

Interviewee: Khan, M.J.

Interview: January 25, 2007

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Interview with: Houston City Councilman Masrur Javed (M.J.) Khan

Interviewed by: Uzma Quraishi

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Transcribed by: Suzanne Mascola

UQ: Oral history interview of Councilman M.J. Khan on January 25, 2007, conducted by Uzma Quraishi of the University of Houston. You can just begin by telling a little bit about your background, who you are.

MJK: Well, my name is M.J. Khan. M.J. stands for Masrur Javed Khan. I am originally from Pakistan. I was born in Pakistan. I was raised in Pakistan. I was educated in Pakistan. I got my bachelor's degree in Pakistan. I got two bachelor's degrees from Pakistan. One is in physics and mathematics and then I have a civil engineering degree from NED College, Karachi, now NED University. After graduating from NED, I did work in Pakistan for about one year and then I moved to America. I came here for education. I came here as a student, as a graduate student.

UQ: So, did you come alone?

MJK: Yes, we just got married before I moved to America. We got married on December 11, 1975 and I came here on January 9. We were married a few weeks before

I got here. I came here by myself because I had the student visa approved and my wife

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[Dr. Attiya Khan], she just graduated from medical school, Fatima Jinnah Medical College in Lahore, Pakistan. She topped the university. She got 6 gold medals from the university. I am not sure now but for decades, that was the record. Nobody got 6 gold medals.

UQ: I am not surprised. Wow!

MJK: But she just recently graduated and we got married and I got a student visa. So, I moved here because it was really a dream of mine to come to America for higher education. She was very supportive because she wanted to come here for her higher education also in medicine. So, I came here and joined University of Illinois at Urbana Champagne which is about 157 miles south of Chicago. And my wife joined me 10 months later in October of 1976. I completed my masters - it took me one year to complete my masters. And then, we stayed in Urbana, Champagne up until May of 1977. That is when she got accepted in a residency program in internal medicine in New Rochelle, New York. So, we moved from Illinois to New York in June of 1977. Then, we lived there for about 3 years. That is where our son, our only child, was born in New Rochelle, New York in September 1978. And then, we lived in New York for 3 years.

In 1980, my wife got an offer to do a fellowship in cardiology which is what she wanted to do after completing her residency. She got offered a fellowship here in Texas Heart Institute. So, that is why we moved to Houston in June of 1980. Again, this is historic in the sense that she was the first female cardiology fellow at Texas Heart

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Institute which is the same institute . . . Dr. Cooley - everybody knows his name - he is the chief surgeon there. And they never accepted a female in their cardiology program. My wife was the first one in there. Opportunity was great. For her field in cardiology, Texas Heart is one of the premier institutions. So, we wanted to avail that opportunity, so we moved to Houston.

UQ: So what were you doing here in Houston?

MJK: In New York, I was working . . . of all the places, I was working in the World Trade Center. I joined an engineering company there. Our offices were in World Trade Center, a company called Ammann and Whitney. So, we lived in New Rochelle. That is where I worked as an engineer. And we really enjoyed our time in New York. We were just outside New York City. We were not in the Bronx or Manhattan but we were very close to it so we had the better of both worlds.

When my wife moved here, at that time, I was working in Clifton, New Jersey at a company who had a contract with Brown & Root here in Houston. So, it just worked out that my company could transfer me, so I didn't have to change jobs or anything. I came here, I worked for that company and they were subcontractor for Brown & Root so I worked with them many years and then I switched jobs and worked with a company called Stone & Webster here in Houston. After my wife completed her fellowship, she started her medical practice here so we decided to make Houston our home. Then, we moved in 1980. We were not sure if Houston would be our home because we had already

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moved twice: from Illinois to New York to Houston and, you know, really not sure as to where we would end up. But after living in Houston for a couple of years and really enjoying the city, we decided that Houston would be our home and we settled down here.

UQ: What factors led you to make that decision?

MJK: Several factors: one is the weather was of our liking. We are from Pakistan. She spent a lot of time in Lahore. I spent my time in Hyderabad and Karachi. They are not cold cities. So, we really didn't enjoy the cold weather of Illinois or New York. So, that was one factor. Secondly, Houston, at that time and even today, is a very affordable town so that the cost of living was very low. You can buy the same house for about half the price here compared to some of the other metropolitan areas. Plus, in 2 years, we got to know the people, we got to know the community. People in Houston are generally very nice. It is a friendly city.

