Sharon Mathew

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SPEAKERS

Sharon Mathew, Rimsha Syed

Rimsha Syed 00:03

Hello, this is Rimsha Syed with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. The date is March 14, 2022, and I'm on a Zoom call with Sharon Mathew for the Voices of Change oral history project. How are you today, Sharon?

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Sharon Mathew 00:20

Good. Thank you so much for having me.

Rimsha Syed 00:22

Yes, I am very excited to be sitting down with you and talking about your life. I should mention that Sharon and I are friends from undergrad. So for starters, can you introduce yourself and also tell us where you're joining the call from today?

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Sharon Mathew 00:41

Yeah, so my name is Sharon Mathew like Rimsha said, and my pronouns are she/they. And I'm currently in Florida, where I'm pursuing my medical degree, and I'm in Clearwater, Florida, if anyone knows where that is. But yeah, I'm a second year med student wanting to be an abortion provider. That's me.

Rimsha Syed 01:04

Lovely. So really, the first thing that I want to ask is for you to jump back in time and tell us about your childhood and your early years, whatever you can remember about your home, your family, school life, or anything else that comes to mind.

Sharon Mathew 01:23

Yeah, so my parents are immigrants from India, and being raised as a Malayali girl in the 90s and 2000s comes with a lot of expectations to uphold and really strict rules and restrictions to follow, and they're very patriarchal. So it's something that I always struggled with, from a very, very young age. And I feel like that's where I was first radicalized to fight for equality was in the home, because of the glaring discrepancies between the expectations that are placed on boys versus girls. And so that's where I feel like I first sought to fight for my freedom, in a sense, even though that sounds a bit dramatic. But being a little girl in a house where you're not really allowed to be free, in a sense, can be really difficult and isolating, especially when your parents don't speak the language that you do. So, yeah, that was me growing up, and looking back now, I feel like a lot of that came from who I am as someone who's non-binary. That was my hijra spirit fighting to be free from these patriarchal norms that our ancestors had to endure, and they weren't allowed to really speak up about. But yeah, that's just my childhood. Yeah, so

Rimsha Syed 02:58

Yeah, so you mentioned that your parents are immigrants from India, do you know a little bit about their process of immigrating and why they decided to settle in, I'm assuming, Sugar Land?

Sharon Mathew 02:59

Yes, Sugar Land.

Rimsha Syed 03:01

Talk a little bit about your time in Houston as well and what it was like to grow up in that city.

Sharon Mathew 03:22

Yeah. I think my mom first immigrated here because she was fortunate enough to have all of her siblings immigrate here first. And so she was able to really easily follow that process of immigration. And then because my dad and my mom had been married before her immigration, he was able to come a few years after her, and so the process was, thankfully, very easy back in the day, in the 90s. So that was their process of moving, and all of her siblings were already in Houston, so that's where they decided to settle. And Houston is thankfully a very diverse city. So I never really felt alone in a sense or isolated being Brown.

Sharon Mathew 04:11

Although growing up in elementary school, I was bullied a lot for being Indian, which was a formative experience, I would say, because it was the first place that I was really ashamed of being Indian and having a cultural background that was so different from my peers, and so

that's where my shame stemmed from. And it's a shame that followed me even into my college years, because I would say that until I was maybe a junior or senior in college, I still had this like innate desire to be White, which I hate to say, but it's so true, just because of how ingrained White supremacy is within our society and how all of these marginalized identities are just constantly dismissed from society and are pushed to do that. So, yeah, in that sense, I was always kind of ashamed of being Indian, but thankfully, throughout these past few years, that's definitely been changing. And I've been working really hard on unlearning everything that this White supremacist state has taught us. So yeah.

Rimsha Syed 05:27

Yeah, thanks for sharing that with me. So you talked a little bit about your cultural background, I also wanted to hear about your spiritual upbringing.

