

Shiraz Lalani

Ugandan Asian Oral History Project: Settling In

Shiraz Lalani: “The guy from Manpower called me. He says, “We have a job lined up for you.” I said, “Fantastic!” So I went for my first day, it was Victoria Beauty Salon. You see, I had told them that I worked as an accountant, but this job that they told me is there for you, it’s in shipping. I had no idea what it was, so I went in a suit for my first interview. The guy calls me into an office and he was kind of taken aback because, you see, it was in shipping and he thought that I was overly dressed for that kind of thing. He says, “Do you know the kind of job you are going to be doing?” I said, “Yeah, it says shipping.” For me, I thought shipping was a company kind of thing, you know, maybe there would be something to deliver. So he says, “Well, we are offering you two dollars and twenty-five cents starting, and the job is right there,” he says, “You can start but you might have to go back and change your clothes.” I said, “What do you mean?” He says, “Well, it’s a different kind of job. It’s not in the office.” I said, “No, don’t worry about me.” I took my jacket off and they put me in the back and there was a truck there, a big truck offloading. I said, “Shoot. I’m a company guy, an office guy here.” That was my first job.

I worked there for two, three days. I go home back to the professor’s house, and he goes, “How was the job?” I was pretty tired, even though I was young, right? Twenty-two years old. So I told the professor, I said, “I’m going to quit.” He says, “Don’t worry, we will let Manpower know that you are not into this kind of thing.” They found another job for me, another—Kitchener area, there’s a lot of factories there so they sent me to another factory and they were making shoes. When the shoe comes around, I put the sole in, it goes up, somebody else does something—it was a line. Every day I go there—sole, sole, sole. This was my job for eight hours. And then, I had to do certain, and I was missing out some...”

Shezan Muhammedi: “Very fast.”

Shiraz: “Very fast. Three days later—three, four days—they called me. They said, “You know what? It’s not going to work out because we need somebody who can speed up things.” So back and forth my first year. I went through twelve jobs. And my last job—fast forward—was at a cookie factory and I enjoyed working there because what I was doing is, the cookies were coming in the line and I would pick up the cookie and put it in a box. This was my job. This is the kind of jobs there were—factory jobs, okay. But there were lots of them, you could change like, you know. There were some broken cookies there so I ate some of them because they were nice cookies, you know. I’d never seen cookies like that. I would grab some and I would eat some so I was warned by the supervisor. He says, “Those cookies, they go in the garbage. It’s not for you.” And he said, “If you want to eat those cookies, we have stuff you can buy separately. There’s a day you can go and choose anything.” But the cookies were tempting. So I was warned, but I started eating another cookie and he warned me again and caught me on the third day again. I was caught. They fired me.”

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Arzina Lalani: "This is cookies!" [laughter]

Shiraz: "Cookies, yeah. Dare cookies. Still there, remember I told you. They fired me for eating cookies because I was not supposed to do that, you know. It was, I guess, hazardous or whatever the case may be.

But during that first year, it was interesting. It was very cold, it was... we had jamatkhana being established in the Kitchener area. More Ugandans came in. I was finding it exciting. For me it was exciting because it was different and my parents were in India so I had to get paperwork ready for them. I sponsored them because they had to be sponsored. They did not get the visa. They were in India but we were told that after everything is done, they would be allowed to come from India. So that part was also being done and I was with my uncle.

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After, two weeks with the professor, I told the professor, "I am ready to move out," because the place where I was working was far. So I said, "I want to be near, you know," because transportation, buses and everything in the morning—its wintertime, remember. And I said, "No, I want to be somewhere near." So there was another Ugandan guy. I teamed up with him and we rented a room, 58 Francis. Remember I took you there?"

Arzina: "50 Francis. Who were you sharing the room with?"

Shiraz: "This was this Hindu guy. Only for a couple of weeks, then he moved out and I stayed at 58 Francis. Remember I took you there? Still that house is there, you know, that building there. So basically that was in Kitchener, for almost a year, year and a half. Then one of my Ugandan friends came and he wanted to go to visit Toronto. He says, "Why don't you come with me?" So I said, "Okay, let's go and see Toronto." This was in the, it must have been in the summertime. We were there in the winter and then in the summertime. And then, you know Toronto Star building?"

Shezan: "Yeah."

Shiraz: "At the bottom is Lake Ontario, and you could go on a cruise there, boat cruise and everything. We had a weekend off, so we came, we stayed in YMCA. My friend's sister, Sully, she was staying in an apartment there somewhere, so he said, "Let's go Shiraz." So I said, "Okay fine, let's go." So we came to Toronto in YMCA we stayed there, and the next day was Sully's son's first birthday, so we ended up there. He says, "What are you doing in Kitchener?" I said, "Well I am doing all these factory jobs, you know, whatever comes I take it and I have to do it." He says, "Why don't you try... I work in the Toronto Star building and there's a company called Kuehne + Nagel. Why don't you try? I'm there in the export department." He said, "You've got an accounting background and they have a customs department." So I said, "Fine."

After we finished our trip—remember, I was in my shorts, we had just finished our cruise, the boat cruise there. So I go on the thirty-third floor and there's a receptionist there. She says, "What can I do for you?" And I said, "Look, I am looking for a job." She said, "What kind of a job?" I said, "Any job." She said, "Let me call the human resources guy." She called the human resources guy—this is Kuehne + Nagel, 1974. He comes out and he says, "Well, what can I do for you?" I said, "I am looking for a job." He says, "Where are you from?" I said, "From Uganda." No resumes, nothing. In my shorts and I'm here talking to this guy. He says, "Come in my office. Tell me in five minutes what you were doing in Uganda." I said, "Well, I came here, I was kicked out by Idi Amin. My job in Uganda, I was a bookkeeper, accounting background, and I was working for this company and we would do some customs clearance." "Oh! You were involved in customs clearance of the goods?" I said, "Yeah, that was part of my function." "Oh," he says, "That's what we do here." This company, part of the department is customs clearance, people

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bringing goods from all over the world, and this is what we do here. He says, "When would you like to start?" Nineteen seventy-four, May 5th. Guess what? I'm still there."

Shezan: "No way!"

Shiraz: "Forty-one years. That was a temporary job. They said, "Well, we'll hire you temporary, we'll see how things work out." Between that day and today, the rest is history. I'm still with that company."

Shezan: "That's amazing. I had no idea."

Shiraz: "I'm sixty-five now. Just recently, we worked out the arrangement and everything. They paid me out but I said, "I want to continue," so they've given me two years contract. But I've worked for this company for forty years, Kuehne + Nagel."

Shezan: "And to think, yeah, you were just there for the weekend to have fun."

Shiraz: "Yes, see what happened. That goes to tell me, look how uncertain—sometimes, when I'm sitting around and I reflect back on what happened, did I know that in Uganda, on that certain day, that Idi Amin would make an announcement and I would be coming to a strange country? Did I know that? No. I come here, there is somebody who's going to take care of me. I did not know that I would be coming with my friend Amin to Toronto. Did I? We didn't know about that, what was going to happen. Then, met Sully, Amin's sister and he says, "Why don't you try the job here." We go on the boat cruise and I said, "What the hell. I'm here in Toronto, nothing to lose." Did I know that at that time, fast forward, that I would be there for forty years? Destiny. I am a believer in this. Whatever happens, Rahim, my son, he says it happens for a reason. Everything that happens in your life happens for a reason. He's a believer in that, I'm believing now because this is what happened to me."