

Saleem Shabazz

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SPEAKERS

Elizabeth Melton, Saleem Shabazz

S Saleem Shabazz 00:01

I started this journey, I guess I'll call it, forty-one years ago. So I've been trying to be a Muslim [laughs] for over four decades.

E Elizabeth Melton 00:17

[laughs] That's a good amount of time. This is Elizabeth Melton, the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life's ACLS Leading Edge Fellow. Today is December 22, 2021, and I'm interviewing Saleem Shabazz for the Muslim Voices collection in the Religions Texas archive. We are meeting at the Longview Public Library in Longview, Texas. Thank you so much for meeting with me today.

S Saleem Shabazz 00:43

It's quite alright, I'm happy to be able to be involved in this.

E Elizabeth Melton 00:48

Well, thank you. I think we'll just get started with a few questions about your childhood. Can you tell me a little bit about your family and where you grew up?

S Saleem Shabazz 00:59

I grew up in East Texas, really. I was born in Beckville in December 1941, and I was there until August of 1951. I moved to California, and in '52, I moved to Longview. My father and my step-mother separated, so they sent us to live with my mom that time. In December '52, we moved to Longview. I lived here until September '58, and I moved back to California at that time. I

graduated from high school in June 1960 in California at Kearny High School, and then right after that, I went right into the Air Force. For the next twenty years, the Air Force controlled my life and everything. But that's basically how I grew up. I was partly raised by both of my grandmothers, and my mother, and my father, and my step-mother at one time. So I lived in a lot of different places and had a number of different influences.

E Elizabeth Melton 02:19

So you lived in both East Texas and California. What were those kinds of experiences like?

S Saleem Shabazz 02:26

Well, the first one was culture shock. I left here, moving to Coronado, California in 1951. Well, in 1951, Texas was segregated. So I had never in my life even envisioned sitting in the same classroom with White kids. My best friend happened to be White. But Coronado is a White town, so I had to learn to be comfortable around White people, because I had never had that experience before. It's kind of strange. Also, we in Texas, the doctors say, "Yes, sir. No, sir. Yes, ma'am." They laughed at me about that in California. I guess that marked me as a bumpkin or something. The teacher even told me, "You don't have to say that."

E Elizabeth Melton 03:29

That's so funny.

S Saleem Shabazz 03:30

Yeah, because - I don't know. I guess they saw it some kind of way as a cultural thing. To me, it didn't make any difference. We were saying the same thing, I was just saying it the way I learned how to do it. I was taught to be polite, and that's what we tried to do. But tell you something else. The teachers in Texas will take the belt. In California they would slap you.

E Elizabeth Melton 04:02

But not a belt [laughs].

S Saleem Shabazz 04:05

A good whack upside the head.

E Elizabeth Melton 04:08

So you were in California for a few years?

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Saleem Shabazz 04:13

Few. I spent most of my formative years living in Texas. Every time I moved to California, it seemed that something happened, and the second time I moved to California that ended with me graduating from high school. Being that you weren't around in 1960, the job market was really strange at that point. See, at that point in life, we didn't have the social programs that help you if you couldn't get employed. I'd gone down to the city of San Diego and applied for a number of positions, doing just little menial work. Because at that time, they used to take the married people first. I was single, so they cared less about me than they did the guy with the family. So I didn't have very good prospects of being hired. My father had laid an arrangement to take the exam to be going to the apprentice engineering program in San Diego. I had no intention of doing that. I tried to make him understand. For some reason, back in that day, everybody assumed that because you were a male, that means that you build stuff and fix stuff. I'm terrible at that. Always have been. I frustrated myself for a number of years trying to live up to that standard, and I finally realized I just couldn't do it. It's not because I didn't try. But they used to give me toys that were wrenches and hammers and all that stuff. Saws. I'd get that stuff for Christmas [laughs], and then I'd go crazy the next three months trying to beat on something.

E

Elizabeth Melton 06:16

That's funny. Can you tell me a little bit about the role religion played in your life as a child and as you were growing up?

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Saleem Shabazz 06:29

Well, the grandmother that I lived with the most was my father's mother. They were pretty much hardshell Baptists. For instance, you didn't go fishing and do stuff like that on Sunday. It was the Sabbath, they considered it, and we were supposed to keep all worldly stuff to a minimum. I grew up with that kind of influence in the house. At the same time, something - it was really a funny contradiction. My grandmother was a bootlegger [laughs].

E

Elizabeth Melton 07:06

But she didn't sell it on Sunday, I bet [laughs].

S

Saleem Shabazz 07:11

No. I didn't realize how ironic that was until I got to be a little bit older. But yes, she made Sweet Lucy, and the people used to come over. Used to be somebody at my house a lot, even White people. We were interracial right there on the porch. And I was old enough to realize what they were doing, but we lived far enough out in the country that I appreciated the company, because I'd get tired of being at home with just me, my sister, and my grandmother. It's not a lot of fun to be had in that situation.

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Saleem Shabazz 07:52

But my childhood was greatly influenced by religion. I joined the church when I was ten, and that was in Coronado. I was baptized at a First Baptist Church in San Diego, California in 1951, and I really took my vows seriously. I tried to study and do all of that stuff. I was able to function real productive in the church until I was about thirteen. I started struggling with the theology, and I would try to ask questions, and I got treated like I was an idiot. But the things were important to me, that's why I asked. I finally, at thirteen - my step-grandfather was going to pay for me to go to the seminary. I had attained office in the church at eleven and twelve, and stuff. I was teaching men's Bible classes at eleven and twelve years old. So I took it real serious. I couldn't make it work in my life, as I saw it. I went to my grandfather and told him that I couldn't be a hypocrite, that I didn't believe as he believed. I wished I did. I have tried real hard to do that, and it just won't work for me. Instead of him being understanding, he condemned me. As a matter of fact, he vowed to not speak to me directly for a while. I was thirteen years old, and if he came to my house, and he wanted to tell me something, he'd tell my mother. He said, "Tell that boy such and such a thing."

