Background:

Sonal Bhuchar was born in Mumbai, India in 1960. She came to the US and Houston for the first time in 1984 with her husband who was perusing his medical career in pediatrics and family medicine. She also worked in healthcare as a physical therapist. After initially settling in Houston, she moved with her husband to Long Island, NY and then to Lubbock, TX. She currently lives in the Fort Bend area near Houston, TX. The couple has three children and a joint office that combines her physical therapy practice with her family medicine practice.

After becoming increasingly involved in her children’s schools, she ran for a position on the Fort Bend ISD Board of Trustees. After winning a seat, she helped manage fiscal appropriations for the district, and served as president for two terms. With her experience in education and healthcare, Sonal decided to run for Texas State Representative on the Republican ticket. Unfortunately, she was not elected. Nevertheless, she is still very interested in politics, and works with several non-profits including Fort Bend Education Foundation, Indo-American Charity Foundation, Child Advocates of Fort Bend, and Texas Medical Association Alliance.

Setting:

This interview centers on the topics of labor and capital to develop a working history around the context of childhood experiences, family life, and daily activities. Much attention is given to Sonal’s various work and political experiences in the US.

The interview was conducted in the office of Dr. Bhuchar who is Sonal’s husband. The interview lasted about an hour and a half with periodic interruptions by an intercom.

Interviewers:

At the time of this interview, Mijin Han is a rising sophomore at Rice University, and is majoring in English and linguistics. She was born in Ulsan, Korea. She is of Korean descent and is interested in the studies of comparative literature, especially that of comparing Asian and American literature.

Shireen Usman is a rising junior at Rice University, and is majoring in biological sciences and minoring in anthropology. She was born in Lahore, Pakistan, but has grown up in the Kansas City area and lived there for most of her life. As an immigrant herself, she has an interest in learning more about Asian American history and contributing to the HAAA project.
SU: This is Shireen Usman.

MH: And, this is Mijin Han.

SU: We are here today on June 26th, 2013 in the office of Dr. Bhuchar to interview Sonal Bhuchar for the Houston Asian American Archive oral history project. So, can you begin by telling us a little bit about yourself?

SB: Okay. Well welcome and thank you so much for including me in this project. I am looking forward to our interview. My name is Sonal Bhuchar, and I am a physical therapist by profession. And I have lived in the USA since 1984, so it’ll be—we’re coming up on almost 30 years.

SU: And so where were you born?

SB: I was born in Bombay, in India. I grew up there. I went to school there, went to college there. Uh, did my physical therapy from Bombay University. And then I got married and I moved here. Got married in 1983 and I moved here in 1984, uh, straight away to Houston, Texas.

SU: Okay. And, so what were your parents’ professions when you were in India?

SB: Uh, my father is a lawyer—was a lawyer. He passed away about seven years ago, and my mother, uh, was a homemaker like most, um, ladies in those days.

SU: And so did you have any siblings—or do you have any siblings?

SB: Yeah, I do. And I have a younger sister, and she still lives back in Bombay.

SU: And so are you close in age or did you go through a lot of school together?

SB: We went through some school together, but we are six years apart. So, she was, uh, always the younger baby sibling, and I grew up as the older one and, uh, we did, but we had a lot of fun together.
We grew up—you know in India you don’t go away and leave home when you go to college, so you’re there till you get married. And so that’s where I was. I lived in—with my parents till the day I got married. I went to school, uh, at Seth G.S. Medical College in Bombay and that was a three and a half year course for physical therapy. Got my bachelors. And, then I worked in India for two years at the local hospital, a very leading hospital in Bombay called Breach Candy Hospital.

SU: And so, did—were you planning on doing physical therapy be—like long before you went to school or?

SB: Oh, well was that my dream ambition? Is that what you’re asking?

SU: Or were you interested in it?

SB: Yeah, I was. I was always interested in the medical field. And, uh, in India the way medical school works is you have one shot chance. It’s not like you can take the MCAT three times or eight times or whatever and then get in. Uh, it was a one time deal and if you made that mark you did, and if not you went into the next thing. And so I missed medical school by about half a percent. And I thought, “Okay never mind. I will continue to work in the health sciences profession.” And I opted to go into physical therapy, which actually turned out really well because when I moved here in 1984, the need for physical therapists is very high. So when I moved here, uh, to Houston, within two weeks I had a job at St. Luke’s Hospital because all my credits had been matched. And, yes I needed to take my boards, but that’s something everyone here needs to do is take the state boards, which I did.

SU: Um, and so do your —did your parents leave India too or?

SB: No, my parents live, uh—live in India. My mother is alive still and she lives in Bombay. And my sister is in Bombay as well. And my dad passed away about seven years ago.

SU: And so do you get a chance to visit a lot?

SB: I—I visit often. I go back at least once a year, often times twice a year because my—to see my mom.

SU: Okay.

SB: It wasn’t as easy in the earlier days when we were here because we were new, and we didn’t have money to fly back, and it’s an expensive flight home. So sometimes it was two years. Sometimes it was two and a half years, but we kind of made it a point to go home back to Bombay ma—you know, as often as we could. Especially since we started having children, we wanted our children to get some idea of our roots and where we came from.

MH: So, you just mentioned that, um, you have children. Can you tell us how many you have and their names?
SB: I have three children. Uh, uh, my oldest daughter is 28, 29 now. Her name is Sonayna (?) and, uh, she went to medical school at Baylor and—well, she went to UT Austin. So she’s a Longhorn and went to medical school at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston and is now doing her dermatology residency at Vanderbilt in Nashville, Tennessee.

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Then our son is 23, and he graduated from UT Austin as well. He’s a communications major with broadcast journalism, and is actually now teaching—working with Teach for America and, uh, is based in Detroit.

And, then our youngest daughter, Supria (?)—our son’s name is Samir, and our youngest daughter’s Supria (?) who is 21 and is a junior. No, she’s a rising senior. She’ll be a senior in the fall at the University of Houston at the Hilton School of Hotel and Restaurant Management. So those are our three kids, and they were all raised here. And I’ll wait for you to ask me questions or you tell me if you want me to just go into my story here?

SU: Uh, you can just go into your story. [SU and SB laugh]

SB: Well, I’ll tell you that we moved here in 1984, and we came to Houston. We lived here about a year and a half. And, then my husband, who’s a physician—his name is Subodh Bhuchar, and this is his—this is actually his office. My office is on the other side of the building. And he, uh, got his residency in New York. So from Houston we went to New York, Long Island, New York.

And, to us it was okay because I grew up—both of us grew up in Bombay, and that’s a big city. It’s like, uh, New York. So, we were completely at home. And, uh, we lived there for four years. And, then he decided that he was gonna do—his residency was in pediatrics, his board certification. And so, he said, “No I—” he’d like to do another residency and board certification in family practice.

So, we went from New York to Lubbock, Texas. And, uh, Lubbock, Texas, if y’all don’t know, is up in the panhandle of Texas, and it’s, uh, 300 miles from anywhere else, any other big city. So, it was quite a big culture shock, and a change from Bombay to New York, Houston in between, and then Lubbock, Texas. But, a lot of fun.

And so we—he did his, uh, family practice residency at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, and we stayed there for two and a half years. But we are both big city people, so we needed to come back to Houston, and we love Texas, um, because it offers a really good quality of life. And it offered a lot of cultural options that, you know, smaller places didn’t necessarily—weren’t able to provide. Because the population of Asians here was so high that we could not only be mainstream, but that we could also be a part of, um, the cultural background that we came from.

So, we moved back here in 1992, where he started his private practice on his own, and I continued to work in the field of physical therapy. I took a break for a few years because my children were growing up, and I didn’t necessarily feel like I needed to have them be somewhere else. Um, I was keen on raising them myself. And so, I took a break from therapy for a few years, worked part time, did some contract work, that kind of stuff, and then, uh, started my own practice up again about 10 years ago.
SU: Um, so what did you find like most different between, I guess, New York and Houston?

