

# Yasmeen Tizani



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## SPEAKERS

Yasmeen Tizani, Rimsha Syed

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Rimsha Syed 00:04

Hello, this is Rimsha Syed with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. The date is May 10, 2022, and I'm on a Zoom call here with Yasmeen Tizani for the Muslim Voices in Texas oral history project. How are you today?



Yasmeen Tizani 00:21

I'm good.



Rimsha Syed 00:23

Good, good. Well for starters, can you introduce yourself and also tell us where you're joining the call from today?



Yasmeen Tizani 00:31

Sure. I'm Yasmeen Tizani. I like to go by Tizani though, and I am in Austin, Texas, joining from my house.



Rimsha Syed 00:43


Awesome. So going off of that, I would like to jump back in time and ask if you can tell me where you grew up and talk a little bit about your childhood as well.



Yasmeen Tizani 00:57

Sure. Okay, let's start with my parents. So my dad, Bassel Tizani, first moved to the States

during the Lebanese civil war, I think. I want to say maybe after he was eighteen, something like that. He was the youngest out of seven or six siblings, and he moved to the States from Lebanon, and then him and my mom got married. And she's Syrian. And it took them about five years for her to get her documents for her to be able to come and live in the US. And my family was in California up until I was five years old. And then we moved to Austin, Texas. And my dad's a chill, stereotypical Arab man. Doesn't say much but works really hard. And my mom, I think, exemplifies what Islam is all about in the way that she lives her life. She always doesn't take anything to heart and is like, "Well, anything I'm doing is for the sake of Allah." And she just moves through life with an ease that I've never seen anyone else be able to do, even through all the hardships she's had in her life.

 Yasmeen Tizani 02:45


But when we came to Austin, I went to Muslim private school up until eighth grade, and then I transferred to public high school. And Muslim private school was the most fun hectic time ever. It was just rampant Arab kids on the loose 'til eighth grade. That was kind of how I lived my life, just in pure chaos. And then I went to public high school. And surprisingly, I had no culture shock because kids are kids everywhere, and I just felt like everyone still acted the same. It was still just kids. Actually, when I first started public high school, I came in with the attitude of like, "Oh yeah, we're just all the same, whatever." And it was by my senior year of high school that I actually was like, "Hmm, no, actually there are some differences." And I was able to reflect more once I graduated.

 Yasmeen Tizani 03:48

I have four siblings. One is two years younger than me, and the twins were born around my eighth birthday, so there's an eight year difference between me and them. They're in high school now. All four of us have always been close. I felt though, when I was away at college, we did become distant. We didn't talk every day. So now that I've moved back during COVID, I've seen how much I missed when they were in middle school, and I was away doing my bachelor's. I think I speak the most Arabic and understand the most, and then my brother understands, but doesn't really speak it. And then the twins kind of don't understand. They understand some words, but they're not fluent in any way, shape, or form. So we lose our Arabic as we go down the list. And I think it's because in the summers, we used to go to Syria every summer, but ever since the war, we haven't gone. And then we went back to Lebanon maybe once.

 Rimsha Syed 05:17

Yeah, so what actually brought your parents to Austin specifically?

 Yasmeen Tizani 05:23

So my dad worked at Intel, and they were starting the Intel office in Austin. And so my dad would travel back and forth between California, Folsom, California and Austin. And they put us in the Muslim private school here when we were here for a year. And they just liked it a lot

more than Folsom. And they really liked the Muslim private school here. So they ended up deciding to just stay in Austin, rather than go back to California permanently.



Rimsha Syed 06:01

Right. And I know that you were very young when you were living in California. But do you remember much about that time or what it felt like to just up and move across the country?



Yasmeen Tizani 06:15

I think it's interesting, because a lot of the families that we were close to in California, they all also worked for Intel, and so a lot of them moved to Austin with us. We were the last to leave, I think, California. I don't know if it's one or two other families, they already moved to Austin before us. So I don't remember much. I just remember packing and packing one of those dolls that when you pull the string, it twirls. And I had a matching one with my friend in Austin. So my mom was packing it and being like, "Yeah, you guys will be able to hang out again." But that's all I remember, really.



Rimsha Syed 07:08

Right. So would you say you have a strong sense of community, whether that's your cultural or religious community here in Austin?



Yasmeen Tizani 07:19

Yeah, I would say so. I think growing up going to the Muslim private school here, I know all the other - I know everyone who went to that school and their families, and I still see most of them, and I'm friends with most of them.



Rimsha Syed 07:41

Right. Can you walk me through the differences between a Muslim private school and then public school?



Yasmeen Tizani 07:56

Well, my public school, not only was it a public school, it was a majority White school. I went to Westlake High School in Austin. It's its own district, Eanes ISD, and it's majority White. So I feel like my experience even in high school is different than most people that went to public school in Austin, depending on what school they went to. But Austin Peace Academy, that's the school I went to, when I went there, it was run not as professionally, I think, as it's run now. I mean, the school was only founded in 1997, which is the year I was born. So it was very much - it felt like summer school, even though it was the whole year.

