## Rama Padmanabham Narrator

## Polly Sonifer Interviewer

## March 12, 2000

**PS:** This is Polly Sonifer, interviewing Rama Padmanabham. It is March 12, 2000. Good evening. How are you tonight?

**RP:** Just fine, thanks, Polly.

**PS:** Thanks for taking time to meet with me. You know we're talking about the SILC [School of India for Languages and Culture] school tonight, and I'd like to start out by having you tell me your current age and your heritage language, your Indian language.

**RP:** Sure. I'm forty-seven years old, and I speak Tamil, the language that's spoken in the southern state, Tamil Nadu, in India.

**PS:** And you lived in Tamil Nadu as a child?

**RP:** Actually, I didn't.

**PS:** You didn't? Say more about that.

**RP:** I was born in New Delhi, the capital. My parents were originally from the south of India, but my dad, being an engineer, migrated from the south and went to engineering school in the north. And once he graduated after engineering, you know, he took up a job with the central government. Then actually, it was British, so he worked for the British, because this was prior to India's independence, in 1947.

And so, you know, they had already made their migration to the north, so the kids, some of us, we were five children, and some of us were born in the South. It is traditional in Indian families, usually the mother goes to her place of birth to deliver her babies, because she has her own circle of—her own family to help with the adjustment process. But with us, being the last of the kids, she just stayed on at home, and her mother actually came out to Delhi to help with the delivery. We were twins. So a long answer to an otherwise short question, but I was born in New Delhi.

**PS:** And how did you come to immigrate to the United States yourself?

**RP:** I came over in 1974, to graduate school, to attend graduate school. I was in the northwest of the country. I was in Pullman, Washington, and Moscow, Idaho. I came in to do my Ph.D. in biochemistry. I finished it in 1977, December, and continued to remain in the country. I first did a post-doc in San Francisco, and then got married and moved to Minnesota, so I've been in Minnesota now for over twenty-one years.

**PS:** And what kind of work are you doing these days?

**RP:** I'm a research scientist. I manage a group of people for a company called Alza Corporation. Alza Corporation is a pharmaceutical company, specializing in drug delivery. All of my graduate school and postdoctoral work were in the field of cardiovascular biochemistry and drug delivery to the heart, so it was a good balance of what I was trained for and what the company needed, so that's how I'm here.

Actually, Alza is a company that is in California, and it's a company that I said earlier specializes in drug delivery. I initially became a part of a more well-known local company, Medtronic, and about ten years ago, my group got acquired by Alza Corporation, so that's how a California company sort of came out to hire the group then.

**PS:** So you work formally with Medtronic?

RP: Yes, I did.

**PS:** Okay. And so how is it that you got married here in the States?

**RP:** Padu and I, my husband, Padu, and I, we met in California. In fact, graduate school friends of mine, who were from New Delhi, happened to be in the Bay Area. My husband, Padu, did his graduate school in Toronto, in Canada, and, you know, he had friends who were friends of my friends in the Bay Area, and they kind of arranged for us to meet, did their own little matchmaking.

We met while I was a postdoctoral student, and Padu being in the computing field, was with Control Data which back then had a fairly heavy research operation in the Bay Area. So he used to visit there, almost on a weekly basis, so we got a chance to meet and decided to marry, and came over to Minnesota once we knew that we were going to marry. We actually married here in Minnesota. Strangely enough, it was easier to marry here than in San Francisco.

**PS:** Really? Why is that?

**RP:** The health requirements, for whatever reasons. It was funny, but we could get married here faster. Of course, one can argue that you can have always gone to Nevada, or Las Vegas, or places like that. But we lived here, so we decided on that.

**PS:** So you didn't have a traditional arranged marriage?

**RP:** No, ours was not a traditional arranged marriage. Our marriage ceremony, too, was anything but traditional. We just kind of wanted to do it in a very small manner, which is quite different from the traditional Indian large weddings. And so, you know, fortunately enough, our parents were happy enough that both of us were from large families and we were both tail-end kids, so—

**PS:** They were worn out.

RP: They were worn out. They said, "Anything, as long as you guys get married."

PS: So you settled in here, had a couple kids, and then you became involved with SILC.

**RP:** That's right. As the kids got to be—my son was about eight when we had heard, again, through mutual friends, about SILC, and we felt that he was old enough. Our younger child, back then, was about four years old, so we said, oh, you know, it's kind of good to see what it's like, so the first year or so that Vikram, my son, was part of SILC, essentially, all we did was drop him off and I just used to do—just help whenever there was help required, as a parent, but at least watched him get involved with the organization.

**PS:** Do you remember what year that was?

**RP:** I believe that was 1987. And it was 1988 that we became much more actively involved. And since then it's been an association that's been pretty strong and continues on to this day.

**PS:** So what are all the things that you did over the years with SILC and for SILC?

**RP:** You know, initially, at SILC I became the teacher of Tamil, the language I grew up with. I also had interest with teaching the social studies curriculum. And being somewhat interested in art myself, even though I am a scientist by profession! I found that children love to paint and draw and sculpt and sing and dance and the whole works! So I found myself getting more and more involved because there was a need at SILC. The need was whoever, whichever parent could do anything, there was a definite place for them. And I found myself, before long, pretty much living there at SILC!

Every Saturday, or Sunday—In the early days, it was Sunday school—you know, I was there with the kids, every hour of the three-hour SILC school. I was pretty much involved with actual teaching, teaching them dance, teaching them art, teaching them painting, teaching them social studies. And then, you know, later, maybe the first couple of years, that's kind of what I did, and then after that, I became much more involved in just the administration duties of SILC, too. I served as its president, served as the principal of SILC, and to this day, I'm still part of the executive board of SILC this year.

And then I saw my kids grow and they started to teach, and my son, of course, taught for many years before he left to go off to college. And then my daughter now, who is an accomplished dancer, teaches, in the last maybe five years or so. In fact, she's been teaching dance at SILC. So it's been a great thing. We've given a lot; we've also gotten a lot. Things change. So it's been a great relationship.

**PS:** Well, let's talk one by one about the things that you did. So you were a parent for a while, just the parent of another kid. Then you were a teacher, and then you became a member of the administrative board, and then eventually, you groomed some new teachers.

**RP:** That's right. Full circle. Full circle. And some of those teachers are my own kids, so it's kind of fun to see that.

**PS:** So what was it that initially prompted you to get involved with SILC?

**RP:** I knew that, with the children growing up here, they were comfortable with life in Minnesota. Of course, they were born and brought up here, so they were quite comfortable with existence here in Minnesota, generally. But as they became older, they started asking a lot more questions about what it felt like to be Indian, and we live in an area where, Mounds View School District, while there are other Indian—both children and parents—who live in this area, the numbers of kids of Indian heritage were not that many, so they started getting asked a lot of questions about India and about, you know, most of the time it was, "Hey, where are you from?" And these kids would say, "Well, I'm from Minnesota." "Where are you from originally?" or things like that, and soon it became obvious that they really needed SILC!

Fortunately, for me and my parents, back in the days when my kids were younger, both my mother and my father immigrated to the United States about fifteen years ago, or even longer, and both spoke fluent English. So in a way, for them, to have these kids here, I mean it was great, because it was, again, when anytime our kids had questions, Grandma and Grandpa were there, and they spoke English, and it was great because they could at least get a little bit of what it was like to be Indian from them.

But soon, it became obvious that they needed a little more, and so we thought that it would be great for them to be a part of SILC, and we felt that because SILC had a large population of Indian kids, you know, or at least similar age groups as ours, we thought that perhaps being at SILC would provide them with an opportunity to meet and be with other children of Indian origin.

Again, as I said, with my parents here, at least our kids were fortunate enough that, from a cultural standpoint, they did seem to get a lot from my parents. Both were inherently interested in listening to stories and that sort of thing, so they did get a lot out of just my parents being here constantly.

**PS:** Did your parents live with you?

**RP:** Yes, they lived on and off. In fact, my mother now, and my father, when he was alive, would come out in the summer months, literally every year. Every year maybe four to five months of the year, they were here. And so the kids really got to know them. My mother was here just a few months ago. The cold weather kind of keeps her away now, but otherwise she's here often enough that the children are pretty close to her.