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Sharon Mathew 05:40

Yeah, so I was raised as a Christian, and I was super religious throughout pretty much all of my life. I tried very hard, as hard as I could to be an active Christian, even especially through my college years, I would say that's when I was most spiritually religious, because I was heavily involved with a Christian organization at UT where I had most of my friends. And so because of that, I was also pressured to stick in with Christianity. But I would say once I left that atmosphere, and I went into my gap year, I was free to explore my spirituality and assess the discomfort that I always had with Christianity, and in the sense that it just never felt right with me. It's a religion that I find personally to be very patriarchal, very sexist in a lot of different ways. And it's a religion that I personally find to do nothing but impose its power on others. And it's just something that I viewed as a tool that other people use to impose their power on others and do whatever they want with it. So yeah I went away from it during my gap year, and I'm really thankful for that, because it just never felt right with me, and I just always felt like I was forced to follow it, because a big thing in Christianity is if you don't follow it, you're going to hell. So it was that fear more than anything that motivated me to stick with it. But once I started to explore other realms of spirituality, I learned that so many other people feel the same way that I do, in the way that Christianity is very, very restrictive and patriarchal and almost suffocating in a lot of ways.

Rimsha Syed 07:49

Right, yeah. So where are you now in terms of your spirituality? What sorts of things have changed?

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Sharon Mathew 07:59

So I wouldn't say that I follow any religion, specifically, I more so have this concept of every human being - not only every human being, but every living creature - has a soul that is inherently equal to ours as human beings. And just because they take on different forms, doesn't mean they're any lesser than ours. And I also believe in - or I'm starting to learn more about - the cycles of reincarnation, and how that all works. Because I just feel like what I

believe is more so a connection between every living being and how our entire earth is an ecosystem and a community of all of our living souls. And it's not just human beings that are capable of consciousness. Yeah, it's hard for me to explain because I'm still trying to understand it myself. And so I'm still learning about it every day, and I'm trying to come up with it as I go.

Rimsha Syed 09:13

Yeah, that makes sense. I think, in a way, everyone is still figuring out their identity. I also wanted to ask, do you have a strong connection to your Malayali identity, and have you gotten to go to Kerala at all since you've been in the US?

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Sharon Mathew 09:34

Yeah, so I have been fortunate enough to visit Kerala a bunch. So I think my family and I tried to go every three or four years or every seven years. I think seven years was the longest gap between us having gone. But the last time I went was in 2019, I believe. So yeah, I'm fortunate enough to have been able to visit my homeland as much as I can. And I do have really strong ties to my Malayali identity. And the only thing that I would say is I wish that I had a stronger connection to my grandparents, because I don't get to see them as often, so I don't have a really strong relationship with them, unfortunately. But I do everything that I can to tie myself back to the identity. Like, for example, at UT, I took Malayalam, so I was able to learn how to read and write the language, which is really challenging because the script is completely different. It's like kanji in Japanese, where the letters are different symbols. So that was something that really helped me form my own bond with Malayalam and being someone who is from Kerala in my own way, because it wasn't something that my parents told me to do. It was something that I completely did on my own, and something that I'm very grateful for. Because the last time that I went to India, I was able to actually read all of the signs that were up there, I was able to read the newspaper to my grandparents. So it was something that I'm very grateful to have experienced.

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Sharon Mathew 11:20

And growing up, I was also able to practice the art of Mohiniyattam, which is the traditional dance art form that's from Kerala specifically. So yeah, growing up I was grateful enough to have all of these really nice experiences where I'm able to connect with my culture in a way that I wasn't able to fully grasp when I was a child. But now looking back, I can see how doing things like practicing Mohiniyattam and learning how to read and write in Malayalam, and also even just listening to music, specifically, from my language, taps into a part of my soul that I don't think any other form of media or any other activity that I do touches. So it's a different part of my soul that I think is healing whenever I do that. That's so beautiful.

