

Name of interviewee: Rafat and Shaista Mahmood

Date of interview: October 26th, 2014

Name of interviewer: Bill Yeingst

Length of interview: 76 minutes

BY: My name is Bill Yeingst, and today is October 26th, and we are conducting an oral history with the Mahmoods at their home in Mount Vernon, Virginia. So can you tell me – if you would both identify yourselves, and then begin telling your story?

RM: Rafat Mahmood, also mainly known as Raymond here in the United States.

SM: Shaista Mahmood, and everyone calls me Shaista.

BY: That's good. If you wanna talk about your family background, and your childhood, a little bit about –

RM: Okay. Well I was born in Karachi, Pakistan, and at the age of, I believe it was three; my father was in the foreign services and transferred to London, England. So we had gone there. And we were there for five – a little more than five years, and then we returned to Karachi when my father got transferred back. The foreign office was in Karachi at that time, and there I joined the public school – it's a private school, but it was called public school – and went to school there for about four years. And then my father had gotten transferred to Washington, D.C.

But during those years in Karachi, we had – when we had just come back from London, it was a bit of a change for me, going from London to Karachi, because one, I didn't know the language. I could not read or write it, so there were some difficulties in school. But the school we were at didn't have a lot of emphasis on the language. But then we went to – when we got to Washington – we were in Washington D.C. for about five years, and I was in school there at – it's called Gordon Junior High School in D.C. And then my father – the whole family moved to Maryland, and then I went to Einstein High School there.

And coming from Pakistan to Washington was also a big change. So schooling was different, friends were different, and going to the stores – and as a kid,, you know, you see all this chocolate and candy sitting there, which is three cents or five cents, and it was just a big treat. – happy to get this chocolate. But that – when you're young, I guess those are some of the things that you focus on more.

And then during my high school days I was working after school. And the reason I worked, because a lot of friends after high school worked also. And then the money that you saved up, you were able to buy whatever stuff you wanted to buy, and you – at the age of 16, I wanted to buy a car, got my driver license, and my dad said, “No, you shouldn’t get a car. You’re too young. You should share it with your brother.”

But anyway, turning 16 on a Friday, got the driver license and looked in the local newspapers, and there was a car for sale very close to our home. So I went to see a gentleman in the afternoon, I said, “I’d like to buy the car,” and he says, “It’s \$50,” and I said, “Sure, I can pay you that.” And I said, “Well, sir, I can’t get the tags for the car today because DMV’s closed, or will close soon, but I can come and get the car Monday.” And this gentleman said to me, “Take my car, take the tags, and use the tags for the weekend and you can just bring them back on Monday.”

So here I am, anxious to have a car, and so I buy the car from this gentleman, and then all weekend we just – with friends, with the top down on the car, we just rolled around on the evenings, late in the night. But where else in the world would somebody trust a young kid to take a car – and trust him with his own tags? I mean, that really speaks volume for the greatness of, not only this country, but the individuals in this country. So that was one of my experiences that I will never forget in life, how kind this person was. And maybe if somebody came and did that – wanted to buy a car from me, I might not do such a thing. But anyway, this was one thing.

And then after high school, I went to college there for a few months and then my father got transferred back. And I went back with them and I joined the university there. And then –

BY: Where did you go back to?

RM: I went to Lahore. And my father was transferred to Islamabad. The university was in Lahore, so I went to Lahore University. I stayed in the dorm rooms there for two years and I joined the economics department. I – and going to Lahore from United States was also another experience. But a very – it was a great experience, basically. We were at the dorm, money comes from your home every month and you just spend your money. I think those were also in universities – like universities here also. Kids enjoy those, I think, years the best.

And I think I really had a great time in Lahore. The city was great. You could go out in the evening late at night, you could go out with your friends to movies, dinners. And there was no such thing as violence like, unfortunately, it is today. The city has changed. But anyway, those were two of my great years. And other great thing about Lahore was that's where Shaista used to live, and her parents were there, and I used to go to their home quite often and meet with her parents, meet with Shaista, her brother, and her sister.

So after graduating from college there, sitting at home one day with my father in the afternoon, he said, "Well, what are you going to do now? Are you going to – do you want to join the civil service here, or what are your plans?" And I said, "Well, I want to go back to the United States." And he said, "Well, you know it's going to be difficult for you being just a graduate to start there and get a job, and to live, and to survive." And sending money from Pakistan, it's very difficult, because it's expensive because of the currency rates and all the other things. So I said to my father, I said, "Well, you know, I wanna go back, so if you can just get me a ticket and a couple of hundred dollars, and I'll figure out what to do after that."

So – and the way – I was confident that when I came to United States, I would get a job because when I was in high school I was working, and I changed many jobs during high school days also. So I knew jobs were easy to find. Yes, they were not high paying jobs; yes, they were not jobs that you wanna make a career out of. But they were something where you could at least pay your bills and you can survive and go to school at night.

So anyway, after convincing my father that this is what I wanted to do, he said, "Well, I think before you go, I want you to maybe think about getting engaged, or at least you have something to think about and work hard." So anyway, he asked me what – "anyone you have in mind?" And I said, "Yes." So I said, "Shiasta." My father and Shasta's father were in school together in college, and they were friends. So he called Shasta's father up and said, "My son is getting ready to go to the United States for his education, and – but I would like to see him get engaged before he goes. And he's shown interest in your daughter. What do you think?"

So he said, "Well, I'll check – talk to Shaista about it. And I don't see any problems." So anyway, that was the conversation. I think

maybe the next day, Shaista's father had called back to my father and said yes. And so then we went from Islamabad, where my father was. The whole family with sweets – like the tradition was in my country, go to their house and formally do the engagement. So then we – Shaista's father, who was general manager of several of these big hotels in Pakistan, had a nice reception and an engagement ceremony in Lahore, I don't know, two, 300 people. So it was a really great evening.

