

# Qusay Hussein

April 24, 2019

35:17

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Refugee, Iraq, Arabic, Migration, University of Texas at Austin, Interfaith Action of Central Texas, disability, mental health, Islam, Doctors Without Borders, Jordan, visually impaired, Interfaith Action of Central Texas

## SPEAKERS

Mehlam Bhuriwala, Qusay Hussein



Mehlam Bhuriwala 00:00

Hello, my name is Mehlam Bhuriwala. I am interviewing Qusay Hussein on April 24th, 2019 for the Muslim Voices in Texas Project. Hi, Qusay.



Qusay Hussein 00:10

Hello. My name is Qusay Hussein. I'm here in Austin, Texas and talking about this project.



Mehlam Bhuriwala 00:20

Okay, Qusay, so first I would like you to start by telling us who you are and describing yourself, where you came from, how you got here?



Qusay Hussein 00:31

Well, I'm originally from Iraq. I [got into an] accident [in] 2006 through [a] suicide bomb, and I lost my vision. After that, I moved to Jordan with Doctors Without Borders, and I came to the United States in 2012. I've been here since then.



Mehlam Bhuriwala 00:57

Would you like to talk to us about your experience when you came to the United States, what that was like?



Qusay Hussein 01:05

This is very hard. You know, blind person and then I [did] not speak English or anything and I don't have any relatives or family. It was quite very hard for me beginning, but I know God has been with me all the time. So, I was not afraid from anything since God has been with me.



Mehlam Bhuriwala 01:34

Okay, and before the interview you mentioned that you would probably be talking about Islam a lot because it plays a very big role in your life and how things have happened in your life. So do you want, maybe, to talk about the role of Islam in how your life has gone so far?



Qusay Hussein 01:53

Well, you know, we know that like each person have his religion or she have [her] religion, so, yeah, Islam is part of me and, you know, I love my religion: I practice it, pray, and you know as you are Muslim, too. You know Islam is all about how to love each other and then how to care about each other. It doesn't matter where you come from, what your color is, it just say love the person. So Islam teach us the good faith, to love each other, to love our neighbor, to love our job, even our job. What we can do, how we can do our job honestly. So this [is] what Islam teach us, and teach us how to, to talk with others and how to respect others. So, yeah (laughs).



Mehlam Bhuriwala 02:47

When did you come to Texas?



Qusay Hussein 02:52

I came here 2012.



Mehlam Bhuriwala 02:54

Okay 2000– so you've been in Texas the whole time?



Qusay Hussein 02:56

Yes. It's kind of my home (laughs).



Mehlam Bhuriwala 03:05

How did you feel about Texas when you first got here?



Qusay Hussein 03:08

Well, to be honest with you, I came to Austin, Texas, and you know Austin, Texas has multiple diversity. And I travel quite a lot around the state and opposite side [of] the country. To be honest, I love Austin quite a bit because it is just beautiful. Like, everyone's trying to help you– Yeah, we have this good, good, good diversity here in Austin. So yeah, I get a lot of help from people from different religions, actually. Like Muslim, Christian, Buddhism, whatever you name it. So we are like here like to help each other. So–



Mehlam Bhuriwala 04:00

Okay, so you mentioned that you travel a good amount, right?



Qusay Hussein 04:04

I do (laughs).



Mehlam Bhuriwala 04:05

Do you want to maybe tell us about that a little?



Qusay Hussein 04:06

Well yeah, I'm [a] Motivational Speaker. Thank God, you know, I so far– (unintelligible audio). I have had 60 surgery just on my face because [of] the accident I got. So I found God. I turned this story to the positive, to motivate others to don't give up. I tell people, "Don't give up whatever small thing happen to you."



Qusay Hussein 04:36

So we see that people from any small thing build depression. They lock the door on them[selves]. They don't want to see human[s], they don't want to interact with anyone. So this stuff builds depression. So I travel to university, to different organizations, deal with people with disability and motivate them. I say, "You are capable to do things! Something taken from you? Yes. But God, He gave you an alternate thing to manage it.



