

Omar El-Halwagi

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SPEAKERS

Elizabeth Melton, Omar El-Halwagi

- E** Elizabeth Melton 00:04
Hi, I'm Elizabeth Melton, the ACLS leading edge fellow for the IDCL, and I'm here interviewing Omar El-Halwagi for the Voices of Change collection in the Religions Texas archive. Today is Tuesday, January 18, 2022, and we are meeting via Zoom. I'm calling from Boone, North Carolina. Where are you, Omar?
- O** Omar El-Halwagi 00:26
Hi, Elizabeth, I am in Houston, Texas. Also, I love hearing all of the acronyms that you are right now. I was like, "Oh, very impressive."
- E** Elizabeth Melton 00:26
Yes, I know!
- O** Omar El-Halwagi 00:29
I'm very easily sold on acronyms. Very easily sold.
- E** Elizabeth Melton 00:39
So many acronyms! Thank you so much for meeting with me today and agreeing to talk to me a little bit and share your story. To get started, if you would just can you tell me a little bit about where you were born and a little bit about your family and early life?
- O** Omar El-Halwagi 00:59

Yeah, so my parents were graduate students at UCLA. When I was actually born, they both were doing their doctorates there. And I think about this often, and I mention that specifically, because I think a lot about my mother, who had been in this country for only a couple of years, didn't have familial support, is trying to finish a doctorate while having a newborn child. About maybe a year or so after I was born, she ended up just getting a master's degree, because it just felt like she was juggling too much. And I think a lot about the beginning of my story as also really rooted in what it looked like for an immigrant woman having to make sacrifices early on, and the expectation that she would make sacrifices. So oftentimes, when I think about anything I've accomplished as an American, I think a lot about my mother, the immigrant, who took steps in different directions. I don't want to define the direction for her, but took steps in different directions than she had initially thought she would to make sure that there was room and space for me to be able to be raised and exist in this country.

E Elizabeth Melton 02:20

Yeah, it's a very powerful reflection. So where did your parents move from? Where did they emigrate from?

O Omar El-Halwagi 02:27

Egypt. So my parents are both from Cairo, which is an incredible city. My dad's only brother later moved to the US as well. My mom recounts the three of them sharing a small apartment in LA. And then my mom's three siblings all stayed in Egypt, both sets of grandparents, while they were alive, stayed in Egypt. So we didn't have a large migration of family members like other immigrant family stories might have. In the US that really is my parents, my brother, and then my uncle and his family.

E Elizabeth Melton 03:01

So have you visited Egypt? Have you been to Cairo?

O Omar El-Halwagi 03:05

I have. The last time I went was right before the pandemic. One of my cousins had gotten married, so it was a great trip to go.

E Elizabeth Melton 03:13

Weddings are always fun.

O Omar El-Halwagi 03:16

I love weddings. I also feel like as an adult, dancing at weddings is a way to get all of your energy while still being like, "No, I'm not at a club. I'm a young, classy professional who's

celebrating the union of two friends." But really, it has a very different vibe. I also feel like if you are a nerdier dancer like I am, weddings feel like a better place for you.

E Elizabeth Melton 03:39

Oh, that's amazing. To get back to your story, so you were born while your parents were about that UCLA. Then what happened?

O Omar El-Halwagi 03:52

When I was two, we moved from Los Angeles, California to Auburn, Texas. Sorry, Auburn, Alabama, not Auburn, Texas. We get to Texas later. We moved from Los Angeles, California to Auburn, Alabama, which my mom often described as a bigger culture shock than from Cairo to Los Angeles. So I spent the next ten years in Auburn, Alabama. I was there until 2002, and I think that matters a lot because 9/11 happened when I was in seventh grade in Auburn, Alabama, and then the following year, we moved to College Station, Texas. So I was moving to a brand new town, brand new place right after September 11, and I think that, in a lot of ways, colors both my entrance into Texas and the person I would grow to become.

E Elizabeth Melton 04:50

I'm hearing a lot of university towns. Is there a particular reason?

O Omar El-Halwagi 04:55

There is. My dad is a college professor.

E Elizabeth Melton 04:59

Awesome, what does he teach?

