

**TRANSCRIPT—CHAVI KHANNA  
KONERU**

Interviewee: Chavi Khanna Koneru

Interviewer: Maydha Devarajan

Interview Date: October 7, 2021

Location: 711 Hillsborough Street, Suite 102, Raleigh N.C.

[START OF INTERVIEW]

**Maydha Devarajan:** Yeah, so my name is Maydha Devarajan. I'm with Chavi Khanna Koneru in her office in downtown Raleigh, the North Carolina Asian Americans Together office. And we're here to do an oral history interview for Southern Mix at UNC-Chapel Hill. So, yeah, we'll get started. I was just wondering if you might want to tell me a little bit about where and when you were born. I know you moved to North Carolina at some point later in your life, right?

**Chavi Khanna Koneru:** Yeah so I was born in 1983 in Oakland, California, and I grew up in various parts of the Bay. In 1989, I moved to North Carolina because my dad is a professor and he got a job at Duke. So we moved to Durham, and I was six, going on seven at the time. My younger sister was born the same year that we moved to North Carolina.

**MD:** Awesome. Yeah, and I was going to ask you, you know, why you ended up moving, but did you start at schools around Durham?

**CK:** Yes. So I was in school in Richmond, California, before I moved. And so I started first grade here in North Carolina in a Durham public school called Southwest Elementary.

**MD:** And where did you go for middle and high school?

**CK:** For middle school, I started off at Githens Middle School, which is another Durham public school. And then from my last year of middle school, I actually went to the Duke School for Children and for high school, I went to the Carolina Friends School, so I kind of switched over.

**MD:** Yeah. OK. And I don't know if you want to tell me, you know, you said your dad worked at Duke. What department did he work in, I guess?

**CK:** So my dad worked in the Asian and African Languages and Literature Department, so he's a Hindi professor, essentially. And also his research is he makes documentary films about India. So he would travel back to India quite a bit during the summers and other breaks. And I mention that also because I think it had a pretty significant impact on the way that I was raised because I probably had more exposure to India than most Indian kids born and raised in the U.S.

**MD:** Yeah, would you go back with him on those trips?

**CK:** Sometimes, but my dad came to the U.S. when he was 17 on a boat. He went to Harvard. I'll just take a second and tell you his story because it's so funny. He had a roommate who was going to like the big city to take a test, and his roommate was like, "I don't want to go by myself, why don't you just come with me and take this test," which apparently is the thing that people did. So he went with him, and at the very end of the test, it said, "Write down the name of two American universities that you're interested in." So my dad wrote down the name of the only two universities he'd ever heard of, which were Harvard and Yale. And apparently it was like a college entrance exam, which he didn't know at that time. So he got a letter back from

Yale saying, "We don't accept women at this time," because his name was foreign. They didn't know. And [he got] a letter back from Harvard saying, you know, "You're in, just get here." So he left his family behind and got on a boat and got there. And so he, unlike a lot of my friend's parents, my dad had been here since he was 17, so he had a unique experience and my mom came over when she was married. And so all of her family still lived in India, whereas my dad's family mostly lived in the Bay. So we went back to India, usually for half the year, all summer vacations, all winter, spring. Any time we could get away, we went back.

**MD:** Yeah, and where in India is your family from?

**CK:** So we're Punjabi, moved during the Partition and mostly grew up, my mom's family, in the kind of area near Delhi, and my dad's family kind of further out like Bihar.

**MD:** Also, yeah, that is such an interesting story [about your dad].

**CK:** Right?

**MD:** Yeah. And I guess his family moved. Does he have any siblings that also came to the United States?

**CK:** Yes, he's one of nine.

**MD:** Oh, wow. [Laughter].

**CK:** So one of them is passed away, but the rest of them all live in the U.S. now. But at the time, he was the first one to come over.

**MD:** Yeah, and did your grandparents end up coming, too, later?

**CK:** Yes. So both of my grandfathers had passed away before I was born, but my paternal grandmother was here for as long as I can remember, and my maternal grandmother lived with us and kind of would do one year with us and one year with back in India, with one of my mom's other sisters.

**MD:** Yeah. Wow. I imagine you have a lot of cousins then.

**CK:** I have a lot of cousins. [Laughs].

**MD:** Yeah, OK. And so I was just kind of curious, growing up, also, did your mom work or was she a stay-at-home mom?

**CK:** Yeah, my mom worked. She used to be a teacher in India. And then at one point she was a Montessori school teacher here. But I think there was a lot of tension culturally in working outside of the home because it felt like, I remember in particular, that someone said to her, "How are you going to leave your kids and go take care of someone else's kids?" So that prompted my mom to kind of create her own Montessori home day care. So that's what she did. I mean, she did work 40 hours a week my entire life, but it was housed in her home, so it was a little bit of a different experience. And definitely, I was around kids all the time, which was also a different experience. [Laughs].

**MD:** Yeah. And I imagine that would be fun at first. And then when you're in high school, it's like—

**CK:** Exactly. That is exactly how it was. Yeah.

**MD:** OK, yeah. Did your parents have an arranged marriage?

**CK:** More or less, I mean, they had the opportunity to meet and talk before they were married, but they probably knew each other a couple of weeks before they were married, at most.

**MD:** Yeah, yeah. I want to come back, I think, you know, I have some questions about how your dad's experiences might have impacted yours growing up, but I just wanted to talk about your school, when you were growing up in Durham. Do you know, like, if you had to estimate how many other Indian kids there might have been in your classes?

**CK:** Yeah, very few. So I'll tell you that what has probably impacted my life in one of the more significant ways was moving to Durham from Richmond, which was incredibly diverse. I mean, not just diverse in racially, but ethnically. I'd have, you know, a neighbor down the street that was Fijian Indian and, you know, technically Pacific Islander, right, which is, if you know those families, that's not how they personally identify. And so I grew up in an environment where I never thought to ask what my race or ethnicity was. No one ever brought it up, and it just didn't seem important. So I moved to North Carolina, and all of a sudden, I was in this class. I was the only brown person in my class. So it was Black kids and white kids. There was no one else. And that was a huge shock, especially at that age, I did not understand why there weren't other people that looked like me, especially when I was coming from somewhere where they were. And I remember having to go home and ask my parents, like, "What am I?" You know, because it just never occurred to me before that I was different in any way. My school probably had a handful of Indian kids and a handful of other Asians of different ethnicities. And at the time, it was like there were so few of us that people would assume that we were related, like, "Oh, I saw your cousin this morning." And it wasn't even that in a facetious or

kind of discriminatory way, like they legitimately thought that we were related. [Laughs] It's like, "No."

**MD:** Yeah, and I can imagine also, like, you know, I have an older brother, so him being the older one of the two, having to go through those experiences first. And, you know, you were talking about the handful of Indian kids. Was that middle, elementary [that] it was like that, or also in high school it was still a handful of Indian kids?

