

Jim Kennelly ([00:06](#)):

Welcome to HUD Co Radio. I'm Kennelly. Today I'm joined by Matt Caranante Program development specialist for the Hudson County Office of Cultural and Heritage Affairs Tourism Development. The office supports a range of projects including celebration of our local history. Matt will be conducting a series of interviews on HudCoRadio, doing just that. Welcome to HuCoRadio. Tell us a little bit about your work and what this series will entail.

Matt Caranante ([00:32](#)):

Thanks, Jim. Much of my focus within our office is to help the community celebrate and preserve its history and heritage. Hudson County is one of the most culturally diverse places on earth. With nearly half of our residents being born outside of the United States. A big part of what has made Hudson County home to all of this culture is its history as a first stop for millions of immigrants. Throughout modern history, Hudson County is known as the Gateway to America for Good Reason. Beginning in the 1600s through the Ellis Island years and up until present day, immigrants from every corner of the globe have made Hudson County their first stop with millions planting their roots right here, becoming an integral part to the growth and prosperity of Hudson County, the United States and beyond. This series of interviews is part of a program called Hudson County and Immigration, the Story of America. I've invited a few of our community leaders to share their experiences as organizational leaders, Hudson County residents, and immigrants themselves. Each of these guests represents a different background and has a different story to share. Our hope is that you can learn something from these amazing people. Regardless of your own background, I'd like to welcome Rimli Roy, who is the founder and artistic director of Surati for Performing Arts, which is located at 844-846 Newark Avenue in Jersey City. Hi, Rimli, welcome to HudCoRadio and thanks for being here.

Rimli Roy ([01:52](#)):

Thanks so much for having me, Matt.

Matt Caranante ([01:53](#)):

Great. So please start by telling us more about yourself and your organization.

Rimli Roy ([01:59](#)):

Well I moved into the US and to Jersey City in late 1999. In fact I moved in on Halloween and I remember coming from India where there are this honking of cars on the streets and it's very, very loud and noisy coming into the us It's quiet and people have this whole idea. People who live in India think that the United States is this and that, and there's so many dreams and so many things that happen there. The last thing I was thinking about is getting outta the airport is the place is quiet. There are no cars honking, there's no people screaming across the streets or walking on the streets. There's like a particular process in place and discipline and all of that. So that was really the first impression that when I got off the plane and when I started driving towards Jersey City, and I remember it was Halloween and we were very jet lagged, obviously.

([02:54](#)):

I moved in here with my husband, and this was in 1999 in October, of course, October 31st. And I would never forget that we got out and we put our stuff into the house that we had moved into the apartment and we moved. We went to the Newport Mall in Jersey City, <affirmative>, and there were people dressed up for Halloween and had no idea what Halloween was. And today it's one of my most favorite festivals. And I always go out and enjoy with friends and family, but at that time I had no idea about it.

So the first impression of seeing people dressed up in different ways and without having any background to it, I was wondering if it was part of my dream. Am I fallen asleep? I still jet luck or what? Wow. But then it was I mean, of course, slowly we got adapted to the way of life, which is a little bit different from, of course, from the way I grew up in India. But then things fell into place and it's been beautiful

Matt Caranante ([03:50](#)):

Since. Great. So can you tell us a little bit about where you did grow up?

Rimli Roy ([03:53](#)):

Well, I grew up in Calcutta in India, and it's supposed to be the cultural hub of India. So musicians, performers from all over the world would come there. And I grew up in a musical family. My father SRO is a very famous, well known performer, singer, and composer back in India. And my mom, Arthi is actually a writer, poet, visual artist, all of that lyricist. And I grew up with them. In fact, Surati is named after my parents show.

Matt Caranante ([04:27](#)):

Oh, I never knew that.

Rimli Roy ([04:28](#)):

Yes, yes. That's how, that was the inspiration behind it. And also have a very talented brother who, who's also a musician today in Bollywood. So my entire family, I have a history of artists and musicians with whom I grew up.

Matt Caranante ([04:41](#)):

Incredible. So please tell us more about Surati. It's a wonderful organization that has a very strong presence right here in Jersey City.

