

Muna Hussaini



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58:28

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SPEAKERS

Moureen Kaki, Muna Hussaini



Moureen Kaki 00:03

Hello, my name is Moureen Kaki, and I am an oral historian fellow with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. I am here with Muna Hussaini. It is October 27, 2:16 Eastern Time, about 1:16 Central. Muna, would you mind introducing yourself for us and telling us where you're calling from today?



Muna Hussaini 00:23

Hello, my name is Muna Hussaini, and I am calling in from Austin, Texas.



Moureen Kaki 00:29

Awesome. And would you mind giving us a brief introduction about yourself, and we'll get into the specifics here?



Muna Hussaini 00:37

What exactly do you want to know? I could take that introduction in so many different ways.



Moureen Kaki 00:42

Let's see. How about this? How about we go ahead and get - because you've got such a fascinating story. So why don't we just actually go ahead and delve into the interview, and I'll ask you to start from a young age Why don't you talk to me, if you don't mind, a little bit about your childhood, what that was like, any memories that you you'd like to share with us?

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Muna Hussaini 00:59

So I am a daughter of Indian immigrants. My parents moved to the US in the early 70s. My father was a petroleum engineer at the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma. And so they came here, and they went to school. And then after my dad started working, I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And I think until the time I was two, I lived in Pittsburgh and New Orleans. And then my father was working for an oil company, and then he actually got contracted out to work for Aramco. And so I moved to Saudi Arabia when I was two, but I lived in an expat community. So think of a little American suburb, put it down in Saudi, build a couple of walls around it. And so it was sort of a surreal experience. You're in Saudi Arabia, but living in a very American lifestyle.

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Muna Hussaini 02:01

And I actually felt like it was an ideal upbringing, because you're in a very small community, the school is really personal, you get to go home for lunch. It was a very family-oriented experience, and my dad was carting us off to go do Umrah any chance he got, any weekend. And so it was sort of this really amazing experience to grow up with so much freedom and so much community and so much access to the Haram. I don't think I realized how amazing that was growing up. Because this was before - if you've been there ever, there's been a lot of development and construction, commercialization that's happened in the last ten or fifteen years, and none of that was there in the 80s.

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Muna Hussaini 02:59

So you've got this very, what I would consider simple experience. Now you go, and there's this big clock tower, and my friends joke that it's like the eye of Sauron, looking down on you. And there's fast food restaurants, and people are on their phones, and it's very commercialized. But before it was just a place to be able to pray. And there was still dirt roads around it and whatnot, so it was a very, very different experience. I grew up, I used to ride my bike everywhere. Even in kindergarten, first grade, I had way more independence than many kids do these days. I could take myself to baseball practice. I could ride my bike to the pool and just go, and so it really gave me a very strong sense of self.

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Muna Hussaini 03:45

And I think those things are my favorite memories growing up, where I would just hop on my bike and go to my friend's house, and we'd be playing cops and robbers or just going to the playground and digging up the dirt and building a fort. Those are the kinds of things that I remember growing up there. And also we lived on the beach. And so I could go to the beach all the time, and just see the sun come up and just hang out, dig my feet into the dirt. And so I had a very free and independent and freewheeling, typical 80s upbringing. I did karate. I had a black belt by the time I was eleven or twelve. So it was great.

M

Muna Hussaini 04:27

But it was interesting, because my parents are immigrants to the US. They were raising us in a

very American environment. But we were very Muslim. And it was also very nice, because it's a two hour flight to India. And so we used to go to India two, three times a year, and I grew up with such strong exposure to my culture and my language and my hundreds and thousands of relatives. And so it was just very interesting to dip in and out of cultures and religion and just be very fluid about it.

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Moureen Kaki 05:12

Yeah, yeah. What a wealth of experience to get to have it in your childhood. That's really wonderful. Thank you for sharing that and painting such a fun picture of it. How long was it that you lived in Saudi for?

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Muna Hussaini 05:25

Almost ten years. Basically 1981 to '91. We ended up leaving when the Gulf War broke out. We actually lived there during the Gulf War. I remember I used to take a gas mask with me to school. We all got one that was issued by the company. I still have it. But we ended up leaving after that, because in Saudi, they don't have school for expats past ninth grade. And so my parents didn't want us to go to boarding school at that time, so we ended up leaving and coming back to Houston. And so high school and whatnot, we left and did in the States.

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Moureen Kaki 06:02

And what was that transition like for you after so long in Saudi in that small community?

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Muna Hussaini 06:07

It was really interesting, because for example, the school I went to kindergarten to ninth grade had 200 kids in it. So you knew everybody in your grade, and you'd grown up with them, and you'd played with them and done everything with them. And then I moved to Fort Bend and Sugar Land and Houston. And my high school had thousands of kids in it, and it was very different. I didn't know anyone, let alone having grown up with my whole class for six or seven years. But I think it was fine. And also for me, my personality, I'm pretty extroverted. So I didn't have trouble talking to anyone.

