

Name of interviewee: Maryam Banikarim

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Name of interviewer: Bill Yeingst

Length of interview: 57 minutes

BY: We're going to begin by you stating your name and the date today.

MB: I don't know what the date is today.

BY: Today is the 13th.

MB: Should I go? I'm Maryam Banikarim. November 13th.

BY: Okay. Welcome to the museum.

MB: Thank you so much for having me.

BY: What we want to do is just have a conversation about your journey and your life here in the United States. We want to touch on topics about your family background, your childhood, education, your family in the context of Iran and the rich cultural heritage that you are a part of, your decision to come to the U.S. and what happened when you got here, your new community, your traditions, your identity and reflections about your life.

MB: Okay. You just want me to start?

BY: Yeah.

MB: We came to the States two separate times. When I was born my parents were quite young. My mom got a scholarship to attend Northeastern University. When she was in her early 20's, she came on her own, and I stayed behind with my dad and we lived with my grandparents. And then he came a year later and then they sent for me. I actually attended preschool in Boston while they finished their graduate courses. Then we packed up and moved back to Iran.

BY: When was that?

MB: I was born in 68 and so that has to be in the early 70s. I would have been in preschool so maybe five or six. Before Kindergarten. And then, as a result of that I spoke English because I went to preschool in Boston. There's pictures of me in little Harvard T-shirts as all good Iranians would have. When

we moved back to the States, I mean when we moved back from the States to Iran they enrolled me in an American school. I went to school called Iran's [unintelligible][00:02:21] where we basically studied English as the primary language and had an hour of Farsi a day really. Then we basically stayed in Iran – and I never came back to the States in that period. We went to Europe because my dad was a banker and so he did business there but we didn't really come back to the States very often – we grew up in Tehran.

My parents were quite western I suppose as they would go. My Grandmother on my mother's side had come from Russia. They had left Russia they were in the southern part of Russia and they fled Russia and come across the Caspian and made their way to Tehran. I grew up with a grandmother who worked. She was a teacher. She was very industrious and sewed and had grown up with a dad who took them to the opera and was quite curious, and driven. In '79 when the Revolution happened, we ended up leaving the country quite suddenly. Like I mentioned I went to an American school and over the course of that year as the revolution sort of took speed more and more of the students and the teachers would leave.

It was sort of like being on the rooftop at Rwanda with the helicopter coming to rescue you.

But we stayed. We stayed until the Shah had left and then there was an interim government that was put in to place that was supposed to be more of an attempt at democracy. After Khomeini came and the army gave up, it was clear that dad was going to get – well, dad got wind that he was going to get blacklisted. We basically went to the airport like we were going on vacation. Me, my mom and my dad actually left to go to Europe on vacation supposedly. We didn't even take my sister who was three with us. She stayed with my grandparents because they weren't sure how long we would be gone for.

We went to Paris and they looked around for an apartment in case we were going to have to stay there. We actually did go on vacation. We went to Majorca on vacation. Then it was clear that the revolution wasn't going to be a fleeting thing so we went back to Paris and we sent for my sister and my grandmother brought her.

We spent- I went to sixth grade in Paris. My sister went to preschool in Paris. Then in the course of that year it was clear the revolution wasn't going to pass in a year's time. And

because my parents spoke English really as their primary second language we decided to move to the States. We were fortunate because my parents had had green cards because they had been here in their 20's and so we were able to get papers quite easily to come back to the States. We went from Paris to an affluent suburb of San Francisco which was quite lily white called Lafayette, California.

BY: Can I just pause you for a minute?

MB: Sure.

BY: I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the family, the community, the culture that you grew up in in Iran?

MB: My experience was that Iranian families were quite large. What I remember distinctly is my dad was one of six. My mom was one of four. On my dad's side every Friday which was really when the weekend happened in Iran we all gathered at my paternal grandmother's house. It was like lots of people around all the time. So even though we had a pretty Americanized experience for an Iranian in Iran – and one of the weird things was we always celebrated Christmas; it was one of the traditions we took back when we left when I was in preschool. Because when we were in preschool I guess they celebrated Christmas in the States and so we had a tree.

We actually took ornaments back and so even though we were Muslim – we weren't very religious but obviously we were born Muslim – we always celebrated Christmas and had a tree and had ornaments which now when you look back is kind of strange.

So large families, very noisy, and sort of the spectrum. Right? I had aunts who wore chadors to ones who totally didn't. That's sort of the thing about big families you have all kinds of things in your families. When we moved to California we moved to Lafayette. Well, my uncle had come before us and he lived in Sacramento. I guess my dad decided Sacramento wasn't for him. They came south and they decided to go to the San Francisco area. They considered living in San Francisco and sending us to the Leshay but then wanted us to matriculate so they picked a suburb that was affluent.

I think because they thought people would be more accepting because they were educated. And also it was considered to be

the best public school. I ended up showing up for seventh grade in this very lily white affluent suburb.

