

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

Interviewee: Kalyani Giri

Interviewers: Arthur Cao (Sophomore); Connie Wang (Junior)

Date/ Time of Interview: July 10, 2013, at 11:00AM

Transcribed by: Connie Wang and Arthur Cao

Edited by: Chris Johnson, Sara Davis, and Patricia Wong (7/12/16)

Audio Track Time: 1:13:29

Background:

Kalyani Giri was born in 1961 to an Indian South African family. She and her three younger siblings lived through South Africa's apartheid years, which later influenced her dedication to promoting tolerance and understanding for future generations. She first enrolled in the University of Durban-Westville to pursue a fine arts degree, but as student riots broke out she discontinued her studies there and instead went on to pursue a Carnatic music degree in Madras, India, where she met her husband. Her husband then moved to the United States and Giri left South Africa to join him in Houston in 1991. She worked as a music teacher, teaching the classical Indian music she had studied in college, but after writing a review on an Indian dance performance for *Asian Women Magazine*, Giri slowly discovered a passion for journalism and cultural exchange, ultimately leading to her establishment of *HUM Magazine*.

Setting:

The interview focuses on the subjects of labor and capital, mostly through Giri's experience of migrating from South Africa to India and eventually to the United States. She discusses transitioning from her training as a professional musician to become a successful journalist and entrepreneur in Houston. Other topics covered include religion, family, and education.

The interview took place in the office of Kalyani Giri, over the course of an hour and thirteen, with two minor interruptions.

Interviewers:

At the time of this interview, Connie Wang is a Rice University undergraduate student majoring in English and art history and minoring in business. She is originally from Lake Forest, California and was raised by Taiwanese immigrants.

Arthur Cao is an undergraduate student at Rice University majoring in civil and environmental engineering. He is from Fuzhou, China.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

KG	Kalyani Giri
AC	Arthur Cao
CW	Connie Wang
—	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
<i>Italics</i>	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]	Actions [laughs, sighs, etc.]

CW: This is Connie Wang.

AC: And this is Arthur Cao.

CW: We're here today on July ... 10, 2013 in the office of Kalyani Giri, um, to interview Kalyani Giri for the Houston Asian American Archive oral history interview project. Can you begin by telling us a little bit about yourself?

KG: I publish *HUM Magazine*. Uh, it's a monthly glossy, lifestyles magazine I started a year ago, and it's meant for all the communities. I wanted it to be a sort of global marketplace [papers rustling] within the pages of this magazine where we can get together and learn a little bit more about each other to understand cultures. And to seek to educate ourselves on basic human values, you know? Like tolerance, understanding. And to appreciate that we have so much that we can share and we can learn from each other, basically.

And, um, I came to Houston 22 years ago. Um, I, uh, started as a journalist. That is not my training, actually. [laughs] I, uh—I studied Indian classical music, which is South Indian Carnatic music in India. I am born in South Africa. 4th generation of Indian origin, 4th generation South African of Indian origin. So that means my parent's grandparents, etcetera, were born there. And, um, I lived there, grew up there, during the apartheid years. And, uh, it was, uh, pretty traumatic. And I believe, fundamentally, there's a part of me that really believes that I started this magazine because of that background, where we were so segregated growing up that we didn't know anybody else who was not of Indian origin.

We did not have the opportunity to mix and mingle and get to know other people. That was not there. If you know, uh, even—because of the South African Group Areas Act, we had to live in areas that were meant for—the classification I'll have to explain first was: white, Indian, colored, and Black. So we lived in areas according to skin color. So, um, growing up, I, um, always felt that it was a tremendous injustice, you know, particularly to our parents, whose—who really struggled, much more than we did. My generation had it a little easier. Not that much easier, but a little bit more easier than they did, because my—my dad worked for Mobile Oil Company. And, uh, it was very traumatic because he was working for them for a very long time, a very high achiever, somebody who really climbed, rung by rung, but he found that because of his color, there were people who were white that

got more promotions than he did, and, uh, you know.

Yeah, the segregation was so deep that I remember him coming home totally drenched on a very rainy day, I would have been about six, and my mom asked him, “Why are you like this? Why?” He said, “No, I had to go use the restroom outside.” You know? Because they had restrooms for whites in the building, and, uh, he—uh, the non-whites had to use one outside. So that kind of stayed with me.

And I don’t think there was a lot of bitterness. They didn’t feel bitter. Up to now, I don’t see that in them. Both of them are still alive. I don’t feel it because I, um, suppose *HUM* is probably what came of those experiences, where I would love my child to grow up in a world that is colorblind. What else would you like to ask me?

[0:04:32]

AC: You mentioned that there are white, Indian, colored and Black. That’s—that’s the—

KG: [overlapping] The classification was there.

AC: Yes.

KG: It’s still—it still is there, even though it’s not—um, it’s not on paper anymore since the ANC took over. But there is still affirmative action. People that—uh, South Africa is, uh, at the moment, I’m going to be very blunt and say it’s a train wreck because everything that Mandela stood for has been trampled upon. And, uh, it’s a mess because the people that have the power are so beyond corrupt that they have trampled on his ideals, his—his spirit that everything in South Africa was going to change. You know, we were going to have a democracy, is what he really believed. But, it hasn’t turned out to be that way. The people are very, uh, devastated by all the happenings that are taking place in South Africa right now. There’s no equality. There’s no good shops. Um, it’s Black rule. They don’t encourage anybody who’s of any other color to participate in high-level positions. So, it’s Zuma all the way. President Zuma has really made a mess of—of things out there.

AC: When was the last time you went back?

KG: 15 years ago. I haven’t been back in a long time because I have relatives visit me. I, um—I really don’t feel the need to because if they are coming here—I have been in South Africa for a long time. If they are coming here, they can spend a little bit more time just seeing the country and spending time here. You know? That—that makes more sense to me. And it encourages them to come and make—make the trip and get away from that. So, I encourage that. But I plan on going at the end of this year.

AC: On the questionnaire you wrote that you left South Africa at the age of 19.

KG: Yes.

