Charan Gill: Oral History Transcript

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| **Metadata Field** | **Description** | **Data Entry** |
| Title | Title of Document |  Rebeca\_Salas\_With\_Charan\_gill\_11-07-16 Complete  |
| Accession Number | Catalogue Number of the File | (Administrator Only) |
| Interviewee | Name of Interviewee (SURNAME, given name(s), middle initial) |  Charan Gill  |
| Interviewer  | Name of Interviewer (Surname, given name(s), middle initial) |  Rebeca Salas  |
| Interview Date  | YYYY/MM/DD |  2016/11/07  |
| Interview Date (non-preferred format) | Eg. November 13, 2014 or MM/DD/YY |  November 07, 2016  |
| Collection ID |  | (Administrator Only) |
| Collection |  | (Administrator Only) |
| Series ID |  | (Administrator Only) |
| Series |  | (Administrator Only) |
| Summary | Brief summary of the interview session (Copy and paste from Form 13 – Session Summary) |  Charan begins the interview describing her earliest childhood memories and also provides a synopsis of her family’s history in Richmond. She talks about her father’s love of horses and how he would race them competitively at the Lansdowne Racetrack. Charan reflects on her recent discovery that there was a covenant in Richmond preventing non-whites from purchasing real estate in the area which is why her parents could not buy property in their name. She outlines her father’s journey from India to Canada and what his first impressions were of his adopted home. Charan recalls instances of discrimination she experienced in Richmond and how it made her feel. She thinks about what it was like growing up in a Richmond neighbourhood and the strong sense of community she felt while living there. She highlights her thirty-four year teaching career, how it got started, and the sense of fulfillment it brought her. Charan concludes the interview by contemplating the ways in which Richmond has changed since her childhood.    |
| Keywords | Keywords indicating interview subjects (Copy and Paste from “Keyword” section of Form 12 Interview Summary.) |  Langley, Vancouver General Hospital, Alexandra Road, Lansdowne Racetrack, *Sea of Stories* Project, Richgate Project, East Indian, Visible Minority, Property, 838 Lansdowne Road, Number Three Road, Bridgeport, General Currie, Burrard, Henry Hudson, Kitsilano High School, Sari, High School Graduation Dance, Westwind, Aida Knapp School of Dance, Brighouse Minoru Pavilion, Cook School, War Memorial Gym, UBC, Swimming, Discrimination, Steveston High School, BCTF, Peace River, Fort Saint John, Dawson Creek, West Kootenays, Nelson, Castlegar, Poverty, Ocean Falls, Second World War, Canadian Armed Forces, Granville Avenue, Horseracing, PNE, Exhibition Park, Sandown Racetrack. |
| Subject | Subject headings applicable to the Interview. The OHC uses Library of Congress Subject Headings. |  Horse Racing, East Indian, Visible Minority, Discrimination, Teaching, Childhood Memories, Canadian Armed Forces, Community, History, First Impressions, Immigration, Family Values. |
| Duration | Length of Interview Session (if applicable) hh:mm:ss |  01:26:09  |
| Interview # |  Number of the interview (interviewees according to date) |  1  |
| Session # | Session # of the recording (X of all interviews in the session) |  1  |
| Location | Where the interview was conducted |  Richmond Museum and Cultural Center  |
| Media Type | Audio or Video |  Audio  |
| Restriction Type | Open (Open access)Restricted (Interview has some restrictions detailed below in “Restrictions”)Closed (Closed/No Access) |  Open [[1]](#footnote-1) |
| Restrictions | Details regarding any restrictions on the file’s use (as outlined in Form 6 –Consent) |  N/A  |
| Rights | Release Information regarding copyright and access through the repository (as outlined in the Release Agreement) |  All rights given to the interviewer (Rebeca Salas) and the Oral History Centre  |
| Funding | Information on how the project was funded. |  N/A  |
| Equipment | Equipment used to record the session. (Brand and model number of recorder.) |  H2N Zoom Recorder  |
| Media Format | Digital format. Eg; .WAV, MP3, .doc, .pdf, .tiff, etc |  WAV  |
| Language | Language(s) of the Interview or Document |  English  |
| Type | Document Type. Eg: Oral History Interview, Conference Proceedings, Presentation, Sharing Circle, etc.  |  Oral History Interview  |
| Repository | Location where the project/collection will be stored. |  The Oral History Centre  |

**Transcription Legend:**

. . . = Ellipses used to indicate where an interviewee does not complete a thought.

[?] = Used to indicate indecipherable words or unknown spelling of words.

START OF TAPE PART ONE OF ONE

[00:00:14]

*REBECA*
Alright, so why don’t we start with your life and maybe we can start with where you were born.

*CHARAN*
I was born in Vancouver General Hospital and I’m the first born in my family. I have two siblings: a brother and a sister. Mom and dad lived in Langley when I was first born. I think I lived there when I was about a year old. I’m not a hundred percent sure, never bothered to ask that question and then we moved to Richmond. I’ve lived here, what I consider, my whole life. We used to always laugh and say “there weren’t very many people now who were born and raised in Richmond.” So, I’m one of those. I’m a baby boomer. All the new schools that were built way back when . . . we went to so many schools. They just kept bussing us from school to school. Richmond was a very small community. It was a farming community. Everybody knew everybody. My dad and mom came to Richmond because of the horses. My dad fell in love with horses. We always laughed and said, you know, “dad’s first love was horses and then maybe his kids.” [laughs]. Our family album is the winners of my dad’s race horses because most people didn’t take a lot of pictures back then but every time a horse won dad took everybody to Chinatown for dinner and we always had a picture taken. At the race track that’s part of winning. You’d go to the winner’s circle and you’d have a picture taken. You can see us grow up. You can see me from the time I was about a year, year and a half until the last winner was when my . . . 1994, just before my dad died. So a lot of history through the horses. For me, Richmond was, it was home. It’s always been home. That’s the only home I’ve known. My friends used to say I was the island-bound one. I didn’t want to go out of the island. I wouldn’t go downtown. I wouldn’t go through the tunnel. I had no reason to go anywhere. I lived here. So from growing up on . . . First of all, we lived on Alexandra Road which was behind the Lansdowne Racetrack and we had a bunch of property there. I remember stories more than I have memories. Apparently I had a black lab dog called Judy that used to go down Alexandra Road because the milkman and the bread man left stuff like butter and bread and whatever. Judy was a black lab, so a very soft mouth. She would go down the road and she would pick up the loaves of bread or the butter and bring them home and leave them on the doorstep for my mom. So then mom had to go back and tell the neighbours that, you know, the dog brought them home. So that’s one of the memories from my mom that I remember. We lived behind the racetrack, as I’ve said, so we had a barn, we had horses, my dad had Great Danes. That’s another memory I have and it’s a story more than a memory for me. I think I was probably two or three but I’m not sure, but very young. My dad had ten Great Danes at once. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen a Great Dane but they weigh 150, 200 pounds. They were like my ponies so I would ride on Great Danes and play with them. They would knock me down and I would cry and I would be told by my dad “stand up, get going. You don’t sit and cry.” That’s a message that has played in my head my whole life. If something happens, deal with it, get up, move on, make it better. So those were early memories and messages that I think I grew up with. I can remember all the different families along Alexandra Road. Everybody just played. You just wandered up and down. Eventually, my mom and dad sold that property and I never knew, until I did the *Sea of Stories* Project, that when my mom and dad bought the property on Alexandra Road they weren’t allowed to buy it in their name because they were East Indian. There was a covenant on the property that said it could not be sold to a non-white. So the property was actually bought in a company name. So I didn’t know that part about my Richmond history. I didn’t know that. I didn’t grow up feeling like a visible minority. I grew up as Charan Gill, you know, that’s who I was. No one called me Charan, actually, when I was growing up. My family’s always called me Buttons. So I grew up as Buttons in the neighbourhood and until I went to school, probably, I was Buttons. People that have known me forever still call me Buttons. Mom gave me that nickname when I was born. Apparently when I was born the nurse came over to my mom and said “here’s your little girl. She’s cute as a button” because I had two teeth [laughs].

