

# Nasriya Witt

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Culture shock, Health Careers High School, Immigrant, Immigration, India, Moving, Oman, Non-profit, Psychology, Refugees, Research science, Saudi Arabia, The University of Texas at San Antonio, Youth mentorship

## SPEAKERS

Nasriya Witt, Rimsha Syed



Rimsha Syed 00:02

Hi, this is Rimsha Syed. I am the program coordinator with IDCL. The date is June 15, 2021, around six in the evening. I am currently in Austin, Texas on a Zoom call joined by Nasriya Witt for the Texas Muslim Voices oral history project. How are you today, Nessie?



Nasriya Witt 00:26

Hi, I'm great.



Rimsha Syed 00:29

I should mention that I've known Nasriya for the past 10 years, which is why I just called her Nessie. I am very excited about this interview. So for starters, would you like to tell us a bit about yourself? And also where you're joining the call from today?



Nasriya Witt 00:44

Yes. I'm joining in from San Antonio, Texas. I'm 23 years old and I currently work in the Refugee Resettlement Services department at Catholic Charities here in San Antonio. I graduated last year [and] yeah that's pretty much it.



Rimsha Syed 01:03

Thank you. So I want to start off by jumping back way in time and asking if you could share a bit about your childhood, maybe some formative memories that you have, and just anything you'd like to include related to growing up?



Nasriya Witt 01:21

Yes, so I was born in Kerala, India. I lived there until I was five years old in my grandparents house. I found it very fun. It was a very fun time in my childhood, just because it was surrounded by cousins. There was not a lot of time to be bored or anything because Kerala's very pretty. There's a lot of natural things. I would just be walking around outside a lot by myself when my sister or cousins were in school, because I was the youngest at the time. Then we moved to Saudi Arabia when my mom remarried, and then we lived in Oman. We moved back to India for a year and then moved to California and then to Texas when I was 9 or 10. A few years later, I met you in high school. That's some of what happened.



Rimsha Syed 02:15

It seems like all of this happened before you were nine. So you were pretty young with all this moving. I wanted to ask, out of all the places that you've lived, do you have a favorite?



Nasriya Witt 02:33

That's a good question. I think I've always taken away different perspectives from the places I've lived. That sounds really dramatic to say when you're talking about a period in your life when you were a small child. There were positives and negatives for every single place. For Texas, it was always about relationships that I built here. I didn't really like the political environment here. I didn't like the weather here. I felt like there was less to do here than there was in California. But Texas was also the place that I made my own friends that I kept for a long period of time. And it's also the place where I became an adult. So in that sense, I feel really connected to Texas. But the places that I've liked the most - I really liked Oman and Saudi because it was an adventurous time in my life. I would say I like Oman a little bit more than Saudi just because it was more relaxed. I think the people were a little kinder. There was more opportunity to socialize with their neighbors and things like that - and just a general ease to their society that I [also] experienced in Kerala. But that could be because I was surrounded by family and people that my family's known for a long time. But in Oman, there was a similar ease, without having family

nearby, and I don't think I've experienced that anywhere else.



Rimsha Syed 04:07

Thanks for sharing. From what I do know about you, you've been back to Kerala a couple times throughout our friendship. I was hoping to hear more about what your family dynamic is like. Who do you usually stay with while you're there and how going back and traveling to Kerala has been for you as an adult?



Nasriya Witt 04:32

We usually stay at my grandparents house, but then a few years ago, my mom built a house there and we sometimes stay there, but it's right next door to my grandparents house. What I always thought was interesting was that I used to be super excited to go and [would] imagine the house in my head and just have this anticipation of going back. When I was younger, the ceilings were so high - I would just remember those types of details, like how I felt when I was there. But because I was growing while I was away, I would go back to the same house that I've been to periodically throughout my childhood and I'd be like, "Oh my god, , it's actually not as big as I thought it was," or, like, "Oh, the ceilings aren't that high," because I was growing as a person. But my memories of that place stay at the same age as when I left it. A lot of my core memories in Kerala are from when I was five or younger.