O Omar El-Halwagi 05:01

Chemical engineering. Far from anything I am grounded in, rooted in, or understand.

E Elizabeth Melton 05:09

Sure, but that makes sense, the transition into Auburn and then to College Station as well.

O Omar El-Halwagi 05:15

I feel like I did the tour of college Bible Belt towns growing up. I have checked off the boxes. I

feel like he just is missing a position at Ole Miss to have really completed the trifecta, but I feel like I really hit a lot of them.

E

Elizabeth Melton 05:32

Yeah, so what was that experience like, as a young kid growing up in what we think of as very conservative, perhaps, college towns?

O

Omar El-Halwagi 05:43

It's interesting, because I didn't know life could be different. Every time I've ever gotten that question, people are like, "Why did you end up staying in College Station for college?" It's really because I did not think that a different town could be in any way a huge shift from what I'd experienced. Unlike in Auburn, where I really did feel like an outsider for most of my childhood, I felt by the time I moved to College Station, getting to move gives you an opportunity to redefine yourself, and I felt like I had figured out ways of being able to navigate a conservative college town pretty well. So I was in public education from eighth grade through high school in College Station, and at that point, I felt like I knew how to engage with a lot of my peers. I knew what I could bring to the table, how I was different. I felt like at that point, I could already understand my role and the ways in which I could function in a more conservative place, not realizing that I wouldn't have to jump through so many loops if I lived somewhere where it wasn't an oddity that I existed.

E

Elizabeth Melton 06:56

Right. Are there few experiences that come to mind when you think of that early life and shaping how you approached those loops, or how you even understood your existence in those spaces?

O

Omar El-Halwagi 07:11

Yeah, there's one in Auburn and one in College Station that really both stand out to me. I've talked about these before. The one in Auburn was actually in first grade. My best friend Nicole and I were at the playground, and at one point, a lot of the kids circled around Nicole. I had went to the water fountain for a moment. I had left her for just a moment, and I came back, and they were all circled around her. As I got closer, I could hear her saying, "But he's my friend." And what they were yelling at her is, "If you continue being friends with him, you'll go to hell, too." So then my first grade teacher brought us all together for what I call my first interfaith dialogue session, in which she said, "Class, if you're Christian, that's great. And if you're Muslim, well, that's good, too." Even in first grade, I was like, "Good and great are not the same. Good and great are not equal." So it was a very important moment for me at that age to be like, "Okay, there is something about the way I worship, the way I believe, that positions me differently, comparatively to my peers, and even in terms of how I'm viewed by my educators." So I think from an early life, that did a lot to color the way I saw myself positioned.

O Omar El-Halwagi 08:34

Then the second big experience that I often think about in terms of an educator or the school system that really impacted how I had to think about the way I was positioned, was my freshman year of high school. I went to the school principal and asked her for a space to pray. Many Muslims adhere to the practice of prayer five times a day, at certain points during the day. For me, one of those five prayers fell during school hours, so I went to the school principal and asked her for a place to pray. This is maybe a four minute prayer, and I had done this since middle school. I'd done it at my middle school in Alabama, I had done it in the middle school in the same system in College Station, had never had an issue. The principal looked at me, and she just said, "No." And I was waiting for her to say "- problem. No issue. No concern." It was just, "No."

O Omar El-Halwagi 09:37

So my family and I reached out to the Council on American Islamic Relations [CAIR] that connected us to the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] of Texas, and they took my case. Being a freshman in high school and having an attorney from the ACLU come down and represent you and do negotiations with your school was seminal for me in thinking about how my rights mattered. How, because of an executive order put under by President George W. Bush, I was able to then have bigger standing in my school, in which they were at risk of losing their federal funding, because they weren't letting me pray. It was such an important moment for me in recognizing the power that I held, and that the rights I held could not be ignored. I think that confidence that I gained through that process has carried over well into my twenties and now thirties.

E Elizabeth Melton 10:40

That's incredible. I'm glad you were able to get that support when you needed it.

