

Interviewee: Zaffar Abdullah

Interview: January 21, 2007

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON  
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Interview with: Zaffar Abdullah

Interviewed by: Uzma Quraishi

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UQ: Oral history interview of Zaffar Abdullah at his home conducted by Uzma Quraishi of the University of Houston. You can begin by just introducing yourself, telling about who you are and your background.

ZA: My name is Zaffar Abdullah and I am, by profession, a mechanical engineer. What else?

UQ: You can tell about your childhood.

ZA: My childhood . . . it was just a normal childhood, I think. I grew up in India. My father had a government job which required moving from place to place every 3 or 4 years. They were transferring him. So, I moved different places in India, especially in Bihar because the seat of government jobs was in Bihar, I attended different schools. And finally did my high school from a city called Gridi in Bihar. I went to \_\_\_\_\_ College. No, before that, we had to do intermediate, we called it. It was \_\_\_\_\_ College, Ranchi. And after that, the BIT-Nasra, Birla Institute of Technology, and so I did my B.S. So, before coming to USA, [that was] the education part.

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My first job was as a lecturer in Polytechnic for 1-1/2 years. And then, I worked for about 2 years in Dokaro steel plant. So, one of the biggest steel plants that was being built at that time in India.

UQ: As an engineer?

ZA: As an engineer, yes.

UQ: If you don't mind me asking, when was your birth date?

ZA: No, I shouldn't tell you because it is a secret! [Laughs]. What is the other thing you wanted to ask?

UQ: You were working at the steel plant. That was the latest thing you did before you came?

ZA: Yes. Then, I applied for immigration for USA.

UQ: Why did you decide to . . .

ZA: There was no clear-cut goal. First of all, a young man wants to go out and see the world and explore something, plus heard this is a very well-off country so you were

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better off, better life, materially, at least. And that must have been one of the causes. And seeing different places. Seeing America. This was a big thing in our days. Nowadays, travels and everything are very common - going to Europe and USA. That was pretty [much a] novelty at that time for a common folk person. And, of course, the first 707 was introduced at that time so I was one of the lucky ones to come by a 707. Otherwise, it was a different plane. I don't know what they were using before that. Maybe prop plane or something like that. So, really, those are the items. And, of course, all the young people - "Let's go to America because immigration is available." Immigration was very easy at that time.

UQ: What year was this?

ZA: It was the end of 1970, I came. I applied and the Immigration agreed. I came within 3 months which is nowadays impossible. I just applied as an engineer, because they had a criteria: engineers, doctors, or Ph.D.s and all those. It was very easy to get. So, it was so easy. So, I left my job and then came to USA.

UQ: And your parents were supportive?

ZA: Not really that much. They were not that supportive because the son will go away and this and that. That always hurt them.

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UQ: Did you have siblings? Did you have brothers and sisters?

ZA: Oh, yes. We had a large family. Six brothers, three sisters.

UQ: And where are you in that?

ZA: Top. I am the eldest brother. Eldest of all brothers and sisters. Anyway, so I came here and from here, of course, I landed in Chicago. And the reason why I landed in Chicago - my cousin, who I just spoke to, he was in Chicago. His name is Hasnat - Abul Hasnat - and he was here since I think 1968 or so. He had done his masters and he was already working. So, I had at least some place to go to because not many South Asians especially Indians or, for that matter, Pakistanis were here at that time.

UQ: So, you flew straight from where to where?

ZA: There is the history again. If that counts . . . Bombay was a very enchanting place for me at that time because all the Indian [Bollywood] heroes and heroines lived there and worked there, O.K., and I had never seen that. So, in those days, the airlines were giving a choice, 4 stops in the same ticket. I was given 2 choices in Asia and I can take 2 in Europe before coming to USA. So, I took only 1 in Asia which was . . . I said, O.K., I'll go to Bombay. I want to see Bombay for a day before I leave. So, I went to Bombay. The next stop was London. I saw London after that. And then, the next stop was Paris. I

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saw Paris after that. The flight was Pan American One actually, first coming to New York. So, that was my port of entry.

