

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

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Interviewee: Elora Shehabuddin  
Interviewed by: Kelin Herrington  
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Transcribed by: Kelin Herrington

KH: Tell me about yourself.

ES: I am from Bangladesh, and I say that because both sides of my family are from Bangladesh, but I was born in Pakistan. And then because my father was in the Bangladesh foreign service I grew up mostly in Europe and the Middle East. But because he was in the foreign service he was a diplomat for Bangladesh, I had a very clear sense of here we are, wherever we are, representing Bangladesh, so even though growing up I only spent four years there, it was very clear to me that I'm from Bangladesh and not from anywhere else. What else? I came to the US for college and stayed on and on and on. When I came it wasn't clear how long I'd stay. But after living in all these places I applied to American colleges and came and then went to grad school here and then met my husband, and we were both going to be academics so this seemed to be the right place. Here we are. I have a US passport now, because he is American-born, but I really see myself as belonging to both Bangladesh and here, and nowhere in many ways.

KH: My next question was going to be, what do you consider "back home"? So you would say Bangladesh?

ES: Yeah... because my parents are back there now...I guess even when I was here and they were somewhere else, I would have said both where they are...When I came to the US they were Kuwait and then they were in Paris, so I guess I would have to specify whether I meant back home where my parents are, or Bangladesh depending on the context. Now they are in Bangladesh so that's just one place.

KH: So your parents are originally from Bangladesh.

ES: Yes.

KH: What did your mother do?

ES: The rules of the foreign service were that when stationed abroad the spouse who was not the diplomat, who traditionally, historically, has been the woman, so the man is the diplomat and the woman isn't, doesn't get to work. She had no permission to work in the countries we were stationed in, so she would be in charge of the entertaining, she would be part of the diplomatic corps wives, and do volunteer work, organize international festivals, things like that when we were overseas. Then the few times, the four years that I did live back home growing up, she

taught at a school for disadvantaged children, but most of my life growing up she wasn't working a job.

KH: Why did your dad decide to go into the foreign service?

ES: He started out to be a college professor in history, and I think at the time it was very prestigious to go into the civil service, this was 1960s Pakistan, Bangladesh was still part of Pakistan at the time, and so I think someone encouraged him to take the test. He took the test, he did well, he placed into the foreign service so he thought okay. They had never gone overseas. Growing up, my mother's family traveled around a lot in Bangladesh. My dad grew up in the village he's from, then he moved to the big town over. They came from a very good family, that's an expression you have back home, you know, good lineage, but they'd lost their wealth over the years because many many kids, the property keeps getting split up, so by the time my father and his brother were born, there wasn't much property left, but everyone had been very well-educated. So he went to the local village school then he moved to the next town over for high school then he moved to the next city over for college, and then to the capital city in Dhaka for university. Then he was teaching for a while, history, social studies, whatever, then someone said, "You should really take the civil service exam," he did, he placed into the foreign service. I imagine the lure of getting to see the world was probably a very attractive one, and so that's what he ended up choosing to do.

KH: Your pre-interview form said you lived in India during the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971. You were quite young—

ES: I was three years old.

KH: Do you know if the situation was at all difficult for your parents?

ES: It was, because my father—we call it of course the Bangladesh Independence War, we don't call it the Indo-Pakistan War, even though India came in at the end and won the war for us, many would say—my father was stationed at the time in the Pakistan high commission, because it was one country, east Pakistan west Pakistan, so he was in the Pakistan foreign service, there was no Bangladesh at the time, and he ended up being the first East Pakistani diplomat to defect, and so the very first Bangladesh mission outside...overseas was actually our house, the first time the flag was unfurled et cetera. They played a very important role, and they would—both of them—take part in protests, once they'd left and gotten asylum from the Indian government and everything was safe, they did protests outside the Pakistan embassy well no not the Pakistan high commission the British and the Americans who were supporting the Pakistanis at the time, Nixon for example was very supportive of Pakistan because he was trying to make inroads into China at the time, so he needed to stay friends with Pakistan for various complicated strategic reasons. So my parents were very involved, Delhi was sort of the center of where things were happening, obviously the violence was happening in Bangladesh, but Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India at the time was very involved and invested in the outcome of the war, so they were very heavily involved in what was happening. The danger was very much at the beginning, so independence was declared March 26, our fortieth anniversary is coming up, which is also my birthday, I remember my college essay began sort of dramatically, "I've always felt my life is

inextricably linked with the fate of my country,” because it’s the same birthday! So my third birthday party was cancelled because suddenly independence was declared and we were in India. And then even before provisional government had been formed in what was to become Bangladesh, my father and a colleague declared that they were leaving, they sort of snuck away from the Pakistani high commission, and did a big press release, a press conference saying that they’re leaving the Pakistan high commission and setting up their own independent Bangladesh mission in New Delhi. So I think those moments, and my father recently wrote his memoirs, it was interesting to see, growing up we’d heard these stories, but when he described people showing up at the house that evening to make sure they weren’t planning anything because people had gotten suspicious, I realized how scary it must have been. I was three and my sister was one and half, so for young parents with two young kids to go into the unknown out there without knowing whether Bangladesh would ever actually come into being, they were risking everything. Yeah, I think they were very scared and apprehensive, because of the violence that was happening in Bangladesh, in East Pakistan at the time, they felt they couldn’t keep working for the Pakistani government. I don’t remember anything myself, but having read the memoir and heard clips of the story growing up, I know they were very in touch with everything, so that’s exciting.

KH: So next they [your parents] moved to France?

ES: Yes. The war ended December ’71, with Bangladesh officially independent, and then April ’72 we moved to France. I think my father as part of his foreign service training had had to learn some French, sitting in Pakistan, but obviously none of us had any, but we were put in when I was four and my sister was two and a half, we were put in a local French school and so we learned French. I didn’t learn English until much later. We were there for three years, went to local school and I think for my parents it must have been—India’s still familiar because everyone grows up even then watching Hindi films, and also they had Urdu in Bangladesh, it was mandatory for a while when it was East and West Pakistan, so the language was very easy for them but to come to Europe for the first time, I keep thinking, my mom with these two little girls coming here, it must have been so dramatic, and there are pictures of her switching to western clothing, I mean, to do that for the first time in your twenties...But I think that they really had a great time, and we were there from when I was four to seven, and then from there to Beirut for a year.

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Most of these postings are supposed to be for three years, but we got to Beirut and then three days later the civil war broke out, the civil war that would last fifteen years, so we went to school for a few months, continued French in a French school because Lebanon is tri-lingual, French, English and Arabic, and then for the summer my mother took us to Bangladesh, and then we came back and we were going to start English finally, I was eight years old, I was going to learn English, and then the war was getting so bad we basically didn’t go to school, so my parents taught us at home for I guess a school year, and then my father closed down the embassy in Lebanon and we left after just a year and a bit in Lebanon.

