Rita Mustaphi Narrator

Polly Sonifer Interviewer

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PS: This is Polly Sonifer, interviewing Rita Mustaphi on April 3, 2000. Good evening, Rita. How are you tonight?

RM: I'm fine, thank you.

PS: Thanks for taking the time to talk with me this evening. So we're talking about the SILC [School of India for Languages and Culture] school tonight. First of all, tell me a little bit about yourself. Tell me your full name, your current age, and your Indian language.

RM: My full name is Rita Mitra Mustaphi. In Bengali, we say it "Rita Mitra Mustaphi." My age is 50. And what was the other question? My language is Bengali.

PS: And you were born in Calcutta?

RM: I was born in Calcutta, India.

PS: And how did you come to live in the United States?

RM: It was an arranged marriage. I got married in 1970 and my husband, he finished his schooling in India, in Calcutta. He did an electrical engineering master's [degree] from this university called Jadapur University. Then he moved to—he taught at Jadapur University for a few years, then he went to London. He studied at Bradford University there, did another master's, and then he came to work at Westinghouse Corporation in New Jersey, and that was 1969. And then he went to India to get married, and we got married and came.

PS: So had you met him before the marriage was arranged?

RM: No, no. My sister—well, we call all our cousins sisters. You know, she's my cousin. But she came to London on a Commonwealth scholarship to study chemistry, and she was married. And in our culture, everybody keeps their eyes open for a suitable match, and she found my husband in London, at some party, and she asked him whether he was thinking about getting married soon, and that's how it all started.

And so she collected all the data and she sent it to my father and said, you know, I think this is a suitable match, and my father sort of like went to their house, talked to his mother, his family. And it took about six, seven months of going back and forth. And his family, they're very nice and they all said that, well, no matter how much we like you when we meet you, the final decision is his.

So when he went to India, that's when he came to our house, we met in a room full of people, for about a couple of hours, maximum, and then they went back and they said yes, we would like this thing to go on. So because of our immigration condition, you know, he was a green card holder, and in those days it was very easy. You apply and you get it. So the first thing happened was our registration, marriage registration. Before that, it was saving money. Because my parents didn't want me to even see him before something is documented. So that was done, and after that, for about two weeks, it was, we met and all that, and then we got married. So that's how it happened.

PS: So you moved here as a new bride?

RM: Yes.

PS: To Connecticut?

RM: To New Jersey.

PS: To New Jersey. I'm sorry, New Jersey. And then how did you end up coming to Minnesota?

RM: Well, he used to work for Westinghouse and then he changed his job to NSP [Northern States Power], and since then, in 1971, we're in Minnesota.

PS: And how was that, being in Minnesota?

RM: I love it. It's really nice. The seasons really attract me, you know, the definite changes. The cold—I wish there wasn't as much, although the last few years, it's been very mild. And also, the last few years, I have gone to India almost every winter, so I don't face that much cold. I love it here. It's really nice. And it's easy to raise kids. You know, what I hear from other friends, from other big cities, so I like that kind of living. And for me, as for my profession, this is an ideal situation. Artistically, I'm always inspired and challenged, and so that I need, and so it's really an optimal place to live.

PS: You came here in 1971. What was the Indian community in the Twin Cities like in 1971?

RM: Very small, very small.

PS: Like how many people?

RM: In those days, boy, I would say even more than 2,000 was a big number. At least that's what I felt in those days. And very little Indian activities used to happen. And when I first came—well, of course, we had—you know, your tendency is to meet with your own kind of people because of the language, and the cultural—I mean, like India is like many countries in one, so there are differences. And so you try to find another Calcutta in Minnesota, and that's exactly what we all did.

So we had a group of Bengali friends whom we used to meet with every weekend, because those days we didn't have kids. There were some other Bengali families that were living here, almost the same age group, same interests and everything. So then it was like finding the family people. You know, sort of, you make an extended family here, away from home. You make a home away from home

And you know, dance was always my passion and it sort of helped me to reach out and find other friends, out of Bengali community. And so I used to participate in all kinds of Bengali festivals. In Bengali culture, they say, you know, in twelve months, there are thirteen festivals going on, and for every festival, there is some kind of dance music. And I was very young, very enthusiastic, and everybody asked me to dance. I mean, that's not just here. From my childhood, everybody said, "Whenever we ask you to dance, you dance," and that's what I did.

And apparently, in those days, some of the Bengalis brought friends who are non-Indians, and non-Bengalis, too, in those festivals, so they started talking to me, that, why don't you teach my child, or why don't you perform this place, that place? And teaching was like—I, myself, was a student at that time. I didn't know how to teach. But it was like, the students taught me how to teach. You know, the children taught me. And I love kids, and so that helped me learn how to teach.

And then, some of the non-Indian friends who were involved in various artistic organizations, or art organizations, sort of told me the options that I might have, where I could reach out to an even larger crowd, and that slowly grew. This was what helped in those days.

But the Indian community was very small. The food. Boy, we used to—for special spices, we used to get them mail order from New York or Chicago. There were no Indian grocery stores here. Clothing. Well, in New Jersey we used to go to these sari shops, where you could buy them. Here, there wasn't anything. It used to be, like traveling salespeople used to come and sell, but for anything that's Indian that you wanted to buy, we had to go to other cities to do that, or mail order. So we came a long way to what it is now.

PS: Things have changed. So 1971, here you are, this young bride, living in Minnesota, and it's cold some of the time, and you're being asked to come and dance at all these festivals and celebrations. And when did you have your children?

RM: I got married in 1970. My first daughter, Raka, was born in 1974, November 30, here in Minnesota. She was in St. Mary's Hospital. We used to live on Portland Avenue, 46th and Portland, in south Minneapolis. And then we moved to Crystal, another house, which is 3300 Brunswick Avenue, in Crystal. And there my second daughter was born in 1981, June 10. Her name is Semonti Mustaphi. And then we moved here about ten years ago, to this location here. Both of those daughters are grown up now.

PS: And the SILC school, tell me how that came to be and how you got involved with it.

RM: Again, thinking about SILC school is going back to my performing everywhere, dancing. And this gentleman, Mr. Menon, KPS Menon, and Neena Gada, those two individuals talked to me and said, "This is a wonderful, wonderful art and there's a tremendous need in the community. Why don't you come and teach? We are thinking of opening a school for our own children." And that time, my daughter was three years old. She was born in 1974, so this is the perfect time. I was thinking of some way she can have friends and also learn other things and I can help teach.

And so it was an outlet for me because before she was born, I worked a little bit, not much, and so I was at home. And that was my dream, I wanted to just raise her the perfect way. I was doing all that and so now it was that—that, I mean, it's like everything fell in its own place. It was very good timing for me to join SILC, so when they requested, I thought, that's such a noble cause. And that it—even today, it's a very unique kind of school in the whole United States. So I'm very, very honored that I had the opportunity to start with the founding members. And I still remember the five housewives had their vision towards doing this and that's what happened.

PS: Who were those five women?

RM: Neena Gada, Shanti Shah, Ranjan Patel, me, and who's the fifth one? Rijuta Pathre, I think.

PS: And how was it that you five women had the vision or the courage or the guts to start a school, which I would think would, in India, have been kind of a male endeavor?

RM: Well, here, in a way, it is, too, because Mr. Menon, KPS Menon, he's the one who, I think, it was his dream at the beginning, and then he saw all this potential that this community has, and he sort of strung all of us together into this garland, I would say. And so once he proposed the view of, this is going to be, that's what he would like to do, and named it Bharat School. I still remember it was in the basement of his house, we had the meeting. I never felt scared or anything. It was natural for you to do, you know, something that you know best.

And at that time, that's the only thing I knew, so it was only natural for my own need to do this, because my daughter needed that. So it was a very selfish reason to start with, but then, once I got involved, and you know, like I said, I love children, it just grew and grew. And you become so innovative, you know, how to teach these children. I mean, now I know it was more of my

personal need to be involved with SILC, but now I'm glad I did, because it's a responsibility that we all must do, any immigrant from any country. So yes, I think Menon was very instrumental to start all of us together into that track.

PS: Did he go on being involved?

RM: No. He started, I believe, a couple of years later, there was some disagreement about the using of funds, and I didn't get too much involved in that. From day one, I was thinking, it's so wonderful to have a school which is very voluntary on everybody's part, and it was going wonderfully, and then I heard things like, you know, fund management wasn't going right. Something was done without—the idea was for it to be nonprofit, but apparently it didn't go that way, and then the whole thing changed. I guess his power was taken away, which was unfortunate, but at that time, that probably was the right thing to do. The school and his vision and everything stayed, but it was renamed and went on a different track. From then on, it became SILC, from Bharat School to SILC.

