

# Meenal McNary

📅 April 28, 2021

🕒 32:28

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Immigrant parents, First-generation American, Indian American, Gujarati diaspora, Assimilation, Heritage, Multicultural, Medical professional, Activist, Racism, Racial equity, Local activism, Army, Veteran, Round Rock, Houston

## SPEAKERS

Meenal McNary, Aysha Moneer

A

Aysha Moneer 00:01

Great. Today is Wednesday, April 28. My name is Aysha, I am an oral historian with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. Today I'm interviewing Meenal. If you can start, just go ahead and introduce yourself and where you're taking this call from today.

M

Meenal McNary 00:24

Hey everybody, my name is Dr. Meenal McNary, I go by she/her/hers pronouns. I am at my house today, Round Rock, Texas, and it's a beautiful day outside.

A

Aysha Moneer 00:37

Great, to start, tell me a bit about your personal background and your upbringing, and any formative experiences during that time.

M

Meenal McNary 00:51

Yes, so I am Gujarati, Kutchi, first-generation American, my parents are from East Africa, Tanzania and Kenya. They immigrated from India in the 15th century, my great, great grandfather, and set up ports on East Africa. And eventually they were pushed out of East

Africa to come to America in the late 60s. I was born in Houston in 1980, so I'm an 80s baby. I think the most formative experience growing up as an Indian in America, especially being a first-generation American, was how much we were forced to assimilate, how much we were basically made to be like the typical American. In doing that, I wasn't really exposed to a lot of our language, a lot of our culture, a lot of our faith, we lost some things in trying to belong to the community that we were uprooted from and had to come to. I think that was very formative in my childhood years. Now as an adult, I'm able to embrace those things a little bit more freely, and really be proud of that heritage.

A

Aysha Moneer 02:08

Definitely. When you say it was difficult to preserve your culture or language - you said you are Gujarati - are there different cultural or community variances with the Gujarati diaspora, and in Eastern Africa, and specifically, where your parents resettled?

M

Meenal McNary 02:33

Oh, for sure. Indians from East Africa and Indians from India are vastly different. Then my mother is from Kutch, her family's from Kutch, so again, different languages. Kutchi is not a written language, it's just a spoken language. Just within the Gujarati diaspora, as you say, we have so many different ways to celebrate, to practice our faith, even the dialects, the way we say certain things are different. When my parents came to Houston to settle, they had a group of East African Indians that they hang out with, and then they have their Indians from India they hang out with. It's interesting to see those two groups interact, and how my parents go back and forth between those two groups. My parents speak Swahili as well, so it's cool to see those East African Indians speaking just Swahili to each other.

A

Aysha Moneer 03:33

When you were growing up, what were some elements of that culture that you saw? Did you find community with other kids growing up that were your age? From both your parents' friends groups? Did you feel kind of caught in between both of those identities? What was that experience as a young person?

M

Meenal McNary 03:59

That's an interesting point. I grew up in Alief, and there was a pretty big East African Indian community in Alief, and all my cousins were there. When Diwali came around, when

Holi came around, when Garba came around, I distinctly remember celebrating those events. But then I also remember, let's say I had henna on my hand, and I would go to school the next day, I distinctly remember being made fun of for that, participating fully in my culture. It was such a weird juxtaposition for me as a young child to process that. Why is it okay here but not okay here?

A

Aysha Moneer 04:39

When you were growing up in Houston during that time, obviously the landscape has changed a lot now, what was it like then? Looking back on it, how the landscape has become more diversified. So how was it like then, and seeing the diversity in Texas now?

M

Meenal McNary 05:05

It's nice to see how far we've come. That being said, we have a long way to go. But it's nice to see communities where Garba or Diwali is not just for that small community. Diwali was celebrated in the community newsletter where my parents live now in Sugar Land recently. Holi was majorly advertised. Even here in Round Rock, I have a dance group that does performances for Diwali. It was advertised to the whole community, and it was so awesome to see the turnout, where I can remember when I was a young girl, eight, nine, ten years old and doing performances for Diwali, that I would have to keep it quiet, because I didn't want anybody else to ask me too many questions, or make fun of me for celebrating something that was weird for them.

A

Aysha Moneer 06:01

Do you remember any specific event or just a general time in your life where you felt yourself coming into your identity more, still being in an America that you might not see your community as much represented in?

