

Interviewee: ABAN RU.S.TOMJI

Interviewers: MELISSA VERNE (Junior); VICTORIA ENG
(Sophomore) Date/ Time of Interview: July 9, 2013, at 10:30AM

Transcribed by: MELISSA VERNE; VICTORIA ENG

Edited by: TIAN-TIAN HE (4/10/17)

Audio Track Time: 1:21:40

Background:

Aban Rustomji was born in Surat, India in 1943 but raised in Pakistan. She was raised in a Parsi community. Growing up an only child, she lost her mom at a young age and was very close to her dad as a result.

After attaining a bachelor's degree and marrying her husband, she and her husband relocated to Columbia, Missouri to obtain their master's degrees. After realizing her job in the library interested her more than her English courses, she decided to pursue her master's in library sciences. She found work at a library in Loyola University Chicago after graduation. She returned to Pakistan when her husband found work there and had a son and a daughter there; they were raised there for their early childhood. In 1979 they moved back to the U.S. when they came to Houston for her husband to pursue oil-related career opportunities. She worked as a librarian in Spring Woods High School for 23 years. After retirement, she worked as a bookkeeper her husband's company, Coating Industries.

Since coming to the U.S., she has remained actively involved with the Parsi and Zoroastrian community, even contributing her library skills by maintaining a catalog and organizing events at the center. During her time in Houston she has also been involved in planning a Zoroastrian world conference and helping plan the construction of the Zoroastrian center.

Setting:

The interview focuses on Ms. Rustomji's dedication to civic involvement, and how she has demonstrated and demonstrates this throughout her life in places like Quetta, Pakistan, Chicago, and Houston, and the Zoroastrian/Parsi community.

The interview was conducted in Ms. Rustomji's home.

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

Interviewers:

At the time of this interview, Melissa Verne is a rising junior at Rice University, majoring in Asian Studies and Political Science. She is originally from Raleigh, North Carolina, is of European descent, and spent a year living in Taipei, Taiwan.

At the time of this interview, Victoria Eng is a rising sophomore at Rice University, majoring in Electrical Engineering. She is from Houston, Texas.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

MV	Melissa Verne
VE	Victoria Eng
AR	Aban Rustomji
--	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.) and noises

AR: [Recording starts at the end of a conversation] That's okay.

VE: This is Victoria Eng.

MV: And this is Melissa Verne.

VE: We're here today on July 9, 2013, in the home of Aban Rustomji to interview her for the Houston Asian American Archive Oral History Interview Project. Um, so to begin, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

AR: Uh, just—just start like, any old place?

VE: Anywhere.

AR: Um, I guess um, I'm a professional educationist. I've been an advocate for libraries. I've, uh, always been interested in community affairs. And um, I've lived a very—led a very rich and um, enriching life. So.

VE: So you were born in India, correct?

AR: Uh when I was born, there was no Pakistan. So what happens is, you know, traditionally the mother goes to her mother's house for the first-born child. So I was born in India, and then after forty days that was it [laughs]—never been there again. So then I was in Quetta, which was also part of British India. And then afterwards, four or five years down the road, then there was partition, then there was Pakistan. So it's always kinda like, you look at my passport and people say, 'Oh, you were born in India.' Well yeah, *but* you know, it's a birthplace with no associations. Whereas with Quetta, there's such a lure of the land—that you feel like even though with the present time problems and all, part of me is always there, you know, so that's what it is.

VE: Can you tell us a little bit more about it?

AR: You know life was so simple, and then—I'm--I'm old, [laughing] so life was simple, and uh, didn't have TV, didn't have computers, didn't have any of these things, so what you did was you played seven tiles, you played cricket, you went out and the sun was setting and you came back to your homes, you had a good family meal, you went to bed, next morning it was out there too. You went out to the orchards, you rode on camels, and went—you know, on a Sunday, you would go to different places and you would watch the sun, and when the sun reached a certain point, then you knew it was time to turn back and come home.

So it was so different then. Now, when I go back with my own kids, I'm so watchful, you know, I keep saying, 'Oh, you can't go here, you can't rest this way, you can't do this, you can't do that.' So within this short period of time, this 40, 50 years, there's been such a dynamic change in that place. That—it's good to have those good memories, and sometimes with memories you always think about them being far more fabulous than they really were, but that's the impression that I still have.

VE: And so this is in India?

AR: This is in Pakistan.

VE: Oh, in Pakistan.

AR: In Pakistan, yes.

VE: And how long did you stay in Pakistan?

AR: I think my first eighteen years were there.

VE: Okay.

AR: In Pakistan. Then my husband and I got married, and we came here to do our Master's, and then we stayed on and then he had overseas job, so went back, had both our kids out there, and then in '79 we came to Houston.

MV: How did you meet your husband?

AR: We were across the—you know, we were the same little enclave, you know, there were thirteen homes with sixteen-foot walls, and he was—he claimed he saw me in my crib, but that was the romantic story. So he liked me, and he decided to marry me. But that's the story he would tell the kids. But we grew up together.

MV: Oh wow.

AR: But there was a five-year age difference with that, too. But what I wanted to say is when we, you know, we were always actively involved no matter where we went to. When we were in the States, the very first time as students, then of course it was the Pakistan association, and we had to have a congress, and we had to have a meeting, we had to, you know, get together and do something. So we were all doers. So we came in '79 out here to Houston, and there was a very small community of Zoroastrians out here, but there was no place. So we got together, and my husband was very instrumental in that, and then we, you know, built the center years down the road.

But you know what it was started off with? Each family would just pay twenty dollars a month, and I would be their treasurer, and the older people, they seem—I mean, I'm old now, but they were older. [laughs] Some of them are not even alive now. They—if I didn't deposit a check the very next week, they would say, 'Oh, we can't reconcile our bank statement, you know? So you gotta deposit your check.' So I would say, 'Oh, so-and-so's check's come, so-and-so's check hasn't come.' But then it evolved—the center evolved, and there were two or three big donors, and I don't know if you've had a chance to go to see our center, but it's very pretty.

(00:05:16)

And um, now when I go out there, and I see—there's the older generation that was already there, there's my generation, then there's a younger generation—my kids' generation, and their kids. And then when you go out there and see on Friday night, they're having dance practice, on Sunday they have religious classes, and then, you know, and different things go on. It really pleases me, that you know, that I've been at the grass root of these things, to see this happening. And, the community's closer because we have a place to meet. So.

MV: Uh, going back to Pakistan did you—do you have any negative memories of the partition at all?

AR: No, I was very young. I was just—I was two or three years old. But the only thing that I do remember was, um, we had a, what we call a go-down, which is like a storage room, and forever and ever there were mattresses and a harmonium. You know what that

is? It's like an accordion. And it was some people—some Hindus that were fleeing and going back, they just knocked on our door, and the woman—we—my mother didn't know her. And she cried so pathetically, and she said, 'This is all my belongings. Can you keep them? And I'll come back for them.'

Well, years and years went by and they didn't come back, and all the mattresses and all the other things went, but the harmonium—the accordion, we all lo--you know, played the music, and my kids played with it, and that was the living memory of uh, the partition that I have. But my mother would talk about how she saw the cruelty with the—they would—the Muslims would cut off the heads with the Hindus, and the Hindus would do with the Sikhs, you know—it was out in the street. And they were more aware of it, but no, I was not. I was a little too young for that.

VE: No one ever came back for their belongings?

AR: No one ever came back for their belongings.

MV: What did your parents do?

AR: My father was a civil engineer.

MV: Okay.

