

Saatvik Ahluwalia



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42:00

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SPEAKERS

Moureen Kaki, Saatvik Ahluwalia



Moureen Kaki 00:02

There it is. Hello, my name is Moureen Kaki. I'm here in Boca Raton, Florida. It is Tuesday, I believe, October 18 at 11:04 Eastern time. I'm here with Saatvik Ahluwalia. I hope I pronounced that correctly, Saatvik.



Saatvik Ahluwalia 00:17

That's perfect.



Moureen Kaki 00:18

Okay, awesome, thank you. Saatvik, would you mind introducing yourself and just telling us where you're coming in on the call from today, please?



Saatvik Ahluwalia 00:24

Sure. Hey, thanks for having me here. My name is Saatvik Ahluwalia. I'm currently in Natick, Massachusetts, and I'm just really excited to be part of this project.



Moureen Kaki 00:34

Yeah, we're excited to have you. Thank you so much for giving your time to the project and for being on today. I really appreciate it. We'll start with some of the early stuff. We were talking about kids just a minute ago. If you don't mind, start with a childhood memory that you'd like to share, please.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 00:53

Related to 9/11, or just in general?

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Moureen Kaki 00:55

It can be in general, I would if you can, give us your earliest childhood memory, and then we can move on to there, but it can honestly be whatever you prefer talking about.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 01:04

Sure. I mean, I think the earliest memory, which I think I have, I don't know if I actually have it, or I've just been told that I had it, is my parents spent a year living in California trying to buy a liquor store or something. And the apartment we lived in had a brook in the backyard, and there was always ducks in that little brook. And I just remember, me and my mom sitting outside, and it's really nice and warm. We're throwing bread into the water, and the ducks are snapping it up. I don't think I could have actually remembered it, because this is - I must have been, I don't know, two or maybe three. But I feel like I remember it, and so it must be one of the things, your parents talk to you about it, and you're like, "Okay, I've made this memory up." But I do have some vivid memories from them, so I don't know, maybe it was just very - it was a very blissful, beautiful, happy time, so I might just be holding on to those memories for some other reason.

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Moureen Kaki 02:03

Yeah, but what a beautiful memory to hang on to, probably comes in handy in some comforting times, too. That's really sweet. And were you born in California?

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 02:13

No, I was born here in Boston.

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Moureen Kaki 02:14

Okay, gotcha. So your family ended up moving to California. Would you mind explaining that backstory?

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 02:20

Yeah. So my parents came to the US, both to Boston, to finish school at Boston University. And I think what happened is, my dad had an older brother or sorry, a younger brother who had moved out to California. I think California also had a really large Punjabi population, and that's what my father's background is. So I think there's this idea, like, "It's this land of opportunity, we'll find community, we have family out there. Let's go out there for a year, see if we can find

the right fit, and if not, we'll come back," because we had tons of family in Massachusetts. So we were really only there for a year, and then we moved back to Boston. And I basically grew up here till I was twenty-four.

M

Moureen Kaki 03:02

Wow, that's a long time to spend. That's kind of my relationship with Texas too. And how do you like it?

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 03:06

Oh, the only reason I left was because my wife went to medical school. So I traveled around the US for her training. So Philadelphia, then Texas, Austin, and then now back here. And after having experienced a little bit, not too much, but a little bit outside of home, I don't think I would want to live anywhere else other than Massachusetts. I wouldn't want to raise my daughter anywhere but here. So I'm very glad that for the final step of my wife's training, we got placed here in Boston. I'm just super happy.

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Moureen Kaki 03:40

Yeah, that's awesome. I know it's difficult to try to get placed where you want to be pleased too, in medicine. That's really cool. Would you mind elaborating on your time in Texas?

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 03:52

It was really transformative. We moved there for my wife's pediatric residency in Austin, and we'd both been to Austin before, and we loved the idea of it's a young hip city, and we used to be young and hip two, three years ago, when we moved there. I started this really cool job at a organization called Progress Texas as their digital strategist. And I had worked in politics when I was younger, but for a lot of different reasons I had to leave it to help support my family. So getting back into politics was really exciting. And not only was I back in politics, I was at this organization that was really a huge player. So I was getting to be exposed to really high level stuff.

