

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

Interviewee: Selina Ahmed

Interviewers: Mijin Han (Sophomore); Chris Johnson (Sophomore)

Date/ Time of Interview: July 11, 2013, at 1:00 PM

Transcribed by: Mijin Han and Chris Johnson

Edited by: Chris Johnson, Sara Davis, and Patricia Wong (6/30/16)

Audio Track Time: 1:28:36

Background:

Dr. Selina Ahmed was born in Bangladesh on December 4th, 1945. Not long after obtaining her master's degree from Dhaka University, Dr. Ahmed moved to the United States in 1971 in order to obtain her PhD at Texas Woman's University in human nutrition. Three years later, Dr. Ahmed left Denton, Texas and moved to Houston in order to be with her husband. After working briefly at Methodist Hospital, Dr. Ahmed began her time at Texas Southern University, where she has been a professor in the department of Human Services and Consumer Sciences for nearly 40 years. She currently lives in Houston, Texas with her husband and is a proud mother of three children.

Setting:

The interview largely centers around the subjects of labor and capital, seeking to create a thorough narrative of Dr. Ahmed's life experiences. Her experiences as a Muslim woman both in Bangladesh and in the United States served as an additional area of interest in the interview. The interview was conducted at Dr. Ahmed's office at Texas Southern University.

Interviewers:

Mijin Han is a sophomore at Rice University majoring in English and linguistics. She is from Ulsan, Korea.

Chris Johnson is a sophomore at Rice University majoring in linguistics. He is from Houston, Texas.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

SA	Selina Ahmed
CJ	Chris Johnson
MH	Mijin Han
—	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
<i>Italics</i>	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]	Actions [laughs, sighs, etc.]

CJ: This is Chris Johnson.

MH: This is Mijin Han.

CJ: We're here today, on July 11th, 2013 in the Texas Southern University office of Dr. Ahmed to interview Dr. Selina Ahmed for the Houston Asian American Archive oral history interview project. Um, so, Dr. Ahmed, could you start off by telling us a little about yourself, your life experiences?

SA: Well, I'm Selina Ahmed. I'm originally from, uh, Bangladesh. And I came here 1971. Actually, the month I came, January, that, uh, [indistinguishable several words] was started. Actually, I came from East Pakistan. So, East Pakistan, after the war, it became Bangladesh. And I came to Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas, uh, to go to school there and graduate school. My intention was to have master's degree. And, um, when I was trying to come here, my family would not let me come by myself because I'm a Muslim woman. And, um, they said that you have to be married to go there. And they did not know at that time that my sweetheart whom I was, you know, dating over the mail, and, you know—and, uh, he was in Houston, Texas. So I got, I applied, uh, several universities, Texas Woman's University granted my application. And I just let him know that—that I got the admission, but now, how do I come? And my family would not let me come without getting married.

So to make the long story short, that we managed to marry each other over the telephone. And that's why he has a different wedding date than I have. But it worked out the last 42 years. We've been married 1971, and, uh, anything we—I want to accomplish through him, I just call him over the phone, it get done, you know? Usually, it is—prompt action is taken, just like our marriage, you know. So when I said that I can only marry you, you know, over the phone. And I explored, actually, about those possibilities that it can be done.

And, uh, Muslim marriage is like a contractual marriage, and you have to have witness from both side. And so his friend signed as a witness with him, and then his family member signed in Bangladesh for him, and also on behalf of him his brother signed. So sometime I get confused. Whom did I marry, him or his brother? So that's—that's how that I came in 1971 and started going to master's degree, but then the university was very kind and my advisor, when they checked my records and everything, they said, "You already have a master's degree, and we can see your ability. Why don't you go straight for PhD." So I start in 1971, January 30 at Texas Women's University and graduated with PhD in 1973, May. In human nutrition, uh, PhD. And actually our PhD program was a NASA Skylab and NASA-funded grant, so ever since I came here that I always was affiliated with space nutrition.

CJ: All right, that's really interesting. Uh, could you tell us about the neighborhood that you lived in, back when you were over in Bangladesh?

SA: In Bangladesh, actually, I came from small, um—it's a city. Uh, it's not capital that I came from. Uh, and it's a beautiful, beautiful, peace, uh, loving, um, environment, neighborhood, with all kinds of people from different religion, different beliefs, and, uh, different socio-economic background. And, uh, we always felt we are very fortunate that we really took care of many, many people that—who are disadvantaged. And we learned that from our parents. Both of my parents were like, you know,

[indistinguishable]. They were social worker, and that's what like—it is an inter-generational thing, and that's what I do now, and my children does the same thing. But it's a beautiful environment and very progressive that we got our—you know, as a female—we got our highest education and, uh, you know, no problem with that male or female had equally been treated. And, so, very, uh, nice economically equal neighborhood. And, um, we are not just like, you know, Bill Gates, like rich like that, you know, but we were very well to do, and educationally also financially, and so we could really, uh, be a role model as well as, uh, helpful in the community. That kind of family background. My father—my mother only had sixth grade education but she always wanted all the girls to have the highest education.

[0:4:57]

As a matter of fact that when I was, uh, 16 years old, that, uh, my family wanted to arrange my marriage. And so, I decided that I don't want to marry, and I told my mom. But it's still in the family that father, uncle, the—the hierarchy, they said, “No, this is an arranged marriage, good proposal, good family, rich family. They—he—she needs to get married.” When I found out that, I left my home. And five houses next to my house, that my sister's-in-law's-house, so I took shelter there. And I started having hunger strike for 5 days that I would not—I did not want to marry.

So my mom took that position. And the—when family comes traditionally, they bring sweets, clothes, and everything, and it is a proposal bringing from the groom's side to the bride's side. And when you accept everything and have dinner together, it is an formal and informal consent that marriage being—going to happen within these two families. So, my fam—my mother was very strong-minded, she said, “No, my daughter wants to go to school. My daughter want to have higher education. We will respect the guests. We'll have dinner, but we are not going to accept any jewelry or clothes from them. Food is okay, it's a common denominator, you know, so we can have that.” And that's how that my younger brother, he really convinced me to come home. And says—my mom said the note that that yes, “We, uh, decided that, no, you're not going to get married. We'll respect your wish.” And so, my brother was very funny, later he died. He said, “You need to come home. We are not going to accept any jewelry or clothes, but they brought the—the delicious sweet. We have to test them and eat those! So we—we did that, um ...

[door knocks, the recorder is temporarily paused]

The—the thing is that even though my mother, you know—the—the background is like, always man gets the preference for the higher education, but family always wants their girls to marry early. You know? So here, we are like six brothers and sisters in the line that are more guys to go to college. So families always think that it is better that if you marry that person, and then, you know, if in-laws give permission, then she can pursue the education. I knew that fact. So—so that's why I left the house. And—and—and I started having hunger strike and then till I can visit family.

So my brother, later on, with whom—he and I had very, uh, you know, you know, very precious memory, that both of us we wanted to be the medical doctor, and then we wanted to study together. And then, uh, we convinced each other we are going to be doctors. So one day he came to me. He said, “Sister, we know we are going to be the doctor.” I said, “How do you know?” He said, “Our handwriting is so bad. Nobody can read doctor's prescription, so that is first indication we are going to

be the doctor.”

But, then later on, then—when my family convinced that family that no marriage is going to take place that I straight went from my 10th grade to up to master’s degree without any interference. And I owe that to my younger brother. But later on, when, uh, I was in college, in master’s degree, he died at the age of 16, you know. And he never had, uh, fulfill his dream to become doctor. So now, my ultimate goal is after I retire from here, if I can go to medical college and fulfill his dream.

