

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interview with: Kathy Banon

Interviewed by: Jonathan Xian

Date: March 15, 2011

Transcribed by: Jonathan Xian

Edited by: Priscilla Li (1/10/2017), Sara Davis (2/14/17)

Audio Track Time: 00:58:05

Interview Transcript:

Key:

| | |
|----------|------------------------------------|
| JX | Jonathan Xian |
| KB | Kathy Banon |
| — | Speech cuts off; abrupt stop |
| ... | Speech trails off; pause |
| Italics | Emphasis |
| (?) | Preceding word may not be accurate |
| Brackets | Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.) |

(0:00)

JX: Um could you please start by introducing yourself and telling us about who you are and your background?

KB: My name is Kathy Banon. Um I am from Iran. I moved to the United States after finishing high school um in 1976 and um I left with my older sister to go to college here. Uh she was four years older than me and she was going to graduate school and I was going to undergrad. Um we had family in Los Angeles, California so we applied to colleges over there and we moved to Los Angeles um in summer of 1976. And um I lived in California for next ten years after that and moved to um Houston in 1984.

JX: I see, um so before you came to the United States you were in Iran right?

KB: Yes.

JX: What specific province?

KB: Tehran.

JX: Oh you're from, so the capital.

KB: The capital. Yes.

JX: So can you tell me a little bit about um I guess your life before you moved to the United States?

KB: Yes, um I lived all my life in um Tehran. And my father was from the—from Isfahan, which was the more

central city in Tehran. And um we uh went to um, um you know, elementary, middle school, high school pretty much in the same neighborhood. We didn't move around too much, um had a lot of family living close to us. Grandparents [on] mothers side and fathers' side of the family both. And coming from a background, with my father's side very large family. They were a family of nine kids, my father being the oldest. And uh my mother's side, there were four kids. And um there were very much family ties and basically um our social life was spending time with family members and gatherings um with cousins. We grew up around family, and we never really—our friends pretty much we left everything at school. We came home and everything else as far as our social life and connections and everything else were family. Um...I have two sisters, very close. I'm the middle child. Um I uh my older sister was a very high achiever, um very serious and focused and my younger sister was playful and um you know, kind of baby of the family. I had a very different and close relationship with both of them actually. Um my older sister had a very, I should say major impact on my life and the way I was thinking um and I had a closeness and associated fun part of my life with my younger sister. Um...anything else?

JX: So could you tell me about the education in Iran?

KB: Yes, education in Iran, um it was really compared to what I have seen here, um much more challenging and difficult. Um competition was pretty high in high school. Our system w—by the time I finished high school the middle school program created—I grew up with first grade through sixth grade was um elementary and sixth through twelfth was high school, and the first six years was just really preparation for the next six. But high school was very, very, very challenging, very demanding, um and it was divided into three majors. You had to make a decision when you went to high school as if you wanted to go to math, science or literature.

[5:00]

KB: I picked literature, and um...um literature as a major had required a lot of reading, lots of history and um lot of memorization. I was debating between science and literature because I always liked biology but um I found myself probably stronger in memorizing and somewhat love of history and literature, to a degree. So that is how I picked my major. Twelfth grade in Iran was the most difficult because everyone had to prepare for a National Entrance [Exam] to colleges. And uh basically tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade was all preparation for that big exam.

JX: Um did you have to take this exam? Because you said you went to school in the United States.

KB: Yes, um I was preparing to go to school for um—I was preparing for the exam. As I mentioned my older sister, we left and came to the United States together. She was number one student in the high school in her major and she was rewarded on a national level for being the first um for her grade level. And as the result she always wanted to come to the United States and get her higher—college degree in United States. But because she got into her first top choice in University in Iran and as the result, the competition was so difficult that everyone encouraged her and everyone just said you have to take this opportunity and stay. So she did stay but she really did not enjoy. She didn't feel like in University we had the resources um and the freedom and the experience that she was looking for in college. As the result, the background I'm giving you is that as much as I tried and worked very hard and I thought that I had a very good chance to get into one of my choices, she discouraged me to take the exam because my father said 'Either I will send two of you together', or um, you know my sister also had to go to get her Master's degree in Iran if I would have gotten into University in Iran. So we kind of planned it together and convinced our parents that, let me not take the exam because then we will be—it will be very difficult decision to make. I will apply for university in United States. My sister then automatically would, she would apply to go to grad school, then the two of us can come together. So as the result of that I did not even take the exam.

