

**Neena Gada
Narrator**

**Polly Sonifer
Interviewer**

March 15, 2000

PS: This is Polly Sonifer, interviewing Neena Gada, on March 15, 2000. Good evening, Neena. How are you tonight?

NG: Good, very good.

PS: Thanks for taking some time to talk with me tonight. Tell me first your full name, your current age, and your Indian language heritage.

NG: My full name is Neena Ramji Gada, and I'm fifty-eight years of age. My heritage is, I'm from India, from the state of Gujarat, Kutch, and at home we speak Kutchi, which is a dialect spoken in that particular part of the region. I grew up actually in Bombay, I never stayed where I was born.

PS: And how is it that you came to live in the United States?

NG: Well, I married one.

PS: Married one what?

NG: My husband, and came here.

PS: And tell us about how that happened.

NG: It was a typically arranged marriage. We were both introduced in a certain time period, and we met a couple of times and then we decided on getting married.

PS: So you came here to get married.

NG: After I got married in India and we both came here.

PS: Big change.

NG: Big change.

PS: After you came here, you did what?

NG: Well, it was quite a challenge. When I was going to college, I had read quite a few books, so I had some concept of going to the United States. And the last book that I read had such a bad impact on me. This book I read, its name was *Crimes of Passion*, and I have no idea why I picked that book.

Actually, a friend of ours had all the Perry Mason books, and I loved to read Perry Mason, so I would go to his place—he had quite a collection. I would pick up a few books, and that time I saw this book, so I picked it up. It was a collection of all the statistics of all the crimes happening in passion. Well, in a way, it was sort of a distorted, one-sided view, but at the time I was so flabbergasted by reading how the crimes are happening in the United States.

Anyway, so that was slightly in the back of my mind, but I knew more about the United States, so when we came first, it was quite a challenge, but exhilarating, too. I was excited to be here. A lot of new things. Actually, everything was new. Even to find food comparable to cook for our dinner or make a lunch for myself, because Ram left in the morning and I was home alone all day. So it was quite a challenge, but I think I loved that part because I always liked to find out things for myself.

PS: And then you had a couple of kids.

NG: And then we had a couple of kids.

PS: Tell us about that.

NG: I had Lisa, my daughter, first-born. That was quite a challenge, too. At the time, in Twin Cities, there weren't any young couples like us who had children. There were a few families, but they were all older than us and had no children.

PS: Indian families?

NG: Indian families. Two families I knew, but they didn't have children at all. So it was quite a challenge when I had Lisa.

PS: And then your son came along.

NG: And then about five and a half years later, I had my son, Ketan, and that was quite a challenge, too.

PS: Why was he a challenge?

NG: I went through quite a few difficulties.

PS: With the pregnancy and the birth?

NG: Yes.

PS: So then you were a young mother.

NG: Yes.

PS: And you were one of the founding members of SILC, the School of India for Languages and Culture. Tell me about how that came to be. How did you begin to have that idea?

NG: That's such a passionate subject with me. I will go back to when I came here after marriage. I got married and I came here, but in my mind, maintaining my culture and my heritage was so important. When we had decided to have children, the first thing that I resolved in my mind, was, "if I'm going to have children in this country, I will provide an environment—a balance of both cultures for my children." This is my famous slogan, you might see the quotation somewhere else.

I had quite a determination, if I'm going to stay in the USA and raise my family here, I want to provide a balanced environment for my child to grow up in. Surrounding them are all the other cultures but I wanted to provide what my culture was, Indian. So it was kind of a thing with me, to have an Indian culture and an Indian environment. I was obsessed with it. [Laughter]

Then when Lisa was young, about 8 years old, SILC started. I think that was 1978 or 1979. And first, Dr. Shankara Menon, actually, he had the idea, and he presented it to me. We met in some social gathering and he said, "I'm thinking of starting an Indian school. Would you be interested in teaching Gujarati?" And I said, "Oh, yes." Because that's what I was looking for. I thought maybe on my own, I may not have that stamina to start something like that.

So we had a talk about it, and then I went to India and came back and I found out that, in fact, he had started a school called Bharat School [Indians refer to their country, India, as Bharat]. And I started there, teaching Gujarati. And the only child I had to teach was my daughter. Eventually I did have two more students, and with three kids, we started.

It was at some apartment building's party room. And we had about four or five different languages, and a total of thirty kids, which I thought was wonderful. And all the volunteers were parents like me who wanted to teach. Dr. Menon was very energetic and full of ideas. And about one year passed by.

Unfortunately, I felt, it was a volunteer organization, and I wanted it to become a nonprofit organization, whereas Dr. Menon had—I don't want to make any remark or anything like that—but he had a different point of view and different ideas. I don't want to go into too much detail,

but then we decided, after one whole year's conversation and discussion with him, we decided that we wanted to make our organization—a completely nonprofit and voluntary organization. So we went ahead, four or five of us ladies, we started the School of India for Languages and Culture.

PS: Who were those other ladies?

NG: There was Usha Kumar, Rita Mustaphi, Rijuta Pathre, Prabha Nair and yours truly.

PS: Okay, so you five women just said, “We’re going to do this.”

NG: We just started, and it was good because most of the other teachers and their spouses went along with us. It was quite a transition and there was a lot of discussion about it, and then finally we separated. So then Ram, my husband, and Dr. Prasanna Kumar formulated the bylaws, and then we had enough teachers and students that we started. First we started at the Commonwealth Community Center on the St. Paul campus, student housing.

PS: And what year was that, about 1980?

NG: 1979. And it was a great experience. SILC was on our mind. Not just mine—everyone's. We were thinking, sleeping, we were thinking of SILC, all the time. This was our overriding thing. If anybody visited the Twin Cities and we'd try to get people involved with SILC or find new people. We'd say, “Oh, would you like to teach or volunteer?” It was like a full-time job.

PS: So that first year, like the first day, the first class happened. Tell me about that day.

NG: Well, it was very unorganized to begin with. I mean, we had been running a school for one year, so in that sense it was pretty organized. But for the organizers, it was quite a task. I really don't remember everything. I don't recall when we had our first election or committee meeting or something. At this point, I don't remember that part. But then finally, eventually, we did have a governing body to run the school, e.g. principal, secretary, treasurer, etc.

PS: That first day that SILC opened up, and there were students coming to the first day of class, how many teachers did you have, how many kids were there, what subjects were you offering?

NG: We had like Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi, Malayalam, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil. We had actually seven languages. At least seven languages and seven teachers. We had teachers—these were all committed teachers—and we had about forty students. This place was pretty small, and now we had quite a few kids, too. But I think initially it was good, because the hall had partitions to make separate rooms. When we were at the Equinox, the community hall, there was just one big room, so this was like the first day of real school.

PS: And what day of the week did you meet?

NG: We met every Sunday.

PS: And how many hours?

NG: For three hours. Ten o'clock, school starts and we would begin with an invocation song—it is called the National Song. Then we would have a first hour of language, a second hour of General Knowledge, and then we give a recess to children for milk and cookies, and the third hour was all the electives, like Indian music, dance, yoga, anything else that we find teachers for. This was all depending on if we have a teacher to teach.

PS: So that very first day, you had all that in place?

NG: The very first day, no, we didn't have all that in place. It was just the languages.

PS: So the first day, it was just the languages.

NG: Just the languages.

PS: So it was one hour of school?

NG: No, we still had the three hours.

PS: So you had three hours of language?

NG: We still had three hours, yes. No, first hour of language and second hour of General Knowledge, Indian geography and history. [What I mean is we did have three periods, but we were in the process of organizing such things as which class each student should be placed in, etc.]

PS: So the third hour didn't exist when you first started out?

NG: No, actually, I should take it back. We did have yoga and we did have music and dance. Rita [Mustaphi] and Raneer [Ramaswamy] really wanted to teach dance, so we did have it. We did have three hours. I'm just thinking out loud and remembering. We did have a third hour, which was mostly dance, music and yoga.

PS: What was the balance of students between girls and boys and their ages, and things like that?

NG: Actually, there were all ages of kids. In one classroom, we would have five years and older—but we didn't take anybody younger than five years. But I think at that time, most of the parents who were involved with SILC, their kids still were at the elementary level. I am not sure about gender balance.

