

## **Sarah Aburumuh**

**March 14, 2023**

**Moureen Kaki** [00:00:02] Okay. Hello, hello. My name is Moureen Kaki. I am an oral history fellow with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. It is March 14, at 1:28 Central Time, and I have with me Sara Aburumuh. Sara, would you mind introducing yourself on the call and just telling us where you're calling from today, please?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:00:24] Hello, salam. My name is Sara Aburumuh. I'm calling from San Antonio, Texas.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:00:33] Thank you so much for sitting down and chatting with me today, Sara. Are you from Texas? Were you born and raised here?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:00:41] Yes, I was born and raised in San Antonio, Texas, and have stayed ever since.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:00:46] Nice. Can you tell us a little bit about your childhood here?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:00:50] Childhood was pretty great. I lived off of 410, Ingram Park area. Now that area has changed quite a bit, but that's where I grew up. And so it was a very simple life. Playing outside every single day. Me and my brother would venture off. Honestly, it was a wonder that we weren't kidnaped, to be honest, because we were just doing a bunch of things alone. But I don't know, some people say that the early 2000s were a safer time, maybe. But I had a good childhood.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:01:33] And would you mind sharing, are there any more memories you can think of maybe with you and your brother or anything else about your childhood that you wouldn't mind sharing?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:01:43] Yeah. So I remember a lot of things. My memory is pretty good. But there was this one time where me and my brother would be outside playing with all the other neighborhood kids, and my mom would actually lock us out of the house because she would be mad that we would truck mud in every time to get water and stuff. So she basically said, "You're not coming in until I yell for you, and drink from the hose if you have to." So that's what we did, and that's what the other neighborhood kids, their families caught onto. They were like, "No, ya'll all stay outside until we say you can come in for dinner." And so we would just be out there drinking from other people's hoses and having the time of our lives.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:02:28] And there was one time where my brother threw something on purpose into the neighbor's yard, and I was deathly afraid of going into anyone's other space. I thought I was a criminal for doing that. And so he did not want to go over the fence. And so I was like, "You know what? You're my brother. I'll do this for you." So I hopped the fence into the neighbor's yard, got nosey, went around looking at their backyard and their plants, and ran into a huge spiderweb, probably this big, like a tarantula. And thankfully, I didn't get hurt, but I had to hop the fence again. I got hurt doing that. And so at dinner time, I didn't know how to lie. So my dad was like, "What'd y'all do today?" And so I just confessed. "I hopped the fence and, I did this, and I got this," and I got in trouble. But I did it for my brother. I still use that against him. I'm like, "I hopped the fence for you, dude. For you, and you were highly capable of getting it yourself."

**Moureen Kaki** [00:03:35] I feel like that's very fair material to use against your brother. That's a big one. And you had to confess it at the dinner table, too. Oh, hello, kitty.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:03:43] Leymoon.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:03:45] Oh, hi Leymoon. Is that your only cat?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:03:50] Yeah, I had to get rid of - I had two. They're brothers. Another one was N3N3, but he was very aggressive. Not a good cat, so I - horrible. I don't know how. I got them when they were kittens. I don't know how he turned out like that.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:04:03] N3N3 was his name? For the non-Arabic speakers, that means mint, and Leymoon is lemon, it sounds closer.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:04:12] Lemon has yellow eyes. That's why I named him that. But he's the polar opposite. He's gentle, he just wants to cuddle. He will meow at me just to cuddle, and so I kept him. I had to get rid of the other one.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:04:28] And did you have any animals growing up?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:04:31] Actually, my dad - so my parents first business coming to the United States was car audio, tint, and alarm, and that's still our family business to this day. But my dad first opened up his booth at a flea market in Poteet, Texas. So it was really nice, because I would go to work with him every weekend, and that's when I was heavily exposed to Mexican culture and Latino culture, because that's predominantly who goes to flea markets and who runs flea markets in that area. So people would sell birds and fish and bunnies. And so I had bunnies. I had goldfish. At one point, I had two German Shepherd puppies. Yeah, and so we would bring them home, but my grandma was very anti-dog, so we had to eventually get rid of them. But I had all sorts of animals from the flea market. So that was our black market way of getting expensive pets.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:05:35] [laughs] That's fun. Oh my goodness. And you said you grew up here, didn't didn't go anywhere else whereabouts in Texas, just stayed in San Antonio?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:05:46] Yep.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:05:47] Nice, nice. Would you mind - you mentioned your brother earlier. Do you have any other siblings? Would you mind sharing some more about your family and growing up here with them?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:06:05] Yes. So we're a family of seven kids. Yeah, seven kids, so five girls, two boys. So it's fun. It's a lot, but fun, because you have a million personalities everywhere. I think growing up having a big family like that made a big difference, because I always had someone to talk to or mess around with. And at school I would always share like, "Oh, I have this many siblings, and this and that." And it was kind of foreign to have that many siblings. But I later realized it was one of the bigger blessings to have such a big family like that. My grandma was in the home with us, so she helped raise me and my brother and the first three of us. She helped raise the first three of us. And so she was kind of the head person in the house. She would cook, she would help my mom clean, she would help us practice our Arabic, make sure that we maintained that, she would help my mom instill values in us, because my parents were young, so trying to figure it out, so grandma was the one doing all of that.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:07:20] Yeah, and then we ended up moving post-9/11, actually. So 2001, 2002, we were building a house, in an area that's polar opposite. So Helotes, Texas. Yeah, so we built a house out there and then my parents have lived there ever since. So different area, different dynamic, different demographic of people that you're exposed to. And then we eventually left the flea market, because business was going down after the recession, the 2008 one. So a lot of shops closed. And so we ended up having to close ours, but then we ended up opening a bigger shop still off of Bandera and 410. So in that area. That's doing well.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:08:12] And can you describe some of those differences or what the experience was like of moving? Did you know when you were young? Were you aware of those differences or was it something that hit in retrospect that you realized like, "Okay, this is a totally different neighborhood that we're moving to?"

