ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

in Celebration of the City of Sugar Land 60th Anniversary

City of Sugar Land

GOODSILL: Let's start with your background. When were you born and where?

MOMIN: I live in Sugar Land with my husband, Hanif, a real estate agent and my two daughters, Alaina and Aleeza, who are 12 and 9.

I was born in Karachi, Pakistan, on June 5, 1973. My family migrated to Houston when I was about 2-1/2 years old and I've lived in Texas most of my life.

I am the oldest. I have two younger brothers who were born in the U.S. My fondest early memory is of my dad taking me to Hermann Park early in the mornings when I was 3 years old. We lived in Downtown Houston at that time, so we'd go several a couple of times a week.

My dad came to the United States as a student in the 70's.

GOODSILL: Do you know if he got a scholarship to come for school?

MOMIN: He did not. He came because he wanted to study further. He holds a Masters degree in English literature, from Pakistan. He loves English literature and even to this day he can quote William Blake or Longfellow. In Pakistan he did an English medium course. That meant he learned in English. Back then it was pretty normal to have the English language as part of the curriculum. He's multilingual. He speaks Urdu, Gurjarti, English, and Sindhi.

He didn't finish his degree in Houston because he was one of the older children and the eldest son. He had some business opportunities and he felt that was a better way to make money so he could help his family who was still in Pakistan. In that culture, the elder male children took care of the family. It was incumbent upon him to support his family. My mother also joined him in Houston. At that time most of our family was in Pakistan so it was a challenge for my parents, just like any immigrants coming to a new country.

GOODSILL: I don't know that everybody really knows what the challenges are.

MOMIN: I believe the challenges are essentially similar to those lower and middle income families face in trying to succeed; finding a good job, doing well in business, finding employees, understanding the new system, assimilating into a new culture, and making new social contacts. Another major challenge when have young children, is "Who takes care of them?" This issue has never really been resolved, even today, taking care of children, and finding a good day care are real life issues that many families face in the U.S.

During my middle school years, we moved to Alief and I graduated from Alief Hastings High School. During my undergraduate years, I attended Houston Baptist University and graduated with a double major in speech communications and political science. I attended Notre Dame Law School and graduated from Southern Methodist University School of Law in 1998. I was admitted to the State Bar of Texas in 1999.

During my college years, I decided that I wanted to be a lawyer. I wanted to help people and felt that being an attorney was the best way to help those who were the most vulnerable in our society. I also wanted to do something that would make my family and my community proud. My dad always emphazied education and being of service to the community, ever since I can remember, my dad would bend over backwards to help others. As I was growing up, I saw that and learned from his actions.

My father played an essential role in establishing two community-based credit unions in the 80s. Both of these credit unions are headquartered in Sugar Land with multiple branches in Texas. The Pioneer Mutual Credit Union has over 8700 members and net assets over $160 million. Nizari Progressive Federal Credit Union also has over $150 million in net assets today.I had the pleasure of serving as Vice Chairman of the Pioneer Mutual Federal Credit Union's Board from 2008-2012.

The priorities of our Shia Imami Ismaili Muslim community are quality higher education and civic engagement. Our ethos is that it is essential that we give back to God's creation. To be bigger than yourself is to provide the community you live in with the best you can, to be good citizens and help the local community and our neighbors. As we see ourselves as custodians of God's creation and we have to leave our world a better place than when we found it.

GOODSILL: Well said. Tell me, why did your family pick Sugar Land?

MOMIN: There is a large Ismaili Muslim presence and our family felt it only natural to move to Sugar Land. We picked Sugar Land, because of the good schools and economic opportunities. Higher education is very important to us. His Highness, the Aga Khan, is our spiritual leader, our Imam. He provides us with spiritual guidance as well as worldly guidance. He graduated from Harvard University and he emphasizes not just higher education but quality education. Sugar Land offers one of the best school systems in Texas with Clements, Austin High School, First Colony, and Colony Meadows. Sugar Land also offers great private schools like The Honor Roll School.

In fact, when my law partner and I decided to move our law firm, Sugar Land was the place we were looking to move. Our firm represents employers and investors and many of them reside in Sugar Land.

GOODSILL: I'd like to hear about the Ismaili Center.