O Omar El-Halwagi 10:46

Yeah, and as an attorney now, I think oftentimes about how lucky I was to know that I even had resources to access. The number of times where I will be connected to a friend of a friend of a co-worker, or an acquaintance who has faced employment discrimination, which is my current practice of law, and they will not know that they could even have a right to bring something against their employer. Or they're like, "But I can't afford it." And I'm like, "Oh, there's a lot of organizations that can do that work for you." I feel very grateful that I was able to be connected to a resource that did take my case without having to ask for compensation. That was a huge game changer. And for me being able to attain my rights as a young person. I now, for any individual, want to make sure that they know that they, too, have resources available to them.

E Elizabeth Melton 11:48

Yeah, that's amazing. With that experience, it sounds like ultimately, it was a very - maybe not positive, but that it had a good outcome.

O Omar El-Halwagi 11:58

Yeah, I'd say positive now. Hindsight 20/20, rose-colored glasses, all those things, yeah.

E Elizabeth Melton 12:06

Were there aspects of the day-to-day back then that were affected by that experience? What was your experience as freshmen Omar, navigating College Station, navigating that issue.

O Omar El-Halwagi 12:22

Yeah. I think it's interesting when you reflect back on your younger years, and they're seminal moments that really define you. A lot of experiences I've talked about, the big moments that have defined me, that one my freshman year of high school. But in eighth grade, there was one that I think of quite a bit. My speech and debate teacher in eighth grade, we were doing a debate, I think on national security. I don't really remember the exact topic. But one of the students went on a pretty long Islamophobic rant. And again, this is a year after 9/11, and she cuts him off. And she explains very clearly, but without giving up any room for disagreement, about how his characterizations were wrong, were offensive, were not rooted in reality. As a new student in that school, who didn't feel strong enough to speak up in that moment, her creating that space changed everything for me. I ended up feeling much more confident with my voice. I got in debates in class with that same student numerous times on different issues. I joined the speech and debate team.

O Omar El-Halwagi 12:31

So by the time I'm a high schooler, I start to really cultivate this voice because of this teacher in eighth grade, and now that I'm in high school, and I now have an attorney from the ACLU of Texas representing me, it is constantly building that confidence. From a day-to-day perspective, I'm growing as a person, but this issue is much more in the background with administrators. Teachers know about it and will bring it up, some of them positively, some of them negatively, but I've been under very clear instructions from a good lawyer to tell me not to talk about it. I think that helped a lot.

E Elizabeth Melton 14:23

Yeah, I'm sure that particularly as a high schooler, that was a nice safe space to be like, "I can't talk about it."

O Omar El-Halwagi 14:30

"I can't talk about it. Nope."

E

Elizabeth Melton 14:34

Well, that's so interesting. Thank you so much for sharing all of these stories. So moving forward a little bit, I know you ended up staying in College Station, and you went to Texas A&M. Was that a shift?

O

Omar El-Halwagi 14:48

I loved it. I had a really positive experience. I was on the speech and debate team, I made really incredible friends. I think something that is interesting when I reflect back on my time at Texas A&M is unlike my time at my two other institutions later on, for my masters at Harvard, and for my law degree at the University of Michigan, where I ran the Muslim organization of whatever institution I was at, I was not a member of the Muslim Student Association at Texas A&M. Their meetings took place the same night as the speech and debate team, and I made an executive decision. I often think back to how in college, I did not have a lot of Muslim friends, which is very different than in other times of my life. I think, in part, I was used to not having a lot of Muslim friends. But also, I think I had just gotten used to being in a place where I felt confident in speaking out against Islamophobia, but had positioned myself, at least in my own mind, of having a religious identity that was political, not spiritual or social. That's something that I would have to spend a lot of my twenties relearning, is how to then make my religious identity, first and foremost, a spiritual one for my own.

O

Omar El-Halwagi 16:14

So at A&M, I was oftentimes the person, whenever there was an event, dealing with interfaith or explaining Islam, or an Islam 101, that people from the MSA would reach out to me to go do it, even though I was not an active member of the MSA. I often thought, "Oh, I'm just the non-Muslim whisperer." Just, "Omar, go." It really took a lot of time to have to rethink what it looked like to have a Muslim identity that was my own, and not just one where I was trying to convince people to see our humanity. I don't know what it would look like if I were to go back to that same nineteen-year-old Omar, and challenge him to think about his religious identity differently. I don't know how the rest of my life would have looked either. Because there was something about feeling like I was an advocate that I think really played the clear narrative in the story of my life, and I don't know if it would have looked the same way if it was not a political identity for me at the time.