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Saleem Shabazz 10:14

I used to think that was kind of funny. I've always considered those kinds of actions as being pretty absurd. You'll throw a tantrum and not talk to me because you're angry because I was honest with you. I told him, I said, "I would think that you would be proud of me, because I'm trying to live up to what you teach. You say I should be honest." I said, "I'm being honest. And I could pretend that I feel the things that you feel and believe, if all I wanted out of this was a position or some money. None of that makes any difference to me. I don't think this is something I can play with." And I left the church. My mother was real strict, but for some reasons, she didn't bother, she didn't challenge me on that. Because I was being as honest as I knew how to be. Making me go to church on Sunday, and I'm not getting anything from it - as a matter of fact, I'd come it resent it. Well, then you're wasting time. The purpose of going to church is to strengthen what I believe, and that wouldn't work. I really felt isolated for a while because I felt I was the only person in the building that felt the way I did. The hymns and all that stuff, I would feel good. So I'm down to go. They're really powerful. And then after I've been out of church for about an hour or so, it would wear off. The same thing all over again.

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Saleem Shabazz 12:16

My mother told me just before she died - about three or four months after she told me this. Because I was agnostic at the time, she told me, said, "I just want you to know that there is a God." And I told her, "If that's true, I'll find out. I'll learn that in time, because I'm trying." And she never said anything else about it. My mother didn't attend church. She had her own way of dealing with life and what have you, but she tried to be honest. It's fair, she knew how to be, and stuff like that. She was a hard working woman, not very well educated. She died at forty-nine. Never drank or smoked.

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Elizabeth Melton 13:31

When did you first learn about Islam?

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Saleem Shabazz 13:37

In December 1963. I got sent to Incirlik Air Base, Turkey. I was stationed in Germany, and they took one of the slots that were in the squadron I was in, transferred to Turkey, and I ended up being the recipient of that reward [laughs]. I didn't really like that assignment, but I had to deal with it. While there - they have pavilions and belly dancers and all that stuff there, but they do it in such a way that as a male, you and the female have very little opportunity for personal contact. That was something that was totally foreign to me. I've always been an inquisitive person. When I see something that is so different from what I was raised around, I start asking questions. Something that I learned when I was stationed in Japan, which was my first assignment, people really appreciate it when you ask questions about them. "Well, why do you guys believe this?" Or, "Why do you do that?" And on and on, because that indicates to them that you care enough to understand them a little bit. So I learned that. In Turkey, I started doing the same thing. And these guys, the houseboys, we had people come in, clean our rooms and what have you, they would sit and talk to me for hours. I asked questions, and they would answer them. And they'd tell me about their prospects for getting married and a whole bunch of other things.

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Saleem Shabazz 16:03

At that point, I didn't really care about a religion. I wasn't actively seeking it out. But I wanted to try to understand things, and one of the things that I used to enjoy probably the most was getting into debates with these hardcore believers, and totally destroying them. I loved that [laughs]. I loved it, it's something wrong with me. So I got to Turkey, and I started trying to challenge them in the same way, and I was never successful. And I left Islam for a while. That was my first real contact with it. And I went back to it. I broke up with my wife, and I was in my third separation. I've been married four times. I've been with my fourth wife for forty-one years. So I sat there in the chair alone in the house, and I talked to God, just like I'm talking to you. And I told him, I said, "You know, I thought I was smart. Obviously, I'm not nearly as smart as I thought I was, because here I am, again. Same outcome in all this. I need some help." And my life started changing from there.

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Saleem Shabazz 17:54

I met my wife. I got divorced from the wife I had at that time, and we got married, and I ended up becoming a Muslim, and have been comfortable with that belief for over forty years. I not only practice it, I teach it. I was involved in teaching in a prison system for about twenty-five years probably in Colorado. I enjoyed it because it helped me to learn. I was new, and I was learning at the same time, so it made me have to do research, read and memorize, and do a whole bunch of other stuff in order for me to be a valid teacher. So that was a blessing in that respect.

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Elizabeth Melton 18:58

Have you learned any Arabic?

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Saleem Shabazz 19:00

I know enough to get by. I know certain common phrases: Alhamdulillah, all praise is due to God. Bismillah, I start this with God's name. On and on, I know that kind of stuff. But to sit down and have a conversation, I would be lost.

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Elizabeth Melton 19:36

Sure. So what was it that helped you realize that you wanted to convert to Islam, or what was that experience?

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Saleem Shabazz 19:44

Islam, when it's practiced correctly, is egalitarian. It's just, fair, compassionate, and discourages actively corruption and power. Because in Islam, if a person seeks an office, you deny him that. Because if he really had public spirit, he wouldn't be interested in that. Because first of all, you're not gonna get pats on the head, you're not gonna get rich, and all that kind of stuff. So you must have something else up your sleeve if you come looking. I learned to approach life from that perspective. One of the reasons for it, if you get people that have good character, that are focused on the public good, they're not gonna make a hundred percent correct decisions, because that's impossible. But their decisions will always be in the interest of the people, and that's so important. But under our present system with money and all that stuff just thrown into it, it's so corrupt right now. Big business runs this country, and I guess it always did. I was probably too naive at first to realize it, like a lot of people are still naive. They still don't know that.