I remember my dad saying to me that all the kids rode their bikes to school. He got me a bike so that I could ride my bike to school. I had to go to the Junior High and interview with the principal before signing up for school. We were very adaptive kids or as a family we were quite adaptive. My parents looked western and me and my sister didn't obviously speak with an accent which made a big difference. I went to interview with the principal; he set us up and I show up the first day of school. Everybody's in iZods and Calvin Klein jeans because that was when those two things were quite popular. I showed up in a pink T-shirt, poofy pink skirt and lace up ballet shoes because I was coming from Paris.

I stood out like a sore thumb. I remember going to the French class which they put me in – they put me in French I because I said I spoke a little French – I was modest and I spoke more French than the French teacher.

They immediately sent me back to the principal's office. Then I went to the math class and I knew more math because math was more advanced in Europe and Iran than it was in the States. Then by the end of the day, they decided I needed to skip seventh grade all together. I was sort of the odd kid in the odd outfit who spoke French and who was brainy because she skipped seventh grade. That immediately made me stand out pretty significantly in that population. It's funny I didn't really get penned for being Iranian per se and it was not far after the hostage crisis, right? I think partly because I didn't speak with an accent and I had parents who were quite western.

And completely randomly because my mom worked in TV she did strategy work in the television business in Iran and my dad was a banker.

In that year that we lived in Paris they didn't have anything to do with themselves except wait. That's anxiety provoking so my mom and a friend took a baking class at Le Cordon Bleu. So when we moved to Lafayette they decided to open up a French bakery knowing nothing really about that. We opened up the first French bakery – Le Croissant – in Lafayette. So because of that even though people knew I was Iranian they just considered me French. Anytime there was an exchange student of any place it would sort of be like trotted out in front of Maryam because that was sort of the way.

We Americanized our names. Maryam became Mary and I think my mom whose name is Geti was called Kathy not dissimilar to Hispanics who in many windows Carlos became Carl. We really matriculated.

There weren't a lot of Iranians that I remember in school or around. We had my parent's friends but we were much, if they had kids, we were generally older than them so we didn't grow up around a lot of Iranian kids per se. We did grow up around a lot of Iranian friends of my parents if you would.

BY: What were your impressions of this new home?

MB: You know, I don't think I really thought about it per se. The things I remember is sort of the cultural divide when people would come to the house. My grandmother would come and stay for a long time, right? And in America there was a sense that your kids graduated from high school and you sent them off. Iranians are similar to Hispanics where the kids stay until they get married or forever or whatever. It's very familial and if somebody comes to your house you invite them to stay for dinner and there's home cooked meals. I remember the things that were distinctive to my parents or grandparents were things like all you can eat menus like there was sizzlers ads and it was like the notion that you would go to a restaurant to eat all you could eat was just such a foreign concept.

When you go to Costco and they would give out free samples my grandfather would get so excited for the free samples. It was just such an optima idea. TV dinners like you couldn't even fathom the notion of TV dinners. We grew up in a home I laugh about the notion of sort of the food movement because I think Hispanics and Iranians again there's a lot of similarities it's like you grew up with fresh food because that was sort of the culture. Parents cooked for their kids. There was also an incredible sense of being protective of your children particularly of the daughters. I remember as a teenager babysitting and them sending my grandmother with me. You go two for the price of one. Or people calling and my grandmother she spoke Russian and Turkish and she spoke a lot of languages but she would go to the church to take English as a second language but English she wasn't fluent fully.

People would call just to talk to grandma to hear her not be able to really speak English on the phone. My house was where a lot of my friends came for dinner a lot. We had lots of people over at dinner all the time. And so, Iranian food is quite yummy and

my grandmother was actually a very good cook. My parents cooked too. We had a lot of people who were always over for Iranian food.

BY: In addition to family and food what other sort of markers of culture that carried with you from Iran to the U.S.?

MB: The main thing was Iranian New Year. We had Nowruz which is not a religious event. It's more of a beginning of the New Year event. I remember as a kid that was one of my favorite holidays because the Wednesday before – it's called Chaharshanbe it's the Wednesday before they would light bushel of fire and you would jump over them. It's a [Zurasian](#) tradition where you would say my sickness to the fire, right? The color of warmth to me. It's sort of saying. We didn't have trick or treating but on that day you would take a pan and you would go knocking on the back of the copper bowl and people would give you candy. But candy like nuts and raisins and things like that. It was our version of Halloween if you would. I remember that was one of my absolute favorite Holidays.

You really couldn't do that in the States. If you set up little fires on your back yard people would think you were crazy. But it's interesting in L.A. where there was a very large group of Iranians – that's the other thing I remember is we would go from San Francisco to L.A. and you would go to Westwood and there were a lot of Iranians there you could hear Farsi on the streets. You could go to restaurants where they served Persian food and desserts. Then in L.A. they definitely had a community and they would have these events. Now that I live in New York and sometimes I get- When my kids were little, I would go to an Iranian New Year's party that a group had organized. They would actually have it like at a Country Club and these little bushels for people to jump over.

