

# Negena Haidary

March 28, 2021 1:43:53

## SUMMARYKEYWORDS

9/11, Afghan-Americans, Afghanistan, Culture, Culture shock, Dari, Diversity and inclusivity, Education, Families, First-generation Americans, Hijab, Immigrant parents, Islamophobia, Marriage, Mental health, Muslim women's identities, New Jersey, Non-profits, Patriarchy, Prejudice, Prison, Refugees, San Antonio, Shia Islam, The University of Texas at San Antonio

## SPEAKERS

Negena Haidary, Eleonora Anedda

- E** Eleonora Anedda 00:03  
Today is the 28th of March, 2021. My name is Eleonora Anedda. I'm working as an oral historian for the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. I am in Sardinia, Italy on a Zoom call with Negena. Negena, would you like to introduce yourself and tell me where you're joining this call from?
- N** Negena Haidary 00:23  
Hi, my name is Negena Haidary, and I'm joining from San Antonio, Texas.
- E** Eleonora Anedda 00:29  
Lovely, thank you. Just to start, would you like to talk a little bit about your childhood?
- N** Negena Haidary 00:37  
Yeah, so I wasn't born in Texas. I'm originally from New Jersey. I was born on the East Coast, grew up around family. In 2009, we moved to San Antonio, Texas.
- E** Eleonora Anedda 01:03  
Was it hard to move?



Negena Haidary 01:07

I think at that age, when you're still a child, and nothing in your life is really set, you don't really have anything of your own. It's easier to make a bigger move with your family back then. I would say the transition was easy. But getting accustomed to a new city and state was the hardest part about the move itself.



Eleonora Anedda 01:39

Do you remember if there was anything about Texas that you were like, "Whoa, this is completely different, even in the way that people do things?"



Negena Haidary 01:50

When you're driving from the East Coast to Texas, everything is green and lush. And as you get closer to Texas, it slowly starts getting drier, and dead and yellow. And so even the environment itself was such a culture change that we were like, "Okay, we're not home anymore." That was something that I'll say. Also, the population of people was very different. When you come from the East Coast, it's more of a diverse population of people who live there. So you grow up at school, and you're used to these people around you who are from different cultures, and they value different cultures, to coming to a state where you're kind of the minority when you go into the school system. And when you're in your neighborhoods, you realize you're the only Muslim family there. So the early 2010 era was very different San Antonio, from what it is now.



Eleonora Anedda 02:57

How would you say it has changed?



Negena Haidary 03:01

I would say just like anything else, the emergence of social media definitely has changed all of the United States, I think. It has forced people to face issues and face problems within their community that maybe weren't voiced in the early 2000s to 2010 era. I have definitely seen a big change in the population in San Antonio. So more people are moving here from different areas, more younger people are moving here. And that's forcing the mindset of the city to change a little bit. But I would say it's still a little bit behind on being inclusive and diverse.

**E** Eleonora Anedda 04:01  
How was your life like in New Jersey?

**N** Negena Haidary 04:09  
It's so hard to remember your childhood unless certain core events happen. Where, at least for me, I feel like most of what I remember is associated with trauma. So if I remember something, it's because I remember feeling so deeply about that thing, that I was able to carry that with me forever and it changed who I am. For example, we lived in New Jersey, East Coast area when 9/11 happened. My dad worked at small coffee truck on the streets of Wall Street, so he would literally just wake up at six o'clock in the morning, get in his little tiny two-by-two coffee truck and sell coffee, bagels, donuts to the business people of New York City.

**N** Negena Haidary 05:13  
So on the day of 9/11, everywhere in New York City was a complete mess. My dad wasn't able to come home that night. I remember it being one of the scariest moments of my life listening to my mom's wails in the kitchen, as she's trying to [reach] his phone not getting anything back from him. It was a day that shook America as a whole. Often, I feel like people don't see the reaction that happened in Muslim households and how people were affected by it. That's why they were so easily able to point fingers and put the blame on a group of, I would say, a vulnerable group of people. I would say that the Muslim population is a little bit more of a vulnerable group, because they don't fight back when other people point fingers at them.

**N** Negena Haidary 06:26  
Post 9/11 in our neighborhood, my dad came home, thankfully. But that's when all of our neighbors started to harass us. And they would stand outside the house, and wouldn't let anybody come out of the house, they would throw eggs, they would throw anything that you can think of at the windows, and they would scream profanities, when we would step out of the house and walk to the short distance of the car. It got to the point where they realized they couldn't stop us from leaving, so they just slashed all of the car's tires. So we were trapped at home for a while. I just remember that being one of the scariest weeks of my life.

**N** Negena Haidary 07:16  
There was one specific younger teenage girl who was taunting my parents. My parents

actually went to her parents' house and they had a sit-down with them. I don't remember anything except for being there. Both the girl crying, and my parents crying, and them talking about being Muslims in America. But those are the moments of my childhood that I remember. Nothing else really, except for those moments that I feel like defined my identity.

E

Eleonora Anedda 07:56

Well, thank you for sharing that. Correct me if I'm wrong, because obviously, I'm not American. I don't know exactly what happened in those weeks, even though I remember seeing 9/11 on TV. But I'm assuming you still had to go to school. Do you remember anything happening?

N

Negena Haidary 08:22

I don't remember anything ever happening at school. That was also an age where I was really young, I think I was in daycare, so I didn't wear the hijab. I didn't look like a typical Muslim child. I think that in that sense, I [was privileged] as opposed to other Muslim people who were directly attacked just based off of their looks. I wouldn't say that I remember anything really happening post that week. But children are cruel in elementary, so you never know, maybe something happened, but I don't quite remember.

E

Eleonora Anedda 09:09

Obviously, as you say, you were really young. But do you have any clear memory, or maybe you've heard stories from your parents, about how life was different before 9/11 and after 9/11?

N

Negena Haidary 09:32

I think everybody had that period after 9/11. When 9/11 happened, it changed everything. It came out of absolutely nowhere, and it changed so much more than the unfortunate event that happened. It had so many ripple effects throughout different sectors. [Narrator edit begins: 10:22] Living as a Muslim in a post 9/11 world, you kind of have to learn to get used to people harassing you solely based off of your looks. Nowadays it's harder to let that behavior slide when someone is disrespecting you, but back then, there was so much fear. Fear of the unknown and fear that associating with the religion openly could get your family hurt. The fearmongering and mob mentality is so scary to think about because you have all these people who all witnessed this big event, they're watching the news, they're watching opinionated politics get mixed in, and they're getting angry. They want to

take justice into their own hands and channel their anger and hurt, so when they see a visible Muslim, they take their chances to blow off steam [Narrator edit ends: 11:05].

N

Negena Haidary 10:28

A lot of people would take off their headscarves, they would do everything in their power to not associate with the religion at all out of fear essentially. They didn't want to be who they were out of fear of losing their lives, which is the scariest thing because when you're an immigrant, that type of stuff happens in the East. Because in my opinion, I think it's a little bit more lawless out there. There's no structure, which is why so many people are suffering. Here, you wouldn't expect that to happen. At the end of the day, people will have their opinions and they will blindly project those opinions if they're given the voice to do it.

