Melungeon Voices Podcast Season Four Transcripts, Episode One: Kiran Singh Sirah

Lis Malone:

Welcome to the Melungeon Voices Podcast, presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Lis Malone. I'm the podcast producer. Joining me as always for the launch of the highly anticipated Season 4, our triumphant return to podcasting, I'm here with Heather Andolina, president of the MHA. Heather, welcome to Season 4.

Heather Andolina:

I know. I can't believe it, Lis. We're on Season 4 now.

Lis Malone:

I know. So we decided collectively that the trick to having another season is that we have to mentally manifest it at the end of each season, right?

Heather Andolina:

Yes.

Lis Malone:

We kept saying, "We're going to manifest a Season 4," right?

Heather Andolina:

Exactly.

Lis Malone:

So, we don't even have to think about manifesting a new season because we are here. We got a brand new season. We have another phenomenal lineup of guests that you have cultivated, and bravo as always bringing together such a diverse collection of interesting perspectives. Before we kick off with our first interview for the season, we always like to have you start off and welcome everybody and give us, I guess let's call it the state of the MHA.

Heather Andolina:

I like that.

Lis Malone:

Yeah, the state of the MHA. See, we're all about firsts.

Heather Andolina:

Yes.

Lis Malone:

So I'm going to turn the microphone over to you, Heather, and you take it away from here.

Heather Andolina:

All right. Thank you, Lis. Welcome back to the fourth season of the Melungeon Voices Podcast. I am truly honored to serve as the MHA's board president and thrilled to continue this journey of insightful conversations with you. First, I want to mention the success of this year's MHA's Annual Union/Conference back in June and to give a special thanks to the Lair House in Mount Vernon for hosting our conference and the Limestone Grille and Bar for catering the author event. They were the perfect match for us, and we appreciate the wonderful hospitality and service provided.

Now on to the fourth season of the podcast. Once again, I'm teaming up with our hardworking producer, Lis Malone, in bringing you all another amazing lineup. In this season, we'll delve into more Melungeon and Appalachian ancestry, history and diversity while bringing you engaging discussions with researchers, thought leaders and everyday individuals who have fascinating stories to share.

Our goal is to create a platform where an array of different people and perspectives can come together to share their stories and knowledge on not just Melungeon ancestry, but also mixed heritage and Appalachian culture to all of you. We hope that the Melungeon Voices Podcast enriches your day and sparks your curiosity and ideas. We're dedicated to delivering thought-provoking content that entertains, informs and leaves you with a fresh perspective. Don't forget to subscribe to the Melungeon Voices Podcast on your favorite podcast platform so you never miss an episode.

We can't do this without you, our valuable members. If you're not already a member of the MHA, please visit our website today at www.melungeon.org and click the Join Now button at the top of this page. Memberships, grants and generous donations from people just like you help to keep our organization running and directly fund special programming such as this. On behalf of the entire MHA Board of Directors, we thank you for joining us, and we can't wait to connect with you.

Lis Malone:

Well, as always, Heather, what a beautiful address. I think that all of the members are very grateful for your wonderful tenure as the board president. If you are not a member, do what Heather said, join up. We love and appreciate your support, and it's going to be another great season.

Heather Andolina:

Oh, it is.

Lis Malone:

I am going to second that, Madam President. So let's talk about what we're doing this week. We have an exceptional guest. We have all exceptional guests, but for today, we're going to say another exceptional guest for Episode 1 to kick off this new season. Tell us, Heather, who will you be speaking with this week and what will you be talking about?

Heather Andolina:

This week, we are speaking with Kiran Singh Sirah. Kiran is a speaker, folklorist, storyteller, peace builder, and past president of the International Storytelling Center and producer of the world-renowned National Storytelling Festival. Prior to his appointment at the ISC, he helped establish several award-winning arts, cultural and human rights programs in numerous countries. Kiran is regularly asked to provide keynote lectures, workshops and training seminars for such entities as the Smithsonian Institution, U.S. State Department, Department of Defense, Library of Congress, the United Nations and many others, and has worked in and in collaboration with projects in Colombia, Brazil, Palestine, Israel,

South Sudan and Uganda. Kiran firmly believes storytelling not only enriches lives, but also holds the key to building a better world. In this season's debut episode, we explore the significance of storytelling in Appalachia and Melungeon communities as well as the importance of telling and sharing our own experiences and stories.

