

# Sehar Ezez

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## SPEAKERS

Sehar Ezez, Aysha Moneer

- A** Aysha Moneer 00:02  
Hi, this is Aysha Moneer, I am an archives coordinator with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. Today is Thursday, July 8. I will go ahead and start by letting you introduce yourself. Usually we also start with telling us where exactly you're taking your call from.
- S** Sehar Ezez 00:26  
Okay, I'm Sehar Ezez. I'm here in Dallas, Texas. I grew up in Demopolis, Alabama, which is in the heart of what's called the Black Belt historically, and I grew up in a pretty small town as one of few Muslim families, probably in the whole county.
- A** Aysha Moneer 00:54  
Wow, okay, great. This is part of the collection for our Remembering 9/11 collection. But before we get into that, to contextualize a bit more about your life and background, tell me a bit about what your upbringing looked like in the county that you grew up in.
- S** Sehar Ezez 01:15  
We moved from New Jersey to Marengo County in '99. We had friends and family who moved to Meridian, Mississippi, which is probably about thirty minutes away from where

we lived, thirty to forty-five minutes. There was a masjid in that town, and then there was a masjid in Tuscaloosa where we would move when I went to college. Actually going to a mosque or attending Friday prayers was a very big deal to us. A lot of the times our prayers or celebrations would just be with family, because we didn't have an actual community where we lived. When we were in school, or my parents were working - we were one way in the public and at home, we only spoke Urdu, we had Qur'an lessons. That was just a very normal part of our upbringing, we almost enjoyed it because it was so different from how all my friends grew up. That was kind of what our experience was growing up there.

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Aysha Moneer 02:38

How was it? You said you moved from New Jersey in '99. I'm not sure if you were old enough to remember those memories, but what was the shift like when you moved?

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Sehar Ezez 02:52

We went from a very heavily Muslim populated area of New Jersey - it was heavily populated with Muslims, but also there were a lot of Italian Americans there. So the two religions in those ten years that my parents were living there that they were exposed to were Islam and Catholicism. Where we moved to in Alabama was very heavily evangelical Christians, Baptist Christians, and no Muslims at all. I think there was one Catholic Church in that county. Almost immediately, my parents noticed that shift when people would ask my parents what they knew about Christianity, and what my parents described was something that was very different from what people, even there, were used to hearing. I think that was a very big culture shock for my parents to have to relearn what their idea of even being an American was because the North is so different from the South. They were also used to a very fast-paced, very non-friendly almost environment to an environment where you couldn't go to Walmart without someone striking up a conversation with you. So it was a very big culture shock for them. I was five so I did pick up on a few things. Almost immediately I did pick up on the remnants of segregation. Wherever you would go, you would see a very strong divide between White individuals and Black individuals.

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Aysha Moneer 05:06

What were spaces where that was manifested in?

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Sehar Ezez 05:15

One of the things that my mom tells me actually, is there used to be a Christmas parade every year in that town. Our first year going, everyone was on the street divided. I mean, it was literally White people were on one side, Black people were on the other side of the street. I asked my mom, "What side do we stand on?" at five. I think that was very shocking to my mom. But it was also - when I went to school, it was very shocking for me at school too, because I wanted to be friends with everybody, and people were kind of hesitant to be friends with me, because they a lot of them had never seen somebody who looked like me. Even at that time, mixed relationships were not a thing there. I think, I'm not sure, but it was only recently where interracial marriages were even beginning to become a thing in that region. I noticed a very strong divide even at that age.

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Aysha Moneer 06:36

Wow. Leading that conversation about growing up in the Deep South and growing up in a city that was segregated, obviously 9/11 has a lot of Islamophobia undertones - not even undertones, overtones - to it. As a young Muslim in a town like that, do you have memory of the day or what thoughts you had on the day of the attack?

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Sehar Ezez 07:11

I was not in school the day that the attack happened. We were actually going out of town. I vividly remember, we were listening to the radio, we were on the highway, and I remember all the cars on the highway stopping. I remember my dad yelling, "Oh my God," because on the radio, they were announcing what was happening. I just remember being very confused. It was very scary to see adults around you panicking like that. And then I even remember, wherever we were going to, they had a conference center where we were going to, they had TVs everywhere, and no one was paying attention to what they were there for. Everyone was surrounding the TVs. To me, that's always stuck out because to see adults scared like that, for a child, I think to this day, that is something that really stuck out to me.