**CK:** Well, so high school was different because I went to a very small private school. I'm not sure if you're familiar with the Carolina Friends School, but it's a Quaker school, had a graduating class of 40. There was one other Indian kid in my class who was half Indian, and he joined our school when I was a sophomore or junior. And I just remember everyone being like, "Oh, well, you guys should date, because, you know, this is obvious." Mind you, I was dating someone at the time, didn't seem to matter. And so, yeah, I mean, I kind of definitely got used to being the only brown person in the room. Where I grew up, there wasn't as much of like a Latinx presence either, not until much later in life. So going from there to UNC-Chapel Hill, where there were so many Indian kids was very exciting. [Laughs].

**MD:** Yeah, I want to ask about college. But just like when you're thinking about those experiences of being in school was your friend group, I don't know if you would say like if you hung out with a mix of people, if it was mostly one particular race, if you remember?

**CK:** Yeah. Growing up, I feel like there was a lot of code switching going on. It was my family hung out with pretty much just Indians, and there would be Indian dinner parties all the time or some festival. And so I had this kind of group — I don't know even if you would call

them friends, but a group of kids that I was always around because we would end up at dinner parties together. And so we had things in common. We got to know each other. And then there were my friends at school, who were obviously mostly white. I mean, high school, in particular, Friends School, I don't know how it is now, but at the time, it did not have much racial diversity, period. So I remember the handful of Black kids at our school and my elementary and middle school definitely had more racial diversity. And so I think that was also kind of an interesting experience because I had more Black friends before I switched schools and then I felt even further removed from like anyone that could understand living between two cultures, if that makes sense.

**MD:** Yeah, no, I can imagine that was a weird transition. And I'm curious, like, you talked a little bit about going to college, that being a huge transition. Was UNC-Chapel Hill the school you wanted to go to?

**CK:** I had no idea where I wanted to go. I did not understand very much about the process when I was applying to college. I will tell you that one of the things that I remember most distinctly about the process of choosing colleges was that my school counselor in high school at the time — and this was again well-intentioned — tried to pitch Rutgers to me because it was a high population of Indian American kids. And I remember thinking, "Why would I go out to New Jersey, to no offense, to Rutgers, but like, it's not like an Ivy League, right? Like, why would you suggest this?" So I was confused. I applied to UNC-Chapel Hill, Duke, George Washington and then a handful of schools in California. And I had wanted to go to California. I don't think I had the guts to actually do it. And really, it came down to, like it sounds really bad to say this now, but at the time, I sort of saw UNC-Chapel Hill as a backup school because I

figured it's right around the corner. You know, like I was not aware of how competitive it was to get in, even at the time that I was applying, it was competitive. [I] just didn't recognize that because I was thinking, you know, getting into a college was about a different experience and leaving your bubble, does that make sense?

**MD:** Yeah. No, I can relate a lot to that. I also don't think I had the guts to go anywhere further.

**CK:** Yeah.

**MD:** But yeah, I mean, like, you know, you talked about your neighborhood, before you came to Durham. So I imagine, you know, you still remember those experiences. Were there specific things that you can remember from your childhood where you're like, "Oh, like this is the South. And it's much different from what I remember—" like growing up in California for those first five years or whatever.

**CK:** Yeah, several experiences. But one that stands out is that, my family lived in a lower- to middle-class neighborhood in Richmond. And every year for Diwali, my parents would open the doors of our small apartment and just tell everyone in the neighborhood to bring a candle. And then, I mean, I remember that like the door had to be kept open because people were like, you know, kind of crowded around. And my dad would read the story of the meaning of Diwali in English, and then my mom would hand out sweets and everyone had their little candle lit. And to me, that felt normal because, you know, I'm like, what, 5 years old, 6 years old? I'm like, "This is cool. This is great." And then coming here and very early on being asked, "Are you an Indian, like a dot or a feather Indian, right?" And I think those two things were in such stark

contrast that I couldn't even understand what had happened, I mean, I was convinced we would move back because like, why would anyone want to live here, right? [Laughs] You know, and definitely like the questions that I got were, I guess in retrospect, ignorance, but at the time, they just made me feel more and more different because I came from a place where I felt like I belonged, and then all of a sudden, I didn't in any space.

**MD:** Yeah, I also relate a lot to that and I don't know, like, you talked about code switching between those two spaces, was that something that— I know I talked to a few people for the other interviews I've done, and, you know, feeling like you have to be slotted into one group, like this Black-white binary that kind of exists in the South. I mean, you know, you talked about people asking you like, "Are you this kind of, you know, Indian or whatever?" Are there other experiences that you think you ever felt like you had to choose, or you felt othered or there wasn't a space for you, like at school? I don't know if there are things that you can remember.

**CK:** Yeah, it definitely felt like that, most of the time. I had thought of an example and now it's kind of floated away. [Pause] I feel like it'll come back to me, yeah, yeah.

**MD:** Yeah, we can come back to that, and I also want to ask you a little bit about, you know, we talked about college, and so I want to get into that and going to UNC-Chapel Hill, I imagine that was a big transition. Were you involved in, like, any of the South Asian or Asian American kind of interest organizations?

**CK:** Yes. So I was definitely excited about the prospect of there being more people that looked like me. But even growing up, you know, the relationships I had with my friends in the Indian community, I mean, I was closer to some than others. But for the most part, those were

relationships built on our parents' friendships rather than, you know, connecting in some other way. So I didn't know what that was going to look like. So when I started going to school that first semester, I gravitated towards like just the people I would normally be friends with. And then as my sort of world started to expand a little bit and you know, what happens as you're a freshman, you're like, "Wow, there's a whole different world out there." I remember very distinctly that I was sitting at the bus stop waiting for the bus to come by, and there was an Indian guy standing there and he was like, "Are you Indian?" And I'm like, "Yes." He's like, "What kind?" I didn't know, like, I just didn't know what that question meant. So I was like, I don't know, gave some sort of answer like, "I'm just Indian" or something. And then he was like, "Oh, you know, there's a meeting tonight where it's like for a bunch of South Asians, you should come." Maybe it was a meeting. Maybe it was a party, I don't remember. I think it was a party, actually. So I was like, "OK." So then I went and I was like, literally, 95 percent of the people in there were Indian, and I was like, "Wow, this is so cool." And I just went headfirst into that world. I was on the board of Sangam for several years. I was a cultural chair and put on the, I don't even remember what you call it anymore, but there was a big—

