

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewee: **Namita Asthana**

Interview Date: 09/18/2016

Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Location: Off the Vine Bistro, Missouri City, Texas

22 Pages



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*Transcript*

GOODSILL: Please tell when and where you were born.

ASTHANA: I was born November 20, 1965, in Lucknow, India. It was a Thursday morning according to my parents. My home town, Lucknow is a small city which is a remnant of the Mughal kingdom, so it has a lot of regal architecture, culture and foods. It was a capitol of India for many, many years, before the British were there. It is in the north central part of India. It is not mountainous; it is flat, landlocked and with rich cultivable soil. It has a big river flowing through it, the Gomti, which is a tributary of the Ganges River.

My dad's father, Krishna Mohan, was in the army and traveled a lot. During his travels, he spotted this city and mentioned to his wife that once he retired, he would like to live there. As things happened, in 1960 he passed away suddenly. He was on his way to the national capitol to get an award for bravery. On the train, he helped an old lady set up her sleeping arrangement and later had a massive heart attack while he was sleeping and he never made it to the city.

His wife Kamla Rani, remembered his comment about Lucknow and after packing up all his things after he died, she moved to the city he had liked. With her mother-in-law and her six children, she moved from an 18 bedroom house to a 1 bedroom house. She never finished high school so to her, family was everything. The kids wanted security, too, and they didn't mind just huddling into one room across three beds with all of them sleeping together, just to get over the shock of their father dying. They wanted their mother and grandmother close by. But they did remember everything else they had left behind in the big home.

Both Krishna Mohan and Kamla Rani came from a small religious city called Allahabad. It is the religious confluence of the three rivers in our Hindu culture and very highly deified. It is a place of pilgrimage within the Indian subcontinent. People go there, visit, plunge into the rivers and take their baths out there. This is where they met and married.



*Ancestral home in Allahabad, India.*

GOODSILL: What kind of work did Krishna do?

ASTHANA: He was in the army. He was Judge Advocate General for the Indian army. I remember stories being told of things he did with the Independence War in India and the patriotism he had in his blood. Even though he was in the army supporting the British he still wanted freedom for India.

GOODSILL: Tell us about the War of Independence.

ASTHANA: 1947 was a time when Indian people was preparing to get rid of the foreign occupation that India had for many hundreds of years; from the Mongols to the Turks to the British. Suddenly they seemed to feel they had leaders they could trust. Every individual did their little part in assisting the revolution. Mahatma Gandhi was the major speaker telling us that violence is not the only answer; you can talk through any situation and get what you need. My grandfather and my parents and the maternal side of my family all bought into the independence movement. Everybody was fighting and showcasing their skills and trying to start a revolution for change. They were all participating and pushing it forward.

My paternal grandfather's role was sneaking out of the house in the night so his parents didn't know that he was involved in dangerous things. He would climb up telephone poles and cut whatever communications lines the rulers had so they couldn't transmit information. He would participate, taking off his military uniform, so he would be in civilian clothes when talking about the power the young kids and the lawyers had, and give them guidance on moving forward. He was a lawyer by profession, trained in the British tradition.

My grandmother didn't quite finish high school and she had a hearing disability so she took care of the six children and waited for him to come back.

In this picture are my great grand mother, Raj Devi and Grandmother Shyam Kumari, before the loss of princely titles.

On my mother's side, her father was also a lawyer. Her mother came from a regal family from the northeastern side of India and knew what it was to run small kingdoms.



*Namita's ancestors, Raj Devi, and Shyam Kumari.*

We were told bedtime stories of how kings and queens lived in the Indian way. That would give us little seeds in our heads that we could go back to that instead of being under foreign rule. They would also participate in small talks, in group discussions, urging each other to recognize this nationalism and push forward this quiet revolution. "I won't consume foreign products, I won't wear Western clothes, I will wear what is produced in India." It could BE Western wear but not imported, to help our own economy.

GOODSILL: When was Krishna born?

ASTHANA: I believe it was 1908. He was 52 when he died in 1960. My mother's father was born in 1910. His name was Rameshwar Dayal and his wife was Shyam Kumari. She came from a small royal family. The provinces they ruled over were northeast of Lucknow. Olden India was so big it was not just one kingdom. This, Madhopur, was a smaller principality.

They were land owners. This is where it was (close to Patna), and this is where they moved to eventually – Allahabad (looking at map).