PS: So they were elementary and junior high?

NG: Up to junior high.

PS: So you might have a five-year-old and a fourteen-year-old, all are mingled right in same classroom?

NG: All in the same time, yes. As a matter of fact, after the first year, maybe the second year, I did have a grown-up student, an American lady who had an Indian boyfriend and wanted to learn Gujarati. So she was my constant companion for five, six years at least. She came to learn. But she was such a good help.

At that time, we were still struggling to standardize things, you know, and she made all kinds of flash cards. But what really helped her was to tape the classes. This was my suggestion to her. When she was at home alone with nobody talking to her in Gujarati, she could listen to the tapes. So I said, "When you come here and when we are in the classroom talking, why don't you tape all that? So when you're traveling in the bus, you can listen." And then she said, "Okay, and then I'll make all the flash cards, too." So she made all kinds of flash cards. So it was very good for my daughter, too, you know, to have somebody there. Otherwise, it was just a mother teaching daughter. It doesn't go very well.

PS: That can be a little tense. So that very first year, you met at the Commonwealth apartments, and you had forty students, three hours, and it was once a week, and everybody was a volunteer.

NG: Everybody was a volunteer.

PS: How did you pay for things? How did you start the funds?

NG: What we did was, we had some fees for students. School starts in September and ends in June, so we have a structure for three quarters. The charge was eighty dollars for one year. That's what paid for the rent, as well as milk and cookies and school supplies.

PS: Were you able to do it on eighty dollars a student?

NG: Yes, we were able to. I think the structure was one student, eighty dollars and for more than one student, there was a slightly different structure.

PS: A little bit lower?

NG: Higher.

PS: Per student, though.

NG: Yes, per student.

PS: So if there was more than one student from the same family, it was more for each student?

NG: No, no, no, I don't mean that. It was eighty dollars for one student, and for two students it was a hundred and twenty dollars. Less, yes. You're right.

PS: So they got a discount for sending more than one child?

NG: They did get a discount for having more than one child.

PS: And you hope that the second one doesn't eat very many cookies. [Laughter] How did you find all these people to be the teachers?

NG: You know, that's what I was just trying earlier to tell you, that most of us teachers, and I can vouch for myself, anywhere we went, anything we saw, anybody, any acquaintance you meet, first thing you'll ask them, "You know, we have started an Indian school here. Would you be interested in teaching?" I mean, we really scouted people. We went out, you know, to the social parties or some functions and talked to people about SILC.

At that time, we didn't have this India Town or anything like that. So it was more or less word of mouth and just talking to people. And then any guest who came, like an artist or dancers or anybody, they would visit SILC, so we had a lot of distinguished guests from India. When we were still with the Bharat School, Dr. Shankaran's uncle, who was an army general, visited us. And then the very next year, we had a famous musician, Bhimsen Joshi. He's a very good classical singer. And since then we had Sanjukta Panigrahi, who was an Orissa dancer. But these are just the few that come up in my mind, but there were so many visitors. We would have them visit the children and Ambassador Kaul visited SILC, too.

It was a matter of pride, for all the people, pride that we are doing something very special. I mean, children are benefiting. And a lot of times—at least I remember twice—two different ambassadors visited over the years. And they told us that they didn't even think there's something like this in India, but in the United States, wherever they visited, they have not seen an experiment of something like this happening anywhere else, under one roof, all these languages. See, usually people have a tendency to have Gujarati school or Marathi school or religious school, but nothing like actually having all different languages under one roof. And that credit really goes to Dr. Menon for coming up with the whole concept.

PS: Did Dr. Menon get involved with SILC when it became SILC?

NG: No, he didn't.

PS: Did he continue to have the Bharat School?

NG: No, he did not have it anymore.

PS: It stopped?

NG: It stopped.

PS: And how did you decide on naming it SILC? How did that come to be?

NG: That was quite an experience. I mean, we had this brainstorming meeting right after we got away from the Bharat School. All kinds of names popped up. Now I can't remember what other names were in the competition. We wanted to actually name it Bharat School, but that name was taken and we couldn't do that. Otherwise, that was, we thought, the most appropriate name.

PS: And what does "Bharat" mean?

NG: India is called Bharat. India is the name given by the British. The Bharat, if I go back to that history, this was one very famous popular king in India, and he almost conquered the whole Bharat, I mean, India, and that's why the country was named after him. Bharat School. So that name was taken, so then after going through all kinds of things, we came up with SILC, School of India for Languages and Culture. Such a long name.

PS: And SILC is that kind of a tie-in to the silk industry? Was there any silk industry happening in India?

NG: Oh, yes. It's an old art, but that was nothing to do with the SILC name.

PS: But there wasn't any connection to that being part of the heritage or part of the tradition?

NG: No, I don't think so, no.

PS: So did people just immediately start calling it SILC?

NG: Yes.

PS: They never referred to it as the whole long name? They always called it by the acronym?

NG: Actually, we have patented it as SILC.

PS: Okay. That's how it's patented.

NG: Yes. The whole name is there, but then the given name is SILC.

PS: So your intention was to go by SILC?

NG: Right.

PS: How did you go about finding your first students?

NG: It was the same method we used for teachers. All the people that you meet and talk to. I think by the time we started and about one year already passed, people started noticing, listening to other people, and the reputation sort of started running around the community, and people started knowing about it, that something like this is happening. And I think what I sensed was, at that time, people already had in their mind they wanted to do something. But you know, collectively, you can do something; singularly, you can't, sometimes. And I think we, within a few years, more than a few years, at that point we reached the population of 150 kids.

PS: Wow.

NG: And that was quite demanding on everyone, because we were not prepared for that. By then we already had so many divisions within the one language group, you know, like a totally different level. By then we already had teachers and had substitute teachers. I mean, response was so good that we had a few names, if that teacher can't come, we'd call the other substitute teachers, you know, back-up teachers, and they would fill in.

And then things pretty much worked by the time clock. People were committed. They will come and they will let you know if they can't come. So it pretty much worked very clockwise and was very successful. Still, we were struggling in the administrative way. I mean, everybody volunteered and nobody was professional running the school. We learned a lot of things. You know, I was born in that language, but that doesn't mean I knew the language perfectly.

PS: Or how to teach it.

NG: Or how to teach it. So this was quite an experience, really, and the most important was General Knowledge. We call it "General Knowledge," to make it simplified, but it was Indian history and geography. We actually had a syllabus of what to teach. And I tell you, before I went to those seven-, eight-year-old kids, I was preparing every time, what am I going to talk to them about? Because I didn't want to give misinformation. And at the time, we really did not have material as such. I remember, every time I went to India in those days, my one suitcase would be filled with books.

PS: When you came back.

NG: When I came back.

PS: And what kind of books would you find?

NG: Mostly I wanted to purchase books on history and geography for the teachers to have back up materials. Also, I got a lot of language books, all different. At that time, all I could think of and all I found were those “how-to” books—you know, in ten days or one month learn a language. I got all those books in different Indian languages. They are still in SILC and some are still with me. In ten days or one month, you learn Gujarati or Marathi or Hindi. [Laughter]

PS: Were those helpful?

NG: Helpful in the sense they were a good resource, but then we made our own materials, and followed them.

PS: Because those are geared for adults, aren't they?

NG: Yes, they were at that time. We were ready to find anything, any materials, you know, to get some ideas.

PS: Yes, I imagine that was quite challenging. It's my understanding that in the traditional Indian culture in India, the men do the leadership and the women kind of do what they're told. So here are these five Indian women who just said, “We're going to start this school.” How did that come to be, you just breaking out of this traditional mold of how Indian women are supposed to be?

NG: Now you are going to take me back to my childhood.

PS: Okay, let's have it.

NG: You're right that that's the general perception while growing up in India, but I had seen so many women leaders. In my own family, I saw my mother making decisions in social and family matters. The family I grew up in, my mother and father were meant for each other so much. He knew what he does and she knew what she does and they both respect each other, and that's how their life worked.

