

Saamiya Seraj

April 18, 2023

Moureen Kaki [00:00:02] Hello hello, my name is Moureen Kaki, and I am an oral history fellow at the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. I have with me here Saamiya Seraj. We are on a call about 10:05 Central Time, April 18, and Saamiya, would you mind just saying hello, telling us where you're calling from, and introducing yourself, please?

Saamiya Seraj [00:00:20] Yeah, good morning, everyone. My name is Saamiya Seraj, and I am in Austin, Texas.

Moureen Kaki [00:00:27] Very cool. And Saamiya, one of the questions we like to start with is, what is your earliest memory of childhood? What's the first thing you remember ever?

Saamiya Seraj [00:00:38] Oh, that's a tough question. So I grew up in Bangladesh, in the capital city of Dhaka, and I actually grew up in a joint family. So I was living not just with my parents and my sister, but also my grandfather, grandmother and uncle and aunt and my two cousins. And I think one of the earliest memories is probably us playing, me, my sister and my cousins, playing in my grandma's verandah. And it was a beautiful open verandah. We could see the mango tree that was right outside our house, sunshine filtering in, and just, I don't know, the magic of childhood.

Moureen Kaki [00:01:27] That's a beautiful way to start this interview. How old were you about that?

Saamiya Seraj [00:01:34] I was probably four or five around that time.

Moureen Kaki [00:01:40] And what was it like getting to grow up with family, an abundance family?

Saamiya Seraj [00:01:49] It was growing up with a lot of love and our house was noisy and chaotic and fun. So we lived in our grandparents' house. It was an old house built right after the Liberation War in Bangladesh. And it was just an old cozy house with a big staircase. So we would all just play there, I don't know, different things, pirate ships and rockets, things that children do. But it was growing up with a lot of love. And there was always someone there to talk with and play with. So it was a really nice way to grow up, I think, as a joint family.

Moureen Kaki [00:02:42] That's super lovely Saamiya, thank you for sharing that. Is there a specific memory, when you think of your sister or your family in general, that you're like, "Okay, that's one I definitely hang onto."

Saamiya Seraj [00:03:01] So Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country, and so we had Fridays off. And so after the Friday Jum'ah prayers, everyone would come back home, and we would sit, all of us sit, in grandma's table and just eat and talk. I think that's one of my most precious memories, just the smell of food and everyone talking and trying to one-up each other in terms of voice, especially us kids. We would always try to be heard, especially when there were so many of us there. Yeah, I think that's probably one of my favorite memories growing up, the Friday lunches after Jum'ah prayers.

Moureen Kaki [00:03:47] It's the simple things in retrospect always, right?

Saamiya Seraj [00:03:50] Yeah.

Moureen Kaki [00:03:53] So you grew up in Bangladesh and eventually you came to the States, right? Would you mind telling us a little bit?

Saamiya Seraj [00:04:01] Yeah, so I grew up, I did all my schooling, I did up til 11th grade in Dhaka. And typically, you apply for college in 12th grade. But my mom was like, "Let's do a practice run so that when you actually apply, you know exactly what to do." So in the 11th grade, I did a practice run, but I got accepted to UT. I used to live with my paternal grandparents, but my maternal grandparents were actually already in America. My grandfather was a botanist, and he was doing research at UT Austin. So that made it a natural pick for me to come here. So finished 11th grade, and then I moved to the US for college, to Austin, and I was studying civil engineering here.

Moureen Kaki [00:04:59] Was that your first time leaving Bangladesh?

Saamiya Seraj [00:05:03] I visited America before that with my parents. My mom, she's a professor. She's a professor of biochemistry. And she does research where she is genetically modifying rice plants so that they're more salt tolerant. Especially with climate change, we have a lot of tidal surges back in Bangladesh and in the coastal areas, the salt, salinity has been increasing in the soil. So they're genetically modifying rice plants to survive in salt water. And so the first time I actually came to America was when she had a conference here, with regards to her profession. So I've been in America before, but this was my first time living outside of Bangladesh.