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MOMIN: His Highness, the Aga Khan, inaugurated The Ismaili Jamatkhana and Center in 2002. He is the 49th hereditary Imam. Governor Rick Perry attended, as did the Mayor of Sugar Land, and other dignitaries and faith-based leaders. I was lucky to be there as well. The Ismaili Jamatkhana and Center is a place of worship for Ismaili Muslims but it's also a place of gathering, a place to make social and cultural connections, to help build a bridge with our communities and with the Sugar Land residents. It's a place where the Sugar Land community can engage with each other building on commonality and diversity in a positive light. We've held TEDx talks and the mayoral debate was broadcasted live from the Ismaili Jamatkhana and Center. A wide array of cultural outreach and interfaith activities are held at the Ismaili Jamatkhana and Center for anyone interested in attending.

His Highness the Aga Khan said that he wanted the Center "to be a place of peace, humility, reflection and prayer. It will be a place of search and enlightenment. It will be a center which will seek to bond men and women of this pluralistic country to replace their fragility in their narrow spheres by the strength of civilized society bound together by a common destiny." This is in essence the purpose of our Ismaili Jamatkhana and Center.

One of our priorities is service to the community we live in. The Ismaili Muslim community was recognized as a Point of Light by our five living presidents for our work during Hurricane Harvey. (https://the.ismaili/five-former-us-presidents-recognise-houston%E2%80%99s-muslim-volunteers) We had over 2500 volunteers who provided over 13,000 hours of community service. Our center is also a drop-off point for periodic food drives.

We encourage children to serve from a young age. My children started to volunteer at age 9. As they grow up they can get more involved and feel that they have a purpose beyond themselves. Also, I want them to understand the internal fulfillment one feels by volunteering and helping others. This is the greatest boost to self-esteem in my opinion.

The Ismaili Jamatkhana and Center has local governance with councils that have specific mandates. For example, one of our organizations has a mandate for outreach. We are involved with various institutions and organizations such as Interfaith Ministries, and Houston Museum of Fine Arts. We signed a MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) with The University of Texas-Austin, and there are other institutions of higher learning that we are involved with, where His Highness, the Aga Khan, has signed MOUs. There is always something positive going on!

I'm a Director on the Board for Focus Humanitarian Assistance in the U.S.A. I also serve as the Interim Executive Officer. Focus Humanitarian Assistance USA is the branch in the U. S. Focus Humanitarian, founded by His Highness the Aga Khan in 1994, has locations and operates throughout Central and South Asia, North America, and Europe. Our mission is to alleviate human suffering. We work with non-profit organizations, government entities and other similar organizations. We help local communities in the developing world create resilience during disasters; reducing human suffering; building communities that are stronger. For example, if there is an avalanche in Tajikistan, we work with the local government to provide support for search and rescue operations and help them in this time of disaster. These developing countries have very few resources and our donors help.

His Highness the Aga Khan has also developed a network of organizations called the Aga Khan Development Network ("AKDN"). They have various mandates regarding health care, education, and alleviation of poverty. Every year we hold a partnership walk in multiple cities including Houston. It is usually held in October/November in Houston. Everybody gets together to raise money for alleviation of global poverty. That is a very important part of our work. And it isn't benefitting just Ismaili Muslims directly; it benefits the communities they live in, and in a way, the whole world.

His Highness, the Aga Khan, is dedicated to developing the Third World by establishing hospitals and schools and developing cities with clean water and sewage facilities. Nobody wants to uproot their family and come to a different country and start over. But sometimes they don't have a choice. If there is better development in those countries, I think it would alleviate a lot of the issues we have here.

GOODSILL: What do you do on that board?

MOMIN: As an attorney, I wear the legal hat, help with reviewing contracts, advising the board on legal issues, I am part of the decision making, I also help in reviewing finances, oversee the staff and provide operational guidance. We have two staff members. Our Focus Humanitarian office is located at the Ismaili Jamatkhana and Center.

GOODSILL: Is evangelism at all a part of your Center's goal?

MOMIN: Our goal is not to convert people. We are who we are and we recognize God's creation. We feel like we are a family in humanity. So we don't feel that we need to go out and convert someone. We are out there to help as humans. If people want to convert, that's fine.

GOODSILL: Is there any kind of process to become Muslim?

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MOMIN: There is. The Ismaili Muslims are a sect. We are Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims. Just like with Christianity, there are multiple denominations, we are part of the Shia sect.

GOODSILL: Tell us about your law practice.

MOMIN: I practice both Corporate and Immigration Law.

