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Amin Mokrivala oral history interview by Mark I. Greenberg, April 12, 2004

Amin Mokrivala (Interviewee)

Mark I. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
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Current Position: Current USF Student

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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Growing up in Iran

Mr. Mokrivala grew up in Tehran, Iran, where he lived until 2000, when he moved to the United States at the age of twenty. He recalls his years in Iran favorably, where he had the opportunity to attend some of the best schools in the entire country. When he graduated from secondary school, he took an entrance exam for advancement to the university level, scoring within the top tenth percentile. He studied mechanical engineering for one year at the university. Soon after he decided that, “It wasn’t really my thing ... I was thinking about coming [to the United States] ... so I just decided to come.”

English courses

He began taking English classes in Iran during middle school, and his learning was facilitated by the fact that both of his parents were able to speak the language fluently. In addition to outside language instruction, he continued studying English throughout his high school and into his college years. He had to pass a language competency examination in English before being admitted to an American university.

College in Iran

He remembers the transition from high school to college being particularly difficult for him, and he quickly became disinterested in his own studies of mechanical engineering. Because admittance to an Iranian university was dependent upon a specific major, students do not have the option of changing their studies after beginning a program. “You got in, and that’s it, you’re going to finish it.”

Move to the U.S.

When he made the decision to leave the country, Mr. Mokrivala was determined to go to the United States. “I’m not one of those people to actually move and just go find my way. I’d actually rather settle and do what I am doing right now. I did not really consider going to any country but the U.S.” He chose to migrate to the United States in part because it was a dream shared by his family, and things have been particularly difficult in Iran since the revolution twenty-five years ago. An established migration network also

eased the transition from one culture to another. “There is a huge Persian community ... around the U.S., so everybody knows what’s going on, everybody sees how successful people are ... when they get here. Everyone wants to eventually get here – because of education most of all.” Also, he says the freedom and the lifestyle as important attractions to people migrating from Iran.

Iranian perceptions of the U.S.

Mr. Mokrivala asserts that there is a favorable sentiment among Iranians towards the United States, reminiscent of the valuable exchanges between the two cultures since before the Shah’s rise to power. While there may have been some hostilities surfacing in recent years as a result of world affairs, “I have never seen a hatred towards America ... especially the people.”

Enrollment at USF

Although many Iranians migrate to California, where there is a substantial ethnic community, Mokrivala chose instead to come to South Florida where his father had found work. “It actually went very smoothly ... I figured this was the best school in this area and at that point I didn’t want to leave [my family].” Initially, he began his classes on the St. Petersburg campus, and was not at all aware of any significant Muslim presence at the University. “When I began taking classes [in Tampa], I was very surprised and excited ... I started meeting all these people.”

Coursework

During his first year, Mr. Mokrivala took a number of “extra classes” to explore other areas of interest. After considering his options, he settled on industrial engineering, which he is “very happily” studying at the University of South Florida’s Tampa campus. He is scheduled to graduate from USF in two weeks.

Effects of September 11

He recalls that the events of September 11, 2001, “did not really change the way that I was treated on campus ... the people are not hostile to me ... but, it definitely changed the way I felt ... I just [felt] betrayed ... [by] those people who did this ... they just made life much more difficult and horrible ... mostly for the Muslims.” He particularly regrets the loss of freedom that came as a result of the tragic events. “This country was built on freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and sometimes it’s a very fine line ... in the name of security, many freedoms are being taken away, or people are afraid of talking or doing what they believe in.”

Citizenship plans

If everything goes as planned, Mr. Mokrivala hopes to be an American citizen soon. Though he has not had any problems personally, he recalls that, “I’ve heard a lot of stories about different people, especially from Arab countries, that ... got deported, or they had to quit school and go back ... It didn’t affect me personally.”

Persian Club

The Iranian student organization on campus to which Mokrivala belongs is called the Persian Club, so named because the term “Persia” refers back to a historical empire that encompassed modern-day Iran and the surrounding region. Though the club was established years ago, it was inactive for some time, and has only recently been revived. “It’s just getting bigger and bigger every day now, which is actually a very good thing I think.” One of the primary missions of the Club is to interact with the USF and greater Tampa Bay communities, educating them on the Iranian culture and language. The Persian Club is primarily a social organization, and does not get involved in political or religious discussions or activities. “This is the culture that we are celebrating.”

Al-Arian controversy

While controversy swelled around the case of Dr. Sami Al-Arian, Muslim students on campus struggled alongside everyone else to understand the circumstances surrounding the case. “If he is not guilty of anything, I hope he will be released and his name will be cleared. But if he is guilty, he better be going to jail and facing justice ... I feel really sorry for [his family] and I hope that I can help as a Muslim and as a human being.”

“There are a lot of speculations ... especially in the [Muslim] community – because they’re religious and political ... I would say it did affect them ... they are trying to get this man cleared of all these charges, and then he gets detained ... that period is the hardest period to deal with ... there is not much going on anymore.”

Extracurricular involvement

Mr. Mokrivala is also involved in the Honor’s Society on campus, where he served as Treasurer for two years. They chapter won the distinction as the national leader among 175 other chapters around the country. He is currently the President of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society, “which is like a little society for industrial engineers.”

After four years at USF, he recalls his experiences favorably, noting that his years here were, despite the lack of name recognition, “better than I thought they would be ... I got a great education, I believe.”

Suggestions for improvement at USF

One criticism that he has of USF is that there are not enough places on campus for socialization. “There are all these very nice buildings, in a beautiful city ... but there are like two benches in front of the library.” One of the problems they had in the Persian Club initially was where to hold their meetings because of the limited social space available on campus.

Sports

Although soccer is not as big a sport in the U.S. as it is in Iran, Mr. Mokrivala quickly found friends with whom he could play. “And then I started learning football, which I am very interested in right now ... I am ... a big fan for the Buccaneers and also for the Bulls, and I went to a couple of games ... it’s been fun.”

Living arrangements

Since his father lived in Clearwater, Mokrivala chose to live with him and commute to the USF campus over the years. “It’s long and sometimes very hard, but ... I got used to it. I have about a forty-five minute commute each way – on a good day.”

His younger brother is now in the final stages of processing his visa, and hopes to make the move from Iran to the United States sometime in the near future. “I’m very happy right now, so I definitely encourage him to come too.”

Post-graduation plans

With graduation quickly approaching, Mr. Mokrivala is planning on attending graduate school at USF after taking the summer off. He hopes to pursue either Industrial Engineering or Biomedical Engineering, or a combination of the two. He currently has a job lined up at the Morton Plant Hospital where he will be temporarily working on experiments for them. “I’m very happy with my education here ... they give me the tools to apply in the real world, which is very important to me.”

Best and worst of USF

One of the greatest parts of USF, in his opinion is the atmosphere. “I like the student community here ... the faculty ... it’s very open ... I could [study] whatever I wanted to ... and there [are] a lot of resources available, because this is a huge school ... there are so many people here.” Ranking near the bottom of the list, Mr. Mokrivala is often frustrated with the administrative bureaucracy at the school. “It needs definitely to be worked on ... it’s growing ... it’s getting better ... It’s not about just getting more students here – we have to give them a quality education back.”

End of Interview