

FHS Oral History Project – Priyanka Chandra Sen

Description:

Priyanka Chandra Sen was born in Orlando, Florida, in 1994. She recounted her upbringing, particularly her experiences navigating her dual American and Indian identity, from her parents maintaining Indian cultural norms at home while attempting to assimilate her within American society, to her own cultural encounters throughout her K-12 education in Orlando. She specifically remembered how she and the other few Indian girls tried to match a particular “American” aesthetic in an attempt to fit in. In 2013, Priyanka attended the University of Central Florida, initially studying pre-law and finance and switching to social media marketing. In this retelling, Priyanka emphasized the cultural stereotypes regarding professional careers and how she overcame them. After graduating from UCF in 2017, Priyanka worked for several companies in varied social media management positions, including Disney, NBC, and Give Kids the World Village. In addition to explaining the similarities and differences in approaches and skills with each job, Priyanka assessed more broadly the social media landscape and its cultural impact, especially important considering that she studied and worked during a decade in which the medium experienced rapid changes (c. 2010-2025). In 2014, Priyanka joined the Asian Cultural Association (ACA), describing how her role has shifted from photographing events to, at the time of the recording, serving as the director of marketing for the organization. She outlined the importance of the ACA for the Indian community in Orlando. Priyanka also discussed broader cultural changes and continuities in Orlando since the early 2000s.

Transcription:

00;00;03 - 00;00;23

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: This is Sebastian Garcia interviewing Priyanka Chandra on May 16th, 2025, at Priyanka’s home residence in Orlando, Florida for the Florida Historical Society Oral History Project. Can you please restate your name, your date of birth and where you were born?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: Yes. So my name is Priyanka Chandra Sen. I was born in Orlando, Florida. And date of birth? September 15th, 1994.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Can you recall your childhood growing up in Orlando, Florida, as an Indian American?

00;00;45 - 00;02;17

PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: Absolutely. So my father came to the States in the late 80s and actually, ended up in New Jersey and came down to Florida because he was craving some warmth, because India is generally very warm. And he put down roots here and brought my mother over and his entire family over, actually. So I grew up in what you call a joint family, meaning his siblings all stayed in the house with us. So I grew up with uncles and aunts, [and] my grandma in the home. And growing up here, I felt like I was living, at that time in the 90s, almost two different lives. I was living the life of an American child, and then I was living the life of an Indian child whenever I would enter my home. There was not a lot of, I would say overlap culturally back then just because there was not as much awareness. So, for example, it

would be the holiday season. And usually here that means Thanksgiving, Christmas, maybe Hanukkah. But for me it also meant Diwali, which is the festival of lights. It meant Navratri, which is our religious festive season. So I almost [had] two identities because there was not a lot of understanding of what I was doing culturally. But I think a lot of that has changed over time.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And we are definitely going to talk about those changes over time. But before we get there, were you an only child?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: Yes. And in a very, I would say busy full house, but I was the first daughter, first granddaughter. So that and also being the one that was born here in comparison to my entire family that was born in India. So that was a big change across the board for the entire family and adjusting to what that means, raising a child for the first time, let alone in another country.

00;02;51 - 00;02;56

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And how do you think your parents did that?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: I think they did the best they could, and they did what they thought was best. And I think a lot of the times immigrant parents are learning from each other as well as trying to take what they went through back home in India and then bring it here and adjust it. And I give my parents a lot of credit for adjusting what they knew to what makes sense societally here in the States, because they made sure that I at least attempted to fit in with what was the norm, whether it was us doing an Easter egg hunt, just so I knew what that was, or decorating the house or going trick or treating, they wanted me to be able to do both, especially when it comes to a conversation with my, let's say, classmates or friends. So, I think they just really attempted to assimilate, but not lose their identity at the same time.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And in what other ways did you experience that assimilation, or did your parents try to attempt to assimilate you?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: I think they definitely wanted me to have an understanding of what the norm was here. I think a lot of it was whether it was through the food, through the holidays, through the cultural norms. Christmas was always really big in our household, though we are not Christian, it was more for the celebratory cultural norm that is here in the States. One thing I do give my parents credit for is they did not change their names, which is pretty common in a lot of immigrants or first gen who come here and they have to adjust their traditional name to be more palatable to people here in the society. Though that is not as common today, and people are leaning more into the traditional mindset, I have plenty of people, even in my father's generation or younger, who go from whether it is Sanjay to Sam, or they completely switch their name and make it more palatable and so I give them credit for that.

