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| Metadata Field | Description | Data Entry |
| Title | Title of Document |  Rebeca\_Salas\_With\_Kanwal\_Neel\_100416 Complete  |
| Accession Number | Catalogue Number of the File | (Administrator Only) |
| Interviewee | Name of Interviewee (SURNAME, given name(s), middle initial) |  Kanwal Neel  |
| Interviewer  | Name of Interviewer (Surname, given name(s), middle initial) |  Rebeca Salas  |
| Interview Date  | YYYY/MM/DD |  2016/10/04  |
| Interview Date (non-preferred format) | Eg. November 13, 2014 or MM/DD/YY |  October 04, 2016  |
| Collection ID |  | (Administrator Only) |
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| Series |  | (Administrator Only) |
| Summary | Brief summary of the interview session (Copy and paste from Form 13 – Session Summary) |  Kanwal Neel begins the interview reflecting on his childhood growing up in Kenya and how his parents came to Canada. He talks about what his mother and father did for work, and how that influenced his desire to become a teacher and community volunteer. Kanwal then explains his involvement in creating engaging mathematics videos to help adult learners earn their grade eleven math credit so they could graduate from high school. He then describes his life journey, becoming the president of the Math Teachers Association, and the efforts he made to understand and address education issues in First Nations communities. Near the end of the interview Kanwal contemplates how his hopes and dreams have changed since first arriving in Canada.   |
| Keywords | Keywords indicating interview subjects (Copy and Paste from “Keyword” section of Form 12 Interview Summary.) |  Mathematics, Volunteer, Teacher, Kenya, Richmond, Aboriginal, Dissertation, Immigration, Education  |
| Subject | Subject headings applicable to the Interview. The OHC uses Library of Congress Subject Headings. |  Kenya, India, Vancouver, Kitsilano, Boy Scouts, 1957 World Jamboree, Steveston Secondary School, Queen of England, High Boyd, Teaching, Open Learning Agency, Simon Fraser University, Khalsa School, Terra Nova |
| Duration | Length of Interview Session (if applicable) hh:mm:ss |  01:17:57  |
| 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

Why don’t we start with where you were born.

KANWAL

Alright, really nice to be here. I was born in Mombasa. It is a coastal town of Kenya and my parents had migrated from India to Kenya. My father was a teacher and I grew up in Mombasa. My childhood was spent from the early ‘50s getting to know different parts of Kenya and also my father was quite involved in a lot of volunteer work with the Boy Scouts, with the St. John Ambulance, and doing all sorts of community work. I think the seed had been sewn earlier in me in terms of: it’s important to give back, it’s important to do volunteer work for others and help out and things, and also to be engaged in your community, and be involved in a variety of activities. So growing up I was involved in athletics, in field hockey, in the Boy Scouts, and then of course our family would get a chance to travel. So the travel bug was with me also. It was really a life which is full of adventure, a life that took you to a variety of places, and also gave you an opportunity to reflect on who you are. You don’t realize when you’re living in that society . . . Until Independence, the schools I went to were predominantly Asian and then there were schools for Europeans and then there were schools for Africans. After Independence, the slow assimilation happened but my growing up was predominantly living with people from Asian heritage in Kenya. So it was important that you learned the language. At that time I knew about four languages and I still do. That was an important piece. The other piece was you’d travelled around quite a bit and so our move to Canada came about as my sister and I . . . I have a sister, one year older than me, we had both finished O-levels which is equivalent to about grade ten or eleven and especially children from Asian parents basically made two or three choices. Number one was . . . It was very difficult because you weren’t Kenyan citizens, you were British subjects. You either went to India for university education or you went to England or you chose a totally different pathway. So my parents applied to come to Canada as immigrants and we didn’t have any relatives and we didn’t know anybody here other than dad did know that Vancouver had a large Sikh community. So he thought “okay, that might be something to root for.” We came in 1969. So in the late ‘60s, I guess Pierre Trudeau had started that whole idea of having immigrants here on a point system. So you came here when you married, not only that you could come with your family, and also there was a need for math and science teachers. So dad was a science teacher and I was finishing my O-levels so dad was figuring out, you know, what is the best option. We wanted to come as a family so they felt it wasn’t okay to just send us to India or England or any of those things. So, as a family, we migrated to Canada. From December, that’s when the school year kind of ended, and then here the school year started in September. So we made our move in July so I had a few months in between from that December of ’68 until August or July of ’69. I taught in a high school for a few years. I had no experience in teaching but enjoyed learning math. I was given a class. It was an African school and I remember teaching a group of fifty students and I was basically trying to stay one day ahead of the kids. I think I did okay because the kids performed quite well [laughs] and also there was a year . . . For about a month my friend and I, we hitchhiked through Kenya. You know, it is unheard of that, you know, you’d get a chance to get out and see the country and we did see the countryside.

