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Oral History Interview with Neela Wickremesinghe
Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, 2011.019.068
Interview conducted by Manissa McCleave Maharawal at CUNY Graduate Center on October 22nd, 2013 in Manhattan, New York.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: [00:00:00] And I'm just going to start by prepping the interview by saying this is Manissa McCleave Maharawal interviewing -- Neela, do you have a middle name?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Kusum.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Kusum.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: And Devika taught me how to say your last name.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Wickremesinghe.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Yeah, Wickremesinghe. Right. On October 22nd, at the CUNY Graduate Center, as part of the Crossing Borders Bridging Generations project. And Neela, I'm just going to have you introduce yourself by telling me your full name and where and when you were born.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: My name is Neela Kusum Wickremesinghe, and I was born on [redacted for privacy] at Lenox Hill Hospital, in Manhattan. Yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Great. And do you want to just -- we're just going to start -- like I always start my interviews really open-ended. Do you want to tell me something about your childhood?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: It was pretty rad, I mean, I'm glad, knowing some background, that my sister is also part of this project, because I feel like in the future, two people can listen to these two interviews and find out were we either lying or where we actually did -- these things actually did match up, so that was good. But we had a lot of fun. I grew up in Staten Island, I still live there, after a brief hiatus for college and graduate school. I lived in Minneapolis for two years, and I just moved back to New York. Yeah, but growing up in Staten Island, I think you identify with that first, I think. Like where you grow up, especially in New York, and then there's a lot of realizing, like when you

realize when you're very young, or at least I did, that when people talk about New York, like in the world, that's where you live. So it's kind of a weird reflective moment, even as a kid, because you realize that you're living in a big place that everyone knows about, but you're living in a part of it that no one really knows about. And so that's kind of the cool part about living in Staten Island is because they still have a lot of secrets that no one cares enough to sort of mess around with or take a boat to go see. So, yeah, we had fun. My mom is from Brooklyn, so she -- all of her family is here, and my dad's from Sri Lanka. He came here in -- I want to say '70 or '71. Early '70s. They're both physicians, and they met at the hospital. And then my sister was born in 1984. I was born in '87, and we have a younger brother named Prian, and he was born in 1991. Yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: So, when you say that it was pretty rad, what was rad about it?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I guess it was -- we just -- we were sort of -- I don't know, I guess we were our own little unit for a long time, because there was a lot -- I mean, three isn't a lot, but, you know, you can sort of run around in the backyard and do your own thing. We were -- I was very jealous of, sort of like, imaginary kids who had like friends on their block. We did not have that. But we did, like, play with each other and have all of that thing. Yeah, we had fun. We still have fun. We always have animals in our house. We grew up with a yellow lab. His name's Gus. In our family, we name our dogs mainly after important dead people in our family. So we had Gus, which was from my mother's great uncle Gus, and now our current dog, Leo, is from my great grandfather Leo. And I hope that one day we'll have more of this. But it's very important animals after important dead people. And my dad came to New York -- it's a funny story, I have a cousin on my mom's side, my youngest cousin, first cousin, John, and he grew up in New Jersey; they're like our New Jersey Italian cousins. And he had to do a school project about immigration when he was maybe, like, I don't know, fifth or sixth grade. So it was kind of a last-minute thing, I remember getting the phone in the kitchen ringing, and it was one of those phones that had the really long cord, so you could take it, like, away, and have private conversations. But it rang, and it was him, and

he said "Oh, I need to talk. I need to talk to Uncle Prasanna," my dad, Prasanna, and he said "I have to do this project for school about, like, immigrants. You're an immigrant, like, let me have it, but give me the short version, because it's, like, due tomorrow." And he said -- and my dad took the phone and said "Now, are you getting this?" He said "I did not come to this country and kiss the ground, I did --" you know, which was very telling. He always tells people that he came here because he had a job offer, and he took it, you know? It wasn't like he really wanted to come [00:05:00] and be an American, and I don't think that any of us really are, but that's why he came here. And the cool thing is that he is one of three also. So he has two older sisters, and himself, he's the youngest -- the only boy, and his oldest sister went to Germany, married someone from Germany, and we have German and Sri Lankan cousins, and his middle sister went to England, married someone from England, and we have half-Sri Lankan, half-English cousins as well, which is -- we've created our own sort of people that are in between, and I think we have -- all the first cousins on that side have a really interesting connection from that way, even though we live so far away. So when they both left, and they left Sri Lanka, and he decided to go, and he ended up doing the same thing, but he really wanted to come New York because, not just because of the job in the end, but because he really was interested in seeing live jazz, and that's why he came, because he said, "Well, I could go here or there, but, like, I could go, like, see live jazz," and that's something he always wanted to do, which I think is funny because he tried to be a musician, but he's not. He took clarinet lessons when we was, like, much older in life, but that was a bad mistake. He just likes -- he's just a viewer, so I thought that was pretty cool. But, so -- his family is more like -- I feel like we have more in common just because there's sort of a history of, like, mixing in his family, so I don't have to explain anything to those cousins, which is nice, I think.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: What about the other side of your family?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Well I didn't -- so again, with this sort of, like, when you realize you're from New York, you realize everyone knows about it, I didn't realize that other people didn't -- that I was very different from everyone else until people -- when you're at school, people say "Oh, what is that?" and they talk about our name, because it's really

long, and on paper, it's a lot to look at, and especially when there's like three kids in front of you who don't particularly look brown or foreign, and so we don't present as foreign, people say "What is that?" And you don't understand that that's a weird question until much later. Like only very recently, in college, did I start getting really annoyed at it, because I was so used to saying "Oh, that's my last name," instead of saying -- instead of pronouncing it to people, now it's very much like "What do you mean? What is that? Where are you from?", "I'm from New York, where are you from?" Like it's kind of -- I was very used to giving the whole spiel about it, like -- and not getting upset. And I don't get upset now, I just get annoyed. But -- so you don't realize that you're not like everyone else until much later, at least I didn't. Just because we were sort of pushed in it, and our school wasn't really that mixed when we were in elementary school. My sister and I went to an all-girls Catholic school for kindergarten through eighth grade, and it wasn't as mixed as -- it's probably not very mixed right now either, but -- so you're thrown into a whole group of kids that, there's, you know, we had -- there was a fair amount of racial and ethnic diversity, but no one really talked about it, and it wasn't -- I guess it wasn't put on display, I guess, maybe like it was in later years, but no one really talked about it, and everyone assumed that you were white, so there wasn't really anything to talk about. And the only thing to talk about was this really long name on a piece of paper that they didn't understand, because it didn't match what they were seeing in front of them.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Interesting.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: And I don't think that -- it's funny, I don't think that my mom's family ever thought that there was something weird -- not weird, or like -- I don't have to explain anything to them either, because I think after a while, they just forgot, to be honest, like they forgot. Like one of my mom's cousins, very Brooklyn Italian side, first cousins on her -- my grandfather's side, said to my dad, "Well, Prasanna, you don't really have a color," and he does have a color, but they're just like him so much that they don't perceive him as foreign. They say a lot of racist things around him, and expect him not to notice, but he doesn't -- I think they've forgotten, because they like him so much, that they forget that he's brown. I don't -- it's just -- it's weird. And kind of cute, at the same

time, because they're all [00:10:00] incredibly fake tan, so they're probably the same. But I think there's -- I think it also was easy because he came to the United States and it was just him, you know? It wasn't "Who are we going to spend Christmas with?", he was like "Can I spend Christmas with you guys?" It was easy, you know, they sort of took him in, which I think was kind of cool and nice. And growing up on Staten Island was also interesting, because the Sri Lankan population steadily grew as, sort of, time went on, but I -- it was different because we were sort of part of that community, but sort of not, so it was good because for a lot of kids, like friends of my parents, they -- who are growing up now, they have, like, Sinhala School, and other things, but that didn't exist when I was little. But I think for a lot of people, it was all a really good thing, but I also feel kind of outside of that community as well, just because -- I don't know, that's -- we don't speak Sinhala, none of my sister or my brother, and so I think that's really the barrier to getting into all of that, so.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: You said that, about your name, it didn't start to bother you until recently.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Was there a reason that that shift happened, do you think? Or is there a story behind that shift happening, or...?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I guess it just started happening so much -- I guess not much more, or I guess I was just becoming more of myself in college and you start becoming very hyper-aware of lots of different things, and taking different classes. You then start thinking back, "Wait, that's -- like, I can't believe people used to do that to like, two little -- you know, two and three, two little kids," you know, just because you can't pronounce it, doesn't mean that I can't or I won't, you know, like, help you through it, or it's not a big deal, you know? Because that's -- it's such a -- I mean, even at home, my dad, everyone calls him Doctor Wick. They don't call him Doctor Wickremesinghe, and that's a huge -- it's like a persona, almost, like it's not -- and a lot -- it's weird, and then you don't realize it's weird until you get older, that the people just truncate your entire name, because it's easier for them. Yeah, but I guess later on in life, I just became much less -- like it's not funny, like, to me, because people are like "Oh yeah, it's really long,"