They did not make me shorten my name or adjust it, and they empowered me to, let's say, if I was in class, if a teacher could not pronounce it, I would make sure that they could. So I think that was the two sides.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What elementary school did you go to?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: I went to Hunter's Creek Elementary School, so I lived over on the Kissimmee side for a while, and then we moved over to Doctor Phillips in 2005. And we have been in this area ever since. And I moved over to Lake Nona with my husband this past year.

00;05;41;23 - 00;05;51;00

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And talk to me about your elementary school experience. What was your favorite subject? You know, your classmates and your teachers, all that?

00;05;51 - 00;07;33

PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: Oh, yeah. Honestly, I had a lot of fun outdoors, which is so funny because I am not an outdoor person, but there was this heavy focus in spirit days and P.E. and field days were really big. And I remember just being in those primary solid colored T-shirts and running around. And I have this very tactile, vivid memory of this day where I must have been in kindergarten or first grade. We were learning about numbers, and we were learning about the number "100." And we had something called the hundred day where we did activities surrounding that number. And I have this tactile memory of making trail mix with ten pieces of ten different things. And things with shaving cream. I just have so much respect for the teachers because I still remember all of it. Not every single detail, but everything they tried to do, to just make it exciting. And when it comes to a favorite teacher, I do not know where this man is, but his name was Mr. Merja, and, he was my fifth grade teacher, and he loved mashed potatoes. And I think he is the reason why I love mashed potatoes. And he would have us leave class a couple minutes early to go to lunch so he can go to lunch with us and get in line in front of us, so he can get his two scoops of mashed potatoes. And so we would be the first ones in line for lunch. So I do not know where he is, and I hope he is well. And he is the reason why maybe I have too many potatoes.

00;07;34 - 00;07;51

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Granted you were very young during elementary school, but do you think at that time you were aware of your uniqueness, your differences, but of course, your similarities to your classmates?

00;07;51 - 00;09;00

PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: Absolutely. If anything, it was actually more highlighted in your youth. I was one of two Indians in my entire school. The other Indian, his name was Vishal. Again, [I] do not know where he is. Shout out Vishal. That was it. Everybody else was not like us. So, again, like I said, it was very evident when no one else really understood what I was experiencing. There would be days where we had, let's say, religious ceremonies or

festivals where I would have to go leave school, for example, or leave town for the festivities. And when I would come back, I would not be able to properly articulate what it was or why because there was no relatability factor. But yeah, it was very clear. There was no moments of feeling alone or being ostracized or bullied. But it was almost like, like I said, a secret piece of my identity because I did not have anyone to share it with. There was not this collective of, you understand me, I understand you, and we are having a forum to speak about it.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. Well said. And you know, relatedly, in terms of your age and how young you were, you know, 9/11 happens, and there was a shift in how this country views brown people generally. I am curious. Did you feel that even though you were young or did your family feel that or did your family talk about it? What was that like?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: Oh, absolutely. I think everybody remembers that day in some shape or form. I remember the TVs being on, the teachers staring at them, and us not knowing what was happening or why we should be scared or what we should feel. We were all picked up from school and it was palpable. There was a change. There was a shift. Again, I personally was not as aggressively affected as I probably could have been. I did deal with one bullying situation where an older kid asked if my dad was on the plane, and I remember bringing that back home, and both of my parents not getting angry or making a big deal about it, but I think it was definitely just out of more of a shielding. I think they wanted to protect me. I never grew up in a home where we had the classic full house sitcom, "Let's all have a family meeting." I did not grow up in a family meeting household. We very rarely talk about our feelings, which I think is in general just something that happens in most immigrant homes. And I think generationally, it is starting to break. But, yeah, that was the big one, I remember coming home with that. And as I grew older, my dad would tell me stories of racism and situations he dealt with and again, it was an additional layer and I think an additional amount of work most people of color, maybe all people of color, have to do to feel like we belong. It is almost like we have to prove ourselves times two, times three, times whatever. And my dad's been here since the 80s and being a person who worked his way up in the industry—and he is in the car industry—you can be the most talented, the most intelligent person, but it is about being respected. And I think you have to command that respect and do it a little more than everyone else. So yeah, I definitely will never ever forget that moment. And I was very young. I mean, in 2001, I was in first grade.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Wow.