Rimli Roy ([04:50](#)):

So yes, thank you so much. Yeah, I started Surati in 2002. We incorporated in 2002, but the nonprofit was incorporated in 2012. So this is actually our 20th year. We are very excited that Thank you so much. And I started off, because I've always had the training in dance and music. I started off teaching Indian classical dance. I've actually trained in three different Indian classical dance forms namely Na Man, Mani and odc. So primarily I perform odc and I do a creative form of all the different genres. And in the organization, of course, we have everything with dance, music visual arts. We've worked with artists from different genres of performing arts and literary arts, in fact. So Sora was started off as me being a dancer and choreographer and then me forming a group of dancers, and we tour with our shows and productions and then became becoming a bigger group of dancers, musicians, artists.

([05:56](#)):

And slowly we started doing festivals, which was back in 2008 I think 2008, even before that, we actually did Summer Fest. I think the first one of Summer Fest was probably in 2005 in Jersey City at Victory Hall, which was at that time run by now what's called Drawing Rooms <affirmative>. We collaborated with them and we did a few summer fest that was very, very successful. And one of the biggest things is that even though our arts and culture is based in Indian art and culture we also try to be very global and generic in our performances and artists by involving artists and genres from all over the world. So even at Holy Festival of Colors, when our theme was colors, our motto was, when everyone is colorful, no one

is different. So even when the festival originated in India, we had artists from different parts of the world come in and showcase the theme of colors and showcased their art and artan music and dance problems from around the world. In 2022, we had a belly dancer, we had people from South America, we had a Mexican dance group. Apart from having Indian dance music at Holy, which is actually the a sense behind S to globalize Indian art culture. And at the same time create partnerships with other genres to be able to create something that conveys a universal message of peace, unity, brotherhood, crossing, gender and race and all of

Matt Caranante (07:29):

That. Yeah, that's wonderful. And to do it here in Hudson County, in Jersey City, I think you're in the right place because we are an incredibly diverse place. And I know that you work a lot with a lot of these other communities, which is really wonderful.

Rimli Roy (07:42):

Yes, absolutely. Because even staying within the Indian community here in Hudson County, I mean, we've done that a lot. We also work a lot with the Indian community. We have a lot of Indian following, but it's lovely to see our holy to see people from anywhere in the world. They feel welcome and at home at the festival, and that was the entire idea. And that is why the Indian Consulate is also a partner. Indian consulate in New York has been a partner and sponsor. Great. And we've just been invited by the government of India to perform Rama in India.

Matt Caranante (08:10):

Great.

Rimli Roy (08:10):

And that's the next thing I'd like to talk about.

Matt Caranante (08:12):

Yeah. Please tell us more about what you have coming up.

Rimli Roy (08:14):

Yes, yes. So Rama is actually a musical, it's in written in a Shakespearean style verse and it's kind of like, it's an English verse basically, but it's following that kind of idea. And the concept of Rama is taken from an old Indian epic tale called Ram Roman. It's one of the greatest epic tales from India. And it's tells the story of Prince Ram from Authia. So these are all mythological tales, but it is one of the building foundations of Indian values and culture and tradition. And we've taken Rama and the story of Rama, and we've used diverse artists. We've incorporated diverse artists to tell the story. So for example, we had last year in 2019, the last time we performed Ram Marvin, we had an Italian ram in Indian Cita and a Caucasian luman showing that people from the same family can be from different, have said different skin colors come from anywhere in the world, but that can tell a universal story.

(09:20):

And we had like King Raven from Lanka is supposed to be a very revered king, a learned man. The story unfolds in a different way where of course, Raven is shown as the antagonist and ram as the protagonist. But the particular version of Ramadan that we have, we show Ram and Raven as equals the original story in India demonizes Raven and glorifies Ram. Here we glorify both because they're both to

be glorified and to be told off equally. And then the story unfolds in such a way. They're unfortunate situations, people make choices and the story unfolds from a very unbiased perspective. And we wanted to show that there could be people who make different choices and there could be an unfortunate situation. So the taking away from the story is different from the way it has been told in traditional versions of the Ram Roman.

