



Himabindu Sreepathy

Flavors Indian Cuisine, World Food Mart, and Kwality Ice Cream and Grill

Bentonville, Arkansas

Location: Bentonville, Arkansas

Date: April 11, 2019

Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson

Transcription: Diana Dombrowski

Length: One hour, Two minutes

Project: South Asian Arkansas

[00:00:00.00]

Annemarie A.: Okay. We're live. Today is April 11, 2019. It's a Thursday. I'm in Bentonville, Arkansas at Kquality.

[00:00:08.07]

Sreepathy H.: Yes.

[00:00:08.10]

Annemarie A.: And I am with Ms. Bindu Sreepathy. Close enough?

[00:00:14.13]

Sreepathy H.: Yeah. Oh, no. Perfect.

[00:00:18.09]

Annemarie A.: And would you start off and introduce us? Tell us your name, your full name, and then tell us what you do.

[00:00:24.05]

Sreepathy H.: My name is Sreepathy Himabindu. That's my full name. And . . . okay. When you say tell about what I do, what would you like? That's a very vague question for me. I can tell so many things. Is there anything specific I have to add?

[00:00:43.04]

Annemarie A.: Well, tell me what your job is. What do you and your husband do?

[00:00:47.11]

Sreepathy H.: We, me and my husband have three businesses. One is Flavors Indian Cuisine, it's an Indian restaurant. Then we have Kquality Ice Cream and Grill, which is mainly Indian-flavored ice creams, Asian-flavored ice creams with a little bit of fusion food. Then we have an Indian grocery store called World Food Mart, which also specializes in carrying international foods. Just in that location, we have a food truck, which is Indo-Chinese cuisine that's called . . . I forgot the name. [Laughter]

[00:01:27.07]

Annemarie A.: That's okay, there's so much to remember.

[00:01:28.16]

Sreepathy H.: Yeah. It's . . . it's just, I forgot the name. [Laughter] Let's just call the food truck for now, I'll give you the food truck name.

[00:01:44.05]

Annemarie A.: That's okay.

[00:01:45.27]

Sreepathy H.: After some time, because we changed the name. I remember the older name, much easier. I mostly work in the kitchens, and Kquality, and I did help in the flavors,

streamlining the recipes for them, getting the proportions right, as well as with the help of the chefs working there. At Kquality, seventy percent of them are my recipes, combined with additions from other chefs and my pastry chef and other people. At the food truck, eighty percent of the recipe ideas were from my husband, Raja. Well . . . and the store . . . I don't know what I do at the store. It's more like inventory management, managing the schedules, ordering stuff, seeing if everything is in place, where I want it to be—easily accessible, because we think it should always be a pleasure. Shopping should be a pleasure for the customers. If it's haphazardly placed all over the store, no one is going to seriously know what we have, so we think it should be well-organized. I help in keeping things in order.

[00:03:09.07]

Annemarie A.: That's great, that's great.

[00:03:10.08]

Sreepathy H.: Yeah.

[00:03:10.08]

Annemarie A.: You do a lot of things.

[00:03:12.28]

Sreepathy H.: Not the accounts. Not the finances, because that's my weak area. My husband does that for me, and he does all the promotions for the food places.

[00:03:23.04]

Annemarie A.: That's nice.

[00:03:23.04]

Sreepathy H.: Yes.

[00:03:23.04]

Annemarie A.: So, before we get into talking about moving to Bentonville and all of the really amazing businesses here that you guys have, let's talk a little bit about you. Could you tell me your birthdate and where you grew up?

[00:03:35.22]

Sreepathy H.: My birthday is on 17 of March. I was born at a town in Andhra Pradesh state, it's a state in South India. I grew up all over Andhra Pradesh before it was split into two states, Telangana and Andhra. My parents were working in **Sangareddi** for thirty years, that's where I grew up. It's right now, as you are, it's all the **Sangareddi** is distributed all over Telangana area. So, I grew up in Telangana. I was born in Andhra Pradesh. I did my schooling in Andhra Pradesh, and then I got my bachelor's and MBBS degree from Nepal.

[00:04:25.26]

Annemarie A.: Okay. And what were those degrees in?

[00:04:26.25]

Sreepathy H.: It's medicine. I got it from Nepal, Bharatpur University. Then, I did try to—I did U.S. **amelier** exams and stuff here, but probably because of the gap between my graduation and the time I got—I graduated in 2005, and I came to U.S. in 2007, but by the time I had completed my exams, it was almost 2010. There was five years' gap. Well . . . I didn't have much success in the, I didn't get to the residency, so that was . . . and then we decided that my husband, who was been helping my father-in-law in business since he was twelve years old, he thought that, well, it had actually always been his dream that he should—I think it was in 2011, probably, that we were having this chat. He was not really—not in the sense, you know that feeling when you go to bed? You are like happy and you wake up happy, but one day, he was like, "I miss doing business. I love what I am doing for Wal-Mart—" He was working for Wal-Mart as a contractor then. He did love it, but then he said, "I miss it." Then we thought we should give ourself five years' time. That's when we decided to do the World Food Mart. But when we started, we initially had Taj Indian Cuisine, which is, that was our first venture into business. It was also an Indian restaurant, it was right opposite the Wal-Mart headquarters. We were thinking of just experimenting how it would be. Because in 2011, there were not many restaurants, other than one restaurant, Indian restaurant in Bentonville. We thought, "Okay, this place needs—" And there were more than three thousand families in Bentonville, we thought. Maybe, we should. We did get into that business with partners, not completely on our own. We had someone, we had partnership with the chef, and I think in 2015—I mean, we had Flavors, it was going on and on. Then Flavors got—Taj