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: Yeah.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: So transitioning into your teenage years. What middle school did you attend?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: I attended Southwest Middle School, which is in Doctor Phillips.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Nice. And were there more Indians at that school or was it relatively the same?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: More Indians. Actually, there is generally a larger Muslim Pakistani audience here and there are more people here from that region. But there was definitely more relatability. I felt there were more people of color for sure, and in general just a little bit more of an understanding. But that was the era, and I am talking 2006 through 2008 and 2009—and it trickled into my high school years—[when] being different, was not cool. Being the same was [cool]. So assimilation was still a big part of it, where if your hair was not straight and you were not wearing Abercrombie, something was wrong. You were not one of the many. So even if there were more Indians in my class, there still was not this desire to showcase culture. It was still trying to fit in as much as possible.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And, to that point, what high school did you attend?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: I attended Doctor Phillips High School.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And it is very interesting that you mentioned that because when I interviewed someone else, they had a similar experience, and it was around the same time frame of sort an almost overwhelming assimilation experience. To put it in more neutral, how did you navigate that in high school? Was there any ways that you specifically tried to maintain your Indianness?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: Oh yeah. The major surge that happened for me culturally was in college. And we will get there. But in high school, I was actually surrounded by a great group of friends who were all part of the Desi diaspora. And they were all mainly, yes, from Pakistan and Muslim, but we had this relatability through pop culture. So I was able to connect with all of those friends when it came to Bollywood, when it came to some of the very few Indian and Desi members of Hollywood at the time, it was, I think, just Mindy Kaling and Aziz Ansari and Russell Peters, that was still a big deal, but that was it. So, in high school, I was able to maintain my culture at home and maintain a through line at school with those friends. But when it comes to, again, the fitting in, I mean, we were still in—and all of my Indian girls will understand this—we were still straightening our hair to a crisp. We were still trying to wear the clothes that were fitting in, trying to almost dull and mute the features that we have as Indians and people of color. And again, we will never look exactly like we think we want to or how we think we should, because it is not physically possible without going that extra mile. So whether

it was the makeup, the hair, the shoes, the clothes, you are always trying to fit in at that age and things change.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What year did you graduate high school?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: I graduated in 2013.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: 2013. So you mentioned college. Where did you attend college?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: I attended college at the University of Central Florida.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What did you study?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: I studied—that is a layered question. So I started pre-law finance and quickly learned that that was not the way to go for me. So I transitioned into marketing and journalism.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Why did you enter college with pre law and pre finance?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: Well, I entered pre-law because I really thought I wanted to be an attorney. I said it in fourth grade because I did a field trip—shout out to elementary school teachers—I did a field trip to juvie, which is crazy in retrospect, but I got to interview a teen mother in jail. And I was like, this is cool. I want to defend people like this. And from fourth grade into college, I really was on this track of becoming an attorney. And it went from going that route to corporate. And as I was in that space, I realized I did not have the passion that is required to enter that zone, especially if I am not even in law school yet. So, I have this love for nonprofit work, which is currently what I do, and also just the psychology behind marketing. And this is prior to social media marketing even being a major or something people can do for work. But now obviously it is an entire career path. So that transition happened midway, which was definitely tough, especially telling my dad I no longer want to be an attorney and want to go into social media marketing, which was not really a thing, and telling my dad that was tough, but it had to be done because I just was not following that kind of predestined structured path.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: But to that point that that was going to be my next question, you know, how did you sort of—when we talked earlier about sort of there were specific things that your family and any immigrant culture broadly chooses to maintain and chooses to let go. One

of the things that, predominantly, generally, not exclusively, but generally maintained is these career stereotypes.