Mehlam Bhuriwala 05:07

So how did you get into motivational speaking? How did that happen?



Qusay Hussein 05:11

How I get to motivation? Well, I when I was with Doctors Without Borders, I went to work with them as patient. Six months later, I worked as counselor [for] patients for three years. So I worked quite a bit with different patients. Then I was managing [patients]; like, for example, take him [a patient] every single Friday, take him to the sight-seeing, like Dead Sea, Petra, Aqabah, in Jordan. And I felt [to heal] the patients, you need something to motivate them to do things. Like even to heal the wound, and often above the medicine to be honest. They give them medicine but, when you are comfortable your mind is not thinking about things. Your body releases relief to your wound.



Qusay Hussein 06:07

I give example: one of the Serbian doctors in the 50s, there was not antibiotics. So his patient, when they leave the hospital, they don't get any infection. So people get like, Why? Why his patient does not get infection? [With the] other doctor, they did.



Qusay Hussein 06:25

So they asked him, they did interview – I read it in the news–and said, "What you did to your patient to not they get infected (What did you do to your patients so that they did not get infected?"



Qusay Hussein 06:36

He said, "Well, I do not give any medicine but when a patient comes to me before the surgery and he told me, 'What percentage [chance] I will get infection?"

Q Qusay Hussein 06:48  
"I just answered him 'Zero'."

Q Qusay Hussein 06:51  
So here, the brain starts working on the zero [percent chance] of infection you get. So the patient does not get [an] infection because his brain says, Oh, I will get zero [infection] from this surgery, I will not get an infection.

Q Qusay Hussein 07:05  
So those people, when I was working with them, I just motivated them. And then they went [away] doing well. So I felt this motivation is powerful, the key to let the person go from place to place. Like from the dark to the light.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 07:26  
Okay, wow. When when did you get started with motivational speaking?

Q Qusay Hussein 07:30  
I start, I told you, I spoke in Jordan a lot and when I came here I didn't speak English. So I was speaking Arabic; the first speech was, for me, here in 2013 with Interfaith Action of Central Texas. It was, they had [a] fundraising event. So I spoke there with my English; was it rusty? (laughs But I think I did well and then a lot of people enjoyed my speech.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 08:05  
Did you do anything else for Interfaith Action of Central Texas ?

Q Qusay Hussein 08:09  
Well Interfaith Action of Central Texas, they have a lot, they have a lot of generosity on me. They helped me a lot through classes and through things, so I'm still doing things with them. And then whatever Interfaith Action of Central Texas needs from me, I will give them because they are working tirelessly to help refugees and things. So yeah, we've been working together like send[ing] refugee to them and if somebody needs help, they call me and [I] talk to them. For example, we have three patien- three blind refugees [that] speak

Arabic, so I was able to work with them to get them the resources they want for the disability people.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 09:00

You mentioned that in addition to groups like iACT, there were other groups from a lot of different faiths that also helped you when you first came here. So do you maybe want to talk a little bit more specifically about that and maybe talk about some of the groups that helped you? How they helped you?

**Q** Qusay Hussein 09:19

With Interfaith Action of Central Texas, it's amazing because they go do - they call it the Red Bench. Basically they travel from where the people worship, for example, church or temples or mosque. They go talk there and just get people together, you know. But also a lot of groups help me. The Muslim mosque: a friend of mine, his name is Ahmad. Which, the first time, he took me to the mosque. And then yeah, when I went there for [the] first time, I felt like something comfortable [was] attached to me. So I started going to the mosque to pray and worship and see people, interact with people. And also a lot of people; like it's not, also a lot [of] organizations not Muslim helped me a lot. Yeah, like Christian churches, they helped me a lot as well. So the reason why, at the beginning of my speech, I talk with you, I say, "It's Austin, multiple diversity."

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 10:42

Okay, great. And so it seems like your faith has really helped keep you sort of grounded and stable when you when you came here to the United States at a very difficult time. Is that is that fair to say?