So after that, I come to the United States, and I land at Dulles Airport, and my brother – older brother was here, but he was not very well established himself. And I found a place – one of my uncles was also, so I shared the apartment with him when I landed here. And I got here in the morning. I think the flight came in the afternoon, about, I think, 1:00 or so. My brother came to get me, we went and had lunch, and then I put my stuff in the apartment and went out looking for a job on Connecticut Avenue, because the apartment was very close to Connecticut Avenue.

So as I'm going down, I see in this one restaurant they had a sign that said, "Help wanted. Cashier." So I said – I went in there and applied for the job, and the guy said, "Okay, do you have any experience?" I said, "I know a little bit about it." So he said, "Well, come in tomorrow morning at 10:00." And I got a job the next day to work there. So I get this job and it's in the evenings. And I applied to the USDA Graduate School to take graduate classes, and I was taking graduate classes there. Economics, Import/Export, and things like that.

So as I was doing my jobs and going to school, I – during my high school days, I was quite involved in racing cars and building cars, and things like that. So we had this opportunity – this gas station came up available for sale in Virginia, which was not such a good area at that time, and the district manager said to me, "Well, it's a difficult location. It's been closed a few times. Do you still want it?" And I said yes. So we – I went to training for it for three, four weeks, then came back and purchased this gas station. I had saved up about six or \$7000 in the last two, three years before buying this station.

And they had said, "Well, we need a \$5000 deposit. Can you do that?" And I said, "Yes, I can do that." And so I started with the gas station.

BY:

Where was the gas station?

RM: This was in Alexandria Del Ray on Mount Vernon Avenue and Oxford Avenue. And so 1975 I buy this gas station, and then in 1976 – no, in the summer of 1975, then I went to real estate classes, and I also got –

SM: You got your green card.

RM: Yeah, and then I got real estate – I took real estate classes. But during this time, I didn't have any immigration – I was on a student visa for a while, and then I bought this business. My student visa was going to expire, so then I applied – there was a law at that time that if you'd invested a certain amount of money in a business, you would get – you could apply for a green card. So then I hired a lawyer and then we filed for the green card. And in 1976, I got the green card. And then I went to Pakistan and we had – Shaista's parents and my parents finalized the date for a wedding.

So then I went back and we got married, and then she came here. And at that time, I had my gas station going, and plus I was doing real estate. I joined a real estate company at that time and started doing some real estate investments at that time. And my father in 1974 – actually, 1973 I came to Pakistan here, after – when my father was still there.

And then in 1974, my father had gotten transferred to the United Nations, so he was in New York. When I told him about opening up this gas station, and he was kind of upset, saying that, "Nobody in your family has done this, how would you do it? You've got no experience. Can you do it? I don't want you to lose your money." And I said, "No, this is, dad, what I want to do."

And so anyway – and it worked out great for me. My – I hired some good people to work with me, and then first couple of months were horrible. Business wasn't good. But I kept at it, and it turned out to be great. And after that, real estate investments started working out for me, and then throughout the years that's what we have done, is our real estate business.

BY: I wanna go back for a few minutes to your childhood in Karachi, and talk a little bit about what that was like. Your family – when did you come together? What kind of celebrations and rituals – if you wanna talk at all about religion and so on?

RM: Sure, sure, sure. Well, as a child in Karachi, it was a fantastic city. I mean, we really – I mean, my father would obviously go to work

during day time, we would go to school, coming back in the evening. We would be outside playing cricket all – through all hours of the day, and get in all kinds of trouble like kids usually do. But nothing that warranted the police to come out there.

And then most of our family was in the province of Punjab and Lahore and Faisalabad, and places like that, except my father's – one of my father's relatives were there in Karachi. So most of the time when we had celebrations – like there was an annual Eid events – we would go to their house, and all the members of the family would get together there and celebrate Eid there. And we were very close to them, so it was a lot of going back and forth there. And Karachi was, again, as I said, it was really a great city. And as a child, it was a good experience for me.

BY: Was your family particularly religious?

RM: No. Our family was not religious at all. I mean, you know a lot of the neighborhood kids would go to the mosque for reading and learning the Quran, but I never did. And my father never did force us that you have to do it, because my father himself was not a very religious person. But he did – his faith was strong, and he always believed in doing the right things. He always said to us also, "Do the right things. Be a good person. Don't discriminate against anybody because of religion or because of their wealth or because of all these things." And I think those were some of the greatest lessons that I've had from my father.

And I used to see his work ethics. I mean, during those times while were in Karachi, there was a war back in – between Pakistan and India, and I remember my father, since he was in the cipher division, he would go to the office and three and four nights at a time, he would not be coming home. They – one of his staff people would come home and take his food to him there at lunch and dinner. He would come two, three times a day and take clean clothes, shirts and all. And the reason was that he – his job demanded that he be there. He used to sleep on the floor in his office. He had a little mattress type of thing, but that's where he slept for three, four days during those war times.

And then throughout our life, I've seen him work. His work ethics were really fierce. Hard worker. And that's coming to us, and I think that's also into my children, who are really hard workers and not afraid to work.

BY: So would you describe your family as being middle class in –

RM: I think so. I think probably middle class at that time. And you know, there was really –

SM: Upper middle class.

BY: Upper middle class?

RM: And there was really a great setback for my father, who never mentioned anything and never complained about it much, but him when he was growing up, he was brought up in a very wealthy family. His father was a very wealthy man – our grandfather who we never met, in India.

BY: What was his name?

RM: His name was Choulery Abdul Sattar Khan, and he was a very senior member of the police force, and then a very big landowner. Had, like, three, four hundred people working for him on the farm. And the – so in those days, my father, when he was in the host of going to college and school – and even in going to school, he was in hostels in Delhi, because his mother had passed away when he was two years old. So he had a stepmother. But even in those days, my dad's clothing used to come from London. I mean, that was the extent of the wealth of my grandfather.