E

Elizabeth Melton 17:15

Sure, and so you've spoken to this a little bit, but what does it mean to you now to be a Muslim?

O

Omar El-Halwagi 17:22

Yeah, I think first and foremost, my Muslim identity is my own. I think that's a very important shift. It does not belong to non-Muslims, and it doesn't belong to the Muslim community, either. I've spent a lot of time, and I'm still working on this, cultivating a religious identity, a spiritual

relationship with God, that is, first and foremost, mine. I'm unsure of how linear we want this conversation to be, but if I want to jump forward to maybe a decade and a half, I would say Grassroot Islam, the organization I've co-founded, has been really instrumental in giving me that space. Where our organization was born out of - this iteration of the organization - was born out of the pandemic. So Ramadan was starting in April of 2020. Everyone was locked up in their homes. My friend Ahmed, who I went to high school and college with and was with roommates with after we graduated for a year, was just like, "What are we gonna do about Ramadan?" And I was like, "I don't know, Ahmed. It's a global pandemic. We could probably think of something." And then the next day, he was like, "Okay, we're doing it." I was like, "Doing what? Doing what?"

O Omar El-Halwagi 18:46

With him and a couple of other folks, we ended up putting together twenty-two events virtually that Ramadan with hundreds of Muslim Americans from across the country attending, in which we had a very clear ethos: that this is going to be inclusive, and it was going to be spiritual. Because we knew that there were a lot of other organizations already out there that were inclusive, but maybe not necessarily rooted in spirituality, and there were a lot of spiritual organizations that were not particularly inclusive. And we wanted to make sure that we put something forward where any Muslim American regardless of what they believe, what sect they were a part of, how they identified in any other way that their life, had a space where they didn't feel as alone this Ramadan. What was going to be a Ramadan journey has become a two year organization. We're in the process of becoming a 501(c)(3). We have done over seventy events at this point, we had our first in person retreats, and it is incredible for me to have a spiritual community now. Where for a lot of the people in the community, I might not be able to tell you professionally what they do, but I can tell you about their relationship to God, and that has been such an incredible experience.

E Elizabeth Melton 20:12

I'd love to hear some more about those first Ramadan events, but I'm also interested to know how the organization is balancing that virtual-to-live experience, particularly if y'all were able to incorporate people nationally. And now local events, right? How does that work?

O Omar El-Halwagi 20:31

Yeah, it's been interesting. So there are three of us who are really at the helm of really making sure this organization continues to run. And we've had a lot of conversations on, what does the future look like? Do we want to just do something where there are local chapters in the future? Is this going to be forever and exclusively a virtual space? I think where we have currently landed, because of how disparate our population is, all over the country really - we have to find that sweet time of where people from California are off work, but people in Boston aren't asleep yet to schedule our events.

O Omar El-Halwagi 21:11

I think the current decision is that we're going to remain virtual with one to two in-person

retreats a year, and that can change over time. We are grateful to be able to have the virtual space with one another. And being able to meet these people in real life for the first time last October was remarkable. You'd be shocked, you're like, "Oh, that person is so much taller than I thought they were," or, "Everyone is even more beautiful in real life." All of these really great feelings. But I think just because of the nature of what we're trying to do, and the fact that all three of us are doing this on a volunteer basis, I think scalability is not what we're looking for right now. And to be able to do a local chapter model or in-person model pretty regularly would require a significant amount of work. And maybe one day that will be the story, but it's just not today.

E Elizabeth Melton 22:10

Sure. You're in Houston, are the other organizers in Houston? Are they also across the nation?

O Omar El-Halwagi 22:17

The other two co-directors Rabia and Arianna are in Boulder, Colorado and Boston, Massachusetts, respectively.

E Elizabeth Melton 22:27

Spread across the time zones.

O Omar El-Halwagi 22:28

Three time zones. A solid three time zones. Arianna, unfortunately, is also the one of the three of us who goes to bed the earliest, and she's the one who lives in Boston, so all of our meetings, I always see her really holding it together, and I know internally that she is doing a lot for the people, so it has not gone unnoticed.