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 04:36

A few months into moving, my mother passed away. She'd had cancer for a number of years, and she finally had been freed from it. And what I found happened is that all that love that she had for me, it felt like it was distributed across Austin. So within weeks of her passing, I got into this fellowship called the New Leaders Fellowship, and I met all these amazing folks who really invested in me. I found some really amazing mentors. And together, the people I met through that program, we've done some really beautiful stuff. And it just feels like it was really my mom who, her presence, was very there. And the people accepted me the way she accepted me for all my quirks.

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 05:22

And we're both AAPI. We're both Asians, and we're not supposed to do this kind of work. But she did this kind of work, and she was proud of me for doing this kind of work. And I met just like all these folks who were like, "No, this is where you belong. You should be doing this stuff." And there's a lot of - a lot of love was felt.

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Moureen Kaki 05:42

That's really beautiful. Sorry, I've cried in an interview before, but I think this is the fastest I've done it, I will say. That's really lovely. Would you mind sharing more about your mom? You mentioned she was your mentor.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 06:00

Yeah. So I was lucky to grow up in a really non-traditional household. Well, I guess it started out kind of traditional. My mom was a stay at home mom for the first eight years of my life, and it was just this really - we had a really powerful relationship, which lasted until she passed away. And then one day, I remember, she sat me, my dad, and my sister down and said, "Hey, I have this project I want to work on. I want to help young people build their future." And she has this thesis that if the private sector and public sector couldn't create enough jobs, then young folks would do risky behaviors. So she wanted to be the person who said, like, "Here's how you become an entrepreneur." And I don't mean big tech CEO, just start your own shop and create jobs yourself.

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 06:53

And we all sat down, and I remember saying, "Yeah Mom, you've taken care of us for so long. You should go pursue what fulfills you outside of the home." So we all agreed. She started working at Education Development Center, and quickly she launched this global campaign called Youth Entrepreneurship and Sustainability, and she took this thing which no one talked about, youth unemployment, and it became this global campaign. However we feel about these politicians today, her first summit was in Alexandria, Egypt, and Bill Clinton was the chair of it. He taped a thirty minute video. There was 2,000 people from all across the world, and for the next ten years, he just made it a thing. And there was fifty-six country networks, almost a million young people were impacted and started their own companies across mostly in the global south, which I think is the coolest part, is that this was heavily based in equity. That like, "There's places which are really suffering, and we're gonna make sure those folks are uplifted the most."

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 07:54

And I think because of her work, I knew I didn't have to become a typical Indian. I didn't have to go into engineering or accounting, even though my dad was in an entrepreneur accountant as well. And I think they also just - my dad was the provider, but also my mom was traveling twice

a month internationally. So he modeled this new kind of, I think, masculinity, where you're both the caretaker of the house and the provider, while my mom was able to go pursue her dreams. And I try and live that way with my wife, where I'm like, "Yeah, my career, as long as I can cover all of our bills, I want you to pursue and become the best doctor you can." Because I think that's what providership means for me as a man.

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 08:43

I know that that went in a couple different directions, but yeah, that that is my history with my mom. And then when she got cancer is when I pivoted away from politics a little bit, because I think she needed some more emotional support than my dad could provide at that time. So I got a more regular job at a tech startup, and we all went through it as a family, and my mom and I became a lot closer. And yeah, it was a difficult journey, because from someone who was so external and global, what ended up happening is she became this beautiful bird caged in cancer. And she knew it, and we saw it happening, but somehow because she was so powerful, she's accrued this beautiful community around her, that in the days when she was in hospice care, we had hundreds of people coming to visit, and even though she was unconscious, they were singing songs for her, telling stories.

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 09:54

I sent out an email to a bunch of my close friends from childhood and college saying, Poonam auntie, she's unresponsive, but I believe she can hear things. So write letters about your experiences with her. I got almost a hundred letters. And I read them to her, and you could see her kind of smiling along as I read them. I think most importantly though, is that she was really excited for me to have a kid. And I hadn't had one then, but I know that I can never tell the full picture of who she is. And so now I have these a hundred letters from people from different walks of life, who knew her different in points in time. And what I intend to do is to take those and create a leather bound book. So when my daughter, and my sister's kids if she has kids, and any future kids that I have, they can still get to know their grandma in all the three dimensional ways that she is, not just my own biased perspective about who she is.

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Moureen Kaki 11:03

Oh, you do such a beautiful job of telling the story. Thank you so much for sharing all of that. And what a beautiful way to memorialize your mom and pass her down. That's so lovely, my goodness. It's really incredible. We're gonna pivot a little bit. You talk to your mom about politics, and with your mom, and what her interests were in terms of social justice and aimed at youth and youth unemployment. But first, how old were you when 9/11 happened?