### [00:05:35]

We went, visited places totally unknown and there was no fear of travelling. There was no apprehension of what you’re going to do and what you’re going to find. So it was basically accepting where you are and what you need to do. So that was that foundation of being adventurous, also having that sense that “you know what, anything is possible” and you move on. So in 1969 our whole family moved to Canada and so that first sixteen years or whatever. I think that would be my phase I would call as the growing up period. So coming to Canada, dad didn’t have a job and we had no idea where we were going to end up so we stayed at the Sikh temple on Second Avenue in Vancouver and here we are, new to this country, and not knowing what was in store for us. It was just a fascinating time to be because my sister and I, and I had a younger brother, we were all carefree. Mom and dad had put us in school. I went to Kitsilano High School for two weeks and my sister and I and my brother went to the elementary school nearby. It was a real culture shock, even in the sense that the Sikhs here in Vancouver basically did not practice the faith that we had been practicing in Kenya. So, it was a variety of different ways of us finding the culture shock. The culture shock not only being in Canada but also the culture shock of seeing the Sikhs here. So there’s, you know, culture shock on many levels. We started going to school and I remember dad didn’t have a job. The BCTF building was on Burrard Street so he walked there and they said “you know what, Richmond is hiring teachers and why don’t you go look at that?” So my mom and dad, this is the story they tell me, they took the bus to Richmond, came to the Richmond School Board office, and they came in, and one of the funny things was dad had a resume but in that resume he had a picture. Dad was very much involved in the Boy Scouts movement and in the Boy Scouts movement he had the privilege of taking the contingent from Kenya to the 1957 World Jamboree in England. So he had been to England and when he was at the World Jamboree he had been presented to the queen. So there was a picture of him and the queen. So he goes in, he shows the picture to the assistant superintendent, and the assistant superintendent looks at it and he says “can you start tomorrow?” There were no questions asked because I think he understood that if there is a person who has the capability of being so involved in a community, they would be an asset here. To make a long story short, the next day dad started teaching chemistry at Steveston Secondary School and that next weekend we came to Richmond, started to look for a house to rent, and we would walk many miles. There were many ditches in Richmond at that time and not many buses. Our family would get somewhere and as soon as we got there they’d say “sorry, the house has been rented” even though you made the call, you had made the attempt to find that particular residence. After about three, four of those tries we finally ended up in one place and the gentleman was there and he took us in the house, he showed us the house, and he says “what do you do?” and my dad explained “I’ve just got a teaching job here in Richmond” and it wasn’t very close to the school so he says “well, the house is yours if you want it” and we said “sure, we’d love to move in.”

### [00:10:18]

This gentleman was a recent immigrant from the former Yugoslavia and he had had a similar experience coming to Canada, nobody would give him a house, nobody would give him a job so he kind of empathized with us. Anyway, he rented the house and he said “so where are you staying?” we said “well, we’re in Vancouver at the temple” he says “I’ll take you there. I’ll drive you all there and whenever you’re ready to move your stuff I’ll come by and I’ll pick you up.” So, you can see that there are good people everywhere. You know, you’ve got to take your blessings and say “you know what, we had no idea who this gentleman was but, you know, over the years he became a good family friend.” So we rented out the first house and then dad started teaching and then that following weekend we moved to Richmond and my sister and I went to Steveston Secondary School. We both graduated from there and those first few months in the school system was also quite challenging because you had been to an education system which was very much based on the British system and here was the Canadian system where you had a lot more independence, autonomy in how you wanted to study and what you wanted to do. Anyway, long story short we both graduated and we both got entrance scholarships to UBC and we both went to UBC. I got my degree in computer science and mathematics and my sister got it in pharmacy and my brother was a few years younger, he went to chiropractor college. Dad started teaching at Steveston, carried on, and then he moved on to McNair. What we found in those early years was, it was quite challenging, it was quite challenging going out. There was a lot of ignorance and racism but at the same time people were also . . . There were people who were very accepting and knowledgeable, too. So you had the dichotomy. You had to kind of understand both sides. I remember the very first few years, you know, you’re out somewhere and people would be basically asking “so when are you going back?” and that was that mindset at that time that you’re going back. I don’t know what that ‘back’ meant. Anyway, it was something which was a different phenomenon. Anyway, long story short, I graduated with my degree and in those university years I started to compete in track. I was competing for UBC but then injuries took over and then I also competed for the Richmond track and field club and then I started to coach with them and then I started to officiate. That officiating has been one channel of my way of giving back for the last forty-five years.

REBECA

Mhm.

KANWAL

To me, that opened many doors for me. I think, when I got my first job it’s because I’m doing some officiating, doing some coaching. I’ve had the privilege of officiating three Common-wealth Games, World Championships. Each one of these places you go, I’d probably would be the only person wearing a turban but at the same token you see the profound acceptance of people when you are in the field of play, that all barriers get removed. You are feeling a sense of community and I think, many times, you see kids from poor nations who succeed is because they put all of that behind and to them sports is what matters. So I’ve had the privilege of seeing athletes, some of the most elite athletes in the world, and some of the kids who are just here to work with them to help them grow. You take that privilege because you are working with those children as a person who is interested in fair play, interested in sports, and working with that. So that sports part of my journey has been profoundly connected with me and I have had friends throughout the world, you know, I’ve got friends . . .