The green card, the way they gave . . . we had to bring our health record, like x-rays and all those . . . blood tests and whatever it was. I have forgotten all those. Then, the Immigration department took all those reports right at the airport and gave me my green card. The guy said, "Here is your green card. Put it in [your] pocket." So, right at the New York airport, I had my green card. And then, after that, I came to Chicago because my cousin was there. Otherwise, a lot of my friends went to YMCA. They didn't know anybody so they were sleeping there, pay \$2 a bed and working in dishwashing or whatever they could get but at least I had a place to live. My *Bhabi*, which is a sister-in-law [in this case, cousin's wife], she was there and I had good food! So, that was a great advantage in those days actually because most people didn't have those, because the community was very small. There was no infrastructure, what you see now, like all these associations, prayer mosques or temples. A big city like Chicago, probably we are 200, 300 people at that time. Now, there may be, I am sure South Asian must be 200,000+, maybe more, I think. Just guesswork. So, that's what was going on.

And then, I really faced the hardship here in the beginning. My career was pretty good. I was always an above-average student, never was top or anything like that. So, I got admission easily, got a job easily.

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UQ: Where did you get admission?

ZA: There in India, engineering colleges are very competitive there. It is not easy to get in there. So, you have to be . . . it is easier here actually to get in. But then, I landed here but there was no money. The Indian government allowed at that time, maximum of \$400 you could take as exchange because they didn't have exchange at that time. So, pretty soon, I had to do it. The market for engineers was very bad at that time. Somehow, for a number of years, Chicago was probably worse. I think everybody was probably. Even McDonald's job was not available. You could not get a McDonald's job. It's not because I was from India or anything. It was not available. So, a lot of people I know, they were engineers. They were working as engineers in India. And they were working as a hired hand like you see people standing here? Somebody comes and takes you for a day. So, they worked for that also. For not very long though. Then, they found some other odd job which was a little bit better. I did my odd job myself. The first job was there was this little glass company which was glass cutting and all, so I did it for one week, when I found another job as a shipping clerk. Luckily, the items were small because I was never big. So, I did it for 1-1/2 months. Then, my next job I got, luckily, was as a draftsman. That also was lucky in those days, that draftsman job. I was very upset that I was an engineer in India. Engineers have a little different value. I was in a government job. I had a jeep. A driver was coming. He was taking me to the job. And now, I am working, first of all as a laborer and as a draftsman. And I had so many draftsmen . . . actually, I was in construction. So, draftsmen were one or two but mostly

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it was, what do they call it? Overseer, or supervisor. Every engineer had those. Like *Sahib*. *Sahib* is a word in India. You know the word. *Sahib*. Now, here, I am a laborer. I almost thought to go back actually. What the hell am I doing here? Then, I started coming as a draftsman. At least it was an office atmosphere instead of a labor job.

UQ: How long after you arrived and by the time you got that job?

ZA: Around 2 months, I think, I got a draftsman job.

UQ: And you were still in Chicago staying with your relatives?

ZA: No, after I got draftsman job, I and another engineer, he was also working as some kind of odd job somewhere, Ilyas [was his name]. So, we took an apartment, shared apartment. One bedroom apartment in a pretty cheap area. That is all we could afford. It was very scary in the night when we would come by train - L train and all those. And then, a lot of people started coming from India, those who were our friends. They were all engineers and they didn't have any place to live. So, at least we were there, so they came. They just put their bed on the floor and they were sleeping. They were doing odd jobs.

UQ: Did you charge them any money for that?

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ZA: No. It was not our custom. Of course, not even for food unless they started earning and then everybody shared in groceries. But rent, we always paid. Me and Ilyas because we were earlier here and were a little bit more established. After that . . . I was so upset that I was working as a draftsman. We call it an assistant engineer which is officer's class there but it is still as a junior engineer, you may call it. Then, there was another Indian working as a draftsman close to me. He was from Bengal. I forgot his name. I asked him, "What were you doing in India?" He was an executive engineer. That means you were pretty high up in your position. And he was working as . . . so then, I felt much better that O.K., somebody higher than me is working as . . . So, from there, it was the jobs part I was telling you about.