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Yasmeen Tizani 09:01

I think I remember I was bullied, or I dealt with mean kids all of elementary school, and it made me cry all the time. I think in middle school, I finally toughened up. I don't know if I toughened up, or I just would chant to myself to - I think sixth grade, I went in with the mentality of like, "If anybody bothers me, I'm just going to apologize so that we don't have to have a long, drawn-out argument." And nobody really bothered me those three years anyway, so I didn't have to utilize that. But I think it built in me - I never felt like an outsider. I think that's one thing that's a positive from going to Muslim private school, is that I never felt like an outsider. I mean, I was labeled the new kid even though I went there in kindergarten. It was just because kids were there from pre-k one. I was able to become confident and figure out who I am without having to compare myself against non-Muslim kids. So how I figured out who I am, was by being amongst other Muslim kids and got to explore my personality that way before going to public high school.

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Yasmeen Tizani 10:28

And then public high school was - I'm widening my eyes, because it was one of those things when I was in it, I didn't have much time to reflect or think about it. I just was going through it, quite literally. I remember I was talking about it with one of my, one of my White friends from high school, and he was like, "Oh, I miss those days." And I was like, "I do not. I have quite literally wiped every memory from high school that I could from my mind." I don't know, I guess I want to say that nothing traumatic ever happened to me, but it was just four years of headaches. And yeah, I think it's sad to me when I have these discussions, because I've blocked out a lot. And I think if I were to have this conversation when I was younger, it would look very different, and I would be much more passionate, and have a lot more details and stuff, but I just have moved on. So I'm just focusing on my life now as it is, but it did shape me a lot.

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Yasmeen Tizani 11:55

So when I think back, I wish I remembered more. But it was just four years. I wore hijab in this high school, and I was the only one, except for a girl who was two years older than me. And it was one of those things where I was asked daily to explain my religion. And I was happy to do so. I never once questioned it. I never once was like, "Why are they asking me? Why don't they ask someone else?" Because I understood. I wasn't dumb. I was like, "This is the first time any of these kids have met a Muslim person. That's why they're asking me." But I never once was like, "Hey, can you guys have some compassion and not bombard me with these questions every day?" I never once thought of it that way. I always thought of it from their point of view, whenever they talked to me. I never got to think about how I felt, because I was always thinking about how they felt, and what they were thinking, and how they were perceiving me. Not because I really cared, but as just to be able to survive through that school. It was just, "Does your dad force you to wear that?" I think I only got that once or twice. But like, most of them were curious. Just pure curiosity. Just like, "What is it?" Just like Islam 101. I literally think I did Islam 101 with these kids maybe five times a year, where I literally just sat down and was like, "Okay, let me explain it, A to Z, what my religion is, what I believe in, and what Muslims are like."

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Yasmeen Tizani 13:44

I think the questions that I will never forget - there's two moments I will never forget. One of them was, I think, sophomore year, and I was in English class with this girl, and she came and sat next to me. Again, English class. There's no like, "Oh, by the way." It was just she looked at me, and she was like, "What does Allah mean?" And I was like, "Oh, Allah is just the Arabic word for God." And she was just like, "Huh. Why are there so many problems then?" And then it just blew her mind to think that our religions were similar, because she's Christian, obviously. And I just laughed, and I was like, "I don't know, ask your people." I think about it now, and I'm like, "Girl, we were in English class." I don't know. I think she came in with a mission. I'm not sure what happened to remind her in that moment to ask me that question. But that's what high school was. It was just a bunch of White kids who felt privileged enough to just turn and ask whatever they wanted without a thought if it was considerate or not. And that's the school I went to.

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Yasmeen Tizani 15:07

The second time, this one's a little bit more funny, but still, I didn't really want to talk to this girl anymore after she asked me this question. It was one of my Islam 101 sessions. I was in my fashion design class in junior year. And it was one of those things where one kid asked me a question, and another kid asked me a question, and then it opened up questions. And we dismissed the class or whatever we were going to be taught that day, and I just sat at the - it was a small class. It was maybe ten of us. And I was like, "Okay, you guys are asking too many questions. I'm just gonna sit down and tell you guys the five pillars, da da da da." I sat down, and I was answering these questions for them. I was doing a lesson plan that day on Islam, just really quick, Islam for dummies. And this one girl looks at me, next to me, and she's processing everything I'm telling her. And she gets to this moment where she gets this look on her face, like she just discovered - this moment like this light bulb went off atop of her head. And she looked at me and she was like, "So Muslims, they go worship somewhere, right? Is there a Muslim church?" [Laughs] That was the last straw.

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Yasmeen Tizani 16:38

And you know something that's so funny? We're chuckling at it now, but in the moment, I took her so seriously, because I'm telling you, I never once thought about what I was feeling. I was always thinking from their point of view, where I was like, "Okay, a White person has grown up in this, and this environment, and of course, they're gonna ask this, this, this, because that's all they know." And it even got to the point where, when we would be discussing racism and politics and discrimination, I would always be thinking about it from their point of view. I'm like, "How can I prove to them that racism is real?" Yeah, that was literally it. It was like, "How can I prove to them that racism is real?" Because they didn't believe in it, and it was like a fairy tale. Their way of thinking was like, "You're being too sensitive. You're taking coincidences and making truths out of them." And that's not the case, but how do you say that to a bunch of high schoolers who've never even met another Muslim in their life before, and by the way, the school only had maybe sixty Black students out of, I don't know, how many kids are in Westlake? 600? 800? I think we counted all the Black kids that we could find in the yearbook, and it was a really small percentage.



