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Vasanta Chivukula oral history interview by Andrew Huse, December 2, 2003

Vasanta Lakshmi Chivukula (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
USF 50th History Anniversary Project

Narrator: Vasanta Chivukula (C)
Current Position: President of
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Interviewer: Andrew Huse (H)
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TRANSCRIPTION

H: Today is December 2, 2003. My name is Andrew Huse, program assistant for the Florida Studies Center. We continue a series of interviews here in the Tampa campus library with USF faculty, staff and alumni in order to commemorate fifty years of university history. Today I will be interviewing Vasanta Chivukula who came here to USF just a few years ago and is president of the Students of India Association. Good afternoon, Vasanta.

C: Good afternoon.

H: Lets start with, what brought you to USF? When did you get here, and what brought you here?

C: Actually, I first came to [the] U.S. in January 2000. I went to [the] University of Texas San Antonio. I was over there for semester in spring, 2000. I was doing my master's [degree] there in biotechnology. For the spring break in 2000, I came here to Tampa, visiting a few of my friends. I was very interested in their program that they have here in biology. Being a major in microbiology with my bachelor's and master's that was my main stream that I wanted to end up finally. I was, like, okay, this is the place that I want

to be in, so I was here. One sad thing, is most of the students that come here from India come here for engineering. There are very few students who come here for sciences and business and things like that. I didn't have a lot of people who could give me the right kind of idea of where to go in [the] U.S., which university is the best or which university gives what programs and stuff like that. Until I came here, I didn't know which school, exactly. I went to University of Texas San Antonio just because my sister was living there. Eventually [I] decided to move out here because I liked the program and the school.

H: What convinced you? What about the program?

C: I ended up in the microbiology program here majorly because I wanted to do something in environmental microbiology. Dr. Valerie Harvard was my major professor. She works with water quality and ecology of these microorganisms. That's what I actually wanted. I ended up in her lab.

H: Let's just talk a little bit about some of the literature you provided talked about culture shock. Talk to us a little bit, for a moment about you first coming to the U.S. What are the major culture shocks for an Indian?

C: Even today when my friends ask me, what is so different about India and the U.S., the first thing I tell them, is, if my mom comes here, she would get home from the flight, and she would get on the same flight, and go back to India. She would never enter the U.S. Majorly, it's pretty different here. First thing, is the way we dress, the way we talk, the food that we eat. The way that we converse with each other. The way that we get involved into a lot of things going on around us. It's all different. Life over here is very

independent. It's not like this back home. I never knew what my father owns. I never knew how he paid the bills. I never knew what bills we had to pay, and things like that. Here, I pay the electricity bill, I pay the telephone bill, I know what's going on. I earn. Back home in India, when you are starting, you are just starting. You finish your education and that's when you get into the earning business. All of a sudden, you are put into an environment where you get the money in your hand and you don't know how to take care of it. You don't know how to write checks to yourself. You don't know how to pay all these bills and have money for your day-to-day life and things like that. Then, the second thing, is your parents are always there with you when you are in India. Any decision you want to make, you first sit with your parents and you say, okay, this is what I'm trying to do. What is right, what is wrong? Here, there's nobody like that. The only person you can turn is your friend, probably your roommate. But he's also sailing through the same boat. He has his own problems. He has his own things to deal with. That's a major thing. Another thing, is when I was in India, I never cooked, I never washed my vessels. I never washed my clothes. I never cleaned my vessels, nothing. All that was taken care of by my mom. I was just studying, that's all. But here, I have to live by myself, I have to take care of all those things. Which means, I'm devoting a lot of time into my household chores than to education and things like that. I have to balance everything here. All these kinds of things, you're getting through them, then you cannot discuss it with anyone, because the next person, if it's an Indian, he's also in the same boat that you are in. You cannot turn and talk to an American, because probably he might not understand, because this is how he was born and brought up. He is used to this

kind of a life, but we are not. It's hard for him to understand what we are going through.

That's basically the thing the moment they get into this country.

H: You came here, and you joined the department. When did you first hear about the Students of India Association?

C: The moment I came in here, my next-door neighbor was an Indian student, [and] was the publicity coordinator for the Students of India Association. When I came here, he first came in and took my email address and he said, okay, I'm putting you on the list of the Students of India Association. You'll get to know all the students. You'll get to know all the events that's going on. That's how I first came to know about it. Probably the second day I landed in Tampa, I knew about it.

H: What kind of events did you first start attending, before you got involved?

