

Jessica Disla

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SPEAKERS

Jessica Disla, Rimsha Syed



Rimsha Syed 00:03

Hello, this is Rimsha Syed. I am the Program Coordinator with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. The date is February 25, 2022, and I am on a Zoom call today with Jessica Disla for the Muslim Voices oral history project. How are you today Jessica?



Jessica Disla 00:23

Alhamdulillah. I'm doing great, thank you.



Rimsha Syed 00:27

Yeah, so Jessica, would you like to introduce yourself, and just tell us where you're joining this call from today?



Jessica Disla 00:36

Sure. My name is Jessica Disla. I have been a brand new Muslim two years now. I'm forty-two years old. My origin is from the Dominican Republic. I was raised between Dominican Republic and New York City. I currently am going to school to become a teacher, a certified teacher here in Houston, Texas, where I live now, and I'm glad to be doing this interview.



Rimsha Syed 01:08

Lovely, thank you so much. So there's so much that we could talk about today, and I would love to hear all about your story. But I do want to start by jumping way back in time and asking you if you can share a little bit about your childhood and family dynamic and anything you can remember, formative experiences from those early years of your life.

J

Jessica Disla 01:33

Sure. Well, I'm the oldest of three girls. My parents, they are still married, forty-three years going strong. I was born into a Dominican Catholic family. Not very active Catholics. They go to church during big occasions, not every Sunday like most devout Catholics. Religion was a very important part of my life, mostly because my whole entire life, I asked hard questions that people would not take the time out to answer. So I was a stubborn little girl that asked a ton of questions. So I was corrected a lot and told to be quiet a lot. So my journey into getting my questions asked took forever, but Alhamdulillah to this day, and now the questions are a little more clear. But as I was growing up, I lived with my grandparents in Dominican Republic, and my grandmother did go to church. In Dominican Republic, they have a lot of mixed religions, in the sense that there's some spiritual stuff that they add to the Catholicism, so it was just very complicated and very confusing for me as a little girl. But when I came to the United States, followed the norm.

J

Jessica Disla 03:18

When I was in school, they don't do it anymore, but when I was at school, teachers actually - the whole school would pray in the beginning of the school day, and say "The Star Spangled Banner," which they don't do anymore, either. So religion was, especially because of the news and television and the Catholic pope and all these other things that were always in the news, religion was always a big deal. And it's something that, as a Latina, it's infused in us from birth. Our parents tell us, "Do this, do that," according to their religious beliefs or according to the cultural norms. So when I went to the United States at the age of nine - by the way, I was born in Miami. I wasn't born in Dominican Republic, but I was raised there, so that's where my fluency in Spanish comes from. Alhamdulillah, thank goodness. I always wanted to keep my language.

J

Jessica Disla 04:16

So the United States was a little foreign to me. There was a lot of cultural differences, a lot of routinal things that I had to adapt to. Yeah, it was interesting to see the differences between what it was like in the Caribbean, to the way it was like in New York. My parents worked a lot, so basically, I had to learn how to be the mom of the house because I was the oldest, I am the oldest. So most of the house stuff, the domestic stuff I had to learn very early on. Always wanted to be a parent, which I am, of three kids. Family is very important to me as it was infused in us with our family values, respecting our elderly, taking care of our children. It's very, very similar to Islam, which is why it was easy for me to accept and adapt and hold onto in the beginning, because a lot of the norms and values are very similar to that of Latino culture and the values that we learn in our family, from our family, from our descendancy. Most of where I lived in New York, there were a lot of people from Dominican Republic. What else can I say about my youth? I went to Catholic school, Catholic high school. That was very interesting. I asked very important questions that were important to me. Very hard questions. I got in trouble for that many times, nothing against Catholics, but if you don't have the answers, you shouldn't be teaching it, just saying, just a thought there. But for the most part, it woke me up to the reality that I was in the wrong. I don't want to say the wrong religion, but I was lost in what I was being pushed into believing.

J Jessica Disla 06:24

In my twenties, I went through a lot of phases of a lot of feeling lost, and in one of those instances of trying to find my spiritual connection with Allah, with God, I fell into a religion called Santería. Santería is the beliefs in many saints and spiritual entities, which I now understand are jinns, and the saints are just shirk, believing in more than one God, things like that. And I did that for fifteen years. I never understood it. I just followed it because other people were doing it. I asked questions, they weren't answered. The questions confused me. The answers that they gave me confused me more than they enlightened me, so I walked away from it and just stopped practicing it all together. So you can say that out of those fifteen years, maybe eleven years, were, "Sure I'm in it, but not physically active in it or spiritually inclined to it or doing anything in it." I just became this person that I wouldn't go to church or I wouldn't go to anything because I didn't feel comfortable in it. Christianity, I sought out, but they rejected me. Some of the Christians, I'm not saying all of them, some of them rejected me, because I kept asking questions about Jesus, peace be upon him. Questions that they couldn't answer, scientific questions that they could not answer, and it was just all very confusing.

J Jessica Disla 08:04

And then 2001, September 11 happened. It never changed my perception of Islam, because I really didn't know much about Islam, and I didn't look into it either. I didn't treat Muslims differently just because I was a New Yorker and September 11 happened. I had my ideas of where that really came from, and none of them became an Islamic thing to me. It didn't become an anti-Muslim thing to me. I would never judge a religious person for an extremist act. It's not the link to religion. There's no link there. So it didn't make any sense. I guess I always stuck to the facts, and so I didn't think much of September 11, except that it was a very catastrophic thing that happened to a bunch of people, including Muslims, that died that day. Many innocent people died, and it was a sad time.