AR: And my mother was a social worker. So, but I lost my mother when I was—she was very young. And she died of cancer, and I—and I'm an only child. I had a very close relationship with my father.

VE: Uh, where was your father educated?

AR: In India. In India, he went to an engineering college in Pune. He was very proud of that, because someone in those days, I think, to get a bachelor's—and we had a certificate and, you know, all mounted up in our living room and we'd look at it, and, so.

VE: Where did you get your undergrad?

AR: Uh, my undergrad was in Lahore, in Pakistan. And then my grad school was over here.

VE: Uh, which grad school?

AR: Columbia, Missouri.

VE: Okay. And that's where you studied Library Sciences.

AR: Yeah.

VE: Uh, what inspired you to study that?

AR: Well, you know, I—I'll tell you, it's a—it's kind of a story—I wanted to do—we were in Kansas, and [laughs] we looked at the map of the U.S. and how did we decide to go to Kansas? Because it was *right* in the center of the U.S., and I said, 'Oh, we go East, we go West, we go up, and we go down.' Well guess what? Kansas in the '60's was very provincial. And they had never seen a foreign person, I think. The little Manhattan town.

So when I walked into the English department, and they said, 'Oh, you can speak English?' And I said, 'Uh, yeah—so our schools were all—you know, we did our schooling and our final papers went to England, and they were judged out there, and they came back and you know we were in Cambridge System, we didn't have established system. So then they said, 'Okay, here's some money. We'll give you some money. You know, you wanna be a student here? It's a scholarship.'

So I said [mutter] 'Oh, here's a scholarship.'—so I took nine hours of English, and I was working part-time in the library, and I thought, 'I don't want to be here. This is not for me. I don't want to be a teacher, and I don't want to go into all this Chaucer and Milton stuff for the rest of my life.' But the *library* part of it interested me. So I started taking courses in that. So and that's how I did that.

(00:09:46)

My first job then was in Loyola University in Chicago. [Laughs] And I have to tell you, last year—I hadn't been to Chicago since '69, and last year I was working on a library project—stop me if I'm rambling.

VE: No, no.

AR: So, uh, I went up there, and I said, 'You know, I worked here in '69 and I'd like— '68, '66, '69,' and the woman just looked—young girl, like you, just looked at me, and just, 'In '68?' You know, like shouldn't you be in a wheelchair? Shouldn't you be this thing—so her look was just aghast. And so I said, you know, 'You're—can you look up my records? Can you do this?' Well she took me around to all of the library, she said, 'This is the lady that worked here in '68!' You know, it's so far back, you know. So young. Everything had changed, I didn't recognize one single thing. But it was just nice to go back and visit.

VE: Did you, um, work in the downtown campus, or—?

AR: Downtown campus. Were you there in Chicago?

VE: [Laughs] Um, I actually—

AR: Since you know the downtown campus.

VE: I visited.

AR: Oh, I *love* that campus.

VE: It's beautiful.

AR: We had an apartment on Lakeshore Drive, and I would take the bus, and it'd take fifteen minutes and I'd be there right at the downtown campus on Michigan Avenue was there. There was a store called Carson's and I *loved* that store. And I'd wait for the sales. And a dress would be only \$18. That was my budget, and that's what the Carson store would sell. They're *beautiful*. And all the styles are coming back here again now. But one can't fit them, though, that's in [laughs]. But that's what it was. Yeah.

MV: Why—oh, sorry—why Chicago? Why did you move to Chicago?

AR: We were going to New York. My husband and I got our degrees, and we were headed to New York. And there was a good friend of ours, and they said, 'Oh, Chicago is just the place to be. Just try a job.' Well the first week we were there, my husband got a job, and then the end of the week, I was there, and I went to two or three different schools, and they were on the Southside. And in the '60's, you know, with the Martin Luther—uh, Civil Rights Movement, it was rough. So you had to be at the station at a certain time, and the police would escort you to the thing. I said, 'Ah, that's not the job,' even though it paid a lot more and had health insurance and everything else. So I said, 'Oh, I don't think I could do that.'

But then when Loyola University job came up, I said, 'Okay, well,' I said, 'this looks like a fun job.' And if I—and I—you'll—don't take this wrong, because I really worked hard and I still work, because I maintain an online library for Fezana, which is the Zoroastrian associations all over the United States, and I spend *hours* on it. I never felt my job was a job. I always felt I enjoyed doing it. It was my passion. So—it was so—

MV: That's the best kind!

AR: That's the best kind, isn't it? Yes, that's the best kind indeed. So it wasn't like—the dollars never attracted me. So I'd say, 'Oh, should I make more money here? Should I do that?' That was never my criteria. My criteria was, 'When am I going to be successful?' And, 'What is going to—how am I going to do that?' So, even though I'm retired for three years, every time I go to any place, I keep thinking, 'Oh, that would make a good display,' or I'll read a little article in the newspaper, I'd say, 'Oh, this would be so great for an English teacher to, you know, use as a positive thing for their classes.' My mind still clicks in that—it's not in retirement mode as yet. So, that's what it is.

VE: What job did your husband have in Chicago?

AR: My husband was a structural engineer. So he did, in one of the big—and I keep this—it's right next to Sears Tower, this big building that came up, he worked on that. And then afterwards, when we went overseas he worked for Exxon. And when, the real

reason when we left in the 70s to come back again to the U.S. was that Pakistan was going through so much of a turmoil, and we thought, 'Now it's time to—time to think about something else.' So—he was an engineer. And he came here and he started his own business, which our son runs now. So.

MV: How many children do you have?

AR: I have two. I have a son, who's older, and I have a daughter, and she's--she teaches at New York, uh, she teaches in St. John's University in New York, and she's got her PhD from Columbia, and she's written a book, and she's in a—she's very accomplished. So is my son. All mothers are proud of their children, your mothers must be proud of you all too. So it's not like they're—they're exceptional for every mother, you know. So, but they are. They're good kids, yeah.

(00:15:06)

And both of them are married, and they have—one has two, and one has one, all sons, no daughters. [laughs]

MV: Are they also married to people of Pakistani descent, or?

AR: They are all Zoroastrians.

MV: Oh.

AR: Actually, my son-in-law is a New York-born Zoroastrian. You know, both his parents—one parent's from India, one parent's from Pakistan, but he was born here. And my daughter-in-law, she's of Indian origin, but she was brought up in Dubai. But they are Zoroastrians, yes. We just got, uh, lucky. We were talking about that—there's such a, there's, you know, when somebody—not that they're bad people out of your community, but when somebody goes out, it's always, you feel like, 'Oh, will this marriage be successful?' And why do we think that way? I think because we are products of our own generation.

So, but it does make a difference when the food is the same, and the holidays are the same, and the religion is the same. It—there is a better chance of the marriage surviving, because marriage is such a give-and-take. So, [laughs] and I think young people don't have very much time for give-and-take these days, so...

VE: Did they meet through the Zoroastrian community?

AR: Actually, yes they did. They did. My son met my daughter-in-law at uh, we have these— every two years we have these national congresses where people from Canada and U.S. get together and they have four or five days of lectures, and fun things, and they met there, but they—there wasn't anything active going on there. Then my

daughter-in-law came back to Houston, and somehow the other went to a party, and they met and they liked each other.

My daughter met her husband at Columbia. At one of these arranged, semi-arranged, you know, like all the Zoroastrian professionals are getting together for a dinner, so that's where she met him. Yeah, and they—and they saw things that were in common, so.

VE: Both of your children were born in Pakistan, you said?

AR: Both of them were born in Pakistan.

VE: So how long did they stay in Pakistan?

