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## **Samina Hussain**



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**Interviewer:** Chad Comello  
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## INTRODUCTION

Samina Hussain has lived in Morton Grove since 2002. Born in the small village of Banauli, India, she migrated to the United States at one year old after her self-made physician father got a residency at Illinois Masonic Hospital in Chicago. Her 19-year-old immigrant mother struggled with her father's long hours, the foreign culture, and brutal weather, but found solace in the beginnings of Chicago's now-bustling Indian American presence on Devon Avenue. Samina's early memories revolve around the Muslim Community Center—which her father helped to establish and where she gained lifelong friends—and being a good student driven to succeed by her education-focused parents.

In this interview, Samina talks about getting a somewhat traditional arranged marriage, the amazing growth of MCC over the years, and why it's so important to have educators who are as culturally diverse as their students. She also discusses visiting family in India (which she describes as less Bollywood, more *National Geographic*), her constant desire to learn, and serving on many community organizations, including the Morton Grove Community Relations Commission, the District 67 school board, and MCC Academy Council.

*This transcript has been edited for content and clarity.*

**SH: Samina Hussain**

**Q: Question asked by interviewer Chad Comello**

SH: So, I was actually born in India. I was born in a little village. My dad is from a little village called Banauli. I was born in a house. They didn't have hospitals, and it was very common for childbirths to happen in the home, and I guess my grandmother was the midwife. My dad came here first. He came directly to Chicago. He was offered a job, a residency position at Illinois Masonic Hospital in the city. My mom and I followed a few months later. I was about a year old when I came here, so I was pretty much raised here my whole life.

My mom was 19 when she came. She had me when she was 18, so she was a very, very young mom, dealing with struggles of a new country, new culture, just typical struggles that immigrants go through. She was dealing with my dad not being around. At that time, I think it really milked you as far as residency hours were concerned. He'd be gone for 72-hour shifts, three days straight. So she'd be running out of milk. *Where do I go get the milk?* No car, she didn't know how to drive. When she saw that movie *The Namesake*, she said, *That's exactly the story of my life*. Especially when she saw the mom going out in the snow to get groceries with her cart. So they were both very hard-working people, and I always knew that.

We lived in the city for a few years. Then, when I was in second grade, we moved to Lincolnwood, and I lived there for almost my entire childhood and young adult

life. I went to Lincolnwood Schools, Niles West High School, then Loyola University. Then I went to University of Illinois-Chicago for my master's. And somewhere in between I got married and I had my first child while I was getting my master's.

I actually got married in India. My uncle and my husband's dad were roommates in college, and they introduced us to each other. We would go to India quite frequently. I do not have many relatives or extended family that ended up immigrating or really wanted to immigrate here. It just never happened. The only relative I have is my mom's only sister who lives in Skokie. So basically, her, her husband, and kids. But other than that, much later some random, very distant relatives came. But as far as my close uncles and aunts, that's the only aunt I have here. Now our family is expanding, as we are getting married, having our own kids. Our friends had become our family, and that was an experience in itself. Some of our friends had very large families and we'd be overwhelmed. But, then again, if our whole family came, we would also have a very large family.

We would go back to India every four years. My dad would take us back to make sure we stayed connected to our family and knew our roots. We would go every four years and even see the progress in India. Because of that, we always had that connection back in our mother country. My uncle and my husband's dad were roommates and my uncle wanted to introduce me to my future husband. We met and we thought that we would be good for each other. We ended up liking each other a lot. So it was kind of like arranged, but not arranged. During my parents' time, no one saw each other before marriage. My dad just saw a picture of my mom and my grandma was like, *This is the girl we picked out for you.* He said, *OK, mom.* With me, my parents said,

*We think you guys would be a good couple.* Without really knowing this, both my husband and I told our parents, *OK, can we meet each other at least?* So it was mutual on both our parts. We wanted to make sure we met each other, but our dads sternly told us, *Oh, I don't know, that's not how it's done.* I told my dad, *No no, there's no way.* So, yes, they set us up, but we did eventually get the chance to meet each other and spend some time together. But it all happened so fast.

After we got married and my husband, Qaiser, came here, I tried to find work. He is a physician, like my father, so he ended up getting residency in Minnesota, but transferred back to Chicago after a year. We always wanted to come back to Chicago. As I said, we didn't have a lot of family and I wanted to be near mine. I always think back, think we're selfish. God, how did our parents do it? Just pick up and go to a whole different country? And I'm freaking out if we end up in another state? My husband also has no family here. For him, my family was his family. So for us, because we had that luxury of knowing that family is close by. We ended up returning to Chicago. I was still finishing up grad school and I had my daughter, Ayana.