**Q** Qusay Hussein 10:58

Yeah, I agree with you because I never lost hope when I lost my vision. I always prayed to God. And I know I'm a human so [in the] beginning I got mad. [I did] not get mad on God. But I go t mad on what happened to me. But after a few months later, I analyzed; I say, No; if God, He created you with your eyes, and he took it back later, it's okay because already He gifts you. So I just started not blaming God and not blaming anyone. I just felt this is my destiny. So I want to live with it and move on. So God, He [has] been with me all the time, like [by] helping me. And I saw it when I was in Iraq, people in the village I was

living in, when I told them I will go to America, they don't believe I'm going to America. But see? God, He helped me in that right now I'm talking with you and I'm in America. So yeah, the hope and faith help the person to move on.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 12:10

Okay, great. So now I want to talk a little bit, I think we've discussed your your Muslim identity, how you feel about Islam and how you consider yourself a Muslim. I want to talk also a little bit about your Texan identity as well. So do you think you can maybe speak to how you consider yourself a Texan? And how do you think that part of your identity has impacted you?

**Q** Qusay Hussein 12:45

(laughs) You ask me the question, the reason, sorry, I'm laughing [is] because if you go to my YouTube channel it says, "Blind Iraqi Texan. Texan (unintelligible audio) Texan Proud." So yeah, I'm proud of Texas. I'm proud with Austin. Texas [is a] big, big state now and from all over the world. So, I don't know; like even when I think of a speech, I'll give you example, I gave a speech in Florida. So I was waiting from the hotel to get the taxi to go back to the airport. So one lady, she come talk to me. She say, "Hello, how are you?" And then I speak with her. And she said, "I know where you're from." So I was like, What's she talking about? She said, "You're from Texas." I said, "How come?" She said "Because you said 'y'all.'"

**Q** Qusay Hussein 13:41

(laughs) So I think Texas is a part of me. And I love Texas and I hope in the future, I will give back to Texas a lot.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 13:54

Okay, did you always feel that way about Texas? Or was, did it go through a little bit of changes, or some change as you lived here from 2012 till now 2019?

**Q** Qusay Hussein 14:13

Can you say that again one more time?

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 14:14

So do you think that how you feel about Texas and your Texan identity, has it always been like that? Or do you feel like it changed over time?

Q

Qusay Hussein 14:25

I think it's been changed over time. To the good way, I think. We're not talking about [one] person here. Correct? We talk about the whole people here because if you talk about [one] person it's changed to the bad a little bit, you know what I'm saying? It's like, going back, about refugees, stuff like that. Texas [is] not receiving refugees. Like, they're receiving but they don't give any benefit to the refugees. For example, like Medicaid or food stamps. But people here in Texas, they are always advocating for people's rights, people's religion. And then our Constitution, it says, You all have to practice your religion, you practice the freedom of speech. So I think, let me phrase this [in] one sentence: if you look on Texas individually, you will be a little bit bad. But if you look on it as a group? No, we are moving on and I don't think small things make the Texan people change or they change their mind too negative. So always, we are looking forward to the future.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 15:47

Do you think that the presence of people like you and other refugees or the Muslims in general? Do you think that is part of the change of Texas? Do you think that is help[ing] causing this change that you're talking about?

Q

Qusay Hussein 16:02

Yes, I think because, you know, I think a lot of people live in propaganda in the US. So if you are just watching TV, and then you look at the news, blah, blah, blah, about Islamic stuff like that, but you never met a Muslim person, you don't know. I'll give you [an] example: I was invited for a birthday celebration. And one person he was sitting with me in a table. He's like, 50, like 50 [year] old guy. And my friend, he was sitting next to me. So we kinda opened religion stuff. So he started talking about Islam, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, like, you know, Islam not good. Anyway, so I was quiet all the time. I didn't interrupt him or talk to him until he finished his thoughts.