Indian Cuisine got converted into Flavors. I think I made a mistake there, you might want to cut it. [Laughter] The lease got over at Taj Indian Cuisine, and the landowner wanted us to buy the whole plot. It was like 650k or something. And Zillow.com showed that. And there was no parking lot. We thought, it's like a small place with forty-plus sitting capacity and very away from the residential area. It was towards Wal-Mart headquarters, which was very far away. We thought we should move, and we tried talking with the landlord, and he wasn't willing to come down the price. So, we were looking for places to open Taj. But when we were looking, we found the space that was out for lease where Flavors is actually located. We did not go into Flavors with the same partners we had at Taj. We had fewer other partners, two more partners there. I wouldn't want to name them.

[00:07:59.08]

Annemarie A.: That's okay.

[00:07:59.14]

Sreepathy H.: Yep. They like their privacy, I believe. So, that's how Flavors started. Then, in 2015 . . . I have no idea why we decided we wanted to do the . . . it's like, it's been so long, even I'm thinking now. People did warn us, actually. People did warn us, there were two Indian stores already, but we thought we were not even thinking of just doing Indian. We wanted to make an international shop, so we opened the World Food Mart in 2015. I think that's . . . and Flavors was not technically ours. We were not 100% owners of that, so we had time. That was the phase when Raja decided he wanted to quit job. He didn't want to work anymore. Then he said, "I want to go full-time into business." That's when

he decided. Since, till then, I was just stay-at-home mom, helping them with Taj, I helped them some till I had my first baby, but then I wasn't helping them there much. Then he said, "Let's do our first. I think we can handle it. You have your expertise in the food area, you know what people want. I know about businesses, how I can manage things." So, he was like, "Let's do it." The day our daughter was born was the same day we signed the lease. That was the first phone call. She was born at, I think, 9:10 or 9:15 or something, and the landlord who hasn't been willing to accept the terms gave us a call, said he was okay with all the lease terms. That's how World Food Mart came into being. We were like, "Okay." I still remember carrying her and going to see how it was shaping up. [Laughter] Then, with Kwality . . . see, I think two years back, me and Raja were actually discussing about opening a bakery, but for special needs, because my son is allergic to a lot of stuff. He was born allergic, he is anaphylactic to peanuts. So, there was nothing. I think I turned vegan when he was born, from 2012 to 2016 I was vegan, almost vegan. Not almost, vegan. Then I turned vegetarian. So, I was like, "Okay. We need a place for people who have—I know Wal-Mart carries it . . . " It was. It started carrying all the stuff we needed, but I was still like, they have limited selection. But then we were thinking about the logistics and thought, the population of special needs is very less. It's just three percent, around, I think, it was three or five. Not exact numbers, but that's the population with special needs. It was like, if you want to do something with special needs, you'll probably have to mix it with something. Since I was cooking for special needs kid at my home, I knew what I wanted, what the options were available in this town. But then he—that got, we had to put it back on shelf because I got pregnant with my second kid, and Raja was like, "I don't think this is the time." Since we didn't have

much . . . I think . . . last year, this came into—we were going from the store to Flavors, when we saw the "For Lease" board. He was like, "This is a big place." [Laughter] I know, we just get tempted. He was like, "This was—" There was a bizarre thing in when we came. We were looking at the place. Now, we don't have the place information, there was like 18x10 pizza machine in there. This was the Larry's Pizza before this place. We were like, "Okay, let's have a look." And he was like, "Are we sure we're up for this?" He was like, "We just can do what we have in the food truck." I know, I missed that part. We had the food truck—if you see the menu, like I was telling you, the 65% of what we have, we had already experimented in the food truck. There were the chaats, there were the paninis, and few stuff we had, we got a very good response. But . . . because of winter, we had to close it down that year. Then we were like, "Okay, we need to move it up to a bigger place." Because people were—they enjoyed it during summers, when they could come and sit, but during winters, it was still cold. In summers, it was not comfortable until—because of the location, there was too much sunshine on the place. Something like that. Then we . . . think this was how this came into place. He was like, "Are you sure?" He had this ice cream idea that we should also have Indian ice creams here, which we would always eat in Dallas, when we went to Dallas. He thought, "This town has ice cream places, and this side of the town doesn't have that many." You have to go a little bit further up, where we hit the Braum's ice cream. "This is the right place for an ice cream spot, because people coming from Bentonville, Bella Vista still have to go all the way for Andy's [Frozen Custard] or anything. Nothing there. This should be Kquality Ice Creams." Which is our franchise business's registry. It's an egg-free ice cream, and we liked the concept of Kquality Ice Creams. It was 14% butter fat, super-premium ice

creams, and fruit-based ice creams, which were tropical fruits, which we didn't find—I mean, we did find mango in Wal-Mart, but other than that, lot of the ice cream flavors were not available here. So, that's how Kwality came into place. I wanted a bakery, that was a long-due dream, and he said he wanted an ice cream thing. So, since we had big enough space, that's how Kwality came into place.

[00:14:38.24]

Annemarie A.: Cool. So, tell me a little bit, because I doin' some research and learned a little bit about Kwality Ice Cream and how it used to be a really big thing in India, especially with the kulfi. Those are traditional ice creams to India. Then I find it interesting that there are franchises started in New York City and San Francisco and Dallas, and then in a place like Bentonville, which is a home of thirty-five thousand people. So, what was it like to kind of franchise and to start that? What was the response to the ice cream?

