



1-23-2016

## Faizal Chaudhury

Faizal Chaudhury

Meg Miner

Illinois Wesleyan University, mminer@iwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/oral\\_hist](https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/oral_hist)



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Chaudhury, Faizal and Miner, Meg, "Faizal Chaudhury" (2016). *All oral histories*. 87.  
[https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/oral\\_hist/87](https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/oral_hist/87)

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by University Archivist & Special Collections Librarian at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@iwu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@iwu.edu).

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Oral History Interview with Faizal Chaudhury,  
Conducted over Skype  
Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Faizal Chaudhury: My name is Faizal Chaudhury and I am a class of 1996 graduate, and I was there from the fall of 1992 to May 1996, and obviously that was right in the heart of President Myers' presidency at that time. So that's how I- I was acquainted with him. He spoke obviously at a lot of the convocations during that time, at the various graduation ceremonies, and a host of other ceremonies too. So- and you know, he was always walking around in the quad. It was not unusual for any student during the time to share some memories with President Myers only because he was out and about every day so-

Meg Miner: [laughs] And you said in your message that you had one specific conversation you remembered about...Renaissance-

Chaudhury: Yeah, yeah. So you know, I think it- it was a broader discussion about "Hey, you know, what's the value of the liberal arts degree?" Right? And that turned into so many things which is not unusual for a conversation with President Myers only because he had so many varied interests. And the quote that really stuck with me was- he's like, "I consider a liberal arts degree the foundation for someone who wants to be a Renaissance man." Right?

Miner: Hmm.

Chaudhury: And I was like, "Hmm, interesting." And so, you know, as we got talking about that he was like, "Oh, you know, the key to being a Renaissance man is having a very wide range of interests and activities, right, so that no matter what situation you're in, you're able to carry on a conver- an intellectual conversation with anyone." And that kind of appealed to me, that conversation, because I hadn't looked at it that way, right? You know, I had just considered talking about, "Oh yeah, liberal arts degree, I guess, you know. Well, hopefully that will get me a job once I graduate." Wasn't sure about that then. [Miner laughs] But, you know, having that kind of conversation really instilled in me the confidence that yes, a liberal arts degree is definitely the right way to go because you have to think about the broader picture, right? You know, I took a class in astronomy. I took a class in chemistry, psychology, I mean such a broad range as opposed to just a narrow focus on one major and gaining knowledge of a subject in just one area.

Miner: Was this- was this a private conversation you had or was it during one of the speeches that he gave?

Chaudhury: Actually, if I remember correctly, he used to have open houses at his house. And it was during one of those conversations, you know, when I had gone to the President's House for one of the receptions. I forget what the reception was for, but he gave the reception often and there'd even be, you know, meet the president events at his house too, you know.

Miner: Hmm.

Chaudhury: So I'm like, "Yeah, let's check out the President's House, that sounds cool." And obviously he would be a very gracious host, you know. He was mingling among all the other students and he asked me where I was from. So a little bit of background, I know I was pretty fortunate but obviously I was an international student at that time.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Chaudhury: Like I had come from Bangladesh. And if you look at the international students going, I think during that time of President Myers' presidency also, there had been a big push to get a lot of international students. I think, you know, the class of 2000- not 2000, boy I'm out of date, 1992, '93, '94, we probably had like 20 to 30 international students each year, which was really a bumper crop for Illinois Wesleyan.

Miner: Oh!

Chaudhury: Right? And they- they really didn't have that many international students until that early nineties period. And again, I- I guess that was- was part of- what was so great. We were able to bring something else to a small Midwestern town. Like I had lived in (unsure, 3:41??) House, and we had people from Cyprus, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh-

Miner: Hmm.

Chaudhury: -Turkey, Greece, just to name a few. Right? And I don't think they had that big of- there were international student days before that ninety- early 1992 period at Illinois Wesleyan. So I think that's how the conversation gets started, you know, he was asking you know, "Where are you from?" and I'm like "I'm from Bangladesh." And he's like, "Oh, that's very interesting!" You know, and, you know, so what brings you here and all that and we got talking about that and that led to a conversation of, you know, of- "What brought you to a small school in the middle of nowhere to pursue your Bachelors degree?" [laughs]

Miner: [laughs] (unsure, 4:21-4:22??)

