# Health and Human Science Matters Season 1, Episode 3: Sonali Diddi

Sonali Diddi: I think the biggest aha moment comes when I talk to people, when I talk to industry, and you're like, "Oh no, what am I doing in academia? There's so much of things to do in the world." And hen I say, "No, the students are the future of our industry as well." So it's good that we can bridge this gap between the industry and the students. So kind of working my way through different news articles and understanding what I'm researching, what's happening in the world about it. Then bringing that back into bite-sized pieces and seeing how it can be incorporated.

Avery Martin: Welcome to Health and Human Science Matters, a podcast by Colorado State University's College of Health and Human Sciences. I'm your co-host and digital media strategist, Avery Martin.

Matt Hickey: I'm Matt Hickey, Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Studies. In our college, we make it our mission to optimize human health and wellbeing through discovery and innovation. Don't just take our word for it. Each episode we sit down with people who fulfill that mission, our college faculty and staff. Today we're lucky enough to have a friend and colleague, Sonali Diddi from the Department of Design and Merchandising. Sonali, welcome and thanks for joining us today.

Sonali Diddi: Thank you Matt. It's wonderful to be here.

Matt Hickey: We're looking forward to just having some fun, getting to know you a little bit better and just chatting our conversation for the next half an hour or so.

Sonali Diddi: Absolutely.

Matt Hickey: So Sonali, I want to talk about things that maybe don't often get front and center when we talk about academic conversations, right? So when I ask you to tell us about yourself, I'm interested in family and personal interest of yours, maybe even in special memories that you might be willing to share.

Sonali Diddi: Sure, absolutely. I'm Sonali Diddi and I come from India and I am the youngest of the three siblings, which many people say that they can relate to. I guess my interests are more in cooking. I love cooking, I love spicy food.

Matt Hickey: Aha.

Sonali Diddi: I think I love more than cooking I love sharing it with friends and family, so that gives me more happiness than just the cooking. So that's what I get excited about anytime, about potlucks, about office gatherings that is something really very nice for me to feel.

Matt Hickey: Do you have favorites or something you're famous for in your repertoire?

Sonali Diddi: Yes, I'm very famous for biryani.

Matt Hickey: Okay.

Sonali Diddi: It's a rice dish. It has lots of spices and it's made with meat or veggies, and then it is layered with the meat, the curry, and then the rice. Then it's steamed for about an hour or so. And yes, it's very flavorful. It can be spicy for some, but that is what I'm known for but I love food. I love trying new cuisines. The one thing which many people don't know about me, I will say is I don't like sweets.

Matt Hickey: Aha. Okay.

Avery Martin: Okay. So all spice, no sweet.

Sonali Diddi: All spice, no sweets. So I can't take sweets in any form. So that's the downside of it is I don't like fruits so.

Matt Hickey: That's okay. That's okay. We'll forgive you for that.

Avery Martin: Yes, we'll work it out. Yeah.

Sonali Diddi: Yeah. So I guess those are some of those things which define me as a person. I love spending time with family and I think last year we closed our house and one of the things which I developed as a hobby is gardening, raising veggies. And that's been a very peaceful way to spend time. And again, I'm also part of the CSU Grow and Give. So the produce from my garden goes to CSU Grow and Give and the LaMer County Food Bank. So really nice. Feeling nice about such things.

Matt Hickey: That's fantastic.

Avery Martin: It's really cool. I may have to request a dish from you because my girlfriend absolutely loves Indian food.

Sonali Diddi: Absolutely.

Avery Martin: That's her thing. So cool.

Sonali Diddi: Okay.

Avery Martin: Yes.

Sonali Diddi: Sure.

Avery Martin: Great.

Matt Hickey: Fantastic. Are you able to get back to visit your extended family with any regularity? I know COVID has clearly made that far more difficult and it would've been in the past.

Sonali Diddi: I think we have been, there was a long gap. I left India in 2008 to do my masters in Australia, and then for a very brief 15 day time, I was in India when we were moving from Australia to the US. I think there was a big gap of eight years that I could not visit primarily because it was like the visa issues, the immigration, there are lots of processes, so I missed India too as a place to go and spend some time. But I was fortunate enough that my parents could come and visit us a couple of times, so that was good. But when we went in 2017, I think that was the biggest shock of life because India had changed so much that it was beyond recognition of where I had left. So I think it was just more cosmopolitan, more consumerist society I would say. We did not grow in such a place, so it was difficult to see the changes which was happening. And after that we went twice. So it was good going back and spending some time with family and friends.