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Muna Hussaini 06:48

And I think in the sense that for me, growing up in a small community just had a lot of confidence, because you're exposed to so many things. There's only twenty kids in your grade, so everybody plays volleyball, everybody plays basketball, everybody's in the school play. So you just do all the things. So it wasn't a big transition for me. But what was interesting was having more exposure. I'd never been around so many Asian kids before, so that was nice. Meeting other kids that were Indian, meeting other kids that were Muslim, and so many, because of where we moved to. That was really nice, but definitely different. You just became one of many at that point, going to the public schools.

M Moureen Kaki 07:39
Do you mean in the sense of a Asian identity?

M Muna Hussaini 07:44
I mean, just one of the thousand kids in my school.

M Moureen Kaki 07:47
Oh, just because there were a lot of students, okay.

M Muna Hussaini 07:50
I had eight classes, and each of the classes had different kids in it.

M Moureen Kaki 07:54
It was that different from when you were in Saudi, I see. Yeah, that's a transition, but it sounds like you handled it well. What were some of the things, if anything, that you remember, that you can talk about in a little bit more detail regarding the differences in transition? Not just the class sizes, but were there any specific memories that you associate with maybe a little bit of the transition?

M Muna Hussaini 08:19
So this may not be what you're expecting, but when we lived in Saudi, a lot of our TV shows were censored. They had someone who would go in and cut out seven seconds of a TV show because people were holding hands. And you could tell it was cut, but you had a sense of what you missed, but obviously you didn't get to see it. And then not only were there uncut TV shows here, but we also had commercials. They didn't have any commercials on TV over there. And I remember being blown away by cable TV, because we only had TV from - cartoons came on at 4pm 'til 4:30. And then it was grown up programming, and there was news from nine to ten, and then the TV shut off. And here it was 24/7 TV. I didn't know what to do with myself.

M Muna Hussaini 09:12
And then access to MTV and music all the time. I didn't grow up with any radio. You would just have tapes. Now I'm dating myself! We would record stuff off of the TV onto our tape decks to have music. So having access to the radio and things like that, it just was like getting dumped into pop culture all of a sudden. And so that was probably the biggest thing that I really loved. But also it was just a lot of exposure, because I didn't grow up watching a lot of TV. I was

always on my bike and running around and playing every single sport and outside, and then now, my mom would not let me watch Beverly Hills, 90210. That guitar riff would come on, and she'd be like, "Turn the TV off." [Laughs]. Suddenly all those power struggles started, of my parents trying to make sure we grew up really Muslim and us being like, "What's the big deal?"

M Moureen Kaki 10:12

That's funny. Gosh, I can't imagine as a teenager discovering total access to cable TV and MTV and all this array of popular culture. That's, that's, that must have been quite the experience.

M Muna Hussaini 10:25

Big transition.

M Moureen Kaki 10:27

Yeah, I bet. You've kind of alluded to it in terms of your parents wanting to raise you guys really Muslim, but can you talk a little bit about what that meant for them, what that image might have looked like for them?

M Muna Hussaini 10:43

I'm a parent now. I have a fourteen-year-old and a six-year-old, and I have so much empathy for them, and I also wonder how they did it. Because I have access to the internet. I have a parenting coach. Gentle parenting, parenting with empathy, child-led parenting, all these resources. They literally just had the example that their parents set for them from a different generation in a different country in a different time. They moved to a completely new country, and they're navigating a completely different culture. And then they're raising their kids in a religion that is not the norm. Even though we lived in Saudi Arabia, there only a handful of Muslims inside our compound.

M Muna Hussaini 11:32

I appreciate that my parents were really open-minded. It wasn't always, "No, no, no," and, "You can't, you can't," and, "Follow all the rules," and, "You're gonna go to hell." But they did try to give us - I think you could say they wanted us to see the forest and not the trees, the spirituality and the importance of our values. I think the one thing I struggled with the most was this thing my mom would say to me all the time, and she was so unapologetic about it. "We are different. Deal with it." And I really struggled with that growing up, because I think their way of doing things was just to say, "This is how it is." I needed the why, and I never got that, and so I really struggled with that.

M Muna Hussaini 12:24

But I loved my parents, and so I never wanted to hurt them. And I think that kept me close to religion when I was younger. I think as I got older, I started to love my religion. But I really needed to understand the why because I'm not the type of person who just does something if someone tells me to do it. I struggled a lot growing up being a girl. "Why can't I do that? Why can my brother do it? Why can he climb the tree, and I can't climb the tree? What does my plumbing have to do with climbing a tree? I have arms, I have legs, my hands, they all work. I can climb the tree if I want to. I don't really care what - I'm not doing anything wrong." And so I think I would push a lot of boundaries, especially for my mom. My dad was a little open minded. He'd be like, "Well, I guess you're not doing anything wrong. So yeah, go climb the tree."

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Muna Hussaini 13:19

There's a story my parents tell. I think I was in fourth grade, and I was on the baseball team, and I was pretty good. And I think my parents decided that I was too old to play on a boys' team. There was no girls' team where I grew up. Remember, there were only twenty kids in each grade. And so I would play on the boys' team. And so then my parents made me quit, and I remember being really upset, because they're like, "Oh, well you're getting older. Girls and boys shouldn't do stuff together." And I remember being really mad. And then my coach and half of my team showed up at my house being like, "Can she come back and play? She's really good." And then I think my parents came around, and I went to play.

