The following oral history memoir is the result of 1 digitally-recorded session of an interview with Hirah Mir by Cynthia Tobar on September 2, 2011 in New York City. This interview is part of the Welfare Rights Initiative Digital Oral History Archive Project.

Hirah Mir has reviewed the transcript and has made minor corrections and emendations. The reader is asked to bear in mind that she or he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Cynthia Tobar: Okay. Great. So now we're ready to begin. And it should be recording. And thank you so much for being here. This is an interview with Hirah Mir. Hirah can you introduce yourself?

Hirah Mir: My name is Hirah Mir. What else should I say?

CT: You're a student at Hunter College?

HM: I'm a student at Hunter College. This is my final year.

CT: Well thank you so much for being here. I wanted to ask you about your background. Your early life and the influences that brought you, where brought to bear on you and your family, their education. I'm very interested in your early childhood and what was that like. And that sort of thing. So tell me a little bit about that. You can begin anywhere you like.

HM: So, I was born in Pakistan. And then when I was three my family moved to Sydney Australia. And then we stayed there for a year and a half. And we won the green card lottery. My entire family, all five of us then we came to the United States in 1995. It was normal. I went to Kindergarten here. So I've been here since Kindergarten. And I remember when I was in I think the 6th grade my parents separated. And that's when my mom and my siblings and I we moved out of the house that we were living in. And we lived in a homeless shelter for a while. It was for women and children. It was actually a really nice place because it was for women and children. They had like a nice recreation center and they had case workers. That's how my mom found out about public assistance and we went on public assistance and she also started receiving disability assistance and my brother, sister and I we got TANF and all that. And then we also received a section 8 voucher, and then we found a house. Right now we're living in Brooklyn. So, and that was like in 2001 I think so we've been on public assistance since 2001, and then everything was okay, like junior high school, high school was fine. It really, I think the problem really hit where I realized how being on public assistance affected was going to affect my future was when I graduated from high school and they said that HRA, Human Resources Administration, said that I was going to a four year school, Hunter College. And they said that my class hours did not count and I had to work 35 hours a week. And they asked me if I wanted to work transit or sanitation. So that's pretty much what brought me to like where I am now.

CT: Can you explain a little more about backtracking a little bit more about your past in regards to when you came to this country? Like what part of the city you were in? That neighborhood and then maybe also talk about when you talk about Hunter College. You wanted to go to Hunter, but it wouldn't count. Tell me more about that as well. HM: So when we came here to the United States in 1995 we lived in Bayridge, Brooklyn. I started school when I was three and I did kindergarten in Australia. But because I came here when I was five and over here it's by age, I had to do kindergarten again. So from kindergarten to like 6th grade I was living in Bayridge. And then 7th grade I went to a different school, because when I was in the women and children's shelter, I had to go to the local school there. And then when we found a house halfway into the year I had to go to where I live now in Brownsville, Brooklyn, like in East New York. So I did 7th grade, half of 7th grade, 8th grade there. And then I got into a specialized high school. Then I went to 4 years there. And then even though, like the school that I went to there were a lot of resources there. There was a college office and they had people to help you fill out FAFSA to help you apply for college and they gave you deadlines. And they were really helpful. But I knew my family was on public assistance, and that wasn't something that you'd talk about or you would advertise. And I didn't know anybody else that was on public assistance. So whenever they were ever like bring in your tax return, or bring in your tax information that you can qualify to get like a fee voucher for CUNY AP's, to get a fee voucher for the AP's I was kind afraid to go because I don't pay taxes and I didn't want to go and give the budget letter and have them go like oh, you're on public assistance why don't you pay taxes. Because all they would talk about at the workshop was you know you need your tax information to fill out FAFSA. You need your tax information to get a voucher for the AP or for college AP's for the SAT's. And they never talked about if you're on public assistance, what do you bring in. And my mom was like you would bring in the budget letter, but I went once or twice and it was fine. It was just like a routine thing. But I didn't know that there were other people in the world or in my school that were also on public assistance. And then the time when it really hit me that you know this is actually going to prevent me... It's...like this my financial status and my family's status is preventing me from accomplishing my goals was when I