E Elizabeth Melton 22:50

That's so sweet. And that's a real struggle, too, I think, with these virtual spaces and these virtual communities that we're still trying to foster right.

O Omar El-Halwagi 23:00

Oh gosh, yes, two years into this pandemic.

E Elizabeth Melton 23:07

Can you share a little bit about what those first Ramadan events were and how you went about just spreading the word of what you were doing?

O Omar El-Halwagi 23:17

Oh, so in old-school style, it was an intense Facebook blast. Rabia and I both, through our years of engaging with various Muslim organizations, just have a fairly large network of Muslim Americans. Ahmed is unbelievable at just producing. He had the idea. The next day, he had set up a meeting with six of us to talk about it, and then the day after that there was already a website. The next event was scheduled for the second day of Ramadan. Keep in mind, all of this happened the day before Ramadan. So it was just an unbelievable speed in which we operated. We were doing three to four events a week, so it was really non-stop.

O Omar El-Halwagi 24:10

It was interesting, though. I think I engaged initially with a bit of cynicism. I think part of that was protective. I think also another part of that was we were in the midst of the pandemic, and I didn't really have a clearly defined goal for what I wanted my relationship with God to look like at that period of time. So I think being able to go through the motions, and when people would talk about their various relationships with God, I think it created a space that felt much safer to think about what I wanted, what felt good, to hear about how some people engage, whether or not that would or would not work for me. I think that's the beauty of when you get various perspectives, is that you find different routes to get to the divine.

E Elizabeth Melton 25:10

Can you tell me a little bit about this community that y'all have created? In my mind, I'm imagining people who are probably around our age and that sort of thing, but I could be wrong. What does this community look like?

O Omar El-Halwagi 25:21

You are not wrong. I think it is primarily millennials. We skew much more strongly towards women, but we also have people who are significantly older. We also have a couple of Gen Zs, which I'm always taken aback that we are not the youngest generation. So there is a mix. But I think what I really love about the community is you have people who engage with faith from a lot of different sects, a lot of different vantage points, some of whom are much more traditional and orthodox in the way they engage with the written text, others who are very spiritual about it. But what I love about that, is we are able to bring in a lot of different vantage points. But the ultimate core of it is these are people who love their faith, and want to grow it in a community setting.

O Omar El-Halwagi 26:20

Something that we agreed upon very early on as co-founders is this is not an organization where we tell people what to believe, but we give you space to share it. I think that ethos has done a couple things. One, I think it's been able to bring in really incredible individuals who

worship in ways that vary from the way I worship and think about things that vary from the way that I think about them. But secondarily, from a personal perspective, I don't want to be an imam, and I feel like there's a real responsibility and burden in preaching in absolutes. That is not something I wanted to be affiliated with, and I think it also opens you up to a lot of risks that I didn't want our organization opened up to. Because then you have to think in line-in-the-sand, scriptural, scholarly perspectives, and that's not what our organization is about.

E

Elizabeth Melton 27:17

Is this your primary community right now for Islam? Do you have another Houston-based community?

O

Omar El-Halwagi 27:25

I have a lot of Muslim friends in Houston. I think that's been one of the great things when I think about Omar at A&M who didn't have a ton of Muslim friends versus Omar now, is I regularly text with a group of Muslim lawyers, who are some of my dearest friends. We, pre-pandemic, would meet up at a friend's house for brunch pretty regularly. We have a large group of young millennial Muslim lawyers who would get together every now and then, aside from my more intimate group of friends. I love that my professional has intersected with my spiritual identity to have given me a community of people. I think during the pandemic, it was one of those situations where you found the people closest to you and clung to them. But that text thread that described, with the other five Muslim lawyers who I'm really close to, was part of those people who we would do that six feet away outdoor picnics. It maintains a presence on one another's life. But I think in terms of a more formal, am I a member of a specific masjid in Houston, there are a few masjids I go to, but I would not say there is one masjid in particular that is my masjid, that I'm vying for a seat on the board and have already volunteered to cook the Ramadan dinner. There's not one of those, and I think that's okay.

