

Shameem Azizad

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SPEAKERS

Shameem Azizad, Shadia Igram

- S** Shadia Igram 00:04
Okay, it is Tuesday, April 30, 2019. This is Shadia Igram and I am interviewing Shameem Azizad for the Muslim Voices in Texas Project. Hi, Shameem.
- S** Shameem Azizad 00:18
Hey! Hi, Shadia.
- S** Shadia Igram 00:22
Can you tell me something about your life? Your story? Anything about your childhood? Places you've lived?
- S** Shameem Azizad 00:30
Okay, I was born in California. My parents are refugees from Afghanistan. They came in the late 1970s or early 1980s and got married here. We were raised in upstate New York. My parents owned a family business, so they worked hard and we worked hard. And my sister and I eventually became physicians, and now we all live in Texas.
- S** Shameem Azizad 00:54

And I met my husband via my sister, who set us up. I've been married for seven years, and I have one three year old toddler. I work as a radiologist from home, and my hobbies are honestly just spending time with my friends and family and eating, shopping, hanging out at the house together. I do really like alone time; I'm kind of an introverted extrovert so I need a lot of quiet time to kind of recharge for all of that "extroverted-ness."

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Shameem Azizad 01:22

I'm kind of a person of extremes. So I like extreme weather, like storms, and I have a lot of ideas, and then I'll get really excited about it. But then I burn out very quickly. I like to read, I like yoga, and I used to love running before I lived here. I don't run anymore - either it's too hot, or I'm just older and lazier.

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Shadia Igram 01:39

Alright, so going back to your parents. So they met here in the states?

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Shameem Azizad 01:43

Yeah.

S

Shadia Igram 01:43

They met here in the States. They both, come independently, met here?

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Shameem Azizad 01:47

Well, they were—I think their families knew each other in Afghanistan. I think my mom's sister was a teacher, and my dad's sister-in-law was a teacher. And they also happened to be on the same plane coming to America, and they talked or something like that. And then my parents met once and then got engaged and married the next two days after, so it was like very FOB style.

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Shadia Igram 02:06

So you grew up in California?

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Shameem Azizad 02:08

No, after the recession hit—I think when my mom had her second child, she left work. And then after my father got laid off, they decided to just try something different, cause California wasn't working out for them. So then they moved to upstate New York—well, they moved to the city and my parents lived in [New York City] for about a year. My dad was a cab driver. And I think that was also rough. And then eventually, we settled in kind of the suburbs of the Northeast. My parents opened up the business. And that just, you know, was a sustainable lifestyle for them. It wasn't easy.

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Shadia Igram 02:39

Were you and your sister ever involved with the business?

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Shameem Azizad 02:41

Yeah, all the time. We worked a ton. Yeah, I mean, because they didn't have like a ton of childcare. So a lot of times we would have to go to the store after school, or summers, or whatever. And then eventually, I started working outside of the store myself, like in high school. And I was really good at Spanish in high school, so I worked as a phone survey person for AT&T in Spanish. Like it's just kind of random things. But yeah, at the end of the day, we also spent a ton of time working with my parents, because it's exhausting to have a family business.

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Shadia Igram 03:13

What did that teach you, that you've carried on?

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Shameem Azizad 03:20

I think that my parents weren't great at business. For refugees, it's not that intuitive, I think, how to run a business in America [in] that you could just focus on one product and sell it really well, you know? They're coming from a country that's just run so differently. And so yeah, I also, I think, they never figured out the balance of how to branch out their business and maybe hire enough staff so they could get more time off. You know, it was just their thing, they ran it, they staffed it. They didn't really have success in hiring people, maintaining staff, and it was also just not affordable. Like, they just made enough to sustain our family and pay their rent and their bills and the overhead for the business. So yeah, I think I learned, you know, how to be very efficient from that. I'm kind of efficient in the kitchen, I'm efficient—I'm always in a rush, I guess? So maybe that's part of that.

S Shadia Igram 04:13
And what year, did you come into living in Texas?

S Shameem Azizad 04:19
2014.

S Shadia Igram 04:23
And can you expand a little bit about any dreams or aspirations that you have?

S Shameem Azizad 04:30
Now? I think I'm living the dream now.

