

Aarzu Punjani



January 30, 2023



1:30:14

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Business, Community, COVID-19, Culture, Culture shock, Diversity and inclusivity, Education, Family dynamics, First-generation Americans, Gujarati, Hindi, Immigrant parents, India, India - Hyderabad, Indian-Americans, Islam, Ismailis, Language, Muslims, Prejudice, Shias, The University of Texas at San Antonio, TX - El Paso, TX - San Antonio, WV - Charleston

SPEAKERS

Nasriya Witt, Aarzu Punjani



Nasriya Witt 00:03

Today is the 30th of January, 2023. My name is Nasriya Witt, and I'm an oral history fellow for the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. I'm in Oldenburg, Germany on a Zoom call with Aarzu. Aarzu, would you like to introduce yourself and tell me where you're joining from?



Aarzu Punjani 00:20

Yes. Hi, my name is Aarzu. I'm joining from El Paso, Texas, but I'm from San Antonio, Texas.



Nasriya Witt 00:29

Okay. Could you tell us a little bit about your childhood? Where were you born? What was your early childhood like?



Aarzu Punjani 00:37

Yes. So I was born in San Antonio, and I was there until I was about three-ish, and then I moved to Charleston, West Virginia with my family, just for my parents' career reasons, business reasons. We were there for, I want to say, maybe a year, more or less, in Charleston, then we moved to Atlanta, Georgia, also for business reasons. We were there for - I was so little. I want to say maybe about a year and a half if I'm getting my life timeline correct. And then after being there, we moved back to Charleston, West Virginia, and we were there for four years. So I was there from kindergarten to third grade consistently. And then, after I turned nine, we moved back to San Antonio, and I've been there since.



Nasriya Witt 01:44

And where were your parents born? Can you tell me a little bit about them? Why did they move

to the US? What was their business?

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Aarzu Punjani 01:52

Sure. So both my parents were born in Hyderabad, India. My dad came to the States, I want to say, in the very early 90s, and my mom followed, I want to say, just maybe about less than a year. They were apart, definitely, I think, for less than a year. So she followed with my brother and my sister, and just like a lot of their peers and people within my community, they just came here for the better life. They just thought that they have more success here. My dad tried a lot of different business ventures in India, and nothing ever really stuck. And he has a lot of siblings, and there was a lot of family drama over there with businesses, and so I think he took it as an out.

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Aarzu Punjani 02:48

So he came here, and whenever he came, he just worked for people who already set up their life here, people within the community that he knew, maybe distant relatives or so, and just worked. And then whenever my mom followed with my siblings, it was the same thing. She just worked along with him with whichever person that they were working for that they knew from the community, gas stations and jewelry stores, things like that. And they moved around for a bit as well before I was born. They moved here in the very early 90s, and I was born in '96. So they moved, I know, a good amount during their time here before I came along. I think they were only in San Antonio for maybe about a year before I was born. And yeah, so they pretty much just stuck with gas stations and jewelry stores, tried their hand at both. And then that's a lot of why we moved whenever I was little too, just because it's tough to, as an immigrant, someone who's trying to establish yourself in a new country, establish a business as well. So they struggled a lot with that for a while. It wasn't really steady until I was maybe about - [Break].

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Aarzu Punjani 04:36

So I'd say that their career or them establishing their businesses release became steady after the 2008 recession, and even that took some time to rebuild after that. That was a really tough time. I remember in general, my parents were always very busy as I was growing up, because when you have your own business, that requires a lot from you, a lot of time. And then especially if you feel like within your business, you don't have enough help, you don't have enough associates working and enough people that you can rely on, then that's even worse. So you have to be there the entire time that the business open. So I remember that being a very tough time. I didn't get to see them a lot. They're always stressed, always worried about the future, worried about how we'll survive, how we'll do, what next. But luckily, things stabilized a few years after the recession, and we've been very blessed since then.

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Nasriya Witt 05:54

Thank you for sharing. What was your parents' relationship like, or what is your parents' relationship, like, and what is your relationship with them like, and what shaped that?

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Aarzu Punjani 06:04

So my parents met in Hyderabad. They're both from the same religious community. So they met in our place of worship. We're Ismaili Muslims, and that's called Jamatkhana. So they met there. My dad was actually really good friends with one of my mom's elder brothers and garnered a crush on her and really liked her because she was involved within Jamatkhana. And they were actually within the same religious education center classes that we have within our Jamatkhana. That's what it's called, REC. And they had one of the same classes within that center, and they kind of became friends, kind of not, because my mom was always just very studious, just into her schoolwork, into her religious obligations, family obligations, and everything.

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Aarzu Punjani 07:11

And so she was social, but to a limit. But she was also a very big, I guess, smart mouth. And so she would be the first one to raise her hand in all the questions. She would be teacher's pet type of thing. And even though he says he was low key, annoyed by it, at the same time, he really liked her. So it was just one of those situations. I want to say they were probably in their early teens when they had that class together. And then over the time of a few years, he didn't stop liking her. And eventually, he started writing her letters, and professing his feelings for her. And she was not at all interested, but then she became interested, and then it just went from there.

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Aarzu Punjani 08:08

So during that time, when arranged marriages were still the norm, they didn't have one. They had a love marriage. So they definitely broke that in that time, which was very difficult to do. They went through a lot to be together. My dad's family was not a fan. Just certain things when it comes to status and class and common things back then in India. There were a lot of issues that they had to deal with to get married, but they did it, and they got married in 1986. And now they're still going strong. Every marriage has their issues. They've had their fair share, for sure, but yeah, they're still together.

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Nasriya Witt 09:04

And what is your relationship with them like? You can tell us what it was like when you were younger and how it's transformed as you've grown older. Are they liberal with you? Are they strict parents? How do they compare to other parents in your community, and how they treat their -

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Aarzu Punjani 09:27

My relationship with with them, I'd say, is good, especially with my mom. My mom is definitely one of my best friends, one of the most cherished humans in my life. Super, super important to me. She pretty much always is my number one. I would put anybody - I would put her above

anyone. My dad is very important to me. He's my dad, you know. Whatever issues come up, your parent is your parent. I love him, and I would do anything for him too. But definitely, they both were, I'd say, decently strict growing up, but they've become more and more chill, I guess you'd say, as the years went by, as me and my siblings pushed back more.