Moureen Kaki [00:06:03] Okay. And what was your reaction? What was the experience of moving like? Was there any - yeah?

Saamiya Seraj [00:06:11] Oof. It was shocking. As I was saying, I grew up in a joint family, and I grew up with a lot of love, surrounded by family and cousins. And Bangladesh is a very densely populated country. My estimate might be a little bit off because it changes. But I think the population density of Bangladesh when I last looked was 18,000 people per square kilometer, and when I first moved to Austin, it was 600 people per square mile. And so I think I felt very lonely. And one of my first reactions was, "What are these vast empty spaces where there are no houses or trees, and it's just grass?" And I think just getting used to the scenery was so different. I know it's not a desert, but to me it felt like a desert. Compared to the greenery in Bangladesh, the scenery of Texas, with its vast open spaces, was a big shock to me. And also I grew up in Dhaka, which, there were buildings everywhere, very densely populated, people everywhere. So I think I was also very lonely initially.

Saamiya Seraj [00:07:40] I started off living in the dorm at UT Austin, and the food was different. And it's not like I - I loved food. I've always been a person who loved food and trying different types of food and cuisines, but not being able to eat food from home, eating different food constantly is a whole different experience. I studied in an English medium school, so I was fluent in English, but talking in English all the time - because in Bangladesh, we spoke a mixture of English and Bangla. There was an ache in my heart. I felt really lonely. I missed the food. The culture was so different. And for the first time in my life, I didn't know what to do with myself, honestly, for the first few years.

Moureen Kaki [00:08:48] So how did you cope?

Saamiya Seraj [00:08:51] So I think in UT Austin, especially in engineering, they had different groups that were aimed at students like myself, international students or BIPOC students. There was a group called Equal Opportunity Engineering, and they had all these groups where - it was smaller groups. The engineering classes at UT Austin, especially the freshman classes, they can be huge, 200, 300 students. That itself can be very intimidating. But what Equal Opportunity Engineering does is it takes smaller groups in those, and they make sure you're in the same class. So you keep seeing a set of familiar faces, even though it's a big class. You see similar faces there. And that helped a lot. And we used to do homework together, and we used to have a class that was just with that small group, and we had assigned a mentor. And so I think that started to feel like a home base in such a big university. And I think slowly that helped me feel more at home.

Saamiya Seraj [00:10:16] I actually also met my husband, and I didn't know he was gonna be my husband, but I met him not in the first - we became friends in my second semester. And we used to play a lot of games together, like Uno, and we used to watch anime together. And so I think that also helped too. I grew up with watching anime with my sister, and that's something that has always inspired me a lot because they have amazing female protagonists doing things to change the world and fighting for climate justice and things like that. And so watching anime, playing games, slowly, slowly you start to see familiar faces again and again, and you start to make these pockets of friendship. And so I think that helped me to feel more at home.

Moureen Kaki [00:11:16] Is your family still in Bangladesh these days?

Saamiya Seraj [00:11:20] So my mom is still in Bangladesh. My sister moved here five years later to start her college. So she came five years later.

Moureen Kaki [00:11:32] Nice, nice. Okay, so you've got your sister, and is she in Texas, too?

Saamiya Seraj [00:11:36] Yes, she is in Texas. And she actually lives ten minutes away from me. Now America is home. But initially, it was difficult. The other thing that helped - and you'll laugh - is I really liked American milk. And somehow the taste, every time I felt bad, I would grab a carton of milk and cereal and eat it. And that was my comfort food. And people laugh. They would ask, what do you like about America? And I said, "I love its milk." And, they'd laugh, but yeah, it was just so creamy and comforting.

Moureen Kaki [00:12:21] That's funny. It's funny that you say that for a lot of reasons. But one is because I remember going to visit family in Brazil when I was young, and I wasn't a huge milk fan, but I drank the milk in Brazil with cereal or something, and I was like, "Dang, this stuff's good. Why is it better here?" It's not as, I guess, processed. This is also fourteen, fifteen years ago maybe. So I can relate to very much liking a specific country's milk, as odd as that sounds. That's funny though. Okay, so milk, that's good, and cereal, I feel like, is a common comfort food for college-age students, too. Maybe not specifically for the milk reason, but certainly a good comfort food, so that's fun. Thanks for sharing that. You ended up finishing your degree at UT Austin, and did you stick with civil engineering?