it's like "Yeah." But then there's also the "Oh, where are you from?" and it's like -- you know, people have a certain sense of -- people aren't aware of the amount of agency that they're taking to ask that question, and then if you -- it's like me asking you back, "Well what does your last name mean?" Like just because you think this is one you haven't seen before, doesn't mean that we all don't have a story behind it, you know. So I think I was just fed up with that, so I stopped being like "Oh yeah, it's hilarious, there's a lot of letters." And professionally, I think I've been aware of it much more, especially when I introduced myself, I just started a new job, and I introduced myself, I would not include my last name, just because I didn't want people to then have this whole separate conversation about where they think I came from, so. But I've been trying to sort of, when I meet other people in professional situations, trying to just jump on in, but yeah, people just leave it out when they introduce me also, I think because they're afraid they're going to say it wrong. But without it, I think a lot of people would not -- I guess they would totally disregard that whole half of our upbringing, because they wouldn't -- they don't perceive us, like my sister, my brother and I, as an "other", so I guess it's like -- it is really annoying, because people think that you're coming from somewhere else, but without it, you would lose that, so.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: And you don't want to lose that.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Right.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Yeah, I'm always sounding my name out for people too.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, it's just -- I don't know, just ask for help, you know, it's fine. Yeah, but I guess our first names are all pretty easy when it comes to Sri Lankan names, but -- I guess my mom was sort of all in. She didn't really want any [00:15:00] Christian Italian names in there, I guess, which is also -- I hadn't realized that until I got older, because you realize those things later in life too. But I guess that was her own decision, I think. I think she was totally fine with that. She sort of jumped on board and was all -- all in.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: When you say "all in", do you mean about the names, or generally about Sri Lankan --

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I think about the names, but the interesting thing is, like, my dad's mom was Dutch, so he himself is also not your typical Sri Lankan either, because his mother was a Dutch Burgher, his father was Sinhala, so they also have a mixed background just because of colonialism and the aftermath of that, and so it's not like she was really marrying into a very traditional Sinhala family, they were already mixed to begin with. My grandmother's family were -- they were in Sri Lanka for hundreds of years, but they had -- there was not -- they didn't intermarry. At least that's as far as I know, but -- and also I think, because he came here alone, it was different. I think, again, like he was much more part of, like, a New York family than she was part of a larger family, just because they were so scattered, and everyone here was sort of, you know, New York, New Jersey, Brooklyn, that was it, so.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: You mentioned your cousins --

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: -- and how they're mixed too. So do you see -- are there commonalities in your experiences, do you think, or...?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I think so, but it's also different because they -- their moms are the ones that sort of hold that -- held their Sri Lankan-ness, I don't know how else to say it, but so I guess you get different things from your mom than you would your dad. So like my oldest cousin, Kamala, she knows Sinhala, and that's like, in my eyes, like that's the prize you get, like, for having a mom that is that half -- that side of the half, you know? But we're all -- I mean, but we're all -- the thing that I like most is that we all look alike, which is kind of silly to say, but it's like, nice, because you don't get that around, so -- it's like meeting another zebra in the middle of the forest. (laughter) But it's nice because we're -- just the similarities are comforting, even though we grew up very far away from each other.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: When you said that the prize for having your mom be is language, why do you think -- what do you mean by that?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I think that if you have -- I guess it's -- maybe it's just my dad, but I guess it's like the mother gets, you know, like they're in traditional, I guess, home more, raising the kids more, so you get that different side of your family history, I guess.

Like I know a lot more about my mom's family history than I do about my dad's, I guess. That's just -- and that's also their personalities, but I just -- in my mind I think, well, like, you do mom stuff with your mom, and my dad is not very traditionally dad in any sense of the way, but I guess it's just his personality that it didn't transcribe that way, or it didn't transpire that way.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: So do you think you grew up with more, like, Italian-ness?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Oh, I think so, just because, like, grandparents were here, and that's -- it's just, you know, it's the other more dominant family, we have more people here. (laughter) My dad used to make wine in our backyard, and he used my mom's grandfather's wine press. My dad has a lot of hobbies, and that was for a couple of summers, winemaking was it. And so he would go to these grape, like, grape markets, and other places, like out in Brooklyn and Queens, and like, people were like, "Oh, Prisan, like, you know, like, you are Sicilian." He'd be like, "No, no I'm not." But it's the same, like, you know, if you see someone, and they have the same interest, you sort of -- you just see them as very much like you. So I think the stuff like that was pretty typical. So like on Christmas Eve, my dad makes linguini and clam sauce. He makes it, and he uses my mom's grandmother's recipe, so. So he's -- I think he just jumped right in as well, when it comes to all these other things. [00:20:00] Yeah, but the Italian side of my family is also really interesting, like everyone's family is interesting, just because I guess that's also a more typical immigration story, where they did kiss the ground when they got here. It was really bad and sucky in Italy, so they left. But -- and I think it's -- that's sort of traditional Italian New York experience, that this is true for a lot of people. And then, you know, somewhere, it ends somewhere in Brooklyn, and here we are. But that side, yeah, there's a lot of differences there too, as well. My grandfather's family is from Sicily, and my grandma's family is from Naples, so not so different, but sort of an island-mainland sort of mentality. But they were also really different families. My mom tells a lot of stories about how she always thought that everyone at her -- on her father's side was yelling when they were speaking to each other, because that's how they spoke. They were always very gregarious bunch who were speaking in Italian, but she thought

everyone was fighting, but they weren't, they were just talking, you know? And her mom's side of the family was more -- you know, it was the second generation of Italians, and they were very much more of an American kind of life and lifestyle. That was very different from the way that her dad grew up. He was one of six, and her mom was an only child. So even though she -- my grandma did grow up with a lot of cousins, it was very different. I feel like it was a big sort of Sicilian upbringing and then sort of quiet American Italian existence, and then they sort of came together.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Are they both -- did they both grow up in Brooklyn too?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, they grew up in Brooklyn too, yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Where in Brooklyn is this?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: In Bensonhurst, in Bay Ridge, yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: And that's where your family still lives, is that correct?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: So my -- all my mom's cousins are there. My uncle is in New Jersey. My grandparents aren't alive anymore, but that's where my grandma was still living, yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: So you have -- you have like a family presence.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, still, like it's my mom's cousins that are there, yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: I was going to ask, in terms of -- because you said your dad makes this, like, clam sauce --

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, so -- I think it's interesting, because when it comes to food, like, he loves to cook. But he doesn't just love to cook, like, Sri Lankan food. It's mainly -- I mean, it's mainly pasta, I mean. So, you know, he does all the cooking for Christmas, and so does my mom, so I think, you know, food is -- people always look at food, I think, as like one of the -- one of the things you sort of get from your family. So I think there's a lot to get from both sides.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Did you grow up with Sri Lankan food too?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: We did. Not -- he would make it for, like, special occasions, but as we got older, there were more and more Sri Lankan restaurants opening on Staten

Island, so we would get it often at, like -- sort of how you get, like, Chinese takeout. And they grew from really small, sort of like, mom-and-pop things to like more established restaurants. And now there's like, I don't know, like, five or six, you know? So in one way it was great, because you can get it all the time. In the other -- in another sense, he doesn't cook it as often just because he can go get it. But he does cook it, like, I would say, like maybe like on demand, like if he really wanted it, but it's just really easy to get it, and it's pretty good, so.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Does your mom cook it too?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: She doesn't. Everyone -- that's a question that I got recently. I started this job, and someone was interrogating me about my last name, and they said "Oh, does your -- did your mom learn how to cook Sri Lankan food?" and I was like, "No, my dad cooked it." Like -- I don't know, like, I guess he was thinking like, oh, like if your dad didn't cook, but -- I think because he's such a cooker, like he's -- there would really be no need, and he'd be like "Please, you're screwing it up," like that's just the personality that would come out, you know, like, "Please don't try." (laughter) But yeah, so he does most of the cross-national cooking, but my mom -- so it's sort of like tag team, like they'll both cook [00:25:00] a fair amount of Italian, but I guess he's the only person that cooks Sri Lankan. Yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: I was just wondering because, like the way you describe your dad, it sounds like he's really embraced the sort of, like, Brooklyn Italian --