Matt Hickey: Okay. What are some of the things you miss the most about your childhood, memories of growing up in India?

Sonali Diddi: I think I miss the most is everything is available at the tip of your fingers. I mean, you go, you get something, and even if you're making something, you get everything right by the corner of the street.

Matt Hickey: Wow.

Sonali Diddi: And here you have to plan each and everything. Let's say if it was like wedding dress, I mean you could get all of that done in two weeks because you would have access to tailors, you would have access to fabric shops, trims, everything. Here it's like a one year plan to make a wedding dress.

Avery Martin: Yeah.

Matt Hickey: My goodness.

Sonali Diddi: I think the accessibility and I would say the public transport.

Matt Hickey: Oh, okay.

Sonali Diddi: I miss that a lot. Even in Australia, I was in Melbourne before, so it was so well connected with public transport. I think that's the most thing I miss in the US is the public transport.

Matt Hickey: Yeah. Where we do it at all, it tends to be coastal. As you move away from the coast, you see much less of that. That's interesting.

Sonali Diddi: And another interesting fact I will say is I learned driving in 2015. I hadn't touched a vehicle or a bike or anything.

Matt Hickey: Oh, no kidding.

Sonali Diddi: So I learned, I got my driver's license in Fort Collins in 2015. So I still consider myself a new driver. I haven't been on the freeway absolutely. And I don't intend to go on I25 whatsoever.

Avery Martin: I do not blame you.

Matt Hickey: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Avery Martin: I don't think anybody should.

Sonali Diddi: Yes. And that's because we were so spoiled with the public transport, the different modes of transport. So you would always get from point A to point B, but coming to the US, it was difficult and you had to learn. So I learned in 2015 the drivers at classes and got my license.

Matt Hickey: Congratulations.

Avery Martin: Yes. We got our license in the same year. So shout out to that grad class.

Matt Hickey: That's great. I have a cousin who's an attorney in New York City who's never had a driver's license. I saw him at a family reunion a few years ago and he said, "What do I need a car for? It's just a hassle."

Avery Martin: Right.

Matt Hickey: But when you get out of those metro settings, it becomes much different. That's for sure.

Sonali Diddi: Yeah.

Matt Hickey: So tell me about your educational journey. And you can go as far back on this as you want, but the natural question is how did you find yourself in the academy? But some of those influences may be pretty far back, right? So I'm curious about your educational pathway.

Sonali Diddi: Yes. And that's something really I will say is very dear to me. I mean, coming from India, in India, I will say this, and it could be my personal opinion, that we were used to having only two streams for your career parts. Either you or a doctor or an engineer. So it was a societal norm that you either go into any of these fields, that's it. I mean there's no other way that you can think of your life. I was fortunate enough that my parents said you could choose what you wanted to. So I always loved arts, I loved drawing, I loved painting. I decided to go into fashion designing. That's how I got into this line of work, I would say. I started my undergraduate in 1998, finished in 2001. It was just a beautiful learning journey. It was so hands on, so action-oriented.

Working with weavers. I worked a lot with weavers even during my undergraduate, seeing them in the spaces which they were and feeling that we were very fortunate to have access to many things which they didn't. But also a feeling of a responsibility to them and their work. And that got me more into doing freelance designing. I was doing freelance designing, doing right from designing to production, to marketing everything in the supply chain.

I think it was two years after I graduated, two or three years after I graduated, one of my professors at the place where I got graduated NIFT, National Institute Fashion Technology. He said, "Sonali, you were very good as a student." I would do a lot of peer teaching. That was something which I would learn as exams. I would do a lot of peer teaching. He said, "Maybe you should just try teaching for yeah, because I saw you working with your friends." That's how I got introduced to teaching.

So to this day, I do give all the credit to my professor. His name is Sanjay Srivastava for introducing me to academia. And after that I think I just love teaching. I just love being among students. So that was again, more part-time teaching, part-time freelancing. After that I worked with the state government from the place where I came to introduce a whole new curriculum in fashion designing to be rolled out in the kind of community college how we have here, we call it polytechnic in India. So we rolled out the program and it was about six, seven years I think after I graduated. At certain point I felt I was a frog in the well. I was not doing anything new. It was the same thing, which I learned I'm teaching and not so much about exploring what it was.