Then, I got a break. The first break I got. Of course, I moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan from Chicago. And that was also the kind of job which was not too very satisfactory to me but it was a better job, better paying. The neighbors there were real nice. There was Erica. Erica was a lady. Her husband's name I don't remember...John.

UQ: So, by this time, was your wife with you?

ZA: Actually, yes. I came alone and then . . . we were already married. She was living with me when I was an assistant engineer there in my quarter. And then, when I came, she was already pregnant. So, she came in January, 1972. So, it took about 1 year after I came before she came. But before that, I had taken an apartment, one bedroom



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apartment. Of course, I didn't have much furniture. I had one table and six kitchen chairs. Before you came, there was no bed also, right? There was a bed? Oh yes, before you came, I got the bed. But before that I didn't have a bed.

ZA: I borrowed a mattress. Somebody had an extra mattress. I took it from them. I was sleeping on that. When she was about to come, about two months back, we went and bought a used bedroom set. A lot of people helped me, Razi Haidar, and this and that. It was the third floor and to bring it up ... So, that is from that point of view.

UQ: She came to Grand Rapids, Michigan?

ZA: No, she came to Chicago. In 1972 and 1973, we moved to Grand Rapids.

UQ: After she arrived here?

ZA: Yes, right. Then, we lived only 4 months in Grand Rapids. I think we had one of the best neighbors right there, Erica and John. Tabassum [my daughter] was very little at that time. So, Erica had a daughter 5 years old, or a little older. So, they were very good friends. And then, we moved to Jackson, Michigan which is about some distance from there because that is where I got a real break for a good job, like what I am doing right now. That was a Gilbert Commonwealth Associates company. Erica would come from Grand Rapids, take Tabassum for a week. She was not potty trained or anything, then

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she will do all those [things] and bring her back after one week. So, it was very good.

And then, in 1975, I moved here, in Houston. And, more or less, I am here after that.

UQ: So, while you were at a company, you would constantly search for a new job?

ZA: You know, one day I was talking to Husain Zafar [in Houston]. Do you know who Husain Zafar is? My friend. It was winter there in the Jackson - December or something like - January. I was having a big coat with ear muffs. I said, "How is the weather there?" He said, "Oh, I just came in a half shirt and a very light sweater." I said, "O.K., I am sending my resume. If ever you find some opening anywhere, just drop it [my resume]." I was not joking. I sent it to him. He probably dropped a few here and there. And then, I was called by Kellogg to interview. Brown & Root was there. Brown & Root gave me a better offer so I just joined Brown & Root. Now, of course, it is called KBR. And then, most of the time, I am here except I was gone for 1-1/2 years because of job. So, I am a Houstonian more or less. I lived in Houston more than I lived in India.

UQ: When you came to Houston, what was your social life like?

ZA: Houston, by that time, 1975 . . . Houston was probably at the same stage as Chicago was in 1971. Chicago was a little advanced [in terms of] the South Asian community or Indian community, as a matter of fact. But here when I came, I think it was the first *Eid* prayer we had, it was in a church in 1975. For me, it was the first one

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here. And I think there were hardly 200 people. Of course, [Mazhar] Kazi *Sahib*, probably when he was here there were 20 people or something like that. Shyam and all the other guys. Then, I found the weather here was good and the community started growing here.

UQ: So, that first *Eid* prayer, was it mostly men, women, or both evenly divided?

ZA: Everybody. Combined 200, I would say. Then, everybody who I knew were either bachelors or had very little kids, or just getting married. So, those are those days. I am here since, except for, as I say, 1-1/2 years I was gone because I joined a different job in Washington and came back again. And unless something happens, I think I will be staying here. This is hometown. It is home now.

UQ: So, when you came to Houston, was it like when you first arrived in Chicago where you didn't know anyone?