We first lived in Niles and then moved to the city because I worked in Chicago Public Schools. Then we moved back to Niles because I was going to have my second child and it was just very difficult for me to hold a job with my husband's hours. It was difficult for him to even offer that support because of the work schedule he had. So I just decided to resign and just focus on expanding my family. My son, Zain, was born in Niles, and shortly after, in 2002, we moved to Morton Grove. By that time, my daughter was about to start third grade. And we've lived in Morton Grove since then.

I tell this story to everybody. When my dad moved to Lincolnwood, all he heard was that the schools are good. And that was it. He's very Asian, education-driven, focused. For me, it was a struggle because none of these communities were very diverse back then. We're talking about late 1970s, early '80s. My parents, as wonderful as they were, were still immigrant parents and it was very difficult for them understand some of the struggles we were going through as far as culture at home, culture at school, dealing with American culture, and their fear of "this is not our culture." It was difficult for them to help us—to help me, being the first child—to navigate through everything. I always tease my younger siblings, *You had us to guide you*. By us, I mean me and my sister after me. By then, my parents had time to learn, *OK, we can let go of some things. This is part of life here. There's no conflict really with culture.*

So when I was looking for a house, my dad suggested, *Why don't you look in the North Shore suburbs like Wilmette and Northbrook?* I was not too keen about his suggestion. At the time we were looking, those suburbs were in the same situation Lincolnwood was back in the 70s and 80s. They were not very diverse. That's what attracted me to Morton Grove and Skokie, the diversity. But I was keeping all options open. I saw how this community had changed, too. Niles was also pretty diverse. We lived right on the border of west Morton Grove and Niles, near Washington Commons, where Aldi is, literally just on the west side of Washington. I was thinking, *Let's just look at all these communities nearby*. I just happened to drive by a house. Our agent didn't find it. I just drove by and I told my husband I saw this house that would be perfect. We saw it. We liked it. We put in an offer, and so here we are.

I thought that the diversity was very important, especially where my kids are being raised. For me, and as I had mentioned to you, we are always going back and forth to India. One of the really wonderful things about that is it has kept us very grounded. I was telling some of our friends that have gone to India that our experience was very different. We would go to a very rural part of India. We would go for summers when we were young, so electricity was virtually gone. No refrigerators. Horrible heat. Water pumps and wells in my dad's home. It wasn't what you see in Bollywood movies. Our experience was more like National Geographic India.

The one thing I also noticed was going back and forth to India was it's a very homogeneous country. You don't see diversity there. No matter how much education you have over there, when you're not interacting with people of different backgrounds you still become very limited in your thinking. I guess people don't realize that. When living in a diverse community, people don't realize that yes, there is a distinction in religious faith, but everybody over there is pretty much brown and neighborhoods are very segregated by religious groups. A lot of the cultural things are very similar between the religious communities, but if you were to go there and just walk through the streets, you couldn't tell who was who. You couldn't differentiate. So I just felt like that's important for my children to grow up in a community where they see people from all different backgrounds: cultural, religious, socio-economic, across the board. And I thought that it was important for other kids to know my children.

Q: Was that one of the reasons that inspired your parents to make the move to the United States? What compelled them?

SH: It was purely economic. Like I mentioned, my dad was a self-made man. I mean that. He grew up in a rural part of India where higher education was virtually unheard of. I don't know what hit him, but he wanted to go and become a doctor. His dad—my grandfather—would continually say, *Why do you want to be a doctor? What good would you be?* To fight those odds, coming from a family where—it's not that they didn't value education—they just couldn't comprehend it. What it could do for a person, to a family.

He taught himself English, because all the books past high school and beyond would be in English, the second language in India. Everything was in English and he didn't know English, so he taught himself English. He thought that this was his ticket to help his family as well. That was the time of “Asian Brain Drain”, where a lot of educated individuals were being given work visas. His goal, ultimately, I think was to retire and go back to India. I think a lot of immigrants who came for that purpose had this in mind, that they're just going to go back and resettle. There are a lot of immigrants who go to Middle Eastern countries to earn a living. But they're not really afforded any rights to have property or to own businesses. It's a very transient immigrant community in those countries and they stay to themselves, have separate school systems, and so on. They go there for the sole purpose to make money, and they will ultimately return to their mother countries. My father-in-law actually worked in Saudi Arabia, and he returned to India. You will never be given any rights there. You won't be able to own property there. So you're going there knowing that you're going to come back.