SB: I think Houston and New York compare, uh, well with each other in that they’re both big cities, but, uh, New York is so much more mobile. And, uh, you’re not restricted in your mobility because you can always hop onto a subway or a bus and get around. Here in Houston—actually the most challenging and frus—one of the most frustrating things that I found when I first came to Houston was the inability to transport myself if I didn’t have a car. And, I used to drive a car in Bombay. I knew how to drive, but I drove a stick shift on the other side of the road, and then I had to learn to drive on the other side of the road and an automatic transmission. And, it took a little while. Um, and so that was one of the things that I found very frustrating that life wasn’t so mobile and, you know, open for everybody to just jump in and out of places and find their own transportation. You had to wait for a car or someone to drive you somewhere, or you had to learn to drive very quickly, which I did, but it just was just a hurdle that had to be overcome.

[0:09:44]

Uh, between New York and Lubbock? Huge difference. It’s a small town, uh, not at all ethnically diverse and, uh, lovely, friendly, wonderful people, but way out in nowhere. And we’re used to lots of people and coming in and out and lots of cultural opportunities available, which were obviously limited, but the learning was great.

And actually, I, uh—before I got married, I had admission to, uh, Northwestern University to do my master’s in physical therapy. But I knew I was gonna get married to him and get—come here, so I thought okay put the admission on hold, and I let that opportunity to do my master’s go, which sometimes I think, “Well I should do it.” But I never quite went back to doing my master’s because I had a family and, you know, couldn’t put the time away for it. So …

MH: So, you just mentioned that, um, you were keen on raising your children yourself, and you also go back to India quite often. So, did you, um, teach them any traditional customs?

SB: Absolutely. Absolutely. Um, I was keen on raising my children myself because I think we’re of the mindset that you should be there for your children and you should raise them as much as you can. If you are in a position where financially you can’t, then that’s fine. That’s understandable. But, we were blessed to not have that constraint, and so I focused on that, and, uh, we created a very traditional setting in the home, a traditional Indian, Hindu setting in the home ‘cause we’re Hindus. Uh, it was not dogmatic in any way or you know. It was just that this is who we are. This is where we came from. We are very happy to be here in the United States because of the educational opportunities that it had offered us, because of the economic opportunities that it had offered us. Uh, but we valued our roots enough to understand that, uh. it’s a gift we have and we need to pass it on.

MH: And do you speak any other languages except for English?

SB: I do. I speak, uh, three other Indian languages. I speak Gujarati, and Marathi, and Hindi, and a smattering of Punjabi because my husband is Punjabi and I am Gujarati. So, we’re from different parts
of the, uh, country, technically, but we both grew up in Bombay.

**MH:** And did you teach your children any of those languages?

**SB:** [laughing] I think that today—to this day stands as my biggest regret. I think we taught our kids very informally, not in a formal structure. And I think that even they regret that they didn’t learn it. We would speak to them in Hindi or Gujarati when they were growing up, but as they got older, their inhibitions and our ability—also because my husband and I, uh, spoke different languages growing up, we had different mother tongues, uh, our common language of communication was English, so it automatically just came out that way.

[interruption by intercom]

**SB:** So, I apologize for that. We’ll try to turn this thing off. [laughs] Okay? [beeping sound]

**SU:** Um, so you said religion was important to you, so is it as important to your children or was a big part of when they were growing up?

**SB:** Yes. Yes, religion was important in our house, um, and again it was in a very informal, loosely structured way, uh, because we—neither my husband or I grew up with very structured religion that you had to go on a certain—you know, you had to go every Sunday to temple, or, uh—we didn’t have very strict structure around that. We did have structure around the fact that wherever I was—and we started off life in very humble surroundings, you know, one bedroom apartment, two bedroom apartment until we moved into our own home and now we’re blessed to have a good home.

Uh, everywhere we went, whether it was a large place or a small place, I had a little shrine and a altar area if you will. And, uh, we encouraged our children to just bow down and say a prayer before they left the house or in the morning. But, we never, uh, followed a structured, particular temple going or Sunday school going routine.

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I believe that what I—what we could teach them in the home about a value system that we honor was what was important to us. Yes, they—they learnt enough to observe our holidays and traditions. And, uh, you know, for example, we would obviously celebrate many of the Hindu holidays that—as they came along. But we would also celebrate Christmas. And we would also—we also, uh, established a routine of Thanksgiving dinner with the entire family. We have extended family here from my husband’s side. And so, we’re a large family actually with lots of cousins, and so the table has grown slowly from five to six to 18 people now at Thanksgiving, you know.

And, uh, it’s been fun and that’s—so, we’ve adopted a lot of the local traditions from America. For years, we put up Christmas trees. I just don’t put it up for the last few years I’ve been tired [laughs] and the children have grown up and gone to college. So, that value has gone down some, and I’m sure it’ll come back as grandkids come back.
SU: So, you moved to Houston first for your—because your husband had a residency here first?

SB: We moved to Houston first because my, uh, husband’s brother lives here, and so we decided we would start form here. So, we were very lucky in that we came into a ready-made setting, uh, where there was a family, and there was a home, and we weren’t struggling to figure out simple things like we—what do I do with a soc—how do I get a social security card, or where do I go to get my driver’s license? So, that was the easier part because we had someone telling us, “Okay, it’s time to go get your social security. Okay, now it’s time to go get your driver’s license.” Um, and, so those were the things that made life a lot easier for us.

We came here. We stayed here for a year. I worked as a physical therapist, uh, at St. Luke’s, very quickly. And, um, then I had to take a break because I was—when we moved here, I was pregnant with our first child. So, when she was born I took again a 4 month break, you know maternity leave break, and my husband was doing research at MD Anderson, so he kind of took over that role. And, uh, until such time as he finished his residencies—both in pediatrics and family practice—I, uh, worked as a therapist, uh, sometimes part-time, sometimes full-time just based on how things were going.

MH: You mentioned that you got your first job when you came to Houston in just two weeks, and can you tell us a little bit about your first job?

SB: Well, it was a staff physical therapist at, uh, St. Luke’s Hospital. And it was a very interesting interview because when I went in to give my interview—like I said when we came, I mean there were plenty of jobs for the physical therapists. It just happened to be a good field to be in. And at that time I was really thankful. Although in the beginning I was disappointed that I had missed getting into med school. I was really happy. I thought, “Oh [intercom interrupts] here’s all the jobs and works well.”

So, uh, I went for my interview and here are the diff—here are the subtle cultural differences. And the department head said to me, “Well, when can you join?” And I said, uh, “In a fortnight.” And he said, “What is that?” Well, we learned English English in India, the Queen’s English, and a fortnight means two weeks, but no one here used that. And even he didn’t know the meaning of that and was like—and so I’m looking at him and going, [laughing] “You don’t know what a fortnight is?”

But, uh, he, uh—so we—you know, those were the little hurdles that we understood each other with. I was fully trained in India. So, it was, uh—that was not the difficult parts. The difficult part was the way, for example, notes were written because it was a huge hospital, uh, department for physical therapy. And, we would see outpatients. We would see inpatients. And there were things I had not seen or done before like treating burns patients, or like, uh, treating cystic fibrosis patients, which I learned over here. And, I found that people were [intercom interrupts] very willing to help, uh, teach—

[recorder paused]

SB: People were very willing to come and help teach or guide me along. And, the other thing I found was that patients were very open. There was never any question of “Oh, you. You’re not from here.” So, you could label it not discrimination in that aspect that, uh, every time you’re in a—I find that when you are in a healthcare setting, uh, patients respect you for what you know and what you are doing. I think that in a corporate setting it may be different, but in this setting it was all right.
SU: So, did you ever experience something like discrimination in a corporate setting or are you comparing it to—?

