

Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez

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SPEAKERS

Rimsha Syed, Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez



Rimsha Syed 00:04

Hi, this is Rimsha Syed. I am the program coordinator with IDCL. The date is June 11, 2021. I am currently in Austin, Texas on a Zoom call with Sakinah Gutierrez for the Texas Muslim Voices oral history project. How are you doing today Sakinah?



Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 00:24

I'm good, thank you. How are you?



Rimsha Syed 00:27

Good. I'm really happy to have you here. For starters, would you like to tell us a little bit about yourself and also where you're joining the call from today?



Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 00:40

Yes, so I am joining the call from Houston, Texas. My name is Sandy Gutierrez, but my Muslim nickname is Sakinah, so a lot of people know me as Sakinah. I am a graphic designer by trade. I have my own advertising agency as well as a nonprofit organization we founded in 2001 after becoming Muslim, and it's called IslamInSpanish. We educate Latinos about Islam in the Spanish language. We also have an Islamic center,

IslamInSpanish Centro Islamico. It's the first of its kind, founded and run by Latino Muslims. So that's my work life. I am married, and I have three girls, alhamdulillah. My family is from Colombia, South America, and I was [born and] raised here in Houston as well and in Stockton, California back in the 80s. So yeah, that's me.



Rimsha Syed 02:02

Wow, thank you for that. How long have you been in Houston, Texas? Have you lived anywhere else aside from that, within Texas or anywhere else?



Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 02:15

Yes, my parents migrated from Colombia in the 70s, and I was the first generation to be born here in Houston, Texas. Then when I was around five or so we moved to Stockton, California. I lived there throughout my elementary years. Then we came back when I was ten to Houston, and we've been here ever since. I became Muslim and got married. Both my husband and I converted to Islam [in 2001]. We decided we wanted to learn the Arabic language, so that we can read the Qur'an and understand it more in depth from its [original] language, Arabic. [In 2006] we went to Egypt for a year, so I've lived in Egypt, as well.



Rimsha Syed 03:19

Wow. So you mentioned that both you and your husband converted to Islam, and I'm very curious about what influenced that decision and how you both went about that process, both individually and as a team.



Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 03:38

Yes, so my husband and I, we were dating in college, [but have] known each other for a long time, since middle school we've been friends. When we got to college, we linked on a different level, and now we realize we were kind of on this journey of finding purpose of life and a deeper connection than just being young and having fun, and all of that. So in the midst of that, we would go to different temples, we would study different philosophies, and at one point in time just before really studying about Islam, we were into Kabbalah which is an ancient Jewish mysticism philosophy, and we were studying that and had become vegetarian and were just changing a lot of our lifestyle.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 04:55

But then in one of our classes at Kabbalah - our instructor who's from Mexico, and would [give] the class in Spanish, and knew Hebrew, and had been to Israel and things, he [spoke] about the three monotheistic religions, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Whenever he spoke about Islam and the Qur'an, he spoke about the Qur'an being the Word of God, and that it had never been changed. He spoke a little bit about how the Muslims pray, [connecting] five times a day [with God], and things like that. It really attracted me personally, my husband as well. We had Muslim friends at the time that were just hanging out with us too, and doing youthful, crazy things. So we knew of the term Islam and Muslims, but not really in depth the theology behind it. So we became curious after that class as to wanting to get a hold of a Qur'an. We asked one of our friends if they could get us a Qur'an or talk to us a little bit about it. Our friend was like, "You need to speak to my mom, she's a convert." And she had married his dad, who was Egyptian.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 06:29

When we went to visit her, indeed, she had converted, she used to be a nun. She was in a convent before she learned about Islam. She was well-versed in the Bible, and then after leaving the convent, she went back to college, and that's when she met her husband and married. Then after being married for eight years, she ended up converting because of the influence that he had, just his devotion to Islam and praying. He never forced anything on her. She just observed him and she learned kind of on her own in secret [laughs]. She decided to convert. Just hearing her story, and then her now knowing the Qur'an and knowing about Islam, she had a lot of resources for us to study. She gave us [our first] Qur'an.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 07:33