J Jessica Disla 09:10

And so moving on from that, I brought my kids up. And I know now that I made some mistakes in raising my children to follow what they wanted to follow as far as religion goes, because now they question things that I did before, and I don't know how to answer them. Because I had to try to get them to understand that I was lost, and I couldn't guide them completely. But I made that mistake, but now my children are non-Muslim. I'm the only Muslim in my family. So it's very difficult to explain how I got to this point, even though they saw it. It's a very difficult for them to understand why I went from point A to point B. When I took my Shahada in May 17 of 2020, I did it online through IslamInSpanish after watching a video of a young girl named Julissa, who took her Shahada, even though her parents, they didn't know anything about it. And then when she did tell them about it, her father rejected her, and her story really touched a special place in my heart and made me very emotional. And to this day even, when I watch her video, I get emotional, because of the emotion that she put into the interview, what she said about how much she loved her family, how they rejected her because she became Muslim.

J Jessica Disla 11:00

J

So after I accepted Islam virtually with IslamInSpanish, it was a struggle to explain it to my family, being the only Muslim member of my family, to explain it to them, and to get them to understand. My parents were accepting. My mom, she made comments, but she's my mother. It was just the ignorant thing to say, so we brushed it off. I talked to her a little bit about it, my family members as well. Everybody's doing well now, but it took some time. It felt lonely being one of the few Latinos that I knew. I wasn't into social media at the moment, because I needed to find my connection to Allah. After taking my Shahada, I had to do a lot of inner search, soul searching, to get to where I am now. I had to struggle with trusting in God. I had to struggle with getting people to understand that my change was for the positive. I got comments about being a terrorist. I got comments about trying to be an Arab, because I was a Latina, and people knew who I was in my neighborhood. I grew up there. So making a comment, like, "Oh, are you trying to be Arab now?" The most ignorant things were said. It was hard for me to brush it off without getting sassy or giving an attitude the way I would normally do. I would defend myself. This time, I just walked away, and I thought it was very hard to not react, and to not give them the energy that they were looking for.



Rimsha Syed 13:02

Right.



Jessica Disla 13:02

But - sorry.



Rimsha Syed 13:05

Oh, don't apologize. Well, I was going to ask, so during -



Jessica Disla 13:12

[Laughs]. I think I answered all your questions already.



Rimsha Syed 13:15

During those challenging or lonely times in your life, what were some things that brought you comfort?



Jessica Disla 13:26

After I accepted Islam or before?



Rimsha Syed 13:30



Let's say both, before and after.



Jessica Disla 13:32

So before, comfort for me was peace and quiet. Just reading a book. I smoked a lot of cigarettes before I took my Shahada. I smoked for twenty years, smoked cigarettes. I thought that was bringing me peace. Reading a book and meditation, that was a big deal for me. But with three kids, who has the time to meditate or keep quiet? I used working out, exercise was a big deal for me too, because it was my way of burning off that energy, that anger that I had, the resentment towards feeling lost. But I never found out that peace. I longed for it, but I never found that peace that I wanted.



Rimsha Syed 14:30

Right, and what about after you accepted Islam?



Jessica Disla 14:33

So after I accepted Islam, and I took my time learning how to pray correctly, once I started praying, and I just trusted that Allah was listening, and that was my peace. That's where I find my peace: praying. Because it's the one time that I am the most connected to Allah, so it's the one time that my heart is - I'm a very private person, so when I open up to someone, or to Allah the way I do, it's very important to me. So the fact that I can just let it all out and feel the weight lifted off my shoulders, in salat is the only time, prayer is the only time that I feel that peace.



Rimsha Syed 15:29

Thank you for sharing that with me.



Jessica Disla 15:31

Of course.



Rimsha Syed 15:31

So going back a little bit to earlier in the interview, you said that as a nine-year-old, you moved to New York, and I was wondering how did that transition go for you? How did that affect your schooling? And what were some of your initial impressions of New York and just how that differed from the earlier part of your upbringing?



Jessica Disla 15:54

J

So in Dominican Republic, we lived in a house. Backyard, I was free to play outside, it was very safe, warm weather, just surrounded by family. We had we had family style dinners. They still do to this day, Alhumdulillah, family style dinners, breakfast, lunch. In Dominican Republic during school hours, they take a siesta of two hours, so everyone naps together. It's very beautiful. It's very family-oriented. So when I got to New York, and my parents were both working, and I was home with my sisters, and I was cooking, and I was cleaning, it was a big culture shock, in the sense, because New York is expensive, and my parents both had to work to make ends meet, may Allah reward them, amin. And they took care of us. They made sure we had food. We had everything. The biggest change for me was being in a small apartment. And I'm not ungrateful. My parents sacrificed a lot. But being in a small apartment, sharing one room with my sisters. Cold weather, the cold weather was - to this day, I - I moved to Houston. I'm sorry, Rimsha, can we pause for a second, so I can give my supervisor her keys?



Rimsha Syed 17:24

Yes.



