

Ramon Mejia



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SPEAKERS

Moureen Kaki, Ramon Mejia



Moureen Kaki 00:02

So my name is Moureen Kaki. It is October 25, 2:14pm Eastern time, 1:14pm Central. I am here with Ramon Mejia, and I'm joining the call out of Boca Raton, Florida. Ramon welcome, and would you mind telling us where you are joining our interview from today?



Ramon Mejia 00:19

Hello, and I'm joining from Waxahachie, Texas, which is just outside of Dallas.



Moureen Kaki 00:26

Hey, welcome, welcome. And Ramon, would you mind introducing yourself for folks please?



Ramon Mejia 00:31

Yeah, my name is Ramon Mejia. I guess I'm wondering, what's the best way to introduce myself? Ramon Mejia, father of two, born and raised here in Dallas, Chicano, my parents are Mexican, and yeah, I've grown up all my life here.



Moureen Kaki 00:54

And what was it like growing up in Texas? Can you talk to us about your childhood a little bit?



Ramon Mejia 01:00

Yeah, growing up in Dallas, it was good. I lived in a working class community, predominantly Mexican, predominantly Black. Oak Cliff is a suburb of Dallas, and yeah, it was good. My mother

was a kindergarten teacher at a nearby elementary school that's in walking distance, so we were really close in the neighborhood. I had family, other cousins that were in the neighborhood, so it was a good upbringing. My parents both worked hard, worked double jobs. But I had good family and good community to support growing up. Yeah, it was good. Good times.

M

Moureen Kaki 01:49

Yeah, yeah. Would you mind talking a little bit about your experiences in Oak Cliff growing up? Maybe one of your earliest childhood memories there, or something that stands out to you particularly? It can be anything at all.

R

Ramon Mejia 02:01

Probably one of the earliest - I don't know - probably the earliest memories would probably be going to the elementary school. I went to Winnetka Elementary, and my mother was a kindergarten teacher there. And one of the very first memories I can think of within school was, I was going to kindergarten, but I had to have had been in pre-K. And this teacher, Miss Anderson, I guess, I got very used to her in pre-K. And then I was moving to kindergarten, and I was going to another teacher, and I was like, "No, I don't want to go to another teacher." I wanted to go back to my pre-K teacher. And that's the first thing I remember. I don't actually remember pre-K at all, I just remember that moment. And then having naps in your in your sleeping bag, and I remember curling my hair as I tried to nap in school.

R

Ramon Mejia 02:53

So yeah, those are probably my earliest memories, just the fact that any and everything that I did in school, my mom was right there. So that means if I did good, my Mom was right there to support. If I did bad, my mom was right there to address it. I think because my mom worked at that school, that other teachers really - it was like an extended family. In the sense that, "Oh, that's Mr. Mejia's son." So then the coaches, teachers, principals, they all knew me on a personal level, because when my mom had to stay after school to not be roaming the halls with either my friends outside or roaming the halls by myself, and all that. So yeah, that's probably the earliest childhood memory was just the elementary school and the life that revolved around it.

R

Ramon Mejia 03:46

Because my mom, yeah, staying late after school for either teacher meetings or doing grading or lesson planning, all these different things, then I would be there waiting for her on the outside, hanging out with friends, hanging out for other kids that were waiting for parents to pick them up from after work, or just kids in the neighborhood that that's where folks hung out. The basketball court was there, the soccer field was there, and kids would just be around the school after for an hour or so.

M

Moureen Kaki 04:19

Yeah. So you had you had a pretty good sense of community then even at a young age, it sounds like is that right?

R

Ramon Mejia 04:25

Yeah, definitely. I had a good sense of community in my location, because all my friends and my cousins, they all lived in the area. So we all knew each other, the parents knew each other, even up and down my street. While the kids, we all went to the same school, the parents, even though we might not know them often, but our parents knew each other. So there was kind of an ecosystem of kids that really stayed out 'til the lights turned on on the streets, as they'd always say.

R

Ramon Mejia 05:05

And then also my parents, my mom was originally from South Texas, just south of San Antonio, from Pawnee, a town called Pawnee. And then my dad migrated here from Mexico. So the community that my dad created here in Mexico, because he was one of the first to be able to come from Mexico, then he and other families that came from that village became almost a magnet in the sense of when folks came across, they were drawn to the same places that my dad and other folks that came from the same village. So then, once they all came, I had extended cousins, and then I had friends that became friends from the same village. And then we had that even the weekend, where there would be family parties, or friends, birthday parties and all that stuff. So there was the community that I had around my school and in my neighborhood, and also this extended family of people from the same village that my dad was from, just built, coming together and supporting each other, coming to this country and stuff.

M

Moureen Kaki 06:18

Yeah. What were your teenage years growing up in this? Did you stay in Oak Cliff until you got older?

R

Ramon Mejia 06:30

Yeah, I stayed in Oak Cliff the entire time in the same house and went to middle school, got - I think my teenage years were definitely more vibrant, and they weren't in the sense of just hanging out and playing with the neighborhood kids. It was in that same way, but it turned very different. In my teenage years, even though I had a good upbringing, and my parents are and have been and still are very much a part of my life and very supportive, there was definitely a rebellious nature that I was a part of, and me and my friends rebelled a lot. So I got in trouble a lot at school. Then definitely, there was a few years there growing up where it was tough, tougher than it had to be. Most of it was my own fault. But yeah, I ended up going to middle school, high school there in Oak Cliff.

M

Moureen Kaki 07:35

And what did you end up doing after you left high school? Do you mind talking about that a little bit?

R

Ramon Mejia 07:40

Yeah. So right before junior year where I'm in high school, me and my girlfriend at the time, now my wife, were dating, and then into our senior year, we got pregnant, we found out that she was pregnant. So we ended up getting married our senior year of high school. Got married the first semester of senior in high school, and then our daughter was born my senior year. And so then, within that later part of high school, I was working multiple jobs, still going to school, trying to graduate. And then as high school was finishing up, I knew that working minimum wage jobs weren't going to cut it to support my wife and then my daughter that was months old. And so then I ended up joining the military. I joined the Marines before graduating high school, so I graduated in May 2001, and then by July 2001, I shipped out to boot camp and joined the Marines.

M

Moureen Kaki 08:54

And how long were you enrolled in the Marine Corps for?

R

Ramon Mejia 09:00

The total number of years, three years and seven months, something like that. So from July 2001 to November 2004 is when I was in the Marines.

M

Moureen Kaki 09:12

So that was right at the prime, too, of 9/11, Iraq, Afghanistan, all of that. Can you talk about that? Do you mind actually talking about your personal response, 9/11, first? Do you remember where you were, how you felt, what that was like?

R

Ramon Mejia 09:32

Yeah. So when 9/11 happened, I was in what was called Team Week. It was the fourth week of boot camp. And it's essentially - I went to boot camp at Marine Corps - I don't know what it's called - MCRD. Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego. So I was in boot camp in San Diego, and in San Diego boot camp, there's a total of thirteen weeks. And there's a certain point, which is I think, the fifth week, in training when you go up north to Camp Pendleton, where you do a lot of your field and rifle training. So within these first four weeks that you're in San Diego, they focus in a lot of conditioning and exercise, and then also drill, creating unit cohesion, and essentially becoming - they really drill - and that's essentially what it's called, drill - they really drill the aspect of moving in uniformity. So it's building this unit mindset, and this unit mind and body and all that stuff. We all work together, and we're all a team and whatnot.

R

Ramon Mejia 10:46

So it was actually during the fourth week, which is called Team Week. And the fourth week, in Team Week of boot camp, is where you're essentially either put on garbage detail, where you go outside, and you're picking up garbage, and you're cleaning up and sweeping and do all that stuff on the outside. Or you're working in offices, cleaning offices and stuff like that. Or you're working in the chow hall, where you're working in the kitchen, and you're washing pans and stuff like that, or you're helping with the food. And during this time, as your unit, your platoon is doing this, then that's when the drill instructors are preparing for the logistics of moving the entire company up to Camp Pendleton to start doing the field training and all that stuff.