E

Eleonora Anedda 12:12

I see you had a thought there. "Does this make sense?" It does. How did this affect you?

N

Negena Haidary 12:27

How did exactly what affect me?

E

Eleonora Anedda 12:35

I guess, Islamophobia.

N

Negena Haidary 12:37

Oh, okay. I don't think that it swayed me away from the religion at all. When I was younger, I didn't really think about Islamophobia. I was just like, "My parents are from the Middle East. Middle Easterners did this." I didn't associate it with religion at all. I didn't grow up fearing being associated with this religion, and when I was nine years old, I put on a headscarf. That was the moment that pretty much announced to everyone, "I'm Muslim. I am a little kid, I wasn't forced to put this on. I'm proud of who I am." It never swayed my sense of direction from the beginning. My parents would attend a really close-knit mosque in New Jersey. We were there every weekend. We had a really good community, so I had a strong sense of religion back then. But fear and outside factors didn't really affect my view of that.

**E** Eleonora Anedda 13:59  
So correct me if I'm wrong, for you it wasn't the religion, it was more maybe the fact that you're the daughter of immigrant parents?

**N** Negena Haidary 14:13  
Yeah.

**E** Eleonora Anedda 14:14  
I see. About that, what was your relationship like, and what is your relationship like with your family and your parents?

**N** Negena Haidary 14:29  
That is a huge question to unload, but an amazing question, because I feel like everyone kind of understands at some degree if you're first generation. My parents immigrated to the United States, my mom first when Russia had invaded Afghanistan, and they were escaping being drafted into the war. [If] you were living in Afghanistan [at the time] and were a teenager, at the age of like sixteen-seventeen, they would come to your house, the army, and they'd be like, "You're of age, let's go." They essentially smuggled themselves out of Afghanistan, made it to Pakistan, and then came to America from there to just get as far away from that as possible.

**N** Negena Haidary 15:26  
My dad followed a couple years later. He actually got deported. He was in jail for a couple of months when my mom was pregnant with me, and she would go visit him in jail. Something super notable that I would remember from there, or at least his stories, is because we're Shia Muslims, we eat halal. In jail, you can't be like, "Do you have any halal options?" It's like going to a steak house and being like, "What's vegan here?" You don't have an option, just take whatever it is, and go. He really didn't have the chance to eat anything. He was so strict in following his religious diet plan, that he would just eat beans every day. Everyone would give him the beans, and he would eat the beans.

**N** Negena Haidary 16:28  
When it came time to pray, he would find a little location in the jail cell, and he would pray. There were a couple times where people would torment him for praying there.

Eventually he - I don't know if it would be called an alliance - but he made some friends. They were the heads of the prison, the scariest dudes of the prison, and they would just be protecting his body as he prayed until he was done. That's the only account that my dad has. It was specifically the Black community that stepped up and protected him when he was praying, and he needed that time alone with God. No one else would come to him and try to help him. And nobody else really owes anyone that, everyone's in the same position, you're all in prison, you don't have options, you don't owe help to somebody else, unless you see the struggle in them and you have it in you to [say], "If I could do something about this, I'm willing to do something about this."

N

Negena Haidary 17:46

So that's a little bit of a backstory about my parents. They are as immigrant as immigrant parents get, from reading home remedies to WhatsApp, and claiming their doctors based off of that, to having to translate documents for them as a kid, which every first generation child has to do. I would say because I was born here, [Narrator edit begins: 18:15] there has always been a huge unaddressed and sometimes un-understandable rift in the way our minds work at times. It sometimes baffles me that they were born in a different time and culture, grew up and became themselves in a whole other country and culture surrounded by completely different people than those they surround themselves with today. You're kind of forced to navigate through this culture that you can't really seek your parents advice on because they've never been through that. They never had to navigate the art of balancing because it was just the world they lived in, the norm [Narrator edit ends: 19:06]. I would genuinely say that it wasn't until I hit like two years ago that I really understood my parents on a deeper level.

N

Negena Haidary 19:18

I think growing up and wanting to do things and be like the kids that you go to school with. Okay, hold on. Let me think. It's not like you want to be like these other children in school, but when you see them going parties and having sleepovers with their friends and you come home and you ask your Middle Eastern parents, and they're like, "Who's the dad? What are the men in that house like?" They don't let you do the same things that you see your friends doing, so you feel left out after a while, and then you're like, "My parents are doing this to me. I see them trying to isolate me from other people." But at that point, you don't understand that they're literally so scared for your safety that they just do not want you to be in a stranger's home at all, [Narrator edit begins: 20:33] even if its just for a couple of hours with others. That doesn't always stop bad people from doing bad things [Narrator edit ends: 20:33].

N

Negena Haidary 20:37

At the time, it's more like an attack, like it's me against you. We're going back and forth. But I do have three younger siblings, so I am the oldest. Now that I've grown past that phase of being a teenager and having to grow up with my parents, I see my younger siblings that way. I'm able to look at their relationship with my parents and understand what my relationship with them was, and understand their motives for saying what they say to my younger brother. How when they said it to me, I was equally just as angry, and I thought that they were totally against me, but that wasn't the case at all. Graduating college gave me a new perspective on my relationship with my parents. Once I kind of had everything that I needed to have, and I was financially stable and I was an adult, then we were able to see each other on a new level that we weren't before.

E

Eleonora Anedda 21:56

Independence made a difference for you.

N

Negena Haidary 21:59

Big time. Oh my God. I think being a girl living in a Middle Eastern household, having independence is the only thing that can push you through some dark times. When you're growing up as a woman in this culture - actually, I would say a lot of other cultures - [Narrator edit begins: 22:34] but Middle Eastern cultures specifically, you start to realize they are extremely patriarchal [Narrator edit ends: 22:43]. They're very based on the man is number one, the woman is expected to stand behind the man and support the man. I'm not saying anything that has to do with religion, because this is something that people [often confuse] with religion. They'll be like, "Islam, blah, blah, blah. Islam, blah, blah, blah." But there's such a huge blurry line between culture and religion in the East, and people often get those confused and mixed together. That's not the case at all. Some ridiculous stuff could be said under the guise of religion, but it might just be a cultural thing that people are trying to justify with religion to make it sound more valid than it actually is. So in our cultures, the woman is expected to support the man.

N

Negena Haidary 23:51

Pause. I'm sorry, I genuinely forgot the question. I totally trailed off.

E

Eleonora Anedda 24:00

I think I forgot the question as well. I was following you. [laughs]



N

Negena Haidary 24:07

Oh, independence. Yes, I'm sorry. Usually, it wasn't until I think a lot of families started migrating to the United States that they understood the meaning of independence. I only say that because right now I work with refugees from my own background, so they come from Afghanistan, and they're literally fresh from Afghanistan. I started this job a couple months ago. I'm going to be honest, some of the stuff that I didn't know about my own country, I literally learned at this job. [Narrator edit begins: 24:57] I'm kind of embarrassed that I learned more about Afghans through my non-Afghan coworkers. Being able to work closely with my own people has shown me a truly raw version of the culture I would have grown up in had my parents not immigrated years prior. Tying this back into my last point, you're able to see those toxic patriarchal norms flow out more easily when working in this setting [Narrator edit ends: 25:39].