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yes, he's "Brooklyn boy," as he calls himself. But yeah, he worked in Coney Island hospital when he first came to the states, and he sort of, like, got here, bought a car, and then, like, drove all around, and was commuting from Brooklyn to Staten Island in his -- I don't know what he was driving, but -- so I think that was his first impression of the city, you know, like, being in the car, it was the '70s, and sort of odd hours, shift work. He said that he used to ride his bike around Brooklyn when he lived in Coney Island, and he used to ride around, like in the middle of the night, like when he had time. He said, if you look crazy enough, no one will mess with you, so he would wear, like, no shirt and an orange, like, winter hat. And he had a flag out the back of his bike. But I think he was also super young, I mean, younger than a professional in

the States just because medical school is college for them, so he came over -- I don't know, he was like 26 or something. So I think he was still excited about sort of running around and doing things. Yeah. But my mom went to medical school in Mexico, so there's sort of another -- a lot of her formative time was spent in a different place also. Then she came back to New York in the middle of the '70s, and sort of was like -- skipped a lot of stuff that people -- that was happening here, and then sort of jumped back into it. So, yeah, so my mom also did quite a bit of traveling when she was in college and after college and then ended up in Staten Island somehow.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: You said they met together when they were working together?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, they met in the hospital. My dad was chief of residents? Something like that, and my mom was a medical student. Yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: How do they tell that story?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: My mom says everyone was afraid of him because he would interrogate the medical students, or the interns, I would say. And so you didn't want to get stuck on a rotation with him because he would, like, make you feel awful. And he asked her what the lifespan of a red blood cell was, and she forgot, and felt awful about it. It's 180 days, or something like that. And those were, you know, those were the first words, I guess (laughter). Love at first sight. But that's about all I really know about that story. Yeah. But it was nice, because, you know, if you grow up in Staten Island, you're so close to Bensonhurst, it's just right over the bridge, so we'd be there, not a lot, but -- not weekly, you know, sort of Sunday family time, we were not that kind of family. But we were there quite a bit with my grandma, so.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Do you know how her family felt about your dad?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I think that, to be quite honest, it made it a lot easier that he was a professional person. I think that, thinking back, I'm sure it wasn't as easy, it wouldn't have been as easy if he was, like, unemployed. But I think a sort of older established, like, physician, everyone was like, "Oh cool, like, that's cool," so, you know. So I think, to be quite honest, that's why it went over, like there was really no issue. And -- I don't know. As my mom says, everyone in my mom's family was like, "Oh," like my mom's

name is Laura, like "Laura, get your head out of the books, like you're so, like, book smart, you have no common sense," that kind of thing. And then she was like, "OK, I'm going to college," did really well in college, and then she's like -- and she, you know, unlike her other two cousins, did not leave college with an engagement ring, and so my grandma's friend Sadie said, you know, "If she's not gonna find in college, where's she gonna find?" So she went to medical school, and she didn't find anyone in medical school either, so I guess that also maybe was part of it. And really, I honestly don't know if there was an issue [00:30:00] either, but I guess it all worked out.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Sounds like it. I was just wondering -- just imagining this, like, tight-knit Italian, sort of Bay Ridge Bensonhurst family, you know, where, I mean, even for your grandparents, Sicily to Naples was -- you know, that could be considered like an intermarriage, so just thinking about, like ways of thinking.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, I guess -- I guess it was fine, I mean -- and also, it's not like they had a huge Italian wedding. They signed the license at Borough Hall, you know? Like it was -- they were both older, as well, so --

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: How old were they?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: My mom was 32 maybe? But my dad's eight years older, so, I think -- yeah, so she was 33 when she had my sister, I believe? Yeah. Thirty-six when she had me, yeah. And so it was not like they were arranging for families to fly over into a destination where they, you know, so ---

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Do you think -- how has she taken on, like, Sri Lankan-ness, or Sri Lankan culture?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Well we actually -- we just came back from a big trip. So it was three weeks in Sri Lanka this past August. And this is the fourth time that my siblings and I had been there, but maybe like the sixth time my mom had been there. So she had gone before they were married, and then once after they were married, but I don't think any of us were born yet. But I think also it's because my dad came -- there was a group of his friends who were here in New York also. So she knew his friends and his friends' wives at that time, and so I think -- sort of, it was less of a, like, "Come see our culture," and more of a "Let's hang out," I guess. But, you know, again, it's not -- the other thing

is, you know, my dad was raised an Episcopalian, and so it's not like -- it didn't come with a community that was Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu that sort of upheld this sort of other mentality, so it was kind of less of a big deal also in that sense, because there wasn't a sort of re-learning of a lot of traditions or other things, and Sri Lankan-ness was really a cultural thing and not a religious thing. In Sri Lanka, there's many different kinds of people, historically, and many different kinds of religion, so I guess she happened to find one that was pretty common for her. I guess not common, but easy to understand at that time. But I think, I mean, I think also it's she really loves it, you know? It was really great to go back as an adult and try to sort of, like, sit back and watch things happen interfamiliarly, but yeah, it was an interesting trip. Three weeks is a long time. And we always go for that long, but the bad thing was that this year, we were without my brother, and we really missed him, just because he has an important job of, like, wrangling my dad, and that wasn't part of the equation because he was working. But she's definitely -- my mom's great because there's a lot of things that a lot of people sort of, like, sit back and take in terms of, like, oh, this is how culture goes, and this is what things -- but if like, if something's not kosher, she will tell you, and so it's really good to -- she's critical in the best way because she can be like "Can you believe what's happening here?" you know, like, so it's good because in the one way, we're both outsiders together. So in that way, there's like my dad, and then there's all of us in one sort of grouping, and then there's my siblings and my dad and my mom, you know, and that's how you can sort of break us down that way, so. And then there's my sister, me and my mom, and then my dad and my brother, just to push it a little further.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: (laughter) Sure.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: But it was a good trip because we got to do a lot of traveling in places that you couldn't go in Sri Lanka for a long time because they had a civil war that is quote-unquote over, but we saw a lot of [00:35:00] places where my dad had never been, so it was interesting.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Do you have a -- can you give me an example of your mom calling out something that's not --

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Well, the weirdest thing about traveling to Sri Lanka, and I'm sure this happens in other places, is that many, many people have servants in their home, just because that's what they do. And when you're a young kid, you don't really realize what's happening. And then when you get older, you're like, "This is kind of strange." It's strange that people -- this is a different sort of employment class, and this is so normal, but it's not normal here, and there's all these class issues that you're so aware of. And I'm sure -- and my dad doesn't think twice about it, just because that's the way he was raised, and for some reason he doesn't really want to think critically about it. So, you know, I can talk to my mom and be like, "Yeah, I really love visiting Sri Lanka, but I really need to visit it without all that," you know, because it's really hard to see a country when you're seeing it through a lot of, sort of -- people are not holding back, but they're keeping you at arm's length. Like you stay with family, and we'll take you around, and you'll be taken care of, and you know, this nice person will make your breakfast in the morning, and do your laundry, and no one really questions that whole interaction of an entire class of people that really aren't given a lot of agency and voice. But on the other hand, it's a whole, you know, economy of people, and that's how they make their living. But just to talk about different issues that we wouldn't really talk to with my dad. It's good to have my mom there as another outside person being like "Yeah, that's weird," too, and we can talk about it.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: So in Sri Lanka, do you feel like -- you said, so like you have this outsider -- you feel like an outsider. You're saying that your family -- there's your dad, and then the rest of you is the outsiders.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, yeah, so because he's the only one that speaks Sinhalese, it puts us at a disadvantage just because he becomes the point person. He becomes the person to talk to anyone that doesn't speak English, anyone that needs to get us somewhere, or find information about anything. So it would be different -- much different, obviously, you know, if we all knew Sinhala. Then we could sort of figure it out. But it's changing really rapidly. You can see, just in the six years that -- or seven years -- that we haven't been there, the amount of English that's everywhere is just -- it's ridiculous. So it's definitely -- you can see globalization happening, which only makes it

easier for everyone to sort of travel to different places. But you're losing something with that, you know, level of globalization as well, but -- so it is definitely still an outsider experience, and it's kind of frustrating, because you're like "No wait, like, this is part of my culture too," like we have in common, but again, you're not reading my as that, so we get put, like, in a different category, you know. "Do your kids eat spicy food?" That kind of deal, you know?

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: What category do you think people are putting you in?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Americans, I guess. Or a lot of people thought we were German, (laughter) just because -- but it's different. If we're with our dad, then it's like, "Oh. Oh, you have a white wife, like this is what's happened. This is your Western family." But yeah, there's a lot -- it's still, I think, an outsider experience because -- just because people are judging us on the way that we look.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: And you think they read you as American?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, I think so.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Not Sri Lankan.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: No. I guess it also has to do a lot with the way that we were dressed, and stuff like that. Devika was wearing -- happened to be wearing a skirt and a blouse one day when we were, like, at a big cultural site, and some -- a Sri Lankan man was like "Oh, that's so funny," he said in English, like "You look Sri Lankan." And it's like, "Come on man, like, yeah, because I am." You know, like, so -- I guess it would be different, I hope, maybe, if we were like, in full sari the entire time, but, you know, we weren't, so I -- it's a big part of it. The other -- the added bonus is that Devika and I were both traveling with our partners, so Devika was traveling with her boyfriend, and I was traveling with my girlfriend, so we sort of -- we all sort of looked like a bunch of tourists, so.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Because -- why, because of them?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, and so [00:40:00] them as being actual true Americans in my mind, like, I guess altogether, it was like, "Oh look, there's your dad," you know, so (laughter). Yeah, but it was also really interesting to travel with them because it's two people that haven't been there, they sort of don't know the deal, and they also can be like

