

Shakeel Rahsed

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SPEAKERS

Shakeel Rashed, Tiffany Puett



Tiffany Puett 00:02

This is Tiffany Puett and I am interviewing Shakeel Rashed. It is July 30, 2019 and this is for the Muslim Voices in Texas Oral History Project. So, the first question I'd like to ask you is just about your story, your life history. Just tell me about your background - where, how you grew up, any kind of defining moments and what makes you you?



Shakeel Rashed 00:37

Absolutely. So, when I think about my life, I kind of think about prior to coming to America, which was 1991. It was August 1991 and life after coming to the USA. I came here as a grad student to George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Of course, I had lots of other choices, but for some reason, Washington D.C. appealed to me. It was more of a choice about the city than the choice about the university. So, that was one of the instances that I defined my life as part of that. If we go back prior to that, I was born and raised in a city called Hyderabad, India. This is one of the lesser known cities of India. Most people when they think about India think about Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, which used to be called Madras or Calcutta. If they're in the tech area, they would think about Bangalore, which are four or five more well known cities of India. Hyderabad is pretty unique as one of the cities right after Bangalore and now most people associate that as the second IT city. Growing up in Hyderabad - it's very unique as a background - one of the few cities that has a Muslim majority in India. That's actually one of the reasons I think there is some sense of confidence that a lot of Indian Muslims may not have that Hyderabad Muslims

will always have.

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Shakeel Rashed 02:45

So, overall, if you think about Hyderabad, a city, which it was actually a city state, prior to 1948, Hyderabad was a completely different kingdom. Altogether recognized as itself, not part of India. The ruler of Hyderabad was considered one of the richest guys in the world at one time. So, all the heritage and the history that comes with being part of Hyderabad is fairly important for me. The other part of my childhood that really defines - and I'm actually wearing a tee shirt to specify that right now - is my school.

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Shakeel Rashed 03:31

I've been to a school run by a Catholic brotherhood. This is very common in India. Most of the good schools are run by some church related organizations. That's a heritage from the British India that was there. A lot of the good schools ended up being run by various church groups. So I grew up in Hyderabad, which, like I said, had a Muslim majority, went to a Catholic-run school run by very strict brothers, no nuns. And then most of my friends who I grew up with happened to be Hindus. Again, that's one of the ways of thinking about India is a Hindu majority state, with pockets of places with various different faiths, right? So Hyderabad as such is one of those places that has all of these things combined.

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Shakeel Rashed 04:39

You mentioned something earlier, when we were just chatting about secular places. Our definition coming from India, for secular is respecting each other's faith, rather than no faith, or ignoring faith. It took me some time to get used to the word secular in the West. In the west, [it's] more ignoring of the faith rather than respecting each others' faith. In India, we use the word secular - now it's getting more of the Western style definition - but in India, we always meant secular to be respecting everybody's faith. Growing up, we celebrated all the holidays, whether it was Hindu festivals. I actually still do when it's Holi during spring. Every year, me and my family still go to one of the Hindu temples and enjoy the festival there. When it's Diwali, which is another big festival - Hindus, we celebrate that too, along with our friends. I've been comfortable going to a church for Christmas mass at early from my age.

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Shakeel Rashed 06:12

Then of course, at home we had Islamic teachings, right? So my grandfather from my mother's side, used to actually give us marks for going to the five daily prayers. He would

actually specify to the kids saying, "Today, you got full marks because you went to all of these prayers, so and so didn't because they didn't go to that" So, that's something that you grow up with when you're growing up in India, you definitely grow within your own family and community focusing on that religion and then you have friends who follow another religion. But, also, when you are traveling on the roads there, religion is everywhere. There are temples everywhere. There are loud speakers going out everywhere, with different religions and everything. And then there are school and friends as well. So, I think that's one of the things that you think about when growing up, but it's also one of those things where it's there everywhere. [At the same time], it's also something you start ignoring as you grow up. It's one of those things that you take for granted [because] it's everywhere. So, you start taking it for granted.

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Shakeel Rashed 07:43

I mentioned my grandfather, but other than my grandfather, not a lot of my other family was so religious. So, not every decision of your life is based on religion, right? People have religious beliefs to a spectrum. Some people would define a lot of their life and decisions based on their religious beliefs. Some people do it for the ritual sake. Some people are somewhere in the middle, right? So what I would refer to myself, as somebody who went to Friday prayer, regularly, out of a sense of ritual and rest of my life was, "Okay, that's not the most important part of our lives." We actually grew up that way, that, "Yes, we were Muslim," but we also didn't make every bit of our decisions based on that. We did it more out of where we were and everything else.