So they did get some of it, but it was different from what they could get at SILC. So that was the main idea, of at least letting Vikram, our older kid, try out SILC the first time, because there was a time for that. It was one day of the week, that we'd have to sort of set aside, but it seemed like not only was he picking up some words of the Tamil language, which he already had, having grandparents live here on at least a frequent basis, but what he soon found was, when he was with—and my daughter, too—when they were with other children of the same cultural background as theirs, the same heritage as theirs, you know, there was strength in numbers. That is, they weren't alone!

I remember, after a few years of SILC, both of our kids going out to their regular school in their Indian outfits and I was a little amazed! "Are you sure you want to go out like that? Is that all right?" And they said, "Oh, no, that's fine. We wanted to." But almost wanting to do it, to share. And so there were a lot of share times in school where objects that either they'd made at SILC or objects that were truly of Indian origin were shared with their school, which told me that they were—you know, they had gone beyond the initial sort of level of comfort to a next level where they were comfortable enough to even talk about it at school, and share, and show and tell at school, which, for kids, of the ages, particularly my daughter, who joined SILC at the age of maybe five and a half or six, was very impressive. I was impressed that she would have no hesitation.

And to this day, they both are very comfortable. At Mounds View High School, they both headed the diversity groups in their respective grades, and Veena, my daughter is in student council, and being the class councilman, the officer of her class. Just last week they had Diversity Day, she conducted the Indian portion of the diversity program at school.

Her friends joined in and she wore Indian outfits and she performed a few dances. I'd like to think that a good bit of her comfort was due to being part of an organization like SILC where they could go in Indian clothes, they could be quite comfortable speaking the language or eating Indian food. I think it was just the whole exposure, the whole atmosphere at SILC that made this possible.

And over the years, I mean, it was initially perhaps a little bit of shyness on their part, but as their knowledge base increased, as their comfort increased, they found that their participation and their willingness to share—and even as teenagers, I mean, those tough teenage years, I remember distinctly in eighth grade, the social science curriculum. In Minnesota, the social

science book, actually, the social studies book has a section on different countries from different continents, and it just happened that that particular textbook used India as an example of Asia, and so they had a whole week of discussions on India and so the school, of course, they knew about—this was when my son was in eighth grade and so they asked me if I would be willing to come in and teach that particular class. And I took time off from work and it was fun doing it.

So it was a whole five days of sharing and it was a great idea because, compared to what their social science teacher could offer—of course, here was somebody that actually grew up in India and was quite familiar with India. It was fun, because along with all the factual information, of course, I could throw in a lot of folk episodes, a lot of discussions of music, dance, foods, festivals, the whole works.

And we, over the years at SILC, have developed a curriculum that we can pull out information from and share it with schools. I know I wasn't the only one who did that. I know of others at SILC who've done it in their own respective school districts. And I found that while I was doing it for that week, I noticed my son, who was in a big class of maybe thirty kids, and there were many groups because it was not just his class session. Highview Middle School, where he goes to, is a big school, and I was there, literally, for the entire week of social science, where it was maybe three classes a day, so it was a pretty big commitment on my part.

But I found that even during the class, Vikram would be sitting there, the kids would ask a lot of questions and they would sort of turn around to him and say, "What do you think?" and they'd ask the questions of him. And I found him sort of struggling with his identity, and that is, you know, he'd say, "Listen, I don't know. I'm just one of you. I may look Indian but I was born here, I was brought up here, and so some of these detailed questions I really wouldn't have answers for. I can give you some ideas."

The factual part is the easy part, the other part, of actually living there is the tough one. Yes, he's been to India a few times but it's not like he grew up there. So I could sort of see him. Then he'd say, "Okay, Mom, that's your question. You can take over." And so it is that sort of sense of, perhaps, identity. And I find now that he's a young man, I mean, it's different. Now that he's a university student, very sure of himself and it's funny, the same questions, I bet he would know how to deal with them!

He knows much greater depth, and perhaps it's partly due to SILC, the interest in knowing about his heritage and therefore now, the willingness to pursue it. And now he's got the self-confidence to pursue it, and wouldn't have any problems in admitting that, well, he didn't grow up there and so he'd have to sort of look that up. That's an interesting question. It's a natural growth process, too, I'm sure.

**PS:** So the things that you hoped your children would get out of SILC, were they realized?

**RP:** I'd like to think they were. In any effort, while you're going through it, of course, there were many a Saturday or a Sunday morning when there'd be other things going on in their lives, and as they became older, particularly. You know, school and all of its requirements became such that—and they were both involved in a lot of other things, too. And so I know, even today, I mean, this weekend when we went up there, Veena had to be at school for a little bit and then to go on to SILC, it really did, at times, I mean, it used to be, "Do I have to go? Do you really want me there? Do I need to go?"

There were those days, too, but all in all, I'd say maybe, you know, we didn't force it on them. Initially, it was, give it a try, and let's—at least sort of go in and see what it's like. And then we found that not only were they willing, but to make them willing, I found that—which is one of the reasons why even I became so actively involved. There was a difference and that is, there was a difference between just dropping my son off and just being an uninvolved parent, compared to the time I would not only drop in, but I'd be there, too, with him and there constantly.

I found that a lot of it depended on my interest and if I was willing to give up my time, surely they were, too. And then we started doing a lot of things together and so I found that perhaps for me those were the best times, because I could be there with my kids, and actually see them and shared in a lot of the events that we had planned, and had to be there. And so it became more than just a school. It became a thing that we did as a family.

**PS:** Did your husband get involved in SILC?

**RP:** Yes, my husband did get involved to the extent that he allowed us the time out, because I'm telling you, it was a significant enough commitment that, had he not been here at home, taking care of the home front—in many ways, I now feel that perhaps that was the best we could have done, with both of us working full time and pretty demanding jobs and he would say, "Yes, you're sort of much more of a people person and you're much more a teacher so go ahead and do whatever you want and with the kids, too."

So all three of us pretty much were—our weekends were, a considerable part of our weekends for the last, I don't know how many years now, since 1988, '87, was part of SILC. And so to the extent where he allowed that, I would say, is the commitment that he had made to it. And of course for all events, he helped with the microphones, the lights, and the photographs and many other odd jobs!

**PS:** When you reflect on the most important thing that you learned, being a teacher, or being on the board, what were the things that really stand out for you as things that you got from it, the rewards?

**RP:** In fact, first may be an opportunity to even be part of it, and the willingness of the organization to allow me to become a part of. Yes, there was a need, perhaps, and you know,

people were needed to fit in to those opportunities, but the fact that it was a great opportunity. It was an opportunity that otherwise I don't think I would have had the interest to even give up as much of my time as I did.

So I'd like to think that first, the fact that it even existed, where I could give it a little and see my kids grow, and as a result, take back something, not only just because my kids got involved and therefore I could, sort of—you know, now that they are older, I can look back and say, "Hey, SILC really did play a role." But for me, personally, at least, too, outside of the kids, it was a great opportunity.

I mean, for me to go out, to be part of an organization that I could be proud of, that I could sort of showcase my cultural background and my heritage. For that, I'd have to say that it was a fantastic opportunity. Being a scientist with sort of a flair for the arts, but it also gave me an opportunity to maybe try out some of my artistic side, which I hadn't taken the time out until then to develop.

In India, as I was growing up, I was, of course, heavily involved in sciences, but there was that artistic side of me, and I did paint and sculpt and learned to sing and learned classical dance and classical southern music. And so I could sort of maintain both sides back then, but then when I came here to do graduate school work, pretty much, it was nothing but the science part. There was no time to indulge in my other hobbies.

And then, initially, when we started the family, too, as the kids were younger and our careers were just in the formative years, too, where we did have to give up a lot more time to our careers, and with children who are younger, too. So I'd like to think that maybe I, thanks to SILC, and my involvement with it, that I at least had a chance to let go on my artistic side of me and so, on a personal level, it clearly gave me an opportunity.

**PS:** So it was a real gift to your artistic side.

RP: Yes, it was. And it was fun to experiment and try out.

**PS:** And do you think that being involved with SILC has changed the way you think about yourself, either as being Indian or being American? Has it shifted those perceptions of your ethnicity in any way or how you value it?

**RP:** Personally, maybe not. I'd like to think that, because I came here as an adult, that, at least, personally for me, I had a fairly strong sense of identity, having grown up in India in a sort of a multi-language situation, because as I said, I speak Tamil, which is a language of the South, but I grew up in New Delhi in the north, New Delhi is sort of very cosmopolitan. Cosmopolitan in the sense, at least for India, New Delhi being the capital city, there are people from all different regions and different states of India who live there.

