

Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project Transcription of Rita Sequeira-001.mp3

http://digiport.athabascau.ca/aasmp/people/r_sequeira.htm

Narrator: Rita Sequeira
Interviewer: Peggy Baker
October 15, 2018

[Start of Interview]

Peggy This is Peggy Baker, I'm at the home of Rita Sequeira in Edmonton. The date is October 5, 2018, and we're going to talk about her life in Athabasca and before Athabasca. Rita Sequeira was born in India and I'll let her tell you about her family and her growing up years in India, starting with what are her earliest memories and her parents.

Rita I was born in India in a town called Mangalore on July 21, 1935. I'm one of four children born to Gregory D'Souza and Lily Jane D'Souza. I had an older sister named Gladys who passed away many years before I was born. For all accounts, I'm the oldest of three. My second sister is Margaret and my younger sister is Sophie. My mother passed away when I was four years old and my siblings were two and 10 months old. I was brought up basically by my mother's sister, Aunt Grace until my father remarried when I was 15 and my sisters were 13 and 11.

All my education was done in English and I went to schools run by the Apostolic Carmelite Sisters. Until I finished my Grade 11, that's the secondary school, and then I did my Bachelor of Arts, also at the university run by the Apostolic Carmelite Sisters. After I finished my Bachelor of Arts, I got a diploma in social work. This was run by a lady who came from the United States by the name of Miss Sciasis. She offered courses in social work for one year. In 1957, I married Charles Sequeira. We moved to Tellicherry in a different province to accompany my husband and we had three children. The oldest, Aroon, was born in 1961; the second, Prem, in 1962; and the youngest one, Nimi, was born in 1963.

Peggy What was your day like when you were growing up? Who else was in the household besides you and your sisters?

Rita When I was going to school, the other people in the house, until my father remarried, were my aunt, my mother's sister, Aunt Grace who took care of us, and my mother's brother, Uncle Dennis, who lived with us as well. After my father remarried, of course, my stepmom, Marceline, was with us. My father was very particular about school and also about church. I was born and brought up Catholic, so we went to daily Mass. I was quite active in school. I was the school pupil leader, that is like the student union president here, and that kept me busy.

My father was also particular that we learn music in the house. I learned to play the violin at the age of six and I played in the school orchestra. This meant a lot of practice after school, so I kept busy with that and that continued even after I started university. All four years of university I was a member of the college orchestra. Also, my sisters were members of the community orchestra called the Amateur Music Society.

Peggy What did your father do to make a living?

Rita My dad owned a coffee estate and he also managed some European coffee estates. He had to be away on the estates so we lived mainly with my Aunt Grace and later on with my stepmother.

Peggy Do you remember any significant events in your early life, what do you remember as being dramatic or traumatic?

Rita We were very close to my mother's sister, Aunt Grace, and when my dad remarried it was very traumatic for the three of us. When Aunt Grace had to leave, she joined the convent because that is something she wanted to but she had stayed back because of my mother's death. So that was a very traumatic experience for all three of us. It was also a traumatic experience when my uncle passed away; he was very close to us. He was a bachelor as well. That was a sad event for me and for my sisters as well. Then my second sister, Margaret, joined the convent when she was very young at 17 or 18. I wouldn't call it a traumatic experience, she wanted to join the convent. She was the first one to leave the home and that was, in a way, a sad event for me.

Peggy So when you started your university education, were you at home?

Rita We were at home, yes, the university was right in my hometown, very close to where we lived. We didn't have to leave and go far away as our kids had to do here in Canada, leave Athabasca and come to Edmonton one after the other.

Peggy Was it about then that you met Charles?

Rita Ours was an arranged marriage in a way, and that's how it was done in my community. I knew his family because his older brother married a relative of mine. We are not forced to marry somebody but in an arranged marriage in my community, you look at a number of factors. Does the boy come from a good family? Does the girl come from a good family? Is the boy educated? Is the girl educated? The older folks and the parents look at things like that. When they are satisfied, they give the boy and the girl an opportunity to meet each other.

My sister-in-law was married to Charles's older brother and this gave us an opportunity to meet. Charles came to my house and we had a chance to go out and talk at length where we discussed a number of things. Then Charles had to leave and go back to his province, which would take him maybe half a day. He would write to me and we would correspond that way and got to know each other. After having done that for a few

months, we were engaged and six months after we were engaged and got to know each other more, we were married on October 14, 1957.

Peggy That was a big ceremony and celebration?

