

Puja Mediratta

**Interviewed March 12, 2008
By Jean Seagers
Midway Village Museum**

Jean Seagers: And can you tell me your name?

Puja Medhiratta: Yes, Puja Medhiratta

JS: And you are from where?

PM: I am from India.

JS: Where specifically?

PM: Oh, I in India I am from northern part of India which is a little bit south of Agra where the Taj Mahal is a, a places called Chan Si.

JS: Are you married?

PM: Yes I am.

JS: And your husband's name.

PM: His name is Deepak.

JS: And children?

PM: I have two children. My son is 12 years of age. His name is Neil and my daughter is nine years of age and her name is Megan.

JS: Where were you educated?

PM: I finished my high school in India and then I was educated in Rockford itself. I went to Rock Valley College. I received my bachelors in nursing from St. Anthony's College of nursing.

JS: When was that?

PM: That was in 1995 and I went into my school nursing and further went ahead and did my master's in educational leadership.

JS: Where do you work?

PM: I work for the Durand public school as an Assistant Principal and school nurse.

JS: 2 jobs?

PM: Yes, that is right.

JS: How long have you been there?

PM: I am finishing up my 10th year there.

JS: Do you like working there?

PM: Yes it is good, it is a small facility.

JS: When did you come to the United States?

PM: I came to the United States in 1990, 18 years ago.

JS: And you were how old at the time?

PM: I was 18.

JS: What was your life like in India?

PM: Well, I was much younger, a kid in India. Comparatively to the United States or just in general?

JS: I guess you would have to compare it to the United States.

PM: In general I was growing up a teenager, I had friends. We did not have facilities like the United States. In India we had cars but we didn't drive cars every day. I had a moped. And we had a lot of people in India who were working in our house. It was a cultural shock when I got here and I saw oh, I had to do dishes. It was a cultural shock but it's really different. Like the facilities in the United States are different from the facilities in India. My life was like my parents took good care of us; I went to a good school. I was in a private school. My sister and I, there were two of us and my dad had his own business and joined family. My grandmother, my mother, my uncles, they lived in the same household and I guess one main thing was that we had about 10 people in and out of our house working and helping out and stuff.

JS: Why did you come to the United States?

PM: I got married to my husband and my husband was here so I moved to be with him.

JS: How did you meet him?

PM: Through family members. It was an arranged marriage.

JS: You said you went to high school before that?

PM: Correct.

JS: Did you want to come here? Was that something you were looking forward to?

PM: No, I guess in Indian culture in arranged marriages wherever the husband is that's where you go and parents arranged it so I didn't know I had an option.

JS: And when were you married?

PM: 1990, in India.

JS: How did they arrange the marriage? Was this done a long time ahead of time? Did your husband ask your parents permission, how does that work?

PM: His parents asked my parents. In arranged marriages that's how it usually goes. There is a few different versions of our marriage. There is my grandmother's version who says that when I was eight months old, families knew each other and he was over at our place and I was crawling around and he was chasing me and my grandmother said you have to grow up and get married and then take her.

JS: And how old was he if you were eight months old?

PM: He was eight years of age.

JS: Was he from Rockford?

PM: He is Indian too and from India they moved to Rockford in the mid 70s.

JS: So he more or less grew up here?

PM: Correct.

JS: Had you ever been to the United States before?

PM: No, I have not been to the United States before.

JS: How long did it take to make the arrangements? Were there a lot of complicated things that had to be done before you came?

PM: Like paperwork and stuff? No, it took about three to four months.

JS: So the arrangements were made for your marriage quite a bit ahead of time and you were married in India?

PM: Correct.

JS: Did anyone else come with you besides your husband?

PM: My husband was already here. So just me.

JS: You were married in India and then you came back?

PM: Yes, I came later on after our marriage. It takes about three to four months for paperwork to process and once I had my papers and stuff then I could come.

JS: How was your journey here? Did you fly?

PM: Yes, I flew here.

JS: Did you go anywhere before coming to Rockford? Did you land at Chicago or New York?

PM: Yes, I landed in Chicago.

JS: And what did you do there?

PM: I still remember the day when I had landed. My husband, his parents and his sister, everybody was there to pick me up. It was a white Taurus that my father-in-law had and we were driving out of O'Hare and I saw these beautiful huge buildings and I thought oh, this is beautiful. This is what I imagine the United States to be. This is what I imagine to be living at and stuff and a little bit later we started coming into Elgin and Marengo, Belvidere and I thought where are we in this farmland. Are we going into a village or something? And when we came to Rockford I saw these houses which have slanted roofs and that's how our huts are in India. I had not seen homes like these before. So I imagine oh these are huts so we are living in a village. That was my impression.

JS: Was the town you came from a large one?

PM: It's a mid size town, kind of like Rockford.

JS: Did you stay with anyone when you came? Or did you have your own home when you got to Rockford?