AR: Well we came when um, Nerena was six, because she started school here. So, she was six years old, and he was—there's five years difference between them, so he was eleven.

VE: Sorry, what year is that?

AR: '79.

VE: '79. Okay. And when you came back, you came to—?

AR: Houston.

VE: Houston.

AR: Yes.

VE: Was there a reason?

AR: Because it was oil, and my husband was, you know, in oil, so in '70s it, uh, it was booming. And he got a job, and then the same story like Chicago, and then I came back, and—course I had to go back, and then I got a—I was so scared, I was thinking, public schools, and oh, you know, there'll be drugs, and these kids will go *wild*, and somebody'll knock him up, or—what's going to happen? So I thought, okay, I'm going to be school librarian—high school librarian. I didn't want these little elementary kids, you know; wiping—wipe your nose and that kind of stuff, so I thought, let me be a high school librarian.

Well, guess what? State of Texas says you have to have 30 hours of education. So, the first year I was here, I worked at uh, HISD school as a substitute, at some school that nobody wanted to go to because it was so wild, and I worked at University of Houston, and St. Thomas, and I don't know where it was. And uh, I got all those credits. And did the education courses, and did the library course—some of them were library. How do you thread a sixteen millimeter projector, you know? I had to sit in class for three hours.

I said, 'Blindfold me, tie my hands at the back, I can *still* thread that projector!' You know? Don't have me sit in class for three hours to take that.
No—you have to be there. Okay. That's what to do.

So once I got that thing, then I—we had moved to Spring Branch because we had done our homework, and Spring Branch were the best schools. So I kept calling Spring Branch up, 'Do you have a job? Do you have a job? Do you have a job?' And I think I wore them down, and they said, 'Yes, we have a job, at the high school.' And it was the same high school as my kids will go—would go to. So they went to the elementary, they went to the junior high, and then they came to the high school. So I thought I'd died and gone to Heaven. [Laughs] So, and I was at Spring Woods for, uh, twenty-three years. So, it was quite an institution, so.

(00:20:00)

VE: What was the neighborhood in Spring Branch like?

AR: Spring Branch was lily-white. Lily-white. There was only one—a lot of Asian kids, but they were professional kids and very smart kids. They had amalgamated with the whites. I only—when I first started work there was one black kid, and the library was—it was—it's a U-shaped school, and the library's in the—not the wings, but the—[motions a U shape] this part of the school. And glass all over. So I would look for that kid, you know, when class would change, because he was sharp as a whip and a very, very nice boy, you know. I would see how is he settling in, what does—you know, what's going on. He did well, he did very well He's now a vice president of a bank in Florida. And he, you know—you get attached to these kids that you know. There were a couple that went as Rhodes scholars, and they'd write to you, and you know, the things go on. And there a couple ones that chew you out, you know, and they call you all kinds of names, and then they meet you in the mall and they hug you.

But, to get back to your question, it was a different school. And it changed. Because then the apartments came up, and then there were the transients, you know, you get a microwave, and you're into the next apartment, you know so the kids are all gone because the parents got a microwave as a gift, you know, so they left this apartment and went to that apartment. Went to the other school thing, and they'd get a radio or a TV or whatever it was.

And it's now—now, last Christmas, I thought I'll take uh, some cookies and go visit my friends out there at school. I couldn't see anybody—it was just totally Hispanic, at school. And guess what? That's the day some kid decided to bring a gun, so I was in lock-down. [Laughs] So from eleven in the morning to three in the thing—I visited my friend in the library, but it was locked down, we couldn't do anything else. And then, came home and we were on the news. It's changed, it's totally changed. It's rough. It's rough, and no kids want to really—they—it's a different, uh, there must be good kids, I'm sure. But by far and large, it's just—they don't want to be in school. The kids don't want to be in school, it's changed.

MV: Did you, in—particularly in Kansas, but also in Chicago or Houston or anywhere, did you experience any sort of discrimination because you were—?

AR: No, absolutely not. People keep asking me that. I was a novelty. I mean—people liked me. You know when you're young, and you're sort of attractive, [laughs] and you can hold a decent conversation, people like you. But what I find is now—there's no discrimination, but because you don't look the same, if I go to Macy's and there's a white woman behind the counter, she'll speak in such slow terms, as if you know, okay, yeah, yeah, I understand you, lady. You know?

[Speaking slowly] 'Do—you—want—this?' You know, like, okay, you know, they just automatically—now I find, it's not a discrimination thing, but sort of an automatic thing, that if you don't look like the normal white person, then you—they feel like you have to go slow in the language, or you have to, you know, try to break it down for you. It's a different kind of a feeling, which I never ever had before! But now I sort of, uh, maybe it's age— [laughs] I don't want to think about that. So, then once you start speaking, of course, then—then they realize that.

But you know, it's just not with them, because I will see kids, would come to the library, and they would be talking in Spanish, and I would think, 'oh, they don't have, uh, maybe they don't have the language skills.' And I'm listening, and they'll be *totally* bilingual. And they'll [snapping] flip from English to Spanish like that. So I feel it's kind of an automatic thing for us, it's not discrimination. But there is a definition that when you say, 'Do you find that there's a difference?' Yes, there is. But no, I—I didn't face that.

MV: So it was never like in a negative way?

AR: No, no, no, no. Because they all wanted you to go to church, and that's, that's another thing, but—

MV: How was that?

AR: Painful. Very painful. You know, so—you went to anybody's house, and you had to go to the church service before going to their house, and that part of it didn't sit well with me. I don't know why, because I think I'm a rebel about these things. I was a rebel then, I'm a rebel now. So [laughs], so that part just didn't appeal to me as much.

(00:24:47)

MV: Did you find that only in Houston? Or was it also—

AR: No, not in Houston. In Kansas.

MV: Oh.

AR: And I'm talking about the earlier days.

MV: Okay.

AR: You know, the farmlands were they're—they all just were—then, they were really different. Um, when they talk about, you know, when they talk of us here in Houston being a bible belt, which I don't see it, but I do. And there's nothing wrong with religion, I mean, but it's just like it's—your life is dictated by every little aspect of that religious, uh, faction.

MV: Right. So you don't feel, um, that your life is dictated by Zoroastrianism?

AR: No.

MV: No? Okay. Then um, just—

AR: Because in Zoroastrianism, I think—well, the whole premise is that you're responsible for your own actions. So, I—I feel like if I—I'm responsible for my own actions, so I would—anyway.

VE: When someone asks, like, 'Where are you from?' or 'What are you?' Quote-unquote, how do you—

AR: That is—

VE: How do you reply?

AR: That is the *hardest* thing. That is the hardest thing to say. Because—I usually do say my native land is Pakistan. I usually say that. But really and truly speaking, when you've lived more years outside then you've lived here, what do you do, but that is the question. If you tell them that you're from Houston, they want to say, 'No no no, but where are you originally from?' You know? So, but I do say Pakistan.

MV: And you also identify with the Parsee community, then?

AR: I do. I do. I do say—um, there was a time when nobody knew what Zoroastr—who the Zoroastrians were. But now I find every place that you go to, and if you say, and they would say, 'Zoroastrian who?' You say, 'Ah, go look up the last volume in the encyclopedia and find them under Z's.' But now I think we are such a diverse community, and that's what I *love* about Houston. The people are not—they are aware about it, and they'd say, 'Oh, I have a friend,' or 'I met somebody,' or 'Is it this,' or 'Did you have these three principles,' or—there seems to be such a knowledge, um, base that's opened up right now. And that is, I think, because Houston's now become such a diverse place.