"Whoa, what is happening here?" and "That's so cool," or "That's not cool," so it was interesting.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: How do you think people read the whole family?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: We had a -- we were traveling a lot of the time in a large vehicle, so, you know, it's just all pile in, pile out kind of mentality, which wasn't much different than, like, getting in the car and going to a, like, national park, but I think it was definitely like a Western absolutely, like, American.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: But you think you guys were read as like a big family, or like...?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I think so, yeah. I definitely think so. Yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Devika, I talked to Devika about the trip, and she said it was really intense.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: It was. I guess it goes back to that, sort of, like, language barrier, because that becomes like a symbol for how information gets fed down through the ranks, and I guess me as the youngest person, was at the bottom of that totem pole, and so it's hard to try to ascertain where you're going, with whom, and how you're getting there, if the entire conversation happened three weeks over phone in Sinhala, and no one wrote anything down. And if someone's lost, they're just going to stick their head out the window instead of paying attention to the two adult children that are sitting in the back. I mean we're not kid kids, I'm 26, you know? That's -- it is a family vacation, but it was also difficult just because everyone's not young anymore, so it's not as easy to be like "I don't know the answer," because I could find it if I, you know, I can find the answer, you know, I can figure it out. But I think in retrospect, it wasn't as intense and frustrating as I thought it was while it was happening. It's just directionally challenged, you know. Things happen. But it did make me really -- it made me really sure that I could travel there by myself no problem, just because I was looking around and I was like "I could do this. I could this better." You know, like, I could do this, I have no -- absolutely no fear of traveling there alone or anything. So that was, I think, really good, because I sort of got my bearings, figured it out, and I'm looking forward to going there alone (laughter) and figuring it out.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: So that's something you want to do?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah. I think it's really important to get a different perspective without, you know, seven other people that were also in said hoopty. But like, just because we were there for three weeks, but we were seeing so many things that we were only -- we sort of here and there for two or three days, so like, I could have spent three weeks just in Colombo, or in the mountains, or in Kandy, you know, just spending slow time. There's a lot of fast time that we were experiencing. But it's also nice because we got to -- I, at least, got to sort of -- my favorite part of the trip also was sort of sitting back and watching my dad do his thing, and that's -- I guess that's the nice side of letting someone else or having someone else plan something very intimate, like a trip back to where someone grew up, no matter where it is. It's like they become -- they're the expert, you know? So you can sort of sit back and let him do his thing, and he can be his butterfly self when he's mostly in a cocoon here, so (laughter).

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Do you think he's different there.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I think -- I think so. I think he's really, like, happy and loud (laughter). Yeah, and it was really nice, because we got to see -- a bunch of his cousins, actually, got together and we had like a big party of all people who are sort of related to us. And so he became like the center. And he's also the youngest out of a lot of these cousins, and you know, the only boy in his family, so he was kind of like -- everyone kind of likes him and kind of knows who he is, and so I think in that way, he likes the attention. He likes the attention no matter where he can get it, [00:45:00] but I do think that he's more like "Yeah, we're awesome," kind of, when he's there. But -- so I think he's a little bit different, but not entirely different.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: And this is the third time your family has gone all together?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Fourth.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Fourth. What have the other trips been like?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Well we went in 2006, and that was my -- that was the summer after my first year of college, and that was when all five of us went. And that was a good trip because it was like, there's no extra people. I love having Katy and Pepper, but you

lose something when it's not just your family, you know, you become, sort of, this is my partner, this is my partner, we speak for them, blah, blah, blah. It becomes like a couples cruise rather than a "This is our family," you know, we don't have to -- we can speak our weird language and do whatever we want and not have to -- and on that trip, my dad drove, so it was three of us in the back, my mom in the death seat, as she calls it, in the front seat, and he was driving. And so I think it was a little bit more like "figure out where we go, I'll get you there" kind of adventure, which was not unlike this trip that we were on, but it was a little less forced, I think. It was a little less show-and-tell, it was more like sort of travel around and see new places, and we're sort of in this tight small unit that wasn't so -- it wasn't like we traveling through the countryside in a huge van with two extras, which was what we were doing this time around, but it was sort of like -- I don't know, I feel like we could pass a little bit better, because we were just smaller, there's less people. And the time before that was 1997. And so I was 10. I can't remember if that was the trip -- I think that was the trip that my -- one of my cousins was also on. But I liked that trip because we did a lot of moving around, but we also stayed put for a lot of places, so a lot of people, like, came and saw us. And my brother was young, so it was very much like come see our new -- the newest one. And the first time we went was in 1993, and that's when my brother was being potty trained. And that was -- so my brother was, like, two, and I must have been like five or six, and yeah, and so we were all much younger, and so I think also there was a lot less traveling around, just a lot more, sort of like, come see my newish family, just because I think it was the first time that lots of people on my dad's side had seen all of us in one place. And we got to meet -- then you start -- you meet all the characters that you still end up seeing when you go back. But, yeah, they were fun. They were also really fun. It was a lot more -- it was a bigger deal. I remember the plane had to stop in, like, Saudi Arabia to refuel, and you know, traveling for a long time, it seems a lot -- much more easy now, and not just because we're older, but I think just because things have sort of sped up in time.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Interesting. I was going to ask, like this cast of characters, so your dad's family is all in Sri Lanka, then.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Well, his two sisters stayed, so my aunt Kamini lives in England, and my aunt Marlene lives in Germany, and so it's only cousins that he has left, and they're very close just because that's how they all grew up, not unlike my mom grew up with all her cousins around. But yeah, so when it comes to his actual family that are there, there's tons of friends, but it's just -- it's cousins that are there left, yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: And so his sisters are in Europe, right? They're in Germany? They're both in Germany?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Germany and one's in England.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Oh, one's in England, that's right. And they -- so those are your cousins.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: OK. So your cousins are in Europe, and then you have, like, second cousins in --

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, so second cousins in Sri Lanka. So we actually met a bunch of second cousins this time around that we hadn't met before, which was cool, because, you know, I hadn't met them before, and they have our same last name. (laughter) It's nice, you know. So they're about, maybe, 10, 15 years older than us. And some of them have their own kids now too, but sort of -- it's definitely nice to meet people [00:50:00] who are related to you that you never met before. But they have -- they have interesting -- a lot of them have been educated abroad, and lived in the States and went back, but it was interesting because they're like "Oh, New York," like, you know, and it's like "Yeah, New York." "What's that like? Must be so crazy. All different kinds of people." One of my cousins was like, "But how could it be, you know, all these different people live in New York, and I remember I was on a school trip, and we went and we drove through the South Bronx and was like, what's happening here?" Like, all these things, there's a lot of preconceived notions about New York, and I wanted to say, you know, the same thing's happening here, you know, just a different kind of floating strata that a lot of different classes of people that don't talk to each other, or don't acknowledge each other. But I guess it gets sort of like hyper-popularized in the media and popular culture, it's more apparent, but yeah, I was like, "There's a whole

class of people who are walking around with no shoes, and sweeping the street, and there are businessmen in three-piece suits that are walking right past them. The same thing's happening here," but it's the same -- not the same, but you can definitely see the strata on which the two extremes lie.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Did you say that to them?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Well, I tried to explain that, for me at least, and I think, you know, I like doing -- in doing this interview, it's funny because I'm talking -- I feel like I'm talking about New York a lot, and I like that, because New York is a passion of mine professionally, but also because I feel like it can represent a lot of different things, and a lot of different kinds of people, and not be like what everyone thinks it is like. But yeah, so I was trying -- what I was trying to say to them is that, you know, you said "Isn't it kind of an isolating place?" and I was like "Not really." Everyone sort of has their deal, and I'm sure it's isolating for a lot of people, but it's -- I feel like there's a more of, like, "we're in it together" sort of mentality. And even if you -- there's a lot of space that we have to share, very close to one another, and so I think that makes the difference in terms of -- you may not like everyone, you may actually hate everyone a lot, but you have to -- you have to share air very close to one another. So at least you're exposed to lots of different kinds of people, which is incredibly idyllic, I know, but that's how I've come to think about it.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: So you said New York is a passion of yours?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, I work in architecture. I'm a preservationist, and a conservator. So I just -- I'm lucky enough to work here and do cool things with cool buildings. Yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: How did you decide to do that? How did you get interested in that?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Not by accident, I think, just because I grew up in an old home, and I grew up in an old school, and then I went to an old church. (laughter) And my mom was really good about talking about all these places, and talking about the importance of history. And so, I thought about doing sort of like mainstream architecture. I was an architecture major in college, but I just couldn't stomach new

construction, so I decided to do preservation instead of straight architecture. I think it's -- I think it's really interesting. It's a good lens -- preservation is a great lens to look at a lot of different things. You can talk about historic preservation and talk about -- and not talk about buildings. You can talk about landscapes, you can talk about people, you can talk about objects conservation, and different things, but it's a way of looking around you and seeing the past in your present, and sort of projecting it to the future. So it's -- I think it's a really great lens to look at everything. But -- so that's how I got in. I got into preservation just because I -- yeah, I love architecture and contemporary design when it's done really well, but it's not done really well most of the time, so I feel like a lot of people think [00:55:00] -- are sort of stuck with bad design, and they feel like they're stuck with what they have, but with a little bit more creativity, there's a lot more that can be done with the buildings that we already have, and they don't have to be super significant and super historic, but there's a lot of creative solutions that come out of preservation I think.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: So when you said that, like, historic preservation as a lens, what do you mean by that?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: It's sort of like a way -- I think of it as a way of looking at something, so if you look at -- it's like, for example, like I'm going to look at history sort of through women's history, or through medical history, or through science, you know. It's a way of looking around you and seeing the past. So I guess it's if -- I went to graduate school at Columbia and I got a preservation degree in the architecture program, and the best thing about it is that they teach you how to look, to look at buildings around you. And through looking at the buildings and the spaces around you, you can glean a lot of information about history and people and basically what has happened in that space over time just by looking around and looking for different things. So in that way, I think it's a way to sort of train your eye to look around and see things that a lot people aren't trained to see. And you don't need to go get a graduate degree to figure that out, I mean, there's tons of people who -- like my mom looks at things like that all the time. It's just a different way of looking around. So I think it's a really great sort of interdisciplinary field, because you can -- you know, we can talk about buildings, and then we talk about

