

BB So it's rolling now, um, this is May 9th 2007 and this time Brian Brim, and I will be interviewing Modesta Putla for the Star City Treasures oral history project. Uh, first question; you were born in India and then you also grew up in India, would you describe a little bit about um your childhood?
MP Oh thank you Brian, um, I think um I born in a small town in India. Um, its not a big city so many things I still feel that I'm a small town girl but the thing is I think always I try to do things well extra very well and doing extra curricular activities sports games um we also have this national national _____ corps. This is kind of a kind of a paramilitary thing for the young students and college going so I was under officer there and that is the highest career they can give um so that part is written in the program so that actually I feel so benefited. Make me to be very disciplined um kind of organized things and then plan well in advance and all so some why in the minimum resources. Um uh opportunities uh when we don't have much opportunities, are many opportunities, then how to survive things like that. So I kind of now, ex-, now very um well I did because I am in a family of uh four uh um with my parents, so kind of a second child. Like, my parents encouraged me so much to do what I want to do study well go out and kind do things travel around uh and I'm so fortunate for my parents encouraging me to do those things and uh I felt that I did so many great things as a in as a child and as a student as a young person from a small town. As you know today we were reading the, women, women's situation in India is not that, um, good actually to really for them outgoing person, but my parents encouraged me and I was all the time trying to do things which usually the girls or women don't do; like I was the first person uh at a national level to do the parachute jumps because till that time only men were allowed to do that. So, when they were introducing the women I volunteered and I was selected from my state and I did that uh though, I think many people after I left for that training and all that, many people told my parents it seems uh can you something happens she breaks her leg or how can you arrange marriage or things like all those things, so but I did that but I'm so proud of I did things like that. Like, I the young age I had to I get to meet prime minister Mahatmas Gandhi that time uh and then also in a working also I worked umm many good organizations especially international organizations and things like this so I'm I think very pleasant very happy umm very active. Umm, I think childhood I had so I'm always grateful to my home, my parents for the...
BB Umm growing up in India you your country had just recently been liberated from from England; did that play a role in how you viewed yourself and the things you chose to become involved in; um, were you inspired by Gandhi or any of the others around him as you were growing up?

MP Um, actually I gave an interview for the strictly business magazine and I said is your model and I said Mahatmas Gandhi uh just because of his simplicity and all so kind of made the whole nation to work on non-violence movement. Uh, I thought that was a great thing because he didn't use any weapons or anything like that but um and he became a leader for many more leaders in other countries. Also, so kind of, I like uh his principles and I could see that in my home my father uh from more thing Gandhi's principles like wearing only cotton thing; so my father anytime you see—he died few years back but—anytime you see he will be always starched white clothes he will be wearing just because that's Gandhi's principle, have cotton your own countries material and I even today I like cotton. But, in this country it is very difficult to maintain cotton (laugh) but I love like going back see many of my clothes are cotton. I love, so, I got from my daddy and that means we all kind of love what Mahatmas Gandhi taught us. Umm but the thing is I know um I've made because its almost 60 years we became independent um many things have changed. Um one thing is uh the positive things is, yes, we learn English we learn English because of the British's, our education system is so good because they are the mm they made the foundations uh in our country. So, anywhere like you know in India each state had their own and language and my husband and myself we both belong to different states we have different mother tongues but we are able to communicate because of English; so there are positive things happen and then but at the same time we followed what was good what my parents taught and uh so even to today kind of uh anywhere I hear some fighting or arguments and things like that I get worried cause I was not grown up like that so things like that. So I don't know whether I'm answering but...

BB I think...

MP ...but yeah...

BB I think you answered very well. You said that, um, growing up women their were certain restrictions placed upon them that weren't placed upon men uh which is the case in many

countries did was there any change in that as you were growing up umm or did it continue to be the same situation for women throughout your youth?