JX: Right, right I see, so yeah that sounds actually pretty typically of um education like not in the United States or European countries. Like I know in many Asian countries it is also the same system and there is um, yeah the test I know in China because I have some relative is a week long ordeal and they also spend two three years preparing for it and its very much a similar system and is just one test for a cutoff, which is ... very, very different system.

KB: Very nerve-wracking.

JX: So, are there any government programs or policies you remember in your childhood that were like relevant to you?

KB: Um, school related?

JX: No just like government related.

KB: Government related programs...um... [pause] to be honest with you not much. We went to private schools. Everything was really, um—all our activities or anything that we grew up with and we were involved in was private.

JX: I see I see, and what did your family do?

KB: My father worked for the oil company. National Iranian oil company.

JX: I see, I see, I see. Um so, now you came to the United States uh basically when you were eighteen or nineteen I'm guessing?

KB: I was seventeen actually.

JX: Seventeen, oh wow. Did you know any English or anything?

KB: I came with knowing grammar but not much of, you know, communication skills. So we could you know—English was the second language in—in high school, throughout actually the last six years in high school I should say. But we didn't have any practice so as the result I consider myself, you know, kind of shy to speak but much easier to understand.

[10:00]

JX: I see, I see. Um so then you went to University in...?

KB: In Los Angeles. Um you know I went to California State University in Northridge.

JX: And um, so when you immigrated? Your father sponsored the immigration as you said, right?

KB: You know we came on student visa.

JX: Oh you came on student visas, I see.

KB: Yes, we came on student visa because at the time we really had the intention to finish school and go back to Iran, and what happened is that the Revolution in Iran happened while we were um still in college. I say we, as me and my sister. So as uh, as the result when I finished my fourth year, by that time my parents had decided that probably they need to leave the country and come, and immigrate to United States. I still had one younger sister in Iran and they wanted to assure that she can continue her education at the time of the beginning of the Revolution in 1978 there were um, you know, universities were closed, high schools were um getting you know impacted by all of this um and I think they wanted to guarantee the continuity for her education.

JX: Right, um so did you transfer from student visa to H-1 work visa immediately?

KB: No what happened is that I was, as soon as I finished college by that time I got married and my husband um already was American. He's Iranian and—but he was on H-1 visa which is work visa at the time. He already finished his education and his company had applied for him to stay.

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JX: Right, right, right, right yeah. No, no, I'm familiar with H-1 because my parents were also under H-1 for many years. And we used to have to go every six months right, we'd have to drive to Laredo, exit the country, re-enter the country to get it renewed. It was terrible.

KB: Is that right? I can imagine... They never wanted to become United States citizens?

JX: No see, my parents always worked right, both of them work and they always had companies sponsoring their Visa. But um every time they got to the front of the line right, the first time my dad went to a different company because the market was really like good. The second time the market was really bad and he got laid off. He found a job like two months later but then we had to go to the back of the line again.

KB: I see, never finished the process.

JX: Right, the third time right, that was right before 9/11 so they like shut down the entire system for like three or four years.

KB: Yes, yes

JX: And finally the fourth time, which was three years ago, we finally made it and now I have my Green Card...

KB: Oh nice, nice it was a long process then.

JX: It really was...but, so how difficult was applying for a visa for y'all back then?

KB: To get student visa?

JX: Mm-hm.

KB: It was quite difficult actually, because there was a lot of kids at that time wanted to get their education in the United States, so it was um it was difficult but not impossible.

JX: Right, um and what were the criteria for that?

KB: Um basically you had to... financial, and acceptance from a university.

JX: I see, and how did you apply to um...

KB: Cal State

JX: Right Cal State without like an SAT score?

KB: Right, well in Iran we applied, there were agencies that would help you with um application. And if you had a—depending on your GPA and courses you had taken they would basically match you with the right university. We started off with a small college in actually, for first semester um in Los Angeles, that was a four-year college, it was easier to get into. And then as soon as we came, um you know, here, and realized, you know, kind of recognized the better universities we transferred.