R

Ramon Mejia 11:36

So in that week, I was on the office detail, so I was cleaning offices on 9/11. It was maybe six or seven of us. We went into what's called the whiskey locker. Whiskey locker is essentially just a wall closet, supply closet that has all the brooms and mops and cleaning supplies, all that stuff. So we're all squeezed into this closet trying to nap, trying to squeeze in a nap, get away from everything. So we already done what we're cleaning up for the morning, and now we're just all squeezed in this closet napping on each other. Then the corporals, they're already Marines, they're folks that were supervising us, they open up the door and they're like, "What the hell are y'all doing?" They're yelling at us, like, "What are y'all doing? Y'all are asleep, this is not - we're under attack, and y'all over here asleep?" And we're like, "What do you mean, 'under attack?'" And they're like, "Yeah, we're under attack. The World Trade Center has been hit, and so has the Pentagon."

R

Ramon Mejia 12:41

And in my mind, I was like, "The World Trade Center?" In Dallas, there's a World Trade Center, but it's a convention center. The World Trade Center is a convention center where they have gun shows and conferences and stuff like that. So I'm thinking to myself like, "Why would anybody want to attack the World Trade Center in Dallas?" And then I asked that question like, "Hey, why would anybody want to -they have gun shows, but what are you talking about?" "In New York." I'm like, "Oh." I didn't even know that that's what it was called, the Twin Towers. I didn't know that the Twin Towers were called the World Trade Center.

R

Ramon Mejia 13:17

Anyways, they told us what happened, and we're all just shocked. They asked, "Does anybody have family from New York?" And then one person raised their hand, and they extorted them out. They essentially, throughout the day, they kept coming back to ask folks if anybody had family in New York, or was from New York, that way they could put them in contact with family and stuff. For the most part, the rest of the time, it's kind of a blur, because we're all little bit shocked. But then you're still in the mindset of having to do what you have to do. "I have to go clean this office before I get in trouble," or something like that.

R

Ramon Mejia 14:00

And then once we finished throughout the day, and they took us back to our squad bay, to our platoon squad bay, that's when the senior drill instructor and the other drill instructors talked to us about what happened. They rolled out a TV, one of those old school ones that it's a TV on the - it's like in school where you pull out the tray and has a VCR. So then they pulled out a TV, and they were showing us the news. And we watched it maybe thirty minutes or something like that. It wasn't long. And then from then, that was it. They told us like, "Hey, y'all are in middle of training, you ain't going nowhere. You're not deploying, but that doesn't mean that upon graduation that you won't be put in a unit that ends up deploying." Because there was already conversations about Afghanistan. I didn't know where Afghanistan was, I didn't know all these different things.

R

Ramon Mejia 15:00

The war was really - not even the war, but the attack on 9/11, and then the events afterwards, were on the peripheral. You knew that they were there, but it wasn't right in your face, even though the drill instructors were trying to drill it into you like, "Hey, this is real. You thought you were just coming for college and whatever, telling folks that, you thought you were just going for college, but no. This is real. You're going to be deploying to war at some point." That was the initial reaction from 9/11. Training continued. In some respects, some folks say that it intensified more just because of given the time of what happened.

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Moureen Kaki 15:50

And did you ever feel concerned, scared, did it affect you on any personal level besides the shock of seeing what happened that day?

R

Ramon Mejia 16:03

I'm not drawing a blank. I'm more so is that - I don't know. I can visually see like, "Oh man, that's wild, I can't believe that that happened." But that was also very disconnected in the sense that it was an event that happened, and then in that moment, that's just the way it was. In the after effects of it, and in the environment, there's some folks that that happened, and it was like automatically, they were like, "Ey revenge, we gotta go back." So in the atmosphere of it all, I think I went from a place of shock to - what is it called when you're not disassociated, but it hasn't impacted me in any direct way, so I have no - I'm indifferent. And this is horrible, but it hasn't really impacted me.

R

Ramon Mejia 17:17

Some people saw, "Oh, we're under attack." Americans, this kind of identity, I didn't have that identity. I didn't see it that way. I went from shocked to being indifferent in the sense of like, "That's horrible what happened, but horrible things happen everywhere." And it was just like that. And to being caught up in that machismo, American exceptionalism, "How dare they do

this to us?" kind of thing. And not so much so that I verbalized it, but that energy is there. So you're just going with the rolling. You're not really thinking for yourself. You're in this group mentality, mob mentality in the sense of -

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Ramon Mejia 18:04

At the end of the day, anybody that says that they joined the military solely for education or solely for health care or benefits, there's also this thing of like, "Ey, I want to be a part of the action. I want to be a part of violence, and I want to be part of engaging in war." That's the reason that you join the military for, so that that wasn't lost on me in the sense of I was not the sense scared, but I was, "Ey, I'm anxious, nervous, but I'm ready. I want to be a part of it." This is history or whatever. I don't know if those thoughts grew out of my own thoughts, or if it's the energy and the atmosphere that I was surrounded in. I just started to just really regurgitate a lot of that thought back.

M

Moureen Kaki 18:59

Did you ever have those kinds of thoughts or that identity or desire before in any other sense, outside of the military?

R

Ramon Mejia 19:13

There was that kind of mentality in growing up. I think that there is that kind of military gang mentality as far as in gang culture and the loyalty to one another and wanting to defend your friends and stand up for your friends in your neighborhood or whatever. I think that there is that mirroring of when you join the Marines, not only are you just part of the US military, but you're a Marine. Not only are you a Marine, but you're part of this specific unit, and there's this emblem, and there's a flag that you're carrying, your unit flag, and so you create this thing. And I mean, that works. That works, being able to put a label on something, and then you're a part of it.

R

Ramon Mejia 20:00

And same thing growing up. My friends were members of gangs. We were part of a street crew. We're friends that hung out together, and we would fight in groups against other folks. That kind of thing. It was very much transferable in the sense of being able to - I was with this group of friends, and then now I'm with another group of friends. And looking back at it, the reasoning for it never really - you could switch the goals or what's happening, but ultimately, it's my way of looking at things is the way - my friends. Who are my friends, and who are the folks that I'm with, and I'm riding with, and I'm going to protect and support? High school and growing up was one way, and the military was another way. And then even now, in organizing spaces, there's a crew that I'm rolling with.

M

Moureen Kaki 20:59

Yeah, yeah. No relatable, absolutely. But okay, thank you, thank you. I want to ask you, if you

don't mind, to talk more about your military experience. I know that eventually got deployed, and if there are limitations on what you can and can't speak about, please, of course, I you respect those at all costs and feel comfortable. But to whatever extent you feel comfortable sharing, could you talk about your military experience and what that was like?

R Ramon Mejia 21:35

Yeah. So when I enlisted, initially, I enlisted as a field radio operator. I wanted to do comms. I'm down to be in the grime of things, but at the same time, I was trying to get some kind of tech skill, or something that would transfer after the military. But then I lost that job. They took it away from me because I had a juvenile record. So I went open contract, is what it's called. Once I was in boot camp, I went open contract, meaning that whatever job is available, or whatever is needed, that I was just gonna be someone to fill that job. A lot of times, a lot of people think - and what it turns out to be is that open contract usually leads to a infantry position. You're gonna be part of an infantry unit.

R Ramon Mejia 22:30

That didn't happen for me. I got put in supply operations and an administration's clerk. So I was put into supply, and essentially, I was gonna be handling and managing files, essentially requisitions, for a supply unit. So that means anywhere from repair parts, water, food, lumber, medical supplies, any and everything, ammunition, parts of weapons, parts of trucks, all this stuff. So that's learning how to be a supply admin and being able to work with requisitions and shipping and receiving and all that stuff. That was my job in California.

R Ramon Mejia 23:15

In preparation for us deploying to Iraq, they started to shift and modify the units, and not only that, but identifying needs that were required in order for us to deploy. And I got put into Humvee school. So I got sent to Humvee school, learned how to drive Humvees, 7-Tons in that way. And then also got sent to machine gunners' course to be able to work the different machine guns that, usually, if you're in infantry, you go to these different specialties, and you either work on machine guns, mortarmens, or tanks, all that stuff. I learned machine gunners', I went to a machine gunners' course, went to Humvee school.

R Ramon Mejia 24:19

And then when we deployed to Kuwait in February of 2003. We already knew the rumblings of like, "Ey, why are we going over there?" This and that. We knew like, "Ey, we're there to be a part of the invasion of Iraq." So we got there, February, in Kuwait, of 2003 and essentially started to create the conditions for us to be able to invade. So it also started, you're practicing like, "How is this unit gonna request thirty cases of water or pallets of this, this and that." And you're essentially starting to play war there in Kuwait as far as with the supply chain and all

that stuff. We're doing Humvees, I mean, convoys from from where we're at up north towards the border down to Kuwait City and back, and stuff like that. Just starting to get everything prepared and get acclimated into the space.