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Saleem Shabazz 21:29

I asked a guy a question was, when I was talking about corruption. I was talking about the mayor's race endeavor. I said, "Why would somebody spend three million dollars to get a job that pays \$150,000 a year?" He just mumbled. Obviously, he's getting some benefit that is worth that to somebody, or they wouldn't be spending money on it. Islam discourages those kinds of people being able to get into power. Now, do they practice correct Islam in the Middle East and North Africa? No. Some of it is so far out of kilter, it's hard even recognize it as being Islam. But under repression, colonialism, and all that the correct thinking was suppressed, and you end up with all these hybrids out there. I figured it was gonna be a while when people can freely express themselves, will we get some people that are real correct spokespersons [coughs].

E

Elizabeth Melton 23:01

Can you tell me what it was like to complete the hajj and what that experience was like?



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Saleem Shabazz 23:09

Sure. That is mixture. First there was awe. Going someplace that you have seen pictures of, that you've seen posters of, and then all of a sudden it dawns on you: you are there, and it jumps out and grabs you. There's the experience of seeing people from everywhere. When I first got there, got to Mecca, I sat in the lobby of the hotel we were staying in and introduced and talk to people from all over the world, literally. It is a beautiful thing. And it's designed to blur lines of social standing. Everybody's the same. So you're required to wear clothes that are the same. You can't wear perfume and cologne and stuff like that. It tries to bring you back to Earth and back in touch with what you're supposed to be with. From that standpoint, it's overwhelming. I saw myself.

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Saleem Shabazz 24:43

I was in the prayer, we call it Masjid Al-Haram. You've seen pictures of guys going around in a circle. Well, that big building around them, that's Masjid Al-Haram. And I mean, it's packed, and I was sitting there, and the emotions and all that gets overwhelming. I remember tears running down my face. At the same time, I saw how cruel human beings can be in their worship if they're not checked. The Muslims are told that if you die in Hajj, you go to paradise. And you might, I don't know [laughs]. I don't have that guarantee. I don't think that that puts you in a position to where you put old and weak people and children at risk to perform a ritual, and I had a problem with that. From that standpoint, it was a very big disappointment, because I got to see up close.

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Saleem Shabazz 26:17

Give you an example. There was a guy from Egypt that was unable to walk the things we had to walk and run. So I volunteered to push his wheels here. I was sixty-something years old, but I was in a lot better shape than he was. Your hajj is not complete until you - there are certain rituals that have to be performed. One of that is Sa'i. That, to us, is the story of Hagar wandering back and forth, and Ishmael. Also, you have to do tawaf seven times at the end, or your hajj is not accepted. So I was supposed to be running him around, the crowd got so intense, that they knocked his wheelchair over. I got in almost a fistfight in the middle of the Kaaba. I pray God forgive me for that. I couldn't believe that people could be so unfeeling that they would hurt a man in a wheelchair, and all you're doing is walking around this building here. Your life and your salvation is not dependent on you doing that. But they've been taught that. That's in their DNA, and they'd hurt you about it. So I was very disappointed.

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Saleem Shabazz 28:02

But that illustrated for me, the educational level of Muslims is not very high. Take everybody in consideration. Sure, the ones over here, they are great students. Those people come from upper class families. Their parents are educated, they have good jobs and what have you, and they follow right in their footsteps. The ones that you need to be helping is the poor guy on the street that's making fifty cents a day, trying to eat. That's the person you need to reach. Human weakness and greed is really hard to overcome, so we ignore people that need it and call ourselves charitable. I put a high standard on being a Muslim, so I have a hard time with people that do stuff so someone can see them doing it, or trying to impress someone. That

irritates me. I don't play with religion. I never have. Even when I was not being religious, I didn't play. If I was going to ignore it, I would say that and stood by that until that was no longer true, and I think that that's what is required of us. That's an opinion.

E

Elizabeth Melton 29:45

Sure. Can you tell me about the Islamic communities you've been a part of?

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Saleem Shabazz 29:56

Here in Longview, when I first got here from Colorado, I was in kind of bad health. I didn't know where they met in Longview, and I had trouble finding it. So we went to Shreveport. Being that I had previously been a follower of Imam Warith Dean Mohammed - that's the son of Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam - there was a guy at the mosque over there that I knew from Oakland, and we communicated, and I went over to see him, and I started going over there. So I attended service over there for about three months.

E

Elizabeth Melton 30:47

Was that primarily a community of the Nation of Islam?

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Saleem Shabazz 30:51

African-Americans. Probably at least half of them had been in the Nation of Islam. That includes my wife. That creates a certain dynamic that if you haven't been a part of it, it's kind of hard to understand. Kind of a love/hate relationship. Then I left there. I started going to the masjid at Tyler. Well, Tyler has Egyptians, Pakistanis, Syrians. They used to have some Turks there, too. Pakistanis, of course, and a few people from India. Matter of fact, one of my best friends over there is Indian. They are a different kind of thing. Because in the Middle East, Islam is very localized, because people can't get around like we can. So influence is right there in the neighborhood, and that's something I saw in Arabia. Every neighborhood has a mosque. They have masjids at gas stations. So depending on where a person goes to pray all the time, that's gonna be the influence of how he approaches Islam. But it is so handy to not have to run all over town looking for a mosque to pray in, that they are all over the place. But I can see why that doesn't exist in some areas, because that would be expensive. Being that Islam is state religion in Arabia. The state pays for stuff like that. So citizens don't have to worry about it. But here in America, because of the Constitution, you'd have to find some way to finance that. I got my name in the paper a couple of times with some incidents, and the rough of it was Rashid was the acting imam out here.

