

Chitra Subrahmanian
Narrator

Polly Sonifer
Interviewer

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PS: This is Polly Sonifer, interviewing Chitra Subrahmanian on November 11, 2001.

Hi, Chitra. How are you today?

CS: Good. How are you?

PS: Great. Thanks for coming out and taking time to meet with me. Tell me a little bit about you, your family, how you grew up, and so on.

CS: Okay. Well, I was born in Mavelikara, which is a city in the state of Kerala, in India, in 1974. My father came to the United States in 1973 and my mother and I joined him in 1974. My father worked, as a graduate student. He did his Ph.D. at Michigan State University, in East Lansing, Michigan. We lived there for four or five years, and then we moved to Boston and we stayed there for approximately a year or so, where my father taught at MIT.

And then a year later we moved to Minnesota. In 1980 we moved to Minnesota and we've lived here ever since. My father started working for 3M and we've lived in Woodbury pretty much since 1981, and that's where I still reside.

PS: So you're living at home with your parents?

CS: Yes. I moved home when I started my master's. I completed that and then I began my Ed.S degree, educational specialist degree, so I continue to live at home. The priority was school rather than living on my own.

PS: What are you doing for work right now?

CS: Currently, I am an assistant principal/administrative assistant at Cherokee Heights Elementary at St. Paul. Previous to that I worked in the classroom for five years. I taught fifth grade. And I had one year, last year, which was the 2000-2001 school year, I was an administrative intern at Farnsworth Elementary. I'm currently looking at—slowly starting to look for a principal position, and, hopefully, next year that'll come about.

PS: So you're working on your Ph.D. right now?

CS: Right now, no. Right now I've completed my educational specialist degree, which is what you need to become a principal. Right now I'm just taking a year off, but I would like to go back and get my Ph.D. I've been in school for five years straight, so I need a little break.

PS: We're here today to talk about SILC [School of India for Languages and Culture]. You were officially born in India, but were basically raised at different places in the United States. What are your memories about the Indian community in any of those places that you've lived, other than Minnesota? We'll get to Minnesota in a little bit, but talk about the other places.

CS: When my parents lived in East Lansing, pretty much the Indian community were students who had also come from India or from various parts, who had come to study. So we would gather, my mom and dad were the married couple, so everybody—on Friday nights. Mom would cook and people would come over to the house to play cards and talk and stuff, she was the one who cooked for everyone.

I remember the various people that were there and, like my parents say, that's probably the best time in their life, when they had, really, not a whole lot of worries, but, you know, it was a good time.

My mom babysat because she didn't—really, she didn't work, she didn't do other things. So we had a house full of kids. Actually, an apartment full of kids. So I grew up with like six or seven kids for those four or five years, and so I learned a lot of life skills there. Perhaps, I think, that's probably where I learned to love people and children. I mean, I love children.

But as far as in Boston, I don't recall a whole lot, except that I started kindergarten there. I remember that quite vividly. As far as the community, there were just one or two families. It was a more—during those times, back in the late seventies, my parents were not too keen on staying because of racism. There was a quite a bit of it at the time and so they didn't feel comfortable. So they tried to get out as quick as they could.

PS: Out of Boston?

CS: Out of Boston, yes.

PS: And how did that racism manifest itself?

CS: Well, from what I understand there was a family, somebody they knew or a family friend, who was jumped and was stabbed and so on and so forth. And just, people were not very friendly. And so they didn't have a real good experience as far as what I was told. It wasn't a safe place to raise kids. That's what they said, so they wanted to get out. And so that's how they ended up in Minnesota.

PS: And was the racism directed at all people of color?

CS: I would say so, but not quite sure. I would say so.

PS: So do you have any recollections of being a child in school and experiencing racial events at school?

CS: No, I don't have—no. I only remember like a few details of even going to school. I remember preschool sometime and going on a trampoline. And then I do remember I was in kindergarten. We had this little play or something and there was this large crocodile that I had to sit on. I was the woman who sat on a crocodile, or the girl who sat on a crocodile.

PS: So when you moved to Minnesota, you were how old?

CS: Six. Or five, actually, because I started kindergarten early because acceptance dates are earlier out east, so I was five, actually, when I started here. First grade.

PS: And what was it like being here, growing up in Minnesota?

CS: There was a lot of snow, and we could go out and play in the snow. It was fine. In fact, like my parents even said that people were much nicer, willing to help you. So it was a different atmosphere for them. Going to school, you know, it was fine. I can't recall any incidents where I had issues or anything like that.

But the issue at a younger age was probably more that there weren't people who looked like me in the classroom. There weren't too many people of color at all, period. I knew one or two at the most, especially out in Woodbury, a fairly affluent white upper-class neighborhood, I guess. I experienced that pretty much all through high school. And especially in high school, there was like five of us, people of color, and we were all friends.

PS: Were you all Indian or all different backgrounds?

CS: No, all different backgrounds. There weren't too many Indians at the time, the early eighties—in fact, when we first moved to Woodbury—initially, when my parents went to go visit, it was just complete forest, and so my mom was like, “I am not raising my children in the woods out here.”

And six months later, they came back and there was starting to be a little bit of development. So at that time they decided, “Okay, well, we'll give it a try.” And that's pretty much the 3M colony out there, so everybody from 3M is pretty concentrated in Woodbury.

PS: So you grew up in this 3M culture?

CS: Yes. 3M culture.

PS: What was that like?

CS: It was pretty good. Because of 3M, there were a lot more international families that were able to move into Woodbury, so that was good. There were a lot more Indians that slowly came in. So I mean, it's brought about a change. Not quick, but fairly fast.

PS: So how did your parents get connected up with the Indian community? What was that like in the early eighties?