E

Elizabeth Melton 28:57

Yeah, and it seems like the pandemic, too, was a time that spurred you to create your own community in a way that does feed you and nurture you.

O

Omar El-Halwagi 29:09

It does. It's been really remarkable. [coughs] Pardon me. Prior to the pandemic, when I thought about my Muslim American community, they were always tied to something that I was professionally engaging with. So in law school, that was the Muslim Law Students Association. In grad school, that was the Muslim Caucus. And then, as a young professional, it was the National Association of Muslim Lawyers and just generally and organically, just a group of Muslim American lawyers who have become close. So this actually feels like the first time in my adult life, where I've had a Muslim community that's first and foremost rooted in spirituality, not any other identity.

E

Elizabeth Melton 30:11

What is your vision for this community that you've helped create? Where do you hope it will go?

O

Omar El-Halwagi 30:23

I promise I am an optimist, and I say this with optimism. But if I had to pick one clear thing that I want in this organization, it's survival. And that is rooted deeply in optimism, that I want that. I think anything beyond survival is a gift.

E

Elizabeth Melton 30:51

What do you see as the challenges that y'all are facing that might pose a challenge to that survival?

O

Omar El-Halwagi 31:03

Yeah, I think it's a few things I think there are really three of us who do a lot of the heavy lifting. We have an incredible community. Truly remarkable individuals. But the three of us behind the scenes have to do quite a bit to make it run. We've had very honest conversations amongst the three of us and with other members in our community at the retreat about how if any one of the three of us feels like we can't keep going, we don't know if the organization can, just because of the amount of labor. I think secondarily, there's a fear when I look at other really interesting Muslim American organizations that over time, things that don't have clear hierarchy or clear structure can easily be disbanded over time. I don't want that for our community. I think it's very possible that if, slowly but surely, people will stop coming, fewer people are more invested. We saw an increase in participation with Omicron, which I think was a reminder that when people are trapped in their homes, people can turn to us as a source for comfort. What does it look like when people feel safe to go outside, for them to consistently keep attending?

O

Omar El-Halwagi 32:30

Those are, I think, some of the initial questions I have in my mind. The conversation I've had with Arianna and Rabia is ultimately we do this so long as it remains nourishing to us. And by us, I really do mean the three of us, because it is such a labor of love. And we want to continuously do it from a place of love and not resentment. So we are happy to put in the work, we're happy to make sure that we keep this alive. But that also means that we have to have moments where we check in with one another and ask the question, "Are you being nourished, and what would make this more nourishing for you?"

E

Elizabeth Melton 33:15

Yeah, I think those are all really important and for any kind of organization or community that's starting out. Shifting back to some of the other aspects of your identity, how does being a Texan influence the work you do?

O Omar El-Halwagi 33:35

After I graduated college, I went to work for the city of Houston. Under Mayor Annise Parker, and I think the experience of working for the fourth largest city in the country in which my job was one of five people who got to ask the question, "How do we make the city work better?" was really crucial in me feeling very attached to Houston. And to think about what ways can I as an individual continuously do work that better impacts the city. I take that very personally.

O Omar El-Halwagi 34:10

I remember when I took the job in Houston. It was not out of a deep love for Houston. But very quickly, when you get to spend every day thinking about how do you make a city work better? How do you impact millions of people? How do you ensure 20,000 employees for the city of Houston get what they need to do their jobs? You very quickly start to fall in love with a really incredible city that is the most diverse city in the country. I can talk about Houston for quite some time. I'm a huge fan. I think being able to build a life there has been so incredible. I think about how different my life is an hour and a half away from College Station. I also want to be clear, I love College Station. I don't speak of College Station poorly, one, because I think with limited exception, I don't like people who move to bigger cities and talk poorly about their hometowns. I think it's in bad taste. But also, two, College Station made me the person that I am. College Station gave me confidence to find my voice. College Station gave me incredible educational opportunities, gave me some of the closest friends I have to this day.

