

Interviewee: KAEMERZ PHIROZE DOTIWALA
Interviewers: RACHEL WONG (Senior); CHRIS JOHNSON (Junior)
Date/Time of Interview: June 23, 2014, at 10:00 AM
Transcribed by: RACHEL WONG; CHRIS JOHNSON
Audio Track Time: 1:16:23
Edited by: Anna Ta (May 19, 2017)

Background: Mr. Kaemerz Dotiwala was born and raised in Karachi, Pakistan. Following his pursuit of education, he left Karachi in 1970 to attend the University of Portland and subsequently, a graduate study at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. A long-time resident of Houston, Mr. Dotiwala came for an internship with the Protocol Office of the City of Houston in 1975 and instantly fell in love with the city. He is an active member of the Zoroastrian Community, having participated in the initial founding of the Zoroastrian Association of Houston (ZAH), which is a member of the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America, and as a Sunday school teacher at the ZAH. The current president of Q Environmental Inc., Mr. Dotiwala still resides in Houston. Mr. Dotiwala is married and together, he and his wife have two daughters.

Setting: Focusing loosely on the themes of labor and capital, the interview takes place in Mr. Dotiwala's office at his place of work. Particular emphasis is given to his occupational roles since coming to the U.S., and to Houston. In the audio, the low hum of an AC unit can be heard, and a telephone can intermittently be heard ringing as well. The interview is briefly paused around the 50-minute mark when a tray of snacks was brought in, and resumes afterward.

Interviewers: Rachel Wong is a senior at Rice University, majoring in Cognitive Sciences with a concentration in Neuroscience. Raised in the Metropolitan Washington D.C. area, she looks forward to returning west to her birth state of California.

Chris Johnson is a junior at Rice University, majoring in Linguistics. A Houstonian since childhood, having the opportunity to work with the HAAA project and learn about the city's lesser-known stories has been a particular source of interest for him.

Interview Transcript:

Key

RW Rachel Wong

CJ Chris Johnson

KD Kaemerz Dotiwala

— Abrupt stop, false start

... Speech trails off, pause

Italics Emphasis

(?) Preceding word may not be accurate

Brackets Actions (laughs, sighs, etc) or interview notes

CJ: This is Chris Johnson—

RW: —and Rachel Wong—

CJ: —and we're here today on June 23rd, 2014 in the office of Mr. Kaemerz Dotiwala to interview Mr. Kaemerz Dotiwala for the Houston Asian American Archive. Um so Mr. Dotiwala, could you start by telling us just a little bit about your childhood, maybe where you grew up at?

KD: Sure! I grew up in Karachi, Pakistan uh in uh... in Zoroastrian surroundings um it's uh our—our whole area consisted of coreligionists and co-community members. Um I was uh educated from my childhood at uh Catholic institutions uh 'til the last three years of my life where I—I went to uh, a Zoroastrian school. And... uh what else would you like to know?

CJ: Um, what was your family life like, who did you live with?

KD: Oh, I lived with my parents um I lived with my parents and our um aunts and uncles lived close by to us so we were always interacting with them. Um some of our aunts and uncles were within walking distance and some of them were within driving distance and my grandparents, uh, well uh I lost m—my father's father—I've never seen him because he passed away when my father was still a young boy. So, uh, never met him, but all my other grandparents, I was lucky enough to, to have interacted with them.

RW: Um, while you were growing up, can you tell us a little bit about what you enjoyed t—t—doing as a child? Like maybe some activities, your friends?

KD: Yes, I uh I actually I enjoyed reading a lot um uh, bu—but not uh—but more like mythology, fairy tales um and I was also interested in uh... in uh books on science, 'cause I liked to tinker with stuff from an early age, so um, uh that's the path I ended up following later on in life as well. Uh I enjoyed certain sports uh — Pakistan is famous for a certain sport called 'cricket,' but I didn't enjoy that one—I found it uh too boring. Uh I played—I played field hockey, rugby, uh I fenced and I rode, so I spent a lot of time doing all those various activities.

RW: Oh wow. That's quite a few activities.

KD: Sorry?

RW: That's quite a few activities!

KD: Yeah. Uh well, over a time period, b—a lot of those activities, I—I—I did uh like, from, 8th or 9th grade onwards. Yeah. Uh also, uh I was uh active in debates and elocution competitions uh which—which I won a few of and lost a few, so... so I spent some time doing that as well.

CJ: Um, you mentioned that [clears throat] for most of your childhood education, you attended a Catholic school, was that correct?

KD: Yes.

CJ: Um so could you tell us a bit about that, how that was?

KD: Uh it was very interesting, because uh Catholic school at that time period was supposed to be the best private schools there were, and so most parents endeavored to send their children to, to Catholic schools and that's one of the reasons why my parents—although it was quite a distance from, from—from my house to the school I went to uh and my dad, he used to drop me every morning. Initially, my dad only had a bicycle so I would—I would ride on the rod of the bicycle as a child, and um, he would drop—drop me to school and pick me up from school, and—and um, schooling for us was from 8 in the morning until 3:30 in the afternoon with a couple of breaks in- between.

RW: And what did your parents do for a living?

KD: Uh my mother was artistic by nature so she uh—she developed a—a business where uh there— there's a dress worn in India, Pakistan, South Asian countries called a 'sari.' And so she designed saris and—and she had those embroidered, so we had a lot of people working at our place with—with the embroidery work. And she was considered uh I mean, even today people from Pak—Karachi, Pakistan will tell you that her institution was considered one of the best places to get the saris done. So yeah. So, she—that's what she did. My dad was involved uh, uh as a manager at an automotive uh dealership. But uh over there, the dealership was a combination of dealership and parts...store. So, it was all about those things. (0:05:25)

RW: Can you tell us a little bit about um growing up with your parents? What was it like?