JX: I see, I see.

KB: So the private school was called Woodberry College or University. It was sort of an easier way to get entrance to get into United States, and after that we just transferred pretty much anywhere that... much better chance to get to a better, better four-year university.

[15:00]

JX: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I see, I see, I see. So you told me you were married after you came here and um your husband was already working at the time and then that um expedited your process to get the um Green Card?

KB: Right, he had green card, I got married and we applied immediately.

JX: I see, I see, I see.

KB: Automatically after five years I got my Green Card.

JX: Okay, I see, I see, so um when did you first find a job in the United States?

KB: My first job was um right after college, um which was in '91—I mean 1981. And um when I went to school at that time, actually, in Los Angeles...what was the economy at the time? It was—I remember that um it was quite challenging to find job. The economy was not too bad, but at the same time landing your first job is always very challenging because you really don't have much to offer. As a result one of the skills I had um was drafting because in college for interior architecture design and architecture all and all you do learn how to, you know, not only design but also deliver by drafting skills. So I applied to a couple of architecture firms, no luck. But engineering firms also do hire people to do their drafting. So at that point I was ready just to get to a company. I didn't want to go to sales, I didn't want to work for bank. I didn't want to do something completely unrelated to what I was doing. So I said at least if I can't get into architecture I want to stay in engineering because I knew architects and engineers work together very closely. And um—so that is how I applied for a drafting position in a mechanical engineering firm.

JX: I see I see, and you said you made 24k on your first job on the form right?

KB: Yes.

JX: So if you do not mind saying, relative to that how much was like, living expenses?

KB: I was living with my parents but that was a very basic, basic salary I think at the point. I mean um, um...are you asking me like if I could live on that salary on my own? I probably could rent a one bedroom or studio somewhere in L.A that was semi-safe and would be able to have, you know, enough for living expenses. But because I was living with my parents, that was really um irrelevant, I mean that was money in my pocket.

JX: I see I see, I see, well that is nice...so were your living arrangements throughout actually that entire thing. Like in college, and then later like after you got married and after you got the job?

KB: When I—I started off living in the dorm. Our university, state universities are not really college systems and the dorms, they don't provide housing to that extent for you. Uh so after um one year of living in dormitory, you know in that small college the first semester then we rented an apartment and lived with my sister in an apartment close to college. And I was always living in an apartment until I got married. Let me correct—let me correct that, before I got married my parents moved from Iran to United States. So from my own apartment I um rented a bigger apartment so that we could all live together. So I lived back home, I went back with my parents and then got married and moved to our—to another apartment with my husband.

JX: I see, I see, I see, so how was that? Was that like a big adjustment?

KB: It was really a big adjustment, you know, I feel like I've gone through so many different adjustments. Adjustment of leaving the family behind, because I felt so sheltered and so close to the family. To come and adjust myself in an environment that was—I felt completely lost and could not relate to the culture, could not relate to kids of my age. Um and you know I went through that adjustment and I felt like to a degree I made that—my life comfortable for myself.

[20:00]

KB: So after a couple of years of feeling more Americanized, I had to go back and live with my parents again. And that was another big adjustment because my parents came back from Iran and I used to live on my own, you know going to the library for example and not telling anyone what time I'm coming home. And then I would do the same thing at the beginning and my parents would be calling all my friends worrying about where I was, you know. So I went through that kind of a mental adjustment again knowing that, you know what, I have to realize I have gone through an adjustment that my parents haven't yet. So I have to respect that, and given the... it's easier said than done now, at the time I was very frustrated but now I can see the pattern. So we went through that adjustment. They adjusted themselves gradually and I adjusted myself and we kind of met halfway and we could kind of, we were back together as a family and I was a kid again. I was not an individual running my own life pretty much until I met my husband and then we got married. Again, my, my background and fam—family background—again I think in any culture there are variations. My father was very educated and open-minded. My, my mother and father were very much involved in your lives and I can tell you that we were—in Iran, within the society we were quite westernized. There were um more or less two groups of people back in Iran at the time. Strict and more religious; less religious and more westernized and modern um group of people. So I belonged to that group um in the sense that education was important, the rights for um, you know, free thinking was important. So I grew up with family, especially the fathers would make, you know, that kind of decision more so in the families. I give so much credit for what I have achieved in life to my upbringing and my father. Um the loving, caring part of my mother and support was always there, but the fact that my father was always for independence, education, and success, um I think was one of the most important things that made us, me and my two other sisters, who we are today.