Rimsha Syed 12:18

That's so beautiful. Is Malayalam the main language spoken in your household?

Sharon Mathew 12:24

So yeah, my parents will speak Malayalam to us, and then we'll respond in English is usually how it works in our household.

Rimsha Syed 12:35

Yeah, that's pretty much the same in my family.

Sharon Mathew 12:37

Yeah.

Rimsha Syed 12:40

So another thing I wanted to ask is just to hear a little bit more about your dance experience, and if that's something that you've continued in your adult life.

Sharon Mathew 12:49

Yeah, so it's hard for me to talk about, because I really loved dance as a kid. But unfortunately, because the bullying was really bad for me when I was the kid, I became so ashamed of being Indian and being - end up doing that kind of dance instead of doing something like ballet, or like jazz, or hip hop that everyone else was doing, I begged my mom to let me stop. And she forced me to continue. I continued for nine years. But then there's a special graduation, not ritual, but a performance that you do called an Arangetram, which is the final dance performance that you do with your dance guru to show that you've mastered the art form. And so I didn't do that, because I was just so ashamed that I didn't want anyone to know. And so I stopped a little bit before I could have done that. And so that's one of my biggest regrets in life is that I let all of the bullying get to me. But I was just a little kid.

Sharon Mathew 14:06

And I remember there was one class that I had where I was in elementary school. And we were talking about the little different dances that we would do, and my teacher, because I was doing something that was Indian, my teacher made me go up in front of the whole class and show them something from my dance. And I was so shy as a kid, I didn't know what to do. So I tried to do one step, and then everyone laughed at me. And so it was really embarrassing for me as a kid, but yeah, all of those experiences made me want to quit as a kid. And then when I got older, I realized that my mom was actually a very, very talented dancer in her village, and she actually really wanted to go join a dance team professionally, but her parents didn't let her. And so it leads me to feel even more regret, because I feel like that was my mom's way of allowing her to fulfill her dreams that she was never able to because her parents didn't let her. And so it was a painful thing for me to realize later on in life, but yeah.

Rimsha Syed 15:27

Yeah. Do you see yourself ever rediscovering that passion and dancing again? And I guess on the same vein, would you say that you feel a little bit more comfortable with your identity as you've gotten older?

S Sharon Mathew 15:43

I do definitely feel way more comfortable with my identity as I've gotten older, especially, I'll wear a pottu, which is a bindi. I'll wear a pottu everywhere that I go, because I don't want to be compared to anything that I'm not. One of the biggest insecurities that I've had growing up is whether I'm considered beautiful or not. And especially because in this country - and I mean, internationally, right - the beauty standard is Eurocentric and White. And so part of me unlearning that in myself has been for me to put a pottu on every day and to remind myself that you cannot compare me to anyone else. You can't compare me to the White Eurocentric beauty standard, because that's inherently not who I am. So it's a physical reminder for not just myself, but everyone else around me that you can't compare me to something that I'm not.

S Sharon Mathew 16:42

So in that sense, I've been really proud of being able to be Malayali, and being able to unlearn all of those really gross, annoying standards of beauty. And that's also why I got my septum ring as well, because that's something that's also indigenous to not only India, but also South India, especially, is septum rings. So that was also a step that I took to decolonize my own face. Yeah, and as far as dance goes, I don't see myself pursuing it now. But I do see myself going to different dance events, because those are really rare to come by. But whenever they do happen, specifically Mohiniyattam, I do go to those. And also, because my art form that I do practice specifically is with painting. And so that's an outlet that I use for me, especially with spirituality.

Rimsha Syed 17:48

Yeah, it's really nice to see how your creative outlet shifted from dance now to painting. And I almost want to quote what you said about your own Eurocentric beauty and read that back every day, because I was just very well put. We've talked a little bit about this already, but if you're from Houston, I think a lot of people know that Sugar Land has a very high Brown population. So I was curious if there were a lot of South Asians or Indians at your school through grade school, and if that environment ever created any of sense of solidarity, because I know that you've also talked a little bit about some of those negative experiences and the shame that you experienced, but I was just curious if that was ever coupled with a bit of a more positive experience as well.

