

Sharjeel Syed

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SPEAKERS

Mehlam Bhuriwala, Sharjeel Syed

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 00:03

Hello, this is Mehlam Bhuriwala with the Institute of Diversity and Civic Life, interviewing Sharjeel Syed on November 1st, 2020 for the Muslim Voices in Texas Project. Before we get started, I should specify that I do know our guest personally, which is why I'm particularly excited to be speaking with you today. Hi Sharjeel.

S Sharjeel Syed 00:20
Hey Mehlam.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 00:22
So I guess, just to start, go ahead and introduce yourself.

S Sharjeel Syed 00:29
Yeah. I'm Sharjeel, I grew up in San Antonio, Texas. Grew up pretty traditionally Muslim, have been a part of a lot of different communities. Just because of school I've gone around to a lot of places in the US, currently in Chicago doing my residency. I'm excited to be here, excited to speak on my experiences.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 00:53

Okay. So you grew up in Chicago, or sorry, San Antonio, were you born in San Antonio?

S Sharjeel Syed 01:00

No, I was actually born in Karachi, but I moved here with my parents when I was about a year old.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 01:07

Okay. Okay. And how was it? Did you feel like there was any sort of transition? Or you feel kind of just based on your age when you moved, that you were kind of naturalized anyway close to when you started growing up? Or did you feel like there was any sort of lingering conflict or transition or anything that you had to kind of learn?

S Sharjeel Syed 01:32

I think the fact that my parents obviously lived their whole life in Pakistan before, the type of culture and household that they created for us definitely did create some contention in terms of the culture here, and in terms of the culture that they were used to. Although I don't remember Pakistan. Growing up, I only spoke Urdu and I failed kindergarten because I didn't know enough English, right? My mom didn't speak English at home and my dad was always at work, so he didn't really have time to come home and speak to us in English and teach us. That's just kind of a microcosm and microexample of the contention between the two experiences.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 02:21

Yeah, absolutely. So if you don't mind me asking you, were you in ESL classes as a kid?

S Sharjeel Syed 02:27

Oh, yeah. For sure.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 02:28

Yeah, that's a pretty common experience. My brother was in ESL classes I think through the third grade, and he was born here. I think a lot of the times, it's a matter of what

languages are spoken at home. Sometimes I think it can get sort of confusing for children.

S Sharjeel Syed 02:47

Yeah. I think it's funny how that sometimes happens, though. Because I feel like, at least I've seen it in Texas, they'll just see somebody with a foreign name and they're just automatically thrown into an ESL class. I think by the time I was maybe in second or third grade, I probably was reading at a higher level than almost every single person in school, in my grade, and I still was in ESL class.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 03:09

Yeah, I think that's something that's common too. My brother was, by the time he was in his second or third year in ESL, it got to a point where he was teaching the other kids and it was very clear he didn't need to be there anymore.

S Sharjeel Syed 03:22

Right? Yeah.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 03:23

Yes. You mentioned sort of contention and sort of cultural conflict at times in your childhood. Do you feel like that had a deep impact on your childhood?

S Sharjeel Syed 03:36

I think it did. I think that I lived kind of a double life of going home and being with all the ghorras. Like with non-Pakistanis and not as diverse people, and having to be one way with them and living a different life, different cultural heritage. Then coming back home, or going to Sunday school, or going to parties and davats with my parents and having a totally different community, a totally different way of talking and approaching people.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 04:15

Do you feel like that having to kind of go back and forth, and I think some people define it

as code switching. I think for other people, it's a more psychological thing. Do you feel like it had an impact on you having to kind of go back and forth at times?

S

Sharjeel Syed 04:30

It did. Honestly, I would say that the vast majority of it would be positive impact. I think it just diversified my experience and showed me different ways that people think and live. This from a very early standpoint, I think it allowed me to be more understanding towards other people of other races and other cultures and just having a different world out there to explore. I think made me more privy to the fact that there's other experiences people have.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 04:56

Exactly, exactly. I completely agree with you. I kind of had a similar childhood where I also was kind of flip flopping back and forth between my home life, slash my sort of public religious life, and school, and hanging out. Yeah, I agree. I think it has an effect of diversifying your perspective and giving you the ability to really empathize with people. Cool, cool. I'm just curious, I feel like one thing that is inevitable for a lot of kids that kind of grew up in that position is those moments where you feel like both worlds sort of come together. Do you feel like there were any moments that stick out to you where you felt that? That oh, I behave this way in front of this group of people, but I behave this way in front of another group of people, so I don't know what to do now?

