



Naidu Mortha

Curry Point

Bentonville, Arkansas

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Annemarie Anderson: Today is March 16th, 2019. It's a Saturday. I'm in Bentonville, Arkansas. This is Annemarie Anderson recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance, and I am with Mr. Naidu from Curry Point.

Would you go ahead and introduce yourself, give us your first and last name, and tell us what you do?

[0:00:17.6]

Naidu Mortha: Okay. I'm Naidu Mortha, and I'm living in Bentonville from last eighteen years. Worked for Walmart, and I own this business from last two years. So, yeah, I continue to have this for more years. [Laughter]

[0:00:39.5]

Annemarie Anderson: Great. Well, tell me a little bit about what brought you to Bentonville. You said you worked for Walmart, but tell us about coming to Bentonville and what were your first impressions of it as a place?

[0:00:51.1]

Naidu Mortha: So, I mean, when I came to Bentonville initially, I moved from Indianapolis, Indiana, and this was a small town at that time and I thought I cannot survive here for more than six months, but it's been eighteen years. [Laughter] And I have one son. He was born here. He was born here, and he's in eleventh grade.

[0:01:19.4]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well, tell me a little bit about, you know, what made that—you said you didn't think you were going to survive. What made it where you could?

[0:01:29.4]

Naidu Mortha: Because, I mean, the town I came from, the city I came from, it's Indianapolis, it's a big city, and from there, moving here to a small town, I thought I might not survive for long. [Laughter]

[0:01:45.1]

Annemarie Anderson: Well, the South Asian community here at that time, whether it be Indian or other people from South Asia, what was it like when you moved here first?

[0:01:57.5]

Naidu Mortha: So, I mean, when I moved here, there are about 100 Indian families at that time, so it's a small community at that time, but now there are almost 1,500 Indian families. I'm just talking about Indian families, not Asian, and it might be more.

[0:02:21.0]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well, what did you do for Walmart?

[0:02:25.4]

Naidu Mortha: I worked in supply chain, yeah, senior strategy project manager.

[0:02:31.0]

Annemarie Anderson: Cool. And how long did you work there?

[0:02:33.1]

Naidu Mortha: I worked for sixteen years.

[0:02:37.1]

Annemarie Anderson: Okay. So let's talk a little bit and get into your business. Tell me why you were interested in owning a restaurant.

[0:02:47.6]

Naidu Mortha: When I came to this place, like, there is no other Indian restaurant to go, and I saw the community is growing and there is an opportunity for Indian restaurant, so that's how I opened my first restaurant in 2011. I owned that for about eight months and I sold it. That's the first Indian restaurant I opened, and after that, I took a break for two years—I think four years I took break, and after that, I opened this, Curry Point, in 2016. I owned for one year and I sold it again, and two years back, came out of Walmart, so I thought, "Let me take it over," this business, because I know this business more, in and out, so I bought it back.

[0:03:54.6]

Annemarie Anderson: Well, tell me a little bit about what was the first restaurant that you owned. What was it called?

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Naidu Mortha: It's Chutny's.

[0:04:02.9]

Annemarie Anderson: And was that in Bentonville as well?

[0:04:06.7]

Naidu Mortha: No, it's in Rogers.

[0:04:08.0]

Annemarie Anderson: Okay. Cool. Well, talk to me a little bit about—I mean, you're a person who is working in a more corporate level and you're going into owning a restaurant. What is it like, you know, at first? Walk me through the process of opening, the challenges of opening a restaurant.

[0:04:29.0]

Naidu Mortha: I mean, initially, I don't have any experience in opening the restaurant, but I got a good friend, he helped me out. He was in business at that time in different state, and he helped me in opening the restaurant. So we took over one closed restaurant and we made some modifications to that restaurant where we can use it for the Indian

cooking, because Indian cooking is completely different than any other cookings, so we made little modifications and everything. So it was an easy transition because of that friend's help.

[0:05:14.2]

Annemarie Anderson: That's good. That's good. Well, tell me a little bit about opening up Curry Point. You mentioned that you opened it in 2016 and that you bought it back and took it over. Well, tell me a little bit about your day-to-day. What's your day-to-day work schedule like running this place?

[0:05:35.4]

Naidu Mortha: So, I mean, I'll come in the morning around 9 o'clock, 9:30, and my chefs will be start cooking at that time and get the buffet ready by 11 o'clock. So it takes one and a half hour time to cook everything fresh and get it onto the buffet stands. I help them with the moving all the stuff, running the food from the kitchen to the floor, and I also make sure all the tastes come out perfect. If something goes wrong, I have to get it back to the chefs and ask them to make it over and get it out as quickly as possible.

[0:06:23.0]

Annemarie Anderson: Could you tell me a little bit about—or describe for us what kind of food you sell. Like, what are some of your dishes?

