

Thalidomide: Sukeshi Thakkar (2012)

Ruth Blue interviews Sukeshi Thakkar for the *Thalidomide: An Oral History* project.

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Ruth Blue interviewing Sukeshi Thakkar on the 4 of December, 2012 at her home in Stanmore for Thalidomide: An Oral History and this is our follow up interview.

To start off with, Sukeshi, did you have anything in particular that you felt we didn't cover in the other interview, or that wasn't covered as much as you would have liked or any comments on the transcription?

I cannot remember everything that we did last interview, I'll be very honest. But I think with thalidomide, every day something new happens or something else comes along, you can't really cover it all. But as far as I know and can remember, you pretty much covered a lot.

How did you feel looking at the transcription, did you read it through? How did you feel looking at ... seeing your own words printed out?

A little bit too much of "you know," "you know." [Laughs]. I think I should improve on that and not say so much "You know" because you don't! That was a bit odd, looking at that, I'll try and better myself on that.

Don't worry.

But overall, yes, I think I gave a general picture of what other thalidomiders go through, as I do, day in and day out in our lives. Everything, being a thalidomider, I don't know what a normal life would have been but I feel everything has been turned upside down for me. I could have had a very different life and my parents could have been spared a lot of emotions. Not as much healthwise but at least socially they would have been a lot better off if I hadn't been a thalidomider, especially in my circumstances, for example, my community where disabled people aren't maybe as widely accepted as in the Western community.

Okay, I'll ask you a little bit more about that later. I had just a few things I wanted to pick up on with you from the interview. One thing that came through a few times was your parents' concern that people might take advantage of you.

Yes.

Do you think that was primarily because of the compensation money or do you think it was also because of the disability?

I would say fifty / fifty. I would say people who knew what thalidomide was and read into what compensation we got or what was going on with the thalidomide community, what the government was doing etc. maybe those people would try and take more advantage than people just taking advantage because I'm disabled. I think when you're the parent of a disabled child that comes foremost into your mind because you feel as a parent the child cannot look after themselves or make judgements etc. And yes, a disabled person is very vulnerable. Any affection that's showed isn't actually taken on board with great gusto – feeling that, you know, you've got ... again, the "you know" comes back, the feeling that you've got a disability, that maybe you're not acceptable, you try and make yourself acceptable so you try and make yourself a pleasant

person, you try and make yourself amicable and I think sometimes that's taken advantage of. So yes, I think fifty / fifty and definitely the money part plays a huge role in it all and that's why parents are over-protective of disabled children as a whole, not just thalidomide. But as a whole.

Do you think ... did you feel ever in any way that held you back from doing what you wanted to do?

Things as ... like what?

Say if you had a very over-protective family, do you think that stopped you taking chances and going through things and maybe having disasters and things like that?

If you're talking about career-wise or meeting people socially or doing things then no, I think I was encouraged more to do things to do what I wanted to do really and not sat in a corner and not do anything and pretend that I'm not around. My mother encouraged me, my father encouraged me to do a lot of things, to learn how to drive, to learn how to cope for myself. I was sent to boarding school to learn how to fend for myself and ... perhaps I was overly, not protected, but pushed into doing things because they felt perhaps that they didn't want me to feel left out. I was encouraged even more than my sister, in fact I learned to drive before my sister ever did and she's six years older than me. So perhaps it's the opposite, but definitely there was that element of protection, especially when, you know, men were concerned.

Emotionally, wasn't it, that they were protective?

Yes, rather than physically. Yes, absolutely. I was chucked into the swimming pool when I was two years old and I became an expert swimmer so I wasn't held back in doing anything that I could do, definitely encouraged to do. Swimming, horse riding, driving the car, doing housework, cooking, everything. My mother just let me ... in fact, she would tell everyone, "No, let her do it herself. If she can't manage she can tell us." So it wasn't as if I was ashamed of asking for help either because I knew it was there. If I wanted it I had to ask.

