



# ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

in Celebration of the  
City of Sugar Land  
60th Anniversary



CITY OF SUGAR LAND

## Afshi Charania

Principal,  
Oil Products  
Distribution



**GOODSILL:** Will you tell me about your family and how they got to Sugar Land?

**CHARANIA:** Both my parents were born in India. My mother's family had migrated to India from Africa. After the British exited India in 1947, India was split into two countries, Pakistan and India. Pakistan was split into West Pakistan and East Pakistan with India between them.

Right after the partition in 1947 my mother's family moved to East Pakistan (today known as Bangladesh) where she completed her education and obtained her medical degree. My mother was 6 years old when her family left India.

My dad's family moved to West Pakistan (today known as Pakistan). My dad was 12 years old when his family left India. He had already started his studies in India and continued with his education in Pakistan where he received his medical degree.

My mother's name is Parin Ismail. My dad's name is Barkat Charania. I consider myself a mix of Indian-Bangladeshi-Pakistani-British-American. I was born in England, spent my childhood and pre-teen years in Pakistan, and moved to the U.S. when I was thirteen years old.

My mother's family had moved from India to Africa and back to India before she was born. She identifies herself as Bangladeshi-Pakistani-American. My dad identifies himself as Indian-Pakistani-American. People naturally assume I was born in India or Pakistan. To me it is the same subcontinent now divided into three parts, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Both sides of my parents' families were fortunate that other than having to deal with the difficulties that come with moving between countries and the economic challenges of resettlement, they personally did not experience the extreme chaos and hardship a lot of families did at the time of partition and post-partition.

**GOODSILL:** What did your parents do for work?

**CHARANIA:** My dad is an orthopedic surgeon by profession and my mother a gynecologist. There were a few female doctors during her time, but not many. My maternal grandfather was progressive in his thoughts with respect to education, including for his daughters. Our faith leader is our Imam, His Highness the Aga Khan, who leads the Ismaili Muslim community, a branch of Muslims who adhere to the Shia interpretation of Islam. The Aga Khan traces his lineage back to the Prophet Muhammed and his son-in-law, Ali, who was the first Imam of Shia Muslims. As the present Imam, His Highness the Aga Khan, guides the community in both spiritual and worldly matters, to secure and safeguard the quality of life of his followers and the societies in which they live. He has repeatedly emphasized the need for quality education and the acquisition of knowledge to us as being critically important to our welfare, and for us to be able to serve humanity at large effectively. His grandfather was famously noted to have encouraged the community to educate its daughters in particular who in turn have so much influence on raising their own families.

My mother and all three of her sisters were educated. Even though my maternal grandfather was at one point very strained for material resources, he allowed his four daughters to do their schooling while living in the city of Chittagong in East Pakistan. My grandfather barely had money to feed his family, so the Catholic nuns made it possible for my mother and her sisters to attend school with little burden of tuition to the family.

My mother completed her medical degree in East Pakistan while her three sisters completed two Bachelors and a Masters degree between them. My mother is a doctor, two of her sisters are nurses, and the fourth sister was a teacher. My mother is one of ten children. You can imagine the family was very resource-constrained at that time.

My dad is one of ten children, two brothers and eight sisters. I come from a very large family! My dad was one of the younger children in his family. He was the only one of his siblings to go to University.

**GOODSILL:** How did your mother and father meet?

**CHARANIA:** After the partition, my dad's family had migrated to West Pakistan and my mother's to East Pakistan. As tensions grew between East Pakistan and West Pakistan and before war broke out between the two Pakistans my mother's family migrated, in 1969, to Karachi in West Pakistan.

Both my parents were doctors by then and in the same profession but that is not how they met. My mother enjoyed dressing up and keeping up with the fashion of the time. So she stood out and came to the notice of my dad's sisters who liked my mother and her fashion sense. My mother happened to be the doctor who assisted with the birth of two of my dad's younger sisters. My parents were introduced and married in 1970. My parents moved to London, England where my dad was completing his medical fellowship.

Traditional options of work for people of my dad's economic class then were to be a shop keeper or work for someone else. My paternal grandfather, Nimji Bhai Charania, was a farmer in Kamlapur, a small village of nearly a 1,000 people. My dad was born

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*Afshi Charania*”

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in Kamlapur and lived the first 8 years of his life in the small farming village before moving to Ahmedabad, a city with a population of more than 200,000 people then. My dad's family lived in Ahmedabad for four years pre-partition.