Lis Malone:

Well, thank you so much, Heather. Let's take a listen.

Heather Andolina:

Hi, Kiran. It's such a pleasure having you on our podcast today.

Kiran Singh Sirah:

It's so good to be here, Heather. Wonderful to be here.

Heather Andolina:

I like to start off my interviews with the question of when was the first time you learned of the Melungeon people or heard the term?

Kiran Singh Sirah:

Oh, wow. I'm new to Appalachia to some degree, and so I've been here over 10 years. I think I probably lived here in another life because it's definitely home. I heard the term, I think, over the years, and I think particularly in the last few years when I was president of the Storytelling Center when we did a program called Freedom Stories. When we started to work with Dr. Alicestyne Turley, who's a specialist historian, and we started to talk about themes and topics that we could really explore, which was primarily focused on Black history, like the Black storytelling experiences of Appalachia. That's when I started to hear Melungeon, and I was like, "What is Melungeon?" Then I started to have different conversations, and my wife grew up in Lee County, Virginia and has had family living there for over 200 years.

She started talking a little bit about how Melungeon was very maybe common I think, or there was experiences of people she went to school with that identified as Melungeon, but I was still learning. I didn't quite know until we started to do this program at the Storytelling Center. Obviously, then I got to meet with the Melungeon Heritage Association that came and we had this beautiful conversation and then learn more. I got to learn more and realize a lot that there's this diaspora that's all across the nation. It's not just located to one place, and it's a lot more complex. So I was really, really fascinated and also interested. So yeah, I say it was more in the last few years, but I also realized that there's a lot of interest. When I say Melungeon or I talk to someone about it, then people's eyes light up. There seems to be a curiosity and interest people here connected. I also probably say through my friend Wayne Winkler that I've got to know and who also identifies as Melungeon, and I know he has done some research and work in that area.

Heather Andolina:

Yes, and we had Wayne Winkler on the first season of the Melungeon Voices Podcast, actually.

Kiran Singh Sirah:

Well, he's got the best voice.

Heather Andolina:

He does. Doesn't he? He has a voice for radio for sure.

Kiran Singh Sirah:

Oh, yes, definitely.

Heather Andolina:

Now, Kiran, would you tell us more about your own personal unique ancestry?

Kiran Singh Sirah:

Sure. Yeah. In some ways people say it's complex. When I start, they can't make sense of what, India, Africa, England, Scotland, United States, how? But it's not that. I see it as almost like a thread because my origins come from two villages in Northern India, from rural villages. But my people have lived in different parts of the world. For example, for maybe, probably hundreds of years, they lived in the rural parts of Northern India. But when my grandparents left India around the '40s to go to East Africa, and they were part of the freedom fighter movement against British rule and their occupation and that after independence, they went to East Africa to build the railroads. Not everybody left at first. My grandfathers went. It was indentured labor, but it was very a little bit exploitative because the British needed to build an expansion to the British Empire, but they needed skilled laborers. So I think the Europeans didn't want to work out in the heat so they brought the Indians over, and they had to build the railroads through the Kenyan desert to the source of the Nile.

Partly what that was, was a part of a war effort because it was during the war, the Great War, and whoever controlled the Suez Canal and has the source of the River Nile would have control between East and West. So I didn't realize that until much later. But my parents, my mother was born in Kenya, in Mombasa. My father was born in India. He was five years old when he moved to Uganda to be with his father and family. Then my brother was born in Uganda, and then my family grew up in Uganda. Then in 1972, under the dictatorship of Idi Amin when my family had to flee they were given three months. But then actually a second announcement came that my parents were given 48 hours to leave the country or be executed, and so they had to flee. They were robbed on the route to the airport by the army, left very vulnerable. They came to Britain in October the 26, 1972 and landed at London Stansted Airport. I know that because I've interviewed my father about it.