Nasriya Witt 05:30

Of course those things have changed a little bit now - the house has changed a lot. There was a period in my childhood where I would be so surprised by just how different everything was from my memory. I've heard other people speak about this experience, where they think that the countries they have left behind stay the same, or they just think that they would match up to the memories they have there. But of course, they're also evolving and changing really fast. When you're a child and you're growing, you can go back to a place, it just feels totally different because you're not the same person you were before. But yeah, we would stay at my grandparents' house and I would always have family come over, it would be a lot of cousins, a lot of aunts and uncles. Recently, my cousins are having children. So, there's lots of babies around.



Rimsha Syed 06:26

So I wanted to ask how moving around so much impacted your schooling?

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Nasriya Witt 06:35

I started off by going to school in India. My parents wanted me to have an experience of what school was like. I was initially not enrolled, partly because for financial reasons [and] partly because I was left handed. At that time in India, I'm not sure if they're still doing it now, but they would change people's handedness and my mom didn't want that. So, she was hesitant [about] sending me to school. They did eventually send me [to school] when I was five years old - just for me to understand what school was like before we moved to Saudi. [My mom would say], "Don't have her write with her right hand, leave her alone. Let her write the way she writes." [Also], kids in India would get hit if they got something wrong on a test or made a mistake, just for behavioral things. My mom was like, "Don't hit her either," which I think was really nice of her because my sister didn't have that privilege. I think she was hit in school there.

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Nasriya Witt 07:30

We moved to Saudi and I went to Indian international schools in both Saudi and Oman. A memory there was registering for school and having to take an entrance exam and the entrance exam was in English. But when you're a five year old, a lot of the test questions were things like, "Draw this letter," or, "Color that" and I remember this teacher helping me because I had no idea what was going on. Then I suddenly placed into first grade instead of kindergarten. I was supposed to place into kindergarten, we bought uniforms and everything, but the school said, "No you did really well on your exam. You're [being] placed into first grade." And that was really strange because my older sister ended up being placed in first grade as well when she was supposed to be in the second grade. That's something that impacted our confidence in opposing ways, where she felt that she wasn't really that great at school, when she was doing so well in school in India, and I felt like I was so smart because I placed higher - but I also remember this teacher helping me with the exams. That was always a strange memory.

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Nasriya Witt 08:32

I went to school with lots of kids from different places, but most of them were Indian because the schools were Indian international schools. I remember one of my best friends being Egyptian. A lot of immigrant families in Saudi and Oman would send their kids to those schools just because they were available, and I guess maybe it's just what was done there. But yeah, both schools were similar just because of their similar backgrounds. Then we went back to India for another year where we were waiting for immigration things to happen and I was being adopted by my mom's husband, and that took a long time. So, we were in India, but I wasn't going to school. My parents had a tutor for us to come teach us at home, but it was not a formal education. It was just somebody would come to my grandparents' living

room and teach us random things, really. That lasted for about a year and then we moved to California where I did both fourth and fifth grade in one year to make up for the missed year of school, and that was done through California Virtual Academies, which is called CAVA. And that's like an online remote schooling thing that's been there forever.

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Nasriya Witt 09:48

Then when we moved to Texas, I joined the American public school system and that was a culture shock because it's the first time I ever saw kids being rude to their teachers. The schools that I went to in India, Saudi, and Oman, when a teacher walked in the door, you would stand up - we always wore uniforms, they would check our nails to make sure they were cut. If you were a little bit off from the dress code they would make you run around the school - it was very strict, but also full of a lot of respect. I remember our teachers would put on plays for us on International Children's Day. The American education system was a little different. The kids were a little mean to the teachers and the teachers were overwhelmed, and they would be mean back. I saw teachers lose their tempers for the first time in my life. Those things were really odd, but I was also settling into this new culture and that was really difficult. I couldn't really find my place here. We moved schools in Texas too. I did sixth and seventh grade at Zachary Middle School, which I thought was some of the most difficult years of my life, and then eighth grade at Jordan Middle School where I felt more settled. Then in ninth grade, I went to Health Careers High School and made friends for the first time that I've kept forever. All the friends I made before that, because I kept moving to different countries, I never stayed in touch with any of them.