My dad's older brother was very entrepreneurial. He had no formal education and taught himself how to read and write English, and do math. It was my uncle who pushed my dad to continue his education after moving to West Pakistan. While living in a hostel and doing his studies in Shikarpur, a train ride from Sukkur where the rest his family was living, my dad and uncle started a trading business of importing and selling tires in Sukkur. The business grew and my dad's family moved to Karachi, a larger port city, by the Arabian Sea. As my dad completed his medical training in England, it was my uncle's dream to build the first private hospital in Karachi, Charania Hospital. The 200-bed hospital was built from the profits of the trading business. After the hospital was built my dad had his medical practice but he was more involved in the administration side of the hospital.

**GOODSILL:** Where were they living when you were born?

**CHARANIA:** My dad's family was living in Karachi by the time my dad went to England for his fellowship. My parents were living in London when my sister, Celina, was born. She is three years older than my brother and I. My parents were back in Karachi when my mother found she was pregnant with my twin brother, Imran and me. Given the complications of my mother's prior pregnancies and it being twins, my parents were advised to go to England for the delivery. As a result, my brother and I were also born in England. We were born prematurely, so it probably was the best decision. My parents returned to Karachi after we were born, and I lived there for the first 13 years of my life before we emigrated to the United States in 1990. We landed in New York on July 4th!

My dad and his brother were very, very close. They had worked together as one family unit. Working together our families were prosperous. The two sons of an immigrant farmer through hard work and luck were now part of the upper class in Pakistan. In a third world country strife with corruption, power struggles,

low rates of literacy and a small upper class, this came with challenges of security. My dad and his brother felt it was wise to start exploring options to move the children to the West.

**GOODSILL:** Do you remember anything about those being dangerous years?

**CHARANIA:** My dad and his brother did not share their concerns of security with the children, and what we knew we overheard when the adults were conversing among themselves. I do know that most of my friends were escorted to school with armed bodyguards. The need for security depended on what your parents did for a living and owned, and whether you were getting threats of ransom kidnapping in exchange for monetary payouts for the family's safety and security. Given the economic health of the greater population, the upper class Karachites were constantly a target for threats of kidnappings, depending on the stability of the current government in place. All these happenings made my family decide it was best to move to the United States.

**GOODSILL:** Was it difficult to get into the U. S. at that time?

**CHARANIA:** Most of my mother's siblings had already moved to the U. S. in the 1970s and 1980s. At the time, the United States was welcoming to immigrants. I don't think it had ever occurred to both sides of my parents' families that one day they would once again emigrate to yet another country. We were fortunate to have a path to immigration and thus were able to immediately to seek work. We landed in New York and took a connecting flight to Texas.

**GOODSILL:** Why Texas?

**CHARANIA:** The weather in Texas is very similar to weather in South Asia, with the same warm, humid climate. We had heard so much about the Lone Star State and how warm and welcoming Texans were. So Texas it was. Even though two of my mother's sisters and two brothers lived in San Antonio, Sugar Land was a natural choice for us because we had friends in the area and my parents quickly learned that the Fort Bend area schools were good. Houston and the overall region had benefitted from the oil boom and we thought economic opportunities would be good.

**GOODSILL:** And probably a good place to be in the medical profession.

**CHARANIA:** Yes, if one wanted to practice medicine. After running the family hospital in Karachi, my dad found his natural inclination was more towards business than a clinical practice. When we moved to Sugar Land my dad was already fifty and my mother was nearing fifty. At that age my dad had no interest to certify himself to practice medicine in the United States; business was it. My mother had already put aside her practice of medicine when we were young. She decided to stay home to raise her family.

**GOODSILL:** Was it a successful transition when you came to Sugar Land?



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**CHARANIA:** My brother and I were 13 and my sister 16. My brother and I started 9th grade and my sister 12th grade at Clements High School here in Sugar Land. Language is one of the biggest struggles any new arrival faces in a new country. We were very fortunate that all of us, kids and parents included, spoke English fluently, as we had done our schooling at a British school, Karachi Grammar School. Even knowing the language, it was still a culture shock. I went from a class of 50 students to a class of 600 students. That was a HUGE culture shock for me! (laughs) And I saw everything that I had only seen in American movies. The lockers were new to me; the P. E. stuff was new to me; walking around with a book bag was new to me because in Karachi the teachers came to you and you stayed in the same classroom. Here you go from classroom to classroom. To top it off there is a short time to move between classes and then there is the tardy bell. I walked around with a map because it was such a huge school. But within a week, my brother and I, who were freshmen, both adapted. My sister started as a senior. There was more adjusting for her to do because it was her last year before going to University. It was a drawback in that there was no one to guide her in terms of the American system of education and applying to colleges.