But the thing was that partition happened, and my father came a few days – maybe a couple of weeks before the partition, to Pakistan to help start the Foreign Office with many other people. And my grandfather was leaving India to come to Pakistan to join my father, and he, along with his whole family that was there, and the workers that they were all – they were going to come together. There were three or four hundred of them, and they had planned to leave around 6:00 in the morning one morning, and then at 4:30 or 5:00, some people had come and killed them. And a lot of it was – I mean, there was killings on both sides, but it was probably – it was a sad thing.

And my father at that time, being only 21 years old, and all his life living in boarding schools, did not know the extent of wealth and property that my father owned. It was only in Pakistan when he had come that our aunt that was living in Karachi – the family that – the only other family he had there, would tell my dad that, “You know, your father was such a wealthy man. He had all these things, all these properties and all.”

But there was no way he could claim those from the government, because he did not know – and they did not know. They knew he was very wealthy and owned all this, but they didn't know what his properties were, so they cannot make a claim to claim any of the property. So my father basically started from scratch. And I'm sure there are stories on both sides like this, but – so that's it.

BY: Are there any particular holidays or celebrations that you remember from your childhood that –

RM: I mean, I remember on Eid. Like right after the month of Ramadan, you celebrate Eid, and then – so the two Eids were usually very special. We would – once the moon sighting was done, then everybody would go to the store and buy clothes – new clothes for the celebration of Eid, and then we would all go to our – my dad's house, actually. And then we would have festivities there.

BY: What was your house like?

RM: In Karachi, where we lived, we had a three-bedroom house. And that – well, three-bedroom obviously, and one bathhouse. And then we – this was in Karachi. And then when we went back and went to Islamabad, obviously – in Pakistan, when you're working for the government service, you go by your entitlement. Whatever your entitlement, that's the type of house you get. So when we – my father got transferred back to Islamabad, he got a bigger house, obviously.

BY: So when you came to the United States, what – were there things that you missed about Pakistan?

RM: I think the first few months, maybe, some of the friends that you have – you miss them. But besides that, I don't think so. I mean, I really – I was just so happy to be in the United States.

BY: And you have some family here.

RM: We do have – my – I mean, my brothers and my sister are here. Shaista's also family is here. We don't have much family in Pakistan – immediate family, but we do have distant cousins and all that there, in Pakistan. But at that time, when we came here, no, we didn't have any relatives here. It was just friends we made here.

BY: Okay, I think this is a good transition point for Shaista to tell her story.

SM: Yeah. I think I'd like to go back because I want to share my story that I'm relating as a child. I was born in Pakistan. I was born in Karachi. My father that time, he was working with police in Karachi, I think. And again, it started from the partition. The partition had a big impact on the families – all our families. I remember hearing stories from my mother that when they used to live in India, my grandfather, he was a minister to Maharajah [unintelligible][00:24:39]. Maharajah [unintelligible][00:24:41] is the Maharajah of [unintelligible][00:24:43] , and he was his advisor – my grandfather was his advisor.

And my mom's family, they are from Nabad [unintelligible][00:24:53]. And she tells me the stories that they had a house – one in [unintelligible][00:24:58] and then one – they had a house in Delhi. And their house on Delhi was 16 Baba Road, which is – I visited India last year and I saw this street, a beautiful street in Delhi. And she – her stories always were they were only four sisters, and my grandfather married three times. It was somehow – he wanted to have a boy, but his luck was all girls, so my mother said that my grandfather was very open-minded and very educated, and he said, “Well, now I have girls, so I want them to get an education.”

So they put – my grandfather put my mother and my aunts to the school, which was Queen Mary's, in the area. And after the partition they were in India, so they established an education system in India and Pakistan. So my mother went to Queen Mary's and she tells me that, “You know, we used to have a piano teacher who used to come to the house and teach us piano. My father was very open-minded” – my grandfather – and she said, “We were having a wonderful life in India, because the families were well off, they didn't have any problem.”

And then, I heard the stories about 1947, the partition. That was the biggest scar on my family. And that's because it was a huge change for the whole family, for my grandfather. Luckily, that he had the sources that he came into a plane. They had a small plane at that time, and I remember my mother said that we – somebody told us that you have to leave in an hour. You have to leave back up, otherwise some other people will come and they will now kill you, the whole family.

And the stories my mother used to tell me was our neighbors were all Hindu, they were all Sikhs, and we were like a family. We used to celebrate there – we used to go celebrate Diwali; they used to come to our house, we used to celebrate Eid, and then they said we used to call Chacha. Chacha is like an uncle, to all my grandfather's friends. She said we were kind of a very tight community in India. And suddenly when we hear this that we have to leave our house in an hour – so they said, we were all kind of shocked. What's happening here?

So my mother said we didn't have much time. My older aunt was mad, and so she just went inside and she said, "I'm going to pick some stuff." So she picked one suitcase. She put all her silver and jewelry, and all went to the airport. And when they were in the airport and they were putting everyone in the plane, so the pilot said that you have to leave this suitcase. My aunt said, "But these are my things." He said, "I only can take a passenger, instead of a suitcase. You have to leave this suitcase here," because it was a small plane. So my mother said my aunt was crying and she threw all the things there. She left everything.

And then she said we came to Lahore. She said when we came to Lahore – so lucky me, my father – my grandfather had some friends. And at that time, Wagah Town in Lahore was the good area where people used to live there. So my father's friend found them a house. The first house, my mother said, when we landed, it was about 50 families in one – it was a huge house. And it was, she said, we were not used to a dwelling with so many people, so my grandfather somehow found another house where they said we moved to another house.