CS: Well, originally, it was basically, they connected up with the Malayalee community, and there were probably only thirty families at the time, in the early eighties. And so we would hold different events. At that time we could do it in just one-room—at Cedar Riverside, actually. That's where we held our movies, if we had a movie to show. Or if we had a Christmas celebration, or Onam [harvest festival], that we celebrate. It was small enough at that time that we could handle everything.

And, basically, those friends, especially in the Malayalee community, I mean, they're still family friends to this day so it's kind of a long history of friendship. And at that time, they were more, probably, you considered them family more than friends because you didn't have any family. And to this day, I still have all that family.

It wasn't until later on, I think, that we got more involved into the mass, the larger Indian community, with SILC. SILC helped in that, too. Getting exposed to the various communities out there. And the Indian Association, and so forth.

PS: How old were you the first time you went to SILC?

CS: When I went to SILC I was in high school. I think I was probably ninth or tenth grade when I went for the first time. But my parents had told me about it. They had told me about it for so long, and they wanted me to go and they tried to—I just wouldn't have anything to do with it. So I was like, "Why do I need to go there and learn my language?" and all that stuff. Previously, I couldn't speak and I understood, later I could speak, so I didn't think that was necessary.

PS: Malayalam?

CS: Yes, I spoke, yes. So I speak it currently, but I didn't think that was for me, you know. It just wasn't for me. So I waited. It was a trip to India that kind of made me decide, oh, you know what, maybe I need to go and see what's going on and find out what this is all about.

PS: So you told me earlier that you were in a dance troupe.

CS: Yes.

PS: Tell me about that.

CS: I started dance when I was six or seven, actually, and I danced for Rane Ramaswamy. I studied for six or seven years and then I stopped. We danced throughout the cities and it was a

good experience. That was a nice beginning for me to get involved in the arts, and that's how I learned a lot about music and Indian art.

PS: And was that at your request or your parents' urging?

CS: That one was at—I think it was at my request. It was my wanting to do it. I always had an interest for that art and dance, music.

PS: So when you started at SILC, you were older than most of the kids, because hadn't most of the kids kind of been encouraged or pushed by their parents a lot younger?

CS: Yes. Yes, definitely, yes. A lot of the kids, even my own brother, who, he and I are eight years apart—Krish, his name is Krishnan. He started when he was five, so by the time he came around they kind of decided that this was something that, you know, we're going to have him do and there wasn't really an option. But at that time there were a lot of children his age, Indian families where we lived in Woodbury and Colby Lake, so we always—we had a Sunday SILC van that went to SILC. At the time, my dad was the principal.

PS: Of SILC?

CS: Of SILC. So he would, or various parents would like have a carpool van that would—a van that would vanpool that would go to SILC every Sunday. We'd pick up kids and we'd drop them off, and it was our Woodbury carpool. It was a good time.

PS: Anything you remember about those carpools? Did you sing Indian songs or do anything particular in the carpool?

CS: We listened to the radio. That was the thing to do. KDWB. [a local pop music station]
[Laughter]

PS: That's very Indian, right?

CS: Yes, that's what we would do. Listen to the radio—it was a good time.

PS: And did the parents take turns with the driving?

CS: Sometimes, yes. They all traded. But I think pretty much my dad or one of the other parents who was a teacher would take the kids, because the others didn't really need to be there. It was a good time.

PS: So tell you what you remember about the very first day that you went to SILC?

CS: The very first day. It was held over at the location before Saint Anthony Park, which was the commons over at the U. Do you remember what that was called? It was over on the University campus, on the St. Paul campus. There was some housing over there. They had a

little—Commonwealth [married student housing]. Over at the Commonwealth. And it was held there.

The first day I went, and I don't know, I don't remember it too vividly, but I liked it because there were kids my age actually, that were there, and then that was good. At that point, that was like—during those days they had really high enrollment, like 120 kids. And most of them were like high school or that age, so it was nice.

It was a nice place to go because I liked the fact that I could go there and everybody looked like me, and I didn't have to explain certain things, like, you know, that we eat with our hands, and so on and so forth. So it was nice place. At that point I was pretty much sold on it. I liked it.

I started to learn Malayalam, as far as communication. I didn't learn how to read or write, because at that point the script had become too hard. At about thirteen, it became difficult for me to pick up. So the class that I was in was purely communication. We just basically talked and learned that way.

PS: But you said you were already fluent from hearing your parents speak?

CS: Yes, I was fluent but I think—

PS: As far as speaking it?

CS: Yes. I was fluent but I still needed the practice because that was one thing at home, was that my parents tried to implement the rule of, “Okay, only Malayalam in the house.” But after eight hours of speaking English, it was kind of hard to stick to. And so it was helpful, because that was one place where you were kind of forced to speak, or at least listen and communicate. The whole purpose was, basically, just, if I were to go back to India to visit or whatnot, for me to be able to communicate and find my way around and so on, and so that was important.

PS: So after all those years of resisting going, what changed your mind?

CS: I think part of it was just that whole—I don't know if it was denial or just not wanting to be a part yet, and I had to come to it on my own. And not only that, but for myself, the struggle in a fairly white community, and being the only of one or two Indians. That was really difficult, and so it took me until about my senior year in high school before I could truly say that I was proud of being Indian and who I was and where I came from.

You know, because earlier on I had those questions, like “Why can't my name be Lisa or Amy or something like that? Why do I have to be different?” And so it took a long time before I could definitely say that I was proud of who I was and where I came from. And that's the inner struggle, I think. And perhaps if I were raised somewhere else, where there was a large Indian community, it wouldn't have been an issue. But growing up in Minnesota, it was difficult.

PS: With the Malayalam community that was those thirty families or so, did that feel like community to you?

CS: It felt like a community, but there weren't too many kids my age. I was one of the oldest. There were a few, but not enough to say we had a large community of youth. And so we were that first generation, the first children of the first generation, and so it was difficult. It was difficult.

PS: So there you were now at SILC, at fifteen?