And my father, being a Freedom Fighter in those days—see, India had just, in '47, got its independence from the British—and he was a Freedom Fighter. That means when he was struggling with Gandhi—not exactly with Gandhi, but his movement—he went and ate with the Untouchables in India, who are outcast people. And he was outcast from his community for eating with Untouchables, so he was always one of those revolutionary kind of community leaders.

PS: Because he ate with the Untouchables, he was banned from his own community?

NG: Yes, Banned from his own family and community. They did not keep relations with my family. In India, there are arranged marriages. If anybody in my family was getting married by arranged marriages, and some “family people,” if they know, they will go and tell those people not to marry, that these guys are Untouchable, don’t marry their daughter.

So this was an uphill struggle for my family, but my father was very strict in what he believed in. At the time, before he got touched by Gandhi’s movement, he used to love cinema in those days and drama, and he was a pretty jovial person, you know, artful person. But once he got involved in the freedom struggle, then he would wear only *khadi*, you know, that handwoven fabric. So that’s a little background of my family.

My father was very open minded also. I have an older brother and three sisters, and I’m the youngest one. My dad got us enrolled in this organization called *Rastria Seva Sang*. If you want to translate this, “*rastria*” means “national,” “*seva*” means “volunteer” or “services,” and “*sang*” means “association.” And I remember very fondly, I was probably eight or ten or whatever, I wasn’t old enough to go there, but I would go with my brother and sister. In India, that’s very common. Older brother or sister, you just go with them. And this was in the evening, and they will teach you, just like boys or girls go to Brownies or Boy Scouts here. This was exactly like that. So they would have training in how to work with sticks and dumbbells and they would teach you how to march. In those days, other fathers didn’t let their daughters go at night.

Then I remember, about, oh, I must have been in seventh or eighth grade, somebody from our community that I knew was running for election in Bombay city, and he was running for municipal corporal. And this guy is from Kutch, so there’s a strong bond because we are from Kutch also.

So we actually went door to door, knocking on doors, and doing the canvassing for him, and on the election day, my sister and myself and a lot of other people volunteered. In India, the part I grew up is the proper Bombay and it was old part of the town, and anywhere you go, there are three, four, five, six stories, and you climb them, there are no elevators.

And it was, I think it was 1956 or ‘57 and I was maybe 14 years old. At that time, after freedom, the Indian Congress Party was very powerful still, because that was the party formed after independence and they had their convention in Bombay. My sister, myself, and two other girls from our building, with our parents’ consent, we signed up. We went for two months, for training, learning marching, how to salute to all those dignitaries, etc.

And then, actually, when the convention came, we stayed there for ten days at the convention hall. Really it was, it was a big playground, and it was all built up with a temporary tent system. But they had a very good lockup system. And at that time, Congress was so powerful, so they had—this playground was right facing the Arabian Sea, Chopati it’s called in Bombay. All that famous area, you know, the whole strip is full of beautiful big buildings, expensive buildings, and they were given three or four buildings for only girls to stay at night in.

And this whole thing, we were there for ten days, all the dignitaries were there, including Nehru. And we stayed there, and, lucky for me, I was the youngest volunteer there. I got the duty of serving all these dignitaries on the stage, giving them water if they needed water, or serving them something.

The hardest thing was, right after this convention started, outside, at the time, between Maharashtra, which is Bombay, and Gujarat, where we come from, between two states, a fight started, for Bombay. Bombay was the fighting cause. Both wanted Bombay in their state, and outside, the looting and everything broke out so bad, people had to flee from their houses in certain areas.

See, if you were Gujaratis, and if you lived in the Marathi area, you were robbed, or vice versa. And here my father said, “Oh, my God, why did I send my two daughters there?” But the person who got elected in the municipal election, he was the key between my father and us. He came to us and he said, “How are you girls doing?” and then he went back to my dad and said, “Your daughters are fine, don’t worry about them.” [Laughter]

That experience left such an impression on me, with politics. I guess, at that age, the national patriotic feeling was so powerful. I think, at that time, some of the ideas or convictions or some of the beliefs were formed for me.

PS: So you grew up in a family that was pretty activist and encouraged you as a girl to—

NG: Very activist. My brother is active in community activities. After high school, he had formed early a music club with all his friends, and my father had one room just for these guys. So these guys would get together, perform musical instruments, and have their own thing going.

But after that, he became a lawyer, he got into this community activity. Just like we have SILC here, this was *Seva Samaj*. Again, in India, “*seva*” means “service to community.” It’s such a big thing. And they did a lot of reform. At that time, the community wasn’t very educated, especially our community, and people weren’t well informed, and they really got into all kind of different activities.

As that organization grew, they came to the point where they had a really strong social reform movement. My brother was pretty good about writing. He had a gift. So he, in the newsletter, he would write on different issues—how can you do this and how can you do that, and it has quite an impact on the community. So, see, I grew up seeing all that, and my brother—first my father, and then my brother—they were my heroes, you know. Also, my mother, too. So I can’t do anything wrong, I guess. [Laughter] I just grew up with these active people, and they were very inspirational.

PS: So you didn’t have any of those messages that girls shouldn’t do this?

NG: Oh, no, no, no.

PS: Did any of the other women that were starting it with you? Was there ever any talk among you?

NG: In my case, in my family, my sisters had less opportunities than I had. See, I grew up in a joint family system. Now, joint family means not only my grandfather and grandmother. My father had an older brother, and he passed away at a very young age, and he left four boys and one daughter, from twelve years to two and a half years. So in those days, my father gave him a promise that, "I'll take care of your kids," and that was like, if you know it, the epic called Mahabharat Ramayan. In that, he took care of his brother's kids. Now, that means they went to school, they stayed with us, and then when they're done with school and they got married, my parents found for them a house, and got them a business. All this my father did for them. I mean, that's what the extent of his duty was. I forgot the point I was making.

PS: So you didn't hear these rules about how women should be and how men should be?

NG: Oh, no. And my three sisters could not do what I was able to do, go to college, only because of this joint family system, my mother was burdened with so much work, and the daughters had to help her, so they were only able to finish, maybe, high school.

PS: So you were the lucky one.

NG: I was the lucky one. By then, the burden was lessened. I was the youngest one, so by then everything was different. So it wasn't because they weren't capable, it just was impossible for them to do it.

PS: So going back to the SILC board, so here's this group of Indian women doing this revolutionary thing that's not being done anyplace in the United States, and struggling with learning how to be administrators of a school, and how to teach.

NG: It was quite an experience.

PS: How did you make decisions in the early days of the board? When the board would meet, how did you make decisions? Did you vote? Did you do it by consensus? Did you just talk it over until people were tired of talking?

NG: No, we really talked about it, and what was best was decided on.

PS: Did you do a formal voting process, where people would say yes or no, or raise their hand, or was it just talk until everybody agreed?

NG: I guess it was really discussion.

PS: Discussion?

NG: Yes. It was discussion.

PS: And what language did you use on the board?

NG: English, of course. [Laughter] Hey, listen, there are seven different Indian languages. Out of that, everybody average might have known two or three. Like in my case, I knew Gujarati, Marathi, and Hindi, three. Because Hindi, being the national language, and Marathi because I lived in Maharashtra. But otherwise, I didn't know any southern languages. So English was the common thread.

PS: And were there ever times when people would get into their ethnic background and say, "Well, we should have my language now." Was there ever anything like that?

NG: That's one thing I'm so proud of. People were educated and well-balanced enough or sophisticated enough about those kind of issues. And I think, you know, this experience really taught me, and I know a lot of people who were involved with SILC and I know they will say the same thing, it brought out the best in everyone. We never had a struggle of ego or anything, anywhere. What was best for SILC was done, most of the time, 99.9 percent.

PS: Wow.

NG: I really say that proudly, that SILC was the place people really didn't have ego at all, or their own goal, "This is right and this is wrong." We went with consensus, what was good for SILC.

PS: And at the time that SILC was forming, were there also other little language groups having their own organizations that were primarily social?

NG: They were just starting out. The population just started getting more and more, so they were just starting out. I don't think formally there were any groups until after we had a tenth year or some anniversary, by then they were all—most of the organizations were there. So I would say in the early Eighties maybe some of the organizations really got organized, in different languages.