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Aysha Moneer 08:29

What were those reactions like from adults that you saw around you?

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Sehar Ezez 08:35

At that time, it was just fear. It was not knowing what was going on, why it happened, if it

was an accident, if it was on purpose. Then I think later on in the day when the other two - I know one plane struck into the Pentagon and the other one crashed in Pennsylvania, I believe. That was when reality was kind of setting in that these were very much planned. I remember a couple of days later seeing George Bush at the site of the crash speaking, and at that time, I didn't really know what was going on. But I do remember my aunts and uncles and parents being worried about - at that time, even then they were saying, "What impact is this going to have on us?" and being very scared for how people would react to us even at that time.

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Aysha Moneer 09:42

So it was something that the community caught onto pretty quickly that as Muslims, they might be tangentially involved in whatever these current events are happening. Is that something that you were aware of at that age, or did you see it as "Oh, all adults are just responding to something traumatic that happened."

S

Sehar Ezez 10:09

I think for a lot of the adults in my life, they kind of knew immediately to try to assimilate as best as they could. My family in particular, we are particularly darker than most other Pakistani people that we know. Not significantly darker, but dark enough to where we couldn't blend in. So a lot of my uncles took on other names, more American names. A lot of uncles, at their businesses, would not come up front. If they owned gas stations or restaurants, they hired people to be up front, and they fell back. Because at that time, people were calling to boycott Muslim businesses, to boycott even doctors. I remember even doctors being worried because the rhetoric was, "If you give them money, that's going to go back overseas." It was something that was particularly scary for adults who were in the service industry. Because if you're in a professional setting, even though this is the early 2000s, there are still some protections you have against harassment. People who are business owners, are in the service industry, there was virtually no protection, they had to kind of fend for themselves.

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Aysha Moneer 11:49

Right. And I remember before we had this call, you were telling me about your own family owning a business, and you guys experienced some of that as well. Can you talk a bit about that?

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Sehar Ezez 12:01

I think there was just a lot of fear for us because we were new in that area, and we'd just got this business. It would have been very scary for us had people just started boycotting us, which I know a lot of people, in the twenty years we were in that town, that they never came to our business. There was just this kind of immediate need to fall back and blend in and not come up in front of customers as much to kind of mitigate that damage. At that time, there weren't those kinds of resources out there for our community to know how to respond to certain questions. If people came in and said, "Do you support this, that, or the third?" they didn't really know how to respond to those questions. Their immediate reaction was to fall back. I know sometimes we have conversations where we need to stand up for ourselves, we need to educate people. But I think we also have to remember that generation, especially the immigrant generation, were very much fighting for survival. So I don't think we can fault them for falling back and assimilating the way they did.

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Aysha Moneer 13:39

Right. Yeah, I definitely agree. As a child, what was your response to seeing that in your community? Did you have any feelings about your identity within the United States being born as well? Then as an adult, how do you look back and reflect on those reactions as well?

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Sehar Ezez 14:06

Even as a young kid, I really enjoyed learning about history and geography. I had uncles and aunts who would very passionately talk about those things. Because of that, I was very privileged to have a lot of knowledge for my age. When I would go to school and I would hear comments, my gut reaction would be to fight back. If a kid would say, "You're a terrorist," or this, that, or the third, my immediate response would be to fight back and argue back. I remember a teacher pulling me aside one time, and she really did have good intentions for what she knew. She said, "If you just constantly defend yourself, you're going to get exhausted. It's not worth it for you to put yourself out there like that. Just ignore it and move on." I remember she even told my mom the same thing.

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Sehar Ezez 15:16

But even as a younger kid, I also distinctly remember the night we first bombed Baghdad. I remember watching that on TV and just being stunned that we could do that to another country. I remember people watching TV and cheering that for days on end. It was very frustrating for me as a kid to see that. And that's kind of a theme I carried on throughout

my time in that town was just constantly fighting back. And I had people after I graduated who met me years later and said, "You really opened my eyes to things, if I had never met someone like you, I would have probably had a different perspective on Muslims." So I do appreciate that now, that I at least was able to change people's perspective. But I still lost a part of that innocence you have as a child. So that is kind of sad to me looking back.