And that's what took me to Australia to do my masters. I will say this, it was completely different because in India I think we learn more theoretical, we don't understand the practical applications. I'm pretty sure it may have changed now, but this is what my perception is. We are very good with theory and it's when you go to work, you learn on the go. But when I moved to the US, it was more of the reverse way. You understand the practical applications you learn from, how do you apply knowledge? I think that really helped me learn better and I loved learning. After my masters, I think it was my husband's dream because he said, "Oh, you love learning and you should continue your PhD." So it was-

Matt Hickey: Oh, that's great.

Sonali Diddi: I did not even think the world that I will do my PhD. But he was the driving force behind my decision. We started looking and I think that's when we said, "Okay, US is the next place to go." And that brought me to Iowa State University to do my PhD. After doing my PhD, my area is more into sustainability and CSU was just the right choice to be in. So that's what brought me here.

Matt Hickey: So when I hear this, I hear big influences of a professor you named early on who began that process. But then, and I'm really delighted to hear this, your spouse, it was a major player in this process and that's really neat.

Sonali Diddi: Yeah.

Matt Hickey: Can you think of others along the way that were touchstone moments or would they be the-

Sonali Diddi: Oh, my parents have been the other big support. My parents and my siblings all the way through. My brother was in Louisiana before he was at Louisiana State he was doing his master. So that was also one of the reasons that we thought okay, US was a better place to do my PhD. So I would say family has been a huge support mechanism all through these years in going forward as well. And friends and family, I would say are the biggest support.

Matt Hickey: Much to be thankful for.

Sonali Diddi: Yes.

Matt Hickey: Good for you.

Sonali Diddi: Yes. Very thankful.

Matt Hickey: So we managed to recruit you to CSU.

Sonali Diddi: Yes.

Matt Hickey: And you're part of this wonderful college we call Health and Human Sciences. So tell us a little bit about what excites you the most about your research program and your role as a professor here in the college.

Sonali Diddi: I think what excites me the most, I will start with something very gentle and then I'll go more specific I guess. What excites me most is land- grant mission of CSU. I applied for very few universities and all of them were land-grant. I still remember the hallways of Morrill Hall because Iowa State, I'm a grad of Iowa State and it was just so nice to read the history of Morrill Act and what it meant. So I had decided going forward I would be at a land-grant university and that's what brought me to CSU. And that's very near to me. I always feel that we as academics or researchers, we are here to impact the society with whatever knowledge we gain. In that process also learn a lot from others. I think that's the best part of my job is I get to learn every day in different forms and ways, which helps enrich my own knowledge and the way I see the society. That's what excites me about my job in CSU.

Then the other big part why I love to be here is the focus of sustainability all through out the different functions of what we do as university and the place. I still remember, I came for interview here. I got down at DIA and I'm having all these screens showing the melting glaciers and stuff like that. It was like, "Wow, something to do." This is something which they're doing publicly. So it was really nice to see that being acknowledged that we need to make changes in different ways to help us stay on earth for a very long time.

Matt Hickey: Well said.

Sonali Diddi: That was the selling point. I was like, "This is the place I want to be." So I think sustainability was the biggest part of my other decision to be here at CSU.

Matt Hickey: That's great. And our outreach at DIA was part of baiting the hook, so to speak.

Avery Martin: Yes.

Matt Hickey: That's fantastic.

Sonali Diddi: Absolutely.

Matt Hickey: So I want you to exercise your imagination a little bit. Let's flash forward five years. I want you to reflect a little bit on your aspirations for what kind of impact your own scholarship is having.

Sonali Diddi: So I guess it's been a really memorable and a great journey here at CSU for the past seven years.

Matt Hickey: Time flies, doesn't it?

Sonali Diddi: Time does fly. Time does fly. And fast forward five years, right now I am President's fellow with the Office of Engagement and Extension. I see lots of opportunities in the way we can connect campus to Colorado communities. Again, bringing back the land-grant mission. So I'm hoping in the next five years we are better with our engagement efforts, not just us, even me with my own scholarship connecting to Colorado communities and their needs. My area, if you may, it's a beginning right now and what I call it as a Fibershed. It is a philosophy which was pioneered by designer in California. It is just how quickly can you make a product within a hundred miles? That's how she started with that philosophy and California Fibershed is now one of the most successful ones. And I'm like, "Why can't we do that in Colorado? Why can't we make a product which is completely sourced and made and for people in Colorado?" So I'm hoping that with my fellowship and with working with extension agents, how can we create this supply chain, which is based on circular economy.