Saamiya Seraj [00:13:24] Yeah. So I stuck with civil engineering. When I was in undergrad, they actually had a couple of amazing opportunities where professors said, "If you were interested, you can become an undergraduate research assistant in our labs." And so I started the research track early, and I got into it. And so after undergrad, I actually

ended up doing both my masters and PhD. I stuck with civil engineering. Civil engineering is a big field. It has many disciplines inside it. So for my masters, I was more in the transportation side. I was on a project that was trying to analyze people's behavior and figure out, what are certain things that we can change in our built environment to make people switch to more sustainable modes of transportation? There was a lot of coding, and we were essentially trying to build a software that analyzed people's travel patterns. So that was really interesting.

Saamiya Seraj [00:14:37] For my PhD, I switched tracks a little bit. My projects were still being funded by the Department of Transportation, but essentially it was more on the materials side of things. And so I worked with concrete, and at that time there was a lot of policies in place that were changing the composition of fly ash that's used in Texas concrete. And so I was looking at ancient Roman concrete to figure out different things to put in concrete that could replace cement, because cement is actually - it produces a ton of greenhouse gas. So for one ton of concrete, you get one ton of greenhouse gas emission carbon dioxide. And so they are trying to replace cement in concrete with more sustainable materials. And so that's what I was looking at, things like pumice and clay and perlite, things that were locally available in Texas or in states near Texas, and seeing, can we put it in concrete and have the durability be the same as concrete with fly ash?

Moureen Kaki [00:15:57] Wow. That's really impressive and really cool work. That's exciting. And so what happened to that project? Did you continue? You got your PhD, so you're Dr. Saamiya Seraj, and you're now in the non-profit industry, right? Not working with concrete or cement.

Saamiya Seraj [00:16:20] Yeah well, I'm technically not in non-profit. I work with a lot of non-profits. So what happened was I had always been interested in going back to Bangladesh after getting my degree, because Bangladesh is prone to a lot of natural disasters. And from a very early age, I saw how engineering can really transform communities, proper engineering. And I had always been interested in transferring the technology that I saw here back at home. So after my PhD, I actually went back, and I went back and forth for a bit. I worked in Bangladesh for about five years, and I worked in the construction industry there. I was looking at safety on sites, on construction sites, and trying to evaluate, how can you better the materials that's used on the site? So I helped to set up some laboratory testing on site for their concrete.

Saamiya Seraj [00:17:34] So I was using a lot of the knowledge that I learned here, but making it more applicable to Bangladesh in terms of safety, in terms of better engineering. It's not major earthquakes, but we do get earthquakes. So I was also looking at, how do we make safer buildings? Looking at the fire code and things there. A lot of PhD is looking at the knowledge that you have currently and then figuring out, how do you apply it and how do you push the boundaries? And I think this is something that our teachers, our professors back in engineering school taught us, that what engineering teaches you is not just specific sense of problem. It gives you a toolbox to solve other problems. And so I think that's what I was doing in Bangladesh, because the challenges there are very different than what's encountered here.

Saamiya Seraj [00:18:48] And so for five years, I was just in the construction industry and seeing, how can we move forward as a construction industry, have better fire codes, have better earthquake codes, have better safety on sites, and things like that. But what happened while I was there, I started seeing how a lot of the problems that we encountered had nontechnical solutions. So I'll start with the safety aspect. The company

that I was working for had spent a lot of money trying to get their workers to have safer practices in the construction sites. They couldn't figure out why, even after investing so much money, why they weren't listening and why things weren't changing. And one of the things that I realized very early on was, it wasn't about the money or the equipment.