KD: Oh... great. I... have a lot of fond memories uh because uh they always encouraged us to do things we were interested in doing, and at—and at times um pushed us in the right direction. Uh... Looking at it now, because uh, for example, elocution, I was a very shy kid, and uh I wasn't comfortable initially going on stage and speaking. But today, I'm able to speak very comfortably uh make speeches etcetera, and I—I thank both of my parents because, my mother had—had the speaking ability, and my—my father was very good at writing, so a lot—most of my speeches uh in those days, were written by my father and—and I was trained by my mother. So, those—that—I was interested in swimming, and neither of them had ever swum before, but they, they encouraged me to go ahead and do that, and uh—and sent me to—to the right swimming pools and stuff, which helped me uh you know, gain my swimming strength, and swimming ability...and I competed in swimming as well.

CJ: Um so after your high school education um where'd you go to college at?

KD: I went to college initially in Pakistan; uh—because when you say 'high school', what you might mean by high school might be a little bit different than our high—what we call high school finished at the 10th grade. And then 11th and 12th was what was known as—in my case, because I took science, it was called inter-science, if it was art, it would be inter-arts, etcetera.

So, I took inter-science, and—and I went to... uh a college in Pakistan called D.J. Science College...and...then after that, I did my bachelor's in microbiology, biochemistry and botany from uh Karachi University, and...then I came to the United States where I... did my bachelor's in—in—in biological sciences from the University of Portland, but because I'd done part of it already, I was able to get it done in two years rather than the full four years.

RW: Did you enjoy it? At the University of Portland?

KD: Yes, it was—it was a brand-new experience for me, because our system of education was very different. Uh we were—ours was more... uh having to rote information to memory, and—and putting it back on paper during the exams, whilst this was more challenging, doing papers, doing original thinking. Um I had never done philosophy in my life uh and I remember uh the professor, uh Father Schultz, he basically uh used to tell us that it didn't matter whether we did—replied one question or replied all five questions that he put on the exam, it just depended on the content we gave him, and so, it—it stirred up my interest in philosophy and uh I still uh feel privileged that I had him as a professor; I thoroughly enjoyed that subject. Uh on the flip side, I took psychology, and I never liked—I mean, I thought I liked psychology, but after taking it, I...I don't like it! [KD, CJ, RW laugh]

RW: When you were...still in school, thinking about pursuing inter-science, were there any interests you wished you had pursued instead? (0:09:44)

KD: Uh no, because in—again, in Pakistan, when we reached the eighth grade uh we were sort of channeled by our own selves—in other words, we would let the school know whether we wanted—either into science, or uh pre-medical sciences, pre-engineering sciences, or... what they call as inter-commerce—so commerce, so people who would be taking accounting, arts, etcetera, would go into commerce. People who would be doing—going for premed, would go into the biological sciences, and people who were going in for engineering would go in for engineering sciences. So that's uh that's the stage that uh...the stage I decided I wanted to go in for biological sciences, yeah, cause uh I didn't enjoy math so I knew engineering wasn't for me, or—or accounting! But, yeah, later—later on uh in life, I—I—I did switch from—from, uh, doing, uh, premedical sciences, to uh—to uh the field of international relations and international law. Yeah... I—I—I competed and won uh quite a—a couple of prizes in the national science fair, so I was quite involved in science, [phone rings] and I thought that's what I wanted to make a future with. When I got an opportunity to see other subjects which were available over here, it kind of widened my horizons into other things which were of interest to me.

CJ: Um, so what made you want to apply to Portland University, specifically?

KD: Um I had applied to about, four or five schools, University of Nebraska uh University...uh Utah, and I was admitted to both of them, and University of Portland, and I just went to the counselor at the American embassy and I said, 'Well, which one should I accept?', and she said, 'Well, what—what are you looking for?' I said, I'd prefer a smaller school, because I'd been to...large schools, and so she suggested that university, and I don't regret going to it. ...By the

way, the University of Portland also had the winning...ladies' soccer uh... in the Olympics, but uh...I wasn't in school at that time. [RW and CJ laugh] It was much after my time.

CJ: Um and was it difficult for your parents, seeing you go overseas?

KD: I think so. I think so, because it was also quite expensive. Um our community uh did support us going abroad and so, we got loans, and grants, and scholarships and stuff like that, which allowed me to come and study over here, but it wasn't—the financial part wasn't an easy task, and I'm certain my parents sacrificed a lot for that.

RW: Um can you tell us a little bit about... the um culture change when you came—your first year, in Portland?

KD: Uh I was surprised that...uh...that people on weekends didn't want to do... stuff like going to—to a nightclub, or a disco, or dances—uh that's not what the, like the first weekend or something, when I asked the new friends that I had made, their main thing was they were going to get a few six-packs and get bombed. So uh that really surprised me, because I was expecting a lot more activity. Uh so um but then—then I found some other friends who were interested in other things. Uh but, so that—that was a surprise, but otherwise, culturally, uh...we were quite...our community, and therefore us, we were quite Westernized, we had interacted with Americans and Europeans in Pakistan for a long time period, and uh... uh it's—I can read, write and understand English, as opposed to, I can only—I can only understand and, speak my mother tongue, but I can't read or write it, so I was more fluent in English than I was... in the other languages. So, um, so—I—I don't think I had a—I had a big cultural clash as such. Um...nothing was another thing that uh, um initially, we were—we dressed up a little bit more, and then found that the students were more relaxed, so we were able to—to relax our dress—dress code, when going to class. And the other thing was that in, in class back home, there's a certain respect for the professors, uh where—where we will not put our legs on the—on the desk, or be eating or drinking in class. I saw that happening over here, which—which was different, but it didn't make a difference to me as such, yeah. (0:15:12)

RW: Going back a little bit um... you mentioned mother tongue, and um your survey said you speak...Gujarati?

KD: Right.

RW: Um... but to my knowledge, I thought Gujarati had an... Indian origin...

KD: That's correct.

RW: ...Pre-partition?

KD: That's correct.

RW: Um, but you grew up in post-partition...Pakistan.

KD: Yeah.

RW: How did you....your parents brought Gujarati over to...Karachi?

KD: Well, the-the whole community brought Gujarati over because uh... I don't know how much of the history of Zoroastrians you—you have studied or looked at...

RW: Not too much...