Chaudhury: And I was very honest with him. I mean, I was like, “I’ll be honest with you. I just wanted to come to the United States and I was very fortunate that Illinois Wesleyan gave me the best financial aid package.”

Miner: Oh.

Chaudhury: Right? And that was the reason. I- I even- I had no idea because this was pre-Internet, right?

Miner: Oh.

Chaudhury: So it’s not like I could go on the internet and found out where Bloomington, Illinois is and what it’s all about. I literally took a leap of faith and that was a story I was sharing with him. I was like, “I’ll be honest with you. I went to the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka, Bangladesh, pulled out a Peterson guide, you know, I was doing my research, and found Illinois Wesleyan had no application fee which was a big factor in applying because if you have to pay like thirty dollars in an application fee and you apply to ten schools, three hundred dollars is a lot of money for a middle class family in Bangladesh.

Miner: Oh!

Chaudhury: But- but one of the things- so like Illinois Wesleyan didn’t have an application fee. I- I filled it out manually, mailed it in, and just like I did for a bunch of other schools.

Miner: Hmm.

Chaudhury: Right? No internet, no email, nothing. Months later, you know, they ask for more information. I sent all that. Another month down the line, boom. I get the financial aid letter, and I’m like “Okay, I guess I’ll go to Bloomington, Illinois.” [Miner laughs] You know, so he got a kick out of that story, right? That what are the chances that someone like me, you know, and ended up in Bloomington, Illinois...[Miner laughs]...right? And that’s where the conversation- because so you can see in the moment that I’m sharing with you how many tangents we were going off on, right?

Miner: Oh yeah!

Chaudhury: Bangladesh, Midwest, Renaissance, liberal arts. And that’s almost the exact conversation I had with President Myers at that time. Right? And I was fortunate that he spent that time with me. You know, I think it was probably like a fifteen, twenty minute conversation, but I still distinctly remember from a young boy from Bangladesh to being in the President’s

house in the middle of nowhere Illinois farm fields and having this conversation. Obviously, it's not something that happens every day.

Miner: Yeah. That's a unique experience. Is that close after you got to campus then?

Chaudhury: Yeah, I- I want to say that's probably two- I keep saying 2000, probably 1994 would be my guess.

Miner: Okay. So in the middle- middle of your career, okay.

Chaudhury: Yeah, wow. That's hard to think, but that's twelve years ago, right? [Miner laughs] That's why I'm a little fuzzy with the dates. So definitely, you know, I want to say it's probably my sophomore year. It probably wasn't my freshman year.

Miner: Okay.

Chaudhury: It was probably my sophomore year.

Miner: So you knew what you had gotten into by then. [laughs]

Chaudhury: Yes, yes. Yes.

Miner: So, what do you think? Was it- was it true what he said about-

Chaudhury: Well, you know, I- I will tell you this. He was also the first one like- I think he made a reference to NPR or something and I had no clue what NPR was. I- I had been like, "You know, NPR (unsure, 7:07-7:09??) "I encourage you to listen to it. You know, you get a whole host of news." And I'll be honest with you. During my two years, I didn't listen that much.

Miner: Hmm.

Chaudhury: Right? It's only after I got a job and moved to Chicago, one of my other friends also mentioned the same thing. He's like, "Well, I heard that on NPR." And you know, that friend's like, "You know, I could have sworn President Myers said something about NPR and I asked him what the Chicago channel was and he said maybe 91.5. I'm sure down in Bloomington it's something different.

Miner: Hmm.

Chaudhury: And now I'm hooked on NPR, right? I mean, that's my morning commute radio all the time. Again, it's the same route, right? They give you so many interesting conversations from around the globe, and obviously I'm biased 'cause I'm not really from here and it's nice to hear stories, you know, something other than whatever the hell our 24-hour news cycle churns out.

Miner: Hmm.

Chaudhury: But again, it's just- you know, it's just tough doing it well. I mean, even when I was in college he talked about this and I didn't get the value of that until my career was on the line. Right? That's again- there's the diversity. I get the benefit only because- because I'm having the conversation with you and you can tell I like to talk, right? [Miner laughs] So- so someone like that, you don't want to bore people, especially if you know a whole lot of things. You know, if you know a little bit about a whole lot of things, you don't bore whoever you're having a conversation with.

Miner: Huh.