[00:15:20.15]

Sreepathy H.: As of now, we have had good response, but I believe there is more potential for this ice cream here. When we opened, believe me when I tell you, we just start two days—we had some issues with the kitchen when we were opening, like it wouldn't—we'd plan for a day, but we had something or some other trouble would come up, like things wouldn't work when we had big industrial scale. Dough mixer that because of the phase of the—there were so many problems that were popping up. Then my husband said—Raja—said, "I think we should just open it and see how it does." We didn't have much time for publicity. We were like, I think it was on September or October, October

23 or something. I think two days before we opened the place, we were like, "Okay." It was like, "I think we should open." 23 is the day my daughter was born, so we always do things on 23. Everything is done on 23, number ending with 5. 2 plus 3, 5. So, we came and it was a Sunday. Very bad day open, but it was like, "If we don't open, we will never open." Things would get too much trouble here. It's like one thing would break down and we would call and take people to do repairs, and it's like, "We opened and we have had good response." But now, we decided that we would be going into more in-depth publicity. We haven't done any newspaper or radio or anything. It was just spread by mouth. We opened, the sign was we came and turned on the lights, and people started coming in. Good enough. We were like, "Okay. We will fix the kitchen issues as we go on, but as long as we are open," you know, we didn't want to put . . . and was when here that we couldn't open, it doesn't help us. We are stuck putting an investment—I don't know, I can't tell all this?

[00:17:23.19]

Annemarie A.: That's okay.

[00:17:23.19]

Sreepathy H.: That's okay.

[00:17:23.19]

Annemarie A.: Whatever you'd like to say. [Laughter] Another question that I kind of have is, so you've done all of the recipe development for here?

[00:17:34.17]

Sreepathy H.: Um-hm.

[00:17:36.10]

Annemarie A.: Could you talk a little bit about, where did you get those recipes and how did you learn to cook?

[00:17:43.03]

Sreepathy H.: This, like I was telling you more, was like my interest in cooking has been for long time. I have been cooking since 1991. Like my mom, she is . . . I think, at the age of forty or forty-three. She's forty-three, I believe. So, she went to do radiology. So, my mom wasn't with us, so it was just me, my dad, and my sisters. So, I would be the—since being the eldest in the house, I was the one doing the cooking. I think it wasn't . . . I started cooking, entering the kitchen when I was in sixth grade, I believe. I think so, yep, sixth grade, maybe. I don't like eating the same thing twice in a day. [Laughter] And being a vegetarian makes it very hard when you are in U.S. Once we came to U.S. after marriage, it was like we would go—me and my husband love food. We love experimenting with—and I wouldn't like it when I go into a restaurant, and I was like, the first thing even before being seated, I would ask them to show us the menu because it's most meat-based in this country. In India, back in [inaudible 18:58] was never an option. I mean, it was never a hassle, because most of them, it was maybe 70% were like we did, have an option for vegetarian food, non-meat based food and stuff. But when I came here

is when I had to actually learn more recipes, because that's when I learned Italian cooking. Food Network. [Laughter] I would like, my husband loves pasta. That's when it was like, every Friday night was pasta night for us. He still says, "You should put that recipe, I have never tasted that." I'm like, "We will see. Maybe we will add pasta to the menu too here, one day." Then I would look. See, when you try to create new recipes, you're actually going to the supermarket, grocery store, and seeing what you're getting. We love doing seasonal. Of course, not many like seasonal stuff, but now, trend has become that people want to eat seasonal foods. That's how I was like, so we had so many recipes that I could experiment with. Then . . . I would, like, cook new things every now and then, but the serious cooking, the large-scale cooking, came when last year, we decided that for flavors, we wanted to have a . . . what do you call? A proper recipe. Not like, say, in India, where the cooking is more like "You taste, you put." Oh, there's a little **salt**, you go ahead and add salt. I mean, that's what my mom taught me. There was no such thing as a recipe. It's like, we were like, "You watch and learn." I have never gotten a recipe from anybody in India. If they ask a recipe, they just say, "Stand beside me. Come on, stand." Say, "Go ahead, you take a handful of this, a spoon of that, a bowl of this, and fry." They don't have time—it's just that, for them, they say, "If it smells good, that's when the recipe is correct." I mean . . . [Laughter] It's a weird thing in India. That's how people teach.

[00:21:15.05]

Annemarie A.: That's how it—

[00:21:17.27]

Sreepathy H.: Yeah. Because my mom says, if the salt isn't enough, you will never smell the proper curry. It's like the proper smell will not come. If everything is balanced is when the aroma, the drift; it will be the perfect, you will really enjoy it. But then, that wasn't . . . that never works for a big-scale restaurant when you want to have sometimes. You want to have those memories associated with food. Sometimes, you want to eat the same taste; you want to have the same things, even after, maybe, six months. People come back for that. If you cannot deliver that, it never works. So, that's when we decided—me and Raja—decided that, "Okay, we have to have a look at what we are doing." Because we thought if we— that kitchen staff was different thing, we invest in good kitchen staff, that would work. But then, I think it was last year, we decided that we actually have to have active involvement in the kitchen and in the recipes. We don't have to cook, but at least we have a backbone knowledge what it is. Sometimes, it's easier that way to teach. So, we implemented that thing in Kquality. Here, it is more like . . . whoever, it's easier. I mean, I didn't face much difficulty teaching anybody, because everything was in measurements. You just go ahead and teach them; it gets easier. I think that's when more industrial, restaurant-scale cooking became more important for us. Till then, nothing.