KD: Okay, well the Zoroastrians uh are a community which—which starts in ancient Persia...about three thousand years before Christ. And uh so we existed in Persia, and—and the Persian Empire spread from today's modern-day... uh certain parts of Pakistan, going up all the way to the Danube River. And uh but towards... towards the end of the empire, when the Arabs conquered Persia, the—the Zoroastrians— because we were the enemies of the Arabs—the Persians were the enemies of the Arabs—the Zoroastrians were massacred. Uh and they stayed there for about another hundred years, but finally, they—uh a small group of Zoroastrians, to save their religion and the culture—left Persia, and went by boat, and landed up in a place in India. And the Indian king gave us refuge over there, and so we made certain promises to the Indian king, and one of those was to learn their language and to—to also uh lay down our arms, and—and—and to acclimatize ourselves with what they were—the way they live. And so that's where Gujarati comes in—so from that time period, the Zoroastrians' mother tongue, if you will, changed from Persian, to Gujarati, and so you'll find that most... Zoroastrians who are from India, Pakistan and some even from Africa—because there were Zoroastrians who went from India to Africa, uh, speaking Gujarati as their mother tongue. So that's — that's how Gujarati comes, and even though I was born and raised in Pakistan.

RW: Since you were born and raised in Pakistan you identify as—only as Zoroastrian, but not Parsi? Or both?

KD: Uh, both! Because Parsi is uh—is the cultural group, which ba—basically, the Zoroastrians who landed up in India, initially, who are—who are known as Parsis because we came from Persia, which was known as Persis, and so uh...the language...Persia is actually the Anglicized word for Parsa, and so that's why the Parsis, and Zoroastrian is uh is the religion. Actually speaking uh the religion, uh... the world know, uh the Anglicized world knows us as Zoroastrians because from Zarathustra, who was known in the uh Anglicized word as Zoroaster, we became Zoroastrians. But basically uh the religion's real nomenclature is Din Mazdayasna, which means, religion of Mazda worship, and Mazda is our word for god... So.

RW: Thank you.

KD: You're welcome.

CJ: Um I guess shifting back a little bit um while you were in university, did you live in a student dorm?

KD: Depends which university you are asking...

CJ: Oh, I'm uh—Portland University, that is.

KD: Yes, yes. When I was at University of Portland, I lived—lived in the dorm uh...yes, all throughout except summer—and—and that w—that was, the other, yeah, that—the only shocking thing was, when it came time for Thanksgiving and Christmas, we had to move out of the dorm, and for a foreign student, that was a very difficult situation. That's what got me, sort of involved uh with the whole—there—there was no international student association when I went there, and then it got me involved uh in the formation of the International Student Association uh write — writing the constitution, etcetera, which I had never done before in my life. But uh it was an interesting adventure So... then as a group we were able to try and make certain changes which helped everybody who was from abroad. (0:20:17)

RW: Were you successful in getting accommodations for those holidays?

KD: Yes, because we had the host-family program, so uh actually speaking uh even when I was, uh admitted to the University of Portland, uh... the Embassy had—had introduced me to another program called Experiment in International Living, and so the first two weeks or so, I had lived with an American family in Salem, Oregon, which was, I think about an hour, hour and a half drive from Portland. And so, I'd lived with them, and then...when school started, they drove me and dropped me off at...the university. So, then the university helped us find some other host families for the time period, so yes, things—things worked out. And then I—in the summer, I stayed at the YMCA, 'cause it was like three or four months.

RW: So you mentioned that um forming the student association—the International Student Association, was your first managerial, or, leadership, if you will—

KD: Yeah.

RW: ...Role? Um did you like it?

KD: Yes! It's uh, it's interesting because you feel you're doing something for not just yourself, but a group of people, and then of course there's also some amount of power that comes because people recognize what you're doing and they support you. And at, the uh for example, uh one of the things that we did besides trying to find homes for foreign students when—when we had a short break, was uh the student body at that time, because they didn't know, uh they would have uh different programs—you know, from your student fees—you pay student—a student activities fees and they would have different programs going on—but they were never geared towards international activities, and we were paying the same amount of fees, and so basically we started voting as a block, we started block-voting and then, a lot of the fraternity

guys who were running for office would come and—and—and say, okay we'll do these following things for you all, so we were able to bring about a certain sea change of how they viewed the whole international student body that was over there—and it was a fairly large-sized body, yeah... So we, so we ended up having international week, and international day, and so on and so forth, so it—finally the international students got the recognition that they didn't have before.

RW: So... after you graduated, what did you do?

KD: Well, after I finished my Bachelor's, um...uh in Portland, I was going to Claremont Graduate School for, for environmental sciences, but my main interest was to get admitted to the Maxwell School of Citizenship at Syracuse, and I had applied, but somehow, something had happened to my application, and, uh about... just before I was about to go to Claremont, I gave one final try and was lucky enough to speak with the head of the department uh... at Syracuse, and he s—uh he just interviewed me on the phone, and said, 'Well, school starts in two days' time, if you can get here in two days' time, I'll admit you just now.' So I said, 'I'll be there in two days' time', and uh...I just, took off, left all my stuff in Portland with my friends, I said, just send it to me by UP—well, I think it was UPS or something like that at that time, and uh I just flew to Syracuse, and started school over there. So, uh I did...I worked on my graduate work in international relations, international law at Syracuse University.

RW: International Relations is quite a change from microbiology.

KD: Yes, that's why I told you that I change...directions, towards the end. Because, uh... a—although I enjoyed doing uh all the scientific experiments and things like that um I found that I was more people-oriented person, especially this—doing stuff for international students and all, made me feel that maybe... law and political science was where my... field should be. So that's where I changed in that direction.

RW: Okay.

KD: Uh I mean, even in that—even in Portland, I was uh involved in the uh Model United Nations, and so uh that again gave me an exposure to—to this whole United Nations situation... and uh made me feel that that's the direction I wanted to go into. (00:25:30)

RW: The University offered Model U.N.?

KD: Yes.

RW: Really?

KD: M-hm.

RW: Wow.

KD: And we went to different competitions uh or meetings, where w—where we represented—I know one year we represented China, and that's before—that's before China was allowed into the United Nations, I don't know if you—if you learned, I don't know if you know that at one time China was not allowed into the United Nations, it was Taiwan, which was in the United Nations. And we—we were the first group which represented China—or, our school did uh after it got entrance into the United Nations, it was a...very interesting experience.