why they're important, because we -- basically it's because we say they're important. It's about the people that sort of make up these rules and decide that something's too important to let go, so.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: So you think your mom taught to look?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, definitely.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: How?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: (pause) I think -- I think she's a preservationist, you know? You don't have to be a preservationist with just buildings, it's just looking around and noting something's significance, you know? So I think that's really important.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: What do you mean she's a preservationist?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: (pause) It's not just -- and I hate to say, like, oh, it's like, she really likes old things, that's not really it. It's like -- I don't know, it's like seeing -- it's all the stories that are sort of collected in things. Yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: In objects?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah. So that's the other part of preservation that's really cool. And it comes with all these people, and professionals and non-professionals, and all kinds of people that have all these stories ascribed to all these places, and that's really what we're trying to save when, you know, people want to save a building or find it so important to use the correct material when doing a project. It's because it means something. And it only means something because we say it does, you know? We feel a certain way. It's not, you know, all buildings are important, and the ones that we can convince ourselves by making an argument here or there, it's just because we want to. That's the end, you know, we've created all these silly rules, you know, about why buildings are important or why they're not. It's just -- it's because you feel a certain way, you know? You feel so attached to something that it just has to be important for another person too.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: And you've always been attached to buildings?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah. Yeah, I think so, yeah. But buildings and things, and landscapes, it's like -- it just feels a lot better than new buildings (laughter). But the other thing is, in Staten Island, so maybe -- I don't know if I was in high school, but

there's a lot of -- a lot of overdevelopment happening. So between 2000 and 2010, Richmond County, which encompasses all of [01:00:00] Staten Island, was the fastest-growing county in New York state. So it's a huge population of people to deal with. So there's a housing, sort of, rush, and a lot of, you know, perfectly fine single-family homes, which is most of Staten Island -- it's a very suburban, just like certain parts of Queens and Brooklyn -- that are on really substantial lots that you sort of forget that you're in New York City, it's because of the whole spatial dynamic, and so lots of these homes were completely demolished and, like, six homes were put up. So I think that also had a huge impact on why I decided to get into it, because it just didn't make any sense to me. It's not sustainable, as well, and it's not a good -- there's not a lot of pre-planning going into the development of these buildings and how they interact with the rest of their surroundings. And so, you know, a good example is we're coming up on a year of Hurricane Sandy. A lot of the houses that were lost in Sandy are these sort of ticky-tacky houses that never should have gone up in the first place. And because of the overdevelopment that was happening after 2000, 2005, just, I think, lots of different parts of the island were really strained when it came to too much people, too many cars. So that was a huge part of it as well, you know, just try to take some more time with how you think about how your environment should look, and not that everything should be beautiful, but everything could be, you know?

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: And you still live on Staten Island now?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yes, I do. I lived -- so I went to college in Western Mass. I went to Smith, which was awesome. It was also a really great place to study buildings. There's a lot of great architecture on Smith's campus. And one of the interesting things is that there are dorms at --

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NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: [00:00:00] -- Smith, there are only -- they're houses, so everyone lives in a house, and I thought that was a great -- a great way to sort of jump into your sort of first independent life, at least for me. And each one of them is a really good example of whatever architectural style was sort of hot when it was being built. So at first, when Smith was founded, all these sort of white-haired dudes got together and

were like "What is this? What are these ladies gonna like in a women's college?" So it was a bunch of males deciding physically what the architecture for an imaginary female population was going to be. So the buildings that came out of that were all very, very sort of cutesy and idyllic cottages, you know, where would you want your daughter to go, you know, 1870s? So they were almost like little tiny -- it's like doll's houses. And then they sort of progressed from there to be very sort of Romanesque, lots of Colonial Revival. A lot of houses were sort of cherry-picked from town and added in as well. But, you know, in the '50s, SOM did an international-style house that got so much bad press at the time, just because it was a white box sort of plunked down in between, in New England. But now you get a really nice range of sort of American architectural history within a tiny place. So for me, it was like a great place to do architecture, and to do any kind of academics, anyway. And then I went to Columbia, and I lived in Harlem for two years in a post-war building that was very loved, in need of a lot of repair, but it was a good apartment, I miss that apartment. I moved to Minneapolis for two years. My partner started a PhD program after we both finished grad school. She started it at the University of Minnesota, and so we move to Minneapolis 2011, that July 4th, yeah. So we drove cross-country, or at least halfway there, and ended up in Minneapolis, which also is an interesting place to do architecture. They have a love-hate relationship with St. Paul, the twin cities, but besides being really cold, I liked it there. Yeah, I got to do some conservation work there as well, which was good ex-- a good experience, and then I ended up getting a job back in New York, so we moved back and I had to sort of start quickly, so I ended up back on Staten Island, so I take a boat to and from work, which hasn't gotten old yet, but yesterday I was on the boat at like, I don't know, 10:00 or 11:00, and I was thinking, "Well, it's been six months at my job, and if I take the ferry twice a day, that's like a million times a week, so it's basically 250 times every six months, so 500 times a year," if I, you know, whatever. So I did some intense math last night, and thinking that that was kind of nuts, but it's funny because you see the same people if you go -- if you're sort of commuting hours, you know. So I see bow tie guy, I see kids going to Xavier, LaGuardia, and looking mad at the world. Sort of secretarial types as well who look like they've been doing this for a long time. But -- in that way

it's kind of nice because I wonder where all these people work, and then I wonder, you know, if they also think that it's kind of crazy that we all do this too, but yeah, but it hasn't gotten old yet.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Are you planning on staying?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I don't know. Financially, it's all working out pretty good, but for now I think I'm going to be in Staten Island for a while, but hopefully I will -- hopefully it won't be more than a year, but I'm sure that's famous last words, and I can listen to this in 10 years and see if that's changed, but I don't -- I don't plan on staying for forever. But that may change, yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Do you like being back there?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, I think it's good, I mean, I think it would be different if, you know, if money was no option, I sort of came home to an empty apartment every night, I don't think that was -- that would be the most fun for me either. I guess because I was away, it was sort of nice -- it is sort of nice [00:05:00] to come back and my parents are there, and my brother just graduated from college, so he's also home, which is an added bonus. So it's kind of a full house again, which is interesting, but --

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: That's kind of great.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: And it's -- you know, all of us are sort of gainfully employed and we have very different schedules, and we're sort of ships passing in the night. But it's nice. It hasn't gotten awful yet, and I'm sure it will get awful very soon, but for now, I think it's nice. I would love it if Katie comes back to New York and we can have our own place again, but I don't know, thinking about like doing the whole roommate thing again, it's kind of rough, but yeah, but that's what it is for a lot of people. It was nice because my dad was sick for a little while. He had surgery for prostate cancer, so it was kind of nice that we were all home. It's actually really lucky. I was thinking if I was still working in Minneapolis, I would come back, do all this other stuff, but for what it was, it all worked out, so it was pretty good.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Is he OK now?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, it actually went really well. I hope -- he has another blood test to get sort of the OK, but everything went OK, so.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: That's good.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Glad to hear that.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: How was Minneapolis?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: It's different. So I learned a lot about America. I feel like it was my first American experience, because there was no ocean around, I had nowhere to swim, but there's a joke -- I guess, are there jokes in Minneapolis? There was a joke that, like, a Minnesotan is so nice, they'll give you directions anywhere except to their own house, you know, like, they'll be very nice to your face, but not truly, genuinely nice, you know, like, "Oh, you want to, like, are you lost? Oh, I won't help you, but you know." It was an interesting experience. It's still an interesting experience, I feel like, because that's where -- I still have -- like we still have our -- I still go back and visit a lot, so it's not like I feel like I'm completely gone. But the first winter we were there, everyone was like "Yeah, Minneapolis winter is so crazy," and because of global warming, it wasn't that bad. And then the second winter, it was really bad, like ice on the street, and all that kind of thing. But in terms of city planning and architecture, and stuff that interests me, it was good. They have a really great integration of the park system within Minneapolis. They sort of all sort of flow into each other in a way that is like -- unlike any other place, so they -- it's very open and accessible in that way, and there's sort of like these lakes everywhere, and that's why they call it "Land O' Lakes butter." I had never known that until I made that connection in my mind.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Did not know that either.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: But Minneapolis is actually a really diverse place. They have a really large East African population. Also a lot of Thai people and Hmong people. They've had a long history with accepting refugees from many different kinds of places, and so the neighborhood that we lived in was really mixed, and it was a really good place to get all different kinds of food, except pizza. There was this pizza place called "A Slice of New York," with a neon sign of the Statue of Liberty that was sort of mocking me. And I could see it from -- I could turn around the corner and there it was, and it was --