KH: So, did much of this sort of drama were you really conscious of that or was it just part of the backdrop of your childhood?

ES: I was conscious of it, and caught up more in the excitement than the worrying. I remember when we were in Lebanon we would make daytrips to Syria, so I remember once we went to Syria, we had a maid at home that we'd brought back from my mother's village in Bangladesh, and when we were coming back at the end of the day from wherever we went in Syria, they wouldn't let us cross the border, they said no you can't cross the border you have to spend the night here, and so we slept in the car that night, and then the next morning they said okay you can go home now, we went home and the woman, she was white as a ghost, because there were no cell phones then, right, we had no way of—I think phone lines must have been down, or maybe—I don't know the details, did we try to call her? But she had no idea what had happened to us, so all night she was alone by herself...I remember we could see the shooting in the horizon, but she...So we showed up and she was totally scared and terrified, and it turned out, I learned many years later, when my parents were telling the story, that that was the night the Syrians were moving into Lebanon, and then they stayed for fifteen, twenty years, no, more than that, they only left a few years ago. So that's why for our safety they had kept us at the border. For me it was like Oh! We're sleeping in the car tonight! And I hope Muti the woman at home is okay, but for my parents it must have been much more terrifying, but if, you know, we were sort of upset or excited about sleeping in the car, I have no idea. So stuff like that happened, but I don't think, I'm sure we didn't realize the potential for danger that really was there. It was just like, Oh, okay, this is different. Unfortunately, or better, maybe, that we didn't know.

(8:26)

KH: How did your frequent moving affect your childhood? Did you enjoy the changes, or did you sort of wish you could stay in one place a bit longer?

ES: Bit of both...I think I got used to the idea that we'd move very often. I think as I got older especially...in Beirut because we didn't go to school we ended up not having any real friends, it was just my sister and me, and we'd sit there imagining stories and writing stories, and reading, doing a lot of reading, but then we went to Bangladesh for three years, and there we started to make real friends, and cousins, et cetera, so leaving there was very hard, and then the next one was England for three years, from eleven to fourteen, so it was even harder to leave, and then we went back to Bangladesh and that was just for one year, that was really hard, you know, at age fourteen fifteen you make some really close friends, and also I felt gyped, we were supposed to be here three years, these one year moves were unexpected, so you're just getting comfortable in your home, you're getting to know everything, and then we were moved again, so I think as I got older it got harder, so looking back now I have no childhood friends... When I got to college my roommate was from Boston, and there were other friends I got to meet through her, they'd been together since kindergarten, and I couldn't conceive of that, so maybe they paired us together for that reason, we're good friends now, so you know, that, I couldn't claim anything like that. But, you know, I'm glad I got to see all those places. I hope it means I can meet people more easily or something...

KH: There are trade-offs, I guess.

ES: Yeah, exactly. I can't say, "Oh, I've known her for forty three years, but there are other things, I'm glad I got to see all these places, try all these...and really live in places, not just visit...Trade-offs, exactly. Some good, some bad.

KH: When I was reading your form, I was so jealous...especially now that you're telling about all the excitement, wars...

ES: I've gotten a lot of flack from my friends for being in war zones time and time again.

KH: So you haven't kept in touch with any of the friends you made in your two or three year stints?

ES: I have, thanks to Facebook, now found friends. Friends from Bangladesh whose parents also happened to be in the foreign service, who we met along the way, somehow we didn't always have other kids our age in the embassy, it didn't always happen, but a few, because my parents kept in touch with their parents, I've found them again, also on Facebook, recently, but I think the oldest friend from a school is from England, from when I was eleven to fourteen, so I found them again on Facebook, the ones who are academics. You know, I think they're easier to find somehow, you leave an electronic trail. So yeah, from that age. Beirut, I didn't go to school really, so now friends from there, and Paris, I was too young to remember people's last names, four to seven, so no one from that far back.

KH: So would you say that the growth of social networking technologies have made a big difference—

ES: Definitely. My sister, who's a grad student at Harvard, kept traveling to different places, and I'd say, Well I want to see the pictures, and she'd say, Well it's all on Facebook, and I'd say, I'm not going to join Facebook. Of course finally I did, and then it was amazing, you know, when I first joined I just found all these people and also because there were many cousins who were scattered all over the world, it's been good just for the family also, for the cousins to stay connected and then as I said, I found all these old old friends, Bangladeshi and non-Bangladeshi, in different places. You know, if we'd had email back then it would have been easier to keep in touch with people, especially when you leave a war zone, there's no point in sending letters back. Yeah, had this stuff existed then I think I would have been in touch with more people, you know, continued to stay in touch.

KH: Could you talk a little about your first job, at a newspaper in Kuwait?

ES: My parents moved to Kuwait, we'd been in Poland and even in Poland I'd gone to boarding school in England because there were no English schools in Warsaw, this was Communist Warsaw, the only English school was the American school which stopped at the eighth grade, so I was beyond that. I went to boarding school for two years and I came back, spent a year in Poland, applied to American colleges because English universities don't give financial aid to foreign students, foreign undergrads. So I said I have to try America! I took a year off, lived in Poland, did various things and applied to American colleges, and then the summer before I was

going to go off to college, they moved to Kuwait, so I moved to Kuwait with them, and then I flew from Kuwait to Boston, and I got to college and realized everyone's supposed to have this summer job. I needed to go back and see my parents, so I'd heard of people who'd done...another Bangladeshi woman living in Kuwait, who went to college in the US, came back and did this summer job at the Arab Times. The way it works is that most people go on vacation in the summer because it's *really* hot in Kuwait, so they have these openings at the newspaper. It's slow, slower than usual because so many people are away, so they needed a summer substitute for the features editor, so I went in. It wasn't a great newspaper, in the sense that they just took...there was some local reporting, I mean it's a tiny place, but a lot of it was just taking wire stories and fixing them for local consumption, so we'd have to do things like—so this is '88, so just the end of the Iraq-Iran War, so Kuwait had sided with Iraq against Iran, and so things like if a wire story came in from AP or Reuters saying the Persian Gulf, we would have to do things like cross it out and make it the Arabian Gulf, right, they wouldn't allow it to be called the Persian Gulf in the local newspaper.