graduated from college, from high school. Hunter was my first choice. I got in and I was really excited. And I just didn't think at all that someone or the system can prevent you from going to college, because that's the ideal. That's what they tell you since kindergarten. They tell you since graduate school, grade school that you should go to college. So, I was called in by HRA and they gave me like my own card, my own Medicaid card, my benefit card. The first case worker that I met with was saying, it's fine you're a full time student, you don't have to work now. Oh it's like all that's great because I'm planning on being full time. And the next case worker told me that I need an internship or work study, because Hunter doesn't count, and I need 35 hours of it. And then that's when I met, went to Hunter and I met with the HRA liaison and I told her I needed an internship and she referred me to welfare rights initiative. And they offered me a 22 hour internship. And I could only fit 22 hours, because I had 13 hours of class. So a total of 22 and 13, that's 35. When I went back to another caseworker she said I had to cut down on my internship. And also that I should do... that I have to do WEP...She told me I had to do WEP. And she asked me do you want to do transit or sanitation? And I knew that I had been trained by WRI. I knew that's illegal. The work study internship law says that if you have an internship, work study or externship that can count as the 35 hours. And over here at the case center they're telling me to cut down my internship. And if I had not known that by WRI I would have been like okay, and I would have been like alright I'll do transit, something like that. So I connected with WRI in that regard. And then I stayed with them, because they weren't just helping me, they were helping my family. Because I have two younger siblings and I was on my mom's case and I knew my sister was two years younger. So I knew in two years she was going to go through the

same thing. And if I missed one of HRA made it seem like if I missed one appointment there not just going to cut my benefits, they might cut my mom's. And you just never know what they're going to do. But WRI was there, and they were helping me, helping my mom. We just didn't expect that this was going to happen since my mom was receiving disability assistance. She had an exemption from work. So when I got this I had no idea that I just didn't expect it. I didn't know anyone of my friends who was in the same position. My mom didn't know anyone. So it was kind of like, I can't believe this. Why is this happening.

CT: And it's.. I'm very interested to know how HRA and their rules affect children of recipients, of welfare recipients. And how they, in turn, are welfare recipients and treated as individual case studies. So, can you talk a little bit more about that?

HM: While I was on my mom's case I just didn't know my mom had been the only one like she had been taking care of everything, like going to fair hearings and talking about our benefits. She would be the one that would get the budget letters. But I kind of like when I turned 18 things were going to change, but I didn't think that it was going to be like in this regard they were going to make me do work as opposed to go to school. I just thought that it was illogical. I just didn't expect it at all. It was a complete shock. And I think the way being on your mom's case affects you. Personally for me that's all I can say. I felt like if I did something wrong everyone was going to get affected. And because I was the oldest in the family no one else had gone through this, I didn't really know what to do. And they weren't HRA wasn't exactly helpful. Like I went to a fair hearing and they said they wanted to speak to my mom. I was like, but this fair hearing is about me. When my mom went in they were like no way. We want to speak with you. So it wasn't even clear like what the process is. And even my mom didn't know, because her situation was different. She was the head of the household. She wasn't you know someone who just turned 18. So she did not have to do that. So I think it's just a lot of confusion, and it kind of puts extra pressure on you, because you feel like you're not just handling your own case. It's going to affect everybody else, whatever you do. And it was just really frustrating, I guess.

CT: Let's talk about your time at WRI and at Hunter. Your experience while you were there. And what you took the training classes or you volunteered. Maybe you can share a little bit about that.

HM: So the first... I started working with WRI before I even started classes at Hunter, because I needed the internship. And at first I did a lot of campus organizing. Tabling was one of the first things that I learned to do. And I did legal advocacy. Like doing intakes and things like that, but not actually advising, just the procedure. So I worked... One of the things that really helped me like you know feel like I belong at Hunter this is the place for me. Like helping me realize that I don't have to drop out and that I can get through this was that through the legal advocacy that I did with WRI or that I watched other people interns there do was that I realized that I wasn't the only one. And there were students that I had met in my class at Hunter that were coming in with FIA [?] papers that I had come in with. So I just really surprised now that wow you don't know who you expect the person sitting next to you could be in the same position as you. It could help you or you can help them, but you just never talk about it. So one of the first friends that I met at Hunter, she was in my first year seminar and then... like it just doesn't cross your mind that this person is going through the same thing as I'm going

through. And when I and I was really surprised. And I didn't know that. It was just a big coincidence. I was actually really happy when I saw that. And then later on like I saw a lot of more students coming in. I would see those students in the hallways and they were just like regular students like doing their thing. So I don't know I just feel really lucky that I chose Hunter of all places, because if I had gone somewhere else I don't know what would have happened.