I remember him talking at the time that there was a lot of far right neo-Nazi kind of movement, anti-immigrant movements, and they stormed the airports and so the plane had to divert. He always talked about it being a very sunny day. Everyone said it would be cold in England, so that's what he expected. But he landed in Britain, and it was a beautiful sunny day in October. So they moved to a small town called Eastbourne on the south coast of England, 50 miles south of London as the crow flies and 30 kilometers from France. So you could see France on a clear day, and that's where I was born four years later. So I grew up in England of Indian, East African background, heritage. Language, food, it's all mixed together, and then spent most of my life in England, but then spent some time in Spain, in Madrid, sometimes in Ireland. Lived different parts of London, the north of England then I moved to Scotland in 2001. I spent 10 years there before moving to the United States, as you can tell by my North Carolina accent.

Heather Andolina:

So Kiran, circling back, please share what brought you to Appalachia?

Kiran Singh Sirah:

I would say it was this job initially. When I graduated from UNC, I decided I wanted to... and I was there on a World Peace Fellowship, two years, fully-funded fellowship, it was a brilliant fellowship in designing peace- building and storytelling programs because of the work I was doing previously in conflict resolution in Northern Ireland and Scotland. But when I graduated, I realized I'd only really touched the surface in this really big country, and I decided I wanted to stay. I didn't want to go back to the UK, not because it's cold, I actually quite like the cold. It was really because it's a smaller country, and it's so much more to explore. I really started to see the potential of what I initially I would say, I know that America is a... United States is an incredible powerhouse in the world, but what I wanted to do was also influence foreign policy as an anti-war activist.

But now I've become an American, so it wasn't about trying to change people, it's like a I am an American now. When I graduated, I was looking for work because to stay in a country, you need to work, and you need to have a visa. I started to apply, telling people what I was doing, and I basically offered a job to run the International Storytelling Center in Jonesborough, Tennessee. Never heard of Jonesborough before that, never heard of the National Storytelling Festival, never heard of that. I applied. They invited me for an interview and I said, "Well, let me give this a go. Could I handle this? Could I live in a small place? Could I live in this place? I don't know." I came here, fell in love with the place, and I was offered the position.

I just packed up my Subaru with a few possessions that I had and moved here, and that's what really brought me to Appalachia. I feel there's probably more now when I'm in reflection, because I remember with somebody saying to me, "When you go to the mountains, listen to the magic of the mountains." I didn't know what she meant back then, but now I feel I've begun to understand that. It's a much more deeper place than from the outside. Before I left Scotland, I was talking to my friend, and she's a folk singer, and she goes, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to North Carolina."

She goes, "Where's that?" And I'm not too sure. "Let's look on the map." I didn't know even know where North Carolina was to be a silly Brit. But she goes, "That's kind of near Appalachia," and I go, "Oh, maybe I'll end up in Appalachia on the front porch wearing dungarees and playing the banjo," just jokingly, because that's what I knew to be from the stereotype from the Beverly Hillbillies program we watched as kids. That's what I knew, and that's all I understood. But then I'm not that far from it when I'm advocating for storytelling on my front porch. I love my front porch, and here I am in Appalachia as an Appalachian now, but I realized there is magic here. There's also depth. There's also complexity. There's also struggle. There's also resilience. There's pain, but there's also incredible beauty, and that's why I love being here.

Heather Andolina:

Yes to all of that. So you came and you got a job as the president of the International Storytelling Center. Kiran, give us a little history about storytelling and its significance to humans throughout time.

Kiran Singh Sirah:

Wow. How many episodes you got?

Heather Andolina:

Should we make it a series? Yeah.