S Shameem Azizad 04:34
Yeah, I think life is pretty good. I mean, we have a nice house, we're comfortable financially, we have a great healthy kid. Like, I think my probably big project is just kind of slowing down and appreciating what I have. I don't feel like I have—you know, I think paying off my med school loans is a big one. I think that that's kind of a thing that keeps me trapped in working to some extent. I don't have the freedom to just say, I'm not going to work anymore, but not a lot of people do any way. But that I could even think about that, aside from those loans, I think tells me that otherwise, we're doing pretty great.

S Shameem Azizad 05:11
So yeah, I mean, Alhumdillah, I don't—I mean, I think basic life goals. Like, I'd like us to be able to do Hajj, I want my kids—or you know, my kid, or if we have more kids—to be healthy and good people, and for my husband and I to maintain a good relationship. But like, I don't have—this was it for me. Getting married finishing school having a kid; this was it. So I feel like I'm just cruising.

S Shadia Igram 05:36
Living the dream?

S Shameem Azizad 05:37

I'm just cruising. (laughs)

S Shadia Igram 05:40
Can you tell me about what it means to you to be Muslim?

S Shameem Azizad 05:44
Yes. To me, it means to live your life in the worship of God and to live a life of service and obedience to Allah. And I see it as a privilege and a blessing that we were born Muslim, and essentially, as a Muslim, it's just believing that we've been created with no other purpose than worship.

S Shadia Igram 06:09
Can you tell me how you view or what is your interpretation of worship? How do you express worship?

S Shameem Azizad 06:18
I mean, as a Muslim, number one is just doing what has been prescribed. So it's the mandatory activities of worship: the prayers, the fasting, and all of the mandatory aspects. It's also staying away from what God has forbidden as a part of worship. So that's essentially it—doing what you're supposed to do and staying away from what you're not supposed to do.

S Shameem Azizad 06:43
Any other acts of good or bad that fall in between, of course, I mean—generally try to do everything with that intention and umbrella of service. So even like cooking a meal for your family can be an act of worship, because you're doing it—you're doing a good thing in the service of a greater thing.

S Shadia Igram 07:07
How about—can you tell us about your community?

S Shameem Azizad 07:11

Yeah. Oh, yeah, actually, I had something else I had written about that—faith, if I can go back.

S Shadia Igram 07:18
Yeah, please.

S Shameem Azizad 07:19
But growing up, my faith was more like blind faith; it was kind of just rooted in parental and cultural fear. I mean, I went to some Sunday school, but not a ton. But then, as I was in college, I started to attend more Halaqas [learning groups] more seriously. And from then, for the next eight to 10 years, I think just being in Albany, living by myself, and going to Sheikh Mukhtar's classes, that kind of shaped my faith. Just the way he taught it was very much a spiritual-like internal approach to it. As opposed to being very textbook, I felt like he really emphasized the spiritual aspect of it, like how you were supposed to kind of strive to be really—it wasn't like an academic practice. Like you were supposed to really try to feel it in the depths of your soul, like your belief and your practices had to stem from an actual core belief system, as opposed to just this academic debating about different parts of Islam. So that really kind of shaped my faith a lot in those years, kind of in my 20s.

S Shadia Igram 08:24
So growing up as a child, how was Islam understood by you as a kid?

S Shameem Azizad 08:31
It was this very much understood - there's one God, Muhammad [SAW] was his messenger, but even as a kid, I remember, I'd be in the library, reading like Encyclopedia Britannica, right? So I was getting my information from kind of, you know, Sunday school books and the library at school and just—you know, my parents knew some Surah, and they would tell us the basics of what they knew. But at the end of the day, it wasn't—I still feel even now, I feel like there's so many gaps in my knowledge constantly. So I feel like there's a lot to fill there.

S Shadia Igram 09:05
So would you say that your approach to understanding of what Islam is and your relationship with your faith has changed or grew?

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Shameem Azizad 09:14

Yeah, I think it's grown tremendously. I used to be very much just blind faith as a kid. But yeah, and now as an adult, I feel like now I really feel the desire to do more and learn more. And I've always had that drive to learn it, but unfortunately, making the time is something I haven't prioritized evenly throughout my life consistently. So I think my husband has more knowledge, that baseline of things. Like sometimes when I'll say something, he's like, "Yeah of course I know that." And I'm like, "All right. Well, I just found that out today. So—" (laughs)

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Shameem Azizad 09:44

I don't know. Like, my goal is to know enough so I can teach my kid when she asks questions, especially because I think they ask a lot more questions. And sometimes my sister will have questions that her kid who is five asks. And I'm like, Okay, yeah. We both have, sometimes, no idea what to say. So it's kind of another motivating piece, because I don't think blind faith is going to work that well for her.