Rita It was a big ceremony and celebration, and in our community, it takes four days. The previous day of the marriage, the bride has a celebration in her house and the bridegroom in his house. We are not supposed to see each other on the last day you are single. On the day after marriage, you have the nuptials and the big ceremony. I think we had about 2,000 people. On the third day, the bride's folks invite the bridegroom's folks and a few close friends and you have a gourmet dinner, so to say. The purpose of this dinner is to get acquainted with the bridegroom's family and a few new friends on the bridegroom's side, and the following day it's the opposite. The bridegroom invites the bride's folks and you get acquainted with the bride's folks and it's a gourmet meal, maybe about 300 people. And then finally, the bride goes to the bridegroom's house permanently. We had a fifth day because I had to go to where Charles worked in a different province. Those people there would not be satisfied until they entertained us with their own function. By the fifth day, both Charles and I had enough of celebrations.

Peggy Knowing Charles, I'm curious to know what you talked about at that first date, the first time you went out.

Rita He told me that he was nervous about marriage. Am I going to look after my wife well? Am I going to make her happy? What about the children? Will you be able to look after them well? These were some of the fears and concerns that he had here. And those kinds of things, basically, not that he didn't want marriage, he did.

Peggy/Rita So that was a chance to really have an intimate conversation? Exactly, yes.

Peggy Was Charles practicing law then?

Rita For the first three years we were in a place called Tellicherry and he practiced law. He had a fairly good practice. I really came to know the type of person he was. When you are just beginning law, people have to pay you because you have to make a living. Lots of times there were poor people coming to him because they liked him. They had confidence in him. Sometimes people ended up sleeping at the house because they had nowhere to go. They came from a distance and we sometimes gave them dinner and so on. I said, "If you keep on doing this, where does the money come from?" He said, "Don't worry." He picked up work, because they knew he was honest and he cared. After three years, he was appointed a public prosecutor. This was the other side, of course. It was a salaried position and he worked there for six years. Then he applied for the job of a magistrate and sat on the bench for three years in a different place in Kerala, the same province.

It was at that stage that we started to become a little bit restless. He wanted a change and we wanted to go somewhere else. It was becoming stressful as well, not that he shirked his work, he worked very hard. Interestingly enough, we heard that Canada was looking for teachers. Charles met somebody, a friend who had a friend who was working in Boyle, in the County of Athabasca, who said they are looking for the teachers. And this friend said, "I will get you an address from somebody who is working in the County of Athabasca." He brought this address the following day and this is what the address said: Larson, Superintendent of Schools, Athabasca, Alberta, Canada. That was all, no box number, no nothing.

Rita This is how it all started and previously, even before the children were born, I have to go a step back here. Charles had wanted to go somewhere and he got a job in a high court in Uganda. His mother wept and said, "Do you have to go? When you have a job here, you have property here and so on." I said to him, I don't think we should and we decided that we won't go with his mother's tears, so we dropped the idea. Then of course, we had these children and so on. This time when we decided to go and we told her, "What do you think, Mom?" She said, "I'm getting old. You have to look after your future. If you get the chance, maybe you should go."

Charles wrote the letter and gave it to his head clerk. The letter stated to the Superintendent of Schools, Larson, whose first name we didn't know, not seeing any initials, saying that both of us would like to teach because Charles didn't know what his prospects in law were. We didn't even expect a reply because we didn't know Mr. Larson, didn't know his first name, didn't know anything. We thought, let's give it a try. Charles drafted the letter but the typing was done by the head clerk. Charles told him, "You type it, I will sign it and don't breathe a word to anybody." He mailed it and we didn't even expect a reply. In a little over 10 days' time, we got a reply. This is what it said, and I quote, "Should you or your wife wish to teach in the County of Athabasca, we would be delighted to have you." This did it for us from not really expecting a reply. But Mr. Larson said, "You'll have to send all your documents to the Department of Education. If they give you a certificate to teach, we'll give you a job."

Peggy Then you had to break the news to your friends and family.

Rita My family was okay but his family could not see why he would even think of switching to teaching from law. Nothing was certain. I was already teaching and completed my BEd in 1963 at the same institution and I taught there for three years.

My family asked if I was going to teach in Canada. They were reconciling that it was okay and they understood that we were leaving and going far away. But Charles's family didn't want him switching from law to teaching. They realized teaching was a noble profession. There was no dispute there.

Peggy So you sent all your documents in to the superintendent and waited for this reply. Then what?

Rita We sent all our documents to the Department of Education and I got my certificate to teach and we were all excited. Now, the only thing left was for us to get a visa to come to Canada. Charles had to get permission to leave. He was at this time, magistrate in a place called Palghat in Kerala. We told the children we are going to Canada at this time. Our oldest, Aroon, was seven and Prem was five and Nimi was four. They go very excited. Of course, we told them about snow, which they hadn't seen before. I resigned my position at the school. I had taught for three years at this time and we were all getting ready.