Jessica Disla 17:25

Okay, I'm gonna go do that right now. I'll be right back, okay?



Rimsha Syed 17:28

Yep. Sounds good.



Jessica Disla 17:29

Thank you. [Pause]. Sorry about that. I'm back.



Rimsha Syed 17:41

No problem. I think before you left, we were talking about the cold weather that you weren't used to in New York.



Jessica Disla 17:50

I never got used to it. It was so cold to me. It was just so cold. And people were just walking around with little jackets. And to this day, it's been a little cold here in Houston, and I'm okay with it, but not all the time. So when I moved here, I was so happy because there was no more of this cold weather. But so the cold weather, that was a big shock. Also having things open all the time, 24/7, that was new to me. I was only nine, so I didn't experience that that much. But the little apartments were a big deal. I'm not spoiled or anything, but I was used to houses and stuff like that. It was different. What else? The amount of people. Oh, that was a shock. I never

got used to the city ever. Never got used to it. I love New York City, but never got used to it. Went to school there, worked there, but no. The amount of people there, it was just always overwhelming. It gave me anxiety. It made me feel like I was overcrowded, like I was gonna get attacked or something. I'm just not a city girl, even though I was raised there. I don't know, not for me.



Rimsha Syed 19:18

Was there something about New York that drew your parents to migrate to the US, and do you have any other family here in the States?



Jessica Disla 19:27

I do. So my parents, in the eighties, when they did migrate - no, that's a lie. My dad's family migrated to the United States when he was thirteen years old. So he went to school in New York, and he worked in New York. My mother lived in Jersey until they met, and then once they got together in their twenties, they moved in, in New York, and they both worked and got their apartment. Sometimes they lived with family because the rent was so expensive and the pay was so low for immigrants, for people that didn't have - my dad went to school, but my mom didn't. So my mom finished the eighth grade education in Dominican Republic, and to this day she understands English, and she's been in the country a long time, but she doesn't speak or write it. She understands, because she'll have a full conversation with her grandkids, but she doesn't write it, she doesn't know if fluently. My dad does. He went to school in New York, so he does.



Jessica Disla 20:47

When they when they married and stuff, they just stayed in New York. My mom did live in Miami, where I was born, when my parents met, and they met in Dominican Republic while they were on vacation, and then they went back to their homes, and I guess they hooked up and ended up getting married in Miami, where I was born. So I do have family, most of my dad's side of the family, that's in New York City to this day. Most of my mom's family still lives in Dominican Republic. I have some family in Connecticut. They're spread out throughout the States. I have a sister in Virginia. I have family in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. I have family everywhere. California. I don't have any family here, except for from IslamInSpanish, that's my new family, and my kids that are here with my husband. But yeah, my family's pretty spread out throughout the country. And my uncles, my dad's cousin's kids, they moved out and moved away from the city and into other states. So my family's pretty spread out. We still have family in Dominican Republic.



Rimsha Syed 22:12

And tell me about your move to Houston. What prompted that, and do you see yourself living in Houston long term?

J

Jessica Disla 22:22

Because of IslamInSpanish, I came to visit this last Ramadan, 2021. I came in the middle of April, and I stayed for two weeks, my husband and I, and we visited IslamInSpanish, and I just fell in love with the community. I fell in love with the idea that there will be more support. I fell in love with what I saw. I saw people embracing each other, respecting each other. I saw a chance for me to learn more about Islam. I saw a chance to get closer to a community that would support me in my adventure - not my adventure, my journey into getting closer to Allah, and that's the way it's been. So after I left back to the city, when I left back to New York City, I was so upset. That was just the saddest moments of my life, after I went from here back to New York City. I tried to make the best of it. I went back to work, and I made the best for it. I requested a transfer from my job. I had been with Trader Joe's for eight years. Since 2013, I'd been with that company, and I was a manager, and then I stepped down to take care of my children. So I had been with the company a long time. So I requested a transfer to Texas. I finally got it, and July 16, we arrived here, and we left everything behind except for most of our clothing, and we brought that with us on their airplane. And here we are.

J

Jessica Disla 24:13

We made a home here in Houston, and I see myself here long-term. I have lived in different states looking for home. I've lived in Tampa, Florida for six years. I lived in Connecticut for six years. I lived in New Jersey for four or five years and went right back to New York every time, but this time I think this is home. I couldn't be more grateful for IslamInSpanish for helping us with everything. They've just been the biggest support ever. And we didn't need much when we got here. I mean, we furnished the entire house, we were saving up for it either way, but they're always checking in with us, making sure that we have enough. And I've become so active with IslamInSpanish that I don't see myself going anywhere, anytime soon, God willing I don't have to go back for a family emergency or something. Every time I go back to New York is for family, to support my family, to help my family. They're doing so well now, thank God, Alhamdulillah. I do see myself here for a while. I have a son that lives in New York still to this day with my sister. And I miss him very dearly, but this is my life now, I'm very comfortable here.



Rimsha Syed 25:51

Yeah, thank you for sharing that, and it's really great to hear about the immense amount of support that you've received from IslamInSpanish. So another thing that I wanted to go back on, is you mentioned that you're studying to become a teacher. Is there any particular grade or subject that you want to teach, and how did you decide? Have you already taught before?