A Aarzu Punjani 10:24

Also you deal with that a lot as a child of immigrants. They are all for bringing you into this country and raising you here, but wanting to follow whatever they learned about home. But that's not that easy, when what we're surrounded by at school, and socially, and everything is so different. To experience one thing outside of the house and then experience a completely different thing within the house, it's just so difficult. So we definitely have pushed back a lot on them to ease up. And their level of strictness was, I wouldn't say, anything ever way too overbearing. They, I think, tried their best to be understanding and treat us not just as these people who are in charge of us, like those type of parents.

A Aarzu Punjani 11:26

They also, because me and my siblings have worked alongside my parents too, at their businesses, you break that barrier between parent and child where you become co-workers, and then when you become co-workers, you become friends. And then there's a lot of things that you're able to talk about, a lot of things that you become comfortable with - not necessarily comfortable sharing with them, but comfortable just being open with them about how you feel about maybe the way that you're being raised or certain expectations they have from you, certain traditions and customs that they want to enforce on you that you don't think is valid anymore. It becomes easier. So I've definitely had that privilege when it comes to the relationship with my parents just because I've worked with them before.

A Aarzu Punjani 12:25

And then you become - I wouldn't say on the same level, but there's a different type of understanding that comes with it, especially whenever they are comfortable with putting you in charge in that business too, which they've done with us, which is great. They didn't just treat us like employees, they treated us as someone who was properly helping them run the business, not just this person who was running around for you, doing errands for you, and slaving for you. It's a different dynamic, which I definitely appreciated from them too. So yeah, that made things a lot easier in terms of the way they raised us and how comfortable we are around them.

N Nasriya Witt 13:19

So what's your relationship with the country and culture of your heritage?

A Aarzu Punjani 13:27

I definitely love my country. I love India, love the culture. India within itself is so diverse. And

then there's so much within the country, within the culture actually, that's enjoyable, like the food, the music, the movies, languages, just there's so many things. There's so much to take in and enjoy. And then so a lot of it has definitely a very special place in my heart, I'd say. But just like any country, India has its issues. It has its corruption and the things that I might not necessarily agree with, with the way the country is run just commonalities amongst maybe the mentality of most people over there, I'd say. And a lot of that is changing. It's progressing. It's modernizing. But every country has a lot to work on. All people have a lot to work on.

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Nasriya Witt 14:44

And you mentioned that your parents community is the Ismaili Muslim community. Can you share some of what you know about Ismaili Muslims and how that has impacted how you were raised?

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Aarzu Punjani 15:02

I would say that the Ismaili sub-sect of Islam is definitely one that isn't as strict in comparison to others, just in terms of certain restrictions that there are in terms of covering your skin and covering your hair, and certain rules like that, I'd say. So it's definitely very different. There are things about the prayer that's different. There's things about the amount of times that you pray that's different. The place of worship is very different. I don't know what else to say about it.

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Nasriya Witt 16:03

What other traditions or customs do you have that's different from, say, mainstream Islam? So you could even mention, say for example, in mainstream Islam, there's five prayers that people are supposed to pray per day. What is it for Ismaili Muslims?

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Aarzu Punjani 16:25

You pray in the morning, and then you pray in the evening, and I think those are typically the main two that are expected. Otherwise, you can pray whenever you want to pray type of thing, at least that's my view. I'm not a particularly religious person, because I don't agree with being told when you should do something. I think it should just come from when you think it's necessary, when you want to, when you feel like you need it, when you're feeling grateful, etc, etc. So even though in like in Ismailis, it's definitely a lot less than mainstream Islam, there's still a lot that I don't agree with.

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Nasriya Witt 17:29

And how is the community abroad different from the community in India? Could you describe a little bit about what the Hyderabad Ismaili community is like, and also what the community in San Antonio is like, for example?

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Aarzu Punjani 17:46

I wouldn't say that they're too different. I don't know what differences I could point out.

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Nasriya Witt 18:05

I think we had a conversation a while ago. So just for some context, Aarzu and I are pretty good friends. And we had a conversation a couple years ago, where you mentioned what the living situations is like in Hyderabad for Ismaili Muslims. So there's the the Jamatkhana, which is the the place of worship, and their housing that's developed around that. I don't know if I remember that correctly.

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Aarzu Punjani 18:34

Yeah, yeah. So actually, within the place of worship, the Jamatkhana that we go to in Hyderabad, it's actually right where my family in India on my mom's side, it's right where they live. So they call it a colony, actually. So there's a gate, and whenever you come into that gate, there's basically this opened dirt, gravel ground. And around it, you can park your cars, kids play over there. And all around that, there's just bunch of buildings with apartments. And then in one, basically just I'd say if you want to call it the front, right in the front is the Jamatkhana. And then so basically, it's Jamatkhana, that big open ground, and then just all the apartment buildings surrounding it. So it takes a minute to walk to Jamatkhana. You can walk out of your apartment, go down the stairs or the elevator, walk right up to the front, and then in terms of where my mom's family lives, Jamatkhana is right there on the right, and you just have to pass two buildings to walk to it.

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Aarzu Punjani 20:00

So it's a really interesting situation. Very close knit. Everyone knows everyone. Everyone's very open there. Some people who have lived there have been there for so long. My maternal grandfather is still there, living in the same apartment since so long. And I want to say he's been there since before my mom left to come to the States. So that's more than I've been born, more than I've lived. That's such a long time. And similarly, there's so many people who have lived there just as long or maybe even longer. Yeah, I'd say it's really special. And definitely different from here. Here, the Jamatkhana, right now, is within an area where I would say majority of the Ismailis live. I don't live there. If I chose to go to Jamatkhana from my house in San Antonio, it'd probably take me a good hour to get there, maybe. But everyone else somehow ended up over there, so it probably takes them ten minutes, max.

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Nasriya Witt 21:33

Interesting. Thanks for sharing. Is there a language that's associated with your culture of origin, and can you speak it?