That’s—actually I did get admitted at Baylor College of Medicine. When I finished PhD with, um, Texas Woman’s University, came here, and then it did not materialize because of, uh, another reason. When I came back from TWU and started working at Methodist Hospital, 1974, that, um, I heard that my father passed away. So, I wanted to go home. And I took, like, leave of absence. And then I was going home. And, um, but—in the—in the meantime that I had applied for the medical school. But, at the same time, my father passed away. So, I said, “Okay, I’m going to apply. And after I come back from home, then I will start my medical school.”

But on my way, my plane got hijacked. By PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization]. It’s the British Airways in 1974, November 22nd. And then, when all this crisis happened that I survived through all this turmoil, when I went home, the family said, “No, no more college. You have PhD. No more medical degree. You love children. You have to start family.” So, that’s how my medical college got—I had to stop there. But I told them, “No, I have to do the medical degree to—to keep my promise to my brother.” You know, so—that’s—you know, this is what happened to my medical college. [laughs] I ended up from Methodist Hospital to here, and I’ve been here since 1974? 38 years, 37 years? Something like that. Yeah. I don’t count anymore. [CJ laughs]

[0:10:20]

CJ: Um, so, you mentioned that your plane got hijacked. What was that, uh—how did that all play out?

SA: That played out ... you know, see, I was going home. I—I was very sad going home to see my mom. My father passed away. And those days that communication was not that good just like now. By the time I got the letter, you know, and—and I got—apply—I had to apply for my leave of absence, and everything got approved. And then I was going and, uh ... From London to Dubai, the British Airways, um, you know it, um I remember that when I was sitting down, I—we were, like, three people in the seat, and one of the guy from England, and one from Indonesia, he’s a journalist, and then I was sitting. So, we started talking about everything.

And then—then I saw the guy who was sitting with me in Heathrow Airport. They have like plane, uh—you have to go to plane by bus. So, there’s two guy, and started talking to me. And the one of the guy asked me my name. And, so, he said, “Oh, you are Muslim? You will not have any problem.” But I didn’t pay any attention. Then when I saw the guy was sitting behind me, he started—kept on talking to me. And then, at one point that I was just—you know, I got up and I wanted to go to the bathroom. So I had just, my lipstick and my comb, you know, to, uh, comb hair. And I wanted get down in Dubai because my brother-in-law’s and brother, they requested the Dunhill cigarette. [all laugh] “You—you make sure you bring us some from duty free shop, some Dunhill cigarette.” So I said—I said—since I’m going to get down that, you know, I’m going to go to the bathroom.

By the time that, um, plane had sort of landed, and, there were hijackers, like, those two guys

that were sitting behind me talked to me, those, and then, from the ground, people started shooting and coming. And all I could see, the way, the place I was ... They announced that, "Grab a seat, and you need to sit down." So, I grab a seat—the way—not in my seat, but I sat down. From there, um, I could only see that I can get out easily, then stay back. So I got out. 276 person jet, 38 of us could get out. Some of them got killed.

And later, I—I ended up being—that helping airhostess. You know, she got shot. I gave first-aid. And within an hour, we got surrounded by the local police, and army and everything. And the—the negotiation for hijacking lasted for 9 hours. They wanted to have the, um, copilot and the navigator, you know. And they took over the plane. And, um, I ended up staying in that, and then later on, they took care of us, you know. They took the plane. But, in that plane, they kill passenger every 2 hours. Those who stayed in the plane. So I got—I—when I got out, I just help the people who got wounded and everything in the airport. But I was alone, so I could do all these things.

And I—I'm—I'm always—I'm thinking about my father. And then I said, "Okay, if I—I always have seen in my life that my father how he was giving to people." So I said, "And I have not seen him, but what about in my way that if I can help save somebody's life, that's what'll make him happy." So that's what I did.

And the next day that, um, I think we got rescued, you know, so ... And here, my husband was here, and he heard. He dropped me off, and then—and then he heard on radio. He was driving on Gulf Freeway or something that. That, you know, British Airways such-and-such number got hijacked. Then he started calling these people here. But, finally, they got—they could really trace me. And—and we were at that time in one of the Gulf Area Hotel, and, uh, before I had gone to—back to Bangladesh, yeah. So it's just like, you know, rebirth, you know? But for some reason, I look back. I came through that way. I travel all over the world. It never bothers me.

[0:15:00]

Till when 9-1—9-11 took place. When I saw—nobody saw the first plane. But when I saw the second plane, and I could easily see that—you know, just everything became alive with me, the reaction of the passengers. And then I started having, like, flashback, panic attack. Yeah. After many, many years. That, you know—that incident because I came back from Bangladesh to Houston back again, and then I went to Soviet Union, Spain, Japan, and all these places, you know. I had many, many—I—I was—I'm very fortunate that I could, uh, really travel with many things that I did in my life, you know? And, uh, so, um, um, but till all these things happened in 9-11, it just like touched that—that—that what can happen, you know? You know? It's ... you know?

CJ: That's incredible.

SA: Mm-hmm.

CJ: Um, so you mentioned that before you came to the US, you already had a master's degree, is that right?

SA: Mm - hmm.

CJ: Um, so, where'd you get your degree from?

SA: It is, uh, um, University of Dhaka.

CJ: Ah, okay.

SA: Yeah.

CJ: Um, and then backing up a little bit more, uh, what was the name of the neighborhood that you were talking about that you lived in before?

SA: Mm-hmm.

CJ: [overlapping]What was the name of it?

SA: It's a—it's a—it's a district called. Noakhali. N-O-A-K-H-A-L-I.

CJ: Okay.

SA: Okay? It's a district. Yeah, yeah, it's like a provin—you know, here like a county, uh, similar. [CJ laughs] I guess. Yeah. It's just not like a state. It could be a state now, yeah, because it's an independent country now. It's, you know, yeah, so But the—the place where we are from, it is very progressive, uh, place, Noakhali that education is, you know, very, you know, uh—get the priority above everything. So it is well known for edu—um, you know, uh, literacy rate for that area.

CJ: So, you mentioned that for yourself, getting a higher education was very important for you, um, and you mentioned that you also had a sister, is that right?

SA: Mm-hmm.

CJ: Did she also get a, uh—a degree?

SA: All my brothers and sisters are very highly educated, but starting from my oldest sister, she had to get married at the age of 16. She didn't get out from the house just like I did! [CJ and SA laugh] Yeah, so, by that time, that, you know—but for her, you know, she had to obey. But I was a little bit off, you know? So—so I got out. I said, “No, I have to let them know that, you know.” That's the only—very passive way, it's not like, you know. It's like neighborhood in five house, I walk there, and I started crying. They say, “Why are you crying?” “They wanted me to marry.” I said, “I don't want to marry. I want to sleep here and I didn't want to eat any food. I didn't want to cause any trouble.” You know? [laughs] So, you know, very, you know, you know, modest way of revolt. You know, so, yeah.

But then, after that, then I went all the way. Yeah, they always saw that—that I wanted to do something different. Yeah. And I got support from everybody, you know. Even when I married my husband over the phone, you know, just, you know—my family supported the ticket and everything.

[laughs] And I didn't have any money! So—so they did everything. Yeah.

CJ: So when you first came to the US, you said that you lived in Denton, Texas, is that right?

SA: Yeah, yeah.

CJ: Um, so what was that neighborhood like?

