Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Mahima Joishy, Class of 1996
Neelofer Chaudry, Class of 1996

Interviewed by
Millie Cook, Class of 2018

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Abstract

In this interview, best friends, Mahima Joishy and Neelofer Chaudry look back on how they met, and how their friendship influenced their time at Smith. Having both lived in Wilder house, Joishy and Chaudry recount their favorite Wilder cheers and traditions. Joishy and Chaudry were also involved in Ekta, the South Asian Students’ Association.

Restriction

None.

Format

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Videographer

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Transcript

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Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording


Transcript

GEIS: I'm ready when you are.

COOK: All right. So this is Millie Cook, and I am conducting an interview with Mahima and Neelofer on May 13th for the Smith College Oral History Project. Thank you so much for coming in to do this.

CHAUDRY: Thank you for having us.

JOISHY: Such a privilege, thank you.

COOK: It's a privilege for us, honestly. So what's brought you back for reunion? So it's your 20-year, right?

CHAUDRY: Correct, yes.

COOK: What are you excited to do here for your reunion?

CHAUDRY: So we're graduates of 1996. And we didn't know when in time this happened, that we are back for our 20th reunion already. We were just discussing, Mahima and I, that—where have the last 20 years gone? You know, where in space and time have they gone? And being back on campus, it's just really amazing, because it seems like no time has passed.

JOISHY: I would agree. And my friendship with Neelofer was one of the best fruits of my Smith education. We were a group of four of us, named the fearsome foursome. And for the most part, we lived in the quad, with exception of two of the fearsome foursome. She lived in Cutter, and the other lived in Morris. But we had three very happy years in the quad, and were so active on campus in a number of ways. And we came to celebrate our friendship. And that's one of the reasons I'm here. Probably the primary reason is to celebrate the friendships made here.
COOK: That's wonderful. So do you want to tell a little about how you got here, to Smith?

JOISHY: Sure, may I start?

CHAUDRY: Please.

JOISHY: OK. So my story, the journey to Smith started in the year 1990. I was having a very prim and proper tea at the house of Sayeda Kareem in the mountains of Abha, Saudi Arabia. Sayeda Kareem, at the time, I think, was maybe a senior citizen and a friend of my mom. And I was a teenager. I was probably 15. And Sayeeda Kareem said that she just adores her new daughter-in-law, who graduated from this amazing college called Smith College. And I had never heard of Smith College. But the next day, I went to the guidance counselor of [Asir] Academy, the high school I had gone to in Saudi Arabia. And my mind was set. I was going to go to Smith College when it was my time to go to Smith. And I applied, and I got in. But there's more to this story. I'll yield the floor to Neel for now.

CHAUDRY: Thanks, Mahima. Wow. That's a wow story. So, as the universe has it aligned, I had first heard of Smith College through the daughter of a family friend, [Rufuth?] Kareem. Her daughter's name is Henna, and she is a graduate of Smith College in the eighties. And I would so admire her every time I would go over to the house in Port Jefferson, Long Island. I would just be so inspired by anything that she would have to say, anything that she did. She was just this beautiful, smart, engaging, very inspiring woman. And I knew that I wanted to be just like her. And so the fact that she went to Smith was the sole inspiration behind me going to my guidance counselor and inquiring, at Port Jefferson High School, the same high school that she went through many years before me. Where is this place, and how can I get there, too? And there began my journey to Smith. And I applied and I got in as well. And one of the most amazing milestones of my life, I have to say.

JOISHY: Now I didn't even see the campus, because when I applied, I was at TASIS [The American School in England], England, which is where I graduated from high school. So I was just kind of high on the mystique and the photos and the parade of successful alumni, and Sophia Smith's mission. And when I landed here, it was even better than I imagined. And one day, at the president, Mary Maples Dunn's, house, there was a reception. And my mom zeroed in on her.

CHAUDRY: And said, "Neelofer, so nice to meet you. You must meet my daughter, Mahima. She's milling around somewhere here on the lawn." And I said, "OK, definitely, I will." And before I could make my way over to Mahima, I said, "Let me just take a fruit bowl, assemble a fruit bowl for
myself." And I make my way over to the, what do you call it? A boat in which the fruit are in, but it's a fruit itself. A watermelon. Watermelon boat with fruit. And I'm assembling my bowl, and I happened to look up and straight directly from me, on the other side of the watermelon fruit bowl, is standing Mahima. And we lock eyes, and we introduce ourselves. And that was the first moment when, at the inception of our friendship, actually, it was on the first day arriving on campus, over the fruit bowl, at Mary Maples Dunn's house.