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Shakeel Rashed 09:02

And then another part of my life other than my childhood - my mother has been a great influence for me. She was more of the intellectual type. She was a part of the poetry circles and literary circles. The people in those circles didn't look at people in the religious circles as somebody lower in intellect. The idea was that, in India, literature and all of those things have a greater intellectual level and deep thought and poetry versus people who go to the mosque regularly and just pray and come back. So, there was definitely an intellectual versus regular guy kind of thing, and my mom actually believed that she had gone beyond some of these things. She used to look down upon people who did the burqa, the veil. She actually was very against people wearing veils back when I was growing up as a child. Later on, she actually started wearing one herself out of various different scenarios later on. But when I was as a young child growing up, I didn't think that much about people who were conservative. To me, that was like, "Okay, those are not so smart people." But that's one of the influences that we had when we were growing up. So, that defines some of the things that I came to U.S for.

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Shakeel Rashed 11:42

The perception outside of the US, people don't think about Western society as being very religious, right? They don't. Most of the people don't associate religion and Western societies very much. I was twenty-one when I came to this country, I actually was surprised at how important religion was to people here. One of the things that I was really surprised about when I came here was that to everybody, my identity as a Muslim was more important than anything else and that kind of surprised me a little bit because I always thought of myself from an educational point of view, as an engineer, as a technical person, as all kinds of things, but somehow the identity of being Muslim was something that I hadn't thought a lot about before coming to the U.S. Again, as I said, if you're in India, there is no ignoring of religion, it's everywhere. But it's also one of those things that we take for granted, and we don't put that as our identity. We might put it as Indian. We might put it as Hyderabadi, but we don't put Muslim or Hindu or Christian label on ourselves that clearly. But when I came to US, that label became more important for others.

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Shakeel Rashed 13:54

I had a really close friend - and we have been friends for 20 plus years. He grew up in Germany and his question to me was, "Why are Muslims so fatalistic?" And I'm like, "What do you mean?" Then I had to actually look up the meaning of the word fatalistic and I understood what he was asking. I had to think about it because when he asked the question, initially, I was like, "No, Muslims are no more fatalistic than any other people. I don't think that's true." But then he gave me examples and then I thought about it a little bit. I went back, looked up to meaning, I thought about it a little bit, and yes, Muslims are fatalistic. There is a reason for that. We have that belief that there are things that happen that we control and then there are things that we don't control. And sometimes people can attribute more to the things that they can't control. And sometimes they do it more than what is required and that's where the fatalism comes into the picture.

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Shakeel Rashed 15:29

So, that's one of the questions that truly helped me initially, to start seeing some of these things because of what some of the other people said. So I think coming out of India, and coming to U.S., kind of helped define that identity, not just by your own self, but also how other people saw who I was, right? So again, a lot of things don't get defined in India versus they get more defined here. Growing up in Hyderabad, I never thought too much about the color of my skin. But here, it became very obvious. I was darker than most people. Actually, in D.C. some of the African American guys would come and compare their skin with mine. So, those are things that would not have been obvious back, back in India versus what was here.

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Shakeel Rashed 16:44

But then again, in the US, we were so focused on, "We are new to this country and we have to do well and do other things," and all of that. So, that focus became what continued on with the regular life style. Work was more important than anything else. But more and more, you started getting defined as a Muslim. Even in my early US days, I think my most association used to be the same thing that I did in India, - [going] to Friday prayers - that was my association with being a Muslim. But the other thing is in India that was very easy. You went to the mosque, you got out and you went back home. Here, the mosque is more than just a place for praying. It's also the community that you're part of. That's where it starts becoming a little bit more about being a Muslim. I'm going to stop and see if you want to jump to the next question. But does that give you a good idea about the life and background?

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Tiffany Puett 18:20

Yeah, yeah. Okay, that's great. Yeah. So, my next question was just to ask you to talk a bit about your Muslim identity, which you have already been talking about. It's very interesting to hear you talk about kind of how that shifted with your move for graduate school. So, can you say more about that evolved?