[\(10:12\)](#):

So the story is, the name is Marvin. It's called Marvin, a musical, which is the story of Ram Prince from India and the King of Lanka, Raven who's from the kingdom of Sri Lanka, which is known as Sri Lanka today. And we have the same character like Raven's sister in other versions of it. We've had an African American ska, and her split image is a Caucasian super. So we kind of show the same character can be whatever skin color doesn't matter, but the character is important. So the core of the character is important. So we've crossed boundaries, many boundaries, while telling the story, and it's a very interesting take on it. And this year we are also, apart from performing in Hudson County, we are taking this to Manhattan. And we've also been invited by the Indian government to take Rama to India. It combines Indian classical dance and music along with opera, English verse, contemporary jazz, and a lot of different genres and crossing a lot of different boundaries, taking artists from artists from around the world.

Matt Caranante [\(11:24\)](#):

Wow, incredible. So

Rimli Roy [\(11:26\)](#):

It has musical theater too.

Matt Caranante [\(11:27\)](#):

Yeah. Wow, that's absolutely amazing. So you've been here in an integral part of the Hudson County arts community for a long time now. So you mentioned that you were actually part of the first Hudson County Arts Master plan, which was I'm not sure how many years ago, but a little while ago now. Can you share your story about that?

Rimli Roy [\(11:50\)](#):

Yeah, but I think when I first came here, there were certain things that obviously I didn't understand the system. The biggest thing is that even though India has granting systems for artists and all of that, but back in India, I was an IT programmer. I came here as an IT programmer, and that is another story because I used to be working on Wall Street, and I used to be dancing and performing on the weekends and on weeknights as a part-time thing. But then I was like after the Wall Trade Center thing happened, which also there's another story related to that which I'll come to. I realized that my passion in music and dance, I never thought I would be pursuing that full-time with my passion for the IT industry and being coming here as an IT programmer. Remind me the question again

Matt Caranante [\(12:44\)](#):

About the Hudson County Arts

Rimli Roy [\(12:45\)](#):

Mastermind. Yes. So when I first came here I remember that Bill LaRosa, who was then the director of Hudson County Cultural Affairs at that time, he had requested me to be a part of the master plan, and he's the one who even told me about the grants, and he told me that you should be applying for grants, this is what it is. And I did not even understand at that time that actually there could be funding available to artists to pursue what they love and what is their passion, which I thought was an amazing system here back in India, I never explored as an artist getting funding or anything, though I was performing from a very young age. I was in school and I used to be handling all the music and dance and all of that. I used to be performing with my father who's a performer musician.

(13:33):

I used to choreograph all his shows, but I had no idea about the funding portion of it, which was also available then, but I'm sure it was in different capacity. So here when Bill asked me to be a part of to apply for grants from Hudson County, and I started receiving funding probably from 2004 or five or maybe 2002, I don't even remember whether it was the first year, but it's been that long. Then he invited me to be part of the Hudson County Arts Master plan, and I was probably the youngest member over there. And I remember I had a hard time with the accents also understanding what they were saying, even though and I didn't have an understanding of the arts system. So I was there though I did talk, but I remember I did not suggest anything because I didn't know enough to suggest what could be a good plan.

(14:21):

Whereas something like that now I would have a million ideas because I didn't understand what worked, what didn't work, what was the thing to do and what was not the thing to do, which is a huge thing for immigrants coming into a new system where acceptance is a huge thing for you to accept and be accepted. That's such a big thing. And for us to understand where the system is flawed, where we can suggest ways to be, ways to improve, or what can be done mean. Right now, there's a different story, or even 10 years ago, but this was like when I first moved here, so maybe within the first five years. And first me being an immigrant and coming to a new place, adjusting to a new system here, then coming to Arts and Culture, then starting a new organization and then being asked to be a part of a board. It was a lot, but I didn't realize it at that time. It just felt very casual and normal. But I remember thinking, what could I say? Because everything I was seeing at that time was more than what I had seen. But now being used to the system for so many years, there are so many more things I can think of to suggest. So the change and the thought is different.