So—and Houston's really a fun place to live, because people think it's all like John Travolta, with the *Urban Cowboy*, but that's not it. And we have the ballet, and we have

the museums, we have the best universities, you know, and we have so many medical center. And people—and the—when our friends come from Pakistan, the first thing they'll say, 'Oh, it's green!' I say, 'Yeah, we're on the Gulf of Mexico, yeah, you know, we have rain.' But they all think about Dallas, or *Giant*, or these movies they've seen, where they've seen nothing but oil and flat, and you know, that kind of thing. So the perspective is different.

[Pause]

MV: Okay, I'll ask one. Um, when did you get started on the project with the Zoroastrian center?

AR: In the seven—in the '70's, when we came just soon after the '70's—'79, immediately after we started on it. And um, it was like uh, we—three or four people got together and then they wrote down the structure, and we had at lots of community places, and looked at places before we bought that, and it was a group of seventeen people that put their money down and actually bought the land. And when they bought the land and we sat on it for few years, so it's really been ten or fifteen years—less—under fifteen years since the center was being built. But it took a—but there was a goal, you know, you have to do that. In those first phase, was one thing, it was only the prayer room, the kitchen, and a big hall. Then the second phase was the atrium, the library, and the two classrooms. So now we're ready for the third phase. So we want another additional classroom, we want this, so—let's hope it all works out, so.

MV: And the Zoroastrian community is pretty small—in—in the world, right?

AR: It is very small, but that is because of the stipulations that we put on ourselves. So you don't ex—you don't, uh, you don't convert. You don't expect—you don't accept converts. If the girl marries outside, then her children are traditionally not taken in. The boy marries outside, his children come in, which is changing in Houston, because a girl's children, if they choose to do that, there's one priest in Houston that will baptize them and take them in. So, but all these issues, then when they come up, then there's a slight break in the community. Because some of them want to accept it, some of them don't. So then there's little bit of [coughs] I wouldn't say friction, but then we don't get along very well with each other. So, that's what it is.

(00:30:05)

MV: Why did you feel compelled to start building the center with that group of people? What was the motivation behind that?

AR: Motivation was to keep the family as like—how does a family prosper? By having meals together, and having outings together, if we were— felt like uh, an extended family, and if we didn't have a place to meet, couldn't meet at churches and schools, and peoples' homes—we were getting larger and larger. And I think Houston—the one thing that I think Houston Zoroastrian community is *so* different than any of the other

communities, because by far and large the Zoroastrians are pretty well educated. You'll find lawyers and doctors and scientists and educationists and, you know, businessmen. But here in Houston, they're all more business-minded people, they're little mom and pop shop type businesses, you know, they're not *huge*, big things, but smaller things, you know.

And when—there's a different psyche of a businessmen, than a psyche of an educationist, because I would think, 'Okay, my salary's gonna come on the first of the month, I have to pay rent, I have to do this, da-da-da-da-da.' For a businessman—my husband was a businessman—he would say, 'No, this money's gonna come in'—whether it comes in our not—but 'I'm going to be able to do all these projects.' You know? So they have a different frame of mind, whereas I would say, 'I have to save this money before I do the project.' And he would say, 'No, it'll come in. Let's go to do this—let's go to the bank. Let's do that. Let's go to invest.' So there's a different way of thinking. So um, I think that's—to get us all together, and keep us together was the reality of the situation.

MV: And what other organizations are you involved in in Houston?

AR: Well, I used to be uh, very involved. I'm in Delta Kappa Gamma, which is an educational organization, and I used to be very for Spring Branch council of librarians, and then I used to be going to Austin to do all this negotiation for salaries for teachers. So these are the things—and I'm on the art council, I like to do things with the museum. Right now—have y'all went to the Cyrus Cylinder? It was at the Fine Arts Museum? It was *huge*! It was huge. This is this 2500-year-old little replica that came from the British Museum, and it's touring in the U.S.—so I worked with the Fine Arts Museum, I got a speaker, and we did different things with that, so. So that—those are the organizations that I've been involved in.

MV: Okay. And earlier you said—at the very beginning, you said that you are an advocate for libraries. What exactly do you mean by that?

AR: I think, you know, when people think everything's on Google, and the answer is on Google, then my cause is 'No, it's not.' You've got to be examining it. And then I'm—when I set up libraries, and I go to Dallas and set up their collection by cataloging it, and putting it—and L.A., and go to Chicago, and go to L.A.—I meant by doing that, or, you know, doing advocacies up there. I promote libraries, yes, but who reads, really? Nobody reads these days. That's the sad part. And then, and then we—there's a different kind of readers. You know, some read magazines, some read books, some read something—but as long as you read anything, you know you could read the telephone directory for all I care, but *read*. But that part of it is sadly going away. So even librarians now—the—I went to school when—she would say, 'Oh, you're handwriting has to be better than that!' Because we'd have that stylus, you know? I bet you all haven't seen that. There used to be a white tape, and you would take it on the spine of—you'd put this tape on the—on the white tape out here, and then you'd have this pointed little instrument that you had to plug in to heat, and on that white tape you had to make sure that you wrote down the call number of the book. And your handwriting had to be good, otherwise it wouldn't—that's

how old I am, when we started from there, and now of course it's all in the computer. So you make a mistake, poof! You can clean it and put it up right there. But those—those days are, you know, it's kind of interesting to be—I love the computer, I don't know what I would do without it. But there's been a track record for what you've been through.

(00:34:51)

MV: Um, I was going to ask—is there any sort of, or have you thought of developing a library at the Zoroastrian center?

AR: I have! I have. That is that—I have. And uh, it started with the—it's been a 10-year project. And I'm online. So if you—if you want to go to it, you know, you could just go [spelling out website address] w-w-w-fires-dash-fezana-dot-org [www.fires-fezana.org]. And after I developed this out here, then I decided associations around—Zoroastrian associations around the country should buy into the thing. [Typing sounds, Ms. Rustomji is looking up the website] And it's been a hard sell, but they are doing that. So that's where I said, when I have to go and do the—when it's, uh, [talking about website] it doesn't come up from here, so. [Clicking sounds]

MV: Have you worked at all with um, Bapsi Sidhwa and her family?

AR: Bapsi Sidhwa?

MV: Yeah.

AR: Yes. Bapsi Sidhwa and I are good friends.

MV: I just interviewed her a couple weeks ago.

AR: Did you?

MV: For the same project. Yeah, and—

AR: I haven't seen her for a while. She's getting frail.

MV: She was, I think she was—

AR: But she's so alert in her mind, yeah.

MV: She is.

AR: She um, Bapsi Sidhwa—she's wonderful. Uh, I interviewed, you all glance through the *New York Times*, but *New York Times*, for the Fourth of July had a section on immigrants that have made an impact in the U.S., and she was in it.

MV: Oh, wow! Now I need to look that up.

AR: Yeah.

MV: That's cool.

AR: So it was the thing—[pointing the computer] this is our website, and this is our catalog. You go in there and look at the catalog, and, you know, you look for the books. And these are only Zoroastrian, all Zoroastrian books. Either they're written by Zoroastrians, can be on gas turbines, or on religion, or on history, or on fiction. And we have a small budget, and then you buy books, and people keep donating. And people, when they—they know that there is a place out here, they come and give you the books. And some of these books are rare books that are in the 1800s and 1900s, and I said, 'Don't you have—don't you want to keep this for your family?' And they say, 'No, no, nobody's interested.' So then we do that.