*Vijay Narain, Namita's father at birth. Holding him (r) is his Grandmother, Lakha Rani, seated next to her husband, Jai Narain Lal (l). Standing behind him is Vijay's mother, Kamla Rani. Standing next to her is Vijay's aunt. Seated by their feet is Vijay's older sister, Madhur Mala.*

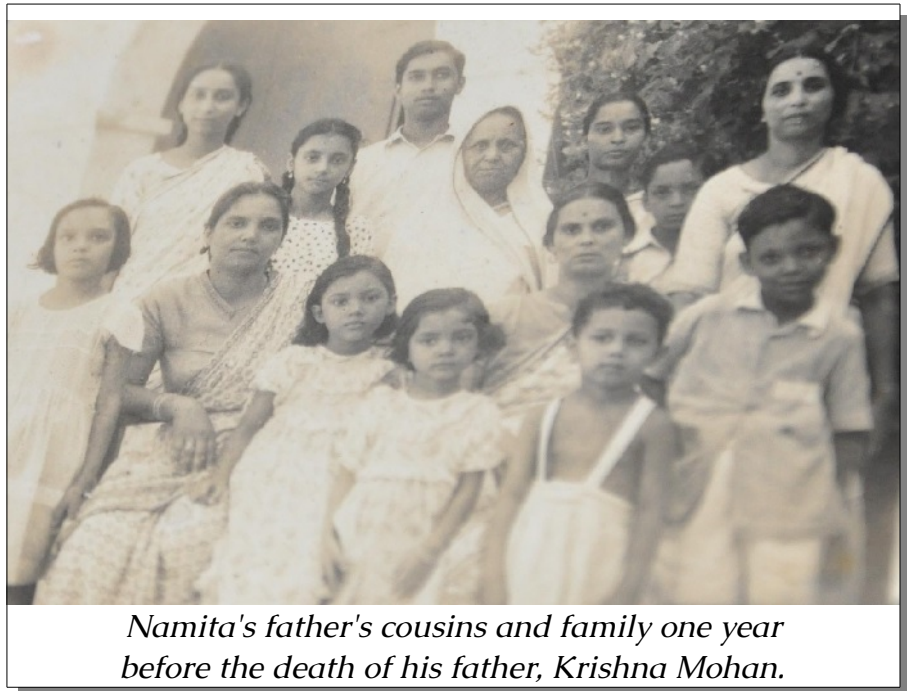


*Map showing the cities, Lucknow and Allahabd, in India.*

When she came back, she found that her brothers' wives were not treating her children in the same way they were treating their own children. They seemed to have a step-sisterly connection and she didn't think that was the righteous way to raise her children. So she moved to her nanny's house, which was a single bedroom, thatched cottage. So from being married to a very important local landowner, she went to living in a thatched one-room cottage, raising fruits and vegetables and trading them for grain in order to raise her two children. But what it taught all of us is, don't forget what is in your heart; don't forget where you come from; be generous; be kind. You don't know what is coming next.

GOODSILL: So this was your grandmother's mother?

ASTHANA: Yes, my maternal grandmother's mother. This is my mother, her brother and her little sister; mother was the oldest. Here's that little thatched cottage, and they are barefooted and wearing shared clothes. This was my father's side of the family, living in palatial homes.



*Namita's father's cousins and family one year before the death of his father, Krishna Mohan.*

GOODSILL: Where was your father, in birth order?

ASTHANA: He is the second-born. There were five more siblings, boys and girls. This is me, my sister, and my brother. I was the first-born, then my sister and then my brother. There is a four year difference between me and my sister, and 5-and-a-half years between me and my brother.

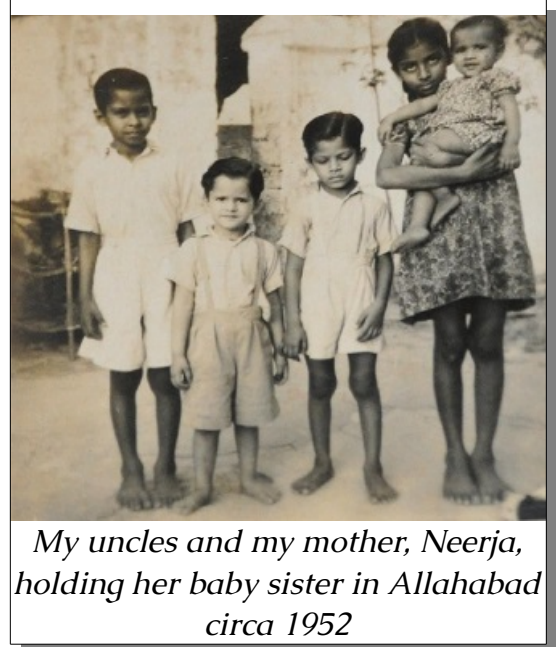
GOODSILL: How did your mother and father meet?

ASTHANA: My mother, Neerja Srivastava, was 19. It was an arranged marriage for her. She was the national champion for badminton in India, and starting her masters in English literature.

She married into this family with lots of children, lots of people living together and leading a very scared, closed life after recently losing their father. So her mother-in-law, Kamla Rani said, "You are not going to go out and finish your education.