C: Before I got activity involved, the first SIA event that I attended was, I think, the Independence Day celebration. The commemoration of Independence Day. We had a big event at the special event center in the Marshall Center. That was the first thing I attended. I was very surprised at the amount of Indian students we had, like 600 students gathered and celebrated that date. I was really impressed. Especially when I came from San Antonio, we had thirteen Indian students on the whole. I was like, oh my God. I still cannot forget that day. I was really happy that so many people around me that I know, that I can relate to.

H: You must have made a lot of friends?

C: Oh yeah.

H: After that first event, obviously, you were very impressed. Tell us a little more. Did you

continue to go to events? When did you get involved?

C: I continued to go events that year, and the following year, I made a lot of friends. I'm pretty talkative; I talk a lot. So, I went around, met friends. I'm an Indian classical dancer. Being a dancer, I got involved in a lot of functions. I used to perform in a lot of events. The following year, actually, a lot of students that wanted me to stand in the president for the following year, which was 2001, 2002. I was like, no, I still want to know where I'm going in my career. I got involved in the Ph.D. program in biology and I wanted to get started with it; to get going. I was like, not this year, let's see next year. I just pushed it on. I was still actively involved in the events. I still was involved with special programs, with the food that we supply to the students during the events, with lots of help for the decoration, and things like that. That's how it really started. That was the year where the president was Sudarsan Padmanabhan, he was also the GAU president the next year; 2002, 2003 GAU president. Now he's the GAU official coordinator. He was the president at that time. He started this airport pickup for new students, which was very impressive. The way we do it is, students who come in from India, we have a website, so they contact us through the website. They give us their itinerary, the day they're coming, and which flight they're coming [in on]. We have as student here go to the airport, pick him up, get him to one of the senior students; one of the students who's already over here. We put him at one of the senior's students house, and he'll stay there for two or three days until he gets his accommodation. We also lease out houses for them in their name. We have those houses blocked for them till the come and get in. We also take them around for groceries for a whole month and we provide them with the groceries for

their house, and things like paper towels; whatever you can imagine. Food, and things like that, so that they don't feel that they are out of place. They feel that they're still in India. They feel that there are people who do care about them. They're not completely in this culture shock. That is one thing that he started. The second thing he started is, we have something called Sunday school on campus here. It's called the Gurukulam of Tampa Bay. It's a voluntary organization; they don't take any money or anything. They give free education to students here, to kids that go to high school. The people who teach them are students from Students of India Association, and also a few professors here on campus. A few voluntary adults outside USF. They collect money and help SIA students in providing free groceries for all the students who don't have any kind of assistantship or on-campus jobs. Getting money from India is a big, big, big deal. A dollar here is equal to around forty-eight units back home. Just to pay the fees, and since we are transfer students, we have to pay out-of-state fees too. Just to pay the fees, and then take care of living is very, very expensive. If you don't have any kind of an assistantship or any kind of on-campus job, because we cannot work off-campus. We can only work on-campus, and we can only work for twenty hours. That's like getting nothing. We started providing free groceries to all these students who don't have any kind of funding. All these programs are ones that Sudarsan Padmanabhan with help of his community and other senior students here started and we are still continuing these programs. That was when I started getting involved in SIA and actively working for it.

H: I want to revisit these things that you just talked about. When did the SIA start?

C: It started in 1984 with just three students and a faculty advisor, Dr. Arun Karpur. He's a

professor in the mathematics department. He's a faculty advisor.

H: What kind of pace did it grow, would you say?

C: Three students then, and 850 students now. That talks a lot. Ours is the second largest organization on campus now.

H: What's the largest? I'm curious.

C: I think it's the Black Student Union.

H: Both those programs that you were talking about sound very interesting. When we started talking, you said, if your mother came, she would get off the plane, she would turn around and get back on the plane and go home because it's so bewildering being in this new environment. It sounds like this airport pickup is such a nice thing to do. When was this started again?

C: Two years back, 2001.

H: Do you know how many people you've picked up so far?

C: Me personally, or on the whole?

H: All together.

C: I think in 2001 we had eighty-four students. [In] 2002 we had 148 students. This year we had fifty-three students. We picked them up.

H: It really must set a much nicer tone for these people to come and to know that there's some arrangements that have already been made for them.