And so I had an exposure to multiple languages and a certain amount of ethnicity, so I sort of had a fairly good sense of identity. Graduate school and universities, in the United States anyway, are quite different, and that is, they're pretty open. They're pretty used to having people from different countries, foreign students, and so, that transition, if anything, was not at all tough.

I was amazed at how prepared I was, because back then, I was young, I was single, and in the sciences, there weren't too many young, single, Indian women. But yet, being brought up in New Delhi, perhaps exposed me to multiple cultures to begin with, and multiple languages, and differences enough that when I came out to do graduate school. The city of Pullman, Washington, is not a big city, it's a small town, really, and so in a way, it was, from a big, huge city, to get used to a smaller town, perhaps was a reverse cultural shock, but from a true sense, I mean, being in a nice, good university town, people were very friendly and the university anyway is a great place to be.

And I think that's maybe the hallmark of most U.S. universities, I think. They are so used to people from diverse backgrounds that you don't really walk into something that's homogeneous even though this was twenty-five years ago.

**PS:** So your Indian identity was pretty well in place?

**RP:** Pretty well in place.

PS: Did it change how you felt about being an American in any way?

**RP:** From that standpoint, whether it was SILC or whether it was just being here and having lived and having sort of taken the trouble of working and establishing one's name, as far as a profession is concerned, it took time. It was strange, because having been here twenty-five, twenty-six years, it was only the year before last that I became a U.S. citizen.

PS: Really?

**RP:** I waited that long, and you know, two reasons. One, I literally felt that I was so much more Indian by heart that—it was, again, a personal reason, but I felt that I would have to really feel a personal sort of connection before I became a U.S. citizen. That is, you know, I did, I owed it to the United States in my own mind to feel that sense of loyalty before I felt that it was correct for me to become a U.S. citizen.

And so it was only about two years ago my mother became a citizen, too, and so we both kind of did it together and when I found out that my mother was so willing—she had been here fifteen years and felt that, with her kids here, that she felt it was time for her to take on U.S. citizenship. And the moment she said that, I almost felt that at that point that that was also good enough reason for me to become a U.S. citizen too! I think it was a combination of both those things,

that it was time for me to become a U.S. citizen. And strange, to add to that, I had made a trip to India three years ago. The last twenty-five years, I've been out to India maybe every three, four, five years, that's been a frequency of Indian trips, and I found that the early trips, the speed with which I could make that connection in India was quite rapid.

But as the years went by, I found that, the later trips, I found—particularly because this last, the trip that I talked about that we made three years ago, when my children came along with us, but the kids were a little bit older, too, I realized that this last trip, that I'd been out of India long enough that that connection, it took much, much longer, that I really wasn't in tune with the latest events. I was completely out of touch with politics and the arts, movies, the whole works.

And I found that it bothered me, that I was so much more at home here, that I'd become involved with what was happening in the U.S. political arena, the kids had grown up. So again, you know, just talking with them and being with them, and being with them and their friends, just the U.S., the books, in general, all of it. I think what that meant was that I realized that it was time. It was time to sort of perhaps give up my Indian citizenship and really accept U.S. eitizenship because now I really had finally maybe made it, in the sense that I at least knew that I was much more comfortable here.

**PS:** Were there any particular special events that SILC was a part of that you were heavily involved with over the years?

**RP:** Yes. As part of SILC, outside of teaching the language or social studies or dance or the arts or any of the other cultural classes, I also participated in the Festival of Nations. And so over the years, it was one of the aspects that I felt, at least for me, initially, that my artistic side was also being used. And so I can recall at least maybe five different years where I've been heavily involved with putting up the exhibit for the festival. And out of those five or six years of involvement, there were maybe a couple that I actually went ahead and designed and made the entire exhibit.

It almost was like a one-person artistic achievement, and it was very satisfying. It took a long time, and with minimal funds, I mean, we had to sort of create out of nothing! But the one that comes to mind is, the theme of that one year of the exhibits was myths and legends, a perfect theme for displaying your Indian heritage, because there's plenty of material to deal with.

And so there I was, having to show that theme in our exhibit, so we got the rest of SILC involved in terms of coming up with ideas for it, and then once we decided on the ideas, there was essentially maybe three months of continuous everyday work in creating the models for it. We depicted three different scenes from three different time frames of Indian mythology. We chose the Ramayana, a scene from the Ramayana. We chose a scene from the animal fables, the Panchatantra, and we also chose a scene from the Sanskrit classical play, *Shakuntala*. These three depicted three different types, three different styles of legends and myths that India is quite well-known for.

And so what I literally ended up doing at the end was actually making those models myself because there was no way you were going to be able to go and pick up a figure or character! So actually, I got into papier-mâchéing in a big way and actually made the respective models and it was really a lot of fun! It was fun, despite the many hours it took—because clearly, it wasn't a full-time profession for me, it was only after work, so it was many hours of the midnight oil, literally.

And the last month or so it became more of a community event, and that is, we have a bunch of us at SILC that have worked for many years together, so we were about maybe ten of us that, for all of those exhibits, over the years, we were ultimately, you know, somebody would take on the main responsibility of coming up with the ideas or doing the main thing, but the rest of the crew would pitch in and help out with the writing of the descriptions of what the project was all about, and making sure that the lights were correct, the actual display was presented in an appropriate manner.

And so there was a lot of both architectural details one would have to take care of, but it was fun. It was fun also working with the rest of the crew. And the rest of the folks that were involved were also friends that had kids at SILC. So in a way what we showed was that the adults and we had the children, our children, each of us had kids who were also part of SILC and could have fun together. It became much more meaningful, much more personal.

And I know that our kids got a lot out of it. I mean, not only my kids, but my friends and all of them who were involved here, because they would all be there at the booth and take turns being at the display and explaining the exhibit to all of the people who visited the Festival of Nations. So all of that sort of added to what, perhaps, SILC was all about.

**PS:** Were these life-sized models?

**RP:** Some of them. The Panchatantra, the animal fable, I made a huge lion. The lion and the rabbit was the tale that I was trying to portray and there was this big rabbit that I made out of papier-mâché and a huge lion. So from that standpoint, it was pretty much life-sized, but the other two stories were human figures and demons and so those were definitely not life-sized. They were not huge!

**PS:** They were not hand size?

**RP:** They were about maybe eighteen inches to two feet, so they were big, so at least it became a little more manageable.

**PS:** You could transport that without any seatbelts in your car. What a lovely story. That's sweet. The next section that I want to focus on is how you were as a teacher, and you said the subjects that you taught were the Tamil language as well as a number of different arts classes.

**RP:** That's right. And the social studies classes.

**PS:** And the social studies. All right. And how did you teach yourself to be a teacher of these subjects?

**RP:** The social studies part, perhaps, or the art and painting and dance maybe are a little bit easier because as I said, you know, I loved the arts so it was easy enough, and I had learned music and dance, so once we chose a particular type of music, we could choreograph it and teach it to the kids. We are right in the midst of it right now for this year's festival.

But the funny part was the Tamil, the language class, because while I spoke Tamil at home, I grew up in the north, so I really never learned Tamil in the true sense. I never really learned to write Tamil! Whatever Tamil I learned was what I picked up at home. My spoken Tamil is fine, but my written Tamil is anything but what you would expect maybe from a serious teacher!

**PS:** Good thing the kids didn't know that.

**RP:** The kids were nice enough, but I know my son, who had sort of learned enough from his previous Tamil teachers, kept saying, "Mom, I'm forgetting what I learned earlier." This was because my teaching standards were a little different, and I was much more of a participating teacher than perhaps he was used to. I was also focusing on the conversational aspects of it rather than the written script.

Language can be taught in many different ways. I chose perhaps the easy way for me, because I was more fluent in the conversational part of it, and was somewhat rusty from the written script part of it. I don't know which one is a better style, but the kids, when I taught, were much younger, and so I thought that they would be more interested in just the conversational part. And so that perhaps was maybe a bigger challenge for me because I'd never taught the language before, and least of all a language that—you know, I wasn't that much of an expert, and so it was tough.

And from a standpoint of course material, we really didn't have as much by way of textbooks or even exercises to give the children, so it was pretty much up to each of our abilities. And so in a way, the kids, if they had an enthusiastic teacher, they got more for the buck! Unfortunately, at SILC perhaps that's maybe one of our, if you could call that a shortcoming, because some of our languages don't really have a good curriculum, because we are forming it literally as we teach it! But maybe that's what makes it interesting too!