And you seem very independent. You come across as an extremely independent person in all that you do.

Yes. I know where my limitations are as well. There are certain things that I can't do and at this age I think if I can't mention them and I behave as a teenager, nobody is going to help me so as far as I can I try and do what is possible. If I absolutely cannot, I won't struggle until death and I will ask for some assistance.

Absolutely, that's what you should do.

Yes. And I found there's no shame in asking because even able bodied people are seen ... even though they can do things they won't do them for themselves. That is sometimes what bugs me the most, God has given you everything, you can do things yourself and yet you're not lifting a finger and it's people like us who are really wanting to do things, wanting that independence and we're not able to.

I think that's a very good answer, yes. I talked to Mat Fraser, I interviewed him and I'm trying to think how he put it because he said it very well. He said anybody with a disability is so keen to appear normal and to be doing the normal things that if somebody shows them affection, like if a member of the opposite sex shows them affection, they just leap at it, even if that person isn't somebody they would actually like ...

Absolutely, absolutely.

... they think they have to do it because, "That makes me more normal."

I totally agree with Mat, yes it is. Any little affection and then, you know, with ... I don't know with Mat but with our situation we read a lot into it as well. So I suppose the opposite sex is even frightened to show us affection so sometimes it can work the other way.

It might go the other way around where they might want to be affectionate but think, "I better not."

Yes, yes, absolutely. A wrong meaning will be taken to it or whatever. I've found that lots of times, not with myself but I've seen it happen quite a few times. Myself, I'm very happy the way I am, I'm very content. I don't think I need that affection because I get it everywhere else – my parents, my family, my siblings, everyone else. I'm not really that bothered about affection because, like I said, it's there for me. But there are people who are starved of it, where the family isn't supportive, friends aren't supportive. In fact, I love my life, being single is what I mean. I don't want the hassle of all that, emotions up and down every day, somebody telling me what to do or telling me how to spend my money etc. So maybe once or twice in my twenties I would have liked that but at this age now I'm very content the way I am and I'm happy looking after my parents, having my own home and pleasing myself really

That's good to hear. Okay, a totally different subject. You talked about having artificial limbs fitted at Roehampton. Whilst that was happening, did you meet any thalidomide or other disabled children there?

I wasn't having limbs fitted because my mother refused that because it needed an operation to straighten the arms and she was told ... this is what I gather from her, she was told that if the limbs weren't comfortable the operation would always be there and perhaps I couldn't do the things that I was used to doing. So she refused the operation therefore I couldn't have artificial limbs. I went to Roehampton to be trained to use my limbs as well as I could so really getting training on basically using sticks and other devices to perhaps pull up my pants, pull up my zip, take them down, put on a shirt, things like that. So that's the reason I was at Roehampton. Make my bed, get my own breakfast. This was years and years ago, it seems like another birth, you know! [Laughs].

How old would you have been then?

I would have been about ten or twelve.

And were you encouraged to try and use your feet?

Absolutely. And I still do except that there's been a lot of wear and tear on my body all these years and I find it very difficult now to bend my feet. They're not as flexible as they used to be. Sitting on the floor wasn't a problem, I could get up without any support. Very difficult now, I have to sit against a wall or somewhere near a table where I can get myself up. So I find that's one of the difficulties, the suppleness of the feet has gone. Perhaps that's also due to old age and ...

It could well be just due to getting older anyway.

Yes and perhaps a bit of arthritis as well so I can't just put it down to thalidomide. But certainly wear and tear of other parts of the body has affected us sooner than maybe it would have affected any normal person and that's a great shame because we still need our bodies to be quite flexible in order to maintain the little independence that we have.

So during that process, where you were learning to use your limbs, the limbs that you have, did you encounter any other thalidomide or other disabled children?

Not thalidomiders but yes, disabled children. Roehampton, that unit ... I can't remember the name of the unit but it was specifically for disabled children.

Was it Leon Gillis?

I can't remember. So many years ago. But it was specifically for disabled children, not only thalidomiders but other children with disabilities.

