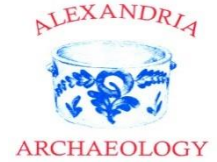




City of Alexandria  
Office of Historic Alexandria  
*Alexandria Legacies*  
**Oral History Program**



**Project Name:** *Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present and Future*

**Title:** *Mehdi Aminrazavi*

**Date of Interview:** *July 4th, 2015*

**Location of Interview:** *Lorton, Virginia at Mehdi's home*

**Interviewer:** *Apasrin Suvanasai*

**Audio and Video Recording:** *Stephanie Slaven-Ruffing*

**Also at the Interview:** *Mehdi's wife, Marylynn*

**Transcriber:** *Apasrin Suvanasai*

**Abstract:** Mehdi Aminrazavi, Philosophy of Religion Professor at Mary Washington University, was born on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1957 in Masshad, Iran. In the interview he recalls his youth in Iran up until his decision to pursue a college education in Seattle, Washington. He reflects on his first impression of Washington and how he adjusted to American culture. While Mehdi was studying at the University of Washington, the Iranian Revolution began. He explains his student activism and describes the effects the conflicts had on him and his family. About half-way through the interview Mehdi's wife, Marylynn explains the manner Mehdi and other Iranian students were regarded in Seattle, Washington during the Iranian Hostage Crisis. In 1985, Mehdi and Marylynn moved to Alexandria, Virginia to start their family. He recalls his various jobs, raising his children multi-culturally, and participating in the developing Iranian community.

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<b>Introduction: 00:00</b>	
Apasrin Suvanasai	It is July 4, 2015 my name is Apasrin Suvanasai and I'm conducting another interview for the Alexandria Immigration Oral History Project. I'm here with Mehdi Aminrazavi at his home in Lorton, Virginia and he has agreed to do an interview with us. Thank you very much.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	You're welcome.
A.S.	So, we can start off with where are you're from?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Right. Well, thank you very much for the interview and also the City of Alexandria for valuing the immigrants and all the people that have lived and gone through the City of Alexandria. As a scholar teacher I know how important it is to be able to go back and access history and I know how many Americans go back to Ellis Island and look at all that so, I'm sure such interviews will be incredibly valuable in the future for second generations — my own grandchildren and great grandchildren. I was born on September 22, 1957 in the city of Mashhad, Iran. It's the second largest city of Iran which is in Northeast of Iran, near the Afghan border and sort of in the mountains area. I finished my primary and secondary education and high school there. Graduated in early 1975 with my high school diploma and then I decided to come to America. Well, do you want the circumstances of why I came or it doesn't matter?
<b>Early Childhood Memories: 02:20</b>	
A.S.	Well, we can first start off kind of with your early childhood memories. Like, what stands out to you?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Sure, sure. I had a very good childhood. My father was in the military and my mother was a homemaker. I have two sisters; I was the baby and only boy so, I was spoiled [A.S. laughs.] Mashhad, fifty-seven, fifty-eight years ago was very, very different; it was a much smaller town and so, the way I grew up is almost lost in America today. We played a lot of soccer in the streets, climbed a lot of trees, and chased cats and dogs. Of course, those were the days we did not have television yet and the computer and all that were unheard of. I had a very good, solid education. We lived In the city of Mashhad and my father — being in the military — he moved around a few times. So, we went to Tehran and a couple of other cities; we were here and there for a few years. That's about it — a simple, but a good and

	happy childhood; none of these electronic gadgets and so on. Life was much simpler. The extended family was there; aunts and uncles and cousins, probably fifteen relatives all lived within a block or two.
A.S.	That's great.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Yeah, so it was kind of old fashioned. I used to ride my bike all over from aunt to aunt and uncle to uncle; that's the sort of life I grew up with.
A.S.	But, in your home it was your parents and then your two sisters?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Correct. Right.
<b>Primary and Secondary Education: 04:46</b>	
A.S.	Can you tell us a little bit about school?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Yes, so schools are very strict — nothing like the [United] States. We had to have uniforms; we had to line up every morning so they could check our hands to see if they were clean and our fingernails clipped — general hygiene. We would line up and salute the flag and so on. There was one person that was in charge of checking the hygiene. Then, our assistant principal would give a lecture about how important it is to behave yourself and respect elders and respect this, and respect that, and don't misbehave. So, that would go on for maybe half-an-hour, forty minutes and— [A.S. laughs.] I know — I don't know how much detail I need to get into, but we all had to have a cup so, we would drink from our own cup; there were no push button water fountains. We all had to have a handkerchief to you know, wipe your hands off and so on. Schools would start sharp at eight a.m. and we went until twelve p.m. There would be a two-and-a-half hour siesta; we would go home. Schools were always within walking distance. Well, when I say walking distance, three or four miles that was considered to be within walking distance. So, we would go home and have lunch and rest a little bit and come back from two thirty p.m. to five p.m., something like that. Then we would come home.
A.S.	Yeah, the details are interesting because it's very different.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Yes, you're right.
A.S.	To me at least. Any favorite subjects you had in school?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Literature, definitely literature. Yes, I loved literature and history, those were my two favorite subjects. Mathematics was heavily emphasized and continued to be emphasized in much of the world; we had to memorize the multiplication table in the second grade —