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Aarzu Punjani 21:43

Yes. So I grew up speaking Hindi. According my parents, it was my first language, and I do remember speaking it, being little. It was definitely, I'm sure, on an amateur level. And then I learned English. And then for a while, before starting school, it was a lot of Hinglish, mixing both of the languages whenever I spoke as a kid. And then yeah, starting school, English definitely becomes your primary when that's what you speak with your teachers, your friends, everyone at school.

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Aarzu Punjani 22:21

And Hindi got phased out in terms of everyday use, but I still speak it well, I'd say decently well or well enough. So I haven't lost the ability to [pronounce] things or anything like that. I am conversational in it enough to where I can speak to my grandparents in it and family in India, and then if I go to India, I can communicate. So I've definitely maintained maintain it enough, I guess you'd say. My parents still speak it at home for the most part, even though they both speak English very well, too. So yeah, just due to them continuing to speak it, due to movies and television, Desi music or Hindi music, I've been able to maintain the understanding and the familiarity. And then along with Hindi, my parents the Gujarati as well, and then so do my maternal grandparents, because they both were actually born in Gujarat. So I can understand it decently. I can't really speak it. Anytime I try to go and speak Gujarati, it just ends up in Hindi, because they're pretty similar, but I can understand it enough sometimes.

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Nasriya Witt 23:56

And as an American born Indian-American, you mentioned that you visited India several times. What is that experience like for you?

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Aarzu Punjani 24:12

It's always been so difficult for me to describe it just because there's a level of closeness that you feel whenever you go back to your so-called home country, even though it was never your home. There is a sense of belonging that you feel there, especially whenever you immerse into your family that lives there, that maybe you're not close to, because they live there and you're here, but you build that connection. And you know things about the country, you know things about the language, the culture, the movies, just everything. You know it, but you also don't know it, because when you experience it here versus experiencing it there, it's completely different. But you're able to build - bridge that gap whenever you go, so the experiences and just like living that, when you go, it's so overwhelming.

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Aarzu Punjani 25:35

And I've loved it every time I've gone. I've only been able to go twice, both times for, I want to say, a good month. And I didn't really travel when I went there. I didn't get to do touristy things, which I wish I could, but it's okay that I haven't yet, because the two times that I did go, I got to just spend it with family. I got to feel like I was actually living there, and I was a part of their everyday lives and stuff. I wasn't just this tourist bouncing around and taking in things but at the same time, not really. Because experiencing just the monuments and the shopping and the

restaurants and everything is so different from fully being involved in life there. So I definitely love it there. I don't know if I could live there ever, because it is so different from what I'm used to when it comes to living life here. But no, it was amazing.

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Nasriya Witt 26:51

Cool, interesting. And how has - Oh actually, you mentioned that you were born in San Antonio, Texas, but then your family moved away for a little bit, and then you came back to Texas. What are your first memories in Texas, and when did your family end up moving to Texas permanently?

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Aarzu Punjani 27:18

So my first memory is whenever we moved back, I guess that's right. I definitely remember just a little bit of a culture shock for me, because Charleston, West Virginia versus San Antonio, Texas are two very different places. Whenever I was in Charleston, it's definitely predominantly Caucasian over there. And then here in San Antonio, it's very diverse. So it was really different experiencing the diversity, but in a good way, because I finally wasn't the odd one out, which I felt a lot over there in Charleston. You don't realize it as much when you're a kid, because I was so little whenever we were there, kindergarten through third grade, that's very young to realize that you're not exactly fitting in. But I did realize that after moving here, moving into San Antonio, that I'm not the only one different anymore. And also there's an Indian community in San Antonio. There's an Ismaili community in San Antonio. I finally have that as well, what I did not have in Charleston.

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Nasriya Witt 29:05

And how has your community changed over time, in the time you've been in San Antonio? And also how has your involvement with the community changed over time?

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Aarzu Punjani 29:16

So my sense of community, I'd say, has been all over the place my whole life. For a while, in Charleston, I didn't really have a cultural community that I could stick on, and that was for many years. And then while there, you have to go out of your way to feel any sort of cultural connection. So whenever we first got a satellite dish, and we had finally access to Hindi movies and Hindi TV, and Hindi music channels and all of that, it changed my whole house dynamic. We no longer had to go and buy the DVDs from the Indian store and just only have that, because there was no internet, so we couldn't just be on YouTube all day or be on Netflix all day and get the taste through that. We had to go and buy the DVDs or find the pirated copy of things to watch it.

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Aarzu Punjani 30:33

But yeah, whenever we finally got a satellite dish, that was - my parents, I knew, were, of

course, very happy. And then it was cool for me and my siblings too, more Hindi movie nights and more Hindi music playing throughout the house all day whenever my parents were off from work, but otherwise, it was always my sister. She's a big Hindi music fan. So that was definitely cool. We felt closer, or I felt closer to the culture that way. Otherwise, there was an Indian Community Center in Charleston, which was nice. But it was difficult to be involved within that, just because by the time I think me, my sister tried to get involved, everyone already had their groups. And we might have fit in better with a group that was maybe both Indian and Ismaili, but that didn't exist. So even though we tried to be involved within that center, it didn't really work, which was a bummer.

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Aarzu Punjani 31:49

I went to a private school in Charleston for the four years that I was there, and I was only one of, I think, two or three Indian kids within the whole school. And then the other two, were not in my grade. So yeah, I didn't have any Indian friends over there at all. Yeah, so there was no Jamatkhana at all, we didn't have that. Yeah, so there were no - I don't think any Ismailis over there. After moving to San Antonio, we finally had that, had a Jamatkhana. And for a bit it was really nice to finally have that, finally have that sense of community, an accessible house of worship to go to. And then I finally had that exposure, which was really nice, too. So I could finally learn more about the religion. I could finally see what it was like to go regularly. Yeah, so that was nice.