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And then I would sort of cover the local social beat, the big events, sometimes the event that my parents were going to anyway, like the Indian festival or something. I think I brought in movie reviews, but it was just having different features. So I learned about galleys, and newspapers, and the hours were different, I think what I remember most is it was a Friday holiday schedule, the weekly holiday was Friday, but because we were a newspaper our holiday used to be Thursday because there was no need to produce a newspaper on Friday, so I was totally completely off whack from my friends in the US, so my weekly holiday was Thursday, not even Friday, and they were doing the weekend on Saturday, Sunday, so that was weird. But it was nice, I had never had a job before, they paid me terribly because they knew I was living at home, whatever, but I remember the second summer having such a hard time going to talk to the editor about, you should really pay me more, and they increased some tiny amount, you know, that was the sort of stuff... But I met some good people, the other staff, a lot of South Asians, like the sports editor was from Pakistan, the woman I was replacing for the summer was I think Indian or Pakistani...I was the youngest person there, but it was a fun experience, I'm glad I did it.

KH: Were there many other women at the newspaper?

ES: There were women. I was replacing a woman for the summer, there were a few other editors of different sections who were women, yeah. I don't think I noticed anything unusual. And I think Kuwait is generally much more open, or was at the time, I don't know now, than certainly places like Saudi Arabia. The editor in chief was a man—no, the top news editor was a man. The editor in chief was what we all referred to as sort of the spoiled son of a very wealthy industrialist, we'd joke that we didn't even know if he could read and write, I'm sure he could but you know, he had cars and women and that stuff, that seemed to be his main preoccupation, but he was officially the editor-in-chief for some reason. There were no inappropriate gender dynamics in the workplace, it was all very nice and proper, and I enjoyed it, it was fun. I felt very grown up, going to work in the middle of the afternoon, so I'd work I think from two to eight or something, it was bizarre, not only was the weekly holiday on Thursday but also the hours were different because we were trying to get the newspaper ready to be printed that

evening, so you don't go to work in the morning, it's late morning or mid-afternoon, I can't remember now. It was just sort of out of whack with everything else.

KH: So did that job influence your ultimate career choices at all, or was it just sort of a summer job?

ES: It was a summer job, but I guess being around politics and news and writing, I think I always enjoyed that... I used to send stories to this young people's page in the Bangladeshi newspaper, my sister and I did that, because even when we were living overseas, every week in the diplomatic pouch we'd get the Bangladeshi newspapers, and they used to have once a week one page in the newspaper, I think it was called the Bangladesh Observer, the page was Young Observer, so they would publish the fiction and nonfiction by young people, so my sister and I routinely sent stuff there. I remember sending something about my tour of Auschwitz, for example, and then also—I was a teenager then—but also short stories, so you know, I'd always enjoyed writing, so I think it was more that I chose the summer job and newspaper because I was already interested in that stuff, and if anything it just reinforced my interest rather than suddenly showing me this is what I want to do. There are probably other things I could have chosen in Kuwait, like oil and gas—no!

KH: You were saying that you chose to come to the United States at least in part because of the financial aid?

ES: Yes.

KH: Were there any other reasons you chose it over another country?

ES: No, because once I learned English when I was eight, it had always been English schools from then on. So Beirut, we went to school for a few days, a month or something, and then my parents taught us English at home, and then we went to Bangladesh, and they put us in a—schools in Bangladesh are divided, English medium and Bengali medium, which means the language of instruction is primarily English or primarily Bengali, so because they knew we would be going overseas again soon they chose the English schools, so when it was time to choose colleges it was clearly going to be England or America, you know, Australia was totally unknown, far away, why would I do that? So England turned out to be not feasible financially because they don't have scholarships for foreign undergrads, so then I chose America. I'd never been here. But you know, I think everyone feels familiar with America, culturally, you get to see enough of it through movies et cetera et cetera—

KH: Sort of like you were saying with the Bollywood type films?

ES: Yeah, yeah, exactly. So I think the way my parents felt comfortable in India because they could speak the language, it's similar clothes, similar food, I think if you grow up watching American films, tv shows, etc, it doesn't feel quite as alien. But I remember, I got in, I found out in April that I'd got into all these colleges, and I had no choice, you know, because they said if you got into Harvard, you have to go to Harvard. There are other places I thought I should go, just to be contrary...I got into Yale, what was the other one...I didn't get into Princeton. I didn't

get into Williams... There's something else, there were three... Anyway, my parents were very happy, I remember, because the letter came to my dad's office in Warsaw, FedEx or whatever it was back then, I didn't even know those things, and he called, he said, It's here, it's here, you have to come! I rushed to the office and he said, I jumped out of my seat! He was very happy, he said, If only your grandfather were here, because his father died before my parents even got married, and he was very well-educated, he was the headmaster at the local high school, so for him this is the pinnacle of everything we could have... So they were very happy, so I felt, I have no real grounds for saying, Oh I'd rather go to Yale than Harvard, because Harvard was just better known back home for whatever reason. So to answer your question, it was between England and the states, and then in the states, you know, I went to where I was told to go basically.

KH: When you came, was the United States different from what the transmitted culture had suggested?

ES: Oh! So what I had meant to tell you also before, so we found out in March or something, and then my aunt who lived in Geneva invited me to Geneva for a month, because I wasn't doing anything in Poland, once the applications were gone and the results were back in, I was just hanging out with my family, and there I met many people who had been students in the US, other Bangladeshi children because my aunt's husband was in the ILO (International Labor Organization) so they knew a lot of other Bangladeshis in the UN circles, and those older children had been to the US and back. So I remember then someone saying to me, Oh you're going to Harvard, that's great, but don't judge America by Harvard, so that stuck with me. And then I also remember a reaction from someone in Poland, in Warsaw, my mom or dad saying, Oh she just got into Harvard, and this woman saying—I forget where she was from—saying, Oh, you have to be careful you don't get brainwashed! Because you know, Harvard has been involved in many sort of conservative movements in Latin America etc, so I came to Harvard armed with these two warnings in a sense.

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I think it's good that I came to Boston, because it's more European-looking in some ways. I think if I'd landed in Texas or even California it would have been more of a shock, but Boston was easier to deal with. And then other people who'd been also warned me that you should eat the pastries while you're here in Geneva or Warsaw because American pastries, they use different butter or something. These are the kinds of things I'd come with, in addition to everything I'd seen. You know, I'd seen *Love Story*, for example, which is set at Harvard. --- extraneous joke--- So I don't think it was that much of a shock, and I'd been away from home to be in boarding school, though of course that is much more restricted...So no, I enjoyed it, even the too much freedom, sort of freshman scrapes and stuff like that, it was fine. I think my main regret about college, looking back now, is Oh my god, I was at Harvard and I didn't take advantage of everything that I could have there? But you know, when you're eighteen, nineteen, whatever, at any point in our lives we can only do so much, right, you can't do everything that's possible to do in any location. So no, it was great, I made friends, I told you my roommate was from Boston, her high school was the older high school in the country, and through her I met her friend that she'd been friends with since kindergarten, and that was an alien concept. And then I



also got to be good friends with people from South Asia or from other parts of the world, so it was a good experience. I think it would have been harder, as I said, to be in a different town than someplace like New England, and also a less international place would have been very hard for me, so it was a good place for me to be, I think. Made the transition easier.