J

Jessica Disla 26:22

Something that I mentioned before - with my children's father, I was in a domestic violent relationship for fifteen years, and he would not allow me to go back to school or do the things that I needed to do, that I wanted to do, because I always had to pick up and hold down the household. So even though I went through that experience, I always wanted to teach. I went to school for it online in 2011. I went to school for that online. But I didn't get to finish because I had to go work full time to support my kids when I finally became a single parent. So once I

took my family away from that violent environment, when I took my kids out of that environment, I had to hold it down and work full time to help them and to make sure that all their needs were met. So I couldn't go back to school. But now I'm here, and my kids are teenagers, so they take better care of themselves. They need me less than they did when they were that little.

 Jessica Disla 27:37

So now I have an opportunity to go back to school and finish my bachelor's degree, which is what I want to do, and I want to concentrate on ESL, English as a second language. And most likely, I'm not certain yet because I start in August, I'm not certain if I am going to choose high school or middle school. I really want to do high school because I feel like they're so lost. Some of these kids just need somebody to listen to them, and a good teacher in a high school is very hard to find. I know because I have high school students at home. But that's neither here nor there. I don't have a preference for age, really, when in teaching. Ever since I had my kids, I found a passion for just guiding them, and what a better way to do that than teaching? I didn't think I would love teaching or love to want to do it as much as I do. I did work at a daycare as an assistant teacher, and it was so much fun. The kids were amazing. I love kids. I've always loved children. I like being surrounded by them. I like playing with them. At the masjid, that's what I do. I just try to keep the kids busy and make sure that everybody's needs are met. That's the mother in me. But having the responsibility of guiding someone and making a difference is very important to me, and it's something I've always wanted to do and now, inshallah, I get a chance to do it. And I don't need much more time to get my certification, so I just want to get it out of the way and jump into it. There's a big need for teachers here in Houston. I mean, there's a need for teachers everywhere, but here I see since COVID, there's a huge need.



Rimsha Syed 29:55


Yeah, I agree. There's definitely a huge need with the pandemic and teachers quitting and everything surrounding that situation. But sounds like a good plan, and I'm really happy to hear that you're almost done as well. So was ESL something that you were part of too growing up?

 Jessica Disla 30:15

Yes. So I didn't mention that. I skipped that, I don't know why. My first year, when I came from Dominican Republic to New York, my first year, they put me in ESL. I didn't speak any English at all. At all when I got to this country. I speak nothing, and not one word of English. The ESL teacher that I had was amazing. Miss Rosa, my third grade teacher, I'll never forget her. I was upset because at my grade level, from Dominican Republic, I was at a fourth grade level, science, math, you name it. The only thing I didn't speak was English, so I had to repeat - because of my age, because of the way they do things here in the United States - I had to repeat the third grade, and I was very upset about that. And the teacher, Miss Rosa, really made it easy for me. She made it more accepting, she made me understand that a year would not change anything for me, it would just make me a better student, and it would strengthen the classes that I was already good at.

 Jessica Disla 31:29

The one thing I could say about Dominican Republic is that, like many other countries, because it's not just Dominican Republic, anybody comes from outside of the United States, their education levels are straight over what's required here in this country. So I got left back, I repeated the third grade because of my age, but it just made me a better student, it really did. Surprisingly enough, English was easy to pick up. I wish it was Arabic, because now I'm trying to learn Arabic, and the older you get, the harder it is. But English was very interesting, so many rules. So many rules in the English language. But so I want to be that person that makes it easy for someone else to learn English from their native tongue. And mostly, I mean, it would have to be - my strength would have to be Spanish, teaching English to Spanish-speaking kids, because that's where my strength is. I know a lot of teachers don't have the time or don't make the time for these kids, and they need as much attention as they get, as far as the language barrier goes. It's very important.

 Rimsha Syed 33:01

Agreed. And did you have any favorite subjects in school?

 Jessica Disla 33:05

I still do, yes. I don't want to sound like I favor them, but I was just better at these classes. Math and science, for sure. Definitely chemistry, and physics was fun. And statistics, that was an interesting class. That was my challenge. Every other math class was just like, "Oh yeah, it's just math." Statistics, I failed it, and I took it again in college, because I wanted to make sure that I got it. That was such a good class. So math and science for the most part.

 Rimsha Syed 33:43

Yeah. And where did you go to university?

 Jessica Disla 33:47

I went to a private school in New York, Monroe College, Monroe Community College in the Bronx. And it was a interesting little school. The teachers, the small classrooms, thank God, because like I said, I don't do well in big classes. I don't do well in crowds. But the classes were smaller. The teachers were more attentive, lots of minority teachers, which was great, because they could relate to somebody that grew up in what I call "the hood." Where I grew up, not that it was ghetto, it wasn't crazy ghetto, but it wasn't Upper East Side. It was the Heights, where mostly Latinos lived, and crime was a thing, but it wasn't too crazy. But the teachers were from the Bronx, and they were from Brooklyn, and they were from - they understood my upbringing and they spoke the same language I did, so it was easier. So once I took Health Administration, because that was a popular thing then. Not something that I really loved. It was just something that I needed to do. I just needed to go to school. I've always felt like I need education. Educate, educate, educate, learn as much as you can. If time is running out, I've always felt

that way. I'm still actually - I'm going back to school, but I'm still taking - I find classes. Now it's more focused on Islam, but before I would find a class. I went to school - okay, I'm talking to much, let me slow down.