MP Um, I think so. Uh, definitely my uh parents were educated so we didn't see that difference in my family but the thing is I know in India because due to my job or I traveled so much I worked so much with the low income rural families and uh parents and children and community so I have seen that difference. And uh and—somehow that's favorite topic or passion also to work for the girls um I did a kind of a mini-thesis also that uh about the girls child situation in India and um another uh paper also what I have written about and girls and their marriage young age because its someday getting old many girls get married in small villages age seven year old. So, I kind of wrote a paper on that which was celebrated for a international um symposium in Canada. So umm and then um I kind of worked on developing the specifically working for the education material for the young children both boys and girls so that the schools or the institutions who were working with these non-profit agencies can help educating the parents and community about giving equality toward boys and girls. So, that's kind of my favorite topic and personally I have only one child who is son uh I both my husband myself we have a spot kind of in this uh what do you call mmm sponsored a girl baby we always did that and we still support one girl just because I like to have girls for myself but I didn't. So, I kind of sponsor my my husband myself we do that and when we are going now to India also we will visit and see how the girl is doing and all so uh the situation is improving uh more and more women when compared to the olden days. They are coming out in jobs and eh education definitely yes be parents are sending their children, girls also, but not necessarily in small villages. If there is a small amount of food they have they would like give to the son than to the daughter and if there is a choice between uh sending school the boy girls and doing at the housework they send boy because it's in Hindu religious country. Basically, they believe that boys are one will take care of the parents in the old age and when they die they have to do all the rituals so they prefer the boy so the girl will be kept at home will be uh the girl will be taking care of the younger babies and cooking, cleaning whatever five year old six year old seven year old. So I'll see in myself also those things and all so it its not that if you go to small village you still see those things umm so I can't say no big cities and all yes they made a big progress women you can see anywhere out uh. Even in my job like I always uh like a community outreach community development work that means I have to travel I have to go out, which was very peculiar for many people because women don't do those jobs; women only do a teaching job or a bank job which is inside sitting and come back home and take care cook and things. So, I did and I known many of the people who worked for me they had problems and they had to travel to get married—because she's traveling that means that's not good she cannot be married uh arranged, they cannot, we cannot arrange marriage, something wrong or so I've seen all those things so I can say there's a progress good progress; but also I think small towns and all they're slow so they're still concerns.

BB With your passion for improving the rural communities in your country um which seems to really have affected your direction in life why what sort of uh inspirations were there for you to come to the United States?

MP Oh, uh, I never wanted to come to United States because uh I was working with United Nations. The, that was agency and I was working specifically for the health and community development programs, and more specifically for the young people. So, I liked my job and that that place when peace in India, because I was in the Indian government. So, when my husband uh moved here to u.s. to do his studies and he brought my son also because I travel I cannot be taking care of my son which is unusually, guys they don't do that—actually my husband did so I was doing continue to work there with U.N. and stay there and I used to visit my husband and my son. I think almost two three years we were like that and then at one point I was thinking what I am doing always I was giving importance to my passion my job not to the family uh so that's the main reason I was not here with them. But uh, I think um I also prayed a lot and uh praying that we want to be together and then in India or U.S. whatever is god's will. So, I believe this is god's will that uh oh at one point I took the to leave the job and join them here at that time I thought I will not work anywhere just stay home and cook, which is not usual; I don't cook. So I thought I must stay there but just three months at home in Dallas then I felt bored so my husband said I don't think you will stay home. So, I went to YWCA found the job volunteers managers so I did

that uh job for six months and then I applied for jobs and got uh job uh so started working and decided stay here. And, that time I applied for my work permit which one was um...

BB How long ago was that that you first came into the U.S.?

MP Uh, it's 1996.

BB In, at what time did you gain your citizenship or have you gained your citizenship?

MP Uh, that is a think 2003 or something I got because when I got my hedge fund we saw that was in 2000 I think. So, that allows me to work in this country and I was working and then uh actually the organization which asked uh um made my hedge fund visa they promised me they will do also my green card because they don't have this certain qualification that required for the job. They don't have so they want me to be working and there and they did but because of the immigration forms and things like that they stepped back they were so worried and they said they cannot do that. So, mmm, that time my husband still was studying in Dallas, so at that point we thought to we didn't money to go to a lawyer to pay and ask them to do my green card, and there is no way—especially from in country like India—when we come we need to have either we should be a doctor an engineer or a computer person or to get the visa uh whether hedge fund or then later citizenship. Not me, I'm not any of that, my husband also any of that so because of that my husband did research and found that I could be applying for green card on an extraordinary ability candidate. That is a something special about on all those things, this is usually we get like Oscar award winners or somebody with a that that the world famous people could get easily but not so I was not sure about that. So my husband did the research because of my international experience I worked with the Germany, I worked with the British high commission, and I worked with the UN; all those people they gave me very beautiful letters about my work and actually one person said it's a loss to India I'm moving to US and things like that. So, on that base I think we just submitted all of our experience and um these uh people international level people letters and I'm given this or that category the citizenship thing so that's how I became here started being here.

BB That's, uh, a difficult process particularly the time...

MP ...yeah...

BB ...at which you came in, um, seems like things really tightened up right around that period of time.

MP We did apply before September 11 incident actually and uh so before that incident itself we were approved and all so that was okay but we did face, my husband really, I think when we were traveling in the US. Anybody who looks like Asian they think that's part of those 11 people who so that kind of one two incident happened but uh otherwise it was um okay we did manage to—um I think.