AC: For India.

KG: Yes.

AC: To study.

KG: Yes.

AC: Tell us a little more about your childhood.

KG: My childhood was, um, the usual childhood in a—in a family that is intrinsically very Indian. We grew up Hindu, very strong in faith. The temple was, uh, basically where we had all our [laughing] entertainment, social life. Everything was there because that's how we—you know, we kind of, uh, evolved from that basic focal area where we grew up.

And, uh, I have three younger siblings. I'm the oldest. I'm 51 years old. I have a—a sister who's just two years younger and then a brother who's seven years younger, and another sister who's 14 years younger. Yes. My brother's in the UK. He lives in Cambridge, and, uh, his wife is a research oncologist and he is in hardware. You know, computer hardware. Uh, my sister, the one that's just younger than me, teaches speech and drama at college level in South Africa. The youngest one is a corporate attorney. She's also in South Africa.

I left when I was 19 because, um, at the time, historically if you go back and look at South Africa's problematic situation, politically, um, there was a riot that had broken out. Um, students, as usual, wanting more rights. They wanted—they wanted difference. They wanted to make a difference. They wanted to slay the demon of apartheid, and, you know, try to—they had their ideals. They had their optimism that they could do it.

But at the—at that time, when I—when I graduated high school and went into college, University—I was at the University of Durban-Westville, pursuing, um, a fine arts degree. Within six months, everything was disastrous because the police came in, and, uh, they fired on students, you know. They—they—well, no real bullets, but they, um, used rubber pellets and there were students that were actually very badly injured in a stampede trying to get away. And, uh, you know, some of them that did hide were still found, and, uh, they had lots of trauma. There was a lot of trauma. Arrested, and uh, beaten, and you could not question the white police at that time because you—you—you must have heard about Steve Biko and, uh, how he was beaten to death. You know? They used sacking and they covered his body and then they hit him, so there were no welts or anything on his body. And the South African police claimed that he hanged himself. So, you know, that's—that's the way it was.

[0:10:03]

There was a lot of secrecy. And, uh, if you—if you understand how the South African situation is, we did not have a voice. So we had to live within those rules, and we knew the rules. There was no freedom of press. We—we could not speak out against the government because you'd be—you'd be killed. You'd be tortured. You'd never be found. You know? They had shallow graves where they, uh, buried people. And, uh, it's only later during the Truth and Reconciliation Committee's meetings that we really realized the depth of, you know, the trauma to the people that lived in that country.

So, um, I left when I was 19, the same year when the riots broke out. I was at arts (?). The

university closed down, and my father asked me—we were at the supper table. We always ate supper at 6:30 in the evening. We'd all sit together, and we'd, you know, eat together. And Dad asked me, "What do you want to do now?" My mother quickly piped up. She said, "Oh, she's gonna go to teacher's training college." Because my mother believes that, you know, job security is in education. [laughing] If you can become a teacher, you're fine. And, uh, I don't know, there was some perverse streak in me at that stage. I, uh—that's all I can look at it as. Because I said, "I want to go to India." And there was total silence at the table. And my father said, "Why? You don't know anybody there. We don't have anybody there. Who are you gonna go and stay with?" I said, "Why do I have to stay with anyone? I can go and live in a hostel. I want to study there. I wanna do music."

And we've—I—I have to go back a little. We learned music from the time we were three years old. It's *always* been there in the family, and, uh, my mother has written books about music as well and, uh, released CDs and things like that. So the family has always been involved culturally, very deeply, culturally involved. So when I made this announcement, my mother said, "Oh my God! If your grandfather were alive, he wouldn't allow it." [laughs] So you know, the usual, traditional, conventional home.

Um, I have to add that I thought that India was a lot more modern than the Indians that—you know, the Indians in India were a lot more modern than the Indians that lived in South Africa because they were so conventional. It's like how, uh, you find the Indians in Malaysia and Sri Lanka who are very traditional, who try their very best to hold onto something that they really didn't know in the first place. But, you know, that has been passed down generations, and things have been added to it, and a little bit of masala here and there didn't make any, you know—any big difference. It just became part of the tapestry of the way our lives really worked.

So when I went to India it was so liberating because I grew up, as I said, in a very strict traditional background, and parents were very strict. Very, very strict. And, you know, they were always anticipating there would be some sort of, um, calamity that would befall us because I was quite rebellious. And they worried all the time that I would do something. I don't know what they ever thought that I would do, considering that we had so many limitations, but they were fearful. Yeah.

So, uh, my father came with me. Uh, the whole thing blew up at the dinner table that night. Uh, my dad—my mother was very upset because my father said, "Yes, that's a great idea." You know? I couldn't study Indian music in South Africa because there was a cultural embargo. Teachers from India were not—nobody from India was permitted to come. They were not permitted to come to South Africa. The passports, including my husband's said "all countries except the Republic of South Africa." So they could not come there. It's only recently that Indians can travel into South Africa.

So at that time, when was it? 1981, I would think. 1981. We, um, went to India, Dad and I. And, uh, I couldn't cook. I could not even boil water, so, uh, he did—when we went to this particular college that—to try and get admission, there were so many things that I had to be tested on because they were sure that I could not come up to the level of—of college—you know, the college level, with music. And so, I remember the music department asking me to sing something. And, uh, I did, and they felt obviously that there was a little potential they could work with me. [laughs]

[0:15:26]

And so they gave me the admission. Always um—well all of them did say, "You know, it's

pro—you're on probation. We'll see how it works out." But it seemed to be working out fine. There were lots of hurdles. I couldn't do Tamil, uh, which is my—my family's, you know, mother tongue. I didn't know it very well. Um, we had to choose another language that was closest to what I did speak, which was Afrikaans, and that was German. So I had to do German at college level, which was so difficult. But I had to get into private tuition, and, you know, join [indistinguishable] and things like that and try to get up to speed with that. And managed to scrape a pass, even though, you know, um, the language are kind of similar, though Afrikaans is a lot more like Dutch. It's a lot more like Dutch in many ways. Um, German is very guttural, and the pronunciation of certain words are very different. Uh, spelling is different. There may be similarities in the words, even like simple thing like a fruit, you know, this pronunciation is similar, but the spellings were different. So, I had to catch up on all that. But, did okay.