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:08:28] Yeah, the neighborhood I grew up in, it was really quaint. I'm sure those houses were considered nice back then, but now if you go in that area, people would assume it's low income. The houses are over forty years old. Income is generally middle class, if not a little bit lower. But where I realized there's differences when I moved because I would be invited to friends' houses and stuff and different parties and things like that. And I would see their homes and I'm like, "What? You have a house this big, and you have a brother and a sister?" That's when I noticed some differences there. The school that I went to had a lot more resources, but I didn't realize that until I was maybe a senior or a junior. Because I was on the debate team, so we would go to different schools to compete even outside of the district. And that's when I started to notice like, "Oh man, my school has a lot more money than other schools. These schools still have chalk boards." And the high school that I would have gone to across the street had chalkboards up until maybe four years ago. They still had chalkboards. Didn't get the overhead projectors, the nice screens or anything like that.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:09:53] So I started to realize my learning would have been impacted for sure if I didn't have those things. And then just the connotation, it was just assumed that you were middle class or higher just because you went to that school, to my high school that I graduated from. But at home, everybody goes through different economic struggles. And so having a family business but living in that area was kind of like we were up and down with finances, but nobody ever knew. And I'm sure a lot of other people with small businesses felt that in that time where they couldn't maintain the lifestyle they wanted or being able to just pay for basic things.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:10:41] Sure, yeah, yeah. And you described post-9/11 as your move earlier. Would you mind telling us how old you were when 9/11 happened?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:10:55] I was in second grade. So what's second grade now, ten, I think?

**Moureen Kaki** [00:11:00] Is it ten? Or is it eight?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:11:03] Probably eight. I can't do the math now. Hold up. Hold on [laughs]. Let me get my calculator. Okay, I'm twenty-nine. Yeah, twenty-two years ago, so I was, yeah, eight.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:11:27] Okay.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:11:27] Yeah. There you go.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:11:29] And do you remember it when 9/11 happened?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:11:33] That is one of my most vivid memories. We were at school and we're coloring something. I forgot what we were doing, but it was still the early morning. And we're coloring, and then usually in the morning, we have the Pledge of Allegiance. You come in. We came into school. In Texas, you have to do the Texas pledge and the American pledge. So I did that in the morning. We go to our activity, and then my teacher says we all have to leave the classroom and go outside to the flagpole. And so I was like, "What the heck? Is this field trip? What's happening?" So we leave the classroom, we go out to the flagpole, and they make us do the pledge again at the flagpole. So I thought that was weird because as a kid, you're used to a routine. Like, "You messed up - interrupted my coloring. What the heck?" We do the pledge, we go back to class, nobody brought up anything.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:12:27] No one said anything until I got home. I got home, and my grandma was on the couch watching TV, and her jaw was just dropped. She looked terrified. And I've told the story before, so if you hear it somewhere else, it's the same story, because people have asked me. But her mouth was just jaw dropped, watching the TV. She wouldn't talk to us, wouldn't tell us what was wrong. And then I remember not being allowed to leave the house for two weeks. So my dad was watching the news and seeing all of the harassment and the public beatings of Muslim people in the streets in New York. And so from what I remember, my mom wasn't allowed to leave the house. So in turn, that was me. So I wasn't allowed to go to the store with her or do certain things for a few weeks until the news figured out what was actually happening or what was actually going to occur from this.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:13:35] And so there was a general state of fear. And my mom was a hijabi, so she had hijab, and she wore skirts or she wore the abaya, which is a long black dress. It doesn't have to be black, but my mom always wore black. And so we know there's association with colors. And so her dressing that way had a lot of people look at her. And I remember one time we were in the doctor's office. My brother had not asthma, but some sort of breathing problem when he was younger. So he went to the doctor, and we were in the waiting room. And some women in Spanish were commenting on the way my mom was dressing and like, "She must be so sad," in Spanish. And my mom speaks Spanish because she was raised in Venezuela, and I understood what they were saying, and I knew the looks they were making were about her clothes. And I always anticipated that going out with my mom, that my mom's a hijabi, my mom looks different. I was always nervous about that.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:14:42] And so I knew they were saying stuff about her, and I even nudged her, and I was like, "They're talking about you." And my mom was very patient, and so she would just laugh. She was like, "Yeah, but they're funny. They're just being funny. It's not a big deal." And I thought it was a big deal. I was like, "This is where you should come back and say something in Spanish," but nonetheless, just ignorance, I guess. But I felt that a lot. If my mom would ever come to school and bring me lunch or whatever, I always felt nervous, like what people were going to say about them seeing who my mom was, because I didn't wear hijab until I was in seventh grade. So quote unquote, I "looked like everybody else" until people saw my family. That's when they were like, "Wait, what are you?" And I had to explain all of that.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:15:31] And what was it like for you to have to explain that stuff? I mean, you talked about how the thought of it made you nervous. Was it difficult?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:15:42] It was, because I didn't have the words to do it. I went to Islamic school. I learned about religion, all of that on the side. But part of that is because my parents came here young, and they weren't well equipped to do it, so they passed us off to schools like a lot of other families do. And so I didn't have the words to explain, "This is a religion, and it's a normal religion, and there's tons of people like me." I didn't have any of that. So I just said, "Oh, I'm Muslim, and this is what we do and what we believe in." But I would get dismissed by my friends and people at school because they didn't even want to understand what that was, that there could be a remote difference between them and somebody else. I was just dismissed. And so I would just stop explaining it. I would just stop explaining it, and then people wouldn't ask for a long time. Again, until I went to a party or they came over. A teacher maybe would ask a question here and there. And then I got older, and then I got more mature, and I had the words to explain. But as a kid, I didn't really have that.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:17:04] Yeah. And I mean, you said you took on the hijab. You started wearing hijab in seventh grade. Are there memories that you could share with us that are specifically associated with that change?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:17:21] Yeah. So I remember sixth grade, I was nervous because I eventually wanted to put hijab on, but people had already seen me a whole year, and I already made friends. So I was nervous that I would lose friends or that I would have to reexplain myself again and again. And the thing is, my middle school era, 2006 to 2009, that's when I feel like Islamophobia really increased because it took a few years after the invasion of Iraq to really have a discussion and discourse of what Islam is in America. I feel like Islamophobia wasn't really a thing until a few years later because it took a few years for media to propagate "these Muslims" and "these terrorists" and that rhetoric in order to justify the invasion of Iraq. And so that rhetoric came up a lot when I was in middle school. So kids would call me a terrorist. Teachers would skim over the discussion of Islam in the book, or look at me to make sure they were saying the right thing, or constantly ask how to say my last name. "Where is that from?" How come my middle name wasn't Melissa? It was Muhammad. Things like that I had to explain over and over again.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:18:49] But then I put on hijab, and surprisingly, I didn't really get a lot of negative attention or anything. I think part of it is that we're just kids, and kids don't really care about that stuff unless it was taught. So I maintained all of my friends, but I did notice there was a barrier now. So I wasn't invited to certain parties anymore. I wasn't considered cool anymore or conventionally pretty anymore. So the girls that I was friends with, they'd no longer want to say hi or anything like that. I had to dress a little more modestly, so that meant buying bigger t-shirts and bigger pants and all of these things that it just didn't look like it fit versus - So I didn't look like I was with the times and all trendy and stuff. Now, modest clothing is a lot better, but back then it was not the case.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:19:53] Yeah. And would you mind sharing with us anything that drove you, or the decisions that drove your decision to wear the hijab in seventh grade?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:20:06] Yeah. So I grew up with hijab. Like I said, my mom wore hijab, but she put on hijab a few years after she was married. And so I grew up with her wearing it. I grew up with my grandma wearing it. My cousins were my best friends,