PS: So what does "Bharat" mean?

RM: Bharat is the name of India, in Hindi language. It comes from Sanskrit.

PS: And how did you choose the name "SILC?"

RM: SILC, School of India for Languages and Culture, that's exactly what they are doing. I mean, their mission statement sort of said it, you know, what are you teaching, and that is, they're very big on languages, and general knowledge and cooking and dancing, and culture. I don't recall exactly who gave it that name, but it was, all of us gave our input into the name.

PS: Do you remember some of the other things that you considered?

RM: Not really. I don't know how the exchange happened, but from Bharat it turned to SILC. No, I was never involved in that name-changing process.

PS: So your involvement was in what capacity?

RM: In dance. Whatever needed to be done with dance. At that time, I was teaching folk dances of some parts of India, contemporary dance from West Bengal, and that's called Tagore style of dance. Kathak dance, which I learned, and also Manipuri dance. So all these four styles of dancing I was teaching, to boys and girls. And they were performing at places like Festival of Nations. What it is today is Festival of India, that India Association celebrates in those days, you know, that festival. Or wherever there are anything—Diwali festivals every year, so the children—and in those days, I used to perform with them. I was the dancer from India and they are trained here by me. Some of them are young students, but some of them are very close to our age, too, so it was fun to work together and do something.

PS: And the style of dance that you studied when you were a young girl, what was that style?

RM: Well, when I first started—well, it's a long story. I had this disease called rickets, which was like a bone degeneration disease. My childhood, my babyhood was like, I was born premature, two and a half pounds, so a lot of TLC [tender loving care] was given, and then I had this disease. The pediatrician told my father that I needed exercise, and so he noticed that we had this huge *almirah*, we call it, like, where you store clothes. It had these large mirrors and I used to stand there and move my hands and feet, and what could be better exercise than that? So that was sort of like a physical reason, I needed to do exercise, and that's how my father put me into dance.

Now in those days, I used to go to the local dance school where you learn everything—folk dance, classical dance, contemporary dance. So then the teacher noticed that there is something more that I need, and I have the capacity to grab on, so he told me to go to some special teachers, and they again told me to go to Rabindra Bharati University. It is the university of performing arts, in Calcutta, India, so I took courses there.

So eventually, I just grew from a very small dance school, through the—I became a graduate of Rabindra Bharati University, and then I got married. At Rabindra Bharati University, my major was Manipuri and Kathak, the two styles, although you had to do some folk dance, some Bharat Natyam, some Kathakali. And so after I got married, I sort of fell in love with Manipuri and Kathak, so I went back every—once in three years, and stayed an extended period of time in Calcutta to learn those two styles. And again, SILC was very much, forced me to do that, because I had to educate myself more, in order to teach more. So this was an incentive that sent me to India to learn more. And that time, I found an excellent teacher in both of those subjects.

PS: In India?

RM: In Calcutta, yes.

PS: And who was that?

RM: The Kathak teacher was, his name is Pandit Vijai Shankar, and the Manipuri teacher was, his name is Sree Khelendra Singh. So I studied under the guidance of those two teachers, and then I came here, and I sort of wanted to bring both of them here for touring and I couldn't afford to bring both, so I brought the Kathak teacher. And the more and more I was falling in love with Kathak, going towards that direction, although I know Manipuri, and I have graduated through that.

I taught both of them, but later on, I noticed that Manipuri is very devotional in nature, what I learned, and it's a slow-moving dance, and at that time it wasn't—there is not much interest going on. They all wanted to learn the Kathak dance, which is a very glamorous dance. It has a

lot of rhythmic work, a lot of movements and stories, and a lot of complexities. And again, for the same need, I just went towards that. And then I said, well, why not go to the top guru, who still is, his name is Pandit Birju Maharaj. And it happened to be a chance meeting with him. He's the one who said to me, "Why don't you learn from me?"

PS: And he was teaching Kathak?

RM: He's a Kathak master, maestro, you know, in the whole world. He's a legendary master. And I told him, you know, "I have to ask my guru, who is Vijai Shankar." Apparently, Vijai Shankar is his student, so he said, "Well, Vijai Shankar is not going to mind because I am his teacher, and I would like to teach you, too." So that is like an honor for me. Here, people are dying to go to their master, and he is asking me to teach, so I wrote a long letter to my own guru, Vijai Shankar, asking for permission, and he said, "I feel very good that he has seen something in you and that I feel like I am responsible for creating that something in you that he has noticed that he wants to teach you."

So there was—very nicely, a transition happened. From then on I went to Pandit Birju Maharaj, to Delhi, learned from him, and till today, every opportunity I get, I learn from him, and he invites me. He's the one who gave me an opportunity to perform at Carnegie Hall, for India's independence celebration, fifty years of India's independence. It was a huge celebration at Carnegie Hall, and he asked me if I wanted to perform in his company, so that was a wonderful opportunity. A couple of years, I went to India to tour with him in their various international festivals in India. So I think, you know, he allowed me to take that big leap. So that's how it happened.

PS: Wow

RM: Yes, it's a huge story.

PS: So that was a wonderful opportunity for you. But all that came later?

RM: Yes. Till SILC school, you know, I was still with Vijai Shankar and Khelendra Singh, Kathak and Manipuri, and whatever I learned all my childhood and teenage years, I was teaching those to the SILC school children. And at that time, I think that was sufficient. They learned the introduction of Kathak, Manipuri, Tagore dances and folk dances, and so that was a good introduction to those children, who, till today when I see them, they are all young ladies and gentlemen, they go back to those days and talk about how wonderful it was, and how thankful they are that they got that opportunity to study the culture, the art, oftentimes, their parents didn't have, being in India. Some of those parents, they come from business families where they never had the opportunity to learn any art, even though they were born and brought up in India. So the parents also feel that they got introduced to this unique art form.

PS: So describe for me, as you remember it, the very first day that you had a classroom of little children at the school, and you're going to teach them. What was that first day like?

RM: Well, I still remember, my daughter was one of them, so it's like working with your daughter and her friends. And like I said, at that time, I, myself was a student, so I didn't know how to do anything. But here, I am a mother, so your motherly instinct worked, I guess. As much as I recall, there was like—we didn't stand up and dance much that first day. It was more like introduction, talking to each other, telling stories through your hands, asking them to tell stories, and sort of like getting acquainted.

The first day, not much standing up dancing happened, but a lot of story dances happened, and talking, and getting that first layer of, you know, not knowing each other, to break that wall. So that was the first day. And see, I think I enjoyed more being with other ladies who were in that house. Then it was in a house. Just being curious.

Even though we are all Indian, I feel oftentimes like I don't know them that much, because they speak different languages. Each of us has some little ties here and there, but a lot of it is not—I mean, it was very new to me, so I was curious to learn about them, they were curious to learn, and there was tremendous sharing and sort of like, we're all five sisters. You know, that kind of feelings started growing from the first day.

And, you know, something, it was just, especially Neena [Gada]. I mean, she's like a mentor to me. She's a very warm-hearted person, and makes you feel so comfortable, and that's what I felt quite a bit. Her daughter [Lisa] was one of the students, too, and she's the one who brought me to SILC, so it's like, any time I needed some guidance, here she was. So it was never like it felt alienated or foreign or anything. It was a very comfortable situation. But like I said, dancing happened sitting down.

PS: So when did you start then actually having them move around the room?

RM: Probably the second time, although it was a small space. I remember, we had to move chairs and tables to make space, and there was just a handful of children, not a lot. I would say, five, six kids at the beginning.

PS: And how old were they?

RM: They were under ten, and maybe one or two—not even teenagers, no. They were like ten, twelve years, maximum, but mostly six, seven, eight, these kinds of children. So very young children.

PS: And were they wearing regular American clothes or were they wearing Indian clothes?

RM: You know, I really don't recall what they were wearing. Probably Indian. I mean, my guess is—I used to dress my kid very Indian, in those days. Even, take today, they said, "You know, every Halloween we used to be an Indian princess." Exactly that day, I don't recall how the children were dressed, but my guess is, they were all Indian looking, because we all felt very comfortable and very, we know this, you know, that kind of thing. And every parent's goal was to Indianize their kids, so I'm sure they wore Indian clothes.

PS: Did they wear the Indian clothes the rest of the week when they went to school?

RM: My kid, she went to SILC before she went to regular—well, '79. No, she was going to regular school. She was going to Montessori school at that time. Even in Montessori school, she used to wear a lot of dresses. Not dresses from India, but just dresses. So it's a mixed kind of clothing. Oftentimes, dresses but—most of the time dresses, but oftentimes pants and things like that. But SILC school, not typical Indian clothes from India, but a lot of dresses. I still remember kids used to come with the frilly dresses, in the dance classroom. Especially now in dance, we have a lot of twirling, and I remember parents used to watch, and their joy as the kid twirls and the dress flies out, so that I recall, the kids coming in dresses. Or *quarta pajama* we call it, the traditional Indian outfit.

