

SRIDHAR: There are times here where I wish I had the kind of community and support that I have in India. I feel like a lot of times in the United States I'm on an island.

And when I go to India it's like, God, I just I'm most comfortable when I can express myself and be myself and I don't have to tick the boxes of 100 different people. Because I feel like that's a formula for disappointment guaranteed every single time.

ADAM: I was born in Florida in the mid 1970s. But 10 months later, my military family was shipped off to Japan. Some of my earliest memories are of Burger King and Shakey's Pizza menus all in Japanese. And snow. So much snow where we lived.

Five years later, we moved to Guam where a rain storm lasts 15 minutes and you can drive around the island in a couple of hours. Then barely two years after that, we were off to northern California where I eventually went to three different schools in a four year period of time.

I remember some of my friends there, like Adrienne in one town and Matt in the next. But in many ways, I spent a lot of time on my own. I have a brother but back then, times were tough and so were our interactions. My community became my stuffed animals, Matchbox cars, and any book or magazine I could get my hands and eyes on.

When I was 12 years old, we drove across the country and moved to Maryland, just my mother, my brother, and me. Soon after, while my immediate family life crumbled, I found solace and support in friends I'll forever consider extended family, like Jessica and Ray and Troy. We still talk regularly.

But I still wasn't comfortable where I was. Something still wasn't right and I knew I was not gonna find it in Maryland. So once again, I was on the move.

By way of a brief stint in Chicago and an eight year layover in Des Moines, Iowa that included both a marriage and a divorce, I finally landed in San Diego in 2008, where I still am as of the release of this podcast episode.

And so for the first time ever, I feel like I've found my people, my community, my place where I belong. I've grown deep roots in the San Diego podcasting and poetry scene, and have made lifelong friends, including lost and found loves.

And truth be told, I proudly no longer own any winter clothes.

Honey, I'm home.

My name is Adam Greenfield, and you're listening to The People In My Neighborhood.

SRIDHAR: My name is Sridhar Reddy, I live in the Capitol Hill neighborhood in Denver, Colorado.

ADAM: I've only been to Denver a handful of times so admittedly, I had to look on a map to see where Capital Hill is. That's when I was reminded just how spread out Denver really is. Which makes sense, seeing that the massive Denver airport with the blue creepy, cursed horse statue is a hike and a half from downtown Denver.

But Capitol Hill is right there, right near the action.

SRIDHAR: I live in a very old home, it was built in 1900. It's been kind of a project for the past couple of years. But no, I used to hang out in this neighborhood when I was a kid and I moved here from Chicago two years ago and this was one of the last few bastions of old weird Denver and I kind of wanted to end up here again.

ADAM: I've known Sridhar for a few years. We met at San Diego Comic Con through a mutual acquaintance and I distinctly remember two things about that night. First, we talked for a bit at the Hilton Bayfront bar after a long day on the convention floor. I knew right then he was my people.

The other thing I remember is his first name. Admittedly, it's not one I've heard before.

SRIDHAR: It's a Hindu derivation, I'm not particularly religious but it means one who possesses good fortune.

ADAM: And as it turns out, it's apparently as common in south India as John is here in the states. But the story of why it was chosen is a bit more interesting.

SRIDHAR: I was named after a boy that my mother had a crush on in high school. My mother got an arranged marriage, as they do in India back then, and so I was kind of named after what could have been. And my father had no say in that process.

ADAM: Whoa.

SRIDHAR: Like I was always opposed to it, I'm kind of an old romantic. I had to go through the whole swooning, wooing process with my wife. My wife is also Indian. I've seen it work for people, so I can't discount it. Is it my personal choice? I don't think I could do it, like I said I have to suffer a little bit for love.

ADAM: That's actually a pretty good summary of half of the poetry I write.

I'd say, though, all that suffering has worked out for Sridhar. He's got a wonderful family and the neighborhood he now lives in taps into one of his biggest joys in life.

SRIDHAR: One of the other reasons why I live in Cap Hill in Denver is my favorite record store is like five blocks from me. It's Wax Trax Records on 13th and Washington. And it's one of the most you know historic record stores in the country, it started here and then a Wax Trax Records opened up in Chicago and it was kind of the forefront of like industrial metal techno music.

ADAM: Sridhar's connection to Wax Trax Records has much deeper roots, though, than just a love of music. There's a history there that's almost a right of passage when growing up.