JOISHY: Yeah. And so, you know, my mom followed up with me. And she wanted to make sure that I had connected with Neelofer. And my mom had even taken her extension down at that time. We had phones, and there were four-digit extensions. Eventually, I did get around to calling Neelofer, and we were both going to get ready for an event at Ekta, the South Asian Students' Association. And before that, we sat down and recapped how we came to Smith. And could not believe that—

CHAUDRY: Indeed, the person who had inspired and led our way to Smith was the same woman, Henna Smith, who graduated in the late eighties. And she didn't even know it, that she inspired two women from two different spots on the globe to come and meet at this very unique, amazing place that has since shaped both of our lives.

JOISHY: Yeah, I mean, we couldn't believe it. Because I know Henna's mother in law, Mrs. Kareem, who my mom had taken me to have tea at her place. And she was the daughter-in-law Smithie. And Neelofer knew her personally growing up. And from opposite ends of the globe, we both came to Smith because of her. And you know, Sayeeda Kareem is still a dear friend of our family, and she was thrilled that I graduated from Smith, just like her daughter-in-law did.

CHAUDRY: Yeah. And I have to add that Henna has a younger sister, [Sabha?], who's also a Smith graduate. So it was the two sisters in conjunction who also influenced me and my journey to Smith. And the two are amazing women who, to this day, are women that I look up to, who are successful, who are active community members in their respective states where they live, and just so admirable. And they are the reason that a new friendship blossomed and continues to this day, between Mahima and I.

JOISHY: Twenty-five years of friendship, and counting. Of the fearsome foursome, actually.

CHAUDRY: Of the fearsome foursome, exactly.

JOISHY: And we miss them dearly. We were all together for tenth reunion, but two of them could not make it this time. But we're determined to still have a
good time. And what's so interesting is we had just stated, before we arrived on campus, that we wanted to sit on the banks of Paradise Pond, and write the opening lines of the article we were jointly going to submit to the Smith Alumni Quarterly, when Amanda, who is one of the archivists here and a Smithie from the Class of 2013 just brought to our attention that maybe we would like to do this. So it's unbelievable how everything has been coming full circle again and again.

COOK: That's so [fun?] that you could be here and tell the story. It's an incredible story.

JOISHY: We've never heard a story like this one. Not that we should think that ours is the best story. But I've never heard anything quite like this.

COOK: Yeah, I think (inaudible). So do you want to talk about your time at Smith? What did you major in?

CHAUDRY: I majored in government, and I minored in third world development studies, although I don't think that minor is called that anymore here. Do you know what it is called?

COOK: I'm not quite sure.

CHAUDRY: OK, maybe just development studies. But I loved my major. I even had the acronym or the shortened version, "gov," engraved into my class ring, on the back of it. And if I had to do it all over again, I would major in government again, and do the archives specialization that you're doing.

COOK: What about you?

JOISHY: I majored in economics, and then I was going to minor in public policy. And then I got a nice scolding from my mom, saying, "Tuition has gone up to $25,000. You better double major." So I really stepped it up and I think did almost all the credits for the gov double major my senior year. So then I ended up double majoring in economics and government. I used to take classes through the five-college consortium as well. At Amherst College, took mathematics and law, jurisprudence and social thought. And that was really amazing. Just really miss my time here. It was just beyond words.

COOK: So you said that you were living on the quad. What houses did you live in?

CHAUDRY: So I moved from Cutter after my first year, and moved into Wilder, because Mahima was there. So I entered the lottery system, and when I had to rank which houses, Mahima was the big inspiration behind me selecting that house. And I became a quad woman at that point.
JOISHY: I was a Wilder woman for all four years. And I remember there were T-shirts being sold, and darn, I regret not getting one. Wasted days and Wilder nights, that was our T-shirt. And I remember sports bras were also sold, saying, Smith Supports Women. And I had one for many years, until I, you know, could no longer wear it because it became shredded.

COOK: What was (inaudible) while you were there?

CHAUDRY: Well, there was a house song that I'd always have you sing, because I never was able to memorize it. Can you please do us the honors?