PS: And you said you had boys and girls both in your class?

RM: Yes.

PS: Typically, boys, traditionally, don't dance in India.

RM: They don't dance, but there's—

PS: So how was that?

RM: Well, dance was never mandatory. It was voluntary, but there were some boys, I remember, Aparna Ganguli, a friend of ours, a very close friend, she has two boys and one girl. And she always wanted her boys to dance. And then there is Godan Nambudiripad, who has sons, and those boys—the parents encourage the children to participate in dance and kids did it, so those boys were with me for a long time, even though past, you know, in their teenage years, they were still dancing.

And Lisa [Gada]'s brother, Ketan, was dancing and Shanti Shah's son was dancing. There were quite a few boys in those days. And I guess the Gujarati families, you know, Neena Gada, Shanti Shah, they have dance in their culture. They have *dandia-raas* and *garba* that they do in their traditional lifestyle, so the boys are used to some kind of movement, some dancing, so they were not afraid. And Bengali boys, I sort of grabbed them, because in our festivals, in our programs, I needed some boys and I told the mothers, we have to have them, those are the only two boys.

And so sort of then on, they were doing it, and I guess they didn't realize that they're boys and they're dancing.

PS: If you don't know you're breaking the rule, it doesn't matter.

RM: No, it doesn't matter. So that's how it happened.

PS: So what were some of the stories? The Kathak dancing is kind of like acting out stories, right?

RM: Stories, yes. It's storytellers' dance.

PS: So what are some of these stories that you had them dance out?

RM: Well, in those days—Kathak started 2,000 years ago, in Hindu temples, and this group of storytellers that used to, dancer actors, they used to travel from villages to villages to religious festivals and tell stories. And they used to tell stories by the use of hand gestures, facial expressions, movements, singing, you know, music, and so that's what I wanted to do is teach the students the usual stories that we learned.

So I taught the children the same stories that I learned from the Hindu epic. You know, stories of Ramayana, stories of Lord Krishna, and some of the stories that they already know, learning from the legends and myths of Indian culture. Enacting those stories, how to tell those stories, so that was my major thing in those days. And also a lot of the songs tell the stories, so you sort of enact them with the gestures, and that's what I taught.

PS: And what language are those songs or stories sung in?

RM: The Tagore songs were in Bengali and the Kathak songs are mostly in Hindi or Urdu, or it's called Brij Bhasa, one of the almost extinct languages of India, northern India.

PS: And did you speak all those languages?

RM: I speak Bengali only, but I can understand Hindi and Brij Bhasa, but I do not understand Urdu.

PS: So how would you find out what those songs and stories meant?

RM: Well, oftentimes I asked the scholars of those languages to tell me the meaning of this song, because I can create the movements when I know the meanings, so oftentimes that's what happened.

PS: And just for the fun of it, tell me just the plot line of a typical story that you would learn about.

RM: A simple story like Lord Krishna's achievement. Most of the stories were created oftentimes to teach a moral to a group of people. Do this and it will bring you a good life. Don't do this, it's bad, it's evil to do. So those days, not everybody used to read and write, so a lot of time, these stories are teaching people how to live a good life.

So this one story was like, in one place, this group of people used to worship one of the gods, Lord Indra, and Lord Krishna came and said, "Why do you always worship this god? Why don't you worship this mountain?" And the people said, "Yes, the mountain is always giving us shelter from all these thunderstorms and everything and we should do that." So they started worshipping the mountain and that made Indra very furious that they stopped worshipping him.

And so he started having huge thunderstorms and floods and everything, people were dying. And people asked for help from Lord Krishna, so Lord Krishna picked up that mountain in his finger and held it as an umbrella to shelter all the people from all the thunderstorms, and even Indra came and said, "I'm sorry I did this out of my own ego. So forgive me," and all that. So there's a lesson to learn that, you know, nobody should be using their power and mind out of ego or anything. Everybody should be helping and sharing each other and live a happy life. So these kinds of stories.

And then there is another story where Little Krishna stole butter from Mother's kitchen. You know, I mean, he loves butter. It's not really butter. We call it "noni." It's sort of like if you boil milk down to a thickness, the cream floats on top. It's delicious to eat. And Krishna always loved it as a young child, and he was a mischievous character and all these milkmaids used to make this and keep it on top of the shelf. And here he loved this and he couldn't get it, so one day, he asked his friends to make steps, you know, lie down and sit down on top of each other. He walked on top of them and broke the pot, it's a clay pot, with his flute, and the butter came down and he shared with his friends, but he ate it. He made a mess out of it. I mean, he stole the butter, that's the thing.

So of course when the mother came and found all this, she was very angry and she was about to hit him and said—no, she didn't hit him, she said, "I'm going to tie you with this pole, there's a pole, with my belt, and you stay there all day. This is your punishment." It's a story of, of course, you did something wrong, you have to be punished for it. But Indian culture is such, you know, with the little children, there is always so much love and affection, that sort of overshadows a lot of the punishment. I mean, it is a punishment the child received by, say, getting the scolding from the mother, but doesn't have to be tied up.

So the story goes beautifully that every time she tried to tie him to the pole, and she's using her belt, the belt is always getting shorter. So the thing is, you can never tie God. God is not one person's property. You love, you share, and God is everywhere.

So there are a lot of dual messages, there are a lot of beautiful things. The mother's love for the child and the mischievousness of the child. You know, it's always, God is not someone way up there and you cannot reach him or her. It's always, in India, in Hindu culture, you bring him down to your level, whether it's a mother-child relationship, whether it's a lover's relationship, whether it's a father and son relationship, and deal with it as in actual life. So there's a lot that children needed to learn to grow up in those days.

PS: So when you hear these stories that were the lyrics of the songs—

RM: Explain the stories.

PS: Then you would just make up the steps that would go with it.

RM: Steps, movement, gestures. Oftentimes, we took just abstract music and created our own stories. That I do even today, when I go school to school. It's a craft that I know how to still tell stories. It doesn't have to be epic stories. It can be any stories, stories of today's life. And that even we experimented with SILC's kids, that tell your story, so I will help you to—I'll teach you the alphabets of the movements and the rhythm and gestures, but then you tell your own story, and that happened, too, in those classes. A lot of quizzes. We'd play a game. You start one line of the story and at the end of that line, another person picks up. You know, charades kind of game, and through dance and movements, they used to do that. So it was fun.

PS: So how often would the kids actually perform a dance?

RM: The school was going on an academic school year, so Diwali was their first opportunity. Diwali and the India Day. All these fell around the same, September-October time. And then again in spring is the Festival of Nations. And then, Diwali time, not only Indian Association, but also all these pockets of Indian communities, their own Diwali celebrations were going on. So the children got to perform many different times, and oftentimes, from their own school the request used to come. I remember parents came at my home, ten o'clock at night, because the child lost the music and he needed the music for the kid to perform the next day. So they performed quite a bit on their own, and on to these programs.

PS: So a child all by themselves could perform a dance? They wouldn't have to do it as part of the group?

RM: Right. That's the way I taught them that, as a solo person, at his or her home, they can perform to show to somebody. That's always the case. I didn't want to restrict them to always have to be group or partners all the time, so that they cannot do the dance without a partner. So it was very individual dances. And believe me, in those days, I did huge performances, I realize. I look back and I sort of feel like how daring I was.

At Northrup Auditorium, we did a show. It is a 5,000-seat auditorium, this Northrup [at the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities], and it was jam-packed. It was presented by the India Association. In those days, they used to call it "India Club." I choreographed, I did the whole thing as a dance drama, and some of the SILC children were part of that stuff. So quite an achievement for being young children from SILC school, participating at Northrup Auditorium.

PS: What year was that?

RM: I think that was, I guess '79 or '80.

PS: So that would have been when SILC school was real new.

RM: Real young.

PS: And you were really young?

RM: I was really young, too. But I did a lot of leadership work back in India, even though I was in college and university, in dance. There was a lot of choreographing dance and individuals, so I had that experience with me, and so it was easy here.

PS: So you just stepped into this role? It was the most natural for you?

RM: It was just like, that's the only thing I can do. I mean, I have my bachelor's degree in physiology, and I have this degree of medical technology from here, I worked in a hospital, but didn't feel like that's where I belonged. Especially when I was expecting my child, I was working at Children's Hospital, and I had to assist the pathologist in the morgue. That's the last thing I wanted to do, so I quit, and since then I didn't go back. I never felt at home. You know, I did it.