Okay. And do you remember those visits or meeting any other children? I know you said it's like a different life or a birth, you said.

I remember in the sense that my mother told me it would be a good idea if I went there. I'd never been away from her. I'd never been away from the comfort ... my comfort zone. I'd always had my dad or my sister or my mother or servants to look after me as we were in Africa and always protected. Being left there on my own was a brand new adventure. I was given a room with a bed in the corner, I remember. And every morning I had to wash myself and dress myself, which was the biggest challenge, because I'd never had to do that before, I'd always had somebody to help me.

I remember this little boy who ... I think he was Arabic, very young, younger than me, about four years old and I was there a couple of days and he just latched onto me. So he'd come in in the morning and get into bed with me and then I think what happened was ... you know as I told you about feelings and latching onto people who show you emotions, I just took him over like a little brother. So I remember that very vividly and whenever my mum came and said, "I'm taking Sukeshi home" he'd say, "And me coming! And me coming!" [Laughs]. So I remember his name as well, so clearly. But it's things like that. I can't quite remember what

the training was but I know I was there for a week and except for this little boy I don't think I would have made it through the week.

I wonder what happened to him.

I wonder sometimes as well. I really wonder because he had one leg ... I think a problem with one of the legs, I think from Polio or something and he used to crawl on his bottom into my room and get up into the bed with me and snuggle up with me ... at that age. I think he was missing home as well, at four years, yes.

So would you say it was a fairly useful process, learning a few more independent skills at that age?

For me, at that age, I was not aware, if you see what I mean, I wasn't aware of my disability as such, I wasn't aware that I was so different from other people because in Uganda, being a close-knit community, I hadn't been made aware that I was different. And then having to suddenly go into this hospital where I was starting to learn things away from my comfort zone, I think I couldn't understand what was going on. And the other thing was I think children or semi adults in that generation, kind of thing, were quite innocent. We weren't streetwise about what was going on, we weren't streetwise or anything like that so I just did what my parents thought was best for me.

I think that was very much the case going back even ten years ago I think things were very different to how they are now.

Absolutely, yes.

Okay. One other thing you talked about was you mentioned ... these are all things we touched on but I thought I should have asked you more about that at the time. You talked about bringing up your nephew and I wondered how long that went on for and if you've continued to have a strong relationship with him.

I have. I'm going to be a great-auntie, he's going to have a baby soon. So just the other day, because he lives down the road from me, he said, "Will you look after my baby now?" And I said, "No, I've done it now. Nothing doing now. You have to look after your own." I do have a strong relationship with him, yes, but it sort of ... my nephew came to boarding school when he was thirteen in Epsom and I was the one who looked after him. Came to pick him up, came to drop him off, did his shopping, did his washing. At sixteen he went back to America and back to his home. After that we didn't lose touch but, as such, the feelings weren't so strong because it's a long, long way away. He was beginning to turn into a young man and he had other priorities. But our relationship now is back on form. He's moved down the road from me and he phones me regularly if there's anything I need. He comes to see his grandmother so it's like, you know, a mother / son relationship again. And I say to him, "What happened to us, Ricky?" And he'll say, "Yes, what happened? We've got to get that back." That sort of thing. But naturally I know he's my sister's son and, as such, his responsibilities and his priorities are with my sister and my brother in law. So I know that and I'm not feeling, "I did this for him and I did this for him and he should be doing more for me." In fact, sometimes I'm glad I don't have anybody around me that I'm responsible for because it is a big responsibility to have children.

Yes. And it doesn't go away.

Especially as he doesn't drain my resources either. [Laughs].

And how long has he been living down the road?

He's been married two years now so just over two years.

That must be nice.

It is because he's in his own home. If I need him I can call him if I don't, I know he's there but he's not in my face all the time.

Yes. Okay, now you talked a little bit about working ... your first job where you worked for Zandra Rhodes as her assistant. Have you got any more memories or anecdotes from that time of when you worked with her, what it was like? I know you said there was a bit of idea theft going on.