### [00:15:45]

In 1982 I had the opportunity of going to Australia, Brisbane, and officiating there and then over the years Australians have come and stayed with us, we have gone and stayed with them so the world becomes very small, right? And then in . . . So that was my growing up and staying connected with sport. The other piece that I thought was important is also being grounded in culture. When we first came to Canada and, you know, mom and dad were also very interested to make sure that we maintained our heritage, maintained our language, maintained the culture. So, we would speak Punjabi at home and, of course, we would be well versed in English and Punjabi. And then I got involved in a folk dancing group and that was the Bhangra. The Bhangra has also been another venue which has taken me places because in 1974 we had just formed one of the first Bhangra groups in Canada. We were invited to the World

Fair in Spokane, so we performed there and one of the big things we did at that World Fair was that at the end of every performance we would have a section where we would get all the audience involved. So there’s a participation piece and that participation piece was just beautiful because, you know, here was that star getting others to learn the art form. That art form carried on for many years to come and now, as you’ve probably seen, Bhangra has become quite mainstream and I’m so, so pleased when you see many performances which have become fusion art. I’ve seen performances where the Scottish Highland dancers and the Bhangra dancers perform together or a First Nations drummer and the Dhol drum are played together. So, this again breaks barriers in many, many different ways. So I kept on my whole notion of being interested in sports, carrying on with that in the art form but I also tried to make sure that . . . I now had become a qualified teacher, I had become a math teacher and, again, in 1977 was my first year of teaching and, again, I went for the interview. Basically, they were looking for a math teacher but in those days it was openly asked “so what are you willing to coach?” So I could coach the track and field team, I could coach the cross country team, I could help with the computer club, I could help with the math club so you can do all those things and you had the energy to do all those things. So I did that and my first teaching job was at Hugh Boyd and from ’69 to ’79 I think I would call those first ten years of knowing the land. I got to know what was Canada all about, get to have your foundation somehow, and you start looking and saying, you know “how do I make a difference?” and “who am I here?” I guess my next ten years would be almost like harvesting the land, right? I have come here, now I have started my teaching career, and you start getting involved with professional development, you start learning, and you start meeting other colleagues who have ideas and you start picking up ideas and you say “you know what, what is it that makes your classroom tick? How can I make my classroom engaging, interesting, active, and all of those things?” So the next ten years were also the start of my family. In 1982, actually in 1980, I met my wife Nancy. She was a lab technologist and, again, we were introduced by a mutual friend and, though we were both at UBC at the same time, never met each other but, you know, you graduate and you meet each other.

### [00:20:26]

She is also of Sikh origin. Our journeys are very interesting. Both of us have our parents that grew up in India. My parents came to Kenya, her parents went to Thailand and then in the early ‘70s they’d come to Canada. As you can see, our parents in their lifetime made three big moves, or two big moves. So anyway, in 1982 we got married and then we had two children. We have two daughters and they were born in ’84 and ’86. Fast forward, last year my older daughter got married and this year my younger daughter got married. Again, both of them have had . . . I’ll just talk about them and then I’ll come back to me. Both of my daughters, I think, have been, we have been very fortunate that they have a sense of giving back to the community. Both of them have done well in their own ways. Our older daughter went to study medicine in Australia and she liked it there, found somebody there, so she’s living there and doing her residency in Obstetrics and Gynecology. Our younger daughter became a teacher, had a wonderful experience as an international teacher in China, in Thailand, and now has got her Masters in Counselling and is a counsellor in North Vancouver. Like I said, we both count our blessings that, you know, they not only are good people but we hope that they can give back in the community. The ‘80s, you start getting in your career and you kind of start wondering “so, what am I doing? What do I need to do to give back and move forward?” One of the things that I also had an interest in is researching about how the Sikhs first got into Canada and what is their history. I got interested looking at what had happened to the Japanese-Canadian, what was happening to the Aboriginal-Canadian, what was happening to different ethnic groups that had come and who had had some mishappenings. This is when I got interested in the *Komagata Maru* incident. I started finding out what were some of the issues and what were some of the problems and how do we make it better. So in 1989 I had the . . . Actually in 1987, ’88, we started thinking. 1989 was the seventy-fifth anniversary of the *Komagata Maru* incident and I managed to work with one of the temples and did a number of events and have a plaque acknowledging it and had some events acknowledged in that event but that was . . . The seed had been sewn into looking at the centennial in 2014 and then this year having the formal apology. So it’s been a long journey but it’s been a very fruitful journey. My goal in all of this was, just as an educator, how do we let others know about this Canadian incident and how do we make sure that we do not repeat such racism here? That was my, I guess, background or goal behind all of that. In 1989, I had a slight change of path in my professional career. Simon Fraser University hires something called faculty associates. So what they do is they bring in teachers who are practicing teachers for a couple of years at the university and who worked with student teachers and then after those couple of years you go back into the classroom. So this way, the student teachers get the most current pedagogy as to what is happening in the schools, how do you make the difference and how do you keep on learning, and how do you keep on researching. So, 1989 to ’91, I had that opportunity of being a faculty associate and I think it really made me reflect and think about my teaching. I said “okay, I need to change.” The kids are learning in rows in my math classroom and they’re getting bored, how do I need to change that? It was really ironic that I needed to find out “how do I engage them, how do I make my classes active, how do I move on?” In ’91 I returned to a different school. I had been at Hugh Boyd. I returned to Steveston and I remember the first few days I started teaching and I had, you know, changed my classes into groups of fours. I had brought in all these hands-on materials, hands-on manipulatives, teaching with them, and the kids were getting it and they were quite happy with the learning that was happening.