The final thing is that when I was growing up, my parents were wealthy enough and we had a very comfortable life. In Calcutta, from ninth grade onward, you have to choose your line, like whether you're going to be a science major or arts or whatever and my mom used to say, "Oh, you are a girl. Just take arts classes and get married," and all that. And it was like a challenge to my mother that, no, I can study science and I can be a science major, too.

But my mom knew that I'm more artistically prone than science, but out of challenge I did physiology and I came out with flying colors and everything, and came here, did the medical technology. But my love, my passion, is dance and my father taught me how to play *sitar*, how to sing. I loved to do all these visual arts and folk arts like *rangoli* and *alpona* we call it, and hand painting and face painting. All those are just my love. God closes one door, opens another door.

So I became what my passion is, and tremendous support from my husband and my mother-in-law. I remember, after getting married, my father said, "Well, now you're married, you shouldn't dance in public." That's the thing to do in conservative Hindu culture. And dance is what I love to do and what I learned the best, and so I cried to my husband and he wrote a letter to my mother-in-law, and she was excellent. She used to write editorials in some Russian papers, or a Russian language paper, I believe.

So she called my father and said, "Why did you then let her learn dance if you're stopping her now?" So then my father said, "Okay, that's fine. If the in-laws' family accepts it, then it's fine." So then my mother-in-law used to write inspiring letters, "Do the dance." So it was like, there was no obstruction from any side, and a lot of encouragement, and from my husband, too. I think I'm one of the lucky people, a female from India, after marriage, continuing dance, even in this day and age.

PS: Of the young Indian women now that learn dance, why do they not continue? Is it that tradition carrying forth that you shouldn't dance after you're an adult?

RM: Very, very conservative families. It's not really even said, but it's just not expected that a married woman would perform in public, perform dance. Music, instrumental music, fine. But when it comes to dance, showing the different parts of your body, doing movements, oftentimes, very traditional people might not take it nicely.

But, you know, I think, in the last fifteen years, what I'm saying, that it's just breaking down so nicely. I mean, a lot of women are very, very talented artists, they're performing dance and their families are taking it. Although I have some friends who said they would never teach their daughters how to dance, although they themselves are dancers. They say that because the inlaws' families are not allowing her to dance. She said "How would I know whether my daughter's in-laws will allow them to dance? If not, they'll be just as frustrated as I am."

So these are both sides, but I see a lot of women who are married and managing family and dancing. It's hard. Male artists, it's easier. Not over dance. As an art form, to continue their art form. For female, it still is very hard, and there are all those taboos attached to it.

PS: I guess we have our own version of that here. All the little girls who take ballet and then don't become ballerinas. So as SILC school was unfolding then, you were making up songs and teaching these children to dance individual dances. What things did you learn about how to be an effective teacher of dance for the children, and what things did you try that didn't work, or what things did you try that did work? Tell me about how you learned to be a teacher of dance.

RM: I think, the first thing that comes is your integrity, whether you really want to do it or not. Because if I didn't have that passion, I could have easily missed classes. I didn't have to go to every weekend, to teach, but it's just, they pulled me so that I had to go. So there was that. To have a disciplined mind, that in order to teach them, I have to prepare myself.

I was a student at that time, so literally, I used to sit down with a pencil and paper and decide what to tell them, and I had a strict class. You know, written down, this has to go this, this, this, this way. And I remember, it was hard on me at times, when there was a performance coming up, this group of children has to perform, and some children wouldn't show up. And it was so hard on me, and I used to open—my house was always open. If they didn't show up, it was like, I have to teach them, somehow I have to bring them on stage. So I would ask them to come any time of the day or night, I will teach that part that they missed.

I mean, now that I look back, I must have had a lot of patience, you know, doing that. But the end result, you know, even today, I do that, too, at times. The end result, what I see on stage, that nothing matters, once I see that beautiful work.

But eventually I learned, I became strict, I learned to tell the parents, "It's not just work from my part and the children. There's a lot of commitment. A total parent-teacher relationship has to be created." And that I learned the hard way. Like I said, you know, oftentimes, children didn't come. It is time for the performance, we are all there, but some children didn't show up. The parents usually got the notion that they have to commit themselves in order to have a part in their children's artistic life.

But, too, many times, they were overjoyed. Like I said, a lot of times they said they had never had the opportunity, and they just—even they said, you know, talking to their friends in other towns, they feel so lucky that in this town, this is here, the SILC school is here, and their children are getting this opportunity. Oftentimes in those days, a lot of small towns in the United States, where there were Indian communities, there were no opportunities. So they are just living in a hole where these parents felt, and I myself, as a mother, as a parent, felt the same way, that this is unique.

PS: Was there anybody else that taught Indian dance as well, or was it just you?

RM: I started first, and then my friend Ranee Ramaswamy, she started later on. At one time, we both used to teach. And I don't remember whether both of us stopped together, or one stopped earlier than the other. That I don't recall. But now, neither of us are there.

PS: So who's teaching dance?

RM: I don't know at this time who is teaching, because last year I know the dance sort of—somebody was coming from the community just to teach a dance so that they can perform in the Festival of Nations. It's no longer a whole-year thing. So I really don't know what the situation is now. I know they were looking for acting teachers, and just teachers of performing arts—music, dance, that kind of a thing. But I don't know whether they have a full-time thing. I would love to do that, but Saturdays I teach at the same time the SILC school goes on.

And now that the community is huge, more than 10,000 people in the community, I'm sure there are people who would love to do that, to teach at SILC school. And now that I am the artistic director of my own company, I have to be much more focused, because we now have national visibility and international visibility and I have to keep that going.

PS: How many years did you work with SILC?

RM: Total, I would say at least seven, eight years, I would say.

PS: And all of that was volunteer?

RM: Yes.

PS: And how many hours a week would you say, on average, did you put into it?

RM: Well, the classes were an hour and a half, maximum, but I remember I used to go early and come back late, so three, four, hours easily, I used to go, by the time I get out and to come back.

PS: And then your preparation time before the class?

RM: Before the class. Maybe a couple of hours every week. Not long.

PS: And then when it was time for some performance?

RM: Then there is no time limit. It just goes on. I mean, practices. Of course, the SILC school practices used to be more, like I said, people used to come to my home to learn their pieces. I would say easily it could go from four hours to ten, twelve hours a week.

PS: A lot of time to give. It's really your passion. When you first started out with SILC, what kind of a vision did you have for the teaching of the dance?

RM: I am, in those days, even now, I'm very purist in mind. I wanted them to learn the way I learned. And so there was no tape recorder allowed. You learned to count the rhythms, you learned to do the movements by counting and using your own mind, and because I did that, till today, I remember what I learned when I was ten years old. So giving them the tool to create your own, rather than depending on a machine, that's what I wanted to do for them. And every step, every movement, we had to write it down.

So that was something I noticed is, even among our own kids, is the cultural difference. Now these kids, I believe, they're bicultural children. And so they're so used to getting handouts. Nobody would bring a notebook and pencil to write, because they know whatever they need, they'll get a handout. So that was something that they had to get used to, bring their bag of

notebook, pencil. We wore Thai ankle bells. Some of them didn't have ankle bells. We call them *ghungru*.

So that was like, whatever I learned, exactly that way, I wanted to teach, because I believe in this, we call it *guru-sishya parampara*, is the teacher-student relationship, and that is not just, I teach them a technique and they learn, and then they go home and practice and perform. It's much more than that, it's like a *guru* is the teacher and she shows the disciple.

The discipleship, you know, even though I was myself, am a student here, I'm teaching these students, so I wanted them to have that, the feeling of discipleship, and how to respect. It's not just a thing, again, not just a thing to dance. They're teaching something more. The respect to your teacher, and they got the essence of it. Even today, when I see that Neena's daughter, you know, she comes and I can feel the warmth, the respect that's coming from her heart, so I think these things are more important to me.

Of course, the dance and the glamour and glitter were there, but when I saw from them the love and the respect, that was much—that's my vision. The kind of respect I give to my elders, I wanted those children to give to me, or any other elders, and so that was my vision.

PS: So it wasn't so much about teaching the dance, although that was part of it, but it was about teaching basic respect.

RM: Basic respect, and how to present yourself. You know, like my daughter, a few weeks ago, she was telling me—she is doing a Ph.D. in molecular biology at Stanford University—and she said, "Mom, you know, today I don't do dance, but I started in those days when SILC school was there and all that. It gave me something. I'm not afraid to go in front of a panel of members and present my paper, because I can present myself. I can be in front of an audience." And I think that says right there that dance gave her that self-respect and self-motivation and not to be afraid of a crowd, and be a leader and just show your talent.

PS: So it's poise and confidence, as well as respect and humility.

RM: Exactly, exactly. You learn to handle all those.