PS: And when the kids would come who wanted to learn the languages, were they coming because the children wanted to come or because their parents thought it was a good idea?

NG: Parents thought it was a good idea. [Laughter] We really dealt with the students who didn't want to be there, at the time, because it was early Sunday morning and at that time, still parents were partying the night before and didn't get home until eleven or twelve midnight.

PS: So you had tired children.

NG: We had tired children.

PS: When you first started out being on the board, you were teaching at the same time, right?

NG: Yes.

PS: When did you have your board meetings?

NG: Sometimes what we did was, actually during the classes, you know, like General Knowledge or elective, mostly elective, in third period we had the meetings. So it was inclusive of the time we were there.

PS: So just a wild guess, that first year, how many hours a week do you suppose you volunteered, to make SILC happen? Just a guess.

NG: I would say, like, say, three hours on Sunday, plus I would say another four hours a week.

PS: Preparing the lessons and doing board work?

NG: Mostly talking to people on the phone. See, by then, we were almost quite known in other communities. Like, the same time SILC started, India Club reorganized. It was inactive in earlier years. India Club and SILC activities went hand in hand in those days, with the Festival of Nations and other activities.

So some of the programs were done by India Association. At that time it was India Club. Like one of the projects that I remember, and I remember the woman who did that, Karla Prakash, she came up with the idea of sending out information to all different libraries and schools, that if you have any topic on India, we would be happy to provide you either with a volunteer or speaker. I think I remember, at the same time, the Minnesota legislature had passed that ethnic program to introduce children in school to other cultures, so it coincided very well. So I tell you, I still get calls for SILC.

PS: To go out and be a volunteer?

NG: Yes. Just the other day, a guy who called asking for an interpreter, you know. He called me to ask if I could help find someone to translate. It was SILC that I got a name from, you know.

Because the reason is, we don't keep up every year sending out new names, so my name is always on the list, I guess.

PS: And you live in the same place.

NG: Yes, same telephone number. We thought about SILC all the time. I think that's what made it so successful. People really put their time and effort in it.

PS: You have a passion for it.

NG: Passion. Yes, I was doing what I wanted to do.

PS: Makes it go.

NG: And then people didn't think, "Okay, I'm involved for two years, now I want to do something else and go somewhere else." They stayed.

PS: So what was the most satisfying thing that you think caused people to stay year after year?

NG: I think the important thing was, for me, I can speak for myself, was that I'm getting somewhere teaching my children, but I'm doing it for the community at large. I mean, here, I always thought, you know, I'm an ambassador of my country, that's what I thought.

And then, this was my chance to educate people. School districts from the Twin Cities would call and I would go in that school and organize cooking or whatever they wanted, and I'll do a display of articles of arts and crafts. Half of my things in my house were used in all these kind of Festival of Nations [exhibits] and things. We didn't spend money in those days, you know, because we couldn't afford it, so we used what we had or borrowed from someone we knew. And most people did it; it's not just me.

PS: So you took your personal belongings and shared them in schools.

NG: Anywhere. And we cooked, you know, and we took our own materials.

PS: Did you get reimbursed for any of those materials?

NG: If somebody asked, I felt, "Oh, boy, you can't do that." I felt embarrassed to get money for it.

PS: So this was your service?

NG: Yes, I just felt I should do that.

PS: Is there any particularly vivid memory that stands out in your mind from a time when the board was meeting and there was some big decision or some issue that was difficult to resolve or some particularly joyful time? Is there any real vivid memory of a particular board meeting?

NG: Not joyful, but hard ones, when we departed from Bharat School. Those days were very tough, because we knew Dr. Menon was a dedicated person. But the point of view was, and I guess I was the devil's advocate when I got after him, and my point was this, if you happen to run as a volunteer and you are getting us all as a volunteer, so declare this as a volunteer organization. His ideas were, this is a volunteer organization, but that he wanted to have some international organization that was a profit-making organization, so there were no clear-cut lines.

I guess after Bharat School started, and toward the end, I don't know how many months later, but that was very hard for me, because here I wanted to do everything right, and I didn't want this experience to go to waste. You know, I mean, just close it or fold it. And I didn't want to be unjust to him, but then at the same time all these volunteers, working [and giving] their time. I wanted to make it nonprofit, just say it is nonprofit. So I think that, I would say, was the toughest point for me at that time. I really had a hard time convincing him to come out clean and just say how it is.

PS: Difficult behavior sometimes.

NG: Yes. And I still admire him for the work he did. He's the guy with good ideas.

PS: Correct me if I'm wrong here, but my understanding is that in the early days of the Indian community here in the Twin Cities, it didn't really matter what part of India you were from, you were all a community, so you all just hung out with each other. So you would socialize together and go to the *Mandir* together, all the *Mandir* type things that did exist, but you worshipped with each other, and so it didn't really matter what language group you were.

NG: Yes. Actually, for quite a few years, it was just you were Indian, you weren't Gujarati or Marathi, and there weren't that many people. And in those days we did a lot of dinner parties, because people were homesick, so you would have dinner parties. And you were walking in the shopping center and you see somebody from India, you will just go up to that person and say hi and introduce yourself and get their name and exchange telephone numbers and have them over to the next party you have. Because there weren't that many people, so everybody sought out everybody else.

PS: So did you find that you started becoming close friends with the people that were in SILC, or were they already your friends before SILC started?

NG: Some were already friends, a lot of them were friends before SILC started. But I think what happened after SILC came across was that I met quite a few new people from different

languages, people that otherwise I may or may not have also come across otherwise. And I always say that due to SILC, I came to know some of the best human beings.

PS: Really? Say more about that.

NG: Very good people. See, this is my logic. Those who were involved in SILC were dedicated people, sincere people. They did what they believed in and they came every Sunday, no matter what. And some of the best people I met here, and that's what I mean by the best human beings. I was really impressed with SILC.

PS: So they just had a lot of integrity and really walked their talk?

NG: Oh, yes. And still do. I mean, we just celebrated twenty years, and I tell you, we, Ram and I, just went back to help with a fundraiser. I guess we raise good money. [Laughter] They tell us that, "You guys know so many people and they will give you money," but anyway, so our part was only raising funds. We aren't involved in day to day stuff now. Lately, the last few years, I don't even go to SILC anymore to teach.

PS: Wow.

NG: Yes, that was very hard. It was very tough for me not to go to SILC, getting up on Sunday morning, and not go to SILC. But I guess there were no Gujarati children to teach, and then I thought it's time for me to take a little break.

PS: If you had it to do all over again with the board, is there anything that you would do different?

NG: With the SILC board?

PS: Yes.

NG: I don't think so. Only thing, I wished somehow I had convinced Dr. Menon to still get involved. That's one thing, really, that I should have convinced him, but I knew that was a tough thing to do, so I wasn't going to think it was something lacking in me.

PS: Now let's talk about you as a teacher. You've referenced some of this already, but we'll just go through the list here. So the subjects that you taught, you said you taught Gujarati. Did your children already speak some Gujarati from you talking to them at home?

NG: At that time, no. Well, no, I should take it back. At least with Lisa, she understood completely, and she could speak, not very fluently. Ketan was good on reading and writing but was shy talking.

PS: So you taught Gujarati. Any other subjects that you taught?

NG: Yes, I taught also General Knowledge.

PS: And how many teachers were there for General Knowledge?

NG: We had at least six, seven different levels.

PS: And they were based on their age?

NG: Yes, it was more or less on that. In SILC what we did was, even though somebody was young or old, we divided not with how much they know, but the age, so they don't feel bad if in General Knowledge some student is like ten or fifteen and sitting with a five-year-old. So we did divide it by the age group in General Knowledge.

In language group, that wasn't the case, people were all at the same place, you know most of the time. Once we had more children, then we did divide by the age, even though they were on the same level.

PS: How did you teach yourself to be a teacher?

NG: You know, that was really challenging. I really, I was in no way teacher material at all. I had no experience at all.

PS: What was your bachelor's degree in?

NG: Sociology and political science.

PS: Very practical.