RW: That's quite interesting.

KD: Yeah.

CJ: Um so after your graduate study, where'd you go from there? x

KD: As part of my graduate study, I—I had the option of writing a thesis or doing an internship, and so, I got selected as the Ambassador Franzheim Intern for the Protocol Office of the City of Houston. That's how I ended up in Houston—I came here for six months and I've been here ever since. Um and that—that was a fantastic experience, it's—uh I don't even know if they still have that internship, uh but that's where you worked as an intern for the Protocol Office of the City of Houston and you—you programmed people from the rank of Ambassador and above, when they visited Houston. And then—then you—there was a special program called Visitor's—uh the U.S. State Department has a program called the Visitor's something...Visiting Visitor's Program or something, and so we— they'd bring in different high-level people to—into Houston, to introduce them to the United States system of government or schools or universities, depending on who they're bringing in. I mean for example, uh right after uh Russia was thrown out of Afghanistan, they brought in uh, uh about four or five uh...justices from Afghanistan, who were going to write the constitution of New Afghanistan, and they brought them to—Houston was one of the places they brought them to—and so we programmed them and these justices were then going to—going to the different law schools and visiting the different professors and stuff. So, yeah, that's the answer.

RW: You mentioned in your survey that you worked under Alice Pratt.

KD: Yeah, do you know her?

RW: The wife...of George R. Brown?

KD: I don't—I'm not sure that was the same Alice Pratt. But uh, this uh—the lady who was the director of the Protocol Office—of the—it was actually known as the Institute for International Education, which had the contract to be the Protocol Office for the City of Houston, and she was the director for the Institute of International Education. So, I don't know if she was the wife of George R. Brown or not, I—I never knew that.

CJ: Um, so what was your initial impression of Houston when you came here?

KD: Uh, just fantastic. Uh that's one of the reasons I'm still here, because it was...it was dynamic, it was constantly growing ev—ev...every day there—you were meeting new people a—and there was a certain dynamism to the city which—which I didn't find in the old cities where I came from. Um also, the people were always on the go and—and they were entrepreneurial and that kind of attracted me to the city. Yeah.

CJ: Um, and so what was the first neighborhood that you lived in when you first came here?

KD: In Houston?

CJ: Mhm.

KD: Um I lived... on a s...it was the Montrose neighborhood, on Yupon. That was an interesting experience as well, because I had called from Syracuse and—and rented my apartment, and the Protocol Office had basically done all the groundwork, but when the lady picked me up from the airport took me over there uh actually I think that—I've never felt that I've been discriminated against, but that was the first time that I felt that there was a little twinge of discrimination because, the manager when he opened the door and I said, well, I'm here, and probably he saw... me, who I am, and said, oh no! The apartment is rented out, it's filled, we don't have an empty apartment anymore. So, I said okay, fortunately the lady from the Protocol Office was with me and she got in there, and I think, gave it to him, and the next thing I know, I was living right above him, and uh long story short, we ended up becoming friends—he would cook dinner for me sometimes, and you know, he would, uh he would—it would be— was a small apartment complex, maybe about, fifteen apartments, uh... but he would be out near the door, sitting and having his beer and stuff, and then I would go and say, hey, what are you doing, you want to come over and have dinner with me and stuff, so yeah we ended up becoming friends. But that—that was very interesting for me, that all of a sudden, whoop, the apartment was not there and then somebody in the know talked to him and it was there. [KD laughs]
(0:31:24)

RW: So, you came to Houston at a much different time—um, what—how's it been like, watching Houston change?

KD: It's been very interesting, very—uh I came to Houston in '75, and uh it has...grown tremendously. I mean, places which were—which—were far, far away away from Houston like Booth, Texas, which is south...on 59, uh south of Rosenberg, the—that whole little town was owned by a lady by the name of Alice Booth, and we would go over there on weekends for—for picnics and barbecue, and stuff like that, she would have all that going on. And today, all that has turned into a residential neighborhood. I mean I don't live too far from there. So... it's uh... I've just seen it spread, spread out. Of course, the traffic congestion was always there, so... because so many people are moving into Houston.

RW: Has living in both Portland and New York... given you a certain perspective on the development, or lack thereof, in Houston?

KD: I'm very pro-Houston. So, uh and I tell my kids the same thing, that uh I don't know why anybody would want to go and live in New York City. Honestly. Because, you are—are living in—in apartments which are like pigeon-holes and you're paying... five-times the rent over there, and they say, oh, it's the life and it's the food, and—and I'll bet you a dollar to a donut-hole that you'll find the same quality and—food and life, in Houston, you just need to know where—where it's happening. If you know where it's happening, you'll find it in Houston. But unfortunately kids who are born and raised in Houston, and I get—were you born and raised in Houston?

CJ: I was...from—from six years old, so..

KD: Okay uh...do not appreciate how much—how much Houston has, because you've—you want to get away from Houston. I'm basing that based on uh I'm quite involved with teaching Sunday school and stuff, and all these kids, as soon as they're going to college they want to graduate from college and um go out uh to New York, or some East Coast city, or Boston or someplace, uh but uh, no—Houston has stuff. But it's—it's also helpful to spread your wings and go, and look at other thing—other places. So New York has it's own charm, uh it's fantastic to visit, I would never want to live—as a matter of fact, I had the option, when I was getting my internships, I had the option of working at the United Nations and live at UNITAR—one of the agencies of—and live, uh exactly opposite of the U.N. so I wouldn't have had to even commute, uh but I decided to come to Houston.

RW: Wow...

KD: Yeah, because uh I had been to New York, and just visiting New—of course, Syracuse is New York State, but it's not New York City, but I'd been to New York City, I had friends in New York City, and I'd visited quite often and I knew I never wanted to live in New York City... so... (0:35:00)

RW: Um so you raised a family here in Houston...

KD: Yes.

RW: ...how did you meet your wife?

KD: Well, she's uh distantly related to me, so when she came to go to school, or to go to the university over here, um, she landed in Houston, and then, I kind of drove her over to Alabama, and...there was nothing at that time but then over time, just chatting and talking and stuff like that, uh things developed, then—then in summer she would visit, because we were also distantly related, so...she visited Houston, and... things happened.