R

Ramon Mejia 25:01

And then in March, we start to get ready. They're like, "Yeah, now we might be going in. Something happened. There's gonna be this thing at the UN." And we weren't really paying attention to much of the outside world of what's happening. I didn't know that there was millions of people marching against the pending invasion of Iraq. We didn't know. The only thing that we knew was, "Ey, Bush is gonna be speaking at the UN," or, "Colin Powell is gonna be speaking at the UN." I didn't even know who was gonna be speaking. But there's something happening in that way. Then there was the thing like, "We're getting forty-eight hours," or however many hours there was given. And then that's when we started to prepare.

R

Ramon Mejia 25:44

We started hardening vehicles, filling sandbags. I was chosen as the executive officer's driver. So the executive officer officer for the company that I was deployed with was the second in command, so I was gonna be his driver. Me and him were hardening the Humvee vehicle, with sandbags on the floorboards and stuff like that, in case we run over a mine or IED [Improvised Explosive Device] or whatnot. And as we're doing all that, you hear this loud whistling sound, and starting to hear this roar. And we're like, "What's that?" And we look up, and it's like - imagine a tall palm tree, and that's the height of this missile, that just shot [whooshing noise] and just passed us, and just shot right through. And it passed us, and they went further south like, "Oh." It's out of there, and that's when the siren started, the air raid sirens, and that's when we - what was initially like, "Hmm, it could happen, it could not happen. There might be war, there might not be war."

R

Ramon Mejia 26:56

I don't remember if I was a PFC, a private first class, or lance corporal at the time, but for us at the bottom, on the bottom echelon, for all we knew that, we're just here, and then we're just gonna go back. Who knows? Whatever they told us, that's what we did. So yeah, it was a missile that was shot from Iraq. And that's not to say that there wasn't anything again, because the US was definitely already engaged in counterinsurgency, and already engaged in ops within Iraq during that timeframe. So throughout that night, that first night, you hear a lot of explosions and a lot of preparation, and we're still continuing to prepare the following days, and then finally, "Ey, we're going into Iraq." And then we went in.

R

Ramon Mejia 27:50

We were based in [Jalibah] Airport, which is in the southern governance in Iraq. LSA Viper, [logistics] support area Viper, was essentially a refuel point. We were the first unit to cross in to set up a supply point, and it was at this abandoned, or this destroyed airfield that used to work prior to the Gulf War, that was destroyed during the Gulf War when the US initially was

waging war on Iraq. And we set up a supply point there so planes, helicopters that would refuel there, and then that's where units were picking up other gear and stuff. So that was initial into Iraq. I was there in Iraq 'til September of 2003. And for the most part, my time in Iraq was spent predominantly conducting convoys throughout the country to essentially take supplies from one unit to another unit, to get the destroyed parts from one unit to another, back to where they're supposed to be taken back to Kuwait and dispose them properly. That didn't happen all the time. And that essentially was my job in Iraq was just driving convoys.

M

Moureen Kaki 29:12

Thanks so much for sharing all that Ramon. How did you leave the military? You said you were there for three years and some change. Was it was it voluntary, you decided to leave, you wanted to? What was that like?

R

Ramon Mejia 29:31

Yeah, so I came back from Iraq in September 2003, and then very shortly after that was placed on camp guard. Essentially, I got sent to a guard detail unit, where we were gonna be providing area supportive guard, guarding the armory, and in the area with the base in Camp Pendleton. Excuse me. And then I was there, and I was a driver there. Essentially I would drive the guards, our sentries, from post to post, whenever they got on post, when they got off post, and stuff like that. It was really easy. It was not much.

R

Ramon Mejia 30:16

And then in April of 2004 I started to have seizures. So I was on guard duty, and I was actually the the nighttime driver. And when you're the nighttime driver, essentially, you're getting up every two hours, something like that, to go drive the sentries to relieve them from their posts, and stuff like that. So you're up, waking up like that. So I was asleep on the - we're in the squad bay, and I was asleep on this couch. It's kind of like a common area. And from what my friends and folks that were there, they say that it was night, lights were off, and all they heard was this tussling. And they thought that actually two of the other sentries or two of the Marines had got into it and were fighting or something. That's how it sounded like. And they switched on the lights, and then I was shaking, and I was having a seizure.

R

Ramon Mejia 31:11

So they call the ambulance, and I remember just waking up in the ambulance as they were putting me in. And then my sergeant was climbing into the ambulance also and was just concerned and told me like, "You had a seizure." And I'm like, "What's that?" I didn't even know what a seizure was. I stayed overnight. They observed me, this and that. And then over the course of that next month, I ended up having two or three seizures every week. And then that's when they put me on medical board. When you're on medical board, essentially, they're doing an evaluation of your health. And they did EKGs, CT scans, all this stuff. They were trying to figure out why was I having seizures. I had been in Iraq, so they looked at traumatic brain

injuries, in the sense of if there was any concussions or things that would happen that I just wasn't aware of. They looked at whether I had tumors. Genetics, essentially, no one in my family has seizures. I was the only one.

R

Ramon Mejia 32:16

So there was this gray area, it was like, "We don't know why you're having seizures, but you're having seizures. Here's medicine." They gave me medicine. They tried to balance it out to where I wasn't having seizures, and for a brief time there, I had stopped having seizures, and in that moment, they were like, "Okay, you're gonna be put on the temporary disability retired list." Essentially, I was getting pushed out of the military. So in November of '04, about a year and a month later from coming back from Iraq, I was processed out. I was put on a temporary disability retired list, and then getting disability. And then I don't know how many months, maybe twelve months or a few months later, a year and a half later, something like that, I had to go get reevaluated. And they just gave me an honorable discharge, it says.

R

Ramon Mejia 33:10

Because at that point, you can try and fight to get back in, to see if you have any - "Oh no, I'm healthy, everything's good. This is what happened, blah, blah," and then you're able to get back in, or they just go ahead and process you out. I didn't challenge anything. I wanted to get out at that point. I had wanted to get out before. When I started having seizures, I could have put up a lot more a fight of like, "Ey, no, no, I want to stay in this. I don't know what's happening, but I want to address it. I want to stay in." Nah, I was like, "I'm ready to go anyways. I was already ready to get out." I never liked the military culture. It was never my cup of tea, so the out was given, and I'm ready to go. Like, "I'm out of here." So I didn't challenge anything or this and that, and I just got out.

R

Ramon Mejia 33:58

Yeah, and then I dealt with seizures for a long time, and I was taking medicine and trying to change my medicine, and having to deal with that aspect of having one seizure and then being good for a few months, and having another seizure, and it's something I'm still having to deal with and stuff like that.

M

Moureen Kaki 34:18

Salamtak. That's rough. I hope that it's manageable, at least, in your life. Are you able to assess - it's been some years now since 2004, eighteen years later. Can you speak a little bit to the impact that being in the military has had on your life in any capacity?

R

Ramon Mejia 34:38

I mean, the military essentially transformed the course of my life and where I am at this point. Before the military, I couldn't tell you what direction or where I would end up at. After the military, I got a glimpse of where my life would have headed had I not been in the military, in

the sense of - I think also the impact of the military, I brought that back home in the sense of deep depression, anxiety, rage, anger. Dealing with coming to terms with my reflections on my time in the military. Not just in the military, but more so my reflections on my time in Iraq. I want to say that I wish that I was at this point without having to have joined the military in the first place, without having to - not being in Iraq.

R

Ramon Mejia 35:52

I don't know, it's one of those things where you have to not balance, but accept but also not accept, in that I joined the military at the expense of families that have been destroyed by US militarism [and] war in order to support my family, but that shouldn't have been the answer. And that's not the answer in general for folks. That's not something I support. Nah, there's definitely hundreds of other options. Some are a lot more harder than that, as far as joining the military. But it's because of the experience of the military and my time in Iraq, that has given me so much, not rage, but righteous rage in the sense to push back against it, like, "No, that's wrong."

R

Ramon Mejia 36:45

And that's something that I've dedicated the rest of my life to being able to oppose US militarism, and the idea that the military is some kind of solution to the problems that we face in this world. So I think that the only thing that the military has given me is essentially insight, to be able to utilize my experience, in order to be able to push back against it and be able to support and organize and deepen the consciousness of folks in our community about the US military and the troubles that it creates, and how harmful it is to think that the US military is good in any which way for our people.

