

Ellie Etminan

**Interviewed February 2, 2008
By Holli Connell
Midway Village Museum**

Holley Connell: If you could state your first and last name please.

Ellie Etminan: Ellie Etminan.

HC: And are you married?

EE: Yes.

HC: And do you have children?

EE: Yes, I do have two children.

HC: What is your educational background?

EE: I got my B. S. degree in mathematics from Rockford College and I am currently a student at NIU. But I don't pursue anything yet; I don't know which field I will end up.

HC: Where do you work?

EE: I am a part time MAC instructor at Rock Valley College and Rasmussen College.

HC: And how long have you been there?

EE: For Rock Valley, about eight years and Rasmussen College since they started which was two summers ago. At the moment I'm teaching one course in campus and one course on line for them.

HC: And where are you from originally?

EE: Originally, I am from Iran.

HC: What place and country of origin? Like a city and town.

EE: It is a province of Baluchestan which is southeast of Iran and the name of the city is Zahdan. It's very close to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

HC: What did you do before you came to the United States?

EE: I was a student and at the time that I was in university the Iranian revolution happened. The university had been closed for three years, I got married and I had my daughter and I was a housewife at the time when we moved to the United States.

HC: What was your life like then?

EE: Mostly ordinary, nothing different from any other mother's life that I see around the world right now on TV. But the difference is that we were in war and that would make it difficult for everybody not just because it was my life as a housewife.

HC: What did your husband do?

EE: My husband was engineer from the United States, getting his degree from the United States. He was in the country for three years before we got married and the reason we came to the United States was that he pursued his master's degree and that we came as students.

HC: What made you want to come here to Rockford?

EE: First when we got to the United States we went back to Alabama, that was where my husband got his B. S. degree and that was the same university that he applied for masters degree. After he got his master's degree government had one year permission work for everyone who is finishing master's degree to work so he applied for everywhere in the United States for the job and Rock Valley College granted us a job. After we moved to Rockford they applied for a permanent residency for us.

HC: When you came here it was on a student visa?

EE: That's right

HC: And then after the degree you were given permission.

EE: Permission for one year to work and after that Rock Valley applied for permission for us to stay.

HC: Had you ever been to this country before you came?

EE: Yes, two years before that I traveled with my uncle and my dad. We had been in Europe and we came for a week and a half to America and I visited Boston, Massachusetts, New York and Washington, DC. We went to the White House and it was a week and a half. It was very short, a week before Christmas.

HC: Was it like a vacation?

EE: It was a vacation that we had, the university had been closed and I have a brother living in Europe so I was off of school and my dad was visiting. My dad is a businessman who was still in Europe and he was traveling to Europe about twice a year and in that because I was out of school he took me with and when we came to the United States. In England it was a big hoopla that the United States don't give a visa to anybody and dad said let's go and try and see why not and we tried that and we got it. At the time it was interesting. It was standby tickets I don't know if you remember or not. You could stay at the airport and at the last minute they would tell you if you get in the airline or not, if the airline had any opening and it was like 1/10th of the

price of the ticket so we stood one night at Heathrow and the next morning we came in the airplane to the United States for a visit. If it wasn't that cheap we couldn't afford it.

HC: How long when you were coming over here with your family, your husband and your daughter and for the actual move to the United States how long did it take to make the arrangements to come here and what was involved?

EE: It was a long arrangement because at the time the United States closed its embassy in Iran. We had to go to Switzerland to get a visa. I went to Switzerland with a seven month old baby and don't know if we would get a visa or not. We stayed in Switzerland for 40 days in a hotel room and it was the hardest part. Switzerland is a beautiful country but I couldn't enjoy it because we didn't know what is tomorrow for us and as soon as we got our visa we flew to New York and my daughter took her first step in New York airport. It was the only open space she could find.

HC: Did you travel with your husband to New York?

EE: Yes, we all went together to Switzerland and we all came to the United States together. Interestingly, the same day that we travel from Switzerland to New York we had a flight to Atlanta and the same night he flew to Birmingham. So it was like 28 hours with a baby in your arms.

HC: I'm glad I didn't have to go through that but I bet you did it well.