So when my father came to the United States, I guess he didn't think that far, but it was the sole purpose was economic. To make money and help his family and get out

of poverty. That was his sole purpose. I think after time, he just changed. Then his children—us—we're here, and I don't think we could imagine having another life in India. I think we've heard of immigrants getting deported. But they were brought as young children, and they never knew any other life. I was reading about a gentleman from Iraq who was very young when he came here. His parents brought him. Then he was recently deported in his adult life and he's like, *I don't even know how to speak Arabic*. He ultimately died because he was diabetic and there was nobody there to help him. How could we have functioned over there after living here for such a long time? My father realized, *Wow, I can own my own house here*. Gradually, as he periodically visited his family, he started to find that they had very little in common anymore. I think it just naturally happened. It's not something you would expect. He grew as a person, whereas his family didn't progress much.

When he came here, he helped create the Muslim Community Center (MCC). He was considered one of the founding fathers. When he came, he discovered the diversity within the Muslim community: there was Palestinians, there were people from Egypt, there were African-American Muslims. There were people who were converts. He realized how limited he was, that he didn't have that much of an open mind when it came to people of his own faith—they weren't all Indians! I think his knowledge of Islam, of the faith, grew. Because over there, you just follow what your parents do, but no one really takes the time to think and read and understand the faith. This is just what you do. I think his understanding of the faith, his perspective, widened a lot. He'd go back home and he'd tell his mom, *No mom, this is not right. What you're doing is totally wrong*. That's how we ended up living here. He passed away here too.

Q: You were pretty young when you came over, but did you hear from your parents what that journey was like? Arriving in Chicago from India and the challenges they faced?

SH: Oh yeah. My dad had the typical story, *I only had five dollars in my pocket*. I think that was actually true. You were given five or 10 bucks or something like that when you arrived. But he was sponsored by the hospital. They helped him find a place and navigate through some things. But my mom, she had a lot of stories. She was nineteen. They came in April, and she said everything was covered with snow. It was probably just a coincidence, snow in April, but she said, *I just remember when I landed there was snow everywhere. We'd never seen snow. We'd only see it in Bollywood movies. A scene was shot in Kashmir somewhere and you would see the snow on TV. But she'd never experienced it. So for her it was a big shock, Oh my God, it's snowing!*

She had me, and I was a toddler. They didn't have diapers in India. That's why kids get toilet-trained really fast over there. Diapers are available now, but still not widely used. Kids soiled and then you'd just clean up after them. She told us, *I didn't have diapers and I didn't know. The stewardess got really mad at me*. She just didn't know those things. Just the concept of going on a plane. Totally unknown to her.

So she came here got very familiar with the corner convenience store. That's where she would go when she ran out of things. There were no Indian ingredients or products. I think shortly she found Patel Brothers, which is nationwide now. But we knew the Patel Brothers since their origins from Chicago. They are making a big store at

the old Toys R Us store on Milwaukee and Golf. They had one of those corner shops on Devon where you had to go down the stairs. They were the first ones to open where you could finally find Indian products. They have their own story about how one of the brothers was an engineer, and when he would meet up with his other Indian friends, the one thing that they missed a lot was cooking from home. That's how they started.

She said it was a struggle to find Indian products. *Now all the Indians come, they have everything. You go on Devon and you can find clothes, food, restaurants.* None of those things existed. There was one sari store and there was Patel Brothers. Those were the only places. She said she would go to Marshall Field's and they would sell fabric. She would want to make Indian outfits for us for social gatherings. She shares a lot of stories and memories, and I do too.

Q: What are your early memories from that time? Do you have any specific ones?

SH: I don't clearly remember how they became friends with people. It was so interesting because she said, *We landed and we didn't have a place to stay, and a random person said, "You can come and stay with us."* I don't even know how they found someone to stay with, but they stayed with someone for about a week or so and then finally found their own place.

My earliest memories are more like birthday parties and get-togethers. They found as many opportunities as they could to get together with other people who shared the same cultural background as them. Even if someone was from another region of India, they thought it was just very different. Even within India, the foods, the culture, the

traditions can differ. My earliest memories were also at the Muslim Community Center. The earliest memory was a building in Logan Square. They were by the Armory by Kedzie and Wabansia. That's where they purchased the first building. I just remember we spent a lot of time there because that was the community center. Then the parents started Sunday School so we could learn more about our faith, and we made a lot of friends there. It was different. We had our community of friends at MCC and then we had our school life. It was very compartmentalized for us back then.

My kids don't understand how we have these close friendships. I told them we just kind of hung around each other and our parents dragged us everywhere, and that's how we became so close. We would have to go with them everywhere. That's how we became friends with each other, because we'd always see each other. Some of us still get together because we've known each other since childhood and have a special bond. We'll get together and reminisce. One of my friends said that it's kind of sad because our kids aren't friends with each other. I think that, with us, because we were always with our parents, we were put in the situation where we were always in close proximity of each other.