Q

Qusay Hussein 17:05

I say, "Did you meet any? Like, you've never met a Muslim?" He said, "No, but I hear the news!" So I say, "Do you know what the prophet Muhammad – peace be upon him –



before he died, what he told to his neighbor – to his people? He said, "What [did] he say?" I say, "Because his neighbor was not Muslim, he said, 'Oh, my people take care of my neighbor.'" So he said, "He said that?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Why say that? You are a Muslim?" I say "Yeah, I am Muslim." He said, "Oh my god! I spoke all the bad things and then you [were] quiet. You didn't interrupt me or fight with me!" I say, "Yeah, but I wanted just to see where you [were] going."

Q

Qusay Hussein 17:42

And then he stands up and comes [to] hug me. He say, "Yes, this is the true Islam, I'm going to – this is what I – right now, I saw the true Islam. Because I'm not going to listen to the news," he said, "anymore."

Q

Qusay Hussein 17:54

Because people don't know what Islam [is] and I told you in the Qur'an that it says, "Love each other." So we love each other. We don't care for stupid, "This is ISIS", then diminish the picture of Muslims; they are not Muslim, and then they don't– they are not related to Islam at all.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 18:16

Wow, that that's a great story. Great story. So can you think of any other times, while you've been here in Texas, that you have sort of come into contact with people that maybe don't agree with Muslims being here in Texas or don't believe that Islam is a peaceful religion, or have some of these misinformed views about Muslims and Islam? Have you come into contact with people that believe in that kind of thing? In other ways as well?

Q

Qusay Hussein 18:56

To be honest, I did not. I did not personally. I always see nice people and most of the people [that] I talk to them I do not see they have a problem with that. But sometimes, you know, I told you– we go back to the news, some people, they don't have any, any idea. Because what they see is just the news and, you know, media stuff. So they think, Whatever happens is [a] true Muslim. But I didn't see [it], and, sometimes, we will have a misconception about Islam, about how we treat women and how–so sometimes I have discussions. I tell them, "No, this is not what you hear. Women have rights, and the Prophet Muhammad–peace be upon him–before he died, he said, "Halla, Halla, bil Qawariyyat." It

means, "Be careful with women." So he, he said, "Be careful with women." Like, take care of them. They are very, very gelen- very, how you say, what is it called when you touch something very soon to broke? What do you call it?

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 20:16

Gentle.

**Q** Qusay Hussein 20:17

Gentle! They are very gentle! So be careful with them. So this is how Islam teaches us. As we see woman Muslim, I think-yeah, how they are at home, we must (unintelligible). When you enter your house, you say hi to your family. So I think he taught us a lot, people who understand Islam, not to interpret it as, Well, it's very extreme. Oh, no, you must do that. No! Islam is very peaceful. And then you need to interpret [it] to yourself in a good way instead [of] very extreme as well.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 21:04

Okay, great. Thank you so much. I think I want to talk now about-so you mentioned before the interview, that you're you're working on a few different things right now, at this time in your life. You know, you're you're studying here [in the States] in college. You want to talk about that?

**Q** Qusay Hussein 21:22

Well, I'm a stud-I'm at UT [University of Texas].

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 21:24

I mean at ACC [Austin Community College], right?

**Q** Qusay Hussein 21:27

Well yeah, but I'm coming here for tutoring. But I am studying at UT.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 21:33

Okay.



Qusay Hussein 21:33

I'm a psychology major. And also social work as well. Dual degree I'm doing, but the reason why I'm here—you mentioned that—I love ACC personally, because ACC gave me a lot before I went to UT, I learned most [of] my English at ACC, and I finished my associate's [degree] with ACC. So I always loved the place and as you see this room was for me. So this is good time. I came here, studied, and if I needed help, I called the tutor. They helped me. So yeah, the reason why I love ACC. (laughs)



Qusay Hussein 22:18

Is it strange? Correct. But when I love a place, I always try to go back and give back to them as well. Like, I always try not to forget them. Even people who did good with me, I always call or email. I say, "Hey, I just want to say hi to you." So this is part of me. I don't know, I never forget someone who did good for me, a thing. Even [if] I forget for a few months, at least I will remember. I call or text message. And I say, "Hey, I just want to say hi and see how is you doing?"



Mehlam Bhuriwala 22:57

So when when did you start studying at UT?