E

Elizabeth Melton 33:26

In Tyler or in Longview?

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Saleem Shabazz 33:27

Here, in Longview. So he had someone call me and ask me if I would meet and pray with him. I told him I would. I called him back. So I got over here and I met him, and he and I hit it off, we're still friends, even though we're very different Islamically.

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Elizabeth Melton 33:55

How so?

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Saleem Shabazz 33:57

Well, for one thing, he believes in going around beating on doors and proselytizing. I don't believe that that's something that you do in Islam. You live your life as a Muslim and be honest and everything, and through that influence, you will influence people. But you don't go around disturbing people. He asked me, he said, "Would you be willing to fill in for me sometimes when I don't have the ability to be here or don't feel up to it?" I told him I would do that. So first thing I know I was on the thing for one Friday a month. That's not what I volunteered for, but I do it to help.

E

Elizabeth Melton 34:56

And was that the imam that asked you that?

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Saleem Shabazz 34:57

Yes. He was a khatib actually, acting imam. So some brothers got together and donated land and money. It was two doctors, Dr. Kareem, Dr. Nasir, two doctors and two private businessmen put up the money to build a mosque, and a group of brothers donated the land. So the brother that was the lead on that is a brother named Anwar Khalifa. He owns Pyramid Homes, and he lives in Tyler. I've known him for about sixteen years. Anyway he called me and asked me to be on the committee with him. I told him I would. Well, shortly after I got on the committee, him and the people at the mosque who had offices started feuding. They said he was trying to overcharge them, and he told them that he had to cut his cost to where he'd donate to labor, but the materials, they had to pay for. So that went round and round for a minute, and then also out of the blue one day, he called me and said, "Saleem, I have quit. You are it now." I said, "But-" All of a sudden, I was the point person, and it worked because I didn't belong to any group over there, so they couldn't claim me any of that on me. I didn't have a dog in that fight. So that's where I am now.

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Saleem Shabazz 37:24

But in Denver, Libyans, Turks, Pakistanis, Afghans, Iranians, Moroccans. So we met people from all of those places. And they are almost the same, but there are little things that they're different in. The Saudis, them and - I don't know, Sudanese are pretty strict, too - a Saudi won't

touch a woman, period. He wouldn't shake hands with you because he can't touch you. As a matter of fact, you go to a wedding, the woman who's getting married sits on one side of the wall, and the guy sits on the other, and you got a person that speaks for her [laughs]. They're the only people that do that, that I know of. Anyway, that kind of practice or tradition leads to tensions, of course, because the rest of us are much more liberal in that. Me being an American, I would probably tend to be more liberal than just about anybody. One of the one of the things that I alienated people with, and that included African-Americans, is I allowed women to pray in the same area. Oh good Lord, I thought they were gonna lynch me for that.

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Saleem Shabazz 39:31

But again, I don't know, I always have been a person that, at some point, I have to be true to who I am. If that means making you mad, then I'm sorry. I'll do that. Not intentionally, but I'm doing it because I think it's the right thing to do. I made some of the immigrant community mad because there are things that some of them believe in, predestination and other things. I don't believe in that, and I'm not gonna say I do. That don't make me right, but I just don't believe it. So in discussions, I always pushed reason and intellect, because God didn't equip any person with any magic powers and all that. He gave all of us the ability to think critically, and compare your situation to things that we accept as being truths, when you talk to religious folks. Well, that was what I tried doing, but that wasn't what they wanted. So I ran afoul of people with that, but I survived it, I'm still here.

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Elizabeth Melton 41:07

So the Longview Islamic Center, is there an active community that's still meeting regularly during COVID? Did that make any difference?

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Saleem Shabazz 41:21

Oh yes. Well, for the first year, hardly anybody went. I didn't go. But probably over the last, I don't know, about a year, I've been there almost every Friday. I don't do a lot of socializing and what have you when I go in, because we pray in real close proximity. And it's habit, we hug. So it's kind of hard to maintain six foot distance with people that you're hugging. And some of them don't believe in taking vaccinations. So I've had to skate pretty thin on that. But over the time I've been out there, I've developed pretty close ties with certain members of the community. A lot of them were kind of like my kids, but at the same time, they show me respect in that way. Six years I was the imam out there. I got sick and can no longer do that, because there's more to it than standing up talking to people about things. You have to do other things, too. I couldn't do them now like I did then. I'd get a call, and I'd go and jump in the car and go over and see what was going on and try to fix it. I can't do that anymore.

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Elizabeth Melton 43:12

Sure. So it's been over forty years since you converted to Islam.

S Saleem Shabazz 43:20
Right.

E Elizabeth Melton 43:21
During that time, have you experienced Islamophobia?

S Saleem Shabazz 43:26
Yes.

E Elizabeth Melton 43:28
What has that been like?