SB: Well, I won’t say in a corporate setting ‘cause I’ve never worked for a large corporation. I’ve always worked either for myself or on my own terms or private practice or, uh, even in the large hospital setting it was never an issue. I found that that discrimination came up in, uh—or that resistance to not being mainstream he—Texas born here or—or US born here. That came up more in social circles or volunteer circles. Like being on the PTA or PTO. Uh, in those days people would look at you and go, “Well, who are you? What do you know?” And, I think your abilities were more challenged there then they ever were in a—in my professional setting.

And, I have done a lot of work in, uh, the volunteer fields, whether it’s been nonprofits in the Fort Bend area or it’s been, uh—you know, I started off with my children’s PTAs and PTOs. And the first time I ever went on my—I know that my abilities were looked at a little askance, and they thought, “Well is she gonna handle this or not?” And then what happens is one works twice as hard to establish your proficiency at something. So, I was working really hard to create meeting agendas than I would ever have worked, you know, to establish my proficiency in physical therapy. ‘Cause I knew I—I knew that. I didn’t have to prove it.

Uh, so I learnt that along the way. Well I, uh—I started off by being in my children’s schools, being very active and helping and being room mom and den mother for my son's little, uh, Boy Scout troop. And I learnt a lot of new things that were very, very foreign to me. Although I was a Girl Scout way back when in—in India.

Um, from there on I got to where I was very involved in—in the school district, in the local Fort Bend ISD school district. And people knew me just from the work that I did with different events and activities around the schools. And, uh, [intercom interrupts] you know, we were building a new school. We were building a new school.

[interview paused]

SB: So, actually, um, I started serving on lots of nonprofit organizations in the area, The Fort Bend Education Foundation and different community organizations. My focus, uh, somehow ended up—because I feel passionate about it in different areas of education, you know, even though I started small, uh, with my own kids’ schools. And so I was—in 2006 I had good friends, American friends, who came and invited me and—not invited, encouraged, coerced, pushed me to run for the School Board of Trustees in Fort Bend.

And, uh, that was the turning point kind of in my life because I had never run for political office. This is a political office. It’s a volunteer position. There are seven members on a Board of Trustees of any independent school district, and Fort Bend ISD, which is where we live right here, uh, had at that time 63,000 kids and now has 70,000 kids in the school district. And it means that you run a campaign and you cover an area of Fort Bend ISD, which is 180 square miles. And you have to campaign very hard and reach out to people. Was something I had never ever done in my life or even dreamed of doing. I thought, “Where have I ended up?”
Uh, and I ran against, uh, three other people. I was the only woman. My, uh—three—my other opponents, one was a black gentleman. One was a white gentleman, who had been in that position before, was an incumbent. And one was a, uh, Vietnamese gentleman. So, I was running against three men. Was the only woman, and Indian one, and, uh, we ran a tough campaign. I had a lot of good friends.

By then, we had, uh, become a part of the community in a big way. My husband’s practice had grown and flourished here and, uh, a lot of people knew him and a lot of people knew me through the work that I did in different places. And, uh, we ran a full-blown campaign, and, uh, I won that election.

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And then I ran—that was a three-year term, and then I ran again in 2009 for another three-year term. So, I served on the School Board of Trustees for six years. That role is a governance role and a [buzzing on recording] fiscal—financial, uh, oversight role. And, it—it was incredible because your oversight extends to almost a budget of $450,000,000, and it’s that—it’s spread over 60-something schools and there’s 70,000—close to 70,000 students, and you are, uh, providing guidance and vision and all of that. Became an eye-opening experience for how this—this [buzzing resumes] community that we all live in operates.

And as an outsider, or supposed outsider, it’s 30 years now. But as someone who came to live here in ’84 and didn’t know how to put money into the vending machine, which I didn’t know—honestly didn’t know. I remember being, uh, pregnant and at an interview at St. Luke’s, and I was hungry, and I thought, “Okay, what am I gonna to do?” And I looked at the vending machine, and I thought—and I grew up in Bombay, but we didn’t have vending machines, and I didn’t know anything about it. And I looked at it and I was so afraid and I thought, “Okay forget it. I’ll just stay hungry. It’s all right.” And I’m sure a lot people do that because there’s a fear factor or an insecurity factor involved.

But, um, over the years we—we learned to reach out to mainstream folk. We made good friends. Uh, our own community grew a lot. And I had the opportunity to lead up some organizations called the Indo-American Charity Foundation and the Indian Doctor’s Association Auxiliary. I got involved—very involved with the Texas Medical Association Alliance. That’s the spouses of the physicians in, uh, Texas. And, uh, all of that networking taught me—and, you know, as a young child, 16 years old, and I would tell my dad who was an attorney, like I said earlier—and I would tell him, “You know Dad, I know I’m smart. I know I’m intelligent, and I know what I want out of life, and I’m gonna do it.” And he would always tell me, “Well don’t forget to take people along with you,” and I never understood what he meant. But, uh, now I’m old and I’m experienced and I understand that you never get somewhere alone. You always—it’s a product of all the people that become a part of your life and touch it in so many different ways. Um, so that—that was my journey into the civic and the political arena. You know … I was invited by the city of Sugar Land—even before I ran for office—to serve on their economic development 4A corporation.

Uh, I think that as immigrants we must realize that we have so much to offer because we have education. We have the—the value of hard work. I don’t think any immigrant shies away from working really, really, really hard because that’s why we came here to establish a, uh—an—an identity for ourselves. But, with all of that, we need to be able to reach out to the mainstream and say we are very
valuable contributing citizens of this country. We wish to be that way, and we will continue to be that way. And, so you need to honor and respect us for that—not need to, but you should. And, they—they can’t until they get to know you on a personal, individual basis. And so you just have to work hard at that. It’s not easy I found.

We both found it was not easy. My husband has been now in private practice for more than 22 years, uh, over here in the Sugar Land area. And, uh, he worked very hard at reaching out to—his association is obviously with the hospitals because he’s a physician and understanding how that—those entities work and, you know, to become [buzzing sound] chief of staff is no small, uh, action. And, uh, that’s—that’s the kind—kind of, uh, outreach that we—we felt really strongly about. So, we taught that to our kids, and wherever we went to volunteer, our kids would kind of tag along, and, you know, they knew to sit with us and do registration or hand out whatever it was that we where handing out or water bottles or whatever the event of the day was. And so, they—to them it’s second nature as well.

[0:30:03]

MH: Oh, you slightly mentioned that, um, you were in a Girl Scout back in India, and can you tell us a little bit about that?

SB: Well, from what little I remember, it was a very small Girl Scouts troop setting within—I went to private missionary, Christian missionary school, as did my husband. Uh, and so we had to do Girl Scouts or we had to do some other sports thing. And I’m not a very athletic person, so I thought, “Oh Girl Scouts. Let’s do that.”

And so I remember going for one campout and the biggest thing I remember from Girl Scouts was we had to learn to tie all these knots and it was hard! [laughs] But, that was—those were the things that we learned. Now, you know, what we learnt—we were educated under—under the English system of the A-levels and the O-levels and all of that. So, even the scouting came from the British system, and so we learnt that curriculum.

SU: So, was there—do you remember a difference between being, uh, your son’s like mother—or den mother and your Girl Scouts experience?

SB: Oh, big difference! [laughs] When they told me that, um, [buzzing sound] “Oh you can become a den mother. It’s fine. All you need to know how—is how to open a box of Oreos.” And, I thought, “Okay, sure.” [laughs] And then, I took it on, and I thought, “Oh my god! No, this is really different.”

We had to organize activities, and field trips, and camping, and we just had—oh, we had to make those little pinewood derby cars because that’s the big project of the Boy Scouts and neither of us is an engineering expert, and we were creating a little car that would come down the hill the fastest or whatever it was.