With Zandra it was ... that was my first job actually ever apart from little jobs that I'd done in the summer vacations and stuff. This was a full time job. I wasn't actually her assistant, I was part of the team that designed and cut and etc. There were far more seniors than I was, I just came in as a very low down person. But I did find ... I didn't find her attitude was very nice and I didn't find the work atmosphere was very nice because of it. But then fashion is like that so you've got to accept it. But having said that, going into a job for the first time and being thrown into that sort of, you know, environment and also being conscious of being disabled, it does throw you back a little bit, it does make you think and it does make you feel a little bit inferior because you've got all sorts to deal with including your disability.

So I did find it quite difficult and, as I say, ideas were taken. You weren't given enough encouragement or support or even a credit for that matter. So it's a little off-putting when you're thrown into an atmosphere like that. I don't know if it's because you're disabled or you feel that perhaps this is normal in this kind of trade but your disability does come to you at that time. "Is it because I'm not capable?" Or, "Is it because I'm this?" It's bound to come in, it's human nature to sort of think that way.

Yes. Well, everybody has self doubt don't they? And you always focus on the thing you think, don't you?

Yes, that's right. Even though it might have nothing to do with it.

Yes, it's true. And how did your career in fashion move on from that point? Was that sort of the start of that for you?

Yes. It was the start of that for me. But I worked with Zandra Rhodes because I wanted to get a bit of experience but I always wanted to do my own, like, Indian clothes. And when I started twenty five years ago, everybody had to go to India to get Indian clothes whereas that's what I wanted to do, bring a little bit of India here and I did by bringing tailors here from India and making specialised Indian clothes. So I built up my clientele in that section. I built it up from about a hundred and fifty to a hundred and sixty clients.

That's amazing.

Yes it was, it was wonderful. I really had a good time meeting all those people.

Yes and working for yourself is always so good, isn't it?

It's rewarding although it has its downs.

But when it's going well ...

It's going very well. And women are so fussy about clothes, so fussy, especially if it's bespoke clothes, everything has to be perfect. They look at the thread, is it matching the garment or not? But it was, like I say, an enjoyable time and my mother was my partner at that time so we both, you know, we were working together and it was great fun, great fun.

Did she enjoy that too?

She loved it, she was in her element. She didn't like taking orders from me but she did like the work.

And how long did you do that for?

About twenty years I think. Or a bit less. About eighteen years, I'd say, I did that. And then my mother got cancer so I gave that up because she needed all the attention again so I stopped doing that. When she got better, then I went into partnership and bought a post office with a friend of mine. So I ran the post office.

I didn't get this from you last time. Where was that?

In a place called Rainham in Kent.

And so you actually ... did you work in the post office as well?

Oh yes, absolutely, yes. I was in partnership with another friend of mine and they ran the off licence and helped me in the post office and I ran the post office.

But you had other staff in there as well?

Yes part time staff but it was mostly my partner and I who would ... we would have staff in sometimes, I'd want a half day, she'd want a half day.

And how long did you do that for?

Five years.

So that's a big difference from fashion designing.

Absolutely, a nine to five job, I couldn't stick it. I hated it. The only saviour was that I could get out into the off licence and serve people and talk to people. I shouldn't say I hated it because I got to talk to people and see a different side of people, the elderly especially. They loved chatting and I'm quite a chatterbox and I loved listening and chatting back and you build that kind of rapport up with them. And the constant reminder that you could be ... somebody could come in and threaten you with a gun. We did have that a couple of times so it was an exciting job actually. People think a post office isn't but you meet so many different kinds of people and regulars, they become regulars. So you'd open up at ten to nine in the morning and they'd be queuing up outside already and you'd say, "Hello." They'd say, "It's okay, luvvie, take your time, take your time." [Laughs].

So it's a very sort of community-focused job.