It was—it was a great experience, but I couldn't stay at the hostel because when we went to check it out, uh, my dad was very put off. Uh, it was more like a dormitory, and, uh, we saw rats on the windowsill. So, uh, yes, it was a government school. So the only one that offered a music degree at that time at, you know, undergrad level. And, uh, he said, "No no no. You can't possibly live here. It's not, uh—you know, it's not hygienic." So we found a tiny apartment, and somehow during those one, uh—those two months that he spent with me, he managed to very skillfully—[coughs] excuse me—find me a guardian. Happened to be, um, uh, somebody with consular—uh, you know, the consular stuff, for, uh, Sri Lanka of all places. And, um, this lady was supposed to be my guardian, and she was. She was as strict as my father. So [laughs] I had somebody keeping an eye out for me, my guardian angel. But, um, it turned out okay.

Then I met my husband while I was in college. And, uh, we were at a party that I wasn't supposed to have been at, uh, because I didn't know the birthday boy, but I'd gone with a friend of mine. She said, "You need to get out a little bit more, you know? You can't be, you know, just hanging out at home every day and, you know, just going to college and doing private tuition. You need to have some fun." So I said, "Okay." And I met my husband Krishna there.

And, uh, I don't know. I think what really interested me was that his family is also very culturally involved. Um, my, uh, sister-in-law teaches dance here. I think you'll have done something on Rathna? Kumar? You'll have—uh, you'll have interviewed her. She's my husband's older sister. So, um, we—we lived there—I lived there for nine years in Madras. And of course we married in 1983, when I was just 21, which is really not something I'd advise anybody to do when you're that young. You know? You really need to live a little bit more. And, uh, what? In 1991 I came to this country.

[0:19:31]

AC: What brought you here?

KG: My husband, actually. Um, I had gone back to South Africa in 1989 for my, uh, sister's wedding. And while I was there, *his* sister who's al—he—who was already living in the U.S. said, "You know what? Why don't you come here, you know? It's—it's nice. It's a nice idea to just bring her and come here." But I was in South Africa and I had this extended stay because, you know, I—I wanted to be with family. I wanted to, you know, just spend some—a few months with them. Months turned out to be [laughing] nearly two years, because he came here.

And then, um, I was balking at the idea. I wasn't—I—I was used to living in India. I loved it there. I loved the freedom. I liked being anonymous, you know, out there because there's so many, you know, people at any given time. It's—it's a country that really, um, bubbles with life at any given time. You can walk down to a coffee shop at three in the morning and you'll see the street, you know, full of people. And, uh, it's safe. It was safe at that time. Now I'm not sure. But [laughs] then it was very safe. And I liked living there.

And I didn't have any idea about coming to the U.S. It was a totally alien concept and it really came out of the blue because one day on the phone, he said, um, "You know, I'm going to be—I'm going to be really accepting what Rathna says and I think I'm planning on going to the U.S. Why, you know—why don't you join me there?" It took me another six months to think about whether I wanted to do that. And, uh, he came—he came ahead. He was here before me, two years before. And in '91 I, uh, decided that I was gonna come. So, yeah.

I ended up—and I know when—uh, I was totally psyched by the way the place was, you know? Um, it was so different, all those huge spaces, the—Texas, I mean. You know, lots of [shuffling sounds] places, areas that had no buildings, and you know, a lot of, uh, [laughing] concrete on the other hand. You know, concrete jungle? And then my sister-in-law's subdivision, where we lived when—when I first came—uh, just to get me acclimated, we stayed with her. And, I—I didn't see a soul. I would be there—when I got over the jetlag, of course—I would look out of the window, and, you know, wait to see somebody walking on the street. And no, I wouldn't. It was very isolating.

And then, uh, I got used to it. Target became like my best friend because it was very close to where she lived. And, uh, in the evenings, when my husband would come, I'd tell him, "Let's go to Target." [CW laughs] It was an exciting pastime for me walking through *all* the aisles and seeing all the stuff. I mean, you know, the varieties. I could not believe my eyes that you could find so many different kinds of, you know, perfume and body sprays and talcum powder, you know, and shampoo. It was astonishing that so many things were there. Another place was—this was way before you time—Oshan (?). There was another store called Oshan (?) that was on Beltway 8 near, uh, Chinatown. The Chinatown area? Uh, Beltway 8 and, uh, Bissonnet. Between Bissonnet and Beechnut. It was so amazing. Everything from car tires to clothing. It was too astonishing for me. I loved going to these places.

And then I was listening to accents. And I would see people of different colors speaking in this accent that I could not get used to. Because, you know, there was so much of British rule both in South Africa as well as in India, and, uh, it was so different to my ear, you know? Walking into a store and hearing these people talk in this very different way, and it took me a little bit to understand what they were saying, and, uh, the cadence, you know? It was very different. And, uh, the way they said things, the words, like we would say al-u-MINium and they would say al-oo-minum, you know? And we would say col-AN-der and they would COL-an-der, you know? They were very—there were differences, and, um, got used to it after a while and started kind of enjoying being here. It was very different. We lived in Clear Lake after we moved out of my sister-in-law's place. We moved to Clear Lake because my husband had a studio there.

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AC: Where was your sister's subdivision?

KG: She lived in, uh, quite close to Meyerland that Braeswood area? She still lives there. Um, Braeswood, um, yeah that area there. She's bordered by Braeswood, Fondren, and, yeah. So um, it was nice the change to, you know, live in an apartment out in Clear Lake. But then again we didn't know anybody and we didn't have a car. And then I found that I was pregnant. And, um, that became quite a trial because my doctor was here at Southwest Memorial and, um, I would have to take the bus, and sometimes there were friends that we got to know, who'd actually come pick me up and bring me here. And, uh, that was a blessing because we got to know people, and, you know, slowly start socializing. And by then I was able to cook, you know. [laughs] Several years into the marriage, yeah. And then she was born—before she was born, I was eight months pregnant and we moved back to the southwest. We moved to Gessner and Westpark, that area. And, uh, she was born at Southwest Memorial Hospital. Yeah.