M

Moureen Kaki 37:34

Can you talk a little bit about what made that switch click? When was that transition that made you go, "Okay, here's this benign thing that I did for my family, and then this is how I see it now as something that -" what you described. That you were looking to support your family, and you see it as this thing that is destructive towards other families, towards other people. What caused that sort of switch to flip?

R

Ramon Mejia 38:04

Yeah, and I think I'll just add it right here before I forget. I think even in my individual own experience, for many veterans or people that joined the military, their experience is completely different from mine, and some might have a good experience, others have really bad experiences, and it ends up hurting not only them, but their families way more than it's impacted my family. I think the diversity of that is - I don't know, I just always keep in mind that things could be a lot worse for - there is a lot worse for folks that join the military, and their experiences, and how they interact with that.

R

Ramon Mejia 38:52

I think for me, as far as coming to terms or acknowledging and redressing, is that it came bits and pieces at a time. I think my very first moment of like, "What are we all doing here?" was in Iraq. Actually, it was in Kuwait. I don't know who it was, it was a general or something. I don't know who it was that was talking to us. And we're all in this big ol' company, our other companies are surrounding, this and that. And they're like, "Yeah, we're gonna get this guy," talking about Saddam, "We're gonna get this guy. He gassed the Kurds," and this and that. In the moment, I'm thinking to myself, I didn't know much of history, but I watched documentaries, and I'm thinking to myself, "Folks, hey, when when Saddam gassed the Kurds, did that just happen?" No, no, no that happened a decade so more before.

R

Ramon Mejia 40:01

But it was just to me in that moment interesting. It was interesting to hear that and then automatically think like, "Wait a minute, some folks are seeing it like this just happened now, like it's happening right in the moment, versus this is a historical event that actually happened." And not only that, but it wasn't 'til afterwards when you hear like, "Oh, the US actually supported Saddam," and all this complex political history. But I started to, when I was in Kuwait, when I was in Iraq, I started to think of like, "Man, what is all this about? What are we really doing here?" Because I would drive around the country, and you'd see the destruction. I saw what war does, not only on infrastructure, but on people in the communities. People are fleeing their homes. Driving up the highway in Iraq, and seeing hundreds and hundreds of families just walking away from the violence and from the war. It had an impact on me in the sense of wanting to question like, "What's all this about?"

R

Ramon Mejia 40:57

And then, when I knew that, I'm like, "This is wrong," was, we were on a convoy. We were on a convoy, and we were paused, we were waiting. I was smoking a cigarette, and I was talking them, the guy was smoking a cigarette. And then we were off this creek, near this creek, and in this creek, there was an Iraqi woman that was dead. She was half submerged in the water and half on the bank of this creek. And I just looked, and then just kept on smoking my cigarette like nothing happened. And I had seen dead people, and I had seen dead Iraqis, but for whatever reason, she is someone that I keep on my mind, always. Because I looked, and I looked away, and in that processing of that moment, years, years I've processed that moment of like, "Damn, I just looked away, like nothing." I don't know if it's I didn't have no emotion, I try and look back, and I watch - put myself in that moment again, of like "What was this? What was I feeling? What was I thinking?" The fact that I was smoking a cigarette, saw this woman who was dead, who had probably had a family, had kids, probably was a grandmother, who was half submerged in the water, and I just moved on, like nothing. And that's really stuck with me. And so that, on a personal level, has impacted me and has kept - is something that I think about Iraq.

R

Ramon Mejia 42:34

But it was since that, from Iraq, starting to question like, "Man, what is this all about? What are we doing here?" I wanted to learn who Muslims were. I wanted to learn what Islam was. I had a

very vague understanding. They didn't really tell us much. In the military, they had these cultural classes and stuff like that, but I had never paid attention to them. And I'm actually happy that I didn't pay attention, because I don't even remember what a lot of it said, but I'm certain that it was all wrong. So all that to say is that moment catalyzed in my mind, and I carry it still. It's a memory that both brings a lot of turmoil, but also something I cherish every moment, in the sense that gives me - I want to continue to fight against the US military as a result of that.

R

Ramon Mejia 43:37

That transformed into me wanting to ask and to learn about Islam, learn about Muslims. And I came back from Iraq, came back out of the military, got - years passed where I was doing other destructive stuff. And then I moved to Ohio, and I went to community college. And in one community college, one of the classes there was Western religions, and the professor was - I'm still friends with the professor to this day. And it was around Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. And we had to visit one of the services, and that moment in that class, I was like, "You know what? In Iraq, I wanted to learn about Islam, and I wanted to learn about Muslims. Here's the opportunity for me to reexamine, go back to that thought process of where I wanted to examine and to investigate."

R

Ramon Mejia 44:29

And so I went to the Jum'ah prayer there at the Dayton Islamic Center, the Islamic [Society] of Dayton, of Greater Dayton, it's called ISGD. And I went to Jum'ah prayer. I don't even remember what the imam said, I just knew I connected with the message. And I wanted to continue learning more about Islam and learn about Muslims. And then I converted in actually August 2008. I converted to Islam. And then that December, January of 2008, 2009, is when Operation Cast Lead happened. And some of the community, there was a good amount of Palestinian families in Dayton, in that part of that community.

R

Ramon Mejia 45:22

And there's one particular family that I got real close with, because the dad was - they had three or four sons, and they're all around my - I was older than him, but they were all young, and then college age, and then the dad was also a professor at the community college I went to, so I got real close to them. And anyways, learning about Operation Cast Lead and seeing the impact that the attack on Gaza and on Palestinians, by the Zionist occupation, I was now on this opposite end, where I got to experience what invasion and war was on the sense of being able to just hear from my friends and people that took me in and considered me a part of this community, this Muslim community that was learning about Islam, and, "We're all a Muslim body."

R

Ramon Mejia 46:23

We're all one Muslim body, and if one part hurts, then we all feel it. And I very much embodied and internalized it. So when I'm talking, I'm asking questions about Palestine, I'm sharing about

my experiences in Iraq. And then also being able - so I got really active in Palestinian solidarity. And it was actually a Palestinian activist, it was one of my friends who was like, "Hey, I see you doing a lot for Palestine. But what are you doing for the Iraqi people? You went to Iraq, you waged war there, what are you doing to address US militarism? It's good what you're doing around Palestine, but how are you using your experience in that way?" And it just allowed me to question, and that's when I got at -

R

Ramon Mejia 47:10

By that time, I was now attending University of Texas in Austin. And then I got active around Palestinian solidarity there, and that was also where I found Iraq Veterans Against the War and got connected with other veterans who were anti-war and wanted to redress the harms that they had committed in Iraq and Afghanistan and wanted to speak out. And so then that's how it led to the path of me being more politically active and outspoken, first about war in Iraq, and then also, even then, just started, in that space, making the connections, because folks were really wanting to connect around Palestine. They were like, "No, we're just trying to stop this war." I'm like, "Nah, fuck that. It's more about not just war, but it's about militarism." We all - the growth process, being able to make the connections, and how all these systems are interconnected is where it started.

M

Moureen Kaki 48:07

That's a lot. That's an intense ride, I gotta say. I didn't know that. I didn't know that about you, that your start was in Palestine solidarity, and then you directed towards - I assumed, and that's what I get for assuming. But yeah, what a story Ramon. What a history to have. What is that organizing been like? I mean, it can't be easy on top of your own experiences and the things that you discussed leaving the military, like how it had an impact on you, and then finding Islam, and making the decision to convert, and then being welcomed into a new community. And then to, on top of that, go and take your experience and go against the grain and talk about exposing how the military has its impact on people. But what was it like to be a Muslim in these spaces? Did that have a particular unique feel do you think, at all?

R

Ramon Mejia 49:13

Yeah, definitely. I think initially, I was cautious of engaging in veteran anti-war spaces as a Muslim. I think initially, because when I became Muslim, I think I was very much wearing my Muslim-ness. I was like, "Ah, I'm Muslim!" in that way. And so I very much wasn't trying to engage in spaces where I felt uncomfortable or that would essentially question my own morals or principles or whatnot. But then I waited out, in the sense of like, "You know what? Me being Muslim, me being a veteran, me being the son of immigrants," trying to rationalize the way of like, "How can I engage in spaces?" Because I didn't want to be around veterans initially.

