

**Esme Littleton** (Farnsworth House)

*Interviewed by Shaniqua Osgood, Shaunte Smith and Andre Hankerson* (2004)  
with excerpts from an interview with Meriwether Rhodes of Farnsworth House.

My name is Esme Rachel Littleton. Back home, I was more often called Rachel, but here everyone calls me Esme. I was born in Sri Lanka, south of India on the Indian Ocean. It used to be called Ceylon when it was under British rule. I was born on November 28, 1919. I'll be eighty-six years old this year. I came to Massachusetts in 1967, so I've been here for almost forty years.

I am of Singhalese and Portuguese descent. There are two nationalities in Sri Lanka, the Tamils and the Singhalese. There are political tensions and terrible fighting between the two groups. I grew up speaking both English and Singhalese. My father worked for the railroad. His name was Arthur Hanibalsz. My mother was Edith Eva Theile, and my childhood name was Esme Rachel Rajapakse.

Sri Lanka, where I grew up, is a tropical country. There wasn't any snow, and the weather was very nice. It was beautiful with sunlight and fruit trees. Everything was tropical. I was born in the capital city of Colombo. We had different seasons like here but they were all warm, and we had the rainy season. I grew up with my parents, and I had two sisters and one brother. It was a small family. My brother presently lives in Australia. His name is Nowell. He was the youngest, and my sister Naomi was the oldest. My other sister was Miriam.

Where I grew up, we had very good schools. We were under British rule, and we had the best colleges and the best education system. We learned to speak very good English. When I was a child I was quite a mischievous girl, but it was all innocent fun, you know? Someone would tell a joke, then the teacher would look up, and I'd keep on laughing, so almost every day I'd have to stand in the principal's office.

I went all the way through college; my major was domestic science, which included cooking and sewing. I went to the Methodist College. Yes, it was all girls! We had a lot of rules when I was in school. There were stores across the street, and we weren't suppose to go over there during school. But sometimes two or three of us would go over anyway. The teachers would check on us, and we were so stupid— we would just stand out in the open, and we would always get caught.

My favorite season is fall. I like it because it's not too warm. It's lovely. I like classical music, piano music. I use to teach music and cooking and sewing when I came here to the United States. I used to play the piano and the guitar. Yes, I do like sports. I like cricket. That's a British sport. We played tennis and badminton when we were young. My favorite color? I like red. When I go somewhere, I'm always attracted to red.

When I first came here I loved to go out all of the time. On Friday after work, we'd go to a dance, on Saturday morning we'd go to work, and after work we'd go to another

dance. All weekend long we danced. And later, I danced with my children at school (Jamaica Plain Head Start.)

When I was young, I didn't come straight home after school. I would stay late to attend games, or other activities, then by the time I got home I was ready to go to sleep. When I was younger my friends were my neighbors, mostly boys. And when I was a teenager, my friends were boys, too. I was a tomboy, but I loved to go out dancing. As teens, we would mostly go dancing for entertainment, or on picnics. My parents were very strict. We had to be home at 6 o'clock to stay with the family. We couldn't even have a radio in the house! When my father died, my mother finally bought a radio.

And we had to go to church every Sunday. There were cars and buses and all, but we had to walk! My father would walk in front, my second sister walked behind, and I had to walk in back with my brother. No, I never got in trouble with my parents. But they would give us collection money to drop in the box at church, and my brother and I kept it!

In 1934 the Japanese bombed the coast of Sri Lanka. We lived in a house by the ocean, so we evacuated far into the jungle to be safe. One morning when we went down to a village to get water to wash, we found out that the Japanese had bombed Colombo.

No I didn't work until after World War II. In my country, ladies had to stay at home, we weren't allowed to work outside of the house. I got married in 1942, and in 1949 I had a child, but unfortunately he was handicapped. So I opened a day care, and all the people in the neighborhood brought their little children there. When I came here to this country, I did the same thing, I took care of children.

Why did I leave my country and come here? Well, this lady, she came from America to Sri Lanka. She lived in the YWCA guest house, and I worked as a secretary at the YWCA. She and her husband wanted to bring someone from my country back to the U.S. to care for their three small children. So, she interviewed me and she asked me if I would like to come. She said it would be a good opportunity. My husband was dead at that time, and my son was in a home because there was no cure for his condition. He couldn't walk and he couldn't talk. I was planning to bring him here with me because there was a hospital in Brighton that took children like him, but unfortunately, he passed away before I came. He was about fifteen when he died.

So I took the opportunity to come here, but things changed once we got to the U.S. I worked from morning until night, looking after the children, cleaning, washing, and cooking. Then, they'd want me to dress in my sari and demonstrate to their guests how we eat in Sri Lanka. So I moved out and found an apartment on St. Paul Street. Then I went to work in the Dietary Department of the Deaconess Hospital. After one year, I moved over to the Beth Israel Hospital and worked in the Dietary Department there until I retired fifteen years later. When I came to this country, I sponsored about five

other people in my family to come over here, too. And out of the five, only my brother is alive now. He lives in Australia.

Have I been back to Sri Lanka? Yes, I've been back, but now I'm older and I'm afraid to fly. There is a war between the Tamils in the north and the Singhalese from the south. Many of our people have moved to Australia (like my brother) and to the United States and Canada. I'm a naturalized American citizen now, and I'm here alone with no other relatives except in Australia.

When I was growing up, we never heard of cholesterol or high blood pressure. All the food we ate was fresh. There were no preservatives in the food. So none of us were sick when we were young. At least, not that I remember. Have you heard of aloe? That is an herb that grows wild in my country. They use it in soaps and cosmetics. But you can just get a plant and use the aloe right from the leaf instead of buying all that stuff. The best tea used to come from Ceylon, but since the British left, they don't know how to grow good tea!

I would say that the biggest adventure of my life was coming here to this country. I think I have accomplished a lot in my life. When I was in my country, I did a lot for the children that I worked with. And here, I've done the same. I stay pretty busy. I'm a foster grandparent, I volunteer at the ABCD Head start nursery school, and I once wrote a cookbook which was incorporated into a larger one for Central Boston Elder Services.

What advice would I give you about life? If there's any problem, always try to speak up and get a good explanation. Find out why and what, and always try to do something good for your neighbor.