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 11:33

It was in 2001, so I mean, I was in sixth grade. I can't do the math right now. Well, it's 2022, so that was twenty-one years ago, and I'm thirty-two. I can't do the math, but I must have been eleven or something.

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Moureen Kaki 11:50

Yes, yeah. Okay, we were a year apart, okay. Do you remember when it happened? Do you have the distinct memory of where you were when you heard about what happened?

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 12:01

Yeah, really vividly. So we didn't know what happened until later in the day, but we knew something happened, because we all got called into homeroom. And when we got into homeroom, you could tell - the teachers didn't have anything to tell us. They didn't have some announcement. I think there's just this fear that we knew there could be planes still flying around. The planes, if I remember correctly, were hijacked in Boston. So there's this worry about - Lexington, where I grew up, is this really historic place. It's where the Revolutionary War started on the Battle of Greene. So I'm guessing there was some concern about would a plane come towards us? And I just remember feeling that there was a lot of unease amongst the teachers. Specifically, my homeroom teacher was a really funny, loud, energetic guy, and he was very quiet. So we didn't know what had happened, but we were still feeling that there was some general unease.

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 12:58

What I do remember - and then we get home, and I hear my mom crying, and I'm wondering what's happening. She's in the TV room, and I think the rest of the evening, we just sat in front of the TV, for better or worse, and saw and heard everything that was happening. I feel like a lot of the next couple of days was watching the television and just seeing the images and hearing leaders talk about how we need to come together and be united, and how we were the most united we've ever been on 9/12, and those kinds of things.

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Moureen Kaki 13:39

And do you remember - we were about a year apart, I'm a year younger than you. I remember having that memory of being in school when it happened and knowing something hit. But do you think you were able to process the full reality of what happened? I'm asking, because I know I didn't, you know what I mean? It's easy to say that in retrospect for me, when I look back at it, and just like, "Oh yeah, I remember that is pivotal moment." Because why do I remember it so well? But I know I didn't really understand the political ramifications and the gravity of the situation until a little bit older. So would you mind sharing how you processed that and what it meant to you personally, if anything at all?

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 14:16

Well so for one, we had a family friend who worked in the World Trade Center, and so I think there was that level of personal worry about this person that we all knew really well. Luckily, she was safe. So I think that keyed us into it a little bit. I think also, I grew up in a house where

we did talk about politics a lot. And as the week's progressed, there was a lot of talk about, "What is the right thing to do, the wrong thing to do?" Even years later, we still talk about, "What were the right distance to make? Were we lied to?" Those kinds of things.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 14:56

But I think what stood out to me most is you hear George W. Bush talk about how we need to be united because we're one country and everything. And then, in a way, they are setting an expectation for how the community should respond. We should respond united. And you see videos of fire trucks coming from all over to come help and retired policemen, retired emergency workers coming back in the line of duty to help, and you're like, "This is powerful stuff."

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 15:29

And there was a big part of the country that was united, but I think what stuck with me most is that we weren't as united as we think we were. Rather, there was folks who were excluded from that union, and I was one of those people. I'm guessing you might have been one of those people too. My family was a group of those people, and decades later, when I was writing an op-ed about it, which is still in the works, and I talked to you my mother-in-law, my father-in-law, my dad, all of them told the same story that they weren't part of that unity.

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 16:06

And you can quibble about we're Indian, we're not from whatever country, we're not part of the Osama bin Laden or whatever, but it doesn't really matter. The average American has no cognizance of what the difference is between these groups. We all look the same. We have beards, we're Brown, we have funny accents. Maybe we look scary, I don't know. But think that's what I remember most clearly, is going back to school the next day, hoping to feel this sense of unity and camaraderie, and feeling like I was actually on the other side of that line.

M

Moureen Kaki 16:39

Yeah no, I know, I know exactly what you mean, in that sense. And how long did that feeling last for you through growing up? Did it continue to affect your life in any ways?

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 16:51

I think it spiraled for me in a bad way. Back then, more so than maybe today, being Indian was a weird - being Brown, like Asian Brown, was a weird thing to be. Apu was the most famous Indian person in the country.

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Moureen Kaki 17:17

Who, I'm sorry?

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 17:19

Sorry [laughs]. Apu is - I don't know if you've ever seen *The Simpsons*.

