

## Oral history interview with Kumaraswamy Ponnambalam conducted by Ruth Belay

20 February 2020

00:00:00 **Ruth Belay**

Okay, well, thank you so much for joining us. If you could please state your name and the year you graduated from U of T.

00:00:08 **Kumaraswamy Ponnambalam**

My full name is Kumaraswamy Ponnambalam, but most people knew me as Ponnu. November 1987 is the official graduation date, I think.

00:00:22 **Ruth**

Okay. And can you tell me a little bit about your life before you came to U of T?

00:00:29 **Ponnu**

Well, I lived in India in a city now called Chennai. It used to be called Madras. Before I came here, I was working there, but in a university as a lecturer. But before that, I did my master's in Ireland and then before that, I did an undergrad in India, undergrad engineering - civil engineering, two different cities actually. My school, I think up to my, I don't know, ninth or eighth, ninth to tenth standard, my school was always like moving because my father was moved from one place to another. So, I remember a lot of my schools didn't even have roofs. So, we usually were under the tree and you know that so we had fun. And so, it's kind of a highly mobile life before that. It was not very easy, but I think we managed okay. Then, I think Canada and the United States, most of the time in one place, one, 6 or 7 years here in Toronto, and then the rest, what, thirty-some years, in Waterloo.

00:01:42 **Ruth**

Okay, and what made you decide to come to U of T?

00:01:48 **Ponnu**

Do you really want that story? [Laughs]

00:01:50 **Ruth**

[Laughs] Of course, yeah.

00:01:50 **Ponnu**

Okay. This is a funny one, kind of. So, I come from a state called Tamil Nadu in India. You can think of us like Quebecoise. Okay? So, we are always fighting for our rights for- one of the major reasons is the same reason, language difference. Otherwise everybody is kind of mixed in India, in terms of religion, at least in most states, but states are divided by language. So, I went to Ireland to do my master's. And, you know, I had the same mindset, like Quebecoise people, and then just like randomly one day, I was seeing TV and there's Pierre Trudeau giving a talk about why Quebec should not separate. Okay? And he was basically, I don't know, giving a talk, it seemed

to be. I don't know what it was. But he convinced me that was a good idea not to separate. Right? [Laughs]. I said, "oh, this is interesting," because I would have thought the other way, you know? So, just, I was in my mind, "that's it." And then I went to India to start my work, after my master's, and I never wanted to leave India because I was quite homesick and so on, but one of my friends in the computer center, he kept asking me to apply for graduate studies in the US. And I said, "no, I'm not going to US. I don't want to go to the US." And then one day- because in India, what happened is that all of us, like when we finished graduating, we hoped to go to the US or in the old days, the UK, but mostly the US at that time. We all would apply to hundreds of places. Hundreds of rejection letters would come. And everybody's sad for one day at least. So, "you want me to get more rejection letters too," with him. But the thing is, I didn't want to go to the US. And then one day said, "look, this, you have to apply." I said, "What is this? This is not US. This is Canada." I said, "I don't want to go to Canada." "No, no, this is Canada and you can apply, you should apply." So, I opened the application, it was for him, not for me. I opened up the form. And it says Department of Electrical Engineering, University of Toronto. And I said, "oh, good. I can't apply, I'm a civil engineer." I said, "forget that." He's just struck electrical to civil. And he said, "now you can apply." [Laughs] I said, "okay, I'll apply because I'm sure somebody who sees this will throw it in the garbage, because, you know, it's not even for the right department." So, I applied, and then of course forgot about it. Then comes a big fat letter that said, you know, "you got a scholarship," this and that and come to Toronto, which I really never knew much about except, you know, we all knew about Montreal because had an Olympics at that time. Yeah, but no one heard of Toronto, really seriously. In fact, I knew a little bit about Waterloo because we were using something that was produced there, a compiler, Waterloo compiler [WATFIV], so I knew more about Waterloo than Toronto. So, it was total accident why I came here.

00:04:32 **Ruth**

Wow. [Laughing] So, once you got here, what were some of your first experiences?

00:04:38 **Ponnu**

Well, the first experience, it was really strange, because, you know, India, in India, especially in the very south, we are very far from any borders. I mean, at least for thousands of years, or at least hundreds of years, we never had any war or anything. But we had, you know, India had a war with China in 1960s [Sino-Indian War], when I was a kid. And as far as I know, India got totally beaten or something. So, the one thing we were always afraid of was Chinese [people]. Okay? And then I come here, I land, I'm right in the middle of Chinatown. And I said, "well, this is strange. We were always scared of Chinese, now I'm going to be right next to them," you know? So that was my first impression, you know? So, it was really strange how you- you know, when you are a child, you're scared of something, and then of course, it stays in your mind forever. And of course, it takes a long time to get rid of it. When

you're done, you fight hard to do it. So, that was my first impression coming to Toronto. I said, "is it Canada or China?" But I didn't realize I was right at the entrance of Chinatown.

Of course, you know, that was my first experience, and then I found it quite interesting that, I think, almost second day, I found people who spoke my language. And I think, expect for one guy, the rest were all from Sri Lanka. So, which I've never been to, but they are Tamil, so we spoke the same language. And, you know, so I basically I was saved by them. You know, because I was quite homesick. And you know- and also I had very heavy course loads. At that time, four courses for graduate studies and a TA [teaching assistant], I had. And the funny thing is I had no idea what a TA was. And I asked somebody, "what is a TA?" You know? They said, "oh, nothing, you just go to that room, and students will ask you questions, you just have to answer it." I said, "What? That doesn't sound like an easy job." You know? So, the first four months were like nightmare, basically a nightmare. I just wanted to go back every day. Yeah, so that is how it was. But somehow, I survived mainly because of my friends.