[00:22:58.19]

Annemarie A.: That makes perfect sense.

[00:22:59.27]

Sreepathy H.: Yes.

[00:22:59.27]

Annemarie A.: Tell me a little bit, too, we've talked a little bit about Flavors and we've talked a little bit about this place. What year did Kquality open?

[00:23:08.01]

Sreepathy H.: Last year?

[00:23:08.01]

Annemarie A.: Last year, okay. 2018.

[00:23:09.20]

Sreepathy H.: Yes.

[00:23:11.06]

Annemarie A.: Okay, great. Could you tell me a little bit about, what is it like for somebody who has a background in medicine who kind of got swept up into a food business—what's it like to open a grocery store? What were the kind of initial challenges to opening the grocery?

[00:23:30.27]

Sreepathy H.: Let's see. The initial challenge was . . . well, when we open a grocery store, I think we—other than handling the finances and stuff—we had zero knowledge, because

were just . . . What we did was . . . Here, I think how things are here is quite different from how things are back in India. Here, you have everything well-organized. In India, it's quite different. I mean, I have grown up in a town and a village, so it was more like the grocery, the produce was a different section. It was never much. I have never shopped in a supermarket in India, I mean, at least till 2004, 2003. Every time, we have this . . . farmer's markets are a thing for vegetables, that's a basic. If you are in a town, that would be on a weekend, Saturday, Sunday. The rest of the grocery store would be a separate thing. Merging those two was different, because we didn't have knowledge about how to keep the temperatures for the vegetables, how to maintain the freshness. We had to get all that knowledge from a lot of people, like we would have to ask the produce guys who were supplying us, what were the temperatures. I think that was what we faced, difficulty. The rest of the grocery, there are companies that supply, like wholesalers who supply Indian foods, we just had to call them to set up an account, and they would send us a grocery list and we would choose. Since I knew cooking, we knew what we needed. I would just see what people need. Then came the difficulty of choosing items, because India has a big country. Each state has different products. I think that was the only problem we had when we were setting up a grocery store, was finding what people from different regions want. Because I grew up in Andhra Pradesh. What I use in kitchen might not be the exact thing, like restaurants, other states, and that was made . . . I think that was with experience. When we opened, we didn't have a lot of things. We would just get, ask customers whenever they come in, what they wanted. Is there anything that's missing from the store? They would tell us what they want. We would just research, call other wholesalers, and see if they carried that product. We started carrying that product.

But main difficulty was maintaining the produce, because the cooler temperatures and stuff wasn't our thing. I mean, when we buy something, we just put it in the fridge, right, and just let the fridge take care of it. [Laughter] Until it's cooking time. So, that's—other than that, I think . . . yeah. And we have, like I said, my husband is a very logical person. Raja is, like, really logical person. For him, his goals are actually all long-term. Like he doesn't do—okay, there is an issue, now I have to fix it. He will say, my decision to fix it, will it be a long-term solution or a short-term or a . . . like I say, acute or chronic? For me, those are the terms. So, he doesn't do anything acute. He's like, "If you do something, you have to think in the long-term impact." Because that's how—I mean, you can fix something like this, but you also have to think if that is going to help you in the long-term. So that part, with his help, it was much easier. Because sometimes like me, I'm not logical thinker. I mean, in the medicine field, it was logical, but when it comes to business, since my family had no experience in the business, my thing was: find the products we need. I remember numbers, like I can remember—but not relating to finance, but I can remember numbers. I can go through a hundred products, or maybe even like a thousand products, but I can still at least remember if comparison was easier for me. But for Raja, it was like all the other things, the promotions, the ads. It was very much easier for him, yeah.

[00:28:24.13]

Annemarie A.: That's great. It sounds like your strengths and Raja's strengths really paired well together.

[00:28:28.08]

Sreepathy H.: You could say that. They did really pair well, up. It's like all my weaknesses were covered with his strengths. Like, he doesn't like anything in the kitchen. But his ideas of . . . like I was telling you, the food truck recipes he has, he can think. His ideas, he can give you ideas. I can give you an example. I cannot actually tell you what it is, but when you say, "Here are a few recipes in the food truck. One is called spicy peanut noodles and fried rice. It's a spicy peanut powder. That's a powder we make at home." You know? He was like, "We love eating it. We love eating it with our breakfast, which is like idli, dosas." It was like, "I think this might actually go well with . . ." The recipe could be ours, I mean, it could be me, but he can think of combinations of food. And he's like, I can perfect a recipe, but whenever he thinks that this will pair well, it actually pairs really well. So, there you go. His ideas, my recipes. His promotions, yep.

[00:29:48.13]

Annemarie A.: That's great. And can you tell me a little bit, too, about—I've noticed a couple things when I went into your grocery store, and one of them is you guys have some ready-to-make batters for *dosa* and things. Could you talk a little bit about, do you guys make that in-house?

[00:30:05.06]

Sreepathy H.: Yes, we do.

[00:30:06.24]

Annemarie A.: Okay. Could you talk about that and how that developed?