UQ: What that your first impression when you came to Houston in 1990?

MJK: Yes, it was, because we were living in New York where, you know, things are different in some ways. But we found Houstonians to be very . . . Houston still is, even though we have grown so much - our population has grown. Development has gone way out from downtown Houston. Houston is a large city with the flavor of a small town. That is that most of the people know most of the places and there are no strange places.

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If you are living in Houston, you know, every place seems familiar. Even the distances are quite a bit but it is not like you are going in another town. I think that overall, intercommunity relationship in Houston is excellent. If you look at other cities in the U.S., there are always or many times, there are incidences or problems between various communities and it is not just between the white community and the black community. In L.A., we have had problems with the black community and the Korean community. Similarly, in some places, there were problems with the Vietnamese community and the local community. And, of course, New York - you always hear stories about all kinds of tension. Houston has had a very great environment of intercommunity relationships. So, that is another thing which we liked. And, of course, the third factor which is a very important factor for us - that the Muslim community and the Pakistani community here is very close-knit, so we could find a good social circle, we could find a good social circle for our son who was a toddler at the time when we moved here and we found other families with similar-aged children where our son could build up some lifetime friendships. Plus, the community is a very caring community. Everybody participates in everybody's events and shares everybody's grief, if there are any. So, that is something which is great about Houston. And over the years, we have seen Houston grow. I mean, when we moved to Houston, Houston was really not much outside the 610 Loop. But we have seen Houston grow and the community has grown along with it. It is just a wonderful city to live in.

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UQ: How do you think that Houston's relationship with the South Asian community has evolved over the years?

MJK: I think that the South Asian community has played a very significant role in Houston. There are a few things which I would like to highlight and if you do your research, you will find other sources validating what I am about to say. One, the South Asian community is a very enterprising community. We, in the South Asian community have made a very strong commitment to businesses in this town, especially after the mid 1980s, a lot of people got into the businesses and a lot of people moved to Houston and got in their own businesses. I believe the LA Times or the Wall Street Journal wrote an article about 10 years ago, about that time, when the economy was down all over the U.S. and one of the cities they mentioned was Houston. And it was mentioned how small businesses were driving the economic engine of this town. So, a lot of the South Asian community got involved in the small businesses. As a matter of fact, if you look at most of the community stores, they are owned by people from South Asia - dry cleaning shops and things like that - and they are very enterprising people. Their commitment to growth, their commitment to grow for the benefit of their family and benefit of the society in general. So, that enterprising nature suits very well to the Houston environment. So, they made a tremendous contribution in that regard. And the Houston community, of course, at large, has benefited from the contributions of the South Asian community. If you look at the student body at some of the universities we have, you will see a very large

South Asian population among the students. Whether it is U of H, TSU, Rice, HBU, you know, everywhere you will find them.

Secondly, the South Asian community, since it was a very close-knit community, it grew in a sense that it incorporated good relationships with other communities. So, over the years, we have seen the leadership of the South Asian community and the Muslim communities have a very close contact with leadership of other communities and work very well [together].

UQ: Approximately when would you say that the community started to grow and how? In what ways do you think that the South Asian community has grown?

MJK: Well, there are several phases. The South Asian community started to migrate to the United States probably in the mid 1960s onwards. The trend prior to that time was to go to England because we were ruled by British India and since we were part of the commonwealth, it was convenient for people who wanted to go for higher education or for labor type of jobs, to go to England. I think towards the late 1960s, this trend of coming to America started. Most people at that time that moved to America came as students.

UQ: Did you find that when you were at the university doing your master's?

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MJK: Right. Most of them were like me. Having completed their basic education in Pakistan, they came for higher education to the U.S. That was a typical story. And most of the people came after getting their basic education in Pakistan or India, for that matter. And many of them came as graduate students for their master's program or their Ph.D. program. After graduating from schools, most of them decided to pursue at least part of the careers here in the U.S. and they went wherever there was an opportunity for professional growth - wherever they could find a good job, wherever they could . . . so, that was a driving force.