you know, if I turned my back to the window and looked around, there was like, a Yankees hat, and a picture of the twin towers, and like a red-and-white checkered table cloth. I could, like, fake it. And that was supposed to be -- that was the best pizza in Minneapolis, but that wasn't really saying a lot. But aside from the pizza, everything else was good. But -- yeah. And I worked in St. Paul when I was there, so I got to sort of see what it's like. It's sort of like an outer borough experience, where people say "Oh, I don't go there because it's so far," like "You wanna go to Brooklyn tonight?" "No, I can't, it's so far," like it's that kind of mentality. But they're only 10 miles from city center to city center. So I'd wake up, and get on the bus, and go to work in St. Paul, and I knew people who were like "Oh my God, your commute," and I was like "Let me tell you about a commute. It's a bus and a boat and a train. That's a commute. Getting on one bus and getting off and going to work is a joy ride," you know? So spatial mentality of where things are and how far things are I thought were really funny because [00:10:00] people say, like, "Oh, you work all the way out in St. Paul?" But it's very different, yeah. But I guess it's also more of a driving city, so a lot of people sort of use the city for what they need, and then they leave. And because it's a lot of sprawl, you know, on the outskirts of cities, it's easy to do that. So I do think Minneapolis and St. Paul have been sort of beaten around by bad development and, you know, highway systems and things like that. But I think that's slowly changing. Minneapolis is a great biking city as well. I think it's, like, first or second in the United States after Davis in California, just because they have -- they have really great legislation on the books, just really progressive for cycling, which -- it's really flat there, so I guess that's why, but it's really easy to get around, and it's super small. So for a sort of brand new place to figure out, it was kind of easy. Yeah. So it was nice for a while, but I don't know if I could live there. But anything's possible, I guess.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: When you said that it was like your experience with America, what did you mean?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, I felt like it was, like -- I guess because I didn't have a direct link to any of the different ethnic communities that were there, the links that I had were at work, or I played in a community band, I played saxophone, and my partner

Katie, maybe all her colleagues at school, but I felt like I wasn't interacting with lots of different kinds of people. I was interacting with people who were very much like Katie and myself, you know, sort of like -- I don't know, like friends you'd make in college -- you know how like in college, everyone chose the school for a reason, so everyone's kind of similar? Yeah, so, but there was much more of a small town feel of it also, like as soon as you drove a little bit, or got out of the cities, it was not like rural -- I just -- it was a different kind of population I guess. And we had some friends who -- her family was from there, so we'd hang out, like, with her grandma and grandpa, and we were talking about -- which was great, because you can sort of have an instant family, and it's nice when you're not from a place, and they were sort of an old Minneapolis Minnesotan family, like, and they were Norwegian, so a sort of Scandinavian historic -- that was the sort of pioneer class of people that came through the Midwest. And so we -- we talked to them about where we got our apartment, and in my eyes, I was like "We have a two-bedroom apartment, for like a dollar in New York language, you know, this is great, it's on a nice street, you know, right near the bus, you know, close to school, whatever," and my friend's grandpa was like, "Um, oh, you live down on, like, Nicolett and Blasdale, that's kind of a rough neighborhood." I was like "Why?" and I was like "Because there's lots of non-whites that live there, I guess?" It was that kind comments like that, I guess. And which really surprised me, because you don't know the backstory of a place or a neighborhood if you're really not from there. And so you sort of get an apartment, because the price is right, and then you figure out that a lot of people have a lot of preconceived notions about it, and then because you have no preconceived notions, you happen to figure out that they're actually not true, you know, it's actually a fine place to live, you know? I wasn't being harassed on the street. But there's a lot of that, yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: How do you think -- how do you think people interpreted you there?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Hard to say. I think people were more -- had more to, like, say about me not being from Minnesota. (laughter) [00:15:00] Like first things first, you talk weird. But it was one my first, like, professional experiences where I had, like, my first real job, which I think was interesting, working in preservation, because the preservation

in New York and Boston, and lots of east coast cities is such a small group of people, and so you stay -- go to school here, you stay here, and everyone, you know, you sort of know people in the business, because of like professors or other places, just like any other profession, you sort of know the people who are working. But as you sort of find somewhere new, and I was lucky that I sort of contacted people and found a contract job there. But it was interesting because I didn't have any back knowledge about their whole architectural deal. I didn't know any of their important stories about their town, and so -- and their cities, so becoming an advocate for that place, by profession, is a good way to start knowing a place because you have to sort of be for the buildings and be for the people that live and work there, so you sort of have to get on board kind of quickly. I did a survey for a cultural resource management firm of North Minneapolis, and North Minneapolis -- people say North Minneapolis, like people here say "South Bronx," like -- in terms of like, if you want to say "bad neighborhood," in a stereotypical, like, neighborhood way, then like "Oh, North Minneapolis." I didn't know about any of the backstory about North Minneapolis before I got there, but I was sent very quickly, it was like this time of the year, and I was doing a survey for a proposed train line that was going to run from basically Minneapolis to the northern suburbs, and then to Duluth, which is the next big city in Minnesota. And so basically, we were looking around to see what the housing stock was like, and if there were any national register nominations that could be had within any of the houses, because if a big train line was going to go through a town, you don't want to disturb, you know, a great neighborhood or an important building. So we were taking a look to see that if there were or were not, sort of, important buildings in the way, which was problematic on a lot of fields, because I didn't like sort of looking around and being like "No, you're not historic, no, yes you are," because I think that's -- it's a hard decision to make, and very sort of cut and dry, and not a critical way to really look into things, and you're really making a judgment call by looking at something, which is really hard. So I was -- it was me and another person, and we were driving around in a rental car in North Minneapolis for like eight hours a day, looking at all these different houses. And we were sort of, like, listening to NPR, filling in these sort of surveys on our laptop as someone else was driving, and trying to do our

work, and I found a house, and I was like "Oh, I'm gonna nominate this to the register." It had a great porch intact, all these other intact wood features. As I was writing, like "Yes, this is great, like, add this to the list," we heard gunshots from -- right from this house, from the back. And I looked to my partner who I was working with, and I said -- or the girl I was working with, and she was like "That was gunshots." And as we looked, like a van blew through their backyard and drove -- like drove through the alley, like I guess it was the in-between of two houses. Drove through and fishtailed out onto the street, and its back windows were all shot up. So I was like "What is happening here?" And so, you know, we did the whole thing, called the cops, do all this other stuff, and you know, that's -- we were talking to the -- talking to a bunch of people in my office afterwards, and they've had -- they have a really bad problem with gun violence in North Minneapolis. And the weird thing coming from the east coast is that when you go anywhere, in a lot of different cities in the Midwest, it says, like "No guns allowed in this establishment," which to me, it's like "stranger danger," like of course there's no guns allowed. Like if you see a gun, like tell an adult, you know? But people are allowed to carry, so it's different. But [00:20:00] I thought that was -- it was really frightening, and I thought it was interesting because everyone was like "Oh, Neela, you must know about this, because you're from New York." And I was like "No, I have never had any firsthand experience with gun violence ever."

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Until I came to Minneapolis.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Until I came here. This Midwestern bread basket. Yeah, so, that was my interesting Midwestern experience.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: So did it make you feel more like you were from New York?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: That experience actually made me feel -- I didn't realize how scary it was until after it happened, until I had to drive -- the person who I was working with, she had her car, and I was driving the rental, and I had to drive it back alone, and I remember being super freaked out just because -- I don't know, we called the cops, and they never showed up, and then we ended up going to the police station, and like, nothing really happened, and I was like "I've seen *Law & Order*, this is not how this is supposed

to work." So, like, I didn't have like a resolution. I just remember it happened on a Friday afternoon, and I was like "I'm really happy I don't have to go back to work tomorrow," you know, it's just -- and it's not like -- no one was hurt, so that was really good, and other things like that, but it was just -- I don't know, it was more of a cultural thing, I think, just because legally they're allowed there, so I guess there's more problems with them, because they're just around more. But I don't think I felt more like I was from New York. I felt really, like, guns are bad. I don't know. It was more -- I felt more not like an adult, I guess, even though I was having to do really adult things, but that happens to me a lot. I forget in my office that -- I was like, "There's a lot of adults around," and I was like "Yeah, you work now." (laughter)

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Did living in Minneapolis generally make you feel like more of a New Yorker?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, I think so, because I was very much -- I am not from the Midwest.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Is your girlfriend from the Midwest?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: She's from Salt Lake City, Utah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: She's from Salt Lake City, OK.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, and so -- and her big stance is, "I'm from the west coast," and I say "Utah has no coast." But that's her, like, equivalent thing, I guess it's like I'm not from here. No, but I guess I was more proud, I would say, and say "I am from New York. This is easy." I don't know. I don't know. I think there's -- it's not hard -- hardness isn't the right word sometimes, but I feel like, correct me if I'm wrong, sometimes when you go to other places, you're like "This is so easy," you know? Easy like, I don't have to scramble to find an apartment that won't make me starve, and scramble to catch the train, and scramble to catch a boat, and do all these other things just to sort of get to where you need to go, and then someone else is like "Yeah, I'll drive today." You know, like it's that kind of -- it's easy in that way where it's not a lot of steps to achieve what you can achieve. But it's harder in a lot of other ways, I think, just because -- well, the weather is really impressive there. It's really, really cold. And it makes it so people who can't afford to get themselves places in cars and things like that

are reliant on busses and stuff. And they are getting a light rail system, which is slowly happening, but there's a ton of people that, you know, standing outside waiting for a bus, that kind of deal. And it limits, you know, who can get where in a really obvious way, around the cities. So it's less democratic, I think, in that way, because their public transportation system is just different, and not so all-encompassing.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Yeah, that's interesting. Less democratic.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, I guess -- because there, I mean, the only -- the most diverse bus line, I would say, is the one going to the university, because it's kids that get a bus card, you know. But a lot of people were like "Oh, so you're going to get a car?" And I was like "No, I'll just take the bus." It's a super tiny place, you know. Yeah, but there's a lot -- it's just a different driving mentality, you know.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: One thing I wanted to ask generally is this sort of, like, identifying as a New Yorker, not -- is just more -- more broadly, how do you identify? [00:25:00]