NG: Yes, very practical. But you know, one thing I told myself, when I thought that I would be teaching Gujarati, that I would tell other teachers who were questioning that, saying "I don't know how to do it," I said, "Think this way. You know more than that child, right? At least you are born in that language, so make up your own rules. You don't have to be a teacher who taught certain ways." I made more emphasis on vocabulary rather than doing anything else.

PS: So you're teaching specific words rather than conversation or writing?

NG: No, because some of the kids were too young for the conversation. But then they do end up talking, like writing on the blackboard, but it was more like vocabulary-building, just saying words and doing this and playing games when they were too little. Then when they were a little older, we did read and write and alphabetize, you know.

PS: I don't know any of them. I have great respect for anybody who can speak them, much less teach them. And tell me about how you developed the teaching materials. That first day, when SILC opened, what did you have in your hand to teach with?

NG: Nothing.

PS: Nothing. So what did you do, the first day of the first class?

NG: Because I knew the alphabet and I know all the teachers knew the same thing, you know, it was just the logical thing to do. We knew our alphabet, we knew the language, so we made up our own thing, really.

I think when we had the Bharat School, we did have some basic material. In that respect, in Gujarati, I was the one who brought some basic things in it, and what we did, we made our own, you know, on the paper, and Xerox it and distribute it. I'll come up with my own test paper, sort of, and I have all their stuff still. I saved most of it. I have an archive here, let me tell you.

PS: Are you willing to contribute part of that?

NG: Yes, of course. Actually, I have told them that anytime they want some of the things, yes.

PS: So you developed your own materials. Did they change as time went by? Did you find that you got more sophisticated, got better quality?

NG: Yes, it changed. And then I kept bringing new things from India, too, so yes, it did change somewhat. But you know, the thing was, the way of teaching may be changed, but actually much of substance stayed the same. The reason was, you are teaching the same thing. You got a little more experienced or relaxed in teaching certain ways.

PS: How many years did it take until you said, "I'm a teacher," and you just knew you were? Or did that ever happen?

NG: [Laughter] It never happened to me. I never think I'm a teacher.

PS: Did it happen for some of the other people, like the dance teachers or other people, that at a certain point they would just say, with pride, "I'm a teacher," and they knew they were? Did you notice that kind of shift as people got more confident with their subject?

NG: Well, I know Ranee and Rita, they both were involved initially with SILC and they used to put their free time, you know, volunteer time there. They both did. But they were already dancers, so in that case, they can say they were teachers, I guess. I don't know. I never thought of myself as a teacher in that sense, I mean, but that's what I was doing.

PS: You were.

NG: Yes, but I'd never put myself as a teacher.

PS: You just happened to run this school and have a subject, but you weren't a teacher. Interesting. What was the most challenging thing for you about being a teacher in the school?

NG: I was so concerned whether I'm doing the right way with the kids, because most of the things I did, I did on my own. And not being a teacher—and still I have trouble saying I'm a teacher—that's what I was always challenged with, that am I teaching right here?

PS: So just a little worried that you might not be doing it right at all?

NG: The right way.

PS: And then on the other side, what was the most rewarding aspect of teaching?

NG: The rewarding was the best part. I really felt good that because of SILC, I learned myself so much, how to do certain things.

PS: Like what things?

NG: You know, like, first of all, coming up with teaching children and preparing the material. I think the important thing was the experience, the whole experience you got at SILC, with people and with different activities, and getting involved with the community at large, and doing all different kinds of activities. I think that really has made it—I mean, I was really happy with that.

PS: So it was the connections with other people?

NG: Connections. And then at that time, I was not a working person. I was a stay-home mom. And to me, I just wanted to have all my time. I would go to my child's, Lisa's, school and volunteer there. That was my life, you know, at the time. It was completely my life.

PS: I understand. What motivated you to devote all your free time to this work?

NG: I just wanted to do it, make it better. As I told myself, that I'm going to make it better for my child in this country.

PS: And how many years did you actually teach?

NG: Well, I taught—SILC started, after tenth anniversary, I was still there. I would say fifteen years. Only the last, maybe five or some years now, I'm not doing that, and we just celebrated twenty years, so maybe six years. So fourteen or fifteen years.

PS: And were you on the board all those years as well?

NG: On and off. Initially, actually, if we go with the chronological order, initially, I never got on the board. I didn't want to. The reason was, I wanted to stay a distance and to see that we were doing everything right. I didn't want to get into the nitty-gritty. So for quite a few years, I was not ever on the board.

PS: What persuaded you that being on the board would be okay?

NG: Once we got a little more established and organized. At that point it was, it wasn't like, "I'm going to get on the board and then go away from SILC." That was not the case. Initially, we just tried to get more people involved and get new people in.

PS: You were doing sales and marketing. You were.

NG: But I was told that I was pretty good bringing people in. I would talk anybody into coming in. [Laughter]

PS: It sounds like it.

NG: They told me that.

PS: So let's talk about how you saw the school grow or change over the many years that you've been involved. What were the biggest changes you saw?

NG: Initially, we started out, when the children were young, and as we grew bigger, and then all the other age kids started coming, so we had a challenge. I don't remember which year, but we actually came up with a curriculum. Seriously, we had I don't know how many meetings and how many months, and I have those books to show you, too, later, but actually we were so concerned that what we are teaching may not be enough for children, and we might be boring them, so we actually, we were constantly working on the curriculum, you know, what and how to teach.

Actually, one year we invited a University of Minnesota professor called Paul Staneslow from the Southeast Asian Center. He came and gave us a seminar on how to teach foreign languages to children. We were in a constant effort to make it better. I did see, as the time went, SILC really grew into—more older children started coming, teenagers started coming. It was quite different.

PS: Were there any new challenges that came with having a bunch of teenagers at the school?

NG: Oh, yes.

PS: Such as?

NG: There the hardest task was that you knew most of the kids and parents. There was one incident I remember very vividly. At that time I was principal, and we were still at the Commonwealth Community Center. We were just too many kids for that little location, and there were a bunch of these girls, Gujarati, seven or eight girls, all teenagers. And we had a tough time telling them, “These are the rules of SILC. You can’t go out of the building,” because of our liability issue, you know.

PS: What did they want to do when they went outside the building?

NG: Oh, they just wanted to walk out or go somewhere or do something. And when they are there three hours, we can’t let them walk around or run around anywhere else, because, actually, earlier years, we did work on the legal waiver because we wanted to make sure that we are not legally bound. We consulted this one lawyer, Mr. Advani, who passed away a few weeks ago. He was a flag-raiser of the North India Association, and he had helped me come up with a waiver, you know, loosely termed, that we are not really responsible. If somebody really sues you, I don’t know what would have happened, but this was all on good will.

I was always a little stricter than other people in following the rules, and my daughter tells me all the time. Yes, so here and there we had some challenges like that, you know.

There was another incident. Some boy had some differences of opinion with some other teacher, and I was the principal, I had to act on it, and I really hated to do that.

PS: What was the issue about? The curriculum or political opinion or religious or what?

NG: No, just something else. No, nothing to do with curriculum at all. Some activity or something.

PS: So how were you able to solve that little friction?

NG: You know, actually, then I didn’t have to do anything. It just dispersed itself. So I was happy. If I remember more about it, I’ll let you know.

PS: So when the older kids came in, did you have any problems other than them wanting to leave the class, or having opinions?

NG: Opinions was okay, because in the discussion, we were very open with that. Certain classroom things, behavior or something sometimes, because we were so close by other classes that we wanted kids to be a little quiet so other people don’t get bothered. But I think it was more like a growing problem for everyone. This place was too small to house 70 or 80 students—and

after that, we actually went to Como Elementary School. There we rented all different rooms. It was just like a school.

PS: I know that in India, your generation had arranged marriages, and that the young generation that was growing up here in the Twin Cities wasn't inclined towards that. They didn't see that as a normal thing to do, because they'd been raised in America. Did you ever have concerns that if the teenagers were together in class that they'd be flirting with each other, or wanting to date each other, or there might be some kind of romance happening in your classrooms, or was that not an issue?

NG: I didn't notice anything, no.

PS: Did the kids socialize with each other outside of the class?