R

Ramon Mejia 50:15

For me, it was never about veteran organizing, so that was all - when I started to engage in Iraq Veterans Against the War, which is now About Face: Veterans Against the War, I very much was coming from a standpoint of both a person who committed harm, but also a person from a

community that has been harmed by US imperialism, US colonialism, in that sense of whether me being Chicano, whether me being Muslim, all that. I carry that with me, and what's more important to me is the impact of US militarism on people, on Muslims, on Iraqis, Afghans, anybody that's a victim of US militarism. Even to this day, my primary community for organizing was not in support of like, "My reason for organizing is veterans." That was never my shtick. I know for other folks, they really saw it as essential.

R

Ramon Mejia 51:18

So I was always very hesitant because I was Muslim, because I was coming at it from a standpoint. During that time, when I first started to engage in anti-war and veterans, there was still very problematic - and even to this day, there's still very problematic White savior bullshit and this American [inaudible] type of thing. And for me, I just never bought into all of that in that way, so it was hard initially, especially veteran spaces, because they're predominantly White. But then even in peace and anti-war organizing, a lot of those spaces are very much privileged, and very White dominant.

R

Ramon Mejia 52:05

I think about those kinds of activism spaces or the ways where I started as a good learning, but I'm very much comfortable now in the space where it's predominantly Brown, Black, indigenous, systems-impacted people that are frontline communities, that very much more diverse and working class than the veterans that I was with, not only within Iraq Veterans Against the War, but just in general in the anti-war, peace space. I'm very much more comfortable in the environment that I am now. I'm accepted both as Muslim, Latino, and all that aspect. So it's like I don't have to minimize or make small my identity in that way. It's not gonna be contradictory to our politics and our worldview, because I think the organization I work with now is very much a left, internationalist, global south perspective. So it's something that I very much more connect with.

M

Moureen Kaki 53:29

I actually think that this is a probably a good stopping point, and I'm gonna take you up on the other session, because your answers tend to run long, so I don't want to cut you off in the middle of a thought, but I also don't want you to be late for picking up your child. So I'm gonna go ahead and pause here. [Session break].

M

Moureen Kaki 53:45

Hello, hello, my name is Maureen Kaki. I am an oral history fellow with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. It is November 2 at 12:17 Eastern Time, 11:17 Central Time, and this is the interview part two with Ramon Mejia. We're picking up where we last left off. And Ramon, you were talking previously about this dual identity that you carry, being a veteran and having the identities of Chicano and Muslim, identities that have been impacted by US imperialism. And

then you were talking about how you're more comfortable in the organizing space that you're in these days because of the acceptance of the latter identities. Would you mind talking about where you're at these days and the work that you're doing, please?

R

Ramon Mejia 54:36

Yeah, definitely. Right now, I'm the anti-militarism national organizer with Grassroots Global Justice Alliance. Grassroots Global Justice Alliance is a cross-issue, frontline, internationalist, and unapologetically left alliance made up of over sixty member organizations from around Turtle Island. And it's not only cross-issue, but it's a multiracial, multi-theme alliance that has people from all walks of life, frontline communities, folks that are engaged around food sovereignty, that are engaged around housing justice, environmental justice, anti-militarism, and organizing against these systems that are trying to harm us, whether it be the police, prisons, and border enforcement.

R

Ramon Mejia 55:38

Just thinking back about what makes this space a lot more acceptable of my identities - just because I think that it's really a makeup of our communities. It's people of color led, Brown, Black, indigenous, poor, working class communities very much like the backgrounds that I have. I think also our values align a lot more in that way. And just to give a short thinking about that, is within veteran organizing or within veteran spaces, oftentimes, there's a critique of specific wars, or the way that US foreign policy is engaged with, but at times, there can be an unquestioning of the infrastructure of the powers that be. Somehow that the military is a force for good, that there's only a few bad apples in that way.

R

Ramon Mejia 56:42

So there isn't - dispersed throughout veteran organizing as a whole, not just within veteran organizations that I've been a part of - there was nothing that we could relate about. I wasn't proud of my time in the military, and that's not something that I utilize as a way to continue to promote that kind of aspect of being proud to be a veteran, that it's good to join the military, and it's good to stand up. I didn't connect with it, and I think at a certain point, I couldn't relate with veterans in that way. And I just didn't want to do the hassle and the debating and the friction that can create when people are very much defending what they participate in, what they saw as something that was good without doing a deeper analysis in that way. So within GJ, I think that our values, our morals, our principles align. So that's something I find I'm right at home in this way.

M

Moureen Kaki 57:55

I'm glad you found an organizing home that makes you feel comfortable. That's, that's important, especially for the kind of intensive work that you do. So yeah, that's good news. You alluded to this a little bit earlier in different ways and in terms of anti-imperialist motivations for pursuing your work, but does your role as a Muslim have any impact on why you do the things that you do in terms of the organizing work that you do and the fact that it's intersectional?

R

Ramon Mejia 58:24

Yeah. After first converting to Islam, it provided a framework for how - it's structured my life in the sense of creating a positive outlook, and wanting to better not only myself, my community, but society as a whole. I wanted to contribute, not take away from my community. So I think as a Muslim, it very much was a driving force for continuing to be politically active. There's always a saying in Islam, where it's like, "Oh, we're travelers in this world." But that doesn't mean that we disassociate or disconnect ourselves from our lives and from what's happening in the world, because our lives are finite, and they're gonna end at one point. So some people tend to retract from engaging in political and public discourse and focus inwardly.

R

Ramon Mejia 59:30

I, on the other hand, very much saw that, "We're travelers in this world," as a finite time to be able to do good. Though in Islam, they talk about this road of travel. That we're on this road of travel, that life is temporary, but on this road of travel, it's our responsibility as Muslims to remove all of the obstructions from the road of travel in order for those who follow. So I feel that that's very much central and core to me as a Muslim, in that everything that I'm doing is founded in my beliefs as a Muslim, that I'm here in this world, it's my responsibility to leave the world a better place than when I first came in, and to be able to think about not only my children, but their children.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:00:30

In indigenous communities, they talk about the seven generations, the next seven generations. And so that's something that I draw from, as well, thinking about the multiple generations that follow afterwards. And so it's just trying to create a better world in that way. So that's one of the ethos. I don't know if that's the right word, the ethos, but yeah, you're removing all obstructions from the road of travel for those who follow. So that's where I draw my inspiration and my guidance from my Muslim-ness from.

M

Moureen Kaki 1:01:08

What a beautiful guiding principle, and for whatever it's worth coming from me, I think you're doing a wonderful job of that. But yeah, you're definitely an inspiration to do better, so thank you for that and for sharing that. We talked about 9/11 earlier and that it happened around the time that you joined the military and things like that, but what are some of the things you can discuss in terms of a post-9/11 world view? We're in a post 9/11 world, so what are the things that you as a Muslim organizer have been impacted by or feel like - I'm not framing this correctly, I'm sorry. Basically, I'm just looking to hear about any experiences, in terms of specifically your Muslim identity, that relate to and can talk about what it means to organize in a post-9/11 context as somebody who converted. I am just curious about that.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:02:14

Yeah, so there's two examples that I can definitely share. How is it like to be organizing as a Muslim? I don't know if it's only just as a Muslim, but also just within left organizing spaces. What comes to mind automatically, of how 9/11 impacted me, post-9/11 impacted me as a Muslim, because prior to me converting, besides being in the military and stuff like that, I never really looked at how post-9/11 had impacted me. It wasn't until I became a Muslim that I saw how those structures and systems were set up in order to continue to work against the Muslim community.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:03:05

One example is in Dallas, there's a Irving mosque that I would attend, that I would go to, and they were getting picketed. They were getting picketed by this right wing paramilitary group. There was a name, they were called BAIR, Bureau of American Islamic Relations, not too far off from CAIR, the Council. It was a play on the name. So they called themselves BAIR, and they would wear full fatigues, full battle dress as far as having flak jackets, having LBVs [load bearing vests], and long rifles, and side arms, and all that stuff. And they would do these picketing, and they would do armed picketing of the mosque. And not only would they do armed picketing of the mosque, but they would actually shadow Muslims that lived in the apartment complexes nearby, that would walk to the mosque. So as they were walking away from the mosque, you'd have these guys in full fatigue with rifles shadowing them, essentially trying to intimidate folks.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:04:17

So then me as being active already in the community and very much politically active, we started to organize a rally essentially to push back against this organization. And it was also at the same time that there was a word that a chapter from the KKK in East Texas was gonna be attending one of their pickets, where they were gonna come to the mosque. So we started to organize a counter demonstration. We started to get speakers, organizations signed on. How are we gonna do as far as being able to hold a space that they couldn't even get near the mosque, not even so much on the sidewalk?