Chaudhury: And obviously I don't consider myself a Renaissance man, but the key is that "Hey, are you...having intellectual curiosity to learn the basics about a whole host of things?" so that in any setting you can feel confident and carry on a conversation, right? I mean, I really feel the foundation I got at Illinois Wesleyan really prepared me for that in that kind of a conversation with anyone. Right?

Miner: That's interesting. That's really great. Did you any opportunity or any awareness the- the fact that he collected a lot of different things?

Chaudhury: Oh yeah, yeah! Especially books, you know. I mean, that was one of his- his key things. And you know, the sad part was I actually in that same conversation I had promised I'd give him this book of translated poems from a very famous Bangladeshi poet. His name was Nazrul Islam. I said the next day, "I would go to Bangladesh and I would get one for you." But being an international student, I mean the plane tickets were really expensive. I didn't end up going to Bangladesh until like very close to graduation.

Miner: Oh!

Chaudhury: So I never did get a chance to- to get that book for him and give it to him.

Miner: Oh.

Chaudhury: But that was another piece of conversation that we had because I remember we talked about Tagore who was also a very famous, you know, Indian poet, I mean Bangladeshi poet and we talked a little bit about poetry in...in the (unsure, 9:53??) also.

Miner: Hmm. Interesting. Do you have any sense of what that kind of personality- one of the things I'm looking at in this project is the influence that a person who has such a wide range of interests has on a place like Illinois Wesleyan and the people who come to it. So I get- I- I understand the impact that it had on you personally.

Chaudhury: Right.

Miner: I'm wondering though if you have any recollections or reflections on- on what that meant to the campus as a whole.

Chaudhury: Yeah. You know, I'll tell you this. The one thing I really felt deeply about was the fact that his personality and it was so easy to just know that he cared about you. Right? I- I- you know, it's hard to describe this feeling, you know. I've been working over twenty years. You meet people everyday.

Miner: Hmm.

Chaudhury: And sometimes, you know, that type of personality comes out where you know that, you know, this person genuinely cares about you. I mean, that's not what my bosses do, not necessarily. (unsure, 10:57-10:59??) Right? [Miner laughs] You know, sometimes, you know, "Okay, that's his job. He's just doing his job," where I've- I've other mentors too, I'm like, "Wow, this person cares about my career. They're concerned with my career goals," and things like that. I think what was so unique about President Myers was it- it just took a couple words out of his mouth and you really felt that he cared. Right? And that was important for me, because remember I gave up almost everything back home, came here and I'm like, "I don't know what the future holds for me." I didn't know if I came to the United States if I would have to go back or whatever the case is, but-

Miner: Oh.

Chaudhury: -just knowing, you know, hey, from the top, from the president, all the way to the professors, people care about you.

Miner: Hmm.

Chaudhury: And having a conversation with him, like I said, even when he talked, not

necessarily a one on one conversation, but even when he was giving a speech at a convocation or graduation, it was so apparent that he had a genuine concern for each and every student.

Miner: Hmm.

Chaudhury: Right? So for a small liberal arts school in the middle of nowhere, you know, if I- I got that feeling, I'm pretty sure students got the same feeling too.

Miner: Hmm.

Chaudhury: Right? Here's someone who really genuinely cares about, you know, what kind of person we're going to be and that's what would really be important, right? I'm sure this is probably going to be a big quote, but, you know, he would always end the graduation ceremony with saying, "Go out there and do good," or something along those lines.

Miner: Hmm.

Chaudhury: Do you remember that line?

Miner: Yeah. Yeah. He used it. The-

Chaudhury: Yeah. Yeah.

Miner: He'd want you to do well but also do good.

Chaudhury: Exactly. Years down the line, about four or five years ago, I went on a vacation to Boston and we were at Harvard square and there's all these little shops, right? [Miner laughs] And this one little shop, right on the main display, there is a placard that has that word with his name at the bottom. And thankfully, it was after Facebook, 'cause I took that picture and I posted it and I was like- I remember that so vividly because that is what he would end his speech with, including my graduation ceremony. Right? You know, that- that was his tagline. You know, I'm glad I'm not the only one who thought that this was so special. [Miner laughs] You know, I- in Boston, some little store- shop owner, you know, God bless her soul. It must have touched that person's heart as, you know, "This is such a great quote," and to have it out there.