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Aarzu Punjani 33:01

So that was a good community for a bit, and then I say for a bit, just because there was some sort of a disconnect. And I tried to overcome it by attending prayer regularly, by making friends within Jamatkhana, by going to the Religious Education Center regularly. We had a class every Saturday, I think, during the school year. So I would go to that, attend the events and everything. And then for a few years, I'd say it was there. But I think the few years that I was deprived of it showed. It never really went away. And I think I just couldn't create that level of maybe comfort for myself, or there were situations where I tried to belong, but I still didn't. I was too Indian and too Ismaili for my non-Indian and Ismaili friends, and then I was not Ismaili enough for my Ismaili friends. So that was a bummer because obviously it wasn't intentional. I was trying. But yeah, that existed. So after a while, I let it go and built a sense of community just elsewhere. It's changed a lot even then, which I think is common. Especially because sometimes you build a community just within what school you go to, what friend group you might be a part of, where you work. So it's always changing. And I've had that a lot throughout my life.

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Nasriya Witt 35:01

And then how would you describe your personal community then? Who do you spend most of your time with? What connected you to your friends throughout the different parts of your life?

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Aarzu Punjani 35:12

So right now, I'd say my sense of community is my friends. A lot of my friends, I met either

through university or high school. And then my boyfriend, which I also met through university, and then my family. I'd say that's my community right now is my loved ones, my most close people.

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Nasriya Witt 35:47

Would you like to share a little bit about your relationship with your boyfriend?

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Aarzu Punjani 35:52

Sure. My boyfriend and I met in university. We were involved in the same on-campus organization. And we've been together for five and a half years now. And yeah, we have a really great relationship. He's definitely, along with being my boyfriend, one of my best friends. Someone I'm very comfortable with, someone who's been there for me a lot. Yeah.

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Nasriya Witt 36:25

Okay, so let's backtrack a little bit. Can you describe a typical day for you growing up? What was it like for your family? You can describe some of your younger years, and also what it was like for you in high school, or just later on in San Antonio?

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Aarzu Punjani 36:46

Sure. So a typical day for me, I guess I'd say, first of all, talk about my childhood in Charleston, because anytime people ask me about my childhood, I consider myself having two different ones, because one was in Charleston, and one was in San Antonio. Both were very different from each other in a lot of ways, and then very similar in a lot of ways, too. But for me, they're separate. So in Charleston, a typical day for me was waking myself up for school. When I was, I think, seven or eight, my parents gifted me a Hello Kitty alarm clock. And they were like, "Here you go. Learn how to wake yourself up for school. Learn how to get yourself ready for school. When you're ready, and you need to be dropped off, let us know, and we'll drop you off." And that's just how it was.

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Aarzu Punjani 37:38

They were way too busy in their businesses, which I don't think is a bad thing. They had their businesses to provide for me and my siblings. I went to a great private school, which I loved a lot because they worked so hard and were able to send me there. It wasn't cheap. So yeah, they were like, "We really can't wake you up this early for school when we're working until super late managing the business. So here's your cute little alarm clock. See how you do. Wake yourself up. You know how to get yourself ready already." They raised me to be pretty self-sufficient from a very early age. Yeah, I would just get myself up, make my own breakfast, and then I'd be like, "Okay, I'm ready. Somebody drop me."

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Aarzu Punjani 38:37

So I'd wake up, and because it was a private school, and because I'm much younger than my siblings - my siblings and I have a nine and a half year age gap - so we never really woke up for school together, just because their school always started so much later than mine. So the house would be dead quiet, everyone's still asleep whenever I woke up and got myself ready for school. Whenever it was time for me to get dropped off was when they would be waking up getting ready for their own day. And then after a bit as well, my brother was old enough to drive me to school, so then he became part of the pool that I was like, "Okay, I'm ready. Somebody drop me." And then my parents would be like, "No, go ask him today. We're tired." Because he's that much older than me.

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Aarzu Punjani 39:26

So yeah, so my typical day would be getting myself ready for school, being dropped to school. So I'd see my parents just in that little bit in the morning, where I'd say, "Bye, I'm going to school," and then if one of them would drop me, then I'd have that few minutes with one of them in the car. And then they would go to work the whole day. And then I did have a nanny, in the time that I was in Charleston, one of the most important people to me in the world, definitely a grandma to me. I love my blood grandmothers, but she's my, I'd say, my real version of a grandma. She's amazing.

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Aarzu Punjani 40:20

So whenever we moved to Charleston, they knew that they were gonna struggle with taking care of me. They didn't want for my siblings to have to be the ones to watch me all the time and be the ones to raise me when they were still kids, teenagers and stuff. So they found my nanny and hired her. And she pretty much watched me full time whenever they were at work. So she would pick me up from school, and she would take me home, make sure I did my homework, make sure I took a shower, make sure I ate. She, throughout those years, definitely raised me. She's wonderful, and wise, and generous, and just one of the most amazing people ever.

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Aarzu Punjani 40:48

So yeah, I guess that would be my typical day. I'd see my parents just for a bit in the morning. If one of my parents got off work early, which usually it would be my mom. My dad would tell her, "You go home. I can close up if you want. You can go home and rest. You can go home and start dinner. You can go home and spend time with the kids. Do whatever you want." My mom would come home sometimes - I think my airpod just died. That's okay. So my mom will come home and spend time with me and my nanny.

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Aarzu Punjani 41:17

She wasn't just my nanny, she was a part of our family to the point where we went on vacations with her. After we moved to San Antonio, she came to visit us a couple times. We've gone to visit her multiple times in Charleston. I just went a few months ago actually to go see

her after not having seen her for a couple years just because of the pandemic and everything. So she's still a really big part of our lives. She's family, for sure. I credit her for raising me, for who I am, definitely as much as my parents, maybe even a little bit more sometimes, which is fine. But her and my mom actually have a lot of similarities, so they get along super well. They're besties, it's very cute.

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Aarzu Punjani 41:52

So yeah, so sometimes maybe if I stayed up late, I would see both my parents after they came home from work. If I went to sleep early, maybe I didn't see them really at all, except for in the morning. If my mom came home from work early, I'd see her that way. If my dad came home early, I'd see him that way. They only got a couple days off a year, just when the business was closed for holidays like Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas. Sundays were really nice because they would both get off work early on Sundays. Sunday evenings were a nice family time. We'd go out to eat or have dinner at home, watch a movie. Yeah, so that was pretty much my life in Charleston. My parents were always really busy, and I had my nanny.