[00:30:08.07]

Sreepathy H.: That was . . . we had this dosa batter. When we opened the store, we didn't actually have it. I think, after around six months of opening the store, we were thinking that we should, because there is a difference between a store-bought. I mean, that has a shelf life. And the one that doesn't have a shelf—those are bad. Since I grew up in Andhra Pradesh, I love dosas and idlis. So, it's like, when we make it at home, we just use it within three days, maybe four. We try to rotate. We make it . . . every week. It's like a standard thing, even the yogurt. I mean, I never grew up on store-bought yogurt. We would just make our own. We get the cultures, the yogurt and, if you call it, cultures. We just make it. Our mom, they never purchase yogurt. They never purchase dosa batter. So, we were like, "So, we should have something that's without preservatives, that is locally made, that's freshly-made every week." It was like, since it's nothing—see, a dosa batter is nothing. For a person who grew up in India, I believe everybody knows the recipe. It might just be a little bit of variation of a difference in half a cup or one cup or what kind of rice or what kind of dal they use, but every family has its . . . and we were like, Raja was like, "Why shouldn't we?" I mean, "We should probably give fresher things to customers." Since . . . I think that's how it came up. We were like, "Okay, let's give them the fresher product, which is locally." And people do love fresher batters, which are made. We make them, we soak the things, the lentils, on Tuesday. We grind it on Wednesdays. We let it ferment overnight, and they are ready and packed by Thursday

morning for being sold. It's the same process. We go through, we do that every week. Even the yogurt, we have the yogurt that's being made every week. We have it, yeah.

[00:32:29.12]

Annemarie A.: That's great. So, did you bring a culture from India? Where did you get your culture from? For your yogurt?

[00:32:39.06]

Sreepathy H.: Hm.

[00:32:41.13]

Annemarie A.: 'Cause I know that's really important, like everybody has their own culture.

[00:32:46.27]

Sreepathy H.: When I was living in—I mean. I'm thinking. That's a very . . . ah. I think we got the culture from, especially for the yogurt, we got the culture from Flavors. 'Cause Flavors makes it. But I can't really remember where we got the culture, probably one of the family living, one of the family friends living in Bentonville gave us loaners when we said we wanted to do. It's just that it never goes bad, unless you have a breakdown on the coolers or fridges. It's just you use the same thing again and again. When we come to the very end, we make it new, like when we have a ball of yogurt left, so it keeps continuing. It's probably from 2011 or 2010.

[00:33:40.28]

Annemarie A.: That's really great.

[00:33:43.11]

Sreepathy H.: Yeah.

[00:33:43.11]

Annemarie A.: That's interesting. So, you guys make your own yogurt, you make your own dosa batter.

[00:33:48.23]

Sreepathy H.: Yes. Idli batter, dosa batter.

[00:33:52.00]

Annemarie A.: Right. Are there any other products that you have that you guys make in-house?

[00:33:56.19]

Sreepathy H.: We are now, from couple of weeks, we have been selling fresh-made snacks that are being made in Kquality. We are also making fresh sweets. It's the same thing again, since I would say people start shopping more after Thursdays, we try to get everything by Thursday, have it ready by Thursday. If not Thursday morning, we at least try to have them ready by Thursday evening so that we can have all the snacks and sweets ready. They're called laddus. We make motichoor laddu, we make the boondi laddu. We have

puran poli, which is a typical South Indian dessert. We have all the savory snacks. I can tell you the names, but they are all typical South Indian snacks. Mostly people from Andhra Pradesh or Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala like those snacks. Now, everybody eats; it's just that, when it once again comes to comparing what's made fresh, comparing with the packaged products with a shelf life. People love having that, as long as it tastes good. It's made with high-quality ingredients. It's made fresh. Everybody wants a healthy lifestyle now.

[00:35:20.27]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, that's great.

[00:35:21.01]

Sreepathy H.: Yeah.

[00:35:22.15]

Annemarie A.: And tell me, too, about—so, I'm interested, too, in how Bentonville and how the South Asian and Indian population has kind of grown since you guys have been here.

What year did you move to Bentonville?

[00:35:38.26]

Sreepathy H.: 2009.

[00:35:40.18]

Annemarie A.: Okay. How has it changed since you've lived here?

[00:35:46.01]

Sreepathy H.: The most, the first thing that comes to mind when you ask me that question is the traffic. When I came in 2009, we were living—it's towards Centerton. We were living in apartments, we didn't have our own home. The travel time for my husband was three minutes from home to Wal-Mart headquarters. Now, I believe it would be around half an hour. [Laughter]

[00:36:15.12]

Annemarie A.: Oh, wow.

[00:36:17.05]

Sreepathy H.: That's how much. In the last, it hasn't been that much from 2009 to 2015 as it has from 2015 till now. This, the Walton Street . . . I was comparing the times yesterday when I went home. It took me, I started from here at 2:40 and I made a stop to buy some snack for my kids. I picked up my daughter and reach home by 3:05. But when I do that at 4:30 in the evening, by the time I reach home, it's maybe 6, 6:15.

[00:36:55.14]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, wow.

[00:36:57.14]

Sreepathy H.: And in regards with the South Indian population, it's . . . I think maybe there were fifteen hundred families when we came in. But I cannot say it has stayed any constant. Sometimes it goes up, sometimes with the layoffs at the Wal-Mart it comes down. But the population who have settled in Bentonville is constant, but the population—the floating one—they come then they go with the H-1 visas. It's some seasons it's high, some seasons it's down. I think early last year, early last year there were a lot of layoffs. After a few months, people started coming in. There's nothing like a constant number. But when I came in, it was around thirteen hundred to fifteen hundred families, I think. Now, it's anywhere between three to three thousand, five hundred families. Or it could be more, because I'm not a very social person.