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Shadia Igram 10:06

It's a little bit different now, I think, for kids.

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Shameem Azizad 10:09

Yeah, I think it is. I mean, because I think kids of immigrants and refugees in general, just tend to toe the line and kind of follow instructions. Because there's kind of this—you have your goals as a family, like, you know, you're going to be a doctor, lawyer, engineer, whatever. And you're not really supposed to step out of line as far as most things go. So that includes your culture, your religion, your career, your education. But I think kids now, we kind of almost encourage her to kind of just be a free spirit—like, she doesn't know the days of the week but she has four-syllable words in her vocabulary, so it's kind of all over the place. And we just kind of—you want them to be a good person, we just want them to be happy. So all that stuff also needs some kind of framework where she's still living her life as a Muslim, for us. I think that's really important to me. So I think balancing all that, for me will require: number one, sustainable faith, and then number two is knowing more and more about it. So I think the more you know, the more practice, too. So if your knowledge, I think, becomes—you know, Sheikh Mukhtar has said before, "Knowledge that is not acted upon will leave you." So I feel like there has to be consistent attainment of knowledge but then you also have to constantly practice it. So it's kind of—as an adult, that's kind of that balance I'm trying to strike.

S Shadia Igram 11:21
Great. So going back to—(speaking at the same time)

S Shameem Azizad 11:24
—community.

S Shadia Igram 11:24
Yeah, about your community.

S Shameem Azizad 11:26
So my community here is mostly close friends who are Muslim, and we've kind of met through other friends. And most of the non-Muslim friends my husband and I have are kind of from other walks of life, like either from school in the past, or, for my husband, like people he works with, but I don't think either—I don't think the people he works with now he would consider close friends. They're more like colleagues and acquaintances. And then for both of us, me probably even more so, my girlfriends from med school. We're pretty close, we talk pretty regularly, but I still consider my closest friends my Muslim friends.

S Shadia Igram 11:55
And has that always been the case?

S Shameem Azizad 11:58
I think throughout middle school and high school, it was kind of, I was a—I didn't have that many close friends. Because number one: we were constantly, like, in the fold or fabric of our family life. So we didn't have the traditional, You can go to the movies and the mall with your school friends, so that I didn't have those strong friendships at that stage of my life. And in college, I kind of gravitated towards MSA [Muslim Students Association]; med school, more varied, diverse friend group. And then again, once I was living on my own in residency, most of my friends came from the mosque. So since then, it's just kind of always been Muslim friends.

S Shadia Igram 12:34

What about the role that community plays in your life? How would you define that?

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Shameem Azizad 12:38

Um, (pause I don't know.

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Shameem Azizad 12:49

I do think because my husband and I both enjoy company so much and hanging out with like-minded people, I think that it's a big part of our lives, to be social, and, you know, spend time with our friends. Community means people for us that, you know, share our faith, share our happiness and celebrations, and also our tough times. Traditionally, I probably would have defined my community as the mosque growing up, especially, again, in my 20s, when I used to go to the mosque a lot. But I just—that's just not the vibe here in Austin. It's more community through friendship.

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Shadia Igram 13:25

Do you miss that?

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Shameem Azizad 13:26

Oh, yeah, but I also don't know how feasible all of it would be with a child now. But at the same time, yeah. I mean, I remember people used to bring their kids to the mosque where I grew up all the time, so yes, it was a big part of it, but it was centered around the scholarship and leadership of our Imams. So I don't sense that here. I don't really have that same drive to go to the mosque, because I don't see it as a place where I learn that much. Nor is it very welcoming. For you know, most—it's just different. It's just a very different vibe. I don't know if the community is just that much larger here, so that's why you just don't see the same people repeatedly.

S

Shameem Azizad 13:59

I mean myself, I'll go to different mosques on Friday. So I'll see different people and very rarely the same people, so it's hard to build connections. We used to have a dinner the first Friday of every month. We had Tuesday night Halaqas, Friday night Halaqas, Sunday afternoon Halaqas, and usually the same people attended all of it. So, you saw the same people repeatedly, and you were all kind of on the same track, because you all enjoyed learning the same stuff, you all liked being in the same spot. So here, I just don't sense that.