N

Negena Haidary 25:40

For example, women working is a huge problem that we see within my field. A lot of husbands just do not allow their wives to work. There's no [complex] reason to it, [they're like], "No, she just has to stay home and cook and clean and take care of the kids." [Typical]. I think that we've seen it possible to balance taking care of a household and having a job. That's not really a valid reason for not [being able] to work. But the men, especially when they've grown up in that culture, that's all they know, and they're just so stubborn on, "This is the way that things are," they will not be open to allowing change and a woman becoming independent, because maybe they feel threatened by it, because it's something that is so unknown to them that they're like, "How are the women gonna act after we let them work?" It's just very outdated, the way that the culture ["mob mentality"] works.

N

Negena Haidary 26:50

That has to do a lot with my parents. When they first came here, obviously, all of that is still fresh in their head. The way that they want to raise us is exactly the way that they were raised and the ideas that they were raised with. It's harder, because you go to public schools here and you see other people achieving different things, and you're like, "I can do that too. I have the opportunity, I'm here to do that, too." But then you have to go home and fight pushback. "Why can't I move out? Why can't I move to another city? Why can't I go get a job in another area?" Once you gain that independence, you have to go back and forth a lot to show your parents that, "This doesn't mean that you're losing me. This doesn't mean that I'm going to move on with my life and I'm never going to look back. And obviously it's going to be scary, but life is scary. You have to just trust that when I'm independent, I can handle things. I can even help you guys."

- N** Negena Haidary 28:03  
That was something that I think I struggled with all of college, up until the end of college, and my parents fearing allowing that independence and the financial independence. But when they saw that just because I have that, that doesn't mean they're losing me. That doesn't mean I change as a person, I'm just growing to better my own life. I will say though, my dad was never the type of person who didn't let women work. My mom had a job our entire lives. But at the beginning, that fresh culture when you come to a new place, and you're still trying to hold on to what you once had is something that you have to take time to shake and show them that it's okay. You can still have those beliefs, nobody's saying that you shouldn't, but accept where things can change. And there's so much room for change always.
- E** Eleonora Anedda 29:12  
I have so many questions, but I just wanted to know, were your parents very young when they moved to the United States?
- N** Negena Haidary 29:22  
My mom was in middle school. My dad is a little bit older than her, so he didn't go to school here. I would say that he was in his late twenties when you came and she was early twenties.
- E** Eleonora Anedda 29:39  
I see. I can understand. They knew perfectly well what they were expected to do in their culture and then they obviously had a cultural shock when they moved.
- N** Negena Haidary 29:54  
Yeah. Big time.
- E** Eleonora Anedda 29:58  
You talked a little bit about college. I wanted to know first of all, what did you study? Where? And how was that experience like for you?

N

Negena Haidary 30:10

Oh, don't get me started. No, I'm just kidding. I went to the University of Texas at San Antonio. I think I made a lot of mistakes in my path through college, that looking back now I'm like, "I wish I really didn't." I wish that I had maybe that older figure that went to an American school to help me navigate through it. But when you are first generation, you're expected to navigate that stuff on your own and figure everything out on your own. Because your parents probably just don't know, even if they do try to help you. So I went into college, being like, "I'm going to be a doctor." And this is something that I feel like in Middle Eastern cultures, all parents just want their kids to be doctors and lawyers and engineers, just the top paying fields, you know. And the reason, I'm not really sure, except for bragging rights, I think. When they go to parties, they're like, "Yeah, my son's a doctor," and someone's like, "Well, my son's been a doctor." It's a lot of - I don't know, those are the parts that I just don't really love when interacting with people.

N

Negena Haidary 31:36

I was convinced that I wanted to be a doctor. I would take all of these courses, and I was like, "I hate all of these courses. I just want to cry, I don't enjoy this, I'm forcing myself to even do this to just get through this exam or get through this week." Honestly, I didn't face my demons until my last semester of college, I was just too scared to tell my parents that I didn't want to go to medical school. So I went through with the program all the way, and then in my last semester, I just talked to my dad. I was in OCHEM [organic chemistry] II. I remember the breaking point. [The professor] drew [some shape with lines] on the board and I just walked out, and I was like, "I can't. I can't do it anymore." [laughs]

N

Negena Haidary 32:27

I went home, and I was like, "Dad, I don't want to be a doctor," and the silence lasted like five minutes. I think he was just struggling with what to say. He had all of these dreams and hopes, and I was months from graduating. He was like, "My child is gonna be this." [Narrator edit begins: 33:11] I feel like I threw four years of built up feelings on him and basically put him in a position where the only thing he could do was accept it [Narrator edit ends: 33:26]. And usually, he would snap, because I think that the men who come from other countries don't know how to handle their feelings very well, because feelings are very feminine, so they don't know how to properly portray feelings. Sometimes it might come off as too angry, but they could just be very emotional about something.

N

Negena Haidary 33:35

I was expecting an emotionally angry response, but I think he kind of understood, and I didn't need to explain too much about how my mental state was doing while I was in college, for him to be like, "Okay, I can see how this changed her and her personality." He was just like, "I know that whatever you do in life, you are going to make it because you're my daughter, I know that you're going to be successful. You're smart. You've made it this far." At the time, he was just like, "Just promise me you'll go get a master's degree and I was like, "Yes, I promise I'll go get a master's degree," because he's just scared that I won't find work in this job market because a bachelor's is kind of useless in the US job market. You could get a bachelor's and work alongside somebody who never got a college degree. It isn't until you get a master's that you get a good job. For him, it was just me having that security and stability that he was scared I wouldn't have if I didn't become a doctor.

N

Negena Haidary 34:50

But now they've been more accepting of it, more open to it. It kind of sucks because I feel like I didn't have a plan B. Once I made it to my last year of college, it didn't give me time to explore any other options. I just ended up graduating, getting my degree and being like, "Now what?" And I'm currently in that position, so hey.

E

Eleonora Anedda 35:17

So you have an applied for a master's yet?

N

Negena Haidary 35:20

I haven't. At first I was thinking - because my degree is public health, I forgot to mention - I was gonna go into a master's program for public health. But I've taken an off year, because I've been working with nonprofit organizations. Since I started the nonprofit, I feel like it opened my eyes to so many different things that I would have never had to deal with. When I was in college, I can genuinely say that it has opened my eyes to so many other things that I can see myself being passionate about working with the public and working [towards] bettering the lives of people who come here, and they just need somebody who understands them. One of my ideas recently, because I was in a couple of meetings for work, and they talk about the older refugee population, and how we can better serve the older refugee population, who come here with their families, their families move on and have lives of their own. Maybe they don't have a spouse anymore, and they're just alone, and how we can make them feel more comfortable and have a sense of community to give them a better quality of life, that late in life.