It’s a very big difference. The values taught were the same, but it was a big difference. And also it was—I was Girl Scouts. They were Boy Scouts and they had different activities that they had to stick to. Well, I went on two campouts because I was the den mother and after the second one he got what is called the Arrow of Light for—which is the badge you get when you’re in fifth grade. And then you become—if you continue in middle school and high school and you’re really passionate about it, you
get your, um, Eagle Scout.

Well, I told him that after two camping trips, I said, “I’m done. I’m not camping again [laughing], and your dad doesn’t have the time because of his schedule. So let’s just call it quits here.” Because Boy Scouts requires a parent to be very actively involved. And he went on to do different things as well. You know, he—his interest was music and so he did a lot of choir stuff and it—it worked out.

SU: Um, going back to your position on the Board of Trustees, what were like the kinds of tasks that you did?

SB: Uh, again, it’s a—it’s a very, uh, big volunteer position in that you are responsible for that budget. You are responsible for the curriculum. Not creating it, but blessing it, providing oversight to it, providing governance, and creating a vision for the district as a whole. And, even though it sounds kind of nebulous that, “Oh you had to create a vision,” it is, uh—you came up with a strategic plan for the district, and, you know, in which you would put your priorities. Obviously academic achievement was the first, and, um, you know, character building, and management of the facilities that the district had. But, overarching to all of that was fiscal responsibility because you had to use that budget that you had to do all the things that you needed to do.

And for a district that had close to 5,000 employees and had all these students at so many campuses, you wanted to ensure—and a very, very, uh, ethnically diverse demographic because the district is about 30% African American, 21% Asian, 20% Hispanic, and the rest was Anglo. So, the needs were different. The, uh, academic levels that—that the students came in were different. And, so, uh, we had board meetings every other Monday, and you had a lot of reading to do before that.

You had a lot of, um—remember that this volunteer, so it’s unpaid position. But because you’re on the Board of Trustees, you would go to a lot of the events that were held district wide. And at the end of every year, you would go to graduation ceremonies. And at that time—now we have 11 high schools, but at that time we had 10 high schools, and we had close to about 5,500 students graduating each year. And, you went through 10 graduation ceremonies and you shook hands with all of the students and you handed them their diplomas. And so it was a marathon session from Friday morning 8 o’clock to Saturday night 8 o’clock, and you just went, so.

[0:35:21]

But, that graduation ceremony was—I did that for seven years and it was the highlight actually of all the work we did because you could see the end result of your work and all that you did on the School Board of Trustees. So, uh, that was what we did, but more imp—also very important in all this was the political involvement piece.

We as first generation immigrants are—tend to be shy and retreating from getting involved in the political process, but if we don’t get involved in the political process—I always say if you don’t find yourself a seat at the table, you can end up being at—on the dinner menu, you know? So, you must have a voice at the table. And, that was the reason I ran. That was the reason. I thought it was important that as a community, we be recognized for what we can bring to the table. And, as hard as that campaign was, uh, I’m very happy I did it.
So, I did that for six years, and then I went on because I understood the educational system well after having served for six years. You know who does curriculum? It’s not the School Board of Trustees. There’s a Texas Education Agency. There’s a State Board of Education that comes from the state level, and the funding comes from property taxes from the state as well. Then there’s federal funding. Lots of different entities. But I understood it because I’d worked with it for so long. And because of my healthcare profession I understood what was happening to healthcare and the big changes that would come to that.

Now, 75% of the state’s budget—of the state budget of the state of Texas is healthcare and education, and because I understood it and because I saw so much change coming about and during my tenure on the School Board of Trustees, we dealt with a budget crunch because the state didn’t have money, so we in turn didn’t have money to operate our schools. And we were called upon to make very difficult decisions like a reduction in workforce. And we had to lay off some teachers, and that was not a very pleasant place to be. But if you don’t have the money, you don’t spend it.

So, uh, with all that knowledge in my hand, I knew that in order to effect further change, uh, we needed to have a voice at the state level. And, so last year I ran for the State House of Representatives at the Texas capitol. And, uh, I was not successful. I was running against a white male, and a black female, and another white female, and myself. But, it was a partisan, uh, race. I was running on a Republican ticket, and there was a primary that had to be won before you get on the November ballot.

And, uh, again we ran a very, very aggressive campaign, in terms of putting money into it, in terms of putting, uh, effort into it. My campaign knocked on 20,000 doors. More than 20,000 doors. We walked. We block walked, and I personally block walked every single day for almost six months from September—more than six months—from September through May because the primary got pushed off from March into May. And I would come to work and then I would go and finish work at 2 o’clock, and then I would start knocking on doors and drop off information.

But, that was when I understood that we are still considered immigrant and not—I don’t look like, you know, my opponent who was a white male Navy man. Obviously, I don’t look like them. And I found that during that partisan race, um, my religion became a factor. My, uh—my ethnic background became a factor. And I’m not complaining. I just realized it that we have a long ways to go as an immigrant community, but that doesn’t mean we must stop. We must continue to con—work and contribute in any way we can.

[0:40:05]

**SU:** So, what exactly do you mean by, like, it became a factor?

**SB:** I think it was a factor in my loss of that election. It was. Um, when you start moving up that political ladder, you are still viewed as not US born, not Christian. And, uh, that was—that was a factor that contributed to that. Um, I—I don’t blame anyone. I realize that … obviously, there is a—there’s a hesitancy in people's minds about who you are and where your value system is based out of. And, to me, that just makes it all the more reason [intercom interrupts] for educating people. And, uh, educating people to understand who we are and what we can bring to the table.

**SU:** So, what did you find were like—why was it different than running for the Board of Trustees?
Was is the partisan aspect, or—?

SB: It was. It was the partisan aspect. Um, when I ran for the Board of Trustees, it’s a non-partisan position, and it is a position that is going to oversee education. And if people see you and who you are, and the work that you’ve done in education, and they know that your commitment to it is going to be 100%, it’s a lot easier to say, “Oh yeah, it’s her.” When you become partisan, there is not only fiscal conservatism involved. There’s social conservatism involved, and, uh, they’re very polarizing factors.

SU: And so, would you—are you considering going back into something like that? Or—?

SB: Into politics again?

SU: Mm-hmm.

SB: Uh, I won’t say no and I won’t say yes. I’m going to continue to build bridges and see where this journey will take us. I have certainly not backed off the political process. I think that our community has needed a lot more education. When I knocked on doors, uh, so many Asian people, Indo-American people did not know that there’s a primary and there’s a difference between a primary and then the main and the November. I had so many people tell me, uh, “Oh yeah. I’ll vote for you in November.” “No, you got to go now! And then you have to go back again in November!”

So, I find that so much education is needed in every ethnically—in every ethnic minority because they don’t know the political process. Um, I find that there’s a ton of apathy. “Oh yeah, I’ll go to vote. I’ll go to vote.” But, they don’t. Again, unless you have a voice at the table, you will become the menu. It’s a—so you don’t ever want that to happen.

Uh, my husband has a radio show for the last 12 years. It’s a call in, live talk show on an AM radio station. And, we use that radio to educate a lot of people. We’ve interviewed—I, myself, have brought in lots of, uh, mayors, city council folk, school board folk, um, senators, representatives who come and talk about what they do.

And actually what I—one of the things I did even after I lost this election was—I thought it was important for the Indo-American community to understand what this whole thing was about. And, together with our local congressman, we brought together and put together an event, invited all of the local officials in this county to come and there were more than 25 of them. And, then we invited the Indo-American community to come out, and there were about 150 of those people who came out. And all it was was a dialogue. And the elected officials got to tell them, you know, “I’m judge so-and-so,” or “I’m your county commissioner,” or “I’m your mayor,” or “I’m whatever,” and this is my role.