M

Moureen Kaki 17:23

Oh my god. I was like, "What?" Okay.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 17:26

Not Abu, Apu.

M

Moureen Kaki 17:29

Okay, okay. Gotcha. I was very confused for a second, thank you for clarifying.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 17:33

No, no problem at all. So as it is, from a social perspective, you're already kind of smelly and weird and a nerd and whatnot. I also happened to be a really small kid growing up. And when people pride, athleticism and strength, and you're not those things, you're also on the outside. And to be honest, I can't remember if the more hurtful racism from my peers lasted a long time. But it felt like it lasted for a long time, or it felt really pertinent. And what ended up happening is I kind of detested myself. I hated myself, specifically because I was Brown. And I tried as much as possible for probably until my junior year of college, or sorry, junior year of high school, to be White.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 18:30

I bought Abercrombie and Fitch clothing, which, maybe it would work, but obviously, it doesn't work because you're still Brown. There was a pumice stone that I used to try and scrub my skin with, because I thought maybe this is supposed to get rid of dirty stuff, and I was dirty. I lost or didn't want to have as many Indian friends outside of a few that I've known since it was four. And I shut off a lot of pieces of myself that I really loved. And I became a sterile version of myself, which I wasn't happy with. And obviously, when you're not being your authentic self, it's hard to bring people who love you for who you are into your life unless they already know you, so it even became very difficult to make friends and stuff.

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 19:16

And I remember this one really strange moment. I guess it was actually a cruel moment looking

back on it. But it was lunchtime. I had gotten the last seat at a table with all of my group of friends, and a kid came who was also friends with us, and, "Hey, there's no seats left. Do you want to go sit with me at a different table?" I was like, "Of course." So I get up and he sat down and took my seat., and then I had to go sit by myself. And maybe it had nothing to do with race, but at that time with how I was feeling, that's what it felt like: I was being excluded because of this thing which is unchangeable, but again, something I disliked. And it took me a long time to remember who I was and feel proud of my heritage. And not even all about heritage, about who I was in all the ways and shapes and forms that I am.

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Moureen Kaki 20:13

Yeah, it's really heartbreaking that that's what it took to get there though. And I mean, that's the thing about racism, like you mentioned, you don't know if it was because of that, but even the psyche has an effect on people, and that stress that folks carry into their lives. Do you know how or what made you come out of it? What caused that shift from your junior year in high school to saying, "Okay, I'm gonna be me now. I'm not gonna try to please others and be who I'm not."

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 20:42

A hundred percent. I had this really close friend Kartik who, his mom and my mom went to either college or high school together in India. They moved to Lexington, we moved to Lexington, we were very close from a young age. And he had gone to boarding school in India for a few years during high school. I don't know why. And then he came back junior year, and we hit it off, cause we've known each other for so long. And he was really close with a lot of Indian kids in our high school. And it was a girl's birthday party. And he said, "Hey man, do you want to perform with me at someone's birthday and do a Bollywood dance? I was like, "Sure." I've always loved dancing. And we practiced for an hour or whatever, and we performed. And it was a three minute dance maybe, but it felt like an eternity of happiness was flooding out of me, and then all these people were clapping. And I was like, "Man, this is fucking cool. I feel seen. I love dance."

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 21:50

And luckily he was just this super loving, nurturing friend of mine, even 'til today, and we started a dance team, and we would perform. And frankly, I actually did find a good group of White friends in high school who were much more accepting of me. And when I started dancing, they loved it, too. They came to my talent shows, and they cheered me on, and we would win first place all the time, so they're like, "Yeah, that's sick. Teach us bhangra, teach us all all this stuff." And I think that's when it started. I think also, when you're in these defined periods of time, middle school, high school, there's a script that you write for yourself, that this is why I am in this context. But Kartik started this catalytic process that was a new Saatvik.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 22:40

So I when I went to college, there's a competition in Boston called Boston Bhangra. And my parents were sponsors of the first one, so I got to go to it, and I saw these amazing dancers

from across the country come and perform. And BU had a team, and I went to school at Boston University. I was like, "I'm joining Boston University Bhangra when I get there." I ended up joining a different Indian dance team called BU Jalwa, but I found this really powerful community of Indians at BU. And I think it took off from there, and these are some of my closest friends today. And actually, to be honest, I should have probably studied harder in school, because I graduated with a 2.9, or something. But what I really did that was what made the college experience, was be the captain of this dance team. And we went to national championships, I made so many great friends.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 23:35