I think that's now 20 or 30 years later where people are trying to reconnect with their traditions and they know the society here know how to wet that up. I think in that window where people thought as hostage takers like lighting a bushel in your back yard would not have been very popular. We didn't do that.

BY: How did your life in the United States develop over time?

MB: We were very- because we matriculated, we became quite Americanized quite quickly. I think you know we were born nomads and zealots. We matriculated. We were like chameleons. You dropped us anywhere we sort of studied the

terrain, figured out. I don't think it's coincidental that I'm in marketing. I basically would read the room and see what was going on and try and analyze what was going on and figure it out. You quickly learned okay, I need Calvin Klein jeans and Izods in order to fit in. You were never going to fit in totally but that got you closer. Customs and behaviors and patterns and how people were with new kids and whatnot.

We quickly matriculated. My sister was seven years younger than me so she was it was easier for her in that sense.

I remember showing up at Junior High and to this day my children make fun of me. I joined every club that there was. It didn't even occur to me not to join or to think of myself as other, I mean I just didn't see myself that way. I joined every single after school club including bowling and I was the worst bowler. Or softball I couldn't even hit the ball but I joined. I signed up and I went. I went to everything. It didn't occur to me not to go.

BY: Were those ways you sought to become American or was it –

MB: I wanted to be involved. I think it wasn't so much – I mean listen, the first thing you notice in Junior High was the cheerleaders, right? That was like the pecking order and who didn't want to be a cheerleader. It's funny then in high school I actually did become a cheerleader. I remember my father I think he came to a game once and he said to me, "Why would you cheer other people on? If you're going to be a cheerleader, go be a football player." So that was not a very popular thing in my home. For me it was like the epitome of the American dream becoming a cheerleader which is hysterical when you think about it. It was that. But I think I just sort of dove in. It was a way of surviving or dealing with the anxiety I suppose was underlying it all.

BY: Actually I was going to ask you were there fears?

MB: You know, I don't think I was conscious of the fears if they were there. I'm sure they had to have been there on some level. I think I was fortunate because we didn't have an accent. I think if I had had an accent that might have set me apart more. People make impressions of people on small things, right? I was fortunate I was always good with languages and so we didn't have an accent. I remember one kid calling me Khomeini or something a couple of times but it really wasn't prevalent for me. I didn't see it. So whether it was there or not it's funny,

now when I look back at my yearbook I think there was a few other Iranian kids but I didn't really see them either. If they were there they weren't in the mainstream or one of them was in the mainstream and she was like me.

Sort of doing her own thing. I was sort of in my own cocoon and I did after school classes and even in high school sort of joined student government. I mean, I was interested and curious so for me already I had lived in a few places. It wasn't like this was the first place I'd moved. I was just genuinely curious and interested. I think about that now that I have kids because I was never afraid to ask for help. If I wasn't doing well in the math class I would go sit and wait for the teacher and ask and want to figure out how I could do it better. I was quick to ask the librarian for help instead of going to the stacks and figure it out myself. It's funny, my senior year I had two cheerleading outfits. I was a pompom girl. One of them said Mary and the other one actually said Maryam so already by senior year I had come more in to being confident or more in to myself.

Although I don't even really know what that meant. Then I ended up coming to New York for college. It was really an accident. My parents had gone to school here so it wasn't like they were completely new to that process. They hadn't grown up here so they didn't really know the system or whatever. It was basically whoever showed up at Ocalonis High School to talk and somebody from Amherst came and that brochure looked good and I thought, "Oh, I really want to go to Amherst." I never went on a college tour. Lafayette was close to Berkeley so we knew about Berkeley. Everybody knew about Harvard and Yale. We had friends who had gone to Yale. I was an okay student. I was a B plus student. I wouldn't say I was an exceptional student. I just applied and I didn't even think about it.

Now when I think about it I didn't even think about it. I just did all the ten applications and sent them in. My choices came down to going to Berkeley or going to Barnard. And really the reason I applied to Barnard was because my mom always dreamed of me being a journalist. She was obsessed with this Italian journalist named Oriana Filatchi she was a big figure in our life. She thought of Columbia – she doesn't even remember this – but she must have thought of Columbia as Columbia Journalism school which has nothing to do with the undergrad or Barnard. She must have said oh apply to Columbia and since I was applying to ten schools any way it was sort of an arbitrary thing. I applied to Columbia. And in the old days you had a book, a

college book that listed all the schools and what it took to get in. My book was a year out of date.

I applied to Columbia and when you looked under Columbia it said women apply to Barnard. I showed up at Barnard. And it was the first year Columbia had admitted women. So people would say why did you apply to Barnard instead of Columbia? The answer was because my book was a year out of date. It was not a conscious decision of any sort. It turned out to have been a really great thing for me. But again it was sort of an accident if you would. But coming to New York was I sort of had always wanted to come east. I don't even know why I had that on my head. I was obsessed with New York having never really been here except as a kid like as a three year old. But being in New York was like being a kid in a candy store. I think there is no one way to be in New York.

