

MIRZA CHOWDHURY

Panahar Bangladeshi Cuisine - Atlanta, Georgia

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Interviewer: Kate Medley

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

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[Begin Mirza Chowdhury Interview]

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Kate Medley: This is Kate Medley, interviewing Mirza Chowdhury at Panahar Bangladeshi Cuisine in Atlanta, Georgia on June 8, 2010. And I'll get you to introduce yourself and tell us who you are and where we are and—.

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MC: My name is Mirza Chowdhury, the owner of Panahar Bangladeshi Cuisine in Atlanta, Georgia.

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KM: And when and where were you born?

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MC: I was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1962.

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KM: And how did you come to do what you do?

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MC: When I first came to the United States my very first job was actually as a dishwasher in an Indian restaurant. And I was there for four years and then eventually I became the manager of that restaurant. And from there, worked in various different food and beverage establishments, and then eventually it evolved into working even in the hotel industry and then eventually owning a business. This opportunity came up in the year 2001. Before that it was working as opposed to owning a business in different aspects of food and beverage industry.

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KM: And tell us a bit about your family history.

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MC: Well my mom is a retired high school teacher and my dad was a physician. I have one sister and my sister right now works actually at a Women's Empowerment NGO in Bangladesh, training women how to get out of the economic, you know, doldrum. And my brother-in-law – my sister's husband – he works in a manufacturing company in Bangladesh.

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I'm single and so I just have one brother and one sister and my mom and dad. They're both retired. They all live in Bangladesh. I'm the only one over here, so my parents and my sister and her family, they all live in Bangladesh.

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KM: And take us back to your childhood in Bangladesh. What was that like?

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MC: Well, I'm very sure everybody thinks that their childhood is unique [*Laughs*] up to a degree. Mine was unusually non-Bangladeshi as it could be. I think it goes back a little bit more to my mom and dad. I have to talk about that before I talk about my childhood.

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Even in 1961 East Pakistan, which was an extremely conservative country at that point, even now so, but at that point even more, my mom and dad got married in the regular American way, which to us in 2010 seems really very basic and given. But in 1961, in East Pakistan, that was practically unthinkable. First of all, my mom was the first sibling among her generation to actually go out and have an employment, have a Bachelors degree and have employment. And she met my dad and fell in love and got married— by herself without her parents' blessing or parents' intervention. So that was quite unusual for that time. It was extremely unusual.

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And obviously I was aware of that from the very childhood that both my mom and dad are very different kinds of people. They're very big on making you independent. Starting from my first grade actually and my mom was a high school teacher and my dad was a physician, but he was a general practitioner so they really didn't have that much money. But even though we did not really have maybe even enough money to be comfortable, my mom made sure that she could save enough money to send me to the most expensive private school in Bangladesh. So I was the poorest student in the most expensive private school, so talk about childhood trauma. [*Laughs*] But it was an English medium school. It was a Catholic school, St. Joseph's High School. I was there from third grade to tenth grade and from there I went to Notre Dame College which was in eleventh grade and twelfth grade. But all the way from first grade to twelfth grade, I was in a private school. That made a huge difference in anybody's childhood when you go to a really, really nice and extremely competitive private school with an English medium also in

Bangladesh—that makes a big difference—as opposed to going to a regular public school. I mean even when I was in seventh grade, eighth grade, I knew that someday I’m going to go to the USA. I just don’t know when. But I just knew at some point.

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So it was a very competitive childhood and being my mom is a high school teacher, I mean she was very big on making sure that academically you’re successful and she was extremely focused on that as personally you were independent. I mean even when I was 10 years old, I was doing a lot of household chores that normally the fathers of the house would do or maybe the older brothers would do, but she would let me do it by myself because she had a lot of trust in me. So it makes you very different, and it really helps when at the age of 18 you come halfway around the world to another country where you don’t know a single soul and don’t have a single penny in your pocket and barely can speak English. So it was a great foundation; so that’s all about childhood.

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KM: Were your parents both Bangladeshi?

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MC: Yes.

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KM: And can you talk a little bit about the food traditions there in your home growing?

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MC: That would be very similar to any other Bangladeshi family. You know nothing so unique about it. I mean you have three meals a day. If you really have to add some Bangladeshi aspects to it, you had three meals a day and for all three meals everybody sits down and has the meal together. Not that everybody is having meals at different times. It was unfortunately a pretty high-carb diet. Even in the morning you're going to have hand-rolled bread with some kind of aloo bhaji which is similar to hash browns or you have some kind of omelets. But with everything you're going to have bread – which will be hand-rolled bread, which is very similar to wheat tortilla, but it will be rolled at home as opposed to buying from—. In Bangladesh nobody really uses processed product.

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Lunch will be very similar to dinner where the main item will be rice, and with rice you take different items that you mix with the rice and then you finish your meal. And then dinner will be very similar to that.

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One of the other aspects of it is in Bangladesh, people normally eat dinner real late, you know. Breakfast could be real early in the morning. Dinner is pretty much mid-day but not 11:30, 12 noon. Mid-day more means 1:30 p.m., 2:00 p.m., and then dinner could be more like 9:00 p.m., 10:00 p.m., something like that. So the meals were pretty traditional. Nothing extraordinary about it. But it was nothing rich. It was just simple.