RW: And you have...two children.

KD: Two children, yes. I've got two daughters [smiles]. Uh one—one completed her Masters in Neuroscience and is working at Tulane Medical School, and the other one is about to go into her second year, coming semester, at Loyola, also at New Orleans. Excuse me.

RW: Sure. [brief pause as Mr. Dotiwala checks his phone] So did you and your wife have a Zoroastrian wedding?

KD: Yes, she is a Zoroastrian and uh we had a full-fledged Zoroastrian wedding uh... and our families came from different parts of the country as well as from abroad. Her parents were from India, so they flew in from India, and we had a real fun—not just the wedding, but the whole four or five days of it.

RW: The wedding was here!

KD: In Houston.

RW: Really!

KD: Yes!

RW: Oh! Wow. So, there was a sizeable community, when you first came here, a Zoroastrian community?

KD: It has grown, uh but uh, initially there was, well, it depends what you call sizeable, I—I wouldn't call it really huge because there were probably about...three to four-hundred people, who belonged to the Zoroastrian community, we knew each other—it has grown substantially since then. So, yeah, at the time of my wedding we had about three hundred people and we know most of them, and they were all invited to come!

RW: Um and you've been quite involved in the Zoroastrian community here.

KD: Yes, I have been.

RW: Can you tell us a little bit about that?

KD: Sure. Uh I uh... think within the first couple of weeks uh after I came to Houston, uh I happened to find about a lady who my aunt knew from Pakistan and so she asked me to go visit her. So, I went to her place for lunch and visited her, and at that time there was no organized Zoroastrian community as such, but they met as friends and had social evenings and things—uh more as friends, and then there was a gentleman, at, I think, was it- Texas, an Indian gentleman at Texas Southern University who gave a lecture that—that Zoroastrians were an offshoot of Hinduism, uh which a number of us a—attended that lecture and that wasn't a true statement and—and so, uh we responded to his lecture, to him, and then we decided that maybe it was important we formed some kind of a group to—to let people know who were are.

Uh and uh, also, progress uh... with the rest of the general Houston community. And so, that's—that's when we got them; there were about five or six of us who were involved in writing the constitution of uh ZAH Zoroastrian Association of Houston. And I was one of them. Um and, so we wrote the constitution, had it parsed by the general body, made changes that they wanted to, and the rest is history.

RW: And when was that?

KD: It was right around 1975 was when it all started. Uhff the top of my head, I can't recall whether we got it all done in '75 or it was '76 when we got it actually done. It took us a little bit of time to get incorporated as a not-for-profit organization, because there was a—an American lady who was a pro bono attorney for us, who did the setting up of, you know, the 503c corporation. So, it took time before it went and we were approved and everything. So that's why I couldn't tell you exactly off the top of my head when it started functioning. But '75 was when we were—we started doing things as if we were an organization. Yeah.

RW: And what year did you get married?

KD: Uh, '86.

RW: When you got married, what kind of home life did you hope to create?

KD: Uh, after I was married? Or, yeah. Basically tried to—to make a life which was uh good for my wife, and my future family. Uh we just enjoyed doing things like driving out into the country, when it was just the two of us, and we—especially me, I enjoyed good food, so we would go out on weekends and try out new restaurants or try out new places in the country. Um and then interact with different people, we had a group of friends, um my group of friends were from India, Pakistan, United States, et cetera. And so we would meet over weekends, we would have uh musical evenings, and uh just fun parties and stuff. But, um... wanted a life that was easy. And—and comfortable. Uh I had my sister and brother-in-law who had just moved, so for a while, they were living with us. And my dad, who was quite old, uh he came at the time of my wedding, and then he stayed with us from there.

RW: Did any other family move?

KD: No, uh not with us. Just my sister, and brother-in-law and my dad. Yeah.

RW: Do you go back to visit extended family?

KD: Uh, I haven't gone back to visit um extended family in—in Pakistan. But, I have gone to visit my other family members who happen to be in Canada, and some other places in the—like, some of them are in New York, some are in New Jersey, so I do go and visit them, yes. (43:00)

CJ: Um I guess stepping back a little bit

KD: Sure.

CJ: —Um after working at the protocol office, where did you go from there?

KD: After working at the protocol office, I, uh—I was supposed to work um with them for about six months, and they asked me to stay on for another six months, uh which I did. And then I started looking, uh looking for a different job. Uh and for a while uh I had trouble finding a job, because everywhere I applied, I was over—they told me I was overqualified for the positions that I was applying for. I was applying for ground floor positions because I wanted to work my way, and learn the business, and when they looked at my resume, they basically thought that I would probably not stay there for long or something, so, um I did odd jobs. Um. Y'know, worked in stores and stuff just to pay my bills. Um but, then, after that, there was a gentleman from Pakistan, who would be an equivalent of the Rockefellers, so, uh his stature in Pakistan is like that of the Rockefellers over here. And, he had been kicked out of Pakistan because the government had changed over there. And, so, uh he wanted to go into the oil business over here, and I knew nothing about oil, neither did he, but we happened to meet at uh some function and we got to talking, and he—he hired me as his administrative vice president. And, so, that's how I ended up going into the direction of the oil business. He bought some wells up in Luling, which is in-between Houston and—and Seguin. If you're going to San Antonio, it's about an hour and a half away from San Antonio. So, drilled our first wells, well, there were some already drilled, we worked over some wells, we drilled some wells, and got into the oil business.

RW: So, you wanted an easy life, so you decided to run a small business on your own?