[00:05:22]

I was born with two teeth and curls. Mom says she can remember, I guess they gave them an anaesthetic back then when they had a baby, and she said she can remember coming out of the delivery and the doctor saying “forget the milk bottle. Bring this one a T-bone” [laughs]. I can’t imagine what my mom thought but they pulled my teeth out when I was not even a month old because when I would suck I would cut my tongue. My teeth never grew back until I was seven years old so those were my baby teeth. Every Christmas they would sing ‘All I want for Christmas is my Two Front Teeth.’ That was one of the theme songs in the family. My dad had . . . Our house has always been an open house. People would come and go all the time. When we lived on Alexandra Road a jockey, Joe Martinez, from Mexico and his wife Linda, they lived with us. They lived in the barn because there was always, they called them tack rooms in the barns where you’ve got the horses in a stall and then you’ve got sort of a stall that’s a little more refined that becomes a bedroom. So they lived in our barn and I can remember stories again about Linda being this fiery Latin that would get mad at people and throw things. I didn’t know her but I have those stories. By the time we moved to Lansdowne Road my sister was born when we moved there so that would have been ’51. We lived in that house for a while and there was a little store attached to it because the racetrack was across the street. It was a little café. When my brother was born, and that would have been ’54, we had moved to what was the family home as we all thought about it. We just always said “Lansdowne Road.” It was 838 Lansdowne Road and where the driveway to what had been, I guess it was Zellers and then it was Target and now I don’t know what it is, that would have been our property there. So I grew up . . . In Lansdowne Road is where my memories of growing up and going to school are really more formed. I can remember the bus driver. I think his name was Mr. Dick. The bus would come down the road and if you weren’t quite ready he would just sit and wait. He didn’t just stop and drop you off at one end of the road or the other. He would drop you off in front of your house. I just remember feeling, never worried like, never worried as a kid. It was just, you know, you played, you did things, we wandered but Lansdowne Road ran between Garden City and Number Three Road and there was only two (street) lights along that stretch. You never worried about it because all the neighbours they knew who you were, you knew who they were, everybody kept an eye out for everybody. On Lansdowne Road we had people from all kinds of backgrounds. We called ourselves the League of Nations because there were Germans, Dutch, Japanese, Scottish, everybody, and nobody was a whatever. They were just neighbours and the same with us. We weren’t the East Indians that lived down the road. We were the Gills that lived down the road. When we went to school I went to . . . My grade one was at Bridgeport which doesn’t even exist anymore. That’s when you know you’re old. And then from Bridgeport we must have gone to General Currie. They now have that as a heritage school, again, you know you’re old. And then I went to Garden City. What I remember about Garden City is they had like a, not a basement because Richmond can’t have basements, but there was like a playground. I can remember running inside with these cement poles and things, strange memory, but playing ball in there. I was one of those kids that . . . I don’t remember learning to read. I just always read, always had book, mom always had book in the house. I don’t remember her reading to us but we always had books. Education was important and there wasn’t anything that you couldn’t do. Even though . . . A contradiction in a way because my dad always said “be proud of who you are, be proud of your roots, but you’re Canadian.” You weren’t a hyphenated Canadian. You were Canadian. Dad’s theme song was always, you know, the best place in the world to live is Canada. The best place in Canada is BC.

[00:10:27]

 Best place in BC is Richmond and he lived that and he believed that. He left India when he was just a little boy. He was, we think, somewhere around fourteen or fifteen. So he wouldn’t even let us cross the street by ourselves and this man comes across the world, you know [laughs]. He just . . . I loved my dad he was, not my hero, because I can recognize some of his faults but he was and, in some ways, still is to me a very special person and instilled a lot of lessons. I’m probably rambling but lessons, from what I can remember from when my sister was born . . . There’s three years difference between my sister and I and I can remember this message from my dad. “Take care of your sister. Take care of your sister.” And then when my brother came along “take care of your brother. Take care of your brother.” So those family values were implanted at a very young age. I’m sixty-nine years old and that message still plays through my head “take care of your sister, take care of your brother.” So dad wasn’t an educated man. He didn’t get to go to school. He played hooky. That’s why he ended up coming to Canada because his mom had said to him, so the story goes, “the next time you play hooky you’re in trouble.” So rather than face the trouble he decided to set off on an adventure and came from the northern part of India and he ended up, at some point, in Singapore. From Singapore he ended up in Hong Kong. From Hong Kong he came to Vancouver. It was all through family you know, like, an uncle had come and stopped off in Singapore so you can go to see that uncle. Then, when you get there Dad was given the choice: go to Hong Kong or go to Australia. Thank god he came to Hong Kong [laughs] because then he ended up here in Vancouver. So that history there. So I have ties to India even though I don’t know them. I did go to India once with my mom after my Dad died. My Dad never went back to India. When he left, he never went back. Every year we would say to him “Dad, go visit your mom. Go visit your mom.” And he’d say “yeah, next year. Yeah, next year.” Well, next year never came and he never went back but he kept saying “this is my home. I don’t have to go anywhere” whereas my mom was born here. She was born in Vancouver. She went to school in Vancouver. She grew up around Second and Burrard so she went to a school called Henry Hudson. It’s still there. She went to grade ten at Kitsilano High School and then they pulled my mom out of school to look after her younger siblings and family because the family needed money. Mom was sent to work, and she worked in a laundry and made virtually nothing but it was money and they needed it. My mom should’ve had an education. She’s a very, very bright lady and she wasn’t given the opportunity even though a professional East Indian family of doctors at the time had said that they would pay my mom’s tuition and pay for everything to let her go to school but my grandma and grandpa said no, she had to go to work, and she had to take care of the family. So my mom never got an education and I think, probably, that’s why school was so important to us. It was just expected that you would go to school. All through elementary school my mom was very involved in school on the PTAs and all that kind of stuff. I was one of those little goody-two-shoe kids, you know, I never had to really work that hard to get average marks. I’m not brilliant but I didn’t have to work hard. I could get through. I don’t remember not having friends. I belonged to teams and clubs and all that kind of stuff. I don’t remember ever getting in trouble. I don’t remember ever having trouble with other kids. Maybe I don’t remember or it never happened. I remember, you know, playing. Our next door neighbours were the Matsuzaki’s. They are a Japanese family and I played with Ronny and Donny the twins, as they were called, because we were the same age and there weren’t a lot of kids around because there weren’t a lot of neighbours, you know, the houses were spread out. We would play and we would jump across the ditches because everybody, you know, there were ditches in front of all the properties. I can remember, Ronny died this summer and I went to the memorial service and we’re talking and telling stories and I can remember . . . I couldn’t remember which twin it was that fell in the ditch but Donny confessed it was him. He fell in the ditch and when Ronny and I tried to help him out he pulled us in. So now you’ve got three little kids in the ditch [laughs].