C: Exactly. I would have been really much composed if I knew that somebody would pick me up from the airport. First thing is, even in India, if I go to another city, I would wonder who to contact, where to go, what to do. I still relate to this story. When I was in

San Antonio, I got out of the airport, got into a cab. It was like 8:30 in the evening. I didn't know what to tell him. I just said, I've come to the University of Texas at San Antonio, will you please take me to the school? I went straight there, he asked me a couple of questions on my way. He realized that I had no place to stay; nothing. He took me to the on-campus housing and he said, okay, this is the place where all the students live on-campus. I got down and the leasing office was closed. It was like 9:00 on a Friday evening. There was a janitor over there. She asked me to come in. She said, the leasing office is closed. She showed me a couch in one corner in the leasing office and she said, you can sleep here for today. Probably tomorrow somebody will come. I was like, what? I mean, my eyes were full of tears. I was like, oh no. I was never alone back home. [I was] always with a bunch of cousins and sisters and [my] mother and father. I was like, oh my God. She expects me to sleep on this couch all alone? I don't even know anybody here. When there's somebody who comes to the airport and welcomes you and is like, I'm there for you, whatever problem you have, you can just talk to me. You'll stay with me for tonight or you'll stay with this person for tonight. It's really a very, very warm welcome for an Indian.

H: It must really be nice to know that after your experience. The fact that you reserve a house for them. So how does this work? Do you have several students in one house together, or is it on-campus housing?

C: No, actually there is an apartment complex right on forty-second street. It's called Campus Walk. Seventy percent of the houses over there are filled with Indian students.

H: How many?

C: Seventy percent of the houses.

H: Oh, wow.

C: We have a deal with the Campus Walk people. We talk to them and we have fifteen or sixteen apartments reserved for the students even before they come here because they email us and say, okay, we're coming. Where's an apartment for us? Usually in a double-bedroom apartment we have four students living. The leasing office has been really wonderful with us. We reserve twenty apartments, sometimes we take only five or six apartments, sometimes we take all twenty and we need more. They're wonderful. They work really close with us. It's pretty good.

H: When did the partnership with Campus Walk come about?

C: 2001.

H: That's recent, too.

C: Yeah.

H: It must really be nice to have a place where there's so many Indians staying at once.

C: [That's] true. That's a major thing why most of the students get into Campus Walk. After living there for six months or one year is when they know what life is like over here. They try to move out to seek better houses or to seek better places to live. Campus Walk will always be the first choice for most of the Indian students.

H: It must provide a lot of opportunities for more social interaction and things like that.

C: Exactly, yes.

H: There's probably a lot of unofficial events going on all the time.

C: Unofficial events going on, definitely. We can have five or six major events here. In

India we have a festival every month. Most of these festivals we gather at one house or the other and we try to celebrate them. There are a lot of unofficial festivals going on in those houses.

H: When a new students moves in, do you tend to mix up new students with older students? Or do new students all come into an apartment together? How does that work?

C: Usually, we try to have all the new students live in one apartment, rather than mix up with the old students. Mainly because the old students either are ready to graduate in a semester or two semesters. Then if they graduate we'll have to get new students in that apartment so that balances out. We usually have old students together, but if there is one student, two students left out that don't have an apartment, we'll try to match up with old students. It's not that the new students are left aloof. We always mingle up and have events together.

H: Then, you were talking about, part of this program, too, includes help with the groceries and shopping and getting their household in line. What would you say, the majority of students were like you? [They] didn't do much chores and things until they had to, when they came here?

C: Yeah, most of the Indian students I wouldn't be surprised if they say this is the first time that I'm cooking, the first time to fry stuff, to boil. It's a big massacre over there. I wouldn't be surprised. One major thing, is when they come here, they don't have any transportation. They don't have cars. It's pretty expensive to buy a car when you just landed. There's no way they can go to get groceries. They're not taking the buses. They do work, but for students that just came here and don't even know where to go for the

groceries, how to buy them. We always make it a point to send a senior student, so we take them in one of our cars and show them around and say what is good, what is bad, how to buy things and stuff like that.

H: Are there any specific things that they especially need to know? For example, do you take them to an India market, with Indian food? Do you take them to the ones that are close by? Are there special limitations, for example, on the kinds of meats and all these things? I realize there's no beef and pork, but do you have special butchers that you go to, or do you just tend to rely on the supermarkets?

C: In India, of course, we have special butchers who we go to, not that I know a lot about it because I'm a vegetarian myself. We have special butchers who do it. Mostly Indians eat chicken, much less turkey. Beef and pork, of course, we don't eat. The other major thing, is everything is different. Using paper towels, we never used it back home. When we do cooking and stuff like that we have napkins and we wash them every day. [The] paper towel concept and all these things are so new. And the frozen food concept. We never have frozen food back in India. Everything is fresh. You buy vegetables every two or three days and we use it in those three days. All these things are a little new. Unless somebody told me that there's something called frozen food, you can just buy it and put it in your freezer, I would have never had gone to that section. We take them around and we show them all these things.