Saamiya Seraj [00:19:57] It was about the communication style and the way the engineers were talking to the field personnel. They were saying things like, "You have to wear a helmet, otherwise you'll get injured." Things like that. But that didn't necessarily tie into their motivation. A lot of the construction workers in Bangladesh, they faced a lot of dangerous situations. They lived in poverty. It sounds really heartbreaking to hear, but I don't think they valued their own safety as much as the company thought that they would. And that was not what was motivating them to work in the construction industry in the first place. So I tried a different approach. So when I talked to them, I said, "I understand that you are the sole breadwinner of your family. What will happen if you get injured? Who will work and how will you be sending back money to your family?".

Saamiya Seraj [00:21:09] And so when I started hitting at what motivates them to work, they started doing better safety practices. And within a year, when I first started implementing all these safety practices, a lot of the engineers worried, "This is not gonna work in Bangladesh. This is not America." There was a lot of like, "Oh, here's a hotshot engineer from America trying to tell us what to do." And I'm like, "No, people care about having good life. Everyone wants to have a good life, and everyone wants to thrive. You just have to find different ways of communicating that to them." And I just kept on seeing this in many different aspects.

Saamiya Seraj [00:21:56] So I was traveling back and forth between Bangladesh and America during this time, and I saw a lot of my peers also being very unhappy with their jobs. They get recruited to a very big company, but then their ideas are not being heard, or they felt like they didn't fit in. There was a lot of racial microaggressions, many different things like that. On the side, I started creating all these workshops for communication styles. How do you motivate your team? Confidence building for women of color, and things like that. Because I had attended a lot of leadership training programs myself, but I felt like they didn't tell the whole story, or sometimes they didn't cater to immigrants like myself or women of color or the BIPOC community in general or women. Time management looks very different for a White man versus a single BIPOC mother with two jobs struggling to make ends meet. So those are some of the things that I started putting in the workshops, more practical examples.

Saamiya Seraj [00:23:30] And then my father passed away in 2019, and things started shifting in Bangladesh too, the political scenario also changed a little bit. I started getting sick. I had to have a thyroid surgery, and I didn't get the quality of medical attention that was necessary for my sickness in Bangladesh. So my husband and I decided that even though I loved my job there, and I was very happy doing what I was doing, because of my health reasons and then things changing after my father's death, we wanted to move back to America. So I actually started wrapping up my projects. And it's funny how life plays out. I finished my last project, and I came back to America at the end of January 2020. And then in the middle of February, all the planes in Bangladesh started to be grounded because of COVID. And then by March, America was shut down, too. And then I was like, "Now what?".

Saamiya Seraj [00:24:42] And another friend of mine heard about all these workshops that I'd been doing on the side, and she was like, "Why are you doing these things for

free? People would actually pay good money to see them." And so then in the middle of the pandemic, we started our company called A Better Force. And at this point, my sister, she started off as a civil engineer, did her undergrad and masters in civil engineering, but then switched tracks and finished her PhD in psychology. So her work also tied into a lot of the things that I was doing with my workshops. So together we created our company, A Better Force. And so we do community workshops, we do individual sessions with people, we work with companies, but our focus is leadership trainings based on equity. We cater specifically to women, women of color, immigrants, BIPOC. I know that was a long answer too, but it was quite a journey. The transition was quite a long journey.

Moureen Kaki [00:26:00] No, no, it was perfect. It was great. And I appreciate you sharing all that with us. There are a couple of things I would like to follow up on in there about what you just said. So if we could backtrack just a little bit, I want to get A Better Force and more of the mission and the focus and what y'all do there today. But I want to back up a little bit, too. Would you mind sharing more? So you mentioned how you and your husband met in university, but would you mind chatting more about what it was like to move back with him and the circumstances of y'all's move? Because I know - yeah.