JX: Right, right.

KB: You know.

JX: And... I mean Shawn tells me that's a spirit you have very much carried out on his upbringing. Strict educationally, very strict educationally.

KB: [laughs]. Yes, again we come from that background that we know the importance of that, you know. Keeping the thing on track, being focused, and having and setting really high standards and trying to achieve it. And I'm sure you come from a background where that is really understood.

JX: That's really understandable. Um so [phone rings]...so now I understand that there is a very large Iranian community in Los Angeles.

KB: Yes, that is correct.

JX: Now does it function as just a social community or as also an economic community?

KB: Definitely an economic community as well.

JX: Um could you elaborate on that a little bit?

KB: Yes, um they are... there are basically two generations that live in that society right now. The ones that immigrated from Iran that came with money and invested in different um businesses and areas and um so economically somewhat that—they have contributed that way. And th—the next generation, that was um their kids, that were educated in the United States and they are now in the workforce. Um and uh as the result the impact really is not social only. Um they are business owners, they are in education, they're in medical fields, and uh they are uh you know the community is big enough it's somewhat—it can....support itself is not necessarily the right word, um but they can impact their environment and...

[25:00]

JX: I see I see.

KB: You know?

JX: So it functioned in that way, but in terms of say... if you to like, find a—looking for a job would you be able to utilize the Iranian community for that purpose?

KB: Uh yes if you choose to. Yes.

JX: Um but did you?

KB: I did not, I um I was more convinced that if I live in United States, um I can always um... get the support from family and somewhat community um if I need to, but I have to definitely view a broader um, um group and make sure I can fit into the society as is uh and market myself just like any—in order to be competitive, in order to survive, and in order to be able to function, I should not focus on Iranian community only.

JX: Right, right, right.

KB: So as the result and the fact that, at the stage I started working I pretty much moved from Los Angeles to Houston.

JX: Oh I see, I see.

KB: That—that's something you should make a note of I guess. That, when I got married, um after a year and a half my husband wanted to change jobs as the result and he wanted to start, uh he was looking into um oil and gas business. And the best location for it—the opportunity was here in Houston.

JX: Right.

KB: So we moved to Houston, at the time we didn't have kids so I started my first job in Houston was with an architectural firm.

JX: And this was your second job overall?

KB: That's my second job overall.

JX: Okay um so, basically you had I guess a level of education and um cultural like integration that it was not necessary to rely on this Iranian community that was in Los Angeles. But for um—were there members of that community that did not have those advantages?

KB: Um advantages in...?

JX: Education and I guess cultural integration.

KB: Cultural integration...um I'm sure that that is true.

JX: And did you see a lot of um, a lot of those members relying kind of on an Iranian economic community in order to survive in the United States?

KB: Uh yes. I think that definitely you would see that in the um maybe um—the longer than—in the older, older probably, people. The longer they have stayed and the later that they have left the country and join the community in Los Angeles, the harder it was for them to integrate with the society.

JX: Right.

KB: So you would see people of even my age or probably just a couple years [older]—it was not necessary just a generation above me that felt the need of staying within the community more. They were people that had started their work experiences. They had uh basically, been more trained in that environment had a more difficult um time adjusting to the new environment and being able to integrate. So as the result, they actually, a big number of them um...two things happened to them. They were in a holding position because they thought that anytime they would go back so they never felt like they have to um really give themselves 100%. They didn't invest 100% to get comfortable with the community, society basically, and uh because in the back of their mind they always thought that they would go back. Number two, is that they were more formed and more aware of how to function and how to deal with um the Iranian culture. When I left, I would say um, I think it was advantage in a sense that when I left at age of seventeen, seventeen and a half. Although I always wanted to go back, never had the opportunity. That was the bad thing that happened, but at the same time never gave me the comfort of going back to this community that in long term would not have worked for me, you know?

JX: Right, right, right, I see what you mean.