As a corporate attorney I work on the transactional side. I represent clients in purchases and sales of businesses, real estate, contract review, and other similar legal work. Some people might think that is boring but I love it! I am able to help people with their businesses. In today's day and age, people are still doing handshake business deals and they neglect to sign documents to memorialize their agreements, which can cause problems. As a corporate attorney, I'm helping people preserve their wealth and making sure they understand what they are doing. Today, we live in a litigious society where it's easier than ever to sue someone. By memorializing your agreement, it protects against substantial losses and liabilities.

Many people will set up a company and have no documents, no minutes and no bylaws. By just setting up an entity is not sufficient to protect against personal liability. There are formalities that need to be followed; otherwise the legal entity will not be able to protect the business owner. My role is to explain this to my clients and guide them on how to avoid personal liability and the procedures of maintaining their investment. Wealth preservation is essential in business ownership. There are times when I've seen people who have lost everything because of bad contracts or handshake business deals, or they had a partner but did not have anything in writing. I have seen families fall apart because of this. I often tell clients that being proactive will help them sleep better at night.

GOODSILL: People who have never run a business don't know that you have building blocks in order to preserve wealth. In order to pass it down to the next generation, you need to have a record of everything.

MOMIN: Many people are not used to contracts and documents. Clients don't always see the value in hiring an attorney to review their contracts and often times sign documents without reading or forethought. This can cause substantial liability, which could have been avoided by obtaining legal advice from the start. So you get what you pay for.

The local credit unions have helped our communities in providing an avenue for saving money and obtaining low interest loans.

I work with individuals and small businesses, people from all different backgrounds, and not just the Ismaili Muslim community. Word of mouth has been the secret to our success. We've been blessed which is why I feel the need to give back to our local community in any way I can.

GOODSILL: Tell us something about immigration law.

MOMIN: When I started my practice 20 years ago, I decided to go into immigration law because I wanted to help people. Since I came here at 2-1/2, I never understood the pain and stress that immigration has on a family. I took being an American for granted. I never thought about how I came here. When my parents became citizens I was a minor child and thus I became a citizen through them without any thought. I never thought how others lived in other countries or their challenges. As I grew up and started getting involved in various volunteer positions, I came into contact with people from other countries and started to understand their challenges and concerns. This drove me towards immigration law because I could empathize.

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Immigration law has changed and yet it has not moved forward. The system needs to be revised. It cannot sustain itself the way it is. Most if not all immigration attorneys will agree. People come here for the economic, educational and social opportunities we have in America. I don't think there is another country in the world where you can come in with nothing and end up having everything. This is what our country is about. That's why immigration is so important.

GOODSILL: How do you get referrals and how do you deal with a client who doesn't have the money to pay you?

MOMIN: All attorneys are required to take up certain number of pro bono cases. We get referrals from the community when someone needs help. We hold legal clinics to provide direction and legal advice to new comers. When people go through the process without an attorney, that's a disadvantage. The immigration laws are at times convoluted and confusing, without the proper legal advice, a case can go wrong, once that happens it gets very difficult to pull them out. That's the heartbreaking part of it. You really need to know the laws. Ignorance of the law is not a defense. Ignorance of the immigration law can be fatal.

GOODSILL: Have you seen cases where people have needed to be deported?

MOMIN: My firm does not do deportation defense. We are a business immigration firm representing employers and investors. Most of our clients are job creators. I protect their interest and make sure they do things the right way.

There are visas for different kinds of entry into the U. S. Visas are based on what the individual wants to do in the U.S. For example, it could be to operate a branch office, to extend the visit, studying, or for investment purposes. Work is generally limited to H1-B for professionals or seasonal workers. Thus, the visas are intent specific.

GOODSILL: Do you have any hope in your lifetime that the immigration system will be improved?

MOMIN: Yes, I do. This is a non-political issue. The system needs to be revamped. Somehow it has to get worse to get better! It is what it is, but I have great faith in our legal and immigration system. After all, we are a country of immigrants.

GOODSILL: Tell me the different ways in which your brain works when you are doing transactional corporate law and when you are doing immigration law.

MOMIN: In transactional corporate law, my brain thinks, "What can go wrong?" That's the premise I go with when I'm reviewing contracts. What is the worst thing that can happen and how can I protect my client? In immigration, it is similar. What can go wrong? And telling the client the hard facts. "I cannot promise you anything. But these are the avenues. At the end of the day, if you get denied, there's a possibility of being deported."
It's similar.

GOODSILL: It is inspiring to hear about the things you are doing in your personal and professional life. Thank you for sharing your story with us.

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