	primary school. But, literature was always my favorite subject from early on and I knew I wanted to do something that deals with humanities and that whole area. I was not a science person.
<b>Family Traditions: 07:47</b>	
A.S.	Interesting. So, to talk a little bit about your home life, are there any traditions or things that you did at home that stand out to you now?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Yeah, taking care of elders; grandparents were always a part of our upbringing. My grandmother lived next door to us and so, every morning before I went to school I would drop by and say hello and good morning; ask, can I do anything for you? And, then at noon I would check on her. She would stay with us for a few days at a time even though her home was next door. Still, having her right there was important. So, taking care of my elder aunts and uncles and especially my grandmother was always part of our job. Kids didn't work outside of the house – well, poorer classes and neighborhoods did — but generally speaking working outside of the house was not part of the tradition. Instead, you worked inside the house; taking care of others was considered to be a job.
A.S.	I see, I was going to ask — moving on to your teenage years — did you have any jobs?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Right, no-no. The emphasis was to do good in school. That was our job.
A.S.	Okay.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	We grew up literally thinking high school was part of our job. So, as I was growing up it coinciding with the sixties and what later on came to be called, the cultural invasion by the West. Those were the days when hippies and the Beatles came, and of course that's when we ended up having television so, I remembered I wanted to grow my hair and my father was adamantly opposed to it [A.S. laughs.] There was a generational and cultural gap; but it was a different time so the rhythm of life changes when you are a teenager anyway. And, that was the time when — because of television and satellite and all that, traditional Iranian culture began to change radically. It became much more westernized and Americanized in particular. So, yeah—.
<b>Teenage Years: 10:43</b>	
A.S.	Can you go further into your social life as a teenager?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Right. So, social life was both simple and complex. Teenagers are complex creatures; it's a special time in their life. Schools were

	segregated — boys school and girls school — so, there was very little contact between boys and girls.
A.S.	Mm-hmm.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	You would see a girl from a distance — that you don't know, say hi and that was the extent of it. So, having a boyfriend, girlfriend – going out was out of norm. A big chunk of mental energy in high schools here spent on personal life just wasn't there. You were required to study very, very hard; doing an average of four hours of homework every evening was pretty average. They gave us lots and lots of homework, probably to keep us out of trouble. Despite that, we would get together — boys and girls separately and go to coffee shops. Coffee shops were just starting those days — pastry shops and so on. That was the extent of our socializing. Every now and then we used to go to movies and parks; that is when they started building theme parks. So yeah, my first time in a theme park was I think in 1974, when I was a junior or senior.
A.S.	So, you mentioned for instance you wanted to grow out your hair and your father didn't really accept that too well. Was there anything else, in response to the westernizing?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Yeah, smoking was becoming more and more popular. Watching more TV, which our parents didn't like, it was a new thing to them. Watching an hour of TV in the evening was a lot. [both laugh] Uhm, the way we began to dress was much more western and so, there would be a reaction from the more traditional segments of the society and yeah, the Middle East is very intricate. Cities are very intricate, it's like a tapestry. Not only do we have rich neighborhoods, poor neighborhoods, and middle-class neighborhoods, we also have religious neighborhoods and less religious neighborhoods — places where they are much more liberal. And, you have to dress appropriately if you are going to such-and-such neighborhood and you have to dress differently if you're going to a different place. So, those were the sensitivities for teenagers, who were breaking and bending those rules and pushing the frontiers so to speak. So, when I was a teenager we were equated with a rebellion; a movement almost, because we didn't do what our fathers did. It was absolute obedience to tradition; traditional values and traditional way of life. So, I think traditional Iranian culture began to change with my generation.
A.S.	Right. So, literature was still a main focus for you in school?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	It was. So, I grew up liking literature and poetry and history all the

	<p>way to the end. When I came to the U.S. I was interested in studying American literature, philosophy, something along those – humanities. And, my father was very frank and said, if you want to go to America to study humanities, I’m not paying for that. If you want to become a doctor, or a lawyer, or an engineer, or something that makes money then, I’ll support you. So yeah, I’ll come to that later.</p>
<p><b>Decision to Move to the United States: 15:40</b></p>	
A.S.	<p>I was going to ask, after high school what were your plans?</p>
Mehdi Aminrazavi	<p>Well, from ninth to tenth grade I was fascinated with the West in general, America in particular. America was where everything was happening — they were sending rockets to the moon and they were doing this and that. So, it seemed like it was the center of the universe and of course I wanted to be here. So, my plan was to come to America. My family was opposed to it; they said, we have universities and colleges, why don’t you go here? And, of course in traditional Iranian culture they’re always fifty cousins you are supposed to marry and so, the expectation was for me to go to a university there, get married, settle down, and live. I was adamant about coming to the West — to America — so, I had my plans set. Finally they agreed and in early December of 1975 I went to Seattle, Washington.</p>
<p><b>Moving to Seattle, Washington: 16:54</b></p>	
A.S.	<p>Seattle, Washington, okay. I’m just curious, among your circle of friends, did they also want to come to the United States?</p>
Mehdi Aminrazavi	<p>Well, yes. Nine of us actually came to the U.S. together.</p>
A.S.	<p>Oh.</p>
Mehdi Aminrazavi	<p>Some of them — most of them went to California. One to Florida, one to South Carolina, and I ended up in Seattle — I had a cousin there.</p>
A.S.	<p>Okay. Was it hard parting with your family?</p>
Mehdi Aminrazavi	<p>It is very, very difficult. It was very, very difficult. Social mobility, in terms of moving around is just not a thing people do. In America — you get a job that pays better in Chicago and you leave your family and you go to Chicago, but there, leaving your family to go somewhere else because they pay you more is almost an act of treason; it’s a betrayal of the family, “You’re selling your family because somebody else is paying you more?” And so, leaving family was not only taboo, but also very difficult. Families are close-knit and extended family were there as I said. So, leaving them was just not — It was just becoming fashionable or popular to go to the West. So, it</p>