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: Absolutely.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: So did you face that?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: Oh, a hundred percent. I see it in my subsector of Indian culture, which is the Bengali community. Doctors, lawyers, engineers, PhD scientists, something in that zone, so those are kind of your cubbies. The minute you deviate from that generalized path—I am not going to say something is wrong—[but] something is off. The immediate question is what happened? So doctor [or] engineer was not going to happen because I was not into science, and I was not into math. So lawyer immediately became the cubby I was put in because I could speak, I was eloquent, I could argue, I was the talker of the family. I would always be with the adults and not the children. So I immediately got put in that zone. Now, though, I am the one that brought up lawyer to my dad in fourth grade, it stayed [with him] because it was in one of those columns that felt comfortable. In retrospect, the reason why that happens to immigrant families and immigrant family children more likely is because your parents just want you to be stable. Your parents just want you to be safe. They want you to have that financial freedom and just that stability that they did not feel when they came here. I mean, you are going to hear stories like this time and time again from all immigrant children. But like my dad worked in a factory, he was color matching chemicals. He was working in a diaper factory, and then he worked in catering, and he was dressing tables, so he had that journey that he obviously did not want me to have. So when I was sitting there in a Costco parking lot, telling him that I do not want to be a lawyer anymore and I want to go into social media marketing, his immediate reaction was, “You are going to struggle.” And I remember telling him, “I am okay with that,” but he was not. So again, it is not wanting your children to live the life you live and also wanting to leave a legacy in it to continue to get better. But yeah, there are those stereotypical jobs that are there for a reason. It is because they feel prominent, and they feel stable.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Right. Absolutely. And of course, it gets even more complicated when you start to realize a lot of those careers are very saturated.

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: Absolutely.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah. And they do not provide a sense of security.

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: There is no such thing as job security. And I think we are learning that more with time. But there are jobs today that did not exist a year ago and so on and so forth. And finding a niche and carving it for yourself is great. And I think people who come to this country to start from scratch, they are actually the people who act, who really—I do not want to say risk, I feel like the word risk has a negative connotation—but it is like a calculated risk of just starting life and really doing something new no matter what. Even if you come here and let's say, yes, work in a factory or become a PhD student, like those are your two really drastic situations, right? You are still taking a major risk. I remember when my dad was talking to me about social media or marketing in general being a risk. “Was it not a risk when you left India and came here, and you made that choice?” But again, it is not wanting your child to go through the same thing you went through.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Right. Well said. And to that point [about] new careers and, clearly you have a deep understanding of the context of your time in the sense of how when you embarked on that marketing, social media path, you realized how unprecedented it was. Can you just talk to me about what it was like studying that field at that particular point in time, 2010-ish, when social media was still in its infancy? You could argue still is in its infancy. Just talk to me about that.