[30:00]

KB: So as the result I never got spoiled being in an environment that everyone, the families knew families and you would get work through connections, and you would uh function differently other than relying on yourself.

JX: Right.

KB: We have learned to rely on ourselves; you're only as good as what you can deliver.

JX: Right see... that's um that's funny that the expectation then was that people would go back. Because I understand the expectation now as far as people coming on student visas is you have to stay here and work for, you know, ten years at least and get some expertise and then you can go back in, like, victory, you know? Instead of like, going back with just a degree and being like, 'Okay we just paid like 160 thousand dollars for you to come back with a piece of paper.'

KB: Absolutely, but you know the mentality in Iran was that that piece of paper was everything you were good for. It was not necessarily what you've learned. You had an education from the United States, now come back and, you know um...you are, you are good enough for us, you know.

JX: Right but I guess that's kind of the thing. The markets in many Asian countries now has advanced to such the degree where it's no longer good enough just to have a degree, you have to actually know something about the industry. Yeah.

KB: Exactly, as the competition becomes more and more you really have to know your business in order to have a real value for your community.

JX: That's true, um so could you um kind of trace your first job in Houston all the way to your present day um—K&M Design Group right?

KB: Yes, yes.

JX: Um so could you kind of trace that path?

KB: Sure. Um after a month of moving to Houston I could land my first job in an architectural firm, which was a very exciting thing for me to do. Um, um I worked for that company, it was a small firm and a very mom and pop

operation. Um I learned some um, definitely I feel like you always learn something from your uh employer, but um after one year I thought that I had exhausted everything I could learn from them. And uh, as the result I started looking for um—I wanted to move to a larger company and [phone rings]...and uh so as the result I looked for another job and uh wanted to join a larger firm because I knew that with a bigger environment I probably had more opportunities to learn different aspects of architecture. And um I joined, at that time, with a developer. Hines um development at the time were the second largest developer in United States. And what they were—they had an Interior Architecture department. What they were doing as a developer they would uh buy properties, develop, find anchor uh clients. And then as the result their interior group would uh customize their office spaces for them. So um little by little I realized that I'm finding the right niche as to um...to work with uh clients that are interested in high rise office buildings. And uh I worked for um them for a while, for a couple years. Meanwhile, I worked for them as a side job actually, I remember now um side job, but at the same time, a big architectural firm in Houston, Gensler, which they have offices all over United States, were putting a large team together for um Enron's new building in downtown Houston. I was hired for that project and worked for them for about a year and a half and that was probably one of my best work experiences. To be in a team of forty people getting involved with every aspect of um...learning how to get requirements from a tenant, when the shell of a building is already built and the inside is completely empty. To get the requirements, to lay out the office space for them, to do the um uh permit drawings, or they call it construction documents at that stage, and construction itself. So a complete circle, basically.

JX: Right, right.

[35:00]

KB: And that built somewhat good confidence in me um that I could then work for the developers. You know, and uh...the switch from architectural firm to working for developer was a great opportunity for me because the level of the competition was a lot less. In a big firm with many great opportunities; there's so many people that want to be on the projects. Um when you go to a developer, there are so many different aspects of it that people are interested in that they want the um designers and architects to work on that portion because there're leasing agents that want to do this different part of it, there are land developers that are looking for investment. There are so many different segments that you do not feel the pressure of competition so you are more free to interact with clients and um feel more uh responsible for your project.

JX: Right, right, right.

KB: So that's—that was the transition. And to architectural firm, small to a large to a developer. And from there in 2000, as the world economy was changing and the idea of, of working with outside companies um was becoming a good um cost cutting idea, they—Hines decided to basically close down their interior architecture um department altogether and work with groups and outside companies.

JX: Right, right, right.

KB: So I found that as an opportunity after working twelve years for them, being very comfortable with the system, knowing how they function, um, um that if I can start my own company—I had two options: I had to either go and work for somebody else, so then as then result all my personal connections and relationships with these people would melt away um because now I would go under a company with their relationship with Hines and—or other developers or other clients. Or I would take this um relationship and build something on that. And I decided to take the leap and do that. And part of the reason also was I um I had a co-worker that was a very um entrepreneurial, um he had that attitude toward everything and so he, he also pushed me towards, you know, seeing this as an opportunity.

JX: Right, right.