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KM: And who did the cooking?

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MC: Well in Bangladesh most of the cooking is normally done by the house servants or the maids. Even now, over there having a maid is a very normal thing because labor is so extremely cheap that it is very easy—even for someone – to use a Bangladeshi cliché term – even for someone who is in lower middle-class to middle-class, to have not just one or maybe two or three maid servants that you may have got from the village. They may be working in a really miniscule amount of compensation, if not really working for food and lodging. And considering the fact that my mother was working and she was a high school teacher, so she was working, so we had maids and they would be the one mainly who would do the cooking under the guideline of my mom.

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KM: And what were some of your favorite foods?

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MC: Some of the favorite food is going to be not what you normally eat every day on an everyday basis but more like the snack type thing, you know some little treats that you get mainly in the afternoon. Afternoon treats are pretty big in Bangladesh. People will have it with tea. I myself didn't drink any tea or coffee, but it's sweets or snacks or things like that. People like fish over there. I love fish. Shrimp is very big over there. In the morning there's a thing called cheera, which is like cracked rice basically— that's rice with yogurt or cracked rice with—it's like a rice cereal, let's put it this way. Rice cereal with yogurt was a very big thing in the morning. Desserts, sweet stuff, things that you make on special occasions. There's a really popular item in Bangladesh. They call it chicken roast; basically very similar to rotisserie chicken over here but imagine doing rotisserie chicken with way-less salt and a lot more juicy. I

mean it will have a lot of spices and a lot of stuffing in it and all around it and it is noticeably more moist than a rotisserie chicken and in Bangladesh that's called a chicken roast. That's a very popular thing over there.

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KM: And how did you first come to the US?

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MC: I came as a college freshman at Georgia Tech, so that was my first foray into the United States. And then I was at Tech for two years and then I decided that I don't want to study Engineering because what happens is that when you grow up in Bangladesh it's engrained in you that you're either going to study Engineering or Medical or Law – some kind of professional aspirations that you have over there.

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It's not that it's forced into you. It's more subconscious way of thinking of what you're going to do professionally, you know academically. But after being at Tech for two years I realized that I don't think I really want to be an Engineer. At that point I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I don't think I still know what I want to do with my life. So I actually got out of school and I was out of school for a couple of years, and another thing interesting that happened at that point. By the time I was actually 22, I was already a manager at the Abbey Restaurant, which was at North Avenue and Piedmont, which was a \$5,000,000 restaurant. So I was actually working full-time in food and beverage management and going to school part-time. Fortunately I had the luxury of taking time off from school and not have to worry about going to school and having a job

based on that or going to school for future employment. I already knew that I would be in food and beverage management, so I had the luxury of going to school to study something purely for the sole reason that I enjoy it.

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So I went back to Georgia State and got a degree in Political Science. And I didn't want to study Food and Beverage Hospitality deliberately because I didn't want it to be myopic, where you work in an area and you study in the same area. I believe that people should be as much versatile as possible, so I deliberately didn't want to study what I work on. I wanted to go to college just to be able to think, not necessarily having a piece of paper that will help me in my employment. So I didn't study Hospitality Management deliberately.

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KM: First impressions of the US?

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MC: The very first impression of the US is that it's spacious. It's large. It's big. Everything is huge. If it is reversed, like if anybody from the United States goes to Bangladesh, they would be — even without any reason, just subconsciously – they would be claustrophobic. They'll feel like they are passing out because it's just so many people. I mean you cannot imagine 150 million people in the size the State of New York. And from there you come to the United States in Atlanta in 1980, where in 1980 Atlanta was actually way less-crowded than what it is right now –way less-crowded, a lot more trees. So that's the very first impression you get.

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Everything is long distances, you know, long hours. I mean there's so many little things. The food – the very first impression that you get about food that American food tastes absolutely horrible. I mean seriously. I mean honestly. I took British Airways when I came from Bangladesh to over here. The meal that I had in British Airways in September 1980 when I was 18 years old was possibly the same meal that I would have today and I would relish it. I would have it, you know, I love it and I'll have it, but at that point I did not eat a single thing. I had a 24-hour flight time with maybe another seven-hour duration layover, so for 30 hours I didn't eat anything because I couldn't eat it, because the biggest difference – and now it is no difference to me – but the biggest difference is that everything is undercooked. I mean, I could not eat the meat, chicken, vegetables. Everything was severely undercooked – which now is okay with me – but at that point I just simply couldn't eat it. So fortunately I came over here and stayed with my uncle, so I was eating Bangladeshi food. But the food outside, I couldn't eat it.

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Even though when I was in Bangladesh there was this, you know, big full-page advertisement for a Big Mac. So when I was leaving the airport, my uncle asked me – what do you want to eat first? I said the very first thing I want to eat in America is really a Big Mac. And we actually did — from the airport we went to a McDonald's and I had a Big Mac. And it was way smaller than I thought it was going to be, but I thought that was just awesome because hamburger was not, you know, as undercooked as steak is or a broiled chicken is. That was the airplane food. I still remember the airplane food. It was basically broiled chicken and steamed vegetables and things like that and steamed rice.

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Meat is very expensive in Bangladesh, extremely expensive. So from that perspective I thought this was just absolutely the best thing in the world, but now I do not eat hamburger. [Laughs]

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KM: Big Mac was your first meal on Georgia soil?