[00:15:36]

So we went home and we all got in trouble so those are the kinds of memories that growing up in Richmond meant. Everybody knew who you were. Everybody treated each other . . . We had fights, all kids have fights. You would cross that line, you know, you’re going to be in trouble. Everybody put their foot over the line. We played baseball, you know, we hung out. Through school I was on, like I said miss goody-two-shoes, I was on student council. I was on the basketball team because I was the same height when I was ten years old as I am now. So I grew very quickly and then I stopped. Everybody used to say to my Dad, I can remember him telling me this that first of all they were . . . The night I was born one of my Dad’s best friends, Dad had all these blood brothers because his family was in India, his one blood brother Uncle Paul was going to India so he was in San Francisco on the night that I was born and he phoned home which would have been very unusual. Long distance phone calls didn’t happen. He phoned home to find out who or what was born and so when my dad told him that we, that was the royal we, had a little girl my Uncle Paul went “oh, I’m so sorry brother” because boys are valued, supposedly, in East Indian families. So my Dad said to Uncle Paul, so I’m told, “don’t you ever say that. This is my little girl and I’m proud of her.” Dad, he didn’t fit the mould. He didn’t fit the mould and yet sometimes he did because when it came time for me to graduate from high school and go to the grad dance, I had to threaten to quit school so that I was allowed to go to the grad dance because at Richmond High, we used to think it was a horrible way but the more I’ve watched other kids I think it’s a better way, everybody went to the grad dance. Nobody got to have a so called date. Everybody had their names drawn out of a hat and, you know, person A blue hat, person A red hat, there you go. You’re going to grad together. My date because there were, first of all, no East Indian kids in the grad class besides me, and my dad didn’t want me to go. I wasn’t allowed to date when I was in high school but I never really thought about it because I was too busy playing basketball and volleyball and being a future teacher president. I think back “god, [what a suck?]” [laughs]. But, I had to threaten to quit school and I knew that was important to dad and he said, you know, he didn’t want me going out with a white guy. Yet, all of dad’s friends were white guys but, you know, his daughter was his daughter and that’s the way it was. He backed down because there was enough of my dad in me that I wouldn’t back down. I probably would never quit school but it wasn’t . . . So I went to grad. To, maybe, touch sort of my bases I wore a sari. I never wore a sari in my life but for my grad dress I chose to wear a sari. So I think maybe, you know, you can read into but I’m thinking maybe I was trying to touch all my bases because I was the first one in my mom’s family to graduate from high school. Everybody else kind of quit. I’m the very first person in my dad’s family to get an education so that was important. My brother and sister probably had different stories of growing up because there’s different ages between us, first of all, and different personalities. We’re similar but we’re not the same. I think the first time I experienced prejudice, where I got called a name, was probably in late ‘70s early ‘80s. I was walking through Westwind, I live in Westwind, so I was walking by the school and some kid called out, they called me a Hindu. I thought “who’s he talking to?” First of all, you know, I’m used to being treated with respect because by now I’m a teacher. I don’t take that kind of behaviour and I couldn’t believe the anger that came out of me. What I wanted to do is grab him by the throat and punch his lights out but, you know, being a so-called civilized educated person you don’t do things like that. So I just said to him “who are you talking to?” Like, “who do you think you’re talking to? If you’ve got something to say to me you come over here and you talk to me face to face. You don’t stand across the field and shout at me and let me tell you a few things.” I can remember just shaking. I’d never experienced that before so it was a shock. It was a shock. That wasn’t what Richmond was supposed to be like and who knows where it came from?

[00:20:46]

 Maybe I experienced prejudice before but was too naïve to notice it. I don’t know, but my brother met more of that kind of resistance because he’s seven years younger, he’s male, so his growing up would probably be very different to my growing up. But, um, memories of growing up . . . Aida Knapp School of Dance. Any little girl that grew up in Richmond took tap dance lessons. So I remember tap dance lessons. The concerts were always held at the, originally, at the Brighouse Minoru Pavilion that’s where the racetrack used to be. That was the first racetrack when my dad first bought horses. That’s where they were and so Aida Knapp School of Dance is a memory. We were the first group to move into Cook School. That was one of the so called ‘new schools’ built when we were there. I remember all the PTA things and the cakewalks they used to have. People used to bake cakes and then they put them out and you’d walk around and you’d stop and there’s your cake. My mom always had something, a treat, after school when we came home. She was a stay-at-home mom until I was, probably about, ten or eleven and then we had some really rough spots and she had to go to work but she always had something, cakes whatever. She used to make cakes in an electric frying pan because we had a sawdust burning stove so the oven was temperamental. She would make a cake in an electric frying pan. If mom wasn’t home and we came home from school, which was unusual, we would go next door to the Matsuzaki’s house and we would just stay with Mrs. Matsuzaki until mom came home. It was just this community. It was a community and it was very . . . you just felt like it was . . . everybody was family. We were very lucky to grow up where we were. I don’t know. Well, from high school, I guess I should skip through a few years, I went through Cook Elementary then I went to Cambie and from Cambie to Richmond High, from Richmond High to UBC. At Cambie, one of the memories I have . . . Because my dad had horses he always had, you know, kids, boys, working for him and I can remember, I don’t remember his name, but I can remember when I went to Cambie School, they used to always talk about two sides of the school. There was like a side for the good kids and a side for the, so called, rough guys. I never got to meet any of the rough guys because they just didn’t fit my world but one of the rough guys, in quotation marks, worked for my dad at the racetrack. Whatever his name was, he just came to me . . . I remember in grade seven, you know, being scared going to a big school, I remember him coming over to me and saying “if anybody bothers you, you tell me.” Nobody bothered me [laughs]. Now, I don’t know if that’s because of him or just nobody bothered me because, again, you know, teams and student council and working in the school store, all that kind of stuff. Richmond High, you know, it was the Colts right? We were the Colts. I played on the teams there, too. I still can’t believe I was a basketball player because, you know, I’m 5’4 on a good day. Lots of good memories, future teachers club so I was programmed from a young age to do what I did. I still have friends that I grew up with from elementary school so there’s people that I knew from Cook Elementary that I still see, not as often as we should, but still see. We had a reunion for Richmond High, class of ’65, a while ago. You start, you know, when you see your picture up on the wall and you think “god, we survived” [laughs] but, again, Richmond High was . . . There was never any . . . You know, it was a huge school, at least in my memory it was a huge school because back then it was grades ten, eleven, twelve and there were probably about 250 kids or whatever in our graduating class but I don’t remember any problems.

[00:25:23]

I don’t remember any fights other than with the Steveston Packers, you know, there’s always the fish and the horse shit but, um, I don’t remember any problems growing up in that sense. From there I went off to UBC, joined a club, called Phrateres which was not a sorority but a women’s club. ‘Famous for friendliness’ was the motto [laughs]. Sucky, right? I’m realizing just how . . . Yeah [laughs]. I eventually became president of Phrateres so there was like 250, 300 girls divided into sub chapters set up very much like a sorority but not all the rushing and, you know, if you wanted to join you joined. It was a club. I think that’s where I learned most of my leadership skills, you know, trying to organize 250, 300 women. That’s a challenge. University, again, was uneventful. The only problem was that I couldn’t swim. I still really don’t swim well but because I was a phys-ed major I had to have half a unit in swimming. I just kept delaying it every year because I knew I wouldn’t pass and so I eventually got to graduation and had a job offer. Back then, women phys-ed teachers could write their own ticket. They were desperate for us. So I got a job, interestingly enough, at Steveston High School. So I grew up as a Richmond grad but went to teach at Steveston. So it was really funny because I can remember when we were on teams we’d be really nervous about going to Steveston High School to play because they were the tough guys. You’d think to yourself, you know, really funny, you think “they’re going to beat you up in the changing room” [laughs]. Those things never happened but those are the stories and then I turn around and I teach phys-ed at Steveston High School and I can, again . . . I just didn’t think it. You know, you just got a job that just was there. There wasn’t a worry. I didn’t come out with a lot of student debt. I worked two jobs through university all the time so I worked all summer and then I always had at least one or maybe two jobs during the winter while university was in session. That may be why my marks weren’t spectacular but I made it through except for swimming. My mom worked, by this time, had worked for the airlines and so she gave me a pass to go on a trip, 1970. It was Expo in Japan so, being young and foolish, I decided I’d go to Japan so I traveled with one of my best friends and her husband on their honeymoon. So there’s three of us on the honeymoon and, actually, they’ve been married just about a year by then so I didn’t go on their first honeymoon. Other people went on their first honeymoon with them but we went to Japan and we went to Hawaii first. We stopped in Hawaii and mom phoned me and said “you don’t have a job.” The school board just phoned and said because you don’t have your university degree you can’t teach. I said to my mom “it’s a half unit of swimming.” So I said “okay, I’ll just keep on travelling.” The ticket was a return ticket but I’ll just extend it and I’ll go around. I’ll go to India. I’ll do all the things I want to do. You just have to send me money once in a while and then I’ll come home and I’ll look for a job after. So my mom’s heartbroken that I don’t have a teaching job. I don’t think I was heartbroken. I think it was “okay, I won’t.” So then I get to Japan and go through Expo and have all those adventures and my mom phones again and says “they’ve decided you can teach.” So now, I have to come home. I come home to teach and I’m teaching away and the director of instruction, Mr. Ernie Ball, wonderful, wonderful man. Always had a smile on his face but he knocked on the door of my Social Studies class and said “you have to have your degree by the end of September or we’ll have to fire you.” Well, I looked at him and I can remember saying “Mr. Ball, you might as well fire me now because UBC won’t grant a degree until November and I can’t swim.” He said, “oh, no, no, we’ll work . . . You go back to work” [laughs].