JOISHY: Sure. Tutti Frutti, Wilder booty. Watch Wilder get down. We're going down to mess you up. We're coming up, whoop whoop whoop. Sounds so silly now. But at that time, we were into it.

COOK: [I'm pretty sure it is?].

JOISHY: Yeah. And we used to have a rivalry with Morris House. We used to steal their "M" and make it our "W." And there were many failed attempts for them to recapture it. Which they finally did, after three years. And we had a rivalry with Comstock. There was something going on. We were stealing things from them, and them from us, but I don't quite remember what now. Do you remember?

CHAUDRY: I don't remember, no.

JOISHY: Sometimes, we would have brunch in Comstock, every other Sunday, because the dining was still very much there in each house. But a lot of people were sleeping in and not eating brunch. So I remember they, you know, had brunch in one house or the other. We would go underground if it was really cold.

CHAUDRY: Oh, that's right. That's right. I personally love and miss the Friday teas, you know. That was just iconic about Smith campus life.

JOISHY: And the candlelight dinners. We used to get to invite our professors.

CHAUDRY: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

JOISHY: With real linens and candlelight and all that.

CHAUDRY: Yeah. We still had the crockery with the floral emblems on all the plates and the cups. And it's just — that kind of tradition is unheard of in this day
and age, at any institution. So to have come through that is just, it's exhilarating.

**COOK:** Do you have any other favorite traditions that you liked here?

**CHAUDRY:** Oh gosh, there's probably—

**JOISHY:** Mountain day. Mountain day.

**CHAUDRY:** Yeah, when the bells would go off for mountain day.

**JOISHY:** We both loved the a cappella jams. We attended every single one. I think we have to attend the one tomorrow in Sage.

**CHAUDRY:** Yeah, they actually have the Smiffenpoofs coming to perform at our class dinner tomorrow. They're opening up for us.

**JOISHY:** We love the a cappella jams.

**COOK:** (inaudible)

**JOISHY:** No.

**CHAUDRY:** Although I must say, my senior year, the fearsome foursome had me try out for one of the—

**JOISHY:** It was a Beatles song.

**CHAUDRY:** But what was the group? It was one of the co-ed groups, though. Five college systems.

**JOISHY:** (inaudible).

**CHAUDRY:** No, I don't remember the name.

**JOISHY:** Something tones, maybe, I remember. There was a co-ed a cappella group (inaudible).

**CHAUDRY:** But they chose a Beatles song for me to — they said, Neel, you can really carry a tune. And we want you to try this. And I was very shy. I was very hesitant. But here were my Smith women backing me up and having me do something. Having me take a risk, and having me explore the unknown. And there I did. I went out for the tryouts. I belted out a Beatles song.

**JOISHY:** It was amazing.
CHAUDRY: Your friend, something about—

JOISHY: Yeah.

CHAUDRY: A Little Help From My Friends, the classic. Just a little help from my friends. And it was my senior year, so I couldn't join the group. You know, they needed longevity, and I was also such a novice. But the experience itself—

JOISHY: She did really well. I think we should have backed you up earlier to do it.

CHAUDRY: It was amazing. And until this day, we scope out a cappella jams in New York City. And we make a date once a year to go.

JOISHY: We've gone most years, and it's so much fun. It happens at the same place, at the Columbia University Miller Theatre. We've gone to a few other places in The Village to see, like, Invisible Men. And then there's a seven sisters a cappella group that we once went to see, the Metropolitones. So we try to keep aspects of what we loved on campus still alive.

COOK: What kind of clubs or orgs were you involved in?

CHAUDRY: So we were both very active in the South Asian Club, which Mahima had mentioned a little earlier. Ekta. And we both took officer positions. In fact, Mahima was our president for two years, our junior year and our senior year. And I took various positions. I was a HONS, head of new students, my sophomore year. And then I became publicity co-chair with [Amina Chaudry?]. And put together all the flyers for events. In fact, we were just looking through the archives and found the flyers for [Mindy?] night, for the henna nights that we had.

JOISHY: We used to be filled to capacity. Like, beyond the fire hazard standards. And the deans used to come. And it was just so much fun.

CHAUDRY: Yeah, we used to cater like a nice South Asian dinner from India House that would come. And the whole campus would be banging down the doors to get in. It was incredible.