M

Meenal McNary 06:25

That's a really good question. I think to keep it personal, local, and immediate, it was when I had my first child. I'm looking at this baby, and I'm thinking, "Gosh, I want him to fully embrace his Indian culture." He's got so many different types of identities from his background, being Black and Indian, Jamaican, Native American, Creole, French, he's got so many different cultural backgrounds, but me raising him in America, I want him to know and be proud of his Indian heritage, I want him to know and be proud that he's Black. These kinds of things that I don't feel like I was able to do. But I feel like now he is

fully able to embrace that and be visible with it.

**A** Aysha Moneer 07:14

Do you only have one child, and how old are they?

**M** Meenal McNary 07:19

I have three, I have an eleven year old, a nine year old, and a four year old.

**A** Aysha Moneer 07:25

Okay, so busy house. How has that experience been raising very multicultural children in Texas and in Round Rock?

**M** Meenal McNary 07:41

I love multi-generational houses. I feel the importance of having the elders in the home is priceless. So my mother-in-law, my mom, my dad, they constantly tell them stories of their youth. My mom and dad will speak to them in Gujarati and Kutchi or Hindi or even Swahili. My mother-in-law teaches them about what it was like for her going through segregation. They've got such a wealth of information from these elders. I feel blessed to have that opportunity for them, whereas I don't feel that I had that same opportunity, because we were just, "Assimilate. Just be like everybody else. Don't worry about anything else. You don't need to learn anything, just learn how to be American."

**A** Aysha Moneer 08:32

Right, and as you were growing up, were conversations about identity happening with peers? Or did that come later? How was that reflection in real time, while you were growing up, or into adolescence, or whatever age.

**M** Meenal McNary 09:01

We didn't really talk about a lot of stuff like that growing up, it was mostly, "You need to get straight A's, you need to get hundreds, you need to become a doctor." That was pretty much it. Homework, homework, homework. Don't worry about anything else, how you feel doesn't matter. As bad as that sounds, that's just what they knew, they

wanted so badly for us to be successful so that we wouldn't face anything that they might have faced or did face. When I came into adulthood, that was where more of the reflection happened. It wasn't until then. Really, I didn't have my first child until my late thirties. It was really at that point that I was able to self-reflect.

A

Aysha Moneer 09:44

When you decided to go into healthcare, where did that decision come from, if you could speak a bit to that?

M

Meenal McNary 09:56

Sure. South Asians, Asian people in general, have a very positive stereotype: we work hard, we're smart. Sometimes that can kind of bite us in the butt. But for the most part, my personal family members, my cousins, all of them are medical doctors or dentists. I really didn't feel like I had a choice. That's where I kind of pursued it is because I just thought, "Okay, this is what I have to do. This is not what I want to do. This is what I have to do." Thank goodness I'm good at it, and I actually enjoy it. Otherwise, I'd be in a whole lot of mess right now. But definitely, I don't feel like our parents were exposed enough to what opportunities were available to us. To no fault of theirs, they just wanted to do what they thought was best for us. I think it's a game changer now that when I talk to my children, "Hey, you can find something you like and still be successful. Because success does not equate to money. Success is not just financial, success is emotional also, it's mental." There's so many things when we talk about success.

A

Aysha Moneer 11:10

How was that experience of wanting to start another area of work with your involvement in the school district? Not to tie those two thoughts together myself, but how does that relate to what you were mentioning right now about that emotional and mental fulfillment? Was that part of it, that kind of involvement? How was that in maintaining the full time job, as well as this new involvement?

M

Meenal McNary 11:42

I will say that what sparked my involvement with racial equity work in the district was fear. Fear of the safety of my children. It's a very real fear. I've had these conversations with all three of my children, we talk about race often, we talk about racism often, we talk about a lot of things often because we have to. We don't have a choice.

Balancing a job and a family and equity work is difficult. But at this point, I don't feel like I have a choice. I have to do it.

A

Aysha Moneer 12:20

Right, and when did that work start?

M

Meenal McNary 12:26

I left the military in 2015 and moved to Round Rock ISD in Round Rock, and really, when Tamir Rice was murdered, is when I started looking into what Round Rock ISD and what groups were doing in the area. Then when George Floyd was murdered last year, I was able to link up with several groups who were very public-facing and active, Undoing Racism Round Rock and Round Rock Black Parents Association. The people that are in those groups have been doing that work for years. They are amazing, phenomenal people, and I'm very humbled to be in their presence.