So that was sort of the miracle of New York was that you could be anybody you wanted to be because there were thousands of different kinds of people in New York. So Columbia was sort of a gift in that sense. Barnard was great because you had lots of women role models. Not that I specifically thought of myself in those terms, but, you know, it must have at some level made a difference. Columbia was a great experience for me. It wasn't dissimilar to high school. I became my freshman class president, I was very involved and had an internship every semester. I felt like there wasn't enough time to take in all of the things I wanted to do. I never really thought of myself as Iranian or not Iranian. It's funny. At Columbia I was sort of I had lots of different groups of friends.

I was friends with the people in student government. Again I joined like 70 clubs. I liked the film. I mean, I was interested in everybody's thing. I was friends with the Euros because I spoke French and Spanish and I sort of grown up partially in Europe and partially in Iran. The Iranians who came in that era and who came through well to do families were sort of more Euro-ish than they were Middle Eastern in a lot of ways. But for me it wasn't like I felt home with them I felt home with nobody it was really the answer. Because I didn't really grow up around Iranians because that's not how my parents had set it up. But I didn't really grow up – in a lot of ways it kind of made me a loner with lots of friends. If that makes any sense. You sort of became inherently a nomad.

BY:

Okay. What happened when you finished college?

MB:

My parents had moved a lot and when I went to college they moved to London actually. I didn't really go back to California for a while. When they stopped moving I couldn't stop. So I moved in college I took my last semester in Paris. Then I stayed in Europe. I came back. Then my mom at that time was living in San Francisco because my father had passed away. I decided that I was going to go – I came up with this idea of either working for an outward bound somewhere abroad or going to Argentina. I barreled down those two paths and Argentina won. I had won a scholarship when I was at Barnard called the Truman scholarship. I thought mistakenly that I had to use the scholarship pretty quickly. As it turned out that wasn't the case. I applied to join degree programs because I thought I wanted to be a journalist and somebody told me – I had met somebody who went to Johns Hopkins – and he said if you want to be a journalist go study something that you can write about don't just go to journalism school.

I starting applying to International Fair schools and somebody said oh you can't make any money with that you should join that with a business degree. I applied to join degree programs. And after I sent in my application I packed up and moved to Argentina. I knew no one in Argentina. I literally just packed up my suitcase and showed up. It was during the era of Menone and they had hyperinflation. And now, it seems crazy but at the time it just seemed like I was going to go down there, learn to tango, become a journalist, experience upheaval which is really what I thought was going to happen when I went to Argentina since they were having turmoil. And instead of having sort of this revolutionary experience I ended up going there, I snooped around they were making a movie called Highlander II with Christopher Lampert and Sean Connery.

I snooped around to get a job on the movie or really to get a story so I could get a job at the newspaper in the English language newspaper and they hired me on the movie. I went from trying to have this really revolutionary experience to having a job where I got paid in dollars and got a driver. A driver would drive me from my tiny little hotel to the studios every day for the seven weeks that I worked on this movie. I got paid in dollars and had a free phone home. It was crazy. In Argentina like all good third world countries, the upper classes all know each other and they're quite small. So once I knew a couple of people – people had given me names when you go to Argentina look up Joe but we were like six generations removed – I had started to call these people. They all turned out to be

well to do people because how else were they connected to people in the States?

So they all ended up knowing each other and then before long I was like in nightclubs with these people like at their ranches. I remember I spent a weekend with the Saudi Arabian ambassador to Argentina when the Kuwait war broke out. It was crazy. It just shows you can't control life. But it was again like for me I was like a chameleon. I fit in there or didn't fit in there as much as I fit in any place else, right? Argentine culture was very similar to Iranian culture. They were very family oriented; very protective of their families. A lot of it was similar but in the same way that I didn't really fit in- I mean you really basically ended up not fitting in anywhere. Or fitting in everywhere to some degree. I had gotten in to Columbia so I came back when the movie finished and I came back after in August to basically start at graduate school.

BY: So you really are a citizen of the world in many ways. You have ties to this incredible heritage in Iran. You have ties to the United States. What do you consider yourself and why?

MB: Well, the place I have lived the longest is New York. I have been in New York since 1985. Yes. I spent a summer in London. I spent some time in Argentina. I have lived in San Francisco. I have lived in a lot of places but really the place I've lived the longest and I think the place where I came in to my own – so what defines you as becoming an adult – was probably New York. I probably consider myself a New Yorker. If I had to pick a country I would consider myself at this point American. Right? There was a while I wasn't so sure I would consider myself American. Probably when I was in college and I thought about joining the Peace Corps but okay how would I feel about defending America and its policies if I didn't agree with who was in power. I had all of these – being a political science major – I had all these thoughts and questions.

But I mean I think the thing that makes America so unique and different and many ways wonderful is the incredible freedom, right? So while yes I think there are many things that we take for granted or I remember after 9/11 being at a friend's home and she came from a big New York family and I remember her being astounded by the news that we tortured people in Guantanamo Bay and thinking, "Oh this was a woman who was highly educated, who came from a very well to do, highly educated family. She never thought that people tortured people because we were in the States." I just thought that was such a

crazy idea. That being said, let's assume everybody does torture on some level because we're synics. And to some degree we might have evidence. But not to the same degree, right?