CT: Let's talk about the particular things you did as a student at Hunter in terms of organizing.

HM: Ok. So I was in the community leadership class. I was Cohort 15. So we had... Before I started working... Before I was in the community leadership class, I also worked with Cohort 14 when they were gathering signatures for the... It was called... I don't know what is called now, but it was S or A something. Okay, that doesn't matter. But it was the access to higher education bill that we're passing to allow four year colleges to count as work activity because right now only two year colleges count as the work activity for students receiving public assistance. And I worked with Cohort 14 during their day of action, which was when they just went, when they went around Hunter collecting signatures and raising awareness. And that was to get the bill passed in the assembly. And when it was my cohort, we gathered signatures to get it passed in the senate. So it was particularly organizing that I did those two years, or was a part of, and I also worked with the high school organizing project. And that I think really transformed me into the person I am now, in terms of realizing what my future goals are and things like that. So, I worked with...and when I worked in the high school organizing project, HSOP, I first worked over the winter semester, at the American Sign Language &

English Academy School, on 47th and 23rd street. And it was a mini college series, so I basically talked about my experience, and I talked about CUNY, and how to apply for FAFSA, and how to apply for scholarships and things like that. I was also teaching students self-awareness skills, teaching them reading and writing skills and also teaching them active listening skills and all the other skills that are important in college. But basically it was just natural. I didn't even have to... I did try hard to be able to how do you say, verbalize what I was thinking so that they would understand. But it was just me talking about my experience and they were intrigued by it. And I just felt like a natural about what I was doing and I thought that was great. And then after, that was just a mini series that we worked for like a few months. And then after that I worked for a whole semester at a school in Brooklyn were we taught the high school version of the community leadership class at Hunter, and that was great. And then, this summer, I worked with 7th graders at another school, PS 111 and when I first started working the HSOP things I realized right off the bat was I went to a specialized school, I had so many resources, I had a college office, I had workshops, I knew about FAFSA, I knew about CUNY, I knew about so many schools, but still I felt like I didn't know what to do, I didn't know how to apply for FAFSA because those workshops weren't geared towards students receiving public assistance. And I was still afraid to ask questions, even though I had so many resources. And then the schools that I worked at, especially, Pacific High School, the students didn't know about that. So a lot of them didn't know about CUNY, they didn't know the difference between public and private. And they didn't know about proprietary schools and things like that. And some of them didn't know how to get financial aid. And I was like, wow, I had so many resources and still I was so worried

about college. So I wonder how they feel without any resources or limited resources and with so many other things going on in their lives, that I thought it was really disheartening and I felt like when you tell them about this stuff, they're like wow, like I didn't know you could go to college for free and things like that. All other students, like one other girl in my last Pacific class that I was at, that I co-facilitated, one of the girls, she asked me how old I was, (that was last year, and I was 20) and she was like oh my God, you're 20, you're only a year older than me and you've done so much. And I'm like, what are you talking about? You just have to graduate from high school, go to college and you'll be where I am. So I thought that was really amazing that she was like, you've done so much. And it's like, you're so close to it, too, its...everyone can do it. So it's like you're giving that type of energy, your giving that type of hope.

CT: And it's impactful. In regards to that student you spoke to when you were her age, where you involved in any organizing before WRI?

HM: Well, in high school, I went to a really big high school, there were 4,000 students and there were like a 1,000 or 700 in my class. So and they had so many clubs I couldn't pick one. But in terms of how active I am at Hunter, I wasn't as active in the school that I went to. Mostly because I couldn't find something that I was really passionate about. And a lot of the clubs, it was really competitive also, so I wasn't exactly the confident student. Like I did well, and I had a good GPA, but I wasn't as competitive as the other students. And I wanted to go to Hunter and all these other students were aimingfor Ivys, so I was kind of more laid back. But before high school, I was really, really involved in, even in elementary school, and junior high, I was really involved, it was in high school where I kind of laid low a little bit. CT: And before high school then, when you were involved, what were you involved with?