KD: Um yeah, because no one would hire me! [laughs] But I'm glad they didn't. Um I—uh... I always wanted to be, in anything that I did, whether it was going to be research, or law, or—my aim was always to learn, and then have something of my own. So, somehow, destiny led me in the direction of this gentleman—when this gentleman, uh when his son came over from England and started running, and he went back to Pakistan, his son didn't the same, same chutzpah that his father had. So we parted company, and then from there, that's when I went into, on my own where I traded uh— because when I was working for him, it was difficult to get our oil picked up by gathering companies. Uh so, I don't know how much you all know about the oil industry, uh but in the oil industry, the independent people, they produce the oil, and it is stored in tanks, but, then, there are gathering companies, that you sell the oil to, who in turn pick it up from you, and sell it to refineries, or put it on the pipeline. And so, there wasn't a gathering company, so, we kind of got a gathering company interested in us, and picking up from not only us, but also the neighboring leases that were having difficulty. So, I got a little taste of what it meant to—to handle business, because the old man let me—gave me a free reign to do a lot of stuff. Which was lucky because it helped me grow, business-wise. That—that man was 7th or 8th grade dropout, who had gone into business and really made it, and I can tell you that what I learned sitting by his side, was more than what I could have learned at Harvard or any one of those places. Practical in—practical information, practical knowledge.

RW: Uh, going back a little bit, you worked while you were going to school in Portland.

KD: Yes.

RW: Um at a movie theater?

KD: Yeah.

RW: Can you tell me... how you got that job?

KD: Yeah, through the university. I just went to the university placement office, and I said, 'I needed to find a job on weekends, and maybe evenings.' And they said, 'Well, we- here's one, uhits' And I think it was about, less than 10 miles away from the university.' And I didn't have any transportation. So, I used to just catch the bus—I had to find something on the bus line. And so this was on the bus line, and I uh... I started working over there as, well, my title was assistant manager, but basically it was the same as chief cook-and-bottle washer. I swept the carpet, and put—serve—served the concessions, and took the tickets, and sold the tickets, so—so I kind of backed up anybody who didn't show up and... plus, also, they taught me how to run the projector. So that helped me... (48:54)

RW: That must have been fun...

KD: It was, it was, 'cause I never knew how the movie theatres ran their projectors, it's quite interesting. They had two—two projectors, and you would be looking, and you knew that there was—there was a little marker at the bottom of the film. Do you know about that? Yeah, and, that's where you click onto the other projector. I didn't know that—but. So, that was interesting.

RW: So, is it true that movie theaters make most of their money off concessions?

KD: I think so. Yeah, they don't make it off—either(?) the big sum of tickets, but, yeah, they mostly, they make it off concessions. Yeah. This was just a small movie theater, where the—where the manager lived above the movie theater and just ran the movie theater. Which allowed me later on to be hired as a manager for a movie theater which was, I think, a quadriplex, or something like that, where there were four movie theaters in one complex. And uh, in those, they used to have the, the film was wound up on a big cassette type of a wheel, and there you didn't switch, you just started it, and the—the curtain would go up and the movie would come and run to the end, and then it would stop, and then it would—everything would finish, and then it would rewind itself, like a cassette.

RW: Oh wow!

KD: Yeah. It's...

RW: I didn't know that existed.

KD: Yeah, that's—it must be quite old, because it was a long time ago. And I think that's how one guy could handle making sure that four theatres were running on time. Of course, we had a lot of help, but...

RW: Sure.

CJ: Um so, when did you move to the neighborhood that you live in now?

KD: Uh... I might be off a little bit, but I think, it was around '87. '87-'88, somewhere in there about.

CJ: And, what prompted you to uh move from where you were to where you are now?

KD: I was renting the house where, where I got married- [A knock at the door occurs; the recorder is paused while snacks are brought in.]

[51:22]

KD: Oh, yes, uh... I tried to buy the house that I was renting... and I think the owner didn't want to sell it. So, we started looking around, and we found a place that we liked, and it wasn't far from the area we were—and I'm glad we did, because uh the area where we were living kind of went down, and where we are living now kind of went up. So I think glad we—I think Providence, somewhat has always guided—guided my destiny to move in directions, and sometimes, even when I feel that, 'Why is this nasty thing happening to me?', in the long run, it seems that it was—I'm glad it happened, because it turned out for the better.

CJ: Oh, and what's the—what's the name of the neighborhood that you live in?

KD: Just now, New Territory.

CJ: Okay.

RW: So, if I have this correctly, you founded Q Environmental.

KD: Uh, yes, and no. Its—Q Environmental was already, I—I was partners in another company for a number of years with my partner—just, my partner and I, 50-50. And the...my wife had formed Q Environmental, she had thought of going into business for herself, but had never done so. So, uh when my partner was wanting to retire, uh I went ahead and bought out his share. And then, my attorney, and accountant, they suggested that, just to make—and then he soon passed away. So at that time, my attorney, accountant suggested to make a clean cut—just to start fresh. And, so, my option was 'go and form a new company', but since this was already there, and she was running it, and she was not really utilizing it, I bought—bought the shares over from her, for Q Environmental, and then basically, started, so yeah, I started it. (53:34)

RW: Um and Q Environmental is not a pure oil supplier, like your former company?