S Sharon Mathew 18:42

Yeah, so I think it was honestly just in elementary school that I had such a negative experience,

because in elementary school, the district that I was in, Fort Bend, I think it was early 2000s. It was very much White people and some Black people and some Latinx people. And that was it for the elementary school that I went to. And so yeah, it was just me. But then going into middle school and high school, that's when my peers started to get more diverse, and that's when I started feeling more okay in my shell, just like everyone does when they're a tween. But yeah, I think in high school, we actually had this International Day fest, which was this huge festival that our high school would put on showcasing everybody's different cultures. And I think that's where I started to try and feel more prideful about our culture, because it was showcased in a really positive light as opposed to my previous experiences. But yeah, in high school, where I went to was Clements, and it was a very much a Brown school. And so I was definitely able to feel a lot more solidarity there. But as with any high school and middle school, there's cliques everywhere. So positive and negative experiences.

Rimsha Syed 20:12

For sure. Do you see yourself settling in Houston in the long term, or do you think you're done with Texas?

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Sharon Mathew 20:20

Oh no, I definitely want to go back to Texas. I think I would want to settle in Austin, if anywhere. Well, we'll see how bad the gentrification gets. But yeah, ideally, I would like to see myself living in Austin, because I love the nature there. That's one of the biggest things that always makes me think I'll settle back in Austin, eventually. But I definitely want to come back to Texas. Everyone I love is there.

Rimsha Syed 20:51

So speaking of Austin, thinking chronologically here, how was your transition to Austin, and what sort of differences did you observe between the two cities?

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Sharon Mathew 21:04

Honestly, I think the biggest difference that I had was being able to be away from my parents. So for me, it wasn't really a difference between the cities, but more so a difference in atmosphere almost, in the sense that I was finally free. Because growing up, I think every one who socialized to be a girl, but a Brown girl, especially, it can get suffocating being in the house where both of your parents are Brown immigrants. And so finally being free from that, I was finally able to take the first steps in exploring who I am, what I like, what I want to do, who I want to be. And so that was the biggest difference for me in my transition to moving to Austin. Because I know whenever you ask people what city they like more, usually, they say they like Houston more, and I always had to be like, "Yeah, I'm from Houston, but I never really got to explore anything in Houston, so I don't know too much about it." But yeah, Austin has always just been a symbol of freedom and exploration for me. So that's why I just always look at it with a sense of love.

Rimsha Syed 22:27

Right, right. Thanks for sharing that. So this might be a little bit open-ended, maybe even too open-ended, but I was curious if you could put into words what that process of self-discovery was for you when you did have freedom.

S Sharon Mathew 22:46

So I guess growing up, my environment was so, so rigid and so strict, that I always felt suffocated. And so moving to Austin, I was like, "Okay, it's time. We're finally here. We're ready to finally do whatever we want." And so my process of self-discovery was honestly just being very impulsive and doing whatever made me happy in that sense. Is that a good answer? It was a really open ended question.

Rimsha Syed 23:31

Yes. Thank you for answering it anyway.

S Sharon Mathew 23:34

Of course.

Rimsha Syed 23:35

But so tell me what you studied in college, and then any sort of extracurriculars that you might have been involved with.

S Sharon Mathew 23:45

Yeah. So in undergrad, my major was biology, and I did a minor in Spanish and forensic sciences. And then I also was able to get a certificate in Spanish medical translation, which I'm super grateful for now going into doing medicine. But yeah, my extracurriculars were very broad, because I originally didn't know if I wanted to pursue medicine. So I started exploring law and education and veterinary medicine, so I was a vet tech for an animal ICU in Austin for two years, which was one of the most formative experiences of my college years, because in the ICU, we had animals that were on their deathbeds and in such poor shape, with really severe symptoms, and I was able to help nurse them back to life. And so seeing that transition from a dog who's about to die within the hour to then being a really happy, playful puppy, and then going into a loving home, was one of the reasons why I chose to pursue medicine. Just being able to nurture that kind of health journey.