Absolutely. Again, yes. There is no challenges and there is nobody looking down at you thinking, "With your disability you can't do this and you can't do that." They were very patient like sometimes I'd have problems in the winter with my fingers. They'd be so patient and say, "No, you take your time" and bring sweets and birthday cards and Christmas cards.

Sounds lovely.

Yes, it was. A real community spirit.

So you were living in that area at that time.

Yes, I was. My father was practicing in Kent in a place called Chatham. We lived in Gillingham and the post office was in Rainham, all close by Medway Town.

And you would have been how old then?

I was in my early thirties, mid thirties.

And what did you do after that?

We ... well, we sold the post office because of the government offering us redundancy or ... they were closing down post offices. So we sold the post office. I did nothing for a while then decided I was wasting my time so I went to college and did ... is it an NVQ in Travel and Tourism?

Gosh, you've had some changes of career – I never know what you're going to say next! [Laughs].

[Laughs]. So I did Travel and Tourism and I did really well. I went to college and was back in the college thing, you know? I didn't know anything about the computer then and there were all these young people, seventeen and eighteen year olds coming and using the mouse, using the computer. I didn't even know how to turn it on actually. I thought, "This is ridiculous!" So while I was doing the Travel and Tourism course I did a quick computer course as well and got myself a computer and started self-learning on the computer. I passed my computer test with a hundred percent so I was very pleased about that. And then got myself a job in Going Places in the high street.

Oh, yes. And how long did you do that one for?

I did that for a couple of years but the reason I left was it was always targets, you know, meeting targets, meeting targets, continuous bombardment of, you know, you have to keep your eye on the goal. Very competitive in there, it was like I was back in the fashion designing business, you know, cut throat. The girls were always putting other girls down because they wanted to meet the targets. I didn't like that, you know, I thought, "You're only selling holidays" and you want to be relaxed and not pressurising them into a holiday that maybe they didn't even want, you know. So I didn't really enjoy working for Going Places.

So I left Going Places and went and worked for a private travel agent for a while, people we knew, and I liked that, I liked the experience. I enjoyed that for a while but unfortunately with the recession, they had to close down as well. Everywhere I go they were closing down.

I think it's a common story these days, isn't it?

Yes, it is. It is.

And so you did that one for another couple of years.

I did. And then it was coming time for my dad to retire. I helped ... my dad retired at the age of seventy, officially retired, but he carried on working until he was seventy five. He was having problems driving, somebody keeping an eye on his work schedule, his timetables, so I took that over from him. He did locum work for five years and I helped him for five years to carry on doing that.

So I'd keep his schedules, take ... if a doctor called, I'd book his locum work for two weeks or whatever, deal with the financial side of things, take him to and from work because he wasn't driving any more and if he had any house calls I'd take him to those. So it became full time with him. And then I decided that as he was getting older, my mother was getting older, we were finding it difficult to visit family and friends, most of them lived here. So I took it upon myself to tell them that we were moving. My mum was really excited but my dad wasn't because he was used to that place for, what, thirty odd years we'd been there.

And he liked it.

Yes he did. So I started searching for homes, coming to London every weekend, looking at houses. It went on for two years before I found this place because, as you can imagine, we were coming weekends and you can only look at two or three houses. So it took me two years and I decided that this was going to be the last house I see and luckily we all liked it, all of us liked it, including my father liked it as well.

It's a beautiful house.

Well it was very different to how it is now. But the layout was the same so I knew I could do things to it, to improve on it, to put your stamp on it really.

I think all these doors that go from room to room are really ... they give it a really good feeling.

They are because you're not isolated anywhere. You need to open the whole thing up, you can open the whole thing up, yet you can have your privacy as well. So then that took over, that took quite a while to sell the house where we were living in Gillingham, then to get this house, the moving etc. because my parents, they couldn't do anything. My mum still could but my dad couldn't do anything any more. So that took my time and we've been here eight years. So it's been quite a challenge. And coming here and redoing everything, that was quite enjoyable. That is actually what I love doing, creating, you know. Something from nothing.