In August, we set off to go to Delhi to try and get a visa. We stayed at the convent where my sister was for a few days and then moved on to a bachelor suite. I was given a position at the convent school in the high school there to teach, which brought in a little bit of money and was very helpful. We had to go to the visa office and there they asked us a lot of questions about our education, our ability to speak English, and so on. We qualified and bingo, we got a visa. Now, the excitement started. The children were looking forward to our leaving.

Rita On the 28th of November 1966, we boarded Air France to come to Canada. Until then, I have to say, we were very excited about leaving India and coming to Canada. Once we got onto the plane and sat in our seats and buckled up, the nervousness and concern sank in. I looked at Charles and I looked at the kids and I said, "What are we doing? Have we done the right thing? We are going to a foreign land, a foreign culture, right in the middle of winter." Later on, when I spoke to Charles, he said the same thing, he felt the same. "What are we doing? Are we doing the right thing? Because once we land in Canada, there's no turning back."

We sat there looking at the children who slept in a few minutes and our first stop was in Tel Aviv, and our next stop was in Montreal. That was the first time we saw the snow and the music was playing, I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas. That got us all excited. The children were very happy, but of course, we couldn't touch the snow. Our next stop was in Edmonton and everything was nice, we got to Canada, the land that we had adopted. We stayed at the King Edward Hotel where we had some very interesting experiences. The taxi driver couldn't open the trunk. We couldn't understand why he had to pour alcohol to open the trunk of a car. This didn't make sense to us.

The next day we got up, got ready to catch the bus, which left Edmonton at 9:00. We caught the taxi, of course, to go to the bus depot. We were just a couple minutes late. Now, what do we do? Charles said, "We have come halfway across the world, let's take the taxi and go to Athabasca." We asked the taxi driver, "Can you drive us to Athabasca?" She had no clue where Athabasca was because she was an immigrant herself from Germany. She called her office and found out where Athabasca was, and she said, okay.

As she was driving us, it was 40 below and not a single car on the road, not a single bus, no human beings, no animals, no nothing. Just snow and snow and snow. I looked at Charles and he looked at me and he whispered, "Where is she taking us?" She drove

and drove and drove, and finally we saw this board, which said, Welcome to the County of Athabasca. Charles said, this is it, whatever it is, this is it. She stopped the car and the kids jumped out of the car and touched the snow. They were excited. Once we reached Athabasca, there was Mr. Larson and Mr. Richards, the Chairman of the Board, and a few board members who came there to welcome us. We were very, very excited, and that was a warm welcome indeed. We were home in Athabasca.

Peggy You had to make some special purchases of winter clothing before you came?

Rita While we were in Delhi, we had some winter jackets custom made, which was great. But what we couldn't buy was winter boots. Those we went the next day and bought at Schinkinger's. I still remember, Mrs. Laura Parkes, whose husband, Reverend Parkes was the minister of the United Church. She said that the two boys looked like little English boys with their jackets and shorts. They did go to school in shorts because they didn't have pants for at least one day.

Rita One thing that Charles and I will never, ever forget was our one-week stay at the Union Hotel. Because we came at the end of November, the home that was kept for us had to be given to someone else for rent. That was quite an experience for new immigrants. I suppose it was a bit noisy, but that was our first experience with the Canadian hamburger, which we enjoyed quite a bit. Then we got a small house right across from the Brick School, but it was very, very cold and it was not adequately heated. But it was a home, nevertheless. One night, the temperature dipped to 60 below. And in the middle of the night, our second son, Prem, began to cry and he woke us up. We said, "What's the matter?" And he said, "I'm cold, I can't sleep." Just then, we heard a knock at the door. I think it was middle of the night technically, and we said, who could that be? Who would come in the middle of the night? And when we open the door, there were these ladies from the United Church who had come with blankets fearing that we may be cold. That was the type of generosity, warmth, and friendliness that was shown to us for the next 42 years in Athabasca. And that's why we continued to stay there. Our children had their educational foundation in Athabasca. I taught for 30 years in the Athabasca school system and so did Charles.

Peggy I'm curious about your experience when you first entered the classrooms. What did you find as being different and unusual from your classroom in India?