EE: I was 24 at the time. I don't think I can handle it right now. It was part of youth that was helping me.

HC: Did anyone come along with you besides members of your family, any friends or any other extended family?

EE: No.

HC: Did you stop or stay anywhere for very long before coming to Rockford?

EE: We stayed in Huntsville, Alabama for almost 2 years and during that stay my husband was a full-time student and I started to at the University of Alabama part-time but after two years he graduated with a masters degree in industrial technology and we came to Rockford.

HC: Did you know anyone here before you came?

EE: No, we didn't know anybody and when we came, when we moved to Rockford in one week we had two trips with a car from Alabama coming to Rockford. The first trip we took it was for the interview and we didn't know if he was going to make it so we say if nothing else we are going to go and see Chicago. So we came to Rockford and they offered the job and it was Tuesday that they offered the job and they told him you have to be in the classroom on Monday so we rushed back there, I sold everything we could and put the rest of it into car and drove all

the way back to Rockford, stayed at Alpine Inn because it was the only hotel that we could park our car and use it as a closet so we used the car for a month until we found Mulford Park apartment. The first time we came for the interview the college paid for Red Roof Inn which was new but we didn't want to be there because it was dead and there was nothing going on. I said let's get closer to downtown perhaps we can see more people.

HC: What year was that?

EE: It was 86. It was September 86.

HC: Did anyone help you settle in once you were here?

EE: Nobody helped me in any way and that's the reason that I am helping people who move to Rockford. I invented the wheel, not everybody is supposed to do that. I find the library by myself. When I was in the hotel I had to go and find the Laundromat and there was nobody telling me and nobody helping me. I asked for Literacy Council but they didn't have any. I could read and write but they didn't have any classes for me. Fortunately I had a chance to sign up for Rock Valley College classes. It's an asset for the community and I always treasure that.

HC: Did any of your family members come here after you did?

EE: Yes, my brother came and stayed with us for two years, he attended Guilford High School and he graduated here. He went to Georgia Tech and now he is the head of ITT Institute in the South.

HC: Very cool.

EE: Very cool.

HC: Where there others from your home country here before you arrived and did you meet anybody from your country once you arrived here?

EE: After a year passed, I met some people in the grocery store. It was cool that we were speaking the same language and we introduced ourselves. I was with my husband and from then on I know a few people, the people I know, about seven or eight families that are living here.

HC: Are any of those people even from your town?

EE: No, nobody. I don't think any of them are from the same town.

HC: What are your current living arrangements?

EE: After Mulford Park apartment we moved to a townhouse and after the town house we bought our house that we are in for 17 years now and we are very happy about that.

HC: Is there anyone from your home country living in your immediate neighborhood?

EE: There was a time that there was but not anymore. They moved out of state. Not in the neighborhood, in the next subdivision.

HC: Did you have a job or school waiting for you upon arrival to the United States?

EE: No. I came here as a dependent to my husband's student visa.

HC: How did you go about finding a job in Rockford once you moved here?

EE: For 18 years I have been a mother, I didn't do anything. I did some math tutoring and one day, the week that my daughter moved to Chicago for school UIC, I received a call and someone said would you like to teach one course at Rock Valley and I said I didn't apply for it. They said we know you can do it, Monday morning come here and that was it; that's how we started.

HC: Did your visa limit you in anything while you were here in the United States?

EE: Yes, my husband had permission to work when we were in a student visa for 20 hours a week. I didn't have permission to work. The year that my husband had permission to work again full time was for him, not for me and after that when Rock Valley applied for permission for us for permanent residency until it happened a few years after it was him who had permission to work not me.

HC: And when did that happen when you became a permanent residence?

EE: We had that five or six years after; I'm not exactly sure.

HC: Where do you see yourself working in five years?

EE: That's a very interesting question. I'm going to be part-time and hopefully with Rock Valley and Rasmussen. I am very comfortable with the position that I have right now.

HC: When you first got here to the United States how did you get around town?

EE: Map and prayers.

HC: Did you have a car?

EE: That was the first thing that we purchased the car.

HC: Was it hard to find your way around Rockford?

EE: When we got to Rockford it was two years that I was driving in the United States and we had two cars so it was hard because the Laundromat is not some sign wherever you go. Yes it was hard. But Rockford has huge streets.

