

Sarah ElSunni

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SPEAKERS

Sarah Elsunni, Rimsha Syed



Rimsha Syed 00:03

Hi, this is Rimsha Syed. The date is February 14th, 2021 and I am interviewing Sarah Elsunni for the Texas Muslim Voices oral history project.



Rimsha Syed 00:15

I should mention that I do know Sarah personally, which is why I'm very excited to hear more about you today. So would you mind introducing yourself, Sarah?



Sarah Elsunni 00:24

Of course. Thanks for having me on here, Rimsha. I'm super stoked about it. My name is Sarah Elsunni, I was born and raised partially in Louisiana and I ended up moving here to Texas at the age of eight. So a lot of my childhood and life was built in this state. Of course, that's what shaped me into who I am. I am a digital marketer. I'm also a digital organizer for a social justice organization, and I work at my local institution, in their global initiatives efforts. I believe a lot of the history and experience that we're going to get into today really speaks to the work that I do now. And it's just really interesting, even when reflecting on questions for this interview, to see how everything led to one another and to see how that led me here. I liked having the topics as sort of a reflection for my own self. That was really neat.



Rimsha Syed 01:40

Yeah, thanks for sharing that. As you mentioned, you did not grow up in Texas, but you are now living in San Antonio. Would you mind describing sort of where you grew up and how you ended up here in Texas?



Sarah Elsunni 01:56

Of course. Like I mentioned, I was born in Baton Rouge in Louisiana, and the first year of my life was spent there. My family ended up moving to New Orleans shortly after. So from the ages of around two to eight, I spent my years in New Orleans where I attended a Muslim Academy, which was an Islamic school, that was for elementary schoolers, to middle schoolers, all the way up to high schoolers. Students would graduate from that school and then move on to college. And so, that was my academic situation up until Hurricane Katrina actually hit in 2005 and my family was forced to relocate. We ended up moving here to San Antonio because my dad's childhood friend, who he had grown up with in our home country, in Sudan, actually lived out here with his family. And of course, he had nothing but great things to say about San Antonio and my dad was convinced to start a life here.



Sarah Elsunni 03:08

I remember as a child, attending my Muslim Academy one day in New Orleans, and hearing all the commotion and the teachers talking about the hurricane. I was picked up from school that day and I never returned, because it was that day that we ended up driving to San Antonio to start a new life here. Sometimes I look back at that time and think that there wasn't - I didn't receive the closure that I wanted as a child with that school - but it's also interesting because although that would be a sad farewell for many students - to me, it was almost like an exciting new beginning.



Sarah Elsunni 03:53

Because as a student at the school, of course, it was predominantly Muslim folks and a lot of the Muslim students that attended the school were Arab. My sister and I were among the only two Black identifying Muslims at the school. This is a school full of students that range all the way from pre-k to the 12th grade and I think we were two of four Black Muslim students. And there were a couple 100 of us. I never felt that I even was represented in that school or exactly belonged as a kid. Of course, you always hear remarks from the kids and kids tend to say hurtful things that they hear, said at home. I would always think to myself, "I wonder where these kids are getting these hurtful words

from," and it made me think about their parents, who kind of have these internal biases instilled in them. So when that time came for me to move, I wasn't as sad as you would think a third grader leaving their home town would be. It was almost like a new opportunity, a new venture or something to seek out. I felt excited to go to a public school where I would be among people that looked more like me and where I didn't feel limited to showing up in spaces.



Sarah Elsunni 05:34

Sometimes I reflect on that. And in the moment, I, of course, didn't even recognize that, I was just going with the flow. But as an adult, when I look back, I realized the almost deeply want that I felt for that change. Not to paint the Islamic school in a negative light by any means, I definitely have great memories and experiences from that school. It definitely helped shape the foundation of my academia, of just my behavior and actions as a Muslim identifying person, but I also, of course, can't really oversee the, I guess I don't want to say trauma because that's a very strong word, but the outcast that I felt as a kid. And to feel like you're going somewhere where you might belong was a really good feeling. It's unfortunate that it had to happen during a time of chaos where, of course, a hurricane is coming, and people are really refugees at this point. But there was always that hope for more. There was always hope to where I could be in a more inclusive space. I know that's really how I was thinking at the core of my being. I hope that makes sense.