S Sharon Mathew 25:09

But so I was a vet tech for a while, and then I also was able to work as a clinic escort. That was

also another formative experience. I also did some grassroots work movement for Planned Parenthood, which was really great. I was able to speak to the Planned Parenthood lobby day - well, not speak - but speak to different representatives at the Planned Parenthood lobby day, which was also really great and made me realize that, yeah, I'm going to be doing this as a physician. If I'm doing this now as a student, for sure I'm going to be doing this as a physician, because I need to be doing everything that I can to protect reproductive health care. And yeah, so those were just a little bit of the extracurriculars I did.

Rimsha Syed 26:03

Yeah. I really liked that you had that very specific moment at the Planned Parenthood lobby, like a light bulb moment where you realized what you wanted to do. I don't know if you might might want to elaborate a little bit on that.

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Sharon Mathew 26:19

Yeah, so Planned Parenthood lobby day, we were fortunate enough to go to UT where the capitol, it was down the street from us. So yeah, the lobby day was basically where all of these representatives from all over Texas came to speak to their local representatives at the Austin Capitol Hill. And so I was able to speak to representatives from both Sugar Land and Austin about the changes that needed to be made and why those protections needed to be put into place. And so I felt powerless as a student, because I didn't have that much say, because even though I was saying all of these things, you could tell that representatives just don't care. They're gonna do whatever gets them the most money at the end of the day and the most votes. So that's what lit the fire in me to know that if I was going to pursue medicine, I was going to do it with this end goal in mind, where I'm going to do everything that I absolutely can to protect reproductive health care for people, no matter what.

Rimsha Syed 27:37

Wow. So okay, shifting gears here a little bit, you're currently in Clearwater, Florida. What were your initial thoughts when moving there?

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Sharon Mathew 27:49

Oh my gosh. We've talked a little bit about this, but it's very different. But it's also the same, because Texas and Florida are similar in a lot of ways. It's very humid, as well. But yeah, I think here in Florida, people are very much more open with their politics. I'm trying to be as neutral as possible. But yeah, people can be very, very vocal about their ignorance in a lot of ways. My first day here, I was literally driving my car, and there were three trucks around me that all had Confederate flags. And I was like, "Oh my gosh. This is the state that I drove into." But at the same time, I feel like at different points in my career, I'll be called to different places that are restrictive, specifically because the work that I do needs to be there. And so in a lot of ways, I have to learn how to adapt to these environments, because this is where the work needs to happen, and this is how I need to learn how to kind of infiltrate, in a way.

Rimsha Syed 29:14

Right. So obviously, your passion for reproductive justice is very obvious and very encouraging. I wanted to ask, what does reproductive justice and reproductive health mean to you on a personal level?

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Sharon Mathew 29:31

On a personal level, it just means freedom. So a big thing for me is, I am one of the first - I say "women," because although I identify as non-binary, I was socialized as a woman. Society will always view me as a woman because I'm femme presenting. But I'm the first woman in my lineage edge who has the freedom of choice. And I don't think many people understand just how sacred that gift is. And so I think all of my life, the reason that I've been fighting so much, is because people with marginalized identities, every conversation you have, even your mere existence is an act of resistance. Because we're taught to push ourselves down, we're taught to not even exist. And so in that sense, our very existence is that. It's an act of resistance. And so being the first woman in my ancestral line with that freedom of choice, I just think there's so much power there, there's so much to make up for, there's so many lives to live, and so many long lost dreams to fulfill. And so every act of defiance on my part, I personally envision as an act of freedom. And so I hold that value very close to my heart.