CS: I think thirteen.

PS: Thirteen? Okay. Surrounded by all these other Indian kids. What else do you remember about that first year when you went?

CS: I started to build relationships with different students. It was fun. I mean, it was fun and you looked forward to it because here were people your age who looked like you. I mean, it was a good time. At that point, I enjoyed it. I really enjoyed it.

PS: So did the kids your age get into the same classes, even though you might be at different skill levels?

CS: Yes, pretty much. It's pretty much age-wise. Like, the only class that you would be separated for is language. You know, you take whatever is your mother tongue, usually, generally. And then with the other classes like social studies or—they call it General Knowledge, too—or an elective class like cooking or something like that, you would probably do it with people who are your peers.

PS: And what kind of relationships formed between you and the teachers? How did you view those teachers, either the same as or different from the teachers you had in high school or junior high?

CS: Well, a lot of them were people you called “uncle” or “auntie” and so on, family friends. So I mean, it was important. To this day, my Malayalam teacher, Rajan Menon, to this day, when I see him, in our mother tongue, I say, I call him “teacher” and stuff like that. So I mean, it's something that stays with you for a long time. He used to teach us little—actually, he used to teach us Malayalam by using like bad sentences and stuff like that, so we would remember them, and those are things that stick with you, to this day.

PS: Like what kind of sentences?

CS: Like he would teach us phrases that when said, you know, come up with a saying that's not inappropriate, but silly or something like that, so that, you know, he was giving us ways to remember words and things like that. It made it exciting, I guess. Different. And in return, I guess we did the same because we couldn't get some things right. When we would translate like

“the sun rises in the east and sets in the west,” we would get it all mixed up and we would switch it around. So it was a good time.

PS: So you saw some of those people outside of class time as well?

CS: Oh, yes, definitely.

PS: In your social life. And were there others that you didn't see outside of class time?

CS: Yes, definitely.

PS: And what kind of relationship did you create with them?

CS: The people who you didn't see? I mean, I think, bottom line, like I think, the bottom line that my parents have always taught me is respecting your elders, and that was something that always stayed. I mean, you weren't out of line, you weren't disrespectful, you didn't act up in the class, and you just did what you were supposed to do and that was it.

Some of those people are still around in the community. I mean, you see them and you have those memories to this day of, you know, the person who taught you cooking or, you know. It's good. It's a good thing.

PS: Describe for me a little more in detail the practice of calling other grown-ups “uncle” and “auntie”.

CS: It's a whole respect thing, as far as, you don't call adults or elders by their first name. You never call them by their first name. So everybody is pretty much an uncle or an auntie, and they might not even be related to you, but you call them “uncle.” You don't call them by their first name, out of pure respect.

It's a tradition that's kind of hard to break, even for myself. Like now in the workforce it's hard, because calling someone by their first name is difficult for me. And so usually when I'm at work, even the people who I might be, you know, not necessarily in charge of, but who I advise and whatnot, I will call them Mr. or Mrs. So-and-So, and oftentimes, they're like, “You don't have to call me that,” and then it's kind of hard to break that. And I'd have to explain, “It's cultural, and it's a tradition, and we don't call people by their first names.” It's hard. But sometimes you just have to.

PS: And it wouldn't quite work if you called them Uncle George or Aunt Sarah either, right?

CS: [Laughs] Yes. Because then you'd have to explain all that, too.

PS: But within the Indian community, a child wouldn't call an adult unknown to them “Mr.” or “Mrs.” Right? They would always use—

CS: It's uncle and auntie, always, yes.

PS: How about if it was your teacher in an Indian classroom? How would you address them?

CS: Uncle and auntie.

PS: Even for your teacher, in a straight classroom?

CS: Yes. Everybody's uncle and auntie. That's what hard, too, now being at SILC, or as an administrator at SILC. There are people that you work with that are considered, you're supposed to call them uncle or auntie, so that becomes really hard when you're supposed to be also peers. That becomes difficult.

PS: And that uncle and auntie is based on your position or your age?

CS: Age.

PS: Okay. So anybody who is older than you, you should address as uncle or auntie?

CS: Yes. Yes, and age meaning like people who are perhaps like my mother and father's age, you know, but people who might be like—I'm twenty-seven, so people who are like thirty, I wouldn't call them uncle or auntie. And depending upon if they're married—there's all sorts of stipulations, too.

PS: So what's the rule about married?

CS: Well, if they're married and they're younger, that's—like my friend, I wouldn't call her auntie or anything. She's a peer. She's one of my friends, so I wouldn't. But people who are—I would say probably people of my parents' generation. Or, within our community, like the Malayalee community, we have—I might call somebody an older sister, which is "*chachi*", so now I have those two, like, older sisters, not necessarily aunts yet, but they're sisters.

PS: So you would say their name and "*chachi*"?

CS: Yes. Like Sailaja *Chachi*. And so she's like my mom's nephew's wife, and she's like thirty-something. Thirty-two. So I'm not going to call her "auntie" but I call her "older sister". There are titles and so on and so forth.

PS: So what do the kids in SILC call you?

CS: Well, yes, that's one thing. They call me—they don't ever call me by name, actually. And yet one day I heard "Chitra Auntie" and I was like, "Oh, no. I don't think I like that." I mean, "Chitra" is fine. That's kind of difficult.

PS: Yes, when you become the grown-up.

CS: Yes, yes.

PS: So when you're in your work relationships with your peers at your job, do you want them to address you as "Ms. Subrahmanian"?

CS: Well, for us, too, that's really hard because with children around, we don't call—like, our staff, we don't have the kids call us by first name. But some schools do call their teachers by first name. So when we're around the kids, I prefer that they call me Miss Subrahmanian, or whatever, just out of respect, so that they learn that. And I call the staff, in front of the kids, I would call them Mr. Specht or Miss Martin, too, so that—

PS: So that you're demonstrating that respect always?