SA: Oh, we had a—oh, we had a house on—what is that? 923 North Locust? I'm trying to remember, yeah, North Locust. And—and this house an older lady donated to TWU for all international student. And I had a room, like, this size. I was so happy. And I paid only \$25 per month. And it had a common kitchen. Common bathroom. And it's called international house. We had the same telephone number. You know? So we—all we did that we—most of the time we stayed, actually, at the school or in the library. And, uh, since, you know, as—you know—as a graduate student, you are very poor, so we—if I had to go to library, I had other friend who could take me to Dallas library, SMU. And I had many, many—I really—I was very lucky and fortunate to get very good friend. But I used to teach them biochemistry and chemistry and they used to, you know, take me to library. [CJ and SA laugh] It's a trade-off, you know! [laughs]

[0:20:00]

And I could never buy any book. Books are very expensive. And we used to get stipend for \$249. Per month. Not per day. [SA and CJ laugh] So, but, that was good enough for us. But I didn't have to pay tuition fees because it was a NASA grant. You know, so as a graduate students being, you know, research assistant. So—but I was very lucky to have that. And that exposure, that access, you know? And every moment that I knew that that I have to make the best utilization of that money, access, and resources that was, you know, given to me. And we worked very hard. [SA and CJ laugh]

CJ: So the reason that you chose Denton was for, um, school, is that correct?

SA: Actually, the reason I chose Denton because my professor, back home, she came to, uh, Denton. And when she had gone back with her, uh, master's degree, then, um, I was exploring to come to school. And I was a research assistant at Dhaka University, Biochemistry Department in Nutrition Division. And the—the, uh, research, uh—principal investigator or the head of the department, Dr. Kemal Ahamed (?), he mentioned to me that I should apply for different places. And actually, um, Cornell University, I got one admission. And the reason I chose Denton, Dallas because it's close to Houston, and I had my intention to be with my—at the time we are not married—so I'll be able to see, you know, my future husband. [laughing] You know? And, um, so, uh, th—that's how it worked out. I gu—I applied many, many different places. But I was always looking for something in Texas.

CJ: Oh, did you have something?

SA: [overlapping] No. No. No.

CJ: [overlapping] Okay. So what brought your husband to Houston?

SA: My husband came to Houston at University of Houston.

CJ: Oh.

SA: And his older brother came to Texas A&M. So, he brought him. At that time, he finished his PhD, he was working at, uh, Medical Center, his older brother. And, so he want to come, and so he arranged everything for him. So he came. And then, so when he came, he could've been—we were not married, you know? And we didn't know whether we would be able to marry each other or not. [laughs] So—so he came to University of Houston, and he did his MBA from there.

Actually, it's—it's like it's, um, always somebody have to pull another person up. You know? That's how it—it was, you know. Family member or friend. So as a matter of fact that my commitment, you know like when my—my husband's brother, you know, when I came, uh, he was actually, um—he went back. And he was the professor in biochemistry department where I was doing research. And so when my family was bugging me to marry now, at later part that, you know, “You already finished your master's degree while working as a research assistant. Now you can marry!” Then I had to come to my brother and tell him, “I'm going to marry only your brother. You have to go do something with my family!” So, he's the one who arranged everything. You know, so [laughs] all this to get detour [laughing], you know?

So—so finally, formally, you know, my in-laws had to go to my family to make things happen. And—but only way it can happen over the phone. 'Cause, you know, I already got assistantship from Texas Woman's university, but they would not let me go there. So his family have to take the initiative to arrange the engagement and then marriage over the phone, and then, again. It's—it's [laughs]—I know it's like not normal! [SA and CJ laugh] But there are so many ways you can do things, you know, so I didn't have to do any—But I had to get dressed for my family—uh, for my in-laws, but my husband, he had his sleeping gown. Because, you just—time difference, he was sleeping and calling and say, “Yes, I want to marry her.” You know? [laughs] But I had to get dressed for his family.

CJ: Do you remember if there was a, uh—a big Asian American presence at Texas Woman's University at the time?

SA: Oh, oh, okay. There—I would say that not from South Asian side, but the Asian, Oriental. You know? We had, my Lil Hali (?), my best friend, she's from Korea, Seoul, Korea, where I learned how to eat kimchi. And then I had friend from Taiwan, and I had friend from Malaysia, and I had friend from Indonesia, and I had two friends from Pakistan and India. Yeah, yeah. So, it—its—it's ac—actually, Texas Woman's University, I think, gave more, uh, exposure to the Oriental student and South Asian student from '60s, you know. Yeah. I would say '50s and '60s. So it has started, you know, like that.

[0:25:25]

CJ: So, you came to Houston in '74, is that right?

SA: Yeah, I—I came. I landed here, I was just telling, last week, when I saw that big Asiana plane crash in San Francisco, that's where I landed first, in San Francisco airport. And I came through—um, I took Japan airline. So the time was so short for me, I wanted to gain a day. And, uh, because last date of admission was January 30th, so I came through Bangkok, Japan, San Francisco, San Antonio, and Houston. Yeah, so this is it. And—and that gave me extra day that, you know, I—I registered late registration, January 30th. I remember. Otherwise I would not, you know—I was almost a—hopefully that every thing works out. [SA and CJ laugh] Yeah.

CJ: So, when you came to Houston, did you move in with your husband, or did you live in an apartment?

SA: Oh, okay, from Denton to Houston?

CJ: Mm-hmm.

SA: Yeah, see, my husband was always here, and then, my husband is always very funny. He said, "Denton? Only two—Woman's University and only funeral homes. That's all. And nothing else." And he doesn't want—he never wanted to move to Hou—Denton. And he said Houston is so much, weather-wise, everything is very close to like Bangladesh. It rains and it floods, you know, everything, and also very tropical-type, you know? So, he want—he never wanted to leave Houston. So, I had to move to Houston. Yeah.

CJ: Um, and so, what neighborhood did you guys live in?

SA: Okay, when we first came, we lived in, called Bessel (?) next—near, uh, Hermann Park. It's now parking lot. Yeah—and, uh—so, we had an incident there, too. It's—my life is—I never had a dull moment. [CJ laughs] When we're living there, first neighborhood, first apartment we got, right? And I used to work at Methodist Hospital and Dr. Michael DeBakey, I be—became very close relationship with him that he had a program that he used to do open heart surgery for people from developing countries who couldn't afford the medical care. So, at that time, we used to have a bunch of Indian people, you know, came. So, that time, also, I had—I had, um, a patient, his uncle, and they were living with me, and he was Dr. DeBakey's patient. And so DeBakey used to release the patient, but then, mandatory one month checkup. That you have to stay here, somehow. You know, we accommodate everybody then, um, for final checkup. Because at that time, the medical facilities also (?) India was not that good, so people used to come here.

So, one incident is that the—the guy, the fellow, he got released, and he stayed with me for a month. And the day he said—the day he would leave, previous night, that we are just helping him to pack and everything. And somehow, some people, you know, bust into our apartment with gunpoint, [laughing] and then they did the gunpoint robbery, and then hit me and him, and then—but nobody died, you know. So, I had, like, all this—all this [laughing] excitement, okay?

So he—so it is like, um—we lived in that not Bessel (?), near Medical Center Area. So we

immediately moved out, that's the main—I wanted to make that a story, okay? But it was—it was very close, convenient that you could easily ride to shuttle to the Medical Center and downtown. My husband was working at Vinson & Elkins. He could—he could, you know, go easily to downtown. And we just wanted to very close to our area. But that incidence, you know, prompted us to move out from that area. That was a gunpoint robbery. [SA and CJ laugh] It's not a single dull moment. Yeah, okay.

CJ: And so where'd you move to, from that neighborhood?

SA: From—from that neighborhood, then, uh, close by. Okay, we—we went from there to another apartment complex. It's shut down now called Smith Square. I don't see it anything—off of Fannin and someplace. Then from there, we went to, um, towards NASA area, southeast. And, uh, it's like, Fuque, Almeda, I-45 South. And we've been there ever since that—that side of the town. Yeah, so ...