NG: Oh, yes, very well, very well. Everybody was.

PS: And what did you do to encourage that to happen?

NG: We didn't have to. They just did it. Most of the kids knew each other socially. But you know, overall, if I think about it, there were more girls than boys.

PS: There were? Why do you suppose that was?

NG: I have no idea, but even in our circle, the Gujarati circle, only two or three of us have a boy and a girl. Everybody has two daughters. For whatever reason, they have two daughters. So I think boys—like my son always had a hard time finding other boys of his age.

PS: Challenging. Then at a certain age they only want to be with girls.

Any other changes that you've seen in the school over the years, the enrollment going up or down, or changes? How do you see that flow?

NG: Well, once the enrollment went up, where we reached 150 students, after that, we moved to the bigger place, then it stabilized for a while. But then a whole bunch of this group, which came as a group and left as a group, this particular group, and that's the time we really had a hard time controlling the behavior. This whole group had like a group mentality.

PS: What group was it?

NG: I really shouldn't name names.

PS: All right. But they came as a clump and left as a clump?

NG: Yes

PS: No. What were they doing?

NG: What they do is, you couldn't tell them anything, from a discipline point of view. You can't motivate them. You know, I have these topics and we will have a guideline in this classroom that this is what we are going to talk about next time, before they leave. And then see if you have time to just look it over and we can then have a good discussion about it next time. And I had a hard time maintaining the mechanics of things in the classroom, keeping everybody quiet that one particular year.

PS: And these were teenagers at the time?

NG: They were teenagers, and they came as a huge group and left as a huge group.

PS: After one year? Not soon enough.

NG: Yes. And then we did have a slight decline in student enrollment after a while. At that time I did raise the question of whether needs were changing, because by then, all the regional groups like Gujarati and Marathi had gotten strong, and people's needs were met without the commitment to come to school. Until we started SILC and up to maybe ten years later, people felt they needed to do this, not just as a volunteer, but even as a parent.

PS: Because it was the only game in town.

NG: The only game in town. But after that when all these regional groups started getting stronger, a little more population grew of Indians and more activities started, they started getting strong. We felt some decline, and at that time I was pretty much about to go, you know, leaving in a year or two, because I'd run out of Gujarati kids. I was just teaching General Knowledge. And we'd discuss and raise these questions, that we've got to do something. So there was some decline.

Now this year they are saying, after twentieth year, I don't know exactly how much the population is now, of children, but some new group has started, like the Punjabi language has been introduced, and some other thing, too. But still, they have lost quite a few of the languages, like Gujarati is not there and Marathi isn't there. Mostly Hindi is there and a couple, like Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam, and Punjabi. So there are less languages now.

Overall activity, maybe not as much. Like in the full heyday, we were all over the place with these, and all kinds of different committees and all kinds of different programs. So I saw the decline a few years back, that it can hit, and then it was logical, you know, it was going to happen, because the community needs have changed. People don't want to bring the kids every Saturday or Sunday to SILC and commit three hours, because now they have all regional groups,

and they have all these Indian movies coming here. They just see in their house the Indian movies, and now these kids are more fluent in those languages, because they watch TV. The movies, I mean.

PS: Indian movies.

NG: Yes. So maybe what at SILC we tried so hard to do it, these movies accomplish. But then, at the same time, it's a question of opinion, different opinions. Kids are fluent in speaking, but then some of the things come up with this pop culture and pop music and pop things.

PS: So, pop culture.

NG: It's not my bag. I'm just not a big fan of—don't get me wrong, I do like Indian films, some of the films that come out. Like all the movies of Satyajit Ray, I have watched each and every one of them. Any of those kind. But these traditional so-called “run of the mill” films, I just can't stand them.

PS: And there are a lot of those coming out of India, aren't there?

NG: Oh, yes, the highest-producing country. And the movies are going all over the world, and they really—before, Japan used to be the number-one producing. Now India is the number one.

PS: Makes you so proud, doesn't it? [Laughter]

NG: Oh, yeah.

PS: Any other big changes that you saw in the school over the years? My sense is that the children who started there were the kids who were the offspring of people who came here in the fifties and sixties, and then as time went by, were there children, like grandchildren or new immigrants' children? How did the population of who was coming change, were there some kids who were actually born in India, when they were three or four, and came here and then—

NG: No, most of the kids were born here. Just the new people who came to Minnesota, they heard about it and they brought the children, but mostly they were born here, most of the kids. There were some families whose children were born in India, but not too many. No, there is no difference. Later on, maybe kids were a little more prepared, because now they're exposed more than other kids were in those days to Indian culture.

PS: Do you know who the students are these days, or you haven't been involved in that?

NG: I haven't been, so I just don't know much about it.

PS: Tell me about your hopes or dreams for SILC in the future. Where do you see the school going? Is it going to be here thirty-five years from now, still?

NG: I really wish, because that's what I wrote in my letter in SILC's twentieth year, that I want SILC to be there for my grandchildren, and that's the wish of my daughter too. That I like. And you know, I really like SILC's—which I have already spoken to quite a few people a few years back, also, that we need to change as the need arises. Right now, the needs are different, and we have to change accordingly.

We need to change as the needs have changed. When I'm saying "need," what I mean is my daughter, when she is raising her child, she is American, she knows the culture, whatever she has picked up. She's not full strength. So if we somehow fulfill their desires or their needs, in the sense, come up with the programs. For example, right now, we already have cooking in SILC, but it's just for the part of the children's curriculum. But if you can have cooking for these mothers, new mothers, or some cultural activities for them and their children together, really traditional Indian things. So some of those ideas, if we can incorporate and make it so viable, that these people can put it in their life, everyday life, and learn something from it.

PS: Does anybody at SILC school right now share that vision with you?

NG: You know, lately, I haven't talked with anybody. We talked for some time back when I was there, but, no, I haven't talked to—but we have been discussing that there. Everybody at SILC knows that we have to change as the time changes. Some of the things that they taught and they started on the Saturday, the whole idea was to incorporate parents of Indian children's children. But somehow, changing to Saturday, that didn't help. None of the kids—I mean, there were very few kids who came on Saturday. The idea, before, we always had SILC on Sunday because for Indian parents, that worked better, and Saturdays, as it is, there are morning a lot of activities for children anyway. So, no, so I don't know. I don't know if I answered that question.

PS: Yes, you're doing fine. Let's talk a little bit about the special events that SILC was involved with. You said the Festival of Nations and you did some Culture Days and you did the India Day.

NG: I think that was the real highlight, I tell you. Through SILC and with combination of India Association—see, I was at the same time involved in both. When we revived India Association, for the first two years, Mr. Zeke Stanick was president and I was vice president then, and that was another reason at SILC at the time I didn't take any position. First few years, I just didn't want to get into any position, because I really wanted to see SILC grow. From a distance, I wanted to see how it was growing, kind of. I'm sorry, what was your question?

PS: I don't know. [Laughter] Tell me about special events, like the festivals.

NG: I think that was the first year, when Bharat School came to be, and India Association revived, and the very first year, Festival of Nations, we took part. I think that Dr. Menon took charge of that. I don't think India Association did; SILC did. And I was in charge of exhibits and entertainment, and he was in charge of the cafe and bazaar. There are four different entities that you can take part in, in the Festival of Nations. So we did that. And then, too, India Association consecutively then took charge of that. And I was the new chair for Festival of Nations for, I don't know, fifteen years or something.

PS: Wow, a long time.

NG: I think, what we did—see, when we started out, none of us knew how to do anything. I mean, really.

PS: You don't give yourself enough credit.

NG: No, really. I mean, Festival of Nations was a big undertaking. The first few years, we cooked meals ourselves. Some people pulled the skin off the chicken and really cooked the chicken. I mean, we worked hard the first few years. We worked so hard, and you barely came even, barely made a profit. And after that, we came up with good menus and rules for how to set up the kitchen, rules for volunteers, etc. Now we started getting a profit after expenses. I came up with all kinds of rules and regulations, what you wear and what you do. If you want, I can show you later on.

PS: We can contribute them to the history.