HC: Did it take you long to become comfortable with getting around town?

EE: No.

HC: Did you speak English upon arrival in the United States?

EE: If you have a second language in high school you can answer that. You can't say this is a book but then you want to talk on the phone and nobody wants to know it's a book, asking questions that you don't know the answer and if you were living in Alabama with that accent that helps you. No. I knew how to speak English but I couldn't carry on a conversation and I would look at all the words in the dictionary of what I want to tell the pediatrician when I visit but I didn't know what he was going to say so I wouldn't look at those so it was hard but I survived and I'm happy that I could do it. The dictionary was my best friend. I would carry that with me all the time.

HC: Did anyone in your family speak English?

EE: Yes, right now?

HC: No, when you arrived.

EE: My dad as I said he was traveling to Europe and I am the oldest one. My brother was in Europe in England living there but it's not helping you if your brother is speaking Spanish. It doesn't mean that you speak Spanish too.

HC: How does your knowledge of the English affect you and your family now?

EE: Do I have any?

HC: Or how did it affect you with building your family as you grew here in Rockford?

EE: Like every mother if you know more you would do better but I tried to educate myself. I think that is really important for children to know Latin before they learn English. It's supposed to be root not everybody is supposed to memorize every word in the dictionary. You are supposed to know the root of the words and from there you know a bunch of the words but no, nobody emphasizes those anymore.

HC: Getting on the English your daughter was so young when you came here did you speak the native language in the home?

EE: She was at the beginning speaking English and I never enforced my language at home but she is reading and writing in our language. She has a very good conversation and I wanted my children to look at our language as an asset not something that pulled them back.

I think they are American first and then Iranian American and I am proud that my daughter writes eloquently, her vocabulary is broad and she doesn't have any problems speaking both languages.

HC: How did you integrate yourself into the community when you moved here, were there any churches or organizations or not for profits?

EE: Nobody, nobody helped me. I made every relationship that I have and I have a good set of friends right now. I don't pick my friends because of their ethnicity, because of their wealth or not having wealth. I have friends from every different denomination from hardliner evangelists to Buddhists, to Jewish people and a few Muslims and everywhere in between. My friends are mostly people that I can communicate with. Most of all they are people that we raise children together and now the children are mostly gone we connect with each other more.

HC: Are there any activities or community organizations that you were working in now that reflect on you as an immigrant?

EE: I had always been from the beginning, I thought that this community is giving a lot to me and I have to give back in any way that I can. For 18 years I have been volunteering in the public school. Before that I would volunteer in the Discovery Center and the Rockford Public Library. Both of my children since they turned 11 have public volunteer work, St. Anthony. My daughter worked in Alma Nelson every summer since she was 11 years old and public Library, my son and my daughter both worked there and I am proud to say that I am working with the Literacy Council now and I am a member of the Rockford Interfaith.

HC: How did it feel to come to a foreign country?

EE: It was like walking in the dark. I didn't know where I was going. I knew where America is but when I came for a visit I came as a tourist. I didn't know what a hardship I have in front of me when I moved here but I was happy that I had my family with me and from the beginning I knew that I was not going to go back, even when we didn't have a permit to stay. My country was at war and it wasn't something that I want my family to be exposed to. I want peace and I couldn't have it there and so when I was coming here I was walking in the dark as I said. I didn't know where I'm going but I carried lots of hopes as long as there's not war I can make it. That's what I was telling myself. Then my husband says maybe we can't find a job. I said we can make it as long as there is hope there is a way to find.

HC: How do people treat you when you arrived?

EE: I love the people of Rockford as much as I heard that they don't accept outsiders in. I never felt an outsider. I think you are outside as long as you want to be outside. I consider myself Rockfordian. I don't think that the problem of Rockford is separate from the problem of me or my problem is different from Rockford's problems so I don't let people ruin the day for me. If they have a bad day it's bad for them. I just take it that you had a bad day not that you want to ruin the day for me. So people treat me the way I treat them and I am respectful to everybody.

HC: What did you think about this country before you came and have your ideas changed?