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Nasriya Witt 10:57

I feel like Health Careers was where I really formed community. I'm part of that community. It was meeting you as well. We met in first period, freshmen PE and I remember you came up to me, and were like, "Are you Muslim?" And I got bullied for being Muslim in the middle schools, so I was like, "Why is she asking?" Then I was like, "Well, she looks different." So I was like, "Yeah," suspiciously. Then I met more kids like me, who were immigrant Muslim kids and immigrant kids of other faiths and other cultures and it was really interesting to find a community of those kinds of students there.



Rimsha Syed 11:50

Wow, yeah. Thanks for sharing and mentioning our ninth grade PE story. So, you talked a little bit about culture shock when moving to California. But I wanted to dive a little bit deeper and ask like, what do you remember about your parents and what they told you when they were deciding to move to America? Do you remember the day of traveling vividly? What was it like when you finally got to California?



Nasriya Witt 12:24

Kids are rarely asked their opinion. No one ever asks [kids], "Do you want to move here?" I'm pretty sure they did ask, but as a child, you're pretty aware that you can say yes or no, but whatever is going to happen is going to happen. For example, even before we moved to Saudi, I was on the phone with my soon-to-be adopted dad and my uncle and they asked, "Do you want to move here?" I said yes thinking they were kidding, and then it happened, and I was like, "Okay, never mind." I remember the journey being long from India to San Francisco. It was such a long time waiting for the [move] to happen because the adoption and immigration process had taken so long. It was just a relief for a my parents when we moved because we were meeting our dad in [San Francisco] and we had been separated for a year. We got really close living in Saudi and Oman together, but when we got to India it was back to being my sister, my mom, and me. We had all our family in India, but our dad had moved to California ahead of us, and he was doing all the legal stuff on the American end and we were doing all the legal stuff on the Indian end. That was a stressful time for my mom, it was a stressful time for my dad, and they were also worried about us missing school. So, I remember the journey being long [and] all of it was [up] in the air.



Nasriya Witt 13:51

Then as we were landing in San Francisco, I was looking out the window and my mom said something like, "Oh my god look at where my girls are," something really sentimental like that. We joined our dad and he gave us jackets because he was like, "It's really cold here." Then we drove to Marina, California, a little seaside town. That's where we lived. I guess everyone has an idea of what America is from movies and things, but at the age of like eight, I didn't have a solid idea of what I would experience here. I remember being obsessed with dandelions and Razor scooters the first year that we lived here. We were really sheltered because we were doing remote schooling, and that was on purpose. My dad didn't want us to start American public school immediately because he knew that it would be really difficult for us. I remember us deciding to move to Texas - and that was only a year later - my sister and I thinking there would be horses and all of that - like the embarrassing perception that some people have of what Texas is. Then we looked up homes

online and that's when I realized that it was more like California than some Western movie.



Rimsha Syed 15:13

I want to transition a little bit and talk about Texas because you have lived here for the majority of your life now. I would like to know how you feel about your Texan identity, if that's something you identify with, or, more specifically, how you feel about San Antonio as a whole.



Nasriya Witt 15:35

I think because I came of age in Texas and so many of the people that I love are here that I do really identify with Texas as a place. I feel like part of me is Texan. My dad's from Pennsylvania and my mom's from India. But my dad has always said, "I'm a Yankee. I'm a northerner." A lot of conservative values have really put off my family the whole time we've lived here. But because I have met so many wonderful people here, I know that a part of my heart will be here, even if I move away and never come back to live here. In that sense, I do really feel Texan and I know that this environment has shaped a lot of who I am. But honestly, I don't really know to what extent until I leave, but there's so much that I love about Texas, and so many things that frustrate me. Right now, it's the heat. So, it's not just political things. It's also something like how hot it is here.