R

Ramon Mejia 1:05:01

And in that process of developing the protest, the mosque leadership, the board, they had concerns, because very much within Muslim communities, there's people that don't want to put a spotlight on them. They don't want to shine a light on their community, because they feel that if there's a light shined on their community, then that opens up for not only agencies, looks for other folks to be able to - they want to go about their day, they want to have the activities that they have at the mosque, they want to be able to serve the community, but they don't really want to engage in anything that could create friction between them and the city officials, or even the government in that way.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:05:49

So we were preparing for this protest, and then the mosque board reached out to myself and a few other Muslims, and said that they wanted to have a meeting. They wanted to mediate, to

have a mediation. And I was like, "I didn't know that we were mediating. I didn't know that we were at odds. What's going on?" And they had essentially set up a meeting with the Department of - I'd have to look back to actually see what - but it's not the Department of Defense. Department of Homeland Security or something like that, where it's community engagement, outreach. So there was officials from - I think it was the US State Department, I think that's where it came from - that were joining this meeting to mediate.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:06:36

And I arrive, and I find them, I'm like, "Wait a minute, why are they here? I'm your Muslim brother, and you just put a spotlight on me as someone that doesn't fall in line, is going against the status quo, is radical." All these things of like, "Hey, I'm politically active." So I was like, "You put me in a position that -" I was telling them, I was like, "Y'all put me in a position that this could harm me. It could turn back, and it could hurt me." And then I'm like, "Why don't y'all reach out to me and actually have a conversation as a Muslim?"

R

Ramon Mejia 1:07:16

I just remember that one, I don't know if it was the board president or one of the other ones, board members, but there were like, "I don't even know you." I'm like, "You don't have to know me. All you need to know is that I'm a Muslim, and you can easily find my number by asking any of these folks in this room," because I knew a bunch of the other folks, I just didn't know this one brother. And I told them that, "You could have easily got my number from anybody else and contacted me, and we could have had a conversation and not bring in US government officials into this meeting in this way."

R

Ramon Mejia 1:07:43

And so I stormed out. I left. Needless to say, the event was canceled, and then I stopped going to that mosque. I stopped engaging with them in that way. It was just one aspect of not having different worldviews, but in the sense of what post-9/11 policy and these apparatuses have done to Muslims, in the sense that, they don't want to cause friction, they don't want to have a spotlight on them, and they they fear that there's gonna be repercussions for even just speaking out a little bit. Especially something like that KKK. How can you see the majority of people are against the KKK? They'll accept other forms of racism, but when it's something that's historically grounded in that way, some people, even folks that would consider themselves having racist views, might distance themselves from the KKK just because of that aspect. So that's one way of it.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:08:54

And another instance where post-9/11 really, me being as a Muslim, was that I was at school. I was teaching seventh grade social studies at a school in Dallas. And it was near the end of the day, and I got a phone call on my phone. And as kids were getting prepared, ready to get let out for school, I saw the phone number, and I didn't think about it. I just looked at it, and I just picked it up. I was like, "Hello?" And they're like, "Yeah, this is so-and-so, special agent with the

FBI." And I'm like, "What in the world?" They were like, "Yeah, so we'd like to have a meeting with you." And I was like, "With me?" I was like, "About what?" I was like, "Well, let me know, give me your information, and I can contact a lawyer and then find out what the deal is." He's like, "Oh, well we're actually outside." They were actually waiting outside in the parking lot in my school. And so then I'm like, "Oh, y'all are here."

R Ramon Mejia 1:09:57

And in my mind, I was like, "Hmm, should I wait?" And in one instance, I was like, I just wanted to know, what's the deal? What are they looking at? And so I was like, "Yeah, I'll come down to see y'all." And they're walking in with my principal, and I'm thinking like, "What's going on? The principal must have been outside letting kids out, and then he saw them, "Oh, we're here to meet Mr. Mejia," so then he walks them in. So anyways, they go to my room, we go to the classroom, and they're doing basic info questions like, "Oh, what's your name, this and that, we just let you know we're here." And they tried to put this like, "We know that you were in the Marines. Would you be willing to put that uniform back on?" in the sense of they're essentially wanting me to become a snitch, being able to become a government source in that way. And I just listen to them, I was like, "Eh, let me get your card, and I'll contact my lawyer, and we can continue to discuss what's going on." Because they were still very much vague, other than the sense of like, "We know your patriotic duty, and this and that." But I still didn't know the specifics of it.

R Ramon Mejia 1:11:15

And then, so I contacted my lawyer, and it's actually a lawyer - I can't remember her name at the time - but they're from Austin. And they're the ones that actually took my case on when I got arrested at UT for protesting the Israeli ambassador. I had got arrested that time, and that lawyer, she saw it on Facebook or Twitter like that, and she, automatically, like, "Ey, I want to support and help you with this case," or whatever. So I reached out to her, because that's the only lawyer I knew. I'm like, "Hey, this is what's happening." And she was like, "Actually, I'm already flying up to Dallas for a lecture at UT, Arlington, so I can definitely - let's set up an appointment. I'll contact them and find out."

R Ramon Mejia 1:12:04

Anyways, we went to this meeting to find out, and that's essentially what they wanted. They wanted me to give information on somebody that was a friend of mine. Not even a friend of mine, somebody that I knew and had engaged with. We were part of a same organization, but that was really much it. But they were really wanting - it was another veteran. It was another Muslim veteran. He was a member of About Face: Veterans Against the War, back then it was called Iraq Veterans Against the War. And it wasn't only me, but it was a few other members that got visits from the FBI wanting to essentially find out more info on one our members, who was a Muslim convert, was a veteran. And then as soon as they, as soon as I found out the information, like, "Oh yeah, we're wanting to find out more information about this person," and this and that. I was like, "No, I don't have nothing to say." And we just got up and we left. So we got up and left. They never contacted me again. They never reached back out or anything like that. So it kind of just went from there. And then over the next few days, another member was

like, "Hey, I got a visit from the FBI. What's going on?" And we were trying to see like, "Ey, what's going on? Is he okay? What's happening with with our?" That's just the aspect of my part in it.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:13:29

But then I'll just add another one, because me being part of a - also not only being Muslim, but me being a left activist. I was a member - essentially, it was an anarchist book club in Dallas. And there was essentially a few days a week where every member, the majority of that members of that book club, got visits by the FBI. And it was some of that same - I don't know if you remember during that timeframe, where it was anarchists - it was when they were creating the designations around Black radical extremists, or that kind of stuff, that was around the same timing, and they were essentially fishing for information about this book club. But it was just interesting.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:14:19

They came to my house outside, and I was like, "Who are you with?" And then I went back inside, and I told my wife, I was like, "Hey, the FBI is out here. Stand at the door and just listen, hear what they're saying." And yeah, they had a folder, and they didn't show me the folder, but they were showing me some of the contents. They were flipping through the pages, and you'd Facebook posts and photos of different folks. And I was just like, "Nah, I don't know what you're talking about. I have no idea." I'm like, "I follow a lot of people on Facebook. I'm a member of a lot of Facebook groups. No clue. I read books. That's it." And then we just closed the door on them, and they just backed out.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:15:01

I don't know, that goes to show you this counterterrorism measures or surveillance, these kind of tactics that are utilized as a result of the war on terror are being exported not only to countries around the world, but also internally, and essentially going after activists that are trying to build up their community, and that are pushing back at what the government does, are being targeted in this way, whether Muslim, anarchist, communist, whatever. If you are opposed or on the different spectrum of what the US government and the US norm is, then that's something that can come up.

M

Moureen Kaki 1:15:54

Wow man, what an intense experience. I mean, you hear about the state violence, like when - the institute of structural violence with counterterrorism measures, and what was brought about with the war on terror, but to have that personal experience and understand what that was like. I mean, were you scared? Were you worried? Were you just surprised? You clearly know, you're well-versed in the fact that if police or FBI show up to the door, you don't talk to them without a lawyer, so that's great. But was there an underlying fear about it? Did it induce paranoia? Were there lasting effects in these kinds of visits?