N

Negena Haidary 36:51

It got me to thinking that there is such a lack of mental health services that are culturally oriented, that are available to these people. I think there's such a huge thing about mental health in Middle Eastern cultures, I feel like it wasn't very recognized, until people started coming to the West and understanding what mental health was. But because they didn't really understand that until they came here, I think that a lot of people had to just internalize all of their problems and let it build up and take its toll without like confronting it or dealing with it. That's why there's a lot of generational trauma, that I feel like keeps getting passed down and passed down. Nobody's dealing with it, because they're just like, "It's fine. You're not depressed, you have a house, you have food." But sometimes it's not as simple as just having a house and food that changes your whole outlook on life. Having those options for those populations -

N

Negena Haidary 38:06

I'm taking a pause. I will say that during the pandemic, I had to face a lot of me time and [was] forced to just sit in a confined room and think about everything. So definitely, I realized that college, life, everything had caught up to me at that point, and that I needed to go and seek help and do something to change what I was feeling. I will say at first my parents resisted, and they were like, "No, you don't need to see anyone, you're fine. You're not depressed." And I was like, "I would not be at this point if I - I would not verbalize needing help if I thought I had other options." It was really hard for me to look for that help because there's such a lack of people from your own culture working in that field, that it just makes you get in your head and you're like, "Okay, well if I go sit in front of this woman named Cynthia. will she just tell me that I'm oppressed? Or will she actually understand where I'm coming from?" Because some of the problems that Middle Eastern women face may seem like oppression, but when you're in that position, you just understand that in a whole different light that might come off as oppression to other people, but to you and other Middle Easterners, you just understand that position.

N

Negena Haidary 39:55

So I have been super interested in going into counseling services to better serve my community. I feel like that's a little bit more rewarding for me, and it's something that I would be happy doing. And my point is, I think a lot of people waste their lives - I wouldn't say waste their lives, but they do something that they're not totally happy doing. It's just for the sake of having money and paying bills, and it just sucks. Because you have to be there every day, you might as well pick something that you're happy to get up, and it actually makes you feel good when you go home and leave this job. And I've worked so many jobs where I hated my life just to make ends meet. So I can say that I know the

difference now, and there's such a different feeling from having a job you don't really love to having a job that's more rewarding, and maybe pays you less, but you get paid in so many other things and experiences that it almost doesn't even matter that you get paid little.

E

Eleonora Anedda 41:13

Yeah, I remember when I was applying to college, and I didn't know what I wanted to do. Both my parents, they have degrees in business, and I thought, "Well, I need to do business." And I hated it. I had a conversation with my dad, and I said, "Well, if I were to die in two years, I will do history and literature. But I know I won't. So I have to do business." Then my dad was like, "No, no, no. It's because you'll have to do it for the rest of your life that you need to do something that you like." And I was like, "Thank you." I understand. Also your story about once the guy started drawing on the board and you have to leave is fantastic.

N

Negena Haidary 42:05

[laughs] Yeah, it was haunting. Actually, there was a test in class. On the test, I was like, "I'm sorry, this has nothing to do with you, but taking this class made me rethink my life choices, and I'm not going to be a doctor anymore." And then I handed the test in to my chemistry professor, and I just walked out and never showed up again. It was kind of embarrassing, but I just couldn't stay the whole one hour looking at this piece of paper [Narrator edit begins: 43:02] with a bunch of wordless shapes I didn't understand [Narrator edit ends: 43:05]. So it was kind of funny.

E

Eleonora Anedda 42:52

Can you talk a little bit more about the work that you're doing with refugees? Did you start thinking about wanting to do counseling, but specific counseling for people of your culture who need certain attention because they are from that specific culture?

N

Negena Haidary 43:15

Yeah, I would love to first and foremost work with the refugee population, because when they come here, this is where, I think, that they get to breathe for the first time. Because it's such a war-torn country, and they live in constant fear, that when they finally step foot in America, I see it as like a breath of relief, not because of being in America, but just living somewhere where you're not scared to sleep in your house at night. Ideally, I would love to work with mental health services, within that, because all of that [takes] such a toll on

these people. You can see [the toll] it takes on them even physically. Some of these people are so young, but because life has aged them so much, it's unrecognizable what their ages are. That's from so much trauma that they're forced to deal with in such a short amount of time, that it's them who I think need the most possible help.

N

Negena Haidary 44:27

But even for them, I don't think that I would ever be a good option because I am not a refugee and I don't understand what being a refugee means, because my whole life I lived in the United States. I was, for the most part safe. I consider myself more privileged, because my parents just immigrated here twenty years earlier. I got lucky, but some other people maybe didn't get lucky. I wouldn't know exactly how to hit the points of where their feelings are, because I grew up in such a different, more open and western culture. As hard as I try to understand, even now, sometimes I don't understand my own culture, because I feel like to women, it's a bit more silencing. It's a bit more like, "You have a role and that role needs to be filled. And if you don't fill that role, then you're not even a woman."

N

Negena Haidary 45:36

The work that I do right now, it's not my forever, but I was in the pandemic, I didn't know what else to do, I was actually working at the mall. I used to do retail store management for five years. I was just like, "I'm done folding pants. I need to do something else with my life." I had a friend who was working with refugees, and she was like, "I could get you an interview with the education department." I had to sit-down with the education director, and they were just happy to get an Afghan-American girl to come in there, because they're like, "These Afghans are going to see you, and they're going to see hope. They're going to see it's okay to still be who you are and be Afghan, and assimilate to a new culture. You don't have to be totally Americanized to learn English and to learn how to be an American." Not how to be an American, but the basics of living in this country, essentially.

N

Negena Haidary 46:49

So I teach English to new refugees, and I also teach them basic life skills, how to call the police, how to get to - simple things that we wouldn't think of. Before I started, I would never think of, "Okay, how do I fill out this form at the Social Security Office." That's something I've never had to deal with. But they do. It took a lot of me also learning a lot of new things, from a country that I've lived in for years for me to be able to better explain it to them who are dealing with those stuff right now. I really love my class, I have a bunch of Afghan woman, and I consider them my friends. They're so cute. They always ask me

about my bunnies. I also have like two pet bunnies. I get so sad because I'm actually moving back to the East Coast. So I have like a month before I move back. The other day I was getting so emotional, just teaching them. I was like, "I'm going to miss these people." I've never connected with a group of women from my own country as much as I have these women.

N

Negena Haidary 48:14

I would hope to continue refugee work on the East Coast. I'm definitely looking into that. But honestly, whatever opportunity comes my way where I'm able to help people, I just would take it up. Just to experience it, just to have that under my wing, put it on my resume, and gain that experience so that I could better fit another role in the future.

E

Eleonora Anedda 48:45

You do strike me as a humanities, human rights person. I don't know if it's me, because I'm biased, and I'm a humanities person as well, but you do.

N

Negena Haidary 48:53

Thank you.

E

Eleonora Anedda 48:57

The work that you're doing looks like it's given you so much to think about, and you seem very happy with the work that you do.

N

Negena Haidary 49:09

I really am. It's just this job. I really love this job. I, first, have never had a group of coworkers that I didn't - I'm a very opinionated person, so if within two minutes, I'm like, "Okay, our energies are not matching," I'm like, "We're done. That's it. We're not going to be friends." I am so quick to judge because I'm like, "I already know what type of person I would get along with, and it only takes a couple of words for me to understand how your mind kind of works." Which is so unfair to say, but sometimes people will say ridiculous stuff and you're like, "Okay, we're probably not going to be friends." But my coworkers, I've never worked with a group of more unproblematic people who are just good people, and they want to do work for the betterment of other people. So I will say that, that has made me happier.