AC: What does your husband do?

KG: My husband is now my partner with *HUM Magazine*, but previous—he's also a part owner of *Indo American News*, which is just down the hall. So he's one of the, uh, owners of it. Three—three partners, uh, own the business. Um, he's also a professional photographer. So, uh, he does a lot of different things. Yes.

AC: What did he do, um, when he first came here?

KG: Who?

AC: Your husband.

KG: What did he do? He was a—he was with my brother-in-law in his company. Uh, that was Video Works? It's called Video Works. My brother-in-law was an engineer, who was retrenched. He worked for, uh, Texas Instruments for a long time and then he was retrenched. So he went into videography. And when my husband came, he did photography for him. So, you know, they were a team. And, uh, that's how we kind of survived. And eventually of course when we moved to the southwest we had to buy a car, by which time we did have some money, so we could afford it here.

CW: How did *you* go from studying music to [overlapping] going to journalism?

KG: [overlapping] Journalism. Quite by default, I would think. It was not something that I—I did teach music when I first came here. I taught music to little kids for about three, four years, I would say. But, um, I was asked to do a review actually for a dance program in 1991. And, uh, the newspaper at the time liked it so much they asked me to—dance review, of all things! Indian classical dance. Uh, and I wrote about it kind of candidly, you know, whatever I saw and I thought was good and everything else, I—I wrote about it. And when we submitted it they liked it and they asked if I would continue to do these, you know, on a freelance basis. And, um, I said that would be fine. Whenever I have time, because I'm teaching kids. You know, music, on—well, on weekends more than weekdays because, you know, they—school days, and of course evenings I was teaching as well.

And, um, it, uh, became so that the demand was there. They needed writers. I found that there are several publications in Houston, you know? English language, English medium, but Indian-owned. Uh, there's *India Herald*, *Voice of Asia*, and *Indo-American News*. I had my start with *Asian Women Magazine*, which had great potential, but, um—and the publisher was quite a visionary, you know? He still lives in Houston. But it went under I think about three years after it started because, um, he couldn't keep it up. I think funding was a problem. Yeah. So, uh, he ditched that, and, uh, I continued writing for *Indo-American News*, you know? And over the years, just kind of taught myself how to.

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And I think, basically, uh, without any—when you don't have training in something, and you don't realize that you needed the training, you—[laughs]—some, you know—there—there's a bit of candor in what you write, and you write what you feel. And, um, I believe that anything that has a human element would always attract people. Once you have—even if you write an essay, I'm sure you look at what's the first line? Because that's going to catch the eye of the reader or your lecturer, and then you take it from there.

And, uh, I found that I enjoyed expressing myself, you know, through the written word. And, uh, *HUM* was I think a natural progression. Basically, I got tired of pandering to what the—you know, the publisher wanted, you know? If somebody, um, a little grocery store has advertised you, then they want me to go out there and wax poetic about the guy and his store, which would just be, you know, a pokey little hole in the wall, but I would have to make it out to be a palace. And I said, “No. I'm tired of doing that.”

I—it was just because of wanting to do something very different. I saw the—the niche here. I realized also that the Indians, the younger generation, they have connected with other communities way better than the older generation. A lot of my—my age group, older age group, they don't have that opportunity to even socialize with people who are outside of their community. That has only been over the last 10 years, I would say. You know? Where you have the galas, and—and, uh, now, with the—a little bit of in—assimilation into the mainstream, which has been only over the last 10 years, I would think.

Because when I first came here, no. It wasn't like boomtown (?) [claps] where, you know, you would be meeting with other people. I—I saw that. Indians also tend to be very insular. They want to be among themselves because they understand each other and the culture and their—their levels of whatever it is. And—and they're materialistic, and education-driven, and high achievers, and, you know, all that. But when I look at my daughter, I see this emerging generation, you know, that, uh, *HUM* could serve better. *HUM Magazine* is all about that generation and the one that's been there before, the 30-something, the 40s you know? And then the younger dynamic, I've got 15 year olds reading the magazine, you know? So, it obviously—it strikes a chord with them. ... Anything?

CW: Oh, speaking of your daughter, can you tell us a little bit about her?

KG: Oh! Anushka. Um. Yes, uh, where do I start? What do you want to know?

CW: What is she like, or—[laughs; indistinguishable]?

KG: Oh, she's, um—she's—she's the light of my life I would say. She makes everything so much better, brighter. She's inspirational. Um, she has an amazing sense of, uh, community. She would not—uh, she's not What to say? She's the kind of person that if she sees somebody on the street and she perceives them as someone who's struggling in some way, she would give her last dollar. She's like that. She's very model, uh, in that way, in the sense that, you know, she wants to help. She wants to be out there.

She's studying at Bennington College. Uh, she's in Vermont. She studies in Vermont. She's doing, uh, English literature. [laughs] It's off the beaten track because usually the kids go into medicine or engineering or IT. But it's what she wanted to do. And, uh, I think if you don't enjoy doing what you want to do, you make it a career that you don't enjoy. But if you love what you do, everyday in your life, you know, you'll—you'll just be doing something that's pleasant, that's joyous, that adds a bit of dimension, you know? So she's, um—also—she also works on campus as a student mentor.

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And I know that because Bennington is such a small school, um, it's in a very—uh, you know, a one-horse town. Really so. Uh, rural, farming, that's the main thing. Um, their Nordstrom is like Walmart. [laughs] And, uh, she enjoys the college atmosphere. It's kids from all over. They've got a very large international community. Uh, her closest friends are from—well there's this one girl from Korea, and there's this boy from Pakistan. They are, you know, close, and they've got a very large, um, lesbian-gay community, you know? The—the—because, well, you're getting kids from all over, and when it's liberal arts, you know, it's going to be—it's—it's a very, um—it's a very student-autonomous kind of school where they're pretty much permitted—I don't know if you know about Bennington, uh, College. The children decide on their curriculum. What they want to study. How—they choose their courses. They put it forward to, you know, their advisor, and the advisor helps them develop that and make it well-rounded. So, by the time they're done with their degree, they're able to go out and do other things, whatever they want to do, you know. You can do law if you want, or you can just be a poet, or write books, or, you know.