PM: When we got to Rockford it was my husband's parent's home and that's where we lived with them.

JS: For how long?

PM: We lived there for two years with them.

JS: Did you know anyone here other than your husband?

PM: No.

JS: Who helped you get settled? His Parents?

PM: My husband was settled and yes his parents did help us when we got the new house and we settled in and stuff.

JS: You bought a home after two years?

PM: Yes.

JS: How about other members of your family have they been to the United States?

PM: No.

JS: Did any of them come afterwards?

PM: Yes, afterwards I did have a lot of my family member's visit us and right now my parents live with us.

JS: How did you go about meeting other Indian families?

PM: Through my in-laws I met other Indian families and through my husband.

JS: Are there quite a few of them in the Rockford area?

PM: Yes, there are lots of Indian families.

JS: Were any of them from near where you lived? Did you know any of them?

PM: No, I did not know any of them.

JS: And you said that you lived with your husband's parents to begin with?

PM: correct.

JS: How did you go about finding a place to live after that?

PM: The real estate market, we just went around house hunting and looked at a whole bunch of homes in the Rockford area.

JS: Were your Indian friends able to help you out with any of that?

PM: My husband new quite a lot about Rockford.

JS: And currently do you still own your home?

PM: Yes.

JS: You said your parents are living with you?

PM: Correct. My parents reside with me.

JS: And when did they come here?

PM: Actually they came here to help with our second child and that's when they moved here. That was in 1998.

JS: You must have a fairly large home?

PM: It's mid size home, a decent sized home.

JS: And you said you are working?

PM: Correct.

JS: Did you work for a while when you came here or did you go to school right away?

PM: I started school right away. I went to Rock Valley College.

JS: Did you speak English?

PM: Yes, I did.

JS: Did your visa limit you at all to any kind of work that you could do?

PM: No.

JS: And what does your husband do?

PM: He works for Nicor Gas Company in Rockford.

JS: Do you think you still will be working in the school in another five years or so or do you have plans to do something else?

PM: Yes, so far I plan on working in a school but I also believe in you know its destiny. I don't know what my destiny has for me the next five years.

JS: How did you get around when you first came here you didn't have a driver's license did you?

PM: Correct. My father-in-law taught me how to drive right away and my husband already had a car for us, for me and I learned driving, got my drivers license within like three weeks or so so I could be mobile.

JS: So you and your husband owned a car?

PM: Correct.

JS: Did you find it difficult to find your way around?

PM: No, not really. I would have to ask for directions from my husband and it took me a little while to learn Rockford but Rockford is pretty simple. I mean there's Alpine, and Mulford and East State and everything else is around it. So no, I didn't have any difficulties.

JS: That must've been difficult when you first came, a new husband that you didn't know before and a new town and the new school.

PM: It was an adjusting time.

JS: How long did it take you before you felt comfortable being here?

PM: I would say that it took me about a good two years I would say.

JS: Were you homesick for a while?

PM: Oh yes.

JS: Plenty of phone calls to your family?

PM: More letter writing. I think 18 years ago there weren't as much international phone calls. Every once in a while. I don't think we had a phone in our home in India so it was difficult but letter writing was quite a lot.

JS: You said you spoke English. Did you learn that in India?

PM: We were in a private school in India. We had English from third grade on.

JS: So you were pretty fluent by the time you got here?

PM: Correct. I had a very strong English accent. England English accent.

JS: Did it make it a lot easier for you that when you came here you could speak the language?

PM: Correct. It was hard for me to understand because of the accent and I think it was hard for people to understand me because of the accent too.

JS: How did you integrate your self into the community?

PM: You know going to Rock Valley was a self-esteem booster and just seeing other Indian people, other Asian kids there it was good networking we would be in the library studying together and talked to them.

JS: Did you attend church of any kind or temple or synagogue or mosque?

PM: Yes, we did go to our monthly prayers which was held in Rockford.

JS: Do you still do that?

PM: There are other options too and our kids go to Sunday School.

JS: Do you belong to any organizations?

PM: We do the Sunday school.

JS: Any others?

PM: I can't think of any, not formally or informally I guess.

JS: Community groups or schools?

PM: Right, like PTO, school groups, community groups like informally we have Asian club, Mendelssohn club for my daughter.

JS: Are you at all active in politics?

PM: Not at the moment.

JS: How did people treat you when you came here?

PM: I think they treated me well because I treat people well so they treat me well. It's give and take I feel. I didn't feel discriminated or anything like that.

JS: You didn't feel out of place or uncomfortable?

PM: No.

JS: How about in your neighborhood, were there any people in your neighborhood in Rockford that maybe discriminated against you or were unkind?

PM: No, I never did feel that really.

JS: Was there any particular place where you might feel uncomfortable, grocery stores?

