

Shadia Igram

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SPEAKERS

Shadia Igram, Tiffany Puett

- S** Shadia Igram 00:00
My name is Shadia Igram, I was born and raised in Iowa, fourth generation American Muslim of Arab descent on my dad's side, so I had that experience growing up, and then also the daughter of an immigrant on my mom's side. I didn't really feel like I straddled those two identities, I definitely felt like I was more American Muslim, that I passed as American, the Muslim was sort of - nobody really knew what it was growing up, it wasn't a big deal. But that was my childhood. And then life took a little turn in college on 9/11, where I suddenly felt that there was an element to my identity that I didn't realize was a negative. That kind of geared my passion of defining what it means to be an American Muslim and sort of forging this path of awareness and activism that has carried me to today. Then fast forward, all these other things happen. I've been in Texas for the last five years, which is a really great thing to be back to the Midwest, because I lived on the East Coast for a few years. And that's me.
- T** Tiffany Puett 01:32
Okay, great. Can you tell me more about what it means to you to be Muslim?
- S** Shadia Igram 01:40
Yeah, I think at its core, I really feel a connection to my faith that is rooted in equality and justice. Basically, pushing back against any oppression, any inequality, I

really feel like that is how I be a Muslim at my best. That's where I feel like I'm really embodying what the message of Islam is. It's not very different than any other religion. Sort of a connection to a higher being that you're set on this mission, to create harmony and equality in your life, I believe to be a mission that God has prescribed to everybody. That's really, more than anything, what being Muslim means to me.

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Tiffany Puett 02:38

Great. So tell me about your work as an activist, about the the initiatives that you're involved in, how you got started.

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Shadia Igram 02:51

I thought about this about a year ago. How did I end up where I am? I never would have thought ten years ago, that I would be where I am now and have formed a community organization here in Austin, that is a place of worship for self-identifying Muslims. It is simply that; if you identify as Muslim, if you are connected to Islam in any way, you are welcome to learn and to grow, and to worship as one, as a community. But looking back, I would have never guessed that that's what I would be doing now. But I got here because I had a beautiful upbringing and a beautiful religious community that I thought was just what everybody had. Then you go through life, and you realize that what I had was very unique, and it was amazing. Anyone that doesn't have that is missing out on something just beautiful. You see the struggle in folks that don't have that, you see the frustration. Finally, it was just like, "Let's just create it here." And that is how we got here.

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Tiffany Puett 04:04

Nice, so tell me about what motivates or inspires your work.

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Shadia Igram 04:12

Yeah. So I think, again, feeling a sense of belongingness in a religious community growing up was so empowering. It was a community that wasn't just welcoming, it wasn't just nice, but it was active, and it was vibrant. It propped up as many people as possible within the community. Obviously, when you're growing up in that, you don't see the repercussions, you don't see the benefits of it, this is just life. And then when you leave it, and you see how important was in shaping a person, you want that for everybody, you want it for your children, you want it for your friends, you want it for

your community. So that has been the driving force; is creating a place and a community that I was so fortunate to have, but then some, right? Because even the community I grew up in was great for that time and that place. But if you look at it through today's lens, you say, "Well, you didn't address racism, you didn't address patriarchy, it didn't address sexual orientation and gender identity." It was welcoming, still within a box, right? If you fit in the box, you were welcome. It wasn't as broad as what we need now, not because they were trying to shut anybody out, but because that was what was socially known and discussed at the time. But now we have all these other instances of inequality. So what we're trying to focus on is creating a sense of inclusion and welcoming, a welcoming community, but also broaden that definition of who we are opening our arms to. We push ourselves to not feel that we've reached, like, "Okay, this is it, we've gotten to the endpoint, we've become as inclusive as possible. We're serving as many people -" but continuing to challenge ourselves. "Okay, who else are we leaving out? Who else can we make room for?" So we constantly think about this, because we believe that diversity makes us stronger. So that's what we're striving to create.

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Tiffany Puett 06:34

Can you say more about some of the programs that you're doing for Muslim Space?