S

Sharjeel Syed 05:56

Yeah. I'm trying to remember a distinct example. I'm sure that happened a couple of times. I mean, I had a 13th birthday party where I invited my desi friends and then also some of my school friends. But I feel like maybe not as much of a religious contention there, like coming together. I think probably later on, in college or med school - even then, I guess, religion hasn't really come up in terms of when I have my Muslim friends hanging out with my non-Muslim friends. We don't really talk religion unless it's an interfaith setting during college, so I don't think I've had that particular experience explicitly.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 06:44

Okay. So, you spoke about your school friends earlier. I'm just curious if you could describe a little bit about what your school life was like growing up?

S Sharjeel Syed 06:59
Which grades are we talking about?

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 07:01
Let's say grade school, let's start with that.

S Sharjeel Syed 07:05
Like elementary?

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 07:05
Yeah. Elementary through high school.

S Sharjeel Syed 07:08
Oh okay. Yeah. I think that my experiences in elementary through high school are pretty different. I mean, elementary school, from pre-k until fourth grade, we lived inside loop 4-10, over by Evers road and stuff. The school I went to there, I honestly don't remember too much in terms of friends there. I mean, it was a good mix of people. I don't have a particular friend that I remember that well from there. But when we moved when I was in fifth grade, or when I was gonna start fifth grade, we moved to the house that we're currently living in. And so, the people that I went to fifth grade with there, followed me through middle school. It was actually predominantly a black student community. Most people were black, there was a good amount of Hispanics as well, and so it was pretty diverse from that standpoint. There was also a sizable number of Muslims as well, mostly actually Arab Muslim, which is kind of a new experience for me. I would say that I had a decent number of friends. Starting in fifth grade I really got into basketball and football, so I was part of the athletic crowd a lot too during middle school. And so, that colored a lot of my experiences, like the type of culture that, kind of jock culture. It was weird because I was always the nerd amongst the jocks as well because I was smart, so that automatically made me a nerd. Then, I was in all the advanced classes, and so that exposed me to a whole different group of people that I was interacting with. Then for high school I went to John Jay Science and Engineering Academy and it was really interesting there too because the school is a little bit like one of the under-served sides of San Antonio on Marbach Road. And it's [a] predominantly lower income Hispanic community. Then you have the science and engineering magnet school on top of that, which is like an influx of people from all over the NISD, our school district. It's people from all backgrounds

and they're coming from, some of them are a little bit more privileged, but they're all science, engineering, high performing students. It's an interesting parallel going in between those worlds even within the microcosm of a school. I had friends from all sides. I wouldn't say I was traditionally a popular kid, but I was social and connected with a good amount of the school.

Mehlam Bhuriwala 09:47

M

Okay, okay. Nice. I'm interested in this distinction between your sort of middle school, junior high experience, and your high school experience. Do you feel like going from an environment where you were in a more diverse population and I think surrounded by people more or less that either looked like you or could empathize with you on a racial level at times, to a different school with more or less a different crowd - do you feel like those contrasts colored your perspective in any way?

Sharjeel Syed 10:25

S

Yeah, I definitely think so. Because I think that I definitely felt more at home with the middle school crowd. There was obviously like [audio cuts off].

Mehlam Bhuriwala 10:39

M

Hold on, I think you cut out for a second. I think your audio cut out. I'm having trouble hearing you. Hello? Hello? Oh, looks like we lost you. Would you mind speaking, you're speaking on your phone, would you mind calling back? I can't hear any of your audio anymore.

Sharjeel Syed 11:16

S

Yeah. I was saying that I definitely felt more at home with the middle school environment that I was in just because obviously there was more Muslims and people to connect with on that level. My family didn't grow up, I mean, I didn't grow up that well off and a little bit more of a low income household. And so, there was definitely more of that and more diversity. People were just I felt more real and coming from a similar background, socio-economically. I was able to connect with them and just felt more at home. I think I probably have more people from my middle school to this day that I keep up with than I do from my high school.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 12:05
Interesting. Was your high school further away from where you lived? It was a magnet school, right? So I'm assuming from all over the city and I'm assuming the middle school was somewhat closer to your home?

S Sharjeel Syed 12:19
Yeah, the middle school was a five minute drive and the high school was a twenty minute drive.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 12:25
Okay. Interesting. Yeah, it was in a different neighborhood. And it was a science and technology magnet school correct?

S Sharjeel Syed 12:36
Yeah, science and engineering.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 12:37
Science and engineering. I'm wondering, did you know then what career you wanted to pursue? Did you know that you wanted to go into medicine then or was it something you kind of figured out along the way?