O Omar El-Halwagi 35:40

When I think a lot about my experiences on a campus like A&M - which I think A&M might be more conservative than other colleges, but not to the same extent which is typically spoken about. I oftentimes think about how different my life would have been if my voice was just one of a chorus versus one of a handful of soloists. I would love to live in a world where people with marginalized identities did not have to be soloists. But I think it built a lot of character, and has given me tools of how to engage with people who might not believe what I believe. But I can also understand that for many of them, there is a place that is coming out of a lack of knowledge, and there is a well meaning demeanor. At the same time, as an adult, I also know it's not my job to justify my humanity to anyone, and that it shouldn't be my labor to get them to where they need to get.

E Elizabeth Melton 36:53

Yeah, I love hearing the trajectory of your story, and the things that you've come to realize, and when and where that happened. When you first moved to Houston, was that right after undergrad?

O Omar El-Halwagi 37:09

I moved to Houston maybe nine months after undergrad. I was in DC for a little bit and then came to Houston. I moved there. I was planning on staying in DC.

- E** Elizabeth Melton 37:24
Had you already decided to become an attorney?
- O** Omar El-Halwagi 37:28
Did I already know I wanted to be an attorney? Was that the question?
- E** Elizabeth Melton 37:33
At what point you went on that trajectory to becoming an attorney.
- O** Omar El-Halwagi 37:41
Oh, my freshman year of high school. There was no question that I was going to become an attorney.
- E** Elizabeth Melton 37:49
Was it because of the your experiences that year?
- O** Omar El-Halwagi 37:53
Yeah, very much so. Very much so.
- E** Elizabeth Melton 37:57
So you were already on that path when you decided to work in Houston.
- O** Omar El-Halwagi 38:03
I was. When I was at A&M, I was awarded the Truman Scholarship. It's selected by the federal government, and it was a huge turning point in my life. I remember getting to the Harry S. Truman Presidential Museum where they send all of you after you win for a week, and having such intense doubts about how I was able to be in the same room with a lot of these individuals. But the reason I bring that up is, one, not only did it expose me to a lot of other potential opportunities, but also, two, I remember part of what I took away from that weekend was if you are planning on going to a graduate program, you don't have to rush. Build up your professional expertise, find things that you care about or are passionate about. You don't have to rush to law school, med school, whatever program you want to do at twenty-two. So I decided to take that advice and work for a few years. I think the other part of that advice is being in a room of individuals who are incredibly high achieving started to shift my definition of success. And I very intensely thought that for me to be a change agent at the scale that I wanted to be at, I had to do perfectly on the LSAT. I had to go to the best law school. I had to be very intensely competitive to maintain pace with my newfound peers. It took a lot of time in my early twenties to unlearn a lot of what I personally took on.

E

Elizabeth Melton 40:09

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. What advice do you have for future generations? Thinking about this, oral history is something that will persist. What would you want them to know about you as a Muslim and about the work that you're doing? Big question, take your time.

O

Omar El-Halwagi 40:33

Thank you, I really was ready to jump right in. But I think the advice I would give to future generations if they were to listen to this would be, first and foremost, figure out what you believe. Center your spiritual growth on your own terms. And then the second part of that is that even though it is your spiritual identity, your journey, you don't have to walk it alone. Find people that make you feel like you are closer to the divine and cling to those individuals, because it is your journey that you need to have comrades on.

E

Elizabeth Melton 41:32

That's really beautiful. Thank you so much for taking some time today to talk to me and to share a lot of your experiences with me.

O

Omar El-Halwagi 41:43

Of course. Can I share one more thing that I'm really excited on that I've been working on?

E

Elizabeth Melton 41:50

Absolutely. Please do.

O

Omar El-Halwagi 44:52

Amazing. Thank you. So during the pandemic, I was looking for a way of being able to express myself, and I started doing screenplay writing. Something I'm very proud of is I've now written several pieces that have lead Muslim American characters who are living lives that aren't just about their religious identity. I am so excited to be able to create written works, that maybe one day will be able to screen, that showcase different lived experiences of Muslim Americans and hopefully could add to the cultural script that I did not have growing up.

E

Elizabeth Melton 42:50

Yes, that's amazing. I love that.

O

Omar El-Halwagi 42:54

But yes, Elizabeth, thank you so much. I'm very appreciative of this opportunity and your time today. Thank you.

E

Elizabeth Melton 43:14

Yes, thank you.