because we were just only allowed to hang out with our cousins really. So I saw the older girls putting it on, and they were my inspiration. Like, "If they can do it, I can do it." And I had a lot - my parents taught me to be confident. My dad was very much like, "Women's power, you can do just as much as a guy can," in the house, and so I never felt not confident. I never felt not nice looking or anything. And so putting on hijab, I knew eventually I would have to do it. And then the way my parents talked to me about it, I remember telling them -.

[00:21:06] I actually told my mom, I was like, "Mom, I started my period." And that's when you technically are accountable to God when you mature in that way. So like, "I started my period, so I know I have to put hijab on, but I don't want to do it right now. I wanted to start a clean slate, seventh grade." And so I had that conversation with my mom, and she said, "That's fine." And then my dad, same thing. He's like, "It's your choice, but you know we taught you, and you know the benefits, and you know better, but at the end of the day, it's your choice." So I went with that. I just went with that. I was nervous going to school, but I don't think anyone was really paying attention. They probably just thought I was some foreigner, which is - they didn't talk to me anyway. So I'm like, "Okay, nobody was on my back for the most part." But my parents were very supportive, and then my cousins around me and stuff like that.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:22:04] That's good. That's good. And I'm glad to hear that you had examples of that too throughout your family that inspired that to you, because that's not something that a lot of folks necessarily have here, coming from families who immigrated. So, yeah. And Sarah, would you mind telling us a little bit about where you're at now? And yeah, I'll just ask you that.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:22:31] Okay, so now I am a public school teacher, so I teach in a high school, and I got my bachelor's degree here in San Antonio. I taught for four years and then decided to go to grad school for curriculum and instruction. So still education, but I'm now able to write curriculum. I'm able to review it. I'm able to teach other teachers how to teach. So that's been a big blessing because I feel like so much of the teacher that I am now was the teacher I wish I had when I was younger. And so I'm able to teach other teachers how to do that, how to talk about Islam, how to talk about Brown people, how to talk about anything.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:23:18] The other day, this was maybe three weeks ago, actually, I came across a history assignment, super cliché, but I came across a history assignment in the copier, and it was - what was the title of the assignment? I think it was called Hot Topics. Yeah, it was. It was called like Hot Topics: Middle East. And I was like, "Okay, gotta read this." And I have a picture of it. I'll look at my album. But I was like, "What is this?" So I got nosy, and I was reading all the questions. And clearly the unit was about - Hotspots. There you go, it was called Hotspots. Hotspots in the Middle East. So clearly the unit was about Israel, Palestine, they even brought up Russia, Chechnya, where else? Oh, and then Iran was its own thing. I was like, "Okay." So I'm reading the questions, and the last question was an open response question. And you know what? Let me pull this up, because I don't want to get this wrong. I always have dreams of this happening to me, but this actually happened, I promise. Because I never thought I'd have to sit here and confront, because it's been a while. People just kind of stopped being Islamophobic. I wouldn't really get a lot of comments or anything. People just stayed away, so I didn't have to deal with a lot. I can't find it.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:24:56] I don't even know what the question says, and I already believe you though.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:25:00] Okay well, it's there, but the question was an open response question was structured like that. So it said, "Define terrorism and label who is using terrorism of these countries." That's exactly what it said. So it had -

**Moureen Kaki** [00:25:18] Oh ouch.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:25:18] So it had Israel-Palestine. Chechnya-Russia. Iran. So I was like, "Okay, number one, this is totally not an appropriate framework for this content. I'm not surprised, but also - Okay." A little bit like, "Did you not - okay, whatever." Anyway, so the first thing that got me was "define terrorism." So it left it to an open interpretation for freshman. I don't think that's appropriate at all. There's a clear definition of what terrorism is. You can look it up. However, the second part of the question, making students choose who was using terrorism based on that definition, I thought was really inappropriate. And so I saw that, and I took a picture of it.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:26:16] And I had a moment where I was like, "Okay. Am I going to call out, or am I going to call in?" And so calling in has been something that I've been working on for a few years now. Just because I'm in this space, and I'm the only hijabi Muslim teacher who's not just has a bachelor's degree, but I have a master's as well. I'm the only person with that. And so I'm having to really navigate this space a lot differently than other women have to and constantly prove myself and really just show my credibility, not just in that area, but in all of education. And so I was like, "Okay, I'm really mad, but let me step back and figure out how I can call in, because I'm sure it's coming from a place of ignorance."