KB: So um we did that and at the end of 2000, we opened our own firm, just two of us, in a 1000 square foot space and uh, ten years from that time, I mean we haven't gotten into a big company, but there's—there is a group of seven

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of us that we work together. We don't office together, there's three or four that we office under the same roof. But um I created—because of the economy and the ups and downs, created relationships that we can, um I can—permanent contract employees that they work from home. So I can be a team of eight designers and architects for the projects that it is required or I can be as small as a three or four company that doesn't have a huge overhead and I can survive a down, down turned economy, which I did. We went through two and half years of probably the most challenging years of our career and um survived it. Um didn't have to lay off anyone, which, that was, you know, that was a big plus. And then, I felt like we're getting—feeling, I'm not sure if the economy is turning or not but we have certainly gotten busy for the last six months again.

JX: I see, I see, I see.

KB: Extremely. Actually I see that the larger clients of mine are expanding, moving, and everything that was on hold for the last two, two and a half years I see that they are feeling a little bit more comfortable and moving forward.

[40:00]

JX: Right, right, um, so, so it was from small firm to big firm to Gensler, and then um and that was when you worked on the Enron thing. But then the interior design department was shut down and you started the K&M design right?

KB: Right, uh it was from small firm to Gensler, which was the big firm, and then to Hines, that was the developer, and then from Hines to K&M design.

JX: I see, um hey if you do not mind saying, how much the pay starting from the, from the smaller firm?

KB: Smaller firm it was from twenty-eight thousand dollars. When I left Hines, when I left Hines, my salary was like fifty-five. So everything was in between, and until we start K&M....and working for yourself, you double and triple your own salary. You double and triple your income, really.

JX: Right, but then there is also very much more risk right?

KB: Absolutely, many more risk, a lot more responsibility, but financial rewards is there too.

JX: Right, right, right. Um okay, and I'm assuming the other guy is the, is the 'M' of K&M right?

KB: Yes, yes. [laughs]

JX: So from that, like I understand from what you told me so far, right, that um you do not rely on the Asian American or Iranian American community as an economic resource as a personal choice.

KB: That is correct.

JX: Um but I guess do you have any I guess thoughts or feelings on like how that community functions in Houston, or whether you've had any interaction with it?

KB: Yes, yes. Um there is a professional group of Iranians um in Houston. That they would um, that I have attended their meetings um couple times. Very educated, pretty successful group of people. Good resource if um, you choose to use them and um and as a matter of fact, I am working with a group of those people. I have worked with a couple of those people on projects um, um knowing that, you know, they are also a part of this society but through other uh firms they were recommended. And uh my experience has actually been very good knowing that they are Asian American um people, you know, companies that definitely you can rely on them because you know their culture and there is definitely a comfort level there, um that's the biggest advantage of it. The only reason that I, I just don't

want to feel too comfortable so that working with non-Iranian community people would make things more challenging for me. That's just a check and balance on personal level that I do.

JX: Right, right.

KB: Otherwise, um the truth of it is that you really do um understand their culture better and there's definitely a comfort level.

JX: I see, I see. So um are there many other—is there large Iranian community in Houston?

KB: Um, forty thousand.

JX: Okay, well that's pretty sizable.

KB: That's a pretty sizable...

JX: A lot more than I thought, actually.

KB: Uh, yes.

JX: I see, I see. So um are you like um socially, like I guess your friends and like other arrangements, do you often um I guess socialize with them or with like your...?

KB: Yes, very much so. On personal level and social, um definitely.

JX: I see, what part of Houston are you from?

KB: We live in Memorial.

JX: Oh that's right, Memorial...um Memorial is a very good high school.

KB: Yes.

KB: Though architecturally, it's very— [laughs] I hate that high school in its design. There's an outside bathroom, it's the first one I've seen in the United States actually. It's a horrible outside bathroom.

KB: Is that right?

JX: And the color-coded hallways...anyways, and the whole thing is open.

KB: Oh yeah! The color-coded stuff, yeah.

JX: This one time I was at Memorial for a debate tournament, I was in debate in high school.

KB: I see.

KB: And I had like these papers, and it was humid and I had to walk around outside. And by the end of it, my papers were all just damp from the humidity; it was really horrible.