SRIDHAR: (And) there was one guy when I was a kid and he was like the cool guy, right? I mean he had like all the punk rock tee shirts, he had a mohawk, he had the piercings, all this stuff and like every time I took a record to the cash register I just wanted him to say, "Oh, that's a good choice, like that's a good band." And he never said it you know like I had like other employees they're like, "Oh, this is an awesome record." And it makes me feel good like oh I picked something good, it's like a little validation or something. I never got validation from this guy. And it's still like one of the things that haunts for some reason. Like I tried so hard, I would pick up like the most unlistenable Karlheinz Stockhausen, Russian, electronic symphony number four, something that I even hate you know like just to win this guy over and it never happened.

ADAM: Ah, the never ending quest for vindication and a stamp of street cred as an artist.

SRIDHAR: I think part of being an artist or being in the arts yes we are expressing ourselves individually but the feedback of our communities and our peers it means a lot. It's kind of a reassurance that we're doing the right thing or we're doing something right... So having that community is actually really helpful. And I think artists in particular community is just as important as the work you put in individually in your art.

ADAM: Sridhar's current work has him right in the middle of that artist community, too.

SRIDHAR: I'm in media I guess. You know I publish comic books, I write for film, I direct for film, I produce for film, through comics now I'm getting very involved in the music industry and it's been my goal for a long time to find a marriage between all those things that I love. And so yeah, I make media I guess.

ADAM: And making media is something he's been doing since he was a child.

SRIDHAR: I remember my art teacher actually called in my parents because they said what I draw and painted was really violent and dark and he needs to cheer up. And my folks they were pretty, my mom was worried about it, she's like, "Why do you always have to draw skulls and blood and all this kind of stuff?" I was like, "I just like it, I like Halloween," you know, whatever. But she knew I wouldn't hurt a fly and you know she ultimately defended me on that. She's like,

"You're supposed to teach my son how to draw, not what to draw." You know? I still remember that meeting and she stood up for me and I'm grateful for it.

ADAM: Now that's good parenting. And I'm pretty sure that's the standard goth phase most teenagers, myself included, went through in the 90s. But for Sridhar, that phase unfortunately made him a potential target.

SRIDHAR: You know like I used to paint my fingernails and like and then you know started getting called a fag and all this kind of stuff and I stopped doing it because I was just scared. You know? But yeah, like Colorado was a very hostile, Reagan's America was a very hostile place for anybody who was different. And then Colorado on top of that after Columbine they started going after goth kids you know because that's the reason why people shoot people because of Marilyn Manson obviously. But like yeah it was always a witch hunt in Colorado, and you could not be different and you couldn't do those things. Which is kind of why I had to leave, you know? Like even though as much as I love this place, I love nature, and I love the mountains, and I love all that stuff, I had to leave because it was hostile to who I was. I just could not find my people, you know?

ADAM: At the heart of this musical and overall artistic search for one's self and place in this world, though, was Sridhar's escape and a shaky sense of comfort.

SRIDHAR: Listening to The Cure was you know I must have had a crush on like 20 girls in school that I just never talked to. You know? And like Robert Smith was my internal voice of my heart breaking you know was the pain of inarticulacy right? That's always been the crux of The Cure for me. So you know I'd just sit there and mope and like wonder what could have been if I mustered up the moxie to talk to the popular girl.

You know film was another one where you know I loved industrial music, you know Nine Inch Nails, the Ministry and Skinny Puppy and all that stuff and that aggression when I got to go to shows and just be in the pit, I never hit a person in my life except one person I got in a fight in football once, but like that was a place I could just let it out. You know I was so angry and I was so frustrated and I could just get in the pit and let it out.

ADAM: Alright, if you're not familiar with the term pit, or mosh pit, I'd first say they're not for the faint of heart. Nor are they for short, skinny mopes like me. Can't say I didn't try it a few times, though.

The poetic description of a mosh pit is it's a physical hurricane of human energy and rage and expression comprised of elbows and shoulders and fists.

The more visual way to describe it is to imagine a small circle of people in front of a stage with a band playing loud, fast, angry-sounding music. And all these people in the circle are

purposefully running into each other, bruises and bloody noses be damned, with an intensity that matches the music.

It can be a brutal, if not cathartic or purgatorial, experience.

SRIDHAR: Well you know that's the beautiful thing is like a lot of people don't understand about pits is that there's a decorum and there are rules, you know? Like and yes you're slamming into one another and you're punching, you're doing all that stuff, and there's always that one guy who is just like is looking to hurt people and he usually gets kicked out at some point. Gets his ass whooped. But like you're there because you're all fuck ups, and you're all there kind of commiserating that. And you know I loved that experience.

ADAM: But when it came to rules, those were sometimes sorta thrown to the side when it came to acquiring music and movies you don't want your parents to see. You had to be sneaky about it, another rite of passage. And a little help from some sneaky older peers and siblings always helps.