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Shakeel Rashed 18:42

Absolutely. So, again, like I said, during grad school, I started associating more with Muslims, and again, going with Friday prayers and everything else. But like I said, In the U.S, it's not just about going to prayers and getting out, it was also the community that you hung out with. So, if you're fasting during Ramadan, you're generally with the community and you're part of that. Other things start coming into the picture with that. So, starts becoming us versus them at some point, which is one of the things that I always did not like. So, I pulled myself out of those type of environments most of the time. But then of course, you have that feeling for Fridays, "I have to go to prayers." So, you still want to be involved.

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Shakeel Rashed 19:35

In the early 90s, one of the big problems in the world was what was happening in Europe - Bosnia and all of that area. There were some protests that were happening. During that time, being in Washington, D.C, you always got involved with things like that. Of course, a lot of people would say, "Hey, don't be so active about these kind of things." But I've

always been a fairly social person. I've always looked at causes whether good, bad or ugly. Even back in India, I had a little bit of political involvement, going to protests and all of that. One of the things for me was getting involved with the protests that were helping Boston Muslims. Again, there are things that make you part of the Muslim community and make you more visible to others as being part of the Muslim community. So, [at the time], in D.C. I was going to these protests, marches and all of those things. Some of the people would advise me saying, "You are a student, why are you doing these kinds of things?" I just looked at them and said, "This is me. This is what I want to do. And at some point, if it gets overwhelming, or something, I'll go back off." So, again, always giving more priority to education, more priority to all the other things that are required.

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Shakeel Rashed 21:31

After graduating from D.C., I moved to New Jersey area for my job. One of the things that happens within our community is that we associate closely with other people just like us. So, when I went to New Jersey, the easiest thing for me to do as a student who couldn't afford my own apartment, was to rent out a small room and one of the rooms available there was with the mosque in New Jersey. I was like, "Okay." It was pretty strange for me, but I actually lived and rented a place in a mosque when I first moved to a place called Boonton, New Jersey. Again, this is another kind of thing that starts you thinking about how, "This is it, this is your community, right." Even at that stage, I kind of tried to keep myself not too coupled with the mosque. So, I would actually just not be there, and just go there for sleeping and maybe a few events here and there.

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Shakeel Rashed 22:59

But as you get more and more into the U.S. community, you start forgetting about your Indian identity and you start hanging out more with your Muslim identity. You'll see that an Indian Muslim will probably have more local Pakistani friends here locally than their regular old Indian friends. Because the circles get divided once you get here because most of the other faiths are now congregating around their faith or their cultural activities or something that is related to their thing. Muslims are congregating in the mosque or Islamic centers or things like that. So, you kind of get that separation. So, you'll see more Indian Muslims having Pakistani friends than Indian friends because that's how the social structures start going through.

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Shakeel Rashed 24:09

Then of course, the question of marriage comes up. Marriage always again, among the Indian community, parents are very involved. I got introduced to my wife, went back to

India, got married to her. One of the criteria that I was actually quite comfortable about was the fact that I did not want to marry a very conservative person. My mom was okay with that. That's how I met my wife, who was part of the advertising community in India, she was a copywriter for various social causes. So, that was pretty wonderful. We came up here and came back to U.S. Again, the the social circles is what defines a Muslim. We did have non-Muslim friends, but every Friday, of course, we go to the mosque. That's our central thing about being a Muslim is that Friday connection to the mosque, kind of like this Sunday connection with the Christians or Saturday with the Jewish folks and everything. So that's our connection, right?

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Shakeel Rashed 25:22

We had kids later on. One of the themes that happen as kids grow up is then you start thinking about their identities. And you want to give them that identity of a Muslim, a good Muslim. So, you start getting more associated with mosque and activities again, or hanging around with more friends who have Muslim kids and sending them to Sunday school, and all of that. But again, one of the things that you would see with my own - I actually did not associate with one mosque for a pretty long time. Even though I lived in one, I would go to other places, and not be associated just with one type of a place. Somehow, I didn't feel comfortable enough where I could say, "This is the only one that I want to be associated with."