[0:30:24]

CJ: Do you remember, um, how much the rent was at Smith Square, by any chance?

SA: Uh, about ... the first one was ... I think \$65 per month or something. That other one was—I would say, not more than 145 or something like that. I can verify. My—my husband is accountant, so he's supposed to remember all those things. [SA and CJ laugh]

CJ: How would you say that Houston's changed since you've been here, over the years?

SA: Oh my God. Tremendously. It has changed for the better. I will say that it's—it—it—it is such a welcoming atmosphere that people really move from LA or New York to here because of the cost of living is cheap. Only thing that in Houston disadvantage is that right now we are going there with Metro and everything, but always, um, you know, um, you have to have personal transportation. You do not, you know—you—you know, so city was not, like, built that way. And, other than that, still people can afford car and insurance and live very comfortably in Houston rather than in New York or Los Angeles, you know.

So—so I personally know lot of friends and relatives. My house was just like a, you know, you know, you say the halfway house? [laughs] You know? People always coming. Interesting thing is that I lived in one address for 34 years, and two years ago, I changed. And lot of people say that, “You see, you do not have right to change that address because that is our permanent address.” [CJ laughs] So everybody had that address, my friends and relatives, and, you know, nieces, nephews, cousins, anybody came to United States. My, you know, address, 10010 Carcaspen (?) Dr. was the, for 30, 40 years, you know? [laughs] For permanent address for many people.

So, actually, Houston, I will say that, you can see always, it's a very tolerant city, where I have seen, you know, right after 9-11 also. I did, uh, many, many, many, many program, many panel discussion right after 9-11. And I still see that, you know, Houston is most tolerant city. Even though sometimes a lot of things happen, lot of, uh, educational things we do, we cannot change people mindset. You can put policy, laws, and everything. But Houston, I think, is there where—when law, before law changes, mindset can change. You know? And I did a presentation at U of H social studies

graduate program. I think that my presentation topic was that “How Terrorists Hijacked My Life,” you know? So, we—we did lot of panel discussion, lot of things. In many churches, synagogue, city hall, you know, uh, community centers, you know, just to bring the, you know, sanity back. And—and Houston was very good at it.

CJ: So that topic that you mentioned that you gave the lecture on, that sounded really interesting.

SA: Mm-hmm.

CJ: Could you tell us a little about that, what the subject matter was? What your—?

SA: “How Terrorists Hijacked My Life”?

CJ: Yes, ma’am.

SA: Exactly the—the reason it is—it is, you know, first of all, the people, as I said that law and mindset. You know, just right now, what? Last week? Supreme Court passed the, uh, gay marriage right, right? It’s law. But how another person is going to look at a gay person and react, that is two different things. So, law and mindset doesn’t come parallel. The reason I did that presentation that I can tell many things that—mayor can do that, okay. We have police every neighborhood. But, am I, you know, do you think that I have the power to see everybody’s mind that how that person is going to react unless I personally show that as a Muslim woman or as a Muslim man that, you know, I—you know, I’m not in—um, what do you call, um, hijacker? Or I’m not in Taliban. I’m not, uh, going to hit you.

[0:35:17]

Like the young man who is—who he appeared in the court yesterday, um, from Boston Marathon hijacking, right? Um, Boston Marathon, uh, killing, bomb, shooting. He—what about the message he wrote on the board that United States people are killing all Muslim people without any reason and this is his way of taking revenge? Even though he said that he did not want to do or kill innocent people. How do you analyze that? How do you analyze that? By looking at it, everybody was fond of this young fellow, right? Nobody said a bad thing about that. And he really—for him, he really disappointed so many people.

Similarly, let me give you an example, that when, um, first Gulf War started and the older Bush was the President and I was in Soviet Union and I was trying to come that day, and then, when I came to the Moscow airport, they said “Okay, war’s started. Pan American Airline is not available, and you have to go to Germany, through Aeroflot, and then try to come back to United States.” Okay, war’s started there. I came home, and just like that, um, in our neighborhood, the people know we are Muslim. Okay?

So I remember after I came back, the next day, I had my evening class. And across the street, the gentleman lives whose first name is Mike. And, I came. I reached home after my—teaching my graduate class by 8:45. And I saw that, um, as soon as I got in, I see that Mike is there, and my husband

is shaking. He's a diabetic. And I—I was asking that, "What happened?" And my husband said that Mike has wanted to hit me because I'm a Muslim and that we started the war. So, I just told Mike to leave, and then we had other very good neighbors that aided (?) from that one side, and—and two other people that I called.

And, um, for him, that—he doesn't even know that I'm not Arab. He doesn't know I'm not Indian. I'm not Hindu. I'm Muslim. All he knows that, for him, all Muslims are Arab. All our people are bad. So, all these neighbor talked to him. Okay? But the—that night, we solved the problem, we called the sheriff department, and I did not want to bring any charge. I said, "You're going to take him now. You're going to release him tomorrow morning." "Then, what he's going to do to us?" "No, I'm going to talk to him everyday and see that I can clarify that."

One week later, my son was, what? 6 years old? 7, yeah, he was in first grade, I think. He came back, he said, "Mommy, can I change my name? I want to [laughing] make my name, um, Warren Moon." I said, "Why?" You know, the quarterback Warren Moon for Houston Oilers. I said, "Why, you know, you want to change your name?" He said, "No, no, no. I want to change my name to Warren Moon." I said, "Sit down. What is happening? Why want to change your name? Your name is Mehran, it means 'love and blessings from God.'" He said Big Mike told Little Mike, his son, to tell all the children to call him Saddam Hussein and not to play with him.

So instead of he being small, he took it—come up with a solution, right? He thought that if he changed his name, "Warren Moon," the quarterback for Oiler, [laughing] everybody's going to like him. I said, "No, you are going to keep your name." And, next morning, I went to his school and talked to his counselor, and talked to him again. And I said that, you know, "I'll be with you when you when you play, but you keep your identity. You don't have to change anything. You are fine, and they're fine, but they just need to understand who you are." So that's why that I chose that "How Terrorists Hijacked My Life". There are many, many incidents like that. And those things happens in silence.

[0:40:17]

MH: Oh, yeah. Um, so you mentioned that you traveled a lot to different countries.

SA: Mm-hmm.

SA: And I was just wondering was it because of, um, conferences, or related to your work, or was it more like traveling—?

SA: Everything was related. [laughing] I'm poor then. I'm still poor, but every—everything was paid for because my NASA project. It's very interesting that, uh, NASA, when—I did my PhD in NASA Skylab, but then I did fellowship. And fellowship is like, American Society for Engineering Education program NASA has. And they used to give summer program, uh, summer fellowship program. So I wanted to do some research work, and one of my, uh, real dream was to go to Soviet Union and study cosmonaut. So, I wrote a concept paper for \$30,000, and gave a title that "International Food Pattern for International Space Explorer." And when I submitted to EOC Office NASA, they loved it so much, not only they funded for that \$35,000, it ended up 5—over \$500,000 project to go to all those countries to study about the space program.

So—so I had many students did master's you know on that. Like, we—we—we—my idea was that food is a common denominator. And, you know, when you put food, you can resolve many issues. And also, those international space explorer also have to know their requirement and their need, as well as the astronaut from here. And same information you can apply in the therapeutic purpose in the hospital. What—you know, the outcome of those results, uh, now we do. We—we, you know, um—we do like, um, uh, in the health program that, uh, intercultural dietary habit, you know, religion, values, social customs, everything plays important role for a diet. So ... [indistinguishable]

CJ: [clears throat] So, what was your first job in the US?