And I never had a lack of interest from the kids. I just made up stories. We'd actually act them out, and we'd have a lot of plays and so, from a conversational standpoint, which was my main focus, that was great. The social studies curriculum, it was a little bit easier because literally, you

know, there is material. I would go to Ames Library, at the U of M, and it's a huge library on Southeast Asian studies. There's a ton of material that I could get from there.

**PS:** Was it aimed at children, though, or was it college material?

RP: It was college level. It was definitely college level. And so you'd have to read up and try and get ideas and formulate a curriculum first and then somehow build in the interest for your children, based on their age groups. One of the years where we had kids who were maybe sixth, seventh, eighth grade kids who were a little bit older, so for social studies, because they were also dealing with British history, or not British history as much as the English and Indian pre-independence era, and it wasn't ancient Indian history but it was the British era, we saw the movie *Gandhi*. We essentially did the whole social studies curriculum just patterned after that movie. We'd select parts and each hour at SILC on social studies day, we'd just show twenty minutes, and the movie is a long movie, so you could literally take the movie and make the whole social studies curriculum. And we'd take just segments of it and I'd show the movie and I'd talk about what that particular part, who the players were and how they—you know, sort of build the English involvement in pre-independence India by just looking at that movie, so that was sort of something that we did, and I know the children just loved it.

For me, from a social studies standpoint, it was the best part of the teaching experience, because these kids remember it even now and when I have a kid come back and say, "I loved that. I'd love to see that again and talk about it." So it means a lot. And I'm sure for most teachers, that's kind of why they do what they do.

**PS:** Sure, yes. There's something sweet about having your student come back later and appreciate you. So with the language classes, you didn't get any textbooks from India, on Tamil, or workbooks?

RP: We had a few, for just dealing with the script and the alphabets and vowels and things, but those textbooks were not of great quality. Perhaps it's also because they were geared for kids in India who maybe have a lot more exposure, and so, you know, by no means was language teaching at SILC sort of an immersion class or anything. So because of that language, perhaps, is the toughest part of SILC. It's tough to expect kids to spend an hour a week and get the language! So in a way, we focus therefore mostly on vocabulary, and mostly on just association of—you know, we'd bring out just some interesting tunes, or we'd say a simple nursery rhyme in English, and try and translate that just so it would make it a little more interesting and meaningful, and perhaps they would remember it.

And so those were the techniques we used, but unfortunately, the material from India was more traditional material, which really couldn't be as much gainfully used for the language classes. We did have to rely on it for the script. But it didn't do much for the conversation part.

**PS:** There are many different languages offered at SILC, right?

**RP:** Right.

**PS:** Did it line up that the children who were in the Tamil class had parents whose language was Tamil, or not necessarily?

**RP:** With Tamil, it happened that usually the kids whose parents, at least one of the two parents spoke Tamil, would also be taking Tamil at SILC. But for some of the languages, particularly Hindi, there was not that sort of a division, mainly because there were students who were PIC students, which stands for Parents of Indian Children, who were children of Indian origin who may have been adopted by local Minnesota families, and so those children—because Hindi is the most commonly spoken language in India, a lot of these children decided to take or would decide to take Hindi.

And so the Hindi class usually was the largest class at SILC and usually was also the class that didn't have as many parents who could teach it, mainly because some of them chose Hindi not because of any other reason, but because it's the most commonly spoken language in India. Some of the southern Indian kids were also in Hindi, even though their parents spoke some other languages at home. And so from that standpoint, it wasn't always necessarily so, but generally speaking, with the other languages, it was usually that you'd have children who spoke that language at home who took that language at SILC.

**PS:** So were there children whose parents spoke to them in Tamil, so they came in with a working knowledge of it, even though they were only five or six or seven years old?

**RP:** Yes. The kids operated at different levels, but generally speaking, I'd say that children who grew up here in the U.S. I mean, other than kids who are so young that they continued to speak fluent Tamil at home, the moment these kids started going off to schools would somehow, over time, perhaps, their Tamil or their other languages that they spoke at home, perhaps would become a little rusty.

And I found that, particularly in Tamil, when I was there, I mean, we had a couple of young kids who were very fluent. In fact, they were sometimes more fluent than I was as a teacher! And there were others who, for example, my son, or my daughter, who heard—I mean, they do hear a lot of Tamil at home but were not as fluent in their conversation. They can read and write but again, their Grandma's here or Grandpa was here. They can understand Tamil but their spoken Tamil isn't the greatest. And so, you know, we had a mix of kids of all ranges of abilities, in terms of the language classes that they attended.

**PS:** For you, personally, what the most challenging aspect of being a SILC teacher?

**RP:** Maybe, it was a challenge, but it was also perhaps the best thing that could have happened, and that is a lot of times, we worked without a curriculum, without a textbook that you could

follow. A lot of teaching depended on your own interest and your own ability to teach, and perhaps not everybody is a good teacher. It doesn't come naturally to a lot of people, so a lot of it depended on your own interest and your own ability to disseminate information that you could get out of a text as you're reading and to make it more accessible to a child. Most of us were definitely, by no means, trained teachers. Other than an interest in teaching, and I used to teach at the university, but it's—

**PS:** Very different, isn't it?

**RP:** Very different.

**PS:** And what was the most rewarding aspect, on the other side of that coin? What was the most satisfying?

RP: The most satisfying was, I think, as I mentioned earlier, was the fact that kids appreciated the time you spent. Not only my own kids, but children when they are out there, at the end of it, the enthusiasm you showed was definitely brought back to you. And even as recently as last week, we had put together a dance. My daughter and I, we taught a whole bunch of children, eighteen of them! They went out for the Festival of Nations preview this Saturday. It was a piece we had just worked with the children maybe five classes or so, and there were, again, some kids had mastered the dance and some kids weren't as familiar. But they all enthusiastically got into it, and once the review was over, some of the younger ones who hadn't done this earlier came back and said, "Did we make it?" They thought the review meant that they really were going to be asked—I mean, if they didn't do a good job, that we couldn't participate at the Festival of Nations.

And so at the end, just the pride that they had mastered something that was a little hard, if you had never danced before, never done that before. I mean, it meant a lot. So just the satisfaction from seeing, at the end, children really—you know, I suppose that's true of any teacher, and that is, at the end, when the kids really come back and tell you it had meant so much to them, you feel it's all worthwhile, and that is, the time that you've spent is worthwhile when the children are enthusiastic and got something out of it. So it's the standard teacher response and that is, it's wonderful to see that at the end, when they do care, and they do come up and they say, "That was great. It was fun participating."

**PS:** And how many years did you teach? Eleven?

RP: Yes.

**PS:** Are you still teaching now?

**RP:** Yes, I'm still there.

**PS:** How are they going to replace you? You're moving out of town.

**RP:** Oh, they'll be fine. Again, we do have others, too, so in a way, maybe it's a great opportunity for somebody else to come in and do it.

**PS:** So what are you teaching these days?

**RP:** These days it's dance.

**PS:** Just dance. So is Tamil being offered anymore?

**RP:** Tamil is being offered. We do have Ravi, who's a good friend, who's doing a great job teaching it. So again, SILC goes on, and it's nice to know that there are younger families who are taking on the baton because there is that commitment. Each of them have a child or two there, and so it continues.

**PS:** Are there any ways that you've seen the school change or evolve over the years?

**RP:** Yes. You know, some kids, at least in the last eleven, twelve years that I've been with it, I mean, it used to be that the number of children has sort of—it's one of those that goes up and down in terms of, if you were to graph it over time, I'm sure there were years when we had a lot of children, and there were some years when we had maybe half the number of children, and right today, this year, I mean, I was just amazed at how big it is again.

Last year, we celebrated the twentieth anniversary, and perhaps it was just because we got enough publicity from it and the fact that it was, the impact of it was far-reaching in the community at large. Again, it's familiarity and it's awareness, and so it reached maybe a larger group. The last couple of years, I think the Indian community here has grown, too. Maybe, perhaps partly due to Y2K, we have a lot of Indians, who are on temporary software programming assignments. But nonetheless, the numbers have grown again.

**PS:** How many students are you at right now?

**RP:** I think, I could be wrong, don't quote me, but I'm going to say maybe sixty, sixty-five children! And this year, the difference is that we have a fairly large contingency from the state of Punjab. I believe it's the first time that Punjabi is being offered at SILC as one of the languages, and there's a fairly significant number of kids who have joined in because Punjabi is being offered. And it's nice to see them because it's nice to have a fairly large influx of, even if it is just one specific language, and therefore one specific community, it's nice because the strength in numbers that it brings is kind of nice, because the rest of the kids benefit, too.