Saamiya Seraj [00:26:43] My husband and I, we met in freshman year, but we actually didn't get married until - so we met in 2005, but we didn't get married until 2011. And one of the biggest barriers was I'm Muslim, and my husband is Christian. And I grew up in Bangladesh. My husband is Taiwanese, but he was born and brought up in America. So it felt like we were from two different worlds, completely two different worlds. And our connecting bridge, I felt, was anime. We just shared our love of anime. And so we struggled a lot. We knew we liked each other, but we honestly didn't know how we could make it work because I had always known that I would want to go back to Bangladesh and work there for a for a while. And my husband, having lived in America all his life, I didn't know how he would adjust to Bangladesh, which is a developing country, a different language, a different culture.

[00:28:09] My husband, he doesn't seem that way, but he's a hopeless romantic and very optimistic. And he was always like, "We'll figure it out." We also got significant barriers and objections from our family because their objection was rooted in practicality. They were like, "You two are from different worlds. How will you make it work in a marriage?" We faced a lot of obstruction from our community as well, which is hard because when you first come to America, you, as a Brown Muslim young woman and an immigrant, you already feel out of place. And then you find pockets of community. But then if your choices in life make you marginalized in those communities as well, then that's hard because - and I know they all came from a good place. And I think interfaith and mixed-race marriages are more common now. But I think back when we got married, we drew attention very easily.

[00:29:33] To be honest, there was a lot of hardship, but I think I focused on our relationship and how good it made us feel. And one of the things that I loved about my husband was I could always be my authentic self with him. I could just be Saamiya and use my voice. And I thought to myself that a relationship that feels so good and honest and true to me, I don't think it can be wrong in the eyes of God. And that's the answer that I gave to people who didn't believe in our relationship. But over time, I think people also saw that we work together. And I had a couple of aunts who actually really supported me in my decision to marry my husband. They told my family, like, "You've trusted Saamiya all your life. She's always made good choices. She has made you all proud. So why would you not

respect her decision in one of the most important decisions of her life, who she's going to be with as her life partner?".

[00:30:58] So we got married in 2011 in Bangladesh. And my husband, he did a lot. He learned the language which, learning a different language is such a big bridge-building between two cultures. He knew that was my dream to go back and at least try to work in Bangladesh. We knew that the political situation was not as stable and things like that. But we decided we wanted to try. We were young. So, yeah, moving back, it was difficult, of course. But I think him knowing the language really helped. And I think it actually strengthened our marriage a lot because so many things when he went back home, he could really finally understand where I was coming from.

[00:31:55] And this is a funny - one of the things he would say early on in our marriage, when you are living in America, he would say, "Why do you keep putting everything in the fridge? Why does the bread go into the fridge?" And then he went back to Bangladesh, which is such a hot and humid climate, and he's like, "Oh, now I get it. You put everything in the fridge because in Bangladesh, if anything's out, it's gonna spoil." And so it's just all of these things started clicking. I used to say that the mangoes in Bangladesh just tasted so much better than the ones that we have here. And he would call me a food snob or a mango snob. But then when he went to Bangladesh, and he actually had the mangoes, he was like, "Okay, I see. I see where you're coming from." So just things like that.

Moureen Kaki [00:32:50] That's really beautiful. That's really, really beautiful. I appreciate you willing to share such a personal experience in your life. And I'm glad that you had that support from your aunts, too, because I know that in some cases, you don't have any. So that's nice. Thank you. Yeah, amazing. Just an amazing story. And so you mentioned that your health was the reason that y'all made the decision to move back to the US, and that's when you and your sister started your company A Better Force. How long has A Better Force been around?

Saamiya Seraj [00:33:30] We started in October of 2020 in the middle of the pandemic, and actually Zoom made things so much easier, because we could host the workshops virtually. We weren't limited to just Austin. So it was great. I think Zoom provided such a great infrastructure, and virtual meetings were more commonplace. And so we started in October of 2020, and unfortunately in 2022 I got diagnosed with cancer, and so I had to take a break. I got really, really sick. And so 2022, we did host a couple of workshops, but we were less active. But I'm out of treatment now, and then in 2023, again, now we are ramping it back up. So about three years.