You just help me be a part of this life and help me raise the rest of the brood." So she went as a 19 year old kid to being a 19 year old wife, or more like a care-giver to her husband's siblings. She felt a little claustrophobic. Then before she was 20, she had me, so she's still a child, with a child, and taking care of all the other kids. My father's youngest brother was 9 years old at the time. So he was like her first-born. Even today he is more like an older brother to me.

GOODSILL: Your father's family was wealthy. What was the appeal for them to arrange a marriage with your mother?



*My uncles and my mother, Neerja, holding her baby sister in Allahabad circa 1952*

ASTHANA: That's how things worked in India in those days.

GOODSILL: It mattered where she had come from, originally being regal, but it didn't matter than she wasn't wealthy?

ASTHANA: That's correct. For them, she was a good girl from a good family and let's make the most out of it. In arranged marriages, the younger the girls are the better it is because you can get them used to your way of living. So that's how it was.

GOODSILL: What is your father's name?

ASTHANA: Vijay Narain. On his side of the family, there weren't too many sons. If there were, they would pass on by the age of 50, so most kids didn't get to really know their fathers. As a salute to their passed-on ancestors, every generation took the grandfather's surname, to keep the grandfather alive in their memory.

GOODSILL: That must make genealogy very difficult!

ASTHANA: Yes. My brother's last name is Mohan, after our grandfather. So after a while, we said, "We need to stop and just go sequentially!"

GOODSILL: What was your father's occupation?

ASTHANA: My father was also a lawyer, but he was a bit of an entrepreneur. He dabbled in lots of different things and ended up getting his MBA and going into marketing. He worked for large corporations in their marketing division. He worked for a large television company and a large tractor company. Every 5-7 years, he would change his job and move up the ladder a little bit here and a little bit there. Eventually he set up his own IT business, which is what I ended up doing for a while, anyways.

GOODSILL: And his language skills?

ASTHANA: English, Hindi, a smattering of French. He was in the airport on the way to the London School of Economics, with a full scholarship to study there, the week before his father died. His father didn't want him to leave the country so at the Customs and Immigration point he told his friend not to let him leave – to let him stay in India. It was fated that he was in India when his father passed away so he could step up and take care of the family. In the 1950s-60s it would have been hard for him to come back and take care of them.

GOODSILL: What year did your mother and father get married?

ASTHANA: 1964.

GOODSILL: How did he feel about having to give up going to school?

ASTHANA: He felt a little angry but he felt it was fate. The authorities said no to his leaving and he felt he needed to come back and restart life.

GOODSILL: So he and your mother are now (1964) living in Lucknow.



*Namita's Father, Vijay and  
Mother, Neerja in 1964.*

ASTHANA: Yes, living in Lucknow, staying with his mother and helping her raise the children. He became like a pseudo-dad to all his siblings. In the back of his mind, he had two ideas: work in his corporate life to bring home the money he needed to support the family but in the background, he was always doing something else.

One time in 1961, he was in sales for a small business – Xerox. It was so new for Xerox to be in India. He was setting up a new center for them. He was always doing different things.

GOODSILL: We are up to the 1960s... what had happened to Independence Movement from 1947?

ASTHANA: The British left the country by 1947. So it was a new kingdom, a new regime, a new world. Everything was self-determined. You could do anything you wanted to do. Everywhere, new rules were being set. It was an exciting time. Good things were happening.

I grew up with a community of family members. There were uncles, and aunts, their spouses, their children from both sides. We would move from one grandparent to another grandparent because parents wanted to go out for a movie night or something like that. We never felt a lack of support. With that said, you learned to deal with every kind of attitude and tantrum and mindset. Nothing was ever a big deal because it was always a family member. You can't fight family, you just deal with it! So it taught us a lot of things. You don't need to be close with just your brother or sister; cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents all matter. A lot of your learning was done in the cuddles of your grandparents.

I remember that after my grandmother would eat food, she would get cold. We didn't have air conditioning. She would follow the sun in the yard with her chair. After a certain time when there wasn't any more sun in the yard, she would get back into her bed and get all her grandkids to come around her and make her warm. Those were fun times, just sitting there, cuddling with each other. It had nothing to do with closing your eyes, we were just making her warm. That was the goal. We were like little water bottles! (laughing) Those are the things you remember and laugh about. There were 20-some first cousins in the group and we grew up as closely as one could. It helps when you travel, when you have different bosses and things. Nothing is a big deal because you've already seen every kind of attitude. With the Army background from my paternal side, I was exposed to a lot of Westernism.

For instance, the food we ate was different. You might have turkey for dinner and fresh Western bread. From my mother's side, they were so connected to the land, they pushed everything to me that was Indian. Everything that was being made and baked was visually presented as Indian foods.