**PS:** Do you know what to attribute this sudden influx of Punjabis? Are they in a computer industry or not?

**RP:** No, it may not be that. It may be that they're part of the Sikh community here in town. They are part of the Sikh community and a lot of their children are learning Punjabi language. A fairly significant group of the children are also learning Punjabi dance. We were there at SILC to celebrate the Festival of Spring maybe a month or so ago, and all of the Punjabi community was there, which was nice. They came in and shared with the rest of the SILC children how Spring is celebrated in the state of Punjab. It's nice because they bring in new ideas, bring new people in, and it was a good display of that one community. So I think that's how the Punjabi group came to be a part of SILC. I think it was also because of the twentieth celebration. I believe some connection was made at that time, and you know, it's great.

**PS:** What hopes or dreams do you have for SILC in the future, for the teachers, or the subjects that are being taught?

**RP:** I'd like to think that as long as there are people of Indian origin here, I'd like to think that the school would serve that same purpose, and that purpose is to, while it celebrates the identity of each of the children, it also celebrates the fact that there are quite a few of them, that they don't have to be isolated, and that here is a school that they can come in and be part of, and explore what that identity is all about. And use their new-formed identity as a means of strengthening their own self-confidence. I'd like to think that that is going to continue on over the years to come. It'll be nice if it does.

**PS:** And you yourself are moving to—

**RP:** That's right. I'm going to be moving out to California, to the Bay Area. In fact, I'll be out the first of April. And so it's a big change for me. I'll be moving out from Minnesota after almost twenty-two years, and so it'll be different. I don't know. I haven't looked into it. I don't know if there are similar schools such as SILC in the Bay Area. The Bay Area has a fairly large Indian population, and it's also an area that's noted for its ethnic diversity. And so I'd like to think that there is a group such as this, and so it'll be interesting to see how that does evolve.

**PS:** So tell me now, if you could do it all over again, if you could go back and rerun it, is there anything that you might do differently, as a teacher?

**RP:** I really don't think so. I think SILC has changed, and I think the people, the kids, their backgrounds, what they bring in, is what determines, I mean, you know, what the teacher has to teach. And so I'd like to think that even if I had to do it over again and I had a chance today to do it, I would sort of look at the children and see what their needs were and tailor my teaching methods to what the kids and their needs are.

And I know as the Indian population evolves here in Minnesota and with a lot of influx of new people who have just come in recently, their children, their needs are quite different from the needs that my children had. Twenty-five years ago, things were different. And so I'd like to

think that my teaching methods perhaps would change, but children are children, so basically I'd like to think that as long as I had that sense of pride in my own heritage and as long as I was enthusiastic enough to share with them that heritage, that part would continue to be the same.

And while the children would be different and their knowledge base would be different, I view what I brought to SILC and I view what SILC was all about to be much more than just that mere factual knowledge base, because I think that the facts can be picked up from a book, the facts can be picked up from any encyclopedia, but it's the living experiences that were—that was what SILC was all about. And so I'd like to think that that part would still be the reason, motivation enough to continue on. And perhaps, therefore, really, I wouldn't think of it as any different.

**PS:** Some of this we've already talked about, so now let's go on and talk about you serving on the board of directors. You said that for a year or so, you were on the board and you continued to be on the executive board. So what motivated you to serve on the board? What was it about board service that was more attractive, or in a different way attractive than being a teacher?

**RP:** In a way, I felt that being part of the board, at least I could give it some sense of what SILC was about in the past and provide that continuity. The board members, the rest of the board members, the current principal, the current president of SILC, are in some ways newcomers to the community and so I thought that I would provide perhaps a little bit of that historical perspective to the current board, and it was that sense of still being part of SILC that kind of made me want to even be part of the board. And as long as I felt that I could contribute something positive to the organization I would continue to be on the board. Clearly, with me leaving Minnesota now, I have to make sure that somebody else takes over now where I did.

**PS:** What year were you elected to the board?

**RP:** I've been part of the board as a member at large for the last couple of years.

**PS:** Oh, okay, so just recently. And your first year on the board, what role did you play?

**RP:** I was just a board member at large.

**PS:** Just a board member, okay.

**RP:** Before that, I mean, at SILC, the board at SILC includes the president, the vice principal, the principal, the secretary of SILC, and then we have two members at large, and so I was one of the two members at large, over the last year at SILC. And we get nominated and for us having been part of SILC, we make sure that the board has enough membership from more recent people at SILC as well as at least one or two of the old-timers, just to make sure that there is some continuity. If it comes to it and if we ask for advice or so, that we could at least pull out from some of our past experiences, to give the newer members a sense of what worked and what didn't work, to give them a sense of direction.

**PS:** So you were an old-timer.

**RP:** That's right. I was an old-timer.

**PS:** In a most positive sense, of course. And when you joined the board, you said there was an executive committee as well, and you were part of that for a time, or is that what the board is?

**RP:** That's what the board is.

**PS:** So that's the same thing, the same entity. When you had board meetings, how were they conducted? What language were they in, what time of the day were they held, how did you reach decisions? How did it flow?

**RP:** Usually at SILC, which is also true of anything in India, that is, English forms the unifying language, and particularly here, it's clearly the language of instruction at SILC. Other than the language hours, the rest of SILC is primarily, it's English. And so the board meetings were held at SILC and during SILC hours, so while the kids were being taught, the board would be meeting in a different classroom. And so pretty much most of our board meetings were conducted during SILC, or sometimes we'd go meet at a coffee shop not far from SILC, just to sort of make sure that we had some space to sit down and talk. But usually, it was fairly informal.

The president of SILC, the current president of SILC, would essentially run the board meetings, and the usual discussion items that are brought up at these board meetings are the status of teaching staff, the number of volunteers, because everybody is a volunteer at SILC. And any special needs that certain either languages or certain social studies classes or certain of our cultural activities had. If there were special needs for each of these areas, we would talk about how we would meet some of these special needs, and particularly at the time of Festival of Nations, because both the dance program for the Festival—SILC has always participated in the dance, and also the exhibit, are managed by SILC.

At the time of the Festival of Nations, which means from about December through May, is a time that the board and the exhibit chairperson or the dance program chairperson would meet often. We would always have our discussions, also, as a part of the board meeting, mainly because these are the main events that SILC sponsors and supports.

**PS:** And you've been involved in both of those?

**RP:** Both, also.

**PS:** So you get committee'd out. Were there areas where there was always an easy agreement, where it was real easy to get to consensus, or did you vote on items, or was it just a discussion?

**RP:** It was usually a discussion. At SILC, it seems like the people that are involved with SILC are usually people that have a need and a desire to give of themselves, to see children sort of take on a sense of knowing what their identities are, so there is that commitment. So it seems as if the people that participate heavily in SILC are usually people that seem to agree more than disagree, and so we've really, at least from my recollections of the past, I mean, I don't think we've ever really not agreed on anything significant.

Usually there are people that—you know, we'd talk out what our thoughts were and usually, it was quite obvious what course of action we would take, and so usually action items were given out, and it was usually never issues that could not be resolved, because they were not issues that people had real differences on. So I'd like to think that the cohesiveness of the group had a lot to do with the sense of mission that most of the people there had, and that is because we sort of looked at the well-being of the school at large, we tended not to disagree.

And usually because everybody had full-time jobs outside, that it really was a voluntary organization, and so people chose to be pretty gracious about what they agreed to do and went about it. It was a small group, but yet it was a group that one could rely on, because they were usually consistently there to do whatever it is that had to be done.

**PS:** This question might be out of line, so don't answer it if you don't want to, but you all came from all different parts of India, and my guess is that if you had all been in India, first of all, you never would have met each other, because you were geographically divided, but if you had, you might have had disagreements about what was important based on your own region or your ethnicity or your religious background or your language group or whatever, and when you were here all together, what made those divisions insignificant or unnecessary? I mean, why were you so willing to work together?

**RP:** That's a very good question. I'd like to think that again, India, though it's a country that's more than a country, and it's always spoken of as a sort of a subcontinent with diverse groups, diverse racial origins, diverse religions, languages, and so on, SILC has, while it has promoted the sense of Indianness and the sense of identity, it has kind of stayed clear out of the areas of controversy, particularly religion.