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Muna Hussaini 14:03

I don't know that I navigated that one by myself. But it just showed that it an important lesson I learned, that religion isn't about just these random rules. It's about a way of life. And I think something that we evolved into was, "You can do anything you want and be anywhere you are, as long as you remember who you are, and you do it with the dignity of your beliefs and your values. Doesn't mean you go looking for trouble, but is there technically anything wrong with playing baseball? Nope. So then go do it, and be excellent at it, and you can maintain your Muslim identity even if you're playing on a boys team. And then hold your space and hold your values." And I think that's something that I've taken with me, no matter what, to look at things critically and not just accept -

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Muna Hussaini 14:56

I even struggled with wearing hijab. Like, "Why should I wear it? I don't understand. I'm not responsible for boys. I don't care what they think or do or say. They need to be responsible for themselves." And I really, really struggled with it. And then I met girls in college who were wearing hijab, and I had this epiphany where I was like, "Wait, it's not stopping them from doing anything. That one runs marathons, and that one's the smartest person I've ever met." I had these constructs in my head of what a girl who wears hijab is supposed to be, and I realized, even myself, I have limited my understanding of what a Muslim girl should be.

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Muna Hussaini 15:32

And so then I was like, "Oh yeah, I can punch through those walls, and I can form my own identity." Because hijab is a commandment from God. It's not about limiting you. It's about

placing value on who you are. And it's not anybody's business what you look like, unless you choose to be that intimate with them. And then it's your choice. To hell with what anyone else thinks about you. That's actually what hijab is about. It's very liberating to me, and that's why I love wearing it. But I don't think I understood that, because I was always told, "You must do this. You must do this," without the why.

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Moureen Kaki 16:10

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, thank you for bringing up some important issues that I think will resonate with a lot of people that listen to this in the Muslim community. I know it's something I would have wanted to hear as a younger person growing up in a Muslim household, so I appreciate you sharing that. Could you talk a little bit more about how you discovered the "why?" You mentioned that you struggled, that you didn't get it from your parents directly when you were younger? How did that come together for you on your journey of - I don't want to say embracing your Muslimness as if you hadn't before. But the way you talked about the transition of finally coming to the understanding of hijab and stuff like that, was there a journey where you could outline how that "why" happened or how you discovered it?

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Muna Hussaini 16:58

I mean, I really, really struggled. How do I say this? I struggled so much with gender roles where, think it's Thanksgiving, and everybody's watching TV. And then it's time to cook, and I get pulled off of the sofa to go do dishes and cook, and my brother gets to keep watching TV. Or it's time to do the dishes, and I get pulled to do the dishes, or it's time to fry onions. I feel like this story plays out in so many ways, that there were always different rules for my brother, and I did not understand why.

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Muna Hussaini 17:39

Even going to hang out. I remember, we were going to go to Project Graduation, and me and my brother were both ready to leave. Our friends came to pick us up, and at the last minute, my mom decided my brother could go, and I couldn't. And my friends are standing there being like, "What is going on? How come your brother's walking out the house, and you can't go?" And I was like, "Yeah, I don't know. If it's bad for me, isn't it bad for him too?" And not being able to understand that. I got really good grades going up, and I was really good at every single sport I played, and I did not understand the difference between myself and my brother, because when I looked at our capabilities, none of them were different. I mentioned I had a black belt in karate by the time I was twelve. I played baseball, I played basketball, I played volleyball, I played soccer, I played tennis. My brother had trophies than I did, but capability-wise and grade-wise and everything we did, we're pretty much on par.

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Muna Hussaini 18:40

And I just kept seeing all the things I couldn't do. And I struggled with hijab, because it felt very constricting to me. It felt like something that was going to limit me. I can't go places. I can't wear stuff. I can't be who I want to be. I can't do what I want to do. And I think I also struggled

with it, because if our religion is from God, then shouldn't it make sense and be perfect? And if one thing doesn't make sense, as far as I was concerned, the whole thing didn't make sense. Because that's integrity. If you can pull one thread, and it doesn't fit, everything else falls. And so that this hijab thing really, really bothered me.

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Muna Hussaini 19:26

And I think that's what was so cool about going to UT as an undergrad, because it shook this construct I had of - when I was growing up, where I was growing up, there were a few of these caricatures I had in my head of girls who wear a hijab. It's kind of like the equivalent of a preacher's daughter. Your parents made you do it, and then you get to school, and it comes all off, and everything else goes out the window, and these girls are partying and hooking up with guys and doing all these things. And I was like, "That's not what that's supposed to be about." And then there were the other girls whose parents never let them go anywhere. They weren't allowed to drive. They were literally always home. I don't know, I guess I just imagined them cooking or sewing, which probably isn't even true now that I think about it. But it's this stereotype I had in my head of like, "Well, these girls are very meek and controlled." And I didn't associate with either of these two extremes.