Once we started to read the Qur'an, there was no looking back. We didn't want to continue learning about anything else, we felt that we found something that was fulfilling. Every time we read, anytime we had a question, when we wanted clarity, there was always an answer to everything. So we continued to read the Qur'an on our own, until it got to a point where she encouraged us to learn Arabic. Our journey is kind of together, so that's why I'm saying, "Us." But she had mentioned that there was this class that we could join, and it was the explanation of the Qur'an, from the Arabic text from an instructor who had studied. It's a science called tafsir of Qur'an. We started going to classes every week. After about six months of that, we have our individual stories of how we ended up converting, but we converted a week apart. Then a month later we married as Muslims.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 08:56

But the thing that drew me, that was very clear for me wanting to accept Islam or continue on this path of learning Islam, was when she explained the concept of God and Jesus. I come from a Catholic background. I wouldn't say that we were very practicing. But we did go to church on Sunday. We did celebrate Christmas, but not necessarily the way that we did when we were in Colombia during Christmas time. In Colombia, you have the novena, where every day, you go and you do prayers, and you go to church and you light candles and things like that, it's more rituals, whereas here in America, you're just preparing for Christmas Eve, and you do a prayer that day. So we weren't very practicing, I would say, but I did believe just from what I was taught that Jesus and God, and the Holy Spirit was one altogether. Combined, made this one God, and that we did pray to the Virgin Mary. And there was also saints, but I was never really taught to pray to the saints, just you always mentioned, Jesus and the Virgin Mary.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 10:39

The sister who was answering our questions, she explained that God is one, and He has no partners, and whenever we worship, we worship Him alone and directly, and that Jesus was a messenger, and he was sent by God with miracles to help guide the people. He was an example. His mother is the Virgin Mary, and we do revere her very highly, but we do not pray to her or him, they are just examples, they walked on Earth just like us. That, to me, seemed very clear and easy to accept, because one thing that I felt whenever I wanted to reach out to God, or pray in a time of fear or just whatever emotion that I was in, and I wanted to reach out to God, I would always feel a sense of confusion. I didn't know if I should say, "God," I didn't know if I should call out to Jesus, I didn't know if I should call out to the Virgin Mary. At what point in time do you call out to who? So for Islam to simplify it to just the creator of the heavens and the earth, the creator of Jesus, the creator of everything, and it's just you and Him directly, and you don't have to go through anything or anyone. It's a direct connection, He hears and sees us right now, you just call out to Him. That was very, very appealing to me. It just felt like a burden was lifted off of my shoulder, I didn't feel confused anymore. I just felt like this was for me.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 12:41

So after hearing that, that was really the thing that made me want to continue to learn, and I kept going to classes. In my classes, I would actually wear the hijab, the veil to class. First, it was just out of respect for the other sisters that were there wearing hijab, but then it became a thing that I enjoyed wearing, and then we would actually pray with the group whenever it was time to pray, even though we weren't Muslim. It was almost like I was

practicing Islam without actually having testified verbally, but it was in my heart and in my actions. My husband and I had already kind of let go of going out and drinking or whatever [you do] when you go out with your friends. Really, a lot of our friends were kind of fading away, the ones that we used to do those things with. So really, our weekends were kind of spending time either together studying Qur'an, or I was hanging out with the sisters, and he was hanging out with the brothers. That kind of became our life.

Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 14:20

S And then my husband was invited with a group of brothers to travel to Florida for a trip that they do, where it's like, 3,000 Muslims, and they gathered in Florida. It was kind of like a retreat. He wasn't Muslim, and they invited him, and we're young, I was twenty-one, he was twenty-three. So he's like, "Yeah, I want to go on a cheap trip to Florida. I like traveling." So he accepted the offer and he went with them. Basically on his trip, that's when he became Muslim. He ended up learning a lot. And my husband, who is Colombian, too, he met another Colombian Muslim there, which was just so amazing. Out of 3,000 Muslims, you found someone from your country that had embraced Islam, and they just spent the whole time talking to each other about Islam and how Islam had so many great solutions for the country that the country could benefit from. Then by the end of their conversation, the brother is like, "Okay, you say that Islam is so great for our country, but you haven't accepted it for yourself. You should consider accepting it for yourself." So he did. And there's a lot more details to his story. But just as a summary, that's where he became Muslim.

Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 16:08

S Whenever he called me to let me know that he had become Muslim, that evening I was hanging out with the sisters, and I was watching videos about Islam with them. We were just having a sisters' gathering, and a sister had asked me that night, how come I had not accepted Islam, or had I not considered doing my testification, because when you become Muslim, the way that you become Muslim, or you accept Islam, is that you testify in Arabic or in English a certain statement, that "there's only one God worthy of worship, and that the Prophet Muhammad is a messenger of God." I hadn't done that yet, and they asked me, like, "When were you going to do it? Or are you thinking about it?" And that night, I just thought to myself, "Well, I mean, wow, I'm pretty much practicing [Islam]. I'm wearing hijab to the classes and to the sisters' gatherings, and I'm going to classes to study the Qur'an, and I'm praying with people and there's a lot of things that I left from my previous lifestyle just naturally." It wasn't something that I desired anymore. I had this physical change, but I hadn't testified to it.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 17:48

So I really was contemplating like, "Yeah, that's really the only thing I have left." And then that's when my husband calls me and tells me that same night that he had become Muslim. So I kind of just broke down like, "Oh my God, it's amazing how I was having the same feeling while he was out there in Florida [taking] his Shahada." I told him, "Well, maybe it's time for me to do it as well." But I wanted to wait until he came back. Then at the next class with our instructor and the group that we had been studying with, the following week, that's when I took my Shahada. We took our Shahada one week apart.



Rimsha Syed 18:38

Wow. Thank you so much for sharing that journey with me, it was really insightful to hear about your experience and your husband's experience. I was curious about if your family was receptive to your decision to become Muslim.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 18:56

Yes, so my parents knew that I was studying Islam. I always just had a really open relationship with them, and just letting them know what I was into. They knew that I, before Islam, was going to different temples and churches and things like that with my husband. We would have a camera and interview people and ask them questions about their faith. We were just always really curious. So then when I started to learn about Islam and take classes about Islam, they also knew. They were aware that I was studying Islam. When I decided to become Muslim, and I let them know that I became Muslim, it wasn't like, "What is Islam? What is Muslim?" because they knew that I was studying it. From my father, he was like, "As long as you're with God, that's all that matters, and I'm okay with that."

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 20:09

But for my mother, it was hard because I made the choice the day that I became Muslim that I would wear the veil, the hijab. From day one, I started to wear the hijab. That was, I think, the hardest thing for my mom. I don't even think that it was anything to do with the religion, but it was just like my appearance was so obvious and it's so different. All praise due to God that now in Colombia, there's a mosque or community in almost all the major cities in Colombia. But before that, twenty years ago, when I became Muslim, nobody knew anything about Islam and Muslims, and I had become Muslim three months before September 11. After I became

Muslim, three months later, that's when people were on alert [about] Islam and Muslims, but not in the best light. Already, there was no knowledge on Islam and Muslims, and whatever there was, it was probably just some negative image from films or media and whatnot. [Her] not understanding what Islam was, and then I'm putting on a veil. For her, it was like I was trying to be something else that I'm not. For her, she felt that I was trying to change my culture, she thought I wanted to be Arab, or that I was being somehow influenced in a way that was outside of my own will. So it was really hard for her.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 22:18

But I understand that, because first of all, I'm the only daughter, I have two brothers. My mom, in Colombia, was a beauty queen in her neighborhood and her country. So being the only daughter, obviously, she wants me to be like her. Then all of a sudden, I'm just covering my hair and dressing more modestly. It was really hard for her. At the beginning, she didn't want to go anywhere with me, not even family gatherings or whatnot. That was hard for me, too, but I totally understand her. But my dad was cool, and he's always been cool. The funny thing is that my mom, being the one who gave me the hardest time, and she's the one that said, "I would never become Muslim. I'm gonna die a Catholic." She actually ended up becoming Muslim four years later. So that's a whole other story.



Rimsha Syed 23:31

Wow, that's really beautiful to hear that she also ended up accepting Islam, and I'm assuming that you had a really big part of that decision.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 23:42

I hope so.