We really don't bring in the religious parts at all to SILC, and while SILC stands for School of India for Languages and Culture, the culture part is—you know, sometimes in the Indian context, it's hard to take away, because a lot of our cultural aspects do have perhaps a slight religious connotation, but what we would do, we would present it more from a background standpoint, provide that sense of connection, without bringing the controversial religious part of it.

And that is, we would discuss it more as—for example, I mean, a few months ago we celebrated Diwali, the Festival of Lights. The Festival of Lights, Diwali, perhaps akin to Christmas, is the most popular festival in India. And it's celebrated in some form or the other by the majority of

Indians. And while there is—if you really look at why Diwali is celebrated—one could say that it celebrates, globally, the victory of good over evil, in a nonreligious sense, but on the other hand, from a religious standpoint, it's the story of portrayed in the epic Ramayana, and that is the victory of Prince Ram over the demon king Ravana.

And so in a way, one could argue that if you bring in the fact that it's a victory of Prince Ram over King Ravana, the demon ten-headed king of Lanka, one could make the argument that, from that sense, it's not really religious. All you're doing is you're showing that there is this mythological story of Ramayana and in that story, a very famous, loved prince of Ayodhya, that is, Ram, came back from fourteen years of exile in the forest, to come back to his own kingdom. And so the people of Ayodhya celebrated Diwali for the first time when Ram came back from fourteen years of exile.

And so what we did at SILC was, we presented that story in its entirety is, and said that's why Diwali was celebrated many years ago. Well, here is how it was celebrated, and we'd focus on making oil lamps. During the Festival of Lights, the people in India would light oil lamps and at night, the whole countryside would be just full of light. They'd have fireworks, they'd wear new clothes, they'd make sweets and exchange greetings.

So this was really the cultural context. We sort of steered away from the actual religious connection, but we focused more on what was done in that time, and we gave the context of a story that's a mythological story, without saying that Ram is otherwise an incarnation—if you'd look at the religious context, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the preserver of the Hindu Trinity. So if one would look at that, then one can argue that there is that religious connection, but it isn't there.

But if you don't focus on the religious connection, say, and focus more on how the festival is celebrated, and give them a little bit of historical context that, you know, here is an interesting story, and this is the story of this prince, and focus more on the story. Most kids are fascinated by stories, and so we don't bring in the religious aspect of it, which, perhaps, could be, to people of different religious backgrounds, perhaps that could be construed as not being too politically correct. We steered away from some of these tougher issues, and so then it doesn't become as controversial.

So in a way, I feel that SILC has managed to do it, in a very cohesive way, mainly because it presents some of these cultural events for the children, from a mythological, from a historical perspective, rather than from a religious perspective.

**PS:** Are there any Muslim children?

**RP:** As far as I know—I know we've had Muslim children in the past, but at this point, I don't know. I'd have to say that I really don't know, and I'm sure there are children who are of the Christian faith who are at SILC. We make sure that we don't preach, that we present activities

more from a cultural standpoint rather than bring in religion. I mean, it's true and that is, when you really look at festivals and why they're celebrated, there is somewhat of a distant connection to some occurrence which could be construed as religious. But we make sure that we put it in a context that is more appealing to children so we don't question their faith.

**PS:** And Hinduism isn't highly evangelical in its nature anyway, right?

**RP:** That's right. Hinduism is clearly not a religion that has that evangelical, the missionary parts of it, that would make it hard to present. But nonetheless, to be fair, we feel that all aspects should be presented. I know in the social studies curriculum, there was one year that I taught and we did present religions. That one year we did have a teacher who was of the Zorastrian faith, who was a Parsi woman who also discussed the Parsi religion. And so there was a class that she talked about what that religion was, and then we also had a class and we talked about Hinduism and we looked at what the ritualistic parts of the Hindu faith are, and we also talked about Islam.

And so what we tried to do was, we tried to sort of give them—I mean, if it was one religion we tried to make sure that everything was presented, which is kind of what happens in India, I suppose. It's a secular country, even though seventy, seventy-five percent of Indians are Hindus. From a standpoint of the Constitution, it's secular. Multiple faiths are followed in India, and as long as you present all of them, then we feel that nobody will have any objections.

**PS:** Tell me about the people who were on the board. Were all of them people who had been teachers at one point, or did some people come in just to be on the board who hadn't been teachers at SILC?

**RP:** Most of the board members and particularly the principal, assistant principal, the president, usually had had some teaching. They don't come at it cold. You usually are nominated to be on the board, and there is a nominating committee. And so the only way to become a member, particularly a president or a principal is, you've got to have been there at least for a certain period of time, to make it.

There are other board members, such as, the member at large, and the secretary who may not have been teachers at SILC. I remember, at least the time that I was the principal, I know we had a lady who was a PIC parent. We wanted to make sure that we would represent at least the children who were part of the PIC Association, too, just to make sure that, you know, that their needs were met. Their needs clearly were a little different, because the PIC children were children who didn't have the benefit of having an Indian parent at home, or a parent of Indian origin at home. And so we wanted to make sure that SILC would serve their needs as well.

So we tried to be as inclusive of the different bodies of people that were part the student body, just to make sure that everybody's needs met and the board was as "well-rounded" as we could make it. And I know, the Punjabi group, I know has expressed interest that they would at least, it

would be nice to have one of them be part of the board as well, because it's a way of at least making sure that, directionally, over the next few years, that we have diversity.

**PS:** So did you make an effort with the members of the executive committee to be geographically diverse in terms of what part of India they were from?

**RP:** It would have been nice if we could, but it's not always going to work out that way. That is why we made sure that different languages were represented. There was a time at SILC where the South Indian languages were perhaps more represented on the board than the northern Indian language, Hindi. This may be because Hindi was the only northern language at that time. Those years the board had more representation from the southern speaking regions of the country.

But, as I said earlier, because a lot of us at SILC—I mean, my parents were from the South but I grew up in the North, so I'm quite familiar with Hindi, too, as I am with Tamil. And so I'd like to think that I was a little more global, and having been brought up in New Delhi, you know, which sort of had a little bit of representation from all over India, I felt that, to begin with, that I was perhaps a little more globally Indian than some of the others at SILC.

Even my husband, for example, who comes from the South, he comes from Madras and he hasn't lived in the North at all. So his perspective is a little different than mine. And it's the same of anybody. I mean, if you lived here in Minnesota and you were born here and you didn't really travel, didn't move around as much, even within the United States, I can sort of see that your perspective would be perhaps a little different.

PS: We call it being provincial.

RP: Yes.

**PS:** Without it being negative.

**RP:** It doesn't have to be negative. In India, particularly, it's clearly so because each state has its own distinctive language and history and so some of these regional differences are quite ancient differences. It becomes even more acute, I think, in India than it does here.

**PS:** Were there ever any challenges with finding enough people to serve on the board? Did you have to beg?

**RP:** I don't believe we did. I know I was never in the nominating committee, but, you know, yes, I'm sure the committee has had its times, because it does take a commitment. And being a voluntary organization, I mean, it's—you know, usually these are unpaid jobs, and so you have to be willing to put in a lot of time. For certain people, your children were there. It made it a little bit easier to want those people to also be giving up more time to be on the board, but there were a few teachers who didn't. For example, just a person that comes to mind is Pujabhai Patel,

who's our yoga teacher, who doesn't have children at SILC. And yet, even today, he comes in and teaches yoga. Very committed. He's doing it out of sheer love for the art and commitment to the organization.

But on the other hand, the majority, I would say, of our teachers usually tend to have children there, or have had children go through the organization, so that at least they've seen the benefits that SILC has. But there are a few who are very committed, even though they don't have any children that are currently or have been part of SILC, and yet they are adults who are very willing to give of themselves and give their time, so we have both of those kinds of people that serve on the board.

But clearly, it has to have—I mean, there's got to be some sort of return that one would have to get out of doing this sort of service, and I do marvel at those people that don't have children who still are willing to put in their time and effort, because they're truly giving, much more so than some of us who have gone through it. You know, we've done it, again, hopefully, for our children, too. We've tried to do beyond that, but yet, one of our underlying reasons was that our children were there, too. And so I'd like to think that these other individuals who have done it without that motivation are truly to be admired.

**PS:** Well, you talked a little bit about being involved with carrying out the Festival of India art exhibits—not art, but the exhibits. They weren't specifically about art, they were cultural exhibits.