**MD:** AKD? Aaj Ka Dhamaka?

**CK:** Not Aaj Ka Dhamaka, there was another one, I don't know, that Sangam put on. Maybe that's what— I don't remember. You know, it's like all of a sudden all of my friends were Indian, like, that was it. That was my world. I figured out that I was Punjabi and that I was still a minority in terms of the [laughs] South Asian community in the area. And it took me all the way to senior year to realize that I was kind of doing the same thing that I had with the friends, the kids of my parents' friends, is that I was hanging out with these people because they looked like

me, rather than because we had a lot in common. And I mean, I don't know how many other people go through that experience or come to the realization. But I remember distinctly senior year that I stepped back and I was like, "OK, I'm going to start picking my friends based on, you know, things that we have in common." But I think it was rational to want to just be around people like you when you had spent the majority of your life being othered and not fitting in and feeling just like you didn't quite belong. And going back to your earlier question, this is not a specific example, but I do remember moving here and kind of assuming that I was going to hang out with the Black kids because there just seemed to be like— right? I mean, we have more in common, I'm coming from an area where I like hung out with— most of the people that I was surrounded by in the Bay were people of color. I mean, we definitely had like non-people of color friends but that's what I assumed. And then I didn't fit in with them, and they didn't seem to want me to fit in with them. Like it was like, "You're more conservative—" and I mean, I think in my Indian traditional ways that I was forced to act in, right, like the cultural values, it was like didn't mesh with those folks. And then I was over here trying to hang out with the white kids, and they did not understand when I went to their house, like why everyone was wearing shoes in their house or why, like, you know, their parents didn't care that we were watching some rated-R movie or something. Like there was so much that never made sense to me. And I'm not sure how much of it was like I vocalized it or someone else vocalized it, but I very much internalized the feeling of not belonging anywhere specific. And to complicate things further, because we did spend so much time in India and I have a set of cousins there, I would go to India and think, "OK, this is my time to belong. I'm fluent in Hindi. I mean, I am very culturally Indian." And yet all people talked about the entire time I'd be there is like how Westernized I was, how Americanized I was, how I spoke Hindi with such an accent and I was like, "I don't see it. I am

just like you and like, you don't understand when I go back, they're going to be like, 'You're not like us.' Like, what the heck?" I just remember feeling so internally frustrated at the fact that there was no clarity around where I was supposed to belong.

**MD:** Yeah, no. Well, thank you for sharing all that because, I think that again, I relate to a lot of those experiences.

**CK:** Yeah.

**MD:** I think being a second-generation immigrant, there's a very unique set of experiences there. And, you know, I also want to go back to something you said, you know, that maybe the Black kids when you were growing up in school didn't really understand the traditional conservative Indian values you were talking about. I don't know if you could talk a little more about what that meant and what that looks like in your household, like if that was a big part of your experiences growing up?

**CK:** Yeah, I mean, there was some of that in the sense that like we have these rules that don't make sense to other people. And I'm sure they didn't make sense to the white kids, either. But what I realize now that I do appreciate is that the Black kids were more willing to name that whereas some white kids from more passive aggressive about it. And as I've gotten older, I have learned to value people being honest. You know, there are things like, "Oh, you couldn't sleep over at anyone's house." Now that I'm older, I realize it's not just Indian people and it's not all Indian people. You know, one of my closest friends is Colombian, and her mom was the same way about it. But at the time it felt like my parents were the only ones that were this way, and I had to dress a certain way for school and like, this was appropriate and this wasn't—

**MD:** Things being too short or something?

**CK:** Oh God, yes. But I think there was also, and again, not something I realized until I was older, there's a lot of anti-Blackness in our community, in our families, and I don't think it was like, oh, my family unit in particular, it was just the general attitude. One of my best friends in elementary school was a Black girl who lived not too far away, and we did spend the night at each other's houses. The first time I ever went to church was with her and that was a crazy experience. But I started to notice when I brought her to things like, "Oh, my family's going to this Indian party." You know, they let you bring a friend so you brought a friend. There was a certain judgment and a certain unsaid, unspoken, like, disapproval? And I think when you're young, you're so focused on approval that I don't think I consciously made a decision that like, "Oh, I'm going to go hang out these people instead." But I do think that like, there's cultural pressure to be friends with a certain race of people and to not hang out with another race of people. And I hope that's OK to name that.

**MD:** Yeah, no, I think that makes a lot of sense and I appreciate you, you know, talking through that. And I also do want to get back to ideas about anti-Blackness in the South Asian community. I think, you know, there's a lot to talk about there also. And I know also before you said you realized when that person asked, like, "Oh, you're Indian?" And, you know, being like, even within that, what does that mean? When do you think you were able to articulate more things about your identity saying, "I'm Punjabi"? Like, did you have conversations with your parents about that kind of stuff?

**CK:** Yes. I immediately called my parents. I was like, "What kind of Indian am I?" And my mom was like, "What do you mean 'What kind of Indian are you?' You're Indian." [Laughs]

It was a very confusing conversation for her as well. And then, you know, it was like, "Well, we're Punjabi, but we don't go to the gurdwara and we're—" you know, when did I finally figure that out? I don't know. Probably, like, some time in my twenties. [Laughs] It takes a long time to sort through all that, especially because there aren't forums for this kind of conversation, which is why I think this project is so wonderful because so many of us grow up thinking we are alone in feeling this way and that our experiences are unique in an isolating way. And you know, yes, our experiences are unique, but it's nice to know, like for you to affirm that, "Yeah, I feel that way sometimes, too." I spent most of my life not knowing that other people felt this way.

**MD:** Yeah, and I mean, I know you talked about like those friends that you had through Sangam and things like that. You kind of realized senior year that you wanted to maybe be a little more selective in exactly who you're friends with but did you not really talk about this kind of stuff with people?

**CK:** Not at all. Yes. I didn't feel like there was anyone I could talk to about it. So all of a sudden people thought that I just didn't want to hang out anymore. And I remember using school as an excuse, like, you know, "I'm really into this—" I actually I was taking a class in law and morality at the time. I really was into the class. But for some reason it also kind of was the root of where I started thinking about these things. So I was glad to be able to use that as an excuse while everyone else was having senioritis. And I was like, "But I don't know what I'm doing after, so I have to focus." [Laughter].

**MD:** Yeah. And I know you also said you realizing that you're Punjabi, you said, "Oh, even that is like a minority within the community." I don't know if you could explain that, is that what you mean when you said you don't go to the gurdwara?

**CK:** Yeah, so we are Hindu Punjabi. My grandmother's family was Sikh and, you know, went to the gurdwara. So there's a portion of my family that is turban-wearing, you know, like very religious. But I fell in this like in-between place, I mean, particularly in North Carolina and the South in general, the majority South Asian population is Gujarati. I didn't even know what that meant. Because the people I was surrounded by prior to, were Hindi-speaking Hindus who were mostly North Indian, right? Like I realize now there's differences in terms of like where they originated and the fact that some people speak Hindi, but their native language is something else. But as a kid, I was like, "I don't understand, this is how I thought all Indian people were." And that's also part of the lack of belonging here, is that the Punjabi kids, for the most part, all went to the gurdwara together and the Gujarati kids were in TGA [Triangle Gujarati Association] together. And there wasn't really a space for those of us who are like me, and at least I didn't even know how to connect with people like that.

**MD:** Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And growing up, like those Indian families that you would hang out with on the weekends and that were your parents' friends, you kind of alluded to this, I guess, but do you know where in India they were from or just the fact that they were also like Hindi-speaking Hindus?

**CK:** Well, now I do. Some of them actually are South Indian, which I did not realize at the time. But a lot of them are definitely like North Indian, some are Rajasthani, some are— I forget what you call people from like the Mumbai area, but— oh my gosh, it'll come back to me, this is embarrassing. But yeah. The other thing is also most of them had kids that were closer to my sister's age. And so I know that my sister grew up having more of a space for these conversations. It was by the time I met a whole bunch of Indian people, they had figured out

their identity for the most part, or thought so, or they had figured it out enough in terms of like, here's who I want to be, I want to hang out with Indian kids or I don't. And that was, I'm sure you experienced that at UNC-Chapel Hill, too. There was a very distinct difference between the Indians who hung out with Indians and the Indians who didn't.