It's lovely, isn't it, being able to imagine how a room could be?

Yes and then when a room takes shape you feel, "Oh good, this is really coming together." It's like the extension, I never thought it would be so nice but it's come together so nicely and I'm glad because I think my mum deserves the best.

So you've been basically non-stop busy all the time, always working and having something going on ...

Yes.

... and I remember you mentioned at the time that your mum had her stroke, you had a fashion show. So are you still doing a bit of the designing?

Yes, absolutely I am. But let me tell you, after we moved here and I got the house re-done, re-decorated and everything, I joined a Women's Association here and started a sort of, you know, putting myself out into the community, doing charitable work etc. with this Women's Association. There are a committee of twenty four ladies so I started at the bottom, just being a co-opted member, then became a committee member, then social secretary and for the past two years I've been chairperson. So I have a lot of work I do with them. In fact, we've got a disabled / special needs party we call it, Christmas party, this Saturday, where I invite disabled people from the community, we give them a lovely lunch, some entertainment and Christmas presents. So this is going to be happening this Saturday. We started with about thirty people attending, we've now got over a hundred who attend. So that's another thing.

So that's keeping you very busy.

Yes. And every month I have to organise a function so that keeps me going. This is my second and final year as chairperson because you can only do two years. So that keeps me busy.

I also went to Stanmore College to do a language course. I did Spanish ...

[Laughs] How did you fit all of this in?

[Laughs] Evening courses. So I did Spanish there. And then I still carry on my designing but that's only for a few clients, very loyal and very easy-going, not demanding. So I still do my fashion designing as such.

So those were some of the designs you had in the fashion show?

Yes. The fashion show.

It was a big fashion show, wasn't it?

It was, yes, it was attended by over three hundred people. The fashion show was my mum's dream really, she wanted me to show my community what I was capable of and how differently I could do things and just because I wasn't all there physically, I was still all there mentally. And it was her real desire that I became Chairperson of this community and do a fashion show because that's really what I'm trained for and I put up the fashion show with ... it was a lot of hard work but a lot of dedication from my committee members as well and the fashion show was a huge, huge success. Unfortunately, as soon as the fashion show finished and we all sat down to listen to some music and a little bit of dancing she collapsed, right there and then. And later on I found out she'd had a massive stroke.

That must have come as a big shock if she was all right one minute and not the next.

Do you know what, Ruth? I thought she'd collapsed because she's diabetic. I thought she'd either had a hypo or a hyper, it never, never crossed my mind that she could have had a stroke because my mother has always been so active. It's never like she's sat down and put her feet up and said, "I don't want to do anything." She's like me, always wanting to do something.

Yes, sounds like you.

Well I think I've taken after her. I can't sit down, I'm fidgety, I want to do something. If I don't have anything else to do I'll go and tidy cupboards or I'll sit on my computer or something or the other, you know? And she was just like that. So when my sister's daughter in law said, "She's on the floor" I thought, "Okay, she must have eaten a bit too much or she mustn't have eaten enough or she forgot to take her insulin and she's on the floor." I had no idea what had happened and everything's still a blur. I couldn't imagine my mum being there on the floor, having a stroke, being taken away, even there when we got to the hospital I thought they'd say, "Oh, she's all right. She's just had a" What do you call it? A fainting session or something like that. When they came and told me that she'd had a stroke and they need to treat her right now, there's a four hour window, still it was like I was in another place, you know? And it's only that night when I was sitting with her and she wasn't responding, all night long I sat with her and she wasn't my mother, she was just not there and the next morning I realised that this was far, far more serious than I had thought it would be.

And that was quite a shock because she was everything to me – my partner, my mother, my friend, everything. And it was her time to enjoy herself because she's worked all her life so hard; for me, for ... we were kicked out of Africa, she had to resettle all of us from one country to another. There she was, when it was really time for her to enjoy herself she couldn't do it any more. So it was, you know, very, very hard and my sister's always been the weaker one so when she came ... she didn't realise how bad it was so I had the double responsibility of caring for my mother, my sister and my dad.