They didn't even enjoy the taste of onion and garlic because they were living on the other extreme of clean eating habits. They were vegetarians. My mom was a vegetarian and married into this family where my father was a hunter. He would bring home deer and quail and partridge.

GOODSILL: And your mother had to do the cooking?

ASTHANA: She did the cooking for everyone all the time and she stayed a vegetarian all her life. She cooked all that meat and never tasted it, and it was the yummiest food I ever had. So we grew up with a very blended palate, that one could eat very traditionally Indian and very traditionally Western all in the same day! It kept our minds open. My father would always say, "Celebrate every event, every



*Namita's Father, Vijay and Mother, Neerja in 1969.*

festival, in every culture because it is a reason to get together with your friends and family. And who knows where you are going to live. You need to know everything so that no matter where you decide to live you will blend in, and you will have fun." So any excuse we had, we would cook regional food and enjoy it.

GOODSILL: And your language skills?

ASTHANA: Hindi, English, and some local dialects that are out there. I can understand but would not dare to start a conversation in French.

GOODSILL: What was your education like?

ASTHANA: There were lots of nationalist schools in India, but my mother chose to put us in an Irish convent school, run by the Irish nuns. I am not Catholic. It was a denominational school and it was one of the best schools in the community. That was why we went there. For years I went to Catechism classes because the nuns didn't know I should be there. I guess because of my light colored eyes they just assumed.

After about four or five years, they wanted to talk to my mother about the plan for confirmation. My mom asked me, "What is confirmation?" I went and asked the nuns, "Mother Brenda, what is confirmation?" She looked at my face and said, "Girl, are you not Catholic?" I said, "No, Mother, I'm not." She said, "Okay, go back to your moral science class."

GOODSILL: Where did the light colored eyes come from?

ASTHANA: It's a genetic throwback that appears every third generation. I remember meeting my dad's grandmother who had light eyes. I have many cousins from my mother's side that have light eyes too.

GOODSILL: Where do you think that comes from?

ASTHANA: I am not too sure, but I have my own theory. Alexander the Great had been to the northeast part of India and left behind a lot of people. I was told he came with three shiploads and left with one. Most of them died and the ones who didn't die were too weak and feeble to carry on or too disillusioned by the concept of war. They stayed behind and made that part of the world theirs. In northern India, it is very common to see light eyes. The further north you go, the blonder and lighter the people get. My husband's first-born brother was blue-eyed and blonde haired with Indian features. In fact, he was pet named "Pinkie" because he was so light.

Mom and Dad had three children and I'm the oldest. My sister's name is Geetika and born in 1970, who still resides in India. My brother is Prateek, born in 1971, now residing in Katy, Texas.

GOODSILL: Was the education system affected by the departure of the British?

ASTHANA: Not at all. The nice thing that the British did when they made India their home was leave behind a solid education system, a solid street system, and a solid phone system. So we did benefit from that.

GOODSILL: When they left, the system of government was changed?



*Namita flanked by brother, Prateek, and Sister, Geetika.*

ASTHANA: Yes, and there were parallel lines of education. One was based on the English system of A and O levels and the other was a nationalistic system that they were establishing and putting in place that was slightly different in content. The books were a little different – not so worldly in their content – a little more centered on the details of India and the aspects of India. It also changed by the time I came to do A and O levels. For instance, you had three parts in History – ten questions from Indian questions, two questions from world history, and three essay-like questions. So things were changing.

GOODSILL: After high school, what happened in your life?

ASTHANA: My father was always a traveler and he got posted to another city. In that city they had a different kind of education and I wanted to follow my father. So for two years, I jumped from an Irish Catholic school to a French Protestant school.

GOODSILL: Did the rest of your family go with your father?

ASTHANA: Yes. I was the only one who switched to that school, preparing to join my father. It took three weeks for my jaw to close because I would go onto the campus and there would be boys. I had come from an all-girls school! I remember meeting the principal and her saying, "It's all right. It always happens to kids coming in from the convent." So we got completely different educational exposure from those years of school in that Protestant school. We learned that there was life beyond Catholicism and beyond Hinduism. There is another world out there. I'm still in touch with that principal. Last time I was in India, I had lunch with her and spent time with her. Education supervisors have really given a lot to me and I've really learned a lot from different people. The nuns never forced Catholicism on us and that made us want to learn more. So I learned from them not to force something on a person; people will become interested in due time.

GOODSILL: Did you move with your father?

ASTHANA: Yes, I did move with my father, a little bit. But he kept moving back because Grandma didn't want to move. So he would go out to his jobs but keep coming back to see her. I finished my undergraduate work and in one of those intra-school activities, I met my husband.

The story in the family goes that Mom fell in love with him before I did. When he became visible on my radar, she helped me. She paired me up with him in multiple ways; chaperoned trips where we could spend more time with each other. His name is Manish Asthana, born in 1964, incidentally also from Allahabad.