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Sharon Mathew 31:11

And so that's why reproductive justice has always been something that is so close to me, because as people with uteruses, we are hindered - well not hindered, I don't want to say hindered. But if we become pregnant, it is something that is incredibly life altering, because pregnancy is something that will irrevocably change the way your body works permanently, it can damage your body permanently. And it is extremely fatal for a lot of people, which is something that people don't really realize. But as a medical student, I've been able to learn very intimately just how damaging pregnancy is. And especially with the way that society in the world has developed, women have always been tethered down in a way and not been able to explore the real sense of freedom, a lot of the times because of pregnancy. And so tying that to how I'm the first woman in my lineage that has that freedom of choice, I understand how impactful it is to be able to have that freedom to determine whether or not you want to terminate a pregnancy. Because that's something that is a newfound technology for us, and it's a newfound medicine that is finally safe for us to use. But even then, it's still not allowed for us to use because the patriarchy demands that they control the bodies of people with uteruses. And so it's just something that is so sacred to me, because I understand how important having that freedom is.

Rimsha Syed 33:10

Wow, totally agree. A lot of people who aren't super familiar with the with the framework of reproductive justice think that it's only about abortion. Do you ever find yourself having to defend the framework of the reproductive justice movement or really just explaining to people what it means in a more broad sense?

Sharon Mathew 33:36

Yeah. So it's tricky, because a lot of the times, the way that I found other people defending reproductive justice is saying that, "Oh, well, Planned Parenthood, 99% of the reproductive health care that they provide aren't abortions." But I want to change that narrative, because abortions should be okay. They should be okay to talk about because abortions are health care. They are one of the most safest procedures that you can perform. I think I even read a statistic that said they were more safe than wisdom teeth surgery, which is insane because nobody even bats an eye at that. And no one bats an eye at things like vasectomies or anything else. But the way that I found it is that, yes, reproductive justice is also about birth control. It's also about safe sex. It's also about safe sex education in the public school system. But at the same time, we also need to emphasize the fact that abortion should not be a taboo subject and the fact that it is a taboo subject is the reason why we have all of these different laws that are coming out that are restricting reproductive justice in a lot of different ways.

Sharon Mathew 34:58

Because of the fact that abortion is taboo, reproductive healthcare is seen as taboo. And so things like Planned Parenthood losing their funding happens, and all sorts of things like sex ed is about abstinence only when, in reality, that's not going to be something that is beneficial to anyone in the long run. But yeah, I have had to defend reproductive justice by saying that it is all-encompassing, and that I want people to be able to also have the freedom to not choose an abortion, if they want to. If they want to have a pregnancy, they should have the - if they don't feel comfortable with pursuing an abortion, then what can we do as a society to also help them have the money to be able to raise a child? Because I also know people who have had to have abortions that, had they had more money, had they had a more stable job, they wouldn't have chosen it. And so it's things like that, where reproductive health care is not just about, "Oh, let everyone have an abortion." It's about, what can we as a society do to support a person in making a decision that makes them the happiest?

Rimsha Syed 36:15

Yeah, thank you for sharing that. So I know that you're involved with some social media campaigns where you create graphics about various reproductive justice issues. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Sharon Mathew 36:31

So I'm part of two. So the first group that I was involved with was called Somos, and it was under Dr. Julie Hakim, who's a professor at Baylor College of Medicine. And so there we were providing gynecologic information for adolescents who have uteruses. And we were providing that information specifically in Spanish and for the Latinx community specifically. So we were also tailoring that information to be culturally competent for the Spanish speaking population, because there are - obviously as there are within every cultural community, there are different taboos and different myths that thrive within different cultures. And so the information that we gave was specifically for that population. And then another group that I work for, it's not really

a social media marketing campaign or anything like that. But it's a group called Unmuted, and it's a subsection of Medical Students for Choice, which is a national org, and it's pro-choice medical students. But the subset that I worked for is called Unmuted, and it specifically focuses on the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality within reproductive health care. And so obviously, I had to join. But yeah, that's a group that I just recently joined, I think a month or two ago. And I'm really happy to be involved. I'm really grateful to be involved.