So, Houston, at that time in the 1970s, was a good place. A lot of people were attracted to Houston because of the oil industry was doing great and it was opening up a lot of opportunities for a lot of people. So, many people from all over the country after completing their master's degree, then their Ph.D. degree, they moved to Houston. Then came the devastating economic downturn of the 1980s, the collapse of the real estate market, the saving and loan scandal, the overall malaise of economic downturn. There was very little economic activity. There were no jobs. I am talking about all over America. And the real estate market collapsed. Banks were in trouble. There was no funding available for business loans and things like that. So, [the South Asian] community suffered a great deal, just like every other member of the society. There were a lot of foreclosures. There were a lot of people who lost their jobs. There were a lot of people who lost their homes. It was a terrible time in the 1980s.

But when that cycle was completed and economic activity started back up again, starting from the late 1980s and early 1990s, we saw the influx of entrepreneurs as much

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as the influx of students. Prior to that, only students were coming here. After that decade of the 1980s, towards the end of the 1980s decade and throughout the 1990s, we saw more and more entrepreneurs coming to Houston. And their focus was more towards establishing their businesses. So, even if they were working in a job, their goal was to find a quick way to have their own businesses. The people who wanted to stay in their profession, they were staying in their profession and trying to have professional growth in various segments of the areas of interest. But entrepreneurs, even if they were working somewhere, their goal was 'how can I start my own business? How can I find one?'

UQ: Was it right around that time that you would say that the Pakistani community and the Indian community here in Houston really established themselves solidly, or even before?

MJK: Yes, what happened, at that time, especially when people started to go to their own businesses, the community changed from being a transient community to a permanent community, because when you are in a job, especially if you are working in an engineering firm, it is very difficult for you to, at least in the initial stage, say O.K., this is it, this is my city. You are always, 'O.K., where is my job going to send me the next time?' So, you have a mindset of being transient. Even if you are in a place for years and years and years. I mean, you have this mindset, O.K., where is the next job opening up in my company where this opportunity is available to be transferring and things like that. But when you are geared towards establishing businesses, you are establishing

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yourself as part of that city, as part of that community. To suggest that at least mentally, the transient nature changed from permanent nature for the South Asian community at that time.

UQ: It sounds like you are saying that entrepreneurs, small businesses, played a big role in making the South Asian community here more permanent?

MJK: I would say so but I do not want to diminish the contribution of the professionals either. The professionals came and they are the ones who established community centers. They are the ones who established the mosques. They are the ones who established the community. They are the ones who established the beacon schools because professionals, once they completed their education, they started their jobs. Then, the next thing for them was just the commitment towards their family. And there is one unique thing about South Asian families, and I guess it goes a lot for most of the Asian community, but since I know a little more about the South Asian community . . . the South Asian community's total focus is on the family, and for us, family is not just defined as husband, wife and the kids. Family is defined in a little more broader sense. So, even when somebody from South Asia would come to America and complete their education and after that, doing their jobs of working the business or whatever, throughout this process, including when they are students, they always have in the back of their mind that they have to support their family back home and they never forget that a lot of people

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in their families and in their communities and really in the nation as a whole sacrificed for them to be in a situation where they can establish their career, get their education.

Like, I will give you an example. The education in Pakistan is so cheap. My whole yearly fee in engineering school was like 300 rupees which, in today's time, is like \$5. Even in those times in terms of dollars, it was a very small amount. You cannot get an education of that level in one of the finest institutions for that money. What happened is the people of Pakistan sacrificed for us to get basically free education. So, South Asian community members who came here, they never forget that. And you will find them supporting their families back home, sending money for the education of their siblings, their brothers and sisters, helping their cousins out and their mother out and their father out - doing everything to make the status of the family better than what they left.

So, it is one of the great phenomena of the South Asian community. And that is another way of adhesion in the South Asian community. So, one member of the family came here as a student, got his or her education, got his job or whatever, got his green card and then after getting his green card or even before he became a citizen, that person was worried about how can I get [bring] the other members of my family? So, at least they would guide their other siblings that O.K., this is the process of coming here as a student. So, it kind of opened the doors for their other family members and after they become a citizen, they will apply for the immigration of their parents and their siblings and things like that. But all along the process, they were very much concerned about doing it the right way, doing it legally. I never heard anybody giving tips to his siblings of how can you come to this country illegally. They were always concerned about O.K.,

this is the process and we can help you with that process. So, that is another phenomenon about the South Asian community.