Matt Caranante (15:32):

Great. So we'll go back to any advice that you might have for people, because now you've accumulated quite a bit of experience in all this, but I'd like to touch back on you mentioned nine 11. I think you have a story about that if you

Rimli Roy (15:48):

Yes. Yeah. So I was doing a job on Wall Street and I was interviewing and all of that, and I used to be working with an organ corporate there. In fact, when I moved here I was on a different visa, obviously I was on, I had to get an H one Visa to be able to do a IT job. And when I was on the IT job I was in fact in Wall Trade Center. We were in California earlier that month, first week of September, we were in California and we got back and I was in Wall Trade Center all of September 10th. I was there and my office used to be on Wall Street, but I had not yet started working on a particular project. So then I was kind of like on, you're working for the organization and you're actively interviewing. But I remember the

next day when Walter Center thing happened, when the disaster happened, I used to live in Newport where I still do, and I remember the entire impact it had on the community.

[\(16:51\)](#):

It was disastrous. We were broken. And I remember seven days straight, the television was on in our house, and I used to be waking up with the news, crying and going to bed with the news. And I remember I was volunteering for Red Cross American, the American Red Cross and Salvation Army. I was translating for hundreds of people who had businesses on the streets who spoke Bengali, which is the language I speak back in India, coming from Carra, which is the state of Bengali. So Bengali, and of course Hindi, of course, I understand Hindi and I speak Hindi which is the primary language apart from English. English is the official language in India. And we had to go to school and we had to have English as the first language. And I'm very grateful for that, for which communication is great moving to the United States, but I had to be translating for people who had businesses on the streets of New York who had cards or little small businesses.

[\(17:55\)](#):

They didn't have insurance, they didn't have a lot of other things. I had to be translating and create cases. So I became a kind of lawyer for them, advocating for them and getting them food stamps are getting them money from these places and also food, clothing and other things, and funds from whatever was available during that time. And I think that was one of the most I would be ever grateful that that opportunity was there for me to serve the community at that time. It was a very, very emotional time for all of us. My husband used to work on Wall Street also, and it was just by minutes that he missed the train for which he was not stuck there for hours. And I don't know what would've happened. And we spent the entire day getting people back from trying to find out how we could help.

[\(18:44\)](#):

Some of my friends were stuck in their houses. There was no electricity. It was a nightmare for us. But just to think that being an immigrant, and I moved here in 99 and 2002, that happened 2001, sorry, 2001. So you can imagine end of 99, within a year and a half of moving into a country, something like that happened that had such a huge impact, <affirmative>, but it also brought the community together in so many different ways. And I think that was one of the learning lessons in my life where, you know, can think you can't take anything for granted. And I remember for even years after, even now, even when I see a chopper going close from the Hudson, I live on the Hudson. So when I see a chopper even flying by it, there's not a moment where I wouldn't think about what happened then. It was a huge impact on our community. And then we were downstairs by the water when we saw the building scramble. So it was a huge thing. Yeah, huge thing to go and

Matt Caranante [\(19:42\)](#):

Witness. No kidding. <laugh>. So what advice would you have? I'll been asking if you have advice for future immigrants, but I think you also have a lot of advice for artists of any culture or wherever they're from. So if please share any advice you may have.

Rimli Roy [\(20:04\)](#):

Well for artists, I would say that there has to be, I realized that with artists, I see a lot of people who are shy or who think that they don't wanna express themselves, they stay within themselves. It's very important to network, to talk to people, to find out how you may contribute, how you may help, and at the same time, how you have to ask for help. I realize that learning the hard way and the long way that there is help available. I think in here in the United States, there is so much available out there, there's

so much funding available out there. As artists, we need help in terms of finding people who can get us not only financial advice, but to organize things. Advice for space. Space is a huge issue in Hudson County for artists. And I'm very glad that we have a space right now, and I'm already talking to so many artists because we are ready to offer our space to have book readings to exhibitions, performances, even if there's might not be a huge space, whatever we can accommodate, have little minis, concerts, have events out there.