NG: We planned that when you have a volunteer in the cafe, you need only nine people: two or three in the front, one or two making mango milkshakes, two people right in the window serving up, one person on the chicken, and one or two people, I don't know if we designated nine or not, but nine people total. In those days, we used to fry *samosas*. So doing *samosas*. And *papad*. Later on we added that. But the point was, the whole thing, it took time to establish all that. And that was Festival of Nations.

Then at the same time, through India Association, in those days, we used help the Children's Home Society. Every year we organized a culture day for the family. I coordinated with CHS for maybe 10 years. One year I coordinated a seminar on ten different topics.

PS: That was for adopted children?

NG: Adopted children. Children's Home Society's program. I did that quite a few years, too, but one program that I coordinated I was very proud of, it was ten-week seminars, on all different topics. I would get the right person for the discussion group, like Indian family system, Indian costumes, or Indian traditions and religion or whatever the topics were. And we had a ten-week program, and we had all different groups of speakers come in and discussion, and then we had

our last seminar with all the people like us and our children, family discussion, and people can ask kids or us any questions. And that was the most lively discussion, because what we said and what our children answered was quite different.

PS: Really? Give me a couple of examples.

NG: Just simple things, like, you know, a certain style of clothing or something, how to wear or what to wear. We will go really traditional and Lisa will go with what's latest now, you know, kind of thing.

PS: American fashion.

NG: No, Indian fashion. See, another good thing happened with this, when I was so involved in all kinds of things, Lisa was there in every activity. See, when we did the Festival of Nations, you know, sari-draping and bindhis and Mahendi handpainting, she and some other girls of her age, they were all there, always, you know, doing things. And then there was Children's Home Society, and at SILC was, you know, the Festival of Nations was part of it. And a few years later, not in the beginning, then we started helping parents of Indian children by having a culture camp, or culture day, one day at a day camp. So that's another activity.

But I have to tell you one thing. When I worked with Children's Home Society and all these young parents adopted a child like either six months or four months or whatever, I used to know them by name at that time, and had a personal relationship, in the sense, knowing them, each other. One day, just the last year my brothers were visiting us and we were at Mall of America. You know, there is one eating place. We were sitting on the terrace for dinner. I don't know if you know Miriam Weinstein.

PS: Yes.

NG: Okay. Her daughter, older one, what's her name? Rita—not Rita.

PS: Asha?

NG: No. Her name is some very short—Rita. Anyway, she has two daughters. They were just walking by, and Rita saw me from a distance and tells her, "Mom, Mom, Auntie, Auntie." Oh, I was so thrilled. I mean, I was so happy that she remembers and connects me like an auntie, you know.

PS: Oh, how sweet.

NG: Actually, her second daughter, too, when she was going to be adopt, we were talking and she said, "Oh, I would love it, when you go to India, you can bring my daughter."

PS: So did you?

NG: No, I didn't. It somehow did work out to bring her back, but somehow it did work and she had somebody, stewardesses, bringing her daughter there. But I know quite a few of these parents, when they come to Festival of India at India Association, we still have a fun time talking to each other.

PS: So you kind of adopted all these adoptive parents.

NG: Oh, gosh. Yes, it was really rewarding.

PS: Tell me about the displays at the Festival of Nations. How did you come up with what to display? Out of all the things that you could put in the displays, the cultural exhibits and so on, how did you pick which one was the right one for that year?

NG: First few years, we put up our own ideas, like Indian costumes, musical instruments, Indian cuisine, etc. But then, Festival of Nations used to come up with a theme, a theme for the year and we went along with that. A couple of times we won first prize.

PS: Like what? What would some examples be?

NG: Like one year we had all Indian arts and crafts, and you know, brass work and all that. And one year was all musical instruments, then one year was Indian cuisine, so we really went out of our way of putting up all that stuff, with subtitles and descriptions of everything. Then one year we had Gandhi, you know that movie came out, so we did that.

PS: There was a theme at the Festival of Nations?

NG: No, we did that.

PS: That was yours, okay.

NG: That was our theme. And then we had 200 years of United States, at that time, Statue of Liberty, we did that, and we put a sari on the Statue of Liberty. [Laughter] I have all those pictures to show you.

PS: Oh, that's great.

NG: So all those different things. And many times the wedding theme came up. Two times, when I was still involved. Two times the wedding theme came up. First time when wedding theme came, we made these four pillars, you know, of a *mandap*, it's called, a canopy. And we created the whole thing around, and that *mandap*, over the years, in actual people's weddings was used.

PS: Just because it existed?

NG: Because it existed. And there was nothing else available that year.

PS: That's great.

NG: Actually, my own cousin got married in that *mandap*. That wedding took place in the Twin Cities. So quite a few weddings it went to, and it's still somewhere, somebody's house now, I don't know where it is.

PS: But if the wedding theme comes around again, you know where to find it. When Festival of Nations would tell you the theme, did you have any difficulty coming up with how to illustrate that sometimes?

NG: I was the general chair, so it was my task every year to come up with the four people who are in it just for all those different tasks, so for quite a few years, Preethi [Mathur] was there, and she's very resourceful. Well, what we did initially, all these exhibits, I know this guy, India bazaar guy, who would pay for the bazaar to come to the—see, we used to give it to the highest bidder, whoever can pay India Club more can get the bazaar. Okay, the arrangement is, you get one place for the bazaar. Each ethnic group gets one spot.

PS: And you can sell things at the bazaar?

NG: Then you can sublet it. Because India Association needs revenue, so we sublet it. Now, this guy will pay the rent for three days. Before, it was only three days, then it became four days. And then he will put up whatever he wants to sell, and then not only will he pay them, but he'll give a predetermined amount to India Association. And then eventually, because I knew these people, we were able to rent three spots, three stores, and India Club would make a lot of money.

PS: Obviously.

NG: In the exhibits, in the very beginning years, as I was telling you earlier, most of us used things what we have. We never spent a dime on that, and that went for me and some other people who were involved. And then we would call people. "I heard you have so and so stuff, and this is our theme. Can we borrow from you?" That was quite a project, going to people's house, getting that thing, asking them how much it cost, cataloging that, how much money, and who did you get it from, and then returning it. So everything was laborious.

PS: Did any of it ever get stolen or wrecked or broken or anything?

NG: Lucky for us, most of the things were returned very carefully. You know, another thing, at Festival of Nations, you can buy the insurance there. And then they had a pretty good history of not ever having anything happen.

PS: So you have some wonderful memories.

NG: I think I forget so much.

PS: Some of it you maybe wanted to forget. [Laughter] Well, let's see. I'm at the end of my list of questions, unless there are other things that you want to tell me about.

NG: You mean you don't have any more questions for me?

PS: Oh, I know what else we were going to talk about. Tell me about your children being in SILC. So your children—Lisa, at least, was one of the first students, and Ketan, a little bit later, when he got old enough to go to school. Tell me about how they responded to being in school, and what was the good stuff, the hard stuff, and all of that.

NG: That was quite a challenge. First when I started SILC, or Bharat School first, Lisa was ten years old and Ketan was five years old, and, yes, the kids didn't want to be there. It was just, you were bringing them there. And then again, on top of it, I was the teacher. So it was very challenging. Once they got involved and then she somehow figured out there is no other way, I had to go every Sunday, and then it was okay, and then there were a couple more kids, too. But then somehow she got involved in a lot of activities, you know, being my first child, and I know I was a very strict mother initially, you know. And she did get into a lot of activities whether she wanted to or not.

PS: Like what sort of things?

NG: All related to the SILC and Festival of Nations activities, and performing for the Festival of Nations. And not only that. In those days, we used to go some places if somebody asked us, we'll go and demonstrate or perform. We were heavily involved with all the schools and nursery schools and cooking. So she really was in most of these things, taking part. Like, as I was telling you earlier, like sari-draping. We would drape for three days, different people coming different times. Then bindhi and mahendi.

And then Ketan came along, and Ketan, even though he didn't start at school, but he was there every time I went, because I didn't leave him home. I have a picture. He's just sitting there on one of the chairs. [Laughter] So he sort of grew up with SILC. And he was a little easier student than Lisa was. Ketan, from the beginning, was a very compliant kid, a very quiet kid and a concentrating kid, whereas Lisa always was active. Even as a child, she was very demanding and active.