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:27:06] So I sent an email to the department chair who's one of my friends, and I was like, "Hey, I heard you guys are talking about hot topics, Hotspots in the Middle East. I do want you to know that I am Palestinian and Muslim, and so I would love to take part in these discussions to help you guys out with any lessons or content-creating or whatever. Thank you so much. Have a great day." Didn't even mention the paper. And that comes from Islamic value of character. You always need to be better. And it's so hard because this is real human emotions. I can't always be the better person. I'm trying. But I was like, "Okay, they're gonna look at me, they're going to see Islam. They're not gonna see Sarah. I have to do this better."

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:27:57] So she actually reached out to me and said, "Would you come to our planning meeting on Monday at 8:15?" I was like, "Sure." So I did. I showed up. There were eight teachers there, social studies, different content areas there. And I told them like, "This is what I heard you guys are teaching and stuff, and this is who I am. I can answer all of your questions. I've actually been doing that here for a while. I don't mind being the token. Please ask." And so I taught them why this framework needs to be changed. When you go into talking about the Middle East - or the SWANA [South West Asian North African] region, correct term - the general connotation is that these people are barbaric, they're terrorists, they are uneducated, they don't know how to be civil.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:28:47] And so I told them like, "Whenever you're asking these questions or you're bringing up this topic, students are not going to look at people like you. They're going to look at people like me. So when you bring up the framework of terrorism, how do we define that? Is it subjective? Did we really look into both sides of this?" And I

made the comment that – I told them, I was like, "I'm Palestinian. So, to me, terrorism is funding a nation with billions of dollars in fancy weapons. And they were all nodding their heads. They were like, "Yeah." I'm like, "Yeah. So to me, that's terrorism, but that's not an option you gave your students."

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:29:28] And I also brought up the demographic of our school is drastically changing. We're 76% Latino, Hispanic. That's what they label it. A good chunk of our students, maybe 10% are Brown. So Pakistani, Desi, South Asian. A lot of them are Muslim as well. So it's time to change the framework, and that's how you're gonna get better responses from your students and also educate yourself. It's 2023. A simple Google search of like, "What's happening in Palestine?" or, "How do Palestinians feel?" Being able to just look up that stuff opens a wide range of possibility when you're constructing these questions. And I didn't bring up the paper, like I said, because probably just something they got off the Internet, but still, I don't want the same things to repeat like they did when I was in school.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:30:31] Yeah. And if you wouldn't mind, I mean, you touched up on some of this, but why is it important to you? What are the values that drive you to do that extra work? Because it is extra work. That's a lot of time for you out of your day. And teachers, as we know, public school teachers particularly in this time, are already overworked, undervalued, underpaid and facing ramifications for teaching subjects with ethics and honesty in ways that are unprecedented. So could you talk about some of the values that drive that and inspire you to do that even more work?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:31:09] For sure. So Islam is a way of life, something that I have to live. It's not something that I put to the side. And I'm not perfect, like I've mentioned before, but being a visible hijabi already puts me on a front where I have to present Islam in a way that is palpable to people and that it makes sense and that my behavior is connected to that. So one of the things we value in Islam as Muslims is justice, not just divine justice, but justice in this life as well. So Islam is not a religion that's like, "Hey, just worship and be peaceful. Call it a day." There's practical ramifications when Islam is practiced correctly. So, so many of the things that are happening in the Middle East as a result of colonization and Western values, are the reasons why we have so many problems.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:32:06] So justice, for example, is treating people equally no matter where they come from. Making sure you're paying someone correctly, making sure you're doing your job correctly, keeping the promises you said you were gonna keep. I see that in my day-to-day life when I'm working with people all the time. Also, going out of my way to help somebody. If I notice one of my coworkers is not feeling well or they're going through some stuff, I take on that burden of like, "Okay, let me take care of you. I see it as a team versus this individual system, everyone's on their own. I don't see it that way. I reflect that in my students, in the way I treat them, in the way I grade them. So I try to practice critical justice pedagogy in the classroom where I take a student's perspective, and I respect that, and I bring it into the classroom.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:33:03] I try not to follow this rigid system, this traditional system of punishing kids with grades or teaching them to fit a certain mold of what is considered respectable. I value their cultures. I value their language. I value their feelings. And so all of that is part of not just Islam, being that person, but critical pedagogy as well. So it goes hand-in-hand. If I practice my religion correctly, I am gonna see these things correctly in my life. And so that's part of it, too. And then also educating others. The dawah piece, it's called in Arabic, educating people about Islam, that's something I do all the time. And