[\(21:21\)](#):

So innovation and thinking outside the box is key for anyone, because that's something that people who worked with me, people who know me for a while, whether it's the county or the city, people tell me that these are the rules that we have to abide by. And I would always be challenging the rules. Why can't we do this? Why can't we do that? There has to be innovation, there has to be thinking outside the box. Because if everybody were to follow the book and do everything, then there would be no innovation and nothing that would challenge them. Nothing that would pave the path for future artists to think beyond that, because it is so important. Even for immigrants, the same thing. I mean, they may not be a rule in place today for this, but why not for tomorrow? Why not? Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, think about something for tomorrow.

[\(22:08\)](#):

This, it's so important to try and tweak something, to challenge the rules, to challenge your environment. And that comes from family too. It's for everything. My daughter just left for Berkeley College of Music. She just left this weekend. We just dropped her off to Boston. We just got back on Sunday. She's a singer song and she's been doing a lot of gigs in New York, this and that. And I always keep telling her this because I feel that sometimes artists and two, or even immigrants or people who are new in a place, they're where you, oh, this is how they do it. So can I do something different? How would people take it? You have to be sensitive to what's people's ideas and thoughts and understand that with Indian culture, a lot of people who are not part of the culture think, oh, would this be offensive? Would this be something? Ask the question, move forward, create partnerships. Everybody is out there. Everybody wants to do something new. Everybody wants to innovate. Everybody wants to create something new. Everybody wants to make music, wants to create new pieces in dance, to break boundaries and barriers. Just onward and upward is my message to everybody. That's extremely important to, for feedback, for anything that we wanna do. There is always space for improvement. There's always space to think about how we can do things better.

Matt Caranante [\(23:28\)](#):

Excellent advice for anyone for doing anything. So tell us a little bit more about the new space that you have now.

Rimli Roy [\(23:39\)](#):

Well, the new spaces, I went to see another space on that street, and I passed this, the space, and I just saw it by chance. And it was just a studio space, perfect for dance and music and yoga and things like that. And I spoke to the owner and she said that the space next to it, which is an office space, is also available just without thinking in the sense we've been looking for space for so long. We just went with combining the entire space together. And now we have an office space as well as a studio space. And in the office space, actually, there is some space where we can also have music or other things. And we are open to having events. We are open to having little events where in the office space, it's actually quite open with the kitchen and stuff.

[\(24:25\)](#):

So we can actually have things where we can have wine and cheese events or exhibitions, art. I would love to promote artists in that space. I would like to the community to think about this is their space. Come to me with ideas. I'm open to doing anything and everything there. I don't wanna think about, this is only a space for classes and workshops. Yes, rehearsals is a huge thing. Having rehearsal space. I wanna make rehearsal space available for artists. I'm open to collaboration. I'm already in conversation with the city to see if we can block up the street and do some other festivals there. I would love to work with different organizations and do as much things there. I've even been thinking about doing a cultural tour, so doing little performances there and then taking tourists on a walking tour around down Newark Avenue and do tastings and food tastings and wonderful things like that.

[\(25:19\)](#):

I wanna do more things with the community. I want people to think that we are out there two Thai partnerships, because there's nothing more rewarding than people coming back to me and asking me, Hey, when are you doing your Marvin Red? Next? We are waiting for it. When is your holy, those messages is what keeps me going. That is the fool to my fire. So those are the things that is so important, because when people come and say that for Rama, when there are people who were, there were kids who were four year olds, and there were 60 year olds sitting in that auditorium, and people out there, after they left the auditorium with their feedback, they told us, everybody sat there with pin drop silence watching the show. So that is what I mean. I understand that it's funding and all of that. It's great.

[\(26:05\)](#):

I mean, we have to pay our artists, we have to pay the bills, we have to keep this going. But for an artist at the core, the appreciation from people, the acceptance and coming back with feedback that is rewarding is the most important thing to carry on what we do. I mean, somebody once told me, my husband tells me all the time that if somebody gave me like a million dollars and said, you won't get any of the money in your hand, but you'll get this money to do your production, I would be one of the happiest people. I mean, it doesn't matter what money I'm taking back home, but if you're able to do something that that is your dream to put something up without, obviously Marvin went to a black box theater. We did it in a House productions, we did it in Miles Square theater for 2018 and 2019.