 Jessica Disla 35:38

So aside from getting my health admin degree, my associates, because I got a job administering a daycare, that's what I stuck to. So I never worked in that field, health admin, I never worked in the clinic. I never worked in the hospital. Not as an administrator anyway. And once I did that, and I fell in love with being around the kids in the daycare, I also assisted as a teacher in the classroom, because my job was done in the office. So I wasn't gonna spend the whole day sitting in the office. I never mentioned liked sitting in an office for the entire day. I like moving around. So I would jump into the classes and help the teachers with lunch time and nap time and help them when they went on their school trips. I think that's where I developed the need for wanting to teach. Aside from that, I tutored the teenagers, I found it fun, and I also worked in a summer camp as a leader, a summer camp leader, so it was kind of like teaching. So I always wanted to do stuff like that with the kids. That's what I went to school in Monroe College for, health admin. I was gonna go back for a bachelor's, and then I ended up, because my children's father, the one that was abusive, he basically forced us to move to Florida. And later on to find out that it was his way of controlling who I was around, because my family was in New York. So if he moved me to Tampa where I knew no one, literally no one, then he could control the situation a little better.

 Jessica Disla 37:37

When I moved to Tampa, and I found myself struggling not only in my relationship, but struggling to get to keep myself busy and motivated and positive, I broke it off with him. I was strong enough, Alhamdulillah, I was strong enough to let go of that relationship and try to do things on my own. So what I ended up doing, more learning, I ended up going to beauty school, which is another thing that I love, doing hair, makeup, nails, things like that. Not nail so much. But I always liked doing my hair, getting my hair done, and doing my nails. So beauty was a thing, and because I had a daughter, my daughter was four years old at the time, I wanted to learn how to do things for her, for her hair, and teach her things, how to take care of herself beauty-wise, internally, outside. That was important to me back then. So I went to cosmetology school in Tampa, and I got my cosmetology degree, and I took the state test and passed it, so I'm a licensed cosmetologist to this day. I do hear sometimes. It's interesting. I like educating people on beauty and educating people on how to stay away from certain things that will harm them, their body and stuff like that. And I'm rambling, I'm sorry. I know I answered your question like twenty minutes ago.



Rimsha Syed 39:22

No, I was really interested to hear about this whole different side of you.

 Jessica Disla 39:27

I know I have so many sides.



Rimsha Syed 39:29

Yeah. I did want to segue just a little bit. So I can see that you wear the hijab, which of course brings a unique set of struggles. And you talked a little bit about the discrimination that you faced, and I wanted to hear a little bit more about that, and whether or not it was difficult for you to make that choice to wear the hijab, and to keep wearing it every day. And also if you - maybe this is too many questions, but also if you remember -



Jessica Disla 40:06

No, it's good.



Rimsha Syed 40:07

- the first day wearing the hijab and what that was like for you.



Jessica Disla 40:11

Yeah, so I, when I first when I first decided that I was going to take my Shahada with IslamInSpanish, the first thing that popped into mind - and now I know it was the shaitan putting whispers in my ears, trying to confuse me. But the first thing I thought about was, "I'm not wearing hijab." I had a whole attitude about it. I said, "Oh, no, I love my hair." [Laughs]. I was so ignorant. I was like, "I love my hair. I love the way my hair - I work really hard on my hair." That was the most ignorant thought in my head, and the most ignorant thing I could say about hijab. Funny enough, the time when I took my Shahada, I put on a scarf, the only scarf I owned. I put on a scarf, I still have it to this day. Put on the scarf and covered my head, and I struggled so much with it. I said, "I want to be respectful to IslamInSpanish. I want to put on a scarf." I didn't know that I didn't have to. I just assumed that I would follow the rules, because that's what I do. I'm a very obedient child, and I follow rules. So I put on my hijab. I struggled. It was so ugly. I struggled so hard with it, looking back. I think it's the funniest thing in the world. So funny, I swear. When I think back, I'm like, "Wow, I really went through it." So I put it on, and it was slipping off because it was silky. I never used those again. It was silky, and it was falling off.



Jessica Disla 41:55

And I did my Shahada, and then I never stopped wearing hijab. I never stopped wearing hijab after that. I struggled so much trying to find a way to wear it, where it was comfortable enough for me to fit - because my job at Trader Joe's, it was very physical. And so keeping the hijab in one place was very hard, and especially because I only had the one. It turns out, I worked with this sister, her name was Precious. Mashallah, she was so sweet to me. She taught me how to pin it, and she gave me a set of pins, which I didn't even know I needed. She gave me a set of pins, and she told me, "Buy some caps to keep your hair in one place, and do hijab this way,

and do hijab that way." She helped me so much, may Allah reward her, amin. And she told me, she said, "If you have any concerns, watch YouTube videos." And I was like, "I hate watching YouTube. I can never find anything."

J Jessica Disla 43:14

Either way, I ended up watching YouTube videos, and now was even more confused. Because I said, "All these girls, they look like they're in their twenties, and I'm here in my forties, and I look like a granny." [Laughs]. That's how I felt. And that's not how it is, but that's how I felt. I felt like I looked like my grandmother, literally. I was putting on my cap, and I was literally, "Oh my god, I look twenty years older." These are the things that were concerning me at the time. But I struggled with hijab. I tried fifty million ways to do it. After I got married, my husband told me, he said, "You know, Allah rewards you just for trying. He sees that you're struggling, but you still put it on, he's gonna reward you for that too." And I felt like a child. I said, "Oh good, I'm gonna do for the rewards. Yay, I'm gonna wear hijab because Allah is gonna reward me."