Yasmeen Tizani 18:24

I remember - I'm going off on a tangent - but I remember in our school magazine, they did an interview of one of the Black girls that went to school, and she was talking about how excited she was that there was a Black superintendent that was just hired, because there are no Black teachers in the entire school or any Black points of authority in the entire school. And she talked about her experience a little bit of racism at Westlake, but it's one of those things where racism is never mentioned, because the second you say racism, all the White kids, their ears shut off. Because they're just like, "Oh, you're just talking about fairy tales now?" But yeah. So back to that girl in my fashion class that asked me if there was a Muslim church. I was just like, "Yeah, it's called a mosque or a masjid." And she was like, "Oh, cool." And I was like, "Yeah, cool."



Rimsha Syed 19:23

Yeah, that's so interesting, because it's a pretty common thing I hear from Muslims who did grade school in Texas, literally becoming the spokesperson of the religion, especially when it comes to 9/11. And people automatically assume that if you're Muslim, you're so willing and open to talk about it, because obviously it has something to do with you, and that's 100% not the truth. But yeah, I'm just curious if you've ever had any of those experiences alongside your Islam 101 lessons, if people have directly asked you to speak on on 9/11, or hear about what you had to say?



Yasmeen Tizani 20:05


Honestly no, because again, I didn't enter White Austin until high school. I was pretty sheltered. I was in a Muslim bubble until eighth grade. All my parents' friends were Muslim, all my family, all my friends were Muslim. I think the only time I ever interacted with White people or non-Muslims is [in the] grocery store. I think we did Kumon. But Kumon are mostly Indian kids, if they're not Muslim. And karate, which is like, you don't really talk in karate. It's just exercising. Which now I think about karate class, there was these two White kids. And there was a girl and a boy, they were brother and sister, and they were the only ones that talked to us in the entire class. It was me and my brother and these two Egyptian kids, and we would hang out with these two White kids in class. We always used to think back on them and be like, "Yeah, they were so cool. We were karate friends." And then I thought about it one time, and I was like, "Wait, they were our friends because they were the only ones who talked to us."




Yasmeen Tizani 21:28

I think by the time I was in high school, most kids - we were really little when 9/11 happened. I don't remember 9/11 happening on my TV screen. I remember, me and my Muslim friends making jokes about it in middle school, where we were like, "Ahahaha, all White people think we're terrorists." I'm telling you, we were menaces in middle school. I think the only time we ever had something related to 9/11, not really, it's just more about the stereotype that all Muslims are terrorists. We went to science fair, and we were a Muslim private school, so yeah, competitions were the only times when we interacted with other schools, and one of them was

science fair. And we went one year, and it was me and my friend Neda, and we were just waiting for reviewers to come by so we could talk to them about our projects. And there was these two White kids in front of us from public school. And I remember they were doing the nastiest thing. They were picking gum from underneath the tables and chewing them [gags]. And me and Neda were looking at each other, we were like, "This is what's wrong with White people." We were like, "White children are not okay."

 Yasmeen Tizani 22:56


Both of us were just like - and I remember they turned to us at one point and were like, "Do you guys want some?" And we were like, "In what world would we say yes? No." And I remember the kid looked at us, and he was like, "Do you guys go to terrorist summer camp?" And me and Neda were like, "Yeah, yeah, we do." We were so unfazed. We were like, "Yeah, we do. They were teaching us how to make bombs last time." And the kid was so interested. He was like, "Wow, that's amazing." And I never thought about that kid again. We could have gotten the FBI called on us. But those kinds of jokes were very common. But even when a White person tried to take a jab at us, we already made those jokes about ourselves. So we were like, "Come up with something new. Come up with something different."

 Yasmeen Tizani 23:55

Which happened to me in college, by the way. It's just so funny. High school, I don't think anybody ever asked me about 9/11. I think the most awkward thing about high school is that for some reason, I would always forget the date when it was 9/11. And I would always ask someone like, "Hey, what's the date?" to write it down on my paper, and they would always give me the nastiest look and be like, "It's 9/11." And I'm like, "Oh sorry," [laughs]. I think that's the only time that anything related to 9/11 happened to me in school. But in college, there was this one kid who - I don't know what I did to tick him off, but I think I either just didn't find him funny or didn't give him any attention, and he noticed that. And I remember, he was trying to make a joke. It was my freshman year. I think he was trying to make a terrorist joke, but again, I looked at him, and I was like, "Not funny." I'm like, "Come up with something funny, and I'll laugh." and I had to do something, so I left the room, and I come back an hour later, and this guy - I walk back to my desk, I think I forgot about it, honestly. And he looks at me, and he's like, "Oh, I came up with this amazing joke. I even pulled up al-Qaeda music on the internet that they behead people to this music, and I was gonna play that when you entered, but I decided not to." And I was like - I don't know. It just doesn't affect me at all, because I'm just like, "And?"

 Rimsha Syed 25:44

Right, yeah. Well, thanks for sharing that. And speaking of the hijab, which you were talking about a little bit earlier, obviously that brings a unique perspective in your life. And I was curious about if you remember your first day of wearing the hijab and what that was like, and then more broadly speaking, how you came to that decision to start wearing it.