ZA: No, here it was different because, of course, even in Chicago, I was lucky - at least I had a cousin. A lot of people didn't have it. They landed in New York. I have a story actually to tell but it is not about me - somebody else I know. Mohammad Ansari - he came and he didn't know anybody. So, he was in the airport, poor fellow. Of course, when we came, we didn't know the culture. We didn't know the city. We didn't know where to go or what to do. A completely new thing. So, somehow he took a taxi, went to

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one of my other friends because he [Mohammad] had a letter from somebody else to give it to him [my friend, Razi] so he [Razi] can let him stay with him and all those . . . he was my friend though. He [Razi] was actually in Chicago that day, [but he lived] in the suburbs. It was the weekend and he [Razii was visiting me] in my apartment. So, Mohammad went in the night, at least about 11, 12 or maybe later [to Razi's apartment], but his apartment was locked. So, what to do now? Somehow, the taxi driver helped him, took him to the police station. Then, they verified that he has a bonafide visa . . . that he was an OK guy and all this, all his passport and everything. Then, they called [the apartment manager] and actually, the police came and told the manager to open the apartment in Razi Haidar's absence. Razi went back on Sunday night and saw him sitting in his apartment, he said, "who is this sitting in my apartment?" So, this is one of the things. And there are a lot of . . . I don't know if that matters to you in this interview or not. Again, it is not about me.

One of my friends was doing odd jobs. One of them went to . . . what do they call it when they call for a job and he goes as a laborer in the evening? He said, "Somehow, I just came back alive today." I said, "What happened?" He said, "They had a Viva paper towel." They had just introduced that at that time. And what they were doing is they were calling these day labor-type people and putting them in a van and gave them a big bag and a small Viva samples. Their job was to hang them on every door. In one neighborhood, they dropped [off] one guy. Another neighborhood they dropped [off] another guy and they would collect them later on. He said, "When I went to one door,

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there were two big black dogs and they started chasing me." So, he threw all his bag around like a champ and got out of there!

UQ: When you came here to Houston, you didn't have a cousin, so . . .

ZA: I had Husain Zafar who was my friend. So, I stayed with him. He was a bachelor anyway at that time. And we were playing bridge, cards in the evening with Kazi Sahib and Moiz.

UQ: So, you had a place to stay immediately upon arrival?

ZA: Yes, here, I didn't have any problem. And then, I had a job. I was already working for 2 years. I had a little bit of money. I was not that desperate when I came here. Then, I took my apartment.

UQ: So, did your wife come with you when you first came to Houston or did she come later?

ZA: No, I think she came to live here. They were paying plane fare and everything. It was like a regular job now. It became a bonafide job and everything. So, it was pretty nice.

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UQ: So, there were plenty of people to make friends with?

ZA: No, not as many as we have now but, of course, Kalim was here. Husain and, as I said, Kazi Sahib and Shyam.

UQ: About how many families would you say?

ZA: At that time, I don't know. It started building slowly with 10.

UQ: 7 or 8?

ZA: Yes, at that time. And then slowly, it started growing.

UQ: And those 7 or 8, they were married?

ZA: No, not all of them. Hussain was not married then. In 1975, yes, I think he got married. Of course, Kazi Saheb was married with children. Sham was married, yes. Kalim was married. Only Hussain . . . he was newly married, I think, right at that time. And after that, we are here just living our life. That is all.

UQ: Did you hope to accomplish anything in particular?

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ZA: No, not really. As I said . . .

UQ: What drew you to Houston?

ZA: Houston? Of course, as I said, the weather. When Husain said, "I am in half [sleeve]-shirt." So, I said, O.K., I am coming. And then, I had a good job. My community started and the kids started growing up. They started going to school. I liked the place so I stayed. So, that is the main thing.

UQ: Were there any struggles you remember particularly facing after coming to Houston?

ZA: That was not a real struggle. Of course, in businesses like computers or engineering, the market is up and down all the time. So, all you have to do is be on your toes. It is not a government job or like a medical profession. Those are much more stable jobs. A professor in a university. You must be familiar because your husband is in that job so you have to be very, very agile. Of course, luckily, I didn't face much trouble. Of course, always there was every few years, you were worried that you would lose your jobs. Somehow, I did not lose the job. I lost it once though. But other people did much worse. Some people did rather poorly from that point of view.