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Shadia Igram 06:39

Yeah. We have three tracks of programming through Muslim Space; we have faith-based programming, things like Friday worship, Friday prayers. What makes us unique to the Austin community, Muslim community, and a lot of other communities in America is that there's no barrier between genders. So everybody comes in through one door, we all enter the prayer space through one door. There's nothing barring the person delivering the sermon from seeing every single person in the congregation and connecting with every single person in the congregation. Then we also have weekend programs that delve into the Qur'an and verses and topics and themes. But instead of it being a lecture from a scholar, kind of one directional in how that information is being presented to the audience, it is interactive. So there's no "professional" scholar at the table. It's just everyday people who are bringing their experience and their understanding and studying the text as one and it ends up being: everybody's going to leave with a deeper understanding of whatever verse or topic that they're discussing, because you've now heard it from somebody else's viewpoint, whether it be a male, female, different ethnicities, different sectarian affiliations, and it's awesome. And even non-Muslims, we find

that when we have non-Muslims engage in this, if they bring knowledge of biblical text, or even just another belief, again, deepens that understanding, and then also just unifies everybody. So those are the bigger things that we do with the faith-based track. Then we have a social-based track, very fun, potlucks, trivia nights, outings, anything you would normally do, you're just doing it with other folks in the community. Then we have a very strong service-based track, where we don't necessarily serve the community within, but we feel that we are part of the wider Austin community. There are a lot of amazing organizations and groups in town are doing phenomenal work. We want to support them. So we partner with soup kitchens and food pantries to help them on the serving line, help them stock their food pantry. Because again, we're not here to recreate the wheel, they're doing amazing work, and we just want to be part of that. Then we also do some more independent projects that benefit not just the Muslim community, but also the non-Muslim community. We've done two years in a row where we supply books to the public schools in the Austin area. These are like Ramadan-themed books, or children's books about religious themes. We find that it does two things, one for the Muslim kid in the class, they can then see themselves in these books. You feel like you're suddenly a part of this landscape instead of being an outsider. But also to the non-Muslim kids in the class, when they see that it normalizes the diversity. So we've had phenomenal feedback in the last two years that we've done this, and we plan on doing it again, and all sorts of just other fun service-based, where we keep very busy, and it's been fun.

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Tiffany Puett 07:00

What would you say have been some of the greatest successes that you've seen in your work? What are some of the challenges that you face?

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Shadia Igram 10:33

So successes, you can just look at numbers, I'm a numbers person. I like to see the growth. I like to see the growth and those that are attending our events, that are on our mailing list, and like our Facebook, all the clicks and everything. That's all great. But what I really love is when I tell a random person, be it a Muslim, or non-Muslim, about Muslim Space, and the concept behind it, it's like, "Oh! That sounds awesome. How can I learn more?" Of a hundred random people I will tell about Muslims Space, at least ninety-nine will have a positive response, similar to, "Oh, I wish I had that in my hometown. I wish I had that growing up". So we feel like we're serving a need. Then the challenges are honestly really minimal. We don't get a lot of push-back. I don't want to focus too much on community

members who think we're rogue or we're outside the fold of Islam or we're too progressive or we're too liberal, or there's not a need for us. There may not need be a need for us in their life. And that's perfectly fine. I am glad that they have a community that they belong to, and don't see the need for Muslim Space. But there are so many people that this serves that that's what we're going to focus on. So the challenges, so minimal. It's all good.

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Tiffany Puett 12:02

Nice. Okay, so to shift direction, just a little bit, tell me about what it means to you to be a Texan or what Texas means to you. I don't know if you feel Texan at this point.

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Shadia Igram 12:19

It's kind of weird, because I feel Texan because I'm from the Midwest. So I felt a bit of a coming home when I moved to Texas, like, "Oh, my people, we're laid back and we're friendly. This is what I miss." But I don't know if I feel Texan because I don't think Texas looks like the image of what Texas looks like, right? At least that's not been my experience. Texas is diverse, and it's proud, and it's vast, and it's so homey, even if you're in a big city like Austin, and I consider this a big city. It's just so friendly. If that's what it means to be Texan, sign me up. I'm there. But I don't know, I guess I'm still kind of defining myself. I don't know. I don't say "y'all" yet. I think when I finally adopt that, then I'll feel like I'm a Texan. I haven't gotten to that point.

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Tiffany Puett 13:21

Right. Okay, great. Yeah, it's been interesting. I've been asking everyone this question. I plan to later kind of put together all the responses to get all these different responses. Because there is this large image in a lot of people's minds of what a Texan looks like. But I think for many people who live here, that doesn't match their experience. So getting people to think through, "So what does it really mean to be Texan?" People have interesting responses.