**MD:** Yes, you know, I think that is a very particular distinction, and I don't know if that's something that you heard, but definitely when I came to UNC-Chapel Hill, I heard from another Indian person saying, like, "Oh, don't just hang out with Indians, like, don't live with Indians, they're too much drama," which I thought was really fascinating. Did you hear things like that when you were—?

**CK:** Yes, I mean, like I said, I dove in head first, so I was living with Indians.

**MD:** OK.

**CK:** I was in the drama, there's a lot of drama. It's very true. The part I never quite understood and probably what helped me take that step back was that there was a lot of self-segregation that was going on within the Indian community, and it wasn't even just, "OK, we want to hang out with just other Indians." It was also exclusionary. It was, "Oh, that person's South Indian, so—" and I mean, I remember people saying that, I didn't even know there was a "good kind of Indian" and a "bad kind of Indian," right? There's not. And I mean, not to go completely off topic, but then that has to do with colorism and white supremacy and all that kind of stuff. But at the time, not knowing any of that, what I will say is because of where I was born, because I had the opportunity to go to a place like Friends School, no matter what else was happening. I continued to have the good fortune of wanting to be inclusive because that is what I

had gotten in those spaces. And so the idea of leaving someone out because you didn't like the color of their skin. No one said it in those terms, but like, "Hi, racism," like that is not cool. [Laughs] And I just, you know, I remember trying to sort through all those different values and being like, "I don't understand." Like that very first party I told you that I was invited to, I brought my good friend at the time who was, you know, like almost 6-foot white girl. And people were not very nice to her because she wasn't Indian. They were super interested in meeting me, I was the new Indian girl, not at all interested in her. And at the time, I was so carried away with the popularity and, "Oh, this is so great, I have all these new friends," that took me a couple of years to realize how wrong that was.

**MD:** Right, yeah. No, I think that makes a lot of sense. And, I mean, thank you very much for sharing these things. And you know, I think we talked a little about some of these, you know, these terms and these things. But to be, I guess a little more explicit, when you're thinking about how you identify are there are certain terms that immediately come to mind that you use now? And also I'm sure that has changed over time. So, I don't know if you can think, "Now I use this, but I wouldn't have in college."

**CK:** I mean, I still identify as Indian American, but I think what that means to me is different. I think almost like it is one word to me, whereas growing up it felt like I had to choose between being Indian or being American. Another reason, you know, I use my full name most of the time, and it's because Khanna was my maiden last name. It is what I feel like connects me to my Punjabi roots, which are a big part of, you know, who I am and Koneru, who is my married last name. My husband's family is South Indian. They're Telugu from the Hyderabad region. And I also value the cross-cultural, cross— well, not ethnic so much, but, you know, like there's

definitely distinctions in the way that he grew up and I grew up. And it's also because of the additional discrimination that came from North Indians towards South Indians. So yes, I guess that describes it, but I'm very intentional about using both because I do think that they're both important parts of my identity.

**MD:** Yeah. And I actually meant to ask that before. So you said your husband is Telegu and did you meet him in college, or where did you meet him?

**CK:** No, I met him in D.C. after law school, I moved to D.C. to do some legal work. He's also a lawyer. He was working for the federal government. We met pretty randomly. You know, we just started having conversation. I know people don't meet like that these days anymore, but we actually did. And as things got more serious, I remember calling my mom once, and, you know, as Indian kids, you don't really even tell your parents you're dating someone because, first of all, taboo. Second of all, when are you marrying them? But I do remember calling her and saying, "Is it OK that I'm considering a serious future with someone who's South Indian?" And she was like, "Yeah, that's an absurd question." But I didn't know. Right? Like, I'd never talked to my parents about their level of discrimination on that so I was like, "OK."

**MD:** Yeah, I think that's so interesting. And my family is from South India but my parents are from different parts of India, so I can imagine. You know, I'm curious, does your husband speak Hindi?

**CK:** Mmm mmm [no].

**MD:** I mean, are you going to be teaching your kids, like is that something you talked about?

**CK:** Yeah, I mean, you know, I am fluent, I grew up bilingual. Again, a big part of my identity. So yes, I have two children, one, my son is now 5 and my daughter's about to turn 2. And with my son, I struggled a lot more with how to how to teach him this language without excluding my husband, who does not speak Hindi and speaks an Indian language that is nothing like Hindi, right? He also is not fluent in Telugu, like he's conversational, but not to the point where he feels the need to teach that to the kids. And I think, you know, as we grow older, we become more confident in what's important to us. And so with my daughter, I have done a much better job of speaking to her in Hindi. When we're alone, I try to be exclusively in Hindi. It's not ideal. It's not great, especially with my son talking in English, but I encourage my parents to talk to her in Hindi. But, you know, I don't know what the right way to do it is. And I know some people who speak other languages, like I have a good friend who's Puerto Rican, whose wife didn't speak Spanish, and he was adamant about speaking Spanish to his child, who is now the same age as my son and fully bilingual. But I think when you have a little more confidence in your own identity, then it's easier to do that. When you're still feeling like you're figuring things out, then, you know.

**MD:** Yeah.

**CK:** I'm sorry, that was a very long-winded answer to your question.

**MD:** No, no, I think that's really interesting just because I think that's something I relate to a lot, my parents didn't teach me any Indian languages. And is your husband also from the South? Or did you grow up in D.C.?

**CK:** No, he is from Buffalo, New York.

**MD:** Yeah. Do you think that there were cultural differences in those experiences, like him being from the North in the United States, I guess?

**CK:** Yes, definitely. I think he was a lot more aware of the diversity that was around than I was. Like, I just thought the South was like— I mean, why would someone do that to a poor little Indian kid? [Laughs] But you know, there are also some similarities because Buffalo is not New York City and there were some very close-minded people, and he had some experiences that were just based on pure racism and discrimination that, to a young kid, again, don't make sense. We also don't have family around here because they were all still in California, and still are. So I think because he had more family, it felt a little bit more safe, like there were still spaces to connect with people who were like you.

**MD:** Yeah. Right. And I also wanted to go back to the question about identity. And I want to ask you a little bit about the work you do also. But I imagine being in this role and this work that you do, that you think about things like identity a lot and like, you know, the different identifiers that people use. And so I'm curious, you talked about "Indian American" as like one that was very much something that was familiar to you. Do you think like "Asian American," is that something that you would identify or use for yourself? Or like "a brown person"? You talked about you were the brown kid when you were younger, so I just was curious, like if those are things that apply?