### [00:25:55]

 It was really a very powerful time for me to see where things were going. Now I started taking extra risks, I started speaking at conferences, I started sharing some of the ideas that had gained. Those ideas kept on spreading. I was starting to take risks. I think one of the biggest risks I took was in ’93 is . . . Open Learning Agency at that time was wanting to make videotapes about teaching math. They had a number of people who could not graduate because they couldn’t get an equivalent of Math eleven. So they needed a math course to graduate from high school and these were adults who really were having a hard time. They wanted a math video and they wanted to teach that. Anyway, I auditioned for the video. What’s there to lose, so let’s try it, right? So basically who’s who from the math community was there to audition. So I go and audition and they said “well, teach us about the slope of a line.” All my math friends and geeks went in with their formulas and they were teaching the formulas. I was wearing shoes with shoestrings so I took my shoelaces out and I showed them what slope was and how slope varied, what is zero slope, and what is negative slope. Slope is just a matter of moving a line from horizontal to vertical. The director basically took one look and he stopped and he says “I finally get it.” I don’t need those formulas I need something visual. You know, you had that idea of how to present it. So, anyway, long story short they hired me as one of the co-hosts presenting it and there were two of us so I was the math person and my co-host was actually a stand-up comedian; Christina and I. It was a wonderful way of bouncing ideas so we made sixteen half-hour shows and those shows were run by Knowledge Network for the next twenty years. It was a really great way to, kind of, get that teaching of math out in the open. From then on I had many names: math guy, you know. It was an instantaneous recognition of teaching math and moving on. That opened, really, lots of doors for me and it was wonderful professional development for me too, to figure out what needs to be done. Each one of our sixteen shows would start with a problem, we would teach the math, and solve the problem. It was a precursor to that whole problem-based learning. It had been a great way to move forward with that. The show came on and the show was really successful and then a couple of publishers approached me so then I became an author with a couple of math textbook series: Math Makes Sense, which is still used in the schools. I was one of the authors with those textbooks and then the people on the BC Math Teachers Executive said “you know, why don’t you join our organization?” so I joined the organization and then in late ‘90s I basically joined the executive for a few years. I think it was in ’99, I became the president of the BC Math Teachers Association. So when I was the president, I had the opportunity of travelling to different parts of BC. As I’m travelling, I am seeing what is happening in different sections and I was quite alarmed by how poorly the Aboriginal children were doing in math. There were a number of statistical ideas that told us this was happening and I needed to find out for myself what is it that is hindering them? How can we shift that thinking? So that was one of my ideas that I started to, kind of, working with that.

### [00:30:28]

REBECA

Can I interrupt?

KANWAL

Sure.

REBECA

I’m just going to see if there’s a second door that they can close there.

Rebeca tries to reduce outside noise by finding a second door to close.

### [00:30:36 – 00:31:13]

REBECA

Okay, continue. Sorry.

KANWAL

So I’m travelling around the province and I’m looking and I’m going “okay, you know what, something needs to shift here.” We started working with some of the publishers and started including content which had some Aboriginal ideas, Aboriginal ways of thinking, Aboriginal ways of knowing, Aboriginal ways of learning and that was something that was in the back of my mind. How do we move that forward? That was that piece that kind of resonated with . . . Are you okay with that?

REBECA

Yeah, as long as it’s not distracting you.

KANWAL

No, no, I’m fine.

REBECA

Okay.

KANWAL

So that was the piece that I started, you know, thinking about it and going “okay, how do I move this forward?” I started off that knowing the land was the first, and then harvesting the land, and now it was, kind of, “you have started harvesting and now the fruits are coming” and you need to really get down to “how do you make a difference?” The next ten years was starting to learn how do you make that difference. So 2004 I left Richmond professionally. I’m still living here. I’ve been living here since we came in ’69 and we sure have seen the community grow. I think I’ll always call Richmond my home. For many reasons, not only just the land but the people, the perspectives, and the variety of different diversities that we have here. In 2004 I came to SFU again, full-time. I started working in teacher education. I started as a faculty associate once again and then from there I moved to a coordinator position and then I moved to the associate director and I did a variety of roles there. At the same time, I started working on my doctorate and in my doctorate that fundamental question that I had been asking about myself and asking about, you know, how do we make it better for Aboriginal children to learn and do well in mathematics was in the back of my mind. I changed that a little bit talking with my supervisor, Dr. Peter Liljehdal and Dr. Mark Fettes. They put me in touch with Vonnie Hutchinson who was the director of education in Haida Gwaii. Haida children were also having those difficulties. So, I went to Haida Gwaii and what my thesis turned out to be is looking at numeracy in the community of Haida Gwaii and how the Haida practiced numeracy and how do we use that notion of practicing numeracy and put it in the school curriculum. Not the other way around. We had the curriculum and then we’d go to the community. Now we bring the community into the curriculum. It was a fascinating time for me. A time to talk to carvers, jewellery makers, totem pole makers, talking to fishermen, talking to loggers, and hearing their stories. When you start talking to them, none of them said they used math but when you get deeper into questioning them they had profound knowledge of three dimensional spatial sense, they had profound knowledge of how do we have the sense of patterns, how do we understand the land, how do we understand the environment, how do we look at the whole notion of scaling, and how do we even go as simple as designing a button blanket.