GOODSILL: Tell us a little bit about his upbringing.

ASTHANA: He grew up in the same city where my parents met and grew up. They are also a family of educators. His father was a teacher and his mother was a homemaker. There were lots of similarities between his mother and my mother's side of the family; large families living together and lots of cousins. So we get along really well. He is also the first-born of three. He has two younger sisters.

GOODSILL: So it could have been an arranged marriage but it wasn't.

ASTHANA: The way I took it was it was kind of arranged. I gave them the option of going ahead and doing everything they needed to do because I chose to spend time with him. We got married in 1989.

GOODSILL: Then what happened?

ASTHANA: He is a chemical engineer and after taking his first job he decided he didn't want to be a chemical engineer! So he switched very quickly into the IT side of the business, which was booming in India at that time. His first job was with Unisys and it allowed him to travel the world. He was in London when our relationship became more serious and my father's words were, "If you want to go with him, you have to marry him. I'm not sending you with him without you being married." So we waited for him to come back from London and we got married in December 1989 and then moved to Brussels in January of 1990.

GOODSILL: You didn't finish telling me what you specialized in, in college.

ASTHANA: The course that I did is not the way you look at it here, where you have one major. It was a three-year undergrad. I was a political science major with a minor in English literature. Then I did a one-year course in IT consulting/IT development. My first job was with Apple in India, teaching the seniors or the higher management, because the stenographer pool was going to go away and they were going to get personal computers. So they would have to do their own typing – no more dictation.

GOODSILL: That must have been a hard job!

ASTHANA: It WAS a hard job because in those days, there were restrictions on what you did while you were using your computer. You couldn't smoke, you couldn't have coffee by them, and the computers were supposed to be in an air-conditioned room while your office might not be air-conditioned.

Nobody liked what I was teaching them! I was probably the age of their granddaughters, which made it worse. But it was fun, just getting in there and seeing all these bigwigs in their world. With programming, using those zeroes and ones, you were changing things. You were automating things. Typing was like using an electric typewriter where you could go back and erase things.

Those magic moments were beginning to happen in the late 1980s and it was exciting times in India then. Later on, I ended up working for an educational institute where everybody was trained to do the same things. I was one of the teachers training them how to do programming and then going out and spreading the word. India was starting the big push towards grassroots IT training. Everybody needed to know basic programming. Everybody needed to know how to handle intelligence.

We didn't know what the bigger plan was, as young graduates. We were just doing what we were being told to do. And it was exciting to do! There would be lines and lines of people to say, "Test my I.Q. and tell me what class I qualify for." So it was fun.

GOODSILL: So, what did you do when you got to Brussels?

ASTHANA: When I got to Brussels, we realized that two people cannot have a career. One has a career and the other has a job. It was my husband's career that we put forward, and I decided to do a job. So I worked for different companies on an interim basis, because we would travel 6-8 months back and forth, between different countries. I worked for companies like Amgen and a whole lot of medical companies for 6-8 weeks or more. The longest stint I had was at Schlumberger. By that time my husband had switched his job. He was with Schlumberger and I was working in a different department. Those were the best days of our lives, when we look back. Young, no kids, traveling everywhere, every weekend filling a bag and just follow the river and where it takes you. Europe is such a small space. Three hours of driving time puts you in a different country.

I remember the night the Berlin Wall came down. We were there. We didn't know what was happening because we were on our usual weekend trips. I didn't know we were going to be part of this, to see the Wall come down. I was on that train the night the wall came down. I complained that I had a reserved berth and everybody was packing into the compartment. There was no place to even sit down. I learned a lot of things after the fact. Everybody was going to Stuttgart, everybody was going to Berlin, because the Wall is coming down. We went in with our passports stamped 'West Germany' and came back with them stamped 'Germany'. I still have that passport.

We've seen a lot of magical moments happening without knowing we would be a part of it. Or, when I was pregnant, trying to cross a street in Paris, across the Champs-Elysees, because I was craving a hamburger. There are lots of people, cops holding us back and I'm telling the guy, "I really need a burger. I'm starving." He looked around and said, "Okay. Run across." So I ran across and made it to the other side of the street, and then there is the whoosh of people who go past me, and that was the Tour de France. Things happened to me without my knowing they were happening! (laughter)

GOODSILL: When did you have your first child?



*Manish, Namita, Sasha and Sam 2016*

ASTHANA: My son Samarth, (Sam), was born in 1993 and he was my fifth pregnancy. Before that I somehow would lose the babies. I had an abortion for my 1st pregnancy, because I thought I was too young. That procedure messed up my insides. Afterwards I miscarried my pregnancies quickly. So when my son was conceived, the doctor said they would do a medical intervention and hope I could carry him to term and it worked. In the meantime I changed doctors and the message was not clearly passed between the doctors of what the medical intervention was. I almost died giving birth. It was decided that if I did get pregnant again, I would be necessary to have a Cesarean Section.