**RP:** That's right.

**PS:** Were there any other special events that you were involved with planning or carrying out, as a board member?

**RP:** Not really. The exhibits and the dance programs that I've been part of now for many, many years. But outside of that, it was essentially the twentieth anniversary celebration last year that we celebrated in a very big way. Along with a lot of others, I clearly put in my time to make sure that that was a successful event. Because it was a celebration of twenty years of this organization, and it was fun to see children that were part of it twenty years ago, and who are now adults and have children of their own and still believe in it.

**PS:** Tell me about the celebration. What was it like? What was going on during the celebration, and how many people were there?

**RP:** I would say maybe, from an audience standpoint, we had about maybe 300 people who attended. We had organized a program, and as part of the program, we had a slide show that depicted the history of SILC, and we pulled out slides from twenty years ago. Outside the slide show, the children did a dance program, they sang a song, and then some of us adults put together a play, a play called *Confusion of Languages*. It was kind of fun.

**PS:** Tell me more about that.

**RP:** This particular play was written by a gentleman by the name of Mani [Subrahmanian], who used to teach Tamil at SILC some years ago, and he was certainly quite adept at playwriting, because it was a clever play. For somebody growing up in India, it's obvious—you brought up that question earlier, and that is, India is so diverse, and how do you manage to sort of bring in the positive side of diversity to SILC.

And the play was, as it says, it's confusion with languages, and it was about a car accident, that occurs in a major city in India, and the two cars are "personed by" two couples, who speak different languages, who want to find out what happened and who is going to pay for damages. One couple, the husband speaks one language and the wife speaks another, and the other car, the couple speak two other languages, and then these people only speak those languages, and they don't speak any other common language! So it's just confusion and whole bunch of fun! [Laughter].

**PS:** It sounds fun.

**RP:** It was fun. The children loved it! We had narration for it, so we all said our lines in respective languages, and we chose all of the languages that are currently taught at SILC, so there were children who could identify with one language but not the other, and so it brought in all of the aspects of the languages at SILC, and yet, it was presented in a funny manner! We adults participated in the play and it was fun because the kids got a chance to see us have fun, too.

**PS:** Describe the relationship you had with other board members. Did you become friends, did you socialize together, or was it pretty much just at SILC?

**RP:** Some of the board members, you know, we are quite good personal friends with, so in a way, it explains why that made the board connections, functions and the fact that we had really not significant differences proceed smoothly. Some of us were friends even outside of SILC. In fact, we were friends before SILC, so it really made that part quite easy. And the fact that we were friends, we certainly had the same mission, and the same sense of commitment to SILC, so it made of all these differences really seem quite insignificant. Since we all had the same mission, it just made that job that much more easy.

And so, from that standpoint, really, the board or any of these meetings, and the twentieth anniversary celebration, the board, at that time, the committee that was formed to even run it, we were all—had worked with each other for quite some time.

**PS:** So when somebody new joins the board, like I'm imagining the Punjabis who are now coming in, that you talked about, when they have somebody on the board, they probably won't know all the rest of the board members as well, right?

**RP:** That's right.

**PS:** Is there a process for becoming on the inside, if you will, or being accepted?

**RP:** Again, I'd like to think it's a question of time, too, and I'm sure the group is open enough that eventually, they're going to feel they're part of it, and they're already a part of it because they come to SILC every week, and you know, just by being there, teaching at SILC and being part of the cultural events, they're already there, and so they are getting acquainted. Just again, it's like any new kid that comes to the block. I mean, by being there and participating in events, you get to know people, and I'd like to think that they'd be quite easily assimilated.

**PS:** This is a great question. To what would you attribute the long-term success of SILC? I mean, totally run on volunteers, I'm guessing kind of a shoestring budget, what was it that kept it going?

**RP:** I'd like to think the reason it still is there, and while it's had its ups and downs, in terms of student enrollment over the last twenty years, the fact that its mission is so clear, and that is—and it's a mission that is one that, you know, every year, each of these kids, as they grow up and become young adults and sense that sense of accomplishment on their individual parts, you know, that itself is perhaps the driving force behind its success. It's an easy story to tell, and it's a story that clearly has these past accomplishments that can almost speak for it.

And since we have established, perhaps, a cycle of how students can, in a way, as they grow up at SILC, can become teachers and can become volunteers and can participate and can bring in their infusion of new ideas and their thoughts. And the curriculum is open enough that it allows for the sort of influx of new ideas, that this whole cycle, hopefully, will keep continuing. And as long as we have some of our students who come back and are willing as, maybe when they become parents, or even when they're young adults, that are willing to come back and be part of SILC, both from an organization standpoint, from a teaching standpoint, that it's going to be here to stay.

Currently, our SILC principal, Chitra Subramanian, is an old student of SILC. I mean, she was maybe one of the early students, and professionally, she's a schoolteacher, and teaches school, and now she's back as the principal of SILC. So right there, you have a cycle of what I talked about. The fact that she, as a child, was a student of SILC, and today, as an adult, as a young adult, a contributing adult in society—she's a schoolteacher and now she's the principal of SILC, so right there, you've got that element of the second generation that's already come into SILC.

So I'd like to think that, as the Indian community gets older, that SILC isn't going to be organized by people like myself who grew up in India, but perhaps the next generation is going to be the board, the leaders of SILC are going to come out of our kids, who are not, I mean, didn't have their younger years in India, but actually grew up here in America, and therefore are going to be presenting to their children and their students kind of what being "Indian" is like. Perhaps that's what would be the relevance that they would bring. It's going to be a different SILC, but it would still be meaningful because they would still need to pass on that sense of identity.

**PS:** And how do you think the curriculum might change? What might shift? Might there be not as much language, or more culture, or different emphasis? What do you see shifting?

**RP:** Yes, yes. I would like to think, I mean, languages, maybe it's one of those areas for next generation is difficult. It is kind of a hard one to teach, if you don't have a strong background in that. But I'd like to think that the social studies part, anyway, is part of a textbook. You can make it more interesting by bringing it up as a story form, which is kind of what we do in social studies. But the cultural parts, I think, would evolve. And I'd like to think also that perhaps SILC would, and SILC does, and another purpose that stays is it is a place for children of similar backgrounds to come in and meet, and so it is that social connections that they make there, the friendships that they gain there at SILC, that will continue to be. And so I think that's kind of how different SILC is going to be tomorrow compared to today.

**PS:** You mentioned the PIC group, the Parents of Indian Children group. Did you see that those adopted children blended in well with the children who were growing up with their Indian parents, or were there any divisions between those two groups?

**RP:** The PIC group isn't a huge group at SILC, and I know I've seen—not having taught Hindi, which is a language most of the PIC kids are in, but I have them in my social studies classes, and currently, even in dance. I mean, dance is one easy, nice cultural event that a lot of children participate in. And when we do our plays for the different festivals that I've organized, I mean, PIC kids are all there, and they're very well assimilated. And you know, I've seen them blossom—you know, initially, they come in a little bit shy because they are not as familiar. They haven't been part of other dance groups before, but they pick it up quite fast.

And so the first year, maybe they're still not as confident, but the next year, the same kid is just so darn good, and so eventually, I mean, it takes time, and I think, it—not even singling out PIC kids, I think it's kids in general. I mean, you know, if a kid comes in to SILC who doesn't have friends to begin with, you know, it's like any other school, and that is, initially, it's a little bit of, let's find who's my friend here, and then once they find friends, the next year becomes much easier than that first. And then as time goes by, they're very comfortable. So again, it's a question of time.

But eventually, PIC kids are just as adjusted as others, and it's the social and the cultural parts that I think are perhaps more meaningful to them than the language, because the language part, if you don't—you can't really learn a language by just going there for a while, for one hour a week. For most of them, that part must be a tough part because they don't hear those languages spoken at home. But really, that's not what SILC is only about. It is the rest of the cultural connotation that's perhaps more important.

**PS:** Do you have any particularly vivid memories of your time on the board, any one meeting where you made some big decision or some big change that happened, or any particular part of being on the board that stands out for you as a strong memory?

**RP:** Not really, other than the meetings that we had specifically for the twentieth celebration. The twentieth anniversary celebration was a big event, and so the meetings for those, to organize the program, to organize the dance. We had a dance after the dinner, and to set up the school to decorate it, to make sure that it would be a memorable event. I'd say maybe that whole year last year, just organizing the twentieth celebration. It was fun. It was a bunch of real dedicated people, and, you know, just meeting frequently enough to make that an event that the children would remember. It was certainly quite an event, and from a memory standpoint, that's what comes to mind.