So it sort of made me stronger actually. It did make me stronger because I used to cry at the drop of a hat. If anybody said anything to me I would be in tears, you know. But it has made me stronger. This past year has really shown me what it's like and how tough life is. I thought I had it hard but I can imagine people who are ill going through so much more, so much more. I've only got limbs missing but imagine people who have ... you know, their brains don't function, their bodies don't function, it's terrible.

Yes, it puts a different perspective, doesn't it?

Absolutely it does. It makes me feel blessed actually, really it does. Looking at mentally retarded children who've got no concept of what life is about. Now, who am I to complain, you know? I've got everything I ever would have wished for and more and little things like this, who am I to complain?

Well, I think you can see it like that but you have had a right to complain at times in your life.

But Ruth, if I keep doing that I'll keep feeling bitter and I'll keep projecting bitterness. I can't do that. And I have to be positive for the people around me as well. I've got people I'm responsible for.

Yes and the great thing about your mum is ... this is a huge tragedy to hit her but she's had a fantastic time with you and for this to happen at the end of this fashion show which she really wanted to see ...

Oh, she saw it, yes.

... there's positive things to take from that as well I think.

Yes. She saw my nephew on the stage modelling as well. I think she got very, very excited and stressed at the same time and, you know, she was ...

Perhaps her blood pressure went up a little as well.

Absolutely, yes. I think so. And she was ... I can't tell you how excited she was! She was clapping and whistling [laughs].

I'd have loved to have seen that.

Actually Mikey was there as well with her two girls. You know Mikey?

She mentioned that she was there.

Yes, she was there. Fortunately she just left before it happened but she came to the fashion show as well.

Yes, she mentioned she was there. Okay, you spoke at the end of the other interview very strongly and very passionately actually about your anger towards Grünenthal and you did actually already mention a little bit earlier ... you sort of answered this question before I'd asked you, which was what in your life do you think would have been different if you had not been affected by thalidomide, if you can answer that?

Well, basically I think my life would have been different in the sense that ... as my sister, I think I would have been married off, had a family, had my own children, perhaps on my way to being a grandmother now. I think part of my trouble was the circumstances ... my disability is to ... did contribute towards it, but my circumstances because of my disability as well. Going from one country to another, having to settle down. I don't think I matured as quickly as other people did because of the protective atmosphere that I had. So I wasn't let out into the world as quickly as perhaps any other teenager or adult would have been. Perhaps that was a contributing factor.

Do you think your family would have actually come to the UK had you not been coming here to be assessed for thalidomide?

Yes because when we were in Africa we were offered the opportunity when the British left to have a British passport. So it wasn't just thalidomide that brought me to England, it was the whole scenario in Africa. So that had nothing to do with my disability; perhaps if we hadn't come to England we would have gone to Canada or somewhere else. Perhaps the thalidomide issue did push my parents into coming to England but the thing was that with me being a thalidomider, it was very difficult for both my mum and dad to up and go and live anywhere. They had to first think of the circumstances where I could be comfortable. I could go to a good school. It was always around me so I guess that was the whole idea of coming to England, that they could perhaps give me more independence, perhaps give me ... let's say I wouldn't have been judged so much as I was in India or anywhere else. So I think those are the circumstances that led to us coming here in the first place and, of course, we had British passports so why not make use of it?

There was something else you asked me.

It was what do you think in your life would have been different if you hadn't been affected by thalidomide and you said probably you would have got married and had children.

I think that it's not that thalidomide has stopped me, being a thalidomider hasn't stopped me, it's the community at large, my community at large that haven't totally accepted me. Perhaps now I have because I've proved ... but I don't think I should have to be in that position to have to prove things. I know a couple of other Indian girls who are in the same situation as me. One of them is living with her brother and sister in law, one of them is still with her parents, not married. They don't get out much into the community because of feeling embarrassed.