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Aysha Moneer 16:32

Yeah, definitely. Like you said, your family was one of few Muslims in the area. Did it feel exhausting at the time, feeling like you had to defend yourself or even educating people throughout college? How did you take care of yourself with that kind of experience?

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Sehar Ezez 17:01

When I was in college, right before I started college, I decided to wear the hijab. On my campus, I, looking back, kind of allowed myself to be tokenized. I would speak at events, I would show up at events in solidarity for other people, other groups, kind of speaking for the Muslim community there. I remember I was just constantly running around. In high school, I would meet my friends' parents and have these in-depth discussions. For me, I always took it as a learning experience. I think I really learned to talk to people who had very radically different ideas than me in a way that almost every time I've been able to effectively get some kind of point across to them. And I've learned things about my own community, about us, that we need to address to if we want to move forward and have a successful community in this country. So it was exhausting, and at times I can even say it wasn't fair necessarily, but it was ultimately a learning experience for me.

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Aysha Moneer 18:35

Okay, great. You just mentioned briefly your time in college. Can you tell us where you went and then also walk me through that that time in your life? I know you mentioned that you were involved in a lot of organizations, and you were speaking at a lot of things, what exactly did that look like, in general, that time period in your life?

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Sehar Ezez 19:05

I started college 2012 and I put on a hijab probably about a couple weeks before I started college. I was a scholarship recipient, I went to the University of Alabama, the main campus in Tuscaloosa. I was a very enthusiastic college student, I was an Alabama fan. I went to all the games, I wore hijabs that matched the team's colors. I was joining different

clubs. I kind of revamped the Muslim Student Association that the campus had, and I would go out of my way to join different groups to, I think for my part as a first-generation college student, get my community's name out there as well. One of the biggest experiences I had in college was being a part of groups that went to meet the state legislature. I got exposure to those groups of people, I got exposure to how lobbying works, I was able to give the Islamic perspective to things like Medicare for All, to things like prison reform. I was a part of a group that met with Senator Shelby and Senator Sessions, before the start of our part in the Syrian war and voiced the Muslim community's concerns there.

S

Sehar Ezez 20:59

ISIS at that time had emerged. I think it was right before or right after ISIS's emergence when the Boston bombing happened. I actually remember that day my parents didn't even want me to go to class. I did stay home that day, because the fear that they had for me to walk on campus after something like that was astronomical. Because by that point, I was already physically assaulted twice on campus because of wearing a hijab. A lot of times, it was very common for people to throw things at me after football games or make remarks. At that point, around 2015, that's when things started really becoming kind of heavy for me as well. I can't remember what it particularly was, I think one time I was walking with my friend, and this guy just threw a cigarette at us. And it just really set me off. And my friend told me later, "You can't do that, because that's going to put your life in danger." I think that was a really profound moment for me, because as much as you want to be an advocate, as much as you want to fight back, sometimes it's a jeopardy of your sanity or safety. Those years were very formative for me as far as learning what my limits were in the real world with being an advocate or ally.

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Aysha Moneer 22:57

Wow, that's crazy to hear. You just mentioned that change of perspective a bit. How did that change things? Did it make you more careful in the things that you were involved in? Or was it in those kinds of interactions specifically? How did that change?

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Sehar Ezez 23:23

2016, shortly before the election, I ended up taking my hijab off because I was not finding a job, comments were getting more aggressive. That was really the biggest reality check for me, coming into the professional world where I learned that there's a time and a place for advocacy. A lot of us do have to survive on a day to day basis, it's not healthy to

constantly be ready to go into defense mode. I don't think it changed any of the things I was involved in. I stayed involved in those groups that advocated for prison reform and Medicare for All. I helped some students at the University with visa issues after the travel ban. So my advocacy changed to providing financial and legal resources for people who need them. I think that was also a very big eye-opener for me as well, because as much as the protesting and the speeches and that part of advocacy is very important - because it is important to make people uncomfortable - but at the same time, there's another side of advocacy which is much harder and much less glamorizing, which is providing people with financial and legal resources. I became more heavily involved on that side over the years, and I really enjoy that work as well.