Kiran Singh Sirah:

Well, obviously, I ran the Storytelling Center for 10 years. I stepped down a couple of months ago, so it was a decade, really. Now I would say I've always had a love and a passion for storytelling, but I didn't know I'll end up running a storytelling center. So sometimes when you get that job you start reflecting on your story and you see it through that lens. I'd say I do a lot of thinking. The job encourages you to do that, that when you are in that world and you are engaged, you are working with storytellers. You are listening to stories. What stories does is broaden your perspectives. It excites the imagination. You get to travel across not just places in the world, but across time. You get to travel from 40,000 year old civilizations to understanding places and people. The history of storytelling will come differently for different people.

But the way I would see it that people often talk about storytelling beginning around the campfire. It's what our ancestors did to share, to pass on knowledge. But I believe, and I've talked about this a lot, that it started before. Initially, it started in the mind, in the imagination when our earliest ancestors looked up into the sky and began to use their imagination when they saw the stars and they began to wonder. We never stop wondering. We do that all the time. We think, we imagine, we explore. That's a human trait. We're always doing that. When we scroll through our phones, we're searching for the truth, right? We look at the news, we're searching for the human story. I think that place of the imagination is the birthplace of storytelling. What has happened over from the development of the human species was that our particular human species, we developed the ability to communicate through story, which then helped our humanity, our species to survive, not just survive, but communicate to beat other human species and eventually develop that ability to communicate in a more complex way.

Back then, the storytelling as the or tradition got told around that fire. It got told around by tradition bearers. I would say it began in Africa and over time, as societies and people migrated and evolved and went to different parts of the world, the traditions went with them. It's always been something that until very, very recently in human history, it's been an old tradition passed from one generation to the next, to the next. It's entertainment, but it's also knowledge, it's lessons, it's wisdom. It's a way to bind a community into a group, a group identity. It's an intangible aspect of identifying a people where all parts of multiple narratives, and we are still doing that as people. The United States is just a piece of rock, but a story that we infuse in that rock that makes it a nation; the same of a flag, the same of a place, the same of a region.

Appalachia is just a piece of rock, and being Appalachian is an imagined idea. Of course, ISC defines a place, but somebody may identify as Appalachian, but they live in another part of the nation or the world, it's imagined space. So it's the same with story. It's a continually flexing part of who we are and our identity. Some people might suggest that, "I think therefore, I story." It's embedded in our DNA. Barbara Myerhoff, the Jewish anthropologist suggests that we are not just homo sapiens, we're homo narrens (storytelling humans). Narrative is who we are. I would say that it's so core to our humanity that it's the thing, the one thing that we want to leave and share when we die. To know our story has been heard, witnessed, and appreciate and valued is one of the core aspects of who we are as humans.

Heather Andolina:

That's so beautifully said. I completely agree. So why is it important for us to tell our own stories, especially within our Melungeon and Appalachian communities?

Kiran Singh Sirah:

So that other people don't tell those stories for you, simply. Because when you think about the history of Appalachia, how did I know about Appalachia? From a stereotypical demonizing TV program that demonized the region and the people, the Beverly Hillbillies. You know what I mean? It was a fun program, but to many aspect, it was playing on a stereotype. It was demonizing. It was making fun of other people who were telling that story. It's really important that people cultivate their ability to share and to tell their own stories. People are, but it's, are they're being heard? You know what I mean? I think that goes for any group. There's also the complexities within that group. Just like there's no one single narrative for one person, I have multiple stories, I have millions, so do you. We all do. Just in a group of say, the Melungeons, there's going to be multiple complex Melungeons that grew up in Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina or South Carolina or different parts, the experience is going to be different.

The history of the Melungeons is going to be different based on the social political climate of that time and what has shaped into the identity of today, how somebody might define themselves. I think when people cultivate and learn how to share their own story, then it's agency, it's power, it's empowerment. It's also saying that you love yourself. It's allowing yourself to say, "I want to tell my own story. It's my story to tell," and I just think that's really important. I'm very hesitant on the idea of we only think about storytelling as personal narrative. I really think it's important to recognize the collective, the folk traditional, the folk stories, the stories that bind us as a group, but it's also. Where's our place within that group? When I look at my heritage, yeah, I have a multiple complex heritage from different countries, and there's a story about what is the Indian or Asian community in Britain.