H: Are there any other examples of things like that; paper towels, frozen food?

C: I remember my husband studied in the same school. He came here in 1996. The vending machines were very new at that time. We didn't have them at that time in India. His

friend came by and said, I'm really thirsty and want a Coke. How do I use this vending machine? My husband, he's very cranky. He told him, put the coins inside and start yelling, Coke, Coke, [and] you'll get a Coke bottle out. Things like that. You never know what's new here. The first time I came here, I didn't know that we had a vending machine for stamps. I was like, stand in these lanes in the post office and go there and ask for a book of stamps. He was like, why don't you take it from the vending machine? I didn't even know there was a vending machine for stamps. Everything else, you actually experience. You don't know what's new here.

H: We pretty much covered most of the aspects of the airport pick-up. Out of curiosity, which groceries do you use around here that are Indian?

C: We have an Indian grocery store called Apna Bazaar on Fowler. We have Asian foods, I think, on Fowler again. Then there is Taj Groceries on Busch Blvd. These are the three major grocery stores for Indian food. Most of us go to Kash n' Karry and Publix.

H: Maybe just a special trip to the Indian market for certain things?

C: For certain things, yes. Like spices. Indian food is really spicy. I don't think we get any spices in Publix and Kash n' Karry like the ones in Indian stores.

H: We just talked about the pick-up program. What was the second one you had already mentioned?

C: It's the free groceries.

H: Oh, yes. How many students rely on those groceries, would you say, in a given semester?

C: Last year, I think we provided free groceries for at least sixty students because we had

147 students come. This year we had only fifty-eight students come and we have fifteen students providing free groceries. We're planning to stop in a week from now.

H: Where does that money come from again?

C: We have a volunteer organization on campus. That's called the Gurukulam of Tampa Bay. It's run by Indians and it's for this. It's like a free tutorial for these students. They go through all the subjects that they have at school apart from giving coaching for SAT, GMAT, and MCAT and stuff like that.

H: Who are the students that are taking advantage of this program?

C: They are students who go to high school.

H: It's just anybody?

C: Anybody. It's not just for Indian kids. It's for anybody. We have a lot of Americans, African Americans who come to this school.

H: It's every Sunday?

C: It's every Sunday from 9:00 to 1:00.

H: How many members of SIA participate in the actual teaching and tutoring?

C: I think around fifteen to twenty students.

H: How does that work? Do they just give donations as they can?

C: The parents of the students who come there give donations.

H: It is a fixed fee? Or it's just as much as they can?

C: No, as much as they can. Even if they can't, nobody forces them to. It's just out of their bill.

H: It sounds like that's a huge help. You mentioned the difficulties with the exchange rate

and all the fees that you have to pay. It ends up being much cheaper to try to raise money just in the community.

C: That's one thing, in 2001 we had a major issue about assistantships. There was a policy that the graduate assistants will not be paid with tuitions. They have to pay the complete tuition. The obligatory state tuition will not be waived, and policies like that coming up. We thought, there's no point increasing the burden on the university to fund these students. If we can grab the funds that we can get outside the Indian community, that the burden would be easier on the university and the students will also have a better opportunity to go to school.

H: When do the curriculum start? Tampa Bay curriculum, it's called?

C: It's called Guru Kulam. Guru Kulam is an Indian word. In olden days, in India, the students used to live with the Gurus. Guru is their master, their teacher. The students used to go live with the teacher and learn things. That's why it's called Guru Kulam. The place where the Guru lives and the students go. The students do the daily chores for the Guru, help him out with his daily chores. The Guru, in turn, teaches them. That's why it's called Guru Kulam.

H: When did that program start?

C: That actually, I'm not very sure. Dr. Arun Karpur, our faculty advisor, is also the founder of Guru Kulam. I would assume sometime in the late 1980s.

H: Do the students who depend on the groceries tend to take part of the teaching?

C: It's anybody. There are some students who get the groceries [that] teach there, but not everyone.

H: Do the active members in SIA tend to be Hindu?

C: No, I'm not Hindu.

H: So it's mixed between Muslims and...

C: Oh, you're talking about Hindus?

H: Well, I guess. Yeah, Hindus.

C: Hindu, the religion?