CS: Yes, definitely.

PS: So what other classes did you take at SILC that were particularly meaningful? You mentioned the Malayalam class. What others particularly stood out for you?

CS: We had this one class, SAP. It was called SILC Achievement Project, which was a class that I really enjoyed. Generally, it had kids that were beyond a certain age, and so the older kids, generally, were in there and we worked on various projects. I can't remember any of them, but we worked on various projects. [Laughter] So that was nice.

PS: What was the nature of the projects?

CS: I couldn't even tell you. To be honest, I could not even tell you. But I remember that that was like a special thing, because kids had to wait to get into SAP. You had to be a certain age to be in there. And Anoop Mathur was our teacher, actually. So it was a good time.

Any other classes? The standard, like yoga and music and cooking. Those were all fun. I think also when we had our days where we displayed our work—like SILC Day. We had an annual celebration. Those types of things were fun, too. Because I remember, a lot of times I would emcee. I'd be the MC [Master of Ceremonies], so that was kind of fun. Those were the ones that really stand out.

We did a rap for General Knowledge once. There were like ten of us and we rapped about Indian history, and it was kind of cool. That was fun, because all had on SILC T-shirts and sunglasses. That was when the Chicago Bears won the Super Bowl, and then had done this Super Bowl rap, and so we were trying to imitate them. [Laughter] So it was cool.

PS: Did you find that you started to get together with the kids from SILC outside of SILC?

CS: No. No, not really. Not really.

PS: What was the barrier to that?

CS: Well, at that time, I didn't drive or anything like that so it was kind of hard to even do that. We lived out in Woodbury, which was kind of far away from everybody, I think. So that kind of was a barrier. Time, traveling and all that good stuff.

PS: And then the other kids that lived in Woodbury? Were they just younger than you?

CS: Yes. Actually, that was a whole different generation, almost. Like my brother is, we're—not generation, I shouldn't say that. We're eight years apart, so the kids, when we did the vanpool, it was all kids his age. So they were all his friends. And to this day, they're all, like, great friends, close, and they see each other all the time, when they're back home from college and stuff.

PS: Do you ever feel a little jealous?

CS: Not so much jealous, but just kind of—I'm happy that he was able to experience that. To go to school, high school, and have kids that were Indian with him, and who were so close with him. I think that's made him, you know, such a better person.

Because he and I talked about that once. When the twentieth anniversary came around, we talked about—I said, you know, how I felt SILC had such an impact on my life, as far as, there were people that looked like me. And he didn't have the same experience as I did, and I think it was because at that point there were more Indian children in his own school, at Woodbury High School or wherever he was at the time.

And so that made a difference, growing up with other Indian children. And they saw each other all the time because if it wasn't SILC, they had potluck parties once a month, or the 3M Indian people had potluck parties once a month so they would see each other there. And so, I mean, they were always around each other, so it was a completely different experience. It was interesting.

PS: Were you involved with any of the Festival of Nations booths or anything?

CS: Oh, yes.

PS: Tell me about that.

CS: Actually, now that you said that, yes. Those were memorable experiences. I always volunteered at the India booths, which was a display booth, and volunteered there. So I'd dress up as a bride or whatever, and whatever was needed. I did that for a little—I still pretty much do that. So that was a part of my life.

And then the café, too. A lot of times my dad and I would volunteer there in the café, and sell food and stuff. That was all pretty much related to SILC, concerning community.

PS: And what did you learn from those experiences?

CS: I think the most important thing was just, giving back is really important, and not forgetting who you are and where you come from, and to always give back and to continue to give back. I think that was probably the most important lesson. And, you know, being proud of who you are and where you come from. That was really important.

And I think just being an ambassador for India. It seems like you're always the ambassador, as far as relaying information and then letting people know. So to this day, even at school, people ask, "Well, can you come present on India?" and I always do because I feel it's my responsibility to let people know what it's like, and how people in India live, and who the people of India are. So it's important.

PS: So you went to India a couple times?

CS: Yes. Well, actually every two, three years because I still have my grandmothers there, and uncles and aunts there. We have a lot of family here, but we still have some family back home, so we go every two, three years.

PS: What's that like for you when you go back?

CS: It's very interesting. I always say I love to visit but I don't think I could ever live there, because I've just become so Americanized and used to this way of life. It's difficult, though, going back as a woman. You start to realize that you're not so free to do what you want, and that's really hard. That piece of it would be very difficult to not, you know, not to just go and walk out the door and go wherever you want. You have to have people with you, and sometimes they have to be men, who can be there to protect you, I guess.

PS: Is there truly a threat to a woman walking by herself on the street?

CS: Well, I mean, I haven't even been alone and I've been like grabbed many a time, and stuff like that. So, yes. I mean, it's not like a threat as in—but you start to feel very uncomfortable, and that type of stuff. It's hard.

PS: Who's grabbing you?

CS: Men, in the streets.

PS: Thugs, or just regular men?

CS: Probably just regular men, because when you go to turn around, there's no one there. It's very sneaky and it's very nasty.

PS: So is there a sexual intent or is it to rob you?

CS: No, probably sexual, mostly. And just, how you interact with people here is not the same that you interact with people there as far as being a woman. You know, your mannerisms here. And here, you can do what—I mean, pretty much do whatever you want. You’re free to do whatever, but there, I mean, you have to be reserved and kind of, you know, not flirtatious. I guess it seems as though you’re being flirtatious, but here it’s just your regular run-of-the-mill behavior.

PS: So how did you learn those cultural rules?

CS: A lot of it was my mom mentioning them, or just experiencing it.

PS: So if you broke one of those unspoken rules, how did you get the message that you’d just done something wrong? Did somebody tell you?

CS: Yes, oh, yes. Oh, definitely, you would be told, that, you know, this is not okay. A lot of times it’s my mom who will inform me to stop doing this or stop doing that, because you’re interpreted to be this way or that way or whatever. So there’s clear messages that you receive.