Moureen Kaki [00:34:37] Cancer in the midst of a global pandemic. Cancer is hard enough. In the midst of a global pandemic, it's even harder. And then in the midst of moving back with a family and trying to start a company. That sounds like mission impossible to a lot of people. How'd you do it?

Saamiya Seraj [00:35:00] I'll sidetrack a little bit. I think the joy of making my company came from the desire to find my authentic voice in a world that tries to squash it down. And I see that in so many people, I feel like unless we can actually use our voice and just be ourselves, it's hard to thrive. It's hard to feel content and happy in life. When I first came to America, it was a few years after 9/11. And I remember a lot of my family telling me, "Don't reveal that you're Muslim. Don't make waves. Just keep your head down and do what's expected. Get a good education." And it took me years to realize how not saying that -

because being a Muslim is important to me, and not saying that openly in conversations, how much of my self-confidence or self-worth that eroded. It felt like I couldn't be myself.

[00:36:34] And slowly, slowly, as I started being in America, I was like, "Why not?" This is what this country was founded on, religious freedom. And then I started being more open about the fact that I'm Muslim. I started being more open about the fact that I was Brown, and my experiences as an immigrant, my experiences that I'm facing here. But at first I had to use language that was so frilly, and I had to put in so many bows and niceties in it because I was afraid of what the reactions would be. And then that places a different kind of burden. And so it was a transition to not speaking up, keeping my head down, and then slowly, slowly starting to use my voice. And the more that I was authentic in sharing my experiences, I felt empowered. I felt more happy. I was doing things.

[00:37:50] And so I remember there was this point when I saw a clip of Hasan Minhaj on TV, and he was talking about his experiences after 9/11. And he was talking about how there were glass shards. Students at his community or school, I don't remember which one, had put glass in his bag. And his dad was like, "It's okay. Let's take this out. It's okay. Don't react." And Hasan Minhaj was like, "Why wouldn't I react. This was harm that was done to me." And then he said language that just changed my life forever. He said, "This is the difference between a first-generation immigrant and a second-generation immigrant, is that we have the audacity to want to be equal. I want to be equal." Seeing him on stage and talking about all of these complex emotions that I had, that I felt bad for having. That, and I didn't have the words to.

[00:39:03] All of a sudden, things started to make sense, and it just felt very, very empowering. And I think from that day onwards I was like, "You know what? Yeah, life is hard. There are situations where I can't be completely my authentic self, but I'm going to try, and I want to help others feel the way that I'm feeling, empowered to tell their own story." My experience's, what I was telling you about my husband, even though it's frowned upon in Muslim circles, I married someone who's from a different faith than mine. And I felt like an outsider in my Bengali community. I felt like an outsider in my Muslim community. And I thought there must be other people like me. I wanted to help people feel empowered to make the choices in life that make them happy. I think that desire is what helped me tackle the impossible.

[00:40:21] And I had a lot of help, too, from my family and especially my sister, my mom. They were there through thick and thin. Losing my dad was hard. I realized how patriarchal society is after my dad died, because people changed. The way banks treated me changed back in Bangladesh. How my dad's business partners were treating, how society was treating me. And even during my dad's funeral, there were a couple of places where they were like, "Are you sure you want to be there? You're a girl." And I'm like, "That's my dad. We're just two sisters. This is all I have. Yeah, I'm sure I want to be there." We oversaw all the funeral arrangements and everything. I think all of those experiences really strengthened the resolve in me that I want to help others to feel that way, feel empowered to do what they want to do.

[00:41:45] And then the cancer was really hard, too, because you don't expect to get cancer in your thirties. And what happened was I got pregnant around the same time that I was opening my company, and that's when I had the cancer. I had my cancer in my third trimester. And I remember telling my doctors, "Hey, I think something is wrong," because the biggest symptom for me was itching, and apparently that's very common for lymphoma patients. I think thirty percent have itching. And I would go to my doctors, and they would

say like, "It's just itching. You're probably not giving enough lotion." And I'm like, "No, I am."