Qusay Hussein 22:59

last year?



Mehlam Bhuriwala 23:01

How do you—what is your experience at UT been so far?



Qusay Hussein 23:04

Well, to be honest, it's good. It's good. It's kind of a little bit difficult. Part of it is because [the campus is] so big to travel between building and building, because I'm visually impaired. But I'm learning. I'm learning and [what is] difficult will come easy, God willing, little by little. I've been enjoying, the people there is good. Summer professors, they are wonderful. Been working with me. And yeah, I've been enjoying it. I'm part of some

organizations. Like for people with disabilities there or Doctors Without Borders chapter. So yeah.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 23:53

So do you feel like you have gotten the same kind of academic support that you got here [ACC]? Because you mentioned that they helped you with English and everything here, do you feel like you've gotten that kind of support since you started school at UT as well?

Q

Qusay Hussein 24:09

I could not say yes or could not say no. Which is—I know it's not an answer. But I feel, I felt—personally, this is just my opinion—I felt that tutoring, helping at ACC is more more useful than [at] UT. Because as a visually impaired person, I need more time. You cannot just [give me] half an hour. And then, just that—I need more. Somebody explaining to me. And I'm tactile. You know, I like touching things to understand it. Here at ECC, they give you time, whatever hour [of the day] you need. And then they don't tell you "No." But at UT you must do it online. Register it [a tutoring session] in one week to get the appointment. So I feel this is more challenging for me personally—this is just my opinion, by the way. But besides that, summer professors—I told you—they are very wonderful. And even I did a documentary with two of them, because I really love them. So I did [a] documentary with them.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 25:24

And so do you also feel the same— I guess I was wondering what your opinion is on—you mentioned earlier that sometimes it can be a little bit difficult to move from building to building a UT. So do you think that you've gotten the same kind of support in terms of your disability and assisting with that and kind of making things easier in that way too, here at UT?

Q

Qusay Hussein 25:50

This is not to—this is [a] mobility thing. If you compare it to ACC, it's different because ACC is just not as large as UT. So it's easy here to navigate because it's a smaller place. But at UT you see each department, they have many buildings and this makes it a little bit difficult. It's not [that] disability can't help you with that it's just [that] you need more timing and then [the] mobility technique to move from place to place. And then also, to be honest with you, do not also forget—there, the student is wonderful as well. Like when I

will walk from buildings, they always come to me saying, "Do you need help?" So I ask them, "This is [the] right direction? I'm heading to this building." So they help me too. So it's been getting there. (laughs)

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 26:45

Good, I'm glad to hear that there are students stopping and helping you—

**Q** Qusay Hussein 26:49

Yeah. No, to be honest, the student is the most wonderful there. It's very helpful.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 26:56

So I want to talk a little bit about what you're studying in particular. You said that you're studying—

**Q** Qusay Hussein 27:02

Psychology.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 27:03

Psychology and sociology?

**Q** Qusay Hussein 27:05

Social work.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 27:05

Social work. So what made you decide to study those things?

**Q** Qusay Hussein 27:11

Good question. So before my incident in 2006, I was studying plastic surgery. When you lose your vision, I could still study plastic surgery but I could just teach it, not practice it. So I told myself, No, I want to do something more useful to other people. So I switched it to

psychology and I'm going to study psychology. But also I found out social work—the thing, the information missing from psychology you find in social work. So I added the degree because—I told you— something [was] missing from psychology. So they complete [it] in social, complete the degree for you or the information you want to help your patients and to help yourself as well. To understand not just to study one direction, you study both directions and to see which one [is] useful to help your clients.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 28:18

And so is that what you would say is missing from psychology or—

**Q** Qusay Hussein 28:22

It's not missing, it's just—for me, it's just psychology is more broad and social work is more narrow: the idea, what you need to do. So I feel like psychology is the field, and social work, it gives you more—how do you say it—in different fields, you could work. You could work in a clinic or you could work in refugee services—maybe your coworkers there, or you do an internship there, or you could work with refugee—it gives you more, more resources or more opportunities to work with other people.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 29:08

Is that what you want to do after you're done with your schooling? Is—

**Q** Qusay Hussein 29:11

My goal is to become a doctor in psychology. So yeah, I'm working ,hopefully, to get my doctorate from UT. It's still early but this is my hope and my goal. Hope and goal come together, God willing, and—

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 29:29

God willing.