that's simple as someone asked me a question like, "What is fasting?" Me answering that is considered dawah. We're not out to convert people, but we are out to still continue to spread a message that could help people in their life.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:34:11] Yeah, thank you for sharing that. I want to back up a little bit here and ask you, I know you were eight when 9/11 happened, and that was also a time in your life where you had changed neighborhoods inside the town, so it came with an environmental and cultural shift, if you will. But did you - I guess I want to know if you've had any experiences since then, since 9/11 happened, that you could tie to a post-9/11 state. You briefly touched up on some general things, including the paper with the question about terrorism, because that links in some way. But are there personal experiences that you could share that you think would correlate specifically that? I think you're nodding your head, so I think you know what I'm asking.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:35:03] Yeah, for sure. So in high school, I was in my AP U.S. history class and there was a conversation about - I don't know if you remember that mosque, youth center that they were trying to build a few blocks away from the World Trade Center. There was a whole scuffle about that. And so I remember my teacher brought that up. And she asked in front of everybody, "Should these Muslims be allowed to build this youth center? Formulate your response, and then we can discuss in class." And I was just - I remember being so angry, so angry because I had a good relationship with my teacher. And I thought, I don't know, like, "Why would you ask that? You have one in the room. You could just ask me." But I remember being so angry that I didn't even want to participate in writing my response. And I remember turning around and talking to one of my friends, Ali, who is a lawyer right now, and I was telling her, like, "This is what's going on and stuff." And she already had a response ready, and I didn't know. So she had everything ready.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:36:19] So anyway, she called us back to share our responses in front of everybody. And she was like, "Does anybody have anything to say?" And I was just so mad. I didn't even know what to say. And Ali stood up, and she went on a tirade about how this was ridiculous, and that Muslims should be allowed to build wherever they want to build. And she's like, "Factually speaking, it's not even a few blocks away." She went on a whole thing. And I just looked at her, and I was like, "You are such a good friend." And 'til this day we talk, and she's a lawyer now. But that experience, seeing her stick up for me like that, and just de-validate that whole moment was just awesome. So that's the kind of person I want to be, and I learned that through her.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:37:07] And then so moments later in my grad school, we would be sitting in a course called "critical perspectives" or something "in education." And you're going to have those people who have a very traditional mindset of what should be taught. My professor at the time would always bring in current events, and that's when I would really just stick up for myself and provide that perspective any time something was brought up. And for the most part, people were respectful, but I still felt angst, like they didn't want to work with me. I actually had a student - I got called into my professor's office to do a review for a portfolio, and he told me - and this was two years ago - he told me, he was like, "Hey, so I need to talk to you about something that's not related to your portfolio." And he was like, "You're not in trouble." But I was like, "Oh, great, what is it?" And he goes, "A few students feel unsafe around you."

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:38:11] And I just started crying in his office. I was at a breaking point. I just started crying. And I told him I was like, "What do you mean, 'unsafe?'" And the

fact that he - it broke my heart that he felt that he needed to even deliver that to me, because I thought we were on a different page. Stick up for me. But whatever.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:38:39] No, you're right though.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:38:40] Yeah. I was like, "What do you mean by 'unsafe?'" I've never been called "unsafe." I've always been told that I'm a kind person to be around and all of that. So he was like, "Yeah, we have a few students who feel unsafe around you." He's like, "The way you voice your opinions can come off a little abrasive, and just wanted to let you know that that's what it is." And I'm like, "Well, why didn't the student talk to me? Why can't they be in this office right now, and I can explain myself and that I've never meant anything." And I told them I was like, "I've never personally attacked anybody. I've never yelled at anybody. Do I come off as maybe abrasive? Sure, but that's subjective. Because I'm a woman? Because I'm covered? Because I stood up to certain people?" And I told him, I was like, "You know better. You teach this course. This is exactly what we talk about all the time." And he's like, "Yeah, I know. It's part of the system."

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:39:46] But again, I didn't understand why he felt the need to say that. So anyway, I told him, I was like, "Well, what can I do? I don't want to walk into class next week and people feel 'unsafe' around me." And he was like, "No, just keep being you. Be yourself. Just be a little bit more mindful of the room." And I was like, "Okay." I just gave up at that point. And I thought about it, and I was like, "You know, if I'm gonna be mindful of the room, it's not because how I feel is not valid. I'm gonna be mindful because I need to consider other people's emotions and be more mature about it, I guess. And maybe I was angry or all of these things." But the only reason why I have changed my tone was because I remembered that, "Hey, this might be the [person's first] exposure to Islam." I did it for my religion. I didn't do it because of any other reason. And that's really hard because that stuck with me. Now I have to work even harder to make sure those people feel safe, when saying the truth is considered an attack. It's been very difficult to navigate that rhetoric, for sure. People don't even realize they're caging Muslims and how they can speak and how they can regulate their emotions just like everybody else.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:41:24] But I think that's part of the struggle, too, is knowing that. But also, how do I tell the truth in a way that is still honest but can reach as many people as possible without compromising my values. I think that's very difficult. There's a lot of Muslim - quote-unquote "Muslim" - politicians who are trying to do that, and people have comments about that. But I don't judge them. I just think they're in a tough place, and I wouldn't want to be in that place. I don't seek to have leadership to change anything because it's almost futile. The system is not meant for that, so I can only control myself and my little systems. And if more people are doing that, then eventually you'll have some sort of break. And I think we're seeing it now with the way people talk about the Middle East and stuff. But there's just so much out there.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:42:25] Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. And do you still feel that in your current job, that sort of fear? Not necessarily fear, but the way that you have to be careful about how you express yourself, because you're being read as a representative of Islam and all those other things you mentioned. Is that something you still feel in your current job as a teacher?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:42:44] Absolutely. And I feel like it's gotten worse with all the legal ramifications of what can be taught in a classroom and the distrust of teachers. There was a moment at school. This was my last year in grad school. So I had a final project. It was in

my education research class. So it's research in action, which is where you take your thesis from a previous semester and actually do the field research on students or teachers. So here I am excited, ready to do this project. And my project premise was to talk about how teachers deal with the idea of race and talking about race in the classroom. That was the hot topic I wanted to talk to teachers about. So my research was my colleagues, and I was gonna do interviews about how they approach race in the classroom and all of that. And I had questions ready and everything.

**Sarah Aburumuh [00:43:48]** Until I had a colleague that I was actually mentoring. So he wasn't a teacher yet, but I was his mentor, and he had a very negative interaction with a Black student in his classroom. And he is a White male. He came from a university institution, that he really prided himself on being the devil's advocate in the room, you know that type, kind of thing. And so I already had a hard time mentoring him. But anyway, he had this really negative interaction with a Black student in which he questioned her and he debated her over her saying that she felt unsafe. So he actually debated her. I had my own students witness this. They were the ones who came and told me, like, "This is what Mr. So-and-so said. Can we talk about this?" And so I shut the door, and we talked about it.