Rita The first year that I taught, I took over from a teacher who had gone on maternity leave and this was a Grade 2 class. At that time, I wore a sari. The first thing one little kid came up to me, she touched my sari and she said, I like your dress. This was so cute. It's a little bit difficult to compare the Grade 2s to the high school students that I had taught. Language was no problem because I had studied the English language, the medium of instruction was English. I found classes here were more flexible. I was brought up under the British system where the curriculum and everything was a little more rigid. I found here there was a little more flexibility, creativity, and discussion built into their work, which I enjoyed. As far as the discipline was concerned in India, the children tend to listen more to the school authorities and are more akin to doing their

homework and those kinds of things than in Canada. In India, for example, in an English classroom, if you gave them a composition or an essay to write and you corrected that essay, the kids were expected to do all the corrections. The kids here would be surprised that they were to do it again. You mean, we have to correct all those mistakes and hand it back to you? I said, "Yes, I've spent all this time last night correcting it, that's what I expected you to do." But that wasn't what they wanted to do. There were differences like that but otherwise, I think children are children, and it depends on how you deal with them. I didn't find too much of a difference that way.

Peggy During your career at Athabasca High School, you and Charles both were very involved in lots of activities, but most people will remember you and the debating program.

Rita I enjoyed being involved with debating and so was Charles. I think that carried over into the classroom as well. I not only did the debating as an extracurricular activity, but I also incorporated debating into my classes in English 10, 20, and 30. Whatever course I taught, I did debating simply because debating is researching, speaking, critical thinking, and being able to think on your feet. Language Arts is nothing but incorporating all of these skills. It worked out really, really well.

Peggy You had some spectacular results.

Rita It brought students together and it brought the community together. I remember in the provincial tournament, we needed 120 judges, 40 chair people, people to serve, to cook, to drive, you name it. We needed hundreds of people from the community and they came, they helped. In a small town like Athabasca, nobody said no. That was the beauty of the town. Just yesterday, my son Aroon, sent me an e-mail saying "Someone else that I met remember you and Dad because you were so involved in the community." Sometimes it's almost embarrassing when they say things like that. I enjoyed it.

Charles and I couldn't have enjoyed it, if the community didn't provide me with the chance to be involved. I think that is really important. I have to thank them because they gave me a chance to be involved. I was involved with the fringe and I still remember whenever I phoned somebody, unless they absolutely couldn't come because of some other commitments or not being there, they always said, "Sure, I'll be there. What do you want me to do?" That was so exciting. I appreciate their help for my kids. My children's characters were built because of this community, and that was wonderful. If we could have continued to stay there, we would have stayed in Athabasca. Many people say, "Why would anybody go there? Wasn't it cold there?" I said, "Of course it was cold, but it was the warmth of the people." That made all the difference, and that was wonderful.

Peggy What was the response of your family and friends in India when you told them about 60 below and so on?

Rita They worried every time they wrote or we phoned them. They were worried about 60 below. I remember the second year when my sister, Margaret, came to visit Athabasca. She came for Christmas and two things happened that year. She was in Athabasca for about two weeks and just about every day she had an invitation for supper, or tea, or for a visit, or something. People were dropping in to visit her or we took her around. Number two, it was an exceptionally warm Christmas season. She met so many people that year. I said, "Margaret, when you go back home, tell them yes, they are warm and yes, they have lots of friends." And once she went back home and she told them that people were very friendly and though it is cold, they are comfortable and they're warm. Then they were satisfied.

My other sister has come several times and they've seen how friendly people are, in spite of the cold, you can be warm. They are satisfied and they are very happy.

Peggy Then both of you became involved in professional organizations and the political side of schools and education.

Rita Both of us, after retirement, were on the school board. Charles was also the chairman of the school board. He was on the school board for just one term. He chose to be only for one term. He was also involved with the multicultural association and many other organizations at the provincial level. I was on the school board for three terms. While I was teaching, I was also involved with the communications of the ATA and several other political action committees of the ATA. What I enjoyed most, was being with the French and the live arts, because that involved the community. I did like working with the Athabasca community, because I got to know them so much through the organizations with which I was involved.

It was a very sad day for both Charles and me when we had to leave in 2008 to go to Edmonton because his health required specialized medical care. One other thing that I really enjoyed was being a university facilitator, where I supervised BEd students who have to do some student teaching. I had to supervise them while they were doing their student teaching and interestingly enough, Mr. Francis, who later became the superintendent of schools, was my first student teacher. That was over 20 years ago. I enjoyed doing that. Many of my student teachers are now employed at Edwin Parr High School. As a school board member, I was a liaison between the University and the Alberta School Boards Association. I worked on a committee to improve the quality of student teachers and what could be done at the university level to improve teaching practices. It's been a very interesting life for me, both as a teacher and as a school board member and as a member of the Athabasca community.

[End of Interview]

Machine transcribed by: trint.com
Edited by: Shirley A'Hearn
Proof-read by: Jan Thiessen
March, 2022