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Nasriya Witt 43:54

And on that topic, how has Ms. Anna shaped your identity even now? And I especially want you to focus on how she has shaped your cultural identity, because she wasn't an Indian-American woman, right?

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Aarzu Punjani 44:12

No, no, she's Caucasian. She is one of the most non-judgmental, all-accepting, super respectful - I'd say even though she's so old, she's very woke, even in that time when I was so little. Loves all cultures and just never thinks that anything is below how she lives her life. So she would watch Indian movies with me, she would listen to the music to the point where she would go out to the Indian grocery store that we had in Charleston and buy Indian songs, cassettes, and play it in her car, because she just loved it. She loves the food. She even learned a little bit of Hindi. Not much, but a little bit. And yeah, even though she wasn't a part of all our culture, she helped me keep it, because she fell in love with it.

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Aarzu Punjani 45:33

And even though I didn't have a Jamatkhana over there in Charleston, I still learned the prayers, because she would sit me down with our - we had a cassette of our Du'a, which is our prayer. She would sit me down and be like, "Your mom wants you to learn this, you learn this. Here's the book, here's the cassette. This is your family's religion, this is your religion. This is something that you should learn." And I was, I think, seven or eight, when I learned it just with the cassette, just with the book, and she would just leave me there, check up on here and there, do things around the house. And yeah, so even though she wasn't a part of it, she helped me learn it. She helped me keep it, embrace it. And I even learned things about it along with her, which was really nice.

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Nasriya Witt 46:42

She sounds like an incredible person.

A

Aarzu Punjani 46:45

Yeah, she is.

N

Nasriya Witt 46:48

Could you also elaborate on what a typical day was like for you in San Antonio, say when you were in high school, for example.

A

Aarzu Punjani 46:57

Yeah. So, I guess I'll start with - I talked about my childhood and my typical day in Charleston. After moving to San Antonio, it was in some ways the same, in some ways very different, because I no longer had my nanny, because we moved, she stayed over there. That was really upsetting to me that I couldn't take her with me, and that we couldn't stay over there. Definitely one of the hardest things I ever had to go through in my life, just being apart from her after being so used to her every day. And she was my grandma, my caretaker, my friend, just so much for me. She's just so wonderful. So that was really hard. So not having her after moving to San Antonio was tough.

A

Aarzu Punjani 47:54

But again, it was tough just on a personal level, it wasn't tough on the fact that I didn't have anyone to take care of me. She taught me how to be self-sufficient. She didn't spoil me at all. Even though along with being my nanny, she was someone who helped my parents maintain our house just because they were always so busy. So during the time that she would make me do my homework or send me to go shower or something like that, she would do things around the house and everything, which is actually what she did prior to us meeting her. She worked just as a housekeeper for multiple families before we met her.

A

Aarzu Punjani 48:38

And then my parents met her and were like, "You're amazing. How about you stop working on being a housekeeper for all these houses and just work for us full time and take care of our daughter. And if you want to be somewhat of a housekeeper for us at the same time, you can. If not, it's fine. But just we trust you, and we need someone to watch her daughter full time, almost full time." So she did both. But along with her - whenever she would do certain things around the house like laundry, dishes, and stuff, she would make me help her, but in a good way. It was fun.

A

Aarzu Punjani 49:24

It was just me spending time with her while she did chores. And I had chores too, as any child should. So she would help me with those too, and through that I learned how to work a dishwasher, how to work a washing machine, how to do my laundry. 'Til this day, I'm the most annoying person when it comes to doing my laundry. I will not wash my towels with any of my clothes. I will separate my colors very specifically. I know what water temperature is better for my blacks. Very annoying when it comes to my laundry, but I get that from her. She taught me how to do things around the house for myself, and after coming to San Antonio, it very much came in handy because I ended up being home alone every day after school.

A

Aarzu Punjani 50:19

So whenever we moved here, moved to San Antonio, my parents were working on starting up their business. My brother was already a young adult by then, so he helped them. My sister, after she got off from school, she would go and help as well. So I would come home from school every day to an empty house and stay alone until somebody came home if they got off of work early, maybe even after they all left to work once the business was closed, which was then at nighttime, so then I would get home, make myself do my homework, feed myself do my chores. Yeah, just a lot of alone time, a lot of just having no choice but to be self-sufficient and be self-accountable and everything.

A

Aarzu Punjani 51:18

So that was my life for a couple years, I'd say, in San Antonio, after moving here, which was very different. I did have some family here though, which was nice. We didn't have any family in Charleston. We did have some family in San Antonio. So I did have that, which was nice. I finally had some cousins to be with every now and then whenever we could. And the Jamatkhana too, which was really nice for a bit to have, whenever I could go, if someone was able to take me, or if my aunt uncle were nice enough to come pick me up and take me along with them and my cousins. So yeah, that was really different for a while.

A

Aarzu Punjani 52:10

And it was hard, it was lonely. I look back on it, and I think I was so young, I was only ten, and I just had to be at home alone all day. I had my own set of keys. I knew how to work the alarm system. I knew what hiding spots to hide in if, God forbid, anyone ever broke into the house while I was home alone. But I mean, that's reality. I didn't have a choice. It was either my parents took me to work with them all the time from school, which they didn't want. They tried hard to find someone who is just as good as Miss Anna, but they couldn't. Unfortunately, we didn't find anyone.

A

Aarzu Punjani 52:59

So then yeah, I just had to be on my own for a bit. And I definitely think it got easier as the years went on. It was almost every day, some days if my sister didn't go to work, she would be

at home with me, which was nice. Some days, I wouldn't mind going to work with them, so I would just do that. And they struggled a lot to build up their business, because it started from scratch whenever we moved to San Antonio. So that took them a lot of years to build and stabilize it. So yeah. And then that lasted, I'd say, on and off from middle school to high school. And then finally in high school, I started to work. So then I went to work. You're muted.