S Sharjeel Syed 12:48
I think that it was a combination of both. I knew I wanted to go into science and medicine was one of my interest, but I think back then actually, I wanted to go into engineering. I think as I went through the school and then just reflecting a little bit more on some of my other experiences, especially in terms of health and the healthcare that I saw for my family back in Pakistan, and also reflecting on the death of my grandfather, which actually happened several years before I started high school, but just thinking about it more made me more motivated towards pursuing medicine rather than engineering.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 13:30
That affected you. Interesting. Were you somewhat close to your grandfather? What

kind of relationship did you'll have?

S Sharjeel Syed 13:38

Yeah. It was interesting because like I mentioned, we moved here when I was a year old, but then he came to live with us for several months. Then we visited Pakistan when I was six years old for about three months. I actually missed a month of second grade because of it. Those several months that he came to visit us were pretty impactful because as I mentioned, my dad, an immigrant father, was working super long hours. There was a big chunk of my childhood where I didn't see him very often and my grandfather ended up, I became very close with him during that small period that he was with us, and kind of saw him as a secondary father figure as well. Then, when I went to Pakistan with my mom and my dad and my sister to visit him, it was actually during my visit that he got progressively more sick and then he passed away, which I think is what kind of prolonged our stay there as well. Just to attend the funeral and recovering from that.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 14:40

Well, yeah, obviously quite a significant moment in your life. I'm sorry for your loss, but I'm glad that you were able to at least be with him towards the end. I'm sure that also probably had quite an effect on your takeaway from the whole experience.

S Sharjeel Syed 15:01

Yeah, for sure. Instead of just hearing about it, like seeing it. I was looking through the hospital window at him as he was dying. And so, that was definitely something that imprinted itself on my brain. Then retroactively asking my mom about the condition in which he passed, and what led up to it, and just learning more about the specifics just made me angry and also more motivated to impart some change for other people and motivated me to go into medicine.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 15:34

Mm hmm. And so, when did you start to form those conclusions about what transpired with your grandfather?

S Sharjeel Syed 15:43

Yeah, I think it was around high school. I started becoming a little bit more interested in medicine actually partly due to the fact that - going to Sunday school. Going and just

listening to lectures and stuff and hearing more about the Prophet's life and how he was basically a mercy and a blessing for people around him, and how he encouraged us to live our life in a way where we are serving other people constantly. That started sparking my interest in medicine initially. Then I was reflecting on my experiences with medicine in the past and I started asking my mom questions, my mom and dad both, about the nature of his passing. Then also my grandma - my grandmother also passed when I was in high school and I had uncles and aunts who had passed early in Pakistan as well. I was just curious, why is this happening? Why are people so sick there, especially in our family? And learning about how the healthcare system doesn't serve the poor there that well, and not everybody has equal access, and how that's just a big issue, made me want to - it kind of brought everything together. Multiple things that were happening in my life at the time.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 17:11

Okay, so I definitely do want to talk more about the healthcare situation in Pakistan. Before that, I'm just curious, you mentioned that faith ultimately played a more or less significant role in you kind of deciding in this path for yourself. I'd love for you to elaborate a little bit more on where you think the relationship is between your career path and your religious identity?

S Sharjeel Syed 17:43

Yeah. I think that they have pretty much become one at this point for me. My religious identity is essentially a practicing Muslim. Trying to - the goal is to be the best that I can in terms of serving our Creator, Allah (SWT). And in doing so, we have the example of our Prophet. I'm learning more and more over the years about how he lived his life and about the ideals that he exemplified, and asked us to exemplify. I mean, one of his best sayings is that "the best amongst us is the one who's best for other people or the one with the best manners." A lot of it is just how you live your life and how you interact with people on a daily basis.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 18:43

Right.

S

Sharjeel Syed 18:45

That speaks to me a lot. The prophet sallallahu alayhi wa sallam was the first progressive, he was probably one of the first social justice, legitimate social justice warriors. Not like the derogatory way that people use that. And so, if I'm going to live my life the way that he exemplified, medicine is one of the best ways to do that. Just inherently a job where you're constantly in service for other people and you're also connecting with other people in very, very intimate ways. When you're outside of medicine, a lot of people just think that patients go to doctors regarding their medical issues, like having a heart attack, or they're having trouble breathing, or maybe something a little bit more simple, like their knee hurts, and the doctor just cares about that. They just give him medicine and that's it, but that's not what medicine ends up being like. I would say the vast majority of medicine and our day to day activities are more about learning about the intricate stories of the people in front of us and all the different things in their lives that impact their health. Whether it's where they live, if they can pay their rent, if there's any issues going on at home like domestic or child abuse, if language barriers and cultural barriers and how that impacts the type of care that they can get or the medical information that they have. You really learn about people in very intimate ways and learning that really opens up the door for you imparting change in their lives or impacting their lives on a very deep level. And so, yeah, I think that the privilege of practicing medicine really allows me to connect my desire to serve other people in very real manners, just like the prophet sallallahu alayhi wa sallam did.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 20:51