	was a new thing for most of us and very-very difficult.
A.S.	I see. And so, Seattle, Washington—.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Seattle, Washington.
<b>College Education in Seattle, Washington: 18:30</b>	
A.S.	How did you go about choosing—? What school was it?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	University of Washington.
A.S.	University of Washington.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Well, first I had to—I didn't know English; didn't speak of word of English so, I had to go to a community college, Shoreline Community College, where we met [points to wife] in English class. [laughs]
A.S.	Oh okay. English class — where you met wife.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Right, right. That was after I'd taken basics of ESL, English as a Second Language. And, so once I learned enough English I transferred, both of us transferred to University of Washington to do further studies. So, as I said my family wanted me to study something [hand gestured air quotes] real [laughs], as they called it. So, I studied urban planning and majored in Urban Planning, minored in Philosophy. So, it was a struggle in many ways; my family of course was away so, that was very difficult.
<b>Keeping Ties Back Home: 19:50</b>	
A.S.	You still kept in contact with your family?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Oh yeah. Yeah, as much as I could. Those were the days we wrote letters—actual letters, and it would take an average of a month to a month-and-a-half for a letter to get there. And, so as far as calling they would send a telegram saying let's say, next Monday between 4:00 and 6:00 we'll be calling you. So, they would have to go to the telephone—center for telephone something. Uh, like a Western Union kind of thing during that time and call. So, yeah we were in touch, but communication was not anything like this.
A.S.	About how often did you get to speak on the phone with them?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	It was very expensive; they went by minute so, we would talk maybe once every three weeks and I looked forward to that. I got a letter every two months from them and I'd write back so, those were the happiest occasions. Then, summers I tried to go home to visit so, most summers I went back.



<b>First Impressions of the United States and Seattle, Washington: 21:13</b>	
A.S.	Oh, that’s good. Just to back track a little bit, what were your first impressions coming to the United States, and Seattle specifically?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Well, [pause] it’s very difficult to describe. So, the Iran that I grew up in was primarily a secular country. In some aspects there wasn’t that much of a culture shock because you know, we had bars, and movies, and so on, and so forth. But, of course in many-many other ways; the way people lived and behaved and the different language and diet—I mean, they had different diet and foods. So, there’s a major culture shock.
A.S.	Mm-hmm
Mehdi Aminrazavi	You find yourself in, Alice in Wonderland saying, where is this place? What do you do? Where do I—? How do I shop? We had grocery stores but, nothing like what they have now, Giant and Safeway, we had Safeway. So, initially it takes some getting used to. It’s a major, major shock but, my attitude was that this was kind of a temporary thing; my plan was to study for four years and go home. That was the plan. So, I didn’t immigrate to America, at least that wasn’t the intention. How things developed and unfolded put me on an entirely different path. All of the Iranian students who came to the U.S. came to study and go home, basically.
<b>Adjusting to a New Life in Seattle, Washington [Drinking Culture, Dating, Political Activism, Food, and Climate]: 23:18</b>	
A.S.	So, to get into a little bit of your social life when you first came here, you mentioned you met your wife; anything else you really have fond memories of?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Yeah, let’s see. It was difficult to have a social life because I came from a non-drinking culture so, going to parties and getting drunk or—drinking was just not part of socializing. Having girlfriends and you know, what American kids do, just wasn’t part of the culture. So, by American standards I probably didn’t have much of a social life. Social life was to get together with a bunch of other freshmen and sophomores, cook and go hiking. Yeah, Seattle is a beautiful area.
A.S.	Oh yeah.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	So, we used to go hiking, walking—also, there was a lot of political tension at the time. It is now 1977, early [19]78 and Iran was like a pot beginning to boil. So, I got involved with politics, as most other young folks like me did. We became activists and revolutionaries—

	working for good causes. Part of my social life was spent being an activist, part of it was to spend time with my girlfriend, [both laugh] part of it was to do what other kids do you know, have pizza and fun.
A.S.	How was the food different from back home?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	It's very different in that eating out generally was not a part of the culture; you rarely ate outside. I mean, maybe once a month you went to a restaurant with your family. All food was prepared; homemade food was food. When I came here of course I didn't know how to cook so, for a few weeks I went to this hamburger joint called Herfy's and ate hamburgers for breakfast, lunch, and dinner until I got sick. [both laugh] I had to learn how to cook starting with simple stuff, omelets and then gradually other things. But, yeah I craved Middle-Eastern food—Iranian food. Now, there are several million Iranians in the U.S. but those days there were maybe at best fifty Iranians in Seattle. There were no Middle-Eastern restaurants so, it was difficult, but you kind of get used to it after a while.
A.S.	Mm-hmm. Was there a big climate change?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Climate change, yes. The Middle East—Iran is very sunny and of course, I come from the Northern part where the climate is very much like Colorado. So, we had four seasons but, it was generally sunny. Seattle was like this every day [notions to outside, clouds and rain] three-hundred days out of the year; that was very depressing. I just wasn't used to rain; we rarely have rain there. So, it just kept raining and raining. That part was very difficult. That's why most Iranians when they came to the U.S., they went to California.
A.S.	Yeah, okay. So, you're going through school, and towards the end of your program what were your plans? What were you thinking about doing?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Right. So, I figured I would graduate at the end of '78 and then go home. That was the plan.
A.S.	Mm-hmm.
<b>Iranian Revolution and Political Activism – Summer of 1979 in Iran 27:56</b>	
Mehdi Aminrazavi	And, then came '78 and I decided to pursue—I finished my degree in urban planning and wanted to pursue philosophy. So, I went for my master's degree in philosophy and while I was studying doing my master's, there came the revolution in 1978, '79.
A.S.	At the same school?

