

Deepak Medhiratta

**Interviewed 3/12/2008
By: Jean Seagers
Midway Village Museum**

Deepak Medhiratta

Jean Seagers: What is your name?

Deepak Medhiratta: My name is Deepak Medhiratta.

JS: And you live in Rockford?

DM: Yes I've lived in Rockford since 1976.

JS: Whereabouts do you live?

DM: We live in northeast Rockford right now.

JS: Are you married?

DM: Yes you met my wife; yes.

JS: Her name?

DM: Puja Medhiratta.

JS: And do you have children?

DM: Yes two children, Neal and Megan.

JS: They have American names.

DM: Well we got to change a little but I suppose.

JS: How old are they?

DM: 12 and nine.

JS: Where were you educated?

DM: Well I started my schooling in India Delhi, India and I've been in this country since middle school and high school and I want to Rock Valley too here locally.

JS: So how old were you when you came here?

DM: 12 years old.

JS: What brought you here?

DM: My parents, my parents moved here so here I am.

JS: Why did they want to come here?

DM: To seek a better life for our family.

JS: Did you come right to Rockford then?

DM: Yes.

JS: You must've known someone here.

DM: My uncle which was responsible for bringing all of us here. He was in Rockford at that point. He's in Ohio now but, yes he was the one. He came here so my dad came here. We came later on my mom and my sister.

JS: You gradually came all of you?

DM: Yes he came like a year earlier and we came later.

JS: Where do you work now?

DM: I work for Nicor Gas Company.

JS: Have you been there for a while?

DM: Almost 20 years next month.

JS: You said you're from Delhi?

DM: Delhi it's the capital of India big, big city.

JS: Millions?

DM: Yes definitely, definitely.

JS: What did your parents do there that they wanted to leave India?

DM: Well my mother was a housewife. She just took care of the house and the kids and the family. My dad had his own business which wasn't going that well at the end so he wanted to try something different and see how we could improve the family.

JS: That's a big change.

DM: Definitely yes.

JS: So you had your early schooling in India?

DM: Yes, which was an English school.

JS: Did you know English when you came here?

DM: Yes I did.

JS: Where did you go to school then?

DM: I went to Lincoln Middle School and graduated from Jefferson.

JS: Did you say you spoke English then?

DM: I spoke English when I came. I'm sure I've improved since I came.

JS: What was your life like in India?

DM: Well I was just 10 years old. Kids go to school, play, have fun really, no responsibility.

JS: Did you have a middle-class upbringing or what level there do you think?

DM: I was middle-class. We weren't high and we were safe and middle class I would say.

JS: Did you have brothers and sisters?

DM: I have a sister she lives in the Chicago area now but she came originally too yes.

JS: It was just your father and mother and sister then?

DM: And then my uncle and his family lived in town. My other uncle lived in town but they both live in Ohio now so my dad is still in town. My mom passed away so my dad lives in town yes.

JS: And that's the reason you came to Rockford itself?

DM: Yes my dad came here 12 years old from somewhere that far away he's going to go with his parents.

JS: You had never been to this country before visiting or anything right?

DM: No never first-time.

JS: What about your dad?

DM: No.

JS: Did it take a long time to make those arrangements for your uncle to bring you over?

DM: It didn't take that long back then but I know now it takes a long time. I mean an immigrant can go to India and get married and bring his spouse takes five years right now but when I married Puja I was a US citizen so it only took her like four months. I believe but now even that's a longer process now and when my uncle sponsored my dad it took like 3, 4 or five years maybe. Now you would be lucky if the brother can come in 20 years. The lines have gotten so long just more and more people are sponsoring so it takes longer 20 years to be reasonable then so you don't know why that person might be not living anymore.

JS: Do you remember anything about traveling here the journey here what it was like?

DM: Well it's a long way. It wasn't the first time I was in an airplane. I've flown before it's a long almost 18 hour flight time a long flight yes.

JS: And where did you land Chicago?

DM: Yes I came from Delhi to London from London to Chicago.

JS: What did you think when you landed in Chicago?

DM: Well that was the first time I saw snow which we have plenty of this year, too much.

JS: You came in the winter then?

DM: I came in November. Yes as a matter of fact I came November 1976 wasn't that the election day when Jimmy Carter was I think it was the 200th year of the United States 1776 too... I think.

JS: Jimmy I think he became president about that time yes.