KH: Was it difficult being away from your family for the first time?

ES: It was, because they were so far away. When I was in boarding school in England they were in Poland, and I'd go home every three months, we had terms, so I'd go home in December, I'd go home in April, I'd go home in the summer, whereas now they were in Kuwait, and I was going to go home once a year. So at Christmas, I'd go up to my aunt, to my mother's sister who lived in Canada, which has even more snow than Boston—I'd been in Poland, so I'm familiar with snow, but yeah, that's how I spent my Christmases, by going to Canada. And also, Harvard, like Princeton turned out later on, has final exams after Christmas, so my abiding memory of Christmas is lugging all my books for final papers and to study for exams up to Canada and then back, and I'd get some work done but not that much, it was a ritual that began, I'd cart work with me because I'd feel guilty if I didn't. So all the library books to write the research paper would get carted up there and back.

KH: It [the questionnaire] says what was your port of entry, so did you just come straight to Boston?

ES: Yes. Oh, and sorry, you asked if I missed—it was hard because I was seeing them once and seeing my aunt helped, and we talked on the phone...

KH: Had you known your aunt before coming to—

ES: Yeah, we'd met up over the years, she visited us in Paris and Bangladesh and in London, so I don't think I grew up seeing any of my relatives annually, but every so often. She'd always send us birthday cards. So that wasn't a shock, and I got to know her children, her sons were both much younger than me but it was nice to get to know one part of the family on a regular basis, every Christmas. Because they had been here for a long time, they had a Christmas tree and things like that, which I hadn't grown up with. We knew all the songs, all the Christmas carols from school, but we never had a tree at home, or the practice of presents at Christmas, so that's where I got that formal training, by going to their house...you know, formal training in the traditions, Christmas eve, Christmas morning, all that stuff. I'm sorry, what was your next question?

KH: Well, sort of going off of that, what did you do for Thanksgiving?

ES: I was in Boston.

KH: So you would stay on campus?

ES: Stay on campus, yes, it wasn't a big holiday to go away anywhere, we could stay on campus. I think I went back to my Boston roommate's house once, and maybe another Boston

friend's house. It may have been to stay overnight, may have just been for the meal and then back to campus, yeah, our campus stayed open...I think I basically stayed around, I never traveled for Thanksgiving, I'm pretty sure.

KH: Was it difficult to get a visa?

ES: Yes! Yes, because the first time it was very easy, my dad was the ambassador to Kuwait, so the Bangladesh embassy made an appointment with the US embassy, he came with me, we sat down in a nice room, probably got coffee or coke or something, and the paperwork was done and then we left. And then summer of 1990 was the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein, and that was the summer between my junior and senior year, so I'd worked at the Arab Times the first two summers, end of freshman, end of sophomore, junior summer I was going to do senior thesis research in Bangladesh, but I'd bought my ticket on Kuwait Airways from Boston to Kuwait to Bangladesh, and then I was going to come back. So I came to Kuwait in June, when Harvard ended, saw my parents, and then went on to Bangladesh. August 2<sup>nd</sup>, the invasion happens. My I-20, all of my paperwork for my visa had been sent to Kuwait, but there was no way I could come back to Kuwait in August or early September to do my Kuwait Airways thing back to Boston, so I contacted Harvard, and they sent the stuff to me in Bangladesh. And then I had to go to the US Embassy in Bangladesh by myself, no dad, no special appointment... I think someone in the Foreign Service maybe got me a little in. And I remember, I had what I had, I didn't have my parents' financial statements or anything like that because they were stuck in Kuwait. And I remember—I had one year left at Harvard—the woman asked me all the questions, and I said I don't have this, I don't have that, there's a war, Kuwait's under occupation, and I just remember so clearly, she took off her glasses, and said, "You know, I could deny you this visa if I wanted to." It was just such a power trip, I was so annoyed. She knew I'd been there and back, my parents were there, what was going on in Kuwait...And she said, "Well, I'll let you go." I didn't have every single piece of paper but for good reason, but I'd been there and left and, you know, she knew exactly where I was going. So that I remember, but that was the only time I had the slightest difficulty getting a visa. Otherwise, you know, it's very straightforward, they send you paperwork from the university and then you show your bank statements or your parents' bank statements etc, how you'll cover the financial aid, plus this and that and the other. This was long before 9/11, I think it's gotten harder since then, I know of cousins who have tried to come since then, and they've made it but it's always been much harder, even for children of former diplomats, or even the children of well-connected people. So it's getting harder and harder.

KH: Do you think even for similar student visa situations?

ES: Yeah. I had a cousin who got into Princeton, and his father, my uncle, was also a diplomat, and I don't know if he'd retired already by then or was still in the Foreign Service, but they made it—they dragged it out enough that everyone was very stressed about, Would he be there when the semester began. And he got it in the end, but there was a lot of stress, which I don't remember from the first time I came. So this was five, six years ago, post-9/11, I'm pretty sure.

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KH: Have you kept up with news and popular culture in Bangladesh, and maybe generally in any parts of the world that you lived in?

ES: Bangladesh yes, because I ended up doing my senior thesis and dissertation on Bangladesh, so I kept going back. That summer of 1990, when I went to do research and my parents were still in Kuwait, was the first time I felt, I am going there on my own as a grown-up—whatever, I was 21—I'm going on my own and I'll meet people who are not related to me and have adult conversations, so that was a big summer for me. And I've gone back many times since then. And I do keep up with the news, obviously, I do consider myself from there. Other places, I think not in as intimate a way. So France for example doesn't seem as personal to me, you know, I'll keep up with the news there as I would any other place. My husband is Lebanese, so Lebanon came back to haunt me and be part of my life again, and I go there and I started doing research there recently, so that again has become more personal to me. But other places...what are the other places, Kuwait—yeah, I guess Kuwait I sort of keep tabs on, but I think France I care about, but it doesn't seem more mine than other—it's less personal.

KH: Poland?

ES: Poland I actually do, because I think people don't know as much about Poland, so I feel I should sort of take care of Poland. I feel invested more.

KH: France has enough people taking care of it.

ES: Yeah, exactly. You know, France is fine. I guess if I hear about neighborhoods I know or something, then it feels more special, but otherwise France is fine, it's in good hands. There are enough people doing France.

KH: So how did you decide what academic path to pursue? What drew you to it?

ES: To the academic path, or the field within?

KH: To the field you chose, and I guess more generally academics?