Rimsha Syed 16:39

Right? Very hot. Very unbearable at the moment. So, it seems like you might not want to live in Texas long term, but where do you see yourself living long term?



Nasriya Witt 16:52

I have no idea. I really don't. My family speaks about it sometimes, like buying houses nearby. But I know that I want to spend the next couple years of my life living in other places, other countries, hopefully. I think about whether or not I want to move back to India when I'm older or move back to Texas. Those are the two areas that I am most connected to, but I really have no idea. And I think that's kind of exciting. I haven't picked a career that will force me to settle down in one place. So yeah, it's really open ended right now. It's exciting for me because I've lived such a transient life. That's something that I'm more comfortable with than being in one place forever.



Rimsha Syed 17:43

Yeah, that does sound exciting. So, I'm going to transition again and ask if you and your family practice any religion or any sort of spirituality?



Nasriya Witt 17:55

Yes, so I was raised Muslim. I think my mom comes from a fairly traditional Muslim family. We fast, we pray, we were taught Arabic when we were younger. We would go to madrasas. If we are lucky, we go on Hajj or Umrah, which a lot of my family has done. A lot of my uncles and male cousins live as migrant workers in Saudi Arabia. My uncle owns a company now so he employs a lot of my cousins. Because of our connection to Saudi and Kerala's connection to Saudi in general, there is a lot of affinity with their version of Islam, which is the traditional Sunni version. I was technically raised in that faith, but when we moved to Saudi it was also the height of - I don't know the exact phrase to use, but I guess Wahhabism. So, my parents decided not to enroll me in religious schools there because of the nature of their religious education at that time.



Nasriya Witt 19:03

So, when I moved to Saudi actually I lost touch with my faith and I stopped learning Arabic. When I would go back to India afterwards, I was taught more about how to pray and things like that. But since I was only there for just a year and I kept missing my religious education, at this point in my life, I had forgotten how to read Arabic. I knew very little when it came to religious texts and things like that. I know how to pray, but I don't know it fully, honestly. I'm also not that connected to my faith because of my dad, who is not very religious. He's more spiritual and I take after more him more in that sense. My mom has always encouraged me to be religious, but she also isn't somebody who will insist on that. I told her when I was in the seventh grade that I don't think God exists and instead of being really upset at that, she was someone who talked me through it and showed me her perspective. I've always had my own perspective on it and for a long time, it was very scientific. Recently, I've kind of evolved and I'm starting to look at it from more of a spiritual lens. But even then, the part of me that sees life from a science perspective, that part is still very strong. So, I need things to make sense to me before choosing to practice it. There's a lot of religion that obviously you're taking on faith, and I'm not very good at that. I'm a little bit spiritual, but mostly an atheist or agnostic Muslim at this point in my life.



Rimsha Syed 20:44

Thanks for sharing. Is your dad Muslim as well?



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Nasriya Witt 20:48

Yes, he converted, I think because he was living in the Middle East. He was born in Pennsylvania. Then when he was 17 or 18 he lived in Europe for a bit, and then work took him to the Middle East. So, he speaks German and Arabic and I guess he was naturally curious about the faith because he was living in the Middle East and he had a lot of Muslim friends, so he was okay to convert. But I think a big reason why he converted was to marry my mom. His Muslim name is Muhammad, I don't know if you knew that. Everybody on my mom's side of the family call him Muhammad instead of Miles, which I think actually a lot of converts that convert for marriage have to do. I kind of disagree with that. I don't think you should make people change their names. But that's a thing. He's not very religious though. Because he speaks Arabic, I think in that sense, he is more connected to like - he can read the Qur'an easily and things like that - but besides that, he is not very religious. I don't think anybody in my family prays regularly. And I hate to throw my mom under the bus, but she always says she does, but I've never really seen her do it.



