

Shafick Panjwani

Ugandan Asian Oral History Project: Settling In

Shafick Panjwani: “School’s already started so we can’t go to school, we can’t get registered for school. All we had is these documents from the Canadian government telling us that we’re landed immigrants, right? So I don’t remember the first week with them [my brother and his family], we probably watched TV and didn’t do much, stayed around the house and stayed around that area. We used to live in Richmond so that’s where we went. We used to live right next to the mall. There was an apartment building behind the mall so we lived there and we sort of got to know the area, walked around and all that. For a month, a month and a half, there really wasn’t much we could do, help around the house, play with my niece and nephew and all that. But we started school in January of ’74, January or February of ’74, when the school started after Christmas break, and they put me in grade ten.”

Shezan Muhammedi: “You were fifteen I guess at the time?”

Shafick: “Fifteen at the time, so they put me in grade ten. And going to school—first of all, the clothes that I had were different, I would call it different now, things that you probably wouldn’t wear. There was racism in school as well because they had a whole bunch of people that came in 1973, ’72, ’73, so there was racism in school because you didn’t really mingle with too many people. I knew one other kid who lived in the same complex that came from Uganda and I got to know him. I knew him from back home and got to know him here, and one of my friends that’s here now, he was here so I got to know him. Other than that, I didn’t really know too many people.

I remember going to school and learning what they were teaching and I’m thinking, “This is pretty easy.” Even though I had missed a whole year of school, almost a whole year of school, in Uganda, the subjects that you were taking and what they were teaching there, were two years ahead of what they were teaching here, almost. There were a couple of things, like social studies was different. Geography was fine, it was part of social studies, we knew that. The math you knew, but then they put you in power mechanics even though you don’t know anything about mechanics. I told them I wanted to do electrical and they said, “No, no, you can’t do electrical, you have to do power mechanics.” Stuff like that.

Going to school every day and doing all that, when summer break came in grade ten, I found a job. I was working downtown selling ice cream on the bicycles. It was called Dickie Dee, you know one of those things in front and you drove around town selling ice cream to people. It was by commission so you didn’t make any money if you didn’t sell anything and you got fifteen cents per ice cream that you sold, and at that time, ice cream sold for a dollar, dollar fifty or whatever it was. So you loaded up and you biked all over Vancouver to sell this ice cream and when you ran out you went back and got more and you came back again. On a good day, you made thirty dollars, on a bad day you make ten bucks I think, but it was a job.

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When summer finished and school started again, I got another job in construction—a company that was owned by an Ismaili. I started working for them so I never went back to school. I started working with them doing different jobs, getting paid minimum wage at the time. My brother was working and my sister-in-law was working but supporting six people, and we're trying to get my parents. By this time, we knew where they were, we knew where they were the whole time, so we tried to sponsor them to come. The more income there is, the better it looks, so I didn't go back to school, I just started working for this company doing construction work for minimum wage and my whole paycheck would go to my brother so that he could run the household or whatever.

I did that for the longest time. Nineteen seventy-nine, '78 or '79, the company was in hardship so they weren't getting enough jobs and I wasn't getting paid regularly so I quit and started working for a gas station, the graveyard shift. I used to work the night shift all the time. I'm trying to think which came first, the construction or the gas station—other way around, the gas station came first and then the construction. I used to work at the gas station and go to school in the daytime and work at night kind of thing, and then I left school and worked fulltime at the gas station at night and then the construction. Then I got a job at a cabinet manufacturing company so I started working there. While I was doing that, I met Jane my wife, and I started going to school at BCIT [British Columbia Institute of Technology] and I took appliance servicing—learning how to fix appliances—because I had a knack for that even though I was working at the gas station. A lot of friends had problems at home with machines and things breaking down and household items. I used to fix them all the time for free, so I learned how to do a lot of electrical stuff and I just had a knack for it so I got into it. I took appliance servicing in school, which is a ten month course, and then the recession hit.”

Shezan: “That was in the early 1980s right? Yeah, okay.”

Shafick: “No jobs, alright. Couldn't get into that field. I was living with my parents and then Jane got an apartment in Richmond so we moved in together. The place where we were living, an apartment building, they were looking for a maintenance person, they were hiring so I started working for them. I used to do painting there and maintenance, and a cousin of mine owned a painting company so I started working with them and doing all that. Then I started my own business doing painting, construction, renovating basements and stuff like that. It was with my cousin that we started the business together and he moved to Toronto, and the company I work for now, at present, I started working for them and I've been with them for almost thirty years.”

Shezan: “Thirty years? Wow.”

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Shafick: "That's the story. Long and boring."