My kids, I don't really drag them everywhere. I told my friend, *The most important thing is that they have a core group of friends*. I am not raising them the same way we were raised. My parents were always very wary of us hanging around with kids that were not Indian or Muslim. *You're going to lose your culture*. So we had friends at school, but we couldn't be as close to them. We couldn't hang out with them as much. I think that's very common in immigrant communities. When my kids were raised, I very much encouraged them to be friends with nice people that share the same basic values,

regardless of race or religion. We are all concerned about our kids. We're concerned about education. We don't want them to get involved with drugs. We want them to be honest and kind. Those are just some very core values, and as long as their families held some of those basic values, I couldn't care less what their race or religion is. Plus, how are people in the community going to know who we are if they don't get to know who we are? That's always been my philosophy.

I actually was on the MCC Academy Council. At that time, it was called the MCC Full-Time school. I was asked, *Why don't you bring your kids here?* I said I'd be happy = to impart my background and education and help on a school council. But if that's really bothersome to some people, that I don't have my children here, then I'd be happy to leave. I do care about our community center and the school here. I want to help in whatever way I can. But I really believe in public education. Even though my experience is very different from my kids, I still know that there is that component of education that can't be taught in books. My kids' experience is just very different. I think it's nice because I've tried to push them to not compartmentalize their lives. Be proud of who you are and be accepting of others too.

Q: Jumping back to your childhood and those earlier memories. You went to public school all the way through?

SH: Yes, I went to public school, then our religious education was Sunday School. At that time, they didn't have a full-time parochial school. Even when they did—I'm trying to think of when the school first started, '89 or '90—I don't know if my dad would have put

us in any of the schools. I don't know what he would think about it. But in any case, I do believe in public education. And those who want to send their children to private school have every right to do so.

MCC Academy has grown a lot, especially since Habeeb Quadri has become the principal there, someone from a younger generation, born and raised in America. Before, the Academy had people who grew up in foreign countries running the place, and there was a disconnect between their experiences and the kids growing up in America. So having Habeeb there has been very helpful in bridging that gap. He can impart his own experiences growing up in America. You can function within your faith, in your culture, and American life. Because culture is very different from faith. There are many cultures represented at the Academy. But you can bring those two together and have those kids being involved in sports, community projects, and so on. Not living in a cocoon. Habeeb has done a lot with that school. I really applaud him for that, and I think it's grown so much that a lot of people do make the decision to enroll their kids there because of him. Somebody told me, *If he's not here, I don't know if I would keep my kids in here or not.* I thought that was a very big shift when he took over the Academy.

Q: What kind of student were you?

SH: I was a good student. I mean, like I said, my dad: *Just get A's.* I remember when I was in sixth grade, he's said, *Your grades should be so good that the teacher can't even write it.* I'm like, *What? What does that even mean?!* I got a B in science and I remember, because my parents had to sign the report card, he wrote: *Next time,*

*Samina will get an A, as if he was so embarrassed. I remember the teacher told me, You tell your dad that the B is a good grade. I remember thinking, No, you don't understand. I can't tell my dad that.*

Q: That's a lot of pressure.

SH: Yeah, but that's a very typical Asian response. Like if you listen to Hasan Minhaj's stories, that's very typical. My daughter was telling me when she was watching *Glee*, *Did you see that episode where the kid got an A minus—he was Korean—and the dad comes in and says, "A minus? That's an Asian F!"* It's just very comical. But not exaggeration, it's true! A lot of Asians really value education. I know he always wanted us to do well in school, so I did well in school.

Q: What were your interests?

SH: I always wanted to go into education. My dad wanted me to be a physician, but he'd never say anything. I didn't want to work all those hours. When I was in high school, that's what I was aiming for.

Q: You mentioned you had siblings?

SH: Yes, I have four siblings. Rummana is the one after me and she's a journalist with the Chicago Sun-Times. Next is my brother, Kamran, an optometrist and currently the

president of MCC. Almas is the baby and she works as an investigator at the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation. So we've come full circle because my dad held the presidency position at MCC for eight years, and now my brother holds that leadership position. He is the first MCC president from the second generation. The Muslim Community Center is a very democratic institute. I don't know if people know this. We do have elections, and we elect our president and board members. My dad served two consecutive two-year terms and then he had a break and then they asked him if he could run again. So he ran again for two two-year terms. My mom said it was very stressful, balancing his career and the MCC, but serving the community was one of his passions.

I think because of him, that passion rubbed off on me. After graduating Sunday School, I came back to volunteer teach when I was in high school and college. When I left my job, I just couldn't do nothing. I always wanted to be involved in the community in some way, shape, or form. That was around the time that I was asked to be on the school council for the MCC Academy, and I served on that school board for about five or six years.