A

Aysha Moneer 13:13

What does some of that work look like?

M

Meenal McNary 13:17

Sure, so there's a lot of involvement in local governance, school board happenings. In Round Rock ISD, we focused on local elections, which are hugely important. We focus on the legislative aspects, such as recently, we've put a lot of effort into HB 392, which is the CROWN Act, which prevents discrimination based on protective styles of hair more specifically for the Black community. There should be no reason why your hairstyle prevents you from learning. We focus on a lot of that kind of stuff, which is really important work, and it's exhausting work. But it's necessary because the status quo was not working for our children.

A

Aysha Moneer 14:11

When you're working alongside these other parents and community members, what is that experience like? The work that you're trying to do internally, and the I'm assuming a lot of the red tape that you probably have to deal with from the district, how is that as a parent and also a concerned community member?

M

Meenal McNary 14:35

I can sum it up in one word: frustrating. It is beyond frustrating to put energy and time and effort into making sure that Black and Brown children are safe, and the district will still make the decision to go the other way. Even given this solid data, the district will still make a decision to continue to harm those children. It's very frustrating. What I find empowering, though, is to connect with the Asian American and Pacific Islander [AAPI] communities, our Muslim community, our Black community, our Mexican, Latinx community, and bringing all of those groups together. Because we do have one cause, it's to protect our children and have a safe environment for our children.

A

Aysha Moneer 15:28

I really like the direction you went with that in terms of the empowerment that community members feel when connecting with each other. How is that community in terms of within Round Rock? Are groups more homogeneous with the communities that they're identifying with? Or are you now in more interfaith spaces, or multicultural spaces? How is that like?

M

Meenal McNary 16:01

I think the recent events, with the AAPI stuff that has gone on in Round Rock ISD has prompted the Asian and Pacific Islander community to now move more towards working with the Black community and working with all people of color so that we can target this racism and xenophobia, because racism is racism, it doesn't matter if it happens against an Asian person or a Black person. It's racism still, because the people that are put in power still have the power to enact those policies that will not allow us to have equity. That's a problem. Historically, those groups have not really spoken with each other, but what I find powerful about being in a multiracial household is that I have the South Asian perspective, and my husband has the Black community perspective, and we can bring those two together. That's a really beautiful thing.

A

Aysha Moneer 17:06

As you are raising your children that are multiracial, what are your efforts like in conveying that understanding to them, and what is their understanding of identity?

M

Meenal McNary 17:31

I'm going to go back to the power of the elders, and the amazing, priceless knowledge that they drop on these kids, and how they talk to them about who they are, who they are

in this world, what space they can take up, and how amazing they can be. When I see my parents and my mother-in-law talk to my kids, and talk to them in real time about real things that are happening currently, it's just an amazing thing. Because our parents have lived through things that I haven't lived through. I'm kind of the in-between. I grew up American. That's what I know. But my parents have had both sides of that coin. So I always go back to the elders. I'm so grateful for them and the value that they bring to my kids' lives.

A

Aysha Moneer 18:23

To go back a bit, because I realized that we went over this. To move back a bit in time, you said after undergrad, you join the military, and then afterwards went to grad school. Correct? Or was it during?

M

Meenal McNary 18:43

I went to undergrad, then I didn't have the money to go to grad school, so I joined the military. I did grad school first and then I had to put in the time because they paid for it.

A

Aysha Moneer 18:53

Okay, so talk a bit about what that time period was like, and what you were doing, what your work looked like.

M

Meenal McNary 19:06

It was an interesting time period. I love my parents, but the number one reason for me joining the military was not to have them choose who I would marry. Again, growing up American, when I came of age, I was shocked when they told me that my picture was circulating around the Indian community. I said, "I don't think you guys understand that you're not going to have a part in this." I ran into an army recruiter, and they said, yeah, they'll pay for dental school. And recently, before the army recruiter, my dad had said, "Well, we're gonna help you pay for school, so you need to listen to us." I said, "Whoa, I need to find a way around it." So the army was the way around it. I signed up that day when I ran into the recruiter, and my parents cried for weeks, and it was a really horrific time for everybody. But we still went through with it.