00:06:52 **Ruth**

Okay, and what did it feel like to kind of, like, start getting used to the campus life and different-

00:07:00 **Ponnu**

Yeah, I mean- okay, in the beginning, I didn't have residence nearby, so I had to, you know- I came out two weeks later because they were delaying my visa or something. So, I had to come two weeks later than most people, so it was hard to find any place. So, I had a very expensive place somewhere near the old Honest Eds. So, I'd walk about half an hour to come and go back. So, I was like, you know, coming to classes and this and that, you know. I had a heavy course load, but firstly, because of my friends, I would probably stay around a bit, but I never really stayed in campus because of this, you know, living far from here. And then, I was lucky to get the graduate residence the next term. This is like, you know, I came in fall, so you get it in winter, I think. That was amazing, because again, in grad residency, you find so many friends and- of all countries and it was much more together. It was- after about three years there I even I met my wife there, my future wife. So, it was definitely a big change from living outside the campus. And then, of course, when I came in, Sanford -Fleming Building, which was supposed to be my office, had a big fire and got destroyed basically.

00:08:22 **Ruth**

Wow. Okay. Where is that now?

00:08:25 **Ponnu**

It is there now, but when I came you couldn't be there because- it was it was also some- I think it was a library too, but somehow, they saved the

books I think. So, there was nothing inside, like the shell was there, so they were going to rebuild the whole thing. So, we were put in a building called Haultain Building, I think it is still called Haultain Building. And the funniest thing they said is, "oh, your office is right above the SLOWPOKE Reactor, nuclear reactor." It's like, "oh, that's funny. I wonder if we'll get radiated?" You know? "Oh, this is very safe, don't worry." So that's where our offices were for- until they finished building this, which took a long time. I think, two years or something they took. So that's, that's where I was in terms of office, which is, I mean, was good because then it was also next to another building which had the industrial design department. So, some of my friends, eventually were from that department. So, it was easy to go there than the other departments, but it was okay. I didn't feel too uncomfortable after some time. It was pretty good.

00:09:31 **Ruth**

Okay, so what were some of the student organizations that you joined or were involved in?

00:09:35 **Ponnu**

So, I mean, as you came as a foreign student, the first probably- everyone meets is the International Student Center. I think it's still there. And next to chemical engineering and between civil engineering so I'm sure that's where we all went, right from the beginning. And in fact, I don't know if- I think you are automatically a member or something... I don't remember being a member of the International Student Centre, but we were always involved in many of their activities. That's one thing. And again, we were all, I think, automatically a member of Graduate Students Union- [Ruth: yes, yeah] I mean, which is- definitely organized meetings and stuff like that, that we could go. I- I mean, other than some of the activities that we did, with, not necessarily student, but with any kind of organization, I don't know if student union did it or others did it, we would join them. You know, it could be a protest march. It could be meetings, like I remember, I was looking at it, I was, you know, I was very active in going up to these famous people like Noam Chomsky and Carl Sagan, all these people because in those days, one of the biggest worry was nuclear war between US and Russia. You know, and Canada being caught in the middle. So, there's all these people would come and talk about all these dangers of nuclear war and other wars, of course. So, I was definitely involved in going to these meetings, but I was- I don't remember being any association.

00:11:18 **Ruth**

And what were those meetings like?

00:11:20 **Ponnu**

Say it again.

00:11:21 **Ruth**

What were the meetings like?

00:11:22 **Ponnu**  
Where?

00:11:23 **Ruth**  
No, no. What were they like? Just like the nuclear, the anti-nuclear movement, I guess?

00:11:27 **Ponnu**  
Yeah. So, I mean, there will be some protest march usually. And then we would go to like, I vaguely remember one of the last one I went probably was, is it Massey Hall? In somewhere in downtown, because I remember Carl Sagan sitting on the stage. You know, so it's- obviously, probably most of the people there have something to do with the universities. And some other public, but people care about these things. And, I mean, basically it's a lot of talking. You know? And you listen to them and of course, in some places, they would allow you to ask questions and so on. I don't remember me asking any questions there, but it's the kind of thing that I went, I think. And, of course, the sometimes the marches are more for fighting for the Sri Lankan Tamils, so we would probably go stand in front of the US embassy. That was usually the case, even though they were not directly involved, probably. But, or sometimes Indian embassy. And I don't remember Sri Lankan embassy ever, but these are the kinds of things that happened in terms of protest marches.

Because at that time, the Sri Lankan Tamil problems became worse and worse and worse. So, I was just making note that one of the time I was asked to go deliver a letter in New York City on behalf of them only because I had a little bit of political connection to people in India. So, they thought that I could be a deliverer of the letter to the Chief Minister of the state that I came from, which is next to Sri Lanka. So, they thought that it might work. So, I mean, I did go and give it to the- the medical doctor was attending the Chief Minister because he was sick, that's why he was in New York, for a hospital visit. But I was able to actually- I can't believe that they even let me still do this, those days! I could go to the Waldorf [Waldorf Astoria Hotel], which is a, some fancy hotel, and I could knock on the door of this guy, they let me even go to his door. And I gave this letter to him that basically, I think, said something about the Sri Lankan Tamil problem, whether they could help about stopping something, some atrocities that are going on. Yeah. So that was tough. I even think that was a strange thing that happened.

00:13:53 **Ruth**  
That's amazing. What other ways were you guys able to build community here, and to kind of support different causes?

00:14:04 **Ponnu**  
I mean, the one thing is the number. So, the number of Tamils, for example, it grew. There were always enough Indians, but Indians, you know, because

India is really a big country with so many languages, we couldn't easily, probably, go to any other meeting other than where Tamil was spoken. So mostly, it's trying to find people who had association, you know, where Tamil was spoken, that's- there was one at that time, which were Indian Tamils. So, we would go there. I mean, that's a kind of a common center. But then as the number of Sri Lanka Tamils grew, and they are far more in number and organized, there was almost all the associations that we had were with them. And of course, being grad students we were always looking for free food [laughs]. So, whenever any Sri Lankan family says, "oh, come for dinner or something, lunch," we always went [laughs]. That's one of the major meeting point, I would say with all our friends. Like, you know. I mean, the friends could be anybody, we will just say, "oh, let's go," and they will come. They don't have to be Tamil, or anything. It's just who is around at that time. But usually the families that invited us for any kind of food were Sri Lankan Tamils, families. So that's was very good, like, you know? All these troubles made us get together, actually. Yeah, we were all together doing this and that. But, we had actually 1982 we had a Tamil Eelam conference.