JS: Did you stay in Chicago for a while or did you come right out of Rockford?

DM: No we came to Rockford.

JS: Who was there to meet you?

DM: My dad and my uncle and aunt.

JS: And what you think of Rockford?

DM: I don't know everything was big big, big, big cars, big homes, big yard. We had a house in India too but the yard and stuff we have here now we have a big lot right now. Again, we came from a big city just like in this country if you were in a big city you know your yards are smaller and stuff. Here everything is bigger, a little cheaper to buy compared to bigger towns.

JS: You said you had uncles here did they have children; were there any other children?

DM: He had two children. He came here in 1969 originally so he was here much earlier than all of us.

JS: Who helped you get settled then?

DM: Well my dad had already my dad had initially come and stayed with my uncle for awhile and then he got a job and then an apartment. When we came here we had an apartment kind of a house semi furnished so we lived.

JS: How did you mother feel about that?

DM: We again we came from a big city in India where we stayed with our grandparents together like one big family. It's a little different but you know.

JS: Where did you stay when you first moved here then you stayed in an apartment?

DM: We lived off of Sandy Hollow Road, yes.

JS: How did you go about finding a place of your own than with your family?

DM: My dad had an apartment and then a year later he bought a house on Harrison Avenue and then we stayed there then when I got married and stuff we bought a house over here.

JS: How long have you been married?

DM: 1990.

JS: And you own a home now you said?

DM: Yes

JS: Is there anyone living in the home besides you and your two children?

DM: My wife's parents live with us.

JS: Are there any other people from India in your neighborhood?

DM: Oh yeah a lot of them.

JS: Is it kind of an ethnic neighborhood?

DM: I wouldn't call it ethnic but it's a prime location northeast everybody around there is professional people and stuff.

JS: You said you went to Lincoln when you got here was that difficult to get acclimated?

DM: Yes where I came from we had uniforms in India. Here we didn't have uniforms. We did not call our teachers in India by their names. Sir here I was very it was a hard time getting used to saying Mr. Miller.

JS: Were they all male in India you teachers?

DM: No but you call her Auntie. You would never say a name in this country saying somebody's name is not... in India we're more respectful. I'm not saying it's disrespect here but if I was to call someone's name and I'm 10 years old and he's 50 years old I don't think you take it very well.

JS: Just a cultural thing.

DM: Yes

JS: Then you went to Jefferson?

DM: Yes I graduated from Jefferson, yes.

JS: And after school then what happened?

DM: Well I went to Rock Valley and got my associates in business and I haven't gone further yet but I work for NICOR Gas. It's been good to me.

JS: Are you a naturalized citizen?

DM: Yes.

JS: Where does your wife work?

DM: She works for Durand School District.

JS: Is she a teacher?

DM: She's an Assistant Principal/nurse over there.

JS: Where do you see yourself working in another five years?

DM: No I think I'll be where I'm working. I am not going to go and look for a different job or anything. I'm happy and okay.

JS: What kind of work do you do?

DM: I work in the field at NICOR.

JS: Going back to when you first came to Rockford did you have trouble getting around? Did your father have a driver's license or anything?

DM: Oh yeah you have to in this country. I know there are buses out there but they're not very convenient I don't think. My dad he drove in India before to it wasn't a total... it's a new thing

because you drive in the opposite lane in the left, here you do the right driving so that something you have to get used to yes.

JS: Did you get a license as soon as you turned 16?

DM: Yes I did, yes.

JS: Did your family own a car then?

DM: Yes.

JS: Did you find it hard to find your way around Rockford?

DM: Not really. I was here a few years before I started driving.

JS: Right but just getting around the town?

DM: Yes it's a new town yes a little bit you have to get to know the town but it's not a big town compared to if you had to get used to Chicago or something. It's a small town and easy to find I believe in this town north and south east and west so it's not like...

JS: Now how was your English when you came here could you communicate with the other kids? Did they make fun of you or anything like that?

DM: Yeah they did. I mean that's okay that's part of it.

JS: Did you find yourself hanging out with the kids that were your ethnic group or weren't there not many of those around?

DM: There were not that many around at that time. There are a lot more now in town. I feel not back then.

JS: Did you have trouble making friends?

DM: A little bit yeah.

JS: Was it because of your personality do you think or were kids just not as friendly?

DM: Well I'm new and people don't know me that well so it takes time to warm up to people you t know.

JS: Did you parents speak English when they came?