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Shakeel Rashed 26:36

Not until my 30s, I met some of my senior friends from Hyderabad again. We founded startup together, they were a little bit more conservative and more religious than I am. I don't use that, not anymore - like I was talking about my mom - intellectual versus conservative. I use that more today as people who follow the rituals, people who are very regular with their prayers, people who have that definition, their decisions are based on a faith framework more than my own. I think that was my turning point. Actually, that was where I started feeling more comfortable being associated - seen as being part of a very close Muslim group. So, we founded a company called Olive Systems in Dallas. Most of our definitions, even as a company, we would take decisions based on our faith. Even when we had a need for taking a loan - as a board, we decided that we don't want to take a low interest based one. Again, in the Islamic faith, interest based loans are seen as bad, right, it's seen as usury. Now, personally, on my own personal side, I have a home and I had a mortgage all of those things. But for the company along with these friends of mine, we did not want to do that. Right. So, that's what I call where your decisions are now based on very much a faith framework. I was comfortable with that. I was hanging out 24/7 with this group. I was learning a lot myself about the religion.

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Shakeel Rashed 29:08

Now, spirituality wise, personally, I do a lot of reading. So I've done a lot of reading on my own faith as well as other faiths. So, like I said, I grew up in Catholic school, I've read the Bible a few times. I've read the Bhagavad Gita, which is the Hindu holy book. I've read other theological books. I have personally spent - this is a little later in my life, but I've actually spent 10 days in a retreat in a Buddhist monastery. So, from a point of spirituality, I have invested my time and energy into that search - the quest. But as a comfortable Muslim, I think I felt very comfortable with my all of Olive Systems Group, which kind of helped me not be judgmental of people who may just follow one thing, and they do one thing that's that's all they believe in everything else. Maybe I had, like from my mother's side, I had grown up with some judgment about that. But during my Olive Systems days, is where I gave that up. I was dealing with people who were - so, one of the members of the Olive Systems team was a very high ranking official from Sun Microsystems, and one of their top salesman at Sun Microsystems - and this guy was one of the most balanced people I knew, who had all of his fundamentals really clear about religion and practical life. Right. So, he became a really close friend of mine, he helped me in terms of "Yes, there are always doubts, they're always questions. And then all of these things are fine. All the questions and all the things a lot of people go through," that he can help me through some of those myself. But I think that was my turning point of being more Muslim. During my early 30s, I spent time in a startup, which was completely defined by people who were following the faith really closely.

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Shakeel Rashed 31:53

This is the time I just moved to Texas, I moved to Texas in 1998, initially started in Dallas, and then came to Austin in '99, with a company called Trilogy here, and then founded my own company in 2000 with this group of friends. We kept that going until about the 9/11 time frame. Afterwards, the whole tech scene tanked, so we had to give that up and move on. But those years kind of helped me get a little bit more comfortable with my Muslim identity. I was involved a little bit with the Lewisville mosque during that time - because of the other people who were part of the group - Lewisville is a suburb of Dallas - that was at that time. After we closed on that startup, I went back to my consulting [and there was] a lot of travel - again, that whole identity of [a] business[man] - went back to my regular self and normal - [I] didn't get too involved with any other mosque after that. I sent one of my kids to Sunday school, and I saw that their definitions didn't really match with mine. So I kind of pulled her out and kind and taught them at home. Both of my kids have been taught by me, not going to a Sunday school, and everything. They have learned the Qur'an from me, they've learned the basic principles from me - I wouldn't say they're super religious, but that's something that we want to give them the choice of anyway. Let them define their identities as they grow up.

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Shakeel Rashed 33:55

So, that's where we were. Then about 2011 - the area that we live in, Steiner Ranch, had these fires. A few of the homes were burned down. And one of the things - and again most of the time, you're Muslim within a social identity. So, as Muslims within Steiner Ranch - we were about 10-12 families - why don't we raise some funds and help some people who had their houses burned? That idea came up just after the 2011 fires, and because I'm involved with lots of other people - so, one of the things that happens with a lot of people from the subcontinent, within India, Pakistan, Bangladesh - they socialize mostly within their own groups. One thing about me and my family is we have been social, whether it is with our folks, neighbors, everybody else - we are very neighborly folks, right? So, we knew more people within the Steiner Ranch community. So, I was basically told, "Hey, why don't you collect and then you figure out where this money goes?" I got together with one of our neighbors who was running a tiny church related group helping our these fire victims. We donated to them as well as the Steiner Ranch Steakhouse people. That made it into a group that did something. We did an action - something good. We took our kids to go clean up the homes that were burned down in Steiner Ranch. So, me my daughter, some of the other friends' daughters - all of us, we went down and cleaned these places, we picked up pieces. Of course, those kind of things really affect you. When you see these people having their full regular lives, the things that you value - the China, the pictures, all the beautiful cards - scattered that aren't burned completely right - that kind of shakes you up a little bit. So, that is what got this group together, within Steiner Ranch. And we were like, "Hey, we actually did something good." We collected close to \$3,000 within that small group and we donated to part of it to Steiner Ranch and they actually matched those funds - so that got doubled. And then through this another small church group - that went into other places, too. So that kind of helped us define, "There is this little community that can take action."