 Yasmeen Tizani 26:10

All right. Oh one point before I start on my hijab story is that one thing - I know you were talking about how in high school, a lot of us felt like we need to be spokespersons for Islam, especially if we were outwardly looking like we were Muslim. I think the more insidious thing that happened to me is that this thought process of buying into the propaganda that we are fed from the American school system. I don't know if it was just that school, but I have a feeling it's more broadly, where when it comes to White children, the topic of racism, and the things that the US has done, and the laws that affect us in our day-to-day lives, how racist they used to be, and how even though technically, discrimination is illegal - even if we buy into the fact that there's no racism today, the fact that it happened fifty years ago, it still affects today. That line of thought is completely expunged from the American school system. Kids are taught that racism happened, and now it's over. That's what kids are taught. And even me as someone who didn't even enter the American school system until high school, I still was - high school, I think I was so mad.

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Yasmeen Tizani 27:53

I was really mad in high school. I was mad every day. There was just a deep fire inside of me, and I think it was because I was going every day and dealing with everyone around me operating on the fact that racism was over. And to tell them that it's not is like telling them Santa is not real, or is real, or whatever. It just completely breaks the narrative that they've been told from children, from a young child. And even I was starting to think like them. That's the thing. When I went to college, and I [took] a break from having to explain myself every day, and even now. I think it took me a long time to reflect and realize I was putting myself through a lot, because everything that I was feeling in my head, I would always counter. If anything racist ever happened to me, I would always be like, "Okay, well, wait, is that person actually being racist, or am I just being sensitive? Or am I over analyzing?" That's what it is. Every single time anything would happen, I would always overanalyze, to be like, "Wait, is this actually what it is, or is it something else?" I don't think like that anymore, because I think you need to trust your intuition. And that's something even White people tell their own kids, where they're like, "Trust your intuition." But all of a sudden, when Muslims or people of color, we trust our intuition, and we're like, "That was racist." It's like, "Oh, well, wait. Look at all the facts."

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Yasmeen Tizani 29:47

So that was my only thing to point out about growing up in an American school system. Unless you had parents who were super political or analytical like my dad was. My dad was the kind of guy who - he would listen to news from three different sources. And when he would listen to them, he would always tell me like, "Okay, this one is biased towards this, and this one's biased towards this." It's not so much fake news or anything, but it was just knowing every source, what their bias is, when you read it, you can yourself decide if they're being accurate, or if they're being swayed a certain way. And that's how my dad taught me how to approach politics, where it's like everyone has an angle, and you should just be analytical. Even if it's a source you really trust, still, you shouldn't act on it a hundred percent based on [inaudible]. But I think I want to tell every person of color or Muslim going to high school right now, I want to tell them, to be like, "It's okay to trust your own intuition, and you don't have to overanalyze everything." And I feel like the American school system, it's not like an evil Big Brother situation



where it's on purpose. Everybody's being fed misinformation. But by removing certain information, and especially the Texas education system, you can build a narrative. And that's why it's so hard to talk about politics and racism, discrimination with White people.



Rimsha Syed 31:52

Yeah, no, I'm really glad you brought that up and addressed some of the problems within the public school system and how those flaws can actually cause self-doubt.



Yasmeen Tizani 32:02

It was it was so hard.



Rimsha Syed 32:04

Yeah, I agree.



Yasmeen Tizani 32:06

Also, just one more anecdote from high school is that my senior year, every Friday was a discussion day where they would pull topics out of the hat, and we would all discuss it. And it was the most traumatic events we would discuss every Friday, and I was the only non-White student in the whole class, except for one other girl that was half White, half Asian. And we would talk about everything from shootings, to police brutality, to terrorist attacks. We talked about the Charlie Hebdo attacks in that class. And I had to sit there and be distraught. And even the Chapel Hill shooting. Three young Muslims were shot. And it was one of those situations where I literally was like, "Finally, an example that I can show them of racism working." It's so bad, but I wasn't even sad that those three people died. I didn't feel sadness. I felt like this is the outcome of racism. And I felt like I could take that and be like, "See? Look. People die, so it's real." And it was so upsetting, because I think I was the only one that wrote it, the Chapel Hill shooting, and she actually picked it out of the hat by luck. But then she looked at me, the teacher, she looked at me and was like, "Oh, we don't need to talk about this today." And then we just went on to do a different activity. And in the moment, I was so embarrassed. I don't know why. I was so embarrassed. That's all I could feel was embarrassment. And I look back on that moment, and if I could go back, I'd put my foot down and be like, "The way you don't want to talk about it is the root of all these problems," and call her out for it. But she was one of those woke liberal White people. And in the moment, I just felt so embarrassed. And by the way, in that class, White people quoted MLK at me. So that's high school.



Rimsha Syed 34:48

Yeah. Well, I guess going back to the question I had about the hijab,

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Yasmeen Tizani 34:54

And I started wearing hijab, because I got my period. And then I walked out and I was like, "I got my period, I guess I'll start wearing a hijab." And my mom was like, "Are you sure you want to wear it? You're in eighth grade, and you live in America." And at the time, I didn't really understand what she was saying, because I was like, "Do the laws all of a sudden change depending on what country you're in? So what we're in America, yeah, I'll wear it." And the first week I wore it, I didn't wear it to the swimming pool, and my mom was like, "That's not how hijab works." And I was like, "Okay, well I guess I'll have to figure out a solution for that." And yeah, I just started wearing it. It was fine. And I went to high school wearing it. And I mean, in high school, wearing hijab, other than all the questions about Islam and stuff like, "Does your dad make you wear that?" It was fine. I knew there were some kids that didn't talk to me because I wore hijab. That didn't bother me because I was like, "Do I want people who wouldn't look at me to be my friends, if I wore hijab, if I didn't wear hijab?" I was like, "I'd rather wear it and know who wouldn't talk to me than not wear it and pretend like I'm one of them."