Matt Hickey: That's cool.

Sonali Diddi: I'm hoping that that's the way I see myself five years from now.

Matt Hickey: Well that certainly helps us understand your affinity for the land grant mission, right?

Avery Martin: Yes.

Sonali Diddi: Yes.

Matt Hickey: We live in this big and incredibly beautiful, in my opinion, state, but also incredibly diverse. And that diversity ranges from the topography to the climate to the people and communities.

Sonali Diddi: Yes.

Matt Hickey: And so contributing to that stewardship mission really has appeal. Good for you. I'm hoping it works out.

Sonali Diddi: Yes.

Matt Hickey: I'll have the front row seat as I cheer you on and watch your journey.

Sonali Diddi: Absolutely.

Avery Martin: Yes.

Matt Hickey: So tell us about a day in the life of Sonali and her team. What does it look like to be a scholar in your shoes?

Sonali Diddi: I would say, I think the way I work is block off times for different projects. So right now I'm working on two grants and other project with the related to engagement and extension. So kind of blocking of time and just working my way through of, I made a make a list of what needs to be done, get it done, work with my graduate assistant on different projects and kind of guide her through. So kind of making deadlines working my way through. I think the biggest aha moment comes when I talk to people, when I talk to industry and you're like, "Oh no, what am I doing in academia?" There's so much of things to do in the world. Then I say, "No, the students are the future of our industry as well. So it's good that we can bridge this gap between the industry and the students." So kind of working my way through different news articles and understanding what I'm researching, what's happening in the world about it, and then bringing that back into bite size pieces and seeing how it can be incorporated.

Matt Hickey: That's neat. So when you think about yourself as a teacher and mentor, what are some of the touchstones for you in terms of what you try to share as a message to students who might aspire to do what you're doing and to be where you're at a land-grant university?

Sonali Diddi: Sure. I think the past year has taught me in telling students to give themselves grace and it's okay. There'll be a time for everything. So if they're not the best learners at this point, that's okay. It's their own feeling of how they best learn and encouraging them in that space and giving them different options of learning. So whenever I teach, I have these different modes. One is lectures, and as I said, what are the current events going on and how that weighs in. What they hear in lecture is another big thing of how I teach my courses.

I tell students that as they should be looking out of their textbooks, it can't be a textbook knowledge. The more they go out, the more they see what industry is doing because that's the place they're going to be at some place. So more practical knowledge is what I stress upon for them to gain from different channels and the students now have access to different social media channels. News comes in different ways and forms, and they can choose to engage in whichever way they feel comfortable to learn. So kind of stressing that they have to develop their own style of learning and what works best for them. I'm here to help them whenever they want.

Matt Hickey: Oh, that's great. I love that.

Avery Martin: That's great.

Matt Hickey: So I think all of us to varying degrees try to make ourselves approachable to students. There's this perceptual barrier that professors are unapproachable. And of course we occasionally have moments where we would like to be approached, we're sitting in office hours and nobody comes to talk to us or something along those lines but do you take deliberate steps to invite students into, "Come see me, come talk to me, come let us pursue some questions together?"

Sonali Diddi: I think one of the most things is people I guess just know that I'm passionate about sustainability and I have students who are also passionate about sustainability just come and walk into my office and we start off working on a project or I engage them with something which I do, and with the others I think what has helped me know my students better, and this is my personal goal, is to know all their names in the first two weeks. And for some reason I know their last names better than their first, and I still haven't figured out why that is. But it helps me connect with the students on a personal level. I have students ranging from 40 to 70 students in a class. So it helps me connect with them when they know that, "Oh, she knows my name." Then slowly as the semester progresses, I kind of talk to them just asking about them about, "How did your weekend go? What's going on in the other classes?"

Because coming from a different culture, I think it took a big learning curve for me to understand that the students have social life as well, because we always grew in a place where studies and academics were the only thing that you did, no sports or extracurriculars. So it was a big learning curve to say, "It's okay, they have their own life, they have social life, they have other things to do, and studying is not just the one thing which they do." So trying to understand how their life is and then balancing out or suggesting them other ways to help them study better or learn better.

Matt Hickey: That's great. You have spoken really elegantly about the appeal of the land-grant mission and so you've anticipated one of our central questions. I want you to talk a little bit about the things that appeal to you, what you enjoy the most about being a member of this college community, the College of Health and Human Sciences.