BB Lets talk about something just a little bit different; you are the executive director of a non-profit agency in Lincoln, and you're a executive director not only as a woman but as an immigrant woman. That is a very unique experience Um had you seen yourself eventually ending up in a position such as yours did it come on as a surprise and what are some of the challenges you faced to get here?

MP Uh, when I applied for this position I, I was uh like now applying time I was very wait to jobs like, know, program management, non-profit experience all those things but when I saw this advertisement for this position it is like specifically for the Asian community. I, they, didn't really expand what Asian commune-but-Asian community so I thought I had several years of experience working with Asian community so that's how I applied. Uh so, I got the job that's but when I joined actually I thought it's a small non-profit agency, it's kind of a peaceful thing, a nine to five job um so that was uh my understanding. But I think, once I took over that uh in a week's time we had a major, major outbreak of the news related to the Asian Center and interfaith council—god that was really shocking. Um uh so—I had to really take control in a week's time the whole Asian center and make plans with the board members to move away from there and have all independent finance management and everything. So, very uh, board members were very confident and supportive and I think they also have confidence seeing me I can manage that; not necessarily be depending on interfaith council. So they gave all the cooperation, we could move and then later within six to eight months, we found this place we got it done. We moved here and um there are challenges, I'm not telling it's a peaceful job, but its in a way Lincoln is a nice place and uh uh my husband still thinks I should not be—this is something small for me he says. That

um but kind of feel, feel it is very peaceful place and um if really kind of I balance my emotions I think I can really be seen here for few years uh managing the Asian Center and maybe training some young people who can be the next uh generation leaders or next leaders for the Asian Center. I think that's my definitely goal because I saw the other non-profit agencies how they are having uh same concern to have finding a leader for their centers and if anybody who is okay to manage and they leave then the center goes down. So I definitely don't want to see the Asian Center, because its almost like, god, this has 12 plus years experience but I still feel the center has become more independent after I joined 2004. Uh so I feel like this is my child so I don't want to see this child abandoned or anything happening so I need to train some people who can take over even if I have to leave that's my goal I need to do that.

BB Do you feel like you've been having success at that or has that been a very difficult challenge for you?

MP Uh, success can be measured in so many ways and I can always say, "Yeah, I'm successful because from 60,000 annual budget to now \$400,000 annual budget." That could be the success but I don't know—I don't know whether to say, uh, I kind of did well on that or not. But, many challenges actually, um I think umm, I'm learning on this job many things. Uh, I'm not that I had all the experiences to manage no; um, everyday is a learning experience and, uh, I kind of trying to leave on young people capable people. Like today, you managed so well that one program I was so happy that that's what I want to see. That it should not be, previously Modesta has to do everything, Modesta has to now. I don't see that I want many people like you to be able to manage independently things. So uh, I think when each program and staff they manage independently, are depending less on me, that day I think it will be I can say okay we made—really we moved forward positively but, uh, till that time I think it's a challenge. Finding bilingual people is a very big challenge; we have bilingual staff but we need to be having qualified people and I'm happy now we are having some qualified people on our staff. So, that's a very good thing, so I think, um, we are making progress that's I can say; I don't say whether its success or not success.

BB Okay, so if in a few years from now you walk through the office and you look for something to do but everything is taken care of because your staff is ahead of you everywhere you are...

MP ...yeah...

BB ...going, is that the day that you'll say okay my child is okay and I can leave?

MP I think so. Yeah, that will be nice to see and do so that makes yes maybe I will just have to sit and write grants or make sure funds are there for all the staff. I think I still feel that is a major part I am doing here making sure funds are there so all the staff members can be paid, all the programs can be taken care of. Uh, so its lots of public relations lots of uh relationship maintaining with funding agencies and, uh, with the board members and then with the staff. Um uh, that is, yes one, when we make all those things when we balance all those things. Yeah, we can see that independence then I can sit peacefully.

BB So you've told about jumping out of airplanes and being one of the first women to do that in India and working with poor people in rural areas in India to try to help them improve their lives. Now you sit and you work with other agencies, and funders, to try to uh secure funds for the future of your agency, which is quite a large distance to of traveled throughout your life. Um, when you look back at this point what seems to be the greatest memory or the most enjoyable thing that you've worked on?