<p>Mehdi Aminrazavi</p>	<p>At the same school, I'm at the University of Washington in Seattle. The rumblings, it's exactly like a volcano you know, the mountains start shaking and shaking and you have seismic events and you know something big is going to happen. We all became more-and-more radicalized; more-and-more revolutionary. We took the social-political events seriously and participated in them. And, so I myself being young and foolish participated in the process as a student activist. So, came early 1979 and suddenly the Iranian Revolution is happening back home. Something that we had heard from our fathers and forefathers you know, they would refer to the Revolution of 1906 and 1850s and so-on. We read about them in history books and here—in the middle of a revolution and powerful events—we just kind of went with the flow.</p>
<p>A.S.</p>	<p>Mm-hmm. So, you mentioned you were an activist.</p>
<p>Mehdi Aminrazavi</p>	<p>I was an activist, yes; I was a very staunch activist. What we had in Iran at the time, I don't know how much I should talk about myself and the events that were happening, should I?</p>
<p>A.S.</p>	<p>Yeah, please.</p>
<p>Mehdi Aminrazavi</p>	<p>Yeah, that's part of it. So, what we had in Iran was essentially a secular-modern dictatorship and who likes dictatorships? Especially the younger generation—the younger you are, the more you tend to like freedom and so “freedom” became our thing. We became activists and began to have protests against the Shah—the King at the time. It grew and became bigger and bigger and became more organized, and then by early 1979, late '78 it became apparent that the existing monarchy in Iran was about to fall. Initially we were jubilant and happy; the prospect of a new society, change, freedom, and all that was very attractive to us. So, the Shah of Iran left—if I'm not mistaken—in February of 1979. Ayatollah Khomeini came and with his arrival things changed radically. It wasn't just a Republicans turning Democrat kind of thing, it was a fundamental change. Kind of like when Russia had its revolution and Lenin came. Or, Mao Zedong went to China. Iran just completely went from a secular state into a theocratic religious state and the clergy —whom for us—their role was to preach in the Mosques suddenly became ministers and members of congress and so on, and so forth. So, it didn't take up—. Okay, so in that summer— I, being a revolutionary—went home with the attention to stay. This is the summer of 1979. With my degree in urban planning I joined an organization that was in charge of developing the rural areas. We would go to rural areas and make an</p>

	assessment of what people need you know, a clinic here, a road there, and so on; it was a voluntary organization. Uhm, it lasted about two-three months and then, I realized that things were not going well at all; they were going the opposite direction of what we expected. My father who was in the military had retired by then, but still he was being harassed and ended up being under house arrest and we just realized everything we intended to achieve ended up going the wrong direction, the opposite direction.
A.S.	That was because people were just opposing you?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Well, yeah. Our platform was freedom and democracy and their platform was religion and theocracy. Then they started dividing and making medieval laws mandatory you know, women have to be covered, no to this kind of music, and no to that kind of art, so on and so forth. So, in the late summer of '79, I was in Mashhad and we had a family conference and my family said, why don't you go back. It's just not a safe place for you to be and also, my father was being harassed. My father had no desire to leave, but my mother, who ran the show basically, always, said well, depending on how things go your father might have to leave the country. So, you go back and settle down. Also, there was romance involved you know, I wanted to come back. [both laugh] Yeah, ladies have their own way of—. [both laugh]
A.S.	You were keeping in contact?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Oh, yes.
A.S.	Okay.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Long letters [unintelligible.]
A.S.	Were you worried about your family during this whole revolution? Were they worried about you? Were they supportive of what you were trying to do?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	No, no. They were adamantly opposed to what I was doing; especially my father. Uh, he would say, look, when I was a kid we didn't have running water, we didn't have electricity, we didn't have this, we didn't have that. In one generation we've gone from being a backward country to having all sorts of amenities and so on. So, what's the problem? Our model was the United States, Europe, France, and Germany. They have democracy, why don't we have it? They have this, why don't we have it? So, no my family was very, very opposed to the revolution. Opposed to the rule of Mullahs. Opposed to my activism; something for which I still feel guilty. I played a part in not only destroying the country, but also tearing the family apart.

A.S.	A very difficult time.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Right, right. So, in the late summer I went to Tehran, got my student visa renewed and came back and that was uh—I'm skipping over a lot of details, otherwise this would be a five-hour interview. [both laugh] So, I went to the American Embassy in Tehran, renewed my visa; I still remember that there were a lot of radicals and student activists surrounding the American Embassy in Tehran. That was right before we took the American hostages if you remember.
A.S.	Yeah.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	So, I had to make my way through the crowd and got my visa and came back and left shortly after that. It wasn't too long after I came back that they took the American hostages and closed the embassy. So, a lot of my friends who went back, they got stuck and couldn't come back.
A.S.	So, you made it just in time.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Yeah, just in time.
A.S.	Yeah. We could probably do like, three, four interviews after this because I'm sure you have a lot to talk about. Well, we can take a short break. <b>[Break: 37:54]</b>
<b>Mehdi's Wife, Marylynn Speaks on Her Experiences During Iranian Revolution Concerning Mehdi: 37:57</b>	
Marylynn Aminrazavi	I should tell you my version.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Oh yeah, her version is [unintelligible.]
A.S.	You must have been scared too while you were back in Seattle.
Marylynn Aminrazavi	Yeah, it was very intense. They were then starting to deny who they were, like they would say, "We're French" or, I don't know, Hispanic or something. They wouldn't admit they were Iranian because a lot of people were getting hurt. You know, people would beat them up or whatever.
A.S.	Oh, back home you were saying. During the hostage crisis? Yeah.
Marylynn Aminrazavi	Yeah. Before that, they mixed in with everybody. It was no big deal. <b>[audio stops: 38:32]</b>
<b>Back in the United States: Effects and Consequences of Iranian Revolution 38:47</b>	
A.S.	So, you're in your master's program. You've come back to the U.S.,