Rimsha Syed 07:16

Yeah, that makes sense. It must have been a very formative time in your life. You were in elementary school when you moved?



Sarah Elsunni 07:24

Yes.



Rimsha Syed 07:25

Okay. Wow. How would you say your experience here for the rest of elementary school and middle school and high school was different from attending the Islamic Academy back in Louisiana?



Sarah Elsunni 07:40

Yeah. It was definitely different because I felt that I could be myself without obviously, being feared, or having this fear of judgment. I think when we come from traditional upbringings, we are always expected to think or act or look a certain way and sometimes it can be scary to cross those boundaries. But of course, at a public school, I felt, I just felt more comfortable with exploring new things. And seeing the diversity at my school, or at least somewhat diversity, because - the way I think about it is, I have a deep love for Texas. It's also bittersweet because I call this place home, but I also acknowledge that this home wasn't initially built for people that look like me. And you can't deny the oppressive history that lingers. It's just hard to feel that I wholeheartedly belong sometimes.

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Sarah Elsunni 08:51

I think most of all, this became very evident to me in high school, when I made the decision to wear hijab as a junior. I say this because when I did that, I was very, very shocked by the amount of people that actually had no idea what hijab was or what it meant to be Muslim. And it felt weird to have to be the teacher of such a thing while I was still learning and adapting to it myself. I realized, although I had this hope that Texas would be different, public schooling would be more diverse and inclusive, I was also met with sort of similar feeling to how I felt at a Muslim Academy in elementary school, where I felt like I was one of the only ones of my kind. Because I went to the largest high school in San Antonio that had about 4000 students and I was the only hijabi woman there. And not only that, but of course, I'm the only one among people that don't even know what it is.

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Sarah Elsunni 10:11

That kind of put that into perspective for me. I realized that although I have the freedom to be myself here and I feel less judged and it felt like more of a safe space, I realized that there's a long way to go with our diversity inclusivity in these school systems. That was something that I started to feel like at the beginning of wearing it, which was junior year. I have faint memories of that year as well, because it was around that time that I started to connect with other Sudanese American people my age, who lived in Dallas. I was shocked to see the difference between the school systems in Dallas and that of San Antonio because, of course, Dallas is a more diverse community. There's more Sudanese people that live there, the community here is super small, and there's not really anybody my age that I feel I can relate to. And so, making those friends in Dallas was really huge for me.

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Sarah Elsunni 11:33

I was surprised to see that at their high schools, they had entire Muslim associations

created and led by the Muslim students that look just like me. And here I was in San Antonio, only 200 miles away, having to explain what a hijab was to my peers, and having almost to justify my beliefs and choices. On the other side in Dallas, they're throwing cultural appreciation days at school with their American peers, who completely accepted and celebrated their identities. I would often see that on social media and of course, it's just an observation [that] I was just very surprised by. But at the end of the day, I was always really happy to know that my friends had these spaces that they could exist in. It just simply left me with more of a hope that my high school and city could be more inclusive and represent more of that diversity.



Sarah Elsunni 12:39

Over the years, after I graduated, I have seen more of that, because there were younger Sudanese folks in our community, who ended up attending, and just while being in conversation with them, I can tell that that has been changing. But, of course, I'd love to see it change a lot more. Yeah, that was a bit of an overview about my academic or school life here in Texas. I ended up graduating high school and I attended UTSA, where I did see a lot of that diversity. It was really cool to be a part of, really cool to have that representation, and be able to connect with people that shared a lot of my values and beliefs. That was definitely like a silver lining of the story was, I think, college. And I can talk more about that experience and how that helped to shape my worldview. I definitely feel it has a lot to do with, you know, my global perspective at the moment.



Rimsha Syed 13:55

Right. So before we talk about that, where did you go to high school?



Sarah Elsunni 14:02

I went to high school at James Madison and this is on the northeast side of San Antonio. Like I said, the largest school in the city, and it had over 4000 people. I think my class alone was about, I think, a little over 1000 [students].



Rimsha Syed 14:24

That's very different from my high school experience at Health Careers, where we had a total of 4 to 500 people. Very small, very tight knit.