### [00:35:24]

It came with the cultural stories, but then they embodied symmetry, they embodied looking at tessellations, they were all part of the ideas that were very, very intuitive for them. So, taking that intuitive sense and making it more concrete and making it more outward was the challenge. I was really fortunate to use some of those ideas and make that part of my dissertation. That dissertation then was quite good that I had the opportunity to work with the Sto:lo Nation and work with the Squamish Nation and come up with some resources for those Nations too. As I’m going along in all of this, somewhere in the late ‘90s I had the opportunity of making the drum. The drum making workshop was also my connection as a person with the aboriginal community. As you’re making the drum, one of the things that you also have an opportunity is to reflect about yourself, reflect about who you are, reflect about what your journey has been. In a way, this drum kind of reflects my journey. The drum, I have painted the drum, and it took me a few years to paint the drum. I chose to put the maple leaf as the center of the drum. The maple leaf to me represents the land that I live in Canada; represents the environment we are. The First Nations use two colours primarily. They use black and they use red. Red usually represents life and the maple leaf is representing life. And though my outside of the drum has twelve numerals, almost looking like a clock, they’re from different cultures but these cultures are from the past but they guide us into the present and the future. So the numerals that I’ve represented on my drum go from one to twelve and they will go from one with the Hindu-Arabic and leading up to the twelve which is the binary system which is the foundation of our technology now, everything is done in binary. You have the Babylonians, and then you have the Romans, and then you have the Chinese, you have the Brahmi. So these are different representations on the clock. We are here for a finite period of time but life goes on. As the life goes on, the drum also represents that heartbeat. It’s the heartbeat [begins to beat drum to the rhythm of a heartbeat]. We will hear that in the Aboriginal cultures but that heartbeat is in every culture in every human being. The beat goes faster. The beat goes slower. There might be a pattern. There might not be a pattern, but that beat is what connects us. It’s what connects one human to another, one culture to the other, one race to the other. What we need to do is breathe. We all breathe the same air but we sometimes forget that. We sometimes forget the rhythm, the beat, and the heartbeat. So as I play the drum, I reflect on my journey, I reflect on my journey. It’s been a great heartbeat and you don’t know how many heartbeats you have but that beat of that community stays with you. The beat of the people stays with you. Though I’m formally retired from my day-to-day teaching but I continue and I continue with a wonderful project at SFU called Friends of Simon. Friends of Simon is one of those projects where we have young, bright, caring undergraduates that go out and work with immigrant and refugee kids, mentor them, tutor them, give them hope so that circle of that beat carries on.

### [00:40:38]

All you can do is you hope that you carry on that rhythm, that beat. This is the only way I feel that we can take away that whole notion of the chaos that we feel in different parts of the world. Those parts of the world could be right here in our community, or it could be in a small First Nations community which doesn’t have running water, or it could be an inner-city place where people are homeless, or we don’t have to go outside Canada to see what is happening, the travesties, or you go to a war torn place in the Middle East or Africa or Asia. I think at the end of the day what you need to think about is, you need to have that compassion and with that compassion have that passion of working with others, working with people, working with a life that lets you be who you are but also be with likeminded people. If the people are not likeminded, I think you’ve got to hear the different perspectives. I remember one researcher telling me that research is all about people, places, and perspectives. So it’s the people and then it’s the different places and you’d be grounded where you are but enable you to travel the world and be prepared to listen to different perspectives. There are different ways people approach different perspectives and carry on with those particular perspectives and then work with that. I think I’ll let you see if you would like me to talk a little bit more in depth of certain parts.

REBECA

Sure. I think before . . . I have some questions going back in time but before we go back in time I guess I’m a little bit curious about what you see for yourself in the future. I’m assuming a big part of that would be family. Your daughters are married I’m assuming their future plans are possibly for children, that sort of thing. But what do you see for yourself in the future. Not necessarily just in Richmond but just in general.

KANWAL

Mhm. Thank you. I remember when I was retiring and people would always ask me “so what are your plans? What are you planning to do five years from now, ten years from now?” or whatever. Sometimes we spend so much time thinking about the future that we don’t live in the present. I think my pet answer for the first little bit was the universe will unfold and I will be told what I need to do. I have been so blessed in the sense that, ever since I’ve retired, I had no idea that I’m going to have been presented with a project which has given me so much back in terms of the heart and the mind. I had no idea both my daughters were going to get married. I had no idea that I would have the opportunity of travelling different places. That is where the beauty is that we have to let go and let the universe speak. It’s not that you don’t plan things, yes you do plan. For example, in December I’m going to go to Australia to visit my daughter. My wife and I are going to go. We’ll have some travelling time but at the same token when we return again it’s wide open. I do see myself in the years to come, health permitting, is to keep giving back to the community be it in the line of culture, be it in sports, be it in volunteerism, be it in teaching. Those are some of the things which I think can become of who I am. That’s what I hope and I will keep on giving. This is where I think you keep on getting inspired and you inspire others. It’s that beat that you keep on working on.