Um, what else about Anushka? Yes, she was at Michael DeBakey High School and every other kid that was there was going into med school or, you know, doing something with the sciences, but she—[coughs] she decided on Bennington because she loves writing. She loves English. She's a voracious reader. Yeah. [chuckles] She's traveled a lot. From the time she was six, she's traveled by herself. She's gone pretty much all over the world, yeah. So, that's her in this picture. [Reaches for a picture on top of a bookshelf]

CW: Aww. [laughs] I see she has a koala with her, so—

KG: Yes.

CW: —she definitely likes exploring things, [overlapping] like holding koalas.

KG: [overlapping] She loves to go to places. [sits down] She enjoys traveling. Her godmother lives in Australia, so she'd gone there a couple of years ago. And, uh, they are encouraged to do internships in

January and February because the college is snowed under.

CW: Hmm.

KG: And it makes it very difficult for students to live out there when it's—you know, the—the temperatures are the way they are. Yeah. So, she's been to South Africa, worked there for two months, done internships all over.

CW: And, would you say that you entering the field of journalism influenced her choice to become an English literature major at all?

KG: You know, I don't think so. I—I don't think it influenced her. I feel that whatever is genetically there already, it's—it was a pre—you know, what—predisposition, I would say. She already had, uh, something in her. Maybe I myself went into music for all the wrong reasons. I could have done journalism formally with no training, but it's come to this, you know. I mean, I should have done it formally, learn the lessons. [laughs]

No, I wouldn't say that she's doing this because she is influenced by me. I doubt that, so, you know. [laughs] I feel that she is very much her own person. She's, uh—she's a very independent person. She's very mature for her age. And she's the kind of person who's very nurturing, even at college. Um, when we have our conversations—she calls me at least once in two days, if not every day—then, um, she would be telling me about the students. And there's always this concern about the freshmen coming in and all the new experiences, you know, drugs and stuff like that that are out there, you know. You—you have the prevalence of everything on a campus, especially when you're living there, and, uh, you know, you are not going home every day, and there's nobody to monitor you. So, I've heard her tell me about students that, you know, drink too much, and she keeps trying to tell them, "Listen, it's okay to do that, but, you know, you have to keep it [laughs], you know, where you're on a safe level, and, uh, you know, able to get back to your room, you know, without being compromised maybe." And, uh, she's always talking to them about education and getting ahead with, you know, doing your assignments on time, and not antagonizing anybody. [laughs] Yeah, so that's basically Anushka.

[0:40:34]

AC: You said that Indians in other places, uh, around the world, not India, hold on to their traditions [overlapping] really hard.

KG: [overlapping] Yes.

AC: Would you say the same for Indians in the US?

KG: No.

AC: How so?

KG: They're very different. They're coming here directly. We are talking about the first generation Indians from India that are coming here, right? I mean, they're coming here. Then, you get the next generation that's born here. And, uh, they—they hold on to traditions, but not in the sense that, uh, the Indians that are in other countries do, who have been there for long—for a time.

Like Indians in South Africa, typically, let me—let me start with that. They had no choice but, you know, to hold on to language, to hold on to traditions, to the culture because if they didn't, they would have lost it all, you know, because they would have been just swallowed up by the larger communities, right? We're talking about, you would have just lost it, lost everything. Today, I can very bravely say that biryani is one of the national dishes in In—in South Africa, honestly. Anybody, no matter what the skin color would know what biryani is. If I bump into a fellow South African here in Houston, regardless—they can be Jewish, they can be, you know, African, the first thing, "Hey, do you make biryani? Do you make bajas?" You know, those are things that—it's like part of the fabric of the country, you know.

And, uh, we have so much to be proud of. We've, uh—they've built temples. I think we have about a hundred and eighty in South Africa itself, you know. And, uh, don't—don't quote me on that number, but I'm thinking it's close to that. You know, even if it's a little shrine somewhere. They want to worship. They want to keep the language alive.

Um, here, I'm seeing, even my sister-in-law's kids don't speak the language. You know, they don't speak Telugu. That is their language. They—they don't speak it. They may understand, but they don't speak it. In South Africa, you find even the third generation speaks it, may not be premium, uh, you know, but it's kept alive after what? Nearly 200 years. And, here, when the Indians come to this country, they—somehow they're influenced by the westernization and, uh, they fall into that—you know, that mode, which is not a bad thing because it's a step toward assimilating, but in doing so, some—some things are compromised as well.

If you go to South Africa, Sri Lanka, Malaysia I met a lot of people, you know, Tamilians because, um, I attended a couple of, uh, conferences on Tamil, um, in India, where I had the opportunity of meeting people from Malaysia and Sri Lanka. And I saw how similar they were to the people that I know back in—in Durban, you know. They were very much like that. They had the same values. They have the same ideology. They wanted to keep the language. They—they, little—you know, even if it is like—[laughing] you may consider this barbaric. I do at times. But there are some things that are so irrelevant to today, you know, that may have been scientifically done in the old days, and, uh, is not relevant today, but they still practice those things today. And, uh, it's kept alive even though—look, South Africa is in a different time zone completely. Everything is so different. And, uh, they keep those things alive that don't have relevance anymore to the day and age, but they hold on to it desperately. So, does that answer your question?

AC: Can you give us an example of one of those practices that they hold on to?

[0:44:56]

KG: There are so many. I don't know where to start. Um, see, some things were scientific in the beginning. At—in India, if you think about, uh, you know, when, uh, you go to a funeral or something like that, and they—they literally douse, uh, the body. They—they do—you know, they use turmeric,

things like turmeric because it's an antiseptic. Tho—in those days, they didn't have mortuaries or anything like that. And, uh, you—you go to the funeral, and then when you come back home, you don't want to be contaminated by that. It's what they believed, which is quite scientific if you think about it. So they would use, uh, turmeric water to—to bathe when they come home. So, you know, they're cleansing themselves head to toe.