N

Nasriya Witt 54:06

You mentioned that you started to work in high school. At what age was that, and how was that for you?

A

Aarzu Punjani 54:15

I think when I was about fourteen, I would go just sometimes during the holidays and things. And it wasn't even necessarily that my parents were like, "Okay, come to work to work." It was just, "Come to the store. Just be here." And then while there, I was just like, "Well, what do I do? Let me make some sales. Let me learn some stuff. Instead of just being here and doing nothing, finding random things to do. Let me maybe do something more productive." Because also, when going, it was so cool to see my parents and my siblings do their thing there, that I was like, "Oh, maybe I could do this."

A

Aarzu Punjani 55:04

And yeah, so I became a little salesperson, and did that on and off just during holidays and things from the age of fourteen to sixteen. And then sixteen, I worked fully during holidays, so Christmas break from school, it wouldn't really be a break for me. I would work. And then Christmas is such a busy time for retail, so it was not a break. It was crazy, Christmas craziness. Same thing with Thanksgiving breaks. Same thing with summers, during weekends, the days that I didn't have school during other busy seasons, Valentine's, Mother's Day, things like that. And then I became fully full time after graduating from high school. And then right after high school, I started college just after that summer, so then I was full time college, full time the store, juggling both.

N

Nasriya Witt 56:16

And where did you go to university? What did you study? And besides that, how did your responsibilities at the store evolve?

A

Aarzu Punjani 56:26

So I went to the University of Texas at San Antonio, where I earned my bachelor's in business management and a minor in marketing. My first two years of university, it was really just core classes and then being at the store. So I wasn't really involved on campus. I didn't really have much of a campus college life. Also, because I didn't live on campus, I just commuted because it was only fifteen minutes from my house.

A

Aarzu Punjani 57:02

So I really focused on the store a lot. I started managing employees. I started helping with the hiring process. I started helping with training. I started fully managing the store schedule, payroll, merchandise, inventory, marketing. When it's your own business - even though it's not mine, it's my parents', but it is our family's sole income, so in a way, it's mine too - it's so hard to not involve yourself in every single aspect. It's so hard to take a step back and only fulfill these duties or only fulfill this role. I started being involved in everything, almost everything. I'd say there are some things here and there that maybe I just don't know, like certain things about the accounts and things like that, that are more my mom's territory and stuff. But wherever she needs me to help her, I'll do it. I'm not like, "Oh no, that's not my job." It is. It's all my business. It's all our business completely. So then I would always think like, "Oh, this is my job. I should be involved. I should help her." So yeah, it changed a lot. It went from just being someone who was interested in making sales to full blown management.

N

Nasriya Witt 58:53

But alongside all of that, you were a typical college student. Were you involved on campus?

A

Aarzu Punjani 58:58

In my last three years, I was very involved. I started off just as having membership in a few different organizations to being on the executive board for a few. So the one where I met my boyfriend, I was the treasurer for that organization, a business student organization for just women in business. I went from being a member to being the vice president to being the president. I was very heavily involved in that organization. It took up a lot of my time, but because I had a passion for it. I loved it. It's definitely one of the highlights of my college experience. There was a few others things that I was involved in, within the business school. So yeah, it was a lot of on campus involvement plus classes plus the store. Plus, in my very last year at UTSA, I got an internship as well. So then I also had an internship, so I was full crazy, busy mode my last two, three years of college, to where I look back, and I'm like, "Why? Why did I do that to myself?" Because there was never a moment where I didn't have a thousand things to do, but I wanted to do all of that, and I survived.

N

Nasriya Witt 1:00:44

Wonderful. Aarzu, when did you graduate, and what have you been doing since then?

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:00:51

I graduated - oh my God, when did I graduate? 2019 in May. Yeah, so spring semester of 2019 was my last semester at UTSA. So the internship that I had in my last year at UTSA, I planned to be full time within that company. But there were some familial obligations that, due to - I needed to make some sacrifices, and it was that job, unfortunately. So I left that company after

graduation. I went fully full time at the family business. It was supposed to be just temporary, and then six months later or nine months later, however long, COVID. So in the pandemic, which was, as everyone knows, a really difficult time for family owned businesses, small businesses - difficult time for everybody, the whole world. It just rocked everything. So my temporary sacrifice turned into to something that's even going on now. I'm still at the family business.

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:02:27

But this is going to be - now that things have stabilized, in a sense I guess, with COVID - it's still there, but it's always gonna be there now. So it's time for me to utilize my degree in another way. It's nice that I'm utilizing my degree at the store, because I was a management major, and that's what I'm doing. But it wasn't what I thought for this long, unfortunately. It's okay. I did it for my loved ones. I did it for that familial obligation, which I don't regret. But now, I'm gonna move on from that and see what's next. So I'm just gonna explore for a bit, see what else I want to do. It's probably still gonna be somewhat in management, marketing, that type of thing, maybe even something within higher education, professional development, which is somewhat of what I did through the business student organization at UTSA. So I have a lot of things that I want to explore to see what I do next.

N

Nasriya Witt 1:03:48

And we're interviewing you during a unique time in your life. You took some time off the store. How long was that? Where are you? What did you do in that time?

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:04:02

So yeah, right now I am taking a break from the store. I have been in El Paso with my boyfriend and his family for I want to say three, three and a half weeks now, which is the longest I've ever been able to stay here just as a leisure type of thing. In terms of here, and in general, I have not taken a break like this in honestly ten years of my life. Because my summer breaks weren't just summer breaks after some time. It was work. Christmas break, work. Thanksgiving break, work. Weekends, work. It's been that for me for a very long time. So this is the first time that I woke up and did nothing, which was very different for me. I'm used to being busy. I'm used to having a lot of things to do all the time. I'm used to a lot of responsibilities. So it's been honestly really difficult for me.

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:05:25

I'm also so used to multitasking, and here some days I was like, "I don't even have one task. What do I do with myself?" So it was so hard. My first week and a half here, I caught myself always looking at - I have so many to do lists. I have a personal to do list, a professional to do list, a work to do list, a home to do list. I'm such a to do list type of person. I have so many notes, so many lists. And I caught myself looking at those and working on them, bugging my

employees and my family about stuff at work, and then they were like, "Girl, you're on vacation. What are you doing? Stop it." And I'm like, "But now I have time to do this. So what am I supposed to do?"