Then the other thing is, there used to be a priest here at Columbia University who's revered by everybody, and the family of that priest decided to give his collection, his memorabilia, his PhD degree from Columbia University, all of the silver caskets that he got from around the world—and they decided that we in Houston should be the recipients of this. So we've got a special display and we—we rotate the display so that we can put all the stuff out of there too. And his name is Dhalla. So we were the recipient of that too.

MV: How do you spell that name?

AR: D-h-a-l-l-a.

MV: Okay.

VE: So the collection—the catalog is online. Is the—are all the books physically stored in Houston at that center?

AR: Well, the Houston books are stored in Houston, and they've got ZAH on it, and Chicago books have got ZAC on it there in Chicago, and Dallas books is ZAND, or whatever the association name is. And it will tell you. It will tell you—the thing on there, too. So if we were to look up, like, for instance, uh, [typing] I'm going to look up Bapsi. Then it will tell me who has Bapsi Sidhwa's books. Out here. So, and then they've got pic—you know, different things out here.

MV: Wow. And you—

AR: So this is—

MV: —made this?

AR: Yes! My work—solo work for the last six or seven years.

MV: Wow. And when did you retire?

AR: Well, retirement was—huh?

MV: Officially, I suppose.

AR: Well, I—it wasn't ever—my husband passed away, and uh, he was sick. And uh, there was—somebody had to take him to the hospital every day. So it was a forced retirement. So it was like three years ago.

MV: Okay.

AR: Yeah.

MV: And what, um—you mentioned some of the jobs that you've held in Houston, but is there any way that you could just, kind of like, go through them for us?

AR: In Houston?

MV: Yes.

AR: I've only been at Spring Woods.

MV: Oh, it was only—oh, okay.

AR: No. And uh, I've been at overseas—every overseas place we went to, I was always at the overseas school. I just walked in, and they'd say, 'Oh, we have an opening.' You know, and that's it. So I was at the Karachi American School, I was at the Greece place out there. For a little while. And so I did that. But I was at the Loyola University, I was—and then of course I was started off with Columbia, Missouri. I have not had very many jobs.

MV: Okay. And you just mentioned that you lived in Greece? Why were you there?

AR: Because I like Greece. [Laughs] So we've just gone back. I took the whole family to Greece.

MV: Oh, wow.

AR: So I turned seventy, so said, 'Now, what can I do? For my family.' So we all went to Greece for ten days. And we just got back from Greece. So I just like Greece, and I've been to every little place there. I'm a passionate woman; I do what my passion tells me.

(00:40:28)

MV: So did you travel a lot with your family, like even when your kids were growing up?

AR: Yeah, yeah, they did. They did. And they protested because we went to every museum, and every castle, and every pyramid. And they said, [whines] ‘Every pyramid’s the same and you make us go down all the way up and back up.’ And now what do they do? When we travel together and they—I’ll say, ‘We’ve seen this. We don’t want to see this.’ And [feigns shock] ‘What? You don’t want to see this? See what you’re missing?’ So, I kept thinking this’ll never turn around, but things do turn around. They tell me what to do now. I like to travel. I like to travel, and I—I like people. I like people. That’s it.

VE: Were your children, when they were born, did they have Pakistani citizenship or U.S. citizenship?

AR: No, Pakistani citizenship. We all had Pakistani citizenship.

VE: When—did you ever get U.S. citizenship?

AR: Yes, when we came here in the 70s. Before that, we were all Pakistani citizens. We all had green cards, but then we didn’t have citizenship. One of the requirements for working in a school was to be a U.S. citizen, so you couldn’t work for the state of Texas if you weren’t a citizen, so you [snaps] got it right away. So I had to jump into—you know there’s a long waiting line for several, four years, five years, but since I said, ‘Well, I won’t have a job if I don’t get this thing.’ They said, ‘Ok, we’ll bump you up.’ Then they bumped me up. Then there was the civic test, and I *studied* for that civic test because I thought ‘*Oh,*’ that Spring Branch and the *Houston Chronicle* has a Spring Branch edition and they’ll say, ‘Local Librarian Fails Civic Test’ or something [laughs] if I didn’t know the right answer. How many judges are there, and how many things are there you know. So I really went and studied hard for that test like my life depended on it. [laughs] So that was.

VE: Uh, growing up, what language did your children speak with you and your husband?

AR: You know, unfortunately, we just spoke English, so they understand but they don’t speak Urdu, Gujarati, anything else.

VE: Is that what you spoke with your husband?

AR: Ah, we spoke mostly English for some reason or the other. Well, every time we wanted to scold the kids and wanted not for them to know about it, well then we would speak the other language. We don’t really speak the other language so much so.

So one interesting thing that I wanted—that just bumped up because you talked about what did the children do. In the year 2000—you know I told you we have congresses where the kids mar—met and married. Well every five *years*, we have a *world* congress, where all the Zoroastrians from the world come. In the year 2000, we had it here in Houston. And for the three years, we must have *worked* towards it to get it going. And the amazing thing was that

there were 2,200 people that all got together for this congress, which was such an eye-opener, because for all of us that came from small communities, like my daughter who was like a teen at the time, and she said, ‘Mom, there are 2,200 people here?’ because when we were growing up, there were 81 in Quetta you know, so it’s just like. And it was a very successful congress, and I was the public relations chair at that time, and I felt so good about it because we got the *New York Times* reporter to come over, and then we had NPR, and we had a whole lot of, you know, national, uh, whatever you call-- media attention for it. We got interviewed. But it was really a highlight for the Houston Zoroastrians for that world congress. For a small community to have people get together and work toward this congress, and since then, that was the seventh congress, and now it’s the tenth or eleventh congress. And every time congresses are held, they will say, ‘Houston was the watershed mark,’ you know, for the congresses that have went because everything was Texas-style. It was big and large and lavish, the food, the entertainment, the book exhibit, you know we worked so hard. We got books, and it was just very well done, so I really—I think that was kind of like a neat thing to be involved in.

VE: Where was it held in Houston?

AR: At the Marriot Hotel. And it was so crowded, and the elevators so full. And everybody checked into the hotel, and I told my husband, ‘I’m gonna sleep in my own bed.’ Well in twenty minutes, we’d been zipping down to the sessions in the morning, and the people were waiting for the elevators coming down, and they would say, ‘Oh, we didn’t get to try to _____ from the twelfth floor, we can’t come down—walking down in our formal clothes,’ and we were faster coming from here, so this worked out better for us [laughs] so, you know. It was at the Marriot Hotel.

(00:45:45)

VE: What kind of places around the world did people come from?

AR: You just name it from A to Z. We didn’t even know there were Zoroastrians in Latin America. We didn’t know that there were—you know, it was just--somebody came from Zambia. Somebody came from Azerbaijan. Somebody came from everywhere. Most of them were, of course, from North America, or from U.S. and Canada. Lot of Indians. Iranians came. They got special visas. Lot of them applied, but only twenty were allowed to come, but they were from all over. So it was just uh, very nice, and you were made friends with people. Especially when you were emailing them back and forth, you saw a face you could relate to.

MV: What, I just wanna know, what would you like to see happen in the Zoroastrian community?

AR: I would like minds to open up. I would like more acceptance. I would like more tolerance, in a way to—I would like to see that.

MV: In what way?

AR: I would like to see the woman being free. You know, we all talk about, ‘Oh, the woman’s respected,’ and you have the thing, but if a woman’s child cannot be part of—I would like—I would really like acceptance. That’s what I would like to see during my lifetime.

VE: So you mentioned that a priest in Houston if—

AR: We have sev—we have—go ahead, ask me a question.