Shadia Igram 14:28

Was that kind of routine schedule, was that in your childhood or during college?



Shameem Azizad 14:32

College and med school.



Shadia Igram 14:34

What was the community like? Were you a frequent mosque-goer as a child?



Shameem Azizad 14:38

I would say moderately but again, my parents were just so busy. So, you know, it was more piecemeal when we were kids. But it was an integral part of our life, I will say that. Like, memorizing and—you know, I think that my parents did the best they could to keep it a vibrant part of our life. But I think because my parents themselves were so busy, I never got the sense that we were part of the bigger social community which was very Pakistani. And I felt very out of place. Like on Eid, our outfits were never the same as everybody else's, because they were all in their Pakistani clothes. And all their parents knew each other, like they all had open houses to go to on Eid, and my parents were always like, Oh, Eid was so much better in Afghanistan. Like, This is terrible, this is so boring.



Shameem Azizad 15:20

But at the same time, they also had to work on Eid, and my mom's family just does not practice. So for them—I mean, I was talking to a cousin last week. And she's like, "What are you doing?" I'm like, "Oh, you know, getting ready for Ramadan." And she was like, "Oh, you're not even fasting!" For her, it was like that one component, and it's like you either fast or you don't. And for most people, I think, who I know, and for myself—my family included—it's not just about that one thing. It's like a huge thing that Ramadan is coming, so I grew up with that my whole life. My mom's family just kind of didn't practice at all.



Shameem Azizad 15:50

Then when we were older, we kind of brought it to everyone. Like, Oh, let's everybody go out on Eid. And it was a thing, but even then we were the only ones who would have fasted all month whereas everybody else was just like another day, like a family brunch. So community as a child was tough as far as like a big Muslim community. We didn't really

have that—not because it didn't exist, but my parents were just really not part of it. And maybe it was because they were refugees. I mean, similar to us, we have lots of open houses and Iftaars we attend now. And I mean, are the refugees really included? Not really.

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Shadia Igram 16:21

Mm-mm.

S

Shameem Azizad 16:21

Or even if they're included on, like, one Iftaar or one Eid event, are they people we really talk to and consider as close friends? Probably not. But maybe they have each other? But I can say that my parents didn't really have much of an Afghan community, either, because there is this disparity between Afghans who practice Islam versus those who are more Persian culturally and just don't practice. And there were more of those Afghans where we grew up. So my parents just kind of isolated us because they didn't want us to grow up like that, either. It was just a tough balance as kids.

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Shadia Igram 16:51

So how are you preparing for Ramadan?

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Shameem Azizad 16:53

I decorated the house. (laughs) And I looked at some Pinterest recipes for my husband to make in some—for some stuff for Suhoor, but really not that much more. I mean, just trying to set some goals for myself for memorizing Qur'an or just trying to not sleep or not watch so much TV! (laughs) That would be great.

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Shameem Azizad 17:16

And then just talking to Asi about it, getting ready for Iftaars, and trying to set a balance of how many we're not going to attend or attend, just because the days are long—excuse me—and I just feel like it's a very exhausting month if you don't pace yourself. And I'm not even fasting, but I'm just tired. So yeah, I think it's just like a marathon month; eating dinner so late is just really, really stressful for me. So I, you know, I already get very upset when we're eating after Maghrib but now it's just going to be like a matter of routine for a full month. And it's gonna delay our kids' bedtime. And it's just a whole thing. So—



Shadia Igram 17:52

You would say that this, the Ramadan that you're experiencing now, is probably polar opposite of what it was like as a child?



Shameem Azizad 17:59

Oh, my parents always did—my mom always made special stuff. I always remember eating our favorite foods every day in Ramadan. I mean, my parents really did their best to make those times special but there weren't presents, and there weren't decorations. You know, Tarawih a big part in high school and college, and all that; our whole family would go. But even then, I mean, the days were shorter when I was that old. If it was now, I mean, going to Tarawih at 10pm—it, you know, requires more strength. (laughs)



Shadia Igram 18:33

You said there is a lot more community.