[00:42:28] And for fifteen months I went to six different doctors telling them, "Hey, it's not just the itching. I'm really fatigued. I know something's wrong. I don't feel the same." And there were like, "Of course you feel tired. You're a new mom. These are just postpartum hormones. These are postpartum eczema." They had all sorts of things. And for fifteen months, no one took me seriously. In the end, I had a dermatologist who was also a woman of color. She was the first person who took me seriously. And she said, "This is not a skin issue. Something is happening." And she ordered blood tests for me, which finally - looking at the blood -

[00:43:19] And there's so many things that can happen that can derail you getting the proper health care in America. I remember the blood test came back during Christmas time when everything shut down, and the blood results looked bad. And I Googled it, and I was like, "You know what? This is either an autoimmune disease or a cancer." And I booked an appointment with an oncologist and a rheumatologist, and that's how my cancer got detected. And so for fifteen months, my cancer was allowed to spread unchecked. And that's why I had to have a very aggressive chemotherapy, because by the time they caught it, my cancer had already spread everywhere and into my spleen.

[00:44:03] And I think part of that also strengthened the resolve because women of color are gaslit in the medical industry. Being able to advocate for yourself could be the difference between life and death. And that's why I want to give people the confidence to believe in themselves. Because I remember there was this time when the doctor gently suggested that maybe all of these things were happening because I was so stressed. And the implication was that it's all in my head. And I remember feeling so much shame and going into the car and just crying. And I'm so glad I had the support of my family who said like, "Hey, it's not in your head. Something is wrong. I want you to keep looking." That's how I ended up at the dermatologist, who was a woman of color, who was the first one who took me seriously.

[00:45:13] Being able to tell our stories, being able to advocate for ourselves could be the difference between life and death. And I just want people to be happy, thrive in their lives, and not feel shame for being who they are. That desire, that resolve helped me to go through all of that, all of cancer. And I had a two-year-old daughter, and I wanted to live for her. I wanted to make the world a better place for her. Honestly, there are times when I did not want to go to chemo, because chemo devastates you in ways. And I would just look at her smile and say, "No, I have to go through this because of her."

Moureen Kaki [00:46:02] Sorry, that just sounds really messed up. It is. It doesn't sound really messed up. It's just really messed up. Of all the trials and tribulations you would have to go through, you can't even get proper medical attention and care from people who are explicitly trained in these fields, but not trained to avoid biases or even try to think those through. And to have your health suffer as a consequence is just so unethical and counterintuitive to everything that medicine in this country claims to be, that it's infuriating and so heartbreaking to listen to your story. But I'm really grateful that you've shared it. And I mean, I gotta ask Saamiya, how do you maintain such a positive desire to keep pushing? You mentioned your daughter, too, but that's a story that would incite anger. It would incite anger, it would drive people to accusing doctors of negligence, to have cancer grow in you for fifteen months. How do you deal with it? How do you maintain your positivity and your desire to keep pushing forward?

Saamiya Seraj [00:47:24] I think the simple answer is I'm not always positive. There were moments of anger. There were moments of heartbreak. I remember there was this one night where I just couldn't stop crying because my husband mentioned something that my daughter did. And he was like, "Oh, she does this so often." And I had never seen her do it. And it was at that moment that I realized how much of her baby phase I had missed out on because I was so sick. And I just remember the tears just coming out, and I could not stop. I'm a big advocate of therapy. I definitely went to therapy and helped me to process all these emotions. And I think one of the things that really helped was learning that all of the emotions are valid, the anger, the sadness, the tears, not just the good things. And I think just accepting reality for what it is.

[00:48:47] The easy answer is I'm not always positive, and I struggled a lot, but I think in the end I have people who gave me a lot of love, and I think I want to return that. And I think when you're rooted in love, when you're rooted in hope, it just helps you to be on a more positive trajectory if the dips are there. And I think my faith helps a lot, too. There were times - today's the 27th day of Ramadan, which is such a special day for Muslims. Yesterday I prayed to God, and I said, "There are problems that are bigger than me that I don't know how to solve." But I think back to the roots of Islam, which is - the word means submission. And I think that one of my key beliefs in Islam is that bit of submission, where you have to realize that you're a part of something much bigger, that you're just a tiny human with so many imperfections. So I think putting that in perspective helps.