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Shakeel Rashed 37:36

Within a few months of that incident, we started talking about, "Hey we don't really have a mosque nearby Steiner Ranch." The closest one we had - people would go to the main mosque on Lamar and Braker, which is quite far. The one in the south is considered very conservative, so not many people want to be associated with with them. It's like one of those stricter mosques. So, when women would go there for Friday prayers, if they're not fully covered, somebody would actually pop in and tell them that they are not doing the right thing. So, people don't feel comfortable about that, especially my wife. We didn't really associate with that. The other closest would be Brushy Creek or somewhere over there, which again, is a little bit off, right. A few of the friends within our neighborhood were pushing for this and we liked that idea. We felt comfortable with the group, especially after what we had done after the Steiner Ranch fires. We felt like this is a group, most of them are professionals, doctors, not

the super conservative, but people who believe and have faith as that underlying principle. They all want the same thing. Their kids are about the same age as ours, they all go to public schools, or some are sent to Islamic schools. So, we kind of felt like, "Hey this is a comfortable community. We can work with that."

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Shakeel Rashed 39:14

In general, I have this habit of if I'm involved with a group, I get more involved with the management, or leadership of the group. I can't stay a passive member of the group. So, I kind of took more ownership of this group, along with two other gentlemen who are actually much more involved with this project than I am - Dr. Junaid Siddiqui and Dr. Rahman Siddiqui - I have requested both of them to come and talk to you all. Again, it's more of a comfort level type of feeling. We started getting more involved with ICLT [Islamic Center of Lake Travis]. Suddenly, this became real. Initially, I didn't even think that it would become real. I did not think that it would become real so quickly. We had our first fundraiser and we collected a decent amount of money and I'm like, "Really, this is happening." But that's what it took -we slowly built through that, between three of us and also some of the other members who were helping us. We started looking for a venue to build this mosque. We went through a few scenarios on that. Finally, found where now ICLT is built. We felt fairly comfortable with that place. We knew it's a industrial area, lots of mobile homes and everything around that space. But one, we felt it was fairly inexpensive place to start, and we were getting a pretty decent piece of land - fairly flat. So, we felt fairly comfortable about it and we went ahead and got started.

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Tiffany Puett 40:45

Did you already have an imam in mind when you got started?

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Shakeel Rashed 41:36

We did not. When we started off this mosque - again, these are things that you start thinking about later on. Initially, the idea was - let's build a place. Some of the members just wanted to get started with a portable, which is what a lot of other mosques got started off as. But somehow, we had this feeling that we didn't want to start that way, we want to actually build a place, we want to have a nice place all of that.

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Shakeel Rashed 42:11

So, we have a 17 member advisory group for this. So, with all of this, there is a lot of work involved. We finally got the permits in 2015, started constructing in 2016, January of 2017. It was a Saturday morning, I believe [it was] January 7th. One of the things that

happens when you're building something, you get attached to the place. My phone has lots of pictures of the full construction phase. Again, this is one of the things that happens when trying to build a new place. I did not identify with one place completely - and we were building this place - so, I became one of those guys who takes pictures of every stage of the place.

T Tiffany Puett 43:19
It's like your baby.

S Shakeel Rashed 43:21
It becomes like that, right? So, every time I would visit, I would take pictures. Among the group, I am a little bit more social media savvy. I'm a little bit more savvy in writing about things. Also, I have a little bit more time than some of the other members within the group. They're all really busy doctors or other members within the group. So, I have a little bit more time, so I tend to be more involved with the place. So, I took a lot of pictures and everything else, as I went through that process. Then January 7th, 2017, early morning, we got a call from our builder to come to the site saying, "There's a fire at the site." Me and Dr. Rahman Siddiqui, by that time it was pretty much gone. It was like completely gone. And it was getting close to the end. It was January, we were hoping it would end by March, April and we would start in May. We saw the whole place and boom, it was all gone. It was just the a few steel structures remaining out of that place.