MP Uh, I, I, I don't know. I liked my childhood, I think many, many things what I did is really I liked because at one time before I came to United States I was thinking god, I'm not priding or anything myself but, I was thinking so many things I did uh because initially when I joined in a career life I had a goal when I joined I need to work with the U.N. That's it, that was my goal and I achieved in 15 years uh and then I kind of traveled around the world. But, seems to be my grand mother knows about me when she saw me when I was small. She always used to tell me, "You are different you're going to travel around the world." She told me when I was so small; I don't know how they can tell those things. I don't know; but now I always feel thinking back about my grandmother, who is not anymore uh she died long back but, how she could guess that I coul- I, I'm going to do all these things. But, when it comes to my mother she don't think that I should be working, or being, in the United States because she always thought I was doing great in India and doing great jobs and all. So, she thinks why you need to go so far away, why can't you be in

India? So those are the things that, so, I feel I kind of did good things; but, I think still maybe something unique I need to do. I like to do things like that so I still had to find what is that and...

BB Do you think at some point, um, you will go back to India you'll be drawn back there to do work there again or uh...

MP I don't know what to work. but I want to go back to India because I have my own house. Uh, we, my husband myself, very lovingly, we constructed our own house with a designer and all those things. Um, we never stayed there in that house; uh, we gave for the as gospel people who visit from international. They come and they don't, they come just; they want a nice house with a furnished house so our house is there for them. So, we take very small rent for them, not really great amount because we don't want money, but we just want serving the god and also making sure we're helping people who are uh spreading the message of Jesus Christ. So we and they are taking care of our house different people every two years different people will come but uh we're hoping maybe in next ten years. Uh, both my husband myself want to go back retire and stay in India in our house I don't think—my husband—my son will join because he's kind of almost grown here, studied here, it left to him what he wants to do. But we both, definitely, maybe next ten years after that I may go back to India not to work but just retire and stay in my house that I very much have the memory just to listen music read my favorite books. I love to read books uh and then uh have a stay in my house not doing anything. I think I did too much work, too much, (laugh) so I want to just sit around and enjoy.

BB What books do you envision yourself reading as you grow old since you seem to enjoy greatly...

MP I, uh, now a days I 'm reading biographies, biographies, I'm reading um bill graham. I just, I hopefully I'll take with my in my travel to complete the work um but otherwise I usually now fictions I like so much um and also like autocracy and suspense all those novels. I like um but also I like to read something about the finances usually. So you can see any Saturday, Sunday, I'll be sitting at Barnes and Noble, not libraries, Barnes and Noble because there we can have coffee and other things and move around and. So I sit and catch up all the books uh once in a week or something, I do that, yeah.

BB Do you ever have the privilege of reading books in your mother tongue or are you restricted to reading in English primarily?

MP Uh, I yes I started reading in English, in English language I think from my college days I can say but I still remember all the time in India I have my favorite authors in my language. So, whatever it is I have to buy the book and read it and I used to have those books I think my brother is still keeping, I think in his house all those books, but coming here I don't have that opportunity to read those. I don't know I ever tried anywhere we get those books; like today's reading thing, I was telling like what Sudha read, I know about that story because I read few months back about that um because they're all writers so I try to keep it up and read those interesting things. But, my own language here I don't that access so let when I go home now for four weeks my sister will be keeping all those books for me to read so hopefully I will do that.

BB Do you miss having that opportunity in the U.S., is that something that is difficult for you or is your mind occupied enough with what you have going in your life that you don't reflect on that too often?

MP Basically, I try to I like to read, uh, either in my own language or English so anything I like to read I'll read that's it but reading in my own language because some of the authors. Yes, the I like to read again and again sometimes which I don't have that opportunity here but I don't miss that much because I am still reading I am still continuing on that and uh so uh hopefully I will read more and more I don't know I like to read that's it.

BB It sounds like you've been able to adapt pretty quickly to the different situations you've gone through in your life, uh, you overcame the gender expectations in India even, and that can be a difficult thing to do in any culture, but what is something coming to the united states that did create a big challenge for you? Some that was hard for you to deal with?

MP I think when I was in Dallas and, uh, Texas state south many people I thought they took it seeing our face they thought we don't speak the language. That's one assumption they made which used to irritate me; that, god, we speak English okay. When we speak English, also it became challenging because its kind of like here people have ears are tuned to kind of certain accents certain way people not our accent which is different. So, I always feel why don't they