**PS:** Yes, it sounds like you really put your heart and soul into that one.

RP: Yes, yes.

**PS:** You got a good return on it. That's great. Are there other things about being on the board that you want to talk about or share with me tonight?

**RP:** Not really. For me, at SILC, more than the board, I'd like to think that, for me, the real fruitful times were when I was really out there on the floor, either teaching dance or teaching a language or the social studies, so for me, the good part was the actual teaching part, rather than the board membership part, which was good, but there was really, for me, the personal sense of satisfaction was the teaching rather than being on the board.

**PS:** And you taught many different subjects over the years. How did you decide when it was time to stop teaching one and start teaching another, or did you teach several simultaneously?

**RP:** Oh, yes. There was a year when I taught all three. Everybody says that was a sure time for a burnout. It was tough, it was hard. But I don't think I'm usually afraid of taking on a little more than I can handle. That was a tough year, but you know, as long as you have fun with it. Certainly it was tough, but it wasn't impossible. That group of kids that I was with was a fun group, and so really I didn't mind that at all.

**PS:** And when you would take on a new subject, or during that culture part, you would do arts and dance and music, all in one? Was it all part of the culture classes?

**RP:** No. I taught music at SILC and the kids would just come in and do music, or the dance, because we do it for the Festival of Nations, we usually pull out kids from the other cultural classes, too. For example, yoga or cooking, too, and I've taught a few cooking classes at SILC, too.

**PS:** You did it all

**RP:** Yes. You know, usually people do. I mean, it's not unusual for people, once they're part of the organization, to—because it's a voluntary organization, you sort of do whatever there's a need for and you go fill up that gap. And so it's not unusual to have parents kind of being involved with multiple things all at the same time.

**PS:** So how did you decide, like, which quarter you were teaching what class? Would you say, "I'm tired of doing cooking. You do that this time"? Or how would you switch it around?

**RP:** Sure. I mean, at the beginning of the year, some of our early board meetings would be to talk about who the staff for the next year would be. We'd try and identify how many levels of certain language we would have at SILC, and we would make sure that at least we had a main language teacher for every language, that we'd have main social studies teachers as well. The social studies was at different levels, based on the number of the children and based on their ages.

And so we first, early on, in the summer, we'd actually have a game plan. We'd make sure that all of the main staff were allocated, and so that would be the time that we decided who was going to teach what. And of course, since it's a voluntary organization, we'd run into times when we had no social studies, level one, teacher and we'd have no this teacher or that teacher, and we'd have to sort of make a few phone calls, and try and see if we could get somebody to commit to at least being a coordinator. And all of these areas had a coordinator whose responsibility it was to make sure that a teacher showed up for that particular language or for that particular social studies class.

**PS:** And so would people commit for a whole quarter or a whole year?

**RP:** What we would do is, once the main language or social studies coordinator was available, that person would then kind of, you know, they could teach the whole year, and based on their availability, but usually they would always have another person that they could rely on, at least one person, so that if they happened to be out of town on business or sick or something that they'd have somebody in school. And so we did that for almost all of the different languages, social studies, or cultural classes, because otherwise, you couldn't do it.

And so usually, the beginning of the year, you would kind of know what you were going to be responsible for. Sometimes you over-stretched, and so you'd find yourself in too many things at the same time, but usually, that's when you relied on your network of other friends and volunteers who you'd say, "Well, can you please do this for this particular month or this particular quarter?" just because you had a busy curriculum at school or at your job. So you made sure that you had somebody in class for that matter of time that you couldn't be available.

**PS:** How do you think your life would be different if you hadn't been involved in SILC? What would you have done with all those other hours?

**RP:** I'm part of a dance company here in town called the Ragamala Music and Dance Theater, and I'm a member of their board, too. I became a member of that board a few years ago and so I'd like to think that—it's a nonprofit organization, too, just as SILC is—that I would have found a place to devote my—at least a little bit of my time to. I've always enjoyed volunteering and so I think that if not SILC that I would have done something where I would have given up a little bit of my time because it's kind of what life to me is all about.

**PS:** And so the volunteer things that you've done would have always been something centered around Indian culture in some way or other?

**RP:** So far, yes. I mean, so far, the two activities, the two areas that I've given up a good bit of my time to have been SILC and the Ragamala Music and Dance Theater, so far, that is indeed correct. But other than just volunteering in my kids' schools—you know, the science fair projects or judging science fairs, that sort of a thing, but so far, they've been more focused on Indian—maybe because these were things that I knew I could contribute in a positive manner. But who knows, once I move on to California. I mean, I like to think that I could branch out, and do something else more on a mainstream level.

**PS:** Well, my guess is, if you find an Indian school, you'll be there. I wouldn't bet money on it, but I'm guessing. Well, I'm at the end of the prepared questions that I have. If there's anything else that you'd like to tell me about, or share about, or special memories that you have, or a thing that you're especially proud of, anything like that you want to share with me, just go ahead.

**RP:** And this would have to be, again, just something related to SILC?

**PS:** Whatever you want to talk about. Your time.

**RP:** My time. Thanks. As part of the Minnesota History Center, [I'm glad the record of these experiences will be kept in Minnesota.] I mean, it's kind of nice since my stay in Minnesota is kind of coming to an end, and so from a standpoint of thoughts, at least I'd like to think that this is a state that I've lived in the most in my life. Even in India when I grew up, you know, the twenty-one years I was in India, I was clearly not a resident of one particular state while I was born in New Delhi and stayed in New Delhi for a good maybe twelve to fifteen years, I lived in

Bombay as well, so Minnesota would always hold a special place for me, because this is the place where I have lived for a majority of my life.

And I came here just out of grad school, and I came here for my first significant job, which, you know, is what brought me here to Minnesota. But it was always significant because this is where my kids grew up and we established ourselves as a family. I mean, it was definitely a time where I saw myself as a contributing citizen to society at large, by way of my professional life, and I also saw myself as a spouse, as a parent, as a mother, as a parent who knew that my children would need to establish their sense of identity. I felt that somehow I'd have to go beyond and do a little bit more to bring that sense of identity to them, because I felt that it was in their youth, it was in their formative years that that sense of identity is really crucial to providing, because I felt who I am today, had a lot to do with my first ten, fifteen, twenty years of life.

And I felt that with my children, not having been born and brought up in India. I felt that my children would benefit from this added sense of identity that I would need to provide them. At first I thought I could do it with just the limited resources I had, and that is relying on just myself, my husband, my extended family, and it was great, because I'm fortunate enough that both my side of the family, as well as my husband's side, we have a fairly large family network here in the States and Canada. But later, I felt I needed to rely on organizations like SILC.

My husband is from a large family of eight children, four of whom are here on the North American continent. I'm from a family of five, three of whom are here in the North American continent, and I'm lucky that my kids have not only uncles and aunts and grandparents here, but they're also very fortunate in that they have cousins of equivalent ages. They have a lot of cousins, with whom they're very close. These cousins are cousins that are just as Canadian or as American as my kids are, and so they're all kind of growing up here and discovering who they're all about and what they are good at, and where their lives are going to be taking them.

And I feel that Minnesota and my whole involvement with SILC and the arts has given them a sense of what part of that identity is all about. Of course, now it's up to them to go in and use it, and to feel confident in whatever they do, in whatever jobs, in whatever lives they lead, however those lives may be. But clearly, when I talk to them today and clearly, when I see them as young adults, I can see that Minnesota will continue to be the only home that they know, even though we're going to be out in California for a bit, and who knows from there where that's going to take us.

But my son, who just left today to go back to college says, "You know, it's going to be different not to come back to Minnesota, but this will be home." And so I know he's going to be back here, and I can say that for myself and my daughter, too, and that is, having spent as much time here in Minnesota that this will be perhaps our home, and so it's interesting that you've come in and interviewed me at this kind of phase in my life.

**PS:** The closing of one chapter and starting of a new one.

**RP:** Exactly. It's the closing of one chapter, and that chapter, I really have no regrets. It's a chapter that's been a fun one. It's been a chapter of discoveries and exploration as a parent, as an individual, and it's been an extremely rewarding experience. I hope that my next phase and my next chapter are just as rewarding, just as fun as the last twenty years here in Minnesota.

**PS:** Great. Thank you.