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Muna Hussaini 20:27

And then I think when I went to college, and I started meeting girls who wore hijab, and weren't either of those extremes, it really pushed me just to realize like, "Wait, if they're doing it, and they're living their life, and they're proud of it, and they have fun, and they do all the things they want to, why are they doing it? What is it to them?" And as I started talking to them more, and I started reading about it more, and trying to understand it, I think I came around. And I will say, a lot of the resources and books in my house were very desi, and so they were written in a very patriarchal and narrow way. And I would start reading these books, and then I'd want to hurl them at the wall. Stuff about like, "As a woman, you must obey your husband, and you can't leave." They were just very, very narrow and controlling, I just thought, "I'm never getting married. Screw that."

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Muna Hussaini 21:26

And so then, I think meeting these girls who did it with so much love and reverence, and that they were able to maintain their identities opened it up for me. And then as I was reading, just had this realization of like, "Wait, you do it because it's important to who you are. Because it's not anyone else's business what you look like. Your value is not in your appearance. And by the way, if anybody is interested in you, they need to be willing to invest. And if they're not gonna invest, you don't need to waste your time." And that I found really appealing. That resonated for me as a human being of everything that I've lived, and everything up to that point.

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Muna Hussaini 22:06

And then I just made this decision, I think it was junior year. On my birthday, I started wearing it, because it felt very liberating. I did cry, because I felt like, "Okay, this is a new chapter," and

I was saying goodbye. There's times in your live where you feel like there's a before and after. 9/11 is one of those. But I remember this day of putting my hijab on was one of those where I was like, "Okay, I'm stepping into this new lane." And I went to class, and I wore it, and I've generally wore it since then. I did take it off for one day, but maybe we'll talk about that later, because it's part of the 9/11 story. You're still on mute.

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Moureen Kaki 22:48

Yeah, we can actually delve into that topic now if that's okay with you.

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Muna Hussaini 22:54

Yeah, let's do it.

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Moureen Kaki 22:55

Yeah. Do you remember where you were, how old you were when 9/11 happened?

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Muna Hussaini 23:01

Yeah, so I had just moved to Colorado. I had graduated from college, and I had had that summer off, and I was starting my first job after college. So 2001. I'm guessing I'm twenty-one at this time, twenty-two, something like that. And I had just moved to Boulder, I think, two weeks ago. I didn't know anyone there. I didn't have any family. I didn't have any friends. I had my first apartment by myself. My dad had just moved me in and left. And then 9/11 happened. With the newfound freedom and money that you have in college, I was driving myself to work, and I was eating a popsicle for breakfast, because that's what you do when you're allowed to do whatever you want to.

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Muna Hussaini 23:50

And I remember hearing - I was trying to find some music on a radio station, and there was some news report. And I wasn't listening to the news report, because I was like, "What's going on? Why isn't there any music?" So I was hitting all the presets on my radio, and then every single radio station was talking about these planes. And then I actually started hearing the words, and I realized, "Oh my goodness, these planes have crashed into the World Trade Center, and people are getting hurt, and there's a lot of fear and hysteria." And my drive to work was, I think at that time, just seven minutes. And so I got to work, and I remember feeling very anxious, because I just kept thinking, "Oh my god, I really hope it's not Muslim people."

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Muna Hussaini 24:43

And then as I walked into my office, everybody was in the lobby watching the news, and I felt like they all turned around and looked straight at me. And I'm wearing hijab, I'm one of the only non-White people there. And I walked so quickly to my office and shut the door. I felt like I

couldn't breathe. And then of course, it did come out that it was Muslim people. And I remember being so, so scared. And again, I'm twenty-one. I'm twenty-one. I'm in a place where I don't have any family, I don't have any friends. I have just moved there. And I'm so scared. So I go home that night, and I call my mom and dad. At this point, all the planes are grounded. There's no traveling. I'm stuck. I don't know where to go.

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Muna Hussaini 25:37

And there's a series of events that happens in the next couple of days that was really defining for me. I went to work the next day, my parents had said, "Take your hijab off if you're feeling scared, if you're feeling uncomfortable. We want you to be safe. Take it off. You don't need to be in a difficult position. You're by yourself." And I struggled with that, because I was like, "No, I don't want to live my life like that." And I go to work. I did take it off, and it felt so wrong, like I was walking around naked, that I ended up putting it back on, and I shared my office with a Mormon guy, and he was like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa." I was like, "You're just gonna forget that you saw my hair. I'm putting my scarf back on." And he's pretty religious, so he got it. It was fine. But I think he was the only one that was in early that day, and he did see my hair.

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Muna Hussaini 26:35

But then later that day, I think it was that day, I don't exactly remember, there was a guy who sat across the hall from me. And the G-rated version of the story is that he came into my office and threatened me and told me to go back home, because he was going to join the Air Force and bomb the hell out of me and my family and kill all of us. And he was a pretty big dude, 200-250 pounds, ex-military. And I'm in this little office tucked into a corner, I'm this little girl. And he's cussing me out and threatening me, and my office mate literally just stood up, pushed him out, shut the door, locked it, and called security.