PS: But during the interchange, whatever you were saying or doing wrong, they wouldn’t stop the interchange and tell you you were wrong? Your mother would tell you later?

CS: Yes, after the fact. Yes, and it could be like, you know, for example, I was talking to my cousin and he had some friends over, and the way—and this was when I was younger, too. But the mannerism, and the manner in which I was speaking, you know, she was like, “You’re not supposed to be that outspoken” or “You’re being flirtatious.” It was just kind of, whoa, that’s my cousin, but I guess it’s interpreted to be that way.

And here, there are no restrictions on how you speak and who you speak to, and so on and so forth. So, you learn at a young age—and what’s acceptable to wear and what is not. No jeans. American clothes are okay, but you have to wear a skirt, or whatever.

But the thing that’s the hardest, I think, about going back to India is, no matter what you do, you speak the mother tongue, you can speak the language, you can wear the attire. They still know you’re not from there.

PS: What gave you away?

CS: And I’ve asked that, because, you know, I can have my hair like everybody else, I can do everything the same, and they say, “Well, you look plump. You look healthy.” Or even little things, like the glasses that my dad wears, or things like that. It gives people away. And the shoes. Different things like that. They know. They watch for that.

PS: So the stranger on the street could pick you out as being an American Indian?

CS: Oh, for sure, yes. And I think, even like my mom, in her—where she lives. She went to town once and a man was like, “Where are you from?”

And she’s like, “I’m from just up the street.”

And he was like, “No, no, no, no. Where are you from?”

And she’s like, “No, really. I just live up by the water tower. That’s where I live.”

He’s like, “No.”

And she’s like, “How do you know?”

They know. They know you’re not from there. You look foreign, I guess. So in a way, you’re a foreigner in your homeland. I mean, and that’s how I feel, like I don’t fit in either place, really. I fit more here than I do back home.

PS: And what’s that experience of not fitting here? What’s that about?

CS: Not fitting here, in that you kind of have both feet in two separate cultures, two separate worlds, that are completely different in many ways. Very opposite of each other. So that becomes difficult, too, is when you’re being raised here, with Indian values.

I remember, in elementary school, you know, when I was younger, during the day you’d be American and at home, you come home and you’re Indian, and you live two separate lives almost, because they don’t really mesh well. So it was hard. It was very hard.

PS: Were you reluctant to invite your school friends over to your house, or vice versa, to go to their homes?

CS: No. I mean, it wasn’t—those types of issues weren’t there. I mean, playing with friends and stuff, that wasn’t an issue. But it was hard to have them over for dinner, because if you’re having rice and traditional food, I mean, that was hard.

PS: And what was hard about that?

CS: Well, just, you know, them not wanting to eat what we ate, or whatever, and so that was hard. But I could go there and blend in fine, because if they’re having hamburger and whatever, that’s fine. I can blend in. But for them to eat in our house, it might be a little difficult.

PS: And did your family eat with your hands, at home?

CS: Yes, we do.

PS: And was that unsettling for your friends?

CS: And that was part of it, too, is like I don't think they even knew that we ate with our hands. That wasn't something I shared. Or when friends did come over, you took out the spoons and forks. For guests, whatever. Different. You're always on your toes, I feel. You're always on your toes, making sure that, you know, being respectful in all manners in both cultures, and, you know, everything.

PS: And is that hard work?

CS: Yes, yes.

PS: Tiring?

CS: Definitely, definitely. And I don't know if it's so much now because, like for my brother and people his age, but I think for myself, being the first child of an immigrant family, that was hard because I was the guinea pig and everything was new to them. So that was hard.

PS: So finding that group of Indian kids at SILC was a real important part of you finding out who you were, in a sense?

CS: Yes, definitely.

PS: What exactly was the thing at SILC that happened that helped you say, "This is who I am"?

CS: I don't know if it just one specific thing. I mean, just the whole atmosphere of being there, that was really important. I think you have a sense of pride. It probably wasn't one specific thing. I think everything played into it. I don't want to come off as sounding that I was completely like not Indian. No, I mean, I wore the traditional clothing. I did everything.

But I think it takes a person to come to their—you know, it takes a while for them to come to their own terms, to be able to truly and honestly say, "You know, I'm very proud of who I am and where I come from." And when you don't see that in your everyday life, as far as going to school, and you don't see people who look like you, or you don't have teachers who look like you, I think that becomes hard for kids, when they don't have role models who look like them, who have experienced what they've experienced. I think that becomes difficult.

PS: There was an essay that I read one time where a young person from SILC had written that being here and being Indian American or Indo-American, they described it as living on the hyphen, being between these two worlds.

CS: Definitely. I would 100 percent agree. I mean, living in between two worlds. And my parents always said, "You know, take the best of both worlds." It's easy to say but it's hard. It's hard to take from this and that, from each culture. It was a difficult thing. Maybe had I grown up now, when times are different, maybe it wouldn't have been so hard. But I think it probably was the times and the place and it was all in a circle.

PS: And were these things that you could talk over with your parents, either your mom or your dad?

CS: Most of the time, yes, but a lot of the times you just didn't share certain things.

PS: And what held you back from sharing?

CS: You know, just some things might not have been acceptable or not okay. I don't know. You know, like just cultural things, too, as far as kids in high school and stuff, who had—you know, my friends who were drinking and things like that, and that just wasn't acceptable to my parents. And, you know, things like that, and you just didn't share, because you didn't want them to think that they were—that they could possibly influence you and have, you know—and that was the worry that, you know, my parents' saying was, "We trust you. It's the rest of the world we don't trust." So there are things that you just didn't share. You just figured they just don't know. [Laughs] What they don't know won't hurt them.

PS: Or you.

CS: Yes, yes. Definitely.