H: Yes.

C: We have quite a few Muslims and Christians, too.

H: It just runs the gamut there? I was curious, because I didn't know if they would join an Islamic thing instead of joining the Indian [thing]. Do you know of any?

C: I don't think so. As well as I know, it's the Indian Student Association. It's not the Hindu Student Association. Actually, so far, I never thought of that. I'm like, why would any Indian, even if he's a Muslim, why would he go and join a Muslim community when we have an Indian Association.

H: India comes first?

C: Yeah. I hope I'm _____.

H: I was just curious.

C: I have Muslim friends who are very active in Students of India Association.

H: That's neat, that nationalism can overcome those differences. Tell us about some of the events you have. Let's start with the Independence Day celebration.

C: Let's go back a little. I became a president in April; April sixteenth is when I took over. We had a cricket tournament. Cricket is a big, big, big game in India, just like football is

over here. You'll be surprised to hear that, when there is a cricket match going on in a town, the whole town is given a holiday. You don't go to work, you don't go to school. It's like a big, big, big event. We do have the same event over here, twice a year. Once in summer and once in fall. The first event that we have is a cricket tournament. That is usually in April, pardon me.

H: [A] quick question. Indian students volunteer to play? Do they have teams that stay together throughout the year? Or do you just form teams for the specific events?

C: Usually there are teams that are formed, not just for the whole year, but for their entire lives sometimes. We have Alan Knight, who played for a particular team, and we have people working in California, working in New York, Boston, and all these places, and they still come back to play the game. It's just the spirit that gets them back. We have new teams forming because there are more and more students coming and then they want to play, too. It's not just the Indian students. We have a Caribbean team; we have a Pakistani team. Then we have a lot of other teams that play, not just the Indian students. Actually, the cricket tournament, SIA co-sponsors along with the USF cricket group. This cricket group was formed, I think, six years back. SIA and the USF cricket group, together, have these events twice a year. It's not just the Indian students, but it's everybody. It's open for everyone. We are trying to involve the faculty also. We want the faculty, also, to come play with us. That's the first event. Then we have something called Dosa picnic. *Dosa* is an Indian pancake. We actually reserve the Riverfront barbeque grill. We have all the students come there and we all celebrate that. The students cook the pancakes and all the students then eat together. This usually is also

sponsored by the Guru Kulam of Tampa Bay. The ladies from the Guru Kulam of Tampa Bay come down and they make the pancakes for us at times. That's the second event. The third event would be the Independence Day.

H: I just want to stop you real quick. I want to get back to the cricket just for one second. You're saying, there are teams that are formed, and they're ongoing. Do they all have names?

C: Yeah, we have names. Names like Ughtah, Match Fixers, Hyderabad Tigers, Mavericks. The maximum amount of teams that we've had was, I think, in 2002 we had twenty-four teams playing.

H: Is this between all over the university? Or just SIA?

C: All over the university.

H: Twenty-four. Wow.

C: It's not only the university. It's open for outsiders, too. The Caribbean group, majorly are based in Brandon. They all work outside but they do play. We had twenty-four teams, and each teams has eleven players. We had twenty-four times eleven players play at a time. We have the soccer teams reserved for two days, for a weekend. We have going on from 8:00 in the morning until like 12:00 at night.

H: How long does it last? Is it just one day?

C: Two days.

H: The first day is the semi-finals, right?

C: No, the first day is elimination. We have twenty-four, then we have twelve, then we have six, then we have four, two, one.

H: How many games will a team play in a day?

C: Up to three, I think. Or sometimes four.

H: It's a really grueling tournament.

C: The following morning, every student comes back saying, oh, my professor was so angry with me because I couldn't work today. I had so much sore body. I hear this all the time.

H: Let's say, was it last year it was twenty-four teams? How many of those are SIA?

C: I would say twenty teams.

H: It really is Indian dominated.

C: Yes.

H: Do the Indians tend to win the tournament?

C: Not always. We had the company team, I think most of them are from Pakistan, we have a few from India, too. They won twice. Last year, we had the Match Fixers, which is an Indian team, win. This year we had Yoddha, which is an Indian team, that won. It's not always an Indian team.

H: Oh, sure. [I was] just curious. That sounds like a real galvanizing event, getting everyone together. You mentioned it's like a holiday at home. Is there that kind of festival atmosphere?