PS: That's something all of us need [Laughter] to develop. How did you see the school change and grow and evolve during the years? Did you see it shifting?

RM: Yes. I remember, when I started there, you know, like in Menon's basement or some other—we used to go from one house to another, at the very conception of the school, to, when I was teaching one year, there was like 100 students, a lot of students and a lot of energy, positive energy. At times, very chaotic conditions. Then I heard that, when I left, I heard that it sort of quieted down.

Maybe there's not much need in the community, or maybe the focus was going a different way, or maybe SILC needs to go through changes of its teaching syllabus, who they are teaching and what they need—like, even my daughter, when she grew up, she said, "I don't feel like going to SILC anymore because it's meant for younger kids." So then SILC started a program for older children. So I think it was evolving part for all of us, the teachers and the school and the students.

So SILC has gone through quite a bit of changes. I went to their celebration of, what was it, the twentieth year, and it was wonderful to see that a student who came out of SILC is now a teacher at SILC. I mean, that's what we all look forward to, that one generation gives it to the next, the next generation carries it on. So it was wonderful to see that.

And it grew so much. It used to be like each classroom was like a one—one family. The Bengali group and the Marathi group, the Hindi group. And now there's a lot of interplay going on among various groups, which is wonderful that they're, among the little groups, they're sharing. I think they did a play where parents and children got involved, the teachers and students did one play. So that's really nice to see one big thing done by all different groups, and the adults and the children. It's a lot of mixing. Not only multidisciplinary, multi-age group. SILC has gone through a lot of changes.

PS: What do you think brought that change about?

RM: The need in the community. Well, obviously, children need it, the students need it, and the parents needed to offer it and step back and see. And oftentimes, we are so much in it, we don't see what—we, oftentimes, the parents—you know, we were raised to do what our parents told us to do. Our tendency is to do the same thing to our kids, but the children here oftentimes tell you, "Leave me alone. I will do it all my way. This is one way I want to try it, and to challenge myself."

As a parent, you are always looking for a safer way the child can grow. So now the parents are learning to step back and let the child have a challenged life. And so it's a growing, learning experience for the parents, too, and I think that has sort of forced SILC, the direction it's going, that we have to change. I mean, even as much of Indianizing as we want to do to our children, SILC is at a point, it's a bicultural school. Not only children, adults come nowadays to learn a craft. Cooking or some—a non-Indian wants to marry an Indian, wants to learn the language, so these are wonderful resources that SILC has.

PS: So that's still going—adults coming?

RM: Yes. When we started, it was focused only for children, and now I noticed, you know—I mean, I get called from time to time, "Do you know anywhere I can—I am..." This non-Indian male is calling because he wants to learn Bengali language because he will be marrying a Bengali girl, and where can he learn it. So I referred him to SILC, so SILC is a wonderful

resource for serving not only the children population, but adults, too. And beyond the Indian community.

PS: When you started changing the curriculum to keep the attention of the teenagers, what did you shift or change to make it more relevant for the teens?

RM: Teens are very much into rhythm, so the more rhythmic things I can do, and the more interactive things, among the children, that they can interact with each other, then it's a more fun atmosphere, and that's what I went towards, rather than telling stories, which is so foreign to them, Indian stories. And it's nice as a folktale when they're very young, but when they grow up, they know all the folktales. They oftentimes cannot relate to those, because this happened thousands of years ago, so then you come down to what they understand, and that is rhythm and the music. Oftentimes we didn't use music that has lyrics, it's just instrumental music, a combination of jamming, that they can move around, they can feel comfortable. So that was where I went.

But I still, you know, my spine is Kathak dance, and so I never—I didn't want to get out of the Kathak repertoire, you know, Kathak vocabulary, so that I always wanted to keep it pure, but show that side of Kathak that is full of rhythm and full of pirouettes and very exciting things, that they feel comfortable with.

PS: Is Kathak dancing always done with the bells on your ankles?

RM: Yes, traditionally, yes. To do any classical dance of India, you have to wear ankle bells, to accentuate the rhythms. In olden, olden times, they used bells to gather an audience. You hear the bells and drumming and music, and audience will come to the temple.

PS: So the bells were used to draw a crowd, and that's just the traditional meaning of them?

RM: Yes. In those days, the bells and the drumming and music used to bring crowds, the audience, and later, in Hindu period, a lot of Kathak dancing happened even sitting down. The dancer has a *dupatta*—we call it a veil—that she oftentimes will tie on her head to act as the [male] hero. Oftentimes, she covers her head to act as a young woman going to fetch water, and oftentimes she would tie in around the stomach area to act as a belt—I mean, when she acts as a boy, she wears it as a belt. And all of these, the dancer is enacting some story lines through facial expressions and gestures.

So that time, rhythm was not as important, but later on, when the Muslim rulers came to the country and they patronized this art form and they brought in musicians and dancers together, and then they found out that there's so much they can do together with the music and dance, and then the rhythm became a big thing in Kathak dance. And whenever there is rhythm made, you need to use your feet to create the rhythm, the bells really helped to create the music. Oftentimes we say, "the talking feet," are with the bells.

PS: So is Kathak dance typically done in temples?

RM: No, that's the big difference between Kathak and Bharat Natyam or any other classical dance styles of India, Kathak started in the Hindu period in the temples, so there are typical Hindu dances in Kathak dance. And then since the Muslim rulers helped, you know, enriched it, there are typical Muslim dances, which were from the Muslim court period, the royal court period. So it has a Hindu period, it has a Muslim period, and that's the uniqueness of Kathak. No other dance style has been influenced by those Indo-Persian cultures.

PS: And what's the primary difference between the Hindu and the Muslim period, in terms of how it affected the dance?

RM: Hindu dances are very devotional in nature. A lot of the storytelling is affection and love, with God and me, whereas Muslim period is more for entertainment of human beings, you know, the king or the emperors. And so the stories became very down to earth, and a lot of it—the main emotion was love, and more love on a mature level of adult to adult, like husband and wife, or two lovers, that kind of thing. Children's love was there, too, but more of, from the spiritual love to human love, you know, that was in the Hindu and Muslim quite a bit. In the Hindu time, the rhythms and all that was very subdued. In the Muslim time, they are very flamboyant. So they are very different from each other, yet they're all performing the same dance.

PS: And to an untrained eye, who is not familiar with Indian dance, would they be able to tell the difference between the different styles of dance?

RM: Just looking straight, from the costume, a little bit, the Hindu costumes are all the way covered up, to your feet, you know, long skirt, for the female, and for the male, it's called a *dhooti*, it's wrapped around a fabric. And the female, what they wear is called *lahenga choli*. *Choli* is the blouse; *lahenga* is the long skirt with the *dupatta*, or the veil. Men wear a *dhooti* and that's it, you know, just a *dhooti*.

Whereas in the Muslim costume, they wear short dresses called *angrakha*, with a tight pant called *churidaar*, and again the veil of the *dupatta*. And for the male, it's called a *sherowani*, it's like a double-breasted shirt, with *churidaar*, the long pant. And also they tie, they call it *patta*, it's like, just a belt kind of thing. So from the costume you can see the differences, even for an untrained eye.

And dancing, you know, like I said, rhythms and no rhythms, you know, some obvious things from the devotional to non-devotional. That kind of thing. And the music. Somebody who knows anything about Indian language, they will see a lot of Sanskrit *sloka* or chanting kind of songs in Hindu dance, whereas, Muslim dances, they use typical classical—not Indian classical, but Hindusthani music, which is some of the music called *tarhana chumri*. *Chumri* is also Hindu.

But *ghazal* from the Urdu, that kind of thing comes, so that is different. But trained people, of course, can see a lot more differences.

And also I should mention the gestures. Kathak dance uses a lot of the gestures that we use in our everyday life. You know, like this means stop and anybody can understand, you know, two people enacting together, if one person goes like this and looks away, that I don't want any part of you. Very simple gestures were used that still are used in Kathak dance. It's not as, the vocabulary is very subtle, it's not given out completely and it's not very structured. It's a very fluid dance form and people can relate to it much more than some of the other styles.

PS: That's a lot. You obviously know your subject very well.

RM: Thank you.

PS: Did you ever serve on the board of SILC?

RM: I think one year, I think. I'm not absolutely sure. I've been on so many other boards. I think so, I think one year.

PS: Is there anything that you remember about being on the board?

RM: Oh, boy. See the thing is, I was so focused into dancing and dancing alone, not much attention I paid to other things, you know, so no, I don't remember.

PS: You don't remember anything. Okay, well then I won't ask any of those questions. Tell me about, from your perspective as a parent of your children, you obviously thought that the school was so important that you would devote a lot of time and energy to it, and you enrolled both of your daughters in the school?

