

The Joy of Como Park in St. Paul by Raji Shankar



I came to U.S.A in October 1980 - to Duluth, Minnesota as a young bride. Fall colors were so beautiful, but I remember feeling the acute pain of leaving my parents, siblings and friends behind to embark on a new adventure. Marriage and a new country – a double adventure!

I spent my afternoons watching soap operas but soon tired of it. After the hustle and bustle of Mumbai (Bombay back then), here I was surrounded by empty walls while my husband went off to work. I was planning to join UMD for graduate studies but I had to wait till the New Year when Spring semester would start.

I decided to apply for the position of a sales clerk at the local department store which was within walking distance of my apartment building. I first thought it to be below my station in life. After all I had a Master's degree in Microbiology from M.S. University of Baroda and wanted to do research, publish papers and become famous.

Duluth, MN did not have many Asian faces back in 1980. Some customers at the store thought I was exotic, while others were more dismissive since I looked foreign. I remember several faux-pas that were the result of my different cultural background. I had a bad headache one day and went to a pharmacy and asked if they sold drugs. The pharmacist looked at me strangely until I said I needed something for my headache. After I had been working for a month as a sales clerk, one day on my way out, I was asked by a lady to open up my handbag for inspection. "Why?" I asked. "I work here you

know". She smiled and said she was part of the security personnel and that she needed to inspect my bag. I remember feeling insulted. I was naïve in thinking that I would never be the subject of interrogation or prejudice.

I joined UMD in Jan 1981 for the Master's program in Biochemistry. That opened up a whole new world to me. I loved the challenges of the program, made truly great friends with fellow scientists and post-docs and professors. I was treated as an equal and with respect.

We moved to Minneapolis after I completed my graduate program at UMD. I had given my qualifying exam for PhD but decided not to pursue that since I wanted to start a family. There are days when I regret that decision. But my husband and I did raise two wonderful children who have chosen careers close to their hearts. I have a good work life balance and each job change (there have been four) has contributed to my growth. I chose the picture of myself at Como Park in St. Paul because that is where I love to go to relax, rejuvenate and smell the flowers. I call Minnesota home and despite its cold winters, would not be comfortable anywhere else.