[00:30:14]

I remember thinking to myself “he smiled through that whole time telling me that I didn’t have a job anymore” but I went out to UBC and UBC’s pool was outdoors and not really heated and so I attempted to fulfill my half unit of swimming. I don’t know if I should admit this now or not but, hey, they can’t take my certificate away from me anymore [laughs]. I got pneumonia. I was so sick I got pneumonia because I’ve had tons of people try and teach me how to swim but I do not float. I am not buoyant and with my body build I should be but I’m not. So dense bones, maybe, is how I’m going to think of it. So I don’t float. I float about six inches below the water which makes it very hard to turn your head to the side and breathe. I got pneumonia and I was walking through War Memorial Gym to go and take my so called swimming test which I knew I couldn’t pass but I was going to go and try. A cousin, not a real cousin, but one of my many cousins he married into the Gill family. He was working out there and he asked me where I was going and I said “I’m going to go take my swimming test.” He says “you’re sick!” I said “I know.” He said “you’re not going in there.” He said “come with me.” So he took me to the director’s office. I can’t remember the name. I can’t remember the name of the director. And said “my cousin’s not taking her test. She’s too sick.” The director said to me “can you swim?” and he’s nodding his head. I can swim, I just can’t swim if my feet can’t touch the bottom [laughs]. I can swim so I wasn’t really lying. He phrased the question in a very open way. So with his encouragement I answered in a very open way and I said “yes, I can.” So I got my degree. You know, like, all the turmoil. When I still see this cousin through marriage I always say to him “I don’t know if I should thank you or curse you” because, you know, I went right from high school to teaching. I taught for thirty-four years, I can’t remember, thirty-four years. So, like, I never veered off that path. Maybe if he hadn’t intercepted me walking through Memorial Gym my life would have been very, very different. I can honestly say I had a wonderful teaching career. Yeah, I lucked out. The kids . . . I never had a kid bad mouth me. I’ve never had anybody refuse to do something that I asked them to do. When I first started teaching, September of 1970, mini-skirts were in style and I wore them and women teachers were not allowed to wear pants. So I wore my mini-skirts which presented some challenges going to school. I taught social studies and PE so I had to change my clothes four times a day because they split my PE blocks so I’d have socials, PE, socials, PE. So I had to change my clothes all the time so I became a quick change artist. My min-skirts, there was one girl that always came to social studies class early and so, I don’t remember her name, but I would say to her “how high on the board could I write?” and “how low on the board can I write?” So I wrote on about this much of the board all year long but, again, I was only four years, maybe, older than the kids that I taught, if that. Everybody treated me with respect. I treated kids with respect and I got that respect back, I think. I had lots of funny things happen over the years in teaching but if we did them now we’d probably get disciplined. We had water fights. The phys-ed teachers became one of my very best friends. Carol and I were teaching phys-ed and one group of kids, class of ’75, they were my favourite kids; Shelley and Dawna and a bunch of other kids. They decided that they were going to dump water on us. So we ambushed them but in order to escape our office, because we barricaded ourselves in the office, we had to get out of the office and there’s a window. So we climbed out of the window into the parking lot and the principal walked by as we’re crawling out the window. Mel Richards was one of those . . . Again, lucky, he allowed us to have fun and work together and he just looked at us and said “hello” [laughs]. “Can’t talk.” You know, it’s like very normal to see two people crawl out of the window of their office but it was like, we had fun. We had an incredible amount of fun and throughout my teaching career I would have to say I had fun because I always vowed the day I wasn’t having fun I wouldn’t go to work anymore.

[00:35:27]

From teaching at Steveston High School, I stayed there until 1995, and then I went to work for the BCTF in professional development. So I got to travel all around the province then. I saw places that the Island Bound Princess, that’s what they called me, would never ever have seen. So, you know, my territory was the Peace River, Fort St. John, Dawson Creek, um, little holes in the wall up there and also the West Kootenays so Nelson, Castlegar, like, everywhere as far from Richmond as you could get but I had a great four years there, came back to Richmond, by that time the schools had gone eight to twelve. I still think that was a mistake. I think the system that I grew up in: elementary from kindergarten to grade six; middle school, seven, eight, nine; and then secondary, ten, eleven, twelve. I still think that’s the best age spread for kids and it gives you an opportunity to offer more courses. I was a high school counsellor for most of my teaching career and so I had a great time. I retired from Palmer officially in 2004 and the world had changed a lot by then. Richmond was different. It wasn’t a little town anymore. It wasn’t farmland and horses and all that. It was high-rises. When I grew up they couldn’t build anything over three stories in Richmond. So all of a sudden we had high-rises. Poverty, which I don’t think . . . We weren’t rich but we never considered anybody poor but I saw poverty when I started teaching/counselling at Palmer. I saw inner city which surprised me. I grew up in Richmond and that surprised me to see poverty. People that, you know, lived in an apartment by the Lansdowne Mall, which would’ve been the Lansdowne Racetrack, , living in apartments with virtually no furniture. You know, just a TV and mattresses on the floor. So Richmond has become a very different place to live. It’s not the community that I grew up in. It’s the community that I still live in but I don’t feel as connected to it as I once did. It could be anywhere in the world now. In my mind we’ve lost some of that neighbour-ness and I don’t know . . . I used to have a theory. When I was going to be in charge of the world I was going to ban garage doors. I wasn’t going to allow anybody to have a garage door because it’s too easy to drive up to your house, flip the little remote, and go inside and have the little door come down and you never see your neighbours. I think you should see your neighbours. I think you should have to say hello, not have to, you should want to say hello. You should actually know who your neighbours are and I’m very lucky on the little part of Richmond where I live, like I said in the Westwind subdivision, our little block is still what I would call a community. We know each other. We know each other’s names. We don’t necessarily visit back and forth but we say hello. If somebody needs something, you know that somebody will help you. There’s not a fear of who lives next door or, um, we still have community. Like, we still have on Halloween, like, the whole road decorates and we all do funny things. If somebody loses a partner, you know, if somebody dies in the neighbourhood you can see everybody going back and forth with cakes and cookies and dinners or whatever. It’s still . . . I got goose bumps. It’s still that little town but it doesn’t extend everywhere anymore. The Richmond I knew and grew up in and participated in, like I’ve sat in on city hall committees on multicultural relationships and all that kind of stuff and I’ve been on the school committees, it’s changed. I think it hasn’t necessarily changed for the best but it’s changed and we can’t stop change. We were talking earlier about the American election. That’s scary. If that can happen there, it can happen anywhere and that’s not the world that I want for me and mine. I want the world that I grew up in where people could say something to you and it was your word was your word, like, that’s again a message from my dad.