We don't have one single story. It's complex. I was born in Britain. My parents were born in another country. So it was a chance for me to look at my identity for what was I inherited, but also what do I claim and what I'm emerging, what do I wish to be. When I moved to Scotland, that was different because I also adopted a Scottish identity too and when I moved to the United States. So I think it's really important to explore that complexity and to celebrate it, to come together, to share and to be rekindled. When there are gatherings, I imagine with the Melungeon heritage gatherings that once a year, it's a storytelling event. We are coming back around, metaphorically, figuratively, around the fire, relearning who we are, where we come from, what are our lessons? What binds us? What do we celebrate? These rituals are so important to our human experience that we get to celebrate them and remember and look at each other and be in fellowship and community again. That makes us stronger as a people.

Heather Andolina:

Let's talk about some of the important work that the International Story Center does.

Kiran Singh Sirah:

Oh, yeah. I was there for 10 years, so I'm not right there right now, but I took over as president in 2013. There'd only ever been two of... other been the founder, Mr. Jimmy Neil Smith that founded it in, the organization at least, in 1973. So I wasn't born. He came up with the idea of creating a storytelling event. There wasn't a center back then, it was just an event. That particular event happened in Jonesborough, but specifically back then, it was an initiative to save a dying mountain town, part of a revitalization effort, and 60 to 80 people came. Then what Jimmy Neil did is that he brought mountain man storyteller, Mr. Ray Hicks from Beach Mount in North Carolina, that is both of Scotch Irish, which most people know, but he's also of Cherokee heritage. Many people don't really talk about that side of it.

They very much talked about his Scotch Irish heritage, but he's also part Cherokee because I know, I've watched his videos. He would talk often about understanding the medicine of the land that he lived on like the palm of his hand. He knew he was an expert forager, he understood the medicine. I know that part of that was just living and being part. So I think he represents a lot more than we initially think about Ray Hicks. But what Jimmy Neil did was invite Ray Hicks to tell at that first festival, and Ray Hicks became almost like the face of the festival. He was a 6' 1/2" tall Beech Mountain, North Carolinian mountain man who used to tell Jack tales, very charismatic, a beautiful human. That particular moment of 60 to 80 people on a flatbed truck with some hay bales around the courthouse, the Jonesborough, sparked a movement.

It happened to be the first public event exclusively devoted for the art of storytelling in the world. It helped to professionalize the storytelling industry from something that people did every day, which they still do, but into a professional industry. Then you had the professionalization where people started submitting their taxes, doing it for a living. It was also part of the National Folk Movement, a folk revival that was happening across the country where storytellers would go to folk festivals. But when they heard that there was a movement for them, a place for them, they came. And you think about the mountains before the internet and all these things you had to hear through word of mouth, but they came. They came to the mountains, and came to Jonesborough. What was 60 people turned into 11,000 over 40 years, around 40 to 50 years. So during that period of time, what happened was Jimmy was a visionary, and he still is, but very much thought about the idea of you create something, then you work to become it.

So he called it the National Storytelling Festival with the idea that a small Appalachian town can create something that's national, of national importance. He started to invite storytellers like Pete Seeger, Alex Haley, Guy Carawan. He started to invite many others. There was Kathryn Tucker Windham, that's considered a matriarch from Selma, Alabama of the storytelling movement; Jackie Torrance, who is one of the most studied storytellers. She's passed as well, African American storyteller, also a matriarch, one of the most studied storytellers from her archives and recordings to many others until modern day when we invite social justice storytellers, peace-building storytellers, activists, mosques, all different types. The author of Orange is the New Black, Piper Kerman and Larry Smith to slam poets to National Poetry Out Loud Champions, those that tell Appalachian focused place, but also Idaho and the Gullah traditions, the African American traditions, multiple traditions, and those that tell folk tales to personal narrative. Those that have become comedians that turned storytellers, musicians turned storytellers.