And I- you know, I was talking with one of my colleagues here, the faculty who passed away. He and I, we were quite important in the sense that that was the very beginning of computers. So, we had a Commodore 64 that together we had bought, so I was able to put the very first Tamil font on a PC probably, and he was able to some graphics, and we were able to demonstrate all that there. And then eventually he became one of the best Tamil font developers ever.

00:16:04 **Ruth**  
Really? Okay.

00:16:05 **Ponnu**  
Yeah, I mean, that was just amazing work he did after that. So, I gave up on it, but he was doing it [laughs]. He was in Toronto and he was also very connected to the Tamil community. Yeah. And he was also, he then kind of- he was connected to a Tamil radio station. So, he did some shows and so on. And he is a very, you know, he's like, more than, for me, more than Leonardo da Vinci. He could do art, he could do music, he could do engineering, he could do math, he can do, you know, font design, computing, anything. So, he would be involved in so many different things. And of course, wherever I can get involved a little bit with him, I would do it. So, that's that. I think he was a big link at that time, and of some of his close friends as well. Yeah.

00:16:56 **Ruth**  
Could you tell me a little bit more about, I guess your experiences in the graduate residence?

00:17:01 **Ponnu**  
Oh, okay. So, I don't know if you guys probably don't even know it doesn't exist anymore. I mean, the building that I lived, actually.

00:17:11 **Ruth**  
Yeah, I think they built a new one.

00:17:12 **Ponnu**  
Yeah, well they built a new one for the grad somewhere else, but in the place where we were, they built an underground residence, on the corner of St. George and Bloor. There's a tall building there, but it wasn't there before. So that's where the grad residence was. So, the picture I sent you wasn't the original residence [Ruth: Okay] – doesn't exist. So, it was like old fashioned way of- like this like courtyard in the middle, and then rooms all around like, maybe three floors. And I think they divided by suites, so that there's four or five rooms in a suite and usually girls had their own suite, I think. The boys had their own suite. And, I was first in the downstairs in the corner of St. George and Bloor, it was really the noisiest corner. And, I think, the next term, probably, or- I was able to move to the other corner which is the quietest corner in the second floor. So that's how the rooms were. And in those days, I can't believe that we were given the service of cleaning person coming every week to clean all the suites, and they will change all the bedsheets and pillows and everything. Pillow covers and everything. So that's- I can't believe that they would even do that anymore. So that's what we had. And they- of course, the building was so old and a lot of cockroaches. Always somewhere. So, I'm happy that they destroyed it to build a new one, because I don't think they mean they will do all kind of fumigation, but I don't think they can really get rid of it. It's an old building.

Yeah. So that's kind of thing I remember. And we would, of course, cook together often. Because, you know, all these people who are Indians and Tamil they have similar food. So, we would cook together and I couldn't wait for somebody to tell me, "oh, come and eat with us today." I'll go and help a little bit and eat there and then clean the dishes. That was my service. Although, I eventually started learning how to cook and that was probably not a bad place to start. Although in the beginning, they didn't trust my cooking so I was only doing all the cleaning and cutting, sometimes. Even cutting, my friend would not let me. He said, "you don't know how to cut." [Laughs] So the only thing I did was cleaning dishes. Yeah. So that they allowed me to do.

00:19:27 **Ruth**  
Yeah. And was there activities that you guys did together?

00:19:30 **Ponnu**  
Yeah. So, there was a basement. The basement had like a games room, like there was definitely billiards table I remember, and maybe table tennis? Yeah, and a TV in those days. And I mean, again, this is where you meet people that you don't normally know. You meet them there. So, I really remember a few people, like there was this one Sikh guy, very big guy. He's always there. Not terribly friendly, but I think he's- like probably really

Canadian, like grew up in Canada, probably. So, he was kind of aloof, but then you know, once in a while we'd say, "hi." And then we would play billiards and all this stuff and either your friends or somebody who's sitting there who will say, "okay, let's play," and we'll play something that is there. And they would sometimes, you know, have some organized things like little parties. So, I don't fully remember, like maybe for New Years or something like that, they would have. For anybody, like the whole residence. And I remember the secretary who was also the one who allocated your room and so on. So, you know, the very tough one. So, we were always scared of her [laughs]. She usually used to sit in the front somewhere. And, she's the one who allocates- she was like the all-powerful person in that building. I remember that we were always scared of her.

00:20:55 **Ruth**  
Yeah, definitely not a person to make mad [laughs].

00:20:58 **Ponnu**  
No [laughs].

00:21:00 **Ruth**  
You'd get that corner room at St. George and Bloor [laughs].

00:21:02 **Ponnu**  
I mean, like- in those days we didn't think so seriously whether she's only mean to us like, the people don't look like her, or she's always mean everyone, I didn't know. But we were always scared of her [laughs]. Yeah, and I think I met a few friends that room who I didn't, like- probably, I wouldn't have normally easily met otherwise. So that room was helpful for people to make friendships. And I know for sure one of my colleagues who eventually marr- like he's a kind of white Canadian, but he stole our first ever Indian girl that we saw [laughs]. He actually married her and they are still married. And so, we were all just mad at him for just stealing this girl under our eyes [laughs]. Because he was way more handsome than we were [laughs]. He's still my friend. Yeah, so I don't think he would mind you mind even if I tell these things.

00:22:00 **Ruth**  
No, yeah. That's funny. So, I guess how- what were the pressures that you guys felt as international students when different things were changing in the surrounding community and pressures on campus?