[00:40:38]

You know, your name is something you need to be proud of and I’m Charan Gill and I’m proud of who I am. I’m not sure what else I should say [laughs]. I consider myself to be very, very lucky. I’ve been very fortunate in my life. Thing have just unfolded. I haven’t had to go looking for very much. I just seem to always be in the right place at the right time. I sometimes believe I have a little guardian angel that sits over my shoulder and goes “you better watch her this time. Something stupid is going to happen” because I’ve put myself into some amazingly stupid opportunities and yet they’ve worked out. I’m lucky.

*REBECA*

That was great. Thank you for all that.

*CHARAN*

There’s so many things that, you know, there’s so many stories. I guess that’s when you know you’re old when you’ve got lots of stories.

*REBECA*
I guess so. Or you’ve just had meaningful experiences as well. It sounds like you’ve had a lot within Richmond, yeah.

*CHARAN*
I have, you know, I’m, like I said, I’m very glad that I grew up where I did. I was given the opportunity to be a person. I wasn’t just a girl. I wasn’t just, you know, someone from an East Indian background. I was Buttons or Charan. That’s all you can ask for.

*REBECA*

You are wearing button earrings, right, yeah [laughs]. I just realized it was button earrings.

*CHARAN*

Yeah, I do. It’s really weird, like, you can notice how much jewellery I wear, none, but button earrings, my sister did that years and years back when she was travelling. She found some, mind you they were huge ones then because earrings were really big and she brought them home from Harrods, two beautiful buttons and had them made into earrings for me and I thought “why not?” I’m always amazed at the number of people that notice because I don’t look at people that closely. Maybe that’s my problem but most people will recognize buttons.

*REBECA*
Yeah, that’s sweet. I do have some notes that I took as you were talking. Maybe I can just . . . Just certain things that were interesting and I was curious to hear a little bit more about, um, maybe just continuing on the theme of your life as a teacher. You mentioned that you were always on track to become a teacher. Was that always a hope and dream for yourself or was that something that you fell into because it’s interesting to hear people’s hopes and dreams of when they’re younger as compared to, you know, later in time.

*CHARAN*
I think I was just programmed. I think my mom wanted me to have an education and, you know, when I graduated from university women didn’t have a lot of choices that they have now. Most times you became a nurse, not me, a teacher. At one point I had an opportunity, perhaps, to be a stewardess but that wasn’t considered a career, right? So, teaching was . . . I think if I went to university now I don’t know if I would be a teacher. I don’t know that because the school system that I taught in in the 1970s is very different from the system now. I’m glad I’m not teaching now. All the things that we worked hard for have been taken away from us. So, I don’t know. Maybe I’d be a lawyer. Maybe I’d be a lawyer but, I have to say that because I was a teacher I know I’ve touched a lot of lives because there isn’t anywhere I’ve ever traveled in this world, I haven’t done a lot of travelling but I’ve done some like Japan, Mexico, United States, France, I bump into people and they’ll come over and say “Hi, Miss Gill.” So you think if you’ve been able to do that then that’s worth a lot, right? That’s worth a lot. So, do I regret being a teacher? No. Would I have made a different choice? Maybe in a different time frame because there are different opportunities but, I don’t know. It just, it was there. It’s again, one of those things. My life just kind of unfolds. So I don’t know if I’ve answered your question or not [laughs].

*REBECA*
It’s just interesting to hear, and it doesn’t necessarily . . . When I say “have your hopes and dreams changed?” I don’t necessarily mean change from what they were when you were younger, when you were a child, when you were in school, but how those have evolved or continued.

*CHARAN*

Well, we played school all the time, like, all summer long we would play school and, of course, I was always the teacher because I was the oldest.

[00:45:46]

I had a chalk in my hand [laughs]. In honesty, though, there weren’t a lot of careers for women to choose from. The choices are much broader now.

*REBECA*
Another thing I was curious about was you started to touch upon the reason why your father ended up in Canada. I was just curious to hear a little bit more about that. You mentioned that he got into a little bit of trouble and that was something that his parents did but, yeah, I’d be curious to hear a little bit more about his beginnings and also journey to Canada.

*CHARAN*
I have to first of all start off by saying I didn’t ask enough questions when my dad was alive. I didn’t realize how little I knew about my dad because he never talked about it, you know. I had to interview someone for one of my . . . I went back to university to do a post-degree thing and I had to interview an immigrant so I thought “well, I’ll interview my dad.” So I interviewed my dad and I picked up a few things but I didn’t ask him nearly enough questions. I wish I could have . . . I guess if I’d be telling anybody anything, if I had a message coming out of this is talk to each other, ask questions. Dad left India and came to Canada . . . First of all, his dad died before my dad was born and my dad was the youngest by a huge gap. His brothers and sisters were like fifteen, twenty years older than him so he was like this afterthought and from what I understand, spoiled rotten. His mom breastfed him until he was five, you know. He left and never went back to see his mom. When I went to India there was only one relative still living there that would have known my dad. He was my dad’s nephew but they were the same age. My cousin, [Sadara Singh?], he had a picture in this little room in this village house and he said to me “look up there, look up there.” I thought “I don’t know who that is.” It was a picture of my dad as a young man. I’d never seen a picture of him like that. When dad came to Canada it was through, again, a series of “you can stay here or you can go there” because India was part of the British Empire or Commonwealth Empire back then, I guess. Men traveled, women didn’t. People had come to Canada. A lot of Sikhs had come during the, I guess it was the Boer War in the 1900s, so they saw the country and they went back and talked about the country. My mom’s family, my mom’s grandparents came to Canada in 1900-something or another, very early 1900s. There’s pictures of my mom’s grandfather and his twin brother holding Clydesdale horses by the reigns down Burrard Street because they had a so called trucking business except it was horse and wagon delivery, um, lumber. When dad came he knew nobody here but he came, like most people did then, because his papers said he was the son of so and so. He wasn’t the son of so and so. He was an uncle but he had come to Canada. When he came here he didn’t speak English. I’d never seen a picture of my dad with a turban. My dad was always clean shaven. My dad was Canadian not Indian. The night my dad died, I’m skipping here, I had cleaned . . . My mom and dad were divorced and I used to go out and visit my dad and tidy up the house. I cleaned my dad’s place, I don’t know, a thousand times and I had never ever seen his passport, his army papers, or some of the other papers. On the night he died they were sitting out on his bureau so [laughs], how come? How come, all of a sudden, there’s pictures out? I have, as part of the project there was a picture of my dad with his turban and I think “holy cow, that was my dad?” because he looked about, he was probably about fifteen or sixteen years old and this skinny kid. When he came here he ended up in Ocean Falls which is way up north, right? because there was a lumber mill there. They went wherever there was work. My dad said that he walked from Vancouver to Kamloops and picking vegetables along the way because they were broke and they needed money and they traveled where the money was, right?

[00:50:57]

My Dad just, he followed his dream. His dream to have horses. He got horses because one of the men, I remember seeing him I don’t remember talking to him but I remember looking at him. His name was Thaka Singh. He was a bachelor who lived at the Brighouse Racetrack and had two horses. He had the turban and the beard. When Thaka Singh was sick he asked my dad to buy his horses. He wanted my dad to buy his horses and send the money to India. He said he knew that my dad was an honourable man and he wouldn’t take the money and abscond with the funds or whatever. So Thaka Singh got my dad into the racing business and dad sent the money back to his family in India. So dad worked in the lumber mills. He had horses. He was wealthy at one time. He became very poor at other times. He always worked hard. That’s who he was. He was one of the first and only East Indians that joined the Canadian Armed Forces during the Second World War because they didn’t want non-whites in the Canadian Forces. They wanted you to join the British Forces but not the Indian Forces but my dad joined, went through basic training, got all the way to Halifax, and they discovered that his trigger finger didn’t work. He’d broken his finger somewhere and he couldn’t pull the trigger. So that was an opportunity to, um, what’s the word I’m looking for?

*REBECA*
Honourable discharge or something?