Rimsha Syed 22:10

So, earlier, we talked about your journey through elementary school, middle school up until high school, but now I kind of want to hear about your college experience.

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Nasriya Witt 22:24

So I stayed in San Antonio for college, I went to UTSA. It was such a rigorous time in my life. Throughout the course of school, I worked on and off two jobs - I worked at a jewelry store and I worked at a research lab. I also double majored and started off as biology major [and] pre-med - you know, classic for an immigrant child. Then I realized, halfway through that it's so much work and I was working so hard to go for a dream that wasn't mine. So, I stopped pursuing that goal.

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Nasriya Witt 23:02

A lot of that had to do with it negatively affecting my mental health and realizing that if I'm going to be doing something and working so hard toward something, it should actually be something I'm interested in. I was naturally curious about psychology - and I can tell you more about that if you'd like. I was curious about psychology, I always had been, and then I took an intro to psych class, and I realized it was easy for me. I was like, "Okay, I don't want to graduate early," I wanted to take my full four years in college. I added that as a secondary major instead of having it as a minor. That's a decision that

sometimes I think is dumb, but then sometimes I'm really grateful that I did that. Because biology and psychology are two degrees on its own that doesn't make you that employable. So, it's something that you have to go to grad school for, for both majors. In a practical sense, I'm like, "Okay, well, I shouldn't have done that." But in the sense that I followed something that I was really passionate about, I'm really glad I studied psychology. It did make life really difficult for those four years because that's so much to do. I was working all the time or studying. And amidst all of that, I was trying to have all these new experiences and experience the college life.



Rimsha Syed 24:18

Aside from studying and working, were you part of any organizations while you were at UTSA?



Nasriya Witt 24:27

Early on, I pursued some premed organizations, but I didn't stick with them, because I wasn't passionate about that. But then I joined an organization called FIMRC, which was the Foundation for International Medical Relief of Children. It was a nonprofit that raises money for various FIMRC sites across the world. I think in my year, we raised funds for project sites in Peru and we ended up organizing a group of students to go there. I think there's a negative conception of voluntourism, but I think we were really aware of what we were getting ourselves into. We knew that we weren't going there to change people's lives, but we wanted to participate in cultural exchange and experience this place and see what the project sites were about and see what kind of work they did. We did a little volunteering things like entertaining the kids or the mothers of this place, things like that.



Nasriya Witt 25:17

I thought that was a very significant experience in my life, just because Peru was a country that was similar to India in many ways, but also their culture was similar to the southern Texas culture, like the Hispanic American culture, just in terms of what people wore and what people ate. I really liked it there. I feel like it was a place that I could live. I wouldn't have known that if I hadn't gone there for this trip. I guess a lot of where my passion went to in college was my job at the research lab. I worked for Dr. Georgianna Gould at the physiology department at UTHSCSA [University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio] and our research centered around autism and other behavioral health disorders. Because of the role that I had there as a research assistant and the relationship I had with Dr. Gould, I found this as a job that really kind of focused on growing my self as a scientist and as a person and gave me a lot of

opportunities. I would always travel for work, which I find very fun. I ended up mentoring high school students in the lab. I started working in this lab in high school. So similarly, other high school students would join and I would mentor them. I fell in love with research because of Dr. Gould and my experiences in this lab. I shifted from wanting to be a doctor to wanting to be a scientist because of all the experiences I had in this lab. I spent a lot of time there, a minimum of 20 hours a week.



Rimsha Syed 26:56

Would you say that Dr. Gould was a mentor figure in your life?



Nasriya Witt 27:02

Oh, for sure. She is on paper, a mentor for me. I call her my science mom. She's someone who came to my graduations in high school and college. She's still so involved in making sure I get to where I want to go. And also, I am really invested in her research and in her lab as well. She gave me a really realistic perception of what that's like. It's not easy. I think there's a lot of fighting to get funding. That's something that I'm apprehensive about when I think of my career in the future, but I think it was such a valuable experience that I'm really grateful to have met her, and I definitely see her as a mentor.