### [00:45:16]

Um, grandchildren, both of them said not yet but we’ll wait and see what happens. To me, family is a very important part of my life. My parents are still alive and they live in Richmond and to be grounded in one generation and then with the other generation and I think that’s an important piece for me. So family’s important but also community is important. When I say community it’s . . . There are a number of communities that I could see myself as being grounded in, you know. I’ve got that whole . . . the community of educators, the community of being in the Sikh community, being in that community of athletics. I have known a number of people that were officiating or competing at the Rio Olympics, so there’s that community. There are communities within the community and you carry on, you know, weaving through those particular communities and working with those.

REBECA

Mhm. So keep on doing you [laughs].

KANWAL

Yes, that’s the bottom line. Yeah.

REBECA

One thing I was curious about in terms of life in Kenya, so have you had any . . . You’ve talked a little bit about your childhood and things you used to do, games, school, this sort of thing, but do you have any special memories that you keep with you. When you think of being a child in Kenya is there anything that comes to mind or maybe something that you miss about Kenya?

KANWAL

I think you’re right. I think one of the things I missed was the sense of freedom. The sense of freedom that growing up I remember the sense of play. You’re out in the neighbourhood and it is dark and you’re still playing and my parents weren’t concerned where I was. It was that sense of you are part of that community, the community knows who you are, and you know the community. Nowadays I think with all sorts of . . . people are paranoid about all sorts of things happening. We have, kind of, really been sensitive. In a way, society has made us do that. Now we have become very cautious about how and where we are and what we do. So that whole sense of play and just playing. There was no motive like, it was not an organized play. Here you would see people play “here are the Lego blocks and I want you to make this toy.” You know, it was none of that. It was sticks and stones, literally, and you played with them. You’d get the cardboard boxes and that’s what you played with. You made your forts out of them and then you played with them and as seasons change you destroy them and you make the next set. You had a tree house, you’re climbing trees. It was that sense of play that I think gives us that sense that “you know what, you can be creative about anything.” If there was one thing that would be the thing, that notion of, you know, being adventurous, being creative, and not really having to worry but I know I can’t repeat that now because times have changed, you know, people have changed. There are all sorts of, you know, we all know that whole notion of terrorism and all sorts of things have taken that away from us.

REBECA

Mhm. So a sense of play.

KANWAL

Yeah.

REBECA

I think it’s clear that family is very important to you and I think listening to your story, your journey is very closely connected with your parents’ journey. So I was wondering if you could just tell me a little bit more about your parents’ personalities. I heard a little bit about your father’s experiences but I’m just curious about what they’re like and what their personalities are like. I think that would be really neat to hear because it’s tied to you so closely.

KANWAL

I think both my parents really had that sense of adventure. They are very adventurous in the sense that they have travelled to South America, they have traveled to Australia, and when they’d gone to South America they traveled for a few months. One of the things they would tell me is that they would book one night in wherever they’re flying and then they will find out where the locals go and stay and then they will go stay there for a month. Not even knowing the language, they would use sign language and that again is that spirit of being able to accept what’s out there, right? They never had that sense of staying always in one of those fancy hotels or whatever. They would stay where the locals are, shop at the local market, eat at the local place. So that was that one piece that I think has given me and my siblings that sense.

### [00:50:42]

So adventure, travel, was very important to them. Also the whole sense of being a volunteer has been very important to them. Both mom and dad have volunteered in all sorts of places. They still volunteer at South Arm Community Centre. Dad’s in his 90s, mom’s in her 80s. I think in a couple of weeks when it’s Halloween they’ll still go out and give candies. You know what, it’s really interesting to see that’s their purpose. There are people who kind of forget that, you know, you can stay away and not be connected but that’s their connection. They still try to have a very active life. They will go to Watermania three times a week and, you know, dad’s driving. Even though they are not very physically active but they do try to go and at least go sit in the hot tub for a while and that’s about it [laughs] but at least they get out. It’s staying connected with the community. That I think is a really important piece. It’s not just within your own family but also within your community. That is something that they have done. Dad had a real sense of giving back. So when dad retired in 1985 they were opening Khalsa School in Surrey and he was one of the founding principals for that school. For the last thirty years he’s been on the board of directors but he has done this as a volunteer. Mom has always been very interested in teaching Punjabi language and also being involved with the United Way and being involved with other organizations. So, to both of them, I think staying active, staying involved, doing volunteer work has been a really important piece and that’s been their life.

REBECA

It seems to connect with you and your personality.

KANWAL

It does and, you know what, you don’t think it does but I think subliminally or whatever it becomes a part of who you are. You see that and you want to do that in your lifetime, too.

REBECA

Another thing I was curious about is you mentioned as a family some general first impressions or perhaps things that surprised you about coming to Canada which was the double culture shock that you were speaking of. Were there any other things about how Canada was at that time that formed your first impression, or perhaps your family’s first impression, or anything that surprised you whether big or small. I was just curious about that. It’s always interesting.