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Muna Hussaini 27:18

And I froze. I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what to do in my head. I'm like, "Why is he threatening me? I had nothing to do with this. I'm sitting here just like everybody else." And I remember being so upset. At that time, the company I was working for was very supportive. They took care of me, and they made sure I was safe and security moved that guy. I have no idea what happened to him. I never saw him again. But I appreciated it. They handled things very respectfully and expediently. And the other sad part about what happened to me was not only was I - I dealt with - and that's not the only difficult thing I faced right after 9/11.

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Muna Hussaini 28:15

So I had just moved to Boulder. I didn't know anyone, and that day - and I felt very lonely and scared. And I went to the mosque in Boulder, and it's a tiny community. And if anyone knows anything about Boulder, they have very limited zoning, and they keep it that way for various reasons. But the mosque was started by students, and it's really small. And so the mosque itself is only for men. I don't know if it's still like that this is, whatever, twenty years later. But

the mosque was only for men. And there was a women's section, not in the house next to the mosque, but two houses over. But if you've never been there before, you're not gonna know that.

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Muna Hussaini 28:58

So I just looked up the mosque, I think it was Yellow Pages or something. And then I drove over there, and I went inside. And I was forced out really fast. "No sisters." And I'm like, "Yeah, okay, I understand. But I need to be around Muslim people." And they wouldn't talk to me. And they were very harsh. And they were like, "No sisters," and they would make eye contact, and they wouldn't even listen to me, and they didn't even tell me that there was a sisters' area, but even if, it wasn't prayer time, so nobody would be there even if I went. And I remember sitting outside in the shoes and crying 'cause I at least wanted to stay at the mosque, and I didn't know where else to go. And I remember feeling so sad that my people couldn't even be my people on that day and give me the two seconds to explain what I was going through and why I needed to be there. And so in addition to being othered by someone I didn't know, I got othered at a place that I should have been welcomed.

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Moureen Kaki 30:17

Absolutely Muna. I'm so sorry that you experienced that. What a horribly, lonely feeling that must have been.

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Muna Hussaini 30:28

It was really hard.

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Moureen Kaki 30:30

You want to take a minute? We can pause the recording if you'd like, we can take a second.

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Muna Hussaini 30:34

No, we can keep going. I think one of the things that I really love about my parents is that I think they taught me that when you see a problem, you should try to fix it. And I think that pain has always stayed with me, but I think over time - and we'll talk about it later if you want to - but I'm really proud that, living here in Austin, that a bunch of friends and I started a group called Muslim Space. And it's just a inclusive Muslim organization that you just come as you are. And there's no judgment around it, that you should just be able to be yourself and come to the mosque and participate in learning and service and fun activities.

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Muna Hussaini 31:28

And that's been something - we've been going strong for a couple of years now, but with this

realization that we got to build the world that we want to live in. I haven't let the things that have hurt me define me. But it took me probably ten years of processing to be able to turn that corner. And so yes, I'm crying. Yes, I'm hurt. Yes, I remember what happened that day. And I did go inside myself for a very long time. And I didn't necessarily think about it, because it hurt too much. But as with everything, you're on a journey. You take that pain, and you do something with it. I'm not an artist. I don't write poetry. I don't write music. But I do problem solve. And I feel lucky that I've been able to do things that help our community and myself and my own kids for that better future. And I think that remembering what was hard makes it really important to ensure that we do better. So thank you for the question, but we can definitely keep going, Moureen.

M Moureen Kaki 32:43

Sure. Thank you, Muna. And following the aftermath of 9/11, you talked little bit more about work and what the instances that happened there. How else did 9/11 affect your life moving forward, besides you talked about the isolation, community, and the way that led you to build new space. Was there anything else related to that, that you wanted to add or discuss with us?

M Muna Hussaini 33:12

One of the biggest things that changed for me after 9/11 was always an awareness of space. I would say I've always been a free spirit, walking into spaces and just being able to be and have fun. And I think after 9/11, there's this very clear line in my life of before and after of doesn't matter where I am, looking for exits, looking for who's around, looking for where I should sit so my back is against a wall of safety. And I think most women consider safety all of the time. Like, "Okay, am I walking at night? Am I in a group? How well lit is this place?" I think after you've been attacked, all of that goes out the wayside. And I'll tell a story, and then we'll talk a little bit more about the changes that I -

M Muna Hussaini 34:21

I had several things happen to me after 9/11. And one of them was within weeks of 9/11. I was with a friend, a co-worker, and we were walking on Pearl Street which is an upscale outdoor mall. And I think most people have these general rules of safety. If you go out in public or you go out in daylight, and you in group, or on a certain side of town, you'll be safe right. And all those rules didn't matter for me. I was with a friend. I was in a nice part of town. It was public. I can't remember if it was dark or not, but it might have been evening, but again, we're at a really upscale outdoor mall. It should have been okay.

M Muna Hussaini 35:03

And we're walking, and from out of nowhere, someone came and tried to stab me. And I didn't even know what was happening. We were walking by, I think it was a pool hall. I think the bouncer to the pool hall saw what was happening, and he pushed me out of the way. He saved my life. He pushed me out of the way. I didn't know what was happening. And then they told me, "That guy tried to stab you." And luckily, my friend was with me. It just threw me for a loop.