M

Meenal McNary 19:59

I finished dental school, and then I joined the military. I've been stationed all over the world. I've been in Egypt for a year, I did do a tour in Iraq, and I have very conflicted feelings about war, especially being a war veteran. I don't believe we're doing any good, but that's a conversation for another day. I was stationed in Hawaii, I was stationed in Georgia, and then I finished my time at Fort Hood, Texas. In the military, that job is 24/7. I didn't have time for anything. I was also a single parent with two boys. So I would drop them off at daycare, I would do my job all day, I would come back, try not to get charged the extra amount for leaving them past six o'clock at daycare, come home, feed them, play with them, put them to bed and I was done. It was like Groundhog Day, every day was the same thing. I was very excited that my time came to a close in 2015, because to be a civilian after being in the military for ten years is a really good feeling.

A

Aysha Moneer 21:08

What was your role in the military?

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Meenal McNary 21:12

I was in the Dental Corps, I was a dentist in the military. When I finished dental school, I got commissioned as a Captain, and I was a general dentist. Then I went to my specialty training in endodontics, which is root canal training. Once I finished my specialty training, I was the head of my endodontics department at Fort Hood. I was a professor with the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences in endodontics. I was teaching grown dentists how to do root canals properly on our soldiers.

A

Aysha Moneer 21:48

Okay, and how was that like?

M

Meenal McNary 21:52

It was interesting. It was interesting because as a woman and as a South Asian woman, I wasn't the one people were expecting to be in charge. I often got the, "Where's the dentist? Is the dentist coming soon?" "No, I am the dentist. I'm the one in charge." It was sometimes an uphill struggle to teach people who outranked me, who were mostly White males, that when you're in my department, I'm the boss. That was my constant struggle in the military. Being a woman of color in my rank, I was not in the majority for sure.

A

Aysha Moneer 22:37

You said you were stationed all over the world. Were you doing trainings for dentists where you were stationed as well? Or was it mostly doing dental work in the areas that you were stationed?

M

Meenal McNary 22:54

Egypt was an interesting place. I was the sole dentist for, I think it was about a 4,000 person camp. It was all different kinds of countries, there was France, New Zealand, Australia, Ecuador, Colombia, Canada, and our US contingent. That was a really cool year because I was able to work with a dentist from Colombia and a dentist from Fiji and teach them what I know. They taught me what they know. That was a really cool perspective on how to approach dental treatment. For the most part, as an army dentist, I was just knee deep in people's teeth doing dental work, even in a war zone. In a war zone, specifically, the dental officer serves as a triage officer. If there's any kind of mass casualty that happens, we are the ones that call what category any people that get hurt go into, whether they go to the hospital, whether they can stay on the side, or whether they will not survive. That was a very different experience as a dentist, being involved in something like that. But even in war zone, I got to treat a lot of the locals, a lot of kids, which was a really cool thing.

A

Aysha Moneer 24:20

What was one of your favorite memories of where you were stationed?

M

Meenal McNary 24:29

That's a great question. I was stationed in Hawaii for three years, and my favorite part of Hawaii was going to Ko Olina, which was a beautiful climb up to the top of the mountain and you get to overlook Hanauma Bay. I mean, it's just gorgeous. So I would take my son, my oldest was born in Hawaii. I would take him up there with me and we would just sit and enjoy the view.

A

Aysha Moneer 24:54

Oh, wow. That sounds really nice. Did you have time to do things like that for yourself when you were stationed in places, or was it very busy, like you were saying?

M

Meenal McNary 25:07

It really depended on what the mission was at the time. If we didn't have a lot of troops that were coming out, going in, then I was kind of free on the weekends to do what I could with my kids. I did spend a lot of time exploring a Oahu with my oldest son, which was really cool.

A

Aysha Moneer 25:25

Yeah, that sounds like the dream. So you leave the military, you said you were in the military for ten years, and what came after that? Is that when you moved to Round Rock, are you now working in clinics? What was that transition?