She said, when we were living in that house, and we were accustomed of every luxury things – so one day, she said, "we went to the neighbor's house." And back then I'm sure all the Hindus left their houses the same as my grandparents did. My mother said, "when they went – and they said when we went to our neighbor's house – I – she said, what I picked was a toaster. She said – I said, okay, we don't have a toaster in our house, so let's leave with a toaster. And my aunt picked the iron. And she – and now sometimes she laughs about it. She says, why did we pick those things? But that was maybe, I don't know what was in their mind.

Anyhow, she said we started our life again from the scratch. We didn't have anything. No money, nothing. And my father – grandfather was a very hardworking guy, so he was looking for

something. And luckily he found some sort of business to run, so they can be a family. And then my mother tells me that there was – the cousin of one of my mother's cousins was left behind in India. And the families – they said, the girl is in India, so we don't have to bring them back, because she's been dealing with the family. And I don't know what they did to her. My grandfather said, "I will go back and get her."

And my grandfather went back and found this girl. She was living in a very bad situation in India. Anyway, she brought him back, and – because that time my mother was only 15 years old, I think – 14, 15 years during the partition. And she tell me because of the situation at that time, four or five girls – my grandfather wanted all of them to get married. So my mother said my father was also been there for friends of my grandfather's, and they used to study in Delhi in college. So my grand – I'm sure my father must be coming to the house in Delhi.

So he came and he said he wanted to marry my mother. So my grandfather said, "I have raised my daughters in a very lavish way, but I don't think you can afford her." So my father's family, they came from India – they also migrated from India. And they lived in a village. So my father said to my grandfather, "You know I will take good care of her. I will make myself capable to take care of her." So my father, because he graduated from India – he got his bachelor's in India – he came to Pakistan, he got married to my mother. But during that time, he wanted to make – do something for himself. So he wanted to do law.

And my mother – I remember she said, "Whatever jewelry I had, I sold it to buy him a ticket for London." So my father went to London for five weeks when we were very young, and I remember he lived with my grandfather at that time. He wanted to do – he was – he really wanted to give whatever best he can for his family. This is – I think this is all about we're just saying. It's the hard work; it's the mission of what we want to be in our life.

So he went to London, he did his barristership, he came back. And it is so strange, when he came back he didn't practice law. He found another good opportunity. At that time there were about five hotels in Pakistan called Oberon. Big Hotel Flatties in Lahore, **[unintelligible][00:33:08]** in **[unintelligible][00:33:10]**, a palace in Karachi, and my father said, no, no I want to manage these hotels. So he became the head of all these hotels, and that's where I remember growing up in hotels.

So because they always give the General Manager a very beautiful suite, and you wouldn't believe it; the suites were all air-conditioned. We had a driver with a cab, and I remember going to the palace in the cars. And then we traveled we traveled to Bishal, we traveled to Karachi, we traveled to Kabul one day – my father took me to Kabul.

So in Bishal, I remember there was all the Buddhists come that time. During that time, it was during the – before the Cold War, and we used to meet all these foreigners all the time. And because my father lived abroad, so he was trying to educate us to tolerance, meeting all other peoples, and we used to celebrate Christmas in Lahore. And I remember my father had some Christian friends, and so again we celebrate all kinds of festivities in Lahore. We used to send gifts. I had some Christian friends, Janie was her name – she's now a doctor now I think; she was in Lahore. And her father's name was Uncle Richard. I still remember going to Uncle Richard's house.

And my father and mother, they had a nice life in Lahore and could say that they were quite broad-minded, and they really wanted to give their children an education. So when I got married and I came here – so it was not much of a difficulty for me to adjust here, because I was kind of seeing everything in Pakistan. Because living in a hotel, there was [unintelligible][00:35:04]. I remember watching that with my father. So he was very open-minded, and that's how I grew up in Pakistan.

So and also at that time, I must say, I was my – you know, kind of – I had a picture Elvis in my closet, and I was used to go to college, and it was the best time. And my grandmother's house in Wagah Town was basically, I must say, was the basic that we – we all grew up unique to meet all the cousins and the families send me things. And I was – and religion was part of me, I would say, because I studied religion. And in school, actually, I studied Urdu language also, which is – which I love. It was a beautiful language. Also English I learned, Persian I learned, and also I learned religion.

So it – religion actually is something that really gives us comfort. So I really do believe that faith is – one should have a faith, because it gives you a lot of confident things when you are down. And so I always – and I used to pray, I must say that I used to pray. Not five times, but whenever I got a chance. And I used to fast in Pakistan, and we used to celebrate Ramadan – all Ramadan – with our cousins, with our families.

And Eid is very special. Twice, I remember going to my grandmother's house, and, you know, I remember she would always have a bag full of money, and she would – whenever the kids come – so she'd give five rupees, five rupees, maybe here, maybe in [unintelligible][00:36:58], I don't know. But we would get so happy to have that. Eid they called it, Eid. It's for all the children – all the family children, they come and every person has to give Eid to a child.

So that – and then, you know – before Eid, there's another thing we – I remember as child that we used to go to the bazaar one day before. Because at that time, you go and have your bandas, you have to have henna on your hand. And this is before the celebration of Eid. So that's very – that's a very special one-day before when all the cousins go to bazaars and buy some nice stuff, some henna some jewelry, some – and from the beginning I loved to go. Just to buy some different clothes and have tailored whatever I'd like to do.

So the life in Pakistan was very nice, and people were nice that time. And my experience here in America was also – it was very nice. I came here in April the 18, 1976, after getting married. And the first time when I came to New York, and then I saw New York, and I said, oh my god, I don't want to live here. It was not the city for me. And they took me to many stores, he took me to McDonald's, and – first of all, I didn't like McDonald's. And he said, "Okay; let me take you someplace else." So he took me to a pizza shop. And I said, "Oh, I like this." So I ate pizza because it was maybe similar to what I was used to of eating.