Like "Why would someone do that? They don't even know me." The only thing I can think is because I wear hijab. And I'm alive because of the kindness of a stranger. I wish I could go back and say thank you to this person, but I have no idea who he is.

M

Muna Hussaini 35:54

My coworker was with me, and he was extremely important to my sanity at that time, because he was so empathetic. He made sure I was okay. He checked on me constantly after that. He made sure all of my friends and all of my co-workers checked on me. They just formed a little emotional circle around me for the next couple of weeks, months. And really, they still check on me every once in a while, even though it's been twenty years. You can choose to see the crazy thing that happened, or you could choose to see - what is it Mr. Rogers says? "Look for the helpers." I had so many helpers that showed up for me.

M

Muna Hussaini 36:44

But it was really hard for a long time, because I couldn't trust that I would be okay anywhere. And it took me a very long - I ended up having a little bit of a mental breakdown, and I had to take off time from work and go to therapy. But I could not relax for the longest time, because I was afraid I was gonna get attacked, and it didn't matter where I went. And even though that story was really hard for me to comprehend, one thing that happened to me, and it wasn't violence, but it's probably one of the things that hurt the most. I remember I went to Taco Bell to get food, and I was inside ordering. And all these stories are within days of each other, weeks of each other at the most. It's a month max.

M

Muna Hussaini 37:43

I was getting food, and you know how you order, and they give you a cup, and you can go get your soda, and then you wait for your food? And so I was getting my soda, and I was filling it up, and a little baby was learning how to walk, and the baby was falling and grabbed onto the back of my pant legs. And so I just stood there and waited. Because if I moved, I was afraid I would knock the baby backwards. So the baby's just playing and pulling on my pants, and I'm just waiting. It's probably been a minute at this point. I'm trying to be like, "Whose baby is this? Come get your baby." But if I turned around, I might move and knock the baby over, so I'm just waiting.

M

Muna Hussaini 38:23

And I think the mother finally realized where her kid was. And she came, and she was so mad. And she picked up her baby and flipped her around and looked at me and was like, "You people stay away from us." And again, that's a G-rated version of what she said to me. And I was just dumbfounded, because her baby had been alone with me at that point for two minutes. I could have picked up her baby and walked out the door if I wanted to, and she wouldn't have noticed. But I tried to be kind, and that's how I was treated. And I just remember thinking like, "Who thinks that about someone? What did I do? What what did my scarf evoke from her that she thought I would hurt a baby? What kind of person hurts a baby?"

M

Muna Hussaini 39:14

That really hurt. That judgment hurt. I remember going to my car is sitting in my car and just like crying because of that judgment, that stranger. It took me a while to not internalize that, but it was just this realization of like, "What do people see and think when they see me?" Fine, I can take my scarf off, but I can't take my skin off. These people's judgments are so heavy. And then the irony of it is I'm getting judged horribly for things I haven't even done, and then look at these actions that they're taking that say way more about them than me. And I get to walk around with these judgments for God knows how long, and they can say and do these horrible things with no accountability.

M

Moureen Kaki 40:15

And was this something that continued to happen, that environment, that sort of change? It sounds like you've taken those experiences, and you mentioned this earlier about the Muslim Space organization, and channeled into utilizing the helpers, like you call them, around you towards building a sense of community. What did that take? I mean, that must have been quite the turn to go from these experiences and dealing with this kind of heaviness to turning around and saying, "You know what? I'm going to do something more powerful with this." That takes quite a bit of strength. Would you mind talking about that journey?

M

Muna Hussaini 40:54

If I were to put my finger on what changed, I think it was having kids. Because I think for ten years, I don't know that I was actively empathetic towards other people. I felt it, but I don't know if I took my empathy and transformed it into action. And then when I became a mother, I thought, "I want better for my kids. I want more for them. I want them to have the things I didn't have and live a life where they don't have to compromise on who they are and how they want to live." And then I think taking it further, I don't just want that for my kids. I want that for everybody's kids. I don't care where you're from, or what you believe, or who you love. I actually think that's the world. That's the Islam that I feel like my parents taught me. And the religion is, to me, the embodiment of love, and everyone deserves that, not just my kids.

M

Muna Hussaini 41:08

Because what's the point otherwise? When you start othering folks - someone did that to me, somebody othered me, because they decided my scarf from my religion, or whatever, wasn't good enough. And so I just refuse to let anyone check a box that put someone else in another category. And wanting that for my kids, I just thought, "Nope, I'm not going to compromise anything for my kids." And I don't want them to look at me and say, "Mommy, how come you didn't do more for the world? How come you didn't try more?" I don't want that on my conscience. I think one thing that Islam, to me, always teaches, is yes, it's all about your intention. But then there's the saying of like, "Okay, if you want to keep your camel, you still have to tie it." You gotta tie your camel. It's gonna wander off. It doesn't matter if you have

good intentions or not, you gotta follow your intention with action. And so doing the work is equally important. Yeah, I think in that sense, the activist in me will always be agitating a little bit and not be satisfied with status quo.