00:22:15 **Ponnu**  
I mean, the communities- you see this is a huge thing. Like, I remember even from, I don't know, like 1981 doesn't seem like that far, but it seems far in some sense. For example, I remember the one other- because I had to walk very far to go to Bathurst, the first four months, those days you can, it's really in the evening and night, I could not walk more than a couple of blocks before somebody called me a Paki or something. You know? This is what I

remember. I was always kind of scared of that, that somebody is going to be violent against you. But, you know? You never know. So that's how it was in those days like I couldn't even like- I'm sure every day I was called something. So that's all outside the campus, but inside of course is more, much more egalitarian and nicer. So, it's like almost like a different world. Right? Coming inside the campus.

So, the one thing of course, internationals were always worried about is, is money, obviously. Because we will probably never had enough for- like, remember being often hungry, because we couldn't afford a lot of- like, enough food, I would say. That's why we were always looking for food. But- So, when even having enough food wasn't that easy. I'm assuming that that's true with many international students, because when the fees went up, and so on, that's why we were always very upset, you know? Trying- So I was lucky after some years that my supervisor found me a TA job in geography. I was actually geography TA. In addition- So I had two TA jobs. I think I had one in engineering and one in geography. So that was good because my money situation got better. To some extent for an engineering student to do geography TA and computing, for example is quite easy. You know, we do a lot more there, so you can do that much here. So, it was much easier and more hours for me. Compared to engineering, they give more hours, more money, less work. So, that was a big savior, because by the time I was already getting married, or something like that, and then we had kids and so on, so the money situation was tight, but at least now I had this other TAs there. And so, I think the situation of food and money was quite tough for most students. Yeah.

00:24:42 **Ruth**

Could you talk a little bit more about the, I guess, the student reaction when the fees went up and why they went up?

00:24:48 **Ponnu**

I mean, most of the students were very docile, right? Like I said, most of the students were all grad students in those days. Foreign students, a big number of them were grad students and if they're undergrad, they were probably paid for by some big rich scholarship or something, so they didn't have to worry about the fees. So, it's only grad students who had to save money from what they get to pay for the fees. So, when they go up it's like a significant hit. Maybe some grad students, some of them had savings or can, you know, get other money, I don't know. But, most students were quite upset with any change in fees because they are a significant part of their income, when things went up. But on the other hand, most of them were very docile. So, they wouldn't say anything. Like, so, even I even forgot this letter I wrote until you guys sent me. I said, "whoa, I wrote that?" [Laughs] I thought that was very courageous. So [laughs], it was like that. It's more- I think almost 99% of the grad students were too quiet. They wouldn't say anything. And then, since you didn't have undergrads, who were probably even younger and more ready to fight, there was nobody to fight, really. Yeah.

- 00:26:06 **Ruth**  
Yeah. And do you remember why you felt like you needed to write that comment, like that Varsity article commentary?
- 00:26:13 **Ponnu**  
I think it's just also, by timing. I must have just read this couple of other articles that supported. Like, you know, I was always saying that, you know, even though we- as a person, as an individual person, I probably gained by moving away from India, immediately, like, immediately with at least- immediately the Indian people suffered, because they basically subsidized my education. And nobody cared about taking the money from them. I mean, we're all talking about only, you know, here, "oh, we are their kid, there and there. They're not Canadian, they're not paying fees." You know, "they're not paying taxes," and so on, which is not true either. We were paying taxes or whatever we were supposed to do. But, like, you know, none of these governments were thinking about compensating for all those countries where the immigrants came from, where the immigrants were trained, right? I mean, we didn't train these people, we saved all that training money, but nobody's compensating those countries, before and now. Right? So, it seems, like at least, you know, maybe it first started economics, but it still didn't feel right. And at the same time, people claiming this is the reason we have to do it, you know, that I was probably quite mad about it, myself. I just wrote it. And so, it's- I don't know, what year was it? '83? I don't remember what the year was.
- 00:27:37 **Ruth**  
Not a 100% sure.
- 00:27:38 **Ponnu**  
Oh, maybe I have it here. It is just that I'm wondering why that particular year? Because I mean, obviously, they kept- you know, these fees- I think, at the very beginning we didn't have differential fees. [Ruth: No] Yeah, so it's just probably that, you know, the idea that- Yes, 1982. So, it's just next, like, you know, I only came- this is my, only second term. So, I'm sure I was quite upset. Because we don't have much money at the time. And then these differential fees are much higher, I think. So, I'm not sure any other reason. Other than that, just by coincidence, I had read all these many things at the same time. And then this thing went up and, and we were quite tight for the money.
- 00:28:24 **Ruth**  
Could you maybe go a little bit more into that? Like, how did the change in fees and the differential fees affect international students?
- 00:28:33 **Ponnu**  
I mean, like I was saying before, we were already tight with respect to just living, you know, food and boarding, right? I mean, obviously boarding is a

significant expense. You know, like now, probably. I don't know if the ratio is the same or different compared to- Toronto probably, is more expensive now and compared to food, but in those days, it was not necessarily. Like for example, I remember, if I had paid in grad residence 250 dollars a month at the time, I probably spent, you know, easily, almost 150-200 a month for food, in those days. I think that's what I can vaguely remember. Just to buy the basic stuff.

Okay, so you know, then the whole grad, you know, the RA [research assistant] was 500 or something. 550 or something, a month, so you can see how tight already is. I mean, we had to pay fees from it. So, it was not the great situation. Because it's not like we had families here, right? I mean, we were just basically ourselves, that's it, right? Like, in a sense, you know, I can ask \$5 of something from my friend, but not like hundreds of dollars, even in an emergency, for example. So, I remember many times the fees that we didn't have, and I think you have to do something, I forgot, something like you're delaying it, you can tell them, well, "I'll be delayed." They put a steep fine on it, or something like that, I remember a few times happening. Because you know, it's all tight management of money. So, you have small saving or by eating less, that's the only place we can save because we can't tell the rent, the landlord, who was U of T, that we will pay less. No, we can't. The only place you can save is by not eating.