	to Washington.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Correct, right.
A.S.	So, what were your plans now that you're finishing up your master's program?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Well, my plan was to do my doctorate degree.
A.S.	Okay.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	<p>And, uh, hoping that by the time I finished my Doctorate Degree things will have settled down in Iran so I can go home. So, I was two years into my doctorate degree when in 1981 my father was asked to go to Tehran for interrogation, for what they call "interview." But the regime at the time was very much afraid of the old guards so to speak and the old generals and all those so, he went to the police headquarters in Tehran at 11:00AM and uhm, two hours later they called and basically said he died. He had a heart attack in the interrogation room and passed away. So, the circumstances remain you know, virtually unknown because they said um—they gave us twenty four hours to bury him and no autopsy, nothing. So, he passed away, and the U.S. and Iran cut off diplomatic relations. There was no banking, no money coming in. I didn't have a green card so I couldn't work and so, suddenly my life went from living a comfortable student life to being virtually homeless. No money, no status, no nothing. The University's Office of International Students called all Iranian students, we went to—I still remember— Gould Hall and lined up. They had to take mug pictures, numbers and all that because we were status-less. So, President Carter said, given the circumstances in Iran we won't deport you, but your status here remains to be determined. So, we were kind of in a limbo. Meanwhile we weren't allowed to work; I had a little bit of money which I spent. And then, as I said we were kind of in a state of limbo. It was very difficult to contact my mother and my sisters and so, they were worried about me and I was worried about them. That was when —as if it wasn't bad enough—the frosting on the cake came, the Iran-Iraq war. The war started and it worried my mom for eight years and one million people died in it. So, from 1978 to about [19]81, '82—and this part pertains to your project as well, that's when the big migration of Iranian's began. Millions of Iranians just basically applied to go anywhere and the first choice was of course America. So, just to change the subject to the immigration part of it and then I'll come to myself—all the bureaucrats, all the technocrats, all the people with money and power, all the ex-generals, and all the high ranking government folks, they picked up, left and</p>

came to America. By and large, for the sake of simplicity, the wealthy Iranians with a lot of money went to Southern California and those that were ex-members of the Parliament: generals, politicians—including the Shah’s son who still lives in McLean [Virginia]. They all came to the Washington [D.C.] area and settled in-and-around Washington; including Alexandria, Arlington [Virginia], and so on, hoping to influence policy. So, we kind of became like Cubans essentially you know, Anti-Castro Cubans— basically ex-patriots waiting for something to happen in Cuba so they could go home. That’s how it was with us Iranians, we were waiting for things to settle down or the government to change so we could go home. That’s when you got a huge-huge influx of immigrants coming to the [Washington] D.C. area. Alexandria was a very reasonable area in terms of prices and so on at that time to live in; certain parts of Old Town [Alexandria] were still on the high end. So, a lot of Iranians settled in Alexandria and Arlington, and some of them on the Maryland side in Bethesda and Rockville. As of today, we have these two huge communities in these two areas. As to myself, after what happened to my father, I neither could afford to continue my studies nor could I concentrate, and so I quit school. Well, I put it on hold in ‘81 and for two years I basically did odd jobs you know, whatever I could to survive—waiting for something to happen, waiting for something to change. Meanwhile, the news from back home was getting worse and worse. Hundreds of thousands of people were being slaughtered in the war, including my own family, several cousins, and several high school friends and yeah, things were very-very difficult. So, for two years I did odd jobs in Seattle and then after two years when I emotionally kind of recovered, I decided to move from Seattle, from the state of Washington, I just had bad memories. My political activism, my circle of friends, all of us, we just needed a change. So, I applied for different Ph.D. programs and I was accepted at Temple University in Philadelphia [Pennsylvania]. So, in 1983 I went to Philadelphia and meanwhile, they had confiscated everything we had back home—the revolutionary government, the revolutionary court and so, I started working two, three jobs, going to school, and sending money back home to support my mother and sister. Gradually they were able to stabilize the situation. So, I started studying and doing my Ph.D. in Philosophy of Religion at Temple University until 1985. In 1985 I was writing my dissertation and I had a professor that went to George Washington University [in Washington D.C.] and said, “Why don’t you come here and finish your work?” So, I came with him and that was my first introduction to this area as a whole. My