Shameem Azizad 18:35

Yes. Now, I feel—I feel it much more, and I know my kid is growing up with a whole different vibe. Like I mean, just totally different. I think even as a kid, a connection to Allah just—she and my niece both talk about, they'll ask for things from Allah. Like, I mean Alina told her I got LOL dolls from Allah. She was terrified of losing them. She's like, "Bibi's gonna be very upset with me if I lose these dolls because Allah gave them to me." I was like, "Oh my God, he's not going to be upset with you. It's fine!"



Shameem Azizad 18:58

But then Afiya the other day was acting really weird—she popped her head out of bed and she's like, "Allah, I would like some LOL dolls, please." And like, it's funny that she asked for the same thing that her cousin got. She didn't ask for some other thing. And we were explaining Salah to her yesterday, so we were just asking, and she was like, "Well, why are we praying?" She was like, "Yeah, well I don't do Salah. If I want something, I just do this"—she holds her hands in prayer—"I just ask Allah." She's kind of a very in-tune child. Like we got home the other day from a late night and she just got into bed. And she's like, "Oh, alhumdillah for our house. It's so nice." Or some days she will leave the house and she's like "Oh, alhumdillah, My plants are blooming." Or she'll say, "Alhumdillah, I didn't leak! I made it to the bathroom on time." She seems to express the gratitude concept with the correct word pretty good for a three year-old. So she's growing up with those things more

inculcated into her day-to-day life than I did.

S Shadia Igram 19:50
Would you say that she's developing a relationship with the Almighty at a younger age?

S Shameem Azizad 19:54
I think so. I think just even thinking about it, yeah. Absolutely. But again, I don't remember what I was like as a three year old.

S Shadia Igram 20:04
Let's move on to what it means to be a Texan what it means to you.

S Shameem Azizad 20:09
I actually don't identify as a Texan, just American-Muslim. But I would never describe myself as a Texan. It just doesn't cross my mind to do that.

S Shadia Igram 20:19
What does being a Texan-

S Shameem Azizad 20:20
I would probably think more a New Yorker than a Texan because maybe I spent more time there-the most time there. I don't know.

S Shadia Igram 20:28
What would be the difference? What are the identity markers of a Texan that you cannot quite attach to your own identity?

S Shadia Igram 20:35
But you live here.

S

Shameem Azizad 20:35

Yeah, I think Texans really take pride in being Texan. And it's a thing for them. Like, they like certain aspects of being Texan. They love the heat, they love the hot sauce. I mean, sure. I love tacos, yes, but I don't know that that particularly makes me Texan. I think it's just the culture of what I see as a, quote, unquote, Texan is not me. And I mean, I've been to some remote parts of Texas and I can tell you [that] the people who really do identify themselves as Texan I absolutely have nothing in common with. I mean, they're living in fracking towns, and, you know, they're Southern—you know, they're Southern white ladies with blond hair for the most part. I mean, that's what I see as Texan. And maybe if I'm here long enough, I'll start to think of myself that way, but I really don't. I feel no affiliation, in that sense, to say I'm a Texan. Maybe even more Californian than that because I was born there and I've gone there pretty regularly.

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Shameem Azizad 21:29

Mhm.

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Shadia Igram 21:30

And with all that it includes—

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Shameem Azizad 21:32

Yeah, I think I just see it as a bigger part of America. But I don't—I just never think of that adjective to describe myself.

S

Shadia Igram 21:40

Are there elements of Texas that keep you content with residing in this state?

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Shameem Azizad 21:47

Oh, yes. I love not paying state tax. (laughs) I do love the—I mean, I live where we live. I love our home. I love our friends. There's a lot to do with a kid. There's a lot to do as a family. There's a lot of culture. I mean, this past weekend, we just hung out as a family and all day—I mean, we went to this dragon boat race, we went to a farmers market, there was a live marching band. I mean, my in-laws live here, too. There's family, there's friends, there's stuff to do. I feel like a lot of America is very homogeneous as far as the same consumer outlets and ways to spend your time. But I think there's a nice diversity of it

here. And it's a safe, comfortable place, relatively, to live. I just hate the heat.

S Shadia Igram 22:34
And when you say here, are you talking about Texas, or specifically Austin?

S Shameem Azizad 22:37
Austin. Yeah, there's definitely parts that I would not feel comfortable living in.