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:06:22

But I weaned off of that after them telling me multiple times to cut it out, and my boyfriend telling me multiple times that, "You're on vacation," and telling myself as well that after I leave from here, it's not going to feel like a vacation if I continue to do this, if I continue to look at the cameras and check up on them at work. If I look at my to do list, if I follow up on certain things, even though I'm not there. I did have a few things that I needed to work on during this break that were left incomplete after I left, but I was adding things onto that, because that's what I'm used to doing. I'm used to my responsibilities over there and my duties over there.

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:07:24

So it's really hard for me to just chill out because I haven't done that in a long time. But I finally did it, I'd say for about half my stay here, which is still good. So yeah, it's nice. And yeah, I'm gonna go back, actually tomorrow I go back to San Antonio. Yeah, resume my usual busy self, which will be interesting. I wonder if it'll be at all different, having had this time to chill, if it might make me take things easier. Because otherwise normally I'm full of stress and anxiety and so many things happening all the time and trying to finish so many things at once type of thing. So I wonder if it'll change something, and I think it might, which is good.

N

Nasriya Witt 1:08:35

Have you at all reflected on your identity outside of your family and the family business since you've been taking this time off? Have you identified some professional goals or considered who you are as an individual outside of your family?

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:08:52

I definitely have. This time has been therapeutic in that sense where I felt like because the pandemic was such a time where we didn't know what was the future, what was gonna happen. And I felt like I had been in that mode this entire time ever since after graduation when I left that job to be at the family business, and then COVID happened, and then I just stayed and stayed and stayed. I felt like I was in that mode the entire time, where I just kept putting off my own career goals. I kept putting off what I'm gonna do next. I felt like just everything around me was moving and changing, and I was still just doing the same thing.

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:09:55

And this was a big change, so then that allowed me to think about who I am apart from the way I am at the store. Who I am apart from what I got comfortable in these past couple years. Who I was in college, how many things I managed and how different they all were from each other,

whereas right now all I've been doing is just focusing on the store. I sacrificed a lot, and I haven't been able to explore other things, other jobs. I haven't been able to travel. There's so many things that have been on pause because of the fact that I stayed, which is okay, I mean I'm still young. I know I can make up for it fine. I'm not gonna get anything out of regretting my decision or anything like that, so I don't even try to think about that.

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:11:06

But yeah, yes, definitely had a lot of self-reflection. And I think it's built up my confidence back up a little bit. Because whenever you feel stuck, just spiral, where you're like, "This is all I know how to do now, and I'm never gonna learn anything else. I'm never gonna be able to do anything else. I waited too long." This and that type of intrusive thoughts and self-sabotage and everything. But this has been refreshing, definitely, and I know I needed it. And it feels nice to have this conversation right now, because all this time, you just think about it in your head, but you don't put it together in this way until you're forced to. So I'm actually really glad I did this now.

N

Nasriya Witt 1:12:12

I'm so glad this was a good experience. Now I'm actually gonna pivot and ask questions related to race and political identity. Have you experienced any unfair treatment, and what happened if you have, and why do you think it happened? You can take some time to think about it if you'd like.

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:12:43

I know I have a few situations that I can probably highlight. I haven't thought about them in so long.

N

Nasriya Witt 1:13:03

You can take as much time as you need. We can even pause if you need to.

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:13:09

Yeah, let's pause. [Break].

N

Nasriya Witt 1:13:18

If you've had a moment to think about the last question I asked, so yeah, have you experienced unfair treatment?

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:13:27

So I guess like many children of immigrants and immigrants in general, I have a couple that I remember. Unfortunately for all of us that, that is something that's common, but I have one that I can highlight. So in Charleston, as I mentioned, primarily Caucasian. And so in my school and the private school, definitely very primarily Caucasian. Like I said, I was one of two or three Indian kids, not a lot of African-American kids. I don't think they were many of Asian descent or Hispanic, I feel like all I remember is just it being Caucasian. And so I did have a teacher in the third grade, who I did feel like [targeted] me a lot.

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:14:43

I'm not gonna say I was fully blameless, but I wasn't the only one that should have been blamed in certain situations, but I was, which sucks as an eight-year-old to have a teacher you look up to, you see every day, who you appreciate. Especially because in that school with it being a private school, with it being so strict and stuff, respecting your teachers was a big thing. You could not get away with disrespecting them, which I liked. Teachers are amazing, they do deserve respect. They do so much. And so, I never felt like I was someone who disrespected my teacher. Yeah, I was eight. Kids goof off. You get sidetracked. You giggle in class. You have side conversations. It's normal.

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:15:52

But anytime that I was somewhat involved in those class shenanigans with some of my classmates and stuff, I would get in trouble, and not anybody else. I would get sent out in the hallway, not anyone else. And then during parent teacher conferences, she didn't have the best things to say about me, which sucked because I had great grades. I had amazing grades. I did well in school. So it was always just behavioral stuff. According to my parents, she did try to say certain things about my work ethic and things too, but they didn't make sense to my parents, because I didn't have any issues when it came to my classwork or anything. And my grades showed for it, my test scores showed for it. My entire time at that school, I did very well.

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:17:00

And yeah, so that definitely was upsetting that I felt like she always targeted me. I remember one very specific situation where I was sitting at a table with, I think, three or four other classmates. There were two boys, who were goofing off during while she was teaching us something. I think it was the time when it was social studies or we were learning about history or something. And I was following along in the textbook, and they were goofing off, and I told them to stop. And she just heard my voice at the end of it, even though she did hear them, but she heard mine in the end. So maybe she thought that I was the primary one goofing off or something. And she called me out, and I told her that I was just telling them essentially to shut up. And they even tried to say, like, "No, Aarzu wasn't doing anything. We were doing it."