So thinking about it, I think it's easier for men who are thalidomiders to get married because they are the one who's doing the asking and everything, rather than the women. And I believe there are three of us, three Hindu girls who are thalidomiders in the whole community. And if three of us all are single, then it shows something about the community.

I see what you mean, absolutely. Yes, yes. So it's like a double obstacle to get through. So you have the disability anyway ... well three things. You've got the disability, you've got the compensation, the extra money and then you've got the cultural side of things as well.

Yes. And I think the compensation side of things always worried my mother. She was always worried that I'd be taken advantage of which many people have been. Perhaps have a couple of children and then the husband would then say, "I'm leaving." And because I'd had the higher income or whatever, I'd end up paying him. And plus looking after the children. So I think it was always at that back of my mother's mind and she was always wary about anybody who showed any kind of affection.

Yes, what are they after?

Exactly. And I think if I hadn't been a thalidomider, that doubt wouldn't have been there in my mother's mind. She wouldn't have thought that. Just like my sister got married and went away. It wouldn't have been even considered, what are they after.

Thank you. Are you still involved in the NAC now?

No. I finished my two years with the NAC and I didn't re-apply because of my situation at the moment.

Of course, with your mum.

Yes.

I'm at the end of my questions. You've been really fantastic again.

Thank you.

But is there anything further that you'd like to add that you think we haven't covered or that you would like to clarify or say more about? You can, of course, always contact me later ...

Yes. There was something at the back of my mind but it slipped. That's why I was looking confused. I thought of something but it's gone. But if I think of it I'll email.

Thank you so much.

Oh, that was quick [laughs].

I know. I told you it would be quicker today. I'm not going to torture you like last time [laughs].

Oh you didn't torture me. Once I start ... get going, I can't stop actually.

You have so much of interest. I had no idea that you'd run a post office.

Yes, yes. I loved it.

It must have slipped through last time. Okay, thank you very much Sukeshi, thanks for your time.

You're welcome [laughs].

Okay. Turning back on again because there's another career aspect to add to the interview.

Yes, after Zandra Rhodes and working on there, I went on the Robert Kilroy Silk programme that he used to have every morning and I was telling him how difficult it is to find ... it was a programme on jobs for disabled people. And I was just telling him how difficult it was. And he said, to me, "Have you got a job at the moment?" and I said, "No, I haven't. I'm looking." The next day I got a phone call saying, "Would you like to come and work for me?" [Laughs]. So I went to work for him for a year and then left when he went live because I was travelling from Kent everyday to Shepherd's Bush.

Oh, was he Shepherd's Bush? I always thought he was based in Birmingham because he had a Birmingham accent.

Yes, he had a Birmingham accent but he was based in Shepherd's Bush. And then the travelling every day for a live programme meant I had to leave home every day at five o'clock in the morning and I didn't fancy doing that. So I was on his research ... he had three or four research teams and I was on one of the research teams, phoning around, making travel arrangements for people to come in, making sure they get paid for their travelling, getting them comfortable. It was fun.

I was going to say, did you enjoy it?

Oh, I loved it. I loved it. Really nice atmosphere. It was very different from Zandra Rhodes because we were all working together, we were all ... basically we were all aiming for the same thing, a programme at the end of the day. So it was lovely and in one team we had four people so there was a nice rapport between the four of us. It was a good job. I wish he hadn't gone live.

That seems to ... you've talked a few times, you like the community ...

Atmosphere.

... working together with a team, don't you?

Absolutely. I'm a team worker rather than alone.

Yes. Okay, anything else to add? Skydiving? Airline pilot?

[Laughs] I wish! I wish!

Hollywood movie star?

I wish! I wish! [Laughs]. If not Hollywood, at least Bollywood.

Bollywood, yes.

Yes, I would love that! Do you know anybody who would make a film? [Laughs].

[Laughs] I'll see what I can do. Okay, well thank you very much again.

Okay, great.

END OF RECORDING