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MC: Big Mac was my first meal in the United States and it had to be Big Mac –not any other hamburger or not Burger King or not Wendy’s or anything like that. Going back to it a little bit, you know, you talk about childhood and coming to the United States, one little history. In Bangladesh, the grocery store paper bags, they’re made from used or old magazine papers. So when I was growing up, every time I would go to a store or a market and all the groceries – after we’d take the groceries out of the bag, I would actually unwrap or open the grocery store bags and I would read it. So that was my way of reading about the United States is from grocery store bags. And you’d read advertisement after advertisement about Big Mac. That was the biggest thing – and Coke, but Coke you have in Bangladesh even at that time. We had Coke.

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So my exposure to the United States was actually through used magazine pages from Bangladeshi grocery store bags. That’s my exposure. And for many people over there at that point, you know, because you just can’t afford to buy books in English you know or even if you do that’s literature. But you’re talking about real – knowing about the culture or, you know, it’s really the magazine pages. You just read grocery store bags.

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KM: You're the only one in your family that moved to the US?

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MC: Define family.

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KM: Well, immediately family.

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MC: You mean me and my siblings? Well I only have one sister, so yes, in that case yes.

However, a lot of my uncles and aunts and nephews and nieces, they were already – and still are – in the United States.

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KM: In Atlanta?

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MC: In Atlanta, several of them are in Atlanta. That's right.

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KM: And is that why you decided to come to Atlanta?

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MC: Yes, my maternal uncle, my mother's brother, actually he used to own a restaurant, an Indian restaurant and he used to live over here. So one of my reasons, even though I got admitted to other universities too, one of the reasons to come to Georgia Tech is that number one so that I could stay with them. It's not just a matter of finances but the idea of staying with them, and also obviously the financial aid didn't cover the lodging and things like that. So that was really the reason to come to Atlanta to stay with them.

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KM: Okay, The Abbey, talk about your first job there and how did that come to be?

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MC: Well, you mean the first job in the United States or first job at The Abbey?

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KM: Well what was your first job in the United States?

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MC: Well the first job in the United States was, as I said, as a dishwasher at an Indian restaurant. I did that for less than six months. From there – I'm going to go through this very quickly. From there I became a server in the same Indian restaurant and after, like I said, two years I became the manager in that Indian restaurant. And around 1984 I left that and I went to Atlanta City Club and Atlanta City Club I started as a server. And within two years I became the assistant maitre'd over there and while I was assistant maitre'd at Atlanta City Club, one of the

members was George Gore, who was the general manager of the whole organization of The Abbey and the Mansion Restaurant.

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So he came over to the club one day and met me and he said well why don't you come over and we'll talk about things. And then I went over to The Abbey and I became the dinner manager at the Mansion Restaurant, which right now is called the Ivy Hall at North Avenue and Piedmont Road. So I was the dinner manager at the Mansion for two years and after that then an opening came up as an assistant general manager at The Abbey Restaurant. So I went from there to The Abbey Restaurant and I was there for like two years and then I decided that in the restaurant industry you can only become a GM – you cannot go any higher than that. There's only so much you can go, so I decided I wanted to foray into the hotel industry. And I left The Abbey and went to Marriott Waverly Hotel which at that point was Stouffer Waverly Hotel and I started as a restaurant manager and in that hotel I was there for six years and had six or seven different positions starting from restaurant manager to food and beverage cost controller to all the way up to assistant director of food and beverage and also assistant rooms manager.

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And from that hotel I went to Cobb Galleria Center and I was the banquet manager at the Cobb Galleria Center. I was there for two or three years and from there I went to Georgia World Congress Center and became the banquet manager. And while I was the banquet manager at Georgia World Congress Center, I was there for three or four years, this opportunity of owning a business came up and so I took that.

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KM: So you made the rounds?

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MC: Yes, and I don't know whether it is pertinent to our interview or not, but it was not that I was seeking it out. Starting from I would say 1986, after my second year from Atlanta City Club, starting from Atlanta City Club up to the Georgia World Congress Center, the Stouffer Waverly, Cobb Galleria Center in the middle of all these things Holiday Inn Ravinia, which was the flagship hotel of Holiday Inn Ravinia and Georgia World Congress Center – all four of these organizations – in each one of them I stayed three to four years. Each one of them was exactly where my ex-boss called me up and recruited me into his new position, every one of them.

[Laughs]

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KM: And who was that?

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MC: Well different ex-bosses. It's like when I was at Atlanta City Club, George Gore brought me over and called me up and recruited me to work at The Abbey. When I was at The Abbey-- well from Abbey to Stouffer Waverly, yes, that was my own volition. But when I was at Stouffer Waverly, [Bi Lowen], who was my ex-boss over there went to become the food and beverage director at Holiday Inn Ravinia, called me up and offered me the job as the banquet manager over there.

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While I was at the Holiday Inn Ravinia, Chuck Sovern, who used to be the director of human resources at Stouffer Waverly referred me to become the banquet manager at Cobb

Galleria Center. While I was at Cobb Galleria Center, Cobb Galleria Center's general manager went and became the general manager at Georgia World Congress Center and he called me from there and offered me the job as banquet manager over there. So it fortunately worked out okay.