N

Negena Haidary 50:15

Also, having a purpose besides folding pants all day has given me a fresh feel in life. I feel like depression forces you to feel like you're useless, you're worthless, you do nothing that has value. Honestly, personally, doing this type of work has made me feel value and worth in my life, even the little things where I get a thank you back from it. I'm like, "Wow, that's rewarding, and that makes me feel better about myself." I will definitely say that, if we were talking before I got this job, it would be a very different me. So I'm really appreciative of having that opportunity, and them taking the chance on me. I had no experience at all. I was just like, "I will try my best if you take the chance on me." I'm so lucky that my director did because it worked out fantastically in the end.

E

Eleonora Anedda 51:20

Related to that, can I ask you what you said earlier about having this conversation with your parents, where you were like, "I really need to find help somewhere." Did you manage to convince your parents?

N

Negena Haidary 51:36

It was definitely an iffy topic, because no one in our family ever has sought mental health services, even though I can definitely tell you, some people need mental health services in this family after all of this stuff. It's just too many minds and too many people who are clashing. Anyways, off topic, no one in this family has ever, ever sought mental health help, because when you say mental health, immediately the word mental translates into crazy. When you say that you have mental health problems, or you're depressed, in our language, sometimes I've heard my parents growing up describing other people who are depressed as "mariz" and the word "mariz" means sick. It would be called a sickness that people would have.

N

Negena Haidary 52:43

When it came time for me, and it was breaking point for me, I couldn't hold out any longer, I didn't see any other options except for going and talking to someone about it. I brought it up to them. My mom is a little bit more open about it. That's because she has been working in a field as a caretaker for a couple of years. She understands health and things like that. But for my dad, he was like, "Okay, well, you're going to start taking this medication, and you're going to be on drugs, essentially. You're going to be so different. You're going to be taking drugs. Maybe only take it for two days, and see how it feels, and then move on with your life." And I'm like, "That's not how antidepressants work, you have

to be on it for at least six months. Are you telling me that I only came to you because I'm upset about something that's gonna be over in two days? I wouldn't have come to you guys unless I felt this deeply about it."

N

Negena Haidary 53:52

I can honestly say that before I started taking medication, my mood was completely different all the time. It was very negative. It was very lost and hopeless. I think I would project that onto my family by being more irritable and snapping very quickly. But once I was able to even do something as simple as being on medication, it sucks, but I can say that I have seen such a shift in my own brain. Having just dark thoughts all the time to, "Okay, a little part of your brain can house the dark parts, but don't let it consume you. You still have to move on with your life, you still have to achieve other stuff." And I can genuinely say that being on medication has changed me in the past year, I think for the better, and I hope to not be on them one day, but I'm grateful for modern medicine and the fact that I had the opportunity to even get this medication, when some people don't, and they have to deal with it for the rest of their lives. After a while of me changing, and me just acting different and more pleasant to be around, then they were like, "Okay, this is working." They didn't fight it anymore. They were like, "You do what you gotta do to feel better about yourself." Hopefully one day, all faith in God, that things will get better, inshallah.

E

Eleonora Anedda 55:40

I see. So they saw that it made a difference.

N

Negena Haidary 55:44

Yeah.

E

Eleonora Anedda 55:46

I couldn't agree more. I totally understand that if you have intrusive thoughts that keep eating you up, it's just not good for you. The other thing that you mentioned that I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about with this idea, as you said, that women are, in Middle East culture, expected to be number two. I was wondering if you grew up with that idea yourself.

N

Negena Haidary 56:39

Yeah, I will say that I have been very lucky. I have these opinions, but thankfully, it's not opinions that I formed in my own house. When my parents first got married, my dad is very - I think my mom's the breadwinner, actually. He was so encouraging of her going to college, getting her psychology degree, supporting her while she had to go to school. Then she was like, "Okay, let me also have a couple of side hustles." My mom is the queen of side hustles. Quickly, she became the breadwinner of the house. Some people may feel threatened by that, I would say more in our culture. I could see how a man from Afghanistan would be threatened that his wife is making more than him. But thankfully, that was not the experiences I had in our house, my dad was always like, "No, you got to get educated, you need to go work, you need to have your own life." In that sense, I think me, my mom, my sister, we got very lucky to have a head of a household that's like that.

N

Negena Haidary 57:54

I can say that growing up in a community where you're surrounded by other people who are from the same culture, I can see that in other families that may exist in the community, where just the husband is working, and when the wife is at home all day, and she's depressed and doesn't know what to do with her life. She's not really allowed to do anything different about it. That's just how things are, and she has to be happy in that role, because it's just if that role exists, you're expected to fill it, I think. Thankfully, I haven't seen it myself. It didn't really impact me growing up. I was never scared that I wouldn't be able to get a job. I had my first job at fifteen. I was able to drive and I was able to go to school, but a lot of the refugee girls that I work with, right now, they're around the same age range as me. I've been driving and working for years, but they're like twenty-three, twenty-four, and they're like, "My dad will not let me go to work or won't let me drive." And it's just kind of like, "Aw, I'm sorry that that's the way things have to be."

N

Negena Haidary 59:24

But I would hope with more time in the US and being here that they wouldn't keep their families trapped to those situations and they would be more open-minded about it. But this is something I was just texting with one of my cousins about. There's this word "ehsâs." This word is in Dari, which is what I speak. It's just when somebody just has a sense, or a feeling that you don't have to tell them to have that feeling, they just have it inside of them. I think if somebody has the ehsâs in them to be open to allowing women to progress as a gender, then there's no fighting it. Progression will change.

N

Negena Haidary 1:00:16

But if you just don't have that in you, and you're like, "I grew up in a patriarchal society, and men are in control, and I like it this way, I'm comfortable this way," then you're probably never gonna grow past that. If you're that late in life, and you're stubborn on your views, and you're not willing to listen to other stories and accept other paths that might lead to the same destination, you're just like, "Nope, this one path is the path that I know. I feel most secure on this path." It sucks because if you stay on that one path, you will never experience anything else. If you take those other paths, you may find that your life gets even better than the original path that it was on.

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:01:15

It's more a matter of choice and having choices. I want to move on to - let's call it another segment. I wanted to ask you, how would you describe your identity as a Shia Muslim?

N

Negena Haidary 1:01:47

I would say that my identity is still in the works. I can't confidently say that I completely found my identity as an individual. To me, when you're going through some things, I feel like there's specific tracks that you go through. Once one thing is in order, then the other thing as a domino effect will be easier to get into order. I will say that within this time that I have felt depressed and angry, I have also felt a disconnect from religion more than I would like to. But I still heavily identify as a Shia Muslim. When it comes to practicing, I could be better. I see room for improvement in finding myself within the religion. I'm not the best Muslim that I think I could be. There's so much more room to fix things in my life. I'm willing to fix it, I'm not giving up on the religion, just because [I've] seen some dark times.