SA: Oh, oh, my first job was in—at Flow Memorial Hospital as a—a—as a dietary assistant, you know, taking the tray to the people. Yeah. I had an incident that when I took my first tray, the man was dead! [CJ and SA laugh] So, it was the lowest. Actually, one of my, uh, fellow student, she was a diet—clinical dietitian there, so I was bugging her to death. I said, “I just—you know—I’m I’m student, but I wanted to work!” And she says, “Selina, there’s one—one job I think I can right now find, but you have to go, like, 5:30 in the morning.” I said, “I don’t mind. You know, I’ll go.” And then I started that as a Flow Memorial Hospital as a dietary technician, you know, so dietary assistant, and—and from that job, it’s minimum wage. Yeah.

But I—I had fun! [laughing] I learned so many things from them. I—I wanted to see the system, you know. Just like, you know, I came from another country, I do not know hospitals. All my knowledge was theoretical. So I—and here, students when I’ve been teaching the last, you know, 38 years, I see how we send our students for practicum, but I had all the theoretical knowledge. I never had any practicum—practicum experience. Similarly, when I started having children and sending them to school, before I send them to school, I really bought all the books and studied that how my children will be taught. I wanted to see that, how the system works.

CJ: And so, a little bit before you mentioned that, um, in your apartment you had relatives and friends that came over.

SA: Mm-hmm.

CJ: So, um, when did they all come to US? Was it sort of in waves, or was it one by one or, um ...?

SA: Uh, sometimes one by one, sometimes, you know, his brother, my brother, my sister, you know, his nephew, my nephew, or friend’s son. One of my friend’s son has stayed with me two years. All my children—he had that—the best part of that my children never grew up that everything is mine and mine. Sometimes they didn’t even have pillow because they had to share their bedroom with somebody else, you know. So it’s just like, you know, you—you do things for other people and always that. Always that. And my husband is that way too, so, you know, we ne—we never had okay everything have to be just museum, you know. It’s a very comfortable living. Everybody—we felt like that we are so blessed that we have to give another person, you know, head start. And if I can give you the ball, you know how to run with it. This is good that you run with it, you know.

CJ: Um, and so what did you do after that, um, being a dietary technician that is?

SA: Oh, then—then, um, my husband used to work for Vinson & Elkins law firm. He was an accountant. And the founder of Methodist Hospital, um, he, uh—Mr. Al Frank Smith, his father was the founder of Methodist Hospital. So Mr. Al Frank Smith had, you know, talk to the one, my husband and heard that—that I’m studying. And I couldn’t believe that six months before I finished my, um, degree, they flew me in from Denton to Houston Methodist Hospital just for an interview. And then six months later, I have a job. You know so, I fell lucky that—and he always wanted me to work there. He was very nice person.

When I changed from Methodist to, um, Texas Southern University he used to call me then, “Honey, do you get enough money? You know, and paym—you know?” And—and I—I used to do—I said, “No, not enough, but I want to teach.” You know? And—and then I’m glad that I made that decision. I see at the institution I’m in, I can make a change in people’s life. And um, I—everyday, everyday I see that. When I go home every day, I always ask myself a question. “What have I done today to improve somebody’s life?” And I have a school here and that gave me a platform to do many things locally.

As you know, I became the director for Mickey Leland Center when Mickey died. You know, Mickey Leland, um, Congressman Mickey Leland was my very good friend. So after he died in Ethiopia, that our—I became the second director for the center here. And I think I ran for four, five years as a director. And, um, so Mickey Leland Center on War, Hunger and Peace is just like, almost like Baker Institute, you know. And that has plenty of opportunity do things globally you know.

[0:47:43]

CJ: Um, so how did you first become interested in human nutrition as like a—um, as a career field, as an area of studies?

SA: [overlapping] As a career field. Well, uh, back home I studied like home economics—

CJ: Mm-hmm.

SA: —and—and nutrition was a subject. You know, you have like family, child development, art, interior design, clothing and textile. And, so, uh, I like chemistry, biochemistry and nutria—you know, those are the byproduct of, you know—nutrition is the byproduct of the biochemistry, and—and I enjoyed that. You know so ... as—as—also I wanted be a doctor, you remember ? [SA and CJ laugh] So I couldn’t be a doctor, you know? So it is close to that, you know, medic, paramedical, medical field, yeah. Yeah.

CJ: Um, so on your questionnaire form you said that you’re a member of the Asia Society Texas Center, is that right?

SA: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

CJ: Um, so can you tell us about your involvement in the organization?

SA: Oh, see, uh, every, um, big state has Asia Society. And, um, Asia Society Texas Center is, um, just recently that they're—they build that new building and everything and it gives you scope for cultural exchange to many things, you know, business opportunity, you know. So that's why I'm on the advisory board. Yeah.

CJ: And, so how long have you been with that organization?

SA: Oh, many years I think. Seven, eight, 10 years something like yeah. I—I was member of many, many organizations. So recently, you know, um, with my husband's illness that I got out from many, but I still—I'm a member of this. But I used to be member of Spaulding For Children. And I was the, um, um, member for advisory board for KidCare. You know it's no long—I think it's—it's smaller ways now to change. And then, um, I'm life member and the board member for the Bangladesh Association. And, um, there—of course there's professional organization we have like all those others, you know, but the're like community thing. And, uh, Asia Society Center that, uh, it gives me, you know, scope to, you know, whole Asia-wise, you know, as a continent, you know, there are many things, you know. And also I'm a part of resource (?) organization called—they do also the educational, uh, thing. And, uh, we—I got into this with that also, um—the first person in, from my country to get Nobel Peace Prize was Dr. Mohammad Yunus. And, uh, he also is on the advisory board for resource (?) who does educational, uh, thing globally.

MH: Um, you just mentioned that you were studying home economics back in Bangladesh.

SA: Mm-hmm.

MH: And I was wondering was it common for a woman back then to study home economics?

SA: We just—at that time that home economics college, I was the second batch of the home economics college. So—so it was just like, um, a privilege, you know, for many people to go to that fashionable home edu—[laughs] you know. It was, uh, founded by Ford Foundation from here. In '60s Ford Foundation had done many, many things. United States had done many, many things for developing countries. So at that time East Pakistan, West Pakistan—I think West Pakistan had two home economics colleges and East Pakistan, we had one. And, um, lots of my professor, they came to Oklahoma State University and got the training. And that's why my dream was American Miss (?) Oklahoma. I wanted to come Oklahoma, but when I came 1971, my husband took me to Oklahoma, Stillwater I said I don't want to go back there again. [laughs] It's just university. It is small, you know? Yeah. So, um, yeah, it is—it is really a—like everybody's wish list to wanted to study in home economics college.

[0:51:59]

MH: So—and you also mentioned that it was impossible for you to pursue a medical career back then?

SA: Yeah. It was like—like family decision at the time. Remember that they wanted me to marry, you

know. So it's just like, "Oh, you know, then you go to college. You know, you just get your education by the time you get married have family." But they're no—you know, majority of the time that that is—was the—the motto of the family. But now, I see that there is a paradigm shift in every society. You know, now that they really like to see that their girls get whatever, you know, they wanted to study, if possible, you know. They will provide that, um, support.

But also, for my family, that [phone rings] I got the support. But, um, [phone ringing].... My family, um, no different than that, you know, "Yes you're going to." Nobody thought—nobody was, uh, having vision that okay you get the girl's education and then they—they wish to, uh, you know, uh, the political figure or anything that non-political (?) sir (?), like you now. They—yes, they became doctor. Now they can—more people are becoming engineers, pilot, but of course teaching position.