S Shakeel Rashed 44:49
So, that was pretty - [laughs] - like you said, it was our baby. That was what we were really looking forward to during that time. And, of course, this came right after the elections and everything else. So, it was kind of a confusing stage for everybody in our life, right. I think most of us were very comfortable and we never thought something like that would happen in Austin. Again, I still don't believe it was nefarious or whatever because I believe in Austin we have always been very welcomed and we felt very comfortable about building that place and everything else. But it did happen.

T Tiffany Puett 45:35
Can you say a little bit about - some believe it was nefarious and some said it was never really proven?

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Shakeel Rashed 45:41

Yeah, I can definitely talk about that. So, when that happened, based on the current environment of January 2017, immediately after the elections, and the elections were very polarizing to people - and that was the start of Muslim ban and everything else. The immediate response from some of the community members was that this was an arson. Now, some of these members they're not so involved in the community, but they already put things on social media, saying, "This is arson. Somebody burned this down," all of those things. [Within] the advisory board - there were also some members who still believe it was an arson - but because it was not proved - and one of the things in the executive committee, which is me, Dr. Junaid Siddiqui, and Dr. Rahman Siddiqui - we kind of decided that, "Hey we don't to put this out as an arson because we want to work closely with the Austin Fire Department. We want to work closely with the police and we want to see what's going on. There was also a unit from the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms group, I think they were more thinking that this was this actually arson. But between Austin Fire Department, Travis County, Austin PD and the FBI - they decided that this wasn't an arson.

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Tiffany Puett 47:44

Had there been any kind of negative - I mean, had you had any other things before that?

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Shakeel Rashed 47:50

There was one incident where somebody had put on graffiti while the construction was going on. But the graffiti was more guns, there was one swastika sign also on it. But again, we thought that was the extent it was and nothing more than that. So, there were signs of that, but we didn't want to take it in that direction. Also, one of the things that the three of us decided was the fact that it happened. What we had to think about was, "What is our reaction to it." And if we say, "This is an arson," we are starting with negativity and hate, and we did not want to do that. We wanted to take this as a positive thing.

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Shakeel Rashed 49:03

Going through this process, one of the things that got decided was Dr. Junaid Siddiqui would be our spokesperson for all of the media and everybody else. But unfortunately, he's was really busy. So, that fell on me. So, you will see all of the recordings right after our incident, where I say, "Look, we do not want to go at this from any negative point of view. It happened. It already happened, whether this was an arson or whether it was accidental, whatever it was - it happened." What we want to tell people is that, "Because of what happened, it also brought a lot of love to the community." There are

basically churches, synagogues, multiple organizations that got together immediately in our support after that. People did not even know that we were building a mosque before that. So, we got a lot of community support out of this. And we did not want to make this into a negative thing. We wanted to take that positively.

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Shakeel Rashed 50:29

We had insurance. So yes, that got burned - fine. We'll work with insurance to see what they can cover out of that. We'll work with our community to start. So, the immediate question was, "How do we rebuild?" And not, "How do we make this into some kind of scene? Or use this for any other purpose." So, we made it clear that only official people, either me or Dr. Junaid Siddiqui would talk to anybody outside in this incident. Anything outside of that, ICLT doesn't take any responsibility on the statements that come from other people. I think the community actually supported us on that. We had a solidarity event, just two weeks after that, and the community showed up - with our community and lots of other communities that showed up for that - and we gave that same idea throughout is that, "We are not going anywhere. We are part of this community. So, yes if it was arson, yes, you burned this place, but we are going to rebuild. It's not like that's going to drive us away. We are part of this community. You will see us more."

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Shakeel Rashed 52:04

So, prior to ICLT, so one of my most commonly thing I was known for within our neighborhood was the guy running the ViperBots parents group at Vandergriff High School. So, again, those are the things like, "I'm not going anywhere," neither are some of the other members that are in this community. We are here and we have as much freedom to build a mosque here as anybody else and that's what we are going to do.