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UQ: And regarding your neighbors, you said earlier that you had a very good neighbor in Chicago.

ZA: No, not Chicago. Chicago was regular . . . they were nice people but Michigan, extraordinary.

UQ: What about here?

ZA: Here is average.

UQ: Did you see a difference between the neighbors you had back then and your interaction with them compared to now?

ZA: It is a little bit different because I had small children and they had small children. And that made a little bit more interaction. Now, my children are gone and somebody who has small children, he doesn't have much in common with me. So, we have interaction but not to that level. We meet, say hello. When I go out [of town], he takes care of my newspaper and all and those types of things but nothing that much. But they are nice people. I didn't face any real trouble with the neighbors.

UQ: Do you feel they treated you any differently because of your race?



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ZA: I don't know because on the surface, it doesn't look like that. It looks fine as far as neighbors are concerned. Job is a different thing. Job, of course, at the beginning, it was not like that. They were not used to outsiders. If there is a job, they will probably give you a job but a promotion, it was very [unlikely] . . . they will like you as a worker, but not to go up. Now, it is a little bit of . . . I mean, they are getting used to that now, that these guys [South Asians] can go up. But I don't know if it is one hundred percent or not. But it is much easier now because I think the barrier has been broken by us. But at least if you are qualified, getting a job is not a problem. The only thing - where you want to go. You will feel more resistance, subtle resistance. They won't say anything. It is an educated place. They talk very nicely. Lately, it has been getting better and better, I think, in that respect. Now, others, I don't know.

UQ: Tell about your transition from your single life to family life.

ZA: That happened in India. The only thing, when she was not here, I was forced [to be] single, so that is different.

UQ: Yes, that is true. When you first arrived in Houston, were there any community associations or groups like ethnic associations, Behar Association, anything like that?

ZA: Now, but not at that time. Of course, I don't know if ISGH was not there. Now, of course, I go to the Behar Association. I go only two or one time a year.

UQ: It is new.

ZA: For me, it is new. They are maybe there for 10, 15 years.

UQ: What about an Indian cultural group? Nothing like that?

ZA: I am not a member. I just go when there is . . .

UQ: How about back then in 1975? Did they have anything?

ZA: I don't think they had anything. I don't know. If they had, I don't remember. So, everything grew from . . . it developed later.

UQ: So, about what point did you think that development started. You say it developed later. Around when do you think that . . .

ZA: The community started growing right after I came and in Houston, it started getting faster after 1973, I heard. And that is when I came in 1975, because the oil embargo put the prices up. It became, I believe, from 1976, it became \$2 to \$12. That was 1976, right? 1976 or 1977. And then, as the oil prices went up, Houston's economy went up. And more jobs are created here. So, people from other parts of the USA, they

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started coming. And once jobs come, then people come and start their business. So, the business people started establishing. I think it was after I came, it was slowly growing already. And after the embargo, oil embargo - I forgot the exact year - 1976, 1977 or something . . . then the price of oil went up and Houston started growing. The community at large was growing. Houston is growing, so our community, they also started coming and started doing business or job.

UQ: So, you would see that kind of a turning point?

ZA: I think faster. Few people were always there. University of Houston. Here and there. But it was not growing that fast. Once the oil prices jumped - Houston started growing and our community started growing.

UQ: So, after you came to Houston, you didn't return to school at all?

ZA: No, I did my master's here but that was not full-time because I had a family to support. So, I was working in Brown & Root and I was going in evenings at U of H and I did my master's there.

UQ: When did you do your master's?

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ZA: 1981. 1981, it was completed. It was the spring of 1981. I started in 1978, I think. So, it was evenings. Six credits average, I believe. Summer I took, sometimes I didn't take. So, I finally finished my master's there.

UQ: Were you alone as far as people in your ethnic group attending those evening classes?

ZA: No, I think there were others also. Some others. Not many. But a few of them were there. And they might be not exactly in my class but I am sure they are in masters somewhere.