I think what was most important though is I felt like I owned something, and I made something beautiful with people I really loved. And frankly, to me that was a much more valuable experience than writing a really good essay or getting an A on a physics exam. And maybe my life would be different now, had I done really well in school, but I think it's all worked out for the best. I've got this amazing family. I'm in the middle of job stuff right now, but I've had a career that I'm really proud, which has been meaningful to what I see myself as or who I see myself as. I wouldn't change anything at all. Yeah, I think it was that little dance performance with Kartik awakened this - reawakened who I already was. And it's been a process accepting that person over and over again, over the next couple of years.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 24:31

I have to say, my wife played a big part of this too, because she was the first woman I dated who didn't really have any - I think she just accepted me for me. There wasn't like a, "You should be doing this kind of a job or that kind of a job." There's a pretty basic thing of like, "Whatever it is that you want to do, work hard at it." I don't think that's a high standard to have. People should be passionate about what they do, and they should work towards it. But most people who I had been in a relationship with before had this expedition, like, "Oh, you should go to masters," or whatever it is, and she didn't. She just let me be my totally goofy, weird self. She knew there was times when I could be more juvenile because you're with your friends and you're in that context, but I was also a serious human being who had goals and aspirations and wanted to build something with her. Yeah, lots of different stories, but that's the journey, I think.

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Moureen Kaki 25:30

No, that's really great. I mean, to find your your identity, to embrace your identity through a cultural aspect like dancing, how much fun? I mean, what a great way to do it. Yeah, that's incredible. I'm going to be YouTubing some videos to see if I can find it.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 25:45

I'll send you some.

M

Moureen Kaki 25:46

Yes, please, please, please. That's be awesome. What a cool thing. Could you share a really - whatever most descriptive memories could come from, from the dance routine, whether it was a moment where you were competing or something like that. I just want to pull that, because that's too much fun not to get into a little bit more.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 26:06

Okay, so it's a series of memories, but they tie together into why it helped me. So I joined them because I saw the promo video at Boston University India Club, first meeting, and they're like, "We're the best team. We were in the championships, blah, blah, blah." And my quasi-competitive self, cause I'm not very competitive, I was like, "I want to be on that team, because they're winners, and I want to win." We had a terrible year. And the next year when I became captain, after most of the old team had quit, there's like six of us left, I remember that we played our intro video for the new freshmen. And all these older folks were like, "Oh, what a joke. This team is going nowhere. It's all talk." So I had a chip on my shoulder. And that year we didn't do too hot either. We competed this competition called - man, I'm forgetting what it's called, but it went really poorly.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 27:01

And the next year, we went to the same one, and we won it. We got first place, and I remember one of the guys who competed with us the year before saying, "What did you do? How did you go from who you were last year to this team? It doesn't make any sense." And I was like, "We just love what we do." Frankly, we decided to love our way of being a dance team, and our style more than trying to be other teams. And whatever weird stuff that we like, it worked at that one competition, and we got to go to national championships. And I think that, when we won - so the way that competition worked, it was a tournament system. We were up against some of the biggest teams, including a team from Canada who everyone's super afraid off, and we were definitely underdog. And when we walked away with it, it was just all of that work hard work, building a team with your best friends and traveling, it was very validating of this vision that we had for what the team would become, as we were the new captains. I just have so many good memories of that dance team.

M

Moureen Kaki 28:13

That's amazing. That's so cool, my gosh. And so it's been twenty-one years since 9/11. 2001. What are your thoughts now? We talked about the fear, some personal struggles that you've experienced as a result of racism and other types of xenophobia, especially ones that orientalize MENA [Middle Eastern and North African], Desi, Punjabi, basically Brown people. What are your thoughts on what it's like in the contemporary? Do you think it's changed? Do you feel like it's changed? Do you think you've changed to adapt to it? What do you think?