HM: Okay, so when I was in 7th grade, I was the student activities representative and the president of my class. And that was in the school when we were living in the shelter, that was at that school. And then we moved and then I came to the neighborhood where I'm at now. And that school didn't have that many extra curriculum activities so I don't really remember doing much. And then 8th grade, I was involved in a...I don't really remember that many activities in that school. I don't think there were many. There was like the Beacon Program after school. And then after school I had to be with my family, so I didn't go to those.

CT: And your family, let's talk about them a little bit. How...did you get any moral support for all these activities and growing up in your situation, from your mom and from your siblings?

HM: So, I think I definitely got more moral support now, because when I was in high school, my mom was really protective. And my parents got back together, so both of them were really extra protective. So, I tried going to after school activities, in high school, but I didn't want to get involved in something too lengthy because then I would have to explain why I'm there and I didn't really want to go out of my shell. But they were always really supportive of me going to college. And ever since I was little, I've been in school since I was three and it's because of them. Like, they taught me how to...like when I was in Pakistan they taught me my ABC's and things like that. And my dad and , when we would drive, I would read the license plates. So they were always a part of my education. And I think in college, they realized how important it is, like not

just your education but the things that you do, especially for graduate school, you have to be well rounded- you can't just focus on your studies. you have to be involved in your community, be involved in your school. And when all this, I think the HRA process and the possibility that I might not be able to go to Hunter, kind of made them realize how important, how extra important education is for me. And then when I started working at WRI, and when I finally realized that I wanted to pursue graduate school, I just explained to them, they're not just going to be impressed by my GPA, you have to do so many other things. And they saw how involved I was with WRI, and I talk about WRI all the time, and my mom's met most of the people. My dad knows them, he hasn't met them, but he knows who they are and they just saw how supportive WRI was and that kind of helped them realize that I know what I'm doing and they know what they're doing. And they've just been giving me like more extra support in terms of my education. And in terms of my career prospects, I just know what I'm doing to get into graduate school and things like that. But for I guess specifically for moral support, when I graduated I had to go to...you know, when I had to work WEP and things like that, the work experience program, my mom didn't know. I was scared, but she was ten times more scared than I was and she didn't know who to talk to. And then I was talking to WRI but she didn't know WRI at the time, so she didn't believe half of the things I was telling her. Like I was saying I can do an internship, I don't have to do WEP and things like that. So she was kind of getting really upset and she thought I was trying to not comply. And she was afraid that our benefits would get cut. So I think she was really confused and nervous, but then after awhile she realized I had the support from WRI and that they can help her advocate for her case. And that's what they did, they gave her a lot

of help in terms of keeping the benefits, applying for medicaid and things like that. So whenever she has a question, she asks me and that's what I do. And my dad was never involved with the public assistance stuff, so he doesn't know that much. But, he really did want me he really wanted to go to school, but I just was really mad at him cause I was like if you guys had of never separated, we wouldn't be on public assistance and things like that. So I really didn't talk to him that much about it and he could see that I was upset, but it all worked out, because they got back together and I'm no longer receiving public assistance and neither is my sister. My brother is the only one right now, he's sixteen, he's in high school. And my mom just receives disability assistance.

CT: And were our parents back in Pakistan or where they actively involved in their communities, do they ever talk about that part of their lives?

HM: I don't think they were that involved in their community. Like, even politically, I don't think so. My mom, she hasn't completed high school, she actually went to high school in the United Arab Emirates so she didn't complete high school. I think my dad maybe has a bachelors' in college in Pakistan, but it doesn't really translate over here. So I don't know what to say about that.

CT: No, no problem. And what do you think now after having been involved with WRI, its impact on you as a person, and its impact on those in your family and your outlook and what your opportunities, maybe you can share a little bit about that.