KD: Correct. Q Environmental is more of a—we occupy a unique niche in the environmental business. When you look at the environmental business, you've got two types of companies. I mean, there might be some hybrids, but—uh basically, there are companies who are consultants, who will—who will go and use their knowledge to recommend to their clients what to do and what not to do, how to be in compliance, et cetera, what cleanup they require. Uh and then, there are companies which will actually physically do those cleanup things. They have trucks, and dozers, and all that stuff. Well, Q kind of uh combined that situation where we can go into a company—and our unique niche is, we are... targeted toward sustainable environmental solutions. So we go in, and see what—what kind of waste a company generates. And try to see how—number 1, how can we go green where that waste can be recycled or reused? If we can't recycle or reuse it, then how can we uh send it for disposal where it costs the company the least amount of money? So, uh our core business is recycling motor oil. The motor oil that comes out of the crankcase? So, that's—that's what we recycle, and same with the antifreeze. The antifreeze that comes out of your car? We recycle it, and we go ahead and put it, y'know, make a new product out of it. The oil is used as a fuel, but it can be re-refined, where it can go back into your car. We—we don't go all the way up to that stage because we haven't invested in our re-refinery. [Phone rings] Um, uh so those—that's our core business, but besides that, we also take care of, we're a one-stop shop for used oil filters, which are—which are shredded, and the metal goes for, y'know, re-bars and stuff like that. And the—in the filter, there's something called filter fluff, which is a cardboard-y paper stuff in there. And uh that, we send to cement plants for energy recall, which means it's burned for energy. So, uh it has good BTU values. And then, we also recycle absolvents. Uh a lot of people use a certain absolvent, which is like kitty litter. And we go in and send it for recycling and it goes into road base—your asphalt. Uh cloth absolvents. We go in and recycle those, where we're able to pull anything that it has absolved out of there and return the absolvent back to the customer if they wanted. So—so stuff like that. We were just working on a new program for LED lights, uh just doing it for our neighbor across the street, uh where we are—where we will go in over there and at no additional cost to the neighbor, go ahead and install a full LED program for them, save them the money, and basically, they can pay over a time period from the savings, so basically after, say four or five years, they've got the savings they made off the LED lights that we've installed, but not that didn't ever come—come up with any money upfront. And then they continue to enjoy their LED lights and the savings for a long time period. So these are the kind of—so, we got—we got uh state of the art stone water filters. So, uh according to the laws of the United States, this ditch which runs along the side of—of the fence, and, the stormwater drains et cetera- if oil or petroleum products go in there, then it's against the law, because you are polluting the navigable waters of the United States. Not many people would think that this ditch is a navigable water of the United States, but because it goes uh to the bay, to Galveston Bay and so on, that's what it's considered. And therefore, uh we have to be really careful. So we have these filters which will go ahead and absorb- absorb all the hydrocarbons, and only allow the water to go through, and then those, that filter can reset again for energy recovery. So, totally recyclable. We've got green products which—which have microbes in them which will eat up all petroleum

products and destroy it. So these are—these are the kinds of things that we are always looking for constantly, for new technology... [gestures to snack tray on table] Please, help yourself.
(59:15)

RW: Thank you.

CJ: Um you mentioned a little bit before in the interview that you taught Sunday School, is that correct?

KD: I teach—yeah, I taught and I still teach.

CJ: So, what prompted you to get involved in that capacity?

KD: Uh I've always been interested in world religions. Um... even—even when I was in, I don't know which year maybe sixth, seventh grade, eighth grade, or something like that. I won prizes in religion. Uh, when I was in Houston, and we came over the concept of a one-room schoolhouse where one of the uh community members who happened to be a professor at U of H also taught the kids. So you had the youngest kids to the oldest kids. And sometimes that concept worked and sometimes it didn't work because the—either the younger kids were bored, or the older kids were bored. So... uh it so happened that there was a uh youth-related meeting come up in the—coming up in Los Angeles, and so we started talking about that, and I said, 'Okay, I'll go ahead and take on the youth, and—and help them with the information as well as getting—getting the uh financial backing to go ahead and go to Los Angeles'. So we took 13 of our—yeah, so that's all of them. We said, 'Either all of us will go or none of us will go.' And, so they worked hard, and they raised funds, uh all by themselves, had potluck and all kinds of different projects they did. They raised the funds and all—all thirteen of them went and—and we did a presentation, which was again, out of the box. Uh most of the people were presenting lectures and talks, et cetera. And our, these kids, they—they had developed a response, as if they were interviewing somebody uh as a news program. And so all the answers came through as a—as a result of the news program. So we developed a great common core and grants, and from there, it continued for a while. And then, I handed it over to a different set of people, who have taken it. Uh and, I think either you all or somebody is going to meet one of uh our Sunday school teachers who's doing it now. But now, I basically just, whenever he's in need of some assistance, where he's going to be out of town or something like that then I step in and help.

RW: When your children were growing up, did you have them participate in religious education?

KD: Yes I did, uh they—but I have believed rightly or wrongly, that uh... I'm a great believer in human free will. Because of my religious background, because human free will is uh— is one of the cornerstones of Zoroastrianism. And therefore, I feel like if I am to practice it, I have to practice it starting with my family. And, so I would talk to them, encourage them and ask them to go, but I don't believe I ever really forced them to go, so, uh I think I did put a little more pressure on my younger one than on my older one, so the younger one took— uh and then my sister teaches Sunday school to the really young kids, so they went to her class, but as they

progressed on, the younger went to all of them, but the older one um probably didn't go to all of them.

RW: Did both of your daughters have the um, Zoroastrian coming-of-age celebration?

KD: Yes, um there is—[phone rings] there is a ceremony called the Navjot ceremony, where the—where the Zoroastrian child whether it's a boy or a girl, is initiated into the community and they both had that celebration. Um at the time of my older daughter's Navjot celebration, uh the High Priest from India had flown in to do it, perform her Navjot. And uh I just felt—I'm not, and it was great, and there was a huge crowd and everything. But uh I felt that maybe, to maintain the decorum of—of the occasion, it- only those people who are really interested we invited. So for the younger one, we did her Navjot at the house, and had the priests come over there, and the whole—whole family was there but not everybody. And in the evening, we had a big dinner reception. So—so, they both got big parties, but the other one whose Navjot—the actual ceremony was done in the morning at the house.

CJ: Um I guess while we're talking about your children

KD: Yeah.

CJ: Do they speak any um languages other than English, you mentioned that you spoke several on your consent form?

KD: Yeah, my uh older daughter is quite good in French, and my younger one struggles with it. But—but they both had to take French. They went to Duchesne Academy, so I guess uh they had to take French as the language. And uh... they both speak English fluently, and they understand Gujarati, they tell me, but they don't speak it or read or write it.

RW: They went to, I'm sorry, a private school?

KD: Yeah, the Duchesne Academy of the Sacred Heart, which is... uh near Chimney Rock and Memorial. (1:04:45)

CJ: Um and you mentioned also in your consent form that you were involved with the uh Interfaith Ministries of Houston?

KD: Yes.

CJ: Can you tell us a little bit about that?