**CK:** Yeah. So "brown" came from college. I remember somebody using the term "brown town" to describe Indian people. And at first, I was appalled like, I was like, "Is this OK? Even if we're calling ourselves this, is this like an appropriate thing?" And then it just became OK. And I think kind of reclaiming that term gives me power. I use that term a lot more because that is who

I am, and I like to make the distinction of being brown in North Carolina, which is, as you mentioned before, talking about the fact that everything is very Black and white and, you know, doesn't include the stories or the experiences of brown people. So I do try to say that very explicitly. Yeah, the Asian American identity, I wouldn't say that I grew up thinking that, you know, the Chinese kids in my class were having the same experience that I was. But as I got older, I think, it was particularly after moving to D.C., what really brought me to this is that in law school, I focused on voting rights law and my third year of law school, my 3L year, I was accepted into this externship program with the Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division in D.C. And I was in the voting section, Obama was up for election. And at the time — this is before the Voting Rights Act was gutted — so the Department of Justice would send folks all over the country for Election Day to be federal observers. I was sent to Bergen County, New Jersey, and there happened to be a large Korean population in the precinct that I was working in. And one of the things we were there to monitor was language access and making sure that they were given the option to bring someone into the booths with them and all this. And I think just being there that day and advocating for them in that way helped me realize that this was very much like my experiences. It's hard for me to describe it any better than that, but it was just like, sometimes it takes a moment in time for that connection to happen, and that was the moment for me. And so going forward, I had started to look at this as like, "OK, my community is broader than just Punjabi, North Indians or South Asians or—" you know, "this is like a pan-Asian community." I think the idea of it being a political identity really came from coming back to the area, seeing the growth in population. And honestly, just strategically knowing that if I were to just band together with all the Indians and say, "OK, we're going to vote this way," you're not going to have that political power. And what's really important, beyond the political power, is

having voice and having representation. And I do think that we have enough similarities as an overall community, but I don't go around like using "Asian American" as my primary identity.

**MD:** Yeah. Do you think it's South Asian American or just probably Indian American is something you would [use]?

**CK:** Yeah, sometimes I'll say South Asian, but you know, even within South Asians, there are such varied experiences, and so, yeah, I mostly will say Indian American.

**MD:** Yeah, yeah. And I think that's really interesting because I was speaking to some alumni at UNC-Chapel Hill, who founded some identity-based groups, Asian identity-based groups, and they were talking about — and this was in the 1980s and 90s — how they would use the word "Asian." And these were people from obviously different parts of the diaspora and "Asian American" was something that was kind of newer to them. And then, you know, across different generations how that's kind of transformed. And when you were growing up, was "Asian"— because I know there also this kind of perception that that does not include South Asians. It's more—

**CK:** East Asian.

**MD:** Yeah, East Asian.

**CK:** Yeah, I definitely grew up with that perception as well. And even now, I have to often correct people when they're like, "Oh, you're working with NCAAT, pan-Asian, right, but how many Asians do you have?" And I'm like, "OK." [Laughs] What I will say, though, is that a term that I have struggled with is "Desi." So "Desi" means from the homeland, from the

motherland. And when people who are also brown and South Asian, whether they're from India or Pakistan or somewhere else in the diaspora, say Desi, [that's] perfectly fine with me, I feel like that's appropriate. When I started doing the work with NCAAT, there was some pressure put on me to start using the term "AAPIDA." OK. Are you familiar this?

**MD:** Not the "D."

**CK:** "Asian American Pacific Islander Desi Americans." And [we] actually had a conversation, we did a workshop at UNC-Chapel Hill, this was probably 2017, 2018, with a group of students who felt very strongly about using that "Desi American" part of it because the term "Asian American and Pacific Islander" didn't make them feel represented. But I had, like, such a problem with someone from outside my community referring to me in that way that I just never got comfortable with it, right? But I do think it's interesting because I think there's a lot of people in the progressive work who do feel strongly about using "Desi Americans" so that people feel included who otherwise wouldn't feel included by the term "Asian American."

**MD:** That's fascinating, because I never heard that before—

**CK:** That makes me feel better because I was like, "What? What is this?"

**MD:** That's so interesting. And I also am curious, do you think Southern or Southerner is a term that feels comfortable to or something that you would use? Or would you probably say, "I grew up in the South" or "I'm from the South" as opposed to using that word like "Southerner"?

**CK:** I would say that since I've formed this organization, I have used that term and meant it. Prior to, not only would I not say that I grew up in the South, I tried to not claim this place as

much as possible because I didn't feel like any of the identifying characteristics of being Southern or any of the positive attributes associated with the South, I didn't feel like any of that applied to me, like I felt like I was just stuck here, but that again I didn't belong, right? And it took me moving to D.C., being in a different environment, to realize how Southern I actually was and that it wasn't a negative thing. I mean, I remember like going back to the Bay, like every year and my friends saying like, "Oh my gosh, you're developing a Southern accent." And I went home that day and started practicing like my "hellas" and all that, like I'm like I got to stick to this California thing. I mean, I literally told people until like college that I was from California because I really just I couldn't claim this place and I didn't feel like it could claim me. But I do now, yeah.

**MD:** Do you think the work that you've done here [at NCAAT] is what made you kind of feel like that is something that you can claim?

**CK:** No, I think when I came back to North Carolina, I had this appreciation for the way I had grown up—I mean there are things about like Southern hospitality is real and there are some things that I do appreciate about the culture here, but there's also some things I don't, which is that kind of passive aggressive way that we move through things. And in terms of forming this organization, a lot of it is about being able to say these things that I've spent my entire life not being able to say and not just me, but creating that space for so many other people, especially for younger people. That's probably what's really meant the most in terms of NCAAT, is like being able to see people connect with other people their age when they're at that really stressful time of life in middle school or high school or the beginning of college. And having those conversations

like, "Hey, I don't feel like I belong." "Oh, I don't either." "Maybe we belong like in this other little group." [Laughs].

**MD:** There's something said that I wanted to— oh yes, you were talking about those future generations, do you think your kids would identify differently? I know they're really young, but like thinking about between your kids or even your parents. Like, I don't know if [you have] talked to them now [about this], if you think there are terms that you use that they wouldn't use?

**CK:** Yes, I don't know about my parents so much, I mean, they definitely don't associate with the term "Asian American," but I think, you know, we talked about that a little bit. I do think it will be very different for my kids. Truthfully, I don't know what it's going to look like, but I will say that I have been very intentional about wanting them to be in spaces where there's a lot of diversity. They're in preschools where there are other brown kids and there's definitely someone in their class that looks like them. And I think that's a really important part of feeling that belonging. I mean, they're born in North Carolina. They're going to be Southern. [Laughs] Like, that's unavoidable. And it's also like, I've come a long way because I mean, I didn't even used to claim this place. And now I'm going to have two kids who are like, "This is my birth place," this is crazy. [Laughs].

**MD:** Yeah. I guess, like, I wanted to also make sure I got these details. What year did you start your undergrad at UNC-Chapel Hill?