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:18:09

But I don't know, maybe they didn't do it as clearly. They're kids, they're also gonna want to

not get in trouble and stuff. Or maybe she didn't even let them speak. I can't remember that. I just remember how upset I was that I tried to tell her that I wasn't doing anything. Those two boys, they weren't even my friends. I wasn't even friends with them. So I was like, "I'm not talking to them." And she told me to stop arguing with her, and she sent me out in the hallway, and I just cried. I was so upset, I was so sad because I wasn't used to getting in trouble. I didn't get in trouble like that. It was just in that year that I was always getting in trouble with her, and I don't know if she was just prejudiced or what, but that is what my dad claims, because he's had his fair share of those type of situations post-9/11, that type of thing. So during parent-teacher conferences, he did feel that that's what it was. I was young, I don't know. I'll give her the benefit of the doubt. She was a good teacher in general. But yeah, it was really upsetting that she always only saw me at fault.

N

Nasriya Witt 1:19:38

That's very interesting. And I can see that that's something that you still think about and has made an impact on how you view the world. Related to that, has your views of living in the US changed over the course of your life?

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:19:56

Yeah, yeah, it definitely has. I don't know if that has to do with the fact that you see things more for how they are as you grow older, or if it actually has gotten worse, which I think it has post-Trump, honestly, I'll just say it. Yeah, post-him, post-the digital age, post-people not being afraid to say those type of things because they found people who share the same views, so then they put it out there online. They show it on the streets. It's very prevalent, and it maybe always was, but we see it a lot more now because social media. It's there. It's always there just in our face, at our fingertips, all the time.

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:20:57

So yeah, in my opinion, I think it has gotten worse. I don't think people are - I don't feel the same type of acceptance as I used to. I also feel like even if someone back in the day didn't necessarily agree with the way you lived your life, they would just turn the other cheek. They wouldn't get so pressed about it to the point where they would want to have some sort of control over it because they disagreed with it. I think that's happening a lot more now, where they're like, "That's not the way we want people around us to live their life, and they just shouldn't even exist here at all. They shouldn't even be allowed." I didn't feel like that was as much of a thing back then. It was, but it wasn't. Yeah, it's just stuff needs to change for sure.

N

Nasriya Witt 1:22:05

And after this conversation, what do you consider your identity then? Are you American? Are you Indian? Are you Indian-American? What do you identify more with?

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:22:18

And then I said it in the beginning, but India within itself is so diverse too, that if you're from a different state, then someone that else that you know, it's not the same type of Indian at all. I have a best friend, two best friends who are from South India. They're from Kerala, and my family is from Hyderabad. And we have so many differences in just the way that we are, the language that we speak, how our families live over there. There's so much, so many differences. But of course, there are similarities too, and there are similarities in terms of how American we are. There are similarities in terms of how Indian we are. And there's those same type of differences too. And that's just what shapes everyone differently. But yeah, I would say Indian-American.

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:22:18

I definitely say Indian-American. It's definitely a mix of both. Everyone who is an immigrant who, like me, also might have been born here but has a strong connection to their home country because of their parents, because of their own will to be connected to it by enjoying certain parts of the culture, you're definitely gonna feel both. And then everyone has their mix. If I have a friend who's also Indian-American, we're going to be Indian-American in different ways, just because of our upbringing, what we choose to take with us, what we agree with.

N

Nasriya Witt 1:24:10

Wonderful. Great, thank you for sharing. I'm gonna end this interview with one last question. If there's a message that you want to shoot out into the future to whoever might come across this interview and listen to us, what would that be? What have you discovered so far in your life about community and identity? And how do you implement that into your life? And what do you recommend to people, or what is a value that you think is worth sharing or highlighting?

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:24:49

I think for me, definitely, I'm someone who has a lot of family values, especially when it comes to my mom for sure. I guess I would hope that that's something that's maintained within people. Yes, I totally agree with everyone living their own life, doing what's best for them, and for their life long-term and everything. But stuff in the moment matters to your family, and the moment matters too. Your loved ones in the moment matter. And they're the ones that you begin your life with, and they're the ones who gave you so much throughout your childhood, and everything. Of course, every family dynamic is different. So I can't speak for everyone's particular situation, of course.

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:24:51

But yeah, just in terms of me in my life, I've always been very appreciative of my mom and my parents and my family. And yes, I've had many family issues. There's been many fights. There's been many falling outs. So much, just like anyone. But in the end, it doesn't change what I experienced with them during my childhood. So yeah, that's how I always like to look at it, I

guess. My past with them is very important. I can't change that. Whatever happens, happens, but I'm always gonna keep the relationship alive and the relationship important to me, because of what I've gone through with them, and then when I only had them.

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:26:05

I've been in a place with my family where we didn't have any other family, any community, we just had each other, and that's always gonna stay with me. And then they're not just family, they're my coworkers. I've worked with them, I've done so much with them. Our dynamic is so different at home, and at the store, and mixed. And it's crazy, but it's different. And yeah, it's important to me, and I think everyone should find something about their family dynamic that they appreciate, and that keeps the importance alive for them to maintain that forever.

N

Nasriya Witt 1:28:15

And it's beautiful. Thank you for sharing. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we conclude this recording?

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:28:25

I guess just adding to the question that you asked, in what I hope maintains, within people, just to accept the way other people choose to live their life without trying to control it, just because you don't agree with it, whether that comes to religion, whether that comes to their sexual orientation, whether that comes to just them wanting to break social norms in terms of marriage, having kids, just anything. If it's not actually harming your life, then stay out of it. Just accept it and worry about yourself. You're really not going to lose sleep at night if someone is out there living their life differently. You're choosing to lose sleep at night about it because you want to control other people and have them live life the way you choose to, but that's not why we're here at all.

N

Nasriya Witt 1:29:49

Absolutely. All right. I think I'll go ahead and stop the recording if that's okay.

A

Aarzu Punjani 1:29:57

Mm-hm.

N

Nasriya Witt 1:29:58

Okay sounds good. Thank you so much for joining us today.



Aarzu Punjani 1:30:03

Thank you too.



Nasriya Witt 1:30:05

Awesome. All right, bye Aarzu. Thank you.



Aarzu Punjani 1:30:09

Bye-bye.