*CHARAN*
Yeah, but he got no benefits. He got no benefits from being in the army but his army pay book was on top of the bureau the night that he died and I’m thinking, like, “how come dad?” You know, like, “how come?” but he . . . Dad lived his life the way he wanted to and I guess that’s the most you can ask for anybody. He always said he wasn’t going to be an old man in a hospital. He was going to die in the barn. He made it up to the house and then he died. So, you know, um, what did he do here? He was president of . . . When he went to Ocean Falls, there was a temple there so he brought the Bible when the mill was shutting down and the funds needed to go somewhere so he brought the Bible and the money down to Vancouver and gave it to the temple on Burrard and Second and that’s where my mom’s family was. I asked mom, even recently, because divorce was very unusual in the Indian community but my mom and dad they overcame some of that. It was not a very amicable, by a long shot, divorce but eventually they found their way back to being friends and I think it’s because there was a grandson. If you want to spend time with the grandson you take your turns, right? You get together. So my sister was very, very lucky to have a son. He belongs to all of us. Travis is all of ours but when my dad died, along with the papers, his wallet, he had an old picture of my mom in his wallet which just, it just, yeah, you know? And then my mom’s now in a care facility in Richmond and when I was going through her stuff, because she fell and injured her brain so she’s having some difficulties, in her wallet was a picture of my dad. I’m thinking “Jesus Christ you two!” I guess I’m not supposed to say words like that, anyhow. Who knows? Who knows? But mom grew up in Richmond like my dad because she’s only nineteen years older than I am so she was very young to have a family, around my age, but I don’t know. Dad did what he wanted to do. Mom worked hard. Sometimes because he did what he wanted to do she had to work hard. Money was really, really tight when we were growing up, you know, but I still made it to university and came out without a lot of debt. Did you have another thing?

[00:55:23]

*REBECA*
Um, yeah, I mean, it sounds like I have a pretty clear impression of what your dad thought of Canada and it sounds like his citizenship was very important to him. Before we started the interview I mentioned that there’s this one topic that I find quite interesting, and the museum finds quite interesting, but just general first impressions of coming to Canada, was that ever shared with you from your father or was it always just “I am Canadian?”

*CHARAN*
It was always “this is god’s country.” That’s how he would describe it. You know, “this is god’s country.” What was the other one? There was something else about . . . My brain’s just gone blank but there was another phrase he always used to describe . . . Oh! Richmond was the banana belt because it was always sunny in Richmond [laughs]. My mom’s family, my mom comes from a large family. She’s the oldest of eleven and so my cousins and my aunts, they would come to Richmond because Richmond was ‘the country’ right? So they would come out to Richmond for family dinners on Sundays and it was like an all day trip. They almost packed everything because, you know, public transportation really was limited except there were the trams. I went to school on a tram. We had to take a tram to go to school sometimes when I went to kindergarten. It would be where Granville Avenue and Number Three Road . . . somewhere around there. I remember taking a tram and, again, it was safe for kids to take trams. You’re kindergarten and you’re going to school on a tram. My mom used to make dinner on Sundays and there could be five because that’s mom, dad, brother, sister, and me or it could be fifty because if my mom’s sisters came, and their husbands, and their kids. You just didn’t know who was going to be for dinner. Dad would be down at the because the racetrack was still on Lansdowne road even though the races had moved by, I guess it was the late ‘60s early ‘70s they didn’t race there anymore, but dad . . . If somebody was down at the barn and they were hungry he’d just say “come on, Betty will cook for you” and she did. There was no, sort of, ‘aha’ moment. It was just kind of like “this is where you are.”

*REBECA*
It sounds like he was just, sort of, for lack of a better word, gung-ho. He was just really like . . . He was really happy to be in Canada and BC and Richmond.

*CHARAN*
It was just, you know, this was his life. He lived his life the way he wanted to and he’s just a very strong-willed man. A very gentle man.

*REBECA*
Maybe for those who are not too familiar with the horseracing part of Richmond, could you maybe tell me a little bit more about that. You mentioned some memories about, you know, when there were winners and you remember that as a child but maybe just a little bit more about your family’s history with horseracing. Obviously, it’s tied to your father as well.

*CHARAN*
Dad got those first horses when I was about, maybe, two years old so we’re talking 1940s. He started with just racing and training and then dad started to breed horses so we had babies. On Lansdowne Road there was almost five acres, I guess, we had and the paddocks and the barns. Dad would, he had a stud and he’d have mares, he would breed them. We weren’t allowed to go and see anything that was happening. We had to take our turns sitting up with the mares before the full thing but as it got to the actual event he would always side track us and send us somewhere because girls didn’t see certain things. My dad was very strict around the racetrack. The racetrack was . . . Okay, there were three racetracks at one time: Brighouse Racetrack which is now where the Minoru Pavilion is, okay; and then there was Lansdowne Racetrack which is now the shopping center; and then there was Exhibition Park which is now the PNE. They traveled a circuit and dad . . . You know, you would have your horses at home and then you would go to the racetrack to train them and then you would move from the Lansdowne Racetrack to Exhibition Park. That was part of the circuit and then eventually Sandown Racetrack came in which was over in Victoria just on the other . . . So the horses would go from there. My dad also raced in California, in Portland, and on the prairies in Alberta. It was a tough life because you never got a holiday. The horses had to be fed every day. We never went anywhere as kids. We never went on a holiday because all summer long the horses were running, all winter long the horses were at home and horses are first, right?

[01:00:31]

They’re your livelihood but they’re also . . . They were like my dad’s family. There was the stud, the male horse, he knew my dad’s voice. If dad walked out . . . This is when dad moved out of Richmond. He moved to a farm in Langley. If he walked out the door and dad called out “hey guy” the horse would come from wherever he was and come over and, you know, they were his family. They were his kids. He didn’t have a lot of winners. His big dream was always to win a big stag horse race and he never did. I have to tell you one funny story about my dad. Dad’s first name is Phangan, P-H-A-N-G-A-N. Nobody ever called him Phangan. So he was either PS Gill or Cousin Gill. He became Cousin Gill because when the horses were over in Victoria, racing, Native Indians were not allowed to go into a bar back then. So my dad and a bunch of the guys on the track were going into the Sandown Pub or whatever it was and they wouldn’t let one man in because he was Native Indian. So the guy turns to dad and says “tell him I’m your cousin” [laughs]. So dad says “this is my cousin. He’s coming in.” So after that everybody at the racetrack called dad Cousin Gill. You see, there was that community. There was that community in Richmond, there was that community in the horse racing business. My dad was an amateur wrestler so if anybody did anything that he thought was inappropriate, especially if his daughters were around, there’s a nerve here on your neck that if you pinch it or tighten it, it causes excruciating pain. So my dad sometimes would just walk by and give somebody a little tap on the shoulder [laughs]. But the racing business has changed as well. It used to be a family business. You know, the Fishers had race horses and the Gills had race horses and the McDougals had race horses. Now it’s big companies having race horses. So that’s changed, too. I don’t think I really answered your question but . . .

*REBECA*

No, that’s great, yeah.

*CHARAN*
Horses were a part of his life, you know?

*REBECA*

Yeah. One other thing I was interested in is you mentioned that in a lot of ways your family was Canadian, right? You didn’t feel like you were East Indian. You felt like you were Canadian but there are certain ways in which you felt like some of the traditions of the culture came through, specifically with you being a girl and that sort of thing. I was interested if there were any other forms of, you know, how the culture came in, maybe, in different ways?