M

Moureen Kaki 43:33

Good for you. Because we need, I think, a little bit more of that on a regular basis. So thank you for being willing to do that. And what's life like for you now these days Muna? You have two kids. You said earlier that you're working on the Muslim Space stuff. What else? Bring us up to speed.

M

Muna Hussaini 43:52

Oh my goodness. So I work in tech. My arch-nemesis is making lunch and doing laundry [laughs]. I'm like, "Can we outsource these things? I don't want to do it." Hate the laundry pile that never goes away. I wish my kids could eat peanut butter and jelly every day, but they're all high maintenance. "I want a grilled cheese, Mommy. I want lasagna. I want a pizza. Why can't you -" Sorry. I used to do a lot of community work, but we're post-COVID now, and I ended up quitting a lot of community stuff just because I was, as my son likes to say, "social distancing."

M

Muna Hussaini 44:37

So that's been interesting to be less loaded down on things I'm doing, but it's been beautiful in the sense that I've been able to spend more time with my family and my kids. We are a big soccer family. My daughter plays competitively, my son has started playing, my husband likes [inaudible] I think I'll hurt his feelings if [inaudible] He just recently got injured, so he hasn't been playing. And we watch everything, English Premier League, Bundesliga, LaLiga, Serie A, every single game. So a lot of soccer in my house, a lot of sports in that sense. Been doing just a lot more with my kids. I guess I'm the cool mom, because she's in ninth grade, and I help her with geometry. And I didn't realize it, but I forgot I'm really good at math. I remember geometry from thirty years ago, so I help her with her homework all the time, and we end up on FaceTime with all the kids in her grade doing homework together. So that's my claim to fame with the high schoolers [laughs].

M

Moureen Kaki 45:43

The geometry tutor mom, that's awesome. But one question that I'm interested in knowing the answer to is, then, who's the family rooting for in the upcoming World Cup?

M

Muna Hussaini 45:54

Oh, I don't know. That's a good question. That's a very good question. I feel like - okay, so my husband is part African. So he always gets very excited for all of the African teams that play. We'll see if Nigeria shows up or Ivory Coast. Who knows? I think there's always a conversation

about Argentina and what's gonna happen, Netherlands, such a technical team, are they gonna do well? I'm sorry, I don't have an answer for you. Maybe France.

M

Moureen Kaki 46:31

France, okay. Okay. Interesting choice. Okay, gotcha. We're a huge soccer family, too. My mom was born and raised in Brazil, even though we're Palestinian, and we've been Brazil fans ever since. Because it's hard not to be, I mean, when you have a good reason to be, it's easy to jump on that bandwagon and be like, "Yeah, I'll root for one of the best teams." But it can cause some tension too.

M

Muna Hussaini 46:56

Yeah, there's no way of knowing. You have all these superstars show up and play on a team that they haven't played with. They gotta have good chemistry. Just because you have Neymar doesn't mean he's gonna do all the things.

M

Moureen Kaki 47:09

Yeah, it'll be an interesting World Cup. It'll be a fun one to watch. But Muna, I think - what part of your story have we left out? Is there something that we haven't touched up on that you would like to talk about to this point? I have a couple more questions for you, but they're less story-oriented. So I wanted to give you that option to get that out of the way.

M

Muna Hussaini 47:36

I think about my story and 9/11, there's a couple things I think we could talk about in that. I did have a lot of other hateful incidents happen to me. I was spit on once on a plane. I was run off the road while I was driving. There's so many things that I could tell you that happened to me. In each of those instances, there was a stranger or someone that was there that helped me, and I try to always think about that person, and not the person that did the mean thing. That is always grounding for me, because there was always someone good, or someone who tried and really went above and beyond. I mean, I still sometimes pray for these people, because if they weren't there, I think I would be a broken human being at this point.

M

Muna Hussaini 48:30

I think another aspect that I have more awareness on now than I did then is on mental health, because I've always defined myself as someone who is really strong and really capable. And I have never, ever led a life where fear was the deciding factor or primary decision making factor. And I refused to be scared. And I think over time, what I realized is that is - how do I say this - being able to be vulnerable and admit that I was hurting was actually stronger than just punching through and saying, "I'm going to be strong," because then I was able to actually

admit what was wrong and face what I was afraid of, to then go through it. And I always have a little bird that's sitting on my shoulder with me. It never goes away, but the bird does not control me. These memories, the things that I went through do not define me.

M

Muna Hussaini 49:34

And I have to manage it sometimes. And I have to choose to get up and go out of the house every day, and I do choose it, and I choose to live with joy, but my fear will not ever control me, but it's always there, and it keeps me safe. I wish I didn't have it, but I wish I didn't have to take out the trash either, so what are you gonna do? I think the important thing there is the focus on mental health and being able to take care of yourself and being able to process your emotions and deal with them. Because I didn't even know how to ask for help. I didn't know how to figure things out. I was really lucky to have people around me who helped me, but those are not things I asked for. Those were just people who rallied around me, and I'm grateful for it.

M

Muna Hussaini 50:21

I think now, I would want to have more agency in that situation. And that's really the empowering or strong part to be able to show up and deal with things on your own terms. And I think I've learned those things now, but I didn't know them at the time. And I'm really grateful that I did see a therapist, because I don't think people talked about therapy twenty years ago the way we talk about it right now. And no matter what challenge people are facing to be able to take care of yourself and make yourself a priority, that's another big lesson, is that I am important. I do have value. I can slow things down and take care of myself.