PS: So you said that you were told to take the best from each culture?

CS: Right.

PS: And if you, at this advanced age of twenty-seven, could say what were the best things that you got from each culture, how would you put words to that right now?

CS: Well, I think, as far as the American culture, things that I've learned and have helped me a lot are just being independent. You grow up at such a quick, fast rate here. That's bad, and there's also good things, too, that, you know, there are things that I'm doing that probably females back home would not be doing.

PS: Such as?

CS: Just to be able to have my own car to go to work, and do what I want, when I want. That's just not—it's not practical back home. And to say I have three degrees, and to be able to go to college like I wanted to, and to study what I wanted is another thing. You know, to become a teacher. It's not the most traditional Indian career.

And so having been able to do what I want to do, and not because—you know, is going to get me a job, or what is going to provide me a livelihood. Because that's the only way out, is to become an engineer or a doctor or something like that. To be able to do what I want to do is really, really important.

PS: So you see those as American values, more American than India?

CS: Oh, definitely. Definitely. As far as Indian, I mean, just the whole sense of community. There's a deep sense of community, and giving back. That's something that I've really learned. Values of respect and education. I mean, not that it's not American, but for my parents, the mantra that they always said was, "Education is your key to success. That is your key. That's what you need to do." And that wasn't an option. You're going to go to school, you're going to go to college, and you're going to be a success. That's the bottom line.

And so, those type of values I think were really important, and that, you know, to work really hard. To work really hard. And whatever you do in life, make sure that you're the best at it and have a passion for it. Those are things that were really important, too.

PS: How long did you attend SILC?

CS: I'm not even quite sure like how long I went. I can't remember if I was still there my senior year of high school or not. I think I only stayed about three years.

PS: And then what happened that you stopped going?

CS: Actually, I think part of it was because a lot of the older kids had left, and so it became not as fun, probably. So that was part of it. And then I had started going to college after high school. It was my senior year and things like that, I think.

PS: So you were taking college courses while you were in high school yet?

CS: No. No, no, no. But just like, after I left SILC I wasn't involved at all. I didn't even come back to teach or anything. So I'm not sure how it was or why it was that I stopped, but it just kind of stopped.

PS: Did you get any resistance from your parents when you announced that you weren't going to go?

CS: No. No, they didn't have a problem with it.

PS: Did your brother continue to go?

CS: Yes. He still was there, and so my dad was still involved as president. I think he had every position at SILC. So yes, they continued on for a while. My brother and the rest of the kids that lived in Woodbury, they all went for a long time.

PS: So you stopped going. Did you keep in touch with any of the kids that you met there?

CS: No, not really, no. But I saw the teachers and stuff, because they were all family friends of ours still, so I would see them. But I didn't see any of the kids, really.

PS: Was that all right?

CS: Yes, that was fine. I was okay with that. I was fine with that.

PS: And then what was college like for you? Where did you go?

CS: I did my undergrad at the University of Minnesota, and it was fine. I was able to finish, actually, in like three and a half years. And I became involved with their Indian student association there, and then at that time I also did become involved with India Association. I was a board member then, so I was still doing the Festival of Nations and things like that, and participating sometimes. We had adult dances, too, that we did for Festival of Nations, so that type of stuff. So I was always still involved in the community, at some level.

I think it was in college that I was able to meet more students of color, become more involved and have more friends that were from all over the world. Egypt, Afghanistan, Tanzania, all over the world. But more friends of color. I think that's when it became more apparent that I wanted to be—I wanted people around me that kind of knew what I was going through, so a lot of my friends were first-generation children, who also struggled in their own cultures, in their own way.

PS: Did you have conversations with them about that?

CS: Oh, yes. All the time. We still do. Yes, how difficult it is, and the cultural barriers that exist. You know, because a lot of us met, and then the whole dating thing came into play, and marriage and all that. Not necessarily that any of us are married, but just the whole rush to be married from our parents. At a certain age you need to be married. So that type of stuff became apparent, and a lot more difficult to deal with.

PS: So I would imagine it was pretty comforting to find out there were people who, even from other cultures, had the same dynamic.

CS: Definitely, definitely. And that it's perhaps a universal thing. It's not just—because you think, oh, you're the only one who's in this, and that's not the case. Everybody goes through it, but in their own way. That's probably the most universal thing, I think, for first-generation immigrant children. I never got the terminology right. First-generation immigrant families' children or something like that. [Laughs] But I think that's a common bond.

And actually, I also started having more African American friends, because—and I did in high school, too, but more so, and that, I think, just people of color, in general, being able to relate to them. It was easier.

PS: My sense has been a lot of the time that there's a certain tension between the African American community and other immigrant groups. My sense, personally, is that there's a sort of a resentment that other immigrant groups come here and they start out in poverty and they work

themselves out of it. In the African American community, many people just stay in poverty. Did you get a sense of that?

CS: No, actually, not really. Not at all.

PS: Well, you were interacting with college students, too, probably.

CS: Yes. But I don't know. I've never really sense that myself, but then, Minnesota is not probably the best place to—as far as, we don't have like a high population of African Americans, either. So, I mean, it's not your—probably you're not going to see that as much here. If you went to areas with high concentrations of African Americans in poverty, perhaps that might be the feeling. I'm not sure.

PS: So you finished your undergraduate in three and half years, and then what?

CS: I began teaching for St. Paul public schools in 1995, and I started as a classroom teacher, and taught fifth grade for five years. And then after a year of being in the classroom, I started on my master's at Hamline [University], a master's in education. That took about two years, I think, going part-time. Towards the end of that one, I started my Ed.S, my education specialist, to become a principal. Last year I did an internship all year, and I was at the same school for six years, Farnsworth Elementary, on the east side. And then this year, now I'm at Cherokee Heights Elementary.