HM: Well, this is going to be awhile, cause I think I've changed so much. Like in high school I was serious about my education, I didn't try that hard I could say, cause I was really discouraged. But other students were so competitive, they were doing so much better and they were talking about Ivy Leagues and things like that. So as I was saying I

kind of like, I wanted to lay low and not be as competitive as them. And also cause I was afraid of failure. But WRI, especially, Dillonna, told me that you have to apply for every opportunity that you get and that's what I've been doing. And like I've applied to so many scholarships. And my main asset is the work that I've done with WRI. So when I apply to scholarships, I immediately, that's what I talk about and how that's impacted me. And I've gotten some scholarships and I haven't, but that's a really big change because in high school I didn't apply for any thing, not even a single scholarship, because I didn't think, what do I have. And even now, even if it's a stretch, I'm gonna go for it. So, I guess in that term, WRI has made me more confident in my own ability. And that's just through the things that I've learned, that you can go to college and just seeing the role models and seeing other people who are in the same position and who have succeeded. So in terms of that, I've become more confident and I believe more in my own abilities. And another way I've changed is I've become more opened minded. And just for example, in high school, I was always like with my friends and you always talk about people and things like that. And one time I was tabling and this girl was walking, and we asked her if she wanted a flyer, and she was like I don't have time. And then, my friends were like, well maybe she's really tired, or maybe she had a bad day. Or maybe she has a learning disability or a physical disability. And I just never thought about that, and I think that just made me a more mature person and no longer a mental adolescent. So I think in terms of that, that's more of a personal, I think. So it's changed me in terms of that. And just I think not being so closed minded, in terms of being open to people, listening and being open to their experiences and trying new things. I've been able to make more friends that way. And I've gotten along with a lot more people and I think

they've changed me in that term. So they've changed me in terms of giving me the confidence in my own abilities and also making me a better person.

CT: And your time with the high school program that you mentioned, can you share a little bit about that and the effect you've seen it take in others. I know you mentioned it earlier, but maybe you want to say a little more about it.

HM: So I guess I can give one more example. When I worked in 47th, the students that we worked with, their college advisor told us that the year that we work with them, they had a 100% improvement in students who had applied for FAFSA and applied for CUNY compared to the last year. Last year seniors, no one applied. And this year every single member of the senior class had applied. So I guess in general the effect of the program that it was like a success for us and that's how I knew this works. And I want to be a part of this and I want to see other students go to their schools. One of the student's got into Columbia that I worked with. And I thought that was amazing, and I thought maybe if I had a WRI for me, I could apply. So I like giving students that confidence and just when you tell them, oh you can go to... I went to study abroad in Italy, and I went to study in Barcelona on my own for a week. And when I told students about that experience, just like seeing their eyes light up, and I told them, I didn't have to spend a single cent of my money, because I got a scholarship for that. I got financial aid and things like that. Just seeing their faces light up of all the possibilities that even I didn't know about when I was in high school. I like seeing that and I like talking about it, because I genuinely want them to have those same experiences that I had, because I never thought I would have those. And also, specifically in the 7th grade class that I taught, we had this one student, he was really, really obnoxious most of the time, and he was very, like he would talk

back a lot and he wouldn't listen and he was always like having side conversations, but when we talked, that day we talked about CUNY, we talked about high school, and we talked about financial aid, and getting money, and scholarships and going study aboard, he was the best student in the class. And he knew so much, and he was talking about, you know, we talked about proprietary schools, and schools that are for profit, and he was like I saw a commercial like about Monroe, is that a proprietary school? He said, what's the school that have a two year, and four year, and things like that, I think he was talking about John Jay, which is only a four year now. And then, you just have to talk about...like don't underestimate the way these students, the way they feel. They are thinking about college, even as young as 7th grade. So I think that just seeing how active they were, how much information they knew. Some of them knew what schools they wanted to go to already. And they knew what high school they wanted to go to, they knew college they wanted to go to and they're 7th graders. So, I just think that speaking to them about their fears about not being able to pay for it and not getting in is really helpful for me and for them, because I just like reflecting back on like, I can just use my personal experience to guess how they're feeling and kind of cater to what I'm saying to that. And I had another example. In the class we have them by autobiographies and for the 7th graders when I came to the class they're in &th grade, what problems do they have. And then a lot of their stuff is really, really touching. It would make me and Rachel cry, Rachel, the co-facilitator with me, the coordinator of HESOP. And like I couldn't believe that in 7th grade these students are thinking about these things. And I really wanted more time, but we only spent like a month or a few days with them. So I really, I want to get back, I want to be in that environment for the rest of my life. Being

like in an education environment and be able to bond with students and kind of connect them to resources and kind of foster in them the confidence they need to or the motivation they need to pursue their academic dreams so.