KD: Yes, I—I have been involved with uh the other community groups since I came to Houston—even b—even before I got involved with Zoroastrian Association in its pre-formative days. And that was because um, uh when I arrived at uh the protocol office, one of their bridges was uh the Rothko Chapel, and you all must be familiar with Rothko 'cause it's not far from

Rice. So, uh I was involved at Rothko—and Rothko had a lot of interfaith related activities over there. So, uh I represented the Zoroastrian community uh at some of those activities, before I knew there were other Zoroastrians in Houston. And uh—and it kind of carried on from there, then initially, in the interfaith community, I—I got involved with the Meals on Wheels program. And then from there, I just got involved more with the other things that had to do—uh my younger daughter was selected for a fantastic program that the Interfaith Ministries has, it's called iLead. It's for students from 9th grade to high school. And uh... still involved with the Meals on Wheels program and uh... they have, like every year, they've got a devoted dinner where—where people from different faith groups meet and discuss certain religious issues. Uh it's quite interesting, so I'm involved in different programs like that.

RW: Um what do you like to do in your free time?

KD: Uh I—uh I have a voracious appetite for information. Mostly news, so I'm very interested in knowing what's going on. So, I—I uh I look, just at different news programs, different TV programs at times, but mostly news and History Channel, uh some reading, some Googling. Some writing. Uh I develop little PowerPoint presentations for Sunday school classes. So, some of it takes some of that time. And then, I also uh like to chisel away as much time as I can to spend—spend with the family, because I don't really have a lot of free time, with all of the other activities I've committed myself to. So, I've tried to chisel away, maybe at least a Saturday or a Sunday with my family.

RW: Do your daughters come home often?

KD: Uh, no, my—my older one barely comes home, because she's working, and she only has like a Friday through Sunday off. And uh the older one right now, she's with us because it's summer, but when she goes back—but we go and pay them a visit, so—yeah. But they do—they do come home, it's just not that—it's never often enough for parents.

RW: Cool.

KD: So, that's—that's where it is. Um... it's... it's strange because free time- yeah, uh then, at other times, free t—again, free time, we just decide to drive out into the country, that's something that we enjoy doing. Uh... since we are empty nesters again, that's what we've gone back to.

RW: Do you think of yourself as a Houstonian—a Texan? (1:09:03)

KD: Absolutely. Absolutely, yes. It's uh—well, as a—as an American, and as a Texan, but 'Texan' is a different state of mind. Uh it's- it's that final frontier, it's—and I've been to California, and I've been to Portland, and I love all- and those are beautiful places, but I wouldn't live any place but Houston, Texas. Maybe San Antonio. San Antonio has a lot of character to it as well. Yeah uh. The—I think again, it's this whole concept of free will, and freedom of thought uh is ingrained too deeply in me. I have—I have grown up- I mean, I left Pakistan when I was

eighteen or nineteen, and I've been here ever since then, but those—those formative years, I have tangled with people who were Communists, I've tangled with people who were Socialists. Because I was in the university over there, and I still never agreed with those viewpoints over there. So, but—but I saw what happened to our country when there was a dictatorial type of government, and it's telling you what to do, uh as opposed what you have in this country, or in some of the other Western countries. Uh... actually, I'm kind of saddened, that a lot of my young friends do not realize what they're missing out—what their parents had, and what they're missing out, because the—a lot of their freedoms are being infringed upon. And—and so, that's what I tell my kids. I say, 'You need to be vigilant about these things, otherwise, you'll lose it.'

RW: Um what's been your biggest accomplishment so far?

KD: Getting married to my wife. Really. Um because uh it has allowed me to do everything else that—that I wanted to do. And, I knew that starting out, I—I would never get married until I was standing on my own feet, and that I would be able to sustain a family. So, I got married fairly late in life. Uh but, I think because of—of having an understanding wife who uh really is the wind beneath my wings. Yeah. She gives me the freedom to—not that I wouldn't have continued doing it, but—but then I presumed there would have been butting of heads but there's no butting of heads, uh because over here, I'm—I'm supported in things that I'm doing. Uh and, it takes a lot of my time away from, from uh from family. But, she's understanding. And, that's what helps. And I look forward to going home at—about 4:30 or 5 in the evening, I'm—I'm thinking 'Okay, I'll go home,' I'll start winding down for the day, but it's about 8 o'clock before I leave my office, so you know, my weekdays are not that I'm home by 4 o'clock, or 5 o'clock, or 6 o'clock. Rarely. Um that's one accomplishment. The other one is of course, uh... the things that I, y'know, I was involved with the formation of the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America, which is an umbrella organization. And kind of literally took ZAH involved in there, we are the—we are one of the organization which was the initial signatory to that document. And a number of our members were officers who were there. But I was one of them who initially represented ZAH in the organization. So, things like that. Just a variety of stuff, small things.

RW: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

KD: No I think it's fantastic that you all are recording the oral history, and uh—um I hope that, in the future, scholars will study uh the impact that uh different uh communities, and different nationalities have had in making Houston what Houston is, because—because Houston really is uh—is the United Nations of the world. And I can say that because I've experienced it, having been given the privilege of working for the Protocol Office. And not too many people have had that privilege uh of interacting with the kind of people who—who have made Houston great. And because these people involved with the Protocol Office and meeting Heads of State and stuff, I've had the fortune of being a fly on the wall—wall, while these guys were talking and discussing stuff. So, that's a unique experience which uh, and that's why I know how much from, from—from political, to cultural, to religious, uh you know, like Bishop Fiorenza—was the Bishop of—of Texas. Uh he was quite involved in—in things. Uh one—one of the reasons, why in the '60s—I mean, I—I didn't experience this, but I heard it, in the '60s why Houston didn't

have the same kind of racial breakdown uh that the—the other other cities had, was because people like Bishop Fiorenza, and people like, uh what's his name um, the Wheeler Baptist Church, the head of the Wheeler Baptist Church, um his name escapes my mind, but his daughter was a TV anchor lady. Um anyway, to come to my mind—but they worked together to make sure that Houston was peaceful. Things like that, not too many people know. So that's why I say Houston has really occupied such a unique position in the history of things, uh because there are so many different people that live in Houston.

RW: Okay, well thank you so much! (1:19:49)

KD: You're very welcome. Uh so what are you all majoring in?

CJ: Uh I'm a Linguistics major.

KD: Linguistics?

CJ: Yes sir.

KD: Fantastic. So you speak a lot of languages?

CJ: [Laughs] Not quite.

RW: And I'm an—

[The recorder is turned off; the interview ends]