There's no other way. Yeah, because everything else fixed. So that's why we are always hungry, and then mad. And then we have to do all the research and all- You know most graduate students wanted, you know- like some of them even have night labs, you know, they have to go to the night labs and so on. Most of us worked in at least evening - night. Now, I wasn't very good at working too late. But still, you know, all this drains your energy, and then you don't have enough money for food. So that was really bad. So that affected everyone, that didn't matter who you were. Yeah. So, because more or less, we all got the same money. Not much different. I mean, this is why when I got the second TA, I was like, "I'm rich." You know? [Laughs]. There was a huge difference. So that's probably why, you know, some- for example, I know at least couple of students went back because they couldn't manage the stress of managing all this together. I mean, I- at least for the first four months, I was ready to go any day.

00:31:32 **Ruth**

Yeah. Were the GSU [Graduate Student Union] and the International Student Center, were they fighting to have differential fees overturned? Was there support like, that you guys were getting from them, potentially?

00:31:50 **Ponnu**

I don't think ISC would have got involved with it. They are more of like a cultural organization than trying to support any kind of issues like this. GSU, I don't remember any big fight for- They might have said one way or the other, I don't remember, but I don't think they had a big influence on this at all. So,

it was basically, "well, it's done and done." That's it. That's how it went. So, in some sense, much later, I think they started in Waterloo, they started giving the, the differential part back, as a scholarship. [Ruth: Okay]. So at least the fees are kind of equal to the Canadians. [Ruth: Okay]. But those Canadian fees themselves went up quite a bit. Yeah, so- but, you know, that wasn't there when I- You know, I was kind of like- When I saw that I was already a faculty member, I said, "whoa, these guys are having an easy time. I didn't have anything like this," you know? Giving the differential back which, which you know is a significant part of the money. [Ruth: Of course, yeah] But of course, I'm assuming all the costs went up and all this is needed. But, very recently, like two years ago, I was getting somebody from Nigeria. And he showed me that, "look, yeah, you give me all the full scholarship and everything, but look, there's not enough money here for me to come," you know? Including TA and so on, that we gave. So, I had to give him an extra to make him even have enough money for say food, for example. [Ruth: Wow, okay] Yeah, you even now. So, at least, you know, at least, I mean, I don't- Like maybe if I had gone and told my supervisor he might have understood, but I didn't think I would even had the courage to go tell him, "look your money is not enough." I didn't do that.

00:33:45 **Ruth**

Yeah. I mean, it's definitely a hard conversation to have, especially like once you've started. Yeah, like, it's, yeah, it's easier to negotiate like you said before, right?

00:33:54 **Ponnu**

Yes. So, I mean, also, you know, most students- like I was surprised with this student from Nigeria. He was good at finding all the information, because I didn't even know, like I told you, I just came. I didn't have any idea whether there's enough money, nothing. And when I came, the first four months, I had to pay \$400 a month rent compared to the grad residence, 250. I mean, for a double room. But you know, it's a huge difference in money at that time, that- So that's why I was too happy to come inside, when it's still we were very tight in terms of the money. Yeah, so- And also, I think the TAs, you might only get two TAs in a year. So that was not- like the money wasn't too much, because most of these courses were not happening in the summer, especially in those days, so there were hardly any TAs in the summer. So, this is a pretty tight situation, but from now I know that from my new, my own grad students, things probably haven't changed too much. It's just the numbers look bigger. You know, I had a \$6,000 scholarship for all of it at that time. Maybe now we give them 20,000. But, it's still not enough.

00:35:11 **Ruth**

Yeah. Especially when you compare it to the cost of living. Yeah. And especially in Toronto. It is definitely different than Waterloo.

00:35:20 **Ponnu**

Oh yes, it's terrible. I mean, although Waterloo is getting as bad now. [Ruth: Really?] Yeah. So, it's kind of ridiculous, but that's how it is becoming. So, it's a little bit cheaper, probably, but not really that much.

00:35:25 **Ruth**

So, I guess from what you've said about, like, the difficulties of being an international student, has that made you as now a faculty member at Waterloo more sympathetic?

00:36:46 **Ponnu**

Yes. Yeah. I mean, for example, I will never ask any of my new students to take more than one or two courses in the first term. I had four courses and a TA. So, I knew that that was unnecessary. I mean- and also U of T was, in some sense, should have been even more like relaxed because they- here we take six years to do a PhD. In Waterloo, we are supposed to do it in four. And I could still allow them to take it easy in the first couple of terms. Because there's no point driving them nuts when they haven't even learned how to do things in the system, right? So, it doesn't matter how good they were before. It's a new system, and they have to learn how to do it. So, what's the point? Like it's a long four years time to finish a PhD. Why should I ask them to do all four courses in two terms? They can do one, or they can do two, whatever, you know? Whatever they can feel they can handle. It's good for them and good for me. So that's a huge change. I don't know why they- I mean maybe because my supervisor was- I think he did a PhD in US where you have lots of courses, but they are like kind of like a little bit short courses, like. So, I don't know, maybe he didn't think of- I even, much later, I wrote a complaint letter to him. "This is a silly idea that you had. I had to do four courses in the very first term. And I came two weeks late in addition. So it was like, disastrous.

00:37:12 **Ruth**

Yeah. What did he say?