KB: What high school did you go to?

JX: I went to Westwood in Austin, Texas.

KB: Westwood, Austin, yes, yes.

JX: Um but, yeah I'm from Austin, so...now um from that economic path, did you ever feel that as an Iranian person in America, that there was labor discrimination?

[45:00]

KB: Um...I have to tell you in all honesty, I sometimes don't know if discrimination comes from being Iranian, or being a female, or um combination. Um definitely um, there were times that I felt...that um perhaps—and plus I have to say is that um [discrimination], something we create in our minds, truly is there truth to it, or um you don't necessarily fit a position. You know, I—I'm not sure exactly sometimes where the decisions comes from but there were times I felt that.

JX: Right, if I can, like I guess, press this question a little bit further, I understand that it's not good to operate on the assumption that there is discrimination out there or else you'll never try, but like realistic—and it's good to assume that it's something we create in our minds even though realistically that may not be the case. So realistically do you think that that was actually the case or do you think that it's like um like, in Houston especially, that it's um present?

KB: Um...to be honest with you I should say no, I don't feel that. Because otherwise I would have not been where I am today. I am a female, I have accent, I was born in Iran, and I think I have um succeeded a lot more than many Americans in, in my class. So looking at the result, um I would say that I have been given pretty fair, really fair opportunity. Of course you take the opportunity and you make something from it yourself. But I definitely, quite honestly think that I have been giving really fair chance.

JX: Mm I see. So now for K&M design group the clientele is just the people you met when you were working in the architectural industry?

KB: Yes.

JX: Okay. Um because you already mentioned that, that was one of my questions and I was just making sure.

KB: Right, and plus that I do work for developers and they send their clients my way. It's about a lot of connections I have built with the owners of the properties.

JX: Right.

KB: The owners of the properties um will send their clients to me, and that's how we get lot of our jobs, basically.

JX: I see I see, so do you still work for a developer part time and small business full time or just small business full time?

KB: Um no, no. The developers are my clients now.

JX: I see, I see, okay, okay.

KB: Now, I mean um, 100% I am K&M, but now as a client—they used to be my employer, but now they are my clients, that they would um—anyone who would be interested to lease space in their buildings, and um they would send that information to me and say 'could you meet with these people and help them with the design of their office so they would be interested in leasing space from me?'

JX: Mm, I see, I see.

KB: We are a tool basically, which you know that's, that's the niche we found, to convince their client that this is

the right building for you because ‘look, we can design an office for you that is such and such, it meets all of your criteria, so this is a perfect fit.’ And to be honest with you, we don’t necessarily— if it doesn’t we also express that by saying that, you know, ‘this floor or this building might not work best but you could certainly look at some other options that we have.’

JX: I see, I see, I see, so um who's the M of K&M?

KB: M of K&M is Mort Mehti, my office partner. Which—which we just, just recently, I kept the name, but we separated our um businesses because of the nature of the econ[omy]—his um specialty in the economy, um he had to kind of diverge into more development. And then as the result, the M is no longer with K&M. [laughs]

JX: So it’s just you now...

KB: But we're good coworkers, friends.

JX: I see, I see. Um so I guess um some more questions unrelated to the um to the jobs. Do you have any concerns or did you at any point have any concerns about raising family um in America in Houston or Los Angeles?

[50:00]

KB: Definitely, definitely. Um as much as I wanted to integrate myself in the society, I was always um— I always knew the differences, um difference in culture in um a way of upbringing. The um environment, I found, I found it quite challenging um that understanding my environment to be able to relate more to it and to confidently separate the good and bad and being able to combine the best of both cultures. And I think part of the reason that I did not want to um stay very— in a very tight knit society, in the Iranian society was I wanted to make sure I understand enough and I can blend in to the society that I can raise my family with a um, with a good understanding of what’s going on around me, you know. Because I have seen many, many families, that they took advantage of the support group, they were quite disconnected with reality.

JX: Right, right.

KB: And then that is nothing but pressure, personal pressure, family pressure, and you transfer that not understanding your kid's where, and what is the real environment they are growing up in, um would results in many negative things, additional difficulties. So yes, I did note that going in, that it would be a biggest challenge of my life being raised a different way and being ab—having to raise my family a different way.