My daughter, Saakshi (Sasha), was born in 1996, magically. By the time she was born, my husband had moved to Houston because of his job and I was refusing to go, after going through the pregnancy scares before. I didn't want to leave that doctor until the baby was born. So he would travel back and forth and I stayed in Brussels until she was born.

GOODSILL: How did that affect their citizenship status?

ASTHANA: I kept my Indian citizenship because we traveled the world. We were EU nationals, with the identity card allowing us to live in the European Union. So the kids have the right to claim their citizenship after living there for 6 months. When we came to the U.S., I came kicking and screaming because I was tired of traveling. It's hard to travel with two kids. My daughter was six weeks old and my son two and half years. After living so close to so many family members, being by myself was very lonely, very depressing, and distracting. My goal always was to go back to India, to go back home and live there, with everyone. However, knowing my husband's travel life, and his mantra to me, "Let's try to make it home wherever we hang our hats. Let's try to be as happy as we can, and travel back as much as we can, because I don't think I could get a job in India right now. And wherever I get a job, I'm traveling with it." We got to Houston in 1996 and have been here since then.

GOODSILL: What are your children's names?

ASTHANA: My son is Samarth and my daughter is Saakshi. My son is known as Sam and my daughter as Sasha.

When I got here, my mom reminded me that one of the girls I grew up with lived in Houston. So I called her from the Galleria Doubletree telling her we were here and I was supposed to find a house. I asked if she had any suggestions. She said, "You need to move to Fort Bend." Now, coming from Europe and India, when you say Fort Bend, I'm looking for a fort. I decide to drive to her house, and coming down all these freeways, I'm asking my husband, "Do you see any forts around here?" He said, "I don't, but I'm just following directions."

We get near to her house and call her, asking, "Where are you again?" She says, "Look for the big monument that says First Colony, and make a left turn." I didn't get it. There was no fort, there's no big monument, this was not going so well. We get to her house in Fort Bend and we figure out there are NO forts!!

We found the climate, the soil, the people very, very much like India. I found the friendliness of everybody we met, right from the minute we walked in, from the young man at the car rental lot, the hotel staff, the shopkeepers, and the people I met. I felt like I was back in India. They looked different but their hearts were the same. So to me, when he said, "Home is where you hang your hat" that seemed realistic. Eight months into his job here, they said he was getting transferred to Hong Kong. "Oh no, I'm done. I'm not moving any more. We've hung the last picture up and I'm going to stay." So he went to Hong Kong for nine months and I stayed here. I stayed right here in The Meadows.

We rented a house and because the kids were so small, he invited his friends to come and spend time with me and be that support structure that I needed while he was in Hong Kong. He would travel back and forth, and five months after his Hong Kong trip, he went to Sydney and I stayed in Houston. Because I stayed, I was growing roots faster than you could imagine. I didn't want to leave any more. I wanted everything to be like my home was in India; we could leave the doors unlocked, everybody knew everybody else. We were making friends down the street, we were having group picnics. We had a little expat group from the Schlumberger Spouses Association.

GOODSILL: Every nationality?

ASTHANA: Every nationality; everybody just clinging together because they wanted to make this work. They had a magazine called SSAfara which was the foreign travel magazine, meant for the spouses. I ended up becoming their layout person. This is all volunteer work. The mom's would send in their articles from different parts of the world. Everybody felt a little connected. I did that for a couple of years and got back in my IT stride, and made some friends as the kids were growing up. Made some tremendous friends that I'm still friends with, 20 years into the process. I decided we were NOT moving. My husband came up to my son, when he must have been 4 or 5, trying to talk to him by saying, "I'm sorry I'll miss your birthday, but I'll be back for the party." My son didn't look up and said, "It's okay, Dad. I know you travel a lot." It broke my husband's heart that it didn't bother our son that he wasn't going to be there on his birthday.

When he came back from that trip, he decided he wasn't going to travel anymore and he would change jobs, taking a local job. He joined Sun Microsystems and the next thing you know, he's the swim coach, the basketball coach, the soccer coach. He's going and doing things every day with the kids. If he ate out with his clients two days in a row, my daughter would come up and say, "AGAIN? You're eating out again?" He found his spot and the kids just grabbed onto it.



GOODSILL: Had you moved to Sugar Land by then?

ASTHANA: We had bought our house in Commonwealth. It was a home that we had spotted. It was going to be a starter home, in front of a beautiful park. My daughter was so young that it would be just perfect for us to raise our kids. And we are still there. We never moved.