JOISHY: And we used to perform, too. We used to perform as guest stars in the celebrations, performances. We also performed. You know, we had really good showcases of South Asian song and dance at — there was that alumni gym, and then also Holly Flanagan theatres. We were very active. We used to do the aerobics classes pretty often.

CHAUDRY: I think one of our dance performances is in the archives, (inaudible).
JOISHY: Is it? Did you find it?

CHAUDRY: I didn't find it, but I remember that it's in the — when you said Holly Flanagan. They have it in the archives.

JOISHY: Yes, that was, I think we got so much applause that they asked us to do it again for another group. Because it really drew a crowd. It was a little risqué, but not in a bad way. And it was one of those Bollywood numbers that had topped the charts. And a few talented friends of ours choreographed it. I think you were on the choreography team. I joined at the end. It was you and two others who helped choreograph that, yeah. And I remember, Neel is a dance machine. We used to have so much fun dancing with her at all the different parties on the quad. And performing. We even took that show on the road. We performed another Bollywood number at Brown. We were invited. We auditioned and we got to perform. And that was huge.

CHAUDRY: That was incredible, because that was a national conference going on for South Asian students. And for our number to have been selected to perform, I mean–

JOISHY: We traveled al the way there. And then, we also performed at The Boathouse. And they even performed for the military somewhere. Do you remember?

CHAUDRY: Oh, that's right. That was off-site. (laughing) (inaudible)

JOISHY: I remember hearing about that. I wasn't performing with you guys on that one yet. But one of your dancers dropped out, and I quickly studied her part. But it was really fun.

CHAUDRY: Yeah. Fun times.

JOISHY: So it really was wasted days and wilder nights — really, really was, had so much fun.

CHAUDRY: Yeah. And we were reminiscing. We came to college, like, our four years were pre-cell phone years, where, you know, we didn't have–

JOISHY: Pre-internet, too.

CHAUDRY: We didn't have Internet also, yeah. And no email. We were not communicating with each other or professors or anything by email. So it was really on the cusp of the whole digital era.
JOISHY: Although we had email, the [Unix?] account set up by the computer science department. Very rarely, some professors would use it to announce something. But it's so unheard of. Maybe we got one email a month, or two, maximum.

CHAUDRY: Right. It wasn't the go-to mode of communication by any means. But then, as soon as we left it, it exploded. So we were on the cusp of all of it, right here.

JOISHY: Ninety-six was, that last semester in our senior year, the Internet. Meaning like, with the browser was available. And I remember I did a piece on pornography for a class. And the research obviously had to be done on the Internet. That was the first time I remember using the Internet, for an ethics class, and involving porn. And I think I remember you doing a paper on domestic violence against males, which required the Internet, as well.

CHAUDRY: I remember all of, like my bibliography, was all Internet sites. And I remember thinking, Is this OK? Like, how am I not using hard–

JOISHY: And also, very few of us had computers, because they were so expensive back then. That 99 percent of us were using the computer labs. And they would keep some of the labs open all night, because we didn't have computers. And we didn't have printers, either. That I remember very distinctly. But now everyone has their own laptop and smartphone and so on. Yeah.

COOK: So you said that you were active in the South Asian group.

JOISHY: It was called Ekta.

COOK: Were you aware of the EAS [East Asian Studies] program getting disbanded? It being a major, and then getting disbanded? In the research that we were doing for these interviews, it came up that it was completely taken out as a major, because there just weren't–

JOISHY: EAS, what does that stand for?

COOK: East Asian Studies.

JOISHY: I remember that there was a little bit of controversy about a professor. I don't want to name him right now. But people were protesting that they let him go, and he was teaching classes in the East Asian Studies major, along with, I think they called it Oriental Studies back then. There was a huge protest about it. And I think Amherst absorbed him. And soon after, I
think it was disbanded. But in our years, it was still a major that people
selected, right? Do you remember that?

CHAUDRY: I believe so, yeah. I don't remember hearing about the controversy while
we were here, that it was in danger of disbanding. Or do you?

JOISHY: I remember some rumbles about it. I know there was a professor that was
let go, and people were protesting. Yeah.

COOK: Were you guys politically active on campus?

JOISHY: I think being a feminist makes you politically active. And I would say yes,
we were. We voted. First time I voted for President Clinton.