EE: As I said, when I came here I came as a teenager and I loved to see the freedoms that teenagers have here but when I came with a family, now I'm a mother and I don't like those freedoms children and teenagers have. I think that parents should have more respect and that they should have more authority and that's how I was feeling at the time I came. And now that I look at it years after I see that it's not one size fits all. What I see in America is a spectrum of colors so I can't say who is doing what and what do they expect. I expected freedom and I see freedom is here.

HC: Did your move here turn out like you thought it would?

EE: I was looking for a better life and I think I have a good life.

HC: What has been the best part of living here?

EE: I don't have any answer for that. Everything is going so well. Are you a mother?

HC: I am not.

EE: Okay, so if you see as some mother your children are happy, your children booming, so you feel that I did a good job and that's the good part of any life.

HC: What has been the hardest or maybe disappointing part of moving here?

EE: I am not disappointed with my move in anyway. It could be anywhere else and it would be the same thing. It's you that makes connection with your society. Society is not as responsible to make connection with you.

HC: What do you miss about your former home?

EE: My family and friends but as I visit I see that I don't have that much connection anymore. Lots of memories that I made here, at the same time they've been making memories with each other so I'm not part of those memories anymore but the childhood I miss that are the memories that I could share with my family and my friends.

HC: You've mentioned that you've gone back to visit?

EE: Several times.

HC: Do you think that you will spend the rest of your life here?

EE: I think so.

HC: If you have children, which you do, what do you want them to know about the culture of your homeland?

EE: You know culture, as I said is a spectrum of colors. I want them to have my family's values. Not every American home has the same values so every child is coming from a different home, they carry their own values and it is the same for my homeland too. So I want them to have a value for their family life and that's what they would get from home it's not getting it from culture.

HC: What do you like to do for fun?

EE: That's interesting. I start with my friend, we started a book club two or three years ago and now we have signed up for dancercise. We're going to go for that this Wednesday. What else am I doing for fun? I love to do different things from shows to walking outside and we take short trips to Wisconsin. I like that very much and to Chicago, Chicago is very interesting.

HC: It sounds like you enjoy the adventure of doing something new.

EE: Yes.

HC: Are you a citizen of the United States?

EE: Yes.

HC: Has there been anything difficult to adjust to in the United States?

EE: Cultural way. I can say it would've been better if I had a mentor and somebody took time to show me around as I said I discovered world all by myself. It would be much, much easier. When I see these young girls I take them to the library. I take them to Borders I take them to the apple orchard. I say it took me three years to do this and now it takes three weeks. So yes I wish I had a mentor who was helping me out.

HC: Your struggle has made it much better for others. You know it's like you had to go through it and you're like not only have I gone through it now I'm going to make it better for someone else.

HC: Were you nervous in thinking about coming here and settling down?

EE: No. I am a very logical person. I let the event happen and then I deal with it. Before it happens I don't know if it's good or bad so how can I be nervous about it.

HC: How do you feel about the current debate in this country about immigration?

EE: I very much agree that we should not have open door policies. I mean I am looking at every country like a home. You can be a very good host and invite people to come and have dinner with you but you should know how many people are coming and how long they are staying. So I think that America is supposed to change that we don't let anybody get in. They should have a good process of who we want in and stay in line if not this year next year will be your turn. If

we give them that number to stay in line in five years it would be your turn they don't put their life on the line to come and pass our borders to come here. The other thing is why they want to come here especially when we are talking immigration with Mexicans. Why do they want to come here because there are no resources left there why don't they have a big company put there and they will have a job. I don't think they're coming here to help people clean houses so you know as much as I want people to have a good life I don't think keep the doors open is helping anybody. Maybe helping one country you are looking for cheap labor instead of sending it to China send to Mexico and then you don't have to deal with that immigration policy. Actually I just read a story about Hershey has built a plant in Mexico and is doing that they're sending it there, labor is less expensive and they are still producing the same thing. . Labor is less expensive, land is less expensive. Resources are more available and you don't have to ship it by boat or airplane, a truck could do that. So you have to see what is the source that they want to come here. Are they coming for jobs and definitely give them jobs and they won't come. Nobody wants to leave a comfortable home for two nights hiding under the bushes.