Right. I think it's great that you mentioned sort of taking a holistic approach when evaluating patients and taking socioeconomic factors, language barriers, etc, into account when treating the patient. Because as far as, I'm obviously not an expert, but from what I can see, that's a relatively newer approach in medicine. Is that right? Kind of trying to really treat the patient as a whole human being as opposed to diagnosing the medical issue. I'm just curious, what do you feel is the difference regarding the patient's care, when taking all of these factors into account? As opposed to kind of evaluating their symptoms? Just basically evaluating their chart on a blank piece, just a static piece of paper? So, what do you feel is the difference between the doctor that takes all of that into account and the doctor that [laugh]?

S

Sharjeel Syed 21:56

That's a very loaded question. You're opening up pandora's box here, but I'm very passionate about this as are a lot of the people that I've connected with in medicine who

have similar interest. It makes a world of difference on every on every level. We can sit there, you can imagine the two extremes, right? One, you don't care about the socio-economic status at all, and the patient comes to you with an issue and you just prescribe the medication and you think you've done your job. You send them home and then the patient comes back into the ER or the hospital a couple of months later, a couple of years later, of a massive heart attack. You go back and you look and this actually comes full circle towards my grandfather's story. He died of a heart attack relatively young and the reason he did is because he couldn't afford the blood pressure medications that the doctor had prescribed him. For that doctor, he had done what he thought was his job in terms of diagnosing the medical condition, prescribing the medication, and seeing the patient home, but what he failed to account [for] was the social stratification that my grandfather lived in, and the fact that he didn't have access to that medication. It was, in a sense, something as simple as that, right. That definitely accounts for here in the US, in terms of insurance issues, in terms of affordability of meds, in terms of living situations. And whether people can afford to stick to that low salt, low carb diet that you've prescribed for the diabetic patient, or whether they can get the exercise and afford a gym membership when you've told them that they have to exercise a certain amount of times a week or something. And so, that factors in like racial components factor in, and definitely in terms of how doctors treat different patients. Through our economic systems, I think there's a big conversation around institutionalized racism happening in our country right now. That happens through many different institutions, including medicine, towards black people in this country. Those institutions impact the way that these patients, their diseases even present, or the the prevalence of which medications work for them. And if you don't take that into account, if you just see every patient the same, and you don't take into account that okay, this is a black patient and different medications work for them, or different strategies work might work for them, or this person is coming from a lower socio-economic background, I need to take that into account. If you don't do those things, you have four outcomes. We have a plethora of literature that speaks on that, that gives us evidence, even in terms of the type of doctors that are treating these patients. We have evidence that when you have diverse backgrounds, when you have paid physicians who look like the patients they're serving, those patients are more likely to respond to those treatments that you give them and they're more likely to get better care. I mean, I could go on and on.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 25:04

I agree. Actually this question might even be more substantive than the last to unpack. But if you could put it relatively simply, what you think a healthcare system that truly evaluates the needs of its patients in that way, what do you think that looks like?

S

Sharjeel Syed 25:34

Well, I think one, we need to first ensure that everybody has access to medicine, right? I am a big proponent of Medicare for all. I think, in such an advanced, quote unquote country, where we have so much money to throw around, especially in our healthcare system, the fact that not everybody has access to what should be the right of health care is a huge catastrophe, honestly. I think that first ensuring that everybody has access should be the first priority before you think about how we can speak to everybody's treatment and individual factors. Then yeah, once you have ensured that everybody is getting care, then having diversity in the people who are giving that care. People coming from different parts of the country, people coming from different cultures, people coming from different races, like basically your doctors need to look like your population does. I think those are probably the two biggest things in terms of ensuring that everybody can get individualized care that's the best for them.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 26:52

I'm curious, you mentioned medical, sorry, Medicare for all. How does that track among the medical professional crowd? Is it somewhat divisive? Does the room somewhat split on supporting versus denouncing the idea or is it relatively popular? How does the broader medical group feel about it?