RM: Yes, they both went to the school.

PS: What did you see or notice about them as they were students at the school?

RM: Simple things they learned and that, you know, in our culture we do that, they see—we make everybody a family, so when they see Neena Gada, it's "Neena Auntie," like you become part of these things. One thing that, it came to be an advantage for them. Say, for example, we are somewhere and they want to say—like you and me are talking and my daughter came, and there's something she wants to say about you to me and she does not want you to know what it means, she would go into the language, the Bengali language, and come tell me. So oftentimes I tease her that, you know, it really, going to SILC really helped you that you can communicate in another language, that kind of thing.

But the friendship grew. Again, the respect. I think it boils down to the respect. They have a very, a deeper feeling for the teachers that they learned from at SILC. They see those teachers, and I can see in their eyes, the respect level goes so high. I mean, there may be ten other Indians standing there, but two of those teachers, like they owe it to them, for what they learned from those teachers. So I think being part of SILC really helped them to grow, as who they are, what their role is the society in, and what they got and what they have to offer back. So I think that was, in the long run, that's what I see.

PS: And you had your daughters studying Bengali, right?

RM: Yes.

PS: And who was teaching the Bengali class?

RM: In those days, Aparna Ganguli and her husband, they taught Bengali classes.

PS: And did you speak Bengali with your children at home?

RM: Yes. Well, we had a rule. At dinnertime, no matter how much we'd speak English, at dinnertime, everybody has to speak in Bengali. So every dinner table, that was the rule. So at the beginning—I mean, every word has to be Bengali, and then we sort of said, "Okay, not every word, but it has to be mainly Bengali conversation." So we used to eat, and oftentimes it's this very quiet time, you know, there were quiet moments, and I used to think, what's going on. And they were thinking up their sentence.

But I am glad I forced them in those days, so they now know. At least they understand. Even now, it's hard for—I think, you know, it's so natural for us even to speak in English, so unless you make it a point that we have to speak in Bengali, it just doesn't happen. But I notice, if someone comes who comes straight from India who doesn't know that much English, my children speak to them in Bengali.

PS: And they're fluent?

RM: And they're fluent in it. So I think that's—they know the appropriate use at the proper time. You know, when it needs to be, they will be able to survive. So that, I think, is again, SILC helped. Of course, that's all part of our life anyway at home, but being at SILC, you know, they know how the alphabet looks. I think they forgot how to write nowadays, but at least both of them can read still.

PS: So they're two-thirds fluent.

RM: Two-thirds, yes. Exactly.

PS: Did you take your children on trips back to Calcutta?

RM: Oh, yes.

PS: And how often did you go?

RM: At the beginning, we used to go every three years, then every two years. Nowadays, I go every year, but they can't, with their school and college stuff. But yes, every two years they used to go.

PS: And how long would you stay?

RM: In those days, three, four months, each trip.

PS: Would that be during school or during the summer?

RM: During school. I even took my older daughter when she was in twelfth grade.

PS: And how did they do their schoolwork?

RM: Well, she was an exceptionally bright student at school, so she used to take homework back home, and come back, and still she's ahead of her class. It used to be like that. It never bothered their school, their academics. In fact, the teachers were all very supportive. They all gave them work like, come back with a written essay about your trip and do a presentation. So that was very good. Although my younger daughter, she went to Breck School. It's a college prep school, so a lot of work there. So she, towards the end, she didn't want to go to India. She said, "I cannot afford to miss that much school." But for my older one, like I said, twelfth grade, she went, and it didn't bother anything.

PS: And when you would go to India for those extended periods of time, what did you do during the time you were there?

RM: Just being with the family. I guess that—and when they were little, that's the only thing. We did go visit some other parts of India, instead of just being in Calcutta. When the kids grew up, we wanted to take them to Taj Mahal and other places. They enjoyed that as part of the big vacation.

But they loved it, because the lifestyle is so different over there. The door is always open. People come and visit without making you a telephone call. Half the time, the phone never worked there in those days. But you eat whenever you want to and big meals and everybody pampers you. I mean, they loved that. Oftentimes it happened that on our way back, none of them were talking, because they were so engrossed in thinking about them. They were missing there, even as they were coming back here.

But you know, they're children, so even children, they get used to, again, coming back to this thing. My older daughter's birthdays always were in India, when she was young. She's a November 30th baby, and wintertime we would go, so the big birthday party, that really helped her. And my older daughter was very close to my father, who passed away in 1991, and so that was—like, she used to go with a tape recorder to my father and ask about my childhood, so she has those even today, and those are treasures of my father's voice.

So yes, I mean, that's how it went. A lot of the time, I spent preparing their food, so it's germ-free, and boiling water and this or that, so it was a lot of work in that. And then taking them to places. You know, not only just relatives but to the zoo, or this or that. They enjoyed it. It was very educational for them and so it was nice.

And I'm glad they went, that now they know the extended family, who they are when we are talking about them. It's not just showing them in the album, you know, this is the person. They can relate to them. Even today, when we call, they talk to them. The only thing my younger daughter says, "Back home, the grandmas still think I'm ten years old, and here I'm eighteen." Because they, you know—in India also, until you are married, you are a child. That's the concept. So they all treat you like a child. And here, you know, you have to be independent in such a short time, so it's a big difference.

PS: When you would go back there, did you stay with your family or your in-laws?

RM: My in-laws' family. The reason is that the house was much more modern and the bathroom facilities and everything was easier for my kids. But I visited my family almost every day or every other day, and then stayed there for an extended period. I mean, like all day and evening, and come home, come to in-laws' family at nighttime. And they're only like five miles apart, so it's not much.

PS: That was not hard. So having your children studying Bengali, and then going to India and actually using it.

RM: Yes, yes, that was very helpful.

PS: Would you enroll them in school there at all?

RM: No. They never went to school there. But they used to, like, a private teacher used to come to my sister's, to teach them. My older daughter used to sit down with the teacher and write, you know, with a slate and chalk. So just learning from the teacher at home, they did that. And my sister-in-law is a school English teacher. She has like a class at home where several students come, and so my daughters used to sit with them to learn. So it was more of at-home tutorial, those kind of classes happened, and that they participated in, but not in a school.

PS: Did they have opportunities to dance while they were in India?

RM: Yes. My older daughter, she performed in a big auditorium and everything. Both of us together, we performed. Well, they learned dance, actually, they learned in India, too. To my teacher, Pandit Vijai Shankar, I took both of them. Like one year, we used to go at ten in the morning and come back at six o'clock or seven o'clock and all day, just to learn dance. She did that. The other one, she was very young, but was in the class with us. I mean, they really got into dance and music. I mean, while we had a recording done and they were in the recording studio for six hours or seven hours a day, so they really saw some professional work, and participated into that. They learned dance, performed, too.

PS: And they never sat there and said, "Gee, Mom, I'm bored."

RM: In the recording studio, yes. They had nothing to do there. I took their colored pens or pencils, because they didn't want to—you know, as much as they loved India and everything, they didn't want to stay home while I am not there. Because I am the most comfortable and closest to them, so wherever I go I need to take them. Sometimes my older daughter stayed, but the younger one never wanted to stay alone. So even though they are sitting there and coloring and bored and everything, they would still go with me.

PS: Just to be with you.

RM: Just to be with me, yes. So we used to go, and at lunchtime, when the artists are eating lunch I used to take her to the zoo or something, spend an hour and come back, you know, so that she has some good times. It was a lot of giving up on both of our sides, I guess.

PS: At a certain point, you said that your older daughter, especially, said, "This isn't for me anymore, I'm too old." At what point did she stop going to SILC?

RM: SILC, I would say, in her middle school years. Well, she went to SILC up to, she performed when she was going to—I wouldn't say middle school. When she went to high school, ninth grade, she didn't go to SILC.

PS: And so how was that for you? Were you still involved with teaching at that time?

RM: No, no. When she stopped, I stopped, too, although my younger daughter was going to SILC, but I wasn't teaching dance at that time. Then this school, things started.

PS: So did you see those two events being related, that your daughter didn't want to go anymore, and then you chose not to teach, or not really?

RM: No. My younger daughter was still going, but I think there were other teachers, too, who could teach, so then I didn't go. I sort of gradually shifted. Like from that time on, then I went

just to teach for the Festival of Nations. One piece, you know. And then stopped slowly, and then I had to devote more time to this [my own company], so it was very gradual.

PS: So you eased yourself out. And how was it not being involved with it anymore? Was there kind of a relief of having your own time back, or did you miss it in some way?

RM: I didn't miss it, simply because I got so much involved. This other organization I had to make it strong, so my whole passion went towards there. And the reason I also didn't miss it, because I saw other teachers in the community who can do justice to the SILC school, too. So it's not like I'm abandoning this to do this. It's like I found a suitable person who can take care of it.