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KM: The Abbey, it's my understanding that was a pretty high-end spot.

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MC: Yes, yes, it was a quite high-end spot. It was a 500-seat restaurant. The two years that I was there it made a revenue of \$3.5 to \$4.0 million per year. It was a church that was converted into a restaurant. It's not a restaurant anymore. Right now it has been converted back again into a church, so—.

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That whole organization, they had four different restaurants and they are no longer—I don't know whether they're even in business or not actually.

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KM: Do you remember when you first started to dream about the idea of having your own restaurant?

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MC: Yes, and I think when I was working in my uncle's restaurant in Anarkali and--

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KM: In what?

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MC: Anarkali--A-n-a-r-k-a-l-i--Anarkali Indian Restaurant; it was a dangerous situation of North Decatur and Claremont Road. And this was between 1980 and 1984, and I mean obviously you're 18 years old and you see a successful restaurant and you see that your uncle owns it and you dream about all the perks of having your own business without realizing that it took a lot of years to actually come to that point. And by the time I joined that restaurant it was already successful, so I didn't see the struggling part. So that was a time when I first imagined or visualized that at some point I may have my own restaurant. It was not any definite thing. And then obviously I went into working in the food and beverage industry. I didn't really pursue opening a business very strongly, even this one. I really didn't pursue it that strongly. What happened is the previous owner, for financial reasons they had to dispose of the restaurant and so I could take over it with really, really low down payment – practically nothing. So and that was the reason – I didn't have to spend much capital investment to start.

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KM: What was the restaurant formerly?

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MC: It was an Indian restaurant. It was an Indian restaurant and we changed it to a Bangladeshi restaurant because the food is Bangladeshi, the staff is Bangladeshi. We changed the menu. We changed the recipes. I mean, it's a lot of different things. Even in the menu we changed the spellings, we changed the names, we changed the terms. It's no longer an Indian restaurant. It's a

Bangladeshi restaurant. See it was an Indian restaurant. It was an Indian restaurant only for 11 months at that point.

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KM: Are the cuisines – are there similarities between the two?

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MC: There is, it's similar. It's not that it's diametrically opposite. More so than the cuisine what's really different is the language. If anyone goes to our menu they will see that the terms are different, the pronunciations are different, the spellings are different. Bangla is a purely phonetic language, so the roots of the pronunciation are very precise and the menu is spelled like that exactly and very, very precisely. It's noticeably lighter. The food is definitely – and anybody who has been to this restaurant and to other Indian restaurants – [this food is] less oily and less greasy, less spicy. It's a much lighter moderate way of eating. It's not as rich and heavy. It doesn't have that, I will say, willful shock value that you get in most Indian restaurants.

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KM: You opened this restaurant when?

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MC: December 2001.

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KM: And how did you decide to locate it here?

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MC: Oh it was already here. It was already here. I just took over the restaurant.

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KM: Were there other Bangladeshi restaurants in Atlanta at the time?

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MC: There were and there still are approximately 15 to 20 restaurants in Atlanta, which are staffed by Bangladeshis, owned by Bangladeshis, however outside the restaurant it says Indian restaurant. So in my definition I do not consider them any kind of restaurant. It's hard to define what they are. So even at that point and even up 'til now, as you know, in Atlanta there is no other [Bangladeshi] restaurant, not only just in Atlanta, but also pretty much between here and New York City, there is really no other restaurant in North America which is Bangladeshi restaurant. Well, again, there's a distinction between an Indian restaurant and a Bangladeshi restaurant. Bangladeshis own a lot of restaurants, but they make it Indian. Don't ask me why. *[Laughs]*

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KM: So did people come or did they not know what was Bangladeshi food?

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MC: What is the question?

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KM: Was part of your early role – and probably still – to educate your customer base as to what is Bangladeshi food?

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MC: Definitely, overwhelmingly so. That was the main reason to open it. For me, it would be illogical to have the name Indian restaurant where everything inside is Bangladeshi, which means I even changed the menu. The whole menu is changed. It actually would not make any sense. It doesn't make any sense for me how they do it in other restaurants and it didn't make any sense. So for me, it was never a question of whether this should be a Bangladeshi restaurant. The question always was why shouldn't it be – even though there were a lot of people who said it shouldn't be? But to me it just absolutely made no sense to why it shouldn't be.

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KM: So describe for people who may never get to eat in your restaurant, what is the experience like? What does it look like and what is the food like and the whole experience?

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MC: I mean it's very casual dining. One of the things that the food that we do over here – the whole idea is to make it what I call palatable to make sure that you do not have to make the food really shockingly or profoundly different to make it nice. It could be something simple, as long as it is genuine, as long as it tastes good, as long as it is consistent, and it is served by people who are genuinely happy that you are there. And to me and not only myself and – you have been here before and you've seen me with other staff members, too –

we don't focus too much on that this is a restaurant and we're working and these are our customers. We never call our clientele that come over here customers anyway. You'll never hear that word in this restaurant. Everybody is a guest.

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So it's more like it's your home. You're here, people are coming in as a guest and the fact that we're all from Bangladesh and they came in and they are curious about Bangladesh and they want to learn about Bangladesh, it actually makes it easier and makes it more fun to go through that process of serving the food. Yes, it is similar to Indian food, but you have to really taste it to get the distinction and the whole atmosphere is – in here is – and when I say Bangladeshi it goes from the menu to the food.