Sarah Elsunni 14:35

Yeah. And I do notice that a school like Health Careers to be more diverse as well. I've had a few friends that have attended that school and they're all children of immigrants, they all come from ethnic backgrounds. It's really interesting to see the contrast.



Rimsha Syed 14:54

Right? Yeah, it was definitely very diverse and I was pretty surprised to find that when I started attending, seeing as most other high schools in San Antonio are predominantly white, I would say. That's what I've heard from people who didn't attend my high school. So earlier, you mentioned that there's a pretty robust Sudanese and Muslim community in Dallas that seems to be missing here in San Antonio. I was curious if you ended up joining the Muslim Student Association at UTSA, where you went to school, and how that experience was like for you?



Sarah Elsunni 15:36

Yeah, so I wasn't very active as a member in the Muslim Student Association, but I did attend some of the events, like showdown. I just remember feeling that it was just really nice to see how all of these communities and schools came together at one location to compete in just a series of events that were really led by the students themselves. Although I feel like I've always sought out that diversity and inclusion, I still have never felt super in alignment with it, just because I don't know that those friendships were naturally created or that I really built upon them too much. I think I mostly appreciated and observed MSA from afar and wasn't too involved in that organization in particular.



Sarah Elsunni 16:49

But I was involved in a co-ed business fraternity, known as Alpha Kappa Psi, in college. And that one was definitely also diverse and one where I learned a lot of my professional development skills. Of course, although it's a professional fraternity, it was also social. So being able to just connect and network with different kinds of people that had different views and mindsets was really helpful in expanding that sort of worldview. Because I feel like my childhood, attending a Muslim Academy, almost made me want to just kind of explore other groups of people to be part of. I think that's why I naturally gravitated towards maybe a professional development type of organization over joining an MSA. Because I felt connected to my deen and my culture and my religion, so I just never felt the urge to be part of MSA, but I have the utmost respect and appreciation for the people that have been on it. I'm really good friends with one of the previous presidents also, who's

like a sister to me at this point. I love seeing these spaces flourish and exist, but I'm just mindful of where I'm choosing to pour my time and energy. I think, as college students, we have, it's almost limited, that amount of energy that we have for all this extra curricular stuff. A lot of mine was given to the professional development fraternity that I was part of. I don't regret it. I definitely feel that it helped to shape me as well into the young professional that I am today. So yeah, it's all good things.



Rimsha Syed 19:07

I'm glad to hear that. And would you say that being at UTSA for college made it easy for you to explore being around and hanging around other communities outside of your own either in a professional or personal way?



Sarah Elsunni 19:24

Yeah, definitely. Because it was for the first time that I was really introduced to the sort of diversity I feel like I was always seeking. It was really in college that that was first exposed. I just naturally started to befriend a lot of the international students, for example, and learning more about their cultures and their backgrounds, like what their way of living is like. It's interesting to say that because after graduation, I started working with the international services department at UTSA and the global initiatives office. That was really a big part of my college experience, was expanding my social and human experience almost through other individuals. Of course, through traveling too, with a couple of the study abroads that I had the opportunity to go to. Those were definitely huge factors of my college experience.



Rimsha Syed 20:37

Great, I would love to hear a little bit more about your study abroad experiences.



Sarah Elsunni 20:44

Definitely. So in the business fraternity, we'd always make it a point to share any opportunities that would come up that were significant to our development. I remember one of my peers shared immersions that the College of Business was holding for students. And it was neat because they were actually sponsoring like 90% of it and they were just asking students to pay a small program fee. We would be able to go on two weeks overseas to one of five countries that we would have to rank. And this was an entire business sort of immersion, where you get to tour companies, you get to tour the

classrooms and see the institutions there, see a different style of teaching, and immerse ourselves into the language and the culture. I heard about that opportunity one day and I ended up applying.

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Sarah Elsunni 21:47

I was chosen to go to China in the summer of 2018. Seeing that was almost the start of me wanting to seek out more of it because - I had been traveling as a kid, but when I would travel, I was always traveling to countries that are predominantly Arabic speaking countries or Muslim countries. It was the first time that I had gone to a country with a completely different culture, completely different language than my own. And so, of course, you're seeing even the contrast between our individualistic society here in the States versus a collective society in China. That was just really interesting. I go to tour institutions, like I mentioned, made awesome friends on that trip. But more than anything, it helped to offer a deep, deep appreciation for multicultural understanding. After that trip, I was certain that I needed to do more of it, just to do it for myself, and for those around me, because I felt that that was the best way that I could be a better global leader.