[0:06:30.2]

Naidu Mortha: So it's completely South Indian, so South Indian means like it will be little spicier than normal, and also, like, the most favorite things are—we have butter chicken. It's the most favorite for our customers. And paneer tikka masala is another one, along with goat curry. We make different varieties of goat curry flavors. That's one of our customers'—I mean, all the time, customers give us feedback saying it's really nice.

[0:07:13.5]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well, too, I want to know, how do you go about finding your chefs?

[0:07:21.9]

Naidu Mortha: It's a little hectic process we follow, because we need right chefs in the right place, and also it's just not one chef; it's a combination of three different chefs we need. So we go through sort of interview process and everything and we also ask them to cook for us first, and once we satisfied, then we will hire them.

[0:07:55.6]

Annemarie Anderson: Could you tell me a little bit about the people you have working for you now in that capacity?

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Naidu Mortha: Like, I have three chefs, as I said. One is a tandoori specialist and one is a South Indian specialist and one is a non-vegetarian specialist, and we have one more for

biryani. So biryani is the main item in any Indian restaurant. Indian restaurant means you should have biryani, hyderabadi dum biryani. So we have a specialist for that.

[0:08:42.7]

Annemarie Anderson: Well, tell me a little bit about—let's see. I mean, what are the challenges of running this place? You've been in the restaurant business for a while. What are the challenges?

[0:08:52.5]

Naidu Mortha: So one main challenge is like getting the product, because we use some special items, vegetables, special vegetables and all, Indian vegetables. We don't get anything around here, so we have to—the closest place we have to go is Dallas, Dallas, Texas, so that's where we have to get from. So it's a little logistics. And not just the vegetables, it's the grocery also, Indian grocery. The wholesaler, the closest wholesaler is in Dallas, so we have to go there every month and bring our stuff. So that's more challenging.

[0:09:45.3]

Annemarie Anderson: I bet. Well, tell me, too, I mean, I know there are several Indian groceries in the area and there are some halal butchers as well. Do you work with any of those people?

[0:09:45.3]

Naidu Mortha: Yes, I do. I work closely with India Mart, with that manager, to get some of my stuff, but it's like in emergency situations. If I need something quickly, I'll work with him and he gets some items for me. But if I want something in bulk, I have to go to Dallas.

[0:10:22.1]

Annemarie Anderson: Makes sense. Do you work with any of the halal butchers around?

[0:10:27.5]

Naidu Mortha: No, I don't, because, I mean, I have local suppliers for halal. Like [unclear] is one of the supplier. He sell all halal goat, halal chicken, everything. When I started initially in 2011, there was no halal meat supplier around. I used to go to Dallas to get that every week.

[0:10:55.7]

Annemarie Anderson: Wow.

[0:10:57.5]

Naidu Mortha: Yeah. Now we are very lucky. At least some suppliers are carrying the halal meat because more of the Indian community like to have halal meat. So we don't maintain anything different, halal or non-halal. Everything is halal in our restaurant.

[0:11:19.2]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well, tell me, too, a little bit about—I mean, I asked you what the challenges are of your job, but what are some rewards of owning a restaurant? What's the rewards of Curry Point for you personally?

[0:11:30.9]

Naidu Mortha: So, I mean, after coming out of Walmart, like I'm owning my own business, so I run my business and I put all of my time into my business. That's what more satisfaction to me, running my own business. And, moreover, like, I'm little kind of people's person, so I like to talk to the customers day in and day out, so that keeps me happy. [Laughter]

[0:12:05.0]

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. Well, I saw you interacting with customers out there. Could you talk a little bit about some of the people who come and eat here and some of the relationships you've developed with them?

[0:12:16.7]

Naidu Mortha: Oh, yeah. I mean, we have plenty of customers, they just come here, and we know what time they come, what day they come, and we make sure we are here to talk to them. Sometimes we feel like they're all family, because, I mean, our family's in India, so we miss them a lot. So these customers who we talk, we share lot of things with

them and they share lot of their family things with us, so we feel like a family. So that's why I like to be here when they come.

[0:12:56.1]

Annemarie Anderson: Are there any specific people that you could talk about that you've developed a relationship with or share some of those stories?

[0:13:04.3]

Naidu Mortha: We have one customer, his name is Charles. They come here all the way from Fayetteville, their family, and he also try to bring his friends along with him all the time. So he come twice a week for a buffet. Lunch buffet they'll come for. I mean, whenever we go back to India, we bring some gifts to them, or they give us Christmas gift and all.

[0:13:44.9]

Annemarie Anderson: That's very nice. That's really nice. Well, tell me a little bit—I mean, what do you feel like your restaurant provides for Bentonville, whether that's the South Asian community, the Indian community that lives here, or whether that's just like white Americans or black Americans who live here?