S Shadia Igram 22:40
In Texas?

S Shameem Azizad 22:41
Absolutely.

S Shameem Azizad 22:42
I mean, I've traveled to Luling, TX, for work. it smells because of the fracking, you can start to smell it when you're driving into town and there are talent towns where the only thing they're known for is, their watermelon spit contest and whatever. I mean, there are some really rural areas here and when you drive, you see Ted Cruz signs everywhere, and Trump signs, and just endless farmland, not a lot. There's no Whole Foods, it's just very different. [Austin] is like a little liberal hub that we live in, so it's very transplantable to any city in America. So it's just what makes this one better. I mean, the traffic is not good, the heat is not good, but otherwise [it is a] pretty comfortable city.

S Shameem Azizad 23:22
And there is a Muslim community, which is nice. So again, there's nothing pressing me to leave except for the weather. (laughs)

S Shadia Igram 23:33
Come winter-

S Shameem Azizad 23:35
I know, I know. My ideal would be to live in California, like Santa Barbara, San Diego, something like that.

S Shadia Igram 23:42
Going back, you've mentioned, I think once or twice now, that you identify as an American-Muslim?

S Shameem Azizad 23:47
Mhm.

S Shadia Igram 23:50
Is it safe to assume that there's no conflict between having those two labels as part of your identity? Or are there are there times where you have felt that—you know, can you be both American and Muslim equally? Are you more one over the other at times?

S Shameem Azizad 24:13
I think being born here, that's the nature of—it's unavoidable that that is who I am. I will say, I think we've spoken about this before, that since I've started wearing hijab, I don't feel the same American sense of entitlement as I used to. I feel more noticeably different than the average American. So that makes me more attuned to just kind of acting a little differently.

S Shadia Igram 24:42
Please, share more about how.

S Shameem Azizad 24:44
For example, one of our friends described this issue where she wasn't happy with the customer service. And then she just, you know, took it to the next level. And I just don't see myself doing that as much. But I mean, there are still days where I get upset: I was at the doctor's office when I had to wait too long the other day, and I was just annoyed. But I always feel like I think about it more in the sense that now they see me as a Muslim person as opposed to before—I might be a Latina, I might be an Arab person, I might be any

minority but they wouldn't know, for example, that I'm Muslim just by looking at me. But now that definitely shines more than anything else.

S Shadia Igram 25:18
So the fear and perception being linked to your faith, can you–

S Shameem Azizad 25:26
I guess. I just, in a way I don't want to be– I mean, in a way, maybe it makes me behave better because it reminds you that you shouldn't be acting a certain way. But yeah, you don't want it to reflect on all Muslims in a way, either– let me see, I kind of had made a note to myself about this.

S Shameem Azizad 25:55
I think overall, globally, our reputation is not good anymore as Muslims, so people don't, I think, like Muslims. I think it's pretty safe to say unless they literally know one. And even though they may still not like the majority, but they like their friend. So I just don't–I'm not happy that that's the case, but it is. And I think that, you know, the state of Muslim countries is not good. And then the state of minorities in non-Muslim countries is not that great either. So as an identifiable Muslim, I do feel a little bit more uncomfortable in my environment than I used to, probably, before.

S Shadia Igram 26:29
Are there repercussions that you fear may occur based on a perceived behavior, or–

S Shameem Azizad 26:35
I do worry about road rage, so there are times where I just keep my scarf off. I mean, most of the time, I don't wear my scarf in the car because I think road rage is pretty intense anyway in the US, let alone here. So I just take that as a–and it's more comfortable for me too, so I just generally don't wear it in a car.

S Shameem Azizad 26:54
Other repercussions, I worry if my kid wears it. I mean, I worry about bullying for her in general as a minority child, and she's kind of darker skinned. She definitely will stand out as a minority. So, yeah, I kind of worry about all of that for her. I think it's harder to

practice your faith in a society that's consistently so other for us. It's just so different.

S

Shameem Azizad 27:17

There's, for example, just the mom wine culture is one small example. It's so prolific in America that young women in their thirties are developing liver failure because two glasses of wine a night, plus some on the weekends with your friends, is like a common thing now for women, like one to two glasses of wine. But people are getting liver failure from this. So that's just this mom culture that's so common, yet all Muslims are, for the most part, not part of that. Or like Christmas, for example, or Easter. My kid asks about that stuff, so there's just so much pushing to the other side for us that, you know, it is exhausting. So I think the Muslim part, yes, is a little bigger than the American part a lot of times because America is a Christian nation. It's not like everybody's faiths are in their home[s]. I mean, we practice Christmas as a national holiday but not our holidays.