00:37:13 **Ponnu**

He didn't say much [laughs]. I mean, this is much later. So, I don't know. I'm sure that he probably didn't do it afterwards, because he was probably fairly new. He didn't fully get it, probably, that it's not the same load as his four courses, maybe in the US, I don't know. In the U.S. wouldn't have been that easy either. But somehow, he didn't think of it. I mean, he's usually very kind guy, but it's just that he didn't think of it, and this was one of the worst things he could do. You know? There was no reason I had to do that and out of which, I think, at least two of those courses were useless for my research. Just took my time and stress. [Ruth: Okay]. So that's, that's another thing. So, I definitely learned these things, to at least not put my new students on the same stress I had, which was unnecessary. I mean, I know we all have to have some stress to work, others will do no work at all, but at the same time, this is kind of totally unnecessary. So, also, you make them in a way that they don't want to stay there anymore. That's not good. You want them to have fun. Yeah, so the last two days, I just had a research hackathon with my grad

students, and researchers. So we just sat in one room and trying to solve the same problem different ways, you know, and I took them for lunch. Of course, I'm in a little bit of a hole now [laughs] feeding them for two days. And you know, snacks, I went and got them coffee from the Williams next door. You know those coffees? [Ruth: Yeah]. So we had fun. I mean, I think they enjoyed it, at least a couple of them wrote saying, "it was really a great idea."

00:38:59 **Ruth**

Yeah, that does sound very fun.

00:39:01 **Ponnu**

I mean even though I was sitting there and talking to them and they ask questions and I tell them, "do this, this," you know, all this stuff, but it was at least, I think, I had fun and some definitely had fun.

00:39:13 **Ruth**

As a faculty member, do you support a different student initiatives or felt like it was important to continue engaging in activism? [Ponnu: You mean-] In Waterloo? Or outside as well.

00:39:29 **Ponnu**

Well, at least again- you know, all this there's nothing new, you know? There's- sometimes, we never learn anything, so there's all the same issues still. For example, now they took out that differential fee thing. You know, the differential fee that-

00:39:42 **Ruth**

Yeah, only for PhD, though.

00:39:44 **Ponnu**

Something they did, and I wrote back saying, "this is a silly idea, because they already- even giving that wasn't enough." I told you, my students showed me that wasn't enough. Yeah. And now you take it off. So basically, you're saying don't take foreign students unless they come with their own money. Right, that's what you're saying. You know, it doesn't matter, the action is leading to that, there's no other way they can come, you know? So, then we then we have to get up only, get students only who are sort of affordable, can afford it. I can't get students from Nigeria or even India, you know, where they don't have sufficient money on their own. I won't get them, because I can't give enough money for them. So that's not a good idea. So, I did write that. And I mean, and they are assuming that someone like me, like more senior will just find research money and give them. I mean, they are doing that. But, what about all those young faculty members, right? And, so- who probably doesn't even know how to find this. Right? Or don't want to. So there will be suffering without saying much. So, so this is what I do, like, I- we continue to fight one issue or the other, doesn't matter whether you are faculty or student. For example, I don't know this could be here or- I am

always trying to bring outsiders to the department. You know, there is a lot of inbreeding going on in Canada. They hire their own students. So, our thing is that is a very bad idea. But it is not easy to get people to stop. And, I've been fighting for thirty years and it is still happening. I've been fighting- I heard from another colleague that it's got worse in Canada. So, that's not good for our system, academic system. I mean, there's very good research everywhere that show that this is not working well. Because it is very simple, if the student is really, really clever, and if they went out, they have to start from the beginning, and they work hard and they will do well. If they don't work hard, they won't do well. Whereas if they stay here, they don't have to show anything to anybody because they prove themselves already, they will be complacent, they will get into politics. You know, these are the things that happen and they drive nuts those who are not so-called insiders. Right? So, in both ways, it is really bad. Both for the individuals and for the system. So, I keep fighting. Yeah, I mean, I always like my students the best. It's like all children, we like our children the best, but that's not a good idea to just keep them around. You know? They have to go and they will definitely do better than staying at home. Same thing with the students, same with the faculty. There's no difference.

00:42:39 **Ruth**

For sure. It's just- it's very- it's difficult. Whether it's international students coming to Canada or even Canadians going elsewhere. Like, the fees, you're still international student everywhere else, right?

00:42:49 **Ponnu**

Yeah, yeah. I mean, of course, it depends, like in terms of, yeah- For example, if you go from here to study in Europe, it would be pretty expensive. Right? Even if you have Canadian money. So, I mean, it's not easy to do at all. And very rarely you go from so-called rich country to poor country to study, so that you can actually double your money, triple your money, to spend there, but there's very few. So, it's generally, whenever you have- and the mobility is important, you know? Mobility is what made the world kind of interesting, right? So, if you stop the mobility, then we'll all be in our own little village like we used to and that's it. I mean, there's something good is that probably we wouldn't have screwed up the world that much [laughs], but other than that everything interesting that's happening would have stopped.

We've all been just- they used to say in the old days, nobody went beyond about 10-15 kilometers from their village, most of the time. So that's how we would have been. So, the only people who made any changes were the ones who moved out of those 15 kilometers. Right?

00:43:58 **Ruth**

Do you think the challenges or, in many ways, looking back at historical record, it seems like the differential fees are a response to anti-foreigner xenophobia? Ideas of what it means to have supposed foreigners or

international students in these spaces taking away from domestic students? Right? So-

00:44:23 **Ponnu**

I mean, it's very likely, because I think, university themselves wouldn't do it on their own because they do depend a lot on foreign students. So, they are doing it because of some political push for this and politicians gain from this official way of showing they're doing great stuff for Canadians, right? So that's why they are doing it. They're just getting trying to get local people to think that they're doing something for themselves, for them. Right? So, I'm sure that the university on its own, wouldn't normally do this. Because, you know, you want to get the best student and you don't want them to be constrained by money. Right? So, it's definitely- there's political push is why universities are doing that. Of course, there are two ways of doing it. The university get a lot of fund cuts. And they don't count the number of- like, for example, we go by number of students times how much money, but they kind of make the formulas hard in a way that if you have foreign students, you don't get much money. So then, of course the university have to charge more money for the foreign students. Right? So that's how they indirectly do it. Even though just allowing, just- if you say to the university, "you should do that," they wouldn't do it. But it's only that indirectly, by cutting things so they are forced to do it. Right? So, generally the university people are, you know, they're aware that we should get from anywhere. I mean, most of them came from somewhere anyway. Like most of the faculty members are not from Canada.