J Jessica Disla 44:15

At the moment, I don't know why I didn't mention this, but at the moment, I was living in Connecticut, and I was isolated from the city. And I lasted four months in Connecticut before my mother asked me to move back in with them in New York to help them pay for the apartment. So I left back to New York City, and that's when all the craziness began. The minute that I took the train, wearing my hijab, did not have to wear my mask, people were giving me looks. People that normally would not - people of ethnicity like Spanish people and Black people, they were giving me looks. Girls would do the craziest things. For example, I had a girl that was sitting next to me, and she started playing with her hair, and I just, I couldn't do anything but laugh. Because I thought it was funny, that just because I'm wearing hijab, she's sitting there trying to get attention with her hair from the rest of the people in the train. Now, personally, I don't care what anybody does around me, but I thought that was funny. I thought that was funny. I don't know what she thought, but I thought it was funny. I was just making dua for these people. But I didn't know what else to do.

J Jessica Disla 45:31

When I went to work, when I went back to New York City, and I went to work, and one of my friends from work saw me, she was like, "Is that you?" She was like, "What are you wearing?" Everybody was just - they weren't negative about it, but they were just - they would ask me the most random questions. They already trusted me because I worked with them six, seven years. They had questions about hijab. I answered it to the best of my knowledge. I cleared up some misconceptions of Islam while working at Trader Joe's. I try to educate people as much as possible, because I know that being on the other side is confusing for them, and being New Yorkers, they only see what they hear from social media or the news or whatever it is. They're only following what they believe in, what they've heard, what they've seen from outside sources. People don't normally, especially in New York, stop you to ask you questions. They don't talk to each other much. They don't stop you and say, "Hey, why do you wear hijab?"

They just assume that you're Arab. That was the one thing I got a lot. "Are you Egyptian? Are you Arabic? Are you Egyptian? Oh," and they'll be like, "You're Spanish? Are you muslim?" Like, "No, I wear hijab for fun." [Laughs]. It was just an interesting time.

J Jessica Disla 47:00

The hard time for me was accepting that people that I knew from my neighborhood would make comments like, "Oh, yeah, what you trying to do now, be Arab? Whatever." Things like that. It made me uncomfortable, but more importantly, because they would say these things in front of my daughter, and my daughter would get upset. She was ready to fight somebody, to defend my honor and to defend her mother. So it was a very trying time, but I can't say that I've had it as difficult as what I see now on TV, or on social media, about sisters getting their hijab pulled off, or sisters being stopped in front of a school, and teachers not allowed to teach because they wear hijab. These things that are happening now just make me appreciate that I'm in a place where, inshallah, that never happens. There must have been a hard time for sisters back around September 11, but everything is a little easier now here in the United States, as opposed to other places, whether in France or India, or all these other places, New Zealand, Australia, where Muslims are being attacked, especially the sisters, for wearing hijab.

J Jessica Disla 48:22

So every time that passes on, that I see a story about a sister being attacked for wearing hijab, or - I mean, don't get me wrong, it happens in this country. I've read it a couple of times this year, last year. A couple of younger little girls, for wearing hijab, the teachers treated them some type of way. And I understand it happens here too. We might not hear about it so much, but I know it happens. But the fact that I can wear hijab, and I can go about my day, and have the freedom to do that, that's beautiful. But the fact that my sisters outside in other places are going through stuff, it makes me want to wear hijab even more. It makes me want to fight for that right to wear hijab. It's just a scarf. It's not offending anybody. Mary, may Allah be pleased with her, the mother of Jesus, may Allah be pleased with him, she wore hijab. Everyone wore hijab back in the day, until like the beginning of the 1900s. And I know in my country, when women go to church, they put on hijab, so it wasn't too much of a sacrifice for me, especially at my age. I could see if I was in my twenties, and I was still confused about sacrificing the beauty of my hair or whatever it was.

J Jessica Disla 50:00

But in my forties, anything that brings me closer to God - the older we get, I think the more we think about death, and our relationship with God, and trying to do things correctly, so that we're not paying for it in the afterlife. And having family members die, and the older I get, the more family I lose, to age or to whatever it is. So you think about these things. And I don't know. I respect everyone's decision to wear or not wear hijab, I don't judge people for not wearing it or wearing it. That's not my place. I'm not the judge. I'm not Allah, to decide or not decide what's good for me or for anyone else. I can only fixate on what I do with my own self. But hijab has been - I'm still struggling with hijab. I still pin it like a little girl here on the side to keep it from falling off, because I'm always moving around. I think the biggest challenge for me


was explaining it. And then when I did the research, because I went through some websites and on YouTube, especially One Path Network, and other sites where sisters would upload a video about why hijab is important.