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: I remember sitting in class and I was in a general marketing class, and they were talking about how businesses—and I am talking 2013-14, so over a decade ago—businesses are just starting to use social platforms such as Instagram to promote their whether it is product, service, etc., and the conversion rates on what that looks like at the time. And mind you, at that point the algorithm was completely different. There were optimal posting times, etc. and I remember thinking, “Are businesses going to shift from the commercial on TV to the social post?” And this is Pre-Influencer time. Then as time progressed, I started seeing the surge of the YouTube Creator community moving into the Instagram space and all of a sudden having power and very quickly did our generation and generations younger than us stop caring about the celebrity and started caring about these “normal” people who had “normal” lives—and I say that with quotes—who were promoting products and services. And that was when I saw value in potentially shifting my career in either managing the platforms, managing the relationships, or having an eye or jurisdiction over how a company is utilizing those platforms. And that ends up being the concept of social media marketing management. And that was kind of where I started leaning. But before that, I was a content creator. And I always like to say content creator instead of influencer because I just think that word holds too much power. But yeah, I was a content creator on Instagram. I worked with small businesses, I took quality photos of their products or services, and I posted it for them. And what quickly happened over, I would say three to five years is it went from the product or service—let's say you are doing social media marketing for a latte and or a coffee shop, and you are taking pictures of lattes in 2013 or 14, [and] it shifted in 2016-17—to it is me drinking the latte. Look at my face. Then it became just me no latte because it is about me. And that shift in what was the norm, especially in Instagram, made me almost remove myself from the creator space. And I went behind the scenes. So it was incredible, over the span of maybe three to four years, how quickly the shift occurred, and I was able to be a part of that in my career and in my education.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah. It is fascinating, as you are saying this answer, I have like a million more questions because of the way you articulated it was very interesting. So you said, “Pre-Influencer era.” So that means—how would you periodize that? Like what was the year?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: So in 2012, 2013—and I am going to mainly use Instagram because that tends to be kind the pivot point when it comes to business usage on social platforms—at that point, it was a space for you to put mainly photos and video was not there yet. So mainly you are putting photos to show to your friends and family. There all of a sudden was a surge, and I like to use 2016, 2017 because the Kardashians-Jenner family, which are, I like to say, along with Paris Hilton, are the “first original influencers.” If we want to use that word a little more dangerous. They were that first batch where they started utilizing social media to showcase products and brands that they were associating themselves with, and there was a lot of product placement occurring within social media. That transition, and then the folks from YouTube moving into the Instagram space, is why influencer marketing started to surge. You want to feel a relatability between yourself and the person using that product. And I think a great example in today's world is with TikTok, you have folks like Nabila, who is a Bengali content creator. She went from YouTube doing makeup reviews to now owning her own home decor brand. And again, she has partnerships with Coca-Cola. She has partnerships with Restoration Hardware, but it is because there is a relatability to a person who may look like you. That was not the case in our parents’ generation or later, because they did not relate to Tom Cruise or Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie or George Clooney. They did not look like those people, but those people were selling them products. So there has been a shift. And I would say that the mid to late 2000s is when all of a sudden, if I do not relate to you, I do not want to buy it, happened. And the girl next door—and when I say that you might have pictured Sandra Bullock, or you might have pictured Reese Witherspoon or whoever that is to you—the girl next door does not exist anymore because she or he or they looks different to every single person. And that was where the content creator stepped in.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And I am curious, how have you throughout your career, sort of, not impose but sort of, used your Indian background whether [to] uplift your community or bring more awareness from an outsider perspective coming in. Just talk to me about that.

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: I think the beauty of what has happened in the last decade or so is that there is this resurgence of being an independent, unique person. There is this desire to utilize platforms to showcase culture through content. And there is almost this, people crave this arena of sharing. And I think it is beautiful because I see Desi creators wanting to wear their, what we call *Jhumka*, which is our Indian earrings to work with their suits. I am seeing people take their meal preps, I am talking about your classic fitness bros, but instead of doing grilled chicken and broccoli, they are doing chicken tikka and some sort of Indian vegetable on the side, [and] they are still counting their macros, like you are bringing in your culture to your life rather than creating a boundary or a barrier. And I think the beauty of social media is it

[allows] people to see how to do it and then giving them a space to do it themselves. Whether it is, let me show you this eye makeup look I do when I am wearing my cultural clothing for an Indian wedding, but let me show you how to take it out on the town on a normal day. And that has been really interesting, seeing that people are celebrating Diwali casually now. I think it was in the last two years Publix started putting signage out front that said, "Happy Diwali," and they are celebrating this festival that people did not know about ten years ago. And so I think there is this blend of understanding that there is a lot more people from India and from that area than we think, and they are here to take up space. They are here to earn, they are here to lead and people who are in the marketing space, in the corporate space, are having to take them seriously. And I think that is where you see that shift.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And conversely, social media, the internet more broadly, has an underbelly. And it could be a very dangerous, problematic place.