David Holt is known as a musician as well, and he would tell on stage how he used to tell stories in between his music sets, but now he performs music in between his stories. You can hear that very much with different storytellers when they talk about how they became storytellers, how that part of them emerged. They realized, "This is what I am." They claimed it. So that movement really began and turned into the National Storytelling Festival, which is the flagship. But what the International Storytelling Center does as a nonprofit, that is a physical building, but there's also a lot more... While I was there particularly, we built on a lot of work that Jimmy Neil began. But working with NASA scientists to understand complex ideas around science and discovery and imagination once again, through the stars and explorations to working with healthcare professionals, putting storytelling into hospitals and understanding of the healing power to social justice work as well.

Everything from training the Pentagon on alternative uses to violence using stories to build relationships and empathy and connections with tribal leaders in different countries; for helping troops and commanders cultivate their personal narratives from rural towns. When they use those stories to cultivate relationships when they're trying to do peace conflict prevention with others in different parts of the world, to working with the state department, foreign relation officers, foreign services, and how

to share their stories that they want to tell as well as projects that brought young people, emerging leaders from Lebanon and Iraq and Turkey and Egypt to United States fostering intercultural cultural diplomacy, relationship building across our nations. So storytelling is a cultural diplomacy tool. It's a peace-building tool. So the ISC was very much at the pinnacle of doing a lot of that work, year-round residencies, particularly through the artist as storyteller, people that have been cultivating stories to perform.

That's a capital P., Performance storytelling. That's primarily what ISC was well known for, but also preservation, the collecting and the preserving of those traditions. The practice, which is the application of storytelling in different fields, healthcare, justice, peace, et cetera. I would say through those three Ps with the values of justice and equity and diversity and quality was about helping people to broaden their perspectives of the broader story that is part of who we are. Everything from working with young people at risk, to communities at risk, facilitating dialogue, using stories for story circles, all sorts of things, so that's what ISC did and still does. My role was to oversee that work and develop the partnerships and also the funding, and then it was in a really good place for me to step down. It's like, "Well, I feel I've done my job. Now, let me explore what else I want to do."

Heather Andolina:

Yes. Going back to talking about diversity, I think a lot of people don't realize how this small historical Appalachian town of Jonesborough, Tennessee brings together all these diverse voices and cultures to tell their stories.

Kiran Singh Sirah:

I like to think about of a global village that descends in our small town, and to get the hometown Southern experience too, which is really nice. It's not a big city where it's... I'm from a big city, so I'm not anti-big city, but there's something intimate and friendly and caring and warm about being in when you can walk from tent to tent and meet your friends. As a peace builder, I'd say it was also a peace-building initiative because when you have people from all walks of life from 50 states and beyond sharing space together and engaging is something that transcends politics, then you have the opportunity to build fellowship and be present with one another. That experience, that kind of moments are very rare in our society. That's why I always saw it as a peace-building initiative.

Take the feeling that you have in this moment and go share that love with the world, that's my vibe. But at the same time, ISC is just one institution. Now, there are thousands of institutions around the world now that do this similar or different. Some storytelling institutions are doing specifically marginalized voices. Some are doing stories of the South or cultivating New South, global South. So there's all sorts of different types of approaches to it, and essentially, no one organization owns storytelling. It belongs to everybody. It belongs to humanity. You know what I mean? Some people try to co-opt it, dangerous politicians. I think companies that are trying to frack our region and I can exploit, storytelling can be used as a dangerous force, but it can also be used and why it should be used as a force for good, building community.

Heather Andolina:

Do you have any advice on how our listeners can begin to write and share their own stories and experiences?