S

Shadia Igram 28:10

So do you feel that maybe not only having that "Muslim-ness" to you, but also that you are now visibly Muslim, it has pushed you to the fringes of what is the normal American experience?

S

Shameem Azizad 28:25

Yeah, I don't think I blend in as easily for sure. Yeah. I mean, there's probably places that now I probably wouldn't go as—like I don't go to the gym as much. It's just not as comfortable for me.

S

Shadia Igram 28:36

I want to talk about the Ramadan storytime project. Can you share the background behind that?

S

Shameem Azizad 28:45

Sure. So I joined the Board of an organization called Muslim Community Support Services last year. Namely, I really shouldn't have done it under the umbrella of them anyway but at the time, that was the— I mean, I don't think Muslim Space even existed at that time, which is third space. So that organization really centers on providing support to the indigent and abused within the Muslim community. But since it was Muslim Community Support Services, when I joined it was kind of like, Oh, can we expand our offerings and

just increase our name brand recognition to Muslims in the community at large? So once that was on the table it was like, Well, what can we do for everybody as opposed to just this limited 15 percent of poor people in our community? And also just so more people hear our name, and will donate and all of that. So for me this Ramadan storytime was a big one because I had a two year-old at the time, so I would take her to storytimes all the time at libraries, or bookstores, and whatever. And so I think somehow, that's how I got the idea that we should try to do one for Ramadan. And MCSS was kind of like, "You can do whatever you want as long as you're doing it and we don't have to do anything."

S

Shameem Azizad 29:53

So I spoke with Barnes and Noble, and they were like, "Oh, that sounds great. We'd love to do that, and our management is talking about incorporating local culture and flair and community into your stores." So they were very receptive and they let me decorate a table with Ramadan stuff and suggest authors and different gift items that they could display in Ramadan. And the attendance was very robust for both of the storytimes we did—actually, we did three last year, too. And attendance was just incredibly high. We always do the storytimes right before the Barnes and Noble storytime because they already have a storytime at Barnes and Noble. But I think max, like 15 kids show up for those maximum, if that. But this was like, I think even the store was shocked to see how many people showed up for it. And I think it just showed a need in our community and a desire for parents to just have activities for their children that let them feel like it's a month of celebration, and they're around other Muslims. And again, this is something to do with your kids on a Saturday during the day when you're fasting and everyone's bored.

S

Shameem Azizad 30:57

And so yeah, it just was a big success. And I think some things I learned from it were—I mean, I think a couple of the books I read were not—for the first storytime—weren't on sale at their store. So I've definitely tried to focus on reading stuff that will bring business into their store as well. So it's kind of a collaborative effort. So yeah, I mean, it's a lot of fun to do it. And it makes me happy because—and also, one of my biggest goals was I wanted my kid to feel represented in a place that she goes so often. She goes to Barnes and Noble at least three times a week, if not more, with myself or my nanny or whatever. And they go to tons of storytimes, so I just liked the idea of us going during our holiday season and seeing our stuff represented. You know, for Passover and all Christian holidays they have corporate signage, and for us they don't, so they just printed on a piece of white paper and put it up, which is kind of annoying, but still, this year I think they've increased the display size quite a bit compared to last year. But again I have to ask for it like, "Oh, I see this Passover display on an end here."

S Shameem Azizad 32:00
"Oh yeah, we can do that for you guys, too."

S Shameem Azizad 32:02
So, I mean, it definitely requires a lot of pushing. Even when I went the end shelf will have like three of the same book on three different shelves whereas they have a list of 20 books they could stock. It's just [that] you have to really push.

S Shadia Igram 32:18
Were there any adverse or negative outcomes that came from this?

S Shameem Azizad 32:21
No.

S Shadia Igram 32:22
And can you share more about the response from the community? So we know that Barnes and Noble has been more receptive to it. And—

S Shadia Igram 32:30
And BookPeople—

S Shadia Igram 32:30
And BookPeople.

