had this total British accent." So that's the first memory, and I can still see the guys running around.

One of my really good friends, Jason, even to this day we're still really good friends. He's Jewish. We met at nursery school, and then I went to Jewish day school--not day school,

but day camp in the summertime. We've been friends for life, and probably will be, I mean, since we were six or five. It's pretty funny, he moved away when we were six, he moved to Toronto, and then he came back a couple of times when we were eight or something. We wrote letters, and we still have the letters that we wrote to each other when we were little kids. I went to his bar mitzvah when we were thirteen. Then we didn't see each other for four years, and then I was in school in Boston, and I called him and said, "Why don't you come up," He said, "Okay." Now, mind you, we had not seen each other, and you know, when you're kids and stuff, and when you're seventeen and a college freshmen, you say "Oh, my God, what if he's a dork? I don't want to hang out with some dork."

So he got off the plane, and we immediately recognized each other. We're so similar still, we got along really well. We kept in touch. We were just in Toronto on July Fourth, and he's living in New York now. I called him and said, "I'm going to Toronto. Why don't you go." He wasn't sure, and then he ended up showing up, so we hung out in Toronto for a little while. So we're still really good friends. He just passed the bar exam in New York, or, knock on wood, I hope he passed it. He's living in New York. He's like my first friend, so that's my second memory from Winnipeg. First is that other one, but the second one, obviously, is my first friend.

We went to school there, and I remember walking to school. It was maybe six blocks, seven blocks, to school, and we were covered head to toe, big boots, big socks, snow pants, coats, the mittens, only your eyes are showing, and scarves and stuff. It was bitter cold, and you'd walk through the snowdrifts, and you'd disappear, because there was so much snow. That was kind of cool, because we used to have snowball fights and stuff like that.

I was the youngest kid in my class, because I skipped a grade. I was always the youngest kid, always the smallest kid. But ever since then, since I skipped kindergarten, I've always been with older people. It was just fun, going to school and being older. My brother's exactly two years older than me, to the day, but in school we were only a year apart.

PS: So your brother was the party animal, and you were the studious one?

RS: I was more studious, but at the same time I still had a good time. I also liked that we learned French, because in Canada you have to.

PS: Even in Winnipeg?

RS: Yes. It's weird, because now when I count, the first language that I count in, if you have twenty things, is French. Even though I speak no French, I count in French, and after French, I count in Gujarati, and after that I count in English, and then Spanish. So

it's really weird how that stayed with me.

I have great memories from Winnipeg in school. I can think of friends that I had. I still have one guy, whenever I go to Winnipeg, I still call him. We haven't seen each other in fifteen years, but we talk on the phone. I've been lucky in the sense that most of the people that I've hung out with and been friends with have all been kind of like me, very social and still able to succeed and do stuff. Jason just finished law school, and most of my friends are in some sort of professional program and things like that. It's interesting how you surround yourself with people who are like you, or like-minded, even at an early age.

PS: When you think about school, was there anything about school in Winnipeg that was challenging? Did you ever get teased for being Indian, or anything like that?

RS: My brother did. He used to get called "Paki" all the time.

PS: "Paki?" What does that mean?

RS: It's derogatory--Pakistani. But in Canada, that was what the derogatory term was. I mean, what are they going to call you, Indy, you know? So they'd call you "Paki." I've always been pretty lucky, I've rarely faced racism. I think my parents have faced it because of their accent, my brother because he's older, but for me, almost never. I don't know if it's just because I'm oblivious and I don't notice, because a lot of the times I'm in my own world. I do stuff that I want to do and I don't care what people think.

It's kind of funny, just an antidote to that is, with ACES [Athletes Committed to Educating Students], which is the program I work with now, Sue Miller is our chairman right now, and she was talking about how we'd been able to be so successful in such a short period of time. She said, "Well, part of the reason is because we're inexperienced, especially Rajiv's inexperience, because he just does stuff, and he doesn't know if you can or can't do it, he just goes and does it, and he doesn't worry about it." I think I've always been like that.

Even in grade school, I was obviously the only Indian of my friends, but everyone was always interested, not that I know a lot about India or anything, but I was always the different one but not different, because I think it went beyond that. It was just like, oh, we're just friends. My best friends have almost always been non-Indian. Jason, he was Jewish. I think maybe we had that common bond, that he was the only Jew, and I was the only Indian in our group, but I don't know. My brother felt it, my parents have felt it, but I don't remember in Winnipeg feeling it at all. Kids say stuff like, you're this, you're a different color, but you're five years old, you're going to say that.

PS: So there was no malice?

RS: No.

PS: They were simply making an observation.

RS: Right. I don't remember anything like that. My brother, he'll be the first to tell you, he's gotten in a ton of fights for me, protecting me, because he was the big brother. He's probably dealt more with it. I bet it was because I was oblivious to what was going on, and he was the one getting into all the fights. I think also because I did so well in school, I was always at the top of my class. But I wasn't a study nerd, do you know what I mean? I studied, I did well, but I also was very social, and friends with, and friendly with, everybody. So I haven't had to run into those problems, not then, anyway. Also I think another part was, I'm always the youngest kid in class.

PS: Which grade did you skip?

RS: Kindergarten. I went to like one-fourth of kindergarten. Oh, no, first grade is what I skipped. I was half-day kindergarten, and then second half of the year I was on half-day kindergarten, half-day first grade. Then the next year I was bumped immediately to second grade. So first grade I skipped.

PS: You were speaking English as your primary language, so language was no barrier for you?

RS: No. Numbers, I was always interested in numbers. I did really well in math. I used to love to read, I used to read all the time. So I would do that kind of stuff. Then my parents made us play sports and stuff.

PS: They made you play sports?

RS: Well, yes.

PS: You were real excited about it?

RS: I was initially excited. I get bored really easily, and so if I don't do well in something, I have that internal competition, if I'm not good, I don't want to do it. If I'm mediocre, that's fine, I'll still play, but if I suck, no way. [Laughter] But I think another reason that I've felt it, is I was always the youngest kid in class, so everyone had this feeling of I had to be protected.

PS: Were you also physically smaller than the other kids?

RS: Yeah, because growing up, obviously, they had their growth spurts a year before I

did. When we moved to Minnesota, fifth grade, we moved here, I had a foul mouth, just a really foul mouth. The kids were like, "Yeah, you got a really bad mouth, that's why we liked you." Back then you're like, that's cool to swear. Now, it's like, "Oh, you sound so trashy." But in fifth grade, I had bodyguards, and people would like get into fights over who would be my bodyguard.

PS: Really. How did you persuade them to be your bodyguards?

RS: I didn't ask.

PS: Oh, they just would surround you?

RS: Yes, it was just, in Minnesota, obviously there's little to no diversity, and in 1981, even more so. It was fifth grade, I was probably the only Indian at that school. No, maybe there was one other, I don't remember. But not very many out of a lot of kids. I did well in school, and the teachers liked me and the other kids liked me. There's like this group of guys who decided they were my bodyguards. Again, it was that whole fifth grade, "I'm protector." So I never had people bully me or anything, and if people did, these guys would go and say, "Don't do that." It was really weird, but things have always worked out pretty well for me. My brother, the other day we were talking about something, he said, "I think your nickname should be Ferris," from "Ferris Bueller's Day Off."

PS: Oh, because things just always work out for him?