[00:38:03.19]

Annemarie A.: That's okay. You're a busy lady.

[00:38:07.13]

Sreepathy H.: So, not much. We love doing business, but me and my husband are not really very social. We love having a private life. It's—when I tell, my friends say, "You are in front of people most of the times." I say, "Probably that's the reason, when I'm away from here I prefer it to be very quiet." I don't . . . I don't like [whispering, inaudible 38:34]. Like, I'm the last person. Ah . . . I'm like, whatever peace I get is what I get.

[00:38:46.01]

Annemarie A.: Makes sense.

[00:38:49.24]

Sreepathy H.: Maybe my friends will be better people to tell how much population there is. It could be more, it could be, I don't know. Not really that much knowledge with that.

[00:39:02.22]

Annemarie A.: That's okay. Do you have any—I mean, in what ways, or are you involved in the South Indian community here? Whether that be through cultural events or organizations?

[00:39:18.08]

Sreepathy H.: That would be my husband's section. [Laughter]

[00:39:23.14]

Annemarie A.: Is he involved in any of the organization?

[00:39:28.11]

Sreepathy H.: Like I said, there are a few organizations that—we are not actively participating.

Like, we are not any members in the events or anything. But if people do come and ask for something, we don't hesitate in doing it, because this community has given us—even I think it was a school, even. They had this cultural event on March 28, and we were like, "Okay, it's a kids' event." So, we were like, "Okay. Let's give them free ice cream coupons." We gave around a thousand coupons in the school for a scoop of ice cream. So, we are not . . . when we say, more like, we like helping out friends and family. If

anybody comes and asks for help, we don't hesitate in helping. But we are not—my husband is not a person to get involved in boards or anything like that.

[00:40:34.29]

Annemarie A.: That makes sense.

[00:40:36.06]

Sreepathy H.: Yes.

[00:40:37.18]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. You guys have a lot to do. Tell me, this is another thing that I forgot to ask a little bit before, but I saw, too, when I was in World Food Mart that some of the products that you guys have are marketed—they're like Spanish-named products. You have, I think, La Costenita.

[00:40:58.08]

Sreepathy H.: Yes.

[00:40:59.24]

Annemarie A.: So, talk a little about that. Do you have any Latino people who come in and shop there?

[00:41:06.07]

Sreepathy H.: Yes. See, the reason we named it World Food Mart was, yeah, we still are not—we haven't actually expanded it to how many countries we want, but we have, when I say this, it's more like all the Indian population, Asian, I would have to specify, it's Indian population when they shop is after the work hours in the evenings or towards the weekend. Every customer I have in the morning from the time we open the store till three or four would be other ethnicities. It's everybody. People, when they see the World Food Mart, we initially had reaction from the Indian community. "Why do you guys name it World Food Mart when it has—?" We did have when we opened the store, I think for the first month we just had Indian stuff, Indian. Then we did the Middle Eastern stuff, we did the Chinese products. We added Mexican products. But like I said, this town is not just Indians. It's everybody. Bentonville, there is just a gap of the bridge between Bentonville and Rogers. Not much difference between Springdale, and we have many people coming from Springdale, from Fayetteville, who shop. So, when we have so much ethnicity, why just restrict ourself to one community? It's . . . that's why we thought, "Okay, let's keep adding stuff." Actually, Raja wanted to do more, like increase more on the . . . line, but we are . . . a little short on time. [Laughter]

[00:42:53.26]

Annemarie A.: That makes sense. But I do think, by end of this year or maybe early next year, we are planning on moving on to more countries. Because, when we put the name, I have people coming from all over the world, just because of that name. They ask, we have a lot of African products they want. So, maybe down the line we'll increase it more. But right now, I got sidetracked. Me and Raja got sidetracked by Flavors and Kwality and the food

truck. [Laughter] But yeah, we intend to, because it's more—our store is more sentimental for us than anything else, because we signed the lease on the day my daughter was born. We keep going back and forth. We are like, "This is more an active business." Flavors, it's . . . you have to have that interaction with the customer. We have had people, customers, who have come to Taj. We opened it in the end of 2011, towards the end of 2011. People who were coming to Taj still come to Flavors. And I believe we have kept that standard. They want to come back, and they want to see our faces, especially Raja's face because he has been the face of Flavors forever. Since he has worked for Wal-Mart, a lot of them are our friends.

[00:44:38.03]

Annemarie A.: Makes sense.

[00:44:40.01]

Sreepathy H.: So, we didn't want to lose that personal touch. I think that's where . . . yeah. I think that's where we got a little behind on the store. That's my personal thing that we still have to—like I was telling you earlier, there's a lot of potential in this town. I wouldn't call it—who wouldn't love to have convenience at shopping, right? Have everything at the same place. Like I personally don't like shopping much. If I go to a place, I would want everything at the same place. That's it. Done. Like not like, "Go." So, we want to, ultimately, achieve that thing for World Food Mart instead of just being another store in Bentonville. We do want to leave a mark, actually.

[00:45:38.27]

Annemarie A.: That's great. I think that you guys already have done that.