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KM: Tell us about the menu. What's on it?

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MC: The biggest idea is the variety. I mean, it's a huge selection of vegetarian items, not to mention the fact that if somebody wants something that is not in the menu – as long as we have it in the kitchen we can make it. We are never so hung up on that it has to be exactly how it says on the menu. If somebody wants something in a particular way – if we have the ingredients in the kitchen – we'll make it, as long as it is a Bangladeshi item.

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[The menu] has lamb, it has beef, it has chicken, it has fish and shrimp, and it also has goat meat. Now the goat meat is with bones and everything else is boneless. The fish is also boneless, so it has –and within all of these meat categories there are several dishes.

There is a big amount of variety in there. And in our restaurant everything comes family-style for the whole table. Even if someone is quite apprehensive about the food at least on the table there will be five or six different items even it's just for a table for two that they'll find something that's palatable. And if not, we'll bring something different from the kitchen, so something that they would like.

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The concept is not that you order one item and I'm just using these as an example. Like, let's say in a Thai restaurant or in a – definitely a lot of Chinese or even in an American restaurant where you order an item and that item comes in front of you on a dinner plate. Our whole concept is different. You actually get empty dinner plates and you get all sorts of things on the table and then you just pick and choose whichever one you like. You make your own combination or you can choose just one item and if there is any particular item that you like then we can bring more of that once we realize which one or you realize also which one you like more. So it helps.

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KM: So tell--tell us like a few of the dishes that you served the crowd earlier tonight.

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MC: They started with the vegetarian Halim soup which is with pureed mixed vegetables and different kinds of lentils and cloves and ginger – is one of the most primary spices in there and comes with a lime wedge on the side. And with the soup they had the mixed naan bread, which is with shredded cheese and chopped onion and chopped garlic and chopped cilantro, all four of them mixed together stuffed in the naan bread. It's the idea that you

dip the bread in the soup. And after that they had the basmati rice with green peas and grilled onions and raisins. And with that they had like five or six different items. They had a beef with potatoes. They had lamb cooked in a cream sauce with chopped green spinach and homemade cheese and we make our own cheese. They had a specialty item which is sliced cucumber cooked with yellow lentils. They had garbanzo beans with eggplant. And they also had a mixed vegetable dish. And then with that they also had some more bread, the same mixed naan, and they had some mango chutney –the idea is to put that on the side of your dinner plate and you mix just a little bit with everything and it kind of accentuates the taste. And then after dinner they had dessert which for them was the homemade cheese and milk balls slightly fried and dipped in honey and sugar syrup, however, which we also have a specialty dessert, which is, we make our own yogurt. It says homemade baked yogurt made with milk, which was sweetened with honey, which it's a really light refreshing dessert. So that was, briefly speaking, their whole meal. And we do a lot of large meals like that where we ask the guest how many guests it's going to be and then we pretty much set the whole meal from appetizer to dessert and we email the menu to the guest and they can take a look at it and make any kind of revisions. So by the time they and their guests arrive you don't have to go through the decision process. You just sit back, relax, and enjoy and we just bring a lot of food to the table. And if you like something in particular – different from what was offered – we'll bring it to the table. There is no extra charge.

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KM: And I observed that you're very hands-on. You're at the table with the guests and talking about the food and—.

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MC: Well the main reason I do that is particularly someone who is here for the first time. What we do not want is someone who made the effort of coming over here, had the food, and if I do not explain to them the particular way of eating the food which is going to optimize the taste, they're going to finish the product and they're going to be with not a memorable experience. But there's a particular way of eating the food, which obviously I just suggest to the guest. They can do it whichever they feel comfortable, which actually makes a big difference in how the flavors of the foods comes out and it makes it way more tasty so at least at the end of their feast they will have an experience which they will remember that it was a little bit better or different than just another dinner, you know, something that was really flavorful, really different, really something that they were going to come back to.

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I don't think it is anything that unique because, to me, in this restaurant we pretty much have only one goal that when a guest comes to this restaurant our goal is not what the experience is going to be on that night. That is really not the focus. Everybody in this restaurant has just one goal. What do we need to do for this guest to come back again? And whatever that means, so if this guest comes back again another time then at that point we have actually accomplished our objective, so that's the whole idea. So whatever we need to do to make this guest come back again, and that's the main thing.

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KM: Talk about being located on Buford Highway.

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MC: It's a wonderful location. It works out great for us because people automatically – at least people who are adventurous – they automatically know already that Buford Highway has myriads of multi-cultural restaurants from all aspects of this globe – you know all parts of this globe – from everywhere.

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So it is easier for them literally to drive down Buford Highway without even knowing that this restaurant exists and then seeing the sign and then seeing Bangladeshi cuisine. Oh, I don't even have a clue what Bangladeshi cuisine is, so let's go over there. But if we were not on Buford Highway, if we were on – I don't know – anywhere else, maybe if we were on Clifton Road, let's say, people would not be driving up and down the road just to find restaurants, so being on Buford Highway is really an added plus especially since we are an ethnic restaurant. If we are not then it's a different case. But people actually who are looking for ethnic food drive down the road and find that they have found a restaurant where they don't even know this cuisine because this is the only Bangladeshi restaurant and then they come in and venture in and then hopefully they'll come back in, so it's actually a big plus.

