Southerly: How did you become environmentalists?

Shah: I grew up in Huntsville for the first six years of my life. So I knew what a clean environment was. I took this for granted – trees around me, being able to breathe in the streets. And then I lived in Mumbai for ten years. That was my first case of seeing poverty in real life, seeing pollution firsthand, seeing a river filled with plastic and sewage. Experiencing all that made me realize: This is my fight.

Nicolau: I grew up in Rio de Janeiro. It is amazing, beautiful, the beaches and everything. I wanted to take care of that. I always had this deep connection with the environment and animals.

Southerly: What kind of environmental work have you found in Huntsville?

Nicolau: So now I work for a NASA project called SERVIR, which in Spanish and Portuguese means "to serve." We use satellite data to address environmental problems in developing countries. During my master's studies, I worked specifically for the Amazonia hub. My thesis project looked at deforestation patterns.

Shah: There are NASA offices here in Huntsville solving environmental issues in developing countries. But there are not many local companies focusing on local problems which we can solve easily.

Southerly: Do those opportunities exist in Huntsville?

Shah: As part of the North Alabama Sunrise hub, we led some demonstrations at the city council to make Huntsville into a leading, sustainable city in Alabama and in the South. Because we do have that potential. We even drafted an ordinance to create a sustainability commission within the city council. The biodiversity here is insanely high. People call it "the Alabamazon." Imagine: There's a lot of focus on robotics here in Huntsville, but for defense purposes. But the same robotics can be used for species monitoring and growing food, like a farm bot to enable outdoor gardening.

Nicolau: You won't find jobs that are directly related to what you could potentially do here. Like something in conservation, renewable energy, or waste management. For computer scientists and engineers into defense and aerospace, it's a perfect job market.

Shah: If some of that money for defense jobs – 30% or 20% – could be invested in renewable energy projects, that would be huge. That would be going with the tide instead of against it.