So we lived in – we stayed in New York – first, his father was not well, so we used to go every week to New York. And I still remember my first time coming to Washington. It was in the late afternoon, and we had taken the Eastern shuttle flight from New York to Washington. And the day was very clear and I remember landing in Washington. Oh my god, I said, "I can live here. This is the city I really want to live." And that time, he had apartment on Route 1. It's a small apartment. He had prepared for me when we were coming. A very beautiful apartment. We stayed there for I think five months, I don't know.

But meantime, Ray's father was not well, so we used to go to New York every weekend to see him. But his condition was kind of deviating. He had cancer that – so we were just, in our minds it was that we had to now take care of the family, because he could

go any time. And my mother in law and my younger sister in law, she used to live with the family, in New York with them.

So we were kind of looking around here and I told Ray, I said, I have to change this sofa. It's so bad. So we were roaming around where his business was, so we – it was in Warwick Village, we saw this townhouse, and we just said, let's go see what they are selling the houses. So I just remember that we went into the office. I saw a very beautiful woman, Mrs. Need. That was her name. And she just welcomed us, and she was telling us that this is – we are selling these houses, and we said, "How much do we need to put down?" And she said, "About \$300." And I told Ray, "Just don't buy the sofa and let's buy the house."

So she took us to the small townhouse, we saw the house, and we bought the house. And lucky we did, because we made the right decision. After one month we moved to the house, and his father passed away. So when his father passed away – before, in fact, he passed away, I remember he came – I don't know, he drove three weeks before. And I showed him the house. And I showed him the house and he looked around the house and he saw and said, "Oh, so family can live here." I said, "Yeah, yeah, you can come here anytime." But I think he was looking for my mother in law and my sister in law, that they would now have a house. So luckily we were very fortunate that we had that house, and the whole family lived there for three years.

But in America – experience in America was, from the beginning, was very good. I remember next-door neighbor to that house, it was an African-American lady, when that lady came with a box of jellies. So I said, "Oh my god." She said, "No, you are our neighbor, so I brought you some jellies." So that's how you know, I tried to interact with my neighbors, and then I invited her for dinner. At that time, I was cooking Pakistani food. I didn't have any help, so I cooking some Pakistani food, and that's how somehow we get to know the neighbors.

Slowly, slowly, we moved to another house, and then we had another neighbors. But I was busy with the children, raising kids, and not meeting that many Americans, I must say. Because I think at that time I thought we were Pakistani, so I made some Pakistani friends. And we used to – we tried to have the same celebration, which we did in Pakistan. So we tried to have the children go read Ramadhans for the Eid. I remember I used to have fights with all of them. Why did we have to take them to the mosque? And I'd say, "You know, this is how I grew up. This is what – who I am."

So I try to do whatever I can for my children. And every morning when you take them for – not every morning, once a year I must say, to the Eid – the mosque. And they all, everyone fought with me and they didn't want to go, but I pushed them until they turned 13, and then I dropped it. I said, I tried my best and I tried to teach them well. What I have learned from my parents, from my grandparents, because I was born in a Muslim house, and so I had them to learn Quran.

And the question came, which was very good, I must say, that my son said, "Why I'm learning in Arabic? I don't understand." And I said, "Because I learned in Arabic." He said, "But what is the use of learning Arabic when you don't understand? I want to learn in English." And I said, "Oh, you were right." So he learned it in English, and I learned from him. This is how one changes within a generation that you just don't have to follow whatever you've done. You just need to learn things from the young people. He said, "No, you have to understand the Quran; otherwise you were just learning it." So this is what we did.

And I have learned so much from people here. People here are such good people. We have never had any bad experience. We always have good neighbors, always. We have different nationalities – in our old house, we had Egyptian neighbors, we had such good people. We have American friends all over. My kids, they played with all their neighborhood children. They never had a problem at all. Some small things – the boys, they must be boys. They have to start fights in the neighborhood, but not a big thing. But the neighbors used to take care of each other in our old house, also. And here, we're also really blessed. We have good neighbors.

BY: I wanna go back to when you met. Can you talk a little bit about when you met, and what it was like to become engaged to –

SM: Yeah.

RM: Do you wanna hear her version, or mine?

BY: Both.

SM: I was very young when I got engaged. I was 17. And in our culture, basically – like a boy, something natural, but you cannot share it with anyone. That's another thing, if you like a boy, you just keep it to yourself.

RM: You didn't even tell me this.

SM: Exactly.

RM: I am just finding this out now.

SM: So anyway, because of the friendship of the fathers, you know it was his father and my father were friends, and they were here in Washington. So I remember on Eid, I think, the father sent us a picture – a whole family picture, so all his brothers and his – so I was just looking at it and I said, "Oh, he's a good looking guy." So I saw the picture, and then he came. And he actually came before his father, so he lived with us for five months in our home.

RM: I did.

SM: Yes, you did.

RM: But it went fast.

SM: So that's how somehow we get to know each other. But if you said the love at that time, it was not in my mind, because I was focused on my study. And I was all prepared, whatever, my parents make a decision for me, because this is how we grew up. But my father did ask me when the proposal came. So he said, "What do you think about him?" And I said, "I don't want to go to America. I like it here." And then my brother said, "You know, when you go to America it's going to be different. You should go." All these siblings – and I said, "Okay, if you say so."

So we got engaged, and I was 17 and I think he was 20 or 19 or – very young age. And the three year engagement – that I must say, we were engaged for three years. So I was finishing my college and Rafat was doing his business and his green card, so I was – that time was – there were so many proposals start coming, after I got engaged. And some of my aunts said, "I don't know what he's doing there. He might not be doing anything. There are such good boys here, why don't you marry someone else?" But I must say, my mother was very strong. She said, "No, we have engaged her and she has to get married."

And he used to call my mother all the time. But at that time – and sometimes my mother said, "Okay, why don't you talk to him too?" And I said okay and I talked to him, but actually, I must say, after we got married, that's how we somehow grew up together.