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Yasmeen Tizani 34:54

Yeah, so hijab. I started wearing hijab in eighth grade. So that was during my time in Muslim private school. And most girls my age at most, and private school already started wearing it. So I was the last one to get my period, and the last one to wear it. And I remember we had a codename for the period in our school for some reason, and we called it "the knuckle." Why the knuckle? I don't remember. I'm sure we had a reasoning though. And whenever anybody got it, we would be like, "Oh my god, they got the knuckle." So dumb. And we were trying to hide it so much from the guys and stuff. One time one of our classmates went in the bathroom, and she got the period in the bathroom at school. And all of us were whispering, and we were like, "Oh my god, she got the knuckle." And the guys were like, "What's the knuckle?" That was, I think, the highlight of our lives. We were like, "Oh my god, it works. The secret code works. They don't know what we're talking about."

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Yasmeen Tizani 38:25

College, I struggled with hijab for a bit. I think there was one point where I was like, "Should I take it off?" Because it felt like - I don't know, it didn't feel like I was wearing it anymore for religion, it just felt like - I guess my iman was at a really low point, so I just didn't feel too attached to it. And I remember one of my college friends being like - her opinion had changed of hijab over the three years we'd known each other. When we first met each other, she wasn't convinced of hijab, and I was, and then over three years, she understood the hijab, and I got to a point where I wasn't convinced of it. And that snapped me out of it to be like - not that I changed someone's opinion, but the fact that I've like completely switched 180 in my opinion of hijab without even realizing it. And then after that, I decided to keep wearing it. I think how I kept wearing it is that I'd realized that I was putting a lot of weight on the hijab that it didn't deserve.

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Yasmeen Tizani 39:14

I decided that no longer was I going to be obsessed. I don't know, I just realized that I was carrying something so heavy without realizing it. I think I was attaching a lot more to the hijab

that it needed to be attached to. I think I just needed to redo my intentions of wearing hijab where I was like, "Okay, a lot of stuff has happened in my life, but when it comes to wearing hijab, I'm wearing it because in the Qur'an, it says to and no other reason." I'm not wearing it to be fashionable. I'm not wearing it to be different. I'm not wearing it to signify that I'm different than others. I'm not wearing it for any other reason except in Islam it says to, and that's it. I feel like if I attached anything else to it, I would crumble. So since that, I've decided that I haven't had a problem with wearing it.



Rimsha Syed 40:15

Yeah, thanks for sharing that. And going back to your schooling experience, whether we're talking about high school or college, did you have any favorite subjects, teachers, anyone who was a mentor, even anyone who inspired you?



Yasmeen Tizani 40:36

I think I'm really bad at keeping up relationships, especially mentorship type of relationships. I've always been in my own world, and I'm just deciding what I want to be and where I want to go and what I want to study. And then whoever can help me there, I approach them, but I think that's something I realized, especially when you have to ask for letters of recommendation, that I'm like, "Dang, I'm really not good at this mentorship stuff, or keeping a mentor around."



Rimsha Syed 41:14

What were some of your favorite subjects? And also, what did you study in undergrad?



Yasmeen Tizani 41:21

Favorite subjects? Middle school, I had none, because I felt like I was going to a summer school, so I didn't feel like I was really learning anything. In high school I really loved physics. It was the first time I took a class, and I was like, "This makes sense. This explains a lot of things." It actually made sense to me. I've always been interested in art, it doesn't feel like a subject, necessarily, I was interested in, but I've always been all about anything that I can be messy in, I'm about it. I love chaos. I don't know, I hate having to - in other classes, you always have to have the right answer. I was very anti- the education system. I was like, "Anything where you can have the wrong answer and still be right, that's what I like." And I think that's why I really like art, because you can just do whatever. And as long as it makes you feel something, you're doing it right.



Yasmeen Tizani 42:39

I decided in eighth grade I wanted to do architecture. I think this is embarrassing but funny, and I'm like, "Dang, I've really changed a lot." Because in middle school, I had an existential crisis, where I was like - We were in history, and we were reading a book about people, and I was like, "One day, we're all gonna die, we're all gonna disappear, and there's gonna be

nothing left of any of us, and we'd be lucky to even make it into any of these books, and there's nothing to signify that we were even here." I don't know why, it was just like, eighth grade Yasmeen Tizani was wilding. And I was like, "Is life even real?" And I decided that, "You know what? If I build buildings, if that's the art form that I go after, then after I pass away, there will be something here to say that I was here." I remember people would tell me, "Oh, you should do fashion." And I look back at what I was wearing in middle school, and I was like, I mean, I love fashion still, but not based off of what I was wearing in middle school.

 Yasmeen Tizani 44:06

And I was looking at art. And the only reason I didn't do art was because I was like, "I don't know how I'm gonna convince my parents. I'm not going to be a starving artist, because that would totally be a possibility." And that was my parents' one thing, which was like, "You can do whatever you want, as long as you're financially stable." And I was like, "You can't guarantee that with art." At least I didn't think so at the time. And so I was like, "Fashion design." But then the existential crisis where I was like, "Clothes literally don't even last a lifetime." And then my friend was talking about interior design, and I looked into that, and I was like, well, if I'm going to design the interior, I might as well design the whole thing. And so in the eighth grade, I decided to do architecture. And then in high school, I went and I did internships, and I did summer programs for architecture. And I did art, AP art, had a portfolio.