I was also on the Morton Grove Community Relations Commission for a long time. This was after the whole mosque expansion project controversy. I was on the negotiating team on the side representing MCC, negotiating with the Village, and the Department of Justice as mediator. I was actually on the other side of the table. Then Diane Grigg asked me, *Do you want to be on this Community Relations Commission?* Because she was on the commission at the time. I thought, *Why not?* Obviously, we're going to have to deal with each other. This is a great way for us to be proactive instead

of always being reactive when situations arrive. I was on the Community Relations Commission for a total of 10 years, first as a member, and then I was Chairperson for about five years.

I've always been involved in my kids' PTAs, and I was Vice President of Programs and then VP of Hospitality. Shortly after, I was asked if I wanted to run for the school board, and again, I thought, *Why not?* I'm trying to think... this is my fourth term. I think that's going to be it. There's a lot more younger families moving into Morton Grove. I'm telling those young parents, *Please, you need to step up.* I'm a very firm proponent of having new people, new ideas and perspectives. I always think that everything can be improved, everything can be changed. I'm not a big fan of the same-old, same-old all the time. With some things, yes; some things, no. Times are changing.

The first time I ran, it was contested. Second time I ran, it was contested. I think the third time I ran, we didn't have enough people running, so we ended up having to appoint. The fourth time, it was uncontested. I don't think I'm going to run anymore, because I feel like that's just too long for me to be there. We need to have other people take the reins now and help move the district in a different direction. Even when our superintendent, Dr. Beth Flores, would want to try something new, I would always be like, *Hell yeah, do it.* I'm all for it. When we got into an intergovernmental agreement with the high school. I know some people thought, *No no, the high school is taking over.* From an educational standpoint, I was attracted to the philosophy of the initiative. Some people thought it was a move towards consolidation, and I said, *No, it's not. It's to ensure that there is a whole K-12 continuum.*

Because you have nine feeder schools going into Niles North and Niles West and they're all doing kind of their own thing. They do talk to each other, but I think the high school realized how much remediation they were doing, and it wasn't helping. They started the agreement with District 69—which is Madison, Edison, and Lincoln Junior High—which also serves some Morton Grove families. The idea is to ensure that there is some kind of continuum so that everyone is coming into the high school is more or less on the same page, if that makes any sense. And yes, there's going to be some kids who are still struggling, but at least you know there's a continuum from kindergarten all the way up to high school.

There are two districts in that agreement, 69 and us, 67. Both of our contracts are very different. With 69, they have their own struggles and what their vision was and where they wanted to see their district going. We had our own struggles and we had other goals with this agreement. So our contracts are very different from each other. I feel like we've benefited a lot from this IGA. I was very open to trying something like that. If we're not going to try new things, we're not going to move forward.

Q: So you're obviously very involved throughout the community. What have you learned about the community throughout these different avenues?

SH: I've learned a lot about the politics and whatnot. I have learned that yes, our community has changed. Demographics have changed. I still think we're struggling with people in leadership positions that represent that change. That's the reason I got on the Coming Together committee as well. When I was on the Community Relations

Commission with Morton Grove, we sponsored some Coming Together events. That's how I learned about it. I left the Community Relations Commission because there were too many things on my plate. I had to cut back. And I think at some point the Commission was a little bit stagnant. I was wanting to see some things and I thought I don't see it going in that direction. And I know Mayor DiMaria wanted to reevaluate all the commissions and see what their purposes are, what their goals are, and possibly change that. So he was in the middle of that, and I told him I'm just going to step back because I want to focus more on Coming Together. And then I got involved in Coming Together more directly because it was something that I really wanted to be part of.

I've always had a concern, but never wanted it to be my sole agenda. Yes, you can have an agenda. You want to make change. But I think sometimes we have to take baby steps. Sometimes you do have to really push hard. When you look at the whole Civil Rights movement, there had to be a hard push—sometimes violent, unfortunately—to move legislation and get to a level so that we can at least start moving in the right direction. But even with legislation, change won't happen overnight.

One of my biggest pet peeves was, the demographics around here have changed but our teaching staff didn't reflect that. Administration-wise, same story. Leadership positions throughout the area, same story. That's one of the things that upset me a lot. So any superintendent candidate that came, I wanted to know what they were going to do to diversify the staff to reflect the diversity of the community. I remember there was one candidate who said, *Those candidates aren't even out there.* And I thought, *Well, he's off my list,* because it looked like he didn't even want to try. I find that very hard to believe. I told the superintendent that. Because if you go into any

college with an education program, you're going to see a diverse number of students who want to become teachers. They are there. I think you need to really go out there and find them.