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I love identifying as New Yorker, because I think that it covers a lot of bases. When I was in college, I did a sort of documentary, not unlike this, about diversity on Smith's campus, but with video. You know, a lot of people are hung up on, like, having, like, as many different kinds of people, especially in academic institutions, it sort of comes out more about how people identify, and all that kind of stuff. And when I was doing that project, I thought a lot about that question, and I -- I like being to sort of identify as a New Yorker, because that gives me -- I feel like it covers more bases than saying "Well, you know, I'm Sri Lankan, but I'm Italian, but I'm Italian-American, and you know, my grandmother's Dutch, and colonialization has a lot to do with that," but a New Yorker, I feel like you just -- it's easier. And not easier in that I can't -- you know, explaining my background is hard, but I don't feel like saying "I'm Sri Lankan" describes all of me, and I don't feel like saying "I'm Italian" describes all of me, but I feel like you can say "I'm a New Yorker" and that sort of describes all of me.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Does your family ever talk about how they identify?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I think mostly my sister and I will talk about it. I'm sure we talk about it more than my brother. I don't know how my brother identifies. And I also

think that gender plays a huge role in that as well, because I guarantee people don't question him as much as they question my sister and I, just because he's a sort of tan, tall, bearded man right now. That's his adult look even though he's the youngest. But he -- I don't think that he has to sort of explain himself in a lot of ways, just as, you know, no one would ask my dad, because he is obviously an other figure. No one would say "Oh, where's your last name from?" because he's read as someone who's not from here. So I think he sort of gets that -- my brother gets that perk as well. But I definitely talk about it with my sister more, and I don't think my mom -- I don't know, maybe -- I don't know if she thinks about it. She just thinks of us as, I don't know, hers, I don't know. (laughter) "What are you? You are my babies."

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: You're just mine.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, so I don't think -- yeah. This most recent trip, I guess I've thinking about a lot more, just because I've been -- it's been in my face, so I have to think about it. Like realizing that I'm just as Sri Lankan as everyone else in Sri Lanka, you know? And that's fine, and I don't have to be anything more than what I am, so. Yeah, so, I guess there's a lot left to me -- this trip has left me with a lot more questions than answers, but that's a good thing. And a whole lot of "I should write about this, I should write about that" kind of ideas, you know.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: What sort of questions?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Well, when I was there, you know, part of the whole tourist thing is that you go and look at important sort of cultural sites, and that is directly related to what I do and what I think about professionally, and so for me, thinking about how, like, being Sri Lankan is presented in buildings, and how Sri Lankan architecture is a really great example of Sri Lankan history because it shows Portuguese, it shows British, it shows Dutch, it shows all of these mixtures of different kinds of people in a building that's, you know, many different kinds of buildings that are still being used, and still being adapted and ideas are being taken from them and contemporary architecture as well. And how they're being conserved and preserved for the public, and what kind of public is seeing that now after the war is over -- super interesting just to think about that. When we went to the north, in Jafna, which we couldn't go to because of the war in

previous years, [00:30:00] you see all these bombed out places, and after we got back, I found out that they do this thing, they do like these war tours with people from Colombo, which is the capital, and it's such a tiny country, it's like the size of West Virginia, but it's like of bombs were going off in one side of West Virginia, and you couldn't go there, you sort of put up a mental block, and in your mind, it's farther away than it is. So there was an influx of tourists -- Sri Lankan tourists from the south going to the north, just to look around this place where it's very familiar because they hear the place names all the time in the news, but then they couldn't go there. But they take these different tourists on these war tours like where important battles have happened, or where different people were killed. It's only been two years -- two or three years since the end of the war, and it hasn't been, I don't think, sufficient time to think critically about different aspects of the war and the huge loss of life and human rights violations that happened on both sides. There hasn't been enough time to sort of mitigate and edit what the government thinks is important and is telling all these people, because they're the ones that are writing and constructing all of this information that is then presented and curated to people who are looking at it as tourists, and are eating all this information. They're the ones consuming it, and so without taking a critical look at who's presenting it, like, issues of cultural resources, and all these different kinds of things are just sort of flying around. And World Heritage Sites, and international cultural site management, and lots of different stuff hasn't really been talked about in this specific kind of way. And then there's like general, like actual architectural conservation issues, like buildings are crumbling, and then they fix them in traditional methods that are really great, and I want to know more about that. But -- so I was thinking about all those other things as well.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Yeah, that's a lot.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, it was lot. (laughter) It took a while to -- sort of, lots of waves of information and feelings came after the trip, also, as well, just because it was happening all at the same time. So you need -- I needed some time to think about it and to talk about it. I talked about it a little bit with friends of mine after I came back, and then I started actually talking about it, maybe last week, because it was just a lot, you know?

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: You guys have been back like a month now?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah. More than that, six weeks, yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Yeah, I know I saw Devika -- actually I saw Devika -- well she was sick after.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, with the dengue, yeah. That was another added bonus for the trip. Yeah. Yeah, she was saying your dad walked by, "You'll feel better." (laughter)

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: (laughter) Yeah, he yelled through the window, or something. Yeah. He loves Devika. Well I saw her right after she was like -- it was like the second day she was out after she'd gotten better, or something, and there was a dinner at my brother's house that I saw her at, and I was like "Oh my God, how was your trip?" and her and Pepper were both like "We don't even know how to talk about it."

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: We don't have the words yet, yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: And it came up a lot in our interview as well.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah. It's weird. Maybe -- I mean -- I don't know if it would be the same if we had gone to, like, the small town where my mom's grandparents grew up in, in Italy, but I don't -- it would not be the same, you know, for obvious reasons, but I guess it's just the time and the, like, it's like the repeating of it, you know? We all go every couple of years and see kind of the same stuff. We see kind of the same people, but it's different because it's like "Oh remember when you did this when you were small?" You know, like, you came to my house, and we did this, and it's sort of happening again. But it was definitely -- like yeah, so, definitely next time we're going to about some things very differently, but. (laughter)

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Devika was saying that it was like -- [00:35:00] that she was thinking about it a lot in terms of like why she didn't know more about the Sri Lankan -- like her Sri Lankan family history, or the language, or --

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: It's difficult because you say, well, like "Hey Dad, like, why didn't you do this?" and then immediately, he's like "Don't attack me." You know, like, "It's not my fault, I was busy, I was working, like, blah, blah, blah," and it's like "I'm not trying to attack you, I'm just trying to ask you, like, throw me a bone, couldn't you have

taught me the alphabet?" you know, like that kind of thing. And I don't know the full story of why that is and why that was. It's one of those things where it's like "I could have known a lot, but you didn't tell me." But I also think it's the kind of information that you get from your mom sometimes, unfortunately, and not from your dad, or maybe not my dad, just because he doesn't have that "Oh let me tell you about, like, when I was little," and he does, he has, like -- it's not like he doesn't talk about it, because he does, and we are really lucky that we can talk to our aunts and our cousins about it as well, but they have a whole other wealth of knowledge, and it's completely different. Also, just because there's such a time -- there's an age gap between them. There's 10 years between the oldest sibling and the youngest. And then especially in that time in history, I think it's really important because he was born in 1943. It's like, Sri Lankan independence didn't happen yet, all these things, you know. And his sisters were so much older, it was like, they're sort of contemporaries of my mom's parents, you know, in terms of age. And so there's a weird, like, in between generational thing that happens, like the oldest cousin on my dad's side, on our Sri Lankan cousin's side, she just turned 50. And so it's like, yeah, we're first cousins, but it's more of a -- it's like a -- too old to be my cool older cousin, but you're sort of too young to be my mom, but it's a different -- it's not like a we grew up together, we're three years apart kind of deal. So there's a lot of different sort of going in between, and in and out of different generations, and in and out of different time periods that you don't -- I don't think I've experienced in many other sort of family tracks, or family systems, because sort of every 25 years, there's a generation. It didn't really happen that way. And because my dad also was a little bit older when he had kids, we're all really spaced out, in terms of the cousins.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: But you think there's a really, like, gendered aspect to the way knowledge gets, sort of transmitted?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I think so. I think for some reason, you know, you get -- or these specific set of parents that I got, my dad was sort of tight-lipped, and I guess I'm the same way in a lot of respects about my own life, and we're really similar, I think, in that way. So I don't necessarily think it's a bad thing, but my mom is sort of over-the-top, like, "I will tell you when my grandparents were born, I will tell you their names,