R

Ramon Mejia 1:16:34

Yeah no, definitely. There's this, not only uncertainty of you're being watched. I'm like, "Okay, so this shows me that I'm on somebody's radar." Growing up, where I grew up in my community, whenever the police were driving around, or whenever a cop car or whatever, you adjust yourself in the seat. And not only that, but if you're getting pulled over for speeding or whatever, there's always this subconscious, "Do I have anything in the car? Do I have weed in the car? Wait a minute, my friend was drinking a beer. Is there an open bottle in the back?" Who knows. There's always this lingering thought like, "Am I gonna get caught doing something wrong that even I don't know about?"

R

Ramon Mejia 1:17:34

So, in that essence, in one way, it really transformed the way that I engage with people in the sense of, I think when I was first starting to organize and being very active, I was connecting with as many people as I could, because I wanted to not only learn, but I wanted to meet folks and move with with folks and learn about the work that was being done locally, not only locally, nationally. And so then it caused me to close my circle a little bit in the sense of like, "Wait a minute, am I being informed on if people were surveilling in that way?" So there's not only that, but then thinking about these stories of folks that really get arrested under trumped up charges and end up spending decades in prison for something that they didn't do, or under just fabricated evidence.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:18:34

So in one way, it was really a concern and really something that I was worried about, and it stressed me out. A lot of anxiety, being in moments of depressive state of mind. And then just thinking about like, "Okay, there's just one thing," like the mosque situation with the State Department there, then it's like, "Okay, well now it's like me as a Muslim." So there's one thing, like the State Department thing at the mosque, and here, I am a Muslim that's active, pushing back against against White supremacist racism. And here's another aspect of where I'm a Muslim, I'm a veteran, I'm organizing with other Muslim veterans and veterans. And this is another space where there's been government interaction. And then there's this other space where it's left, anarchist organizing space, where that's another.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:19:29

So it just definitely felt like, on one hand, it put a lot of stress and strain on myself, and then just in communicating that with my family and being - they were always like, "That's why you can't be saying stuff like the way you say. You can't be going to these marches. You can't be going to these rallies. Why not -" And they have these concerns, because my family being from Mexico, there's a certain way that state violence there is enacted on people that push back against the cartels, against local police corruption, and so forth. So there was concerns like, "Oh, maybe you should calm down and not say stuff." So my dad would always say like, "Hey, lower it a little bit. Watch out, because you don't want to be caught up in something that you don't even know."

R

Ramon Mejia 1:20:21

And so yeah, that was definitely a lasting - I don't know, if it's trauma. It's definitely something that's always still on the back of my mind, even when I bring it up. Just because I've been doing a lot more organizing than I was before in the sense of now it's not only national, but more international travel. And I'm meeting with a lot more organizations, and it's wanting to be able to move carefully and with intention about, what is it that we're doing in this organizing work that we're doing?

M

Moureen Kaki 1:21:08

Yeah man, that's really wild. That's really wild. It actually sounds - I don't know if you've ever seen the documentary film by an Algerian-American, it was on PBS, called *The Feeling of Being Watched*. It's a phenomenal documentary. It's put together by an Algerian-American journalist, and it was describing some of the first communities, she was part of some of the first communities that were surveilled as Muslims and tracked. And some of the experiences that you're talking about in terms of feeling like you need to close your inner circle, and, "Am I being informed on? Am I being looked at in this way that I was asked to be looking at other people?" she touches up on a lot of that, and how far that paranoia got within the community, to the point where it was really affecting people's mental health.

M

Moureen Kaki 1:21:59

And so yeah, it's really intense, and some of the stuff you were saying reminded me of that. It's called *The Feeling of Being Watched*. It's really, really good. If you have a chance, check it out. But yeah, super, super interesting stuff. I mean, I don't mean to make light of what are serious issues in your life, but I mean, goodness, thank you for sharing those kind of things. Ramon, you mentioned earlier being a seventh grade social studies teacher. What was that like with all your identities as a veteran, Muslim, anti-imperialist, anarchist, leftist, Chicano? How was that?

R

Ramon Mejia 1:22:35

So I taught seventh and eighth grade for three years, and it was really good. The approach to social studies, I think the schools that I taught in were very much working class, immigrant-dominated, Spanish, majority of students were either bilingual, or were recent arrivals from Central America, from Latin America. So the schools, they had - how do you say? I don't want to say there were troubled kids, but in the sense of there was definitely youth that needed direction, needed guidance, needed support, needed mentorship. Their parents working two, three jobs, so more than anything, the time that they actually have a lot of guidance and a lot of supervision is in schools.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:23:37

So the principles at the both schools that I taught at for those three years - I taught at one for two years, and then another one, for one - they were very much in a sense of like, Here you go. These are certain benchmarks that we have to achieve around the standardized testing or

whatever, but other than that, they're yours. Just keep them out of trouble." In that sense they were very [inaudible] like, "Whatever you can do." And so then, as long as I was touching on certain pieces of the curriculum that spoke to the standardized test, then I had free rein of how I taught the class.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:24:21

So I, as being already active in organizing spaces, being politically aware of what's happening in the world and wanting to bring that into the classroom, showing that, "Ey, social studies is not just in the past, but it's happening and being constructed as we speak." I fundraised to buy a class set of Young People's History of the United States. That way, we didn't have to use the textbook that they gave us, because it was all nonsense. So in that way, my kids, they really liked it. They enjoyed the way that I approached history. Not only that, but they also did see me active. "Hey Mr. Mejia, I saw you on the news," because I was at a Palestinian protest, or something like, "Hey, I saw you we're talking to the school board," because I would go to the school board meeting, and then saying stuff. They liked that aspect of it, and they would ask me questions about about my activism, and then even just drawing out some of the things that they would want to see different in their own communities. And so more than anything, I think that me teaching was, yeah, the content was one aspect of it, but more than anything was just supporting youth becoming who it is that they wanted or intended to be. Just being the support system there.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:25:53

Just to give one example of how I worked with youth, I had this one student that was really good in soccer, and I was the girls' soccer coach, and she was really, really good. And another teacher came to me, and they were like, "Hey, Mr. Mejia, I need so-and-so to be - you need to take so-and-so out of the the soccer team, because they're sleeping in class. They're sleeping every day in class." I'm thinking, "Hmm, sleeping in class," I'm like, "They never sleep in my class. They're always up and about and good." But it was also the first class of the day, so I'm like, "Hmm." I was like, "No worries, I'll talk to them and see what's going on."

R

Ramon Mejia 1:26:38

And talking to them, they were actually just exhausted and tired and were sleeping in the first class, because they had got little to no sleep, because here you have a thirteen-year-old, twelve-year-old that was staying up 'til two, three in the morning cleaning offices with her brother, with her family. They were cleaning offices. And that was something that the teacher failed to just even ask, or the student also didn't have enough trust in this teacher to be able to share that information with them. But when I asked her, and when I talked to them about it, they told me like, "This is what I do." And on one hand, and I understood it. Folks are trying to survive and trying to make ends meet. But then I also talked to her mom, and I talked to her brother. I'm like, "Hey, it's not really good. I understand the need for it, but also, you'd want to make sure that she's focusing in on school and getting plenty of rest as possible."

R

Ramon Mejia 1:27:39

So that's just one instance, but that was my approach with teaching. I always gave the students benefit of the doubt, whether they're angry, lashing out, or were disconnected or not connected, either with the material or just in class, because these kids had so much on their minds, that I tried to build as much as I could as a individual relationship with each one, having 140 students or something like that. It's hard to do, but that was my approach. I think I got a lot of support from fellow teachers in the sense of me being Muslim, being a veteran, and being active, politically active. Some teachers, some folks were like [grumbles], obviously because our politics were different.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:28:28

And then just to share something about the veteran piece. I remember there was an ROTC in that school. And I don't know if he was a major or a captain in that ROTC, but he came to me, he was like, "Hey, it's Veterans' Day. We want to give you a gift and celebrate you for being a veteran." And I was like, "Boo, I ain't tryna do that." I didn't tell him that, but I was like, "The kids really want you to do it," and I knew I had some of my students were in ROTC. They didn't like ROTC. Some kids, they didn't like the class the way it was, or a lot of info, but they did like the certain physical aspects of it, or them being outside and just not being behind the desk. So I think that's one thing that they drew too is wanting to be outside more.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:29:21

And I just remember, whenever they were doing the Veterans Day ceremony thing, I wore my Iraq Veterans Against the War shirt. So I went up there like, "Hey, thank you. Thank you for this gift. I appreciate y'all. Thank you for acknowledging veterans. Don't join the military if you don't have to. Have a good day." [Laughs]. Afterwards the instructor was like, "Come on Mejia, come on." We would always have debates back and forth about like, "Nah," and "I don't like -" And they were just seventh and eighth graders. That's a moment where folks are trying to gauge them and get them that way throughout high school and stuff. They're like, "Oh yeah, I'm gonna join the military right off the bat."