**GOODSILL:** Did you find that the education was easier or harder than what you were used to.

**CHARANIA:** Much easier. The British education was all essay writing. So you learned how to think critically, to write concisely. Here it was a Scantron; you had multiple choice and you have a 25% chance of being right. It was much easier.

**GOODSILL:** Where did your sister go to school after she graduated?

**CHARANIA:** She was accepted to University of Texas at Austin right out of high school, but having moved to Texas so recently, not fully acclimated with their new home and still learning the ways of Texas, my parents were not ready to let her move to yet another new city by herself. Instead she went to University of Houston for a couple of years and then transferred to UT Austin. My parents stayed with us for a year and in 1991 went to Pakistan because of my dad's work with the hospital. So we were left here with my cousin, which was difficult. I think for me that was the most difficult part of the transition, not having parents here. My cousin and his family had emigrated here the same time as we did, so it was the blind leading the blind. (laughter) But it worked. Circumstances make you very flexible and very adaptable. And that's good because I think you learn a lot about yourself and your own strengths from that, and you realize you can get through it, even if it is not your first choice. At the end of the day, it's all about your mindset.

My sister ended up graduating from UT Austin, in 1995, with Honors, with a Bachelor's degree in finance. She is one of those students who never picked up a book but goes to class and learns through osmosis. My brother and I graduated from high school in 1994. Even though we were accepted to various colleges, my parents wanted us to go to UT-Austin, as my sister was already there. The three of us lived in a condo together in downtown Austin, which was the BEST decision my parents made for us. I attribute the three of us living together for those 18 months for our close sibling relationship today.

**GOODSILL:** And what was your major?



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**CHARANIA:** My major was marketing with a minor in Spanish and my brother's was MIS [Management Information Systems]. All three of us went to business school at UT Austin.

**GOODSILL:** Why did you get a minor in Spanish?

**CHARANIA:** With my family relocating to the United States I realized the importance of language, and how fortunate I was coming to this country speaking fluent English. I also speak Gujrati and Urdu. We were taught Urdu in school so I can also read and write in Urdu. And I speak a few other dialects as well. I thought I had a good ear for languages. So when it came time to pick a foreign language in high school (which was a requirement), I chose Spanish because that seemed the obvious choice, living in Texas. I realized I liked Spanish and it came easily to me. It also did not hurt that I had a great Spanish teacher, Mrs. Brown who taught Spanish I and II, at Clements High School. She had a love of the language that she shared with her students. Spanish has been very useful for me. I can't claim fluency but am passable and can communicate well enough to get my point across.

**GOODSILL:** What did you do after college?

**CHARANIA:** My brother and I graduated from UT in 1997, and we turned 20 years old that year. At that time the whole family (my dad

and his brother) was together. Before then my dad went back and forth between Pakistan and the US. My mother was back in the US my senior year in high school. When we were in college, there was no need for either of them to be here, so they were both out of the country during my undergrad years. From the time we moved in 1990 to when my brother and I graduated UT Austin in 1997 we spent summers in Karachi.

**GOODSILL:** What was it like to go back?

**CHARANIA:** It just felt natural, as if I hadn't left. Except I had accented English! The dressing was different. If I wore jeans here, I probably wouldn't be

wearing jeans there. I never covered my head there, and I was never asked to. In terms of education, in Pakistan, if you wanted to learn and get an education, you went to an English school, which was a private school. So you had to have means. Unfortunately with a huge gap between those with means and the many without means, the disparity between the social classes was very evident.

In America certain things are the basic standard. You have air conditioning, running water and electricity. It doesn't matter how poor you may be, most poor even have basic plumbing and electricity in the U.S. Such is not the case in Pakistan. In the US you have access to free education here whereas over there even the government run non-English speaking schools, were not free. Hospitals will admit you in America even if you do not have health insurance. There you just wait. God forbid if you are diagnosed with something or have an emergency. It is very different.