Despite some ideas so we learned after – so arranged marriages are not bad.

BY: Where did you get married?

RM: Lahore.

SM: But, yeah. We got married in our house in Wagah Town, but father build a house in Wagah Town, because I used to live in a – we used to live in hotels all the time. So my dream was that I wanted to get married in a home. So at that time, our house was renting, so my father said, that's your dream, so let's take off. So he just told the tenants that you have to leave, because my daughter wants to get married in the house, so we got married in our house in Wagah Town.

And it was a very traditional wedding. We had hennas one day before, and then the next day was the wedding. And then he took me to – for the honeymoon to Mari for a day, because he didn't have that much money. So we went for a day to Mari, and then all the family engagements after the wedding. Oh, there's a dinner here, there's a dinner there. So we spend, I think, two weeks together after we got married. Then he had to leave because I didn't get my visa, because I think after green card, I think he had to apply. So it took me – it took four weeks, I think, before I got my visa.

So I came after him. I came with my sister when – she used to live in Canada. So she came for the wedding. So after four weeks, I landed with my sister in America.

BY: You have children, correct?

SM: Yes.

RM: Four.

BY: Can you talk a little bit about how your cultural traditions have remained the same or changed across generations?

RM: I think one of the biggest things that we feel with our children is that we still have a mindset of how we were brought up, and the values and the cultures. But since these children grew up in this country, there's sort of a clash of those things. Like in our part of the world, girls – when they get to the age of marriage, it's the mother and the father that find a boy and a family, and then they

get the girl engaged or married. But in this country, this is one of the dilemmas that, in our mindset is still – that we will do this for our daughter. And our daughter I guess assumed also that we would be doing this.

So this is really a – something that's a problematic, actually for the girls in this country, especially that belong to the first generation that have come from Pakistan, or any other place, I think. But the second and third generation, I think things will be different. With the boys, it's easier. They get married in – sometimes they will fight with their parents, we want to get married – girls are a little bit more careful, so girls are different in that respect, if we impose our culture in that respect too much on them.

SM: We don't want to do that. Actually, I had – I learned my lesson. My older son, when he was in college, I was trying to find him a nice girl. So I introduced him to a Pakistani girl, which was a disaster, I must say.

RM: It didn't work out at all.

SM: It didn't work out at all. And he was thinking that it's my mother introducing me, so maybe it wasn't –

RM: A good family, a very good girl.

SM: It didn't work out. So in fact, when my second son was very ready to get married, he asked me, he said, "Mom, can you find me a nice girl?" And I was very scared. I was so scared. I said, "I think you should go and find yourself." He said no, and I'm sure he must be dating other girls, but he was also not in another person's shoes. He was confused. And maybe it's in his mind also that my mother will find – and I think it's basically the children usually look up to their parents. If their parents are happy, so then they believed –

RM: It was an arranged marriage, and yeah.

SM: Their marriage is happy, hopefully this is what – and luckily, I found a girl for him, my younger son. And I just introduced – I said, "I can only introduce you, and you have to make a decision." So he took his time. He, I think, a year or two and luckily they've been married, and they have two beautiful girls, and they're very happy. So sometimes it works, and as **[unintelligible][00:52:59]** said, "None of the girls are looking at me." And she said, "Mom, you have to find us some boys."

RM: Because we restricted them like in our country or our mindset, the girls cannot or should not date. And then when you restrict them in that way that you can't date, or not to associate with boys too much, then that goes okay, and then all of a sudden you realize that they've passed – they're 25, they're 26 now, 28 now. And then you can start getting concerned that at that age in Pakistan, girls are married. But that is one thing that I think is – and a lot of people in our community are facing this. They tell their girls not to date and all this. Whereas a lot of these people that are really religious are more – follow the Islamic ways –

SM: Their girls are getting married.

RM: Their girls are getting married quicker. And what's the reason for that is because they go to these – they have these websites and organizations now where they meet each other, and they – their mindset is still the same that the girls should get married early. So those girls are getting married. But the ones that are, like, from the modern families where religion was not a very good thing, but still in our mindset was this that – those girls are having difficulties.

SM: But you know, I have told my girls, I said, I have no problem accepting whoever in your life –

RM: But you know you say that now, but we didn't say that ten years ago, eight years ago.

SM: But you know, I really do believe that once you – as a parent, once you give everything to a girl, to be confident. So they have their skills, they have their jobs. And I know this thing is something – as a parent, we are hoping to find nice boys, but I think as long as–

RM: But now girls are getting married later anyway in this country. They don't do the – very few are getting married in the early 20s. Everybody seems to wait. And I've asked many girls, why, what is the reason for this? And it's because we want to find – we want to have a nice husband that has good work ethics. That's working – that's got a good job, because they want to – I guess they want to do – they want to do better by themselves, basically.

SM: I think a girl has a profession, she is working, and she's taking care of themselves. That's the biggest comfort a parent can have.

RM: And that's what we emphasize to our daughters. Get your education, get your jobs.

SM: Your job, and be independent. And they are independent, and hopefully they might meet someone. Don't know.

BY: So in terms of their identity, do – when do they see themselves as American? When do they see themselves as Pakistani, or Indian?

RM: You know, most of the time, they see themselves as Americans. And every now and then, when they would see in the media there's too much attack on the – in Pakistan, we've had so many –

SM: And the Muslims.

RM: And the Al-Qaedas and all these people were there. And they feel that there's a lot in the channels like Fox and all that, criticizing, then they do feel that these groups – or Bill Maher would say something that would just generalize all Muslims – that's when these kids would say, we are American Muslims. And why do people say things like that? I mean, that's a concern that comes to their mind.