M

Moureen Kaki 1:29:21

Good for though, good for you. What a story, honestly. That's awesome. I'm telling you now, I would have loved your class as a seventh, eighth grader. I would repeat the seventh and eighth grade social studies classes, for the record. Ramon, you mentioned earlier about how you left - I'm gonna do a little bit of a 180 here. But you mentioned earlier about how you left the Irving mosque following the instance of them calling Department of State, or whoever it was, to come mediate. But did you find a new Muslim community? Have you found a space where you can practice and feel yourself and feel comfortable?

R

Ramon Mejia 1:30:53

Yeah, I think my house [laughs]. I think just here. So there's two reasons why. I'm from Oak Cliff. I think when I first became Muslim, whenever I first converted, I lived very near to the mosque in Dayton, Ohio, and it was very much like my community. I knew everybody. And I

converted there, so everybody knew me. It was like, "Hey yeah, that's the convert." So it very much felt like a community. And then when I moved to Dallas, I didn't know anybody, so it was like having to meet folks and to learn folks. And the mosques that were closest to me were thirty, forty, fifty minutes. They were pretty far. The Irving mosque was maybe thirty-five minutes or so. And then there's another mosque at Valley Ranch, and that's a little bit further drive, but it's still in the same vicinity.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:31:57

And so in one instance, I didn't continue to go. I would periodically go to other mosques when they were they're having a workshop, or a panel, or something like that, to try and - I would go and make the effort to want to do that. But it got to a point where it was just far. And then also, I don't know, I just couldn't relate, because me very much being politically active, I couldn't just continue to listen and learn the same things over and over. And because of that, a lot of this stuff became repetitive in that way. And no shame, no thing on folks, and very much folks are very - religion is essential to who they are. Me being Muslim is central to part of my identity, but going to mosque and being very much -

R

Ramon Mejia 1:32:55

I think there was a certain shift from where I would be moreso wearing my Muslim-ness a little bit more than I am now. And now, people still know I'm Muslim, and people ask me, I'm like, "Yeah, I'm Muslim," or, "Ey, I don't eat pork," and they're like, "Oh, why don't you eat no pork?" I'm like, "Because I'm Muslim." So there's certain things in that way, but before you could see, I think you could tell that I was Muslim in the sense, because I hung around a lot of Muslims, especially when I was in college. But the thing that always binded me with Muslims were the ones that were politically active folks that were active on campus, and UT, and organizing, and within organizing spaces. So I didn't find a mosque just because of the distance, and I don't attend mosque periodically.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:33:42

I very much have now continued the lessons and the teachings that are within Islam. I'll watch periodically whenever [Name redacted] comes and does some videos and some presentations. I'll check those out online. They do a lot of the broadcasting of the Jum'ah prayers on Friday. So I listen to some of the khutbahs and lectures in that way. And I think that was one example of [Name redacted] where he was able to [take] me under his wing a little bit and was supporting me, especially in times when I was really depressed and really felt like I wasn't a part of this wider Muslim community, because I felt like -

R

Ramon Mejia 1:34:25

Externally, I look Arab. I don't know if it's my beard, or just brown skin, brown hair. So it was very easy in Ohio, because people knew that I converted. People knew that I was Mexican. And so then I was known, and I had a community, whereas when I go to a mosque now, I very much blend in to the mosque, and if you don't know people, then nobody talks to you [laughs]. And

then I'm very much an introvert in the sense that I'm not the one that's gonna be like, "Hey, how's it going? Salam, I want to talk to you. No, I become an extrovert once I've already known you, once I've already built a relationship with you, that's when I get very comfortable and very comfortable in having conversations. But it's that initial meeting that -

R

Ramon Mejia 1:35:15

And I think for you and Ahmad, I remember I think we first connected online, and then also through phone, because we were organizing that rally. So it was that aspect [inaudible]. So that's how we met. So then that already breaks down a barrier when I meet folks online or through organizing spaces, like through conference calls - I remember it was conference calls back then, now it's Zoom [laughs]. So my practicing of Islam is very much personal in the sense that, I don't know, like I said, my circle is very small. And now the good thing about me being within GGJ is that you have organizations DRUM, Desis Rising Up and Moving, Palestinian Youth Movement, our new members, AROC, Arab Resource and Organizing Center, so these are organizing spaces that are predominantly Muslim, and Muslim led. So that's where I find the community as far as with Muslims that are active politically.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:36:04

Going to the mosque and listening to lectures there that are very much apolitical in the sense of very much focusing on yourself and on your immediate community, not the wider society, is something that I couldn't relate anymore. And so that's why I drew back as far as from going to the mosques. I think what happened at Irving mosque brought me to this point like, "Yeah, I'm very outspoken in that sense." And it didn't matter to me what your status is. You don't talk down to me. And I'm not going to be someone that's going to play some role that's being the submissive role. That's not who I am. So in trying to find another mosque, there wasn't - what do you call it? I think that political aspect of it was very much at the forefront of me. It was like, "I'm politically active first, and me being Muslim is part of my identity, and because - what pushes me towards activism." I think if you're Muslim, and it doesn't push you towards activism, then you can only relate with people so much around religion.

M

Moureen Kaki 1:37:47

No, absolutely. Absolutely, definitely. Yeah, that makes sense. Thank you for answering that. I'm winded down Ramon, pretty much you've spoken to everything that I want to ask you about, and if it were up to me, we would have a podcast based on your entire story, but unfortunately, we don't. So yeah, I want to give you an opportunity just to either say any final words, or if there was something that you wish I'd asked you about that I didn't, that you want to touch up on, or elaborate on something else, just space for final thoughts about everything we talked about.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:38:26

No, I don't know. No, I think I'm good. I don't know.

M

Moureen Kaki 1:38:31

Then I'm gonna ask you something if it's okay, because you're such an inspiration, and I think you're such a good role model for folks who want to get into this work, but maybe don't know how. So if there's some young organizers, whether they're Chicano, or Muslim, or both, or whatever, if you had a piece of advice to give to young folks listen to this, what would it be?

R

Ramon Mejia 1:38:51

Be open to learning. Just learn. Whether it's around organizing, whether it's around activism, whether it's around just studying political theory, or just movement understanding, wanting to learn about movement, or even just certain leftists, anarchists, communists, Islam, any and every subject that you want to learn about, I'm saying just being open to being a vessel and learning about it, and then making your own conclusions after the fact. I think so oftentimes, that we have these preconceived notions of the way things are and who people are. So that can invert, indirectly set up a barrier between you. It creates a barrier, this curtain where it's like you're not you're not able to experience your full potential and the learning process and growth. So I think more than anything is for folks that are youth whether they be Muslim, whether they be activists, organizers, whatever, be open to learning.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:40:05

And then once you are at that point where you're learning, and you're understanding, and you know where is it that you're able to contribute, then find those organizations or create those organizations and those community groups that are going to continue to push forward, like the worldview that you relate to, that speaks to you. So I think more than anything is that. I think so oftentimes, we set up barriers, and then we don't actually engage further than our own comfort zone. So it's about being in discomfort. It's about wanting to learn and going out there and exploring.

R

Ramon Mejia 1:40:40

And then I think that there's always folks, or even myself, I can be very self-critical, and there's room for error. There's room for adjustments, and that happens, and it's changing your course on different ways, the way you want to engage. That's it. Be open to learning, don't set up barriers without having learned about them, and also, if you're wanting to engage in your community, then find those groups that are doing that work in your community that you want to be a part of. And if there's none that it exists, then connect with other like-minded folks and create something that you're able to push forward.

M

Moureen Kaki 1:41:24

Really great words of wisdom from a brilliant organizer and just downright awesome human being. Thank you so much, Ramon, for sharing all of this with us. I know some of this was pretty intense, so I really appreciate your time, and your energy today, and the willingness to share

your stories. It's been quite an honor to listen to you talk. Yeah thank you, thank you.



Ramon Mejia 1:41:44

No problem. Thank you.