M

Muna Hussaini 51:00

But for the longest time, I think being a victim of a hate crime - I don't know where I came up with this story, but I started telling myself like, "I'm not supposed to be here. See? Look at all these things that happened to me. I'm not supposed to be here, and I just got lucky. I should have died. I'm just lucky to be here." And instead of being in a space of gratitude, I went to a space of not valuing myself, and then always sacrificing myself to find value, and then it made me do things like working relentlessly to be valuable in other ways, and then almost burning out. I think I've been able to work through some of that balance, but it's just a call out that these things happen. You don't realize what the impact is. And then you can spin and not even realize you're spinning.

M

Muna Hussaini 52:01

And loving yourself and valuing yourself and getting help and finding strength, those are all things that are different for everyone. And being able to be still enough to hear it, I think is really important, because all of these things that happened to me, I could have broken at any point in time, and sometimes I'm like, "Wow, I still show up. I could still play with my kids. I'm still a functioning member of society." And then I'm like, "Yes, I'm gonna celebrate." Life is too short to be broken in a corner by yourself. We're allowed to be sad, but I want to fight for life, I guess, is what I'm saying.

M

Moureen Kaki 52:44

Yeah, no, I think that's really beautiful. I really do. Would you mind - this is actually going to be my final question for you. But would you mind sharing about your vision for your community, what that looks like given your experiences and the work that you do, and what you're doing with the Muslim Space org?

M

Muna Hussaini 53:01

So the motto for Muslim Space, or our tagline, is, "Where you belong." And that's literally just come as you are, and be yourself, to be able to partake. And I think that that's a beautiful thing, no matter where you are. And we have to exist in the world with the energy and the intention of the world we want to live in. And so while that might be Muslim Space's tagline, that's actually what I want for everyone everywhere. How would your life look different if everywhere you went, and all of the relationships that you were in, that you belonged, and you had safety, that you knew you were loved, and you knew you were accepted?

M

Muna Hussaini 53:01

That's the world I want to live in, where there's room for everyone at the table, where there's room for, however people are feeling, and that we take care of each other. And we are on the same team, there is enough for everybody, there's not scarcity, and no one is stuck on their own. And if you're in pain and you're struggling, that's fine. You don't do it by yourself. That's the world I want to live in, whether it's a religious space, or the neighbors on my street, or the school my kid goes to. And so I try to show up with that. I don't know that I get it right all the time, but that's the energy I show up with.

M

Muna Hussaini 54:38

And I don't know, sometimes, for example, at work, I have some friends who will say, "Muna, you gonna get taken advantage of. You can't be that nice. You were too nice to that person. And I say, "Maybe. Maybe I was too nice. Maybe I did get taken advantage of, but you know what? I'd rather be that person than be a jerk." So there can be a cost, but I choose it. Because I know what I went through, and I will never, ever knowingly be part of any story to marginalize anybody else. So I'm okay with that cost. Because I don't think it's a cost. We believe - what is it? In Arabic, you use the word "amana," which is a trust. It is the thing I have been entrusted with, because I know what that pain is. So I feel like that's my baton, and I get to carry it, and I will pass it to everybody around me because I can. So I think, hopefully, that's an answer to your question that makes sense.

M

Moureen Kaki 55:45

No, it absolutely makes sense. And it doesn't just make sense, I think it's a wonderful vision for your community, for everyone. And I hope it comes to light, I really do. And I think it's incredible that you've taken what could have been something that, like you said earlier, could

have broken you permanently, and instead chose to enact kindness because of it at every turn. And I think that's really beautiful, too. Muna I want to give you the chance to give any final words here before we wrap up. If there's anything else you want to add, anything else you want to say, whether that's something you touched upon, to touch up on something you said before, or just a final word for folks out there listening.

M

Muna Hussaini 56:33

There's a hadith, which is a saying of the Prophet that I think is really, really profound. And that is that kindness beautifies everything it touches. And it is a resource that we all have in abundance. We just get to choose it. And it is so small and so under-appreciated. Even just a smile is good enough. The kindness of strangers literally saved my life. And I think that if we can all just be more kind, I think that that by itself is enough. And I think that's something we're all capable of. We appreciate kindness. How do we give more kindness, even if it's just a smile?

M

Moureen Kaki 57:38

Words of wisdom that I hope folks listening take with them. I really do. Muna, I thank you so much for your time today. And thank you for sharing these experiences with us and these memories. I know some of it was very difficult, but I do hope, I have no doubt actually, that folks listening will be inspired and have a lot to learn from your incredible story. So I thank you so much again for your time today and for being with us.

M

Muna Hussaini 58:05

You're welcome. And I love that y'all are doing this work, and I appreciate being able to be part of the journey with you, Moureen.

M

Moureen Kaki 58:15

It wouldn't be anything if we didn't have folks who were willing to share their stories, so thank you so much. I'm gonna go ahead and pause the recording now.