And, uh, today in South Africa, even though, you know, the—the coffin is there. The person is dead. They would have been stored in a mortuary, and you're not really going anywhere close. In the olden days, they would just have the body out on a—on a pallet, right? They won't have a coffin per se because you're going to take that pallet, and when—uh, you're gonna go to a crematorium and just put it out there and put a whole lot of logs and burn the body. Today, it's so much—everything is electric. You push the thing in, and it's—you know, you don't even see it. You don't even go close to the body.

But up to now, there are people that go back home, and they take, you know, a shower with, uh, turmeric water, you know. It's lost its relevance, but it's a simple example, you know, of, uh, what, uh, you know, really was there in the olden days, but is still being practiced today.

And then, if you look at another thing, in India, you know, there were child marriages. And, uh, kids were, you know, little children when they were—when they were married, like at five and six years old. You'd have some sort of a little cradling basket or something where you'd bring the child into this hall, and you have the wedding ceremony, and the bride, groom maybe around the same age or maybe even an older person. And, uh, today you'll see even in South Africa—but I've seen this in India, too—um, they would bring—the bride could be like 20 years old and severely overweight—
[Phone rings, recording is paused.]

[Recording is resumed.] —overweight, uh, bride, you know, and traditionally in—in the—is it taping?

AC: Yeah.

KG: The olden days, the uncles, the mother's brothers would carry the baby into the hall, but now it's like—it's—it's so silly to see this big girl sitting in a basket with her two tiny uncles struggling to bring her into [laughing] the marriage hall. So, you know, I saw this in India as well. And in South Africa, you know, there are traditional families that still do this. So, those are just small examples, but there are many many.

AC: Do you hold on to these practices?

KG: No. No. No, I don't. Uh, my family, they're traditional, but not to that extent, you know, where something doesn't make sense anymore. You have to—you know, especially with our influence on the older people, I think they changed. They did. But, there are still certain pockets of people in South Africa that still keep and hold on to those traditions.

And food, our food has, uh, remained pretty much, uh, basically the same, but it's also evolved. That's another thing: the evolution of our food that, uh, uses, of course, the local—you know, the local ingredients, whatever's prevalent locally, like how it is like in Mexico. You'd use corn and jalapenos and—and, uh, cactus. In South Africa, whatever's available There's a lot of sugar cane. You got—you know, you use, uh, local, uh, foods that are very, very available there. And it's also a country that

exports a lot of food outside because beautiful edible land, and ... so conducive to ...

AC: Tell us a little more about your parents. Where are they now?

[0:49:52]

KG: They're in South Africa. Dad is, uh, 81 years old. My mother is 78. They live alone. They live in the house that he bought—he built for us, and we moved into when I was four years old. They still live in the same house. Um, he's getting deaf. He's not getting—he's—he's becoming deafer, [laughs] if there is such a word. Um, they're very united. They have a marriage that's 53 years old and, uh, they have a good, solid relationship. They understand each other very well. They live by themselves, of course, empty-nesters because everybody else—all the kids, have left. My sisters live close by. They have homes, you know, where they're living very nearby. Um, they—unfortunately, I feel sad for my parents in many ways because of the perilous nature of—of South Africa. The crime rate is so high, you know.

Um, they woke up in the middle of the night about three, four months ago. Uh, my mother woke up, and she shook my dad awake. And she said, "I can hear something on the roof." And, uh, he woke up, but she immediately—we've got tenants. We've got a huge backyard, and there is a free-standing little house at the back, and she's got tenants living there. So, she called the tenant and told him. She said—it was about three or so in the morning, and she said, "Look up onto the roof. What's going on?" You know, because he could see it from where they were. And, uh, he brought—[laughs] he's got a shotgun. So, he came out there. And he looked, and he saw three guys on the roof.

So, uh, they—yeah! Three guys on the roof. And, then, he fired a shot. And, uh, they ran away, but, uh, you know, it's very unsettling, so, uh, they were sitting up. They couldn't—they couldn't sleep again because my mother was very nervous about what was going on. So, about six o'clock, she thought she'd take a shower. So, she went in and everything. And she tried to open the tap, and there was no water coming out. So, obviously, these guys were—they were stealing the pipes, the copper pipes. They stole some of them. Uh, they were in the process of stealing the other pipes that were running around, you know, to bring water to the house. And, uh, they very, um, thoughtfully closed the—the main, so—[laughs].

My mother—my mother said, "There's no water and how can that be because there's a reservoir?" We live in a place called Reservoir Hills and there's a reservoir right there. Like, it's walking distance. How can there not be any water? So, my father said, "Ha! That's because they—that's what they were doing. They were stealing our pipes." And those original pipes from the house, you know. So, um, poor man, I mean, at that age had to go, you know, and, uh—go and get PVC and put those in, and replace everything, and

It's just a lot of additional expenses, and a lot of, uh, you know, it's—it's anxiety for the old people, especially if they know you're living alone, and, you know, they—they target you. That's why, uh, my brother keeps telling my dad, "You need to upgrade your car." And, my father says, "That's what saved my life." You know, because if you have, uh, a snazzy car—it doesn't have to be terribly snazzy, it just has to be something that looks very good. My dad drives, um, a Mini—Mini, you know? And, uh, he's had that for a while. But, it's only the two of them, so My brother's been trying to buy them a different car. He's been saying, "Why don't I get you something, you know, nice?" And,

uh, my sister has a Mercedes, and she's been trying to tell them, "Go and get a good car."

But, my father and mother are still culturally, you know, involved. And, that culturally involvement takes them—my mother teaches classes in Tamil—to different places, to libraries and to different areas in Durban. So, uh, this car, when they are coming home late at night, nobody cares to hijack it because it's—it's got nothing special about it. You know it's a common car. And if it was a high-end car, then they would be in trouble, you know, because they'll kill you for the car. I—I have seen this in—in South Africa. You know that they will just kill you for a car.