[\(26:53\)](#):

And then there are challenges of taking this show in a bigger space. There's expensive. I understand that funds is always a challenge, but if an artist is given funds to create their work without any restrictions and without any barriers, then you know, see things like Broadway. But then there are restrictions. What I'm trying to say, if I were to take this show to Broadway, which a lot of people said that it is very Broadway style because it is it's a musical. Is Broadway inspired? Of course. But the genres are so many, so different things. People have never seen this kind of a show before. But the challenges are that if you have the funds for something like that and you want to think of doing this on Broadway, there are so many other things, unions and everything that comes into place. So we need to create something where we can make it as big as Broadway, but it will, doesn't have to be called Broadway. Think of a new genre. We have to think of pathbreaking things that is gonna change people who are monopolizing the arts,

Matt Caranante [\(27:55\)](#):

<affirmative>,

Rimli Roy [\(27:56\)](#):

You know what I'm trying to say? Yes, absolutely. So it's extremely important. We need to create that opportunity for ourself, create something that would be bigger than broad. Why not? Yeah,

Matt Caranante ([28:04](#)):

Great. Well, in that spirit, why don't you share how people can reach you and how they can support your organization?

Rimli Roy ([28:11](#)):

Okay, so we have an arts and entertainment outfit, which is SRA Inc. That's something that I know people always get confused about because the non-profit is SRA for Performing Arts. And our website is [sora fba.org](#). Should I spell that out or, that's perfect. That's okay. Yeah. And the arts and entertainment outfit is Sora Inc. Which is mostly, that is mostly our classes when we do private events and things like that. But currently my work is 98% into the nonprofit, which is doing the festivals, the performances, the creation of new work doing all the community events. So I work with a different organizations like we are doing an event on 10th of September, what is it called? Is it the Berlin? No, not the Berlin one. What is it happening? 10th of September. The Apple Tree House is

Matt Caranante ([29:09](#)):

Oh, Bergen Square Day.

Rimli Roy ([29:10](#)):

Bergen Square Day, yes. So we are actually doing Bergen Square Day on 10th of September. We are very excited about it. So the thing is that people approach us with budgets of a few hundred dollars, and sometimes people approach us with budgets, budgets in the thousands. We try not to turn anyone away. If we can afford to do that show and we can bring in a professional artist and give them a compensation, we say yes because we have to also keep our doors open. We have to keep a minimum cost. Sometimes I work a lot. I also have donated a lot of my time to senior citizens to different things that we've done, but we try not to work with different budgets and different organizations. We try to not, as I mentioned, we try to not turn anyone away. We try to do something for every organization that approaches us.

([29:58](#)):

If it is feasible, if it is something that we can do, if the artists are available and if it works, we try to make it happen. And you probably know that about us because we try to work with different community organizations. And that's very important because I know of organizations everywhere where even if we would feel that, okay, this is still our sizeable side amount of a budget, they would have to turn that down for whatever reasons they might have. But I think it's very important to work grassroots. It's very important to reach out to everybody and anybody who needs arts in their lives, and I think everybody needs arts in their lives.

Matt Caranante ([30:38](#)):

I would agree. Okay, well, thank you so much, Rimli. This was really great. Oh, <laugh>, this is why I brought you in the really amazing stuff. Thank you so much for being here. This was really, really great.

Jim Kennelly ([30:51](#)):

Thanks, Matt. The Hudson County and Immigration, the Story of America interview series is supported by a grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission. To learn more about the Hudson County Office of Cultural and Heritage Affairs Tourism Development, check out their website, visithudson.org. Remember, you can keep up to date with county government news and announcements by following us on Twitter. Our handle is [hudcotweet](https://twitter.com/hudcotweet). Videos of county events can be found on YouTube where our channel is, [HUDcotv](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...), and we're on Instagram at [HUDcoInsta](https://www.instagram.com/HUDcoInsta) and on Facebook at [HUDcofb](https://www.facebook.com/HUDcofb). Finally, thanks as always to Hudson County executive Tom DeGise and the Board of County Commissioners to support the programs and services featured on this podcast.