KANWAL

Hm. I think going to university, um, it sometimes gave you that sense that you just don’t know where your journey is going to take you. At the same token, Canada and the education system gave you that platform that anything is possible, too. So, even though there was that racism piece and also getting a job was difficult but institutions were open to possibilities. So I think I remember getting into the teacher-ed program at UBC. I didn’t make it the first time around because my marks weren’t high. It wasn’t that you’re done. It was that, if you take summer school, you get your marks high in these courses and then you can reapply and we will see. So I did do that. I went back, I got my GPA up, I went back, I applied, I got in, and then during my practicum I remember going to a school and, you know, it was challenging at times but then you managed to find ways to work through those challenges.

### [00:55:38]

As I was competing in track, again, there were both sides. There were times that you felt there was kinship to people and there were other times that you felt that you are ostracized for being who you are. I found that it was really challenging to see the dichotomy but it was also you can really be jaded in going to one camp but I think if you let yourself be open to possibilities, eventually, good does come out. That was my journey and my working at that. I think that’s what I found, that even as I moved on in my professional journey, I think, maybe being able to communicate, being able to understand others, I had certain privileges. I know that. I understand that and I know there are people who will go through a lifetime in Canada and they won’t have those opportunities or privileges. That’s why I would always find ways to work with the underdog. You know, to find out what is it that they are not getting it and how can I assist in their journey. That would be my way of helping others and working through that.

REBECA

Okay. I guess, just because you are such a long-term resident of Richmond, I was curious to know if you have any general observations about how you’ve seen, you’ve mentioned Richmond growing, um, growing or changing since you’ve first arrived here. Have you had any personal observations about that or maybe opinions? I was curious, yeah.

KANWAL

Yeah, I have really seen the community change from having ditches in most of the main streets here to now being an urban center where you have people, condominium after condominium being built or whatever. I think Richmond is trying to find that happy balance with the environment, with the agricultural land reserve, with all the land on the east side of No. 5, No. 6 road. So at least that is maintained but then the west side has become very, very much of a residential place. Richmond has all along tried to maintain that sense of community but it hasn’t been easy. I think when you see an influx of a certain community, it shifts the dynamics of that community. I remember teaching at Steveston when that first influx of people from Hong Kong came as Hong Kong was being turned to, back to England or back to China, actually. It was really a challenge because we . . . the principal had printed a newsletter and it was a bilingual newsletter; one side English and one side in Mandarin. I remember one of the staff members saying “what is this?” You know, “what has Richmond become?” It was really an eye opener in the sense that it was very difficult for some people to find that shift.

### [01:00:05]

Though there have been people in Richmond from different ethnic groups since the thirties, you know, the Japanese were here since the turn of the century. So it was really challenging when it became more of an urban center. I think what happens is the community has grown and I find that there are different areas in different places but it’s become a real challenge for the community to be accepting of others. So what happens is everyone tries to be with the group that they’re most comfortable with in terms of language, in terms of food, in terms of cultural activities. So, you’ll find that, doesn’t matter which community it is. It could be Japanese, it could be Chinese, it could be the Ukrainian. They were always trying to find people who they know and work with. So that I think has been a shift. The other piece I think has been a real shift is we’ve lost a lot of the agricultural heritage of the community. I remember being in grade eleven. I went to pick strawberries in the summer and it was so difficult I said “I’m never doing picking!” [laughs].

REBECA

I’ve tried it myself [laughing].

KANWAL

Exactly, right! And you’re going “my goodness, people do these for a living right?” They pick berries, they pick vegetables, and I’m going “I wish everyone had the opportunity to do it for a few weeks” to understand how difficult agriculture is. That was that piece that, you know, is that challenging piece. The other piece that has really shifted is when we first came is you knew when the fish were in the canneries because the whole city smelled of fish and all the canneries are gone; that whole industry. So industries change. The fishing industry is gone. The logging industry is gone. The farming is, we’re still kind of maintaining a little bit of that. So there has been a shift of different industries that have changed over the years. That’s what I’ve seen. The city has gone from being a rural place to an urban place. Those are some of the shifts that I’ve seen but in all the shifts that I think that Richmond has tried to maintain that sense of community by building different community centers. So that sense of community, they have tried to maintain that sense of agriculture by having the Terra Nova agricultural area. They’ve tried to have different pieces of people doing the different agriculture. There are different places that they have tried to maintain but at the end of the day it’s people that make the community. So I think there is still that goodwill of making this a community. In 2010 when the Olympics were here that really gave this community a sense of cohesiveness, a sense of pride, a sense of, you know, “this is a community.” I think different communities work with that.

REBECA

I have a question. I think you’ve indirectly answered it a few times because you do have such a strong sense of giving back and paying attention to the community and its health. I was wondering though if your hopes and dreams have changed since you first arrived to Canada? And if they’ve changed to where you are now, I think maybe that aligns with your plans but your quote unquote plans. Yeah.

KANWAL

My hopes and dreams is they kept on changing throughout my life, right. I had graduated from high school hoping that I would get into university. I did that. I had graduated from university hoping to get a job. I did get a job but it wasn’t what I wanted. I had hoped that I would become a teacher. I became a teacher. I had hoped that I’d become a good teacher. It happened for a bit and then I wasn’t happy. I had hoped that I would be able to be a better teacher and it happened. I had hoped that I would be able to teach at the university. It happened. I had hoped that when I’m at the university I’m able to study and get a doctorate and it happened. I had hoped that somehow I can be connected with the Aboriginal community and give back to the Aboriginal community and it happened.