Miner: I've heard of it on coffee mugs

Chaudhury: Yeah. I'm sure. I'm sure. Yeah.



Miner: And so was it in the store for sale or was it just in the store as a sign?

Chaudhury: You know, I will go back and find that picture for you Meg-

Miner: Oh, that's okay.

Chaudhury: -because I'm pretty sure, and you know- again, like I said, (unsure, 13:49-13:50??) I posted so many pictures it might take me awhile to go back and find that picture.

Miner: Yeah.

Chaudhury: But I- I will find that for you and definitely email that to you. It's amazing, you know- you know, because I was telling you how much you knew he meant to you, so even when he passed away, you know, there was a genuine sense of loss for us. And by us, I mean obviously- collectively in the IWU community I think it was so apparent, right? And again, that- that- that's how you- that kind of impact he may have left, right?

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Chaudhury: 'Cause- 'cause you know, there have been a lot of different presidents and they'll leave their mark, don't get me wrong. Obviously, I am biased because he was our president while I was in school.

Miner: That's true.

Chaudhury: But even after that, you know, I see other presidents too, you know, as part of the alumni they all reach out to you. You have conversations and all that. And then I had Eckley- Professor Eckley as one of my professors too. I think he started an investments class. You know, I mean, obviously the quad is named after him, right?

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Chaudhury: It's not like I had interactions with one president. I did have interactions with three presidents of Illinois Wesleyan.

Miner: Uh-huh.

Chaudhury: So that- I think from that perspective I can tell, you know, President Myers- President Myers, he was really something unique.

Miner: Hmm. Huh. That's great. Well, what else was he? You said you knew of his book collecting interest. Did you ever see any of those when you were in his house or-

Chaudhury: Oh yeah, because he was- he was proud of it, right? He was like, "Here's all the stuff that I collect," so, you know- I'll be honest with you. Back then, I was like, "Where am I? What am I going to do? Oh yeah, this is great," Do you know what I'm saying? So obviously I- I was wowed by it, so to speak. But hey, for an eighteen year old boy or nineteen year old boy back then, you know, people- really everything really sinking in, where I fit in the big picture and all that, you know, I was just so glad I was in such a welcoming environment. That- that's really the key takeaway from me.

Miner: That's a great story. Well, do you- do you know anybody that I should talk to about this? You've been in touch with anybody who I should-

Chaudhury: You know, I am actually connected. As I mentioned, I was in the international house at that point. And again, I said I had a unique experience 'cause it wasn't just international students, right? I think- I mean, Darcy Greder really made a great decision that hey, it was going to be a great immersion, you know. I think sixty percent of the students were, you know, from the US and the other forty percent were probably from international-

Miner: Hmm.

Chaudhury: -different international countries. So it was such- living in the international house was, like I said, just an awesome experience. Right? 'Cause, you know, my roommate was Ukrainian. Next door was someone from, you know, Rockford, Illinois. Next door down was someone from India, then Sri Lanka, and then, you know, maybe Washington, Illinois, right? It was just like, "Wow." It was truly a really, really, you know, remarkable place and I was so, so fortunate to be there.

Miner: That's great. So did you have any awareness of the- what happened to President Myers' collection after he died? I don't know, 'cause-

Chaudhury: No. No, I do not.

Miner: Yeah. Okay. Well,

Chaudhury: I would think, you know, obviously his family and his wife probably did something with it. But I- unfortunately I do not.

Miner: That's okay. Just checking- just making sure I'm . So is there anything else we should know

Chaudhury: No, no. Like I said, it's- you know, even just talking to you brought back so many really fond memories and-

Miner: Oh good!

Chaudhury: -I'm- I'm just reliving some, you know, some of the best years in my life. So-

Miner: Oh, that's wonderful to hear! Well, I hope you're- you're doing well and you're happy with life out in the snow blow to the-

Chaudhury: I- I have no complaints. Like I said, you know, I have been so blessed and so fortunate from- from those early years at Illinois Wesleyan and just not knowing what's going on to what I've ended up with. I- I have no complaints. I have truly been blessed.

Miner: Fantastic. That's great. Alright, well, you have a good day.

Chaudhury: Okay.

Miner: Alright.

Chaudhury: Alright. Thank you, you too. Buh-bye.

Miner: Bye.