listen I'm speaking in English so I used to feel that, and I used to feel very bad that god I know the language but we still people don't understand me. That was one, uh, uh, concern or challenge the second thing is the dress I love to wear all the colorful Indian dresses and then uh until in Dallas I used to wear mostly my Indian dresses; but then I have to quickly adapt to the way this the way people here dress mainly because I was given indirectly messages you need to accepted here you need to show that you're changing you're easy to uh adopt this country's way of living. So very reluctantly I kind of uh changed my dress though I'm not wearing back in India I used to wear pants and shirts and all those things till my college days; till that time I never felt I'm wearing something different or anything but then later I'm so passionately wearing my saris my chiliads, like this and another thing is colors and now here even I'm not happy that one I want to wear my Indian dress and people to see just normal, not peculiarly looking at me. I don't want that um that's one thing at one stage also I felt getting jobs is very difficult um because when I was applying and all though they haven't seen me maybe my resumes and all um I thought it is little more extra we need to really promote ourselves to get jobs. Um, I don't know, now I am not kind of looking for jobs or anything but I still feel I think um for immigrants its maybe a little difficult thing to get easily jobs, not just on the qualifications. I think sometimes so that's another area so uh those are the areas and travel whatever though I come from India since my work experience with international agencies where every agency gave me a car with a driver. Though I learned driving, I never had to drive okay so always there is a car with a driver that is the Indian way. U.N., I had my own U.N. car there and the thing is you cannot enter to certain government offices if you do not come in an official car so I'm trained I'm used to. So luckily my husband takes me around and though I have my driver's license I learned and all I stopped at one point not driving and I don't drive much but here people expect you to drive everywhere yourself and be available but I thought oh no I am helping the environment not bringing another car and spoiling the environment. So I'm just sharing my husband's car and not that difficult because some of the meetings some of the staff members come so I go with them or I request staff members so so I thought I am helping but that is another area people expect you to drive yourself and be independent only in the small towns. I don't think in New York, Washington D.C. people drive, they don't drive that much so that's another area I think. But I don't know how many concerns I raised so there are few challenges; yes it's not easy to be easily accepted and, and moving to Lincoln I liked it because people here, the minority community is like no big number you have. You're like one of them so that people don't see you, they accept you whatever so I am slowly also uh able to wear my dress not on a regular basis, but at least weekly I plan wear and people know me now I wear these things and so...

BB So you feel very comfortable, at least in the Asian Center, wearing traditional clothing?

MP Yeah

BB ...and then...

MP ...in Lincoln also yeah I think people I do go sometimes meetings and all wearing they always appreciate that so I thought its good.

BB Is that just when you're meeting with non-profit agencies or even when you going out you know maybe to Barnes and Noble or that kind of thing?

MP You know once in a while yeah I go like this yeah because weekends I may wear my own dress or sometimes simple dress and all but but I never went profe- if I had to go to a bank meeting Wells Fargo manager uh the president I think I might wearing like this I think yeah he was okay but I doubt whether any other like big agency corporation offices like that how they will see me if I go in my traditional dress I don't know.

BB What do you see in the future for yourself?

MP Mm, I think I just uh want to see my son because he is the only child so as parents our hopes is on him. So we hopefully feel this is the country beautiful education and very well so we want our son to get benefited from that that's what I would like to see that staying here at least. My son studied well and established himself good; so that's one thing and now my husband is planning into business line so hopefully he will move away from his career and I hoping to help him and uh and as of now he says you do not need to help me, just cook vegetarian meals for me that's enough because I am good preparing vegetarian meals. So stilling but hopefully I am seeing that maybe getting into that line and have our own business or something like that uh and then retire next ten years.

BB What kind of business is it that your husband is starting up?

MP Oh, Indian restaurant we're planning; we have chosen the name we will when we come back from India start advertising. We have Asari, Jason's company, helping to develop the website logo and all those things, ah, so you did all that basic work um this is at South Pointe mall. We are trying because at that area we don't have Indian food uh so we chose that place at the mall, very busy place so we almost, we signed the lease for the place also. So hopefully it'll go from September we will have a small open house and then we'll start that soon.

BB Do you think that's going to create a big change in your life or do you think it will be something you take in stride?

MP It's a definitely my husband's baby that kind that business initiative he wants he cooks, cooks so well and he ate here many dinners and he's not that happy and that made him to start his own. So, uh, I am hoping um it will be successful uh that business thing and then if the that's completely different we never did that we always worked both my husband myself into in the social services area so this is something new so maybe we need change we both so hopefully it will be okay mm.

BB I hope that things do go well for the both of you.

MP Thank you.

BB And I look forward to trying the food that certain...

MP Of yeah, you must come Jason also said that he will come. Time.

BB Do you need to be moving on now?

MP Yeah, is that okay.

BB Okay, that's fine

MP Did you cover your main things or anything like that all?

BB They're your main themes, Modesta, and I think we covered a good amount of material so...

MP Okay, good.

BB Great.

MP Okay, thank you for giving me this opportunity to share about myself, thank you.

BB Thank you for sharing.

MP Yeah.