In my family, majority of us are teachers. My—two of my aunts are college professor. All my brother-in-laws are college professor. My older brother used to be college professor. My middle, uh older than me—my, um, middle sister she's a school teacher, you know—was school teacher. So everybody. My brother-in-law, Wisconsin he's a college professor. So it's just we are in education, you know. [Laughs] Every—majority of the people, but their children, their children now they're more doctors, engineers. Like my two daughters, they are, uh, one is chemical engineer. One is, uh, electrical engineer. And my son, uh, he is finishing his, uh, PhD, uh, in, um, health education and education leadership. And, uh, he is teaching in middle school now. But right now he's in Tanzania teaching in an orphanage. [Laughs] Yeah. So ... and then he—before he left, he broke his ACL, and when he come back he's going to have the surgery. He's a Denver, um, rugby team captain. Yeah, so this is a ... but—but he's going to be in teaching it looks like me, you know. [Laughs] Yeah, so.

MH: Uh, you mentioned that you moved from Methodist to TSU.

SA: Mm-hmm.

MH: And you said it was because of your passion for education.

SA: Mm-hmm.

MH: And I was just wondering is it also related to your family background?

SA: Somehow, you know. I—and—and actually, when I was doing my fellowship I got the opportunity to get different kind of position at NASA. And somehow what I felt also Okay, my husband he's a CPA dealing taxes, and he has like—he doesn't even know me or anybody, you know? Then children, if I—I have family I have to give them the best. And if I have different kind of profession, would I be able to give sufficient quality time to them, you know? Even in—I'm, uh—though I'm here I could manage better. I could—I never wanted to miss their PTA meeting. I took them to, you know, little Pee-Wee, little, um, you know, baseball practice to swimming to dance lesson to everything that I always wanted to be part of their life, you know. And I know that other profession there is no.

[0:55:56]

And—and—and tell—let me tell you the little secret about me that secretly that I applied to become the astronaut because they asked me. And so I just could not pursue about that. Because I saw that my husband is the best man in the whole world, but, you know, I don't think so that it would be possible for him to raise three kids if anything happened or, you know, during training. So I kind of lingered the process. And at one point they say that, you know, you have allergy or—or asthma type of thing, they go and get the treatment. I kept that application alive for so long, you know. But, you know, it's just my dream that I wanted to, you know, become an astronaut. But then, even my daughter wrote me beautiful letter. "Mommy don't worry about us" and everything. you know. "It's, uh, your mission, your dream to fulfill." But I never could compromise myself that I get only one chance to raise them. I—still I feel like maybe I have not done enough for them you know.

But astronaut training because I did four fellowship at NASA, so I knew that how intense it was and how, you know, it will take you more than 100% time away from your—us family. Yeah, so I could—I had to just ... My app—my application is maybe still there. I don't know. [laughs] So it's gonna be for the senior citizen you know. But it was my dream, you know, just, yeah. I—I'll—there—there is a reason also.

When Neil Armstrong and—and Buzz, uh, Aldrin they came, you know, out from, um, moon they made a trip to all over the world. And at that time we were East Pakistan. And Neil Armstrong, Collins and—and those three people had gone to East Pakistan. The day they were taking a tour with the open car, thousands of thousands of people went there. And I told my cousin, my uncle, "Let's go and shake hand with them." They say, "You crazy?" So I left everybody. I came by myself. I had to climb the tree with my traditional sari and shook hand with Neil Armstrong and went home and told them. And they started teasing me. "Don't wash your hand." [laughs] And I didn't.

So, when I was doing the fellowship at NASA, the same place they were in quarantine after coming back from space they used to be in quarantine. There was my office. They changed that to office, you know, in—in ages. And I was hearing all the stories about, you know, so I felt so fascinated. Then I said maybe this is my call you know that I wanted to apply. 'Cause those are like one of those things, [laughs] yeah, so.

CJ: Um, so you've been a professor at TSU for quite some time. How has your experience been?

SA: I ... let—let me tell you [laughing] the truth that I wanted to leave several times, but I couldn't leave. Because it—my experience, you know, it—every, you know, workplace has certain issues, you know? And finally, I felt that wherever you go there will be different issues, but why don't I stay where I am. I learned now experience to deal with the issues right? And, you know, I felt that I get more benefit than the—those issues were insignificant.

I think again it's your mind, your maturity, how you look at things. You know? And I think I have more scope and my life is more fulfilled being here to help out people than anywhere else I could have been, you know. I think it enriched me more being here. I have wonderful colleagues and friends. I have a colleague she's now 86 years old. And she doesn't have any children or anything. And she—my children are her grandchildren, and my son is her son. And I used to travel a lot and she used to threaten me that if you travel one more time, I'm going to get a black woman for my son. You know, so that close we are, you know. I'm—I'm like—it's just like family. It's like extended family.

My students are like that way, too, you know. So I get students from, you know—I had

mainland China, Korean, uh, Indian, um, Caribbean, African American, you know, Hispanic. But I look at the children. These are all my children, you know. So when—whenever my children were little I used to tell them, I said, “Don’t you think you three are only I have. I have hundreds of academic children that I take care of every day.” [laughs]

[1:01:32]

So there’s, uh, and then my African American—that those Nigerian students—at one point we used to have a lot of Nigerian students and also lot of Iranian student. So really, last 38 years that I got like people from all over the world. And that is the best experience in life you can get that getting to know another person from another language, another culture, another religious background, but then our common goal is the same thing that education and how you do good for the other people.

CJ: Um, that was an interesting segue. So you mentioned languages just then.

SA: Mm-hmm.

CJ: Um, and I saw in your questionnaire form that you said you speak English, Hindi, Urdu.

SA: Mm-hmm.

CJ: Um, so what language do you speak at home or with your children, with your husband?

SA: Oh Bengali.

CJ: Bengali. Okay.

SA: Bengali. Bengali. Uh, you know uh, Rabindranath Tagore got the, in literature Nobel Prize in 1930, I think. And the most widely spoken language in Bengali. So I write my poem. I’m—I write poetry and uh, so—in my language, yeah. And I—I, you know—our poetry club, I translated some. [CJ and SA laugh]

MH: So did you publish any of them or ...?

SA: Not yet. I—I have to do it, you know. Last year, I—I wrote like 35. I—I have to find some of them. Um, actually like, uh, uh, two—four months ago that I was called for federal jury duty. And eight hours nothing to do, you know. So I wrote a poem in the balcony of judgment. [laughs] Uh, so, what else I can. I didn’t have anybody’s I saw a student. She was a nursing student in the pool. She was studying. I said, “You are smart. Just give me some pieces of paper. ” ‘Cause she saw me. My—I have like notepad like this writing. She said, “What are you doing?” I said, “I’m writing poem.” She said you know, “Take some paper from me.” So [laughs] yeah it’s—it’s—it’s like, you know.

See Urdu—when it was East Pakistan and West Pakistan, so Urdu was one of the language. And Hindi, if you understand Urdu and Bengali, it’s a Sanskrit, um, originated, so you can understand

Hindi. But I cannot read and write Urdu or Hindi. I can only speak. Bengali, read, write everything. And—and then interesting thing is our holy book is in Arabic right? Quran, you know, I have my Quran up here, uh, somewhere I think. Oh, up there. This is Arabic. I can read the whole Arabic—whole Quran, but I do not understand a single word. You see, uh, I can read and it—it goes from here [points the upper right corner of the page] this way ‘cause we are taught to read. But now, I read the translation of, uh, it in Bengali or English to understand that what I’m reading. But I can read, you know, like it—it right now Ramadan the—I’m fasting as of yesterday. And we must finish at least once the holy book. And I can read fast, but not knowing what I’m reading, [laughs] you know.