DM: Yes.

JS : Language was never a problem for your family then?

DM: No, we spoke English back in India too, not as a first language but enough.

JS: Do you feel that you integrated pretty well into the community?

DM: I believe so, yes.

JS: How about your parents?

DM: I think it's easier for a younger person to get adapted to a society, a new community compared to an older person. You're a little more flexible if you're young more compared to somebody who comes here when they're 40 years old. It's hard for them to you know, you do the best you can.

JS: Do you attend a church or synagogue or a temple or a mosque?

DM: Yeah we have a Hindu there is no Indian Hindu church what they call a [mundis],[mundis] is another word for church. There is not one in town at this point maybe someday There is one in the Chicago area which we went to about a month ago.

JS: How about when you were growing up to two going to Chicago then?

DM: Yes, yes but we do have a monthly Puja service in town church at Spring Creek. I'm sorry High Crest on Alpine they let us use their church and we have a service there once a month.

JS: Do you belong to any organizations through work or church?

DM: We are a member of the Indian Association of Rockford.

JS: Are you active at all in politics in Rockford?

DM: No, in the Association you mean?

JS: In Rockford are you interested I should say?

DM: No, I think not know we've had some issues and I don't think it's not for everybody.

JS: How did it feel to come to a foreign country leaving something you've always known and coming to a foreign country?

DM: It's a big change, shock but again our parents came here and it's not like they asked us if we wanted to or not they were coming for us too it's for everybody. So it's worked out and I'm glad we came.

JS: So when you decided you were going to get married did your parents, was it your decision or their decision to go back to India?

DM: To get married? Kind of both we were both okay with it.

JS: That's what the other Indian people in the community that's how they found partners?

DM: I think it's probably done less now I mean I came when I was 12 years old. Like my son he's born here. He's not going to go to India and get married. Times have changed and I mean I'm sure he'll get married in this country. We don't know if it'll be Indian or American but whatever time will tell. He's not going to go back to India and get married that wouldn't be fair because his outlook on things versus a person over there is different.

JS: Did your parents encourage you to do that to choose a wife from India?

DM: Yeah because I am I feel I'm still...

JS: How did you go about choosing your wife?

DM: Well we had known her through families. I mean I've met her before and parents liked her parents so that's how it worked.

JS: How did it take place? Did your parents write to her parents; how did that work?

DM: Yeah I think through a common person in the middle but we knew them too, the distant families so then we got married and had a big celebration probably 500 people.

JS: In India? You were married in India then?

DM: Yes in Delhi, India.

JS: 500 people?

DM: Yes, if not more.

JS: Is that the way weddings are there?

DM: Depends you know on how my, I guess in our family we do a good big celebration so yes.

JS: What kind of a celebration was it?

DM: Just the traditional Hindu wedding ceremony in like a normal.

JS: What is a Hindu wedding like it is it like one hour or two or three days?

DM: Depends on how much you want to make of it. We had like a spring ceremony the first day. The second day we had a what they call a (unknown word) and like where, here go to church and say I do it's like that and then the third thing to go to a secret ceremony where you say with the priest and do the ceremony and stuff. It's much longer than we do here.

JS: All the friends and relatives come for the full three days?

DM: Some might come for less it depends on how good your friends with, how much time they have. It's the biggest thing you'll see there. No bride or groom expect to pay for their wedding which is common here I feel some will some won't or some will help or whatever but there it's not even a question.

JS: The wife's family or the husband's family?

DM: They all may be the girl's family pays a little more a little bit it's not like they both we had a pretty good expense at the wedding and I'm sure they did too.

JS: How soon after your marriage then did you come back to the United States?

DM: I think I came 10, 12 days after the wedding and she came, we got married in February. I came in early March. She came here in July.

JS: Why did she have to wait?

DM: Because of the visa process.

JS: And she came to Rockford?

DM: She flew to Chicago yes.

JS: When you were growing up what kind of a neighborhood did you live in? Was there a lot of...

DM: Like family, family business entrepreneur, neighborhood people.

JS: Were there any problems between different groups in your neighborhood?

DM: No it's all the same, Hindu people living in the neighborhood. It wasn't like Muslims or Christians so no problems.

JS: So it really was kind of like an ethnic neighborhood?

DM: Yes back then yeah.

JS: Was there any place around there that you felt unwelcome or uncomfortable?

DM: No, no I will not say that, no.