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Shadia Igram 13:54

Yeah. The weekend we moved here, we went to the Home Depot. And we expected to see pick-up trucks, guys with cowboy boots and hat, and we walk in and we're just like, everyone's, non-White, and there's no cowboy hats, and I'm hearing all these languages. This isn't Texas. This is Austin. But it was, it was very much against that stereotype. But obviously, it was beautiful.

T Tiffany Puett 14:23
Right? Yeah. And I think more and more, that's what Texas is. I think that's what it's becoming.

S Shadia Igram 14:36
I do kind of see Texas being the new leader in the country. I feel like we've always depended on the East Coast and maybe even the West Coast to sort of drive change. But I think that Texas has sort of been a very quiet changemaker, for good or for bad. It definitely has a lot of influence on the rest of the country. I think we're seeing more of it come out. We're looking to Texas and people are coming here. It's inevitable, so future's bright.

T Tiffany Puett 15:05
Yeah, I think that's right. I mean, I also think too, increasingly, the big cities on the East and West Coast, are becoming so unaffordable. Increasingly, it's where wealthy people live; and Texas is more of a place where anybody can live. Yeah, and I think the East and West Coast used to be more like that, but they're not anymore in the same way. And so I think a place for anybody - I think that's right what you're saying about it being kind of the leader of where the country's going, and I think that's a lot of reason why. It's accessible, and people can make a life here. It's hard to make a life in places like New York or DC.

S Shadia Igram 15:52
Yeah, that's where we came from, the DC area. It just wasn't for us.

T Tiffany Puett 15:55
Yeah. Lovely, but you have to have a lot of money.

S Shadia Igram 15:56
Yeah, a lot of people love it. People were very surprisingly left.

T Tiffany Puett 16:04
Yeah. Okay, so last question. Is there anything else that you would like people to know about Islam, Muslims, social justice, or movements for change, anything that you feel like didn't get captured in the things we've discussed so far?

S Shadia Igram 16:25
Like I said, growing up, everybody knew I was Muslim in school, but it was like, "Whatever." They also thought my parents were hippies, and that's why I had a funny name, it was just no big deal. And then, it suddenly became a negative thing. Suddenly, it was like, a label you didn't want to have. For me, nothing had changed, right? It was very frustrating to see the rest of the world suddenly view you and your community in a negative way, when the day before we were all in it together. I think that's what I want to go back to, I want to go back to that time where being a Muslim was no different than being anything else in this country, and in your community, and we were all in it together. Right? We were all fighting for better, together. My religion didn't create a bias or didn't dictate something just because, it was "because you're Muslim." No, it's because we're here in this community that we're doing this, it doesn't matter what religion. We all share the same beliefs, regardless of whatever religion we identify through, we're coming together for social change, we're coming together for improvement. It doesn't matter what religion we are. But at the same time, a different narrative has also evolved in that, again, being Muslim makes you an "other." You must either be a refugee or an immigrant. If you're Muslim, that's what you are. You're also an immigrant, you're also a refugee, or you're always "not from here," right? That's really what I want to change is that it's not the case. Muslims have been here for hundreds of years. Literally, Islam came with slavery. Muslims have been here since before there was even America. But a real Muslim identity has been here. My family's been here for over a hundred years. We've been an integral part of - we participated in everything that was American. So it's frustrating that no matter what, Muslims are seen as an other. That's, I think, the biggest thing that I

want to change, because it doesn't feel good to think that you don't really belong. I was an adult when this happened, and I passed, I could easily pass as just your regular American walking the street, right? My skin is not dark, I don't wear a scarf, I don't have an accent. I had to tell people I was Muslim, and then I would see that reaction. So I got to experience both. But I want to get to a point where if you have an accent, if you wear a scarf, if you're darker skin, if you eat different foods, that doesn't make you any less American. Those are the things that I want to continue to work towards, and the kind of identity that I want every American to believe in, that being American comes with all sorts of stuff, right? You can be a Muslim and be American and it's not this or that, one is more than the other, nothing like that. Kind of a haphazard way of getting around to saying - but that's what I'm trying to work towards.



Tiffany Puett 20:16
Great! Great.