	wife joined me, she was pregnant at the time, so for insurance purposes she had to stay in Philadelphia for six months and then she came and joined me and we moved to Alexandria, and that was 1985.
A.S.	So, you had your [pause] daughter?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	We had our daughter, yes.
<b>Moving to Alexandria, Virginia: First Impressions &amp; Iranian Community 48:33</b>	
A.S.	So, you settled in Alexandria. What did you think? What were your first impressions? I mean, you're coming from Washington but—?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Right. We really liked Alexandria. There was a fairly large Iranian community there and what we particularly liked about it was that the first school that taught Persian language [Farsi] was established in Alexandria actually. These were weekend schools so, my daughter, whose name is Mitra, we used to take her to this—.
A.S.	[Interrupts] Can you spell that?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	M-I-T-R-A
A.S.	Mitra, okay.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	So, we liked it because there were a lot of Iranians. Then, we started gathering in a community center in Alexandria. That was a chaotic period, but yet thousands of Iranians that would come to the area were learning how to organize themselves and do what other immigrants had done before us: to be networking, and to have meetings, and there were community centers which we could use. Monthly meetings just to talk about the good old home land, problems and so on. And, then Iranian school was established there so, I used to take my daughter to just the language school on the weekends. I worked in Alexandria, several places. I worked for a company called Teledyne Geotech, off of Fairfax Street in Old Town. I worked somewhere else in, I think it was in Arlington, National Genealogical Society part-time as a librarian. And, then I was a teaching assistant at G.W. [George Washington University] and working on my dissertation. So yeah, life wasn't easy, but that was the first time I mentally switched from being a student to becoming an immigrant. It just kind of suddenly dawned on me that I might never go home or at least it might be years before I could go home. As the war went on and the fabric of society changed, as religious fanatics took over, the light you know, the hope of going home became dimmer and dimmer. You know, when your children grow up here there comes a point when you just know you can't take them home; they are Americans.



<b>Incorporating Iranian Culture and Tradition at Home &amp; The Developing Iranian Community in Alexandria 51:55</b>	
A.S.	Yeah. So, you mentioned your daughter was learning Farsi and there was a community of other Iranians, right. What about the home life? Were you able to implement any traditional values at home?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Right, right. So, that was the most difficult part of living in America because you can't live a traditional Iranian or Persian life here. So, we had to adopt—I had to adopt, and my case was even more difficult because my wife was American coming from a Catholic background and even though she's not particularly religious, nor am I, it was difficult to raise our child with any tradition. And then, because we were working so hard, sometimes she was working double shifts and I was working two, three different jobs and so on, we needed a baby sitter. We found an Iranian immigrant family, an older couple who had just come from Iran—and initially we didn't know, but as it turned out they were Jewish Iranians. [both laugh] So, my daughter ended up spending a lot of time, five days a week, ten hours a day, in a Jewish Iranian household in Alexandria. So, we are truly a hybrid family; I'm a Muslim, she's a Catholic, and we had Jewish baby-sitters. [A.S. laughs] So, how do you raise your child? That is the question my mother asked. What is her religion? My mother was obsessed with religion. What are you raising her as? And I said, well, I'm raising her as much as a Muslim as is possible, and she's raising her as much as a Christian as possible, but I think the Jewish side is really where she spends most of the time. So, that was difficult, that was truly difficult. In the beginning it causes confusion; we were discombobulated. My daughter would come home and say, students say, they are Christians and they ask me, what are you? And so, what are we? And, what am I? There was a lot of soul searching in that regard. But, then the beauty of America and Alexandria in particular is the multicultural nature of the society. So, you don't stand out as a sore thumb if you come from a different background.
A.S.	So, you spoke Farsi at home with your daughter?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	I tried, yes. I tried to speak Farsi as much as I could, that worked out. That was the only area where I could control things, what languages I spoke to her and the home life. So, I spoke to her in Farsi and she's fluent. At the time she hated it, especially dragging her to Farsi school, but now she appreciates it.
A.S.	Hoob ['Good' in Farsi] I know a little bit.

Mehdi Aminrazavi	[laughs] Oh, you know a little bit.
A.S.	Okay. So, what about food? Could you, did you cook any traditional food at home? You said you didn't really—.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	So, one of the good things about immigrants and immigration is that as they were coming more and more, they were starting businesses, including super markets, Iranian super markets. So, there was Culmore [Shopping Center.] Do you know where Culmore is?
A.S.	No.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	You know Seminary Road?
A.S.	Hmm.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	If you go on Seminary Road the other way, not towards Old Town, the other direction towards Seven Corners [in Falls Church, Virginia], that whole area.
A.S.	Oh, okay.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	That whole shopping center suddenly became an Iranian shopping center. There were supermarkets and so on. So, for the first time I could get real ingredients for real Iranian dishes and I started cooking, that was good. The first Iranian restaurant that I knew of opened right there in Culmore called Persian Cuisine. And so, we began to see signs of a new immigrant group laying routes in new land and trying to learn how to live in America essentially. A different culture, a different language, a different religion in a new landscape.
A.S.	Mm-hmm. And, how long did you live in Alexandria for?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	We lived there for eleven years. Yeah, from 1985 to almost 2000, 2001, something like that.
A.S.	So, gradually you just saw more Iranian culture merging into the area.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Right. Towards the end, we used to rent a large room in the Holiday Inn in Alexandria and have monthly Iranian gatherings where we just gathered; some would play music and some people would sing. It was just more of an excuse to get together and talk about what's happening back home.
A.S.	Were any of your family members from back home able to come to this area?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Uh, not yet. Because, in the middle of the war it was just virtually impossible to—. So, yeah I didn't see my family for fourteen years.