The freedom of opportunity, I remember so distinctly I worked in British Parliament for one summer 1987 I spent the summer in the UK, my parents were living there at the time really my mom was there. I interned for Dr. Charles Goodson Wicks who was running as a Tory MP in Wimbledon. He was like a character out of a book. He had his wife on an allowance. Her name was Annabelle. When he won which he wasn't even from Wimbledon they just sent him there because he could win that seat. I switched over and worked for Mark Fisher who was a labor shadow minister for the arts. They weren't very different they both came from good families. One went to Eton and one went to Harrow whatever. What I remember about the UK – and I matriculated as quickly as anybody could in three months, right?

I was at Wimbledon, I went to Henley, it was like I was studying the culture to figure out how I could consume as much of it as possible. But there are such strict lines in the UK. I remember going and taking – I was at a program that was run by BU – I took these women from the BU with me I said let's go to they were having a polo match at Windsor and I said let's just go to the match. We can buy tickets. It never occurred to me that there were things I couldn't do. I said to them but you have to dress the part. I already knew that. I said you have to dress the part. Wear Laura Ashley and big hats. You got to blend in. That's how this works. We all dressed the part, we went down and I could see we were on the one side which was sort of the public side and the other side was like the country club private side, and I was curious.

I was nosy. I remember looking over to them like we need to go over there and see what's going on on that side. She said well, I'm not good at that. I said well, I am good at that. I said but just don't speak. We walked over and they never stopped us because we acted like we belonged. In the UK if you don't belong you don't walk over there. Because there are such clear class lines. If you're not part of that scene you're not going to be crossing the line to go over there. They don't even bother to check because people know their place. We got in there and I was having Pims and I was drinks on the other side and unfortunately for the other American girls they started speaking

loudly with their American accents and so they outed themselves and got kicked out.

I left to go find my friends. But that notion of being able to read the room and see and observe, right? And as great and as much as I love London in many, many ways there was an incredible hierarchy and there is an incredible hierarchy and people do stay in their lines. And as many foreigners as they have in that country the English do stick together. And yes you can break through that but it's not the same as when you live in the States. In the States there is an incredible sense of meritocracy. There's an incredible amount of freedom of speech. There is mobility. Yes there's still 737 Park or those apartments where it's hard to get in to but that's not the norm. Yes. Some things still matter. So there's still crazy yacht clubs that don't let people in and whatever. But it's not the same as in other places.

So I think that's one of the incredible gifts of America. I remember when 9/11 happened there was that Mosque that was being built and Bloomberg came out and was defending the mosque and I remember thinking like you know when they were frisking people and just thinking the thing that makes us so amazing and so the fact that I think of us is this, I'm part of America I guess tells you that I consider myself American now. We do give people the freedom of speech and we do not take their freedoms away at the first sign of fright. The thing that was most frightening was people panicking and wanting to take that away. Because frankly that is what sets us apart from other countries in the world and that's why people continue to come here.

We're not a perfect country. It would be great if people had health care like other places but you know you talk to people who live in France and they are fleeing the country because they can't start businesses there. Because it's impossible to get people to work the way you might need a start up to work. What you realize is they are all tradeoffs.

BY:

Let's talk a little bit about your career. Your entrepreneurial spirit that has helped you shape your identity within your professional life and if you could talk a little bit about the sort of influences and whether you have role models. One thing that's intriguing to me is that today in parts of the world women are denied the opportunity even when they come out of these incredible cultures where, for example, in Iran where the prophet Mohammed's first wife was a highly respected entrepreneur known for her success as a business woman yet

today within certain cultures it's very difficult for women to succeed. If you could talk a little bit about your personal journey.

MB:

I think I come from a line of very strong women. But honestly I think Iranian women in general are quite strong. I mean I think they learn. I mean, it was one of the other reasons I never fit in with Iranians with my own people in some ways, right/ which is that they it's very focused on getting married and looking pretty and not speaking loudly not because you don't have opinions but because that's not what's going to make you attractive to a mate. And for me that just was ridiculous. I didn't fit in in that way, right? Because I wasn't going to conform to those kinds of norms but they were strategic. It wasn't that they had no opinions or they weren't really in control. They just knew to dial that back because they knew that that's what would make them more attractive to the other sex, I suppose.

But in Iran, women were able to get educated you know unlike Saudi Arabia they can drive, actually do a lot of things and they're quite, they've always been known as quite powerful even if it is behind the scenes. But I come from my mom worked and my grandmother at least on my mom's side who was much closer to us growing up because she really raised us she was a go-getter. She can still not sit still. She comes originally from Russia but that didn't seem to bother her either. I think there was never a sense of something we couldn't do. As I mentioned to you with my dad he thought I should go be a football player and not a cheerleader. I guess there was always a sense that it wasn't gender that limited us. There might have been other things but it wasn't gender.