S

Sharjeel Syed 27:19

From what I've seen, both through personal anecdote and experience and also just nationwide studies or polling that I've seen on this, I think that the vast majority of physicians do agree that Medicare for all, or access for health insurance for all is the way to go. Definitely in terms of the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, the vast majority of physicians agree that that was the right thing to do. It gave millions, tens of millions, of people health care insurance that didn't have it before. It expanded coverage, it expanded coverage to those people who have pre-existing conditions, which is a huge thing. I think that amongst the medical community, it is an opinion that is very well supported. Also, we have evidence. The movement in medicine lately, one of the biggest movements, has been evidence based care. Everything that we do has to have some evidence behind it for it to be taken legitimately nowadays, or at least that's what we try to portray, that we aspire to. There's a lot of evidence for Medicare for all, where if everybody has access to insurance, overall your costs are going to go down at the end of the day because you don't have people running around having to be on these long-term medications and having to come into the ER 24/7 instead of having the

insurance to get their medications on time, like treating it. Yeah, it's cost effective, essentially.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 28:56

Okay. Okay. Thank you. Well, I want to pivot back a little bit back to Pakistan. Obviously, it's no secret that the healthcare situation in Pakistan is not ideal. A personal anecdote, I have a friend whose father, he's American. Well, he was born in Pakistan, but he's a US based physician that actually moved back to Pakistan for a few years to try and create as much positive change as he could in the system. I don't want to put a sour note on anything, but he ended up moving back to the States because at one point, he was like, "I can't do this anymore." Not to put a dour mood on anything, but I'm just curious, I guess, how would you summarize the issue in Pakistan with affordable accessible health care?

S

Sharjeel Syed 29:56

Honestly, I don't know if I can give a fair assessment just because I haven't been there in a long time and I frankly haven't done enough research to be able to say. From an outsider's perspective and from the experience that I know that my family back home has experienced, it's definitely like you would expect with any developing nation. It's just that there's most - if you're wealthy, then you can get care there pretty easily, but if you're not, then there's just not enough safety nets there to essentially guarantee that you'll get care. If you can't afford it, there's not as many safety net hospitals that take people just off the streets and treats them regardless - you need to be able to show that you can pay and if you can't, you just can't. That goes for both emergency care as well as just taking medications. There's just not enough resources and that's society wide, not just with healthcare. I think that creates a compiling and compounding situation of poor health there. I really can't speak anymore to it than that.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 31:15

Understandable. Okay, thank you for that. If you're okay with this, I'd like to pivot a little bit away from medicine specifically.

S

Sharjeel Syed 31:28

Yeah.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 31:28

I think talk a little bit more about religion.

S Sharjeel Syed 31:31

Okay.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 31:31

You mentioned, I think this is something that most if not all first generation America/ Muslim Americans can relate with, but sort of your double life between your school self and your mosque or religious self. I want to talk about the religious life specifically. First, I'm just curious, how would you feel is your experience going to mosque and participating in your religious community kind of throughout your childhood?

S Sharjeel Syed 32:06

Yeah, I think that for me, it's personally always been a positive experience. When I was a kid, all the way up until high school, it was always the thing that I looked forward to the most. Because I always felt like all my best friends, I would mostly see at the mosque. It was a time when I got to go, whether it was on Eid, the masjid that we used to go to growing up on Eid would give out gifts to the kids over that.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 32:38

Yeah, I remember that.

S Sharjeel Syed 32:39

They were probably the cheapest gift[s] you can get from the dollar store or whatnot, but when you're a kid anything makes you happy. It was just the culture of it, like a lot of people here when the holidays come around feel like it's a magical moment, right? They're really into the Christmas season or whatnot. For us, a lot of times at the masjid, the culture that was created at the masjid, was kind of like that for us. Playing basketball after taraweeh during Ramadan and just seeing everybody during iftaar, it was just, it was always the best memories I had at the masjid. Then even when I went into college and med school and stuff, being part of MSAs, that was my social click and that was where I felt most comfortable. And so, places of worship for me even when I'm in a new city

and just going to some random mosque. I remember when I was interviewing around for med school or residency, and I would go to random cities, I would just find whatever the closest mosque was. I wasn't part of that community, I didn't know anybody there, but just walking into that place of worship always gave some comfort to my heart, but that's my experience personally. As I've grown up, I've become more and more aware that there are ways in which these places of worship in America, some of the culture dynamics that are there also make it to where it may not be as welcoming or as happy places for a lot of other people in our Muslim communities, unfortunately. I'm very cognizant of that more so as time has gone by, I think so.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 34:22

So what do you feel started attuning you to that reality for other people? What do you think it was that made you start to reconsider your own personal experiences with the mosque and reconciling that with other experiences that people have had?