N

Negena Haidary 1:03:15

Holding on to religion during those dark times when you're in bed, and you're just praying because you see no another option, you see this glimmer of light the next day. It's things like that, that is like, "Okay, there is [something higher], there is something that you need to believe in and have that faith because it will have your back." Life is gonna happen, the hard parts of life are gonna pass. You might need to get through some of it alone without a helping hand. But sometimes there's somebody looking out for you, and you just can't explain it. My faith has been unwavering, even when I consider myself a struggling Muslim. I just think it's a little bit hard to balance living in the West, and also having this religion that's so tied to Eastern culture, that it becomes a culture clash.

N

Negena Haidary 1:04:15

That's why I always say religion gets mixed into culture too much. As I'm growing up, I'm learning where to differentiate, "Okay, this is religion. This is culture. Let's not get it mixed up." I can say that growing up, I've even seen my own family use culture, but back it up with religion and use religion to spew toxic things. And I'm like, "Is this the religion? Or is this you trying to justify it and convince a little kid and change my perspective on religion?" Because I can say when people say some horrible stuff, and they tie it to something else, it might change your opinion of that thing, unless you genuinely think to yourself, and you're like, "Okay, let's break it down. Does this have to do with this? Or is this something bigger than that?" Learning to differentiate is what I'm currently going through. When I get myself in order - honestly, I'm not even sure what I'm trying to say. But I just hope that one day I will give the time to devote specifically to enhancing my spiritual connection and building on that more than it already is, so that I could achieve a higher level of being satisfied with my identity.

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:05:58

Is there an episode or a story that comes to mind when you say, "My parents were saying this, and they were trying to back it up with religion, when in fact, it was actually just culture?"

N

Negena Haidary 1:06:15

There's so much, oh my God. I honestly couldn't pinpoint something for you. Just because when those conversations usually happen, it's in a heated back and forth. I don't exactly remember what those moments could be about. But I will say something huge is marriage. That's a topic that I think is very easily - people are like, "Religiously, blah, blah, blah." But it's actually culturally, let me give an example. My parents want me to marry an Afghan. Because they are from Afghanistan they're like, "We want to keep the bloodline as Afghan as possible. The kids have to speak Dari." That's it. You just have to marry another Afghan. Sometimes you're just like, "Okay, well, what if I just marry another Muslim, somebody who's from my same religious background?" They're like, "No, God doesn't want that. God wants you to marry an Afghan." And I'm like, "Did God say that specifically, just marry an Afghan?"

N

Negena Haidary 1:07:54

I have way too many strong opinions about things that I just form on my own. But there's the topic of marriage and getting girls married so young, to where they don't know any

better. I feel like when you're a young teenager, you're just like, "La la la. I want to be in a relationship. It's all rainbows and everything." And you don't understand that it's not a relationship, you're signing up for marriage. That's completely different. That's why at least in my generation, I see a lot more divorces, a lot more breakups, or I see people just staying in unhappy relationships forever, because they already have kids, and because the culture looks down on people getting divorced. That's just the way that they live the rest of their lives, which is miserable and kind of sad.

N

Negena Haidary 1:08:51

But it's okay, if that's their cup of tea. I just am so against girls getting married younger, without having their own sense of identity and growing. When I was younger, I definitely wanted to get married really quickly, and I was just like, "I want to have kids and blah, blah, blah." But looking back now as a twenty-four year old, I'm like, "Dude, me at twenty-one, I would be so disappointed in me at twenty-one, if I were to meet her right now and the choices she felt very confident in." You have to push through those events to have a better understanding of life and take a step back and be like, "These are my mistakes, I did this, I'm self-aware." Self-awareness is just the most important thing that a lot of people lack, I think. Once you have that self-awareness, it's just easier to navigate through life and call yourself out when you think you're wrong, or understand how somebody else acts and what could be behind it.

N

Negena Haidary 1:10:13

I feel like I get really off topic, and then I forget what I'm trying to say. But yeah, getting girls married younger, when they don't really have a sense of opinion, and they don't really know what they're doing with their lives, forces them to maybe get pregnant very young, and just stay home and take care of the baby. Then that defines the rest of their life for them, while their husbands may get to go on and just do whatever they want, because they're not obligated to take care of that baby and stay at home. Marriage is definitely something that's so iffy that me and my parents have definitely had a couple of arguments about back in the day, because they wanted me to get married younger.

N

Negena Haidary 1:11:03

There was a time where I wanted to, but the older that I got, the more that I started to go through, I was just like, "Why do I need to get married? I don't need to do that to achieve what I want to achieve on my own." When I'm my own person, and I figure myself out, then it will be easier to have someone else join [my life], instead of just adding yourself into their life or them adding themselves into your life. It has to be you're both on the same

page, and you're making a journey together from there. That's just my views on marriage. But culturally, if you're not married by twenty-four, you're expired. That's it, you're done. Nobody wants you. And I'm just like, "Why do you scare young girls into thinking that and thinking they need to get married so young, because when they hit twenty-four, their lives are over if they're not married."

N

Negena Haidary 1:12:04

Which is so not true, because at twenty-four, you have so many opportunities to do so much stuff that getting married is the last thing on your mind at that age. Thankfully, that was something that I was able to push through, and I'm single with two bunnies. So it's going great. But I do feel happier. I think worrying about yourself and getting yourself together gives you more of a sense of peace before bringing someone else into the loop.

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:12:38

Well, thank you so much for being so candid. I really enjoy listening to you.

N

Negena Haidary 1:12:46

Some people get offended, and I'm like, "I'm so sorry, but I'm not embarrassed to talk about my opinions." Because if you call me out on it, I'll own up to it, and I'll explain why I thought things that way. If something's wrong, I'm willing to listen to expand my own understanding. I'm glad that you're not offended.

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:13:12

Plus, this is your narrative, so you're entitled to your opinion. You mentioned something about your practice, and I wanted to ask you, how did it change over the years, since New Jersey to now?

N

Negena Haidary 1:13:38

I will say the biggest and main change is a sense of community. In New Jersey, we had such a huge Muslim community and a mosque that we would go to every single week. There was a routine because there was a lot of Shia Muslims there. The different sects of Islam just follow different beliefs, so you go to the mosque where they might be preaching the stuff from your exact sect. There's a huge Shia population on the East Coast, so there's so much more mosques. But when we came to San Antonio, there wasn't a single Shia mosque here. It was really different to have this strong sense of religious community to

suddenly not having anything at all. The lack of having that Friday prayer, having that Saturday, just sitting around talking to each other, listening to lectures, that all disappeared the second we came in to San Antonio. There was a really small, small Shia community here. But it was so unorganized that - I don't even know how to describe it. It just fell apart because the community was so small that it was hard to organize things that would be available for everyone. Sometimes when people wouldn't show, it would be pointless to have this event for one person.

N

Negena Haidary 1:15:26

It was so crazy how little Shias live in San Antonio, as opposed to New Jersey, where you had thousands of people there with you. Now you're sitting in a room with fifteen other Shias in this small city in a small little house hearing lectures, and it was still in its own way beautiful. But as a child and not really getting to interact with other people who are on the same level as me, made it kind of hard for me to explore my religion through the lens of somebody who's younger and growing into it, rather than just listening to your parents and what they know and what they believe.