 Yasmeen Tizani 45:16

And then I got into different programs, and I decided to go to Texas Tech because they gave me a scholarship. And did my undergrad in architecture. Terrible. Anybody that wants to do architecture, don't. It's not worth it. I think the only reason I'm still in this field is because I have a lot of passion for architecture that I've discovered. When I was kid, and I decided I wanted to do architecture, it was purely because I was like, "That seems the most long-lasting out of all the arts." And then when I finally entered college, I realized that it was a lot of fun, and designing 3D spaces is mind-blowing. And I hope to design some really cool places one day. It's such a hoot. I've never said that phrase, but I don't know what else to describe the kind of passion that I discovered in college for architecture that I have. But that being said, the field is full of old White men that will never retire, and you're gonna be exhausted and exploited and paid way less than what you should be. So I don't recommend it.

 Rimsha Syed 46:40

Is that what you're doing right now?

 Yasmeen Tizani 46:42

[Laughs] Yeah, it is. I had a horrible experience in my first job as an architect. Here's a fun architecture lingo. I'm not allowed to call myself an architect, because I'm not licensed, so I have to say architectural designer, but to anyone that's not in the architecture world, I do architecture. So I'm part of the architecture team. My job is architect. But in the architecture world, that means something different. Yeah, my first job as an architect, terrible. Three

months, and I wanted to quit and go become a graphic designer. But a good friend of mine talked me out of it and was like, "It'll get better." I don't even know what he said. This is what he said. He said, "There's not that many Muslim architects, so stay your ass in." And I was like, "Dang." He really played that card. I felt so guilty. I was like, "You know what?" Anyways, I was also like - I don't know if you've ever been in a terrible job. You just don't quit because you're getting paid. And you're like, "Okay, it couldn't be worse, so I'm just gonna stay here until I figure out what my next move is." And then it ended terribly.



Rimsha Syed 48:09

Agreed. So do you have a dream project or vision in mind that you hopefully want to design at some point?



Yasmeen Tizani 48:09

But my new job that I have is a lot better. I think working remote or the working remote situation has made it so it's very obvious to see what companies are willing to work for their employees and what companies aren't. Because companies that aren't are not at all considering working remote situations. They're like, "You're coming into the office. Doesn't matter." And then companies that are actually providing working remote options are companies I feel like actually care about their employees in some capacity, because I feel like at the end of the day, every company's or firm's job is to make money and to make a profit. But I don't know, treating people as human beings is really hard to come by, and the company I'm working at right now allows working from home, working remote. They work with you and your situation, which is amazing. And I don't think that is at many architecture firms a possibility, or any jobs in general.



Yasmeen Tizani 48:20

I feel like it's corny to say a masjid, but I would like to do a masjid. It feels, to me, corny. To another - it might not sound like that to you, but to me, it feels corny - is after the war's over in Syria, help rebuild. I think it sounds corny because it sounds a little bit White savior, White savior-ish, even though it's my people and my family. They're going through so much, and I'm going through none of it, and I'm just like, "I'll come back when it's all fixed." [Laughs] But yeah.



Rimsha Syed 50:27

Yeah. Well I think that's a beautiful vision. And earlier, you were talking about your trips with your family to Syria and Lebanon. And I would like to jump back to that and just hear about what those trips were like for you. What were you up to? What parts of the country you were in? How often did you go back?



Yasmeen Tizani 50:53

We used to go in the summers. We used to go a month and a half in Syria, and maybe a week

or two in Lebanon. My family in Syria is one of the most loving, most welcoming people ever. We used to go there and live in their apartment, sleep in their beds. And we never felt like outsiders. They were just like, "Yeah, you're one of us." Wake me up at seven in the morning with water in my face to help clean up the apartment, or the shaqa, as we call it. It's a little bit different than an apartment. It's like a full home, but it's all in apartment buildings because there's so many people living there. And also suburbia is, I think, it's uniquely American. I'm struggling to think of other places where suburbia is a really big thing. But I think it's uniquely American, I want to say. But you know what, and it's so funny, because now when people ask me, "Oh, why did you want to do architecture?" I don't tell them the story I told you, because I was so weird as a kid. Who thinks of that? I usually say like, "Oh, when I used to go to Syria, and I used to see all the architecture in Damascus." That's where my family's from, one of the oldest lived in cities in the world. And so it used to be these old buildings, they're centuries old, next to buildings that are modern, and built in the 70s, or even in the 2000s. And it's just glass and stone right next to each other. And honestly, I think it's one of the most beautiful cities I've ever been to, and I miss it so much.

Y

Yasmeen Tizani 52:55

But you know what? I think about it, and I'm like, "It has to have a subconscious impact on my psyche to lead me towards architecture." Because thinking back, that's what I remember most is the architecture. And I remember feeling that totally cliché feeling I feel of immigrant experiences, where it's like you don't feel American at all, and then you go overseas, and you're like, "Oh shit, I'm American." All your cousins are like, "Yeah, you're American. Don't for one second think you're one of us." And you're like, "Oh frick, who am I? I'm not one of them, and I'm not one of y'all." Yeah, I think it's a really cliché feeling. And I feel like people our age - I feel like it's really childish to hang onto that feeling. I see a lot of Muslim-American comedians, that's their whole bit, from beginning to end is, "I'm not one of them, but I'm not one of y'all." And I think we can reach a little bit deeper than that. I think we're past that. I'm not dismissing the feeling at all, but I think if you make that your whole personality, you're losing your personality. Yeah.