UQ: You really didn't live the student life because you had a family. You only went part-time.

ZA: Yes. It was not a full-time student in Houston. Student life I lived in India when I was living in a hostel which you call dorm here. That was a real student life. Not here. Here, it was just a job and then go to do my masters. That is all.

UQ: Did you have any reservations about raising a family in America?

ZA: In the beginning, I had more because everything is new. There was also, the culture was quite different. You know about it. Of course, a lot of things which were

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taken for granted are very upsetting to us, especially the social life. Especially, girls and boys living together and those kinds of things are still not very acceptable to me and not most people. Those are things . . . who knew? You don't have control over children. You try to raise them one way and hope that they go that way. And everything now, this is not the right way. The right way is what everybody else is doing. But anyway, praise be to God, it came out all right, so we don't have any regret but you always think about it when you are raising a kid. The future, nobody knows what happens - which way they will go.

So that's what was there. Culture, really. Otherwise, job opportunities and all, they were much more here and they are still here. Of course, now . . . when I came from India, I was one of the lucky ones [in India] to have a good job and everything but the opportunities are not that much. They were not that much. Now, in India, if you have a good engineering degree or a good software degree or you are from a good school, I think it is booming right now so for them, it is very nice. If that was the situation, I don't know if I would have come or not. Probably still come because that was the motive that I wanted to go out and see the world. But now, people are traveling so easy and people come and go. It is not a big thing anymore. When I got back to India and they are in good jobs, they don't want to move here. They want to come, of course. They want to see U.S.A. or Europe. . . most of them do. For some people, they still might like to come. And the people who have less opportunities, they like to come, yes - those who are not very happy with their situation there. And it is mostly economic, nothing else.

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UQ: Now?

ZA: Even then. Some, adventure. Some, economics. From Germany and England, the emigration quota is not fulfilled there because they are economically very well-off. But in Poland or any time you have a little bit poorer country, you will see people are in line to come here because of opportunity for something.

UQ: Because of your coming here, did other family members come after you?

ZA: Oh, yes, a lot of them. I have 4 more brothers here.

UQ: Who came after you?

ZA: After I came. And maybe I am the reason why they came here. Of course, they also probably like to come here. They are all living here.

UQ: And did you have contact with your family after you came to America?

ZA: Which family?

UQ: With your immediate family in India?

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ZA: Yes, all the time.

UQ: By phone? By letter?

ZA: By phone all the time. Mother, father. In the beginning, a lot of letters but now phone and everything is so common there. So, it is much easier. Of course, my father is dead now so only my mother is there. So, I have been last year. I am going again. The main reason is I just want to see my mother. She is old now, 81 years old.

UQ: So, when you first came here, how soon after you came to America did you go back to India for a visit?

ZA: The first time, it was not easy. First of all, it was our struggling time - not making much money. And then, the second thing was compared to now, it was much more expensive and I will tell you how. The ticket to go to India was \$1,200 to \$1,500. Return ticket. And when the salaries were \$800 a month to \$900 a month. Now, the salaries are so high and the ticket is still \$1,200, \$1,500. So, it is one-fifth or one-sixths in real dollar value of that dollar. So, it is much cheaper and it is much easier to go. We have bigger planes, faster planes.

Phones were cheaper. I remember when I used to call my mother or my wife, it was a shocker because the first minute, \$3.00. After that, \$1.50 each minute. So, if I talked a few minutes, it was a \$30 bill and \$30 was probably half the salary or something

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like that. The first trip, I remember, it was 2 kids and the ticket expense there. It was not savings. It was one full year of my salary. So, can you imagine how many years it took to save that money? But now, it is much easier because the plane tickets still are at the same level so it is real cheap. And salaries have gone up quite a bit so we can afford more now. Moreover, we are only two now so we can go more often, instead of four.

UQ: So, when you first came here, as you said, you had a friend Zafar Husain. Did you know him before you came?