**CK:** 2001.

**MD:** OK. And then you went to law school at UNC-Chapel Hill right out of undergrad?

**CK:** No, I took a year off between. So I started law school in 2006 and I graduated in 2009.

**MD:** OK, and then you moved to D.C.

**CK:** Then I moved— 2010, I moved to D.C. Something like that.

**MD:** You might have mentioned this but what precipitated your decision to move back to North Carolina?

**CK:** Well, several things, one D.C.'s expensive. My now-husband, you know, had kind of gotten his fill of it. He had gone to law school in Chicago. He had lived there for a long time. And it was constantly, "D.C.'s not as good as Chicago." I actually really liked living in D.C. I would have been fine staying, but I also had a job that I didn't love and we had just gotten engaged. And, you know, for a variety of reasons, it was like, "OK, this is a good time to try something else out." I was very hesitant about coming back here. I knew things had changed, but I wasn't sure how much. And so we made a deal that we would give it a year. And then if I hated it, we would consider D.C. or Chicago. I was certain I was going to hate it, so I was just like planning for the next move. But I came back, and that's when it was like, "Oh wow, there's so many more Asian Americans. There's so many more Indian Americans." And also just that it felt like there was more space for conversations that I wouldn't even have thought about having before, if that makes sense. Like the climate had changed, something had changed about this area, and I don't even know if it was a conscious decision after that. It was just things just sort of fell into place and it was like, "OK, this is home." And that was probably the first time my entire life that I felt like there was a place I would call home, which is very strange to say, but.

**MD:** Yeah, yeah, definitely. I also think we might take a quick break if that's [OK].

[AUDIO BREAK — paused recorder]

**MD:** And so some of the other things I also kind of wanted to ask you about is sort of you were talking about your journey back to North Carolina and what that was like. And then what year did you found NCAAT?

**CK:** 2016.

**MD:** OK.

**CK:** But it was an effort we started in 2014.

**MD:** OK, right. And I guess like, you know, having been in this space during a very tumultuous presidential election and multiple of those, and just like in general, since the time you've come back, how have you seen the community, I guess, particularly like South Asian community or Indian community change in this area?

**CK:** Do you mean politically or—?

**MD:** I would say politically and also, like, you know, outside of that, just in general, like growth and you're just talking about when you came back — I guess that's political but you were saying it's much more progressive.

**CK:** Yeah, yeah. I think I meant more progressive in general, even the Triangle, you know, like when you're in one of the college bubbles — well, Duke or UNC-Chapel Hill specifically — you're definitely in a more progressive space. And I mean, I spent, you know, seven years on that campus. And so Raleigh at the time was not a place that I felt at home in at all. And coming back, I did come back and move to Raleigh, which is, you know, I've lived in Durham and Chapel Hill, and it's still different, you know? And it was more progressive in terms of the Indian and South Asian population in general. There was also just a lot more diversity. So, you know, growing up, like I said, to be quite honest, it felt like if you were not Gujarati, you didn't quite have an Indian community. And then I came back and it was like there were so many different types of Indians— I mean, you could actually use the term "South Asian" because there's so many different types of people. The Nepali community had grown, I mean, obviously, I was aware of the Telugu community because of my husband and that had grown. And I think all those things made me feel like it was a more inclusive space. And beyond that, just racial diversity in general. I mean, seeing that the Latinx community, which is really the other brown community, right, had also grown so much. And I felt more of a kinship there than I did with the Black community in the sense that we were all newer immigrants and we were all facing kind of the same barriers and the same identity crises a little bit. So those were all things that felt different. Politically, because I grew up in such a bubble. I mean, you know, even though I lived in, like the Richmond, Oakland area, my dad's bubble was Berkeley. And then it was Chapel Hill. And so I didn't actually realize how diverse political views in the South Asian community were. And I started to get a sense of that more when I was in D.C., I was coming across a lot more brown people who were very conservative. To this day, I do not understand it because I'm

like, "Do you—? I don't— OK." But yeah, so I actually noticed that there was probably— who knows, maybe that diversity existed before, but I just wasn't as aware of it.

**MD:** Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And I also want to ask you, do you think like your dad's experiences, having spent his young adulthood here in the United States — I don't know if you talked about that when you were growing up, but it's a little bit different than somebody who maybe came here for grad school or something — do you think those experiences impacted how you viewed the South or your upbringing in general?

**CK:** Oh, absolutely. So my dad was actually married before he married my mom and he was married to a white woman and they had a child. So I had a half older sister and she presented as a mixed person, but also could pass for white. So her experience was different from mine. And I think in some ways it made me feel like I belonged even less because, you know, here is a person that I should be able to relate to in some ways, but I couldn't. And my dad had a lot of— [pauses] he had his own experiences, right. When he was at Harvard, you know, he'd had a full scholarship, but he still had to work to make any extra money and he was the janitor and he was this, and you know, everything. And so he dealt with a lot of discrimination that in some ways— have you seen the Hasan Minhaj thing about the American tax? That's how I see it, is that both my parents felt like there was basically things you had to put up with as part of being an immigrant in America and that they didn't feel like the country owed them anything. And so that impacted how I grew up because I also felt like it didn't owe me anything. And I mean, this is a very random example, but I remember distinctly like back in the day when I was younger and we had to do the Pledge of Allegiance in class. And you had to put your hand on your heart and all this stuff. And I remember as long as someone wasn't watching me, I never did it because I felt

like this wasn't meant for me, which I know is a crazy thing to say because we're all American and all that. But I didn't feel like these protections, these laws we're talking about — none of it really applied to me.

**MD:** I think I relate to that also. I mean, first line is "One nation under God" and there's a lot of—

**CK:** Right. Yeah, I'm like, "What God are we talking about? I'm sure you're not talking about my God." [Laughter].

**MD:** Yeah. And I actually wanted to go back to that too. Was being Hindu a big part of— I know the temples were founded [relatively recently], especially the S.V. [Sri Venkateswara] Temple was something pretty recent. But I know for me, that was a big thing, going on the weekend to [the temples], you know, for different cultural events. But I was curious for you, if that was the same.

**CK:** Yeah. So there was just the one temple, the big Hindu temple. And actually, it was a small— like it was just the front part of it. And I felt like it was more of a cultural practice of going regularly than religious and we didn't really go for— I mean, we went for some poojas here and there, but it's not like we went for Sunday services, which is a lot of what people do now. And you know, I did all the Indian dancing and the play reenactments of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Who knows? But yeah, it wasn't that I felt that connection to the religion so much. My mom was always a lot more religious than my dad, but I also grew up kind of thinking that religion was a bit of a private thing. Like it felt like spirituality to me in that what we would do when we went to the temple felt very performative. So I don't know. I mean, I would call myself

a kind of Hindu. [Laughs] I believe in the values and the teachings of the religion. I don't believe everything in terms of, like, I don't love the idea of organized religion in general. So sort of, I don't know.

**MD:** Yeah, I find that really interesting. You talked about like it felt kind of performative. At home, did you have, growing up, you know, a—?

**CK:** A little mandir in the corner? Yeah. And that did not [feel performative]. I think that's part of it is that, you know, my dad didn't really participate in the religious stuff. He says he's religious. But for him, again, it was spiritual. He didn't feel like— but my mom to this day, every morning, will, you know, do a little pooja and she'll light her candle. And when my kids are staying with her, they'll do it with her. And none of that bothers me. As long as there's an understanding that these are just like practices and, you know, they're not— yeah.

**MD:** Yeah, yeah. I think that's also really interesting. And you also mentioned something about dancing. Did you do to any dance teams in college?

**CK:** No, not in college. I mean, I did, like, dances for Sangam Night or whatever. But I did take kathak lessons when I was younger and then I just did all the community dance stuff that, you know, you get roped into.