Y

Yasmeen Tizani 54:20

I think an overview of my life is that I've grown up in Texas, and what people usually view as Texans is not what I am. But out of all my identities, that's the one I feel like I identify as the most. And all my friends are Texan, whether they want to say it or not. But I grew up in a mostly Muslim community, but in America, and then was forced into but also wanted to go to public school. I never decided to go to public school. My parents decided for me. I wasn't against it. I was like, "Sure, why not." But I was from a Muslim community forced into an American one, and it made me so angry. And then I shut off the anger when I went to college, because I decided it wasn't beneficial for me anymore. And slowly, but surely, I've been trying to get some of it back. Because I feel like I lost a big part of myself when I decided that I would no longer talk about politics, and I would no longer be a spokesperson for Islam. I decided all that for myself when I first entered college, and I think it was right for the time being, but I think I maybe went way too hard. And just trying to gain some of that back now. And me as a person, Tizani, I'm the kind of person - and now I've come to accept it, whereas I used to shy away from it before. Where I'm the type of person to be pursuing multiple careers, if not one,

and I'm always busy, and I'm always trying to accomplish many things. And that's what brings me happiness, I think [laughs]. I think. It's just, I want to do it all, and I don't care at what cost. Yeah.



Rimsha Syed 56:48

Yeah. Speaking of being Texan, do you see yourself living here long-term?



Yasmeen Tizani 56:54

You know something? I think there's different parts. So because I do so much, sometimes I feel like I compartmentalize myself, but my architecture side, architecture-wise, I think the architecture in Texas is so interesting, and there's so much potential. And this is the next big - this is kind of colonialist, but this is the next big frontier in terms of architecture. I just feel like California had - okay, so Eastern America is all architecture that's influenced by Europe. None of it is uniquely American. And then once you get to Chicago, kind of, that's when there was a big movement there, of uniquely American architecture, and California had the same wave, where it was an exploration of architecture, and a lot of architects were involved in that. I think Texas is the next one, and the South in general. And I want a lot of it to be influenced by the need of people here who this is their land. And I think there's so much to learn from the architecture they built. And I think that's disregarded a lot in architecture. So in architecture-wise, I see a lot of potential here.




Yasmeen Tizani 58:34

But for me to be able to do anything about it, I think I need to be licensed, and I need to have more experience. And the type of experience I want, though, I don't think any of it is in Texas, at the same time. Like all these established architecture firms and established architecture schools are not in Texas. They're either in New York or California. And if I'm wrong, someone tell me, but that's what I've learned. So I want to go get those experiences and come back. But then the other part of me is like, "I've been here my whole life. Every time I travel to bigger cities, I feel alive." And I just have to make a decision of - Actually, I don't. I think eventually I will figure out whether this is somewhere I want to invest and plant myself in, or if it's somewhere else. Because our parents, most of us immigrants, they left their roots, which go so deep into the land. The communities my mom and dad left, I will never know communities like that. Those communities that they left, their families, they've been there for generations, if not centuries. And my parents were the ones who put down roots here, but I'm the next one to decide where those roots are going to be for the next generation.



Rimsha Syed 1:00:20


Right, well, thanks for sharing that with me. And so this is going back to the conversation we had last time about who the "real" quote-unquote Texans are. And I wanted to hear from you, what is one thing you wish people who are not from Texas knew about Texas, as well as the people who make up Texas?

 Yasmmeen Tizani 1:00:48

Okay, I think a big part of activism, right, or talking about discrimination, and racism, and civil rights. I think this has been true for maybe longer than I have been alive, that people in the North think that people in the South are racist. But they don't realize that we all live in America. Just because you're in the northern part of it doesn't mean that racism doesn't exist there. And at the same time, doesn't mean that the South isn't a thriving place, especially as a White person, you shouldn't look down on the south. And I think I saw this somewhere, where it was pointing out all the big civil rights leaders, that most of them came from the South. So put some respect on our name, kind of. And again, I think it's so hard because I want to be like, "Texas is this, and Texas was that," but I grew up in such a bubble. I forget sometimes that I'm in Texas. I'll go to Dallas, or I go to the Capitol sometimes, and I'll see Trump supporters, and I'm like, "Y'all live here?" I'm like, "This is my state. What are y'all doing here?"

 Yasmmeen Tizani 1:02:45

So I think Texas is a lot more than just like hillbillies and cowboys. But I find it so hard to say that Texas is progressive, or Texas is people of color, or etc, etc, because it's not. And Houston is one of the most diverse cities in America. And a lot of people are surprised when they hear that, but if you've ever been to Houston, then you wouldn't be. I just wish or hope as the state grows, that the parts of it that accept and embrace diversity is the part that grows and not the other part, which I think it will. I don't know. But I feel like it's hard for me personally to say what Texas is and isn't, because I did grow up in a bubble. But my Texas is mostly people of color.

 Rimsha Syed 1:03:57

Right. I think that makes total sense. And so transitioning here a little, I wanted to ask you about your hobbies and what you like to do in your free time.