S

Sharjeel Syed 34:39

Yeah, I think it was honestly when I started becoming a little bit more politically aware. Once I went off to college and I just started learning more about how much identity and just large scale political issues are becoming. Because before, growing up, I grew up in the age of 911, right. I was a first grader when 911 happened and I faced islamophobia throughout school pretty harshly. For me, growing up in that environment was like Muslims versus everybody else. It was like everybody is persecuting us. It just felt like we were a monolithic community, all facing the same issue. I think when I started college, those issues were still prevalent, islamophobia has not gone away, but I think that becoming more privy to a lot of other issues throughout the world and domestically made me more aware of all the different identities within identities. Like this idea of, what do you call it, cross sectionalism. Just learning about that, and then learning about within our Muslim communities the issues abroad and domestically and then speaking with other Muslims. Going to a liberal arts college, I was exposed to Muslims who weren't as practicing. I was exposed to Muslims from other backgrounds who actually were not afraid of speaking on these issues. Then once I became aware, then I could retro actively reflect on the fact of what the makeup was of the mosque. In San Antonio, growing up, we had a, for lack of better words, we had an Arab mosque, we had a desi or a predominantly South Asian mosque, and we had a black mosque. It's getting a little bit better, especially the one that I go to, I feel like they've become a little bit more open. But no, there's a reason why those dynamics exist. I didn't notice that when I was a kid, but now going back, I recognize that. And then even whenever I do go back now, I hear the way that kids talk to each other and talk about people from other groups that are Muslim there, and the

way that they refer to them, and it just makes me more hyper aware.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 37:04

You mentioned a change, could you elaborate a little bit more on what you mean by, how do you feel things are progressing? What do you think the potential is for the religious community to really deal with these problems in a genuine way? And embrace the kind of diversity that defines, I feel really defines, who we are as Muslims, right? That should be one of the defining qualities of the community, but how do you feel certain communities, like the one that you're in now, how are they addressing that?

S

Sharjeel Syed 37:41

In terms of the mosque that I attend in San Antonio when I am back home, I think that they've done a better job in recent years of opening up their doors to people from other groups. I don't know if that was intentionally done by the mosque or if it was just the fact that maybe the situation at the other mosque was slightly not as well off and people were more attracted to come to this one. And then it just kind of inherently became a little bit more diverse. For example, like I mentioned, it started off as a very South Asian predominant masjid. Then over the last 7-8 years, there's been a higher influx of people from Jordan and Syria and from those backgrounds. San Antonio actually has a big Somali refugee population as well. And so, a lot of those groups are also coming to that masjid. I honestly don't know. I do know that around that time, there was a change in the leadership, and the leadership that was at the masjid before was a little bit problematic. It was mostly first generation immigrant uncles who basically just made it a South Asian social scene. And so, I think that style and that cultural baggage really colored the way that masjid, like what it prioritized. There was a big leadership change where it became essentially more democratic and the priorities definitely shifted in terms of who they hired, in terms of the programming that they offered. I think that those two things combined, just coincidence, as well as some leadership change, did come together to bring more diversity to that masjid.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 39:39

That's good. That's good. So going back to when you return to the mosque, and you mentioned sometimes with your conversations that children are having cause you to reflect. What is it that they're saying that causes you to have these reactions?

S Sharjeel Syed 39:57

Yeah, I think these are very strong issues that I'm referencing. One is the racism that's present, anti-black specifically racism, or anti-colorist, colorist narratives that go on that even these kids talk about because they're inheriting it from their parents. I don't know why South Asian boys just think it's so cool and they have license to use the N word all the time.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 40:31

Oh yeah, that's huge.

S Sharjeel Syed 40:32

That's a huge issue in our community. Even as I mentioned, we have Somali refugees and the way that they're referred to, some of the jokes that are made, that are racially charged towards them is very present. Even for me, I don't pretend to understand or to equate my experience with those groups of people, but I am of darker complexion. Even for me, I got made fun of a lot for being darker complexion. There was kids who would call me like oh, "you're not Pakistani or Bangladeshi" or they would give me derogatory names based off of the color of my skin, which made me actually growing up, hate the color of my skin and want to be lighter. I've grown out of that thankfully now and come to appreciate and fight back against those narratives, but it's just another example of different ways that people are not as welcoming. Even when they may not necessarily know that that's what they're doing. They might think they're just joking, but they don't realize that these things have impact on how other people feel and feel about themselves and their cultures.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 41:49

Right, it creates an atmosphere, right?

S Sharjeel Syed 41:51

Yeah.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 41:52

More than anything. I can totally empathize with you. I'm just thinking right now of my

own experiences every time I go back to the mosque. One thing that, I do notice all of the things that you discussed, but one thing that really sticks out to me is a really blatant anti-semitism, which gets very tricky. Because there's historical baggage with that and it's obviously a very complicated issue and it's not made better by kids running around, saying these things to each other. So, yeah, I agree. It's like an alarm signal kind of goes off when you hear those things. But more than anything, that's an example of a product of the culture or the atmosphere or whatever you want to call it, more than anything else. These are kids.