I think with my career again, I never saw myself as a woman or a man or an Iranian I sort of just put my head down and did the work and pushed through. I spoke up. I think sometimes when people are immigrants or they're new in a setting they don't think they can speak. I think I was never afraid to speak. I was fortunate that way. For better or worse I always spoke up. As a result you stood out. Now that could be good or bad depending on the situation. I started off from a professional perspective after business school I took a job in advertising. Really I ended up getting that job in advertising because when I was in college I wrote a travel column – because we moved around a lot – I had sent it to somebody at the Gap and eventually it sort of led me to a meeting with Mickey Drexler who – I joke with him today – that he really started me on my career.

He just called me one day after I had sent him this mockup of this book I had done. And even though I didn't want a job at The Gap, his head of HR who called me after Mickey had called me said to me well, you're really in marketing this is a marketing idea. So I was like oh, I should go in to marketing not really knowing what the hell that job was. But I was sort of a combination right brain, left brain person so that made sense. When I did those career tests that was the job that came up a lot, advertising. I started in that field and I think for me media was always a big part of my life. I grew up in revolution. You saw how telling a story could change people's lives. When the revolution happened I had a teacher who stuck around even though she was American.

She used to run a current affairs hour and I always came in with stories. I remember her saying to my mom I was going to be a journalist and my mom thinking that was like a fate worse than death because they were killing off all the journalists. I always sort of understood the power of media and so advertising was just another form of that, right? It was how do you tell that story and engage people and compel them? I sort of started off in advertising and I think about this a lot. I think part of it is having experienced the tenuousness of everything because when I was in college I didn't even put things on the wall because I thought like at any moment you might have to leave. Why bother? I love that you have all these collections. I used to collect nothing. Because I would say things would keep you down.

Now if you come to my house I have like tons of things everywhere so I'm not sure what that means. I remember being willing to move jobs much sooner than other people. I just had more urgency. I felt like life is short and you only live once and you better run at it hard. I wanted to make a difference. I didn't really know what that meant but I wanted to have left some kind of mark or had made some sort of impact. So I did advertising. I worked at Turner broadcasting and then I went to the early days of the startup where you had a door and two file cabinets as a desk. It wasn't just a cartoon it was actually my life.

Then I went to book publishing. I was willing to try things that I had no experience in if somebody was willing to give me a chance because I was never afraid of failure. It's not true that I – of course when I really sat down and analyzed it I would think well I know nothing about book publishing and I might fail – but I was willing to take the leap and maybe that was because we sort of just kept getting dropped in to things and having to

survive. It was sort of sink or swim. I think one of my favorite jobs was actually working for Univision because I used to joke it was like working abroad but domestically.

But working in the Hispanic space in a lot of ways was like working with Iranians because Hispanics there's a lot of common ground. I used to joke that all good Iranians should work in Spanish language TV. But it was great. I think one of the things was that you could see. I always could see things where other people couldn't see them. I think that's partly what happens when you're an outsider and an observer. Because you're constantly taking everything in. You don't take anything for face value, right? You're reading the room. You're trying to understand what it means.

Are they really saying what they mean or is the body language saying something different? And as a marketer you're interpreting that and figuring out how to connect with people. Being curious was an asset.

BY: How did you develop the skills to read a room?

MB: You know, if you're new in school a lot in early age it's sink or swim. I mean I remember saying to my daughter when she was going off to camp – sleep away camp for the first time – I said to her the kid you're going to sit with on the bus will not be your friend. I can almost guarantee that that will not be the first, that will not be the person you will be friends with when the summer is over. Because that first moment when you walk in to a room everyone is so desperate and afraid of being alone. People are afraid to be alone. They will just sit with anybody. I said but then what happens is you get to actually know each other and you're like you know what, it was just a desperate moment. So it's funny because what I remember is.. I really grew up in high school in Lafayette but my dad moved to Newport Beach my senior year.

I had just become a cheerleader so my mom said we're going to wait a semester here and we'll join you second semester. When I tell my husband that we moved second semester of my senior year to a new high school in southern California he just thinks that's so crazy. But I didn't even flinch. It wasn't even a question. To me it was like oh my God I get to try a new school and how quickly will I be able to it was like a game. It was like how quickly can I matriculate having learned all the things I've now learned? I remember thinking to myself I'm going to go to lunch and I'm not going to panic and I will be okay sitting and

eating lunch by myself. So that conscious choice of sitting and not panicking and sitting with the first person or just being desperate allowed me to sit and read the room – I only had six months – so I could read the room and see okay, what's really going on here?

Who are my people? Where do I want to go? It seems strategic now when I think about it. It wasn't it was conscious but not that conscious. Right? It wasn't like it was a game plan. But I guess it was of sorts. I think as a kid you learn. Kids are brutal. If you learn it young it's really it sticks with you.

BY: You mentioned a daughter and a husband. I wonder if you could take a few minutes and talk about your family?