Most people didn’t know what a county commissioner does, or what a judge does or what—how—why a JP is different from, uh, some other judge. And it was important. And, it was a very, very critical dialogue. And it—I hope that it’s the first of many to come.

[0:44:41]

So, I am still very involved. I’m involved with the Republican Party in different ways. Um, I still go up to Austin. I used to as a School Board member. I used to when I was on the Texas Medical
Association Alliance. And, uh, to me, legislative advocacy is a very big piece of what we can all do. So, I still go up to Austin to speak to our legis—our representatives and our senators on behalf of education. I still call them and say, “Hey, there’s this bill on the floor. I’m asking you to support it, or I’m asking you not to support it.” I think if we don’t do that, then no one will know we exist. Not we as a community, but we as a community of physicians, or therapists, or educators, or students or whatever it is.

Understand that there is an open line of communication. That’s the beauty of the way this government works. So I can still call my representative and say, “Why did you do this?” Or “Would you please consider looking at these facts?” And you give them the facts. So, I serve on several different non-profit boards, the Child Advocates of Fort Bend, Li—Fort Bend Literacy Council, uh, a health care organization, different organizations.

And I went up to lobby on behalf of child advocates to not cut funding, or I went up to lobby on behalf of the physicians, uh, because there were some very key bills being considered this past session. You know, uh, Medicaid was—should we expand it or should we not expand it? Education was gonna come under fire and all of this increase testing and accountability standards. So I went up to talk to them on behalf of education.

So that part of my political persona hasn’t gone away, [laughs] whether I choose to run for office or not. But it is very important part of an immigrant’s life to learn to become a part of the political process. And that can be something as simple as going to vote. You must go to vote. You must. And that’s something I, uh, tell my kids all the time. You know, they study in Austin or elsewhere, but their—their main residence is still here. And when they come here I’ll say, “Go early vote. Do it now.” You know, kinda drive them crazy, but that’s okay.

SU: And so how have they viewed, um, your, like entrance into the political world? Especially on school board if they were in the school.

SB: They were in the school and I was on the school board and, you know, in the beginning they were like, “Oh dear, mother. What are you doing?” [laughs] And “Do we have to face this?” But they were proud of it as we got along—went along. And, um, sometimes they didn’t like the things I did. One—one year we were forced to move exams to January because of the calendar schedule and, uh, post-Christmas and they made their displeasure known. “How could you do something like this?” I mean we made that decision based on different factors, not just the popu—popularity of what the kids wanted.

Um, so we—our house is a very open dialogue house. We make our views known. We discuss politics a lot. Uh, we don’t necessarily sit on the same side of the table because we have very divergent views sometimes. Not all the time, but sometimes. And so, uh, it makes for very strong dinner table conversation sometimes. But it’s good. It’s a very good way to talk about it. So.

MH: Um, going back a little bit, um, about your jobs and professions. You said you first worked at St. Luke’s and then you moved to New York with your husband. So did you have a job there? Or—?

SB: I did, I did. Uh, uh, I did contract physical therapy. I—well, first I worked at a hospital, uh, in New York, Long Island Jewish. And then, uh, because my daughter was very young again, we had some issues with, uh, babysitting because that’s a—that’s always a challenge, especially to new immigrants.
Uh, until I found her situated in a good place, then I— I worked contract therapy at nursing homes, schools, hospitals, in different places. [indistinguishable]

MH: And you said you also moved back to um—

SB: Lubbock.

MH: Uh, Lubbock, Texas. Did you find another job there too?

SB: Yes, and I worked. But in Lubbock Texas, my— my two younger children were born in Lubbock. So … and we’ve been there only for two and a half years during which my two kids were born. So I barely worked part time there because they were all inf—you know, everyone will— was a young child at the time or an infant.

MH: And you also mentioned that when you first came here you didn’t live in a house but you lived in an apartment. Can you tell us a little about the neighbors that you were in?

SB: Um, well let’s see. When we first moved here, we moved because I said my husband’s bro— brother lives here in Houston. So we moved in with them for a few months. And then we found our own apartment. And to tell you the truth, um, everyone kept to themselves and I did not know any neighbors, uh, in the complex that I lived in. It was pretty isolated … for us as a family.

And actually, the first year I came here, I hated it so much and I was so homesick that within about, uh, nine months …. And, uh, we could barely afford it then. But my youngest—my oldest daughter was born by then and she was five months old and I said, “I need to go back and see my parents in India and that’s that and I’m gone.”

And so I went back and I stayed there for three months with my parents and my sister because I was just horribly, horribly, horribly homesick. And, uh, took a little while to get adjusted. But when we came back, we moved into our apartment and we were there for a short while before we moved to New York where my husband got his residency.

And then we lived in hospital quarters in New York. So all of our neighbors were residents and physicians in training and so that was an easy enough camaraderie. You know, we knew people because of professional circumstances. And we had, my daughter was young. She was three, four years old. And, uh— actually the first few months in New York she, uh—I couldn’t find a babysitting situation that was comfortable for me and affordable because New York is so expensive. And we weren’t making that much money. And so she went back to India with my sister and stayed with my parents for six months—no, four months. And then I went back and brought her and I had a situation set up for where she was in a good babysitting environment, daycare environment and, uh, then I went back to work.

But, um, it was difficult to make friends in the early years. Uh, it was a little bit easier when we were in Houston because we had family and they had friends so we kind of just got absorbed into that circle. But when we moved to New York, it was a lot more difficult because we were on our own.
And, uh, when we moved to Lubbock again it was not so bad because even though we were in an apartment—I mean we never socialized with our neighbors in the apartment. But we got absorbed into a circle of friends of families that were of Indo-American origin and it made it very comfortable. You know, someone knew someone and someone knew someone else and so it kind of came together and coalesced.

And then we moved back to Houston and then we were in a house. And actually, this home that we’ve lived in we’ve lived in now for the last 22 years. And our neighbors—I will say this to the—of my neighbors, my neighbors are—[phone interrupts] my neighbors are more than what my family is to me. You know, I have a friend who moved in the same week that we moved in to this cul-de-sac. And she’s American and our children—she has four children and my three children, they’ve grown up like siblings. And, uh, she’s there for me no matter what and I’m there for her no matter what and I can call her in the middle of the night and she’ll be there. So, it’s a blessing now. … Even though our backgrounds are different.

MH: Um, and just to make sure that we know how like, everything cost way back then can you tell us a little about the rents of the apartments, if you can remember?

SB: $275 for a two-bedroom apartment [laughing] in a decent neighborhood in Houston. It was—it was a steal then, but put—balance that off with when we came and I was so homesick and we couldn’t really call and talk to our parents like we do now and Skype and 1 cent a minute rates. It was $5.45 a minute to call India. And we really couldn’t call because we didn’t have that much money.

[0:54:51]

But what I would do—and I remember this so clearly—I would take like a bag of change. I would collect quarters during the week and, uh, gather up about 20, 25 dollars from my change that I would make for, you know, at lunch or whatever. And then go to a coin machine and make change from the vending machine and whatever. And then, uh, I would make a long distance call from the hospital to my parents because I would work Saturdays and Sundays as well. We had to rotate weekends. And so we talked for four minutes and it would cost us, you know, 20-something dollars. And just “Hey, how are you?” And that was it. And those—that—those were the hard times at that time.

Uh, I remember still my daughter—my oldest daughter was born and, uh, my parents—and I had a very large family back home, even though just one sister, lots of cousins and aunts and uncles. And they all recorded on the cassette and I don’t even know if you would remember seeing those cassettes, those little audio cassette. They all recorded some greetings on the birth of my daughter and they sent it to me. And it was the most valued treasure I had, you know, to have everyone’s voices on tape at that time. ‘Cause you could not talk so easily and frequently. Things have changed now, so it’s a lot easier.