ES: When I was coming to college, the assumption was that I would study economics, because many people came to Harvard from places like Bangladesh to study economics, and then the idea was then you go back and you apply it to fix the problems in your country. And I'd done A-level economics, which is a British system, and you take it when you're eighteen, an A-level is an advanced level economics, so I got to Harvard and I could have placed out of the intro class, but I realized I really didn't enjoy economics. I ended up doing this interdisciplinary major called social studies, which is an honors only major, you have to apply to it to get in, and then you take courses in different social sciences, which includes history there, history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, politics, all these different things, and then you have to write a senior thesis where you bring it all together. So for my senior thesis I ended up writing on the Grameen Bank, the microcredit organization. The founder gave the commencement speech here last summer, Dr. Yunus, and they got the Nobel Peace Prize, both the organization and Dr. Yunus in 2006, but not back then. Back then I was sort of floundering, what shall I write on?, and my uncle, the father

of the Princeton cousin, said, You know, there's this new organization working on women, why don't you go write on them? So I did a term paper for a seminar based on the material that the Grameen Bank sent me, and other research I did, and then in the summer I got the money to go there and that's when the Kuwait stuff happened. So I knew I wanted to go to grad school, because I played around a little bit with...you know, I think I interviewed for a couple of jobs, everyone seemed to be going into consulting, which I still don't know what that means, and so I did that, I didn't get very far, and I also couldn't bear the idea of a clock, like a real job, and having to dress a certain way and be at a certain place at a certain time, all that stuff. And I think I always knew I wanted an advanced degree, so even if I'd gotten a consulting job it would have been for a couple of years and then I'd have gone on to grad school. So when it was time to choose what to apply for in grad school, I talked to my advisors and I said I wanted to do social studies, I loved this interdisciplinary stuff, and my advisor said you can't do that in grad school, you need to pick a discipline. She's an economist—she's a feminist economist—so I think from her perspective, political science looked very open and interdisciplinary or broad, so she said do politics (you know, political science, politics, government, it's called different things at different schools), do that, I think that will be good for you. And I'd only taken one politics class as an undergrad, so I thought, Oh god, what do I say in my statement? So this is what I came up with: I said that for my senior thesis I looked at how rural women in Bangladesh come together to engage in collective economic action. What I would like to do in graduate school, for my study of political science or government or politics, is look at how they come together to engage in political action. That was the extent of what I could come up with! I didn't know any debates, I didn't know anything about the discipline...and it worked out, I got into all the schools I wanted to get into, and then...Oh, and for the year after graduation I got a fellowship to go back to Bangladesh and work with rural women. So I was actually in Bangladesh when I applied, and yet I see every year routinely these grad students who got into, say, the history program, come and they look around and talk to people, and I think, I'm sitting in Bangladesh, I had no idea where any of these places were, and I just...So I chose Princeton because it was on the east coast, because I knew New York, so I said, okay, it's near New York, I don't know Chicago, I've never been to Chicago, or even Berkeley—you know, all these other places, they were in places I didn't know, whereas Princeton I could peg as being close to New York City, which I knew, so that's what happened. And it turned out to be a good decision, because at places like Chicago they let in many people, then they weed them out after two years, whereas at Princeton they take fewer people and they get them through the degree. So by chance I made the right decision, so that worked out. So I applied to politics and Princeton was a good place, it was—I ended up taking courses in other departments too, and then over time—I'd already been interested in women, but I didn't do a certificate or anything in women's studies, but there was enough of it in my work I guess that I was able to get jobs also in women's studies when I finished. So I don't know that I went in knowing that I was interested in politics, but once I had to make up my personal statement and look into it—because politics could be defined broadly enough, and my advisor had a point there, that if you're doing economics there's less room for maneuver, whereas politics can be defined as political protest or just redefining different things, so it worked out. But I really wasn't interested in politics, it's not something I *knew* from the beginning.

KH: Every time I look you up, I forget what paths I have to take to find you, because you're not under the history department list, even though you're here—

ES: Well, because when I was hired, the Center didn't have its own space. The director at the time I think was Lynn Huffer, or Helena Mickie or Paula Sanders...now we have a hallway downstairs, we didn't even have a hallway then. And the reason Rice ended up hiring me—I came here because my husband is in the history department, and I was still writing my dissertation, so they gave me a little office space in Fondren, and I sat there and wrote my dissertation, but then I had to apply for jobs, and the job I got was in California, a proper tenure track job, and there it was fifty percent women's studies and fifty percent political science, so I went off, we commuted for two years—no kids, it was fine, hard but it was okay—and then Irvine decided to do a search in Middle East history, and offered Ussama a job, so that's when he said, Well, I can go to Irvine and be there with my wife, unless you find her a job here. They created a job for me. Otherwise there's no reason for a position like mine, I don't have a department. So then they created the job, and then because women's studies had no space, history said, Well, in order to retain Ussama we'll give her space here, so this is where I've been for ten years.

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That's fine, because I like historians, I like history, and then finally they got the space downstairs, and I've often talked about moving down, but there hasn't really been office space there, so...I'm connected by the stairs in the back. So it's worked out. But yeah, I'm not in any department, I teach in Asian Studies and Women and Gender Studies, Asian Studies has been a program for a long time but it's only recently become the fancy center that it is now...The fundraising happened with the Chaos, and Rick Smith worked on that for a very long time...[interruption for phone call] The fundraising had been happening for some time, but once we hired Tani Barlow she came and gave the center shape...So we've been very pleased, it's given the Chao Center this international and national profile, so that's been good. So my responsibilities are in these two places, but because of the way the Rice system is set up, I can't be called a Professor of Women and Gender Studies, or Asian Studies, so that's why I have this bizarre title of Associate Professor of Humanities. And because I had this training in political science, I got a courtesy appointment with the Poli Sci department, but they do a very different kind of political science, so I cross-list courses with them every now and then, but I'm not a member of the department, and I don't think it would be a good fit. So I think the two centers are where you'll find me, and where else... The Chao Center website, the Women and Gender Studies website is where I am.

KH: Has it been at all strange being a spouse hire?

ES: No, because I had my own job. If I hadn't had that, I think it would have been weird, because I never would have known if I could get my own job, but because I had that, and we chose to come here, in the sense that he could have chosen to go there, it hasn't affected me. I think if I had never had that, I always would have wondered, Could I get my own job without being taken in to retain Ussama? But it hasn't been an issue.

KH: How was the transition from single life to married life?