I saw a lot of young talents who were in the situation when I was, you know, first starting SILC. And they needed an opportunity to show their talents and I guided a lot of those young artists, asked them to join SILC so that they can have a forum where they can show their talent. And they still talk about it, that, you know, you are the one who told me to go to SILC, and I'm glad they did, they followed that. So that was—like I found my replacement before I left.

PS: So you didn't have to feel guilty.

RM: No, no.

PS: And tell me about your dance company.

RM: Well, it's called Nritya Jyoti Dance Theater. I am one of the two founders of Nritya Jyoti. It started in 1987, and Ranee Ramaswamy and myself, we formed the company in those days. And '91, she got out of Nritya Jyoti, she formed her own company, and Nritya Jyoti is in its, what, '87 to now, so it's like in its twelfth year of existence.

It has done a tremendous job. We not only performed, we taught. We have a school going. We have a company and a school, and the company is like a twelve-member company that performs locally, nationally, and we hope to go to India. Hopefully, the end of this year. And the school has anywhere from twenty to forty students per session, so we have like five sessions a year.

We also do a culture camp, and that's very unique. Till last year, the children came eight in the morning till five o'clock and they were just immersed in Indian culture, mostly north Indian. Dance, music, storytelling, folk arts. Everything around they did. Making t-shirts and all kinds of things. And we appointed local artists to that summer culture camp, who shared their art. That's the time when SILC is not in session. It's just one week children get immersed into it, and they cooked and everything.

This year we are doing the summer camp where we named it "Dance, Music, Dance," so it's much more focused than doing all the art forms to dance and music and *tabla* drums, which are

only related to Indian classical dance, north Indian classical dance. We present in artists. We presented internationally famous dance companies from India, you know, my guru, Pandit Birju Maharaj, and his company. We presented him with the famous *tabla* maestro, Zakir Hussain. We presented south Indian classical dancer, Alarmel Valli, again, an internationally renowned artist. We presented young artists from India who are touring. We brought artists. Regularly we are bringing four or five artists a year to have an extended period of teaching and performing opportunities here, with our own students. Our students are getting to work with quality artists from India.

So yes, the organization is doing extremely well, and the board of directors is very, very devoted to the organization. We have a very nice board and also we are very fortunate, we got funding from McKnight Foundation, Jerome Foundation, St. Paul Companies, Campus Community Art Fund, Minnesota State Art School, so we are very happy.

PS: Tell me about the Festival of Nations. It sounds like you spent a lot of time and energy on those dances. Tell me about what that was like, preparing for them, doing the performances.

RM: Well, the Festival of Nations was just starting, I think, with the SILC school, and it was like, this note would come that the Festival of Nations is such and such days, the children have to enroll for it, and then prepare their dance. So it was everything geared toward the performance.

Well, whenever there's a performance coming up, you know, everybody gets very focused and that used to happen, which helped quite a bit. Then, you know, preparing for—I know, a lot of parents, there is the first thing, before even the dance started, is what they are going to wear. So it's like, I guess it's their own dream coming true, that they never did it and their children are doing it.

So it was wonderful working with the parents, also, to suggest, this is what I like to see. And they're so cooperative. No matter what it takes, they will get that thing going. Bringing the children and especially, I notice, some of the parents are so disciplined that when the rehearsal is going on, as human nature, you see another parent, you start talking and the noise level is so high, this parent is there all the time to move all the parents to the sitting area or whatever so that rehearsal can go on. I mean, everybody is very focused, too, that we have to do a great job.

And this patriotism, that India has to come out in the forefront, and that helped to push everybody's limits that it has to be that. And you see that, you know, driving the children from one rehearsal space to another, oftentimes we didn't have a huge space to work in. Then taking the children to the Festival of Nations, those people have to see what we are doing. Dressing them up for photo shoot, and finally, the performance on that day.

I always make sure that—which I had, too. Before you go on stage, you must have a rehearsal, and it's hard, oftentimes, because the parents are willing to do more lipstick and this and that, but no, the rehearsal must go on. I don't know how I did it, but I just pounded on, this thing has to

happen, do their thing, to come up on stage, and the parents were so wonderful. They always helped me, and afterwards, you can see the gratitude. Not only from the students, but the parents, that this is history that was made and they felt so good that, you know, I helped their children to go through that experience.

So a lot of time spent on the telephone, on the, you know, getting it right on space, planning, costume designing, I mean, everything from sets to costume to dance. Afterwards, you know, talking to them, photo-taking and whatnot. Again, I gained quite a bit from that.

PS: What was the main thing you got?

RM: The warmth is one thing. How to work with a group of people. The politics of it, what to do and what not to do.

PS: Say more about that.

RM: You hear a lot of things. You know, everybody wants their child to be in the front, that was the one thing. And I'm very—I'm a fanatic on choreography. To me, I like to see the total picture. And these children are dots that I'm moving around to create a picture. So it was oftentimes very difficult for the parent that this child is planted here for a particular reason. You know, there's a line forming.

So oftentimes, a roundabout way is to say to the parent that he or she is suited for that position, it is unique for him or her, even though it's a back line, because I'm forming this diagonal, and from there that person will come out to the front some time. But it's not always that any one dancer is going to be out front. So when I choreograph, I don't look at the faces, I look at these bodies moving.

So it was hard for the parents to accept, especially we are from the colonial age, you know, from that stage concept that everybody stands in a straight line and performs, rather than doing all these things. That's very new for the parents, too. And everybody wants to see their kids.

Another thing is lighting is oftentimes, if you want to do some theatrical thing and light plays a very important role, where the shape comes and all that. Sometimes those parents used to come to me that they are not seen—what's the use of using the costume if the children are not seen. So oftentimes, the face is not the main thing to be seen.

That was the main thing, public relations, is one thing I really learned from dealing with adults and children, and from the whole society. How to do positive criticism, how to be a leader, and not be offensive. Keep your modesty, yet get the job done. So that was the big thing I learned.

PS: Are there any particular events you remember, you know, some time when it all went wrong because something happened, and how you recovered at the last minute, or any stories you want to tell about the Festival of Nations?

RM: Festival of Nations. Timing is another thing. You know, in our culture, we don't look at the clock, so it's always late, late, late. And that oftentimes is very frustrating. I mean, even today, I don't allow my students to wear a watch in the classroom and I say, "Don't look at the clock" and all that, and I'm in that mental set-up, but oftentimes I have to, I mean, you have to be respectful for other people's time, too.

So that was one of the biggest frustrations. The students are about to go up on stage and we are missing a couple of children, they just literally ran and went to the stage. Then coming out, they're so, so late. They're supposed to come two hours before. So that was very frustrating.

I can still remember, many times it happened, and towards the end, I also learned how to handle it. I never used to give them the actual time they will be on stage, give them one hour before, so I know they will be there. If it is ten o'clock that they have to be on stage, I will say they have to be on stage at nine o'clock. I mean, so you learn how to—

PS: So then the late parents would show up at one minute to nine?

RM: Yes, one minute to nine, and still I have one hour of time. So there are a lot of—I mean, you grow up so fast. So that was my biggest dilemma there was time management. The disciplining. And another thing, you know, the children—here, the society, everybody moves so much and so you train one child so well, and that child moved. So again, you start all over from square one. So those are the things I noticed.

But always, I used to look forward to this group of students I'm going to get this year. I remember one year, there were all these teenagers who were very stuck-up teenagers who came, and it was like scary, you know, how to train them, how to teach them. But somehow, I guess, the key thing is to be open to them and listen to them and accept their view, then it was okay.

The teenagers, if I put my feet in their shoes, I oftentimes think, you know, what they think of us as parents. A lot of kids come from very conservative, very value-oriented, and like fifty years before, that kind of family, so for them you need to create a space in which they feel comfortable, they feel safe, they feel they can open up.

So even today, I have some students—I mean, they're no longer my students, they're adults, but they come to me to talk about their problems, which they don't do with their own parents. So I feel that this much I achieved, in their minds, I am safe, I am open to listen to them. And so we must have developed a very close relationship when I was teaching there. And so I think that is the achievement through all these challenges and of course, wonderful times, but there were a lot of challenges, too, we had to handle.

PS: What were the most, other than the time dilemma, what was the single most challenging thing that you ever encountered?

RM: Other than the time? Well, not much, because everything I had, whatever I was telling them, they were doing it. Costumes to makeup to flowers to what is related to dance.

PS: So other than not showing up on time, they were very compliant students?