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Shakeel Rashed 52:42

So we immediately start talking about rebuilding. Of course, the community got affected really badly. One of the things that came out was that a lot of people started talking about, "Is this the right location? Do we want to be in a place which is more visible, easier to get in and out, maybe on 620, other than inside of Hudson Bend. A lot of people were putting pressure on the advisory board to change the location. But then changing location also meant we'd have to go through the permits again, we'd have to go through the process of selling this place, buying a new place, going through the permits again, which would again, push the project by a couple years. So, we went back and forth about this, convinced the community that in the interest of time, it's best for us to just rebuild in

the same place, not just rebuild in the same place, rebuild the same way, so that we don't have to reapply for any of the permits. So, we convinced the community. The community trusted in us for doing the right thing, and we rebuilt it. So, within a year, we were operational. We started in May of 2018 with our inauguration, after getting everything built and cleared. That's one of the things that we convinced our group saying that, "Hey, if we think about moving the location, or anything else, we have basically pushed this project out for a couple more years. And maybe that would have been okay with people, but we thought that it was important to keep the momentum and keep that going and everything else and finish the project.

S

Shakeel Rashed 54:56

We operated without an imam close to a year. Then fortunately, the imam from UT Austin, Sheikh Umer, became available, so we got to hire him as our imam. So, we believe that was one of the blessings that came to us - because he also got more involved with ICLT after the fire and everything else. Slowly as things turned out for him at UT, we were able to hire him as our full time imam. Now, we have him as our full time imam. We have regular Friday prayers, we have regular Qur'an classes, community gatherings. Again, it's a smaller organization compared to a lot of other mosques in Austin, but we are starting off. We are doing fairly well, good community from within Steiner Ranch, Lakeway, Riverplace - all of the surrounding communities that are there.

S

Shakeel Rashed 56:12

Another thing that we we have been able to do as ICLT - now we are actually part of this organization within Austin that connects up all the mosques and we do common events for High Holidays like Ramadan. Now, ICLT is part of that circle also, and a vocal member of that. Now, we kind of feel like we have a place there within that community also and we feel being part of that has helped overall within Austin. We are considered a little bit liberal as a mosque, but also I think that's one of the things that attracted people like me, people like Dr. Junaid Siddiqui people like Dr. Rahman. It's one of those things that if you had issues with something, you have to be involved with building that and making it yours. And if you're not involved, your voice is not heard. And that's what has helped, at least in my case, to be more involved with ICLT. I do give it time, but I also thinks it helps me be more comfortable with it.

T

Tiffany Puett 57:51

You build the community you wanted to be a part of.

S Shakeel Rashed 57:54
Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

T Tiffany Puett 57:58
Yeah that's amazing.

S Shakeel Rashed 58:00
So, that's our story.

T Tiffany Puett 58:03
Yeah, that's a great story.

S Shakeel Rashed 58:05
It's 2:16, actually so [laughs].

T Tiffany Puett 58:08
So, the last question, I want to ask you, kind of shifting gears a little bit, is the Texan question. Tell me about what it means to you to be a Texan.

S Shakeel Rashed 58:19
Absolutely. One of the things I didn't touch during the life part of my story was I also partly grew up in Saudi Arabia. My dad used to work for what is equivalent of National Science Foundation in Saudi Arabia. So, I grew up partly in Saudi Arabia. The first time I came to Texas in the mid 90s, I felt like I'd gone back to Saudi Arabia. It's strange, but I think the reason is a lot of Texans were involved with the building of Saudi Arabia. So, somehow, there is that connection - the heat - I came here the first time in the summer of '96, or '97, I came to Dallas and I somehow felt like I came back to Saudi Arabia. That's my first impression of Texas. We really thought, being in the northeast, you become used to people staying by themselves, like people who don't say hi to each other. But in Texas, it was very common. So, we felt more comfortable in Texas. I do own boots, I do own a big belt. No cowboy hat, but never felt comfortable with hats, anytime, so I don't have that. But definitely, Texas has been a welcoming place. This is one of the parts of our story is the fact that I think Texas people are more comfortable with faith also. Something that really

threw my wife, when we first moved into our neighborhood in Steiner Ranch was she had gone out to meet some of the neighbors with muffins and everything else, and one of the ladies asked her, "What church do you go to?" And she felt fairly uncomfortable at that time. Of course, that's one of the things that's there - in Texas, like I said, most communities are very close to the faith-based communities and everything else. So, we feel that Texas as a whole has been really good. More than Texas though I believe and feel very comfortable with Austin. I think Austin has been really good overall for us, the community that we had our kids grow in. My second one is actually born and brought up native Austinite, the older one was born in New Jersey, but she says she got here as soon as she could. And we feel very comfortable being part of the Texas environment. I think overall Texas has been a very friendly place for us to be here.



Tiffany Puett 1:01:44

Great, thank you.



Shakeel Rashed 1:01:48

Excellent, thank you. Absolutely.