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Sarah Elsunni 23:17

And after that trip, I ended up coming back home and immediately applying to do a volunteer service trip in Puerto Rico. This had more to do with relief efforts during Hurricane Maria, or after Hurricane Maria, actually. So that was also a super important and significant experience in my life because it helped me feed my value of being in service to other people, which is a lot of the work that I do now. After that trip, I ended up graduating shortly after. And after graduation, because of my international experiences, I was super eager to have more of that on a professional scale. I ended up going to Barcelona, Spain for a month to do a marketing fellowship with a startup there. And just to expand my understanding of different markets and what appeals to different audiences and how really to use your skills and understanding of consumer behavior to scale things. I love that I had that experience because although, that one was for a tangible good, I've been able to take those skills and apply them to the sort of digital movement that I help work on now for our grassroots organization. These experiences are extremely valuable to me and the work I do now. So I always reflect on them with such gratitude and appreciation for sure.



Rimsha Syed 25:08

Wow, that was really beautiful to hear about. Seems to me like traveling is a very important part of your life, which makes me wonder, do you see yourself for being in Texas long-term?

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Sarah Elsunni 25:21

Yeah, so I actually think about this a lot. Texas is definitely a place that I feel I could settle down and raise a family. I have most of my family living in Dallas at the moment. I definitely would love to be able to settle down in Texas one day, I do think it's a great state, I definitely see a life here. I also would like to explore other countries for a short while, of course, when traveling is safe again. I see myself living overseas, maybe in the UK, for a year or two years to gain more of professional and academic experience. And then I'm also open to exploring other places for a short period. But definitely, when I look to my life long term, I definitely always come back to Texas and Dallas for settling down.



Rimsha Syed 26:28

Right. So speaking on it being safe to travel again sometime in the near future, I feel like we'd be missing out on a vital element of this time in history if we didn't talk about the global pandemic that we're currently living through. I'm just curious if you could talk about how the pandemic has affected both your personal and professional life seeing as you're not able to travel as much as you'd like to?

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Sarah Elsunni 26:59

Yeah, so it definitely has impacted my life in both negative and positive ways. I do like to kind of speak more about the positive ways because I do feel that they overpower the negatives. That's really interesting to say, and I feel grateful to even be able to say that, alhamdulillah. For me, the way I think that it impacted me most is - I think this time has forced us to seek inwards and to very, very much decide what really, really matters in our lives. And for me, more than anything, it's allowed me to sit with myself and be very clear and true about what it is that should take up space in my life, where I need to be spending my energy and my time, who and what I should be pouring my love into. These things just have kind of - I feel like life almost purged itself with the pandemic. I almost feel like that was a necessary purge because I don't think life pre- pandemic was healthy for many people. I think it's forced us to face parts of ourselves that we probably wouldn't have sat down with otherwise.

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Sarah Elsunni 28:44

For example, for me, the way the pandemic has affected me, aside from that personal level, speaking on a professional level, has been more of that digital movement work. Since all of our lives have been virtual, I've been able to see how I can scale my skills to have more reach and impact to larger communities. And just to a little more specific about that - in the past, my sister and I, because we felt that there wasn't a big Sudanese community here in San Antonio, we created a Sudanese platform to connect the diaspora and be able to network with folks on social media. That was in high school and I've seen how that has had an impact and reach all across the globe. So when we were forced to be more digital and virtual, due to the pandemic, I realized that I can continue to do those kinds of things towards the goals that matter to me or towards the values that I hold.

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Sarah Elsunni 30:12

For example, the social justice organization I am currently working with is one for gender justice and it's called Malukah. As a digital organizer, I've been able to use this time to focus on leveraging those same skills that I developed before, to now have more of a digital impact. And when it comes to educating folks about gender justice, and the violence that women face on a global scale, and to be able to connect women with the tools and resources that they need in different areas of their lives. We focus on things like self defense, healing justice, organization, financial literacy, and economic justice, among other things. It's just been really important for me because this is how I feel that I've been able to be in service of other people during the pandemic. So leveraging those skills for sure has helped me fulfill that value that I carry to. I think that that's definitely one of the biggest impacts of the pandemic has had on me.