### [01:05:30]

I had hoped that my children would be able to have careers, that they can make a difference, and be good citizens of the country. That hope has happened. As I’ve gone along I now start thinking outside that family hope because I know my children will be able to stand on their own two feet and it is my [short pause] . . .

REBECA

It’s okay. Take as much time as you need.

KANWAL

[long pause]. I guess it’s my hope that every new person that comes to Canada has the opportunities. I have been blessed and I’m very grateful but I know some people don’t and I’ve seen that. As we get our new set of immigrants or refugees from Syria, from Africa, they will have hardships. So I have lived a life here and my sense is that I can keep giving. [long pause]. I have a profound sense of gratitude and responsibility. Earlier this year Kwantlen gave me an honorary doctorate degree. I guess when I got that I kind of said “here is a recognition of anything is possible” and that, I think, is me keep on talking about that Canadian dream. The Canadian dream is not in making millions of dollars but having a life where you are safe, you are happy, and you can continue to bring others in the fold and when I look at every day in the news what happens in countries even south of the boarder and I’m going “here we have that profound sense of, really, being a country which has a profound sense of not only accepting but being able to be with others.” Being others with . . . who don’t have the opportunities.

### [01:10:09]

 I think my sense has been that we have had this whole Truth and Reconciliation with the Aboriginal community and I think that’s where we still need to put a lot of our energy and time with. But, as my journey has gone, I have always felt that you need to be grounded in the place which has given you so much. I think that’s where is my hope still that we keep on working but we . . . I am so, so grateful that sometimes words don’t do justice. [short pause].

REBECA

Kanwal you have such a huge heart. [laughs].

KANWAL

I don’t know, I just . . . You go to those dark places sometimes and then, you know, you go to those dark places sometimes and you see those kids and you go “maybe someday, some kids have these opportunities, right?” It’s not easy for those kids and many of those kids, no fault of theirs, but that’s their destiny, right? I mean, you walk down, you know, I’ve gone to places in Surrey and I see some of those kids and they might have all the money but they’re on the wrong pathway. So as educators you keep on working and think “how do we shift those kids to take them away from drugs and take them away from peer pressure and get them into those places where they can be good viable citizens of a community?” I think that at the end of the day people always talk negative about things but I think, you know what, we are in a very good place and sometimes we forget that. We keep on complaining about everything and we really, really forget about how privileged and how fortunate we are. I think as time goes on you kind of realize that, you know what, the journey could have been a totally different journey but this has been the journey and you count your blessings with that journey. Angela and I talk so many times after our Saturday trainings that, you know, how blessed we are. Here we get to work with great people and we say great people, not only great tutors, but great kids who have all these ambitions and maybe one day some of them will fulfill those ambitions and move on with that, right? Okay, this was not in the script.

REBECA

[laughs]. I wasn’t expecting to tear up today either. It’s true though. I mean, even when we started today I said “I was thinking of you and I was thinking of one of the kids.” Yeah, once you work with them and you see so much hope in them and hope in the tutors and hope in the mentors, right, it becomes part of your whole . . .

KANWAL

It becomes part of your whole journey, right? Yeah, and I’m going “wow, phenomenal” really. That journey is, is you look at the good in the people and the good in the places and things, you know. I know some of my toughest kids as I was teaching, over the years had become wonderful people. You kind of look back and say “okay, wow. That was a good journey.” You know, they had a good journey. So you leave it at that.

REBECA

Mhm. Alright, well, I think I’ve thoroughly dehydrated you [laughs].

KANWAL

Oh, you bring me water [laughs].

REBECA

I guess the last thing I would ask is if you have anything to add. I mean, it’s up to you but if you feel like that’s sufficient then that’s great but if you have anything to add about your journey here, you’re welcome to now. Also, I’d like to thank you for putting your heart and soul and charismatic and articulate personality into the interview. I appreciate it, yeah.

KANWAL

Oh, you’re too kind. [laughs]. No, I think it’s important to share these stories because sometimes people think that everyone comes here and, you know . . . and everyone has challenges. It’s how do you take those challenges and shift them and make them into opportunities. It takes time, it takes energy, and you’ve got to keep on persevering. That perseverance takes different places and different ways for different people. At the end of the day the universe will unfold and speak. Listen to the universe. I think we sometimes get too, too grounded or into our own selves and our ego takes over. Let go of that ego and you’ll find that there are ways that you’ll find people and places and perspectives that align with you and align with others and let that alignment happen. One year we had Guillermo, a student from Guatemala, stay with us for about six months. Guillermo’s journey was that he wanted to come to Canada, he wanted to learn, but then he wanted to make a difference back home. So, Guillermo went back and married a Canadian girl and now they’re happily living in Guatemala. The reason why I bring Guillermo is, here is a person whose journey has been a totally different journey and he came as part of my journey, talked to me so much but then he’s gone. So people will come in and out of your lives and you learn from them and you learn from others but you keep on living that journey that you have and do that. Alright, thank you.

REBECA

Thank you so much Kanwal.

### END OF TAPE PART ONE OF ONE

### [01:17:57]

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)