ES: It's been good. My parents, and his parents, despite all their openness, when we said we wanted to marry one another it was a big shock to both families, so for me that sort of colors that whole moment—we were different countries, different religions, so that was a huge deal, and I remember, I think Ussama said it at the time, the parents keep saying, Oh my god, you're going to lose your culture, and I think he put it beautifully: instead, what they should be thinking of is how you're gaining a culture. So my Arabic is terrible, but I feel intimately involved in what's happening in Lebanon, some things I like more than others; you know, the food, the culture, all that stuff. So for me it was a transition to married life, but also a transition to being part Lebanese in some ways, being exposed to all of that, going there on a regular basis—every year we go—so it was more that. I was in college and I was in grad school, we got married in grad school, as poor grad students, and so I think my adult singlehood—single life—was basically the two years I was in Irvine in California, because we were commuting, so I had my little studio on campus, and I had to do all my stuff. We flew back and forth a lot but that's probably the closest I came to having a job and being single, because being single in college doesn't count the same way. So I think that was the closest...So for me when I think of the transition, it's more to do with the cultural enrichment that came along with it.

KH: Have you had any trouble reconciling that now that you have children?

ES: No... We're trying to raise them tri-lingual. It worked for my son, who's now eight, better the first few years. So, even though he went to a local preschool at the University of Houston at age eighteen months and was exposed to English, and of course Ussama and I speak to one another in English, so he knows we all know English. I would speak to him in Bengali and Ussama would speak to him in Arabic, and until age five or six he would be very good about responding to me in Bengali and speaking to Ussama in Arabic, and even—he was so cute—translate, thinking I had no clue of Arabic and Ussama had no clue of Bengali, though we knew enough to know what's going on. And then once he started kindergarten, English just took over, and I can see it...it's easier for him to express complex thoughts in English, and I think sometimes it's easier for us too. So now he tends to speak back in English a lot more, but we just keep talking to him in our languages, so at least it's collecting in there somewhere. With our daughter, who's four years younger, it's been a total failure, because he speaks to her in English, so she's mostly English with a few words. She basically never even had the phase he had, of at least being trilingual for a few years, she's been English thoroughly from the very beginning, and she'll every now and then grace us with a few words in Bengali or Arabic. So that's where they've experienced the mix, and how we're trying to make it work. Food, we'll rotate between different cuisines, but also cuisines we have no connections to, Southeast Asia or Italian, so food is very mixed at home.

KH: What are the religions in your family?

ES: I'm Muslim, Ussama's Christian. That hasn't come up—I think that's what the families were most worried about. In Lebanon, religious identity is very important even if you're not religious, so it's sort of your identity, because it's also on your ID. His family's not very religious, and my parents are, certainly more than me, so what we've tried to do with the kids—and it's come on me to do this, because Ussama doesn't—is to teach them the good moral, ethical principles of all religions, so they don't identify as one or the other, but they know there

are Christians out there and Muslims out there, and everything else... For our daughter, it's not very relevant but for our son, I went and bought this book about world religions, and we read this together. We celebrate all the holidays, so Christmas is a big deal.

KH: Good thing you had that training.

ES: Exactly! I kept thinking, my god, how did I know what to do the first time I had Christmas at their house, and I remembered my Canadian experience. And then we celebrate the end of Ramadan, for example, I'll have a big party and make it fun for the kids. And we've gotten to know more people...I was just remembering today, when I teach my Gender and Islam class, I have my students go do an interview with a Muslim woman, and I was remembering today when I was thinking about coming in to see you, the first year I taught it, I actually didn't know that many Muslim women in Houston, so I wasn't able to be that helpful to my students, I had to ask around. And then the last time I taught it, I'd already met many more. So I think I was much more helpful. I'd check with them first, Do you mind if my student contacts you about an interview, but it happened gradually, when I first moved here I didn't know that many. I think exposing them to different kinds of people has... They meet Lebanese, and they meet Bengalis, but the kids all speak to one another in English. I think it's the language of play. It's hard to play Monopoly in Bengali or Arabic. I don't know how it works, but...even the children where both parents are Bengali or Lebanese, when the kids get together they just talk in English. So that hasn't been as helpful to the language as I had hoped it would be, but it's fine. I think it's more important that they're exposed to everything and then at some point it'll all settle down. Or they'll get to college and be one of these heritage learners of Bengali or Arabic or something, and they'll have some base that will give them an advantage.

(0:60)

KH: They'll be able to talk to you at least, to the family members.

ES: Now they understand everything, both of them, it's just that they're hesitant—English comes out more naturally. And they hear so much of it at home, and certainly all day long at school. I know what's happening, I just keep wishing they'd speak more Bengali and Arabic.

KH: Have they had the chance to spend much time with your extended families?

ES: Back home?

KH: Either way, taking them to see them or them visiting here.

ES: Yeah. We go home every summer to both places, it's exhausting, so we go from here to Beirut, from Beirut to Bangladesh, back to Beirut, and then back here. But we've made a rule of that, because they have...there are no cousins on my side, I have three younger sisters but no one has kids yet, and on Ussama's side he has an older brother with two kids, they live in California, and a younger brother with two kids, and they live in Beirut. So in the summer, all three brothers coordinate and get together at the grandparents, so all six cousins are together for a couple of weeks at least. And then the LA cousins we see every Christmas, and we take turns, we

celebrate Christmas here one year, and in LA the other year. And the grandparents come whenever they come. And then my sisters, one's in London, one's a grad student at Harvard, but she's been in Bangladesh the last year, and then my youngest sister lives in Bangladesh still with my parents. So they know the London one least, because she's in London so we only see her when we're going through London, and she's been to visit, but the other two they see regularly. When my third sister's in Boston, she's come down for long visits, and we've also managed to overlap the last couple of summers, so they know the younger two better, but there are no cousins so it's not the same kind of connection. But my sisters try really hard to get to the level of cousins! They'll play with them, and do whatever they need.

KH: Did you have any concerns about raising a family in America?

ES: I don't think so. I think it's unrealistic—you know, I have friends who will say, We don't want to raise kids here because of this that and the other, but the world is so globalized now, I don't think there's anything here that's not also present there, in terms of TV they watch and movies they see, I think the home environment is the most important thing, and I have friends who worry about private school versus public school. We live across the street from a really good public school, so I wasn't worried that—my daughter's still in private pre-school, because there's no public pre-school, but my son goes there and it's a great school, plus I think so much learning happens at home. Because also I grew up moving, and they put me in whatever school they could afford or was available. So in England, there was a good public school in English, so that's where I went, when we were in Poland, nothing, so they just sent me to boarding school in England. Maybe it's wrong to think that it'll work out for everyone the way it did for me, but I think in the end the home environment is so much, and I think that my parents, while well-educated, to move to Europe and have to learn many things from scratch, so in that sense my kids already have an advantage because we're very at home here, we know what's what and how to navigate things. So I think they'll be fine whatever school they go to, and in the end it's for us to protect them or to prepare them. So to answer your question, I think what would be nice about raising them at home would be the language, but I think even back home, it's not just the friends here, when the cousins get together, the six cousins, it's all in English, even back home, even in Beirut. I don't know that the language would necessarily be better, except there would be more people speaking Bengali or Arabic. Ussama on the other hand was born in the US but grew up in Lebanon, so he was born in Washington, moved back when he was four, grew up there until sixteen, then came back to the US for a year of prep school and then college and the rest. Because I didn't have that experience, it's not something I relate to. I think it's possible to maintain a connection just by going back regularly, but maybe I'm wrong. We're not representing Bangladesh or Lebanon, so my kids might not have the experience I did growing up, that we were the Bangladesh representatives in Poland or... I don't know. I'm not worried about being here the way I know some other people are. There are many advantages to being here.