PM: When there were wars and stuff like that, or now that jobs are going to China and India so every once and awhile I would hear something about it but I really wouldn't feel that people would discriminate.

JS: What did you think about America before you came here?

PM: I imagined like what it was like in the movies and posters, like Chicago, the huge buildings and fast-paced life, lots of cars and bigger and newer cars, neat and clean.

JS: Did you notice here that it wasn't as congested?

PM: Immediately that there were not enough people for me to associate with socialize with.

JS: Have your ideas changed at all as far as what you thought when you first came?

PM: About the United States? Yes, I mean it was a fantasy world and now it's a reality.

JS: What do you like most about this country?

PM: At the moment? Opportunities, if I put hard work and effort into it I get the return, the response back. I like that.

JS: What has been something hard for you here or disappointing?

PM: I think culture over here if there is an American culture that has been disappointing to me. I mean I feel that the ethics and the morals are missing and people take this for granted the opportunities that we have over here. That's been disappointing to me.

JS: Did you notice that right away?

PM: No. It took me a while to notice that.

JS: What's different about for instance food here than it was in India?

PM: I have never had a hamburger, beef and culturally we never did eat beef but over here when I tried hamburger the food was something new.

JS: Did you like it?

PM: At first I did not and now I like it to a point where like once in six months or something like that.

JS: Are there spices to it that are different here?

PM: Correct. I think food is bland here.

JS: What do you miss most about your home in India?

PM: I miss the house, friends and family, people. Yes, that's what I miss, the people.

JS: Specifically, your family?

PM: Correct.

JS: Have you been home to visit?

PM: Yes, last trip was four years ago.

JS: And did you find it different?

PM: Yes, India is progressing too, it's getting very westernized too and in my mind India is what it was in 1990 but it has progressed quite a lot since then.

JS: What do you see that it's different?

PM: People are just getting very much westernized and everything that's available here, materialistic, it's available in India too. People's outfit that's a big thing, they are not really wearing traditional outfits anymore, they are getting more westernized and short skirts and shorts and stuff which we never wore when we grew up.

JS: You wore the saris?

PM: We wore like pants, long skirts and suits and stuff.

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

PM: Once again, I believe in destiny: I don't know. The way the world is moving it is getting globalized, who knows, we might end up in Switzerland or Italy or somewhere, who knows.

JS: What do you want your son and daughter to know about the culture of your homeland?

PM: Family is one big thing and respect, loving, loyalty, good ethics.

JS: Did the children go with you when you went back four years ago?

PM: My daughter did, yes.

JS: Has your son then back?

PM: He has only been there once when he was one year of age. He hasn't been back since. Someday.

JS: What do you like to do for fun?

PM: I like to read. I belong to a book club, talk to my friends, socialization, watch movies.

JS: Be with your family?

PM: Yes.

JS: You are a naturalized citizen?

PM: Correct.

JS: What has been the most difficult thing for you to adjust to after coming to this country?

PM: I never thought about it that way. Probably the adjustment of not knowing the neighbors and I think in India people are very upfront and over here it's looked at as nosy. I mean everybody is into everybody's business and people would ask people questions which over here are considered very private and not knowing that and learning and I'm still learning; I learned a lot and I'm still learning and that's really difficult for me where to draw the line. If somebody tells me that you know this is my time I don't want to be bothered it's like oops I get very self-conscious and say how many times have I violated other persons rights here. So that's difficult for me to not be brought up in this culture not knowing about when I communicate where am I crossing the line here? At times I am too cautious I feel and I probably do not approach more of myself to the other person.

JS: How about adjusting to a marriage when you did not know your husband ahead of time was that difficult?

PM: Yes. It was difficult but we worked through; we brought up that there was no other option and we had no other option so we worked through.

JS: What were you most nervous about when you were thinking about moving here?

PM: Family, family, family. How will it be, how will my husband be, my in-laws and how will I adjust.

JS: Do you like Rockford do you like living in this town?

PM: It is a good family town. Initially I did not like it I thought it was too small, like Chicago is more fast-paced and I wanted to be fast-paced and stuff but once I had my kids it was a very good family town. It has lots and lots of facilities for all different age groups. We belong to Coronado, season passes and stuff. It's a beautiful place. We just love it now. There is a

JS: One last question. How do you feel about the current debate in this country about immigration and immigrants coming in? Legal or illegal

PM: I have heard more about illegal immigrants and if something is illegal it's illegal but for legal immigrants things are getting globalized. I know lots and lots of countries are bringing people from other countries to work in the company because they are hard-working people so it's give-and-take. I cannot understand that America, the original people are American Indians. Everybody else's immigrant. So I don't really think that America is losing its culture. This is how America is. Now if Americans start going to India that's different because Indians have

originally been there in India or in some other different countries. If they are legal and people are coming in then that's how it is, they are coming in and they have a right to be here.

JS: What about illegal?

PM: Anything that is illegal is illegal.