ZA: Yes, I first met him in Chicago and not only that, he is the brother-in-law of my cousin I just talked to. She is [like] his sister. So, once I was there, he also came to the same cousin, so we met there. And he, of course, went to Louisiana for his masters and I started working there [Chicago]. Then, I did my masters here as a part-timer. He was, at that time, a bachelor so he had more flexibility to go wherever he wanted.

UQ: So, when you came to America, I noticed there was a large Behari community [in Houston now]. Did those . . .

ZA: Not at that time. Very, very few.

UQ: When did they start coming and why did they come to Houston?



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ZA: Well, they are everywhere. I mean, Houston is one of the bigger . . . the population of any South Asian community is mostly according to the size of the city and economy. So, New York has the most. Then, I believe at that time, Chicago was number two. I think it is still number two community-wise although it is number three city now. Los Angeles has a very big population. Houston is number four so Houston has a big population. Because of jobs and business opportunities. These are the main driving forces. So, it is for Beharis or South Asian community or Asia community at large or any Eastern European community – it's the same story.

UQ: So, the people who came here from Behar, they were not friends of yours from India?

ZA: No, I didn't know anybody actually. But as the early job opportunities came or their business started, they came here. But in the beginning, Houston was not very important from a job point of view when I came. At that time, either New York or Chicago - they were the landing points always because they had the jobs. Now, the jobs started shifting here after this oil and all and maybe Los Angeles also. There, it was New York, Chicago, Detroit - big job places because, first they went to universities or they started jobs because a lot of people came as students. Then, they became immigrants. So, they were at university. So, they were always struggling at that time. So, once they after 1975, 1976, 1977, then they started earning a little bit of money. Now, I think all educated people are at least . . . if they are not very well-off, they are O.K. They are

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pretty good. Comfortable, that is what I am saying. The South Asian community, like any other . . . I think because of the education and all, I think their average income is much higher than the average American U.S. income because mostly they are educated people who came here and that played a lot of role.

UQ: At that time?

ZA: Yes, at that time. Now, I don't know. I am sure still educated people are coming. There maybe some others also coming who are not that educated. So, that puts them in a higher income status. So, we are financially OK, it looks like. Not rich but comfortable.

UQ: I think the last question is just after you came here, how did Houston treat you as an immigrant? How did Houstonians treat you?

ZA: Houstonians - it was pretty good, except a large city . . . in a large city, people don't have time to . . . like Grand Rapids, that was a smaller town, so it was much more intimate. People meet and all, and they are very welcoming because they had time to relax, slow life. Now, Chicago was not like that because Chicago was very fast. Again, people are going, coming, jobs, university is there. And Houston is more or less the same. Of course, Houston is a little better. It is wider. It is a little more open spaces than Chicago. But a lot of people like Chicago because it has more cultural life

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according to . . . not our culture. Our culture is community mostly but culture at large.

That is what it is.

UQ: Is there anything else you would like to close with before we turn off the . . .

ZA: No. I think basically that is my life. I think you will find the majority of the South Asian community - some may have a tougher time, some may have an easier time. Some have achieved more, some have achieved less. But this is mostly. And, of course, some may have setbacks and all but luckily, we are all right. Our family is O.K. Health is still, I will say O.K. It is not the greatest. So, those are the two most important things. And then, you need a little bit of finances to live and that we have, so I think it is doing all right.

UQ: No regrets looking back?

ZA: No regrets. Of course, first impression, we will always have that itch [wondering] whether he did right to come here or not because you left your other people there. But otherwise, fine. That is first generation. You are second generation. So, you are born in the USA so you don't have that itch. This is your country, you are born. This is my country now but I started from some other country. I have a lot of other friends there, family there, so that it why we go every time.

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UQ: So you still can't feel like you can just turn your back on all of that, you still have a connection?

ZA: Yes, we have to have connection, we have to go there, talk to people. Most probably, I'm not going to live there now. My children are here so they are not going back there. They are born here. At least, the son was born [here]. Tabasssum came when she was completely in a lap so she is not going back. So, I will be here. The first generation cannot break the ties. They have to see . . . my mother is still there. O.K., thank you for your interview.