S

Sharjeel Syed 42:42

For sure, yeah. I think the anti-semitism, I think anti-shiaism, I think all of that is very present. We need to, I try, especially in America, when I'm having public discourse with people who are not Muslim, I prefer usually not to bring those issues up. Because as Muslims, we're already scapegoated as people who are intolerant or whatever way, right. And these aren't issues that I think are unique to Muslim communities, but I think that when you're within Muslim circles, it's important to talk about these internal issues that we do have, in terms of what we just mentioned, like anti-semitism, anti-shiaism, anti-blackness, all these things.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 43:29

How do you feel the conversation changes when we're having these discussions kind of among other Muslims about these issues as opposed to in the more public discourse? What do you think the difference is in those conversations?

S

Sharjeel Syed 43:45

I think the difference is in terms of the facade of unity. Like when we have non-Muslims and we're discussing issues, as I think I alluded to earlier on, when growing up, I felt like it was Muslims against everybody else. Just creating this facade of unity, and a monolith, where all our issues are against everybody else, and we don't have any issues within ourselves. And if we do, it's more cultural things, and not necessarily things that are very prevalent throughout our places of worship or our communities. I think that when we restrict that circle towards discussing issues when it's just Muslims around, then I think you start realizing people are a little bit more open towards talking about the factions within us, and the unique issues that we face amongst ourselves. Because then if you're no longer framing it against a common, I don't want to say an enemy, but common other essentially, right. It's more about, oh what's different between you and me? Or what's

different amongst our subset of Muslim and their subset of Muslim? I think that's when we have a little bit more of this dialogue.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 45:14

Right. Right. Yeah, I agree. I think one thing that I've observed is that on another dimension, in some ways I think you can have slightly more specific conversations with other Muslims because you have that common background. There's one less thing that needs to be sort of explained, to have a conversation about sort of social or political issues. As opposed to with non Muslims, it feels sometimes that there's kind of always that layer of first, we need to bring awareness to this issue. Sometimes so much energy is spent kind of making people aware of an issues' existence, that the kind of nuances of the discussion are sort of left by the wayside. Sometimes when we're having these discussions within Muslim groups we don't need to do that because everyone sort of has that common understanding of, this is what the situation is. and there's sort of less explanatory work that's needed. I don't know if you're sort of following what I'm saying?

S

Sharjeel Syed 46:21

No, I think that you summarized it really, really well and those are very salient points.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 46:26

Yeah. Cool. Before we wrap up, I've had you here for quite a while now.

S

Sharjeel Syed 46:35

I enjoyed it [laugh].

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 46:37

Great, awesome. I guess the last broader subject that I wanted to discuss with you, I guess, is just the future. I'm curious, what are you excited about? What is it you really see yourself doing in the short term and or the long term, whatever it is, whatever time frame you're in right now? Where do you see yourself kind of going forward?

S

Sharjeel Syed 47:05

Yeah. I think for me, when you're in medicine everything that you - you're just down this pipeline and it's just like you're always looking forward to that next step. Right now, I'm in a residency and I'm just looking forward to going on and finishing my training, or doing fellowship, and then being in a capacity. We didn't talk about it extensively, which is fine, but I think for me, as I was mentioning, one of my motivations for medicine was to impart change at a more systemic level. And so, I'm still trying to figure out what that role is going to look like - whether that's going to be within exclusively within medicine or as I'm becoming more and more aware of just advocacy broadly, whether it would be outside of medicine. I'm excited to see how that's going to develop. I think that for a long time, a long time in my life, I didn't really have security in terms of whether my dreams were going to be realistic. Whether I was going to be able to accomplish the things that I wanted, growing up low income, growing up undocumented, and all those barriers that were present. Now that, alhumdullilah, I have security and I feel like there's not as many limitations, I'm just very excited to see what opportunities come and where I can go in the next 10-20 years in terms of my career and in terms of what the type of work that I can do. I'm just excited about the fact that I have options and that there's possibilities, and that hasn't really, I haven't had that mentality before.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 48:57

That must be very exciting. You're almost at the end of the tunnel, and you're about to be standing on a big horizon.

S

Sharjeel Syed 49:05

Yeah, yeah, for sure. That's exactly how it feels. Yeah, that's exciting and that'd be more of my professional life. Then also personally, just continuing to grow and meet new people and forge connections. I'm very social, I love just talking with people, learning from other people, and in the last 10 years, or 12 years, however long I've left in my hometown, traveling around and meeting new people, I feel like personally I've had a lot of growth. I'm just excited to continue that growth and see what kind of person I'll be in 10 years from now.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 49:53

Yeah, absolutely. So just curious, have you declared a specialty yet? I don't know when that decision is supposed to occur for you?