RS: Always worked out. In the movie everything worked out for Ferris. Knock on wood, everything's been pretty smooth for me. I don't know why, I'm sure it's a combination of things, but luck and hard work and potential, I guess that people see. I don't know, it's interesting. I think that's been a big part of maybe why I never saw the racism, was because I was always the smallest kid.

PS: And you had all these bodyguards and your big brother.

RS: Right.

PS: What kind of values did your family stress to you as you were growing up?

RS: Education.

PS: How did they communicate that to you?

RS: Basically, "You will do well."

PS: That was it? [Laughter] How many times a day did you hear that?

RS: Well, "Did you do your homework?" that kind of thing. At our kitchen table we used to play "Family Feud," and it would be like world geography and world leaders, current events. At one point I knew all of the prime ministers and presidents of African countries, when I was in sixth grade. So a lot of knowledge like that.

Our family stresses education, internationalism. That's huge. You have to be able to accept other people. I think that's because we have traveled so much and met people. Most of my parents' good friends are not here; most of their good friends are in other countries. We've traveled quite a bit. At Macalester College, my mom's very involved with the international community, and each year we have a host student. I don't know how it works, but I guess you adopt them for their four years. So for holidays, if they don't go to wherever they're from, they come to our house, and they come to the Indian celebrations. It's part of the whole cultural awareness kind of thing.

At BU [Boston University] I was pretty involved with the international community. At Hamline, where my brother went, he was very involved. My father is involved. For our family education is number one, internationalism, respecting other differences is probably number two, and family is pretty important. I mean, friends are great, but in the end who's there? So I think those three things, that's what has been stressed to us. Without that, I would not be able to have done anything I've done, because the family support is so huge.

It's kind of nice, I have not earned money, not enough to live, anyway, in the last three and a half years, and I would not have been able to start ACES if I had to go out and get a job. Even though my dad was like, "You graduate from college to get a job," at the same time he knew that what I was doing had good potential, and I was doing something good for the community. I think that's important, too. A lot of immigrant families, their first thing that they're trying to do here is they're busting their butt to make sure they get enough money to support future generations. They don't necessarily see the importance of giving back to the general community, because they're saying, "We're new, we have to give back to ourselves," which is fine, but after a certain point, you need to sit back and say, "Okay, I've done what I can. Now let me see where I can help."

In a lot of Indian first generations, they don't see that in this country. They see that as back in India, or wherever they are. But the fact remains, they live here, they're utilizing resources here, and they're not most likely going back. Yes, you should help out there, but you also need to help out here. You need to somehow achieve a balance.

Our family has been extremely involved in the community here. My parents have been on several boards, my mom's on the State Board of Human Rights, and they're on city council things. They have always pushed to "get involved." At Hamline University, my dad was the president of the Parents' Association for a couple of years. So they get

involved. Scouts, they were involved on the committees. They can't help with the scoutmastering stuff.

PS: Why not?

RS: Well, he had to work, and he's not an outdoorsman. But he could provide his expertise on the committees and help with the books and things like that. As an Eagle Scout, I've obviously done a lot of community work, so for me to come back and decide, okay, I want to do something with sports in the community, for a community that I don't know, per se, was pretty interesting. A lot of Indians in this community don't get it. Now that I'm in medical school, they get, "Oh, yeah, you're going to be doctor. That's great." But the fact that for four years I've been doing work for the inner cities, they're like, "Oh, are you making any money?" That's not the point here. That's been a very frustrating thing. Here I am, I feel like I'm the only Indian at times doing things.

There are other Indians, but when I go to certain functions, I'm the only Indian, and mind you I'm the youngest person there by thirty years. These are my parents' generation people, and the parents' generation has been successful, and they should be getting involved. I'll be the only Indian, or my parents will be the only Indians, and it's irritating. I've tried to get Indians involved in ACES. I figured, okay, here's something that an Indian has started, and let's come through this. Some people have ramped up and followed through on what they've said, and I appreciate that. But those are the families who have been here for a number of years and have gotten past the immigrant thing.

PS: What is that immigrant thing?

RS: I see the immigrant thing as, "Let's look out for me. Forget everyone else. Look out for me."

PS: Just me the individual, or me, my family?

RS: Me, my family. You need to do that, I don't deny that at all, but at a certain point you need to say, "Okay, let's do something for the community." That's just where I am, and I'm at that stage a lot faster than most people, and especially most people my age. A lot of people don't decide, "Okay, I'm going to do this for free for four years and put my own resources and my family's resources into this." So it's been interesting.

The irritating thing is, I've asked Indians to be involved, join the board. I even push it as a networking opportunity, because I'm plugged in. I can say, "Hey, you can network with so-and-so." Only a couple of people have even tried, and they don't follow through. They're like, "Oh, yeah, I'm interested," but the follow-through is not there. But there have been two families who have been very good about it.

PS: Two Indian families?

RS: Yes.

PS: Do you want to name them?

RS: Gadas and Sanes. They've followed through for me, and I can only speak for me. Actually, I shouldn't say there's only two, because then there's my parents' friends, the Ahmeds have been good about it. More and more people are coming around now, but I think it's because they're starting to see that there's more to life. There's also more people our age, with NETIP, Network of Indian Professionals. Their strongest component is the community service component. So it's more young people who are now doing things for the community, and not just the Indian community. So I think that's important, because we need to get Indians out there.

Satveer [Chaudhury] was the first Indian representative [elected to the Minnesota State Legislature]. I think that's a pretty important thing, because he's providing a viewpoint to people who have never seen an Indian viewpoint. Granted, his viewpoint may be very different from most Indian viewpoints.

PS: I guess it's pretty American-looking.

RS: It is, but the fact that it's a non-American-looking person giving this American-looking viewpoint is different.

PS: So you're speaking of Satveer Chaudhury, the first representative who is Asian-Indian, who is in the State House of Representatives right now.

RS: Right. I've introduced a lot of people to the Indian, not way, but the Indian culture. In my introducing to them, I've given them the bare bones of what I know, because I can't even scratch the surface of what the real knowledge is.

PS: Let's talk a bit about why it was your family moved to Minnesota from Winnipeg. What was the impetus to move that time?

RS: I think my dad got a job. I think that's it. Winnipeg had limited opportunity. There's nothing there. It's like the Pittsburgh of Canada and worse. There's no economic growth, it's got the highest unemployment rate. It's not a pretty place to be, and more and more people are leaving. Even now, when it's gotten better, we were there last year, it looks better, but people still can't find jobs. Just sick rates of unemployment, maybe 15, 20 percent. Maybe I'm wrong in that, but it sure seems like it. I would have said 30 percent, but I thought that was a little too high to say. But there's no opportunity. People are moving from there. They go into Toronto or to Vancouver, because that's where the

opportunity is. The whole middle of Canada, there's nothing. Here in the U.S., the opportunity arose for my father, so obviously he jumped and took it.

PS: What job did he move here to take?

RS: As a tax accountant with a big eight CPA firm in Minneapolis.

PS: With another big company?

RS: Yes, a big international CPA firm.

PS: A U.S.-based company?

RS: Yes, I think it was Touche Ross. Now they're called Deloitte and Touche. So he started with them, then he moved to a couple of other CPA firms, and then he finally just said, "Screw this, I'm working for myself." So then he started his own practice in 1987, and has been in private practice since then. So that was why we moved here.

PS: Are he and your mother U.S. citizens, as well?

RS: No. They are permanent residents. I'm the only citizen.