 Yasmmeen Tizani 1:04:10

Yeah, so this is one of those things where I think it's been a long time since I've sat down and talked about all of myself with one person, because every time you meet someone, there's a certain side of yourself that you talk about, and so you forget all the other sides that exist. But growing up, I was in every sport. That's something that I failed to mention, is my mom, my parents put us in gymnastics. I did mention karate, but it wasn't the only one. I was in soccer. I was in tennis one summer. I think I was in basketball for a hot minute, but it's not really for me. I was into a lot of sports. I still play soccer every now and then. I'll play volleyball against my will, because it's a social activity. Hobbies, I guess drawing is a hobby. So I paint, but I haven't painted - Actually, I painted pretty recently. I think in November I painted something. I wish I could paint more frequently, but I think I want to say I'm in a rut, but I've been in a rut for a minute. So I think it's a motivation thing, actually. I think I just need to stop procrastinating. It's one of those things where it's like, "Oh, self-care, don't push yourself." But it's like, "No, I've relaxed long enough. I need to do stuff." I even put a deadline for myself, and for the first time ever, I didn't meet that deadline, which is crazy. So I need to work on that.





Yasmeen Tizani 1:05:55

But other than that, it's so wild, because my hobbies is literally just creating organizations. I just started working on a twenties and thirties Muslims in Austin group. I think I want to start a chapter from a different organization though here in Austin, for Muslim professionals. That way we get to meet each other, because again, our parents came here, they put down roots. So we have masjid, but nothing else. We need more things to connect the community, maybe in a more efficient way. Painting, ice skating, I'm learning how to skateboard, fashion is another hobby. I feel like everything except for sports, if it's my hobby, there's a good chance that I'm doing it professionally. Because I just never take anything halfway. Like art and fashion, I'm looking at getting some headshots done, so I can maybe model for some companies. Art, I've been doing art shows since college. I think I have over maybe twenty exhibitions. My next goal is to do a solo exhibition. I have some books and some magazines I want to publish. Some comic books, maybe.



Yasmeen Tizani 1:07:25

Yeah, they're just like, as long as I'm being - I don't know what it is. It's interesting, because I don't know if I really consider myself a creative person, which sounds so weird to say, because everything I do is creative. But I just never - I don't know. It's not a label that I ever was like, "Yeah, I'm a creative person." It just sounds like - I think everyone is creative. Maybe that's why I don't really take it too seriously, the word "creative," because I think anyone can be creative. But yeah, as long as I'm doing creative things. It's not even that I'm happy, I just need to do it. It just needs to happen. It's so weird.



Rimsha Syed 1:08:19

So what kind of art mediums do you prefer?



Yasmeen Tizani 1:08:24

Watercolor. I've tried - watercolor, a hundred percent. If I do any acrylics, that's because I have a bunch of leftover acrylic paint from classes I've taken, and I have a bunch of canvases that I can't waste. They're so big. We're in a Zoom call, but I can show you. They're right next to me. Here's one of a hijabi woman holding a phone and a book. It's not done yet. I'm gonna make it pink and glittery. I haven't added the pink and I'm not finished with the paint. This is an empty watercolor piece that I want to do eventually. Here's one that I started. It has a black border and a white inside, and I want to make it a propaganda poster, like a communist one. Again, I started this before Ramadan. Here's this one. This one is my favorite one I've done so far. It's called *Democracy Is Coming*, and it's a bunch of illustrated bombs falling on top of a hijabi woman's head who's wearing glasses. I had the text here, that "Democracy is coming," but I kind of like it without the text.



Rimsha Syed 1:10:07

Those are beautiful. Thank you for sharing. I had a question in mind that I totally just spaced on.



Yasmeen Tizani 1:10:18

I even want to pitch ideas for TV shows. I'm all over the place. That's a thing where I think I said it earlier, that I want to do it all at any cost. Yeah.



Rimsha Syed 1:10:37

Yeah. No, I love that you're interested in so many different things. I feel like you're a person who's never bored.



Yasmeen Tizani 1:10:46

Yeah, I have to make time for myself to slow down, because then I won't, and I burn out. So I do have burnouts. But it's so hard. I'm like, "I need to make more me-time." But I'm also the kind of person that never says no to hanging out. So before I know it, my whole week is filled with things to do. It's just adulting. Just learning how to adult.



Rimsha Syed 1:11:20

Right, trying to find that balance. Definitely. So I'm looking at the clock here, and I don't want to take up too much more of your time. My last question is very open-ended. Seeing as this is an oral history interview, it will be archived, it'll be documented, hopefully someone down the line several years from now might be listening to it. And things might have changed a lot, or maybe a little by that time. And I just wanted to broadly ask if you had any advice, anything about yourself, or anything we talked about today that you would like to put out there.



Yasmeen Tizani 1:12:05

Advice. I was thinking about this earlier. And when I was in college I was given a lot of advice on whether to join small companies when I graduated versus big companies, because smaller companies, you get more experience, but bigger companies - All I heard was negative things about bigger companies. And I worked at small companies, and then I worked at a big company, and I realized I liked the bigger company more. And I think takeaway is - and I had a feeling too. I was hearing all this negative stuff about working in a bigger company, and I let it get to me. But I think I said this earlier, too, which is trust your intuition. If you have a plan for yourself, and someone older than you or someone more experienced than you gives you advice, don't take it to heart, which is kind of funny, because I'm giving you advice right now. But I think you know what's best for you. I think that's my thing.



Rimsha Syed 1:13:18

All right. Well, thank you so much for sharing and for your time today. I'm going to go ahead and stop the recording.