GOODSILL: And the kids are getting ready to move out! Now it's a perfect sized house. (laughter)

ASTHANA: All our neighbors are like family to the kids. If my daughter didn't like my cooking, she'd march across to Aunt Susan's house and eat what she had. Any and every time we missed the grandparents, we would go to Miss Beverly's house and she would be there to be a grandparent. So we have our whole family here, extended or not. The funny thing about all of this is, if you look at Miss Beverly's picture and you look at my grandma's picture, they could be from the same root stock. But Grandma is Indian and Miss Beverly is not. God meant it to happen.

GOODSILL: Did you officially take up a career at any point?

ASTHANA: My husband set up his own company of IT consulting and I joined him, helping him with my IT background. From that grew a line of business development. With all the IT customers he had, they would ask him, "Since you know how we run our business, tell us how to make it better." So I took up that arm of the business and began teaching people different skills that we had picked up along the way. Just connecting the dots and filling the gaps and not trying to hammer a square peg into a round hole. We were helping create their vision, working on strategic planning. I spun that business off with a new name, calling it NuBizConnect. But somewhere along the line, this food world was a big calling. I saw all this food while growing up, all the pickling, the meats, the sausage-making and the traditional India breads, the French breads. Food was always the go-to thing.

In all this travel, in all this time, somewhere, somehow, I started to get sick. Nobody knew what was happening. They said, "Maybe it's lupus, maybe it's Multiple Sclerosis. We need to test you." Every test they ran was never completely decisive. Many tests into it, including a lumbar puncture that went wrong, I became disillusioned and I decided to give up on traditional treatment and use symptomatic controls. One easy way of using symptomatic control was food. Soon the symptoms were improving. Going back to the simple books, you live and die by your gut.

I started to eat clean and gradually I could quit taking a lot of medications and I started to feel better and was able to do a bit more. I got involved in the community, with Fort Bend Family YMCA, Fort Bend Seniors, and the Chamber of Commerce, serving on their Boards, just giving back to the community. My kids learned how to swim at the Y and that was an essential part of growing up. When my mother would come to visit or my in-laws would be here it was important to connect with the senior community. I ended up being on the executive board of the Chamber of Commerce and was the treasurer for two terms. I was chairman of the Family YMCA for one year and assistant vice-chair for the Fort Bend Seniors Meals on Wheels. I was happy to be doing a lot with the community and making it my home.

At some point (four or five years ago, I think), I got an invitation that The India House Society had decided to give me an award for "Woman of the Year", for being a voracious spokesperson of my community. Any and everywhere that I went, people seemed to say that I knew what was happening. I really treasure that award, that they recognized me beyond my Indianisms or anything else, and just as a member of the community. That taught me that the community is giving to me and there is still a lot that I want to do for the community and be a spokesperson, making other people realize how good this community is.

As my son was heading out to college he said, "Mom, you've been collecting stuff for years in the garage for opening a restaurant. Now that we are heading off to college, please do it or sell that stuff."

GOODSILL: What had you been collecting?

ASTHANA: I collected chairs, high tops, bars, cooking equipment, bins. Whatever I would think that at some time I could use when I opened my restaurant. Vertical coolers and merchandisers were just sitting over there. At the same time my daughter got really, really sick. I suppose all the allergies that I have in my body took a bigger manifestation in the children.

We thought she was passing a kidney stone when she was a junior in high school, but in the end it was a necrotic kidney that was disintegrating and moving out of her body. Going backwards and trying to fix it, we learned that again food allergies played a big, big part in her health. So food came to the forefront.

In the process I had created a line of sauces that were additive free. At the same time, the Chamber of Commerce was starting the Imperial Farmer's Market and it was the right time to take a booth and open it up. Keri Schmidt was the new chair at that time. She said, "Take a booth. You have wonderful sauces and they will sell." It was like an experiment and it DID work. Soon we started to do it in the right way, getting all the certifications, all the labels, etc. I truly started in my home kitchen but suddenly the big retailers were saying, "You should have it in the stores here. We should carry it on the shelf, in the freezer section, in the fresh section." It was suddenly a thing!

In taking it forward, I went to a rental kitchen. The rental kitchen got busted out and evicted from that property for inappropriate behavior that the owner was doing. So I needed my own kitchen. I found a second generation kitchen, not on Main Street, and tried to get it approved and signed a five-year lease. I continued to talk to the big retailers to do these jarred sauces but at the negotiation level of price and margins, the talks fell through.

Now I had a huge kitchen but no retail contract. Again we had to think outside the box. Keeping in mind all our travels and all the bottles of wine that we had in the house and in our cellar, we put forward a wine bar with craft beers. My son suggested investing in a really good espresso machine and getting a nice coffee bar going. My daughter did all the layout for the menus, setting up all the print media for the business. I continued to make food from the sauces I made. Because I made lots of friends as peers at the Farmer's Market, we got all the local produce coming in and suddenly it was a Farm to Table restaurant that found focus in our lives.