 Jessica Disla 51:37

And I had to do my research. I went through YouTube. I read about it, and I studied the part of the Qur'an that talks about hijab, just in case someone - because I knew it would happen eventually, somebody's gonna ask me. I'm the only Muslim in my family, someone's gonna ask me why I'm wearing it. So if I get that question, the reason I did my research was so that I have a smart response, a factual response as to why I wear hijab. And like I said, I can only speak for myself, I can't speak for anyone else. I've had sisters, older sisters from the Middle East, they've approached me at my place of work, and one of them told me she cried when she saw me. And she asked me where I was from. I told her I was from Dominican Republic. She didn't even know where that was. She thought I was Egyptian because of my skin tone. She told me she cried, and she said, "Oh, I stopped wearing hijab after September 11 in New York because I was scared." And I made a dua for her right then and there, and I gave her a hug. I told her, I said, "I'll pray for you, sister. And just talk to Allah and ask Allah for guidance, ask Allah to protect you. Depend on Allah."

 Jessica Disla 53:04

And me saying that was even harder for me to say it, because I was still learning how to a hundred percent rely on Allah. So for me to tell someone else to do it, I'm not much of a hypocrite. If I don't know how to do something, I can't give that advice, because I'm not walking in those steps myself. So I'm not the type of person to tell somebody, "Oh, hijab is easy." No, it's not. Hijab is not easy. It's not easy. And I recommend it, but I can only speak for myself. I can't judge anyone for not wearing it or wearing it. But it has been interesting. It's been a struggle, but not that big. Like I said, it hasn't been too much of a struggle that it's keeping me from leaving my house without it. You know what I mean? There's no want to not wear it. Even sometimes when I go out into the porch here, and I make sure I'm wearing my hijab. Now it's like putting on clothes, literally. That was so much. I'm too detailed, I'm sorry.

 Rimsha Syed 54:28

No, that's great. That's perfect. And that was some really great perspective that you offered, especially how things in Houston feel slightly easier and safer. And I'm sure part of that reason is the very large Muslim population in that city and across Texas, especially in the more metropolitan areas. But yeah, so going off of your experience that you were talking about in New York, do you feel like people were especially confused and possibly rude because of 9/11? And what kind of things were being said on social media, like you mentioned?

 Jessica Disla 55:10

Where do I start? Okay, so yeah, New York. In my neighborhood, not so much, because we had a lot of - for instance, the tobacco shop, the smoke shop was usually owned by Muslims. And they were so nice. They were always nice to the people in the neighborhood. And people in

New York, they love halal food. They'll go to the carts and get their food. These brothers were very nice, but they didn't get a chance to see the other side: sisters. Because the sisters were private, and you wouldn't see them as much outside unless they worked in a Muslim store, in a family-owned store. So personally, I didn't notice not one single hijab-wearing sister until I put on my hijab. So I guess I don't look at people like that. Like anyone else, I thought wearing hijab was a cultural thing. It's an ignorant thought, but I thought it was. So I always thought, "Oh yeah, the girls from the Middle East." That was it. That was the thought that I had. I didn't know anything else.

J Jessica Disla 56:31

But in New York, in my neighborhood, not so much. But I worked in Soho downtown. So I'm not sure if it's because of the fact that it's been so long since September 11, but it wasn't too bad. People kept their distance, I guess because of COVID. There was a lot of social distancing. People wouldn't stop. New York is just a "go, go, go" type of city, so it's not like people are stopping to literally talk to you. But in the train, maybe it was me just being sensitive or scared honestly, that I thought people were just staring at me. Or maybe they were, I'm not sure. Looking back, I think a lot of it was more of my own anxiety than it was people actually saying anything. Because at the end of the day, after Black Lives Matter and after COVID started, the city - I think minorities and people, especially Muslims, were more united to their community.

J Jessica Disla 57:46

Because, for instance, there was one time that because of Black Lives Matter, a bunch of Muslim brothers and sisters got together in Brooklyn in the square, and they prayed together during a Black Lives Matter movement. And I think it just gained some type of respect from the minorities that were already walking this Black Lives Matter movement. They saw that they were praying for them. And so I think that that made a big impact on the way they saw Muslims after that, and the fact that Muslims would stand up against the oppressors with them. They really didn't have to, but they did. I don't know. Me personally, aside from the comments that I learned to ignore, I mean, it's just words. Before I started wearing hijab and covering up more modestly, let's just say, for example, guys in my neighborhood would make sexually inappropriate comments towards me. And when I started covering up that all finished and ended, and I felt some sort of, I don't know, respect. It's like they couldn't see me. To me, I told myself that it was Allah protecting me, because I was covered up and they couldn't really say - What could you say to somebody who's covered up? Nothing really.

J Jessica Disla 59:36

The few comments that people made about me trying to be Arab, I guess because I ignored it, they stopped. My sister, though, she got a lot of questions from people that wouldn't personally ask me. They wouldn't stop me to ask me, but they would ask her, like, "What's up with your sister? Why's she wearing that? Is she Muslim? Is she Arab now or something?" And my sister, she's a little sassy, so she put them in their place. And she's like, "You're so ignorant. You should read up on Islam. It's a religion. It's not a culture. You guys are crazy." She would say stuff like that to them, but she wouldn't tell me. I would hear from someone else like, "Oh yeah, they were asking your sister questions, and she put them in their place to defend you." But

people are going to do that. At my age, I've learned that there's going to be ignorants. Sometimes people just can't control train of thought to their mouth. We just have to teach our kids not to do that.



Rimsha Syed 1:00:40

Right, right. Yeah, that was a great story about the prayer during the the protest.