Sonali Diddi: I think the biggest thing for me is impact and how do we impact people's lives, people around you and with the research which you do with the knowledge which you gain, how can you be a facilitator of a solution and not kind of direct that this is the solution. So I think that's what drives CHHS and CSU in my opinion. We work with human, we work with people, and I think it's really important to understand where do they come from, what kind of values and norms do they hold, and how can you understand them better. Then work through that to provide some support to what they need. So I think that's what helps my research forward in this area.

Matt Hickey: There is this boundless variety of people and history and perspectives. I think that certainly for me is part of what the academy for at large has always been interesting but our college does a nice job of focusing on people and places. I think it's really a lot of fun.

Sonali Diddi: Yeah.

Matt Hickey: So we're glad to have you here.

Avery Martin: Yes.

Matt Hickey: I think we count ourselves fortunate.

Avery Martin: Absolutely.

Sonali Diddi: Yes.

Matt Hickey: Any parting thoughts for our listeners?

Sonali Diddi: I've been saying this a lot, but I guess it's been a difficult one and a half year for everyone.

Avery Martin: It has.

Sonali Diddi: So maybe just taking a deep breath when you feel overwhelmed and giving yourself grace and doing the best work you do with all the support mechanisms we have here at CSU.

Matt Hickey: Perfects. Thank you very much.

Avery Martin: Excellent.

Sonali Diddi: Thank you.

Avery Martin: Great. I am curious in relation to sustainability and of course, reading a bit more about you and reading the source articles that we produced about you, what was the main thing that got you interested in sustainable fashion?

Sonali Diddi: Yes, so it's an interesting journey. So as I said, I used to work with weavers before and I would say I would think majority of the previous generation, as I think of and our generation in India, coming from a developing country. I'll start my journey of sustainability somewhere there. We knew our milkman, we knew our vegetable vendors, we knew where our food came from, so we knew everything. Where are our clothes getting done. It was tailored so it would last longer. So we grew up with these things. We had limited number of things to worry about in terms of material things. And as I move to, I will say mostly US, not Australia, but US, I will say the amount of over consumption in every aspect, which I saw, be it a paper towel to the amount of shoes people have. I mean, I had a friend who had 30 pairs of shoes and a completely rationalized reasons of why she would need each of those.

Matt Hickey: There's 30 days in a month.

Avery Martin: Yeah. Right.

Sonali Diddi: Yeah. So for me it was very novel. Also, thinking about where does this all end up? Are we asking those questions? I think we were at that curve in the US where people were it was globalization, easy sourcing. Things are very cheap compared to 20 years from down. So people like to have more and they're still not happy, unfortunately. So a lot of this social psychological piece with that, and I was like, "Why are people buying so much?" For me, culture and from where I come from inform my decision making the way I grew up. I was just curious about how do people make those decisions to buy more or buy from a certain retailer? Do they look at the values of that retailer or a brand? That's what was my dissertation about. What are those inner things which make humans decide about what to do and what not to do?

Don't they think about, "Oh, this is not good for the earth, but we are still buying?" So those were things which kind of started my curiosity. And as I moved into this space more, they were very shocking numbers from US Environmental Protection Agency, which talk about 11 million tons of clothing ending up in US landfills in just one year. This was a 2019 figure. So that's increasing by the year and the day. We did not have a solution for it. I would say being such a developed economy with the best brains, and we cannot still tackle this problem of over consumption. It is a circle, it is like producers saying, "Consumers need more." Consumers saying, "Producers are giving us a lot of variety at cheap prices, so why not take it?"

So it had to be tackled from both ends of spectrum and that's why I say my research is in the spectrum of sustainable consumption and production because we'll have to tackle and the consumer itself, I mean awareness is huge. Awareness and education and whenever I have tagged on campus and across, I've had people come back and say, "Sonali, I've been to the store and I stop for a moment. And I thought, "Okay, I don't need it."" And I passed through. And that for me is the impact which I'm looking at. If somebody is giving a moment to think, "Do I really need it?" Versus, "Do I really want it?" And make a decision, I think that's where I fit in. That's where my research matters.

Avery Martin: Awesome. Thank you.

Sonali Diddi: Thank you.

Avery Martin: Thank you very much.

Matt Hickey: And that's our show as always. Thank you for listening to Health and Human Science Matters.

Avery Martin: Be sure to check out our other episodes. If you want to learn more about our CSU College of Health and Human Sciences, visit our website, chhs.colostate.edu.