00:38:07

Yes, there is a drawback that we are not visible from the street. There is also another drawback for us that we don't get pedestrian traffic. Our restaurant clientele, I would say 90-percent, maybe more so than that, is destination traffic. This particular shopping center is – it's a different kind of shopping center. It has a huge amount of ethnic businesses but they are purely ethnic-oriented. They're not mainstream ethnic businesses. They have a Salvadorian restaurant, which only Salvadorian people come. They have a Mexican restaurant where only Mexicans come. They have an Ethiopian restaurant where only Ethiopians come. Honestly in this shopping

center, of all the restaurants, this is the only restaurant where you get what I call mainstream clientele that come into the restaurant and not just from that ethnic background.

00:39:05

KM: And tell us about who is your clientele?

00:39:09

MC: Everyone. I mean seriously, pretty much everyone. We do not have any particular trend or we do not have any particular demographics, even – yes, there is – well actually not even that. We even get guests who are exorbitantly affluent. We get guests who are barely surviving college students from Emory. We get guests who are like, you know, a highly intellectual philosopher who maybe came in to give a visiting lecture at Emory for one day. We get guests who are doing construction work at the parking lot and then came in and loved the food and now brought his family a month later. I mean, honestly, there is absolutely no particular trend or demographic of the guests that we get over here. This is the ultimate example of mainstream clientele coming from everywhere. I really cannot say that any particular demographics or any particular race or any particular income level or any particular political persuasion or any particular religious persuasion or any ethnic person group that comes over here – it's everyone. Even age-level. We have had elementary school graduation parties over here so far already—five or six of them. We have had law school graduation parties. I'm just using two ends of the spectrum. We have had law school graduation parties over here. We have had senior citizen – what is that card game – the Bridge party over here, so in every age level we have had – anniversaries, we have had birthdays literally from 10 year-old birthday parties to all the way up

to 70 or 80-year-old birthday parties. We actually had an 80 year-old birthday party, too, so everyone.

00:41:36

KM: How did you learn to cook?

00:41:41

MC: At this point you may have to want to turn this off because – I don't cook. I can taste things really well and I can tell the chef everything is just – go light and do this way or that way. The chef does a phenomenal job.

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From 1980 to up to 2001 I have worked in literally every aspect of the food and beverage industry starting from stewarding to dishwashing manager to banquet manager to cost control to restaurant manager in a fine dining restaurant to a restaurant manager in a really sleazy Greek restaurant to a Mexican restaurant or to a hamburger joint – everything, every possible thing you could think of except being a cook. So that answers your question. [*Laughs*]

00:42:32

KM: Who does the cooking at Panahar?

00:42:33

MC: The chef and we have the same chef from the very beginning and he's a partner in this business and he does a phenomenal job and he does a phenomenally consistent job. You can come here in the slowest possible day and you can come in the busiest possible day. Yes, on an

extremely busy day it's going to take hours for the food to arrive at the table but it's going to taste exactly the same as it is on the slowest possible day. The consistency – he is unbelievably consistent.

00:43:13

KM: So what's his story?

00:43:15

MC: Well he was an electrical engineer in Bangladesh. He came to the United States through what they call the diversity visa program where you actually get a visa through a lottery. And they do it all over the world from the United States. He came over here and he started working as a dishwasher in a restaurant and from dishwasher – because of the challenge with language proficiency he stayed in the kitchen – and from dishwasher he became an assistant chef to eventually a chef. He was actually an assistant chef in another restaurant before he came to this restaurant. And in this restaurant after I took over we actually made him the chef and from that point on he is the main chef.

00:44:01

KM: Hmm.

00:44:02

MC: So he learned his cooking by working as an assistant chef in other restaurants – in Indian restaurants.

00:44:13

KM: Who would you say are your main influences?

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MC: You mean the restaurant-wise or personally? I mean—

00:44:22

KM: Restaurant-wise.

00:44:27

MC: I do not know how to answer that. I mean what do you mean by define influences?

00:44:31

KM: Or personal? Who do you admire?

00:44:37

MC: You mean like personal life? My mom. I mean she is unbelievable. I mean I can go the whole night and talk about my mother. I mean seriously, and I can just give you –I don't even have to talk about personality. I can just simply give you the statistical things about her and it's just—. She's 72-years-old right now and she's coming to the United States in July, finally permanently. She is just amazing. She's absolutely amazing. When I was going to school – and I can just give you just one example. I can give you hundreds and hundreds of examples.

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Like we had a TV at home and my ration of watching TV was just one hour per day. And we would have dinner at that time, so I could have dinner and watch TV at the same time, so you

can do two things at the same time and you didn't waste time. So no one else at our household would watch TV other than one-hour a day because it would be unfair since I can only watch one hour everybody –I mean she would wake up at 5 o'clock in the morning with me and go to sleep at 12-midnight just to make sure that I'm doing things right you know. I mean I know it's going to sound, for lack of a better term—sappy but I can only imagine anybody – maybe Nelson Mandela definitely, you know but if you go away from family yes, Nelson Mandela, okay—that is the people that I admire.