S Saleem Shabazz 43:31
Because I'm Black, it was no different. Hate is hate. It's really something perplexing to me that people would rather believe the worst of people than they would to find out how they really are. One of the people that did the hurtful thing towards us was my aunt. She and I are the same age. We were classmates. We were really close at one time. But she follows Jimmy Swaggart, and that's her business. But she said she don't know what a Muslim is, we might blow her up. Come on. She's never even seen me in a fight. I'm not that kind of person. But that's the kind of thing you have to deal with. I was working at the ministry, Longview Ministries, Community Ministries. There was young lady down there, I think she lived in Hallsville or out that way some place. I just laughed off what she did because, bless her heart, she was sincere. But to her, I couldn't believe in God because I didn't see God in the same way that she did. And I never took her serious when she got running with that. But the thing is, I was talking to a friend of mine yesterday. He is a Universalist, he's not a mainstream, not a Trinitarian Christian. So we were talking about what happens when you do what I'm dumb enough to do: stand by myself and shout at the top of my voice, "That's not the truth!" [laughs] I guess I have to expect a certain amount of push-back on that. I don't necessarily shout louder, but that don't mean I'll quit.

E Elizabeth Melton 46:07
So when you first converted to Islam, is that when you were living in Colorado?

S Saleem Shabazz 46:13
Yes.

E Elizabeth Melton 46:13



Elizabeth Melton 46:13

So you were living in Colorado, and then you moved back to East Texas,



Saleem Shabazz 46:17

Right, 2004.



Elizabeth Melton 46:19

What brought you back to East Texas? What was that experience like? You talked a little bit, I guess, about finding the Islamic community.



Saleem Shabazz 46:28

Well, I was getting close to - I developed asthma, and I guess I was sixty-one, maybe sixty, around that. My endurance was failing me. So I realized I couldn't deliver mail much longer, because it was getting to be more of a struggle.



Elizabeth Melton 46:58

Because you were a postman.



Saleem Shabazz 46:59

Right, at that point. I delivered twenty-two years, I guess. I started looking at how I was going to continue to survive and not have another job. Now mind you, I'd already retired from the Air Force. So I'm 'bout to get two retirement checks, and I probably need a job still, because the standard of living in Colorado is like California almost. I couldn't afford that, so I started looking for places to be I even looked at Memphis. I'd been there before. And Memphis is the kind of nice place if you overlook certain things, just like anyplace else. Me and my wife couldn't agree on that. I stayed in Little Rock for two and a half years, I guess, and Arkansas is okay. It's one of them places - Arkansas it's kind of like a little town. You got petty politicians that run stuff, and they're very colloquial. You know that going in. So if you're going to be there, you have to learn how to just deal with that. When we didn't go through that one, my wife started talking about moving back here.



Elizabeth Melton 49:07

Does she have a relationship to this area?



Saleem Shabazz 49:10

No, she's from New York. Actually, New Jersey. At first I didn't want to move back here. I've got

a very big family, and I love them, but I'm better at it over a distance. They're very - Oh, God. They make you say things that you don't want. They get in your business in eight ways you don't want. When I'm living somewhere else, I don't have to deal with that. For the first time in my life since I was a kid, I'm around a bunch of them. Sometimes, you just bite your tongue and go on. But my wife pointed out to me that my grandmother would love for me to move back here. My grandmother was still living at that time. I couldn't argue with that. She and I had always been - I was tight with both of my grandmothers, but Mama Bertha, she's only thirty-five years older than me, and I'm the same age as her youngest daughter. So I already always had kind of a special bond with her. And I was also the oldest grandchild, and I was a boy. That was to both of my grandmothers, really. So when you have that kind of a bond, I couldn't argue with her, I said, "Okay."

S

Saleem Shabazz 50:56

So we moved back to Longview, and everybody emphasized to me how it had changed. And believe me it has, but also it hasn't. There's an awful lot of things that still happen, that have always happened. They just figure out other ways of making them happen, and that's frustrating. At some point, if something is inevitable, instead of you getting in the way of it, you find a way to accommodate it. But the people, let's say in opposition to the kind of changes that we need to make, they refuse to accept the fact that you gon' get run over at some point because change dictates that some of these things happen. Also, regardless of how much we hold on to what we believe, there are people coming behind you, that's not going to be in the same thing. You can't do anything about that, because that's change, and that's inevitable.

S

Saleem Shabazz 52:25

I see that as - that's something else that being a Muslim teaches me. They call Islam deen al-fitrah. That means "the way of nature." And when you think about it, Islam is about nature. Anything that is unnatural, that don't flow from something, or from a natural place, is not Islamic. Once I knew enough Islam to where I understood that - there are still some people that will probably cut my heart out if they hear me say that, but they they are missing the benefit that it can bring. If people just did - well, if we did most things that encourage good behavior, we would be in a better place. But for some reason, the lower part of our nature seems to be our comfort position, and I'm not talking about any particular group of people. People, period. They accept that role so easily. And that's something else that makes me sad as a Muslim, because one of the charges that we have in the Qur'an is establish justice and fairness. You know that, that's like catching a handful of water [laughs]. You get your hands wet, but you don't affect the outcome, no one. Because the change has to be internal.

S

Saleem Shabazz 54:23

We also have to have a mental thing too, because we've had certain images that have been taught to us for so long, that we've accepted as fact that they're not easily changed. I know I won't live long enough to see any of that happen, because a lot of the things that I realize now, but I'm eighty years old. By the time I would be able to affect the change, to even teach most of the people I know what I know, would take me another probably five or ten years. I'd be almost a hundred. It's not gonna happen, not in my life, but in its time it will. The sad thing I see with that is that the human being has made extraordinary strides in terms of technology

and that sort of thing. But in human development, we're still very primitive. All you have to do is to revert to January the sixth last year. Of this year, actually. These were, supposedly, sane, intelligent people. I really have a hard time understanding, how do you get that to that place? And unfortunately, we don't put much emphasis in trying to understand those things. And you can't solve that problem if you don't know what it is. That's not saying that you agree or disagree with it, but it's a problem. To those people, whatever they're doing is real, or they wouldn't be out there. People don't do that unless they really believe, and there must be something in our society that tells them that.