My personal—how I got into teaching, I just—my second year of college, I didn't know what I was going to do still, and my parents were getting really worried. And I just kind of knew that I wanted to help people. Whatever it was, I wanted to help people, and that I love children.

So I kind of combined the two and, in fact, all the classes that I had been taking kind of fell into place and kind of fell into my major, so I didn't have—I was able to graduate pretty quick. And I vowed, at that point, of having experienced what I had experienced in the suburbs, that I would never teach in the suburbs because my commitment would be towards children of color, or the experience of children who lived in the inner city, working with those of various socioeconomic status.

All the students that suffered from poverty. I mean, just everything that they have to deal with, homelessness and all that. And that was where I was going to dedicate myself, and pretty much that's where I've been, and I love it. I wouldn't have it any other way. They are the reason that I get up every day. It's just a fabulous thing.

And especially, I think, in Minnesota now here, because we have a large Hmong population, and a lot of the children, when they find out I'm from India, they're like “Oh, wow. We eat rice, too.” And so, I mean, if I can make a difference in one child's life, I've done my job, so that's where my commitment and dedication lies right now. It's a fabulous thing.

PS: Was it a change to go from being in the classrooms to being the administrator?

CS: Yes. It was difficult, I mean, initially. Difficult, in the sense, I was still at the same school. I was at the school that I had been a classroom teacher at for five years, and then all of a sudden, in an administrator role. It was a little difficult. And plus being very young. That's one thing that I have—or people have problems with, just, you know, being that I'm so young. But I feel like I'm a natural leader, and so it feels natural and it feels fine, and I kind of tend to think it's their issue, not mine. [Laughs]

PS: And then you, at a certain point, came back to SILC. How did that happen?

CS: Gosh, I don't even know. Being this just happened, I don't know how it happened. One year, the current president came and she said, you know, "What do you think of this? Do you think you could be principal? Would you want to do that? We really need somebody and we're looking for somebody kind of like you, who's second generation, or whatever."

And I said, "Well, you know, I'm kind of busy with school and everything. I'll see how it goes." So I said, "Sure, you know, I'd do it." And then that—it was the year we were having our twentieth anniversary celebration. I was involved in that. And so then at the end of the year they're like, "She's our new principal next year."

And I was like, "Wow, that's kind of interesting, in that I have, you know, having been there as a student and coming back to be a principal, or in an administrative position. It was nice. It was nice in that I think the kids really appreciated it. There was somebody who looked like them, who talked like them, who's in a position where they could look up to and have a role model, and so that I think that's a human approach."

PS: And to the students at SILC, was your being young an asset to them?

CS: Yes, definitely, definitely.

PS: And you didn't speak with an accent like teachers?

CS: Right. I didn't speak with an accent, you know. Kind of cool, and the clothes, and, you know, looked like them and was kind of firm with them and disciplined, which doesn't always happen when they're with teachers who might be aunts or uncles or different family friends. It doesn't always happen. So I came in with my whistle and, you know, and just everything like, you know, "Stop running" and this, that, and the other, and I think they were able to take it more from me, but respected it and understood that that was not okay. And I would always say, "Well, would you do that in your school, in your normal school?"

"No."

"Well, then you're not going to do it here." And part of my training, too, I think helped in making things work. So I finished my year as principal, and then my second year I thought I

could sneak out, but I couldn't. You have to gradually leave, I guess. So this year I'm president. It's been a good experience. I think it's been a really good experience.

There were some really frustrating things, as far as being from—being—having an educational background, there is definitely methodology to everything. And coming into SILC, I was just—I kind of was at a loss. You know, people would say, “Well, did you know you were supposed to be doing this at this time and that at that time?”

And I'm like, “No, I don't know that.”

PS: So you were saying that to them?

CS: Yes. Or former principals and stuff were saying, “Well, at this time of year, we celebrate this or that.”

I'm like, “Well, how would I know that? There's nothing here to tell me, no book or anything that says, you know, these are the things you need to do to get ready for SILC, in August.” And so that became really frustrating and so—and I think part of it has to do with, as people come and go, information is lost, and it's not necessarily given to the next person. So that becomes really frustrating.

Or there have been attempts at one time, maybe ten years ago, to create such a thing, like a manual, but it never got passed on, or it's still in someone's basement. And so those types of things become very frustrating. And so at that point last year, SILC's future was kind of not so good. It was kind of grim. Because with a completely volunteer organization, you know, it became really difficult, and we weren't sure if we could continue the mission.

And so we had a couple focus groups with the founders of SILC, that would be Ram Gada, Preeti [Mathur], you know, all of them, Shanti Shah. A lot of them came. And with current parents and administrators and teachers. We talked about, you know, is this something that we want to continue, and is there support for it from the community. Because the same ten people can't continue to run things. You know, we need a broader base.

And so, well, from the focus groups it was determined that, yes, indeed, SILC needed to continue and to support its mission from twenty-two years ago. And so we held some more focus groups and decided that perhaps the mission—the mission itself had not changed, but maybe our market, our target market had changed. Because in 1979, when SILC was initially established, it was basically a place where families could come together because there weren't too many Indian families, and they could come together and spend some time together and things like that.

But we started to notice that the community is very big now. It's pretty big. And so we weren't sure, what needed to take place but we determined what our target markets were, and we decided that they were adopted children, children who are born and are raised in the United States, and children who are thirteen years and up, because we noticed that at that point, around eleven, twelve, maybe thirteen, kids started dropping out.

So we noticed that we weren't doing things right at that time, because we weren't providing them what they want, and at that age, you know, things start to change. Social things are more important. And so those were our target markets, and then from there we created some committees, like a curriculum committee, an operations committee, which would work on that manual that we could pass on from principal to principal, or whatever the case may be, and everyone was kind of on the same page and would know that this is what we're supposed to be doing at this time.