Rimsha Syed 38:18

Yeah, so out of curiosity, are those intersections of race and socio-economic factors something that you receive in your formal education? Or is that something that you have to search elsewhere to educate yourself about?

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Sharon Mathew 38:35

Yeah, unfortunately, none of that is in our curriculum. I can't speak for every medical school, but most med schools that I have come across just from other friends who are in different medical schools and learning through social media, I've found that a lot of the times socio-economics especially is not taught in schools. I'm lucky enough that the school that I go to had a human sexuality class, which was - it covered the basics. It wasn't great. But yeah, I find that race, especially, is not discussed, even though sexuality is. So I think there's a lot of taboo there that I didn't realize until I got here. And I see how some of my peers are, and how they can be, and how they don't realize how deeply ingrained sexism and racism is, especially within medicine. I would say we don't get any of it really, and it's something that I've been able to learn by just reading on my own.

Rimsha Syed 39:52

Yeah, I mean, I'm really hoping that that's something that's implemented across curriculum, down the line.

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Sharon Mathew 40:00

I know, it's really frustrating.

Rimsha Syed 40:03

What are some of the biggest challenges that you perceive that are going to be involved when you're officially working?

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Sharon Mathew 40:15

Oh, I think the biggest things will be bans on reproductive health care. Within the past few months even, we've seen so many bans come out on abortion specifically. And those are

going to be the biggest things, I think, which just because they're so volatile, you can't really say what's going to happen within the next few months even, because a lot of these bills are still waiting to be voted on. They've just been presented. But yeah, I honestly can't say. I'm hoping that it'll get better by the time I start working. Yeah, fingers crossed, but I will do everything in my power that I can to help improve access. That's just the thing that I'm going to be working on the most, I know, as a physician, is working on improving access.

Rimsha Syed 41:17

Right. Yep. That's very admirable. I'm so glad I know someone like you. Any organizers or historical figures that you look up to or draw inspiration from?

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Sharon Mathew 41:31

Yeah, so Angela Davis, obviously. But she was the figure that I first learned about intersectional feminism from. Yeah, her works really, really opened my eyes to just how deep rooted racism is within this country, which I did not know until I read her works. But having learned that, and having learned how those are so intricately tied to the fight for feminism is something that really changed my outlook on how I want to pursue reproductive health care, because, as we all know, the people that are most affected are going to be marginalized people of color when all of these abortion effects come into play. But yeah, so she was one of the most formative authors that I've looked up to.

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Sharon Mathew 42:36

And as far as doctors go, there are two doctors that I really look up to. Dr. Ghazaleh Moayedi is an abortion provider currently within Texas, and she does a lot of work in the legislative field as well, and also with research. Her career is what I want to do as an abortion provider because she, I think, travels across Texas providing abortion care. And now it's a lot harder because of the six week ban for her, but she set up this telemedicine website, so that she can provide care for people all across Texas, even with the six week ban. So eliminating that barrier of travel is something that I also want to implement with my practice.

S

Sharon Mathew 43:36

And then another doctor that I really look up to is Dr. Leana Wen, who was a former president of Planned Parenthood. I believe she was the first doctor to be a president of Planned Parenthood. But yeah, I really want to work for Planned Parenthood. And I really want to implement change in a really big way, not just - I mean, I do want to help Texas, obviously. But I also want to fight in a really big way across the country. And so I think working for Planned Parenthood in those ways can be really impactful. And so it's just always been a dream of mine to follow in her footsteps, especially because she first started out as a health commissioner for her city and then worked from there. And so implementing changes in those local regions and then working nationwide is something that I want to do.