PS: Are the changes in the immigration law and welfare reform and all that stuff, are they affecting your parents in any way?

RS: No idea. I mean, welfare obviously doesn't.

PS: Not the welfare part.

RS: But maybe the future, for Social Security reasons, but I don't know. I guess since we haven't lived here long enough, that Social Security isn't going to make that big of a difference anyway. So I don't think it's that big of an issue.

PS: Do your parents still own homes in any of the other places you've lived?

RS: No.

PS: Initially, you lived in an apartment. Did you keep on living in that apartment?

RS: Same building, but it's a much nicer apartment. They were pretty nice apartments. They were big, spacious, so it was fine. Here we built a house in Arden Hills, so beyond that, that's it. I mean, our relatives live in these other places and they have homes that we visit.

PS: So whoever is there can be there when you go?

RS: Yes.

PS: When you came to the United States, you were starting sixth grade?

RS: Fifth.

PS: What was that adjustment like? How was that different from being in Winnipeg?

RS: The main thing was leaving my friends and having to make new friends. Right away, you try to be really cool. The neighborhood we moved into, it's my old neighborhood, it's in Roseville, and there were six other guys who were my age. There were seven of us. Matt was in my grade, and then Chad, Steve, and Reid were in the grade below. I think Quinn and Erik were two grades below, so we really didn't go to school with them. Actually, Steve and Erik went to private school, so the other five of us were at the same school, and so I knew them right away. We weren't friends right away, but we knew each other right away, and then you just met people. Just through classes right away you meet people. So that started almost immediately. It wasn't as huge of a transition as I expected it to be. When you're nine, it doesn't matter. I mean, you just sort of roll with it, move on.

My brother, however, started sixth grade at Johanna Middle School, and he had a teacher who just treated him terribly, was just an jerk; excuse my language. But this guy was from hell, and my mother had to go and fight battles for my brother. This guy, I don't know what his deal was, and I don't know if it was just because Ronak was an Indian or what, but this guy was not nice by any means.

Then we went to Chippewa Middle School, and that was seventh grade and eighth grade. Then from there we went to Mounds View High School. That was the first time I ever felt racism, where I knew what was going on.

PS: Can you tell me about some of that? What was it like?

RS: Yes, it only happened once. It was the assistant principal, and I don't want to name his name because that's not very nice. He wasn't even our assistant principal. There were two assistant principals, and there was the principal. It was done alphabetically, so you go to whoever is your alphabetical person. The other guy had decided that he was now our assistant principal, for Ronak and me, and these two black kids, these two brothers. There was some stupid thing about tardies and attendance.

My first class of the day for my junior year, and Ronak's senior year, was Calc II, which was the highest that it went to. It was really Calc III and IV at the U[niversity]. I was a

junior, so I was fifteen, and here I am taking this high-level math class at fifteen, and I was doing pretty well. But the rule was, if you got twelve tardies or fifteen absences, you got kicked out of the class or you were referred to the Attendance Committee, and if you weren't doing well, they'd kick you out, you'd fail, and you'd have to take it over. I had twenty-one tardies and fifteen absences, or something like that. It was the first class of the day, and I wasn't exactly a morning-riser.

This guy, I guess, was irritated that I was still doing well in the class and coming late, and he had told the aides, the hallway monitors, that, "If the Shah boys or the Bezek [phonetic] boys come in late, you must bring them down to my office." The bell rang, and we were late, I had my coat, and I was probably seven feet from my class. Class doesn't start as soon as the bell rings, people still walk in, there are people going past. The hall monitor said, "You have to come with me."

I said, "Why?"

She said, "You're late."

I said, "So is everyone else around here."

She said, "Well, I'm sorry, you have to come with me to the office."

I said, "I'm seven feet from my classroom, it's not like they start right away." I probably took that tone with her, because I was very irritated by her. There's people still coming in from outside, who she wasn't saying a word to, and I said, "You know, this is stupid. Why don't you say something to those people?"

She said, "They'll come down."

I said, "They're not going to come down. They're just going to go to class. Why the hell do I have to go there?"

She said, "You have to."

So she took me down to the office, and she said, "Sit here."

I said, "I'm not sitting." I was very irritated. So I just sat outside, I was walking around the hallway, and they said, "Mr. Shah, please come in."

It wasn't even my assistant principal, it was the other guy. Then they started to talk about me like I wasn't even there, and that really irritates me. "Well, Mr. Shah did this and Mr. Shah was late," and blah, blah, blah. "Mr. Shah used profane language. He said, 'Why the hell do I have to go down?'" They're like, "Oh, my God."

I said, "Profane language?" I said, "Hell is not a swear word."

The assistant principal said, "Yes, it is."

I said, "So if we're in a classroom discussion about heaven and hell, we're supposed to say heaven and beep?"

He just was getting more and more irritated by my stubbornness and my being kind of insubordinate. His door was open, I was sitting across from him, and they were talking. Then I said, "You know, I'd like a chance to tell my side of the story." Because she was like saying that I was so far from my classroom. I said, "You know, I'd like a chance."

He said, "You'll have your chance to do something in a second."

I said, "I would like to tell my side of the story."

He leaned over and he said to me, "You are a very rude, inconsiderate young man. Didn't your parents teach you it's not nice to interrupt?"

I said, "Well, I guess that kind of makes you a hypocrite then, because you just interrupted me."

He just went ballistic. He stood up and--

[Tape interruption]

RS: So the late bus had come in, the office is full of people. His door was wide open and there was a ton of people in there. I had just called him a hypocrite to his face, and he stood up and he yelled at me, he said, "Get out of my office."

I sat there, I said, "I'm not going anywhere until I tell my side of the story."

He said, "Get out of my office."

I stood up and I said, "No. You get out, buddy, because I'm not going anywhere."

Everyone is just like staring in disbelief, because everyone's been afraid of this guy for so long. I said, "I'm sick of this crap. I'm going to the principal." I walked over to the principal's office and he wasn't there, so I said, "I'll wait." I just sat down, and he then came back, and this vice principal saw me talking to him, and he glared at me. I guess that's when he picked up the phone and he called my dad and said he was going to suspend me for insubordination, and my father said, "You will not suspend him. You've

been giving him crap for months, and this will not happen." Then my mother, you don't want to get her involved because she gets pretty feisty.

Anyway, I didn't get suspended, but then they set up a meeting with our parents and Ronak and me, to discuss stuff. It ended up my tennis coach was a hallway monitor, and she told me that this vice principal had said that if Ronak or I, or the Bezek boys, were late, they had to be targeted over anybody else. Mind you, we were like four of the only minorities. I mean, there's more, but we were the only two-brother combination.

Then before the meeting, we had another run-in. We were in the hallway, and we saw this principal coming down, and I was with my friend Ivan, and these other two guys were out in the hallway. We'd all left photography class. They didn't have a pass, and Ivan and I did. He yelled down and he said, "Mr. Shah, where's your pass?"

So being the indignant person that I am, I said, "Why didn't you ask anyone else for a pass?"

He said, "I did."

I said, "Really? Jim, Phil, did he ask you for a pass?"

"No, we don't have a pass," is what they said.

Then I said, "Ivan, did he ask you for a pass?"

He said, "Yeah, Ivan flashed me a pass."

I said, "Really? That's quite interesting," and I pulled a pass out of my pocket, and I said, "It's quite interesting, considering I have our pass."

He got red in the face and walked away, because I burned him in front of students. He was just an jerk. Excuse me.