As a high school kid, my daughter would get very angry when I would discuss her health with anybody. It's the end of the world to be different at that age. She would not talk about herself, her life, and the changes in her life. But as time has passed, she has opened up more and more because we found that in opening a farm to table restaurant that caters to personal inadequacies in food, there are a lot of people like us. They may not be certified as celiac or be medically restricted from certain foods, but there are a lot of people with food restrictions. She is learning to talk to them and that is a big process in healing.

GOODSILL: The Farm to Table restaurant became a reality. Tell us where it is and what it is called.

ASTHANA: The restaurant is called "Off the Vine Bistro". We chose this while sitting on the bed late one night, all four of us in the master bedroom, just trying to come up with names that sounded right that would tie in the wine and the food, the natural nature of the food. We didn't want to have a name similar to any other restaurants in the area. So working together, we came up with this name, "Off the Vine" and bistro, being a gastropub where things are made fresh. It's made from fresh ingredients. It does take a little bit more time for the food to come out, but it works.

We are located at Dulles Avenue and Cartwright Road, 2865 Dulles Avenue. It's truly at the geographical nexus of Sugar Land and Missouri City. On one side of the parking lot, it is Missouri City and the other side is Sugar Land. I live 10 minutes from here so it's a good location for us.

GOODSILL: When did you open?

ASTHANA: I got the key in May of 2015 and we opened September 1, 2015. It's still a thing. Most businesses in the food industry go out of business in the first 18 months. We've crossed 12 months so we have a little bit more to go through before we can say we are "a thing". But it's been fun. I'm putting in 14-16 hour days here and now learning to step out for half a day and let somebody else do it. I've joined the Exchange Club and to me, that networking is my lifeline. Just meeting people and staying involved in the community and sharing every free hour you have for the betterment of something or someone else. It's working really well.

GOODSILL: You were going to tell us about a mentor you had.

ASTHANA: A few years ago, I think in 2005, I met Susan as a part of our networking group. She got me involved in a group called Fort Bend Professional Women and after that another group called BNI Networking. We became really close friends. She has a generous spirit. Through her I met her husband, Bob. He seemed to be like a guardian angel. Anything I wanted to do (my head was like a set of blueprints), I would spit out an idea to him and we would sit down and talk about it. He might say, "No, that person tried it and it worked for two years and after that it was a dud." I would keep pitching all these ideas to him and he would corral me like a big, giant bumper lane and keep me straight. He would help me keep my thoughts going in the right direction.

Somewhere along the line, one idea clicked with him and we ended up doing business expos in Fort Bend County. Together we did 11 expos for small to medium sized business.

GOODSILL: What is a business expo?

ASTHANA: Between him with his promotional items and my doing business development, we would take a business from point A to point B in success. At the B level, we would introduce them back to the community as a showcase, so they could say, "Look what I've done. Look how good I've become. Look at my new products." We would guide new people, guests, visitors, interested members, into purchasing and learning.

We ended up with educational sessions and included people like Mattress Mack, Jim McInvale who would come in and teach us the ten succinct points of success, of how he made his life a success. People were scribbling notes all over the place and meeting people. Two hundred to five hundred people would show up at these expos and we would have 40-50 people showcased. This helped make the community move forward. Bob was there every day until his health began to be an issue. Working with Bob was a very happy time for me.

GOODSILL: You really like networking, connecting with people and teaching. You like sharing information and you get a lot of energy back from doing that.

ASTHANA: Yes, it's fun to share. I grew up with the simple principle in my head, "Do what you want to do." Don't think of what it gets you. Just keep doing what you do right. Don't worry about how it benefits you or if somebody will give you business in return. Just do your part and everything else will fall into place. It's an old Hindu concept and I grew up with that and I live with that. That has kept me going. I think what has supported me big-time is my husband's support. He kept up with his business, and this restaurant would not have happened if he did not have a proper paying job, with benefits to go with it. He comes in and spends time with me every Friday and every Saturday. Or every time when I panic and call him! He will step up and do things.

GOODSILL: Is there anything else you would like to say or have forgotten to say?

ASTHANA: My brother moved to Houston. He visited me in 1998 and stepped up to help a gentleman in New Jersey because he had a gap in his work at that time. He went up to New Jersey for a week. I remember taking his suitcase to UPS to send him. It cost a couple of hundred dollars! That was silly. I should have just gone up there with the suitcase.

He got married two years after that and his job brought him back to New Jersey and he stayed there for many years. Gradually he found his way to Katy, Texas. So we are close enough to be able to spend time together. My sister Geetika and my mother Neerja are still in India. My husband's sister, Charu, is in Arizona. He has one more sister, Anju, in India, too. So we have family everywhere.

GOODSILL: It's been fun to hear how you created family for yourself, wherever you were. You were able to create a rich environment for yourself.

Interview ends