Rimsha Syed 23:45

Speaking of the hijab, and also of 9/11, I was curious if you've had any encounters with Islamophobia since you started wearing the veil.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 23:55

You know, it's funny. Whenever I look back, especially in, I would say, the first ten years of Islam, even fifteen years, I have to say that I never felt any Islamophobia. I can't say that

that's the same for many, because I've heard some encounters from people that I know. Very few, maybe a handful of actual physical attacks and things like that, but even just looks or things that people might say, whatever, I've never had any of that. But I wonder sometimes if it's because I wasn't necessarily looking for it. I say that very lightly because I'm not better than anyone. My parents are really outgoing, open-minded, and just very kind people. They're very positive, and I feel like that's part of my character, and I'm always the first one to smile, or say hi to someone, so I guess I never saw that. I could have been naive.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 25:26

But later, I would say maybe like fifteen years later, maybe within the last five years, I probably had a car on the freeway try to come next to me and kind of intimidate me or whatever. I had my children in the car, so obviously, I felt nervous. But other than maybe that and another time, maybe someone staring at me, or whatever, I really don't feel like I've had that too much. The only thing that I would say that does bother me because it's like, every single time - except actually last week, I went to Florida, and I didn't have this problem. But every single time I've traveled, I've always been the random person to get patted down and checked and stuff like that. That's the only part that I would say that was consistent in regards to feeling a little bit discriminated [against]. But honestly, I wouldn't put myself in that category, that I've really felt any type of Islamophobia.



Rimsha Syed 26:41

Well, that's good news. I wanted to jump back to something you mentioned a little bit earlier in the interview about briefly living in Egypt. I would love to hear more about that. Was that to study Arabic more in depth? Or was it for another reason that you were spending time in Egypt?

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 27:05

Yes, so this was 2006. My husband, ever since we became Muslim, he had friends that were students studying Islam in Medina. He was always kind of feeling like he wanted to go and study as well, to be able to come back and teach people about Islam and whatnot. But he's an only child, and in Islam, respect and honor to our parents - after God comes your mother and your father. He obviously had to have the blessing of his mom, and she wasn't Muslim at the time. She is now, thank God. So she didn't understand the importance of going, or his desire to want to go and study and so she always would say, "No, I want you to be here." And [since] he's the only child, all of his teachers,

would say, "You should really stay and be with your mom, you need to honor her. It's more of a blessing that you stay here with her, especially because she's not Muslim, and you have a greater responsibility with her than going to study overseas."

S Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 28:40

So we did, we stayed, but then after five years of being Muslim, my husband told her like, "Okay, fine, I'm giving this up, I'm not going to ask you anymore. But this is why I'm staying, because in Islam, we honor our mothers, and we have to have their blessing, we have to respect that and honor that, and I want to do that. So I'm staying." But he asked her, "I'm staying for you because of Islam. Is there anything that you don't like about Islam?" And she said, "No, there's nothing that I don't like about Islam." And he said, "Okay, well then, why won't you accept Islam? Would you accept Islam?" And she said, "Yes, I have no problem with that." So she ended up taking her Shahada, and saying her testification that day when he told her, "Okay, I give up, I give up. I'm not going to ask you anymore if I can go study or have your blessing to go study."

S Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 30:08

So that lesson in Islam of honoring, respecting your mother and that that's more important than your desire and will to go study Islam, it has a higher level, is what brought her and softened her heart to come to Islam, and that's exactly what his teacher would tell him. That was such a blessing. But then after a year or so, we got the opportunity to go to Egypt and study the Arabic language, the Fu'sha, which is the classical Arabic, which is what's in the Qur'an, the text, the Fu'sha Arabic. [You see], going to study overseas, was a four to eight year [commitment] - I mean, some people go for eight years, some people go for six years. It was a long term thing. But going to study Arabic [in Egypt] was just a one year commitment. So he asked her if it was cool if we go for a year [since] learning Arabic, that would help a lot to be able to study more in depth, the Qur'an and [Islam]. She was like, "Yes, I'm okay with that." She understood even more now being Muslim, and now studying the Qur'an and practicing Islam. Now, she knew the importance and understood why we had the desire to go. So she gave him the blessing.

S Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 31:45

Then we finally went to Egypt for one year. We would have stayed longer, and they were actually thinking about coming to stay with us in Egypt, but I got pregnant with my second child. I just needed a lot more attention, just family support and whatnot. So we decided to come back after a year. But focus was to go and study Arabic,

the Arabic text of the Qur'an, and my husband, he was able to study, and now he reads and writes fluently in Arabic and speaks fluently in Arabic. I, on the other hand, studied the basics, and I was able to read, and I can read and write, but I can't have a conversation. At least not anymore, because once I got pregnant, as I mentioned - I was just very ill when I was pregnant. I had to stop studying and just focus on my pregnancy and being healthy. I was able to have conversations with the locals and was able to take the taxi and order my groceries and just basics. But then of course, if you don't use the language, you lose it, right. So I pretty much lost it, but I can still read it and write it. So that was our purpose. We didn't work or anything, we had saved up and used our savings. We stayed and focused on learning Arabic full time for a year.