[0:14:08.1]

Naidu Mortha: Yeah. I mean, I can say more for the Indian community, and not just the Indian community. Now, as I said, like, we have a variety of customers. Like, we have

Americans. African Americans, they come for our food. They like our food. And just not that. So we cater to the churches for Easter and for Christmas lunches and big lunches. We do caterings like 300 people, like that, for the church. And also more for the Indian—as I said, we do more for the Indian community. So we have gatherings for big festivals like Diwali and local Indian New Year’s and all. For those, we sell for at least 800 to 1,000 people, and not just from the Bentonville community. We have good relations with University of Arkansas and we sell the students, too, and it’s not just the Indian students, it’s the whole university. We sell for their festivals and all these things.

[0:15:34.7]

Annemarie Anderson: Cool. So there are student associations who get you guys to cater there?

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Naidu Mortha: Yeah.

[0:15:44.4]

Annemarie Anderson: What type of associations?

[0:15:46.5]

Naidu Mortha: More of Indian association, but, I mean, within the Indian, it’s Friends of India is one of the association, and there’s one Muslim—MSA, I think, Muslim Association. And there’s one more. I think Nepal Association is also there. So we sell all

these associations. And I'm more like—what do you call it—I'm up-road vendor for University of Arkansas, so, yeah, anything they need that funds comes from University of Arkansas, they prefer to go to Curry Point.

[0:16:35.8]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. That's great. Well, you kind of mentioned your relationship with the South Asian community, and you've been here for a while. Could you talk about your involvement, whether it be religiously or like another group like maybe the cricket group here, could you talk a little bit about your involvement in the community?

[0:16:58.4]

Naidu Mortha: So with the community, like cricket and all, I stopped about five, six years back. I used to be in that, cricket and volleyball and all these things, but now more with HANWA community. It's Hindu Association of Northwest Arkansas. So if they need any food, catering, sometimes I provide them. Yeah, I have a close relationship with the HANWA community. And also, like as I said, there's a mosque here in Bentonville. I have a close relationship with them too. Like for their festivals, Eid and all, Ramadan, we provide food for them too. We cater food for them.

[0:17:56.9]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great.

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Naidu Mortha: So there are a couple other—like there is one Sikh community, we provide food for them. And any of these communities, if they need anything with food, for sure, like we are the first choice to come.

[0:18:21.3]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well, let's see. I mean, do you incorporate any of those holidays, too, into your—you mentioned you catered for them, but do you incorporate any of them, whether it's Diwali or Eid or Ramadan, into your business here?

[0:18:41.6]

Naidu Mortha: Yeah. I mean, usually with the Hindu festivals like Diwali and all, we do incorporate that into our business by providing different varieties of food or more authentic Indian food during that time. And also like even for the Christmas and Thanksgiving and all, for New Year and all, if it falls on a working day, I make sure all my staff, I want them to be with their family for the festival, so I make sure that if it falls on a working day, they'll be working—we close on Mondays usually, but if Christmas comes on—last year, Christmas came on Sunday, so we gave off on Sunday and we opened back on Monday. So that's how I make sure even my staff have some time with their family on the holidays because those are important to take.

[0:20:04.3]

Annemarie Anderson: That's really nice. Well, tell me, I heard you say for like Hindu holidays you want to do more authentic Indian food. What would that be for you?

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Naidu Mortha: So South Indian, especially South Indian, for South Indians, like, we make more of Indian sweets and more of different home-style food everyone like to have, so we try to have more of those. And also, for some festivals, we don't eat meat, so we make sure we provide pure vegetarian food for the customers at that time, because even in our kitchen we have two different fryers and two different ovens and everything because we don't want to mix. Even while cooking, also, we don't want to mix vegetables with the meat and all. So we make sure we get the more authentic pure Hindu-style meals at that time.

[0:21:20.7]

Annemarie Anderson: That's really thoughtful. Well, let's see. I don't have any more questions left, but, you know, what do you hope to see for the future of Curry Point, the future of your business?

[0:21:41.3]

Naidu Mortha: Bentonville is more growing. I don't say "town" anymore. It's a city. [Laughter] So it's a more growing city, so I believe there's a very good future for Indian restaurants. I mean, for now, for the Indian population, what we have, there are four different restaurants here. It might be more or less balanced, but in future, like as it

grows, the Curry Point future will also be very good. It will be growing too. So it's more opportunity coming up.

[0:22:30.2]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Is this something you'd like to see your son continue on?

[0:22:34.0]

Naidu Mortha: I don't know it is his interest. [Laughter] And, moreover, from what I see from his interests, like, I'm not sure he's interested in business. So I'll be running this show as long as I can, and it's up to him afterwards like if he want to sell it out or me sell it out and move somewhere. We don't know. So I'm not more focused into long term, but for next five years, I'll be running the show.

[0:23:13.3]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well, is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to talk about?

[0:23:19.1]

Naidu Mortha: No. We don't have anything.

[0:23:19.9]

Naidu Mortha: Okay. All right. Well, thank you so much for doing this with me.

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Naidu Mortha: Oh, thank you.

[End of interview]