I just feel it's very disingenuous to tell students to embrace diversity, get along with everyone, and you're not reflecting it. You're not modeling it yourself as leaders. The teachers aren't modeling it. Kids pick up on that. And parents pick up on that. It's just a very disingenuous thing to keep pushing on kids around here when you're not modeling it yourself. But I do want to work cooperatively with my fellow board members and my superintendent, and I don't want to be contentious about it. There are other matters to worry about as well. But it's changing and it's happening.

I would say, when dealing with parents and kids who are English language learners, instead of always looking for volunteers to do translation or hiring people to translate, it would help if you had some people on staff who could speak some of these languages, particularly the majority of languages that are reflective of the community. If you are seeing a huge number of kids who are speaking Assyrian or Arabic, wouldn't it be helpful? I constantly hear, *We struggle so hard to get some of these parents to come and get involved.* Well, maybe if they saw people of their own kind there once in a while, they'd be more willing to get more involved and to come more. And I'm speaking from experience because that's what it was like for my parents. It's like, *OK, everyone here is not like me. What am I going to do here? I don't have anything in common.* My parents were educated, but they still felt out of place.

I tell people I know who are from different backgrounds, at least come to the PTA meetings. To be honest, it does take a certain personality to come and break through as

well. You have me, who was a very, very shy kid, and I really had to push myself to escape that feeling. There's no way things are going to change if I don't try. I know that we always talk about enticing people, *Maybe if we serve people pizza...* Listen, someone who's going to really want to get involved is going to come and do it. I don't think pizza is going to cut it. Everyone is given different qualities. Not everyone is wired the same. But even for someone who is coming from a minority background to come and want to break through a whole educators' community that's not like them, it's hard. I don't think that they're not out there. Maybe they're afraid. If they come, are they going to fit in?

The high schools have done a really good job, I feel, but I think our elementary schools have a ways to go. Hopefully they're moving in that direction. I didn't have my first minority teacher until I got to college. I was like, *Wow*. I was blown away. He was South Asian but grew up in Africa. Other kids need to see people from different backgrounds in leadership positions, because your mind starts thinking that only these people can be leaders. I feel like with our past president, Barack Obama, some people had difficulty accepting that there's a minority person leading the country and not being able to handle it, you know? If you have kids that are just seeing a certain homogeneous community being the teachers and leaders, it's hard for them to think outside of that box. But if you diversify that group... Yeah, you know we have an Asian teacher, we have a Middle Eastern teacher, we have an African-American teacher. All these people can be teachers. And they can be leaders. And they can teach us something.

We have a Filipino gentleman who's a teacher at the elementary school and one of my friends wanted her son to be in his class. She made a special request. She said, *I want my child to have a Filipino male teacher as a role model. A male role model. And I want him in that class.* This is coming from a Filipino parent telling you how important that is for her child to see. And that's what I've been trying to tell everybody in our leadership administration. That's why it's important for all of us to see different people as role models, as leaders of the community. Not just the old boys club in the village or anywhere else in government. That's what's important to get across. And it's also important to get across to people who are of minority background to not be afraid. To get involved. It's a two-way struggle.

Q: Outside of the things you're involved in, what things do you do for fun?

SH: I like gardening, but I haven't been able to do much of that. I'm very involved with my kids. My son plays sports, so getting him to and from games and practices, I'm playing chauffer most of the time. I always like learning new things. I do like to travel. I don't get to do it as much as I want to, but I do like to travel. We did go to India again in the summer. I haven't gone in the summer since the 80s. It's just so hot there. All of my kids coincidentally were able to and this was the first time all five of us went there together. My daughter especially hadn't been there in 15 years, so her grandparents were really excited to see her. They all had a very, very good experience even though it was hot like crazy. They were very happy to be there and to see all their relatives there. When I go to India, I don't consider that traveling—we're going to meet the family. If you

want to see other parts of India, which I really do, you have to not tell your family.

[laughter] You have to go undercover.

During Eid, one of my friend's daughter had made little soaps. And I asked, *Did you make that? I want to learn how to do that!* I've been actually looking up how to make soap. She made something that you just melt and pour because she's a child. But I didn't realize how complex the process was. This is interesting. I was back and forth with her mom, *How'd you do it? Do you know that you use lye?* She said, *Yeah, I know, I didn't want to do that with my kids.* So, I've been looking up how to do things like that. I've always been very handy. The other project I got involved with was with my mom getting her house remodeled. Looking at different aspects of design and learning how a house functions. It was interesting when everything was torn down just to see the infrastructure of a home. I don't get the chance to watch much TV or movies. It is what it is. I just get too caught up in the day to day activities.