their occupations, their stories, what we did on Christmas, what we did on Easter, where my mom lived," you know, all these different kind of things. And my dad will tell you, but you have to ask first. You know, like, so I definitely think that's a difference between them.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Yeah, Devika sort of talked about it also. I didn't -- you know, my father's Indian, I didn't grow up learning Hindi or anything, and regret that now a lot. Like it would have so easy for me to have this whole other thing, you know?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: It feels like a whole other -- not missing, but like an additional part that could have been. But I think that's what makes Devika and I really different from other Sri Lankan-American kids, because if they had two parents, and then they did learn a language, I feel like that have a really different -- much different sort of cultural and life experience than we did, because we were sort of like -- It wasn't like a free pass, but it was like "Oh, we don't have to do all that," you know? I don't know a better way [00:40:00] to try to explain it, but I've -- people who are my age that I knew when I was little, even now who I talk to, who just had really different -- the ways that we grew up are really different.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Did you have a Sri Lankan community or friends when you were growing up?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: No. And I guess that's what I'm trying to pinpoint, is that we didn't have all that, you know? We had, you know, tons of my dad's friends, that we would go over their houses, you know, for dinner or whatever, you know, here and there when we growing up, and they were Sri Lankan, and they had Sri Lankan food, you know, full Sri Lankan kids, and all these other things, but it was not like a community that you would see very frequently. And I knew even when I was young, that we were different than them. At least I felt that way.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Yeah. Do you still feel that way? Now do you have Sri Lankan friends or...?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I don't have any Sri Lankan friends. I feel very akin to people who are, like, in the foreign dads club, as I like to call it, which you are a great member

of as well. When I was in high school, my closest friends were sort of half this, half that, and I felt much more, (pause) again, like I didn't really have to explain anything, sort of like half-Asian assumed sort of knowledge, you know, it's like -- I don't know, it's just a different way of having a little bit of both, I guess. Yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Yeah. I've had really interesting conversations with my mom, who's, you know, was born and raised in New Jersey -- her family's from Scotland -- about, like, whiteness, and like, around me being, like, "You realize I'm not white, right?"

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: No, but I have these conversations, and I don't think that she realizes that sometimes. And I don't think that it's something she does on purpose, but it's like she sees herself in her children. She doesn't really -- and so in that way, I think it's like "Oh, you are my children, like, you are reflecting -- I see me, I don't see a non-white person who --" and that comes with lots of baggage that she doesn't have to deal with, you know? It's not negative or positive baggage, but you know what I'm saying, like it's that topic of whiteness that is talked about but not really talked about, I guess. Yeah, it's hard. I don't know what her -- I have to talk about it now. (laughter) We'll have to have this conversation about it. But her answer to all that was "I'm not white, I'm Italian." Like that's the -- it's another ethnicity, and it comes with -- she had her other own stuff with, you know, to deal with that. So.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Right, yeah.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, so, in some ways, she thought about it, but she didn't think about it. Yeah. I'm now really interested to listen to my sister's interview.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Yeah, you guys will have to exchange interviews when you get them. Yeah, no, it's just something that like me and my mom -- I don't know, that like I think about in terms of her, and how she thinks of me, and her family, and this, like, little family she put together, you know? Yeah.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: And maybe, I mean, for a lot of things, you know, we're just the five of us. We don't have either side, you know, we're --

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Right.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: -- that's, you know, and I think that's the nice parts, you know, that you get from just being with your immediate family and not having one or the other to sort of affect the other, you know? But yeah, it's also, I mean -- I don't really unders-- it's hard to know what my dad's family really thought of her, either, just because it's -- my dad's father died [00:45:00] when he was almost out of medical school, and my grandmother was much older, and she had Alzheimer's when we were growing up. So she lived in New York, she came to live with us, and then lived in New York until she died. But it's not like she had any additional information to add, because she was suffering from dementia, so that's also like, we didn't get that, you know?

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Sure, yeah. I like the foreign dads club.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, there's t-shirts. (laughter)

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Really?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Not yet. (laughter) Yeah, it's like, oh, denim cutoffs and no shirt? Yep. Is he Greek? Fine. Italian? Great. Indian? Perfect. Sri Lankan? Brothers. Like it's just -- it's like very little clothing and a lot of just like junky activities, you know?

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Right. Anyway, well is there anything else you want to add?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Is there anything you think I'm leaving out?

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: No, I mean -- I don't have, like -- I'm not -- yeah.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I don't know. I guess I would love to get my brother in here to do this do, just so we could get -- you could get all of us. His would be a lot different, I think.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Why do you think?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I think that for better or for worse, he had a different experience, just because he was the only boy, and because he had such an intense -- still has an intense relationship with my dad. And maybe he sees Devika and I having an intense relationship with our mom. But yeah, my dad definitely likes him the best, but. (laughter) I mean, my dad loves all of us the best, but, you know, I think he was definitely favored for a lot of things, and he gets to do -- he's like my dad's go-to person

if he needs something, and I think that's very telling. And you know, growing up the youngest, I think, is different as well.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Yeah, I know my brother experiences stuff really differently, but more in a sort of south Asian, you know, post-9/11, sort of like has experienced racism really differently than I have.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Definitely. When this Boston bombing happened last year -- or not even, it wasn't even a year ago, it was like six months ago -- my brother was still at school, he was at Brown University, and some -- as soon as this happened, there was some stupid media break that said that one of these kids might have gone to Brown. And as soon as they showed the picture of the actual kid, he looked just like my brother. And I remember being frightened that he was going to get -- something bad was going to happen to him, or he was going to get picked up after this, just because they had linked his school, and this kid looked so much like him. And yeah, I could definitely see that. But we get that all the time. Whenever we're traveling, sort of like this look of, when my parents travel, it's like "Did this man coerce you into traveling? Like what's happening? Why are you with this brown guy?"

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: What does your mom look like?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: She looks like me. She has short brown hair, or she went platinum blonde about five years ago, maybe. She has short, short hair. But she's -- in my head, she has brown, short hair. Glasses, not unlike my own. And my height. And kind of white, yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: What does your dad look like?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: My dad also looks like me, with glasses not unlike my own. And he has these shoes. But he's like sort of light brown, a little darker than you. And he has curly hair, where he still has hair. And sort of slim. He's kind of like your dad's size. He's very similar.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Have you met my father?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: OK. (laughter) [00:50:00]

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I was there when my dad met your dad. It was a lot of man love happening.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Oh really? Did they get along?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I think so. It was like this furious shaking of hands, which was nice. And then they talked about vegetables, so yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Or Sri Lankan politics, which --

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, basically, yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: -- which my father probably has an opinion on.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I think, in my experience, all dads have opinions on all things. For better or for worse.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Right, yeah, exactly.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah, my dad definitely thinks he knows a lot about everything, which is only half true.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: I was just wondering what they look like because I've heard so much about them from you and Devika, and I haven't actually met them.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: We -- yeah, we all -- we look like whoever we're with, I guess. And I guess that's the other thing, is like we sort of fit into both deals. But -- yeah, so -- and my sister looks such like my mom when she was the same age, because her head is so big. My sister has a huge head. And so does my mom.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: I've never noticed that.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Just take a look next time. Just, yeah. And my brother looks like a dead ringer for my dad when he was in medical school. And this trip we were -- one of the reasons why we traveled this time in August was my dad had his fiftieth reunion for his medical school class.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Oh, OK.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: And so they had, like, their yearbook of all their pictures, and it looks just like my brother. It was really weird. And spooky. But yeah, they look a lot alike.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: I don't look anything like my mother. Neither does my brother.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah?

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Yeah. So, yeah, we don't look anything like her. I mean, kind of do, when you look at pictures, you're like "Oh, maybe we kind of look like Mom," but people definitely are still like, "Why are you with this person?" You know?

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Right, yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Yeah. We both ended up looking a lot more like our father.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Do you think that changed a lot of the perception that you get with people? As a family?

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Yeah, well they're divorced, so there hasn't been, like -- it's like when we're with our mom, or with my mom and her husband, her second husband, who's also Scottish, so it's like me and my brother with these two white people. And people are really confused, just generally, about what our deal is. And with our dad, people just -- that's always just like "Oh, OK, yeah, you know, Manissa looks so much like you," you know, and then like, you know, "Why doesn't she speak any Hindi?"

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah. That's the other thing, is that there's a lot of, like, generational disappointment, I feel like, when you, like, fess up and say "No, my kids, they don't know how to speak Hindi," or "They doesn't know how to speak Sinhala." It's like, sorry. Like I'm sure the reason is he's feeling just as guilty as I do for not demanding it as a baby to speak to me only in a foreign language. But, you know, my mom could have done the same thing with Spanish and Italian, and she chose not to as well, so.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Yeah, that's interesting too.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: So that's basically was that was about. But my one cousin that grew up in England, she lives in Scotland now, and I think she felt -- and in the UK, felt much more backlash after 9/11, because people were like "Oh, you must be Muslim, you must be this, you must be this, you must be Pakistani, you must be this." You know, it's the kind of thing where people just think they know a lot, and she was definitely feeling that more than we were.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Do you think that was because of England more than --

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: I think so. I think it was more of Scotland -- she lives outside Glasgow in a more sort of post-industrial little town, so there's not a lot of diversity, so I think that's sort of where everyone's head was at.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Yeah, sure. My stepfather's from outside Glasgow, actually, so I've been there with him, as, like, his family, which is also, people are very like, "You make no sense."

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Yeah.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: So.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: Well, thanks for the interview.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: Yeah, thank you.

NEELA WICKREMESINGHE: It's really fun.

MANISSA MCCLEAVE MAHARWAL: I'm glad, yeah. Let me just say on tape, thank you so much. [00:55:00]

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