00:46:07

There are some other people also. They're all political figures, definitely Barack Obama. I mean, obviously. I would vote for him 20 times actually. I thought I'd died and went to heaven when he became President you know. **[Laughs]** And so that would be the main person, my mother actually. And there's also another very extremely important thing that happened. I mean I talked to you about how they got married and things like that.

00:46:37

You may have noticed in the middle of this last 45 minutes in this interview I very conspicuously I never mentioned a word of my father. Okay, he was completely absent from life. I mean he was an unbelievably absent person. It was not that he was a bad person. He had a job. He earned money, brought the money, gave it to my mom and that was his only role. I don't even remember really going anywhere in my life with my dad – seriously. He was extremely big in playing chess. He could play chess 24 hours a day without realizing what is going on with the family. I don't think –throughout our whole life – I don't think he even knew what grade I was in. At some point I thought he didn't even know what names we had **[Laughs]** you know for me and my sister.

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If we had five or ten other brothers I'm very sure he could not remember our names. I am very sure, but the only way he remembered is because there's only two. But I can tell you right now he had no idea and he was, I would say, 99.9-percent, maybe 100-percent absent from anything to do with family. So it was my mother who was the whole thing, you know, starting from making any decision – and the other thing I also have to mention about my father – whenever, and I mean whenever, I went to my father with any question about any decision making process, anything – it could be a life-altering decision, and if I asked him a question and his only answer always was – which is a good answer – is I'm very sure whatever decision you make will be the right decision. That was his only answer.

00:48:35

Even when I was 10 years old. If I asked him whether I should go and cross the street you know in the middle of a six-lane highway his only answer would be I'm pretty sure whatever decision you make will be the right decision. **Now my mom would not be like that, but my mom was very different in making yourself independent. I mean, imagine as I said, if you don't grow up that like that you at the age of 17 and a half and 18, you really do not come halfway around the world in another country knowing that you cannot go back. You know when I came to the United States me and a friend of mine, we came. We both came at the same time. He went to Massachusetts and I stayed over here. And we were talking on the phone and we both said the same thing that when you come to the United States the very first thing – this is the very first evening that we were here – the very first thing you realize that you cannot go back. You are not here from a bordering country like Canada or Mexico that if you don't like it you can get a bus ticket or you can walk over there. You are here across an ocean. Either you become successful or tomorrow you might become homeless – but you cannot go back. You don't even have the money to buy a plane ticket to**

go back. So that defines you. That shapes you and you cannot go back, even if you want to. You don't even have the finances to go back. So if that answered the question as to whom I admire.

00:50:00

KM: Has your mother eaten here?

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MC: Oh yes. I mean she has been to the United States so far twice. Each time she was here for three or four months and then she left. She didn't like it that much. She cannot imagine how you have a city with no sidewalks that you cannot walk. I mean, it's different. The United States is so different from Bangladesh, so different. It's unbelievably different. Over there you have your family, you have your extended family. They all live in the neighborhood that you can walk to. You walk to your school. You walk everywhere. You walk everywhere. You go to the grocery store walking. And then you have your family members and you don't have to get in a car to get everything done. It's a different way. You know people have more time to spend with family members, extended family members. So obviously the United States is different for her.

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She didn't know what to do – I mean she speaks English. It might not be as fluent now as it used to be. But it's a different culture, different language for her. Yeah, she was here. She has been here twice. The first time she came was in 1984 and then the second time she came was in 2001.

00:51:19

KM: How would you say the food scene in Atlanta or on Buford Highway has changed in the past 10 or 20 years? What have you noticed?

00:51:32

MC: Well what I noticed is that it changed on Buford Highway, that you have a lot more globalization, you have a lot more ethnic restaurants, but you – I just said ethnic restaurants. However, what also did change – and this is the part which may be slightly disconcerting is the ethnic businesses had become very ethnic-centered. There may be 10 Vietnamese restaurants right now on Buford Highway as opposed to one [Vietnamese restaurant] 20 years ago. But 20 years ago that one Vietnamese restaurant had a lot of mainstream guests. But now when I go to those 20 Vietnamese restaurants, at least 19 of them – maybe 90-percent of the guests in there are all Vietnamese. So it seems like the WASPs or what you call – it's hard to define because they're all Americans, you know, they're all Americans. They have their own area or own places. And people who are from a different culture, different language, they're all in their own enclaves.

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What I have seen in Buford Highway that – and unfortunately it is not because the white Americans or the black Americans are pushing anyone away. What I have actually seen is that we are getting an enormous amount of immigrants coming to the United States who do not speak English, who do not have any intention or any ambition of being a part of mainstream USA. And the reason because of this diversity is number one is the diversity – and I see it among Bangladeshis also – they are more and more, extremely more and more and the pace is going really high every day that they are totally separate from mainstream America. They're among

their own businesses. The Bangladeshis come – I’m going to use Bangladeshi as a perfect example, and if you allow me and I will tell you the political reason behind it.

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They come to the United States. They do not speak English. There are 14,000 Bangladeshis in Atlanta alone and in New York there’s more than 100,000 Bangladeshis. They find their own Bangladeshis to stay with them. They get employment in a Bangladeshi business where all the employees, all the staff members around them are Bangladeshis. The clientele may be American like if it’s a gas station or if it’s a grocery store but they have very minimal exposure to them. At the end of their work they go back to their Bangladeshi family houses and all their friends and everything are Bangladeshi. The whole cultural exposure is Bangladeshi. They go on the Internet and they go on websites, which are actually in the Bangla language. They listen to Bangla music only. They may vote, yes, they vote but other than voting they have absolutely not engagement with the country that they’re living.