S

Saleem Shabazz 56:57

Really, that's where my Islam is. I'm sitting back, and I'm looking at these type of things. These are things that are obstacles, I guess. Like your dad and Mr. [name]. I knew both of them, and they did what you have to do in order to be able to be successful at this kind of thing. They got out of the way. We always have to learn how to do that. Get out of your own way, and if you are an intelligent person, your intelligence will lead you to an answer. But we don't rely on that. We have cults. We like people that speak emotionally and do all of these things, when still taking and weighing what the person is saying. But it is really an uphill battle.

S

Saleem Shabazz 58:03

I had some guys, and these were Muslims, most of them were young. One of the brothers, he was younger than I was, but he wasn't a youngster. They were going to rob a guy that owned a bar and was supposed to be a Muslim, because he's selling alcohol. They said that robbing him was allowed. I sat there and listened to that, I don't know, probably for an hour. Finally I said, "Hey, just a minute." I said, "When did Islam start allowing armed robbery? I definitely missed that book, whatever it was in." [laughs] I got jumped on by a number of people there. "No, this guy's not actually - he becomes liable - allowed to be taken advantage of in that way because he does this and that." I said, "First of all, we're not talking about the guy. We're talking about you." I said, "You please show me where in the Qur'an or even in the hadith, where it says that a person that earns their money in an un-Islamic fashion are allowed to be victimized. It's not there." As a matter of fact, the Qur'an said everybody gets what they earn in regard to economics.

S

Saleem Shabazz 59:54

So sure, you have an obligation to do a certain thing religiously with your money. But here again, Islam does not require a non-Muslim to pay zakat. That's an Islamic duty. Now there is a tax that can be levied against people living under your protection, but it's not an Islamic thing. Also you're not required to serve in, I guess, a life threatening role or capacity in the country or community that you're in if Muslims are in charge. First of all, everybody that is holding office in an Islamic community has one function, and that one function is the establishment of Islam. If he's doing anything other than that, then he's not doing whatever job he has. So for that reason, there are different kinds of decisions that have to be made, and the thing that's scary about that, as it is with any kind of decision where you are giving power to someone, you have to be careful that you are selecting people that can handle the responsibility that's being given to them. And that gets scary sometimes.

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:01:45

In that line, I had a situation. Me and this sister, she's African-American, but she's been married to an Iranian brother. He got killed while I was up there. But I have known her almost as long as I've known Latifah. She has a very negative opinion of America. I do, to a certain extent, but I try to stay within reason with my reason for not liking things. And I don't automatically assume that America is wrong when a dispute comes out. I try to go through the facts, and try to figure out who is at fault. But she wouldn't do that. When Sadat was killed -

E

Elizabeth Melton 1:03:04

Is that her husband?

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:03:06

No, he was the president of Egypt.

E

Elizabeth Melton 1:03:08

Yes, gotcha.

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:03:11

He was not liked by a lot of people in the Islamic community. That's besides the point. But she was at a gathering. I used to teach class every week. And she said, "Well, they should rejoice, because Sadat was dead. He got killed." And I told her, I said, "Someone getting assassinated is never a reason for celebration." I said, "The only thing that we had, we created a vacuum." I said, "Now, who's qualified to replace him?" She couldn't come up with an answer. I told her I said, "So when you're dealing with a problem-" and this unfortunately, it seems to be the way a lot of people think. They just deal with the fact that they got a problem. If you're not working on a solution to it and everything, then so what?

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:04:22

I just drove my son crazy with that idea. He tries his best to be a good practicing Muslim, but he also likes hip hop. Every once in a while he finds it necessary to challenge me and try to defend hip hop. So one day he was telling me, "What these guys are doing is telling you what's wrong." And I reminded him, I said, "Tariq, it never has been a time when I didn't know what was wrong." I said, "What has been lacking is a solution." You stood up and point and say, "This or that's wrong," that's not going to correct the problem. As a matter of fact, a lot of people that's involved start rationalizing why they're even doing that. It's not easy. If it was, it would have been solved many, many years ago. The thing of it is, if people ever started looking in their own family, for instance. If you've got a large family, you've got a lot of different interests in that

one household. You got five or six kids in there, sometimes we got five or six different ideas about what is the priority in life, and how it should be lived, and all that. Well, if it's that bad in that house, imagine when you mess around and you put twenty-five or thirty million people together. Come up with a consensus in that [laughs]. I dare you.

E

Elizabeth Melton 1:06:15

Right? Can you tell me about what Texas means to you or what it means to be a Texan, if anything?

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:06:27

Well, I guess I would be lying if I said Texas didn't have an impression on me. Because this is where I was - my opinion of life was formed to a very real degree. Texas, to me, the average Texan, they're actually good-hearted people. But there are a lot of ignorant people here. And I don't mean that in a malicious way, just stating a fact. People can only do as good as they know how to be. When I say that I'm not talking about any particular group of people, because the thing that makes Texas different, crosses all so-called racial lines, and to some degree, economic lines, too. So this ignorance is ingrained, is something that we're taught. In some ways, it's a good thing. In other ways, it's probably the little bit of a detriment. But we have got to learn that just being from Texas don't give us a free pass in the world. You need to earn some of that. Don't just say you're the best, be the best. That's the important thing. Anybody can stand up and talk stuff. But walking that walk takes some energy, because there are days when you don't even feel like getting up, much less walking.