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: Absolutely.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: From your career, not only how have you navigated that, but can you share any specific moments of experiencing hate through social media?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: Absolutely. When it comes to how to navigate it, the best way is to I personally do not like ignoring them, but I also do not like going head on. I think there is a way to do it in a clean and clear approach and making sure that you are so representing yourself in a way where you feel proud of what you are saying and what you are doing. And I think that comes from knowledge and education, as well as knowing that you are most probably not going to change that person's mind. So you have to know, is it effort worth spending, or is it worth focusing on a person that you cannot change versus focusing on the future? So it is a perspective shift.

When it comes to something I have actually experienced. I personally have not experienced any front racism or anything like that on my personal social pages, but I have managed social pages and, I manage our social page for the Asian Cultural Association (ACA) and seeing and again, it could be misconstrued, it could be confusion, it could be a desire for clarification, but it could be something as simple as "What are those dots on their forehead?" to as broad as, "Why are those guys wearing dresses?" And again, it is not a dress, and I would rather go at it with education. And it is actually this and this is what it means x, y, z versus going in with as much anger or hate as they may be portraying. I like to give people the benefit of the doubt, but a lot of the times, yeah, it comes from a space of ignorance. But let's not meet them there.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Right. Absolutely. So somewhat coming back to your own timeline. What year did you graduate from UCF?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: I graduated in 2017.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: 2017. And you entered the workforce immediately? Did you plan for graduate school? What sort of was your outlook on life at that moment?

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PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: So I did not have a traditional path, post-graduation. I ended up working for Disney for two years in merchandise, and I went from retail to training to becoming a coordinator, where I oversaw a store in Disney Springs. And during that time, I got my Masters in marketing. After that, I was able to pivot and work for GolfNow, which is a tee time booking app that is owned by NBC Golf. So I worked with NBC for about two years in sports marketing and content creation and platform management for golf courses around the country. And I did that for about three years. And now I am working with Give Kids the World Village, which is a nonprofit resort for children with critical illnesses, and I oversee their marketing. So I have been in, when you think about Orlando, you immediately think theme parks, so I did the theme park thing. Then when you think Florida, you think golf. I did the golf thing. And now, funnily enough, though, I am in the nonprofit sector, I am in hospitality, and there is a lot of hospitality in Florida. I mean, that is what keeps us afloat, for the most part. So, a little bit all over the place.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: How has your marketing skills, techniques and approaches changed and stayed the same throughout those different types of jobs?

00;34;27 - 00;35;32

PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: That is a great question. With Disney, I was in a social media internship, and at that point it was all about showcasing the brand as it was. Disney did not at that time, and maybe even today, they do not have this desire to change or adjust as much as other brands do. They're very rooted in who they are. NBC Golf is very DEI [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion] focused, NBC in general is, and they really wanted to grow the game. So their goal was to make golf more accessible to people of all backgrounds and make sure that there were barriers that were put down through their marketing. So that was a really excellent experience for me. And, when it comes to Give Kids the World, this is just pure outreach and knowledge of what the nonprofit is. So it varied based on each experience. And same with ACA, with the Asian Cultural Association, it is all knowledge based. We want to tell you where we are, what we are doing, and also why.

00;35;32 - 00;35;36

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And speaking about the ACA, when did you first get involved with them?

00;35;36 - 00;37;58

PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: I joined ACA in 2014 as a photographer. I photographed their events, and I quickly moved into a space where I was creating their content for them and

building out programs for them. And now I am the marketing director of the organization. And honestly, it was one of the best decisions I have ever made because I have been able to tap into this love I have for my culture, and not just my culture and my art, but the education of it. When you get to teach people about your culture through music, dance, art, food, you literally can see the gap closing. You literally can see hands extending because people want to come together. I think humans in general, there is a lot going on in the world, but humans in general do tend to, my positive outlook is love on each other. And when you share culture, that is how it happens. And when I was in college, I was part of the Indian Student Association, and I saw this desire for the students of UCF—and that was where I really met Indian people, like a mass group of Indian people—[wanting] to celebrate Holi. They want to celebrate the Diwali. They want to showcase their culture through dance and through music. And I had never experienced it before in that capacity. So to go from the Indian Student Association at UCF to ACA was a beautiful transition for me because, growing up in Orlando, it has been such a joy to see the focus of diversity, the focus of inclusion, and also the focus of art and culture within our county government and our local government and our citywide government. People really want to learn, they really want to grow. Even look at the food scene in Orlando, it has completely expanded. And that was not the case when I was a kid. So I think it is just seeing that that shift and in wanting to be a part of something and it is not just Indian culture, it is all cultures.