*CHARAN*
Again, a dichotomy I guess because dad didn’t wear a turban but he didn’t go . . . When we were kids he used to drag us to the temple every Sunday. We’d all have to get in his car and go to the church. He’d be out there a half an hour before the rest of us and tapping his foot because that’s just who he was. So we went to the temple but didn’t really understand what was going on because everything was in Punjabi and my mom and dad did not really speak Punjabi to us. Apparently I was bilingual before I went to school. I don’t remember that. So I can hear the words in my head but if I try and say them it comes out unrecognizable, you know? So I don’t speak Punjabi and that’s a regret that I have. I wish now that I did but maybe it’s too late, maybe it’s not but I don’t hear Punjabi anymore because mom and dad, the only time they ever spoke to us in Punjabi is if there was somebody around and they didn’t want them to know what we were doing or if we had gotten in trouble or something. Yet, the religion, dad, there’s some beliefs that he passed on to us. Whether they be religious or not I don’t know but, supposedly, the day you’re born your life is laid out before you and there’s not a lot you can do to alter that. You live your life the best you can and when your journey reaches its end, it reaches its end. That’s what he always said to us. So don’t cry, and that was the big rule, don’t cry. When my dad died we had, in many ways, an Indian funeral. You know, people have to come to the house and offer their condolences. Because I was the oldest and because, you know, I lived in Richmond, everybody came to my house. So we had maybe hundreds and hundreds of people come through the house which for someone who doesn’t know the culture, that would be very hard.

[01:05:40]

You know, all these people coming to your house to offer their condolences but that was a sign of respect for my dad and so because it would have been important for him we did that but his one rule was, and he used to always tell his relatives on his side, because they were more Indian than my mom’s relatives, “no crying, no shrieking, none of that wailing that goes on at Indian funerals.” So when some of my dad’s relatives came in the house and started to do that I just said to them “what would my dad say to you?” and they stopped. He taught us to be proud of who we were and that fabric of who you are is part because you have roots to India but that doesn’t define who you are. It’s part of who you are. I don’t know how to explain it any other way than that. Values I think are universal, you know, family, honesty, integrity of your name, caring about people, sharing what you can with those you can. I don’t know if those are values from, you know, India or values from my dad or values that are universal.

*REBECA*
I think that makes a lot of sense.

*CHARAN*
Yeah?

*REBECA*
Yeah. I guess one other thing that we should talk about, you brought some items today, but maybe we can talk a little bit about your experience with the *Sea of Stories* or maybe even some of the stuff that came up through that.

*CHARAN*
Well, the biggest shock was that they couldn’t buy property in Canada, you know, in Richmond. I knew about the British properties having all of those restrictions back then but I didn’t realize that Richmond had them. So that was a shock but it was a good thing to learn and it only came up in conversation. We were driving around, we being my mom and I and two of the ladies that were doing the project, and mom just said it like as if everybody had known that forever. I said “Geez, mom. You never mentioned that before” and she went “oh, well. I did now.” It just . . . So doing that *Sea of Stories* thing, it was . . . There were two parts to it. There was the Gill gate, they called it. It was a Richgate project and the *Sea of Stories* project. So the Richgate project was supposed to be symbolically, like gates, what did they mean to you? So for me a gate means it opens both ways. There’s a coming and a going. For that project, you know, we talked a lot about the family in Richmond and the horses and there’s a banner somewhere. I’ve got one. There’s a banner somewhere and those pictures, I thought, were part of somewhere in Richmond. I don’t know if it’s the archives or museum or maybe not. The next project was *Sea of Stories* which was an opportunity to be part of a . . . write a play, something I’ve never ever done. It was, sort of, um, an opportunity to talk about my dad and that’s what I did. It turned out to be something I’m very thankful I had an opportunity to do. I wish I had a copy of the actual play because there were so few people we could invite. I couldn’t invite any of my mom’s and dad’s family to come and see it because we were restricted to, like, four tickets. My uncle Paul, that I mentioned, who, the night I was born said “too bad it’s a girl.” His daughter, it gets complicated, his daughter Vicky is an actress. So in the play Vicky plays me. She played me talking to my dad a year after he died and sort of looking through the artefacts. You know, we talk about “why was your passport there?” and “why was your . . .” because those things, still, I don’t have an answer for. The *Sea of Stories* gave me a chance to see how people’s stories unfold because there were a number, we weren’t the only ones, there was a number; small community though for Richmond because one of the other stories was about . . . Oh, I’ve just forgotten the name but it was like a neighbour. Just a second, I’ll look it up here. Of course, I’m without my reading glasses.

*REBECA*
Take your time.

*CHARAN*

Uh.

*REBECA*
I can help you if you tell me what you’re looking for.

*CHARAN*
Fry, I think is the one. Yeah, it is one. [ Margreth Fry Indecipherable - Both people speaking]. She is an artist in Richmond.

[01:10:42]

That’s one of her postcards. She grew up and her neighbour was . . . I’ve forgotten. Can you see his name somewhere?

*REBECA*

There’s . . . The names I see, uh, Greta Fry and Max McNair.

*CHARAN*
Max McNair. Okay, so Max McNair, McNair family, McNair High School. Okay, he’s related . . . My sister’s first husband who was killed in a car accident a number of years back, Travis’ dad, he’s part of the Blair, McNair families [laughs]. So this lady telling her story about meeting Max McNair turns out to be Uncle Max. My sister’s uncle in-law. So it was like Richmond was still that small community. You could still see those small community connections. Kit Grauer did one and Kit Grauer and I went through . . . I went to high school or school with her brother and Kit went to school with my sister. So, you know, like Richmond in some ways is still a small community but the *Sea of Stories*, um, it was an opportunity to hear about other people coming to Richmond and other . . . Like Kit’s family, their land was expropriated for the airport, right? It took them forever to do anything with the land. It sat there for years and, you know, Max and me . . . Uh, Uncle Max was this person that came over and took over her yard and kept planting gardens whether she wanted him or not and taught her how to make jams and jelly. So it was a chance to hear about that part of Richmond. Yeah.

*REBECA*

So you enjoyed the experience?

*CHARAN*

I did. Again, and I’m going to, you know, if there’s anybody out there listening I would love a copy of the play [laughs]. I don’t understand why I can’t, you know, if they’ve got it somewhere, I don’t understand why I can’t have a copy but . . .

*REBECA*
Fair enough.

*CHARAN*
But sometimes you don’t get what you want. Oh, it’s funny, it opened to a picture of my dad [laughs].

*REBECA*

Yeah, it did. I noticed that [laughs].

*CHARAN*

My dad always said that when he died and we saw a hawk it was him coming back to say hello to us because when he was in India he had a hawk. They had them and, since my dad has died, you would not believe the number of times that a hawk has flown over me. When I went to that one and only time to India with my mom, we were sitting in the village where my dad’s nephew lives and I’m looking out and all of a sudden I look over to this fence and there’s a hawk sitting on the fence watching us. I said “mom, dad came to say hello to us.” You know, like, it . . . I am not religious but I think I’m spiritual. There’s got to be something [laughs].

*REBECA*
I agree. I agree with you.

*CHARAN*

That’s weird that you’d opened to that page.

*REBECA*
Mhm. Yeah, it did.

*CHARAN*

I’ll just close it up now [laughs].

*REBECA*

[laughs]. Well, let’s see, so, um, is that, um, *Sea of Stories*, is this mostly what you’ve got here. You’ve got something else as well?

*CHARAN*

Oh, well, these are just other things. You know, like, this was the Lansdowne Racetrack and that was across the street from our house and that was like, you know. As well, it’s one of those things that you collect and you hang onto because you do. Dad’s been part of a couple of other ones like the *Stories from Shedrow [Whispers from the Shedrows],* I think is one of them, and then that other side of him, becoming India, there was a book put out, I’m not sure when but they interviewed my dad before he died so ’93-ish. They also interviewed my grandma, my mom’s mom. It was about people coming to Canada and pioneer families and so we have a balance in both worlds, I guess. You know, um, Richmond and yet India taps in there once in a while even though there’s no real connection to India. There is and there isn’t. There’s some . . . I would love to go again for one trip. I would never . . . I should never say never. I don’t think I would go back to the village because there’s nothing there. The one person that knew my dad has died so there’s nothing there. I’ve seen the village, I’ve paid my respects to my dad’s home even though that wasn’t his home. His home was here but I saw what I wanted to see. I’d like to go back to see other parts of it and maybe one day I will.