Rimsha Syed 31:29

Yeah, I'm glad to hear that most of that has been in a positive manner. I wanted to talk a little bit more about the Sudanese platform that you mentioned. What is that called? And where does the platform live? And can you describe a little bit about the goals of the platform?

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Sarah Elsunni 31:49

Yeah, for sure. It's actually an Instagram account called Sudanese Shoutout and there's over 100,000 followers on that account. But more importantly, I think what it's done is fostered a community of Sudanese people across the globe. It's been really cool because my sister and I kind of just started that to be able to connect with people who also lived in

Texas or in the States because we felt that that was lacking here in San Antonio, but it quickly became more of a worldwide thing. And it was really cool to see how people have even connected through the accounts, like literally couples getting married because they found each other on the account or people finding business deals, and being able to network through the community was really neat to see too. So that's some of the goals of the account really is to just uplift some of our Sudanese voices around the globe [and] people doing really significant powerful things. Also shouting out everyday Sudanese folks because it's really just about representation and trying to gain more traction towards individuals.



Sarah Elsunni 33:55

The account didn't really start off with goals in mind, it was more of a fun and free creative platform, but it quickly ended up leading to individuals meeting and finding their spouses through the community, networking and finding business partners through it as well, and just friendships. I've fostered a lot of my own friendships through that platform too, and a lot of the people that I met in Dallas, I met through that account. So that was a really neat experience for me and many other people as well.



Rimsha Syed 34:30

Yeah, no, I think that's a really powerful and beautiful initiative and it seems like you took what wasn't there and made a community for representation and for people to feel like they have a sense of community where maybe one wasn't present before. And you did that by using tools like social media, and to me, it seems like you've been interested in marketing and being a digital organizer since high school, which is when you created the page. I want to know where you see yourself going with that as a digital organizer in the future and if you have maybe any short-term or long-term goals or things you'd like to accomplish in that realm?



Sarah Elsunni 35:17

Yeah, absolutely. I do have a deep deep love for production, content creation, directing, especially. My ultimate goal, really, and aspiration is to be a producer and director of international documentary film and to really capture the unique stories of those that we never hear about. Just because, like I mentioned before, I feel I've had the privilege to expand my global mindset through travel and through my multicultural exposure. And as someone who's experienced that, I also feel like it's almost my duty to present that same understanding to people globally, who aren't offered that same privilege. And, of course,

this also goes back to my need as a child for more diverse and inclusive spaces. I've tested that out - I definitely get to do some of this production and directing in my current roles, which is super neat.

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Sarah Elsunni 36:29

I did launch a pilot episode of a series that aligns closely with this vision on my YouTube channel. And I've seen the way that that video alone has resonated with people all over the world, just through the comments section. I'm definitely really excited to be able to do that on a larger scale with more resources, after the pandemic, when travel is more accessible. [I'm] definitely grateful to have done that and worked with a great team of people that helped me even come to terms with this being what I want it to do. Because I will say that in college, I was that student that had no idea of what they wanted to do, really up until my senior year. It wasn't until I had an internship in a marketing role where I started to see myself in this sort of position, long-term. So it was really just through experience that I kind of came to terms with this for myself.



Rimsha Syed 37:41

That's really great. I didn't even know that you had a YouTube channel, so I'm definitely going to have to check that out later. What kind of content do you most enjoy putting out there?

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Sarah Elsunni 37:52

Yeah, so my favorite kind of content, of course, is travel content. Hence, why I haven't uploaded in a while, but I do have a video up there that is the experience of my non Muslim friends attending a masjid for the first time. They're attending a youth iftaar during Ramadan, which is the breaking of fast. And I kind of just documented their experience and we had discussions about it. It's that sort of human experience that I am looking to capture at a larger scale. But just seeing the comments of that and how people resonated with it and their gratitude towards it, it was really moving. Because to me, in the moment, I'm kind of just filming with my friends something that is a significant experience for them, but you don't really understand the impact of something has until it's out there, and until it does have that reach and impact.