In Pakistan there is no caste system. The difference is in the economic class levels; prosperity versus lack of prosperity, opportunity versus lack of opportunity, quality education versus lack of education. You see people on the streets begging. Growing up we always had someone who drove us to school. We always had someone who cleaned our rooms, who cooked for us and were employed by us. I went to school but the daughter of the lady who cooked our food didn't go to school. At that age I wondered why she wasn't in school or why couldn't I teach her the alphabet or some English. The pay scale was barely enough to earn a living let alone break through the cycle of poverty. After coming to the U.S. and volunteering to improve conditions for the economically marginalized I recognized that without quality education it would be very difficult to improve the quality of their lives from status quo.

My dad sold the hospital in Pakistan in 1995. His brother managed the other family business in Pakistan, which was the distribution of tires. My uncle was the patriarch of the family, and he passed away in February of 1997 the year I graduated from University. My dad is also very entrepreneurial. In 1995 he had started a wholesale fuel distribution business where he supplied gas stations with fuel.

When my uncle passed away, it left a gap in the management of the business in Pakistan so my dad decided to go back and take the reins of the tire business. He took my brother with him to teach him the business. By then my brother hadn't lived in Pakistan for almost two decades; it was one thing to go visit and another to actually live there.

My sister had left her employment with Exxon to join my dad in the fuel distribution business. The same year I graduated University my sister was accepted to law school at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. As my dad was in Pakistan it was a natural progression for me to take my sister's place in the fuel wholesale distribution business. Working in the family business I had to develop my own sense of discipline because by then I had no one to answer to or to look to for guidance. It was only me and one other employee at that time. I learned as much as I could from him and learned the rest from making my fair share of mistakes. At that time we were newly licensed to wholesale Conoco and Phillips fuel products. It was the norm for Conoco and Phillips to hold yearly meetings with all their wholesale distributors. I would go to these meetings where there were all male representatives for other wholesale distributors. Back then I was 20 but looked like I was 15. I decided I couldn't wear dresses or skirts anymore; I had to wear pants and grow my hair longer to look older.

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**GOODSILL:** And you're a different ethnicity with all the white people sitting at the table?

**CHARANIA:** And that too! I was fortunate because my Conoco account manager, Judy, was female. Most times we were the only two women in the room. I really enjoyed working with her. I learned how she came up through the ranks at Conoco without having a degree. It was impressive and humbling to see someone make it this far on just their work ethic.

I started working in wholesale fuel distribution in 1997 and have been doing it since then. The company went from having a relationship with one brand of fuel to having a relationship with all fuel companies that supply branded fuel in Texas. In 2006 we bought another fuel wholesaler in El Campo, 45 minutes south on Hwy 59. So now my work includes driving to El Campo a couple of times a week. During this time, my sister had graduated from law school in 2000 and came back to Houston to work for a large law firm in downtown. She got married in 2004, has two daughters and quickly realized the sacrifices she was making in her family life to stay on the partnership track. My dad, once again, made her an offer to come work for the family business as the business was growing. My sister saw the value in being able to work for herself and manage her own time. She accepted and has not looked back since.

When Celina joined us in 2006 I had been accepted to law school at Loyola in Chicago and was starting that fall. When we acquired the El Campo office I knew it would be a challenge for my sister to manage both offices as she had newly rejoined the business after a hiatus of almost ten years. I made the decision to delay law school so we could have a good transition. Then we (my family) had an opportunity to expand and diversify in the health space. My sister took on that opportunity and ran with it. Law school never happened and I never looked back. Instead I changed courses and completed my Masters in Business, graduating with Honors, from the University of Houston. I went to school evenings while I worked full time, and also volunteered. Going back for my Masters was a very fulfilling experience.

My brother was back and forth between Sugar Land and Karachi. In 2006 he decided to move to Dubai in the UAE, to grow the tire business in the Middle East and Africa. Then Dubai was the place to be if you wanted to do business in the Middle East. It was a safe country, welcoming to westerners and foreign companies. After spending twelve years in Dubai this summer my brother and his family moved back to the Houston area. His son starts high school this fall so he wanted to take advantage of the wonderful schools we have here locally.

The good part is that even today, two decades later, my siblings and I, continue to work together like my dad and his brother did before us. We each manage different aspects of the family businesses. We invest together, we buy things together; if we make money, we make it together. If we lose money, we lose it together.

