

Boy, where to begin with something like this? How does one condense their whole life onto one or two 8 1/2 x 11 sheets of paper? Well, like the old Chinese proverb says, "a thousand mile journey begins with the first step..."

It was a cold October evening in 1979 when my mother gave birth to me in the small town of Muskogee, Oklahoma. I was the second of three children in the Aggarwal family. First came my brother Sanjay three years before, and my sister Seema followed me four years after. We grew up in a redbrick house in a decent neighborhood on the south side of town. I suppose my most salient memory of those early years was the joy I took from exploring the space around our house. Not only was there our big backyard complete with a vegetable garden to romp in, but also the fields and woody areas surrounding our neighborhood were ripe for discovery. I used to roam around everywhere, sometimes with a small pack of neighborhood kids, other times just by myself. I really enjoy the memories of all that space.

I would have to say that the most crucial feature of my growing up was the location. The fact that we were an Indian family who had settled down right in the buckle of the Bible Belt presented a number of rather unique, troubling, and often instructive life experiences. How ever did we end up there, you may wonder. My parents moved to Oklahoma as an inadvertent consequence of my father's job offer as nuclear medicine chief at the Muskogee VA Hospital. And that's where we settled. So it came to be that I grew up in a quiet town in the northeastern corner of Oklahoma--a town that had been put on the map in the 1960's thanks to a little song written and performed by country singer Merle Haggard. Cheekily called "Okie from Muskogee", the song embodied the American hometown reaction to the Sixties' counterculture with its anti-war and free speech movements. Although those days were certainly well before my time, the stigma that they left in Muskogee can still be felt today.

A nice place to grow up, it was, but truthfully Muskogee was sometimes rather foreign to the idea of foreigners. Being the only Indian kid in school for most of my primary and secondary school years led to a great deal of confusion, both on my part and on the part of my classmates. I for one was mired in the classic American-born-child-of-immigrants identity crisis. I honestly did not know what to call myself: an American, an Indian, somehow paradoxically both? I remember being confused early on by the distinction between "Indians" from the Asian subcontinent and "Indians" as Columbus mistakenly called the Native peoples of America. My classmates did not help much in this matter either. When I told them that I was an Indian, I often got the peculiar follow-up question: "oh, what tribe?"

Despite this initial awkwardness, I would have to say that I received a very strong educational background during my K-10 years in Muskogee. My teachers were truly concerned with teaching, and they were limitless sources of motivation and encouragement. In fact, I still keep in touch with some of them, most notably my 8th Grade science teacher Mr. Allen.

But I knew that my time in Muskogee had to come to an end soon, lest I was in danger of succumbing to the phenomenon referred to as "anchoring": "once you're there, you're there for good." Hoping to prove this unwritten "Law of Small Towns" false, I decided to apply to the state-funded science and math magnet school in Oklahoma City. This was to become the best decision I ever made for my education and academic development.

Without hesitation, I must say that the two years I spent at the Oklahoma School of Science and Mathematics (OSSM) strongly propelled me to pursue a career in the sciences. OSSM, a two-year public residential high school, offered me a chance to learn from a stellar faculty that was genuinely concerned about my academic success. For whatever kind of daunting academic challenge I wished to undertake, the school was able to provide an educational program that was many degrees more difficult. As a result of my OSSM experience, one word that is inextricably tied in my mind to scientific pursuit is "energetic." Not only did my instructors teach me to strive for precision and accuracy in my work, but they also urged me to passionately enjoy whatever academic discipline I chose to pursue. My school taught me that science is so much more than a series of definitions and formulas; it is in fact a way of comprehending the world around us. At a school where my math teacher pushed me to think creatively and my chemistry teacher always reminded me to "Go for the Gold", I set my goals for achievement in the sciences.

Before starting college, I spent the summer shadowing cardiologist Dr. Satish Kohli at the Muskogee Heart Center and Muskogee Regional Medical Center. He was a friend of our family's and had offered to give me a peek into what it is like to be a doctor. I witnessed first-hand various medical procedures including stress tests, angiograms, and even open-heart surgeries. I gained a great deal of insight into the nature of doctor-patient relationships and the kind of demanding work schedule that is required of a practicing medical doctor. Although much of what I saw I found fascinating, I was not convinced right away that I had found my life calling. It was not until my final years in college when I would become interested in the area of medicine again, however the path on which I returned to it the second time was through my interests in science and my desire to translate scientific advances into the betterment of human health.

In Fall 1997, I started my first semester at UC Berkeley. I chose Berkeley for its diversity, in two main senses of the word. Diversity in its academic strengths and diversity in its student body. I knew that I wanted to pursue a dual education in both the sciences and the humanities, and coming to Berkeley—where its academic strength is spread through so many departments—was the best decision for me. Cal also made sense because its student body reflects such an incredible diversity of viewpoints and backgrounds. That has truly been an education in itself.

College has been an exciting time for me. My interests have always seemed to point in many directions so, during the school year, I tend to pick and choose from the course catalog so as to build a class schedule that reflects these interests. For example, along with the usual classes required for the chemistry major, I enjoy dabbling in philosophy (now my second major), religious studies (now my minor), molecular biology, and psychology. In the community, my interests in education and outreach have directed me to work as a volunteer tutor in chemistry, a caseworker at a free health clinic, and an assistant editor for a few student-run journals. I even had an opportunity to study abroad for a semester at the University of Edinburgh in Fall 2000. It has definitely been a nice 4 (and a half) years, full of breadth and scope. Now I ready to focus in and move to the next stage in my education—training in medicine and medical science.