SU: So was it hard for your daughter and you for her to go live in India for like four months? While you were …
SB: No! She had a blast! She was a baby, you know. She was literally … how old? Maybe 16 months or something. She was a little baby and she was with her grandparents and she had a blast, and [laughs] it was all good.

SU: And so what was the diff—what were the differences between working as a physical therapist in India and coming here and working?

SB: Um, it’s a great question. The differences were primarily in that, um—I thought that we were allowed to a lot more room to grow. You know, they would encourage us to take continuing education courses. They would teach us. They—you know, I could say, “Can I roll off the burns unit and do something else?” and that was okay.

And, um, as long as we followed here …. I found the biggest thing was documentation. Everything had to be documented. It was a process I learned. I had never documented so much in my life before. [laughs] So, in India we treated patients. You wrote a few lines, but that was it. Here, you just wrote copious notes. And I learned that the liability issue was a big p—deal. The malpractice liability issue was a big deal. I think those were the biggest differences.

SU: Um, so you then had a chance, you said, to pursue your master’s before you were married? Or—

SB: [overlapping] Yes. Before.

SU: [overlapping] Just a while ago?

SB: No, before I was married I was still working in India. I applied to several schools I got accepted into Northwestern, um, I actually wrote them and said push it off one semester and I’ll see if I’ll come back, you know, in spring. And I couldn’t because there was so many changes happening over there and I was about to get married and all of that. And this was a marriage of my choice, you know. But it was just the timing of everything wasn’t quite working, so … I let it go.

And it would have been a good thing, but it’s gone. Maybe I’ll do it another time. I’ll do something else. I think the best part—the most fascinating part about here—what happens in the US is you can change your mind. You can change your major. You can do one thing and go back and do something completely different and there’s no holding you back. In India—now it’s changed a lot over the last 30 years. You were on one career path and you stayed on it and change was very difficult.

SU: So can you tell us about how you met your husband?

SB: [SU and SB laugh] I met him in medical school. He was doing—he was a fourth year medical student and I was a first year physical therapy student. And we met and we dated which was, uh, rare in those days. And then we got married five years later.

SU: And so how did both of your families like say …

SB: Take—accept it?
SU: Mm-hmm.

[0:59:56]

SB: They were very accepting of it. Even though we—again like, we’re both Hindus, but we come from different regions originally. Our families do not—us because we both grew up in Bombay and there was this slight hesitation of well, the—you know, I’m a vegetarian. He’s not. But that was very small. It was not an issue. Both families were very accepting. And it was, “Oh, okay. Just do it. Hurry up and do it.” [laughs] So.

MH: So are you still vegetarian?

SB: Yes. I am. I am. You know, it’s funny. Um, I never changed. He—we were in India and he tried to get me to change to being a non-vegetarian. And I could never accept the taste or the texture of meat ‘cause I’d never eaten it. And so he tried a couple of times and said, “Okay. If you can’t. You can’t.” And the story—then I came here and in those days, it was a little bit, uh, harder to be a vegetarian. Now, it’s never a problem. You can find anything anywhere. In those days it was.

And I remember walking in to St. Luke’s cafeteria and looking at the cafeteria menu and I saw “chili” and I thought, “Oh good I can eat this.” ‘Cause in my head chili was green chilies that were cut up. And I thought, “Oh, this’ll be good!” And, uh, I walked up to the lady and I said, “Is there meat in it?” And she’s—she looked at me like, “What are you talking about lady? This is chili!” And she actually said that to me. I said, “Does it have meat in it?” and she goes, “Ma’am, it’s chili.” [laughs] She didn’t know that I didn’t know what chili was. So anyway, she said, “Yes, it has meat in it.” So I was a little disappointed. I came home and I asked some people and I said, “What is chili? If it’s not green chilies?”

But, anyhow, you know, I—I got that a lot when we first came here. I was pregnant. I was working and people would go, “How you gonna have a baby? You don’t eat your meat and potatoes.” You know, or drive through a McDonald’s or a Burger King and say, “Can you give me the pat—the sandwich without the meat patty in there and then just put lettuce and the tomato?” And they’d go, “Huh?” But it’s all good now. I’ve educated enough people on how to make vegetarian sandwiches.

MH: So is any of your children vegetarian?

SB: No, they all eat meat and I cook it. I just don’t eat it.

SU: Um, so has your husband been a big part of your campaign and …?

SB: A very big part, always by my side. A very big part. We—I don’t think could have done it—done it any other way. My husband, my children. Uh, he was very instrumental in the fundraising aspect of it. He was very instrumental in being there at every event I spoke at. Uh, my children block walked for me. Uh, you know, it was a family affair. It really was. And then some ‘cause we had a lot of people become a part of it. That’s how it was. He went to speak to medical societies on my behalf when I was running for the House.
SU: And so how does he find time to do a radio show and …?

SB: He loves it, and I think when you love something you make time. So he’s done it for 12 years. It’s two hours on every Saturday evening. And they have fun doing it. So they do it. [laughs]

SU: How did he become involved with them?

SB: You know, it’s just something he thought would be a neat thing to do. And the call in talk show is very interesting because it’s live. There’s no time lag, no time delays. And they interview everybody from authors to politicians to physicians to lawyers to just anybody. Some days they’ll just have discussions. I think two weeks ago—and I thought “Really? Are you really talking about this?” But they were talking about, uh, the best places to eat when you go back to India or what is the funnest food you had. And they got the most calls on that day. So you know people are wanting to talk about their origins and where they come from and some fun memories that they’ve made. So sometimes the topics are light and sometimes they’re heavy, but it’s all good fun.

SU: Um, and so you are on other—different volunteer boards.

SB: Yes.

SU: Right? So what are like some of the main ones that you’re—or like how you got involved and …?

[1:04:51]

SB: Well I fi—I got involved with the Indo-American Charity Foundation, which was in those day—now it’s a—al—more than 20-something years old—which is an organization that, uh, uh, collected money from the Indo-American community and gave back to mainstream charities in Houston. The Houston Food Bank, the Star of Hope, you, know organizations. Because we—we all came to realize that we live here. We must contribute back here in the city that we live in. Because it’s provided us with so much. Not just money and economics, but a place we call home, a place that we raised our children in, a place that we want to see succeed.

So it started off like that. Headed that up. Um … my husband had headed that up before. My family has been very involved with it. My children were involved with all the projects that we did. And then, um, the Indian Doctors Association was a natural connection that we made. And I headed that up.

And in fact, uh, we created a recipe book with all of our original home recipes. It was a fundraiser. We sold all the books we published. And now the kids—we’ve run out of it and the kids want more and we’re all going, “Well, we don’t have any more.” [laughs] So it was something that the kids can take off to college that they can have and it’s their mother’s recipes that have been preserved. So it was a really good project actually. So all of our ethnic recipes have been preserved in that. So, even from that perspective, it was a good thing to do.

Then I got locally involved with my local school projects and PTAs and PTOs and with the Fort Bend Education Foundation that supports the school district and its teachers. Now, of course, I serve on a variety of boards, the Child Advocates, which prevents child abuse to children; Access Health, which,
uh, provides federally qualified health center and provides, uh, health care to those that don’t—don't have any insurances. Um, I serve on the board of the Sugarland Cultural Arts Foundation, which, uh, supports the cultural arts in this area and worked very hard to restore this hundred year old auditorium that we have, which is called Lakeview Auditorium in Sugarland. [phone interrupts] You know, Sugarland was a compa—[indistinguishable] Uh, I also work uh, closely with Fort Bend Literacy Council.

So like you can—you know, education has been a common denominator in a lot of the things that I do just because I think it’s very, very important. And you know, my son went into work with Teach for America and that’s another very big project as well. So I think his inspiration—he says he drew his inspiration from being continuously involved in educational opportunities.