[0:54:55]

Um, this, uh—I was at a shopping center with my brother once and we were heading toward the car with all our groceries. And there was this young man putting his baby into the car seat. She would have been, I think, about nine, 10 months old. And, uh, it was a high-end car. [AC coughs] She was—he was just putting the child in. And, they shot him from behind, left his body there, took the child out of the car, left the child next to him, and drove off with the car.

CW: You saw this?

KG: Yes. We both saw this. And, uh, the first—the first—first, you're shocked. There were a lot of people in the car park. They were a lot of people there. Lot of—you know, it's a bustling place. And, that's the—the level of audacity. That's how brave they are that they would do this in broad daylight. It was five in the evening, and, uh, five-ish, you know. And, uh, people were just paralyzed. I mean, you know, you could just see the level of shock.

And, then, uh, you know, there were somebody who was closer who went and picked up the baby. And, you know, then somebody called the police. And I'm talking about—what? This was, um, in '90—no, not '90, '88, I think this was in, yeah. Should have been around that time. '89, '88, '89. So, those things did—they do happen, and they're still happening at the moment. It's very bad. [pause] I'm typically very boring. I don't have too many things to tell y'all.

CW: [laughs] No, it's been good so far. We're—we're very interested. Um, okay, let me back up a little bit. Um, you said a while ago that—well, this was in the very beginning—you mentioned that your passion about *HUM* was that it was able to cater—or meant for, all the communities that you could, you know, promote tolerance and diversity and things. When did you realize that that was the potential of *HUM*, and when did you decide that that was something you could do?

KG: It was something that I'd been thinking about for a couple of years, but it hadn't solidified into *HUM*. It was something that I kept seeing all the time when I would go to events that, you know, uh, you'd meet—I'd meet so many different people and always look at the idea of getting to know them better, but how do you get to do that? And how do you get our community to get to know. You know, like, say, the Hispanic community for example, they have so many—they have lots of traditions. They have so many things going on. Only when we see it in a newspaper do we realize, "Okay, that's happened."

You know, so, I thought, "Why not do it, uh, ahead of time so people know, 'Look, this is what

it is going to be happening.” You know, um, Cinco de Mayo and the recipes that go with that. So we would do it a month before. And, uh, if it were—if it was Chinese New Year, we would make—show it out there. And, we’d—I’d get people to write about it.

We’ve typically had lots of, uh, people from the community. I’ve had your, uh—your chancellor write for us as well. Uh, David Leebron, he’s written for *HUM*. He’s done “What I love about Houston.” Um, we’ve had, uh, Gordon Quan, uh, iconic. Um, my goodness, Chitra Divakaruni who is, uh, you know, the creative writing, uh, teacher as well as a very—world famous author, who’s written for *HUM*. We’ve had a stellar group of people who have, you know, written.

And, uh, I’m very happy and proud to say that it’s taken all these people to make this, uh—this cultural exchange really possible. [papers rustling] So, we’ve got Dominique Sachse writing for next month’s, uh, “What I Love About Houston,” so. And, this month we’ve got, uh, José Grignon. I think he’s Channel 26. We—I—I think we believe in the potential, uh, to, uh—of—you know, for *HUM* to reach out to the communities because it creates conversation.

[0:59:48]

If I’m gonna go out there and ask somebody to write, um, you know, about, uh—like, say, typically—I don’t know what communities you all belong to. Uh, I’m guessing Chinese, right? [interviewers nod] If I’ve got to have somebody from your community to write for me, um, I’m going to say, “Take the magazine. I’ll give you a couple of boxes.” It—we distribute free. I’ll say, “Look, take the magazine to your community and let them see.” If they—they’re not only going to be reading what you’ve written. They’re gonna read about what other people have written. And, that in itself is an education, I feel.

You know we—I’m learning all the time. Really, I’m—I’m learning all the time about, um, different cultures. I’m learning about how people, um, overcome so many things to be in this country. I’ve got, um, a Chinese artist that I featured on my, uh—his name is Kyle Fu. I, uh, featured him on my cover for September. It’s an ongoing relationship. I mean, you know, he phoned me yesterday. He told me, he said, “Hey, I vamped up my studio.” He’s a—uh, he, uh—origami artist. He’s excellent. He’s—he’s really top in his field. And, uh, the interview, uh, was quite out of the blue because, uh, he’s a friend of Carolyn Farb, and she sent him to me. And, she said, “You know what? This guy is brilliant. He’s done some origami in my home. Would you care to interview him?” And, those—those were really the early year—uh, months. And, uh, we were struggling because it’s an expensive—have you seen a copy of *HUM*?

AC: No.

CW: No.

KG: I’ll show it to you. [gets up to get some copies of the magazine] Give me a couple of seconds. [Recorder is paused]

[Recording is resumed] Here’s Kyle. [laughs] He’s so funny. [banging noises] That’s Kyle Fu. [continues searching for magazines] So, we try to have, you know, different people on, uh—in the

magazine.

CW: [laughs] This is great because we just—we interviewed Sesh Bala actually.

KG: Who?

CW: Sesh Bala.

KG: Sesh and, uh, Prahba?

CW: Yeah! I spoke to them, like, two weeks ago. [laughs]

KG: Oh, yeah—

CW: This is great.

KG: They do all the temple tours, and they're, um—they're so much involved—

CW: [overlapping] Yes they are. [indistinguishable]

KG: [overlapping] with the Houston Greeters, and—yes. ... So, Kyle was [laughs] my September cover, and he's—he's absolutely adorable. So, you know, we—we just try to introduce. People didn't know there was a—a person of his caliber here. And, I think since *HUM*—and then what he does is every month he wants us to distribute, you know, to his studio. So, it—it creates a lot of awareness because he's got different people coming over there, very diverse bunch of people. And, uh, now a lot more people know about *HUM*. So, that was a good way of spreading the word as well.