00:45:58 **Ruth**

Yeah, no, definitely.

00:46:00 **Ponnu**

Yeah. So, it's- I mean, it seems like such a simple issue, but I think somebody made some economic analysis of this, like how much we get from differential fees, especially grad students. Because, see, when I was doing undergrad studies was not considered like a business. Now, undergrad is like a business. We get so many foreign students and we want to use them to earn a lot of money. Right? So, in those days was not like that. Education wasn't considered so much a business. Now it's a business. Especially with undergrad students, right? Because they have huge classes and so many programmes. More thousands of people, the better because they pay a ton of money. But grad students, at least, were ones that were coming from everywhere, and they were here to enrich whatever country they go to and so it made no sense to make it harder for them. So that's why I don't think universities- it's more like, not a real issue, but more like a made-up issue for political reasons, I think. [Ruth: Definitely]. I can understand with undergrads because of the number. You know, you have thousands of undergrads and if they're all like- if a significant number of them are foreign students, then they do take resources, significantly. And then of course, you can claim this is how

we make money to support all these resources. But that was not allowed- necessary for natural import numbers or something.

00:47:36 **Ruth**

But even for undergraduate students, the expansion of foreign students within that space happened after differential fees. So not even before, like, there was, still like less than 10%, right?

00:47:47 **Ponnu**

Yeah, but that means that still only people who can afford can come. Right? [Ruth: Yeah]. So, it's most of the undergrads who are here paying their own money, obviously, you had to afford- it's not... I mean, okay, some may come from rich countries, but most are not coming from rich countries. So, their money, you know, it has to be significant to pay for it. [Ruth: Yes]. That's kind of unfortunate. But, that's how it is going, because it's kind of less- So I, if I remember correctly, when we were students about 30 years ago, the Canadian students paid supposedly, I don't know, 20 to 30% of the cost of education on their own fees. Now they pay 60% or more. So even Canadian students are paying themselves more of the cost of their own education, which was subsidized by public, in the past, right? And so, of course, now the claim is, oh, this is like an investment. You know, education is like an investment. So, you have to pay for it. And you will somehow get money afterwards. But it's not that simple because a lot of people get educated, but they don't have all the jobs that they need to pay for what their so-called investment is, so that's why they are on student loans forever. You know, things like that. So even for Canadian students, it's become so bad. And of course, foreign students, it's so bad they cannot come unless they are kind of rich. Right? It's not at all possible for undergrads. We know with grad students we have no choice but to get foreigners because the most Canadians don't come for grad studies. So, we try to somehow still manage to give just enough money for them to come. That's, how [inaudible] It's almost tempting them to come here and then they find out that they don't have enough money.

00:49:41 **Ruth**

And then you have to figure out- re-calibrate. Was your time at U of T like, important to your overall life experience and your career?

00:49:58 **Ponnu**

Oh, yes. Because, I mean, I would say everything- Okay, if I had never come here, probably I would have been somewhat similar, but I can't say exactly what because I was already educated in a good institute for my engineering degree in India. And I did get a Master's from outside so I used, you know, I went back to be a teacher in the university. So, if I never come here, maybe I'll just continue like many others. In some sense, maybe I should have done and because almost all my classmates are much richer than I am [laughs]. Because they all stayed when, you know, economy boomed. [Ruth: Yeah] So they are boomed with it. Whereas I came here and I'm still kind of okay.

So, in that sense, maybe I kind of did a bad- you know, it's like, missed the boat [laughs]. But on the other hand, I love the research part and all that. So, I think I gained a lot in that sense. You know, I keep doing whatever I want. Like I said, two days ago, I had for the last two days, I had research hackathon with my friend- with my students and we had fun figuring out some things that nobody have ever tried before. You know, so this is the fun part of it, the discovery part of it, that I think, I maybe- to some extent U of T education, relatively tough and long, you know, I think it gave me confidence to do whatever I want. [Ruth: Okay]. So that is a huge thing. I mean, I didn't even realize at that time, but, you know, I kind of hindsight it seems like that gave me confidence that I could do anything. So, in- to some extent, that's what I'm doing. I wasn't trained in what I'm doing now. I'm just doing because I know I can learn it and do it. So that was a big, big, positive, I think. Even though it was six years [laughs]. I think they still taking more than five years.

00:51:58 **Ruth**

Yeah, I think it's still six years.

00:52:00 **Ponnu**

Yeah. So, I was just- my daughter was here, another daughter, the third one, was here for a master's. She did an undergrad at U of W, Waterloo and then the Masters here. She was thinking about PhD and I said, "look, don't stay at U of T, it takes six years."

00:52:17 **Ruth**

Is she doing engineering as well?

00:52:18 **Ponnu**

Yes, she is an engineer and she's now doing PhD in Netherlands, at UDeft. [Ruth: Wow]. But they're supposed to do it in four years. [Ruth: Okay]. And so, she's in the second year already. So, I think- on the other hand, I think the six years here, probably were my best time, including of course, finding my partner and having, yeah, I think by the time I left U of T I already had two kids [laughs]. So-

00:52:47 **Ruth**

I mean, six years is a long time. Six years is definitely a long time [laughs].

00:52:50 **Ponnu**

So, I mean, also, that's our- kind of my age, what 23 to 29, I was here. So that's the age, like in my, you know, at least in all my friends that were already having kids before, you know, before I had mine. So, it was kind of the time that you would have normally had a family. So, it wasn't completely, you know, completely unheard of. Although nowadays people start much later.

00:53:21 **Ruth**

Yes. But even then, like, I think that was- probably you were in your 30s, so.

00:53:29 **Ponnu**

Yeah, yeah. I think that's kind of old, already, almost reaching the peak of your young age.