**GOODSILL:** Would you like to talk about your volunteer work?

**CHARANIA:** Sure. When I graduated from UT Austin, the first thing I did was I got a dog! She was a rescue from the SPCA in Houston. The other thing I did was I started volunteering with the Aga Khan Foundation USA. I did this from 1997 until



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2006, eventually serving as the Vice Chair for the Foundation's local work here in the Greater Houston area. The Foundation had started doing walks in Texas to create awareness and raise funds for development projects in Asia and East Africa. Having lived in Asia and seen poverty first-hand, I could wholly relate to the work the Foundation was doing in third world countries.

The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) brings together a number of development agencies. The Aga Khan Foundation is one of these agencies under the AKDN umbrella. The Aga Khan Foundation is an international, social development, non-profit, non-denominational agency whose core area of work is in health, education, rural development, and civil society strengthening. Education is at the core of the Foundation's work because without quality education there is no meaningful change and progress. The present Aga Khan's grandfather created a network of schools called the Aga Khan Schools (now under the AKDN agency the Aga Khan Education Services) in Asia and East Africa.

In Northern Pakistan his grandfather opened schools admitting only girls in remote villages situated in the mountainous areas. This is because gender discrimination against girls in education is highest in poor households. Eventually the schools

opened up to enroll boys as well. You would hear stories after stories of how greatly education was valued by women in Northern Pakistan. Women would walk three miles one way just to go to school. How education made such life changing differences in their lives.

The Northern Pakistan region boasts a literacy rate of over 90%. The rest of Pakistan, where these schools were not as prevalent, has a literacy rate around 50%. The Northern areas started to prosper as a result. The Aga Khan Foundation does work in over 13 countries, including Tajikistan, Kazakastan, Kyrgystan, Tanzania, Kenya, India and Pakistan. Students would get meals at school, sometimes this was the only meal these children had all day. With the meal they were also getting an education. As we know, you can't learn on an empty stomach. I truly enjoyed volunteering with the Foundation and seeing real life examples of the impact of the Foundation's work on women and children and entire family units.

In 2007 I was appointed Chairperson of the Aga Khan Economic Board for the Southwestern United States. This Board was responsible for the financial planning, wealth management and economic advancement of thousands of members of the Ismaili Muslim community. The Southwestern United States region then included the Greater Houston area, Beaumont, Austin, San Antonio, Corpus Christi, Bryan-College Station, Denver, Oklahoma City, and Albuquerque.

**GOODSILL:** That must have been fantastic networking for you!

**CHARANIA:** It was a fabulous experience meeting people from all over Texas and outside Texas. I did this for two years and in 2009 was appointed by His Highness to the Aga Khan Council for the Southwestern United States for a three-year appointment. After completing my three years on the Council I was then appointed by His Highness for a three-year term to the Aga Khan Economic Planning Board for the United States where I was tasked to oversee economic upliftment needs of the community across the United States. It's a lot of work but an absolute honor to be appointed by His Highness and tasked to do work.

**GOODSILL:** You must have met some interesting people doing this.

**CHARANIA:** I enjoy meeting and speaking to people and hearing their stories. You see the compassionate side of people when volunteering with them, that you may not get a chance to see otherwise.

**GOODSILL:** Did I read that you were interested in local education too? Did you run for the school board?

**CHARANIA:** I did, I ran against an incumbent. Going into it I knew it is a difficult task to run against an incumbent. I'm happy to have ended the election with the third most votes, between sixteen candidates in the race for three positions, including the two incumbents running for their respective positions. There are no term limits on the school board. So rarely does a seat open up because an incumbent decides not to run for re-election. Incumbents have name recognition so people tend to vote for the person they know and the name they recognize.

Through my community work I have seen first-hand how important education is to our future and the future of our children. And that led me to my desire to run for a position on the Fort Bend ISD school board. I've been serving within the Fort Bend community for a long time. I felt it was the next natural progression, given my community experiences and understanding of how education can change the future outcomes for a family.

**GOODSILL:** Might you run again?

**CHARANIA:** That option is always on the table. I enjoy serving the community, appointed, elected or otherwise. If there is anything I can do for the betterment of our Fort Bend community and the worldwide community, sign me up, I will be there.

**GOODSILL:** Thank you for all you do. And thank you for taking the time for this interview.

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