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Aysha Moneer 25:16

That's great to hear. I know you thought you were young when 9/11 happened, and obviously, you grew into an era of a post-9/11 world and involved in these advocacy efforts. But are there ways that you've seen 9/11 as a catalyst changing perspectives in the Muslim community, or just in general how people go about their lives in the space that you've seen?

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Sehar Ezez 25:46

I think, not just in the South, but the family friends, we had up North and elsewhere, we knew people and heard of stories of people being interrogated by the FBI, being set up by the FBI. We had a few friends who had very traumatic experiences in that aspect. We had witnessed FBI agents come into mosques and pretend to be converts, and it was a big struggle for those communities to retain their sense of community while dealing with that. Those spaces, masjids, often became educational centers for people. They would, after any kind of incident, use that time in the mosque to educate people. This is who you contact for help, this is what you shouldn't do, this is what you should do. There were times where in certain communities, there would be people protesting outside masjids armed, and on those days, the people in the community said, "Women and children need to stay home, older people come to the masjid today instead." That's kind of how I saw those communities adapt.

S

Sehar Ezez 27:17

But at the same time, I will say that that older community - as problematic as they can be at times, some of the ideals that they may have caused some cultural issues. They are a very resilient group of people too. I saw them come together for other people, provide



legal help, provide help with people who were in trouble. I saw people being educated in the mosque. Newer people who would come over, we would tell them, "This is what you should do here, this is what you shouldn't do. Here's what to do if you get in trouble." I think the most profound thing was that there was a girl in Alabama who ended up joining ISIS. The thing that was very horrible about that was there were people in the community who followed the steps that were told to us to do. They called the FBI, they reported her, her parents were involved in trying to get help, and that help just never came. She did end up going over there and joining ISIS. They had the FBI come in to that masjid and sit all the parents down and teach them, "This is what you need to be watching for your kids." It was very eye-opening to us as well, that even if you do all the things you're supposed to do, sometimes your kids can fall into traps that they shouldn't be falling into. As a community, it kind of made us sit back and think what we need to do, as well.

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Aysha Moneer 29:18

Wow, yeah. How old were you when that happened?

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Sehar Ezez 29:23

I think I was twenty. We were the same age as well. I kind of remember people being divided on the issue. Some people were like, "We need to try to bring her back." Some people were like, "Let her go, because if she comes back, this is just gonna make it harder for our community." Because once people heard that this girl joined, I mean, people were up in arms. People threatened that community and said, "If you let her come back here, we're not going to tolerate it." And she's the same age as me, so that was a very real actions-have-consequences kind of moment for me then.

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Aysha Moneer 30:21

Yeah, wow. Growing up and seeing those experiences around you, especially in Alabama, how do you think that 9/11 and the aftermath of it impacted your your field of work?

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Sehar Ezez 30:40

It really made me realize how much our community has a problem adjusting to this country, because unfortunately, in this country, the way of doing things is very bureaucratic. There's a lot of hoops to jump through. If you get in trouble with something, it's not as simple as going to the court and sorting it out, there's so many steps to getting a problem resolved. I realized that the biggest asset our community needs is someone

there to guide them through those things. I've seen people who may have committed a small offense tax-wise get charged with terrorism charges and money laundering charges because they sent money back home, so that they can build an addition to their house back there. All of a sudden, they're being charged with money laundering to the Taliban. That's something that is an innocent mistake that I've seen people go to jail for. From a younger age, I kind of wanted to learn about those things and be a tool to the people I loved and my community of like, "If you do this, this is how you need to do it to avoid getting in trouble."

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Sehar Ezez 32:10

I think, as a kid, I remember Bollywood, and even the Pakistani film industry coming out with movies about people getting arrested at the airport and being falsely accused and being sent to Guantanamo Bay. I know there was a Pakistani movie about this as well. That was very scary for me as a kid to watch these movies, because it was happening, and it was real. That really told me at that age that with all the legal procedures and rules we have in this country, it is still very easy for your rules to be violated. That's something that I've found even the most conservative people that I've come across telling people in our community, "Hey, you have rights, you have Fourth and Fifth Amendment rights, that means they can't just come into your home like that." So to me, it was like, if these people who aren't even fully our allies go out of their way to educate us, it's on us, too, to educate one another.

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Aysha Moneer 33:32

You were young, and I know that you're speaking on this already, but do you think that 9/11 changed your sense of security also?