00:53:33 **Ruth**

Yeah, exactly. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

00:53:38 **Ponnu**

Oh, I just should, I should check my notes. Yeah, I mean, I did some few other student activities like, which will- in some sense significant for me, but not probably in the overall sense. You know, when I came here, that we- So I was in Ireland, and then went back to India. In Ireland, we were already using computers that not did not need punch cards. You know, I don't know if you heard of punch cards? [Ruth: Yeah]. In the old days, the computers needed programs, every line to be in each card. That's how you'd have to give it for it to understand the program. So, when I came here, I was shocked to find that I was still using punch card. And so, you know, I had no choice, I was using it. But somehow the undergrads eventually found out that we are too far behind. So, I remember once they took the punch- these are machines, punch card machines, they took it and broke it in the middle of, you know, the King's College Circle or somewhere. So, I was one of the guys sharing them. Of course, you know, although I knew that I was dependent on these punch card machines, but then when they were replaced by something called IBM Wilbur machines, I was a bit mad because it was like, "why IBM Wilbur machines?" it looks like they were just helping IBM get better, not necessarily that we are going to be in- So I remember something writing about it. Probably more on comments in computer centers. So that's one, I think- I felt like all this crazy that they're getting IBM. And somewhat similar happened at the very end of my thesis. U of T went and bought this supercomputer, at that time, it was called supercomputer. It was a few million dollars from you know- it's like a secondhand supercomputer. And I was against it because I thought it was so expensive. And the funny thing is, after they brought, they found out that they had to spend- I don't know, maybe a million dollar just to put it in the building, because it was so big and needed the building to be opened up on the roof, and a big crane had to lower it down. With all this, you know, if helium cooled or whatever, there was a huge expense. And so, you know, again, I, I remember writing somewhere about this, maybe even GS in Varsity, that this is a bad investment, and its millions of dollars. Of course, obviously, it's coming from somewhere in the University. So, I remember writing against it, although I was the first one to use it because they gave it for free [laughs], for a trial period. I use it and just like I said, before I left, we had computers in my office, there was almost as fastest that and it was only something like less than \$100,000 at that time.

So, like we had like 15 or 20 million, I don't know how many million they spend on it. So that measurement basically is a white elephant. You know, so, I

mean, that's sometimes bad decisions, I'm sure that affected many people, that's a significant part of university money, right?

[Pause] I'm just looking. Yeah, other than the International Student Center, they always had sort of, once- like many things, but once a year, they had this winter, winterlude festival or winterlude trip. So, I went to Orillia once with two of my Indian friends, and that's where I met my wife for the first time. She was also there as an international student, she was Venezuelan. And she was also doing Master's in Engineering. So that's where we met. And strangely enough that thing still goes on. So, in fact, two years ago, I think for our 30th wedding anniversary, we almost joined it again, they invited us, but we went away like two days before. So, I didn't feel like staying two more days to just to join the students to my story. So, I didn't stay, but they are still doing that. It's only in the winter, they do. Yeah. So, you go and stay with a Canadian family one night, [Ruth: Really?] two nights, but one night you eat with them. Then second night, you have like a joint fun thing, where you will have, you know, some fun thing to do. But also like, I think they have their own potluck, so they bring food, but it's all like international students. So, I remember like, that's one of the way that I at least had at least 30 different countries, student names and so on in my phonebook. And, you know, of course, one of them became my wife.

00:58:26 **Ruth**  
Oh, that's so cute.

00:58:28 **Ponnu**  
Yeah, so the thing is, they still do it. Maybe we should go for the 35<sup>th</sup> one.

00:58:33 **Ruth**  
Yeah, definitely. Why not?

00:58:33 **Ponnu**  
Yeah. So, we just have to plan it. So, for whatever reason, we said, we'll go to Orillia this winter, just for a break, you know, and they said, "oh, you should come today," you know, two days after- next time. [Ruth: That is so cute]. Yes, I think that was a good thing for many students, because they didn't have like a winter experience, otherwise, most of them. So even though some of them probably came from Europe, and they had some winter experience, but most of them had no experience. So, you know, given that we are stuck in the winter here, learn to enjoy in some small ways, at least. I even learned to do my downhill skiing for the first time, somewhere there. That's all I have here from my memory, not the best [laughs].

00:59: 24 **Ruth**  
Thank you so much for sitting down with us. It was really great to hear about your experiences as a student, especially in the engineering department, where you know, things have changed now. But I think at the time, you

probably recognize there weren't that many engineers of color. So, it's great to hear a student experience from that time.

00:59:43 **Ponnu**

Yeah. I mean, in that sense that I remember going to Waterloo. Waterloo was different. [Ruth: Yeah]. Faculty members, a huge number of them were non-white. So, it was like, completely different experience from the University of Toronto at that time. Because you know, Waterloo started very young. So, they had not, they just had- nobody cared of, nobody heard of Waterloo. So not many people even applied to go there. So, they had to go even hire people from other countries. Many of them, of course, they only come because they are not from, you know, this Caucasian country. So, they were all like colored people. So, Waterloo had like significantly bigger number of minorities in our faculty then U of T when I went there. All of this changed, of course everywhere now.

01:00:35 **Ruth**

Yeah. Which is great to hear.

00:01:37 **Ponnu**

Yeah. And of course, engineering didn't have enough women faculty members, even now. But again, it's changing. You know, at least grad students, now I think the majority are women, grad students and even in engineering. That's my feeling. So, this is this is again a big change and engineering is probably one of the last one to change, maybe, in terms of gender parity. It is still changing obviously. But this is only here, because we go to places like India I think 60% of undergrad students could be just women. Nowadays, you know? Because, I can imagine long ago that was not true anywhere. But now in Canada, still much lower women in engineering than countries like China and India.

01:01:30 **Ruth**

Yeah, no for sure. Yeah, there's a growing push for STEM, especially with women, so.

01:01:38 **Ponnu**

Because they say, even in the schools, they are discouraged. [Ruth: Yeah] Right? So that's too early to start discouraging. [Ruth: Yeah. Anybody] Yeah, so then nobody will go anywhere. [Ruth: Yeah]. Well, thank you for calling me for this.

01:01:40 **Ruth**

Thank you for coming.