VE: You mentioned that there was one in Houston that, if the mother married outside the community, he would still baptize the children if they chose to. Is that unusual or, as you said like woman are—

AR: It’s becoming a little bit more common than it was before, but if you go back to the home countries like India and Pakistan, it’s an absolute taboo. They will not do it. But here in North America they do it. But, there’s one thing about saying, ‘Yes, you’re welcome,’ and there’s one thing about making them *really* welcome. You know, and I think it’s gonna be a process. And I think it’s going to be easier when my children are going to be—they’re going to be in the forties, but I’m still around, so I’m still a larger-than-life figure. So when I’m getting older and I’m relinquishing my role, then they’ll be—their outlook is going to be different. That generation’s outlook is going to be a little bit more different. It’s gonna come. It has to come.

MV: How—what is the Zoroastrian community like in New York?

AR: They are—New York is so far-flung that they don’t get together as often as we do. They get together once a month only. And then they have these little pockets where they meet. But other than that, they don’t. Now, in the case of my daughter, she will of course meet her in-laws and she’ll meet her sister-in-law once a month. She doesn’t go to the Zoroastrian center because she has two young babies. It means—it’s driving two hours this way and two hours back. It’s just not possible. When they get older—whereas for us, you get into the car. When husband picked this spot, he *mapped* it out, and he wanted a place which was twenty minutes from all areas. You live in Sugarland, twenty minutes. You live in Spring Branch, twenty minutes. You live west, twenty minutes. So then for us, if you call me and say, ‘Oh there’s something at the center,’ I’m hopping in my car. And especially we in Texas, we like our cars, right. We don’t like carpooling.

We like our cars, and we like to go by ourselves. [Laughs] It's easy for us to do that, whereas for them it's hard. But they too do meet at religious holidays and they have a Sunday school, they have a choral group. They're much larger than we are

Now Canada's *huge*, and they have two associations because they're in two different areas. LA is huge. They have two associations. They have the Iranian association, and they have the Zoroastrian Parsi association. And then they intermingle. But there is, uh, in Houston, we only have one. But we're—that's what it is.

(00:50:26)

VE: Could you describe in more detail some of the activities that happen at the center on, like, any given day?

AR: It won't be any given day, but it'll be more on the weekend. But the—from—we have a host of—we have Sunday religious classes. We have library's events where we had to get speakers, and we've got some wonderful, well-noted speakers from all over the world. We will have the sports committee, and they'll, you know, they'll play indoor games with carrom and chess, and that kind of a thing versus play basketball and cricket and all that out there. There's the golden group that the old people meet, which I qualify, but I don't meet. But then there are—there's the women's group that they sew or stitch, or embroidery, or do something else. So there are different interest groups out there.

There's the ZIP, the Zoroastrian Investment for Prosperity. The men meet to say how to invest your money and lose everything [laughs]. You know, there're a whole lot of people that they meet out there. Then there's the group that want to build a fire temple. So different groups meet there all the time. So it's geared—every little thing.

And then there's the entertainment, the social group. And I just—they just had a blast from the past. They're raising funds to go to New Zealand where's there's going to be another youth congress, and the kids were all graduates and they're all—this year, this unusual group of very smart kids that are applying to colleges and going to different places, but they were so good at dancing and performing and singing that each one could be on American Idol or something, you know, so it's a really talented group. So we all go get together to watch.

And of course food is a big thing. Every time we have to meet, we gotta have food. So [laughs]. There are couple of caterers *in* the communities that are very talented cooks, so they, you know, at a very reasonable price they do that. Then we have two, three big events of the year. The 21st of March is New Year, and August we have another one. And things go.

VE: Are there ever events for, uh, non-Zoroastrians to come?

AR: The library's events are open to everybody, and we are gathering more and more interest at my library events. I invite people from all over. We send out invitations to the universities. My library events started like ten years ago. We still have—my first event was only *ten* people. And I think it was about only the committee. And it was postcards, you know, postcards with Zoroastrians. Somebody collected Zoroastrian postcards. That was my first event. And now when we have events, there are a good 120-130 people that will come. And there will be—30 of them will be non-Zoroastrians, people that are interested in the religion that will come.

MV: What is a Zoroastrian religious service like?

AR: It's a hierarchy, you know where the priest prays, and you listen, and you internalize. But it's not a, where you join and you have a—most of them are not, maybe one or two of them are. But since we have a lunar calendar, you can't say that every Sunday is *the* day, you know. It could be a Sunday here, a Monday here, a Tuesday here, which we—Tuesdays, and Wednesdays of course, everybody's busy. So usually it's—the dates are pushed asides and they do that. But usually there are two or three priests, and they go through the ritualistic treatment. That's about thirty, thirty-five minutes. And you sit out there, and then the funeral services are four days, and different things. Baptism is another thing, so. The priest—but you have to be a priest, a child of a priest, a father of a priest, to be a priest. So and then if you've—in between, if there are two or three generations that have lost the tract, they can still get back, but that's another change that's coming. Uh, that they are accepting women priests, and there are two or three in North American that have *studied* for that, and they have *learned* the prayers and done that. And they're—the women priests are.

(00:55:16)

MV: That's not traditionally a thing?

AR: No. It's not traditionally a thing. And I often kinda wonder what really— what's the clicking point for each person to do they do. Why would somebody be interested in spending that much time learning the prayers, learning them by heart, and then providing that service? What is the—what is, you know, behind that personality for them to think about that. Because it's not something that would appeal to me, but it's appealing to somebody else. But that's what it is, you know. There's dedication out there for whoever's doing that, so.

VE: Does one, if they're—if they want to be a priest, do they study on their own time, or—

AR: I think they have a mentor. They have um, a person who teaches them how to do that. Because all the prayers are in Avestan language, which is a dead language. And the

person who knows how to read that, interpret that, tell the meaning of that, is doing that. And the young priests, there are—we have young, the children of the priests that have to go through the initiation rites, they go to India for a long period of time. They learn the prayers, and they're isolated from their families, and they go through really ritualistic thing. And it's not easy. But we've had a whole bunch of young kids that go out there, and have been out there, and they come back.

MV: How—I'm curious, how is the fire involved in the service?

AR: There is—the fire is um, is a symbol, but there's also, if you go into the services you'll see water. You will see—you'll see all of the elements of the Earth. You will see the soil, you will see flowers for the plant life, but none of those get featured!

MV: Okay.

AR: And the fire that's flaming, [sarcastically] which is *so* significant, so 'Oh, they're fire worshippers!' No, it's not. It's all the elements of the Earth are there, and the fire is a part of that.

MV: Okay. And the fire is supposed to keep going forever, right?

AR: Traditionally in uh, a fire temple, the priests tend to it so it doesn't uh, die out. Here, we just have a prayer hall.

MV: It's difficult.

AR: Yes, and the person goes and lights it out there too. So, and the priest will do that.

VE: Before this center existed physically, members would meet in each other's homes, or am I mistaken?

AR: I hear that, and there're—I've got a list going, and I've given it to Uzma Quraishi of the original people that were the six or seven people that would meet. Three of them are still here. So, and then I've listed the names to say they would meet in each other homes on a Sunday, and have a traditional rice and dal and meat, you know, lunch. It's a really heavy lunch, and they would meet out there. And that's how the association—and when I told you that the building started in '79, the association started—the Zoroastrian Association of Houston started a few years back. And somebody's going to interview Nergish Sethna. I don't—is it you all or somebody else today?

MV: No, It's a different pair.