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 29:00

I forget, it's some philosopher, I don't remember exactly who it is. But they talk about how

whatever that thing is you fear instead of running from it, you should turn around and give it a hug. And when I remember looking back, one thing I recognized was that there weren't folks who look like me or you saying that, "You're okay. You are a lovely person. People like you are good." It was just either no conversation with folks who look like us or negative talk about negative stereotypes. And I guess I don't want - and this is from more of a pan-Asian perspective - I don't want kids from our backgrounds to feel that same isolation or not see people who look like them standing up for them.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 29:53

So over the pandemic, we've seen a similar rise in anti-Asian hate to a different community, but still an Asian community. And after the Atlanta spa shootings, where that White supremacist killed those six women, we held this huge rally in Austin at Huston-Tillotson, which is a historically Black college. And we had almost 1,000 people attend. And the most powerful piece of it is, when I led the vigil portion where we had multiple faith leaders come and give sermons and their language and their their faith tradition. When I introduced it, excuse me, I got to look out over the crowd, and there were lots of little kids there. And there was no rally for me when I was eleven. But for these kids were - there were some really young kids, eight year old kids - I don't know if they understand. I didn't understand what was going on. But they saw us. They saw that there was this huge coalition of people saying, "It's not okay, but you don't have to be scared, because we're here for you."

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 31:05

And I think that's what I see at least one of my roles, is to be that person, that whether it's in Texas, or now here in Massachusetts, and I'm trying to find my place doing this work here. But I can't stop those things from happening, those bad things from happening, or those bad attitudes from being engendered. But I can be someone who says, "I'm here with you." I think this got further crystallized by having a daughter who is Asian, and she looks Indian. So there's no mistaking her for who she is. She's got my nose. I think that she'll grow up in a much different, probably better version of Massachusetts than I did. But she's going to be in this really open digital world where she's not just gonna see what happens in her school, she's gonna see what happens everywhere. And whether she understands it or not, she's gonna be able to see her dad is there for her, but also for her friends and for her community.

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Saatvik Ahluwalia 32:16

Yeah, so I think I was afraid of this thing, but now I'm an adult, and I have a responsibility, obligation duty, I think, to be the adult that I needed for myself, for my daughter, and other kids who are equally lost and afraid and questioning their identities and where they came from, because they don't need to, they're beautiful. They're amazing, and they're lovely, and they're funny, and they're smart, and they're creative. I don't know. In a lot of ways, I lost five years of developing who I was, and I love who I am today. And I could have been this person maybe earlier. Maybe I wouldn't be this person if I hadn't experienced those things. But I don't believe that you need it, because you shouldn't have to suffer in order to become this actualized

version of yourself. And so I'd rather my daughter and her contemporary other young Asian kids, I hope they can become their version of who I am for myself, without having to experience the things that I did.

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Moureen Kaki 33:23

That's a really beautiful vision to have for the future community, honestly, and it sounds like with how incredible of a person you are, that they'll do just fine. So yeah, they're really lucky to have you. And yeah, I'm sorry, I'm just getting emotional, because it's sort of the same thing that with Palestinians in my background, it's something that we talk about too. So I totally get what you mean. We've only ever heard negative things about ourselves, and our parents were too tired as first-generation immigrants to know what to even do in this country. So as long as we have role models like you in our community, I think we'll be alright.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 33:59

And you, you're telling our stories.

M

Moureen Kaki 34:00

Hey, thanks.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 34:01

I actually just applied for a job as a storyteller. And it's the oldest thing that we do. It's the oldest thing humans do, but when you stop telling these stories, it's like then the history, that culture is lost. And what happened then wasn't good. And we shouldn't lose that story, because our future needs that story too. As much as, frankly, we need those stories, to hear those stories. This is a really powerful and important thing that you're doing, and I'm so happy to be doing it with you.

M

Moureen Kaki 34:35

No, it means nothing without people like you that are willing to share their stories. I mean, this is where it comes from. And I think your words would have resonated with me as a young kid. I went through the same experiences, and I've spoken to folks who are going through the same experiences, so for you to be willing to put yourself out there in that way is super important, because without that none of it would be possible. So yeah, thank you. We're approaching the forty minute mark, I think. I mean, your stories are phenomenal, I could keep you talking forever if I could, but I wouldn't want to waste your time. But I think we've got a pretty good amount, and it's really beautiful also. I just want to give you a last opportunity to touch up on something that you wish I would have asked or expand on something or if you were thinking about something earlier and we're just like, "Hey, I'm gonna put that to the back of my mind," this is an opportunity for you to share absolutely anything and everything that's on your mind.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 35:42

I think I would just want to reiterate that the solution to this problem isn't electing me to office. Just because you have one Brown guy as a state rep or whatever, that representation doesn't fix that people will still see us any sort of way. And frankly, since you can't fix that view of us, the thing I think our communities need to work on is really building that community. So when my mom moved here from India, she was on the subway, and an older Indian gentleman saw her and said, "Hey, come over here. Come sit with me." He had been in the US for decades longer, and he had a daughter who was the same age as my mom, and he was like, "Come over for dinner with your husband. I want to introduce you." And the person who she was introduced to, her son and I grew up together, and we're close friends.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 36:34