	<p>The last time I saw them was in '79 during the revolution when I left. I wasn't there when my father passed away and so, I had to wait until the war was over. Then, after fourteen years for the first time I went home.</p>
<p><b>Difficulties of Being Iranian in the United States: 58:48</b></p>	
<p>A.S.</p>	<p>In terms of work it seems like you were doing really well in Alexandria. Were there any parts that were difficult about adjusting to living in the U.S.?</p>
<p>Mehdi Aminrazavi</p>	<p>Right. Well, there were many difficulties. Culturally, if you were born and raised somewhere else you will never become American, fully American. So, that was and still is with me even though I've lived here for four decades. Still the culture isn't fully native to me. So, that was part of it. The other part was that unfortunately Iran as you know has been uh, what is the official name? Axis of evil? One of the axis of evils so, being an Iranian is not easy. If you were a Jordanian or Egyptian moving to the States well, some people like foreigners, some people don't and so on and so forth, with that aside; Iranians were particularly disliked by lots of people for right reasons maybe, but we had nothing to do with it, but they saw us as representatives of the axis of evil. So, we were always asked, why are they doing this? Why are they doing that? That part was very difficult to get used to and have to answer to everyone that look, don't identify me with those folks back there. If I liked them I wouldn't be here. But, that's not the general perception. The educated people understand and I was lucky enough to be in academia with a lot of smart people, but a lot of Iranians who came, they had to drive taxis, and work, and do manual labor, and so on. They were subject to a great deal of harassment, and discrimination, and so on.</p>
<p><b>Mary Washington University: 01:01:32</b></p>	
<p>A.S.</p>	<p>I see. So, now you're a professor at Mary Washington University [in Fredericksburg, Virginia] of Philosophy of Religion. So, how did you get to that point?</p>
<p>Mehdi Aminrazavi</p>	<p>Yeah, right. So, I was working on my dissertation and one day my mentor, Professor Nasser called and said—I was teaching at three places actually. I was teaching at Prince George's Community College [in Maryland.] I was teaching at G.W. part-time and I was working at the Genealogical Society. I was teaching at NOVA [Northern Virginia Community College] also, I think. He called me and said, they called from Mary Washington College, at that time it was a college, and</p>

	<p>they're looking for a part-time instructor. I, of course was looking for a job so I said yes and went out to Fredericksburg. I didn't even know there was a college there. And so, they asked me to teach for one semester only. I taught for the first semester and they apparently liked me and asked if I would like to teach a second semester, and third semester, and fourth semester. Then a permanent position opened up and I applied and I was accepted so, I began to teach there and gradually I ended up staying there. Even though we still lived in Alexandria, I used to commute from Alexandria to Mary Washington which was exactly fifty-two point six miles at the time from Seminary Road. [A.S. laughs] So, I did that for years and years and gradually I started a center called Center for Asian Studies and developed that and it became Center for Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. So, that's where I am twenty-four years later.</p>
<p><b>Staying Connected with Alexandria: 01:03:53</b></p>	
<p>A.S.</p>	<p>So, your decision to move to Lorton—Do you miss Alexandria?</p>
<p>Mehdi Aminrazavi</p>	<p>I do, we actually visit, especially Old Town, very often. Weekends we go there and chill by the water and that whole area. I'm hoping to retire in Alexandria actually, as close to Old Town as we can afford. It brings back memories of when I was young, and having children, all the struggles in life, and all that. But, that essentially is a summary of my experience as a student who came to the U.S. in the seventies and for a while was in a limbo. I didn't know If I was going home or being shipped home or staying or what. Then, I officially became an immigrant and officially became a citizen in the early 1990s and so, here I am.</p>
<p><b>Advice to Other Immigrants &amp; Differences between Immigrants and Refugees: 01:05:13</b></p>	
<p>A.S.</p>	<p>So, to conclude you have a very unique experience, but for other individuals that are coming to this country—I guess specifically from Iran—would you give them any advice? What would you tell them?</p>
<p>Mehdi Aminrazavi</p>	<p>Oh, I have a lot to say. I've often thought of writing a book about my experiences and advice to give them. One of the problems with immigrants is that while they are over-seas they create a fictional ideal version of America or Europe or wherever they want to immigrate to, and the America in their mind just doesn't exist. It's the America you know, roads are paved with gold, the land of milk and honey, and so on so forth which probably once upon a time it was, but it is no longer the case. Most of them are not prepared to start from zero again. So-</p>

	<p>and-so is an engineer back home. So-and-so is a doctor back home. So-and-so is a bank employee back home, and they think that by coming here they can continue to do what they were doing back there and no, which they immediately realize, nope, they can't. And, that was one of the reasons my father didn't want to leave Iran even though he was increasingly under pressure. Because he said, some of my colleagues have gone to L.A. and New York and these are generals, but they are driving cabs. I prefer to die in my homeland than go there and do this. So, my first advice to fellow Iranians, who are still coming by the way, is not to fanaticize about America, but to try and learn what it's really like to live in America. There's not a bazillion jobs here, and you have to work your way up, and the American work ethics are very, very different—even from Europeans much less from Middle Easterners. Here, we take work very, very seriously, but in just about everywhere else in the world life, culture, and family is number one and the job is something you do on the side just to get by. So, be prepared to work the American way I always tell them. That's something they have no concept of—work ethics. Then, this is a very law abiding society. You have to follow laws whereas, whether you follow laws or not is kind of relative; it's not as strict as America. So, a lot of Iranians who come to America should be ready to work very hard. They should be ready to be tolerant. We come from a very homogenous culture where, bad is bad, good is good, and there is no shade of gray in between. So, they come to this country and suddenly they see people dressed differently, and acting differently. There are concepts that are absolutely alien to us like, there are gays, and lesbians, and so on and suddenly, they come here and their daughters after two, three, four years want to have a boyfriend and there is a clash. Their sons want to have girlfriends and they flip out and so, they can't digest that. They don't even think about these issues before coming so, some kind of manual of instruction should be written to alarm immigrants of not just the ideals, but the actuals, the realities of life in America which are very different from traditional Islamic, Middle Eastern way of thinking. They are two parallel universes and for most of them, the first generation just never gets it and it causes depression and mental issues, and I know a lot of Iranians who are dealing with these things. They don't reach the promised land, they are driven from home, and they live in this state of limbo all their life. So, being an immigrant is not a very happy experience generally for the first generation. The second generation you know, my children, this is home.</p>
A.S.	Well, that's great. That's excellent. Thank you very much for sharing