So then it came time for the meeting with the parents, and at first they took my parents in, they wouldn't let us talk. By this point, I'd already lined up my witnesses in case I needed to. Miss Swanson was my tennis coach, and she had told me that that's what they were told. They didn't want to do that. Grace was the person that did it, but that's what they were told, they had to bring us in. So this came up in discussion, and I mean, the guy looked really stupid.

By this point, Brungardt, the principal, said, "Whatever it is, you don't have to deal with these vice principals. Just come to my office and we'll take care of things."

So then we were talking and stuff, and finally there was more discussion, and I wasn't able to talk, they wouldn't let me talk. So finally I said, "This whole thing is about me. I guess I'd like to say something." I was about to say something, and this guy interrupted me again, I said, "There you go again." I said, "Didn't you tell me interrupting was rude?"

He said, "Sorry."

My parents are just laughing, my mother is glaring, like, "How dare you talk to an adult that way?" But I'm not one who's going to sit there and take that kind of stuff from somebody else, when I'm right. If I'm wrong, I'll be the first to admit that I'm wrong. But if I'm right, no way am I going to put up with anything.

So my parents said, "Well, I think you should apologize."

I said, "I refuse to apologize. If anyone deserves an apology, it's me from him." And that's what happened; he apologized to me. Then the next year he was like my best friend; anything I did was right.

PS: Did you take advantage of that?

RS: Not totally. I mean, there were times when I would be late, or I'd walk around school. When I was a senior, I had a pretty easy schedule, because I could have graduated as a junior, I had enough credits, so I kind of took it easy.

One class I decided I didn't want to do a paper. We had to do a twenty-page paper, and I said, "Oh, I don't feel like doing this paper, so I'm just going to audit." It was the first class of the day, and so I audited it, so I didn't even show up half the time. I was on post-secondary option, so I only had to be there half the day. In Spanish, I'd ace every test, and my teacher didn't care if I was there or not, so I'd just walk around, go the library and things like that. This guy, he'd say, "Do you have a pass?"

I'd say, "No."

He'd say, "Okay. Well, have a good day."

I took advantage in that respect, but I wouldn't take advantage in the sense that, "I have you in my pocket and I can do whatever the hell I want and you can't touch me," because that's not appropriate. I don't operate that way, and I haven't been brought up to operate that way. I mean, it's good to know. It's always good to save your cards, and if you need to, you play your cards, but I don't do that.

That's helped me in business, because I've been lucky enough to meet a lot of people in this community who are the top executives of everything. Carl Pohlad is one of my

mentors. I shadowed him when we were in high school. He and I have just been friends ever since, so he's helped me along the way. He helped me get ACES started. Obviously, since he owns the Twins, and we work with sports, it's very easy to get the Twins on the board. But the one thing I never told anyone at the Twins until the third year, when someone asked, "How did you get this going?" that's when it came out, and I didn't even bring it up, someone else who knew that I knew, or I didn't know that he knew what my connections were, but he brought it up to this new staff member, that, "Oh, he's friends with Carl." That made me feel good, because they were doing stuff for the program's sake, and this is a good program and a good product. They weren't doing it because they were forced. Maybe initially they were doing it because they were forced, but it had evolved to where it wasn't, "A friend of Carl; must do," it was "This is a cool thing, let's do it."

PS: You're been referring to ACES a lot, but I don't think you've actually defined it yet. Could you say specifically what ACES is and what it does?

RS: ACES stand for Athletes Committed to Educating Students. It's an after-school tutoring/mentoring program for inner-city kids. We work with all the pro sports teams in the community, so here we work with the Twins, Timberwolves, Vikings, the Minnesota Thunder. We also bring in university athletes and front-office staff to balance out men and women.

The goals of the program, it's a long-term program focused on the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. We start with kids in grade four, and the plan is to follow them until they graduate from high school. We work with the schools to supplement what they're learning in the schools, but in a nontraditional way. So to get kids to read, we write biographies about athletes. To get them to do math, we use those athletes' statistics. To get them to write, they have to write interview questions.

The way we motivate, kids are chosen. We have maximum class sizes of twenty, and then we maintain waiting lists. Kids are chosen by their teachers, and their families must commit to being involved as well. With that mandatory parent involvement, we have tutors/mentors as well, so we match kids up in a two-to-one ratio. The goal is one-to-one, but it's very individualized. We provide them these homework assignments. It's our curriculum that we designed in relation to the standards of the state and the city or whatever. We are the first program ever to have all of the teams working together on a long-term basis. So we've gotten a lot of press, TV press, and the national media we get once a year.

So kids start with us, and it's worked. I mean, our first year the kids scored 37 percent higher increase on reading fluency. So the first assignment they get is this biography, interview questions, and something else. When they complete that, two weeks later, they meet that actual athlete. So that athlete comes in and they interview the athlete for fifteen

minutes. We train the athlete on how to basically be a teacher, because they're going to lead an activity, educational activity. It could be a fun activity. We've had it where basketball players, the kids go to the Target Center and play basketball, and then they're scoring the game while each other is playing. Then they go back and they add up the stuff, so they do math based on what they learned. So it's activity-based learning.

The follow-up is they get another homework assignment based on whatever. So they're introduced to a concept, they learn the concept, and then they practice the concept. It's a three-step repetitive process. When they finish that second assignment, the athlete autographs the assignment, so that way the kids realize this assignment is just as important as a trading card, and education is very important, too. It's like this self-reinforcing message. Our kids are very lucky, they get to go to a lot of different things. We tie a lot of incentives into learning.

We get parents involved. I paged one parent 100 times before she returned my call. The only reason she returned it is because she'd seen the number so many times, she thought she knew who it was. Then when she found out who I was, she was kind of disappointed. Then she realized, wait, this kid has done a lot for my kid. She gave me my own pager code, so whenever I called and put in my pager code, she'd call right away, no matter where she was. Her kid went from second grade, he was a fourth grader at the time, went from a second-grade level in reading to fourth grade in three months. It wasn't that he couldn't do it, he was just not being motivated in the right way. She had never been in the schools, she had never been involved in her kids' academic lives, all of a sudden she started showing up at the schools. The principal, I still remember today, she said, "You're not going to believe who showed up today."

I said, "Who?"

She said, "Sedreania."

I said, "No way."

So they credit ACES with that woman getting involved. I still keep in touch with the family, even though I'm not as involved in the day-to-day stuff. With this whole welfare-reform thing, she wanted ideas on how to start a nonprofit to help welfare mothers. She's a welfare mother herself, but to help them get off the dole.

PS: She's a welfare mother with a pager?

RS: Yes. Pagers are cheaper than phones, so it makes more sense for a lot of them. A lot of people in the community say, "Why the hell do they have a pager?" It's \$6.99 a month versus \$29.99.

PS: So people page her and then she calls them back.

RS: Right. So that's ACES in a nutshell. We're starting our fourth year in the Twin Cities, we're the major external program for all of the pro sports teams. We recently, just the other day, got a letter from Minneapolis Public Schools and David Dudycha, who is the deputy superintendent, that ACES is the model program for Minneapolis Public Schools, as far as tutoring, and will be promoted as such. Because of the whole focus of Carol Johnson, the new superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools, on bringing community organizations to work with the schools, and because we have a holistic approach, we have tons of partners.