AR: It's a different pair. And I was really very keen because she's getting really old, a little bit forgetful, and I wanted for her to be, you know, interviewed. And Uzma worked

it out, and she said, 'Yes, I do have a slot,' so I said, 'Oh, give her the slot. Don't give me the slot,' but she said, 'No, we're gonna work both of you in,' so. She was *so* instrumental for all of us coming in, and she offered her home to us. We didn't know her from Adam. We plonked ourselves down to her home. She—my husband had to go for a job interview, she said, 'Oh, take my car!' It was a brand new, blue Bu—Buick. She wouldn't have given it to me. I would've wrecked it out something. But she just opened the thing, and for a whole month, we stayed with her until we got our own apartment, and we did that. And I wasn't the only family—I wasn't the only one she did that for. She [mutter] ... huge amount of people that came in. So, you know, she just--everybody just sort of looks after everybody else and helps out with that too.

(01:00:01)

VE: That apartment you first moved into, was that the Spring Branch—in Spring Branch?

AR: It was a house. We moved into a house. It was a house, and then we saw a house that we wanted to build because—uh, then we moved into that. So this is the third one we've done. The first one we rented, the second one we bought, and this is the third one. We built.

VE: Did your children grow up in the first two or just the first one?

AR: They grew up—here they grew up in all three.

VE: In—since you've been in Houston for so long, how have you—like you mentioned you've seen the center come to be, but what are some other things or some other ways that you've seen the community grow and change?

AR: Well, let me tell you, in the sixties, when we were in Columbia, Missouri, one, one uh, Spring Break, we decided, my husband and I decided we'd drive to New Orleans. So we came through Houston. And I used to be going to camp in Switzerland, and she lived in Fredericksburg. And she would say, 'Come to Fredericksburg! LBJ is my neighbor,' and [dismissively] oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Sure enough, LBJ *was* her neighbor. And we *met* LBJ when we came. But when we came through Houston, all of this area in Spring Branch, where Eleanor Library and Gessner was, there were rice fields, and I've seen that. And all of this area was rice fields too. So when you ask me for changes, you know, then when we moved into the first place that we rented, and we'd go down Gessner, it was a wonderful place. Now you go and see it, it's like tire shops and you know, like, it didn't look like what it was before. So I have seen these changes, yes. I've seen that building that was brought down, you know, we were driving up there to the old Sheraton Hotel where Frank Sinatra sang a song or something, and I saw it being bulldozed as we

were driving, so. Yeah, I've eye-witnessed all these things in Houston. And I'm proud that I'm still here.

VE: Uh, going back to Chicago, because you mentioned that you and your husband are always involved no matter where you were.

AR: Yes.

VE: What was the Zoroastrian community like in Chicago?

AR: [cough] They didn't have an association when we were there. We were part of, like you said, 'Did you meet in homes?' We met in homes, and we had picnics, and we did different things out there too. So this time when we—I went back after years to Chicago, when I was talking to you about that—one person came up to me, and he said, 'I was here the same year as you were, and how come I don't remember you?' and I said, 'Because I was young, I was pretty, I was thin, and that's why you don't remember me.' And so I pulled out my picture and said, 'Do you?' [enthusiastically] 'Yes!' [laughs]

So that's it was. So we met in different homes, and we did that.

VE: How does Houston compare to Chicago?

AR: Chicago was a first big-time city for a small town girl. So it was very dazzling and you know, it's very interesting. It doesn't click like Houston does. Houston is roots. You sunk your roots in here, so you have a stake. I belong.

VE: How old are your grandkids?

AR: Six, five, and one. My son's kid is adopted. And he's a little child that we brought from the borders of Afghanistan. So, my daughter's two boys are biological.

VE: And why did he choose to adopt?

AR: They couldn't have one of their own, so. They tried everything, so that was their decision.

VE: Was it difficult to adopt from that area?

AR: Very difficult. It was almost a miracle [laughs], how we could get that going. It was very, very difficult.

MV: Will the boy be brought up as baptized Zoroastrian?

AR: Well, another story, a little corollary to that child. Child's beautiful. And that's him right there [points to picture in room]. But he's autistic. So he has, um, he doesn't speak. So he's six years old, and he's speech-delayed. And the parents are doing everything they

can to, you know. One specialist to the other specialist to therapy. But uh, I imagine he will be brought up as a Zoroastrian. But how much recognition, how much—I don't know about that. Will the child be able to *accept*. It's a hard question. 'How much is he going to respond to?' is what I meant to say.

(01:05:43)

VE: Is your son in Houston?

AR: He's in Houston, yes.

VE: And he is running the business that your husband started?

AR: Right.

VE: Can you tell us about that business?

AR: Well it um—My husband—it's oil-related. And what they do is they take valves and pipes from off-shore drilling and then they coat it when it's all got rusted, and with fine calipers they take with the sand, and they'll sand it down, and they have this fine line where they coat it. And they do well with that, so.

VE: Were you ever involved in that?

AR: I'm involved more in it now than I was before when my husband was running it. It was like uh, he, and the secretary, and five people that used to work to do the work, but now the establishment hires fifty people. So I have to go and do the—Monday to Thursday I'm there when I do all the paperwork type of things. I do the EPA reports and do the signage, you know, because you've got to make sure that the emissions for the oil, when they do the piping, that you don't do all of the other stuff. So you've got to assign them to different booths and make sure that it conforms to the regulations. So that's what I do.

VE: And when did your husband start this business?

AR: He started it in '81 or '82. So a few years after we got here. So it was a very small business, but it has just mushroomed, and he's done well. 'Cause he was very well-known for his quality work, and um, it's been maintained. And my son is not an engineer by profession. He went to Baylor and uh, got his account—you know, financial degree from there. But he's—he learned from his father. He worked with his dad for a good ten, twelve years. He only had one job when he graduated. He worked for Danielle Steel, and then afterwards my husband said, 'Would you like to come join me?' and he said yes. So it's kind of like a family business. So he keeps saying he's part-owner, and I said, 'Yes, you will be full owner when your mother is dead.' So [laughs] that's about it.

VE: Does he enjoy it?

AR: He loves it. He loves it.

VE: Is it like—

AR: He works very hard, but then it's his—he feels satisfaction for what he does. And he does a very good job. He's really taken it to a different level his last three years. He's done very well.

VE: Is it located near the coast because it's oil-related?

AR: No. It's here on Tanner. It's just uh, outside—in those days it used to be outside of Spring Branch, but now it's Cy Fair district, but it's on Tanner and uh—I wanna say Brittmoore and Tanner. It's in that direction. It's not very far. It takes ten, fifteen minutes to get there. But it's in an industrial area.

MV: Uh, do your children identify strongly with being Pakistani?

AR: I don't know...

MV: Do you think they identify more with their American upbringing?

AR: No. They don't—um—my daughter will feel more American than my son does, but they mostly, their friends are all uh, Americans, and I don't think that they—funny thing is, you know, we don't look like—I don't know whether we—if I were on a street, a Pakistani will sometimes not recognize me. But then people will ask me, and I'll ask them, 'Where do you think I'm from?' And they'll say, 'Oh, Turkey,' 'Greece,' 'Lebanon,' this, that and the other. It's kind of like the Middle East is the thing. They will probably not say that they're—they will say they are Americans because they, of course, have lived more of their life there. I say I am an American, but people don't want to believe it. But I don't know—I don't know that question. I'll ask them. I'll ask them. I'll see my son tonight, and I'll call my daughter up and I'll ask her that question. I don't know what the answer is.

(01:10:23)

VE: Did we ask, uh, how did your parents meet? Did we ask that?

MV: I don't think so.