00:37:58 - 00:38:12

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What have you learned about your culture [whether] something new or reinforced through your involvement with the past student association at UCF, but also now with ACA?

00:38:13 - 00:39:58

PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: I think my biggest takeaway through ACA and the Indian Student Association is the focus that we have on the arts culturally, religiously, spiritually. When people think of Indians—and I am going to stereotype, but I can because I am an Indian—they think we could go back to our original thought process of doctors, engineers, very scientific. And then if we want to go really bad into the stereotype, now we are going into the gas station, hotel owning, taxi driving, so those are the stereotypes of the Indian people. What you do not think of is the dancers, the singers, the beautiful artists, the painters and the artists in the kitchen who are cooking. You do not think of the creativity. And working with ACA and with the Indian Student Association, but mainly with ACA, I have met these incredible singers, dancers, performers who have devoted their life to their craft and the way that they light up when they speak on it and when they are able to teach, is something that I did not experience because I myself, though I am the marketing director for the org and I speak to the organization, I am not a singer. I am not a dancer. I cannot play the tabla or the sitar or any of that, but I can represent those folks and make sure they have a platform. And that is why I am here. I am here to make sure that they have a space that is carved out for them in Florida to perform and share the culture. And I did not experience that growing up. I only experienced it through these organizations.

00:39:58 - 00:40:29

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And to go deeper with that, you have articulated in that response and throughout our conversation of why cultural organizations like the ACA remain important to

exist. It is to showcase culture, to bring awareness. Why is it important fundamentally to do that, to showcase not just your culture but culture to bring awareness in Orlando? Why is that important?

00:40:29 - 00:42:44

PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: I firmly believe that culture is identity. It truly showcases who we are as people and gives us that ability to be our true selves. And if we take it back to me in elementary school, being two different people, one at home and one in school, there are adults who are someone at home and someone at work. And to feel that way as an adult, I cannot imagine what that feels like because I got lucky enough to grow up in an era, and in a generation in which I was able to celebrate my culture. So the reason why these organizations are so pivotal is that people can feel proud of who they are, who they want to be, where they came from, and also share it with people who might not understand it. And if we can share and explain and educate together, it creates this harmony that I think sometimes lacks. But like I said whether you are a music person or a dance person or a food person, I personally am a food person, there is nothing that connects people more. If you come to a table or if you listen to music or watch a movie, whatever the case is, you can see this connection form and that is how people from two very different places can connect. India and the US are not close to each other. There is not a quick hop skip that you can do to be there, but you can feel close if you find a connector. And cultural organizations tend to be that connector. ACA is hosted a South Asian Film Festival for decades, and it is an institution within Orlando. And we partner with the Enzian [Theater], [an] incredible organization and theater. And most of the people who go to that film festival are not from India. They want to see South Asian films that are not Bollywood and learn about the culture and the country, and it is incredible to see them learn about the customs and the culture through art and film. It is a medium that allows people to relate.

00:42:44 - 00:42:49

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: How has Orlando changed since you were born?

00:42:49 - 00:44:27

PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: So much and in my opinion, in amazing ways. I am a big fan of Orlando. I love the city, and I am so proud of all of the focus on culture, on inclusion, on community, and whether it is if you go to Mills Avenue, that is our little Vietnam. It is absolutely stunning. The focus on small business and on people who are trying to showcase their culture, yes, through food, but through art and through just every avenue they can. And I mean, growing up, if you wanted to go out to eat, you were going to Red Lobster. There was not the opportunity to go somewhere that was different or unique. If you wanted to experience something, you were going to Disney. You were not going to the ballet; you were not going to an art festival in Winter Park. So whenever I have people who come into town, I say, yes, do the theme parks, sure, but make sure you go to the other side of the city and see what the city really is about. It is about community. It is about people who come together to showcase who they are. And there is a lot of pride. There is literal pride in being part of this city. And it is very layered. So I am super proud of all of the changes I have seen. I mean, I have participated within the Orange County government. We host the Diwali every single year. So we are lighting a lamp and celebrating the Festival of Light and Good over Evil within our county in downtown Orlando. And like I said, twenty, thirty years ago, no one knew what that was.