JS: And you told me that was on the south side?

DM: Delhi India, Northern.

JS: No I'm talking about Rockford.

DM: I thought you were talking about India, sorry.

JS: So when you came to Rockford were you in an ethnic neighborhood?

DM: No it was right off of Sandy Hollow so it wasn't any, no.

JS: When you came here what did you think about this country before you came what had you heard about the United States?

DM: That it's a good rich good life, prosperity. It's a good prestigious country to be in.

JS: Did a lot of people want to come to the States?

DM: Oh I'm sure yes definitely to get a visa and stuff like I said back then it was five years now maybe 20 years to get a brother or sister here. So I guess more people are wanting to do this and people are prospering in India too. It's not that I think the quality of life that we have in this country. I mean safety and quality yes it's definitely better.

JS: Have your ideas of this country changed much since that time?

DM: I think the country's changed but that's the way time and the world everybody's changing everything is more global now. It's not like look at all our US jobs going overseas at the time you know.

JS: From the time you brought your wife here has your life turned out in America as you hoped it would?

DM: Yeah I have no complaints. It's worked out good.

JS: What's the best part?

DM: Just good family, health, gods blessed us with good.

JS: What has been the hardest thing or something that has disappointed you about America?

DM: I think too much freedom of speech. People can burn a US flag or I mean talk... there's too much freedom of speech in this country where I think should be a little more respect I feel.

JS: What do you miss most about India?

DM: This year I should say the weather. Weather's been terrible but that's okay. All my immediate family is here so I haven't gone there in six years now. She went I think three or four years ago.

JS: How many times have you been back since you moved here?

DM: 5, 6 times maybe in 30 years.

JS: Do you stay for a while?

DM: Usually three weeks, a month maybe it's a long ways yes definitely.

JS: When you go back do you find things are different there than the previous time?

DM: Oh yes there it's changing big-time and everything is more global now you can buy back then you couldn't buy American things over there now you can buy any American things, American Levi's or anything you want, Whirlpool appliances which you wouldn't do back then and people have the money, a lot of people are doing well and you can buy like Ford's got a plant over there and GM so it's a lot more accessibility to foreign products now.

JS: Do you miss anything about India?

DM: I can't say at this point all my families here is the main thing is my family is here I really can't....

JS: Do you think you'll spend the rest of your life here? Do you think you'd move back to India?

DM: I doubt it I mean. I'm not saying never though we may have a home there and home here and we might do like people do in Florida here. We might do that; time will tell.

JS: Do you still have some family there?

DM: I have my dad's sister and them not immediate, immediate family but yeah I have family yes.

JS: How about your wife does she have family there?

DM: No her parents are right here in town. Her parents are in town; my parents are too and her sisters out of the country over there so both of our immediate families are out of India now.

JS: And India's changed a lot?

DM: Oh big I mean you can't even recognize it's the same country.

JS: Is it more prosperous?

DM: Definitely.

JS: What do you and your family do for fun?

DM: Well the kids do sports and we take vacation, go to the beach, go up to Wisconsin Dells.

JS: Do you get involved you said your kids were in sports?

DM: Yes my son played baseball. He was on the school basketball team and my daughter does gymnastics. She's starting some singing group so she's busy.

JS: And you are a citizen?

DM: Yes.

JS: What has been the most difficult thing that you have had to adjust to in the United States?

DM: It's a different culture but I don't know if I can put it on one.. It's the different people in America now you have a lot more a different diverse you got people from all over the world in this country. So it's not like one group.

JS: When you were coming here before you came here was there anything in particular you were nervous about?

DM: It's a different; you know leaving your home and coming to a different, this far away new place and everything new.

JS: How do you feel about the current debate in this country about immigration and about immigrants legal or illegal?

DM: It's a touchy subject are you saying that people who are illegal should become some kind of a...?

JS: No, I am saying how do you feel about it. Well let's break it up how do you feel about immigration and letting more people into our country legally?

DM: Well a lot of people in this country are here illegally already and it's how you want to look at it. They are here but they're doing odd jobs and you know not paying taxes and stuff. Well if they were legal but I don't know if you do that then you encourage more people it's a... I don't know which way is right I guess the government will decide.

JS: Do you think there should be open immigration though legal?

DM: Probably limited because it has plus and minuses about anything if you bring the world gets more competitive and if somebody loses their job because somebody else came to their job they wouldn't... I don't know.