N

Negena Haidary 1:16:17

I am thankful though, because this mosque that I used to go to would - because there was such a lack of organization - we would lose speakers so often. Somebody would commit to coming and being a speaker for our mosque. It's just like having a priest for a church and they signed a contract, blah, blah, blah. But then I felt bad because these speakers that would come would see literally nobody showing up, and it kind of sucked because they go to school to learn all this stuff for them. It's rewarding for them to sit down and lecture to a large amount of people, and when they're not there, then they're like, "Hmm." We lost a lot of speakers who would go to bigger cities like Austin, Dallas, Houston, they would go everywhere but San Antonio because of the small community here.

N

Negena Haidary 1:17:09

A couple times, we got some speakers that were a little bit younger, and I can say that they opened my eyes on parts of religion, that they would allow us to ask them questions, just alone, without judgment, and get a better understanding of what is actually part of the religion and isn't intertwined with culture so deeply. Some of the questions that we would sit there and ask him, it'd be me, my sister, and my cousin. We would just ask questions about marriage, we'd ask questions about life, and he's like, "That's actually cultural." He would check us and be like, "Okay, this is where you need to differentiate, that's culture that you're saying right now. This is religion, and this is what the religion



says." It gave us a better view of the religion raw and unfiltered.

N

Negena Haidary 1:18:13

That quickly went downhill when we were walking around with all this new knowledge that the parents didn't really want their kids to find out that quickly. That speaker moved because some parents were upset that he was saying things that was within the religion, but just stuff that they had raised their kids not to be into and stuff like that. It's so political, when you're witnessing it, sometimes it can affect the way you view things. Because you're just like, "This is a game to you guys, everyone here is just hungry for power. We're losing focus of the main thing here." It can cause you to also lose focus of that.

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:19:16

What do you mean by "so political?"

N

Negena Haidary 1:19:30

I don't really know how to describe it. At least what I've seen in San Antonio, it's been the same community for the past couple years, but it's always shifting, because we lose members, we gain members. I feel like sometimes they lose sight of why we are a community, and it's more about who gets to call the shots in the community, who gets to take care of all the funds. It's like losing sight of being there at a mosque and a house of prayer for other stuff. Little arguments on the side come up about who's in charge, who's the president of this place, just the technicalities that it's like, "It's not that important, we're all just here to vibe and love God." But for some people, it's not that way, at least that's what I've seen here. I didn't really see that that much in the New Jersey mosques, because it was so big, you don't really get that exposure to the heads of the community and stuff like that. But when it's so small, and your parents are part of the heads of the community, then you see that side of things, and it's just like, "Okay, is this where most of y'all's energy is going into and nothing else?"

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:21:09

I understand. Another question I have for you is, what role does Islam play in your life?

N

Negena Haidary 1:21:33

I would say that my entire identity is obviously tied to Islam. That's such a complex

question. It's like when you wear hijab, you're considered a representative of the religion that you're from, a direct representative, because you can go in the street, and anyone could be Muslim, you can't assume what religion they are. But usually, when they're wearing hijab, they're more of like, "Okay, that is a Muslim woman that is a representative of Islam." Having that responsibility and knowing that when you're in public, people will definitely have their eyes on you, and they want to see how you act and how you portray this religion that has so much behind it that could be misinterpreted.

N

Negena Haidary 1:22:48

Like I said, Islam is kind of a vulnerable religion. I'm not just saying that because I'm part of the religion and I'm biased. I think it's a religion that kind of gets pushed around. When something bad happens, like 9/11, they don't make much of an effort to fight back, because of the main mission of the religion essentially, is always promoting peace and having peace. So it doesn't make sense to have an angry reaction or a bad reaction to something negative. The only thing you can do is the way that you carry yourself so that when somebody does see you, and they're looking at you, they will associate that with someone who's respectful and someone who's good.

N

Negena Haidary 1:23:50

Side note, funniest thing. It's actually not that funny. But when I came into Texas, I had met some of my friend's family, and they were from a really small town in Texas. When they first met me, they were like, "I've seen one of you on TV." And I was like, "One of what?" And they were like, "A Muslim." And I was like, "Oh, I really am in Texas now." When people just look at you, they assume that you're this thing from this bigger group that they don't even understand. When they see you, I think that that makes them form an opinion about the rest of the group, even as messed up as that is, one person can be enough to ruin the rep of a whole group. It takes a while to convince people that the whole group is not responsible for this one person's actions. But unfortunately, that's the reality we live in where people will see one person and assume the whole group is exactly like that.

N

Negena Haidary 1:25:03

So my relationship with Islam is respecting it in a way that allows other people to perceive me and the religion and associate us together and understand that we're not monsters. We are regular individuals who follow a religion that if you do enough research about is very similar to other big religions in the world, and is just as valid. The only thing is that when something bad happens, you don't hear from us. People assume that that silence is admission of guilt, and that it's admission of support, when in reality, when things like that

happen, Muslims suffer the most, because we're the ones who get taunted, and people take their anger out on Muslims, just randomly, just for the sake of blowing off some steam and being able to point a finger somewhere. I can't really explain why people act the way that they do when they're angry. But unfortunately, that's just the world we live in.

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:26:17

Do you define yourself as Texan?

N

Negena Haidary 1:26:20

Not at all. When I first moved here, I think everyone who knows me here just knows that I despise Texas with all my life. I was twelve years old when I moved here. It's hot. I'm a hijabi. I'm expected to be fully covered. I don't know if you've seen that SpongeBob meme of the guy with the backpack and there's fire on his back, that's literally just every day of our lives. It made Ramadan super hard. It made stuff that were so easy over there ten times harder here because not drinking water in Ramadan and having 105 degree weather outside and being trapped in the house, it just puts you in [excruciatingly unenjoyable conditions]. I've never ever said I was from Texas. My backstory was always like, "I'm from New Jersey." But now that I'm moving, I'm like, "Oh my God is my backstory gonna be I'm from Texas?" I'm gonna have to be like, "I'm a girl from Texas. I'm a minority living in Texas." That's gonna be my backstory. I say "y'all" and "howdy" non-ironically. I don't know if that makes me Texan. But I consider myself an East Coast girl.

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:27:51

If you had to describe to someone - I mean to me, I'm not from Texas, I'm not American -to people who maybe will be listening to this recording in the future who are not from Texas, how would you describe being a Muslim in Texas?

N

Negena Haidary 1:28:13

I will say that I felt so alone when I came here. Being a hijabi little kid in a public school where there's almost zero Muslims, zero hijabis, people don't really understand. I also moved here on the anniversary of 9/11 in 2010, and I started school on that day. I was in middle school and so there were a lot of mean kids who would just point, stare. I don't blame them. I don't think that they've ever seen a hijabi in their lives before. But it's just remembering events like that, and that you were like, "Okay, I'm somewhere different now."

N

Negena Haidary 1:29:09

When you go out - at least in the past couple years. I wouldn't say now, because Austin is out-pouring into San Antonio, things are becoming a little bit more diverse. But in the early 2010 to 2015, that time. When you live in Texas, there's a large population of Hispanic and White people. It's very easy to feel like a minority when you're within those groups of people, because it's like you're one, and everyone else is a hundred. Everywhere that you go, people have never seen a Muslim, so you're getting stares every single place that you go, because this group of people maybe have never been exposed to diverse cultures. It's not their fault that they don't know how to react when they see someone for the first time.