*REBECA*
It’s great that you were able to go though and have that conversation.

*CHARAN*

Oh, yeah, you know. I could understand, you know, all these people, you know, me with my short hair, right? So they didn’t know what to make of me. I didn’t wear the Indian clothes. I wore a long dress and I was respectful. I covered my head and all that kind of stuff but, you know, the only way that I could . . . I took my dad’s Polaroid camera. I took my camera but I took my dad’s Polaroid camera. I don’t know why but I bought about eight rolls of Polaroid film. You probably don’t know what a Polaroid is, you’re too young [laughs].

[01:15:55]

When we were in the villages they don’t have pictures, right? They don’t have cameras, a lot of them. They have cellphones now but they didn’t have them back then. So I could take pictures of people and it’s really interesting because they would show respect to me because I was my dad’s daughter. They’d never known my dad. They didn’t know who he was but they’d heard all the stories about him, you know, him coming to Canada. He brought all of his family here. We sponsored his family and they’re all here but they would be shy about standing with their husbands because they don’t refer to somebody as their husband. It’s always “this is so and so’s father. So it’s not my husband but it’s my child’s father.” So, trying to figure out who was related to who sometimes was tricky but you could take a Polaroid and say “stand with your family so I can take your picture.” So I took all these pictures and gave them all away and I think dad would have liked that and they got a picture.

*REBECA*

Speaking of pictures, you did bring some didn’t you? Just one?

*CHARAN*
No, no, I’ve got tons of pictures. Those were dad’s babies. Dad and his horses, right? He just . . . I didn’t . . . What I should have brought for you, and I don’t think I did, is one of the racetrack pictures. We have, like I said, our family album where you see all of us growing up through the years. I didn’t bring that one. Oh, but I did . . . Dad used to take everybody, I said, to the Chinese restaurant for dinner. The Bamboo Terrace was the restaurant in Vancouver on Pender. One of my aunts found a menu [laughs]. So it’s . . .

*REBECA*

That was when there was a winner?

*CHARAN*
Yes, every time we won dad took not just us, everybody who was there, he would take them to dinner and he could speak Chinese. He spoke because he lived in Singapore so he could speak Cantonese. He’d be talking away in Cantonese to whomever was there. I didn’t bring those pictures with me [REBECA: That’s okay.] but there’s like, I say, pictures of us from me as a baby and all the way through. This is my dad’s last winner, though. The one on the banner. Where’s that one of the . . . Oh, shoot, just a second.

*REBECA*

I’m just looking at the prices.

*CHARAN*
Yeah the prices.

*REBECA*
And the photos there. There are some historical photos in here.

*CHARAN*
This is the house on Lansdowne Road. That’s the house I remember as being home. This is the Lansdowne Mall going up behind the house.

*REBECA*
Is this you?

*CHARAN*
No, that’s my sister. That’s my sister. That’s Lansdowne Road again with a barn behind. This is Thaka Singh This is the man that got my dad into racing.

*REBECA*
Wow.

*CHARAN*

I guess one of the things that sort of drew home for me is that, you know, we spend all our life collecting all these things and all these pictures and then at the end nobody wants them [laughs]. Nobody wants all the pictures right? One of the family friends that had horses was the McGuiness family. They never had any children so Dad would include them in our family. This was their horse. When you cross the finishing line they always took a picture and then you went to the winner’s circle and you had a picture taken there. Some nights there would be maybe twenty people taking a picture with my dad and, um, Jesse, when she died, this is Jesse here because Don died way before her, they had no family, they had no children, so we became their surrogate kids.

[01:20:14]

They’d come to my house for dinner and Christmas dinner and stuff like that because Dad would say “you have to have them.” When she got older, even though she had family back in the prairies. She wanted me to take all of her horse pictures. I said “I can’t do that. Those belong to your family. They’re not mine.” So she gave me a couple and I still have them but, again, what do you do with all that stuff?

*REBECA*
I suppose you just honour the wishes and that’s something in and of itself?

*CHARAN*

Yeah, but what about all my stuff? You know? [laughs]. Dad always had baby horses and always had dogs. There were baby German Shepherds or Rottweiler’s or whatever. Yeah, not very good care of that picture.

*REBECA*
It’s amazing that it’s here, though.

*CHARAN*
That would have been, oh, gee, that had to have been early ‘40s.

*REBECA*
A special bond between human and animal.

*CHARAN*

You see, that’s on the banner that they do have, that one would be the winner’s circle of my dad’s last winner. So there’s my dad, my mom, and me in that picture. This is the horse crossing the finishing line and then this was a Great Dane because when dad, his dog had died, so the year before my dad died we bought, for Christmas, a Great Dane for dad because it was coming full circle, right? Dad had the nerve to die so the Great Dane had to come and live with us but the size of that thing was . . . This is when he was a puppy. Duke ended up weighing almost 200 pounds.

*REBECA*

Almost like a little horse [laughs].

*CHARAN*

Yes. I’m too heavy to ride him but [laughs] . . . but just all the mementos of the racing, right? And they are at the oval. There’s a display at the oval about sports in Richmond or something so they asked if they could put some of dad’s stuff there. So there’s some things there and hopefully there will be some things in the archives and the museum. I want people to know that he was here and that he lived because you don’t have graves. East Indians, that is something that we follow. We don’t have a grave. You’re cremated and your ashes are scattered. There’s no place to go and say “that person was here” except you can say that about, you know, he was here. He was everywhere. I think this has been an opportunity and if it keeps . . . It lets people remember what Richmond was. Maybe we can hang on to parts of it even though we’re not a small community anymore. Progress, if that’s the right word. I’m not sure it is but things change. You can’t stop it but maybe every once in a while stop and remember that you should know your neighbour.

*REBECA*
I think that’s very true and I totally agree with you. These photos . . .

*CHARAN*
That’s me and my sister and my brother.

*REBECA*

The eldest? Yeah.

*CHARAN*
Yeah.

*REBECA*
There’s somebody in this photo but I think it would be hard to tell.

*CHARAN*
I don’t have my glasses on so I don’t have a clue but there’s a dog at the front [laughs].

*REBECA*

Yeah and a kid there and I think there’s a horse on the other side of the fence.

*CHARAN*
Oh, yeah because they were right there. Our horses were right there. We’re very lucky to have had some of the memories we have. That’s the car, my mom’s last brand new car that I drove and somebody rear-ended me, crunched the whole back, and it was full of girls from Texas because they were part of Phrateres They’d come up for a conference and they were so impressed with how polite the cops were because the police were saying “it’s okay, dear. It’ll be fine. Nobody got hurt.” Down home they’d be pulling a gun [laughs]. So you think to yourself “yeah, mom’s poor car got crumpled.” I’ll put these things away.

*REBECA*

I think we covered a lot today and I followed up with everything that I wanted to but I always like to give the opportunity to say if there’s anything else that you’d like to add that I haven’t asked you about or that you haven’t been able to, sort of, fit into what you were talking about I’d like to give you the opportunity to now and if you don’t have anything that’s fine, too. You have some really, I think, meaningful reflection throughout this whole history.

*CHARAN*
I don’t know, I guess when I’m flipping through these things here there’s . . . Years ago I wrote something called The Lansdowne Road Story and, you know, um, I guess that theme all the time, like, we’re all here. We should be able to celebrate that we’re all here and we’re more alike than are different. I like that all I needed to know I learned in kindergarten; be nice to each other, if you borrow something put it back [laughs]. Life lessons don’t have to be huge and I’m really worried about Mr. Trump [laughs]. Let’s hope the world is still a better place.

*REBECA*

Alright, well, thank you very much. I’m going to turn this off now but, yeah, thank you very much. That was really lovely.

END OF TAPE PART ONE OF ONE

[01:26:09]

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)