Rimsha Syed 33:34

Right, yeah. I totally understand what you're saying about the language and how you have to consistently speak it to retain that knowledge. I took three years of Arabic in college and was not fluent but was able to hold conversations like you said, like groceries, taxi, but now I'm not too sure if I would be able to do that. I want to transition a little and talk about your Texan identity, if that's even something you identify with. Generally speaking, how do you feel about Texas, about living here, and do you see yourself in Texas for the long term?



Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 34:25

It's funny because I never really mention Texas, it's always just Houston, I refer to Houston. But now, since a lot of people have migrated from the East Coast or the West Coast, especially the East Coast, they refer to where they're from by state, like, "I'm from New York. New Jersey." Whereas Texas is so big, you go by city. We're like, "I'm from Houston. I'm from Dallas." We never say Texas. People ask you "Where are you from?" I'm like, "From Houston." I don't say Texas, but then when someone from the East Coast refers to where they're currently living or where we're from, they'll be like, "We're in Texas." I'm like, "Texas is so big. Where in Texas?"



Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 35:21

But yeah, I'm definitely an H-Town girl, and I was raised in Alief, which is an area in southwest Houston that's known to be the most diverse area in Houston, and I know Houston's one of the most diverse in the nation. But Alief is the most diverse in Houston. I don't know anyone who's from Alief, that's not proud to be from Alief. We're all so very proud to be from Alief, because we just grew

up in such a diverse community. We've had our struggles, me and my husband, growing up in Alief high schools in the 90s. There were gangs and shootouts and things like that, you have all of that. I mean, we have plenty of stories growing up like that. But there was still that sense of diversity. You had friends from just everywhere, you had the Latino, the Central Americans, the South Americans, you had the Vietnamese, the Japanese. I don't remember interacting too much with South Asians. I remember that they were there. I mean, I had Egyptian friends, but people from India, Pakistan, I knew them from my classroom, but I guess I didn't really hang out [with them]. They were very quiet.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 37:15

But yeah, we were so super diverse, American, African-American, and we all got along. I mean, outside of school, yeah, you have your different gangs growing up and whatnot. But it was really cool. Anytime you meet someone who's from Alief, right away, you have this connection. There's pride in being from Alief, Houston, Texas. We've had plenty of opportunities to be able to move away from Houston, just because of the business that we do. Aso, from our nonprofit, there's a high demand in wanting to nurture the growth in the Latino community becoming Muslim. Because we have created an organization that nurtures that, there's so many cities that want us to come out and be able to build community, like we've been able to build here in Houston, as well as in Dallas.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 38:40

But I have family here, my husband has family here, and this is just where we're from. We feel a big sense of responsibility to make sure that what we've been able to create, here in Houston, that we make sure that it's stable and that it will be something that's institutionalized, so that it will live on after us. As of right now, we're good. We've decided to settle here and our kids are growing, and I think we're good for now. But we definitely always kind of have our eye out on [places to go] - Colombia was a big one for us until recently, they've been having some political issues and whatnot. Then the pandemic has shifted a lot of things everywhere. Colombia was definitely somewhere that we always wanted to [go to live]. We would go to Colombia every summer with our kids every summer until the pandemic happened. We haven't been back for a couple of years. We still are very much connected to our culture and our family back home, and we love it. If you ask us where we want to go, if there weren't any issues politically or health-wise, Colombia is number one for us.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 40:18

But now, just looking at circumstances, we're just - maybe Florida or something, just have somewhere where there's a really nice beach because the closest thing we have to a

beach over here is Galveston, and it's nothing like Florida or California, and I have family in Florida too. Florida is something that we think about, at least for vacation, and maybe in the future for retirement. I mean, we're still very young.



Rimsha Syed 40:56

How old are your kids now?



Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 40:59

My oldest just turned sixteen. She'll be a junior next year in high school. Our middle one is thirteen. She'll be in eighth grade. Then my little one is six. She'll be starting first grade next year. So I have a high schooler, middle schooler, and then elementary.



Rimsha Syed 41:18

Yeah, a big range. I was gonna ask what sort of things you do at home to stay connected to your culture.



Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 41:31

Well, we're very family oriented. We get together with my brothers, and [my husband's] parents, and my parents. We'll still cook traditional foods, beans and rice, chicken and soups, and on special occasions, like birthdays, or even holidays now. The great thing is that our family has grown as far as being Muslim, where we were the first ones to become Muslim, and then my little brother - I'm nine years older than him. He became Muslim two years after we did. He was fifteen when he embraced Islam. I'm sorry, my father-in-law became Muslim three months after we did. Then my little brother, and then my mom and my mother-in-law. Now my brother who became Muslim, he's married, and [his wife] became Muslim maybe a couple of years after they married, and then they have two kids. So our Muslim family has grown. It's pretty cool.



Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 42:55

So we are able to celebrate Eid or other Islamic holidays with them. We still include my [father, he is] not Muslim yet. He's very inclined to Islam. We give him his space and everything, but he's really proud of us, and he supports us and everything. So on holidays and special occasions, we'll do other things that are more traditional for holidays, like empanadas, which are meat and potato patties, fried plantain, tres leches cake, things like that,

that are more common in holidays. But yeah, we still cook our Colombian dishes. Whenever we decorate, instead of saying, "Ramadan mubarak," which is Arabic, we say, "Feliz Ramadan" or "Feliz Eid," we flip it into Spanish.



Rimsha Syed 44:22

Thank you for sharing. Jumping back to you talking about graphic design when you introduced yourself, I wanted to hear a little bit more about what you do with that and if that's something you studied in college.



Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 44:39

Yes, so I began college studying marketing at University of Houston. Then when I became Muslim, my husband and I realized that Muslims weren't doing the best job at being able to present Islam to the general public, which became very apparent, after September 11. We became Muslim, and three months later, September 11 happened, and everybody wanted to know, "What is Islam, and who are the Muslims?" That's unfortunate, because we should be able to have an open dialogue and be able to have material available in every language for people who want to understand and know more. I had always liked marketing, but I realized that I enjoyed the design part of marketing, which is the visual part of marketing. Then I transferred over to graphic design, and my husband and I enrolled into the Art Institute of Houston.



Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 46:13

I enrolled into graphic design, and he was always into film, that's why we would go to the churches with a camera and stuff like that. He enrolled into the multimedia and film program. We were at the Art Institute of Houston together. We graduated with honors, both of us. We were married, and we were going through the program together, and we had decided that - because it was so important for us, first of all, when we became Muslim, to have to explain to our family members what Islam was, because as I mentioned before, there was very little information about Islam in their countries. Then being here in America, not knowing too much either. September 11 happens, and it's like, you had to kind of speed up the process to really try to make them understand that what they're seeing and what they're hearing on the news, and the media is not what we have subscribed ourselves to, it's not what we have understood and learned about Islam. That is not Islam.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 47:29

So we kind of made a promise to each other and to God that we, with whatever skills and talents that He had blessed us with, that we were going to help the cause of Islam and being able to teach our people the truth about Islam and Muslims. Thus, that's how our project - which at that time was just a passion project - IslamInSpanish, that's how it started. While we were in school, I created the logo for IslamInSpanish. We started to create audiobooks from texts that were translated from Arabic to Spanish that were not available here in America. We had gotten access to them, and we were given permission to turn them into audio books. My husband was doing the audio engineering, my father-in-law who had become Muslim, he was reading the books, or he would read the books and then do a summary of the book. That's what we were producing were audio books in Spanish explaining what Islam was.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 49:07

I was creating the packaging for it. It was a family thing that my husband and I and my father-in-law started, which now has become so much more than just a CD. But yeah, graphic design was my first entry into the work field and my career. My first job was at Tyson Foods, which is a big company that produces meats and they sell them in the grocery stores. So I was part of the packaging design team here in Houston Tyson Foods, and then I got pregnant with my first child after a year at Tyson Foods, so I quit my job to focus on my pregnancy, cause my pregnancies for some reason are always really hard on me. I stayed home and my husband was working as the marketing director and designer for Lovett Homes, which is a high-scale development company. They develop, like \$500,000 and above homes here in Houston, a well known company. So that was how we started, and then we were doing that for a few years, and I would work from home doing freelance work.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 50:44

Then we realized that we wanted to be independent, we had the capability of being independent. So as of [2004], right before we left for Egypt, we became independent, and we created our advertising agency called FocusPoint Studios. That's been our business ever since. We currently have clients. Now we do more digital marketing, since a lot of things are going online. I'm more of a creative director, so I direct our designers. But every now and then I get in there if I feel like I want to design something. I've always had a niche for creating logos. Whenever we have a new client that needs something like that, or a facelift to their branding, I'll sometimes get in there and sketch something up, and it's fun, but I'm more on the directing side and obviously running the business is a whole other monster.