MH: You talked a lot about the relationship of the, um, immigrants’ community and the mainstream community. Can you tell us a little bit about what you think it’s gonna be like in the future and what it has been like?

SB: Yeah. Um, when I first came in 1984, uh, in the immigrant Indo-American community it was, uh—there was a continuous effort, a very strong effort made to blend. Don’t wear ethnic clothes. Don’t—don’t, uh—try to become a part of it. You know, no one stood up and was proud to wear any of their Indian out—clothes. Because it was so new, the whole immigrant population was so new, and you didn’t want to stand out like a sore thumb. Um, and that was fine.

But there was one thing particularly me—for me personally what was very important is, uh, I wear this red dot on my head, and it’s a sign of being married. And to me it was so important, as important as wearing my wedding ring. And I didn’t wear my wedding ring, but I wore the red dot. Um … and it was looked upon a little bit like, “Oh, that’s weird.” Kind of, you know, because if you don’t know something, it’s weird. That’s all.

But I kind of stuck to my guns and decided that that’s something I wasn’t going to give up. And so I continued to wear it and I would go places and people would always ask me. You know, little patients would ask me, “Hey, your head’s bleeding.” “No, it’s not. I’m okay.” Little—an­other little patient said—would say, “Oh, are you a punk? Is that how you color your hair?” “Uh, no, not really.” [laughs]

I remember being at a post office and the lady behind the counter said to me, “Well that’s really interesting that you’re wearing that. What does that mean?” I said, “It means you’re being—it means that you’re married and to me it’s a traditional sign and I want to keep it.” And she goes, “Oh that’s so good. Um, what would you do if you get divorced?” And I said, “Well, we kind of don’t get divorced that easily, but if you would, then you wouldn’t wear it.” Said, “Well, what would happen if you get married again?” And she said, “Would you wear two lines?” I’m like “No. [laughs] No.” Uh, anyway, it became a subject of—topic of conversation.

[1:10:38]

So in the early days there was—I saw a great effort to just blend and not stand out like a sore thumb. Now, it’s gone the other way. And most immigrant communities are very happy to celebrate their differences in a very outward way. And, um, in fact I started up seven years ago—I was the one
that went to the Education Foundation and said, “I think because of the tremendous diversity—” 90 languages are spoken at Fort Bend ISD. You know, children of 90 different language speaking origins. “We need to celebrate it and let’s do an international festival in town square—Sugarland town square.” I don’t know if you’ve ever been but it’s a beautiful town square in the middle of the town. “And let’s do that.”

And so for the last seven years we’ve had this event. And every November 16 countries come out and put up their booths and celebrate their, um, country. China, India, uh, Philippines, Spain, France, Australia, England, New—you know, New Zealand. Everybody comes out, has a booth, puts all their stuff up. We say you shouldn’t—there’s no politics that needs to be brought into it and no religion. Social, cultural, traditional. We have lots of performances from different countries and it’s—each year we have close to 7,000 people that come through that event. And our school children go through the event with a passport and they get their passports stamped at all the coun—areas. And it’s just a really—

So, when I first proposed it to the foundation, they went, “Well, don’t know if it’ll go over too well.” And it was amazing how all the immigrant communities came on because they’re always very proud of what they do and who they are. And they’re always happy to show it off. And they’ll spend hours decorating that tent and their booth. And everyone’s very proud of it.

So if you go to the China booth, their activity is writing the child’s—whoever visits, their name in Chinese on the bookmark. And the line is like out there. Or you go to the India booth and they’re doing henna on the back of your hand and the line is out the door. You go to the France booth, and they’re coloring on white tiles with blue and making, you know, the French fleur-de-lis design. And how much has been learned by so many kids to be exposed to so many different cultures and traditions?

You know, now it’s commonplace that the Indian weddings are celebrated. The mainstream community comes out. They all know it’s five days long. My daughter got married. You know, there’s lots of noise. Right here in Sugarland in the Marriott. Uh, it was a very big event and everyone knows that there’s lots of drums and dancing and no one is hiding who they are.

Uh, about six, seven years ago there was a Holi festival, the color of—festival of colors that was celebrated. And we would go, “Oh my god. What is everyone gonna think?” You know, we come out looking like pink and blue and purple all over you and, uh, everyone comes out to it. Every elected official comes out to it. They have a ball. [laughs]

You know so, there’s a recognition. I’ll say that—that that recognition is here in Fort Bend. You know, Fort Bend is the nation’s—this year, most ethnically diverse community—county all—nationwide.

And we are very lucky to be able to showcase that diversity, to celebrate that difference. You know, and everyone comes out and no one thinks that it’s all weird and out there and you know. So that’s the change. 30 years, but good change.

MH: Um, then what do you think about the relationship, um, in—[clears throat] sorry—inside the immigrants’ community? Um, people from different origins.

SB: Uh, how do they get along?

MH: Um, what do you think like—what has changed? What was it like back then? What it’s like now.
SB: Among different communities?

MH: Yes.

[1:15:01]

SB: Among different immigrant communities?

MH: Yes.

SB: I think even that has changed. I think we are all, um—I think the biggest factor in that I believe is food. You know, uh, every one eats different kinds of food. Everyone enjoys it. That’s why there are so many restaurants and, you know, everyone goes out to eat Chinese food and Korean food and, uh, Mediterranean food and South American food. I mean if you look at Sugarland itself, you know, there’s a, uh, Brazilian place. There’s, uh—you know, our daughter, her favorite food is to go eat the hotpot in Bellaire and, you know, just different things.

Um, the awareness has grown. You know, it’s not that you must just eat burgers and fries and. Everybody’s making different tacos and, you know, just so much fun with that and I think food brings people together and connects them. And so, different immigrant communities have learned to value each other, come together. Um, I think also there’s a sense—and, uh, a pride in numbers. You know, we’ve gone out to Filipino physician association dinners and enjoyed that, or we’ve had people come to our events and enjoyed that. And, um, I think we’re learning to become a global world.

SU: So you said your daughter was recently married? How was planning her wedding like? Yeah, here in the US? Or was this the first wedding that you planned here?

SB: Um, well, it was the first wedding in our family. It was three years ago. And, uh, planning the wedding here was not difficult because everything’s available here. And even between the three years and the wedding I see now so much more is available. I went three times to India to shop for her clothes and the things I wanted to use to decorate and all of that. Now, no one has to go. It’s all here. Even in the three years that I’ve seen. I thought, “Wow! What happened?” [laughs] So, it’s just growing, you know? And 15 years ago when people would have weddings—and, you know, the Indian groom comes in on horse—it was difficult to find a horse that would be all decorated. Now everyone knows. [laughs] It’s all good. So.

SU: So she did all of that?

SB: Oh, she—she—all the bells and whistles. [laughs] Yes, yes. We had a full-blown traditional wedding and we had 70 people from all across the world fly in and then we had 800 people at the wedding. And it was fine. [laughs] Yeah.

SU: And—
SB: Lot more resources. When we first came 30 years ago, even the Indian grocery store was hard to find and then maybe three restaurants, and now there’s 300, you know. Not just here, even in small towns. Yeah. Yesterday, Monday night we drove from Nashville, Tennessee, from where my daughter lives now, back home it was a 15 hour car drive. And, uh, the kids and I were driving and we stopped in a place. It was really funny. We saw—Jackson, Tennessee, small town and a huge sign that said, uh, “BP Gas.” It was a British Petroleum gas station. “And Indian restaurant 24 hours open.” And you could walk in [laughs] and order whatever you want and then it was there. So it’s come a long way.

SU: And so how did your daughter meet her husband?

SB: Uh, she—they were high school—actually they went through elementary school together. Elementary and high and college together.

SU: And so is he also Indian? Or?

SB: He is. He’s a Sheikh. Um, and, uh, he’s a physician as well. So they went through med school and everything together.