S

Sharjeel Syed 50:03

Yeah. One of the decision was already made when I went into residency, so I choose to go into internal medicine and that's what I'm doing my residency in right now. Internal medicine is kind of like a gateway specialty too, you can either choose to stay as a general doctor in internal medicine or you can further specialize. I'm pretty sure, inshallah, that I'm planning on going into hematology oncology, which is just blood and cancer. I'm very interested in the systemic disparities within that specialty, especially hematology in sickle cell disease. It's a disease that predominantly affects black Americans and there's a lot of healthcare disparities there. I'm in Chicago right now, I'm on the south side of Chicago, that's where U [University of] Chicago is. It's one of the reasons why I wanted to be here, why I chose this program was because that's the population that this institution serves. And so, learning how to be an advocate, learning how to address the needs of this population, it really motivated me to go into that field. That's what I'm planning on.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 51:10

Right. Feel free to correct me if I'm wrong, but if I'm correct, U Chicago is just on, it's in Hyde Park, right? Which is just kind of on the tip of the south side? Do you feel like, just talk me very briefly through that experience, what that's been like, kind of serving that historically disenfranchised population of the south side of Chicago? Especially considering coming from where you come from.

S

Sharjeel Syed 51:37

It's been very humbling. It's funny because it takes me a full circle to our beginning of our conversation, when you were asking me about the communities that I grew up in and the type of people that I was more comfortable being around. And this feels like more going back to being at home, being around this population. I can't pretend to have the same shared experience as them, but being able to work with people who I think are just like real people, living everyday, blue collar lives, just basic struggles. And then having on top of that, these compounded disparities, and being at an institution where, at least the institution says its mission is to serve and to address those disparities. There's a lot of great people here that are working on that and doing various projects. I've gotten involved with a number of projects, whether it's with co-residents or with faculty members. And so, I think there's a lot of privilege to be able to do some great work here and I'm excited. I'm excited about continuing to do so and see what my niche will be.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 52:54
That's great. How long do you have to go with residency?

S Sharjeel Syed 52:59
Yeah, I just started like four or five months ago and it's a three year program.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 53:03
Okay. Well, 2022.

S Sharjeel Syed 53:06
2023 I'll be done.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 53:08
Okay. Wow. Okay, so last question. Just a point of curiosity. Obviously, we've discussed at multiple points the impact and the relationship that your faith has with not only your life or your career, but just your personal decision making. Just curious, do you feel like there's any room in your life left to to really integrate that even more with, for example, consider doing medicine or something relating to that but in a more official faith related role ever? Just curious.

S Sharjeel Syed 53:48
Yeah, I think that I wouldn't be opposed towards it. I don't know if I'd ever be at the level like, I'm personally trying to work every day on my own connection with God and just being a better Muslim and being more knowledgeable. I don't know if I'd ever feel comfortable to be - that I'd ever be at a level where I would be teaching other people or working with other people in a leadership capacity on that realm. But maybe as a Muslim American, in terms of speaking more towards my experience and representing people, like the communities that I grew up in and using my faith and background there. It's hard to define, but I wouldn't be opposed. I think that anything that I do, any leadership role that I would hold, any organization that I'll get involved with, my faith would guide me in terms of how I would compose myself. I guess I'm a little bit confused as to specifically what you were referring to.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 55:01

No, I think that's perfect. I think that's really what I was curious about, like how you feel about how that integrates as you kind of move forward in life, where that connects, so great. If there isn't anything else that you want to talk about today, the last thing that I like to ask my interviewees is to just simply, sort of reintroduce themselves or put themselves into a nutshell, if you will. Just to kind of round these things up. In the past, I've had people go on two minute speeches about who they are, what they want to do with their lives, and what they're all about. So if you want to go ahead and take a stab at it, go ahead and tell the world who you are one last time.

S

Sharjeel Syed 56:03

Okay. Talk about being put on the spot. I would just say that I'm Sharjeel, I'm a proud Muslim and world citizen. I am just an individual who is trying to best exemplify the way that my faith teaches me to live while being of service to other people, whether it's through my professional life as a physician advocate, whether it's through my personal life as a friend, and a brother, and a son, and whatever role or relationship I may have with people. I think just trying to live in the path of our Prophet sallallahu alayhi wa sallam is something that guides me and will always guide me inshallah.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 57:06

Great, thank you. All right.