So, coming back to the establishment here, when people started to establish themselves in their profession, then their focus was also their family, so they were concerned about how are we going to make the life of our children better in the sense of providing the best of education and yet, they didn't want to give up their traditions and their culture and their religion. So, their culture and their religion were the driving force of community coming together, holding events, holding functions, family-oriented functions and holding their religious activities around this: that we want to preserve our culture and make sure our children are raised as good, religious people like better than what we were. And that played a very important role in the establishment of the South Asian community as a community. One of the things about South Asian community is that all the events are very family-oriented events. We love to socialize but our socialization has always been that O.K., every member of the family will be part of that socialization. At that time, there were not many restaurants here so that was one of the things - is we could all eat great Pakistani food when you got together with the family. They would always cook nicely. So, those are some of the factors of growth in the community.

UQ: Great. Do you have some time for 1 or 2 more questions?

MJK: Yes.

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UQ: Well, one thing is what inspired you to pursue a position in the City Council?

MJK: O.K., well, I was never a very political person. Back in Pakistan, I was not a political person. I had the opportunity to run for the student council but my family advised me against it because the focus was to get good grades in school and we know that people who go into the student council will have their heads filled with other stuff. I was not political at all but after I got here in Houston, settled my job, my wife was in practice, we wanted to spend time in community service. So, both me and my wife, we became very active in our mosque. We became very active in community organizations and we just loved to do volunteer work. And, of course, that was our need also because that gave us an opportunity to make our son's environment better. By getting involved in the mosque, we can make sure that, hey, there is a good secondary school for him and things like that. And volunteer work was very rewarding in the sense that you really feel like you have some good stuff fill up your days because the main thing you are doing is to help other people.

And then, part of that got me in touch with people who were in politics. I became friends with many of them. As a matter of fact, some of my friends asked me if I was interested in public service. Initially when they talked to me, I was totally taken aback and I said, "No, way. This is not something for me." But then they persisted and I studied the issue more and I found that public service, it has a bad rap. You know, when people are called "politicians," there is a bad connotation to that. But actually, public

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service, in my opinion, can be the most honorable way of living a life because all you do in public service, if you do it right, is help other people - make somebody else's life better. And that is why I was motivated to do this and that is what my whole focus is, is the public office - that I use this time finding ways to help people in everyday [life] - as an elected official. I take it as part of my duty and it is very rewarding. And a lot of things which may sound very benign to other people, to the person who is affected by it, it's very important. So, if you don't have your garbage picked up that day, for somebody else it may not matter, but for you it is an important issue. Or if a street is burglarized, a crime situation which is very bad in your area, you really tackle those issues as part of the city government and many times, we succeed and it is very rewarding.

UQ: O.K., let's wrap it up with just one last question and it is kind of a blunt question. To what extent do you think race accounted in all of this experience?

MJK: Surprisingly, not much. In my first campaign—the second campaign is relatively easier—in my first campaign, I met with thousands and thousands of people asking for their vote for my campaign. There was only one incident where somebody asked me about my religion. It was not an issue. I did not make an issue. My constituents did not make an issue. Of course, you have to understand this is a local election. We don't deal with global issues. We don't deal with international politics. We deal with very local things. But I was very proud of my constituents. But I always used to say and I said it many, many times: that I don't want anybody's words against me because of my race and

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my religion and my ethnicity - then shame on them. But, on the other hand, if the only reason somebody can find to vote for me, is only because of my religion and my race and my ethnicity, then shame on me because if I cannot impress upon the people of Pakistani origin or South Asians that I can do a great job as a public servant, then I don't have any reason to be elected for that job. But it was never an issue. I was very happy that it was never an issue. And since then, it has not been an issue. That is another thing about Houston. I think people in Houston are very smart in that sense that they know what is important and important is how one can serve them properly and I know that if I don't do a better job, that I don't deserve to be there and I will be out of office. But if I continue to do a good job, the last election proved that I got 80 % of the vote even though I had two other opponents with a lot of money, but people supported me.