N

Negena Haidary 1:30:18

But it makes it uncomfortable when you come from somewhere that's so diverse that you didn't even need to think twice about it. The East Coast, [housed] so many Middle Easterners, so many people from different cultures living there, to somewhere like here, everywhere you go, you can feel the eyes burning into your back, and you're just waiting for somebody to come up to you and say something hateful, you're thinking of ways that you would bounce back and say something that won't embarrass you and still represents the religion well.

N

Negena Haidary 1:30:53

Those are thoughts that I don't think that someone would need to have normally, unless they feel so uncomfortable in a situation where they're already thinking of ways to cope with a possible situation that can occur. I would say that, in my mind, San Antonio is a little bit less diverse than I would like it to be. They just have never had exposure to anything else. There's some small towns here where people don't really even have cable. What they hear on their favorite conservative news channel, that's what they decide is fact and they live by it. If it was more of a diverse place, and it was a city setting, I don't think that people would have those thoughts and feelings because they would be forced to accept that this is the way things are.

N

Negena Haidary 1:31:55

San Antonio is a little bit behind on that, it's getting there, I can see in the next ten years, it will become a diverse place where people will feel more included. But it's something that's a work in progress. I can see it being a work in progress right now. I just can't wait any longer for things to be different. I feel like the past ten years, it's been a neverending loop

of just the same feelings to the point where I was like, "Mom, Dad, I cannot be here anymore. I just can't do it." We decided as a family to go back to the East Coast a year ago.

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:32:41

I wanted to ask you why are you are moving, if you are moving with your family, but you said that. The family decision, that was sort of started from you?

N

Negena Haidary 1:32:54

It was initially me, I was just like, "I'm out. I'm leaving." But if you're not married within the culture, then you're not really allowed to leave. You live in your parents' house until you're married. That's one of the downsides to being a woman in this culture, but whatever. I don't pay rent, so it's fine. That's something I'm accepting now as an adult, but in college, I was like, "I'm leaving. I don't care." Now I'm like, "I have student debt. I will stay at home." I was like, "I'm leaving, blah, blah, blah." And my parents were like, "You're leaving us, don't go." I'm like, "This is not about you. This is about Texas." I was thirteen. I didn't have a choice. I can't stay here forever. Eventually, family drama obviously always plays into things and adds that little bit of seasoning that makes the decision permanent. It all worked out in my favor, I will say.

N

Negena Haidary 1:34:07

But I do think that this move will be amazing for my family, for my siblings who are now teenagers, and they don't have any Muslim community to turn to at all. I think that if they go the rest of their teenage years without that, by the time they hit their twenties, they might not have a sense of religion or identity at all. It was a big motivating factor for my family to understand that on the East Coast, there's more youth groups and Shia Muslims that my brothers may be able to make friends and just connect with people who are on the same age ranges them. You know teenagers. You obviously can't tell them something and them be like, "Yes, I respect what you're telling me and I will listen," unless it comes from their fourteen year old friends, who maybe don't really have the same identity as them. But thankfully, my younger siblings are also like, "Yeah, we want that, we crave that because we feel lonely here." That's the main theme for my family is just feeling lonely in a city that we've called home for ten years. Getting that fresh perspective of being around a new community of people who are exactly in the same boat as you might be refreshing. We're just going on the hope of that, hopefully.

**E** Eleonora Anedda 1:35:48  
Get some fresh air from the East Coast. I have one last question for you, but I was wondering if there's anything that we've talked about already that you'd like to speak more of, or something that I haven't asked you that you think it would be important to share? You can take your time to think about it.

**N** Negenia Haidary 1:36:18  
I think I've covered everything that I'm passionate about. Genuinely, I just speak for ages I think, and things come out. I apologize if this interview in itself is rambling, essentially. But that's just how I put out my thoughts. I think I'm good for now.

**E** Eleonora Anedda 1:31:39  
Not at all, please don't apologize. I love my job. I love interviewing and I love listening to people, so it's great for me, too.

**N** Negenia Haidary 1:36:49  
Yeah, that's awesome.

**E** Eleonora Anedda 1:36:53  
The last question that I have for you is - I don't know if it's a question or more of a reflection - this interview will be archived, and hopefully someone in fifty or a hundred years will be listening to it. They may be anyone from the entire globe. I was wondering if there is a message that you'd like to shoot in the future, and say what you're passionate about what you hope will happen to - it can be Texas, but it doesn't have to be Texas. It can be the United States, it can be a community.

**N** Negenia Haidary 1:37:40  
I think my only thing that is so important, and I preach this to my closest friends and family, is number one, to always just like I said, be self-aware. I think that having that self-awareness will save you from situations that maybe aren't the best for you and you can stop yourself earlier than taking that path. You're able to understand other people on a better level if you're not from their background. It helps you understand yourself and the world around you so much better, it helps you get a perspective of other people who may not want to verbalize what they're going through to you. But as long as you understand

and you respect that boundary, then nothing but good will come from it.

N

Negena Haidary 1:38:38

Any choices that may seem impossible. This is something that I struggled with a lot where I was like, "I can't do it, I can't make this change." You really have to remember that at the end of the day, you're the one saying that you can't do that thing. You're the one holding yourself back from making a choice that you know is better for you. Nothing else is standing in your way except for you being stubborn. If you don't take that chance and that risk, then you may never see a change to your life that will positively impact you. There's no harm in straying off of a path that maybe you're not familiar with, just to see what it is as long as you have your limits and your boundaries, so that you don't get consumed by something that may not be meant for you.

N

Negena Haidary 1:39:36

So always have that clarity when it comes to making decisions that are the best for you, and understanding that you can be a Muslim, a woman, a student, a worker, a daughter, a mother, you can be all of those things at the same time, you can balance all of it, you don't have to just choose one thing that you would want to be in life. This is so cheesy, like those cheesy posters. I don't even know a good one. "She believed, so she did." There's probably better ones that have to do with this exactly. But honestly, anything that you think, you can achieve. The only thing standing in your way is you holding yourself back from doing that thing. There's always loopholes, there's always ways around something, you just have to put the time into finding what those things are. Because if you don't you're just running in place your whole life. You're on a treadmill going nowhere. The point is, step off the treadmill and find other paths that may be more beautiful and will bring you more happiness in life.

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:41:05

That was wonderful and also very wise. Thank you very much for that.

N

Negena Haidary 1:41:10

Of course.

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:41:13

Thank you for participating in the interview. I really, really appreciate it.

N

Negena Haidary 1:41:19

Of course, thank you for interviewing me. I love the idea that this encloses what I think is my knowledge. What may be knowledge to me is just blabbering to other people. But for somebody to look back at this - obviously, they won't be in exactly a similar situation in their flying cars in a couple years. But if they're just sad, and they need a podcast to listen to, I would hope that this would be available for them to be like, "Oh, she was funny. Or she did teach me something that I could apply to my life."

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:42:02

Hopefully it's that, yes. So I'll go ahead and stop the recording.