We had a terrible summer. We tried a summer program, and it was terrible, so we partnered with the Boys and Girls Clubs. Now all of our kids are automatically Boys and Girls Club members. We've been talking to the Big Brother/Big Sisters locally, as well as nationally. I met the national president at Pillsbury a few months ago, so we're going to talk about partnering up in our other cities, so that way the mentor connection is there. So we're kind of hitting education head-on. We have tutor/mentors involved, we have schools involved, we have parents involved, we have our staff involved, we have the teams involved, we have community members involved. We collaborate with everybody.

Because of our success, we're going to be one of the first programs that Minneapolis Public Schools helps secure funding for, which they've never done, because normally everyone comes to them, and this way we changed it.

Since our first Minneapolis site, we've expanded to St. Paul and Boston. This fall we're starting in Chicago and Providence. With Chicago, I met with the CEO of Chicago Public Schools, and he thought this was great. So now we're going to be model program for Chicago Public Schools, starting in October. They put up 90 percent of our budget up front. They gave us like a \$200,000 package, so it worked out pretty well.

PS: Do you get paid for what you do now?

RS: Kind of. Like for Chicago, I'm kind of a consultant, so I was getting paid minimally, but I was getting something like a stipend to set up the program. My partner and I split it, so she gets half and I get half. With our staff here, now that we have a staff, I don't get paid. When we didn't have a staff for a couple of months, and since it was government money and it's "use it or lose it," we did use it and I did pay myself partial.

What we did is, we had a staff member who left in April and her salary we split. I hired an interim program director, an administrative director, and then I would pick up the slack, so whatever they earned that was below her salary, I would take the difference. So sometimes I made a dollar, or nothing, basically.

I haven't made much money on this at all. I mean, if I was in this for money, I sure as hell wouldn't do this. I was offered a great job by Cargill when I just started this, and that would have been more in line with the internationalism. I would have been based in Milan, and then traveled to Bangkok, Singapore, Buenos Aires, Moscow, Kiev, New Delhi and London, and I passed it up to start this. Everyone's like, "You're a fool." But I think this has been fun.

PS: Now you're in medical school?

RS: Yes.

PS: When did you start medical school?

RS: Last year, so I'm starting my second year. It was tough balancing med school with running a national program, but now we have a lot of good staff. We're going to have twelve people here, eight or nine in Chicago. My partner's in Boston, so she handles that, and I don't know how many staff members we have there, probably five or something. Providence is just starting, and I don't really consider it a real program. We'll have to scratch that from the record. [Laughter] We have a couple of employees there.

But, for me, I'm focusing on the national stuff, because my connections allow me to meet, basically, the power players in each community. With Carl Pohlad, he introduced me to Jerry Reinsdorf, who owns the Bulls and the White Sox, and also Andy McPhail, who's the president of the Chicago Cubs. From there, I met with those guys, and they said, "It sounds great, we'll get our people involved." That's how we got the Bulls, the White Sox, and the Cubs, involved right away.

I'm going to Chicago on Tuesday and Wednesday, and we're putting together a board, and we want it to be a pretty powerful board who can raise money and has the experience. A couple of people who are big power players in the area, we were given the names, and, of course, I would never have known who they were, because I don't live in Chicago. I called Mr. Reinsdorf and said, "Can I use your name to get in the door?"

He said, "Yes."

He must have made a call for me or something, because they called and said, "We'd love to meet with you."

PS: Wow, you know how to play it.

RS: Yes, that's one of my strengths, is I understand the system of how businesses operate, and we run ACES like a business. It makes us different from a lot of nonprofits. We're very bottom-line-results oriented. There are measures that we use, which are

program measures, but they're bottom-line-results-oriented measures, so that's very important for us. I think when we started the program, that's when the whole focus of nonprofit was shifting towards results-based funding. So we've been pretty lucky. Of course, we haven't done any grant-writing, so we have to start doing that, so we get more support.

PS: Back to high-school things. Was your family involved in the religious community at all?

RS: We were involved in the Gujarati Samaj, the India Club, and the Hindu Society of Minnesota. Is that what it's called?

PS: Yes.

RS: Mostly Gujarati, because that's what our background is. Most of the Indians I know are just Gujaratis; I don't really know too many others. So we were involved. I was president of the Youth Samaj, and I think I was the first president of the Youth Samaj.

PS: The word "Samaj" technically means what?

RS: I have no idea.

PS: What do you do in the Samaj? Is it a social club, or is it a religious club?

RS: It's your community. Maybe it's the Gujarati community, and the Youth Samaj is the youth Gujaratis. We'd get together once a month and did stuff.

PS: Stuff like what?

RS: We once had a lock-in at someone's house, and we just hung out and watched movies and stuff. We used to be involved in the programs, like the Spring Festival, the Youth Samaj was involved in that. I don't know if I was the first president, but I was one of the first. We had a carnival. I was very involved in the setup of the carnival and the Youth Samaj, as well. We set up the carnival and the program, and we were the emcees, and all that stuff. What else did we do? We may have talked about issues, but I highly doubt it; maybe once or twice.

PS: So this definitely was not religious in any way?

RS: No, not at all. The Hindu Society, they had stuff. Now there's more of that going on now than back then.

PS: Are your parents very interested in religious things?

RS: My mom's really involved in the Jain community. They have meetings once a month and we have to go. I don't go that often.

PS: So you don't personally have a lot of interest?

RS: It's not that I don't have interest, I don't have a lot of time. I'm usually out of town whenever they have them. During med school, there was no way I was going to go, because it's like three hours on a Sunday, and that's a prime study day, so I didn't go. In previous years, I was traveling a lot, so I wasn't around.

They had one the other day at our house, a couple of weeks ago, and I caught the tail end of it. They always want to hear the second-generation's opinion. I'm kind of outspoken, and I'm not someone who's going to be intimidated by the whole Indian uncle/auntie kind of thing. I'm not very interested in that. I believe there's a sense of respect that must be there, but I think if they're going to ask your opinion, they want the truth. I'll be the first to give them the truth. I don't beat around the bush.

PS: Do they seem to appreciate that in you, or not really?

RS: Most do. Some people think I'm very blunt, outspoken, but those are the people who are denying reality, in my opinion. Some of them say, "Oh, no, my kids don't date." Okay, whatever. Chances are, your kids date. If you can't accept it, don't say that they don't date. It's stupid. Just don't talk about it.

I don't know how many Indians there are in the Twin Cities, but I was not very involved. I was Youth Samaj president, involved in that way, but I wasn't involved in any religious stuff. We went to Diwali of Gujarati and that was it, and Holi. Those were the three things that we went to. We hardly ever went to the Mandir, except on Holi.

I wrote an essay on Mahatma Gandhi and won an award once. There was not a lot of things for people our age, when we were growing up, to do. Now there's a ton of things. There was SILC [School of Indian Language and Culture], and there youth groups, per se. There's a Hindu camp, but that wasn't until we were a little older, and by that point, I just wasn't interested. We've always had our Gujarati friends, there's a good group of kids our age, maybe fifteen, twenty kids at that, but we only saw each other twice a year, and we didn't socialize in between. If you were at a high school sports game and you saw someone, of course you're going to hang out and talk, but you didn't call anyone and say, "Hey, let's go out." If you did, we would go out, and we would always have such a great time when we'd go out, which would be after Diwali or whatever. But we never, for the most part, did it at other times, until we were older. I think college kind of shocks you into reality. Going to BU, I'd never seen so many Indians in my life.

PS: BU is what school?