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Sehar Ezez 33:41

It did, in the sense that I don't think I'll ever fully feel American. I'll always feel like a hyphenated American, like a Pakistani-American, a Muslim-American, because those identities to me come first. Because to be an American to me does mean to keep those things at the forefront. I have to keep certain things in mind, like when I'm at work, and they're discussing something on the news, I kind of have to say, "Is this something I can chime in on, or am I better off just keeping my opinion to myself?" I remember at a very young age not wanting to go to school after certain events happened. In college, I didn't go to school when the Paris attacks happened. But at the same time, when those Paris attacks happened, my best friend from high school called me, and she's a Baptist,

Southern, White girl, and on text book, you wouldn't think she would even care. But she was the first person to call me and say, "Are you okay? I hope no one said anything to you. You're the first person I thought about." As much as struggling is to be an American, it's comforting to know that you can always break those lines as well.

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Aysha Moneer 35:37

Moving past that or even during those experiences, what brought you comfort? What was healing for you?

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Sehar Ezez 35:48

I had a very close group of friends who were both Muslim and American. They were always willing to sit there and listen to my experience, and I was always willing to listen to other people's experience. That was very comforting to me to know that I had those allies and be able to build a network of people. But I also found a lot of comfort in learning more about my religion, about my culture. I became very into Pakistani music, more traditional music, I learned to play dholki and learned very traditional Punjabi wedding songs. It was really fun to me to learn that. I learned about the partition of Pakistan very heavily at that time, I think my senior thesis was on the partition of Pakistan. That really helped me be very proud of my identity and my culture. I think the biggest thing that I got through that was I was also able to have solidarity for the Black Lives Matter movement, for the Native people struggling with the Dakota pipeline that was going on when I was younger. When the issue came up with the border and the unaccompanied minors, I really think my experiences led me to have more empathy for others. I'm really grateful in that sense for that struggle, because I think it's really sad if you just don't have empathy for others. That does come from ignorance.

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Aysha Moneer 37:48

Today, how do you feel about 9/11? How has your life changed twenty years later?

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Sehar Ezez 37:56

I think it was a very tragic event that did shock America's psyche. I think the saddest thing to me has been the twenty plus years of occupation and invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan that have followed. I think that being my generation, that grew up in war, that so many of my friends' parents went off and got deployed, and now I have childhood friends whose spouses have been deployed. I have people who I grew up with being deployed, and

there's always a fear in the back of my mind of, one, how do those people perceive me and two, quite frankly, anger at those people for participating in that war machine. I think 9/11 really pushed me to learn more about other instances of the kind of war machine that the US participates in. That has led me to be a very strong anti-war advocate. It's led me to build bridges with Iraqi and Afghanistani advocates in those areas and, even as a Pakistani person, learn how our country participates in that as well, negatively. I think the biggest thing to come out of 9/11 was a lot of fear and a lot of resentment for how it was handled, but a lot of networks that have been built that I think will change how the US operates in the coming decades.

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Aysha Moneer 39:57

Hopefully, yeah, I hope so. I want to be mindful of your time, so we'll end with something that we do. Because this is an oral history archive, this will live forever in the UT library. Is there anything that you want to add for someone who might years from now be looking back on this interview? Any note you want to end on for future generations? You can take a minute to think about what that might be, but just a space for you to say anything you want to.

S

Sehar Ezez 40:37

I think the biggest thing is for people who are in marginalized communities that find themselves in that media exposure and public animosity that comes from bad press or bad events or bad legislature, I think that the most important thing you can do in that time is to educate yourself, about your community, about your struggles about what led to those events. I think in educating yourself, you do let some anger go, because a part of that anger that you feel at that point is also confusion about why did this happen? Why are we in this position? And once you educate yourself, you can have the tools to one, defend yourself, but two, become an ally to your community. I think the biggest thing in that position that you can do is also learn to have empathy for other communities. A lot of times like, especially those of us who are immigrants, we may look at other communities and say, "Well, we came here and we became businessmen and doctors and etc. Why can't they do the same?" I think we should use our experiences to see how were the same people who hurt us, how did they hurt them? And learn to have empathy for others and what our privileges are.

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Aysha Moneer 42:20

Great, thank you so much. I will go ahead and stop recording.