C: It will be festival just like when the Buccaneers win, how is it over here? If India wins, it's crazy there. We have fireworks. There's one particular place in India. It's called the Eden Gardens, in Calcutta. That place is amazing. The whole city roars when India wins. It's tremendous. You should just see to believe. It's awesome. Same if the Buccaneers lose, the whole city's quiet. It's as if everybody's mourning. It's just like

that in India.

H: Before we went back to the cricket, you were talking about the third event.

C: Independence Day. As I was talking, I just realized, there's another sports event that we have in the summer. It's the volleyball tournaments. That's also open for everyone. I think we had thirteen teams this time play. This was the maximum ever. That was a two-day event. We had it at the recreation center. We had it going from 8:00 through 7:00 on both days. That's an event. Then we have Independence Day.

H: Tell us about that. What are some of the rituals? Is there special food? Is there special music? Tell us about it.

C: Basically, Indian Independence Day is on August 15. Unfortunately, we've never gotten a chance to celebrate it on that day. That's because either it's a weekday and everybody's busy, or the special event center is booked for something else. What we usually do, is on that very date, we gather at one of the apartments at Campus Walk, have the Indian flag, and sing the national anthem and greet everyone. We have a little ceremony thing. Campus Walk has been really good, the last two or three years. The last two or three years we have been having an event at the pool at Campus Walk where we have Indian food served. All of us get together, we sing the national anthem and then we have food and we talk and if you want you can dance, or whatever. Some gathering events. Then we commemorate the Independence Day over here at the special events center. We have some chief guests we invite from the school. Usually it's a professor from the Indian department, an Indian professor, and then an American professor. Then, we'll have someone from ISS office; International Students and Scholars Offices. They

have been amazing. They have been an amazing help to the Indian students. Any kind of paper work, any kind of INS-related issues. They've been really good in helping us out with it. Even getting out of the culture shock. It's not just the Indian students, but ISS office has always been there for us. We recently had a really bad accident, and we had an Indian student pass away this June. The ISS office was like a backbone working with us. Every issue that we had to face, whether it be insurance, whether it be moving the body to India, the funeral home, memorial service. Everything, they were there with us. I just got into the position as a president. I didn't even know what kind of issues I would have to face with this person. He was in the hospital for seven days with life support. I was not sure that his insurance would be covered. I was not sure how to move the body once he was dead. I was not sure how to get a person from India over here to make any decision about him. The ISS office was there with us, all through it. That was a big, big support for us. We usually have one member from ISS office at any event. They've been really good with it. They'll be eagerly waiting for an invitation from us and they're there. That's pretty much it. We have a chief guest, and the chief guest gives a short speech, either about India and greeting the students, how they should be, what they should be doing. Most of the students back home like me, my mom or my dad always said, okay Vasanta, it's time for you to study your books. You need to focus. This is what you should be doing. When you come here, there's nobody to say that. Even if my focus is lost, who cares? If I have a roommate and he is not studying or he is not focusing, who cares? Why should I care about him? I'm not his sister or I'm not his mother. This kind of issue comes up and it's very easy for a student to lose focus because there are a lot of

new things over here in the U.S. The words from these professors are very, very encouraging to get us back on track and make us go properly. It's very encouraging. We invite them. After their speeches, we have a lot of cultural events, like dances, singing, playing some instruments, skits and all those different functions. Then we have free dinner for all the students who come. For the students, faculty, staff; anybody. We have a free dinner. This Independence Day we had 450 people attending the event. We had dinner for all of them. After the Independence Day, the next event is fall cricket. We have another round of cricket tournaments. Then we have a major, major Indian event. This is called The Valley. The Valley is the biggest festival in India. It's called the Festival of Lights. We have an event for that over here. We commemorate it. We don't get it on the same date, so we commemorate it. That's the biggest cultural event as far as the cultural events go. Again, we have chief guests, we have cultural programs, and then dinner. I think we had 750 that came to that.

H: Is that here, at the Special Events Center, too?

C: Yes. That's the only place that can accommodate so many people, other than the Sun Dome, but for the Sun Dome we need to pay. The Special Events Center is wonderful. Actually, another event that we have is called Ice Cream Social. This was basically for new students to socialize and get to know each other. We serve ice cream to all of them. It's basically for them to interact with each other. This happens even before the Independence Day. After the school starts, within the first week of the school we have this event so they can get to know each other. I think that's pretty much it for the fall semester. The spring semester, we have the Republic Day commemoration. [The] Indian

Republic Day is on January 26. We commemorate it. We pretty much follow the same pattern: chief guest, special events, food.

H: Republic Day, what event does that commemorate? The day that India became a republic?