[00:45:44.27]

Sreepathy H.: Like I said, we have put some goals. I may not be like more forthcoming in accepting my deficiencies, but see, like I said, like you were telling me—he balances me well. He knows all my negatives. And he isn't perfect. I do get angry with him at times, but at the end of the day, that's how marriages work, right? If you don't accept that part, you will never succeed. He has this goals. He will be like—every year, I'm not the person who makes the goals. He's like, "Hey. This is—" He will write it down and then we sit at night, after dinner, and he's like, "See, this is what we need to achieve." He has put lot of effort in Flavors since it became our own. We had partners till I think last year, early last year with Flavors, but then we took over it completely. So, he put a lot of effort. When people see and tell us that . . . you know, there is a satisfaction of achieving something. We still have goals; it's a never-ending process. It's not like, because it's food industry, right? There is nothing like there's an end to what you can provide to people. I think . . . hm. And he is doing . . . yeah, I think . . . like I said, he is never happy with anything. We have our goals. He's more, "We have to achieve this." I am more like, "I can." But I love the kitchen more than . . . so, we are not 100% there, where we really want to be, but hopefully soon. I think we are more happy with Flavors, followed by Kquality, store—we still have to do a lot, hopefully we will be able to complete everything we plan for the store.

[00:48:07.11]

Annemarie A.: That's great. And this is kind of like a bigger question, I guess, but how is the food of Arkansas since you've moved here? How has that impacted you, either like personally, the way that you eat or the food that you developed from Kquality, or Flavors, even?

[00:48:25.24]

Sreepathy H.: I think . . . that's . . . so I was, before I moved here, I was living in Houston. How, when you compare Houston—I think it's more the availability of stuff. When I moved here in 2000, it was just we had one tiny grocery store and gas station. Whatever we get would be what we would eat. That's how I turn into vegetables that were grown locally. The products from this place, products available in Wal-Mart. When I was living in Houston, every—even the Indian vegetables were available in Wal-Mart. So, I never felt that I was not in India when I was living in Houston, but when I came here, that's when I realized it's not. [Laughter] There are, see, you have to adapt. I would not eat most of the vegetables that were available in Wal-Mart. The American section like celery, unh-uh. Then I learned how to make a curry with it, because that's what's available here. That was like thinking, "How to merge this vegetable with what's similar to from the legumes?" We would make curry, sort-of fry with celery, which is Indian flavor more than . . . I think that's how. We still, like, at Flavors, it's still—it's Indian, but we have modernized—not exactly modernized, we have made it more American. It's more American taste. It's milder, it's creamier, it's people who have grown—like myself—my kids don't like spice. My daughter is like, "No." She cannot even, black pepper, no, she

will not tolerate anything. It's more the palate, what we have adjusted the food. We're still having the same recipes, but the palate, we have changed. Even here at Kwality, we still have the chicken tikka, paneer tikka, but the way it is presented, a panini, which is not an Indian thing. So, we're trying to have what we get in India, but things everybody can try. We still have things which are very typical Indian in the menu, but we are trying to see that everybody enjoys it. It's why restrict food to selected few? Yeah, like the pizza. Pizzas, we have tikka, paneer tikka pizza, butter chicken pizza, chicken tikka pizza. Something that's not—pizza is not our stuff, it's Western. But the buttered chicken, the chicken tikka, what we put in the sauces, it's all Indian. We are trying to merge things here, where at Flavors, we are trying to . . . it's still Indian food, but adapted to the taste of people who are here.

[00:51:45.17]

Annemarie A.: That makes sense.

[00:51:46.28]

Sreepathy H.: I don't know if I answered your question, because I get—Raja thinks I talk too much. [Laughter] I get sidetracked. He'd say, "You should probably . . ." You know? Make a note of what you want to talk. But it just jumps because there is so much in there. When you're asking me these questions, it's like, over seven years period. So, I don't even actually remember things that much. Like I cannot put a chronological order or what I'm talking, but it's all jumbled up. It's there. I think I have made some mistakes in telling you the dates and stuff. [Laughter]

[00:52:29.10]

Annemarie A.: That's okay, that's okay.

[00:52:31.16]

Sreepathy H.: So, did I answer your question?

[00:52:33.28]

Annemarie A.: You did. I have kind of a couple follow-up questions. So, you mentioned when you moved here, there was a grocery store and there was a gas station. Could you talk about those places and what they're called and what you could buy there?

[00:52:45.07]

Sreepathy H.: We had everything. Not like now, when you see these other stores. I think, when we came here, what they carried here was basic stuff like lentils. The other day, I was showing in the store what we—the basics, we didn't have the specialty foods. Nor we had access to newer products. But the basic needs for an Indian kitchen is what we would have: the spices, we would have whole spices, powdered spices. I think, once a week, we would get vegetables. Like I said, when I moved here, I learned cooking with what was available here. We would modify. We would eat pasta. It was, for me, we are more experimental. We love experimenting foods. I don't have a restriction that I have to eat India every day. As long as it is vegetarian, I am good to go. I will eat anything. I think so. Not broccoli, no, don't eat broccoli. My daughter wants to eat, she was like, "You