[1:05:05]

Yeah so that’s why I don’t put Arabic. Because if you ask me to read Arabic, I’ll be able to read, but I’ll not be able to interpret it I think. But because the way it is, you know, those days that you must learn how to read your holy book, so somebody would teach you how to read.

MH: So you just mentioned that you’re fasting right now on Ramadan.

SA: Mm-hmm.

MH: Now I’m just wondering, um, are you doing it with your whole family? Are your children doing it with you?

SA: Um, my husband you know, he is, uh, uh, health compromise. So what we do for him and for my mother-in-law also—she’s old, 98 years old. We—we pair like one month a person can, uh, relatively have decent meal for three meal that amount of money to a poor person for—as a substitution for his fasting. Because in also according to religion if you’re unhealthy, you should not be fasting. It has lot of flexibility. But an able body should fast, so my children when they’re with me, they used to, but I do not know what they do now. [laughs] They must be eating hamburger now. [CJ and SA laugh]

So but they know, you know. I mean like we were like that way too, we never—when we were young, you know, when people get older, they tend to be more, becoming more religious, you know. Yeah so. Yeah so I—you know, I—I do it, you know. Some times I do it—we do it optionally. Sometimes like my children already knows that when they have major exam or something, “Mommy I have exam. You—can you fast?” [CJ and SA laugh] So I used to do that for them too. Like one week ago that my youngest daughter—uh, her husband is John. John’s brother-in-law had a major surgery. It’s on the pituitary gland here the tumor. So it was big, big surgery. So for JP—for JP I did fast, you know. Prayed—of course, we pray five times a day and then that is, you know, granted. But in addition I—I fasted for him for his speedy recovery, you know. So, [laughs] you know, yeah. So it’s just like those things that you do, yeah.

MH: And also that do you keep any cultural or religious, um, customs and traditions in your family?

SA: Oh yeah, all the time, yeah mm-hmm. Like, for example, you know, we do celebrate our religious festival. This one is after one month fasting that, you know, we celebrate. You know, we exchange gifts

and everything. And we do the—oh we do Christmas time too. And then, um, also, um, our—we have two religious festivals and this (?) is (?) two and half months later that pilgrimage that, you know, that there's another—another Eid celebration. And we do everything, but both of my daughters married here. And their husband—uh, Cliff is from here. Oh my son and daughters are also born citizen here. So they're all American, just coming from different ethnic background, you know. And so our—oh, in our house everything is just like we look at it equally to everybody. So it's, you know, uh, I practice, but, you know, my husband, you know, like, yeah, if he feels good we will go to sometime Friday, uh, afternoon prayer. But, you know, he is not hard on fast that, you know. He—you know, if he doesn't pray five times he's going to go to hell, he doesn't believe in that, you know. So he's, you know, very and—and also part the children, we always taught them to respect, you know, people race, color, creed, religion become a good person and good human being. That's what our role model is, yeah.

CJ: Um, have you ever gone back to Bangladesh at any point in time?

SA: I have. All of—I mean permanently?

CJ: Um, just to visit.

SA: Oh oh, visit—

CJ: Yeah.

SA: We visit a lot, you know? I mean I used to take my children every two years when they're little just to see where they came from. But when they got bigger, I couldn't afford it because it's a lot of expense, you know. But then, we took a family trip 2003, uh, all of us, five of us. You know, it is very expensive, but then, uh—then my husband and I used to go. And 2010 my youngest daughter with her husband John and my son we took a trip. But I—I cannot take my husband anymore because he's an dialysis patient and, um, we have medical system dialysis back home, but the problem is that, uh, its sterilization is not that as good as here. And you may get secondary infection from the dialysis. You don't die from the dialysis, but you die hepatitis and jaundice and other stuff, you know. So it is not—it is very crucial for him to travel. We travel all over the United States. He can travel for four days. And, um, he doesn't even want to try within United State. Forget about going to Bangladesh. [laughs] You know, so he doesn't want to travel. Yeah.

[1:10:19]

MH: You mentioned that you speak Bengali in your family.

SA: Mm-hmm.

MH: Um, does your children speak any other languages like Hindi or Urdu?

SA: They—oh, for—for Bollywood, they understand the Hindi I guess. You know, they—they'll watch

sometimes all those movies. They can figure it out. But they—they understand, uh, Bengali very good, yeah. Because my youngest daughter, uh, she—uh, after she finished high school, she went to work for Gramin Bank back home in Bangladesh with Dr. Yunus. And so she stayed there, you know, three months. Then later on also she did an uh, fellowship with national democratic party from there. She got another fellowship to go to United States embassy in Bangladesh. So she did that.

And my oldest daughter, maybe she understand more Hindi because also they're—as I said both of them are classical dancer. This is my youngest daughter. [Points to a photo] I re—you know, it happens to be here somebody brought, uh, took it, you know. So she also, uh, a classical dancer and, uh, she understand Hindi language also. So they—I don't know whether they can speak, but they can speak Bengali. Yeah. I don't think they can read and write. We started it's too much. They took Spanish. You know, they—you know, all kinds of things that are necessary.

Like when I finish my PhD, they told me that I have to have two foreign languages. So I said English is my foreign language one and I got by with that one. Then I had to—I didn't take Spanish that time. I didn't realize that I'm going to stay here. I took French. But for my travel, I studied Russian. For my research I studied Russian languages—and Russian language and Japanese. [phone rings] But I'm not fluent at all. Sorry.

CJ: Um, so what do you like to do in your free time?

SA: It—which way did you come? This way or that way?

CJ: Uh, we came ...

SA: You see a garden up there? Oh, I'll show you the garden. Okay. I—I have lots of community garden. And—and I just also like move from one house to another house two years ago. My old house had sugarcane to tangerine to everything. But so I'm working on my new house to build my garden now. I miss my garden, you know. [CJ laughs] So but—but I have here, um, the community garden and those, uh, children are small. Let me see that if I I do not know whether I have the picture for the garden, but these are small children who works with me. These are, uh, the ochar—I actually founded an organi—conference here, um, uh, childhood obesity conference, and this is 10th year. And, um, so, yeah, you can see one. [Hands the album] But these are the children. They come and plant the garden with me, and they also harvest. Oh, I have here. Oh, okay.

Uh, so right now my passion is the childhood obesity. So this is my 10th year of annual conference. I have founded this conference. And, um, we did many, many seminar like prevention is better than cure. And we did, uh, community supported agriculture in the prevention of childhood obesity. That prompted me to have like five, six years ago creating this garden. Okay. I have here one, and two in Alabama. And—and it's we, [alert sound goes off] um, urban harvest. And uh—and I—my point is that when like young people like you already have different dietary habit. But when you start right here, they are so happy. They'll be walking through, "Ms. Ahmed I eat broccoli now." You know so—and they, you have, you know—they planted their carrots and everything. So [another alert sounds] okay I'll—I'll show you that, uh Let me see if I can. See this time that when we harvested all those young people 147 kids they—the motto was that we gave everybody what they planted, harvested, they took home and they created salad for their parents.

CJ: Aww. [laughs]

[1:15:00]

SA: So this is, uh ... everybody was children at some point. Oh, here is one of the garden I guess. See here is one of—is this, uh—I think here the garden. Okay. You know outside here, you know. All these. And then we have, um ... let's see. That the—the—the amount of vegetables we got, whole bunch of them, okay. See. And, um, so—so that is my passion.