SRIDHAR: I remember I used to hang out at Mile High Comics, my mom and my sister used to drop me off there and they would just go shopping instead at the Buckingham Square Mall in Aurora, Colorado.

And I would stay there all day and I had the comic book guy, he was there behind the counter, right? And he saw that I wasn't really into Batman and Superman and Spider-Man, I had my eye on Epic Comics, the mature line that Marvel was doing back in the day.

And so he saw that I had my eye on those and I remember he pulled me over and I was like eight, between seven and eight years old. And he said, "I'll cut you a deal," he's like, "You can read those, can't tell your mom, and I won't let you buy them, and when you're done put them back." You know? And so we did that and I remember he was about to leave, he was a young guy he was about to go to college. And he pulled me over and it was like during Christmas time, he's like, "I have a Christmas gift for you," and he gave me a VHS of Akira. He was like Yoda, he's like, "I think you're ready for this, and this is my gift for you." Right?

ADAM: I can definitely relate to this. Early on in my teenage years I befriended Kevin, one of the maintenance men for the apartments I lived in with my mom and brother. He gave me my very first guitar, an old nylon string, classical guitar that incorrectly, and sadly, had steel strings on it.

Kevin also took a friend and me to my first heavy metal concert at 14 or 15 years old, where I experienced my own first mosh pit. We went to see Pantera, Exodus, and Suicidal Tendencies. To this day it's one of my fondest memories.

But I can't imagine this experience being the same if my mother introduced me to the music and way of living. And Sridhar shares that sentiment.

SRIDHAR: It would have a different feeling because Akira and all that stuff and punk rock music and all that stuff, it's anti authority, right? And like it's also a product of times, you know? Like I was a brown kid in Denver, Colorado in the '80s and '90s, you know? Like there weren't too many of me. And I found something in music and comics and film that I could be independent and I didn't have to assimilate and it was almost an act of defiance, you know, that I would bring a Cerebus the Aardvark comic to school and like having some kid saying, "Oh, what's that? That's weird." And like that made me feel good. You know?

Like if my parents had accepted it then I would have lost that edge. My parents and I think about this, I have a four year old, and I think they did their best to provide a foundation, you know? And I don't think they steered me in any, as much as they wanted to steer me in a direction, I don't think they stood in my way when something connected. Like I had my sister shoplift a Public Enemy record from a store, it was a cassette.

ADAM: Again, for some, another rite of passage.

SRIDHAR: And I remember putting that tape in and I connected, you know? And like my parents were very sensitive about language and content and all that stuff but when they saw how happy that made me feel and how I felt like I was part of a tribe all of a sudden, they never stood in the way of that. And you know and I'm grateful for that.

ADAM: Alright, so Sridhar's had some pretty eventful experiences in life, and some of those self-induced, including purposefully getting lost in places he's never been to before.

SRIDHAR: Like any city I go to, my first order of business is just to get lost. You know I feel like that's the best way to learn about a city and it's people and you just get lost and you talk to people and kind of try to find your way back to where you started and it's kind of like a real proper grassroots way of getting to know a place.

ADAM: But is there something Sridhar still wishes he could do without any hindrances or barriers? As it turns out, there is, and it's a bit personal.

SRIDHAR: Inequality puts a big stick in my craw. You know I feel like I'd love to put my efforts to create an even playing ground for everyone, you know? Whether it's art or life or medicine or you know society or something like that. Like I think part of the immigrant struggle that my parents had, was that they were always starting their dreams on an uneven playing ground. As people of color, as minorities, as immigrants, as whatever it is, as not having a lot of money. They were always 10 steps behind everybody else and they had to work 20 times more.

And I just see someone like my father who's a brilliant man like I said he was gifted as a child. If he was given those opportunities what he could do, you know? And he's already spent now the

past 20 years of his career giving back, that was always his goal. And I imagine like if he had an even playing field like how much more he could do.

If money was no object just create campaigns and educational curriculum and all that kind of stuff that just gave young kids and people just starting out a tool box that they can start working on their dreams, seeing if it works, and if it doesn't work the consequences are not that much. You didn't have to mortgage your house to make a movie. Or you didn't have to get into massive credit card debt to record an album. Those things should be available to people to try.

ADAM: Thanks for listening to The People In My Neighborhood, a podcast series that lives vicariously through the eyes of friends and neighbors. The music in this episode is by Blue Dot Sessions.

A hearty thank you to Sridhar for making time out of his busy day to chat.

SRIDHAR: Yeah, no worries, no, this was good fun.

ADAM: So until next time, I was wondering if you might be able to check in on my cat next week. I'm heading out of town for a little bit....