[00:50:15] But I think I also believe that Islam is all about using the gifts that you have to help others in the community. And I think I grew up with that, growing up in Bangladesh and seeing the community come together after floods, after natural disasters, I think that's something that was instilled in me from my childhood. So I think having that helps. And I think concentrating on the smaller joys of life. I remember there was this one day - so my chemo was every fourteen days, and I used to be sick, usually, for twelve days in between, so I had maybe two days of being up and out of bed. And I remember visiting a bubble tea place with my sister and the sun was shining, and it just seemed so beautiful, because I was just so sick. When you're so sick, and you can't even eat or go to the bathroom by yourself or just function normally, I think you start to notice all the smaller joys of life, like how much joy just the simple act of drinking something that you like can bring, the simple act of eating. And so I just remember being so happy to be alive.

[00:51:44] And so I think what the world - right now, the world seems like an impossible place with all the gun violence that's happening, all the racism and homophobia and transphobia. There are days when I feel a lot of despair, and then I think, "Okay, all right, what can you control? What can you concentrate on?" And so then I look towards my small circle of things that I can control. And then I just concentrate on the small joys of life, seeing the sunshine through trees, having bubble tea, hearing the laughter of a child. And so those are the things that I look to, to bring my joy.

Moureen Kaki [00:52:35] That really is very beautiful. Thank you, Saamiya. I got one last question for you here, because we're about to hit the hour mark, and I'm sure you've got a huge day ahead of you, but are there any mentors or folks that you would say that you learned from or looked up to that inspire your work?

Saamiya Seraj [00:53:02] There are many. There are so many who help you in your journey. My mom, she instilled a love of learning in me. I remember she was a biochemist, and so we would do all these chemistry experiments in the kitchen. She just made learning

so much fun, so I learned from her. My sister, who is always very hopeful and she always has a bad joke in her repertoire to make you laugh on the bad days. And she just has this life force that really wants to make the world better, and so her support. My husband, who really taught me what true love is, just accepting you for who you are. So many friends who have just loved me for who I am and believed in me. The list of support is endless. But I think the messages that I got were, "You are enough as you are. Your value is who you are, not what you do, because who you are, the doing will come naturally." And so these are all the messages from people who have loved and supported me. And it's just helped me shape who I am today.

Moureen Kaki [00:54:50] Well, you're an incredible person with an incredible story, and I don't say that just to make your hardships seem - I don't say that just because the hardships that you went through, but more about the way that you've chosen to power through and still embrace of positivity and the desire to improve and make things better for the people around you. I think that's really, really, really incredible and remarkably inspiring and just really wonderful. Saamiya, I'm so glad that we got to talk, and I'm so glad and thankful that you were willing to give us this interview and talk about this stuff that must be deeply personal and a lot to bring up, especially on a Tuesday morning. So I can't thank you enough for your time. I want to offer you any space to throw in any last words, if there was something that I brushed over that you wanted to expand on, anything like that.

Saamiya Seraj [00:55:58] Yeah. Thank you for saying that. For anyone who listens to this, what I really want to emphasize on is, use your voice. Everyone has a unique voice, and the world needs to hear your story, because your story can change others' lives, and it can help them to feel themselves more, give them the courage to be their authentic selves. And I think especially as women of color, we get so many messages in society that promote shame, that tell us that we are not enough. So I think if you can share your story and your love and just say, "Hey, it's okay to be who you are. You deserve to exist just as you are." I am who I am today because enough people told me that, to believe in myself. And so to everyone who is listening, I want you to know that you're enough. And I want you to share your story with people and just be yourself proudly.

Moureen Kaki [00:57:21] Beautiful words of advice from an equally beautiful person. Thank you so much, Saamiya. Yeah, thank you.

Saamiya Seraj [00:57:29] Yeah, thank you.