**Q** Qusay Hussein 29:30

They will accomplish it.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 29:35

And with that doctorate [degree], is there a particular group of people that you want to help? Or is there something specific that you want to do with once you have those degrees?

**Q** Qusay Hussein 29:47

Well, to be honest, I—not a specific group, I want to have each one each person who wants help, who wants the help. So I would love to help everyone who needs help, even not just treating it: for example in talking. Because a lot of people, right now we see social issues. And then if you have social issues, this is when you start to build depression and anxiety because you don't have interaction with others. And then the other part of it is the technology right now: if you sit with me, or you go to a restaurant, you see people playing with their phone instead of communicating with the person who comes to them at the restaurant or cafe or at home! Many people talking to their parents, or to their wife, or to the (unintelligible), they play with their phone! Without facing the person and talking to them.

**Q** Qusay Hussein 30:43

With my degree, I want to help everyone who needs help and, [to be] specific, also people with disabilities because we have a lot of stigma about people with disabilities. And I want to remove this stigma about people with disabilities. Because some people, they think that a person with a disability [is] not capable to do things, which is—this is very wrong. We are capable to accomplish things. There are many doctors, they are blind or they have wheelchairs or whatever disability they have. They were able to get there and become great people. So I just want to remove this idea of the stigma about people with disabilities.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 31:30

Okay, great. I think that was a great answer. I want to ask one more question. And then after that, if that's okay with you, unless you feel like there's more you want to say, then I think maybe we can wrap this interview up?

**Q** Qusay Hussein 31:44

Sure.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 31:45

So you mentioned—in your last answer, the stigma I think brings up a good point in that I want to give you an opportunity to, without any stigma or any sort of outside perception or definitions, to describe who you are. Who would you say Qusay Hussain is without any sort of outside stigma changing that?

Q Qusay Hussein 32:22

Qusay Hussein, he's the person, I think, that the death called him but he rejected. I rejected to die. Also, to go back to God, He has a purpose for me and—I told you—I went in a coma for twelve days. So Qusay Hussein is a person who wanted to help others, the people who do not have hope. Qusay Hussein will be there for them. It's not to brag for that but this is true. I've been helping people [who] even I don't know who they are. But when they called me or they need anything—I'm talking about outside the country, actually. They call me on—you know, right now we have, thank God—technology to make us very close. From overseas they could call you. The reason why I'm talking technology, about using it, like a social link it's not that. But I'm talking about people—how the technology makes us very close. Before [technology], you sent a letter to your family, [it could] maybe take weeks or months to arrive. Right now, just like— (phone rings). Sorry.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 33:33

No problem.

Q Qusay Hussein 33:39

So people call me, "Qusay, this is what we feel." People with disability or people without disability. I give them how much I can to help them to go out from there, the situation they are into. So Qusay Hussein—I just hope everyone loves each other. And they do not care about the color or the ancestry, where you come from, care about the inside of the person, how the heart [is]. Care about how we can be useful to the world, to your family, to your friends, to your wife, to your husband. Be useful because God created us in a beautiful image. In [Surah al-Tin] Wateen e wa Zaytoon, He says, Wa Khalakna al-insan fi aHsan e taQweem, "We created the human in a beautiful image." So when He says "beautiful image" it does not mean your color, the face of your color, you're black or you're white or you're brown. No, He said, "I gave you a brain, I gave you eyes, I gave you a mouth, I gave you a nose." So this is the beautiful image. Other species, they don't have it. We are thinking; He gives you the piece of the brain, [but] it is up to you to fill it with dirt, or fill it up with the negative ideas or something, or to make it shiny and let people see you, who



you are, and how you can help others. This is Qusay Hussein.