M

Meenal McNary 25:48

I met my husband when I was stationed at Fort Hood, my current husband, and he is a teacher. He was looking for a job, and one of the Round Rock high school principals came up to him in Killeen when they were having a job fair and said, "Hey, we have an opening in the SPED [special education] department here in Round Rock, you want to work here?" And he came to me that day and said, "Hey, you want to go live in Round Rock?" And I said, "Sure, let's go. Let's do it." That was the decision to move here. We moved here in 2015, and I work with a group called Martin Nelson Endodontic Group, we have five doctors, five locations, and it's a really good group of people. Three of us out of the five are former army, and we've known each other for a decade. It's amazing that we all found each other and came back together. Just really good people. They mean well, and I'm grateful to work with people who put the patient above the profit.

A

Aysha Moneer 26:54

Yeah, I think that's definitely really important. I was going to ask next - of course, race and identity always walks into the room with you. As a patient that can be hard sometimes to advocate for yourself when you don't even know what the doctor knows. I'm assuming it's a little less training in dental school, but was that something you had find out for yourself in connecting with your patients? What do you try to do to make sure that that advocacy is there?

M

Meenal McNary 27:30

So for me, specifically, in dental - because a lot of people are scared of dentists, they don't like to go, they don't know what's going on, you feel very vulnerable with your mouth

open. There's a lot of scary pieces to dentistry. I believe in the power of a consult appointment. During a consultation appointment, all I'm doing is spending thirty minutes of my time uninterrupted, getting to know who you are, what your fears are, what your concerns are. Then talking to you in depth, I like to talk, so we're talking in depth about why this is important, why this procedure is important and what it entails. Because if you meet me, and I have to hurry up and get patients out the door to make a profit, I'm going to say, "Hi Aysha. Alright, let's get you numb, let's do this root canal. Okay, you're done, bye." That's not okay for me. I feel really good at this point in my life that I'm able to take my time because I couldn't in the military. Now I feel like I'm able to take my time with people and really know and understand what they want, who they are, what they're scared of, and hopefully to alleviate some of those things. I want to change the narrative of what it means going to a dentist, especially a root canal doctor.

A

Aysha Moneer 28:49

Right, definitely, not root canals, I recently had my wisdom teeth and the surgeon was in the room for about five minutes as the entire conversation. How have you seen the difference in being sped up, maybe being forced to speed up, maybe by paperwork or something in the military, and now you're able to take your time? Do you see a difference in that relationship with patients?

M

Meenal McNary 29:21

For sure. People visibly breathe a sigh of relief. They fully relax, you see the shoulders relaxed, you see the head relax. That, "Hey, I'm not just gonna come here. I'm not just going to take your money. I'm not just going to give you a shot and take care of this tooth. I want to know who you are. My job is important, and I'd like to save your tooth, but I'd also like to be somebody who you feel comfortable around."

A

Aysha Moneer 29:48

You're a dentist, you're a woman of color, you come from many different backgrounds. How would you say that you identify as a Texan? What does being a Texan mean to you?

M

Meenal McNary 30:04

A Texan means being a first-generation American. A Texan means being a daughter of immigrants. A Texan means being a proud Indian woman. A Texan means being a war veteran. A Texan means having served my country. A Texan means serving my community

as a dentist.

A Aysha Moneer 30:26

Great. Go ahead.

M Meenal McNary 30:30

I could go on for hours Aysha, we probably should -

A Aysha Moneer 30:34

Lastly, I just kind of want to open the space to let you either go back to any point that you thought we glossed over, or just take a minute to say whatever you'd like to also include in this interview. Yeah, we just try to have an open space at the end for what you might want to say or end on. If you want a minute to think about, then definitely take that time.

M Meenal McNary 31:05

I love that you end this way. What's important to me is how my children are perceived and how people are going to treat my children as they grow. Their safety is important to me. So I have an ask. I want to ask the Asian and Pacific Islander community, the Hindu community, the Muslim community, the Buddhist community. I want to ask that when we talk about anti-Asian hate, when we talk about xenophobia, you also consider the anti-Blackness that has been prevalent for centuries in this country, and that we center that as well. That we take action against that as well. And not just in posting on social media, not just in thoughts and prayers, action. Join your local community group and speak up to the anti-Blackness, speak out about what's going on in our school districts, among our teachers, in the police department, in all the spaces that you occupy, raise your voice because that should not only come from our Black community, it should come from us as well.

A Aysha Moneer 32:23

That was beautiful. Thank you so much. I will go ahead and stop our recording.