**Sarah Aburumuh [00:44:49]** But I didn't know that I was being recorded. According to this report, I was being recorded. And so the parent called my principal and said, this teacher is saying, quote-unquote, "bad stuff" about White people. And there is a recording. And so my principal passed it off to my academic team and was like, "Can you just go talk to her and figure out what happened? Just go figure it out." So there she is walking to my classroom, and she's like, "Hey, can I talk to you?" And so we're talking, and she goes, so Jerry got a call. This parent said this and this, and I'm like, "Where's the recording? Who said it?" Of course, that was not answered. I'm like, "Okay." So basically it's like, could it just be a lie? What is this? You're not gonna give me proof. You're not gonna tell me who it is. It could have never happened. And I know it never happened.

**Sarah Aburumuh [00:45:50]** Because - anyways, so I explained to her what happened and that actually, the real problem was my [mentee] who had this discussion, and I'm trying to put this in a positive framework and make it a teachable moment. And she's nodding your head, nodding your head. And I also told her, like, "To be honest with you, I'm way too smart for this conversation. I'm way too intelligent to have someone tell me and accuse me of what that parent said. You clearly don't know me. You don't know the story. And so I told you the story. I think you know me and my character by now - I've been here for six years - and how I teach." And she was like, "Yeah, I totally believe you." And the conversation ended there. But ever since that moment, it was a red flag.

**Sarah Aburumuh [00:46:45]** And so I got so nervous because I had this project coming up that I went to my professor, my EDU professor, and I told her what happened, and I told her, like, "I don't feel safe at all. I'm telling you from now, this is a conversation -" and there were more things that were said. I just don't want to mention them. But, "I don't feel safe at all. I feel like I'm treading on water here, and I've been feeling this way for a long time. What can I do?" And she said, "Just completely change your project." Imagine. Two weeks. Everyone's already started their research, and I had two weeks to change my whole project.

**Sarah Aburumuh [00:47:27]** And so simultaneously, I was also taking an African-American literature course. It was actually called - I think it was called Black Histories: Transatlantic Literature. There you go. So it's mainly focused on transatlantic

slavery and literature from that time period. And I went to that professor, too, and I just called her. I was like, "I need to Zoom you ASAP, because this is what I heard at school. This is what I'm dealing with. There's been multiple instances about this. What can I do as a person?" And she soothed me like no other. And I would mention her, but not for this, I'm not gonna mention her. But she's one of the best professors you could ever have at UTSA [The University of Texas at San Antonio]. If you get this person in that class - she consoled me not only as an educator, but as an English major, because it was a literature class. She did that as a person. She reminded me that this is not a surprise. This is going to continue. This is exactly what we've been talking about. And she was sorry that I had to change my project and everything.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:48:41] And my colleagues, too. They were like, "What the heck? We thought you were gonna interview us about something spicy for once," and whatever. And I'm like, "I can't do it. I can't do it." And the thing is, I couldn't do it because I needed my principal's permission. So my professor, my EDU professor said straight up, "Don't even ask her. Don't even put yourself in that position." She was like, "What you're dealing with, just let it go." And she's an awesome professor as well. She taught in Chicago public schools. She's one of the best action research people you could meet at UTSA. 'Til this day, I still follow her on Twitter and we chat. But her making that change for me and not risking my education is something that I can't forget.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:49:34] Yeah, yeah. That's a lot to deal with. So thanks for sharing that story. This is probably one of the last few questions I have for you, but what inspired you to become a teacher in particular?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:49:52] So cliché as it sounds, my English teacher, AP senior year, junior year and senior year. So their class, I mean, it was already a hard class being an AP. And I felt that I could do it because I generally I think I'm a good writer, and I like to read and all of that. But I originally wanted to be a lawyer, so I applied to St Mary's University, got in. That was the ultimate goal. But I went to their campus, wasn't a fan, and then I ended up realizing that I would have to take these mandatory religious courses there as a freshman, and I did not feel comfortable with that, because I am very set in who I am, and so I didn't want to waste my time taking a course that was telling me what to believe and how to send it off to others, which again, that's the school. That's their belief, and they're allowed to do that. But I wasn't gonna put myself in that position, given that I already took so many credits in high school, to set myself back.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:50:59] So anyway, those teachers, they made me feel valued. Any paper that I had to write, I made it about Palestine. Any paper that I got to argue or put on a spin, I did. And it was valued. And class discussions were, again, I was always valued, my voice was always heard. They always gave me constructive feedback, treated me everybody else. And that's what I wanted from my other teachers. I didn't want to be put on a pedestal. And so I just thought about it. I was like, "I think I'm good at teaching," because I work with a lot of youth. I used to work with a lot of youth programs in our mosque. I was like, "I'm good at teaching. I'm good at writing. I like to read. Maybe I can be that person. Maybe I can be just like them." So cliché as it is, it was them that pushed me towards studying English, but also getting my teacher certification and then later my grad school master's on how to write curriculum and teach other people.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:52:18] Nice, that's awesome. Well, I'm grateful that they inspired you to become a teacher, because I think we need more like you. And I'm glad that the students have you, honestly. I didn't have a teacher like you when I was in Texas, in the same

district that you're teaching now. So, yeah, it's it's nice to know that students do have that. Sarah, those are pretty much all the questions I had for you. I know we touched up on a lot, though. Is there anything that you would want to go back and add to, or expand on, or maybe something you'd wished I asked that I didn't touch up on? I just want to leave this room for you to have any final thoughts to share. And they don't have to be final. If there's a subject that you'd like to get into, too, that we missed, I'm happy to do that also.

**Sarah Aburumuh [00:53:05]** You said something like post-9/11 state. I was going to say that even though Islamophobia is very much alive and well, I think things are shifting quite a bit, not only because more people are realizing that representation's important, not just in movies, but shows and having visible Muslims in those shows. I have a part time job at Sephora. And so that's an international company. And a lot of their models are hijabis. They welcomed me with open arms, valued everything I did, everything I stood for. And I think a lot of it is shifting just because we're more present. People don't have a choice but to see us. And a lot of it has to do from liberal rhetoric, being more welcoming to people. And it does have its benefits, of course. But I still think that in certain spaces, like education especially, or even academia, there's still so much misunderstanding or no education at all on what a Muslim is, and what Arabs are, or any of that.