KH: Did your husband or inlaws ever have any doubts about you pursuing a career?

ES: Yes. Not my husband, my mother-in-law was worried at some point. She said, You're both working, who will take care of the kids if one of them is sick? And I think it had more to do with her own issues. When they lived in Washington DC, her husband was at the IMF, the



International Monetary Fund, but she was very well-educated, and she went off... She said when she went off to be a masters' student, she had two kids at home, and was pregnant. She said she was the only married woman in her masters' class, so this is America in the 1960s, it was either Georgetown or George Washington. And then they decided not to stay in Washington anymore and move back to Beirut in the early 70s, and I think her concern—I'm sorry, it wasn't when I was going to get married, it was the job in Irvine, and go off in a commuting relationship, we're married but in two different places—wait, it was when we were getting married, there were other concerns about Irvine—so I think it reflected the very difficult position she found herself in, so she did the masters' as the only married woman in her class, but then decided not to pursue a PhD. And then she did sign up for a PhD at age fifty five or something, in England, and in the end didn't finish that, because she got so busy writing her own books—she's a very successful author. So she wrote her own books and never had time to finish her dissertation, so I think when she saw me trying to make choices about what to do, I think it made her reflect back on the choices she had made as a mother in the early 70s, so I think it was less about me and more about her thinking, Oh god, did I make the wrong choice? I should have insisted, got a PhD and gotten a job back then. But she's done very well for herself, she doesn't need a PhD... We told her, we get a PhD so we can write books people will buy, and if people are already buying your books, unless you want to teach, why do you need a PhD. So that was the only... When we were getting married, her concern was if you're both working, who will take care of the kids if one of them is sick... And then when I was going off to Irvine, because we were in Beirut that semester, Ussama had a fellowship, and I got the offer from Irvine. Ussama and I both agreed it would be difficult, but if I don't get my own job, I'd always wonder... If I waited around, Rice was under no obligation to give me a job, it's only the threat of Ussama leaving that makes any academic institution... they'll only do it in order to keep someone. So we knew that if I didn't do that, I'd be adjuncting for the rest of my life at Rice, they'd give me courses... So the very first time I taught Asian Civ, I was still writing my dissertation, I got to teach with Rich Smith, and there I was a third year grad student or something... It was a great experience, getting up there in front of seventy people, and I think it prepared me well for giving job talks. But had I not gotten my own job, I think that would have been my future, being at the mercy of odd jobs I could find around Houston. So we knew it would be difficult, but I needed to go off and get my own job, and then I could bargain with Rice from a position of strength, or Ussama would get a job there and we'd both be there. For my parents it was also very clear—you've worked all these years, of course you should go get your own job even if it's hard, but I think from their perspective it was, Oh, you're going to leave our son and go off and get this job in California, what does that mean for your marriage, what kind of marriage is this? And I remember the first time, he took me there and left me there, and we had no idea how long this might last, commuting, because there was no prospect for a job for the other at either place, but it worked out. We were very lucky. We met people even in Irvine who had had to commute for eight years. I think we knew that if something didn't work out in three years one of us would make a decision and move or something, so we were very lucky. I feel very lucky in general. Things have worked out.

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KH: This is a bit of a digression, on the mention of your dissertation, but you said that you went back to Bangladesh and worked among women there. How was that for you, as a part of that community and yet not... Did they see you as an outsider, as a Bangladeshi or an American?

ES: I was just reading the introduction to my book where I talk about this. Because I didn't grow up in Bangladesh, my Bengali—I read and write Bengali, but because I didn't go to any Bengali medium schools, for example, it's not really sophisticated Bengali, and also written Bengali is different from spoken Bengali, it has another level of formality to it that exists in Arabic and some other spoken languages, French, English... There are some colloquialisms that you wouldn't use in written English, but otherwise it's pretty much the same language, written and spoken English. But not so in Bengali, and certainly not so in Arabic. So the research I was doing was with rural women, who are typically uneducated, so people at the Grameen bank told me, Do you really know how to relate to them? Because that's the level of my Bengali. But the line I have in my introduction is, so it worked very well for me in the villages because I could speak to them, my Bengali worked perfectly well for them, but when I'd be in more formal settings like academic seminars, I wouldn't find the words. So that was harder for me. I think the fact that I could sit and relate to them, because both my grandmothers had spent time in rural Bangladesh, and in Bangladesh you always had a village home, you don't say you're from Dhaka or any of the cities, it's a point of pride to be able to say from which village your family came, so I know both my parents' village home and I've spent summers there and time there, so it wasn't an unfamiliar setting, and I did research in both those villages as well as in other places, so the fact that I could speak to the women, even though I had an accent, people tell me, We can tell you didn't grow up in Bangladesh. I think it's also because my Bengali, when I do speak it, in some ways however limited it is, is very proper, because if you don't grow up there you don't learn the slang. I don't know any bad words in Bengali, because I learned it only from my parents overseas. So I think that's probably what some cousins mean when they say, It's clear you didn't grow up here. What did strike me once was, I had to go for research from one town to another, and people said, You can't travel alone, you're a woman, and I'd say, Well, I have to. My uncle came with me on the train ride, settled me down and came back, because it's not proper for young single women in their twenties to be traveling alone like this, and then on the way back I finished research early, so I took a train back by myself. I think that's where my ease, being used to traveling alone here, served me well, but I remember people there being quite shocked by it. And also the only train—there are classes on the train, first class has nicest seats, nicest carriage, and I think I traveled second class because that's all they had, so I remember my cousins, who had grown up there, saying, Oh my god, you traveled second class? You sat with all these people you don't know? Whereas for me it wasn't such a big deal, I sit next to all sorts of people here on planes, right, I don't know what they do for a living. So that was interesting, I hadn't thought about that. So I think everyone could tell that I hadn't grown up there, but I think in the villages they were happy to talk to me because I took an interest. And in the end that's all that mattered. The other thing I talk about in my book, my parents are both from southeastern Bangladesh, a province called Chittagong, and it has its own dialect. Growing up, my parents never encouraged us to speak it, they said we should speak proper Bengali, and they spoke the dialect to one another, so I grew up never learning the dialect, so when I did the research in Chittagong, they laughed at me. I think it put the women at ease, that here's something I don't know how to do and they do, I think that helped them. And in other places it was fine. So yeah, I was insider in some ways, outsider in others.