MB: Sure. I have an almost 16 year old daughter Natasha. And a 14 year old son Nicky. My husband Andy. Andy grew up in Cincinnati. He's a multigenerational Cincinnati person. My two kids Natasha and Nicky were – it's funny they both have Russian names and really because I like the names and I guess because of my grandmother – Natasha has an Iranian middle name Siriah and I had a middle name for Nicky but Andy wanted to name him after his grandfather so I acquiesced since I really like Nicky. It's interesting they have lived their whole life in New York, and while they have obviously lived sort of a privileged life where they get to go to great private schools and have lots of access to lots of things. The thing that's been fascinating to me – actually now with both of them – how in some ways they still feel otherly.

My daughter Natasha switched schools for high school and she ended up going to a performing arts school called LaGuardia. She came home her first year and she would talk about how a lot of people thought she was African American. Now remember I'm married to a nice Jewish boy from Cincinnati so they're mixed definitely. But many people would say to her – because she's olive skinned and curly hair which means you could be anything – people would say to her so hey, sister or whatever was the expression and she would come home and be like why do people think I'm black? It's not something she actually took offense to, it was more just like she was confused by the whole thing, right? Because it would happen to her multiple times. We would joke about it.

I remember then reading my journals from when I spent that summer in the UK and it's so weird. I was saying to her I read my journal the other day and somebody when I was going to

Henley people were calling me Whitney Houston. I said people just call you whatever if they don't understand you're like whatever the next closest thing is. When I go to Mexico people speak to me in Spanish because they think I'm Hispanic. Or if I'm in Miami people speak to me like if you're not white then basically anything else. Right? But it's been interesting watching them in their identity and how as much as you would think they would be more conformists because they've had more stability in their life and sort of all the things I didn't have in some ways, right, they're quite opinionated and otherly.

I don't know what causes that. Right? My daughter came home yesterday and was telling me about how she was talking about feminism in her chorus class and like good for her, but Natasha's never afraid of her opinion. And never afraid of standing out in some strange way. I was always trying to fit in you know so it's interesting that I gave them a life where they could totally fit in and yet they are choosing not to fit in.

BY: What elements of Iranian culture and traditions have or how has that passed across generations from your grandparents to your parents to you to your children? Are there certain things that continue such as celebration of Holidays or rituals or life stages, food, language, music, all of these sort of markers of cultural identity?

MB: Probably for us the biggest thing has been food, right? I don't really cook a lot of Iranian food but my grandmother comes to visit a lot and she- so the kids have grown up eating that because of her. My father passed away and then my mom's not local so we don't have a lot of Iranians around us except for my sister. They hear Farsi when me and my sister are together or when my grandmother or my mother are over but they didn't really grow up with a big, large Iranian community either. But I would say food. They definitely like have a conscience sense of Iranian food. Also just the extended family, right? My uncle comes and his daughter is now at Columbia so he'll stay with us and just that sense of extended family is definitely a part of the Iranian culture I would say.

Then I would say not music so much. Iranian New Year. I mean, for a while we celebrated. Again, it sort of depends on when it falls and if we're in town but when they were growing up we did celebrate Iranian New Year more in the sense of setting the haft seen table and actually I remember at Dalton one year I went and did the haft seen table for them at school. They have a little bit of that. They're complete muts. They're sort of

Jewish. We weren't raised religiously so there's not a lot of Muslim I mean I couldn't tell you much about that except for what I learned in college. My husband is Jewish but we don't go to synagogue and he doesn't practice and they're not being bar mitzvah so they know they're Jewish because my in-laws are more observant than my husband and they will come for Passover Yom Kippur and whatnot but they don't have a strong connection to it except that they get to celebrate Chanukah.

It's all about Holidays. Chanukah and then we started doing Christmas because there was one year even though they were growing up in New York they felt very left out about Christmas. I was like I grew up with Christmas so even though for Andy Christmas is anathema to being Jewish I was like for God sakes I always had a tree so we basically now have a tree too. We celebrate everything, except maybe kwanzaa. And that's only because we don't know about it.

BY: What are you most proud of?

MB: I'm definitely proud of my kids. I think they're still teenagers so they're still in formation but it's hard not to be proud of your children I suppose, right? Because they're sort of your imprints in a lot of ways. I don't really think about things that way. Feeling like you're proud of something feels like you're at the end of a journey and for me the journey is never over.

BY: What's been most challenging?

MB: Being a parent of a teenager. Really, parenting teenagers is hard. It's probably one of the hardest things I've ever done. I think partly because what makes me successful at work is exactly the reverse of what makes you successful as a teenage parent or a parent of a teenager. That's the sense of not right so my whole life has been about fixing things. My professional success has been about being a fixer. But you, really, you're supposed to let your kids fix things themselves and not fix it for them and be a helicopter parent. So giving up control and holding yourself back is super hard.

BY: What advice would you give for future generations, speaking of young people?

MB: You know, I do think life is short and that you should run at what you want hard. I do think you need to as hard as it is to do and it's hard for me so I'm not saying this is somebody who necessarily practices it but the importance of like friends and

family and appreciating the moment when you're in it. Because it is fleeting.