And that's why I like getting involved with community. Especially with Coming Together, I was learning something new about other cultures. There was one thing I wanted to try when they did the Muslim Cultures, the Turkish ebru art. It looked like it was on Jell-O and the artist would put dyes on it and then take a stylus and pull the designs apart. I was told the canvas was made with oxtail fat that you could only get from Turkey. I did minor in art, so I think that's why I gravitate more to learning about arts and crafts and things like that.

Q: I'm curious, how has India changed since you were there in the 80s?

SH: India has changed a lot, and is in some ways stagnant. It's very interesting because people here don't really get it. There's a lot of technology now. It moves really fast. I remember when I got married, not everyone had telephones. So you would have to go to public telephone booths if you wanted to make phone calls. They were trying to get a telephone in every house. Everyone had a number to wait for a phone to get installed in your home. But before they got around to everyone, that's when cellphones started coming, so I think that plan just got nixed.

But the population is still horrendous. It's just very overpopulated. The infrastructure still needs a lot of work. A lot of work. So you have technology that's changing and improving lives, but some of the infrastructure still needs to be dealt with. India now is going through some tension too because there's a very right-wing group that's leading the country. I think you heard about the Indian government took away the autonomy from Kashmir. There's a lot of religious tension that's unfortunately increasing. That intolerance is pulling them back. It's going to be devastating. I do worry about my family over there. My husband is continuously calling because we'll hear about someone being lynched or someone being killed in mob attacks. So despite some of the advancements, there is regression.

Although I think they try to portray themselves as a community that is developing, India is an economic power. In some ways, they haven't advanced. There's still a lot of old tensions and bigotry brewing. It's just hard. Especially you have America who people look up to. India always looks up to America. I feel like the political and social tensions here are emboldening some right-wing groups over there. It's very unfortunate. I was actually pretty scared about going. If you apply for an Indian visa, they ask you

what your religion is. They ask who your dad was, where he was born. My family is from India, why should it matter what my faith is? They want to make sure you have no connection with Pakistan whatsoever. And probably the same is true for Pakistan, if somebody who is of Indian background wants to go to Pakistan. I have friends who want to go to Pakistan, but they have Indian background, so Pakistan rejects their visa application. And the same happens vice-versa.

That rivalry makes it hard for people. There's not that understanding that the country split and this is what happened. (Just like America and so many other countries split from England. Indians don't seem to hate the British as much—strange, isn't it?) You're going to have some people who have connections way back when. But they'll ask you all the way back to your grandparents. Were your grandparents from Pakistan? We don't. There's nobody in our immediate family that had ever gone there or settled there. But just as a Muslim person... I was hearing about the lynchings. If someone is suspected of eating beef or some false rumor, that just spreads like wildfire. It was a little scary for me. And then taking my kids there, I was very afraid as well.

When we were little, I remember that we were very carefree on our trips to India, and we'd go around and explore. We would walk for miles and we'd go to like the rivers and hills. But today, even people in India, I don't think they let their kids go out a lot. It's kind of like here. We've become very overprotective of the kids. My kids don't have that experience. I tell them, *We used to go roaming here and there*. This time when my kids went, there was a shop just around the corner. I was afraid because there's kidnappings there, too, when some people find out that you're foreigners. My in-laws would say, *No, don't let them go*. And my son so wanted to go to the shop around the corner and buy

Lays potato chips. One day he did go, and I said as long as someone can see you or you are with your other cousins, you go and then come back.

Q: Have you experienced a similar fear at all here in the States in your life, whether due to your religion or due to your cultural heritage?

SH: As a child, yes. I faced typical harassment as a child. But later in my life, no, not really. I remember when I was first running for the school board, I was interviewed by a newspaper. Someone asked me about my religious background and I said, *What does that have to do with anything? I don't understand why that has to be a point of focus for this race.* Because it was all around that same time that the mosque controversy happened. So the tension was high in this whole area. I said that has nothing to do with me running for the school board. I don't even know why I'm being asked that question. But I know my sister is a journalist and she said, *That's very typical.* I'm like, *No, it's not. It's wrong.* It's a wrong question to ask. She said, *Well, you're different.* That's the whole thing. It shouldn't be that way where you're running and you're different.

I remember when one of the parties was running for the village board. One of the slates did have an Indian person. I remember the slate lost, but his vote count was a lot lower. You'd think that everyone casts a block vote when they vote for a slate, and that's why you have a slate because they're running on a platform. I remember their numbers were consistent, and then you have the one minority on the slate with a much lower count. It reflects that some people would just vote for the slate, but they are not going to vote for the Other.