AR: How did my parents meet. Oof. It was not arranged, I know that. They were both uh—I don't know. It was kind of like a family thing. You know, they weren't related, but it was like a family, an uncle of an aunt of the sister or the brother had a party, and they saw each other and met. All I remember my mother telling me that their wedding

had to be postponed a couple of times because her father died, or his mother died, or you know. Finally they said, 'Ok, this is it. We've got to have small wedding, and we've got to get married.' You know, so I remember that part of it. But how they physically met, I would say that I don't know. It wasn't arranged.

VE: Uh, you said you were very close to your father. Did he ever come to the U.S.?

AR: Yes, yes. Every other year he would come 'til such time as he was able to. Every year we would go, then the next year he would come. Actually this little room was built for him. You know, so I put the bed up here, and there's a full bathroom out there that was made so he didn't have to climb the stairs and go upstairs. And my father had regulations. 10 o' clock he had to be in bed. And I would moan and groan because my computer would be here and no laptops in those days [laughs].

So 10 o' clock my life would have to stop too, so [inaudible] [laughs], so that was it. You heard the news. You turned off the TV. You turned off the computer. You went to bed. That's it. And his meal times had to be, you know, regular, such and such breakfast time, 1 o' clock lunch. And he would make it himself because I'd go to work, but I'd have it all ready for him, and he'd pop it into the toaster oven or something like that. If it was fish one day, and then chicken the other day, and nothing the third day, and that was regulated.

So he'd go down to the Terry Hershey Park, and he'd walk down there. So when he died, you know, I thought, 'What should I do?' so I have a bench that I placed out. I was the first one to place the bench, then after that a *whole* row of benches that people have put up with a little memorial thing out there.

MV: That's special.

AR: Yeah, it's so special. He loved nature. He loved nature. And he'd always want to garden, and he would tell my kids to learn everything from nature. You just have to go out there. You got to be good to the soil. You got to be good to the plants. So I thought it would be appropriate for me to put it out there in the park.

MV: What about your in-laws. Are you close to them?

AR: Yes, I was quite close to them too, so. My mother-in-law drove me crazy. Now, she would come visit too. But uh, she was a shopper, and I'm not a shopper, so that just [laughs]. She walked through a Gal—thing, and she'd grab the first thing you know, shoes, this. I'd say, 'Is this your size?' She'd say, 'It'll fit. It'll fit.' [laughs] So you know, she was a shopper. My father-in-law and my mother-in-law were good people. They loved their grandkids, and they loved their kids. My mother-in-law would just *glow*

when her two boys—she had two boys, my husband and her son—the other son was in Canada. She would just glow when she would see them.

My mother-in-law was very—came from a very interesting family too. And uh, when the British came to India, they had my mother-in-law's father, when they were on camels walking through their terrain. And it's very high. It's 5,500 feet. Quetta is high up. My father-in-law walked all the way through with the British on the camel, and they set up the place. And he had the first English printing press in Quetta. And when we celebrated 100 years of that printing press, and finally we had to close it down. She was rather upset about that. We all went out there to them.

There's little newspaper that would come, 'Quetta Times'. It was so full of grammatical mistakes, and I'd be circling and say, '*This* is wrong. *This* is wrong. *This* is wrong.' And my father-in-law said, 'We are all only interested in the *ads* that pays for the paper to go running. We don't care about the news and the grammar part of it too.' [laughs] But uh, all of those little diaries and journals and photographs, I kept them. And I kept thing, it really belongs to Quetta. And if there was a museum, I'd like to donate them. But the government is so corrupt, I don't know what to do with it. But I have all of these little relics out here too, and I keep thinking when I *really* have time, I really need to do some writing because it's, uh, really good archival material.

(01:16:05)

VE: Oh, I was curious, in—when you got your undergrad in Lahore, did you study in English?

AR: My whole education's been in English because the schools were all during um—the medium was English. So you learned Urdu. You learned how to read and write Urdu. And of course you have to have another language. You learned French, read and write French. But everything was in English. So we went to convent schools which were run by the nuns. And the Kinnaird College that I went to in Lahore, that was also run by Scottish people, so it was all in English.

VE: That's the same school that Bapsi went to, isn't it?

AR: Bapsi went to Kinnaird College too.

MV: She went to one in Bombay, right? I think.

AR: I don't know if she went to a college in Bombay, but Bapsi went to Kinnaird, I know that, but she was—Bapsi and I didn't meet in college because she was a few years older than I am. But um, but we've known each other for a long time.

VE: What do you like to read in your free time? Do you read?

AR: I read all the time. I read historical stuff. I read—um, I'm reading Dan Brown's *Inferno*. I'll of course read anything and *anything* that's got to do with Afghanistan and Pakistan. I read fiction. I read biographies. The only thing I don't like is science fiction. But when I was a school librarian, I would even read those horrible science fictions for the kids 'cause if I didn't know, if they came and said, 'What's a good book?' and if I didn't—had read it and I didn't know what it was, I couldn't say, [dismissively] 'Here read this. This is a good book.' So I just—but I read all the time.

But I thought I would *never* give up a book, a paper book. Because I was so die-hard. I haven't bought a book in three years because now I am on my iPad. And I buy it off the Kindle. I'm—I just can't pick up a book to read anymore. You know, so I just think it's so convenient. And I read the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *New York Times*, and the *Time* magazine, and the *People* magazine. It's all on the Kindle. It's all on the iPad. [laughs] You know, so I'm a convert. I go to my library meetings and they said, 'How can you stop reading a paper? You need to get a better,' and I say, 'Well, try bringing that to bed,' (?) [laughs] But I do enjoy that part of it too. But I do read. I read all the time. I'll even read the stuff that comes in the mail for sales because I always find something's interesting. You know, like, I look at the ads and I see the full-page ads with Houston Chronicle with this restless legs, and I keep thinking, 'Every day I see this. Every day I see this. For years I've been seeing it. There must be a market. Who is it that needs this, you know that they've been advertising?' My mind clicks like that, so I read everything.

MV: Are you involved at all with Asia Center, or Asia Society, sorry?

AR: I used to be, but since they've opened up here, I haven't, uh—I'm a member but I haven't done anything actively with it.

MV: Ok, just curious.

AR: When Naila Qureshi was the head, when she was the director, I used to be involved quite a bit.

MV: Ok. Do you want to have a wrap-up question, maybe? Or is there anything that you'd like to tell us about?

AR: No, I just hope I haven't hoped I haven't bored you all.

MV: No, not at all!

AR: Good, good.

VE: Do you have anything?

MV: Uh, nope.

VE: Um, I guess—

AR: So tell me a little but more about it. Do you all just accumulate all these things, and then you're putting it on uh, CDs or DVDs? Or what are y'all doing with this?

MV: It'll be online on the Fondren—on the Woodson archive website. And it'll also be physically located in Fondren library on Rice's campus.

AR: And eventually, what is it going to—what is the eventual goal of this? Just memories?

MV: Yeah, just collecting the oral histories of Asian Americans in Houston or who have migrated to Houston.

AR: Yeah.

MV: Yeah, just for future researchers, historians to look at, poke around.

AR: Yeah.

MV: It's all really cool. We have a lot—

AR: Interesting stories.

MV: —photographs, and other things.

VE: Everyone has a story. I think everyone has one.

AR: I *know*.

VE: And I think that's what's the beauty of this project.

AR: I know, I know I know. Everyone has a story. That's what makes life so rich and rewarding. And stories are the same. Everybody has the good, happy stories, the sad stories, and no matter what—and that's what brings the cultures together. Because no matter which culture you're in, the basic principles are the same. Ok.

MV: Thank you so much.

VE: Thank you for sharing your story.

AR: You're very welcome. You're very welcome.

(01:21:40)