Rimsha Syed 27:52

Do you see your work at the research lab applying to what you might see yourself doing career-wise in the future?



Nasriya Witt 28:00

I think so. I currently work at a nonprofit, and I really enjoy that as well. But I think I want to be a research scientist, at least partly, if not entirely. So yes, I think I'll be doing work more similar to that in the future.



Rimsha Syed 28:21

So tell me more about your current work and what you do.



Nasriya Witt 28:26

I work in a refugee resettlement agency as the youth mentoring program coordinator, it's YMP for short, I'll refer to it as that. I find YMP very fun. It's a small program. I'm the only staff alongside my director, who oversees programs and then our senior director who oversees the entire department. It's just a lot of fun. I'm technically a youth, I think you're still technically a youth. I just meet other kids who are similar to me in age and assist them with school and navigating this new country that they just moved to and also showing them how to balance school and work - things that we have to do in college. A lot of them are college aged and are either getting their GED or applying to community college mostly, for financial reasons, or high school students striving for school. A lot of them are premed, like we were at that age. It's just a lot of fun, part of the job is creating field trips for students, but a lot of it is also just understanding the refugee community, getting involved. I've learned so much about it this past year, and I am learning about the conflicts that make people refugees and what it means to be a refugee. I think a lot of people have a misconception of it - I did at least. Really, they're just immigrants who have a particular type of visa. There's some clients of mine that have had really significant challenges in their life as well because of the conflicts they're fleeing. But then at the same time, because they're younger, some of them have missed that traumatic experience, and they've just lived a transient life like I had when I was younger. So yeah, they're just immigrant kids.



Rimsha Syed 30:28

So just out of curiosity, do you think that there's a way you could combine your passion of wanting to be a scientist with the nonprofit work that you're currently involved with?



N Nasriya Witt 30:41

I think maybe what I want to study in the future is cognitive psychology or cognitive neuroscience, which kind of go hand in hand. But cognitive psychology, I think would put me on track that would allow me to do research, but at the same time, do things in the nonprofit world. I think there might even be potential research in the nonprofit world, I just haven't really seen it. My work is providing services to people, which I enjoy at this point in my life and I wouldn't mind doing that forever, honestly. It's like getting paid to be kind to people and I think that's really fun. I'm sure there's research in the nonprofit world, I just haven't seen it yet, or experienced it or met anyone who's doing it. But I think graduate school might lead me to that.



Rimsha Syed 31:29

I do have one last question for you, it's a bit open ended. So, feel free to take your time if

you need to think about it. But seeing as this is an oral history interview, I'm hoping that someone down the line will be listening to it or reading it and I wanted to ask if you had any sort of statement or message or a piece of advice that you want to put out into the world?



Nasriya Witt 31:57

Right now, because I'm working with youth and because this has been on my mind for a long time, I really, really, really want to encourage immigrant kids in general, but also, I see it a lot with our immigrant Muslim youth community. I want students to start pursuing art. Yeah, careers in art. It doesn't have to be careers, but I want to see people doing more of that instead of pursuing medicine specifically, but also just the traditional careers that I feel like are really heavily encourage among immigrant kids. I see this in my clients, I see this in our friends. I would love to see that because I feel like there's a lot of passion for those kind of things that a lot of people aren't pursuing. And I'd love to see what that would look like if we spend more time actively pursuing those type of things. I know, that's not realistic for a lot of people and that's totally understandable. Of course, I feel like it wasn't realistic for me either, but at the same time, I feel like part of the reason why people don't pursue those types of fields is because they don't really see themselves there, or it's not something that was told was possible for them, and I really feel like it is. It feels kind of random to say that, but I think that's the message that I would want out there.



Rimsha Syed 33:32

That was beautiful. Yeah, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. I really enjoyed it. And I'm going to go ahead and stop the recording now. Thank you.