Rimsha Syed 44:34

You're really reaching for the stars here.

S Sharon Mathew 44:37

I'm trying, I want to do everything.

Rimsha Syed 44:42

So, earlier you were talking about how your mere existence as a South Asian woman or non-binary person is a form of resistance and is a political act in and of itself, right. And I totally know know where you're coming from. And while that's a very powerful thing, it can definitely also be a lot to carry around on your shoulders all the time. So I was wondering, what do you do to heal? What is that process like for you? What sorts of things bring you comfort?

S Sharon Mathew 45:20

Yeah, it's really taxing at the end of the day. And honestly, the most comforting thing that gets me through every day is knowing that, yeah, I'm probably going to be the first non-binary doctor, but it's just paving the way for people who are coming after us and how necessary that is. And not only that, but the fact that there were so many people that came before us that fought so hard for us to have very, very basic human rights. And so the very least that I can do is uphold that legacy and do the very best that I can to continue to open those doors, and to continue to shatter those restrictions within our society. And so, yeah, the most comforting thing for me every day is knowing that, yeah, I'm going through this today, but in the long run, I'm going to be someone for my patients, hopefully, someone for my patients that will do everything in their power to eliminate these barriers of racism, sexism, and class. And it's going to be a really hard, long struggle, but someone has to do it. And if we're not going to do it, who else will?

S Sharon Mathew 46:48

But in terms of healing, the things that I do are art, because I feel like art and painting is a form of healing that is very soothing to my soul. I've often said that painting is a way that my soul communicates to myself when I don't have the words for me to say it. And then also journaling. Rage journaling is also very, very needed. And something that I have been like trying to explore is also ancestral work, which I haven't started yet. I've just been doing research into it. But the way that I've been saying about how I feel the like force of my ancestors and my soul with the work that I do, I just feel like doing ancestral work will help me gain more of a sense of solidarity within myself, because it's hard to do that when all of your relatives are so far away. And it's hard to communicate, when you don't speak the language as well, and things like that. Yeah, painting is really healing, things like that.

Rimsha Syed 48:05

Thank you so much for sharing that with me. That was really well put. And I don't want to take up too much of your time today. So I have one last question also, very much open-ended. But seeing as this interview is meant to be archived, and it's meant to be heard by people years and years down the line, is there any type of advice or words of wisdom or a takeaway that you want to say before we close out today?

S Sharon Mathew 48:36

Words of advice, I think our souls are so volatile in the sense that they're so powerful. And learning how to listen to what makes your heart beat faster, what makes your soul happier is going to be the key to following your path. And it's going to be the key to finding what your passion is, I think. So learning how to listen to yourself, I think, is the biggest help that you can give yourself down the line. Because your higher self is always going to be there. And it's always going to show you the path that you need to go to down. And so I think learning how to listen to yourself is the biggest thing that you can do for yourself.

S Sharon Mathew 49:32

And also that words are magic, quite literally. And so that's the importance of using inclusive languages, because words shape our reality. And so when you choose to use exclusive language, you create a message that says that those people don't exist. And in doing that, you say that those lives don't matter. And that those lives don't have rights. And so that's how using exclusive language and things like that lead to the dehumanization of marginalized folks and allows for violence to be justified towards them. Because if they don't exist, then who are you harming? So I think that's also my biggest takeaway that I've learned in this life so far is that words are magic, and words are powerful. And just because they're pronouns doesn't mean that they're insignificant. Every word holds power, and every word holds a fragment of our reality. And in that same way, laws are a manifestation of those words. And so that's how they all intertwine with our society, with the way that we think, the way that we speak, what words we use, everything ties down back to words. Yeah, I don't know if that made sense, but yeah.

 Rimsha Syed 51:04

Definitely. No, thank you so much. I really enjoyed talking to you today, and I'm glad that you know you carved out some time to sit down. And I'm going to go ahead and stop the recording now.