C: Yes, the day Indian constitution was taken up and accepted.

H: That was after independence, of course, right?

C: Yes. It was January 26. It took us, I think almost three years after the independence that we had the constitution. We commemorate that. Then we have an international dance competition in March, where we invite all the dancers all over the world. USF you can see all the different ethnic groups, cultural groups here. We invite them all and there's a competition.

H: Have you competed?

C: Not till today, but this year I'm definitely going to.

H: Well good luck.

C: Thank you. That should be one in March. That's pretty much it. [We have] elections, and I'm off.

H: It's just a one-year tenure and that's it?

C: Yes.

H: Are you expected to step down?

C: Yes. We try to give everybody a chance. Why should I stop a potential active SIA member of becoming president? I have had my share of it.

H: Is that right? It sounds like there's plenty of events to keep you busy. I'm sure it's a lot

of responsibility. There's a lot of money changing hands to put on big events like that.

[Do] you ever feel stressed out about it?

C: I have an awesome committee. There are eleven of us, and I never felt I was the president, because I was never in a situation where I had to do something very stressful or I had to take a decision as a president or anything like that. My committee is awesome. Probably my previous committees will hate me if I say this, but mine is the best committee. All eleven active members. When I don't have to go and say, why are you not doing this? You are supposed to do this. No. In fact, they come and say, okay, I did this and this is done. You don't have to worry about it. I have a very good committee. [I] never got a chance to complain or anything. We had the provost, Dr. Khator, we had the dean of international affairs, Dr. JoAnn McCarthy. Everybody came to me and said, this is the best SIA event we have ever attended.

H: Which event was that specifically?

C: The Valley.

H: The volleyball? Oh, the Festival of Lights.

C: We had it on October 14.

H: Where does the festival get its name? The Lights?

C: The Valley?

H: What are the lights?

C: What do you mean?

H: Are there special lanterns?

C: Actually, we have lamps made of mud. It's a small vessel kind of a thing. We put oil

and a wick in it. That's what we use, traditionally. Here, we use the aluminum candles, tea lights. The whole Special Events Center was lit with all these tea lights. We had ethnic traditional decorations. It was really good. The best thing is that when all the people came back to me and said, this is the best Valley events we have ever attended. I said yes, I have the committee working for me. I don't have to worry. It's not just the committee. Usually whenever we have a major event like this, SIA pour in to help us. Before the event I had at least fifty members working at the special events center for the decorations. It's not just the committee that gets in. Of course, the committee plays a major role, but we have a lot of volunteers.

H: Sounds like you have a lot of participation.

C: Oh yeah.

H: What else? There must be an aspect of this that I've missed. One thing I was meaning to ask you, actually. When you coach people, shopping and all these other things, you mentioned a lot of people probably never even cooked before. Is there much support there to help people figure out how to cook? Or do they just figure that out?

C: They figure it out. We don't go into that detail. There is a lot of things that we need to take care of hassles. I can not go to someone's house and cook for them everyday. It's just that they learn it. We need to leave them independent at places where we need to leave them.

H: I was just curious.

C: If they don't eat for two or three days then I will invite them to my house and say, okay, for today you will eat at my place but I will give you some tips so tomorrow you can eat

for yourself. It's like, give me a fish I eat for today, teach me how to fish I eat for my lifetime.

H: Absolutely. Like I said, what did we miss here?

C: These are the major events that we have. I told you about the free groceries. I told you about the airport pickups. I think that's pretty much it. This year, actually, because of my committee, SIA has been so far working for Indian students. There was not much interaction with the outside community here at USF before. This year, we have a very good spokesperson. His name is Bharath Natarajan. He has given a new facet to the Students of India Association. We have been interacting with other student organizations on campus through the office of multicultural activities. We have been hosting a lot of events. We had a SIA dinner event during the multicultural welcome week. We had a few events like the holiday celebration, we participated. We participated in the Amnesty International Event that promotes awareness program. We also plan on participating on the Martin Luther King Day celebrations. We actually won an outstanding educational display award the first time I worked for SIA on campus. We've done quite a few events this semester.

H: It sure sounds that way. It sounds like you've all made an effort to join another events on campus.

C: Not only on campus. We also co-hosted a lot of events with Indian organizations outside USF. We had some major cultural programs where we had artists come from India come here and perform for us. We worked with the Foundation of India Association and we had a seasonal dance program, and Indian classical dance. We had a few vocal concerts.