Rimsha Syed 52:07

I think it's really cool the way you combined your passion for Islam and graphic design and started your own business. It seems like you're doing something similar within the IslamInSpanish community as well.



Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 52:20

Yes, so that's exactly what we did, everything that we offer our clients is what we offer IslamInSpanish the organization. It's a blessing to be able to use all the skills, - which really was our intention from the beginning - that we were blessed with to help the cause of promoting and educating people about Islam who otherwise wouldn't know, because of the lack of information that's out there, or resources, and the language barrier. For us, it's like we feel indebted to do it, because we really feel like God, He guided us to the truth. He guided us to something that really, we have benefited, and our family has benefited from. We live a really healthy life. We understand our purpose, and we have direction, and we have something to offer our family and our children, and we just want to share that with the world, whether they accept it for themselves or not as long as they can have a better understanding of it. If they're able to benefit from it, that's the least we can do to kind of give back for what has been given to us.



Rimsha Syed 54:03

That's beautiful. Sakinah, I'm looking at the clock, and I want to be mindful of our time today. I do have one last question for you. It's a little bit open-ended, so feel free to take your time. Seeing as this is an oral history interview, the hope is that somebody will be listening to it maybe fifty or a hundred years down the line. I wanted to ask generally, if you had a message or statement or any sort of piece of advice that you want to put out there.



Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 54:35

Yes, so I've been Muslim for twenty years now. It's 2021. And I'm going on my twenty year anniversary. Actually, just the other day I became a twenty-year-[old] Muslim.



Rimsha Syed 54:56

Congratulations.

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Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 54:57

Thank you. I'm a twenty year old Muslim, so one thing that I learned, and I was grateful to have been given this advice when I first became Muslim, and it stays true today, is that God is perfect. God is perfect. He's wise, He's all knowing. His message and His desire for us, and His guidance is perfect, right? We call it Islam. It's a whole way of life that has been created by this perfect God. Islam is perfect. But we are human beings, and we are not perfect. We were not created perfect, purposely. Why purposely? Because God, if He created us perfect, we would not need Him, we would never be in need of Him. He created us in a way that we will make our mistakes and want to go back to Him, and ask Him for guidance, ask Him for forgiveness, right? Have that hope in Him always, and always have that connection to Him.

S

Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 56:17

So knowing that, we have to always take in consideration that Muslims, the people who practice Islam or don't necessarily practice totally, are humans that are not perfect. We cannot judge Islam, the perfection of God and His way of life, through the lens of a Muslim. As long as we can do that, with each other, and with any religion or any person, we have to know that people are imperfect. We cannot generalize. We have to get to know each other. Islam, if you want to know the truth of Islam, and the beauty and its perfection, you have to go to the Qur'an, which is the word of God, that's all true. It's never changed. It's His words.

S

Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 57:13

Then, of course, we need an example which is the Prophet Muhammad and all the prophets, peace be upon all of them. If we can be open and understanding and get to know one another as individuals, you'll see the beauty of God's creation, but we can't judge a religion by its people. That's something I learned when I first became Muslim and it's something that I advise people to this day: don't look at Islam through the lens of the people who are trying to practice because everybody's different, everybody has a different experience, everybody's on a different level. Everybody's just different and everybody's trying. Everybody's trying their best. If you want to know the truth of Islam, read the Qur'an. Look at the example of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, as his wife Aisha radiallahu-anha, peace be upon her, said that he was like a walking Qur'an. It's kind of like to say that he was the closest thing to trying to practice everything that was being taught in the Qur'an. If you want a human example of that, you have to study his life. So yeah, that's my advice, Rimsha.



Rimsha Syed 58:38

Thank you. That was beautiful. Thank you so much for taking the time to sit down with me and do this interview. I had a really great time.



Sandy "Sakinah" Gutierrez 58:46

Thank you so much for the opportunity, and I hope that this benefits anyone that gets a hold of it.



Rimsha Syed 58:55

Yeah, I'm gonna go ahead and stop the recording now.