CT: And that's great. Can you talk a little bit more about the structure of the HSOP program, like how does it work, how do you reach out to schools, like how does it work? HM: So I mostly came onto the project where Rachel was the one who did most of the outreach and build the relationships with the schools. And we work at Title One Schools, where, I'm not sure, I think its more than 40% or 70% of the schools, the students are living in poverty. So the schools that we work with were Title One public high schools. I think Rachel, she connected with the schools and she formed a relationship with the principals and then she pitched the ideal of the HSOP call. It is actually called the YLP program, because before it was in high school, but this summer we extended it to junior high schools and now we call it the Youth Leadership Project as opposed to the High School Organized Project. So we taught different types of series when we taught at 47 and I think it was a college series, so the main ideal of that class was help them fill out facts that help connect them to CUNY, provide them with the skills they need, but it was in a shorter amount of time, I think in was in a month or two, so that was like a shorter version of the Community Leadership Class. And then, the class at Pacific [High School] was for a whole semester, so that was more intensive reading, intensive writing, pretty much the high school version of the undergraduate class. And we did the same activities. You were in one of the cohort's right? So I don't know if you guys did the same thing. But when you present for a minute in front of the camera and then you watch it, so we did the things like that with them. We had more trainings, we had more trainings with the

semester long classes like how to facilitate a meeting, how to take notes, how to do animated biogeography's. So we had more skill building in that class as opposed to 47. And then with the junior high schools, it was for a few days and that was in steps, so that class before had us do sophomore activities. Then we did community building activities, like group activities like connecting with the people in your environment. And then we did actively listening was one of the activities for that. And then we did, how do you connect to the community outside. So then we had them work as a group to solve problems within their communities within their school. So that was like self awareness, connection to others and connection to the community at large. And then we talked about college and we also brought them to Hunter and things like that. So still, it's pretty much the same ideal, but I think the process is different, like some of them are longer and some are more skill building and some is more geared towards college applications, and 7th graders they're not going fill out college applications. So that was more just a general overview of the skills you need to succeed, but it was pretty much the same as the others in all three of those schools I worked at.

CT: Will there ever be plans in the future to track the affect that the HESOP program has on students after they apply for college and after their first year of college and... HM: I think that would be ideal if we could do that, but, I think we would need a lot of resources for that. And then we'd have to keep in touch with the students and we'd have to know, we'd have to have a good response rate in terms of that, cause I think maybe we had like 30 or 40 students in total, so we'd had to have a lot of them responding and... We always have them fill out a before assessment and an after assessment. I think we have to figure out a way to utilize those for now, and then we can move on. But I think that would be ideal. Except I know Rachel no longer works for WRI but she when students were in high school, she kept in touch with them and we would give them our number and they would call her and say, I'm trying to apply to you know to BMCC, I'm trying to apply to Hunter and she kept in touch with them. So we always gave them our number so if they want they can contact us and we do follow ups if they've been in contact with us. But I think it, that would be ideal if we could keep track of them. CT: That's just a question I had. You're at your last semester at Hunter at moment? HM: The last year, yes.

CT: Do you foresee continued involvement with WRI after you leave Hunter? HM: Yes, definitely, I've been thinking about that. But I don't know if they're going to offer me anything. But also, I might be going out of state. I recently began thinking about going out of state about two weeks ago when I was looking up more graduate schools. But before that, I knew I was going to go to CUNY Grad, I'm going to work for WRI for the Research Foundation and I really, even now, I'm only working two hours a week at WRI, but I don't not just want to work there. I want to be involved, I want to know what's going on and it's also the fact that I really believe in the work they do and I really believe in the work I do with them. But the bond I've held with them they're my family at Hunter, and Hunter is a really big school. It's a commuter school, so the first year I was there, I hated it so much, I was like why did I go here, why didn't I go to school with a real campus and housing. And it's really WRI that made me feel like this is where I should be. So I'm going to stick with them.

CT: Thank you so much, I think we're done. Any final words?

HM: Uh, well do you have any more questions? I'm kind of sad this is over.

CT: If you want to share anything else, we can. But, we can always talk about it later, and if there are any follow-ups, we can follow it up with a different interview later on.

HM: I don't have anything else to say, I think I talked a lot.

CT: That was wonderful, thank you so much.

HM: No problem.

[End of Tape]