RM: Yes, yes. I mean, student-wise, they were wonderful students. Some children didn't have much coordination and that's natural for them. They are not cut out to be a dancer. And oftentimes, it was hard on me. One of the biggest things I had is my expectation on my own kids, as SILC students, is you are a dancer—because they learned from me at home, privately, and here they're at SILC school, if they couldn't do anything, it was like a big blow on me, so that was a huge learning process for me.

And they used to tell me, "Mom, you didn't even teach me. How do you expect me to do this?" But it's my expectation for my child is, I know she can do it, why isn't she doing it? So it was very hard on me to accept. So that was one of the big challenges, is how to juggle, that they are students, they're children, yet my expectation from them is so high that they should be above everything.

PS: Because after all, their mom's a teacher and a dancer.

RM: Yes, and Mom is the teacher-dancer. Exactly, exactly. So that was another challenge at home front that I had to handle.

PS: Going back to the issue of time, the parents that you would tell them that the performance was at ten o'clock—or I mean, you'd tell them it was at nine, and it was really at ten. Did any of them ever figure out you were tricking them?

RM: Towards the end. They would show up and they'd say, you know, no matter how much you said it's getting delayed and all that. But that's a lesson to learn, you know, eventually they know what I'm addressing. So they learned to—

PS: So you never came right out and said right to their face—

RM: Well, later on, yes, I did say. I didn't mention anybody's name, but because I needed this one hour, and everybody's attention, I had to do that. And they were laughing about it because you open up the situation, but I always made sure that I don't cross boundaries, to insult anybody. And it's a very friendly way, and again, it boils down to what we are trying to achieve. So everybody understood that, so then they're happy. And they're joking, you know. The

husband says, "My wife was getting late," and the wife said the husband, or the kid. I mean, everybody—

PS: It was the kid's fault.

RM: Yes, it's just like that. But you know, SILC is like, mostly it's like a big family. Even today, I meet these teachers in a grocery store or anything, we still nostalgically talk about our days at SILC school. So we got so much out, in exchange of giving whatever we have given to the community. It's something that we hang on to, like those good old days.

PS: Are those five women that started SILC school, are they still what you count as friends, and you see regularly?

RM: Oh, yes. Very, very good friends. And oftentimes, we don't see each other that regularly, but at heart, whenever we see each other, we talk about SILC days. Again, spiritually, we are very much connected. Not always do we see them, but we see them at least two, three times a year, for sure. Or, like my older daughter will be getting married July 2, and so I'm sure we'll see all of them.

PS: So they'll all be invited?

RM: Yes.

PS: Of course. Tell me about, how is it that SILC school has been so successful for so many years, completely as a volunteer effort? What do you think is the magic—

RM: The essence?

PS: Yes, the essence of that.

RM: It is so unique, it's not just one community, like Maharashtra community teaching Maharashtra language. It is not content on religious activities, so it's very open to the whole community, whether it's Hindu or Muslim or Sikh or Punjabi or whoever, of other religious faith, can come. It is towards the education of India's art and culture. It has a very broad spectrum of offerings and very unique that, as India is many countries in one, so is SILC many cultures of India, creating into one entity, and that's what makes it unique and that's what keeps it going. Because everybody has their interest, and when you put ten heads together something wonderful is bound to happen.

PS: Or you get a ten-headed monster.

RM: Yes, that could be, but again, the leadership, I think it has a good, strong leadership that keeps it going. They really go back and forth to their mission statement, what they want to

achieve and they really, with a fine-tooth comb, they choose their leaders, I think. You know, that helps, is that someone with a good vision, for the well-being of the community in the long run, that's what they look at.

And when you see a student coming back as a teacher, you know it's successful. I mean, that child grew with passion towards the school and wants to give back to the school. So it's again that *guru-sishya parampara*, that teacher-student discipleship is in action here. And so when they found their ownership, it's going to stay.

PS: Do you think your daughters will ever be teachers at SILC?

RM: Maybe, maybe. My older daughter, she's in California. She goes to Stanford. She wants to move back to Minnesota. Some day she will have children who will have the need to learn, and out of her own need, she probably will.

PS: So you see the generations carrying it around full circle?

RM: Yes, full circle. And she—maybe not by teaching Bengali, but she plays ice hockey. Maybe that will be taught, to the teenagers.

PS: That's my next question is, as the—you were teaching your children, and your generation was direct immigrants from India, so now you've got, your children are bicultural, and your children's children, your grandchildren, are going to have different needs. What do you think will be the needs that those children will have?

RM: See, my daughter is getting married to a Catholic boy. Their needs will be a bit different than our needs. We wanted Indian values, Indian everything, and theirs, I think, even a bit more enriched, that they want values from all the cultures that their children—I mean, I'm sure she would want Christian culture and Hindu culture, to make a unique culture which is their own, you know, they will be creating.

So the needs always will change. And accordingly, the school has to modify, and SILC has to modify. Like my younger daughter, she goes to Gustavus [Adolphus] College. She learned Kathak dance, now she's learning ballet and modern dance. And in the future she hopes to combine those two, and maybe those days, the needs will come that in order to look at their identity, they need to—you know, they might not need to go back all the way to their root, but their root is, where they're starting from, is that Hindu-Christian togetherness. At that point, those teachers will be valuable, to teach something from their own experience, that's what they learned.

PS: So in that generation, when your children's generation starts being the main teachers, they may not have the skills to teach written Bengali, for example, because they may not know it. Do you think they'll continue to teach the Indian languages, in a spoken way?

RM: Yes, I'm sure, because you know, on a different subject, I have a friend who is German in origin, and she was saying when she was born, her parents wanted everybody to become Americans so fast that you don't speak German, you don't do anything, and now she feels a big void that she cannot speak. And fortunately, the times have changed so much now, the trend is, you know your roots.

So the kids, our next generation, they want to know their roots, and since they got so much out of it, they will also value that, that to their children, they will also say, "Trace your roots." So Bengali will always be—in what capacity, that we cannot predict yet, but definitely Bengali has to be there, because that's the root they started with. So every root, from every subculture of India, will be there.

And so SILC school, I mean, again, the broader spectrum SILC school, the School of India for Languages and Culture, the need always will be there. And a lot of children from India are adopted here, too, who cannot necessarily go back to India every year or every two years. That need is tremendous. Those children, they all know they were born in India. A lot of them come to our dance school to learn, and they love Indian culture. So their need is there, and their children will have the same need, too. So I see the future of SILC school for many, many years, even when we're not here in this world.

PS: Do you think that your daughters will continue to go back to India regularly, throughout their lives?

RM: Because of their work situation or school situation, not as much as I will. And also, India is more like my country. Their country is, they were born and brought up here. They used to say a few years ago that why is it that every vacation we go to India, why not other countries? So for the last two years, we started going for summer vacation to Europe. Last year we went to London. Away, something different from India. Someday they want to go to Africa. So they see India as where my parents came from India, and they want to learn a little bit there, but it is not their passion to go to India all the time. So that's the fact.

PS: And how does that sit with you?

RM: Fine. As long as they know their roots. Me and my husband, we are very, very liberal, and that helped us to survive, that we didn't really grind our teeth every little change that we have to do. Because it was not our children, that idea—we brought them to this world. It was not them who decided to live in this country. So the more liberal, open-armed we are, it's better for all of us.

I feel very proud that our situation is such that we, all four of us, are very open to each other. If there's a crisis on any one of our parts, we have family meetings. We sit down, we call a date and time, and we all sit down, listen to that problem, and try to figure it out, how can we make it

better? So that's a very unique situation, and that can only happen when you're open to each other. And so we achieved that point, you know, it's more like a friendship, in such a way.

I would like to say to all the parents, it doesn't matter if it's Indian culture, any culture. Communication is the key thing. No matter which school, college, or anything you go, communication is something that keeps you surviving. I come from a culture where I was raised in a joint family situation, a lot of people, and that was the support system. And here, you know, just two people or four people are together, and unless you are open to each other, it's difficult. You are in prison. So that's a lesson for everybody to learn. Be open.

PS: Well, we're almost at the end of our time. Is there anything else that you want to talk about that I haven't asked you about?

RM: I think we covered everything. I think we talked quite a bit, on many different subjects.

PS: This was great fun.

RM: Thank you. It's nice to recall, and go through those things. Yes, that's about it.

PS: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

RM: I wish all the best to SILC school and the Indian community. The Indian community is growing at such a rapid speed. That's a wonderful sign. That need will always be there, for everybody. I feel like what I didn't get, I wanted to give it to my children, and that sort of pulled me to what I needed to do to give that to my child, and that's why SILC school came about. And I'm sure every parent will feel the same way, too. And any parent. As a parent, every parent wants their child to be just like them. And you know, children also look towards the father and mother, that they want to be like that. So it's both of their needs that will be served by SILC school, and all the best to SILC.

PS: Thank you.