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:08:15

So we got to learn to be real, but there are very few people talking about that right now. They have got all these little exercises or whatever the heck you want to call them to where you do certain things a certain way, and then that will overcome that. Well, you're ending up, you're doing temporary cures to permanent things. The thing is, I'm thinking in society right now - I don't know whether you really know it or not, but there are about seven billion people on this planet. Seven billion. That is an unbelievable number. There's 330-something million people living in America. We got cities that's got eight or ten million people living in them. People are in a survival mode, and if you don't have plausible solutions to the problems as people perceive them, then you gon' end up with a mess. How do you say it? I guess they just - denial. They refuse to even acknowledge you in any kind of way, so we need to be working on those types of things.

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:10:06

One of the things that I said when Black Lives Matter and all that first came out, we need to develop in every city, a response team to emergency situations. That will stop a lot of the shootings that take place. Because one of the things - and it's something that I don't think that most people have to deal with, and they're not faced with it. If you haven't seen the thing on Kaepernick, you need to see it. It will show, got that one scene with the cop. It shows you the

kind of thing that we face. As old as I am, they approach me like they are afraid of me. And nothing scares me more than a scaredy person with a gun, because he will shoot you. And there's no "oops" involved in that kind of a situation. But if we had emergency response teams, then a police officer wouldn't be put in a place of dealing with somebody that is psychologically unbalanced. You have somebody on the team that's trained to do that. Then that takes that responsibility off of you. So the cop is less likely to shoot somebody in that type of situation.

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:11:53

I'll give us an example. I worked at Denver General Hospital in Denver for about four months when I first retired from the military. One night [pauses]. Messed around here, and it got away from me. Well okay, I know what I was about to tell you. It just came back to me. When you work in a city hospital in the emergency room, you have so much happening until it all kind of runs together after a while. Well this one particular night, they brought in a guy, and they had him back on in psychological hold. He had this group of people, all of them White, they're authority figures. He has this look on his face when I come up of an animal that's trapped, and he had backed up on the cot and got into a fighting position. He was gonna fight them if they came at him. I don't see a win in this if we let that happen.

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:13:29

So I asked the guy that was in charge, I said, "Will you give me a chance to talk to him?" He said yes. I said, "Ask everybody to please move back." I got the people all through the door, and I went over to the guy about as close as I am to you, and I introduced myself, and I told him what I did. I said, "You look scared." I said, "I'm here to make sure that nobody will do anything to hurt you." Me and him were the only two Black people back there. And I said, "But if you try to fight-" I said, "Look how many there are out there. You can't beat all of them." I said, "And they gonna bounce you around and everything." I said, "But I'm here. I'm gonna make sure that they do you the way you're supposed to be done." So in about ten minutes, he relaxed. I had his confidence, and I turned, and I said, "Y'all can come on in now." He let him do what they had to do while he was in there. But I was sweating bullets going in, because this is almost at a flashpoint right now.

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:15:00

And that's one of the things that a lot of people don't realize. Well, actually they do, because police officers are trained to enforce people, to get in their face, and what have you. That has the very opposite effect of what you need if a person is having some type of psychological problem right then. If you mess around and challenge him, you might not like what he does back at you. So you have to try to find some way to relax him, defuse it a little bit, and what have you. I would probably figure that very few people will ever take seriously about forming those teams. But that doesn't lessen my belief that those teams would be a help. I'm not going to say they would solve all problems, because in order for me to be able to do that, I'd have to be way above the pay grade I'm in right now. But I don't think we should stop trying because we can't be perfect. Because as long as you plugging away, and putting another brick on the building everything, the closer you are to realizing what you're trying to do. You have to you have to keep moving.

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:16:32

I wish I knew some way to overcome the feeling of malaise and what have you that exist in this country. The feeling of not being connected. People say that that's caused by video games. I think video games are a symptom of what's wrong with us. Because you got to have some serious problem when you can sit up and satisfy yourself for countless hours by sitting and being an idiot playing a damn machine. No interactions with human beings at all, whatsoever. That's unnatural. And remember what I said about natural. If it's not natural, it's not nature, it's not Islam. It's something that lies outside the realm. But see, we don't have an authority, an Islamic authority, that can speak on such issues, because we are not trained. That has to be something that we overcome.

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:17:50

I don't know what is the best path to it, but we got doctors. The Muslims in any community are one of the best educated groups of people in that community. There was a time when out at the Islamic Center here in Longview, we had twenty-one doctors. And they're still around here in East Texas somewhere, but they just don't go to the mosque out there. So we've got numbers and things, but they're not deployed the way they need to be. We need to work on stuff like that. And quit playing games with zoning commissions, and school boards, and all that stuff. We are trivia-ed to death, because they keep us involved in fighting over things that we can't do anything about anyway, that don't matter probably, or they matter less than some of the problems that we have. It's construction, and the old buildings we have in the cities that are sitting empty and falling apart inwardly and all of that. We need to address those problems and things, and try to update. We talk about inviting people to move to your city, well make it attractive. I don't know.