need to buy me some broccoli, Mama." I said, "Uh-huh, mm-hm, we'll see about it." I'm not buying you anything that I won't—she did ask me, she was three years old. Hmm. But people, I know people like my friends, a few of them, like . . . well, actually one of my family members who are living in other parts of here, they love to eat the sambar, which is a typical Indian food. For me, I can go with the toast. I'm okay with a bagel for breakfast. I'm not like, "I have to eat idli, I have to have dosa." But I love eating that. It's not that I don't like it, but if it's not available, it's not the end of the day for me. I can substitute anything as long as it's vegetarian. I can substitute it. That was what available there. We had minimum. Since we were getting produce in a week, I think they had maybe ten varieties. I would never, I would buy just *tindora*, which is ivy gourd. Okra. Like four or five vegetables I would buy, and chilis, Thai chilis that are not available because we don't usually use the jalapenos or the serrano peppers. We like the spicy chilis that were available there, we would buy them from them. Yeah. Then they opened another store and I think it's in—I can't give you the exact location because it's been 2009, but it was in the lane where Sam's is located, and I knew just had to cross Sam's Club and then go further forward. It was a small gas station. It was there, and he also carried other products, and then he had two aisles of Indian products in there and people would buy. We would also get whole wheat flour, which is very different from the flour we get in Wal-Mart. So, things like that which were, if you are a very conservative Indian and you need that stuff, and you don't want to experiment with food, but I believe people are changing now. I mean, they're not just saying, "Okay, I just have to have this." People have learned to adapt. I'm noticing that everybody is like, "Why not go with seasonal?"

Which is much, you know, it's cheaper. It's locally grown, so it's definitely not going to the transportation fees where nutrition goes down. But, like I said, yeah . . .

[00:56:43.06]

Annemarie A.: Do you ever go and shop at the Bentonville Farmers Market?

[00:56:46.15]

Sreepathy H.: I used to. I used to, till we got busy with the businesses. But otherwise, I would.

Now, I hardly ever go any other place, other than Wal-Mart or Sam's Club. But I would actually go to the Bentonville Square and the Fayetteville. Because the reason I go to Bentonville is, since we live here, we could go at 8:00. Waking up my husband at 8:00 is a very hard thing, because he works. We have two different sleep patterns. I like to go to bed early, wake up early. He's like a late-night person and tries to—when we had partners, we didn't have to be at Flavors. Now, we have to be at all the places seven days a week. But then we had the Saturdays and Sundays to ourself. So, we would go.

[00:57:40.24]

Annemarie A.: Makes sense.

[00:57:42.27]

Sreepathy H.: Yeah. I would buy a lot of stuff, especially the leaves. The basil leaves. I remember because he loves pasta and stuff, and we would get all kinds of heirloom tomatoes, we would buy honey, natural, pure honey there. I think I would buy some sort

of leaves that were not actually available in Indian stores because there were just less, and there were too much population. But they were called amaranth leaves, sorrel leaves that were available there. And they were fresh. Everybody would just put them, get them, cut them in the mornings and bring them. Then I loved the Fayetteville Square because it was more fun. There was a lot of activities always going on there. So, we would go. Yeah, we would. But now, I think the last time I visited that place was . . . three years back. Not after World Food Mart. I keep telling him. But he just smiles. [Laughter] It's like, "Are you sure?" [Laughter] [Telephone rings] Is it okay if I . . . ?

[00:58:59.21]

Annemarie A.: Go ahead, yeah.

[Break in recording]

[00:59:03.02]

Annemarie A.: Okay. I don't have any more questions for you, but I wanted to publicly, on record, thank you for spending time with me, talking with me.

[00:59:10.15]

Sreepathy H.: I have enjoyed talking with you, because yeah, I haven't spoken about many things. It's been long. That's why, if you say it's been like all the thoughts coming at the same time, I'm not, like I said, I cannot put a chronological order on that.

[00:59:24.19]

Annemarie A.: That's okay.

[00:59:27.19]

Sreepathy H.: Yeah. It's been nice talking to you. It's been like going back on the memory lane.
Seven years of what we have been doing, and yeah.

[00:59:38.21]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you want to add?

[00:59:41.10]

Sreepathy H.: Hm. Why I love this place. [Laughter] Bentonville.

[00:59:50.19]

Annemarie A.: Tell me about it.

[00:59:50.21]

Sreepathy H.: Everything is within—I cannot actually say everything is within five minutes of where I want, but when I was living in Houston, we would do this, like mark, news. We are going to do the North of Houston this week. Next week would be East, and then West and South, because it was too much, and his travel time to office and back, he would leave at 7 and by the time he would come back it was 7:38, and I would like . . . I would

get bored. Like I said, I'm a very private person. I don't . . . I'm not . . . introvert, maybe? But this place is like, everything. When I moved, I was like, wow, you can go back and come from office if I call you within three minutes. And people are very friendly here. I mean, I have never seen a grumpy face. Or people who are like . . . you know, whoever I talk to, they have this—they're happy, they are ready to help. It's a nice place. It's not that I haven't seen, but when you see on the scale of like a hundred percent to two percent, three percent, I don't even remember. It's a very, very friendly place. Nice place for the kids to grow up. Yeah. We love this place. Since we have been living for so many years, I don't think I can ever go back to any big cities. I would just . . . I would just run back to Bentonville. [Laughter] Yeah, probably. Yep, never going out of this place, no. Many people have, like everybody says there is nothing much to do here, but like I said, I don't have much time. Not into social gatherings and stuff. But yeah, it's . . . I love them, people are very friendly here. I don't think I have anything else to say about this place other than that I love it and I love the climate. It's not too winter, it's not too summery. The weather is how I grew up in India, except the cold part, which I'm okay, as long as it doesn't snow and I don't have to be in a thick coat. Yeah. Otherwise, it's nice.

[01:02:33.24]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, thank you so much for talkin' to me.

[01:02:35.29]

Sreepathy H.: You're welcome.

[End of interview]