00;44;27 - 00;44;33

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Conversely, what challenges has Orlando faced and currently faces today?

00;44;33 - 00;45;19

PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: I think Orlando is a young city, though it is doing a lot of amazing work, it has a lot of growing up to do. I think Orlando feels like this safe bubble, almost like a haven, which is why [the] Pulse [shooting] was so traumatizing to many, including myself because I always figured we would be good. Everybody else might not be, but we will be okay. Orlando needs to understand that it is a city to be reckoned with. When you think of Florida, you do not just think of Miami anymore. So almost an understanding of the power and then an understanding of the responsibility. I think that is what Orlando has to come to terms with.

00;45;19 - 00;45;24

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: How do you think Orlando will change in the next twenty five years?

00;45;25 - 00;46;11

PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: Twenty five years? I think Orlando, in the path that we are currently headed, I think Orlando is going to continue to lean on locals and actually become more of a space for culture, community, diversity and a little more eclectic. I think when you think of Orlando, it feels very soft around the edges. And, you know, of course it is Orlando. We know exactly what it is. I think in thirty years, in a positive way, we will not be able to recognize it anymore. I think it is going to become a true city that is fueled by local people who love it.

00;46;11 - 00;46;28

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: We have discussed this throughout the conversation, but I ask it explicitly, how has your Indian heritage influenced your perspective on life generally, but also living in Orlando specifically?

00;46;28 - 00;47;57

PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: When it comes to life in general, my heritage and my culture has taught me the importance of your family and your roots. I think it has always brought me back to Earth. I think when it comes to life, and sometimes things get really heavy and you start to drift off into space and culturally and through my foundation, I have been able to come back to Earth and remember what is important. And when it comes to the way I view my upbringing and in my city in general, I think that our culture and most cultures are celebrated, and it makes me really proud and happy to see that I can feel like my culture is celebrated in my city, and not a lot of people can say that. Whether it is the Indian American Chamber of Commerce, they host a India Day with the Orlando Magic, and you get to see dancers on center court, whether it is ACA hosting the Film Festival every single year or Indian food festivals, whatever the case is, it is going to just continue to grow, not just for our culture, but for many others. And it reminds me that it is good to be unique and the more that we speak to our culture and our differences, the less unique we become. And that is not a bad thing. I think it is a good thing

that we feel this relatability. And we can stop having those two identities that I think a lot of people have.

00;47;57 - 00;48;08

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Lastly, if someone is listening to this recording fifty or a hundred years from now, what do you want them to know about your culture and the state of Florida.

00;48;09 - 00;49;18

PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: When it comes to the culture, I want them to know that everybody is welcome to learn. Everyone is welcome to be a part of it because culturally, what we want is people to be happy and people to be together. And that does not mean you have to be just like us. So that does not mean you have to be Indian. That does not mean you have to be from India. But we want you to take a seat at the table, and we want to come together, and I know that that is going to be the same, whether it is fifty, a hundred or a thousand years from now. When it comes to the state of Florida, like I said, I have a lot of love for my city and my state and my home, and I just hope that the path that we are on continues when it comes to the love for culture, community and diversity. And I hope that there is still a focus on the fact that the people are what matter. And when it comes to the kids who are going to be grown up by then and should have kids of their own and so on and so forth, make sure they know that they are different and make sure that they promote their differences, and that way they will not feel so different.

00;49;18 - 00;49;24

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Priyanka, thank you so much for taking some time out of your day to share a little bit about your life story. I appreciate it.

00;49;24 - 00;49;25

PRIYANKA CHANDRA SEN: Thank you.