**MD:** Right. And you know, you can also feel free to share whatever you feel comfortable with, but you know, you were talking about your dad and his experiences prior to getting married to your mom. Do you still keep in contact with your half sister?

**CK:** So that's been a very complicated relationship. I would say if you'd asked me this question five years ago, I probably would not even have mentioned an older half sister. But this is a cultural thing for a lot of cultures is like— what is it, like “secrets breed shame” or something, right? And even though everyone involved knew that my dad had a daughter before he got married. There was a lot of like secrecy and, "Oh, well, now we've moved to North Carolina, so we don't want people to know" or something. So I had a really close relationship with my older sister and then I didn't for a long time. And then I did again. Unfortunately, she passed away earlier this year. So I think part of being able to talk about it is that there is no shame associated with it. She's a good person and ultimately we had a good relationship.

**MD:** I'm sorry to hear that.

**CK:** Thank you.

**MD:** This year, it's been really tough, and in many ways.

**CK:** Seriously, that's what I'm saying, it's the worst. [Laughs].

**MD:** Yeah. And thank you for sharing that also. I know you talked a little bit about how, you know, her being especially half-white, how it impacted your childhood. And I think you kind of touched on this, but that impacted how you viewed race and like your place in the American racial hierarchy and how was this construction that this country has created?

**CK:** Yes. I think for better or worse, when you're younger, a lot of it is about what someone else gets to do that you don't get to do. And it was just that different rules applied. I know now different rules applied because she had a different mother than mine. And my mom,

like I said, did not move to the U.S. until after she was married, and I would say it took her. Gosh, I want to say it was like until I graduated from college, she still wore Indian clothes every day of my entire life. So that's, you know, a whole different degree of like being traditional. But at the time, I just thought that it was— and my older sister's name is Avani. And I thought that it was like because of who Avani was and the way she was perceived that all these rules didn't apply to her that applied to me, rather than realizing that it was just different ways of parenting. So yes, it had an impact on my understanding of race and of feeling like there was a superior race, and I was certainly not a part of it.

**MD:** Yeah. Did she continue to live in California?

**CK:** Mmm hmm.

**MD:** OK. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And I'm just curious, you kind of also mentioned some of these like sort of, I guess, of microaggressions you might want to call them, or label them as such. But are there other instances of like covert or overt racial discrimination that you can recall, you know, thinking about these kinds of questioning about your identity and belonging in your childhood or at college, or even in the workplace now? I don't know if there's instances that stand out to you.

**CK:** [Pauses] There's been comments made— the thing is, I work in the progressive movement, even in these spaces, there's things like, "Oh, your people don't like to get in trouble with the police" or, you know, what I got the most growing up, which I got so used to this that it started to not even faze me was, "You speak English really well." Like constantly. And there was a time in life where I started to use that to my advantage because I was like, "You know, well, if

people aren't expecting me to speak English really well, then if I don't want to answer a question, I'm just going to pretend I don't know what they're saying." Yeah, I was going to say something I probably shouldn't say on camera.

**MD:** OK. [Laughs].

**CK:** So I mean, you know, it wasn't OK then. And it's not OK now. But I think now I have the confidence to say, you know, more than, like just answer the question saying, "Hey, this is an inappropriate question." But there was so many things, there was just like being in spaces where let's say it's a whole bunch of white people and, you know, we're going to the beach with somebody's mom, and she offers everyone sunscreen but me. I mean, things like that, you're like, "OK."

**MD:** That happened to you?

**CK:** Oh yes. Oh yes. And many other instances like that, and they probably weren't even that impactful after a while because I just took it for granted that this was part of, again, the American tax I had the pay of growing up in this country. Thing is, as a child of an immigrant, you get told so much how grateful you should be, how much your parents sacrificed to give you these opportunities, how everything you do in life should be, like, paying back those debts, right? And so you don't have time to think about those other things because you're just like, "I am carrying the weight of the world here and OK, I get it. No one sees me as as someone who belongs and I don't need to because I just need to— I'm just here. I'm lucky to be here."

**MD:** Yeah, I relate to that again. I feel like I keep saying that when you're talking and I— [laughs].

**CK:** No, it's great and, really, it's very validating and reassuring. Though I'm sorry because you're younger than me, and I would hope that, yeah—.

**MD:** Yeah, I'm curious, you know, obviously your kids are so young. But that's why I asked that question, because I'm wondering what it will be like for, you know, 15 years down the road.

**CK:** It better be better. That's all I have to say about that. [Laughs].

**MD:** There were a few questions that I think I didn't really get to touch on, which was, you know, I'm curious, like we talked about sort of this Black-white binary paradigm. We talked about, you know, this like feeling like you might have to be slotted into something, one group or the other. And you know, I'm curious also about if ideas surrounding the model minority myth were prevalent and, you know, also how it played into how you viewed yourself in these spaces in the South. And yeah, just in general, if that was something that was most prevalent to your experiences.

**CK:** It was. And I probably responded to it in a different way than most people from the South Asian community or the Indian community do. I was so adamant about not being put in that box that I probably— I mean, I hate to say this, but there is a point at which I stopped caring about school because I got so sick of the expectations and not so much from my parents. I mean, yes, obviously, there's expectations. But from the teachers, like when they would say things like, "Oh, I thought you would do better on this math test than you did." I mean, I've never been good at math, like this is why I majored in journalism and I went to law school. That is where my skills have always been. I have always loved reading and writing, and there was no appreciation

for that. I don't know how it is for you now, but especially at that age, in that generation, there was no appreciation because I was supposed to be good at math and science, and I wasn't. And I didn't want to be [laughs] like, I just wasn't that interested in it. But because I wasn't, it felt like I was letting people down. And so it just felt like it's better to just not even try because clearly, I'm disappointing everyone as it is. And I think, you know, when I decided to go to law school, my parents were like, "OK, if you really want to, I mean, it's not med school." Not that they thought— I mean, I didn't even try to take a biology class. But I feel like I got to where I was by just having confidence eventually in what my interests were and what I thought I was good at because societally, and I think just especially in the South, I mean, because I do have family in California, I am very aware of what their experiences were compared to mine. And I feel like we're a good decade behind them, still. But because of that, it just felt like there was such a belief in that model minority myth that I wasn't going to escape it. And so, you know.

**MD:** And when you say that you feel like we're a decade behind, you mean in terms of this kind of model minority myth?

**CK:** I think in terms of just, like, all of it. But, like, kind of our level of understanding of identity and race and the way all of these things, you know, the interplay of all of these things and the intersectionality of so many different issues like I think we're in a better place than ever before. I don't think we're where they are and northern California, so.

**MD:** Yeah. And I just wanted to ask you, this is kind of going back to something before, but do you remember, growing up, like how accessible food ingredients to make Indian food or like clothes— I know, like, now, if you drive down, you know, anywhere in Cary, you'll find a sort of Indian grocery store. But I'm curious growing up that that was different for you.