We worked with Tamil Association. Tamil is one of the languages spoken by South Indian people. We had another event with the Telugu Association, which is another state language. We had quite a few events that we organize along with organizations outside USF. We have a year with lots of events. We had at least one event every month. In fact, three events a month at times.

H: One question I have for you is, you were mentioning all the different language groups in India, and there's a lot of different provinces, and different regional differences. Do students tend to get exposed to a lot of other facets of Indian culture? Like, someone's from the South and they've never visited the North and suddenly they're part of this organization. There's all kinds of students from the North and they can learn more about India, essentially.

C: Definitely. One thing is I still see South Indians forming a group, North Indians forming a group. Obviously, it's not really surprising because if there is a Mexican group they try to hang out together rather than mix up with the Americans. If there is an African-American group they try to be with them. Yes, we do learn a lot about India. Sometimes I am so surprised, I listen to something and I'm like, oh, this is happening in India? It's such a huge country. Being from South India, I might miss something that happens in North India. It's like, oh, my God, I never knew this happens in India. It's a very good opportunity to learn more about India.

H: Even while you're halfway across the world.

C: Exactly.

H: The cultural events, probably, are another extension of that. Suddenly they're hearing a

new instrument that they don't hear normally in Northern India. Or they're seeing a dance style or songs and things.

C: One thing I always used to think, is I have learned classical dance, and three major classical dances I have learned are from South India. I always used to have this wrong notion that South Indian dancers are the best. After coming here I learned there are three other Indian classical dance forms from North Indian. I never paid much attention to them. I was like, oh, my dance is the best. Now is when I know there is so much to Indian culture and heritage in North India that we South Indians don't get a chance to know or learn about. It's very good that I don't have this misconception anymore and I've learned a lot about it.

H: Have you considered taking up some of those dances?

C: Sure, if I get a chance, definitely.

H: Anything else that I've missed? We have time left on the tape, so I always usually ask. There's no pressure. If we've pretty much covered everything.

C: The only thing is SIA has been working for students, whether it be Indian or any students. We're always there for any ethnic based group student. We try hard for the betterment of the students, mainly because we all know we all came from a different country. We know how it is like to have been snatched away from your motherland and thrown into some land that you don't know anything about. Definitely, America is a land of opportunities, and given a chance, Indian students will definitely excel because they're very hardworking and they're very sensitive to what's their duty. We are always there, SIA as a committee, as a whole group. We are always there. Anything, any student,

anywhere, any corner of USF, any problem they can always come to us.

H: Looking back at your tenure as president, at least so far, what are you the most proud of?

C: My committee. They are always there, whether I do some mistake or whether I do something good they're always there to back me up. That's the first thing. [The] second thing, is personally I am very happy with all the events that we've had so far. They've been the best. I know it personally. I'm not talking as the president of this association. I'm not talking because this event happened when I was the president. But it happened. We've learned from the mistakes that happened before. We're trying to get it to a better place. I'm pretty sure the next president who comes in will learn from the mistakes that we made and it will be a much better event than what we did this time. I'm so far very happy with all the events we had. Also, personally, I think the passing away of the Indian student has taught me a lot. I have never, ever experienced this much responsibility in my life. I was there all seven days. I was trying to get hold of all the specialists who were treating the students. Personally, I didn't even know the student. It was just like, hi, how are you kind of a thing. I didn't even know that person personally. Now I feel I'm part of the family because I've been talking to the family, conveying the message of what's going on over here to them. Now I know if I go back to India I can just walk into their house and feel like a member of their house. I was really surprised the way I dealt with the situation. When my relatives or my family members died, I was all shattered and I didn't know how to take it. Here, I had that feeling of responsibility and I dealt through it. I think that changed a lot of my views, and attitudes towards life.

H: One last thing, I would ask you to leave a message for Indian students following in your

footsteps. It could be a message for other Indians or other students in general. What kind of wisdom would you pass on? What kind of advice would you give them?

C: I would just say we are here at USF to study, to get better, to better your personality, to get education, to get a job. Stay focused and you are there. I know Indian students are really, as I said, they are sincere. We are pretty hardworking. If you are focused, you will get there. You will excel in any field that you are then. Stay focused and there you are.

H: It sounds like your time here at USF you've stayed focus, whether it be the Ph.D. or the SIA. [It] sounds like you've made some great positive changes and made a lot of friends. I want to thank you for that and I want to thank you for coming and talking to us today.

C: Thank you very much. Thanks a lot for inviting SIA, not the president, but SIA to come and talk here. Thank you.

H: Thank you.

End of Interview