RS: Boston University. On my floor there were three of us. I was like, "What? There's three in Minnesota." I'd never been good friends with any, and all of a sudden I was good friends with the Indians. It was weird, because they sought me out because I was Indian. Like, here's our common bond. At first I was like, oh, that's kind of cool, but then it irritated me, because it was like you have to spend every day, you have to eat with the same people, you have to go to school with the same people. I'm not like that, I like separation. I don't like grouping academic people with social, because when I go out, I don't want to talk about school. A lot of the Indians, when we were premed, we were all in the same classes, and things like that.

I did have a very, very good friend who was an Indian guy, and they just irritated me, and I said, "I'm done with this. I can't be friends with you because you're suffocating me." If I'd go out with my floor friends, they'd say, "You shouldn't do that." They were kind of ruling my life, and I was kind of like, "Who the hell are you? Forget it. You're not going to tell me who I can and can't hang out with." It was basically because these people were Indian and I was Indian that they felt we should hang out all the time.

PS: Indians from India or American-raised Indians?

RS: No, they were American-raised, who were like me, who came from places where there were no Indians. They knew their families and their friends at these functions, but their close friends in high school were not Indian. All of a sudden they come to school, and it's like reverse racism, and that irritated me, because I like many people from all over and being friends with people from all over. So I was kind of put off. It took a while to get back into it.

But I have some really good friends now who are Indian, from college, and that's where I learned a lot about India. I didn't eat Indian food very much before I went. I ate it, but I didn't like it. Then all of a sudden now, if I can have saag paneer every day, I'd eat it. [Laughter] But that's where I met people. I still only would go to the main functions, Diwali and Holi, because the India Club at BU was very active, and a very large community.

Again, I always had things pretty easy there, too. I refused to go to the first India Club meeting. I said, "Why would I go? I'm from Minnesota. I don't need to hang out with them." So I had this attitude about it, and the girls on my floor made me go, and they paid for me to become a member. I said, "I don't even know if I want to be a member, I have to decide if I like these people," so they paid for me. In my second year, someone else paid for me. My third year, some random girl, who to this day I have no idea who she is, she liked me, so she paid for me, because she wanted me to go to some of the events. I was trying to find every excuse. I was like, "Oh, I'm not even a member."

"Oh, yeah, you are. I paid for you."

I was kind of like, "You're psychotic." [Laughter]

But I learned a lot about India while I was there, because those people were very much into the culture. I also met people from India. The classic story about BU, in all of this is, was Amitabh Bachan, who's the actor. He's the most famous actor in the world, and his daughter came to BU I was working at Timberland, and this Indian man came in who was smiling at me, and I was kind of like, "Okay, this is really weird. Stop smiling at me." So I smiled back and said, "Hello." He was with some friend of his, and someone else was helping them. He kept looking at me and smiling. I was like, "You look familiar to me, but I don't know why," because I'd only watched two Indian movies in my life.

All of a sudden, it hit me that I heard that his daughter was coming, so I went up to him, and I said, "Are you Amitabh Bachan?" No, no, before I said that, I said, "You look very familiar to me. Are you a professor at BU?" His friend's mouth dropped, because being Indian and not recognizing Bachan, he was probably thinking I was the dumbest person alive.

He was very nice. He said, "No."

I said, "Okay." All of a sudden it clicked and I said, "Oh, God." I came back, I was so embarrassed. I said, "Are you Amitabh Bachan?"

He said, "Yes."

I said, "Nice to meet you."

I told him I was at BU, and he told me his daughter's name and introduced me to her eventually, and I saw him a couple of times--

[Tape interruption]

PS: You mentioned dating. Did you date when you were in high school?

RS: I did a little in high school. I think I started my sophomore year, and just a couple of girls throughout high school. Nothing more than that. Then in college I dated a lot more, I don't know if that was more. I think that had a lot to do with it. More independent.

PS: What was your parents' attitude towards you dating? Did they encourage it, or forbid it, or neutral?

RS: Oh, my mother's always saying, "You shouldn't date. You need to focus on this and that." My father's like, "Why aren't you dating?"

PS: So you got a mixed message.

RS: Yes. My attitude is, I'll do whatever I want. I dated, and I told my parents. I mean, I've told my parents basically everything, so I don't have too many secrets to hide. If they don't like that I'm dating, they're just going to have to deal with it. I'm not going to not date just because they don't like it.

PS: What kinds of people do you choose to date?

RS: My friends call me the U.N., because I think I've dated every kind. It's not like race or anything is a huge factor. Maybe at this stage, in the later years, when I get ready to get married, then it will make more of a difference, because I'll probably marry an Indian. I'm pretty certain about that. But I think when you're dating, you might as well date who you like. I think I've dated every type of person.

PS: Give me some examples.

RS: Well, just your standard white American kind of person. A German, a Vietnamese, a Mormon, and a Christian Scientist, Indians. I guess I have never really dated anyone who's black. A lot of mixed, half Indian, half other. That's about it.

PS: Is this kind of casual dating, or have these been relationships?

RS: If you call three months a relationship.

PS: So none of them have been real long term?

RS: No long term.

PS: Just pretty casual stuff?

RS: Yes.

PS: When you imagine yourself getting married, it would probably be to an Indian person?

RS: Yes.

PS: Would that be a U.S.-born Indian person, or an Indian from India?

RS: Not anyone from India.

PS: So your vision of your personal future, in terms of relationship, would be probably to marry someone--

RS: U.S. or English.

PS: Raised?

RS: Someone Western-raised. I don't care where, they could be from Australia, but just not from India. That's my definite bias.

PS: You're twenty-five now?

RS: Twenty-five.

PS: Do you have any kind of time line in your mind about when this might happen, like when are you going to be ready to get married?

RS: I operate a lot on schedules, and so in my head, if I don't get married when I'm twenty-eight--because twenty-eight is the first transition point, because I'll be finishing med school. It's also a great year, because it's the year 2000, and I'll never forget what number anniversary I'm on.

PS: Good idea. [Laughter]

RS: But if I don't do it then, it will have to be thirty-one or thirty-two, at the next transition point, which would be after my residency. I don't think I'll get married in between transitions. I might be totally wrong, if I find someone, great, obviously it will happen. But I would say, either twenty-eight or thirty-one or thirty-two, but definitely by then, because I want to have kids when I'm young enough to have fun.

PS: So you imagine yourself having children?

RS: Yes.

PS: When you look at your future, ten, fifteen years from now, what do you see for yourself? Is there a white picket fence and three little darlings, or what does it look like?

RS: I'm a very confident person, so I know I'm going to succeed. I've been very successful to date, so I don't see myself not succeeding. I'm very good in business, and I like medicine. I think I'll be practicing medicine, but I'll be doing business on the side. I'll be married to someone who is educated and professional. I don't want to marry a

housewife. I don't want to marry somebody who wants to stay with the kids. I want to marry someone who wants to have kids and stay home for a little while, until you get them on track, until two or three months or something, then move on and either go back to work or start a business. My perfect wife would be an airline executive, so we can fly to lots of cool places for free. [Laughter] But someone professional, for sure.

I see being very in touch with my family, not just my brother and my parents, but my cousins that I like. I see being involved in the community. I really enjoy it a lot, just being involved, and it's fun. So I'll be sitting on boards of some sort, I'm sure. I envision a couple of kids, maybe three, if I have twins. I want twins, twin boys, and a girl, that's what I want, but you can't guarantee that. So probably three kids, two or three kids. I don't know where I'm going to live, probably on the East Coast.