00:55:16

And do you want me to tell you the two big reasons?

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KM: Sure.

00:55:19

MC: I can tell you. I mean you can edit that. The two big reasons is that the United States Immigration Department or the United States State Department – the United States State Department I think – I don’t know when it started – I think it started 20 years ago or 10 years ago – started this, I would say, absolutely asinine immigration policy of this diversity visa. And what

diversity visa basically is – exactly what I just said, it's diversity but as opposed to bringing people into the United States who are going to come here as college students, who already know English, who eventually are going to be a contributing member to the success of the American story, you have people coming to the United States who are getting the visa through a lottery which means that their only qualification of getting the visa is being a warm body. So they're coming from the villages, from rural areas, from everywhere. However they're coming to the United States without knowing any English at all.

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And you don't learn a language as an adult. They're coming to America as someone who practically doesn't even read or write, so, I'm not saying that only applies to Bangladeshis. I'm saying this from the sub-continent, I'm saying it from other countries, too. That you're having an enormous influx of people who are coming into the United States, who do not speak English, and I think language is the most bonding mechanism in any culture. So as a result of that – and obviously these groups are coming in and then they're having their own children and then they're bringing their own family member from Bangladesh and coming over here. There is no meritocracy in the visa process.

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Now you look at Canada – in Canada if you have a PhD from Japan or India or something you can apply for a visa just based on that you're going to come over here and have a job or something. If you're in Bangladesh and you are an extremely intelligent nuclear engineer or a physicist coming to the United States, it's impossible. You'll never get a visa. But you are in a village in Bangladesh and you literally never went to school and you can barely – you don't read or write, you're completely illiterate, I mean completely illiterate – you can get a visa through the diversity visa program. And then your family and then their millions of family

members and then their millions of family members eventually will come to the United States and populate the ethnic population over here.

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I think it's asinine. It just – it's beyond stupid. You know, it's beyond stupid. People who should be coming to the United States are people who applied for a visa to come over here as a college student, male or female, who will go to a US college, who will get a Bachelors degree, who eventually may or may not get a job in the United States and it will be a meaningful job as opposed to a day laborer or a dishwasher or a laundromat worker, someone who has absolutely no engagement or no exposure to any other part of the United States and it's happening a lot. And it's happening a lot not only from Bangladesh but it's also happening with South American countries, Hispanic countries and things like that, too. It just amazes me. It just absolutely amazes me that who came up with that system. That's all. *[Laughs]*

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KM: All right, well it's getting kind of late.

00:59:16

MC: Right.

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KM: But I wanted to ask you about future plans. What's on the horizon for your restaurant?

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MC: Restaurants are very, very expensive. This restaurant is not at any point that – first of all, we are never going to have another location because I'm never going to have another chef. I do not believe in chain restaurants. If I ever open another restaurant you would never know. Which means that it would be a different name, it will be a different chef, different everything. It will have nothing to do with Panahar. There will never be a Panahar Two. There will never be a chain restaurant. That whole concept is to me illogical.

00:59:57

So the only change that can happen is expanding this restaurant. Well not the only change – the other change could be that this restaurant could go to another location. It's really expensive. It's very expensive, it's time-consuming – I don't see it in the near future. Expanding the restaurant, if we buy out the lease from any one of these adjacent properties it may happen but it's not in the near future. If it happens, it happens. But it's not something that we're really focusing on. Unfortunately this restaurant still – even though it seems like an extremely successful restaurant, but there's also an enormous amount of expense involved in running a restaurant, so it's not that we have an escrow account set up somewhere with half a million dollars that we can use as capital investment to buy out the lease from any one of these adjacent properties. It's not like that. By the time everything is done and over with, families come first and so there is really not that much financial, you know, nest egg on the side for the restaurant.

01:01:13

Most possibly the restaurant will remain successful and it might expand but right now there is no time table really.

01:01:25

KM: Are there other things that I haven't asked you about that you want to include?

01:01:31

MC: Well I mean, I feel really good that actually more people learned about Bangladesh. Literally more people in Atlanta – and I can say that with definitiveness – that more people learned about the term Bangladesh and even what Bangladesh is and where Bangladesh is – the fact that even there’s a country called Bangladesh that exists – actually from this restaurant more so than anywhere else. So it’s a good feeling. You know, it’s a good thing and I just want people to be more adventurous and try that, not just for this restaurant but for any other cultures. And like if they see a restaurant from X, Y, Z-country and they have never been to there, instead of saying, well I have never been to that place, they should say, so I have never been to this – I don’t know what it’s going to be, so we should not go there. I just hope the statement will be that, yes, I’ve never been there, so let’s try out how it is. If I don’t like it at least I know how it is, you know. So it’s a good feeling to be here. It’s tough, I mean, you know, it’s an everyday process and you can never take anything for granted.

01:02:48

KM: Well thanks for sharing your story with us.

01:02:51

MC: You’re very welcome. Thank you.

01:02:52

[End Mirza Chowdhury Interview]