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:19:30

But another part of me, I'm Texan. I am proud of a lot of things that people don't have any understanding about, but I come from a long line of - my family is almost a contradiction, when you look at it. 'Cause on my father's side, a lot of preachers, some teachers in and other things in there, although there were farmers and stuff in there always. But it seemed that the ministers and things had the upper hand. On my mother's side, her family would have come like from sharecroppers. Hard working, hard fighting, and hard partying, hell-raising kind of people. If you can imagine the fact that we were all Baptists. Well, first of all, being a Baptist has its own restrictions and restraints on you, and what have you. And then when you have those type of people around you, you're influenced in such a way that you go off and do things that other people wouldn't even think about, what have you. So it took me years of being away from that to learn that everybody ain't like them folks. But at the same time, I love them. They are my people. But you have to learn to accept them as they are, because most of them ain't gonna change. They gonna be just like they are.

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:21:45

Being that I was a curiosity seeker, I leave the religion then, I leave home. When I'm nineteen,

I'm 10,000 miles from home in Japan. I leave there and go to Germany and everything. Well, by the time I get finished with all this, I've seen an awful lot of this planet. But I figured that God blessed me with all that, that for whatever reason, I guess being that I used to value travel and that kind of learning, even as a child privately, that he gave me that opportunity. So I was in places, listening to the language, eating food, learning things about people firsthand, that I normally would only learn about some book in school. So I've been fortunate, I really have. I've been really fortunate.

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:23:02

I think that everyone that can afford it should travel for a little bit, because it don't do anything about lessening where you're from, it helps you to see it in some perspective. Because when you've never been any place, then wherever you are happens to be the sole center of your universe. But when you go out and you go into Asia and Northern Europe, and all that other stuff, you run into a world that is so different from what you're used to, you can't even recognize it. Then after a while, you get to the point, if you have any intelligence, that you start seeing things in that, that might improve, might open your mind up a little bit about what's going on around you. I enjoyed that. I enjoyed that. But I got old, and I got a big family. I didn't feel like packing everybody out, dragging them halfway around the world with me. But when I was single, I loved it. I'd get into a country and be there a couple of years, and if you stay someplace two years, that's enough time to have a pretty good idea of what the place is like. But you're not going to get that in two or three months. You need to be there for a couple of years anyway, to where you can get a feel for the things that they take as being important, and the things they shake off, and all that. I did that in several particular cases. I enjoyed it.

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:24:55

I came through some places. I didn't spend enough time there to really have them rub off. That's London, Athens, Yugoslavia. I landed in Yugoslavia, and all that. The fact that I was there [laughs], I wasn't supposed to be because my security clearance. But I've decided - thank God, because I did something really foolish. I'm not really a reckless person. But I got tired of being in Turkey, because the person that I worked for was - I'd have to call him a bad name, if I called him something, because he really was a piece of work. Unfortunately, because of my security clearance, there was only one flight out of Turkey a month, that went out at the time that I would have had to go out, which meant I would have had to spend almost a whole 'nother month sitting around, waiting on that day to come. Whereas they had flights going out that landed in Yugoslavia every week. So I set up, and I thought about it. I said, "I'm gonna take a chance. I'm not going to get off the plane unless they have a storm, or there's some kind of military takeover or something there, that I have to get off the plane. Then I'm going to be safe, because I'll be inside the plane.

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:26:45

So I'm in Belgrade or wherever. I think it was in Belgrade. I saw the flight line. I didn't go anywhere. I did meet a couple of Yugoslavian women in Turkey when I was there, because they're from the steppes. That's something else that you learn once you get overseas. We are so isolated from everyone that we value, as a nation, that we have very little knowledge of whatever goes on around them. Whereas when you go overseas, you run into people from all

over. They not only pass through, they come there and stay for two or three months at a time, interact, eat the food, speak some of the language if they're along the borders and whatever. So it makes you understand that they understand what it takes to get along if they have to. We don't count Mexico, and South America, and all of those things, although we should. Another flaw, in my estimation. How can you know how to interact with people when you don't know them? You don't know what they do, what they like, what they even - nothing that matters. And we have been doing that for years. The Canadians - how much do we know about the Canadians? And yet, when you start looking in the entertainment world, a very large percentage of them are Canadians [laughs].

E

Elizabeth Melton 1:28:56

Now, we've been talking a little over an hour, and so I want to respect your time, so we'll move towards the end. But since the oral histories are here, and we're recording them and saving them ideally for future generations, right, so is there anything you want to leave or end on for people to know in the future about Islam or about your experiences?

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:29:23

Well, I think that with regard about Islam, if you're looking for a religion that spells out in specific about justice, the role of women, the role of children, the treatment of slaves, and various other things in life, that Islam is something you should study. I'll say that with regards to future generations, I think that we're going to have to learn to value our own opinions, and stop relying on what somebody else thinks for our understanding of things, because that person, in being human, has as much of an opportunity to be wrong as you. Just because his opinion is different than yours, doesn't mean that it's right. If we start being more thoughtful about actions and things we allow ourselves to get involved in, probably we'll have a better society. Because we'll do things that are more thoughtful about the consequences of the things that we say and do to those around us, and that's important. But there's no magic thing to say or do to have this happen, because without a change of a person's heart, there is no change. We have to learn how to change what's inside us with our regards to how we view other people in the world. That's something that has to be worked on hard every day. But that's about all I would have to say.

E

Elizabeth Melton 1:31:40

Well, thank you so much. Thank you for chatting with me and letting us hear about your experiences.

S

Saleem Shabazz 1:31:49

Okay.

E

Elizabeth Melton 1:31:49

I'll stop the recording now. Let's make sure I save it, and I can find it.



Saleem Shabazz 1:32:03

Is part of your family still here?