**Sarah Aburumuh [00:54:29]** And it's surprising that somebody can go through a whole public system, go through a bachelor's degree, not read anything from SWANA. Go through grad school and still barely touch on what that means. And it just shows that we have more work to do. And me personally, I've honestly avoided the news as a Muslim, because it's always been depressing. But I think I've just gotten to the point where I can only control what's around me, and I have to actually do something. Sitting here and watching it over and over again, getting negative about it, people not listening and all that. There are people around you who are gonna benefit from that, even your closest circles, who we should work with and not ignore, focusing on the masses who will never understand. I think that's a really negative way to think.

**Sarah Aburumuh [00:55:32]** And I've shifted from that personally. My activism now is with people around me, doing that work because that's how you're gonna reach the most. And it's a person - in Islam, we believe everything happens for a reason. And so having to deal with that is kind of a conflict. How do all these bad things happen? How do all these people still hate us? But there's a bright side. How is there a bright side? So I can say maybe a lot of Muslims deal with that internal conflict, that questions a little bit of their faith when they see all these atrocities happen. And I think a lot of people are very open nowadays. I'll go to the store and people will stare me down still. But then I look at their outfit and it's like, "Guns, God, and beer" or something. So I'm like, "Okay, I know who I'm working with."

**Sarah Aburumuh [00:56:33]** But it goes back to those basic values. Am I going to just yell at this person, am I gonna give them a dirty look, or am I going to smile? And so I try to smile, try to wave hello at their little kid or whatever. If they think I'm crazy, it's fine. But at least they have an image, a positive image. Just yesterday, I was getting the mail, and I was wearing all black, even a black hijab because I was lazy. Went out there, and I saw two people walking with their big white dogs. And I just looked at them, I was like, "Your dogs are really beautiful." And they stared at me, and they were like, "Welcome to the neighborhood." And I was like, "Thank you."

**Moureen Kaki [00:57:18]** Wait, were you new that neighborhood?

**Sarah Aburumuh [00:57:19]** Yeah, I just moved.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:57:20] Oh, okay. Okay.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:57:21] Yeah, so I just moved and got a house.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:57:24] Oh, mabrouk.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:57:25] Thank you, Allah ya barik feek. And the area that I'm in is still north side, it's northwest side. So it's still very much rapidly growing. But you can tell the area's predominantly upper middle class, White, Mexican. There's a lot of desis in there, too, that live here. So I'll go walking, I'll see some Brown people walking, and I'm like "Hey." But yeah, so I'm new here, and I'm used to my parents' neighborhood in Helotes, homey, everybody knows us, we've been there for twenty years, to coming here where I'm like, "Oh my gosh, this is my hood now. Am I gonna walk by myself? What's going on here? Do I feel safe? Should I meet people? Should I not meet people? I'm very introverted, and that may be hard to believe, so I'm not gonna go out of my way to go to someone's house if I don't have to. But I should be better in a little bit more of putting myself out there maybe. So when I go walking, I say hi to everybody and make it a point to say hi and smile. So that's new.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:58:39] Yeah, yeah. Well, that's fun. I mean, the new house thing, too, and the new neighborhood, not the need to question and, like, "Should I go out alone, or should I meet people, or should I not?" But yeah, and I mean - so I guess before we do call anything finished, so are those hesitations that you just talked about even within your neighborhood, is that because - and I'm asking this because you've mentioned what you visually wore to go outside - does that also come from being visibly Muslim, those hesitations -

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:59:16] Yeah.

**Moureen Kaki** [00:59:16] - and social anxiety. And this is something that's persisted. I know you said times have changed, but this is something that's persisted since you chose to put on the hijab in seventh grade?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [00:59:23] Yes, it's persistent because - and you'll see on the news, a lot of far right people, they advocate for completely eradicating anybody that's not White. And they have this negative connotation of Muslims. They have a negative connotation of hijab to the point where there will be violence. How many shootings have happened in the last few years in schools or in public places where people just don't care. There's no value for human life. It's very impulsive. And so there is a genuine fear, not just somebody will see me and have a negative reaction and actually hurt me as a Muslim, but I also think of it as I'm a woman too. There's been tons of conversation about how women are treated. The amount of violence towards women, just for existing. And so there's layers to that. I worry about how people are gonna see me in hijab, that kind of person, how they're gonna see me.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [01:00:30] It brought me to another memory. I was going home and to my apartment at the time. I was going home. I was getting on 1604, and I noticed there's a lot of traffic for 2 p.m. I'm like, "What is happening? This is a little abnormal. So I get on the road, and there's this huge - what's it called? - parade, if you will, a Trump parade. So it's all these cars, they're just going around all of 1604. Excuse me. And they have their flags. They have their guns. They have all of that. And I'm merging on the highway, and at the

time there's only two lanes. And I'm like, "Oh crap. I'm now stuck in this." My windows are tinted, thank goodness, but I'm not about to roll down my windows and enjoy my music the way I normally do, because I don't feel safe around those people. I mean, I'm just being honest. I don't. There's a level of hesitation if I see someone with those little symbols or whatever, because of the violence that has occurred there.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [01:01:37] And so I'm trying to not judge and give people the benefit of the doubt. But it's a little hard when, time and time again with shootings and gun violence, that there's no care for human life. How do you have a discussion with somebody who - what's the quote? - actively seeks to misunderstand you? So it's beyond just discourse now. People can actually hurt you. And there's no - the system is not gonna be - they're not gonna support you at the end of the day. So that's part of it. That's part of the hesitation. I mean, I don't live my life in fear anymore, but I still know that there's bad people that exist and that will have bad intentions. And so you have to be careful at the end of the day, because that's real life.