SU: Um, going back to your—when you were working with the Board of Trustees, um, how do you remember like working with the group and, like, the group dynamics and, like, was it hard to, um—did you ever have, like, difficulties coming to your decisions? Or?

[1:19:58]

SB: It was. It was never an easy decision. And like I said, um …. For most part I had—uh, my six colleagues were very committed to the cause of education. And if you’re committed to the cause, then coming to a decision is hard. But it is not so hard. But we were called upon to make some tough decisions. No one wants to lay off people. No one wants to deal with budget cuts, but we had too. And that’s when it was hard to come up with decision making.

When I first got on to Board of Trustees—and I served twice as the president of the school board. The first time I served as president, I—I had people look at me and think, “Uh, what is she gonna do?” Uh, there was doubting. There was a little bit of a hold back, but it went away in a couple of months. Once people know who you are and what you want to do and you’re not going to make some absurd, irrational calls, you know, they get to trust you and know you and work with you.

SU: So was the—being the president of the school board different from work—being a member on the Board of Trustees?

SB: Yes.

SU: Oh. Okay.

SB: It comes with a lot more, uh, responsibility. It comes with a lot more, uh … well, a lot more
difficulty in trying to—you’re herding cats, [laughs] you know, between your board members and administration and everybody else. And you’re trying to make—you’ll always have—the school Board of Trustees is a very difficult position to serve on because you’re dealing with people’s children and people’s money. You’re using their taxes and you’re putting in to work for their children.

And we would get—I would be answering emails till two o’clock at night because you’d get angry parents. “Why did my children’s text book not get delivered to the class today?” Or “Why did my—why was my child dropped at the bus stop, you know, six houses down?” Okay? So it was just something we had to do. And we didn’t have the answers to that. That wasn’t our—our job. It was directed to administration and they would address it, but it was just something. Remember you run elected official, so you’re answerable to your constituents.

SU: So you were the president after you served for your six years?

SB: No, I was president, uh—when—in my third year.

SU: Oh, okay.

SB: And then I was president in my fifth year in the school board.

SU: So as the president, you still worked with the—the Board of Trustees? I’m just trying to … [overlapping] figure out what.

SB: Yeah, the president it elected from among the seven board members.

SU: Oh, okay.

SB: You know, someone is chosen to serve as president.

SU: Um, and so what—does your sister live here too?

SB: No, my sister lives in Bombay. And, in fact, she was here last week and, uh …. So she visits and I visit and, uh, yeah. It’s good.

SU: So what does she do?

SB: She’s a homemaker as well.

SU: And so are your children—does she have children?

SB: Yeah, that’s who was here visiting, but I think she’s caught up doing something else. My niece is here with me. She’s here for the last two months and she’s come to spend her summer. And she’s a dancer. Her degree’s in dance and in law. And, uh, she’ll be a sophomore in college and she said she wanted to come and learn some different dancing here. So she’s taking lessons in ballet, and jazz, and
more Indian classical dancing, and just enjoying doing things that she normally wouldn’t do there.

MH: You mentioned that, um, keeping your tradition and customs in your house is very important. And you also mentioned that you come—go back to India quite often. Do you take your children too?

SB: Absolutely, absolute—Now I don’t. I mean I can’t because they have different schedules. We all try to go, uh, together as much as we possibly can. But now my daughter’s married and she has her own schedule. And my son’s teaching and working, so he has his own schedule. And my daughter’s studying in college, the youngest one. So it’s hard, but up until they were in college, we all went together as much as we possibly could. I mean, I’ve gone alone a lot of times because when my father passed or, uh, to take care of my mom if she falls sick. Then I will make a flying trip out there.

SU: Um, maybe just a couple more questions.

SB: Okay.

SU: Um, so what do you think—what would you consider your greatest accomplishment so far?

SB: Um, as a thing I’d say my ability to … my ability to raise my family and my children in a country that I now call home but wasn’t where I grew up and adapt to the social structure here and still maintain my traditions that I value a lot. I think that’s my number one achievement. Um, and I—I am proud of that, that we’ve been able to keep our traditions alive, our religious traditions, our cultural traditions. My children may or may not do everything that I do, but it’s in their head and at some point they’ll use it. I know.

Uh, but as a—on the other hand what I consider my biggest contribution would be my ability to have come out and opened up a world of … what political and civic engagement for the entire Indo-American community. I was the only—and there are 1028 school districts in the state of Texas. I think I am even today the only Indo-American to serve on—not Asian. There are Asian people who serve, but Indo-American. The only Indo-American to serve on a school district board.

Um, so I think that my ability or my opportunity that I was given to open up this whole world of politics and civic engagement to just—not just my family, but to the entire community because they all heard from me. Trust me, they heard from me. Say, “Go to vote. Come out and do this. This is what we do.” No one knew what a school district board was or what its job was or anything. So that opportunity is a very big deal. And I think that, uh, God graced it upon me and blessed it upon me for whatever reason. And, uh, I think that it was a good thing for everyone. It was a difficult thing, but it was a good thing.

SU: So, you said that your American friends encouraged you to, uh, be involved in the school board. Uh, how did the Indian community see this, like you stepping into politics, especially since it was so foreign?
SB: Yeah. Um, well I think there were, uh … They may have questioned it in terms of, “Why are you doing this? What is so important about it?” But once they got on board, they got on board. And they understood what we needed to do. And it’s not that you say something today and tomorrow everyone’s gonna spring into action. But it’s a learning process and I think now a lot of people understand the value of what has been done and will continue to be done, not necessarily by me, but by anybody who chooses to step into—you know you have to open doors. And I’m not saying I opened doors, but may—I became the scapegoat, all right? You know, whatever way you want to look at it.

But I chose to do it. It wasn’t …. Yes, my American friends encouraged me. They sat here in this very room and said—you know, spent six hours talking to me and saying, “You can do this. You can do this.” And we sat here from four o’clock till nine o’clock at night until I said, “Oh well, okay then I will.” [laughs] ‘Cause I didn’t know what I was stepping into. But, um, the Indian community rallied around phenomenally. They did.

[1:29:33]

SU: Do you have more questions? [turns to MH]

MH: I think I’m good.

SB: You got everything. [to MH ]

SU: Um, is there any other memories or experiences or anything that you want to share?

SB: I think I narrated some of the, you know, experiences that were kind of off or, you know, just different in the light of where we were and what we were doing. Uh, the journey that we’ve taken has been—it’s been, uh, interesting. It’s been very challenging. But it’s been extremely fulfilling to have said that you ran for an election in a country that you weren’t born in, that you succeeded, that twice didn’t succeed the third time for a different office, or to run a business. This is a small business, this is a—a small private practice that I have, or to raise the children or to become a part and serve in so many volunteer positions. Um, it’s been extremely fulfilling and we find ourselves as a family blessed to have been able to have that opportunity.

Um, I don’t think that the journey’s over. I think that we all as immigrants need to continue to work within the mainstream to talk about who we are and the values that we will bring ‘cause we all bring very traditional family values. And that’s key to the success of a country. And that sounds kind of like, you know, out there that here’s a family and here’s a country, but I—I think that that’s what makes a country a family and its strength.

And, um, you know there’s a lot of talk often times about children who are brought up here being confused. Should they follow the mainstream … uh, social structure, or should they be so tradition bound and never—you know that there are—that they’re confused or they’re conflicted. And they’re not. I think you see that. [looks to SU] You—you’re not conflicted. Um, if you know your value system, you’ll stick to it whether you’re Christian or you’re Jewish or you’re Hindu or you’re Muslim. It doesn’t matter. Your value system is your core moral compass, and you’ll stick to it and that’s how it works.
SU: Okay, thank you very much.

MH: Thank you.

SB: I know I talked a lot. What did—

[1:32:13]
End interview