S Shameem Azizad 32:31
—which is the biggest independent bookseller, and they, actually, have been pretty proactive in putting it in their newsletter, too, before each month comes out like, Oh, we're having a Ramadan storytime. And they're doing it again this year. And they've been like, "Can you tell us which book you want featured in the newsletter?" So they've, at times, been even more proactive themselves. I've actually been surprised at the fact that they let something with such a religious bent be featured during the actual storytime. I asked Austin Public Library and they said no. They couldn't do an actual religious thing. They

said, "Oh, if it's a cultural thing, sure." But I couldn't figure out how to do that, so I just kind of let it go.

S

Shameem Azizad 33:04

But no, I think the Muslim comedian loved it. I think one of the biggest shortages in our community is people who step up to do things. We did an event at the Wildflower Center last year; we didn't raise a lot of money nor did we have a lot of people come up after and say, "I want to be involved in doing that next year." Even though we have huge turnouts at these things, I don't see a lot of people taking ownership of tasks to say, "I want to see this keep going for my family." Like, they'll take advantage of the fact that it's there, but I don't think that a lot of people are invested in the long-term longevity of some of these things. It's kind of like, Why can't we have nice things? Its like, Well, it's dependent on one person consistently doing it. And yeah, I guess that's kind of the frustrating part about it. It's that—I mean, it is a lot of work to coordinate it months in advance. I make the book lists, I have to go to the stores, and then sometimes the person you're looking for isn't at the store, and then you also don't want to nag them for this one storytime you're doing you know? So I just—it would be nice if more of the moms who love the idea of it—I mean, people will come up to me and say, "This is so great! Thank you so much for doing this!" But nobody is ever like—I mean, I'm literally just a mom who works myself. It's not like any of these other moms couldn't do it. I mean there are so many stay-at-home moms in Austin! Literally any of them could do this! It's just—they read to their kids all the time! And so many of them used to be teachers before they had kids, but nobody just—nobody steps up.

S

Shadia Igram 34:27

Do you think—going back to where we started with your childhood and that experience—do you think that there were learning lessons, maybe because your parents had a business, you helped out, that planted the seed to take on those kinds of tasks and follow them through?

S

Shameem Azizad 34:47

I do think there's something to be said for personality, I guess, in a sense. I think my husband and I are both ENTJs on the Meyers-Briggs personality front, so I think we both are people who—I mean, my husband is more of an idea guy, and he almost sometimes eggs me on. He's like, "Why don't you so and so to do this?" I'm like, "Why don't you do it?" I think it was something recently where he asked them, "Why don't you guys do it?" It was the MCSS fundraiser and I was like, "Oh, it's gonna be like—you know, I just wish they had an executive board. And then the people who are kind of on it now could just do more of

the work." And he was like, "Why don't you ask Shadia and Omar to do it?" And I was like, "Why don't you do it?" (laughs)

S

Shameem Azizad 35:19

He's like, "I don't, I don't know—that's not my passion." I was like, "Well, maybe it's not their's!" So he's constantly pushing me like, "Why don't you do this? Why don't you have this person do this?" He loves fantasizing about different people doing different things, but I think it's just more of a joke for him sometimes to be like, "Why don't you ask so and so to do this.?"

S

Shameem Azizad 35:34

So yeah, I think my husband and I both share leadership qualities and he's also kind of a supportive person in that if I have an idea, he's just like, "Yeah, you do you. Run with it." I don't have to worry about anyone at home kind of holding me back. It's just kind of like I can run with an idea, and this one was just easy enough that I didn't give up in the beginning. So I didn't get too burned out.

S

Shadia Igram 35:54

Much appreciated. We'll wrap up—

S

Shadia Igram 35:58

I just want to know if there is any anything else you would like people to know about your work, on Islam, about Muslims, or anything else?

S


Shameem Azizad 35:58


Cool.


S

Shameem Azizad 36:06

My work is awesome because I get to work from home. Muslims, I think—I think we're just like everybody else in many ways in the sense that there's fun, decent, good Muslims just trying their best and then there's those that are aspiring to and those that are just really crazy, like right-wingers. And unfortunately, I just think we get a lot more bad press than the rest. That's about it.

 Shadia Igram 36:33
All right.

 Shameem Azizad 36:33
All right, thanks.

 Shadia Igram 36:34
Thank you.