SM: And the children, they don't see anything – they're not really set on one, they just everyone the same. Sometimes you can say something, oh mom, you are racist. I said, no, I am not. They don't like even to –

RM: I mean, it's just like we – and example being, one day, we're sitting here at lunch – this is before President Obama got elected. Obama was just running. Question I was asking my kids, and we were talking, and I said, "I just don't know whether this country – and this was in the mind of a lot of people, not just mine, is that whether this country is ready to elect an African-American President." And all of my kids, all four of them said, "Dad, that's not right. That's the racist" – "What's racist about it? I'm just trying to figure out whether the country will elect a President. All the four kids voted for President Obama.

But what I see good with this generation, not just our children, but all the kids in the United States, whether they're white or African-Americans, or Greek, or whatever they are – they don't have any barriers. And they don't look at people as being a Christian, a Muslim, a Jew, an Atheist. They're just friends with everybody, and they don't look at black, white, all this. And that's a very positive sign. I think that – for the future of the world, I think that's a great thing.

SM: I think it's just the fear of unknown.

RM: Not knowing someone.

SM: Not knowing something. I remember when I came to this country, I was kind of scared of African-Americans, because I didn't know them then.

RM: Because at that time in the media, a lot of was coming out – the crimes, and –

SM: I just go someplace else. So that was a fear of unknown. But after living in this country, I learned that it is in my mind. So that's how I think one can progress and one can change their mindset. And that –

RM: But we are happy that the kids all have **[unintelligible][00:59:17]**. They don't see people as this, that – they have friends of all kinds.

SM: We believed in human beings, good human beings. This is what –

RM: So I'm optimistic the world will be great.

SM: I'm happy that we did a good job I think, then.

BY: But have they learned to cook? Have they –

SM: Yes, yeah, yeah, yeah.

RM: I don't think so. No, we go to Pizza Hut or Dominos, like the Americans.

SM: I have to share this story with you guys, that we took our children to a trip to Europe. Maybe ten, 15 years ago.

RM: 1989, 90.

SM: So we were all eating outside everywhere, and one day my son came to me and said, "Mom, I want to have my own food." I said –

RM: Spicy stuff.

SM: Spicy food? I said, "But whenever I cook, you said, 'I hate Pakistani food.'" He said, "No, I – now I miss it." So that's good. They had a Pakistani restaurant, so we went there. So then my

daughter's said, "Mom, we started cooking what you used to cook in the house." I used to cook [unintelligible][1:00:20]. [unintelligible][1:00:22] is rice and peas, and then some chicken. So they like that, so sometimes now they're learning to cook.

BY: I wanna return for a few minutes to your work. And you told us your story about the gas station and then real estate, and so on. If you could talk just a little bit about the sort of – your ethics, your values in business, and then bring us up to the present in terms of your roles as ambassadors and sort of citizens of the world, and what your goals are.

RM: Well, the business started in 1975, and I was young. I was 23 years old when I opened up my business. And I used to work – I used to go to work at six in the morning and we used to close the place at 11 at night, and I used to work every day, long hours. And throughout my career, no matter what I'm doing, I worked – even today, it's Sunday, I went to work for a couple hours this morning. But I work almost every day. So this – my – and I enjoy it, so that's a good part of it.

But I started with that and the real estate when we – throughout our lives, we've also been socializing. We go to a lot of these political events, from fundraisers to the diplomatic events. We've been involved with many of these organizations that do work overseas. I mean, we were in – we're still involved with Vital Voices, which promotes women's rights and girls' education. And we've also been involved in organizations in Pakistan as – doing fundraisers for them, like developing literacy, or SOS, or children villages.

So we try to do charity stuff here in the United States as well, and we do some in Pakistan also. We – and then this organization called ASHNA that was for Afghanistan – street children of Afghanistan. We hosted their first fundraising event here. We are always trying to improve relationship between Pakistan – Pakistan-U.S., and we've been involved in that quite a bit. We've – many times had Indian Ambassador, Pakistan Ambassadors here together for different events.

We've – for U.S. relations, we continue working with our Senators, and the ambassadors that come from Pakistan. We have known most of the Presidents – Prime Ministers of Pakistan fairly well, and have had them over many times at our home for dinners and for different events.

President Zidari had appointed me as Ambassador at Large for Pakistan, and I was in that position for four and a half years, until his government was no longer in power there. But, you know, that is just something that I was doing honorary. It was not a paid thing for me. I really did not want any government employment, because –not employment, but not to do anything, because we were doing that anyway. Regardless of which government is in power in Pakistan, we just wanted to help either one of them – or whoever's there, just try to improve the relationship.

Because in this country, there are a lot of organizations, a lot of think tanks and all these, but sometimes, you know, the facts get distorted. They're not understood by people here, and then they're not understood by people there. If United States would favor India on something, Pakistan would see, oh, it's against Pakistan, whereas it's not so. We, in the United States, try to keep our relationship separate in each one of those countries.

We've hosted events for – we do our Interfaith Iftar that we've been doing for the last 14 years. We bring in, like, 50 or so people from our friends from the Christian community, 50 or so from the Jewish community, 50 or so from the Muslim communities, and then we try to bring somebody in from the government.

We've had – we've been fortunate enough to have people like Under Secretary Hughes here, Under Secretary Burns here. Alberto Gonzales has been here, was the Attorney General. And one of the last ones, Secretary Chertoff, we've had at least three or four times join us to do these events with us. And then the last one we did this year was with Vice President Biden being at our house, and we had, like, 13 or 14 Congressmen and several Ambassadors from various countries.

And we just like to show these people that, look, in this country we wanna get along with everybody. We – it doesn't matter religion, it doesn't matter what ethnicity they are. So we've been promoting this kind of things for years, and we will continue doing this. This is our objective to do this.

BY: Do you – have you returned to Pakistan, India? Do you see yourselves leaving sort of trans-national lives? Do you have contacts – family contacts or friends that you keep in those countries?

RM: We have been to Pakistan several times. We were in India last year. We have friends in India. As a matter of fact, the U.S.