PS: Too cold in Minnesota, right?

RS: This is a great place to raise kids, and I shouldn't write it off completely, and especially since I'm from here, but I just can't imagine living here. If it grew tremendously. I hate driving, that's one of my biggest pet peeves, so I really want to live somewhere that has a good public transport system, or a lot of taxi cabs. Boston and New York have both. L.A., you have to drive. Chicago, you have to drive. San Francisco, you kind of have to drive. But my top choices for cities are Boston, New York, Chicago, San Francisco.

PS: I'm getting the sense from you, but I just want to clarify, you're imagining that you would marry for love, rather than having an arranged marriage, is that correct? Or would you consider an arranged marriage, if you weren't meeting anybody?

RS: I'd consider it. I mean, the whole concept of arranged marriages these days is like a dating service. Basically, they match up your families, and I think that's the most important thing if you want to avoid divorce, is you need to have the same values. If you don't have the same values, you're screwed, and that's why so many marriages end in divorce, is because you're in love now, but you're so different. If you're that different, you shouldn't be together. I've seen it with some friends, and even in the best circumstances, it just doesn't work, because eventually it will all come out. I prefer not to do that.

I wouldn't be adverse to it. I would say, if you want to introduce me to some girls, fine, but don't expect that I'm going to marry them. I would probably date them, and if I liked them, I would go through the whole course of dating and this and that, and then if I still liked them, then I'd say, "Okay, let's get married," but I wouldn't look at it as the sense of, "Okay, here are your six girls to choose from." I'd say, "Okay, here are my six girls to choose from to date, and then if it works out, cool. If not, find me more." It's just a like a set-up system these days, so I'm not adverse to the system. I am averse to the, "Here are six; you must choose one." I would never do that. I like options.

PS: Is it your perception that a lot of your peers, your age peers, who are Asian, Indian folks, are dating, but not telling their parents?

RS: I would say more girls than guys do that, but I think some guys do, and I think it's stupid, but it's their choice. I think that tells you a lot about your relationship with your parents. Some people say it's out of respect. Well, that's not mutual respect, because your parents should also respect you for making your choice. It's a lot harder for them to deal with it when you've been dating someone for two years, and all of a sudden you're engaged, versus I've been dating this guy off and on, or this girl off and on, and then we'd like to get married. But at least they've had some time to transition. Most parents will transition.

In this community, there's only been two or three Indians in my generation who have actually married Indians. Mostly it's been to non-Indians. So I think, except for the shock value, you might as well tell them earlier.

PS: Have you been to India?

RS: Once.

PS: How old were you then?

RS: Twenty-one.

PS: What was that experience like for you?

RS: I thought it was pretty interesting. I'm glad I went when I was twenty-one and not when I was twelve.

PS: Because?

RS: Even when I was eighteen or seventeen, because going through college, meeting Indians, being exposed to Indian culture, gave me a different appreciation. It also gave me people to call while I was there. [Laughter]

Going to BU was great, because I met a lot of people from America who are Indian. I also met a lot of internationals from India. The internationals from India, their parents are all captains of industry, so when we went there we were treated really well. It was really like being in New York. New Year's Eve in Bombay was like New York, except with Miami heat. That was the only difference. We were at penthouse parties on the ocean. It was pretty sweet. I was kind of like, I like this.

Finally I had an understanding of why my Indian friends from India always wanted to go back. I said, "You guys have all this money and stuff, you might as well just stay here." But they have all the money, they have all the servants, they have everything handed to them, and they can party and do whatever, and have a very hedonistic lifestyle. If you're into that, that's the place to be.

PS: If you're wealthy.

RS: If you're wealthy. If you're not wealthy, you might as well not do it. I would not want to be middle class in India. Some of my relatives are, and I think it's too tough. Granted, they don't know any differently, so it's fine. But for us, it's kind of like, wow, this is really weird.

PS: What class do you consider yourself here in the United States?

RS: Our family?

PS: Yes.

RS: Middle to upper-middle.

PS: So you don't consider yourself upper class here?

RS: No, I don't consider many people upper class.

PS: Carl Pohlad, is he upper class?

RS: No.

PS: He's not upper class either? Who is?

RS: I guess the whole upper-class concept, I mean, if you're talking about money, he's a billionaire, so, yes, he's got a lot of money, he's wealthy. But I've met some billionaires who have no class.

PS: So for you, it's a matter of sophistication, rather than economic wealth?

RS: Right, right.

PS: You don't see him being terribly sophisticated?

RS: Oh, he is sophisticated, he's a very kind man.

PS: What would make him upper class, if not his wealth?

RS: I think upper class is, if you're talking about strict class, he's upper class, he's very classy. There's other people, who I won't name, who I find to be incredibly trashy, but people kiss their feet because they have a lot of money. I'm not like that. I see that with a lot of athletes who I work with who have a lot of money. They're making five, seven million a year, but I would not be caught talking to them because they have no education, and they do stupid things, and I think they're inappropriately--whatever. I just don't like a lot of them.

I guess if you're talking about upper class, I would say, yes, Carl Pohlad could be upper class if it's taking about money, talking about Minnesota. I don't ever use the term "upper class," I guess. I'd say wealthy versus upper class.

PS: Would you ever consider living in India?

RS: No.

PS: So that's not an option?

RS: I'd have an apartment there, in Bombay.

PS: You do have?

RS: No, I would.

PS: Why would you have an apartment there?

RS: Since we have family there, and my cousins from Wales, they have family on their side that they go see. One thing the cousins, we've all talked about, is we all love to travel, and so we'll probably end up pooling money and buying places around the world, so we have a family place to go. So if someone's in Bombay, they can stay there; if someone's in London, they can stay there; if someone's in New York, they can stay, that kind of thing. So I do plan on doing that, but I would never live in India. I think people there are too lazy.

PS: I'd like to spend the last bit of our time together just having you reflect on any aspects of being a second generation Indian American. Has that given you any special insights? What have been the particular challenges about it? How has it contributed to making you who you are now?

RS: I think the most important thing that being second generation brings is that you're living the first-generation experience through your parents, yet you're transitioning.

You're the bridge. You're that first transition piece, you're having to cope with two separate environments. That allows you to cope with many different kinds of people. You learn adaption skills, you learn how to be culturally aware and accepting of differences, because you need people to be accepting of you, and you need to be accepting of others. I think that is the most important thing that being second generation is.

Also, it takes three generations, generally, so our kids will be more assimilated, obviously, into this community. You'll start seeing more and more Indian kids doing nontraditional things. Our parents came over, they're all professionals. I mean, that was the first wave. You're educated, you're a professional, and they've done well here. Indians are the wealthiest, most educated subgroup in the United States. They're also the smallest subgroup. Now, you go to New York, and every taxi driver, or a newsstand guy, is of Indian origin. If you talk to them, some of them are engineers. They're that first generation, they're doing whatever it takes to make the money for their families.

Now, with the second generation, with our generation, there are a lot of kids who are spoiled, because their parents have done well and had to struggle, but they want to give their kids everything so that they don't have to struggle. I would say I have gotten almost everything I've wanted, and to some sense that's contributed to my business stuff. I don't take no for an answer, very rarely. I generally get what I want, and I don't know that it's because I am spoiled, or if people just assume that I should get what I want. "Let's just do it to shut him up."