So there's something valuable about the community that we can build as immigrants and successive generations afterwards. And we really need those things to be super strong and tight, because ultimately, the government can fail, all these things can let us down. But we need to be having those strong, resilient community bonds to keep them going. And it's not just - community organizing isn't about getting people to vote. That's a part of it, maybe, but it's really about, how well connected are we together, to each other? Do we love each other? Do we see that, as much as individuals are important, if the community is sick, then the individual is sick, too? We're not like islands unto ourselves, we're part of this really beautiful, interconnected web.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 37:17

And so I think that's really what I would like to say is I am still in this transition period of moving to Massachusetts. Once I'm a little bit more settled down, my first priority is how do I build this community, which, frankly, it raised me. That's one of the reasons I love being back here is that I was raised by a really strong Indian community, and I want to make sure that community stays really strong and connected, but also reaches out to other communities too, because there's not enough Asian people to keep ourselves secure and resilient. It's only going to happen through this cross racial, cross cultural, cross religious community building, that really has resiliency and love and support at its core. And I don't know how you build that, but I know people have built it in the past, so I think we just need to figure out how that happens and make it happen.

M

Moureen Kaki 38:11

I think there's something magnetic about you that's gonna pull the right people towards you. I don't know why, but something gives me that sense about you, that that's gonna come true. And I lied. I said that was my last question, but you gave such a good response that I do want to ask you a follow up if that's okay.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 38:25

Sure.

M

Moureen Kaki 38:27

What advice would you have for young folks right now? I've been talking to a few young people who, they're new to organizing on campus or just getting involved and more active and trying to understand why these cultural differences are the way they are. What advice would you have for folks who are either having a rough time or are new to this or are just young and don't don't know much about it?

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 38:55

If you want to be an organizer, you have to be really humble. I don't care if you went to Harvard, or BU, or whatever school you went to. When you go into a community, they've been doing that work already. So you shouldn't go in saying, "Oh, I had this -" If anything you should be saying, "How can my skills elevate the work that's already been done here?" So my background is in marketing, and I might be a better marketer or digital organizer than anyone in community X, but I don't know that community. I don't know what they actually need. I can say, "I think you need this." But that's not what they need. They know what they need. They've been there, they've been doing the work. So when you go into community to do organizing, do it really humbly.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 39:35

And do it as an actual servant. You're there to serve this community. Let them lead the way and just uplift their needs, their voices, and their power, frankly, they're powerful. And you should see that, how are you plugging into the system, versus how are you coming in from the top or whatever. I would also say - I was young and egotistical once, so when I ran for office when I was twenty-four, I was like, "Oh, I'm a smart young guy. I can do this." But as difficult as it is in the system that we live in to do this, you should approach these kinds of works only as a labor of love. Obviously, we all to survive, so make sure you get paid, and you can put a house over your head and your family and everything. But you're not going to make - to do this work properly, I think you have to do it just through your heart, because the amount of politics you can be entangled with that take away from the real mission is not - you'll see it as you continue doing this work. And then you have to figure out how to work around it.

S

Saatvik Ahluwalia 40:41

But really, this is a labor of love, and you have to feel that love every single day, because it's really difficult, and it can be really sad, and you lose a lot. I was an abortion rights advocate and voting rights advocate in Texas. We got beaten up really bad. But you have to keep working through all those things, and there's no easy wins. There might not be any wins at all. But if you really love what you're doing, and you love that community, you can keep doing it. And my number is 781-325-5218. My email is saatvik.ahluwalia@gmail.com. If you ever want to

talk to quote-unquote "adult" who's been doing this work for ten years, I'm always here for you, and I want to support you in becoming that organizer, activist, change maker, community person that you want to be.

M

Moureen Kaki 41:30

There we go folks. That's a luxury. We didn't have anybody just dropping numbers and names and willing to share their information. So if you do get a chance to listen to this, please just hit up Saatvik anyway, because it's great to talk to him, and he has beautiful storytelling skills and wonderful advice on top of that. So thank you so much. I'm gonna go ahead, unless you have anything to add, I'm gonna go ahead and call it quits, and I'll go ahead and pause the recording. Sweet.