KH: Was there a lot of that difference in gender roles, going back, that you had to get used to?

ES: Going back it was more about “This is what you should wear and not wear.” I started very early, I’d wear—even when I teach, I find our clothing comfortable, especially since Houston is exactly like Bangladesh weather, so I wear kameez a lot. Saris I haven’t worn since my daughter was born, because it just takes a long time to put on, so I haven’t done that. But on teaching days, when it’s not freezing cold weather, I’ll wear salwar-kameez. This is what I wear when I don’t have meetings and I’m not teaching. So kameez is a cognate of chemise, so French. It’s the long shirt, and then the salwar are the baggy pants, and a scarf—it’s a three-part thing. I’d wear those, I think when I was younger. So dissertation research, I’d gotten into blending in. I think when we went back from London, between eleven and fourteen, I was a little girl becoming a teenager. That’s when people started saying, “You probably shouldn’t wear dresses anymore,” stuff like that. I think the other time gender roles were—I have four sisters, with my father it’s just him and another brother, my mother’s side there’s seven siblings. Because we were overseas, we operated pretty much like a nuclear family, even though we were very much in touch with the extended family back home, many decisions we took—of course I was going to apply to the best schools and see what happened. When I got into Harvard, many people said to my parents, “You’re going to let the girl go all the way there by herself? She doesn’t know this place, it’s really risky.” Whereas I think they wouldn’t have said that if I were a boy, but my parents said, “Don’t be ridiculous, she’s going to Harvard.” So my parents put an end to that. But that’s when I remember thinking, “They wouldn’t have said this if I were a boy.” So that’s extended family. And then also, once I finished college, and even before then: “Oh, when are you getting married,” trying to set me up with various eligible young men... I met a guy in Canada that my aunt arranged, and there was a guy who drove all the way from Ohio to Princeton to meet with me, and I was happy to meet, but they wanted an answer immediately, and I said, “I can’t decide on the basis of six hours of walking around Princeton with you,” so that didn’t go down to well. I went along with it as long as I could, but it wasn’t happening.

(1:20)

KH: So then you met your husband in grad school?

ES: Yes, Princeton. He was in history, I was in political science. We met in ’94, and then he went away to do research in Istanbul and Lebanon, so we ended up commuting even then, so that’s why the idea of commuting afterwards wasn’t so scary. And then we got married and I went off to do fieldwork in Bangladesh, I was gone for several months, so we had a lot of this separation very early in the relationship. We got married in ’95, still in grad school.

KH: Would you say that your race or immigrant status has significantly influenced your life in the US?

ES: No. No, I don’t think so. The only thing I’ve done recently is become involved in this interfaith women’s—

KH: That’s coming up.

ES: That’s the only thing I’ve done! That’s about it. I think also because we were part of, I was always in an embassy, and my father, I got the impression from him that he felt beleaguered by

the different local Bangladeshi associations. No matter how big the community, they seemed to have splintered into many factions, so he would always stay a part of them, so we'd have huge parties, three hundred people coming for various holidays, whether Independence Day or end of Ramadan, etc, but my father would be very careful not to show partiality to one Bangladeshi group over another, because he said, "As ambassador, as diplomat, I don't need to be involved in local organizations," so I think even though now I'm not in an embassy, I'm sort of a normal Bangladeshi-American (I've never used that term), but here I am, I never wanted to become involved with one of those local organizations, and there are two or three in Houston. I don't know how large the Bangladeshi population is in Houston, but there are two organizations. So I've stayed away from that kind of organized activity generally, and I keep thinking it's because of the embassy background.

KH: So what drew you so strongly to the interfaith group?

ES: I think because it had an educational element to it. I got an email from the two co-founders, it was August, a year before that...one of them had just attended an interfaith women's seder for Passover that had been going on for eleven, twelve years at that point, and only women, and they bring in women from different communities, and they share the Passover meal together, and she was very inspired, she's a very young Iranian-American women, she's a lawyer—she's a writer now, she wouldn't want to be described as a lawyer, she's basically gradually left behind her law practice to focus on her writing. She said we should do this, this was fall, so they got in touch with me because the other woman, she's a grad student, I had met with her, I had invited her to many events at Rice, so she reached out to me and said would you like to be involved, do you know other people in town? So I helped them get started, and then in the end—so the idea is to help break stereotypes about Muslim women, which is what I do in my classes, so I thought "okay, I can do that." But I thought really, in a year you're going to organize this? Because I have no capacity or talent. And they did, we had two hundred people at Christ Church Cathedral downtown, by the following August. I was the main speaker of sorts, I spoke in the cathedral before it was sunset, then we broke up into little tables, and there were a couple of Muslim women at each table, and the idea was that all the other women at the table would be non-Muslim, but a number of Muslim women snuck in because they were curious about the event! And it was a great success. And now there's going to be a second annual event in August, and then this month we organized—it was inspired by the Amazing Faith dinners, the Boniuk Center came up with this, basically you invite strangers or strangers sign up to go to a home, and the idea is that because you're a guest in someone's home, you'll have conversation in a respectful way. So this month it's also women's history month, and every Saturday—there was one last Saturday—this Saturday a friend and I are co-hosting a dinner, eight or ten strangers will come to my friend's house, we decided to do it at her house, and it'll be a more intimate version of the cathedral event. They'll come and we'll make some sort of usual dinner food, and we'll talk. So it's not religious religious, it's about being Muslim. We're all Muslim in different ways, some of us cover, some of us don't, some of us don't even believe but have a cultural identity as a Muslim woman, so they're all sorts of women. It's been fun to meet all these non-Rice women, I have a lot of good friends on campus, but it opened it up. I think it was also the right time in my life, my daughter was old enough that I wasn't constantly carrying her, having to deal with her—she's four now—so it came along, a fun group of professional women, and it had this educational component to it, so it made sense to me.

KH: Well, it's about an hour and a half, so do you have any concluding thoughts?

ES: I think you're right, what you said at the beginning—I haven't, I teach the stuff, and the comparison you draw between the African-American experience and the Indian-Americans, or South Asian Americans—so many of them came in under the bright and talented visa thing. I didn't come in that way, I came in on an F-1 student visa, then changed it as I got married and got a job, so I think the experiences are very different, but I think there's a lot of diversity within the Asian American experience. Obviously, just go up to Chinatown or any of the restaurants and you'll find a whole class of people who wouldn't be willing to speak up. We're hoping that these archives will get at all of these different experiences eventually.

(1:28)