JX: Right, but like because as you said you kind of understand what is um like the culture right?

KB: Yes.

JX: Just in general then you don’t want to create unrealistic expectations, and that's the purpose?

KB: Absolutely.

JX: Because, I understand that that does happen a lot.

KB: It does happen a lot. It does happen in our um environment, you know. Any non-American families I guess face that challenge.

JX: Right, that’s true, that’s true. Um so, um do you keep in touch with your family and uh friends in Iran? I understand that most of your family is here now.

KB: But yes, the ones that are in Iran, my husband's side of the family. Um still live, brothers and mother, my

mother in law lives in Iran, actually they're here right now. But um yes, we stay in touch. Not much friends anymore, really lost touch with friends except the ones that who moved here to the United States. But family for sure.

JX: Do you ever go back?

KB: I have never been back since uh I came to the United States.

JX: Why is that?

KB: Why is that you are asking? Because two years after I came here my family moved, and although I had grandparents and distant relatives, um I always really wanted, I always had enough time, perhaps I should say, to um visit my immediate family and my immediate family were in Los Angeles so that was the trip I wanted to make. Plus, with all the um political challenges that were happen in Iran I found it uh not very comfortable to go back.

JX: I see, I see, I see. Yeah um, I had some friends in high school—they were born here. They were Iranian Americans and their parents were from Iran. And they— uh this one girl went back once and she described, you know, the trip. When she was back she had to wear a veil and headscarf and everything and she was like—I mean she was just like, you know it was an experience because it was only a to visit...

KB: Sure.

JX: ...so it wasn't so bad. But I imagine it would be an oppressive experience I guess—I wouldn't really know.

KB: Yeah exactly, exactly. I mean as long as you know that you are doing this for a short period of time I guess it's tolerable. But for me as a woman who had independently thought that there is better ways to express yourself in life, to go to—I did not believe also in the fundamental of what was happening in Iran for women that made me um less interested to go and put myself in that position.

JX: Right. Um, yeah I'm not too educated on that topic—my only education is *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which I read in high school, but good book...

KB: [laughs], that is good.

JX: Um now um what do you think about the opportunities of the second generation Iranian Americans in the United States and Houston?

[55:00]

KB: I think they're um they're in equal or better, you know, um level of competition. I think that the fact that they have the advantage of understanding, um different cultures, and really knowing the challenges of different cultures will definitely, will give them the tools to compete and be, and be the best they can be.

JX: Right, and the parents to push them huh?

KB: [laughs], always.

JX: So um finally, in what ways do you think Houston has been changed by the um, by the immigration from Asian and Iran?

KB: In the last thirty years I have been here I definitely feel the change. I feel um, the society had become more international, um I would say more um challenging for our kids, having raised two kids in Memorial, um in Houston, in Memorial High School, that I would say probably half of the student's population were Asians. Um you

see the same um demand, basically from families from their children. And it's uh, it's amazing that how hard you work and it seems like you are just one of the good ones, you know. So I think the impact of the Asian Americans have raised the bar and standard.

JX: Yeah, Westwood right, where I lived, was very much the same situation.

KB: Yes, I heard about your high school, very good high school in Austin.

JX: Yeah um yeah but see the thing is though, there is so many Asian kids and there is the top 10% rule, now it's the top 8% rule I believe, but it used to be top 10%.

KB: Yes, yes

JX: And it was just a nightmare, there were people, very smart people who would have done well at other schools. And they would not be in the top 10%.

KB: They would not be in top 10%.

JX: They would be very embittered about the situation.

KB: Yes, so true.

JX: There were some kids actually who choose not to go to Westwood despite being district to it, they chose to go to a nearby high school in order to escape that, and I guess create a better opportunity for themselves. So I mean that was a decision back then, which, I mean we thought it was like you know, 'wow, you're leaving you can't take it.' But in retrospect that was maybe not a bad decision.

KB: Exactly, no I understand the same thing is happening here too.

JX: Yeah, um, well I guess that's it, is there anything else you would like to um tell me before I turn the microphone off?

KB: Um no I enjoyed the interview very much. I think it's uh it's great to talk about these things and uh definitely I love to share my experiences with you.

JX: Thank you very much.

[58:01]