**CK:** Yes, there was one Indian grocery store. We all went to it every weekend. My mom constantly complained about all the things we didn't have and when we would go to other places, a lot of it was about just like shoving your suitcases full of the ingredients you couldn't get. And, obviously, like the rules were different back then, so you could bring food and all that stuff. And it wasn't even just, like, getting stuff from India or California or whatever. I mean, we have family in Toronto and there was family and, you know, Chicago and New York and stuff that they had access to so many things that we didn't. And I remember, like my mom, sometimes going to American grocery stores and asking for something and then just getting a look of, like, "We don't know what the hell you're talking about," right? And often their response was, "We don't understand you." Which is super rude and condescending. But really, it was that we don't have context for this. And instead of saying, "Oh, I'm sorry, I don't know what that is" because that makes them feel dumb, it's like putting it back on the other person.

**MD:** I would say my mom, I'm sure relate a lot to that because that's something she's always like, you know, it's a conscious decision, sometimes, like, "You see my skin and then you're not going to hear me or understand me." So, yeah. Do you remember what grocery store that was, the one that everybody would go to?

**CK:** Oh, the Indian grocery store? Yes. Oh my gosh, it was in Cary, it no longer exists. Oh.

**MD:** Was it Triangle Indian Market? I know that doesn't exist anymore.

**CK:** It was even before that. It was what turned into the Triangle Indian Market.

**MD:** OK, so in that Chatham Square?

**CK:** Yes. Wait, Chatham Square, no. Chatham Square is where the—.

**MD:** It's in downtown kind of Cary. That's where that is.

**CK:** OK, so there's where that Patel Brothers is in Cary.

**MD:** Yes.

**CK:** But further down that road, like if you're heading towards Raleigh, there's another a little plaza. And that's where that grocery store was.

**MD:** Around the World? I know there was that one.

**CK:** There was that one, but I'm going to check with my mom and get back to you.

**MD:** Yeah, I was just curious, I think again, like talking about that is not my experience, growing up, they were everywhere. And yeah, I mean, also one I wanted to ask about was— so the questions are changing a lot in tone because I'm just kind of wanting to ask you these before we have to wrap up. But I just thought about this. Do you remember 9/11 as being a point in your life in which people treated you differently before and after? I just know for me, like, obviously I was a baby, so it's not something that applied, but I'm always curious but asking people who are brown, you know, about those kinds of things.

**CK:** Very much so. I mean, I was a freshman in college. And I remember that it wasn't until— I mean, obviously, it was big and dramatic and surreal. But it wasn't until I went home that weekend, because I lived on campus and all the conversations I was having were more around the political impact or just emotional impact for people, but not so much race. I went

home that weekend and, like a true Indian family, we went out to get Taco Bell. And as I mentioned, my mom wore traditional Indian clothing until I was in college. And now that I'm saying this, I remember now why that changed is because we went to Taco Bell. My mom went inside to order, like she usually did. And there were two guys there that started, you know, yelling inappropriate things about being a terrorist and "Get out of my country" and all that stuff. And [they] literally chased my mom out of the place, and we got in the car and left and did not talk about it for a very long time because we were all so traumatized. The next day, my mom went out and bought some American flags and put one on her car and one in front of the house. And you know, all this stuff, and I remember feeling angry, like we shouldn't have to prove our patriotism, especially given my earlier story about not really connecting to the flag. And then she started exploring wearing Westernized clothes for the first time because she noticed that any time she went out in traditional Indian clothes, she would get harassed. And so, yeah, it was a really tough period that's impacted my entire family in a very significant way for a long time. And then things got better, until 2016. The morning after the election results in 2016, my sister, at the time, lived in Cary but West Cary, like bordering Raleigh. And she came out of her house that morning and one of her neighbors started yelling at her. I will not repeat it because there were some very inappropriate languages there, but essentially calling her a terrorist and saying, "See, now it's clear you can go back home" and all this stuff in 2016, right? And my sister is, you know, six years younger than me, and so it's just wild to me that we went all the way back to where we were in 2001.

**MD:** Yeah. And thank you for sharing those experiences. I know like it's jarring and, you know, and scary and traumatic, like you were saying. And I'm sorry that that happened. You know, you mentioned that you didn't talk about that with your family for a while. And then do

you remember the first time you had an explicit conversation about that or you were like, "This did happen"?

**CK:** I think my mom brought it up. And I think the way my mom processes things is like when she's ready to talk about it, she's just ready to talk to anyone about it. And I was kind of like, "OK, we're talking about this now." But I'm glad she did, because then it was like, "OK, it wasn't just in my head." And, you know, she painted it in a— she wasn't like, "Oh, I was traumatized by this," right? Those are not words that Indian moms use, I don't know about yours, but mine certainly does not. But it was like being able to talk about it made us all feel closer because even as a family, it was like, "OK, we are all sharing in this experience and this trauma and this fear." And then I think over time, more and more people started talking about it, and then it became— I remember some comedy sketches about it, and literally before that, I was like, "Oh, I didn't know that other people had this experience." I just didn't stop to think about it. Obviously, they did, but it was nice that it became something that we, even to this day, when people talk about it, I feel that twinge and then I also feel appreciation because it's trauma that's going to stay with me the rest of my life, probably.

**MD:** Yeah, no, that makes a lot of sense. And yeah, I think that those are sort of some of the main things that I wanted to ask about. I guess I'm just like, if there was anything about, you know, your identity and your connections to that, that I didn't ask you about that you wanted to mention? Or just, you know, your experiences living in the South, because I know, like we talked about, it's been kind of a journey, a process to get to that. But, yeah, I don't know if there's anything I didn't explicitly ask you about that you want to mention?

**CK:** I think I'll just mention that, so my younger sister, like I said, was born here in 1989. And she always felt like a North Carolinian. She always felt Southern. So I do think that a lot of my experience was maybe jaded by being in a different environment because I think if you don't know anything else, you might feel like you belong a little bit more. So I think that was also a reason that I didn't quite connect with a lot of people who are my age in the same way because the majority of— I mean, really, for the most part, if you're going to live in North Carolina, you were born here and you're like, "OK, I'm just here now." So I do think that like, it's a little bit unique, but I think that had I not had those experiences, it wouldn't have led me to the point of wanting to take the risk of starting an organization like this. And I mean, I would never, ever have imagined that it would turn into what it has now. But I wouldn't even have gone down this path if I hadn't had to sort through all of that identity stuff for myself and wanting to make space for other people that is more supported so they don't have to do it all alone.

**MD:** Yeah. I think that makes a lot of sense, and I appreciate you sharing these things. And I think those are my main questions, I guess. Just briefly, you mentioned something that I wanted to ask about, but when you think about the American South— or I guess now, would you say that you're proud to be a North Carolinian, or is that still something that you're kind of figuring out and, you know—?

**CK:** I'm a North Carolinian. The proud part, I have to think about. But I do feel, yes, like with running this organization and I'm lucky because the way that the organization has grown gives me the opportunity to have a voice, and I am proud of being able to highlight the things that our community has contributed to this state and so yeah, I guess I am proud, but I would like

more people across the country and the state in general to understand what a big part of North Carolina and the growth of the state our pan-Asian community has been.

**MD:** Definitely, that makes a lot of sense and I think that is actually my last question.

[Laughs] This time it's for real. But yeah, thank you so much. I think this is a good place for us to stop.

**CK:** OK.

[END OF INTERVIEW]