- BY: What do you think it means to be American?
- MB: I think it means to be free. I do think this country is about freedom.
- BY: Is there anything else you'd like to add?
- MB: No but I did like seeing all of the artifacts in the museum. Trying to think what do I have that I can give you.
- BY: That's what I would like you to think about objects, documents, pictures, things that reflect your journey whether it's the literal journey, the actual journey or the journey that you're still on you've been on now for a while.
- MB: Forty some years, yeah. Okay.
- BY: Okay.

[Continuation with the interview with Maryam Banikarim]

- MB: Yeah, so when I got married – so that would have been like '80s – no, when did I get married? Okay, whenever I got married – '97 –my mom moved back to Iran. So really, she lived here, she then went back, and so she went really under the auspices of selling the house because it was under her name, so they hadn't confiscated it. And she's pretty much been there ever since. I've been back to Iran three times. I went when I graduated from business school, which was the first time I ever went back. And me, my mom and my sister, we all went back together. And the house was basically intact, as we had left it.

And so I walked into my room with all my toys just like they had been when I was little. And it was definitely more restrictive, that first trip around was still more restrictive. You had to – of course you have to wear the veil, but they would yell at you on the street and you had to bring it down or whatever. But you're very conscious of not belonging there either. And so I've been back, I think, one time after that. And I went just by myself, and my mom had been living there for longer at that point. And when I go there, I just give myself over to her because it's really a very different experience than being here.

The traffic is crazy. People are basically almost driving on the sidewalk. You bargain about everything. You do ride sharing. And I say to mom, like, “Why are you bargaining with that guy? It’s two pennies. Like that’s what it translates to.” And she’s like, “It’s not the point.” So it’s very different culturally in that way. And yet familiar too. You know? Because I left when I was 11. I mean that’s old enough. But it’s hard – I mean it’s hard to go back and forth because it’s far, and you don’t get a lot of vacation in the U.S. And she always puts the fear of God that you don’t know what might happen.

When you work in the media business or have people who work in the media business, you worry about that more than maybe somebody else. But people go back and forth a lot more than they used to.

BY: So how do you stay connected?

MB: Oh my God. So I mean Iran is probably, not to someone other – like technologically very advanced. So she’s constantly telling me about new systems. I need to get Viber. Download Viber because we can talk for free. So she sends many, many emails. And she’s on social media and likes things and wants to know what’s that picture you posted, and you look good in that picture. She has a lot of free time to be trolling social media really. And she used to come once a year, but now it’s gotten harder because she’s more insecure about leaving the house by itself. Yeah, but she moved back.

BY: Are there things that you send her?

MB: Mainly I send her my old iPhone – right, technology. Computer, things like that. I mean she doesn’t really ask for other stuff. It’s mainly like, “Oh, if you have any old computer because mine’s older.” You know? Oh, the other big distinction between U.S. and other countries is we repair things in other countries. Here, things are disposable. You throw them away. So she’s like, “Oh, your old computer, I’ll have it. Right here it’s like basically I’m just throwing it away.” The cost of labor’s cheap, so fixing things is something people still do. Yeah.

[Continuation with the interview with Maryam Banikarim]

BY: I wonder if we could talk a little bit about your wedding and the ceremony.

MB: Yeah, so Andy and I got married in March, and we actually got married at one of our favorite restaurants, which is no longer around, called Montrachet. And my mom had been living in Iran at the time, so she, when she came, brought – it was a combination of a Jewish and Iranian wedding. And so while we got married by a rabbi was non-denominational, my mom performed the Iranian part of the ceremony. So we had an Iranian ceremony and a religious ceremony, which was based on, I guess, Judaism. And so she brought with her a mirror from Iran and set up sort of the Iranian wedding table, if you would.

But what I remember is, so we basically had about 96 people and the reporter from the *New York Times* because they wrote up our wedding for the Vows column. And our wedding was really about food and the multiples of desserts. And when it ended, at Iranian weddings, people generally dance, and my grandfather walked me down the aisle. And there was no place to dance at Montrachet, but when the wedding ceremony ended, my grandfather and my grandmother just got up – there was no music – and they just started to dance. It was like he wasn't going to not dance at my wedding, even though there was no music.

I mean I think they brought a tape recorder. It's so funny, I don't remember the vivid detail. But literally, there are pictures from my wedding where my grandmother and grandfather are – they're the only people dancing. But he danced at my wedding. And it was definitely one of my memories.

BY: What's the significance of the mirror?

MB: You know, I don't know. But it's always – so first of all, there's a mirror on the haft seen table and there's a mirror at all Iranian weddings. And oh, the other thing that they do at Iranian weddings is they have two sugar cones that they rub against each other. So they hold a cloth over your head, and they did that at my wedding. And they rubbed these two sugar cones together, and they say something about tying your mother-in-law's tongue. It's a crazy thing. And my mom did that. So she actually performed the Iranian part of the ceremony. Yeah.

She officiated. She – yeah, my mom's very funny.

[End of Audio]