Ambassador was our very good friend; we stayed with her there in India. And we really had a good time in India. Pakistan, we go every – we go every year, or every two, three years to Pakistan. And we have friends, a lot of friends of ours that have been in the Embassy here. We talk to them. So we really have good connections there in Pakistan, as well, and we tell them about the way we live here and some of the people that don't know and don't understand.

And one of, I think, the great things were that we had asked Under Secretary Karen Hughes when she was at State Department – the Citizen's Ambassador – group that we should take to Pakistan, and we – she wanted – she was very helpful in supporting that. So we took, I think it was a dozen or so people from here in the United States that went to various cities in Pakistan. Which, they go there anyway every year. So we told the State Department that we don't want any money for this, we just want to go and talk to people about our lives in the United States.

So women went to the girls' schools, and the men went to different places, colleges, some to the media. And the U.S. Consulate there in Lahore and Islamabad had set up the meetings for the people to go to different place, and we just went there to talk to people about the way we live. And this was right – not too many years after 9/11. I think this trip was a couple of years after that.

And people in Pakistan, the perception was, "oh the Muslims in the United States are being treated this way, and badly, harassed," and we went and told them exactly how it was. That no, it's not like this. The media was fueling these things. And yes, every now and then at the airport, somebody get screened, and then they raise a ruckus about it, but it's not anything abnormal. So just to bring a proper understanding between the two citizens of countries, I think, makes a difference.

BY: I just wanna take a few moments for you to reflect on your lives. And what are you most proud of?

RM: Me? I'm most proud of being in this country, and our family.

SM: Yes, I was born in Pakistan, but this is my country, and this is home. And I am so proud to be an American, because we are doing such good work; we are helping everybody. Look what Bill Gates is doing, look what all these people are doing. And I really do believe what I really – sometimes I share this to my Pakistani friends, was over there is there's a lot of wealth in Pakistan, but –

RM: Their giving is not there.

BY: Their giving is not what we give here. And I was telling them, look what Bill Gates has done in Africa. Look what he is doing in India. Look what they are doing for clean water. They don't have to do that. They don't live in those countries. But they are just doing it from their good heart. So we Americans are really giving, and we really want to help others all the time, so we should be really proud of ourselves. So this is what I really do believe. As an American, I am very proud of myself, and I really want to bring what your program is about, the good things about other countries, so we can all somehow work together and find solutions of the problems.

Because this religious tolerance is so important, because the story I really shared with you about my grandparents was that we were living in harmony when the partition happened. Everyone was happy, they were all –

RM: Politics divided.

SM: It's the politics, and it's the people's mind, I think. One has to be always a positive. All religion teaches you good things, all religions goes to one God, the different way – we all pray in a different way. But I think when God is up there watching us, and we are all his children, and we should do whatever we are supposed to be doing here. If we are here in this world, we are here for a reason, and if God is connecting people from one to another, there is a reason behind it. So I really do believe these things.

RM: But we are really proud to be Americans. That's really the greatest thing. And it's not because in this country we have all the financial things that you can accomplish, but this country – look around the world at all the stuff that the United States does. Atrocities anywhere in the world, who's the first one to go there and assist? The United States. Yes, China and these other countries go to these other places, they build these roads, yes they do that, but it's not to help those people; it's to move their goods around those countries. And we got genuinely to help people in this country.

But what I don't like is the way that we are not promoting this. And people don't know the stories about United States. USAID does so much great work. And some places, you talk to these people, say, "Look, you built this for these people and this country.

It's a great thing. This comes from the United States – put a sign on it that the U.S taxpayers have built this dam to provide water. Oh no, we're afraid to do it because they might come and blow it up.” But that's the responsibility of the governments in those countries to take care of this after the United States has done this, not to blame the United States for everything that goes wrong in the world.

So I mean, this is some of the stories we tell people. That look, we see what's happening firsthand, and we are – we know people well enough here in different various agencies that we know what the U.S. – the good work we are doing here. And it's just not being translated over there properly.

SM: Even if it's something very small that we are doing, you don't think it's important. But it was important. We went to this Clinton Foundation dinner last month. Three days before, there was a beheading in some –

RM: Foley.

SM: Foley. So I was very depressed, I must say. I think we were the only Muslims there for the dinner. And I – when I went there, and President Clinton start speaking, and what he said was, that made my day brighter – what he said was, “I am really optimistic about this war. Because yes, you get bad situations, but you are not hearing the good stories, what people are doing. People are trying to – there are so many good people who are making the difference and who are doing a lot of good work, but we are not seeing it on media. We are only seeing the negative.”

RM: The negative stuff. He says, a lot of good going on all around the world, but nobody's telling those stories.

SM: But nobody's talking about it. So that was very thoughtful.

BY: Is there anything else you'd like to add? Because I think we covered quite a bit.

RM: Couple of days ago, we were just sitting and listening to some news – Shaista, she had some news that she got from Pakistan, I guess on the Internet. And at that point you realize, we says, you know – we thank God that we're in the United States. So that was –

SM: Yeah, this is exactly what I was saying. I said, we are so lucky that we were living in this country, and I always said, this is the future of my children, and for my grandchildren's. And Pakistan, yes we are from Pakistan, because we were born there –

RM: And we hate to see the way it's going. We would love to take our children, our grandchildren to live in Pakistan to see where we came from, but because of the circumstances, it becomes difficult. And I hope one day – we're optimistic that we'll get back.

SM: We're hoping that our politicians – all politicians – that's my message to all the politicians, Republican, Democrat. Please work together instead of fighting each other. This is the greatest country on the earth and we need to take this country back, because we are best mind – we have the best mind, we have the best facility, the best people, and just – that's –

RM: We are wasting lot of money on wars. Trillions, so.

BY: All right, so. I think we've covered it. It's a great interview. Thank you so much for supporting our initiative.

SM: Anything else you think, if it's important –

[End of audio]