And some various other committees. A publicity committee, an adult activities committee, an outreach committee. Because at one point in the original mission, SILC was created also to be an outreach, a place of information, so that when people needed information about India, they would call SILC. They would call SILC and say, "Can you come out and do a presentation?" And so we wanted to get back to some of that. But we also realized that now with modern technology that information is readily accessible from anywhere, with the Internet and everything. So that kind of changed a little bit, too.

PS: So is SILC not doing that as part of its mission anymore?

CS: It tries to, but we don't necessarily get the calls like we used to. They're able to find the information from other places, so they don't need a speakers' bureau necessarily. But we still offer it. And so, with the focus groups that started last spring, all summer long our publicity committee started working.

And what was really interesting is that we have people who have lived here for a long time who still don't know about SILC, and that was something that we were really perplexed about. How you could live in a community for that long and not know that this school has existed for all this time. And so then we decided, you know, publicity was really important and something we needed to work on.

PS: So how did you decide to do that?

CS: Well, we created our committee and they started—basically, last summer they did a lot of publicity, putting out flyers at the various restaurants and stuff, creating posters to put up. Sending out a mailing to the larger community. And PIC is part of our mailing list, too. And, in fact, this year now we've had a great—we've had probably the largest enrollment for a long time, I think due to that publicity, and people getting out there, and word-of-mouth spreading.

PS: So what's your enrollment right now?

CS: Right now I think we're about eighty. And at the time when I was there, it was about 120.

PS: When you were a student?

CS: When I was a student.

PS: And then it dropped away to what?

CS: Yes, actually last year it was down to like thirty.

PS: Wow.

CS: And our preschool program has really added a piece to SILC. Like children who are five years and under, twice a month they come for forty-five minutes to the preschool program, and they're able to do activities, arts and crafts on India. And we have a lot of adopted children who come, so that's probably another one of our strengths. So then if they start coming at three, by four, five, by six, they're able to start at SILC full time, and be a part of that community.

So we're doing things. We're trying to, like I said, have a new and improved SILC. It's going to take time, but we'll do it. We'll do it.

PS: So where do you see SILC going? What's your vision for SILC, as an organization, say, five or ten years from now?

CS: Right. My hope is that it still continues to do what it's doing. Its original mission is to provide kids with the languages of India, to learn about the culture of India. I hope it'll still continue, so that the next generation of kids, like my generation, their children will be able to come to SILC and enjoy all the things we were able to, and not lose their cultural heritage and maintain it. That's really important.

And that they constantly are renewing and looking at and assessing things, to make sure that we're providing for the needs of the community, because they're always changing. So I think that's really important. Because this is the first time in like twenty-two years that anybody's really looked to see if we're—what our needs are still.

PS: And at eighty students, is it financially viable?

CS: Yes, definitely. I mean, we're a completely nonprofit organization, so basically we're just, you know, we're just getting by, a lot of times. But we're starting to look into grants and stuff for curriculum. We received an American Express grant for \$1,000 that we're going to put towards our curriculum. Things like that. So, I mean, we can always use money.

One thing right now we're trying to work at is getting technology for the kids. Because we have a website and stuff, so we want to make sure that the kids have access to the Internet and computers, which is kind of hard when you're not in your own setting. You're using a school. Como Park Senior High. And it's a little challenging.

PS: So you can't use their computers?

CS: Well, yes. That's not something we should be doing, so we're looking into finding some laptops and stuff, so that the kids can work at SILC.

PS: And do most of those kids have computers at home?

CS: Yes, a lot of them.

PS: So what would be the urgency to replicate that with laptops at SILC?

CS: What we want to do is—well, SILC is—it doesn't—it's not like regular school, in that we don't try to give like a whole lot of homework and stuff like that, but I think the importance of laptops is this class that we have, SAP, SILC Achievement Project, where the kids can work on the website at SILC, with an adult, and they can learn the skills from an adult right there.

And not only that, but being able to use curriculum. There's lots of curriculum out there for learning languages. Videos and so on and so forth. And we don't have access to a lot of it. So that would be, I think, one thing that's really important for SILC to be into.

PS: And you said you were hoping you could sneak out the door after two years as principal, but that hasn't happened. How do you envision your ongoing connection, if any?

CS: I mean, I'd still like to be a part, and maybe stay on the board, just work with the board. But I do want to make sure that everyone's getting an opportunity to do their share as well, and that's one thing that's really important. That we're all working on this together, and not the same people always doing all the hard work or doing all the work. So we have to continue to move and keep it flowing, so I think that would be my concern.

But in some capacity to be a part of it, I would definitely want to be. And not necessarily teaching, because it's kind of hard. I think what's hard for me is doing this Monday through Friday, the administrative role, and then coming here and doing it on Saturday, too. It's different context, but still it's the same thing.

And so that's really hard. That's something I struggle with. That's why I don't want to go up and teach, necessarily. Because I'd like to have some break on the weekends from my day job. But maybe just being able to advise and being on the board would be a good piece, I think.

PS: And you are, at this point, not married?

CS: Nope.

PS: At the risk of sounding like your mother, when you have kids, will you send them to SILC?

CS: Yes, I would definitely, definitely. I would love for my children to go there. I think it's really important. Just knowing how much it's helped me and been a part of my life. Yes, definitely, I'd love for them to go.

PS: Do you still speak Malayalam with your parents?

CS: Yes. Not like all the time. I think that's hard. I'm actually used to English. But yes, we do. We speak often enough.

PS: And how would you imagine your children learning Malayalam? Would they learn it from you or at school or both?

CS: I would hope it would be a little combination of both. A combination of both.

PS: So is there anything else that you'd like to share today?

CS: No. I think that's it. SILC is a fabulous organization. I hope it continues to exist for another twenty-two years. It's been a fabulous experience and I hope other families and children can also experience it, and that it will be around another twenty-two years.

PS: All right. Thank you very much.

CS: Thank you.

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