But there are a lot of kids who are very spoiled and have no respect, in my opinion. There's a lot of kids in this community who are very spoiled and have no respect for their parents, other than seeing them as a wallet, and they'd sell out their parents in a second. I don't hang out with those people; they bother me. I think that those people have nothing, because the thing is their parents are the ones who I respect more, because their parents worked hard. These guys, if it wasn't for their dad's or mom's money, would be nothing. You're failing out of school, you're not applying yourself, and why bother.

I think that being second generation has been, for me, very helpful, especially going to work in the inner cities. That's a place I'd never been. I walked in there, I think I wore this suit, or this coat and tie, my first meeting, and one of the parents said, "I don't talk to people in ties." So I take off the tie, take off the coat, still the same person. I'm willing to work with you if you're willing to work with me, and I'm willing to learn. I know nothing about you, I know nothing about your community, but I've been through it. People are willing to work with me. I'm willing to learn, too, and it opens my mind. I think that's been a combination of being second generation and also my family saying, "Have an open mind." So I think that's the most important thing.

I think we're the role models for the younger group. People are looking at us, because we're doing things that aren't the norm. Our parents were the professionals. Now we've

got people in marketing, people who are representatives; I'm president of a national nonprofit. You do have the doctors and lawyers. Lawyers, that's another new thing, there weren't too many lawyers. Bankers. People doing things that are different, we're spreading out, and I kind of think that's really cool. Writers. More and more people are seeing that.

Right now there's a huge focus in this country on India because it's the next big business market. So business people are looking at hiring Indians for all sorts of positions. If you position yourself properly, you could get a pretty good job. You see Indians on commercials, on TV. It's starting that Indians are becoming more than just the taxi cab drivers; you're seeing them as the doctors on TV, and I think that's pretty important. So I think that our generation, we're the role models for this next group, because we're the first ones to branch out. Then who knows, in a couple years you'll see some big-time business, other people.

I think I'm one of two or three Indians who works in professional sports in the entire country. I know there's one guy who works for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers as someone on the field, an assistant, or something. I don't know if he's an assistant coach. There's one guy from the New Jersey Nets who works in sales, so he's more front office. But I think other than that, there's no one.

I was in a fraternity in college, I think I was the first Indian ever, and it'd been there eighty years, at BU, where there's 1,000 Indians a year. I've been the first Indian to do a lot of different things, and I look at myself as a role model for other kids. With ACES, and with med school, parents call my parents and say, "I'd like your son to come and talk about this," or "Will you have him advise my child on this?" I'm willing to do it, but only if something's going to get done. I don't want to waste my time, if it's just to be a pain in the butt, which sometimes it is. As sad as it is to say, but some parents just want to have their kid to listen to something, when they know that it's not anything their kid wants to do. I think the open-mindedness is starting to come with our parents' generation, in seeing that we're doing other things. I think that's pretty cool. I think that that's it.

PS: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you'd like to share, any things that you think are important for whoever read this interview, to know about you, or to know about your community?

RS: I think the one thing that is important to notice, and I think will change, given time, is, and I learned this from college, where you had one India Club and all kinds came, but the first immigrants, our parents' generation, they all set up their own native group clubs, the Gujarati Samaj, the Bengali Association, etc. As far as I'm concerned, you're all in this together, and if Indians are going to make a play in this community at any level, you have to band together. The gays have done it. I think that that should be the model for Indians. If they have to choose between a non-gay-owned establishment and a gay-owned

establishment, even if it's more expensive, they go to the gay establishment. My Jewish friends, same thing, always go to the Jews. It's very, very important to support one another. I don't see that with Indians, and it bothers me because India is a collective society. These people came from a collective society, and all of a sudden they're so individualistic as soon as they get here, it's like me, myself and I, and that bothers me.

I'm hoping--and when I talk to people this is the one thing I always bring up--is we're all Indians, if you're brown, you're together. In this country you need to band together, we're not big enough that you can set up. I mean, granted, if you want to have your things, that's fine, but here in the Twin Cities, there's thirteen or fourteen organizations that are all bankrupt because they're all trying to get money from the same people, and there's only so much money to go around. So if you collaborate, form one big organization, you're going to do much better.

With this whole getting involved in politics, with the MAIDA and the Asian Indian Republican Party, you're going to be able to get the attention. We're starting to get the senators' attention because of what's been happening globally. Politically, they need to be involved with us. But to make it a much stronger force, you need to band together and be Indian, not Gujarati, not Bengali, not Telugu, but Indian.

PS: Or Democrats or Republicans.

RS: Well, that's different. If they want to have the Indian Democrats or the Indian Republicans, that's fine.

PS: But to break the Democrats down to all these different subgroups, Gujaratis and Bengalis, is silly.

RS: Yes, it's stupid. Even with the whole Gujarati Samaj and the Hindu Society. I mean, you see the same people at everything, why don't you just form one organization called the India Club?

PS: They have, they have the India Association of Minnesota.

RS: Right, but not everyone's a part of it.

PS: Right.

RS: They're always saying, "We need money, we need money." Well, you get all fifteen--I hear there's 15,000 Indians here. I was pretty surprised. Is that right?

PS: That's what I just read in the paper last week.

RS: If there's 15,000 Indians here, if you have one group representing 15,000 Indians, guess what? You've got some clout, especially when you have the most educated, wealthiest members of society. So that's something that needs to be addressed, in my opinion. I tell all my parents' friends, when they have these dinner parties and they ask, "So what do you think?"

I'm like, "You don't want to know."

They say, "Well, tell us."

I say, "All right, it's going to take some time," because when I get on that tangent, I spew.

It bothers me that you go to college and you have this India Club, which you have like 500 at BU, we were the largest club on campus--actually second largest, gay/lesbian was first, then India Club--and we were able to get a lot of stuff done. In these communities, they're always like, "Oh, we need this, we need this."

Someone recently told me they thought I was the most connected member, the most connected Indian in this community, in the sense of who is powerful or whatever. I think that's pretty sick, considering I'm twenty-five, and there are people who are in business who do more, but they become so insular that they don't communicate with the community at large. I've been very good about communicating with the community at large, because that's how I am. I think if I were the most powerful, or most connected, that's pretty sad, in my opinion. I think that's going to change, because I see more and more Indians rising through the ranks, and I like that.

PS: If you're not in any role, like you're not the president of the Samaj, or you're not the medical student, or whatever, are you not representing ACES, and somebody says, "Who are you, Rajiv?" what do you tell them?

RS: I'm Indian.

PS: So your primary identity is being an Indian person?

RS: Yes. Aside from all those things, I can't imagine what else I'd be.

PS: When you prioritize all the other things that you are, all the other roles that you have, Indian is first, Rajiv is Indian.

RS: Right.

PS: What are the other things that line up behind that?

RS: I'd say, now I'm a medical student, then I'm president of ACES, and that's so close, number two together. Then if I wanted people to say something about me, I'd say, he's an Indian member of the community. That's what I'd want.

PS: That's how you would identify yourself, as well?

RS: I would say, I'm an Indian member who is working to benefit the community at large, whether it be Minneapolis-St. Paul, or whether it be nationally, but I think that's how I would want to be remembered and recognized.

PS: Great. Fabulous. Well, that's all the questions that I have, and I think the tape is almost gone. Thanks so much.

RS: You're welcome.

India Association of Minnesota Oral History Project (Phase 2)
Minnesota Historical Society