Kiran Singh Sirah:

Yeah. Take notice when you wake up in the morning how many times you hear a story, how many times you tell a story. Take notice of the places where that you feel comfortable. When you come home from school, from work and someone asks you, "How was your day?" You tell them a story? When you put your kids to sleep at night, you tell them a story. Think about the times where you feel really comfortable, you meet your best friend after a long time, but you just talk about, "This thing happened to me," or, "This is what's been happening in my life." Imagine coming home for Thanksgiving, sitting with the person you love and you are sitting at their feet, or you're sitting side-by-side and you are sharing your life, that storytelling. It's the greatest moment of storytelling. The kitchen table is the most beautiful form of storytelling I see. The front porch, the kitchen table, the connection between people, so think about that, think about when you do it.

If you want other ways to like, "Okay, I want to go deeper," I always say to people keep a journal. If you're serious about writing or cultivating and processing and imagining, write your thoughts every day. Write every day. Keep an audio app on your phone and just write. Write about the sunrise. Write about the moments. Write about your feelings. Write about the subtle smile that you got from a stranger and how it made you feel. Write about something that reminds you of something. Write about a memory that comes to mind. Just write. If you continue to do that every day, then the story naturally comes. I say storytelling is like permaculture. It's like gardening. Permaculture, the concept that partly we don't try to impose plants or shrubs into a place that shouldn't necessarily be there, but wait to see what naturally should be there. The process of storytelling is like write and wait to see what naturally arises to the surface, what grows out of you.

Heather Andolina:

That's wonderful advice. Where can our listeners contact you and follow you on social media?

Kiran Singh Sirah:

I'm in hiding. No, I'm kidding. People can contact me, just go to kiransinghsirah.net is my website. Kiran Singh Sirah, Facebook, Instagram. You may not want to see my pictures, but anyway, but that's where I am Instagram, LinkedIn, all that. I think I have a website and on the website's my email. If people are interested, there are toolkits and blogs and sometimes I offer tips and ideas. I try to think about stories of the world and what's happening and try to reflect upon it, So I often do writing if people are interested. But yeah, otherwise, I live in Johnson City, Tennessee, how they hang out downtown.

Heather Andolina:

Yes. Yes. You'll take them on a tour of Jonesborough?

Kiran Singh Sirah:

I might just do that. Yeah, we'll go coffee hopping through the cafes.

Heather Andolina:

Yes, I like that idea.

Kiran Singh Sirah:

And share biscuits.

Heather Andolina:

Yes. Yes. Well, I follow you on social media. I love your posts.

Kiran Singh Sirah:

I love your posts.

Heather Andolina:

Aw, thank you. Well, Kiran-

Kiran Singh Sirah :

I-

Heather Andolina:

Yes, go ahead. No, go ahead.

Kiran Singh Sirah:

Yeah, no, I appreciate being here. One of my favorite moments in 10 years was when you and your colleagues came and we sat in my office, and we just shared. The table was like the fire, we just shared-

Heather Andolina:

Yes.

Kiran Singh Sirah:

... our stories about who we are, and you've helped me to broaden my perspective. I love the mission statement of the Melungeon Heritage Association about the idea of what we're working towards as well, it's not just the past, it's like who we are. I have an interracial relationship with my wife. My wife is white, and my kid is a blonde, blonde hair, blue eyes, and I'm brown and bald, and that's the future, and let's celebrate it. I love the idea that we can come from different places and people, but we're all one humanity, and there's so much more that binds us. So I really appreciate what you are doing and your colleagues are doing. Thank you for allowing me to be part of it.

Heather Andolina:

Of course, and you're exactly right. That's who our Melungeon ancestors were, a multi-ethnic, multicultural people. That's who we are today, and that's where we are going in the future. Kiran, I want to thank you so much for being on our podcast and for sharing your story with all of us.

Kiran Singh Sirah:

Thank you so much. I appreciate being here.

Lis Malone:

You've been listening to the Melungeon Voices Podcast. On behalf of myself, Heather Andolina and the entire MHA Executive Committee, we'd like to thank all of those who participated in making this episode possible. For more information, you can visit them on the web at melungeon.org. That's M-E-L-U-N-G-E-O-N.O-R-G. The information, views and opinions expressed in this podcast episode do not necessarily

represent those of the MHA. Melungeon Voices is presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association.