	your experiences with us. It holds great value to us, we appreciate it. <b>[Break 01:10:58]</b>
<b>Differences Between the Immigrant and Refugee: 01:11:31</b>	
Mehdi Aminrazavi	I don't know if you've interviewed other Iranians before or not, but you will see that almost—well, the majority of cases as you said are unique in one way or another. There are immigrants, as in folks who come from South America, Latin America for economic opportunities, they are poor. They cross the border and do this and that to become part of the great society. So, there are immigrants and then there are exiled folks who don't immigrate, but find themselves in the circumstance where they have to go somewhere. Most Iranians who came were well-off because coming to America is expensive. Maybe it's cheaper from Mexico, but if you're coming from there, you better come with some money. So, they come not because they want to immigrate to America, but they can't stand their own country and what's going on.
A.S.	It's not safe.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	It's not safe. So, they reluctantly move. Exile mentality and immigrant mentality are two separate things. The way people behave—real immigrants, who pick up from you know, Brazil and decide to come to America and they know they are going to live here and die here—that's a whole different mentality and that affects what they do and don't. From day one they start a job; they do something to lay the foundation for a permanent life here, immigrants. Some of them stop speaking the language of their native land and so on.
A.S.	That's why it was different for you, because you were exiled.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Right. Well, all Iranians, if you ask them, ninety-nine percent of them will say, we didn't plan on coming here. We didn't want to be here, but we had no choice. I mean a lot of Iranians went to Germany, France, Europe, even Asia. They all say, well, it was a decent country like, Greece or Spain, but had it not been for this damn revolution we wouldn't have come, had it not been for this—. So, they do integrate, but not as well as immigrants let's say. They live in the dream of going home.
A.S.	I was going to say, is there just always a hope that they will go home?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Yes, yes. It's funny because in the beginning of the revolution we kept saying well, we'll be back home in six months, there will be a military coup, there will be a change of government. Six months became a year. Every Persian, Iranian New Year is on the first day of the spring,

	<p>twenty-first of March, so every March Iranians had all these gathering and so on and said, next year we will have this at home. We've been saying this stuff for thirty-six years. So, some people can't give up that dream of going home; the nostalgia of wanting to going home. Especially the older they are—they see themselves as temporary. But, then as time goes by they realize that now this is home. It's a great place. If you have to live your life in exile this is the best place to do it, but still the mentality is that. So, most Iranians you will run into they will have a unique story. They left because of this; they left because of that. Very-very few Iranians—in the last ten years I would say —the younger generation of Iranians back there are so fed up with things that they really have more of an immigrant mentality. They actually say, I'm leaving Iran, I'll never go back, I'll never look back, and go wherever I can.</p>
<p><b>Family &amp; Thoughts of Returning Home: 01:16:20</b></p>	
A.S.	<p>So, you mentioned in Alexandria you had your daughter, there was a lot of happiness in your life. You had great jobs, you had your daughter, your wife.</p>
Mehdi Aminrazavi	<p>Yes, yes. And, then my son was born.</p>
A.S.	<p>Oh, you have a son?</p>
Mehdi Aminrazavi	<p>Yes, yes. I have a son, he's almost twenty-four. He graduated from ODU [Old Dominion University] and he just picked up last year and moved to New York and found a job working for MTV [cable tv station.]</p>
A.S.	<p>[laughs] That's fun, that's great.</p>
Mehdi Aminrazavi	<p>He studied communication, film, and digital media.</p>
A.S.	<p>That's great. Oh yeah, my question was, when you realized that you were going to stay here permanently, did you lose that hope or do you still want to go back?</p>
Mehdi Aminrazavi	<p>Yeah. So, in the beginning of the revolution we kept saying six months from now, and then it became next year, and then it became in five years we'll be there. Now when we see each other we say, inshallah, Iranians say, God willing, we'll spend our retirement home. So, we'll go home for retirement.</p>
A.S.	<p>So, you would still like to go back.</p>
Mehdi Aminrazavi	<p>I do, but every time I go, the reality of the situation is I feel completely like a foreigner. So, I realize that I was almost eighteen</p>

	when I came and spent the better part of my life here. So, I go home and feel like a foreigner there, and much less of a foreigner here.
A.S.	I'm curious, when's the last time you went?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Uhm, last May.
A.S.	Oh, okay. Have your children been?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Not this May—a year-and-a-half ago. They have, we have gone together about six, seven times and yeah, they really enjoyed it. The extended family is still there so, they walk off the airplane and there are fifty cousins; they don't know any of them, but they are still cousins.
A.S.	Does your wife know any Farsi?
Mehdi Aminrazavi	Yes, she speaks very good Farsi. That's the only thing I've been able to do, to Persianize or Iranianzie them, the ambience within the house as much as I can and bring as many things that remind of home. I can give you a tour—? Should I show you?
A.S.	Yes, please.
Mehdi Aminrazavi	[Gets up to show family heirlooms]
<b>End of Interview: 01:19:10</b>	