**Moureen Kaki** [01:02:44] Yeah, yeah. And it's hard as somebody who is so good and strives to see the good in others, to try to figure that out, I imagine. Where's the line of giving people the benefit of the doubt and personal safety in certain situations? Yeah. I'm trying to think of a question to end on a more positive note, not because positivity is going to make everything better, just because we choose to acknowledge it that way, but only because I think that a lot of good things have been said in this interview too. And so much about you is a positive person. You strive to express that outlook, too. So I'd like to keep it on that tone also. But I guess, are there any folks that you want to talk about? You talked about why and how you became inspired to be a teacher, but are there any other inspirations that you have or people, role models maybe, that you'd want to mention or talk about? And this can be related to Islam, related to teaching, related to your friend Ali and the way that she stood up in that class, or it can just be a role model that you've looked at for any other reason in life.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [01:03:59] Yeah. I mean, I have a lot of role models and people that I look up to, non-Muslim and Muslim both. There's quite a few people in education, the bigger names that are coming out, that are Muslim or Brown. And so I'm following them on Twitter, and I'm seeing, like, "What are they doing up north? What are they doing? I know there's people like me somewhere else. Texas, it's hard to find a minority educator, but I know there's other people." So I look at them, and I follow them. My parents, now that I'm much older, I'm understanding them as people. I don't know. I think it definitely took me getting married and leaving to have those deeper discussions with my parents and see them as better role models now. So I look up to my prayer leaders at the mosque because they've always been there, always answered my questions, always entertained a debate or two. So they're there, and then even my coworkers. I have two specific coworkers that, man, they've gone through similar things that I have. Even though they're non-Muslim, they've gone through so many things that I have. And they know my character and they know me, and they've just supported me throughout all my decisions. And I go in their classrooms, and I watch how they do it.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [01:05:37] And so there's a lot of good people doing good work out there. I mean, at the end of the day, people like that are never gonna get as much attention. But it's not about that. It's recognizing it where it's at. So a lot of good people, for sure, are doing the work. And it's just a matter of watching them and learning from them and stuff. Still, I still follow a few activists and stuff from the activism circle. I'm seeing them talk about things, even though it's hard to talk about it. But they do, and in a way that can

reach people. I think I was watching a Dena Takruri interview the other day. I think she was in Israel proper and talking to a few people. I have to remember where it was. But she was talking to a few people who are Arab living there. And the way she formed her questions, the way she responded to them, it was super non-judgmental, just trying to understand how they were feeling being in that area, being who they were. That's a role model to me. You can still talk about the truth, but in a way that, again, convinces people. It's convincing and honest and stuff.

**Moureen Kaki** [01:07:11] Awesome, Sarah. Thank you so much. Is there anything else that you'd want to add as a last note or final words or anything like that?

**Sarah Aburumuh** [01:07:18] I will say one other thing, because my dad gives me a lot of hope. So I'll go to him and complain about everything, doom and everything. And then my dad, he'll say the same thing. He'll be like, "Look at this country." I'm like, "Yeah, about it?" He goes, "Who are the people in these jobs?" He's like, "Think about it. Who are the ones who are doctors? Who are the ones who are engineers? Who are the ones that are in law?" All of these big time institutions. He was like, "Look at it." He's like, "It's our people." He's like, "It's brown people. It's Mexican people. It's people stepping up. It's Palestinians. It's Muslims. It's all of these immigrant people who - or at least their families are immigrants - who are now taking over and doing all of this awesome work." So he goes, "Yes, there are racists, and yes, they have these opinions. And overall, this is the system. However, look at who the face is. And it's gonna continue that way." And I think that's part of the fear from people who are racist, is that we are the ones who are being successful in this work and being able to adapt over and over again because of lives of tragedy and living in diaspora. We're able to do that because we've gone through those things, or we have parents that have gone through those things. So that's something really positive, I think, that you just gotta be the best where you're at. And that's something that he taught me and my grandma taught me. Doesn't matter who you are, just be the best in that field.

**Moureen Kaki** [01:08:55] Sounds like that's what you're working on now.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [01:08:58] Well, I'm trying, but right now it's like, "I don't want to be the best. Leave you alone."

**Moureen Kaki** [01:09:03] The tiredness kicks in. No, make sure to get plenty of rest, because obviously, you know that you need that to be able to continue to do the incredible work that you're doing. Sarah, thank you so much for your time today. Thank you for sharing all the things that you did. I know some of this conversation wasn't necessarily easy stuff to talk about, so I'm really grateful that we had the opportunity to hear your voice on this, because I think there are a lot of young people who were in similar positions as you and I growing up that didn't have the chance to hear voices like this. So I really appreciate you sharing your story and that for them to hear, too. So inshallah, that's something positive that comes out of this conversation as well. But yeah, thank you so much for your time today.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [01:09:48] Thank you for asking me. So this is an oral history project?

**Moureen Kaki** [01:09:53] Yes, yeah.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [01:09:54] Okay. That's yeah, that was some - oral history was something that the head of the rhetoric department really emphasized on when we studied different indigenous rhetorics. This is the way people live. This is a way of life, constantly



telling stories, making sure they're alive. Because ultimately that's what changes people's minds. It's not about the hard facts and the stats anymore. Just talk to people. So thank you for considering me for this and sorry if I took too much of your time.

**Moureen Kaki** [01:10:28] No, not at all.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [01:10:30] I haven't actually talked to anybody about this in a very long time, [laughs] any of this stuff.

**Moureen Kaki** [01:10:34] No, no, I'm glad that you felt like that it was a conversation that you could have in that way. So no, no, no, no. Please don't apologize for the amount of time you took. I'm glad that we got all this, and that this is stuff that people are gonna be able to listen to, because I think these conversations should be had. And the more that we can try to create space for this, and even if this conversation is something that sparks more conversations about it, then yay. So the longer the better. No problem at all. I'm grateful for all of your time and everything that you shared. So please, no worries there.

**Sarah Aburumuh** [01:11:06] Awesome. Well, thank you so much, Moureen. So what's next? You just send me the form, or what is it?

**Moureen Kaki** [01:11:15] Yes. Let me stop recording here.