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Sarah Elsunni 39:05

That's always neat to see because I think as a creator, sometimes we get caught up with

thinking too much about how our content is going to be received. But the way I've been trying to lead is to just make the material and to put it out into the world and whatever happens with it happens. I fully accept the fact that only maybe one person would see it or maybe hundreds of thousands would see this. And so, I am placing a lot of value in telling the stories, doing the work, having the experience, and putting it out into the world and letting it do its thing more than anything.



Rimsha Syed 39:53

I really love that and I hope you're able to continue making videos soon. You mentioned that you made a video sort of around Ramadan time, which makes me wonder what celebrating Ramadan is like here in Texas versus maybe in Louisiana. And do you typically spend that time in San Antonio or with your family in Dallas?



Sarah Elsunni 40:22

I typically do spend it here in San Antonio. Ramadan is definitely a very exciting time of the year. And, of course, it looks so different with the pandemic because it's such a time of gathering, family and friends, and community. It's difficult to do that when we're limited to who and what we can see. It's been really beautiful, I think, to see just even this last Ramadan, how even with those barriers, there still was a lot of community fostered virtually and also through service, like passing out dinners and food banks, Islamic food run banks, things like this. For me, Ramadan, I tend to spend it with my mom, who I live with. Growing up when, before the pandemic, we would often go to the masjid and be part of that community.



Sarah Elsunni 41:35

That was always nice for me to be a part of. I love being able to just go to the masjid at maghrib time and you see all the kids playing and everyone just together and prepare to break fast together. So that's always a pleasant experience and I hope that we can return to that soon. But with Ramadan approaching now, I anticipate for it to be, similar than the last one. I think what I hope to make more of a point this time around is being more in service of people during Ramadan, especially during challenges that we face now, with a lot of people facing food insecurities, financial insecurities at the moment. I think that that will be a really important factor of Ramadan this year. And really every year because that's really what Ramadan is all about, but I think especially at a time like this.



Rimsha Syed 42:40

Right? Yeah. It's kind of crazy to think about how the Muslim community is going into celebrating a second Ramadan during a pandemic. Little did we know that we still would be here. And you're right about - I've seen a lot of mutual aid efforts happening around Texas, where people are getting together in a safe way to make care packages with food and necessities and warm clothing for the unsheltered population, maybe locally. That's been really nice to see and I hope efforts like that continue.



Sarah Elsunni 43:22

Yeah, definitely.



Rimsha Syed 43:25

Okay, well, I do want to take note of the time and make sure we're not running too late today. But before we close out, I was wondering if there was anything else that you think would be good for people to know about you, what makes you who you are or something that we might have glossed over from earlier that you wanted to elaborate on?



Sarah Elsunni 43:48

Give me just one second to think about that.



Rimsha Syed 43:53

Take your time.



Sarah Elsunni 44:37

Yeah. I do feel that I, of course, discussed most of what I wanted to share, but I will close out with one more additional statement. And that is that throughout all of these experiences, the person that those have shaped me into is one that always thinks about how I'm showing up in different spaces, what I'm offering to people, and what sort of impact that I'm leaving people with. That's something that I also urge others to consider and think about for themselves. Because I think, a lot of times, we can cause unintentional harm due to our own lack of self awareness and I don't know that anyone wants to be projecting that out into the world. I think it's our responsibility to sit with ourselves and understand that with all of our identities, and considering who we are, where we come

from - how can we make our human experience more pleasant for those around us? Or how can we try to mitigate some of the harm and trauma that's inflicted in everyday life, just through our actions, through our behaviors, through the way we treat other people, the way we talk to them, the way we acknowledge them?



Sarah Elsunni 46:29

These are things that I'm always constantly thinking about. And although I'm not perfect by any means, I do think that the cynical thought of these holds me accountable and I can always trace back to it and check myself. I genuinely feel that if more of us made an effort to practice that, then this world would feel a little more safe and comfortable to live in.



Rimsha Syed 46:59

I totally agree with you. That was really beautifully said, I'm glad you included that. And I'm also really glad I got to talk to you today and thank you so much for being a part of this project. I am going to go ahead and end the recording now.



Sarah Elsunni 47:18

Thank you so much.