We distribute free. And, uh, you don't pay for it, so. We depend on ads and, uh, that's what kind of fuels the magazine. It's very difficult, though. The first year was really very difficult financially because we put everything we had into it, you know, and I needed, uh, my husband to help me with the magazine, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to do it on my own.

I can—you know, the—a typical month means I have to arrange my own interviews, do my own writing, get—you know, delegate people to write various articles I want, and then get them all back, and start editing, putting things together, getting the photos, getting photo captions, giving everybody credit for everything that they've done. And, uh, then I sit with my art director, and we work on placing pages. What looks good? How is it going to be? What's gonna be our cover? And, uh, we work together, so, uh ... And, Krishna sees to the business aspect of, uh, the magazine where, you know, he, uh, gets the ads, and follows up on business meetings, and creates, you know, the financial backup for the magazine. But the first year was very, very difficult. I think it will be a little easier after this now with the awareness of the magazine.

AC: How many employees did you have?

KG: Just a skeleton crew. I don't need to have too many people here because basically I'm doing the

editing. I, uh—uh, now with the computer, everybody can just send it to me through email, and I can do the editing here.

[1:05:01]

And, I have a art director. He doesn't have to be here if there's no work. Beginning of the month, he's really not around. He comes toward the last, uh, I would say, 15 days, 10 days of the month, when we need him, so that, you know, we can do production and get it out there. Yeah.

We print 10,000 copies. And, uh, we—we do say that it is for a more educated audience, you know, because we want it to be read. And, so we don't put into just about anywhere. I don't have it typically on—uh, at Indian grocery stores or anything like that because it's an expensive publication. People are more interested in what, uh, sales, you know, what food sales are going on, so they would take a—a local magazine—local newspaper to read rather than this. So, I prefer not to have it out there. I try to put it in Whole Foods, and, uh, you know, we have it in HEB at Buffalo Speedway. Yeah.

AC: Do you mind if we take a couple of copies back for the archive?

KG: [overlapping] I would love for you to take a couple of copies back. That would be great. Certainly. Which ones do you want? Just different ones, or you want some of the same, or?

AC: Different ones, I guess.

CW: Yeah.

KG: [overlapping] Different ones? I can give you a couple more of those. That one is—I thought that cover was so cute. People were—it wa—they were just carried away by that one. Anything else you need from me? [pause]

AC: Can you tell us a little more about your faith?

KG: Faith. That's a very interesting question. I would say I'm ... I don't like to use the word spiritual. I think that I am—I believe that there is a higher power. I really do. But, I r—I also believe that there is just one god. I don't follow any particular path anymore. I've come away from that. And, I've also encouraged my daughter to believe in what she wants because I know that we find, you know, comfort in, uh—in prayer. I feel that when I do pray, it's not to any particular god, so to speak. It's just out there to the universe. I feel that if you put out a positive thought, it brings back something positive. That's—that's basically how I—I pray.

And I'm saying that my daughter is more scientific in her thinking. She says, uh, "There's no god. There's no such thing." She says, "I don't pray." I said, "Whatever you believe in, you know." I'm sure there has to be something at the core of your being that tells you what you need and what you expect out of the universe. So, you know, that's what I believe.

But, I do go to temple on occasion. Not on—not when there are crowds out there, you know, because it becomes—I think religion is so commercialized. It's become a business today, you know? I

feel that you can pray even if you're in your own home, or you're sitting anywhere. You can be on a bus and you can send out a prayer.

I, uh, don't believe in having a—you know, a herd mentality where, you know, everyone has to believe this is what it is, and there is nothing else outside that because that's where I feel problems start. Religion is the basis of all, you know, um, the strife in the world. Religious beliefs that go out of hand, and people become fanatical, and then it gets to be crazy.

AC: Would you call yourself a Hindu?

KG: I would like to call myself a child of the world. I believe that I grew up Hindu. I still am. Intrinsicly what is there is very hard to wipe out. And I don't want to do that. But, I think I have, um, put everything into a certain, um It's not—it's not even—it's not even a wide subject for me. It's something very simple and very fundamental as just being somebody who is existing and trying to make the best of life. I don't think that I sit down and I consciously pray, but there maybe times when I do meditate. [pause] How about you?

[1:10:26]

AC: Me? Still searching, I guess.

KG: Searching. I think that's where my daughter is, too, at that point, you know, where she—she says—she makes these loud proclamations, but I'm so sure that it's still in that, you know, state of not—[laughing] not really decided on whatever. But I know that I've come to a point where I do believe there is a higher power, but it's a universal higher power. It's something that we *all*, uh, you know, think of or perceive as—

I'm not an atheist. I don't believe in there's—there's no god, you know, I don't believe that at all. I believe that there is a power that fuels us that, you know, gives us whatever we want. There's something. It could be the mind; it could be the heart; it could be a combination, but there is something out there. And I feel that if, you know, we think positively, everything comes to us.

AC: Well, as the interview comes to an end, can you say a few words about the future? Where do you see yourself or your magazine would be?

KG: I—I can only hope that, uh, the magazine continues to thrive, that it's gonna be out there. I'm not overly—uh, I'm not gonna be overly ambitious about it. I want it to be there, but I want it to be of relevance. I want people to see it. Maybe look forward to reading what's in there, to be able to see that, you know, we are working very hard, you know, to bring out something every month, and that it—the words that are appreciated, the writers are, you know, um—are lauded for what they are putting out there.

I would love to see it grow. I would like to increase pages. I want, uh, naturally, but not overly ambitiously so—I want it to still be very meaningful, and not commercialized, you know. It will generate income, but as I said through ads and maybe through subscrip—subscriptions. We have subscrip—uh, subscribers as well. That's basically what it is.

I'd like it to still be around five years from now. You know, after that I don't know what I'm planning on doing, but I have a book somewhere in my head, and in my notes. So, I'm looking at writing something, if I can put my thoughts together long enough, so.

AC: That's great. Well, thank you.

CW: Thank you.

KG: Thank you.

AC: Thank you so much.

[1:13:29]

End interview