CHAUDRY: I had my absentee ballot in Cutter House on my desk. I voted, you know,
first presidential election. It was the most exciting thing ever. And then,
just in general, we were always supportive. We had a new president. Ruth
Simmons, come in while we were students here. And we welcomed her in,
and her initiatives. There was always— Unfortunately, there were
incidents on campus that would show up sometimes. We would have
racial bias incidences, and there would be opportunities to come and have
your voices heard, or to sit in, so to speak. And I absolutely remember
being part of those conversations.

JOISHY: Our voices were always heard.

CHAUDRY: Yeah. In the houses, amongst fellow students. And if there was something
communal that we would need to go to, we would—

COOK: (inaudible).

CHAUDRY: Absolutely. That's where the activism is embedded, is in these years here.
Absolutely. Or fostered. The hunger for it and the way to express it was
really honed here, I believe. The self-expression and our beliefs, and how
we want our thoughts translated. It was such a great place for that to
happen.

JOISHY: And I remember, at frequent dinners at Wilder — we almost always had
our dinners at Wilder House, the fearsome foursome. People joked that we
even had our own table that no one was allowed to sit at, although that
wasn't true. Everybody was welcome. But Neel would be the one that
would raise issues of interest, you know. Did you hear about this, and
what do you guys think of that? And that was always really wonderful.
And the gov department, their T-shirt at the time said, Woman Is Also A
Political Animal. I don't know if they still have those, but if they do, I
want to buy one now. Yeah.
COOK: So just, with the intention, probably one more. What's your life been like after Smith? What have you done to — do you feel that Smith has made you into the person that you are now, or what are your feelings on after these 20 years?

JOISHY: Well, I'll start. I felt that life was not as much fun for a very long time after Smith, because these four years, they were so magical in that we were living with our friends. And everything was planned for you. You went through the traditions every year. You were so supported, and all that. And the real world was definitely not like that. So I think I had a tough time for the latter part of my twenties, really adjusting to the real world. And I remember a quote from one of the former Smith presidents, and I'm going to butcher it. Marion Barry said that once a woman graduates from Smith, she finds herself quite at odds with the world. And I really did feel that way. I don't know if this is all college students, or Smithies specifically. So I feel like I didn't do too well socially, outside of campus life. But I always treasured the friendships that were fostered here. And they served as my lifelines for quite a bit of my adult life after Smith. Eventually went to grad school. I've been working in New York City for 15 years now. Yeah. And love it.

COOK: What are you doing for work?

JOISHY: I'm an attorney. I do employment discrimination litigation.

COOK: (inaudible).

CHAUDRY: So I would echo a lot of similar sentiment with Mahima. So my trajectory, after Smith, was that it was a great milestone place that helped set the foundation for a lot of how I would think, the choices I would make. A lot of the papers I wrote — you mentioned domestic violence. So career-wise, the largest stint I had in the nonprofit sector, which is what I went into, was working as a victims' advocate for survivors of domestic violence in the court system in Long Island, New York. So a lot of the inquiries I was making as an undergraduate student that followed me into my professional life, where I was exploring, OK, how can I impact women and children and families with this, the realities outside in the real world? So professionally. Otherwise, I returned after doing grad school for a couple of years in Boston. I returned to my hometown and my childhood, where I grew up, is Port Jefferson, Long Island. So I went back to my stomping grounds and made my professional life there. And I would have to say, I'm still learning. It will be a lifelong journey for me. I'm still paving the way. I'm looking to make some transitions career-wise. And I feel that the foundation that Smith and the liberal arts broad way of thinking is something that I'll always use and treasure. So as I pave my way and...
create new things, I can always have that excitement there. And I learned how to do that here.

COOK: That's great. Do you have any advice for graduating Smithies this year?

CHAUDRY: Class of 2016, treasure the memories and be excited to foster the new ones. It's a tried and true one that I'm just going to repeat.

JOISHY: I would say, Learn about networking and how to network effectively and well while you're still on campus. Because if you don't know how to network properly, and after Smith you don't network properly, then I think you're going to be at a disadvantage. And what a shame to not learn how to network properly when you're at resource-rich Smith, and have so many people that you connected with. You have to learn how to keep in touch with them, learn how to socialize in ways that you did while at Smith. It's hard in the real world, but keep it up. Keep up your Smith traditions, and network well.

COOK: Thank you so much for sharing your stories. It's been absolutely wonderful.

JOISHY: Thank you for giving us the platform.

CHAUDRY: Yes, thank you.

COOK: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Keri Ladner, June 2016.