But personally, myself, I haven't felt fear. I think especially if you're a Muslim woman who wears a hijab, you stand out and become a target. And I don't. So maybe that's one of the reasons I don't face as much discrimination. I can't really think of something that stands out, that made me fearful or worried about my kids. I've seen things around me that still reflects that there's still a lot of work to be done. And to be honest, I think that every group has its own prejudices. And it's not to say that Muslim people and Indian people aren't, because they are, too. Everybody is. I hear people who are from minority backgrounds making comments about people from other backgrounds. Everyone seems to have some sort of prejudice. It's unfortunate. And it's always a fight to fight it. If I hear certain terms being used flippantly, I say, *You know that's a derogatory term.* And some people know it and they are like, *Oh, you know, I don't really mean it that way.* No. That's a derogatory term.

I don't know if you know that radio show The Young Turks. I was listening to one of their clips, one of the gentlemen was just talking about language and how the language leads to a mindset. That really struck me. That's totally right because I remember one of my friends using a term that was derogatory and said, *Well, I'm just using it among us. I don't use it outside.* But it still reflects your attitude. Even though you're thinking you're using it in a certain circle, it still reflects something. You need to combat that. You need to combat that daily, daily, daily, and avoid using those terms. Because it perpetuates your stereotype or your bigotry towards certain groups of people. So I just think it's so important to understand why words matter. And when people say words matter, that's a clear example of why words matter.

I remember I was working at a school and there was an incident with a young gentleman. Someone used a racial slur and then the student who said the slur stated, *I was just joking*. I remember the assistant principal was defending the child, *He was just using it in jest. It wasn't used in a malignant sort of way*. But the other kid stood his ground. I remember we were sitting in a meeting and it was all adults, and this is a little sixth grader. I don't know how old he was, but he was very young. You know how intimidating it is to sit in a room full of adults? I was even thinking, *Why isn't his parent here?* He firmly told the adults, *No, that was a racially derogatory comment and it offended me*. You can't just throw terms around like that. What's that doing to your psyche? What's that doing to the way you are thinking about other people's situations?

Q: Well, is there anything else you want to share about Morton Grove or anything?

SH: About Morton Grove, I love living here. I tell people over and over again that if I had to do it again, I would move here. I really found a place that I loved. I love the neighbors. I love the community. One of the first things I did even before I closed on my house is when we were there for inspection, I saw my future neighbor and I introduced myself, *Hi! How are you? We're hoping to move in*. It was funny because she was this elderly woman and not a lot of people got along with her, but I got along with her splendidly. She passed away unfortunately. I was actually in India four years ago when I found out that she passed away. I was really sad because I didn't make it to her funeral. But she was one of the original owners of her home.

I've seen my neighborhood grow over the years. When we first moved in, the neighborhood primarily consisted of empty nesters, so my first two children didn't have a lot of kids around to play with. But with so many young families moving in, my youngest son has more friends living within the neighborhood, and the younger neighbors really put forth the effort to get the neighborhood together. It's so much more lively. I love that our town is attracting so many families.

It's a good problem to have for our schools. But if you talk to anyone in Park View or in Golf... Ever since I moved in, the numbers have stayed pretty steady. And all of a sudden, within the past three or four years, it's jumped like over 20% enrollment. And our buildings are small. We don't have the space. One of the things we prided ourselves in were our smaller class size. And that's changing. Parents are concerned. Like I said, it's a good problem to have. It's nice that we're attracting all these people, but we are in the process of addressing this concern as it will become a not-so-good problem. I'm glad to see Prairieview Plaza being developed, finally something being done over there.

I think our current mayor Dan DiMaria is really energetic. I know that for sure. That's why I like him being there as far as somebody who would want to see change and trying to bring change into the community and that energy, that dynamic to the table. I'm glad to see he's working hard to develop the community. It's changed a lot. We really are attracting a lot more people, a lot more families. For me, it's a great place to be. We've been happy here. If there are any challenges, I feel like there is nothing that we can't face. But I think we have to be a part of that change. We can't just expect it to happen because we want it to happen. We have to be participating and. That's why I said when I was talking about some of the challenges with schools, everything has to

work from different directions. It can't be just one component trying to make that change without any cooperation from the other side.

We've got a great library, great park district. We have a great village. I think we pride ourselves on our snow removal. [laughter] Which is true. Everyone who comes here exclaims, *Oh my God, your streets are so clean.* And I go to my mom's house and I ask her, *What's wrong, do they clean the streets here?* But we all have to work together to bring positive changes and build a positive community. I do think that we all should keep trying. There's always room for improvement. But I'm glad I'm here and working with a lot of people. The one thing I love to do is to learn, and by working with a variety of people from many areas of the community, I have learned a lot. It is an education. I'm always explaining to my kids and students that education goes beyond the walls of a school. And that's very important to understand and appreciate.

Q: That sounds like a great place to end.

SH: Yes! Thank you.