And then of course [takes a deep breath] my biggest thing is that if I find a scope I really like to—I really like to [laughs] yeah—I really like to see that, um, how I can help people understand better each other, you know. Promoting better understanding. Now things are getting to a point I feel like that we need to do more education. At one point, I used to think that maybe we are okay, but I feel like that now we are going backward again. Maybe it is me. Mys—my way of observing things. I—I feel hopeful, but I think that more work needs to be done for promoting better understanding. That is really missing.

And I think how it—it becomes a problem I think when economy is bad. When your healthcare system is messed up. And, uh, you see the influx of now with the revelation of the, you know, immigration policy and all this. People tend to get nervous and then they started doing things wrong. How can we improve from that point, you know? See I'm going to go to conference in, um, Atlanta, uh, Labor Day weekend. And I'm doing like from the Medicare in my language, Obama's healthcare act, in my language, presenting that.

Then, um, I also worked as a visiting scientist at MD Anderson last four years with health disparity program. That also opened my eyes that much work needs to be done in the healthcare. So I gave a presentation last month, um, with the MD Anderson health disparity course. And oh God what was that? “Death, Dying, and the Impact in Healthcare” in cultural perspective? But on the bottom is that things happens in silence. There are so many things happens. It's just people do not know the sufferings of people.

And that, again it goes back to, even though we are living in America we have, um—I will say that from the—our say misinterpretation of Quran still makes Muslim women suffer. And also in the Asian community that suicide rate is very high. Our expectation is too high from the kids. All Asian parents, South Asian I know, Indian, if you are doctor, you are good. If you are lawyer, you're okay. If you are not doctor or lawyer nothing matters. So the kids started having Like and they go to Harvard, MIT, they make B and C. They commit suicide. I knew—here was an article few years ago I had and a Korean, uh, young woman committed suicide at Harvard University because she could not make all A. So, these are the things. There are many things like that.

And then also, in health care—we are also in (?) health disparity. Another thing's happening in our society that divorce—if you are divorced, you're no good. It's all girls' fault, right? I council many women and—and especially I can tell you one story that the lady I was counseling for two years and, um, one day she called me. And—and she said she—her husband came with the machete to chop her head off. And I gave her, you know, Houston Area Women's Center, and there's an organization called DAYA to do the counseling for her. And so I asked her children to call police. The police came. When police come, husband had to leave. And then four, five hours later, I call her again. I said how these things are now under control. And she was upset with me. She said she made a mistake talking to me.

And husband all got upset, and then now husband is depended (?) and brought some Chinese food and he's home with Chinese food. And then—then—then I told her. I said—so I said, “I don't want to see you in the evening news. Yes, if you can reconcile with your husband fine. But is it time yet? You understood?” And then repeated violence few months later again. You know, so how do you educate people to come off from the vicious cycle of domestic violence?

[1:21:06]

Then also, there is a young lady who killed her children, uh, from the post-delivery depression. In—in—that was in, um, not Austin. Where is it? It's, uh, near Fort Worth. Arlington, Texas. And then I had a friend whose daughter also suffered from post-delivery depression. And, um, doctor gave her medicine. Mother would not even tell father what was the medicine and forget about the sharing with the in-laws or the community. Because I saw the lady Thanksgiving night and then—um, no two days before Thanksgiving. And after the Thanksgiving night, Thursday, Friday night, she committed suicide by drinking uric acid. And nobody knew that she was given lithium. Only mother knew. But mother did not tell because she has other daughters. If people know something wrong in this family and they're taking depression medicine, you know, mental health case, they will not be able to marry their son and daughter.

So those are the stigma, mental health. So in health disparity program, all those things have an impact. That these are like pocketful (?) things. People do not know. People do not see, but in a smaller community those things are happening in silence. And the end result is that, you know, the—if they have—the family has children that young lady died, left two sons, you know. So—so there are a lot of consequences as a result of not having open dialogue, you know. And not even knowing that how and where you can seek the help from. So this is ...

CJ: Um, uh, so what would you say that, um—what would you say that has been your greatest accomplishment—greatest accomplishment in life so far?

SA: For me?

CJ: Yes, ma'am.

SA: Oh, say it again?

CJ: Oh, sorry. What would you consider to be your greatest accomplishment in life so far?

SA: For my life accomplishment. I—I feel like that I have not done anything yet. [CJ and SA laugh] Really, seriously I feel like that, as I ask myself, that have I done yet that you know. You know, I—I—I—every moment I get, you know, I feel like that, you know, have I done substantial things for people, you know? So I—I think that my greatest satisfaction is that I'm still able to understand people and help them according to their need without changing their, you know—I—I—I don't have any expectation from them and—and without being expecting anything from them, just being there for them and no matter what. Because my house is also an open house. There are, you know—people come

for treatment or, you know, seeking admission and help and everything. You know, it's financial thing yes. God has given me enough that I can share that. But personally, physically, if I can go and help physically for something for somebody that I feel good. So I try to help people, older people, uh, you know, small kids too, you know. In—interesting thing happens that don't as on family.

[1:24:52]

We went to a wedding reception last Saturday? I think it has several hundred people. So there's a young boy in the community like he's four, five years old. Wherever he sees me, he will come and talk to me. So in the gathering, [laughing] he lost his mom twice you know. [Laughs] And he and I—an old lady with sari and everything that I have to—with several hundred people that I was trying to find his mom. But then yesterday, they called me from the airport. They are going to, um, Saudi Arab to—for the pilgrimage. And so they are counseling their son, uh, “Arian that you remember you have to be with me and your dad all the time. There will be a hundreds and thousands of people.” And he said, “Oh so if I get lost—” actually I have a cat. That's how I think he loves me. I have a cat named Morgan. He said, “Oh, so don't worry if hundreds of people will be there, Morgan Auntie is going to be there too.” He call my cat name and call me Auntie Morgan Auntie. “Morgan Auntie is going to be there right? If I get lost, you know, she will find you for me.” [Laughs] Then the father and mother said, “No Morgan Auntie is not going to be with us, you know, so you have to be—” So he called from the airport and—and say hi. And said, “Why you are not with us? If I get lost how am I going to get my mom?” [laughs]

But, to answer your question, really seriously that wherever I'm needed, if I can do anything for people's need, I feel good because That brings my story that I had a best friend my daughter's, uh—my children's—my children and her children are friend—are still friend. But she died in a car accident several years ago. And at that time, we didn't know anybody that—who could religiously prepare the dead body for funeral. And I learned from her. I learned from—for her and did for her. And, I think that gave me the greatest satisfaction because the way Only, you know, before she died, few weeks before her death, we had a discussion about this. And then she told me that, “You need to learn. You never know who is going to die first. When I die, I would like for somebody to prepare my dead body in a Islamic religious way.” And when she died suddenly on NASA road highway 3, and I felt it was my responsibility fulfill her desire. And from that point on, last 12 years, I prepare the women's dead body in our community when they die. And so I did also presentation for hospice here “Death and Dying.” And, um, that those are the things that anybody needs me in their crucial time, if I can be any benefit to them that is my greatest satisfaction.

CJ: Is there anything else you wanted to ask or ...? [turns to MH]

MH: I think I'm good.

CJ: Yeah, I think we're all done here. Thanks so much for your time.

SA: Oh really. Okay so—so accomplish. If—if my husband's health becomes well again, you know. Right now I—actually like—and I want to retell (?) within next year or so. And my goal was to really

admit into medical school. But if my husband's health is, you know, it goes down, maybe I will not be able to, you know. But that was my—one of my unfulfilled desire and I [CJ and SA laugh] that I want to do for my brother. It should take me three years. Yeah.

[1:28:36]

End interview