Jessica Disla 1:00:47

The picture was very - it made such a big impact.



Rimsha Syed 1:00:53

Yeah, definitely. So tell me a little bit more about IslamInSpanish and why that space feels so important to you personally, as well as the Latino community.



Jessica Disla 1:01:05

So IslamInSpanish, it's more than a center to me, it's family. The first time I sent a message to Sakinah, from that day, it's been like talking to a sister, like literal family, like blood relatives. And nothing I can say to her would upset her or surprise her. And every question I had about Islam, or about anything that I had a question about, she'd make the time to answer. I didn't know the community was so big. When I came over for Ramadan, I was very overwhelmed. It was just so many people. And I didn't know there were so many Spanish people that were Muslim, here in Houston specifically. I didn't know that they had so many programs. They had the 99 Names of Allah class led by brother Isa, they have the Crowns of Modesty, which I am the lead volunteer in now. I love that group. The Crowns of Modesty, where the sisters get together and discuss - we take classes. Right now we're taking a video class about self-esteem and how to love yourself and then to, after loving yourself, love your family and things like that. Things that at my age are very important to keep a household, to keep my family, to make sure that they have what they need from me.




Jessica Disla 1:03:08

[We] just started a program called Sister Sunnah. Right away, they approved it. They loved the fact that somebody wanted to lead it. The Sister Sunnah is going to be a program where sisters fast and break fast together. We're gonna do it on Mondays, the brothers do it on Thursday. So I noticed that the brothers already were doing it for the last two years, but none of the sisters were doing it, and I got a little jealous. So I suggested that we start a Sister Sunnah group, and Alhamdulillah, this Monday the 28th, we're going to start fasting and [having] iftar together, and having conversations about why fasting is important, and discussing Allah. So that's happening. And also potlucks, I have so much fun. I love to cook. And the fact that everybody gets to bring in different types of food from their culture, and we get to share it together and feed the community, that's always been fun.

 Jessica Disla 1:04:08


What else? They have so many programs. And unfortunately, because of COVID, off and on sometimes we have to cancel things, but it's been getting better. Everyone's following the rules, people are wearing their masks. IslamInSpanish has been a source of strength, like support for me. As far as family goes, they answer questions that I have, all of them. They always have the right answers. And when they don't know something, they look it up. They make sure that they have an answer for me. And I do ask a lot of questions, and they have a lot of patience, and they make the time. And I haven't had to pay for anything. Anything, and that, by itself, because I'm from New York, that surprises me, that I get to enjoy all these classes and features and watch all these videos and ask all these questions, and not one time has anyone mentioned money to me. Everything is done for the sake of Allah. Also I get to talk to sisters in our chat group, we get to talk to each other, and we have sisters all over the world, literally. And they get to share their knowledge also in this chat group. It's just been family away from family, really. It's like I have my my siblings and my parents and my family, and then I have my religious family. So it's like a double bonus. I feel like I've been gifted twice. Allah has blessed me, Alhamdulillah. Allah has blessed me so much, I just - overwhelming, it's very overwhelming in a positive way. Not a bad way, like crowds.

 Rimsha Syed 1:06:13

That's beautiful. Ramadan is actually right around the corner. Are you looking forward to it?

 Jessica Disla 1:06:20

Yes, Ramadan. I am. And I've been preparing by, like I said, fasting. It's my first official complete Ramadan here in Houston around this Muslim community. Because in New York, it was very segregated. You had the Yemeni masjid, you had the African Masjid. The language was a problem for me. I didn't fit in, basically. I mean, of course, during salat, during prayer, you fit in no matter what. But otherwise, having a conversation, I didn't speak Arabic, and I still to this day do not speak Arabic. The only Arabic I know is from my prayers, what I defend myself with in salat. But now, I can have these conversations with sisters in Spanish, and I can have them in English, either way. But it's a very diverse community. It's not only Spanish people, we have Pakistanis, we have Yemeni, we have Afghanis, there's Desi. We have a large amount of cultures, and it's really fun to pull from all of them, from these cultures, and learn about their clothing, the differences, their food and stuff like that, and then what brings us all together is Islam. It's really beautiful.

 Rimsha Syed 1:08:07

Yeah. So Jessica, I want to be mindful of your time.

 Jessica Disla 1:08:14

No, you're fine. I'm sorry I spoke too much.



Rimsha Syed 1:08:18

No, please don't apologize. Was there anything that we talked about that you would like to expand on, or anything you just want to add? Keeping in mind that this interview will be archived and people can listen to it several years down the line, is there any advice or words of wisdom that you would just like to pass down and have out there?



Jessica Disla 1:08:44

I guess the best advice I can give to anyone really, Muslim or non-Muslim, is just dig deep inside your heart, and when you feel empty, look to God to fill that void, because other things in this world will not be so satisfying as the relationship that you have with God. Stay strong and find God. Ask God for guidance. That's the best thing. That's how I ended up where I am. I literally got on my knees and asked God for guidance. And I pray for my family members, that they find the guidance that I have, that Allah guides them the way he has guided me. It's been a blessing. The IslamInSpanish family is a blessing. I couldn't ask for anything more. This is the most content I've been my entire life.



Rimsha Syed 1:09:55

Thank you so much. Thank you for your time today and this interview in the perspective that you brought. I will go ahead and stop the recording.