PS: May she'll get a child just like her. [Laughter]

NG: [Laughter] I tell you. That would be off the record, that will be my ultimate revenge on her. She gave me such a hard time, she was a very challenging kid. She was active. She didn't break things or anything, but she had to have an activity every minute of the day. By the time Ram came home, I said, "She's all yours. I cannot do any more." But, yes, the children really got involved in all kinds of activities, and eventually they did like it. They knew, "This is it. Mother is going to go there every Sunday anyway," and they did take part in everything SILC did.

PS: Would you say that they became fluent in Gujarati?

NG: Lisa is pretty fluent.

PS: Reading and writing as well?

NG: We write Gujarati, but Ram and I, we both come from a part of the Gujarat called Kutch, and at home, we speak Kutchi, which is only a dialect. So Lisa was very fluent, but mixing up both languages, Kutchi and Gujarati. She wasn't very high on writing or reading as much, but she was very good in speaking. Whereas Ketan was the other way around. Being shy, he did not talk much but he would understand and could read and write better.

Whenever we went to India, Lisa will talk, even if her grammar isn't right and people laugh. Literally, they laugh at her. It didn't bother her. But Ketan won't open his mouth. Being shy, he knows he's not saying it right, so he won't talk, but he's good in reading and writing.

PS: How about the General Knowledge classes? Did they like that? Did they have you for a teacher there as well?

NG: No. General Knowledge there, I used to take a small kids class in General Knowledge. Ram took some older kids, and I think Ketan was once in his class. But there were some other teachers, too. And actually, I preferred that they at least go, in that, in a different teacher's class. Everybody in SILC, all the students, kids, they enjoyed General Knowledge, because there was discussion and there weren't hard and fast assignments, as such. You know, like Gujarati, we will give them.

PS: Did most of the students who were in the Gujarati class have parents who spoke Gujarati?

NG: Yes.

PS: So they could practice at home with their parents.

NG: Oh, yes.

PS: Did you give the parents assignments about how to help their children practice their Gujarati? They just spoke to them like they would.

NG: They'd just speak to them. No, there was no assignment for parents. It was understood that they would speak at home. But you know, one thing I noticed, somehow in Gujarati, even I'm guilty of that, we talk to our kids at home in English only, for some reason. Gujarati just never came. I mean, it does come, but I'm saying, it's not strictly Gujarati only.

PS: I know that in my family's background, that the parents didn't want their children to learn German, because when the parents wanted to have a private discussion, they could do it in front of the children in German and it wouldn't be understood. Do you think any of that was happening?

NG: No, it was nothing to do with that. We just got so used to English, you know, it was just, we'd say it in English.

PS: When your children would go to India with you on these trips, how do you think their SILC experience affected that?

NG: Oh, very much. SILC played a wonderful part. What they were, somewhat they learned at SILC. Actually, whenever they went back home, they even felt themselves, like Lisa and Ketan, that they knew more than the kids right over there.

PS: Oh, really?

NG: The reason is, I went to Gujarati school, and all the linguistic schools were very powerful in those days. Now all the parents want their children to go to English school only. The curriculum there is very different. Most of those English schools are religion based. I mean, religion is there also.

PS: But it's the Christian religion.

NG: Yes, Christian. Yes, it's Catholic. So whenever my children went there, they felt themselves they were different and they knew more than the kids over there sometimes. No, I don't mean more curriculum-wise, you know, the total history of India, but the heart of the culture, they knew more than the kids over there. [The tendency over time is to accept Western ways.]

Over there what is happening is, they want to really copy the West, with popular culture. You know, with movies and the fashions, and they want to get away from Indian culture, and this trend is for a long time. It's not just a new trend. Whereas when our children go from here to there, they feel what they expected from us, how they're supposed to do there, and they do that,

because they are in India and they don't want to hurt anybody's feelings. And they try to fit in. Like my children both, when they went there, they really fit in so well, in the situation.

Like in the beginning, my parents still lived in the house I grew up in, which was only two rooms. They go there, and especially Lisa, Ketan was still young, she will fit into anything. She will speak fluently, and she just becomes one of those kids there. And that made me proud, and Ketan also, when he grew up, but by then my parents had moved to a better place, so it was slightly different. But they go there and they just mix in.

I'll give you one example. We went to one, this particular wedding on Ram's side and I had both my children. This was the first wedding in that house. I mean, after Ram and his siblings got married, this was the first wedding, their kids' wedding. In Bombay, somebody's flat was empty, you know, somebody wasn't there for a while, so they thought they would keep that flat for us to go at night and sleep and have our own private space.

And here we were there and they told us, and Lisa said, "Why do we have to go there? Why can't we stay right where everybody is? Because I don't want to go away from here." So in this huge hall, everybody gets their own bed and sleeps right there. That was okay for her. So what my point is, my children really tried hard just to be one of the Indians, and they didn't demand, "Oh, I have to have this or I have to have that." They just got along with everyone.

PS: What a gift.

NG: I will tell, if you are in Rome, do like Romans do. We are going there not to see how bad it is, we are going to see your grandparents, and you have to comply and you have to be happy and keep them happy. You know, be just one of them.

PS: So you taught them those values here at home as well.

NG: Yes, I mean, that's not why we are going there, to criticize how the Indian conditions are. We are going to see our family, and that's the most important thing, than, "I can't have this and I can't have that."

PS: Did your whole family go when you went back to India for those visits, all four of you?

NG: Well, what I did, I took them for a longer time. In those days, I went for four or three months. What I used to do with their school was to talk to them ahead of time, and in those days, they didn't say no. So I'd have the curriculum and all the work, week by week, what they're supposed to finish, I'd take it with me.

PS: And they could do that?

NG: Yes. What my point is, there wasn't as much they missed and I did keep every day a regimen, that, one hour read this work and go over whatever you have, so it's not too much burden, two, three hours or something, but we kept one hour every day and they finished. When they came back, they weren't behind. And actually, teachers were happy, because they are bringing new experience. So I did stay. So those are formative years for them to stay there, and they were still young enough and they learned how to stay there also.

PS: Now you talk yet about India as home.

NG: I still do.

PS: It still feels like home to you?

NG: Last few years, there's somewhat a change in my mind. I'm coming to, like, terms, this is my home. But until quite long, yes, to me, home was India.

PS: When did you become a citizen of the United States?

NG: It would be less than ten years now. I wasn't a citizen—that was another big deal at Festival of Nations.

PS: Tell me about that.

NG: Well, when this woman named Michelin Raymond, who is in charge of Festival of Nations was, until last year—conducting the whole Festival of Nations, and she found out that I'm finally going to be a citizen, and it happened on the Festival of Nations time. So at Civic Center—at that time, they still called it the Civic Center—so she came specially down there to attend the ceremony.

Before that, the funny thing happened, when I went for the questions, you know, at Bloomington office, the woman who was talking to me, and for something she asked, and I said, "Oh, do you know Michelin Raymond?" She said, "Yes, that's my mother." And she was supposed to ask me all kinds of questions. And then Michelin came down there when I swore in, and so it was kind of funny and good.

PS: And don't they now have part of that ceremony at the Festival of Nations, is the swearing-in of new citizens? Isn't that part of the celebration?

NG: Yes, just one day they do that. But see, your number doesn't mean it will be there. It will be any day. And mine coincided on that day, the Festival of Nations.

PS: Well, we have probably ten minutes left on the tape. We don't have to fill it up, but if there's anything else that you would like to share, go ahead. The floor is yours.

NG: No, you ask. I can't think of anything.

PS: I kind of ran out of questions here. I think we've covered everything pretty well.

NG: Well, overall, I really feel good about what I got involved in, I really don't feel that I did everything I could, but still, it was a good start.

PS: And it's still going on.

NG: And it's still going on, and the way I see the community now, it's so firmly developed in all kinds of activities, all kinds of organizations, and I remember still the days when we struggled to find the basic things like an Indian grocery. So it's really different now.

PS: Things change over time, don't they? And we change.

NG: We change.

PS: Okay. Well, thank you very much for taking time tonight. I appreciate it.

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