

Isa Parada

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SPEAKERS

Isa Parada, Rimsha Syed



Rimsha Syed 00:03

Hello, this is Rimsha Syed. I am the program coordinator with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. The date is November 8, 2021. I am on a Zoom call with Imam Isa Parada with the IslamInSpanish community for the Muslim Voices oral history project. How are you today?



Isa Parada 00:24

I'm doing fine, thank you.



Rimsha Syed 00:26

Great. Thank you so much for being here. I'm sure there's so much you could say about your journey, but I'd like to start by asking you to introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your family dynamic and childhood.



Isa Parada 00:44

Okay, excellent. My name is, again, Isa Parada, born Christian Parada in Manhattan, New York, to Salvadorian parents who migrated to the States in the early 70s. A little bit after my birth, my older sister, who is eight years older than me, also came to the States with my grandmother, my mother's mother. I was raised in a Christian household, went to private school for most of my elementary years. I was heavily involved in the church, especially on my mother's side. She wouldn't just go to Sunday Mass, she would also take us to different programs throughout the week. That was much of my upbringing with my older sister. She had a unique situation, because coming into the States in the late 70s, early 80s, there wasn't really any ESL [English as a Second Language] program going for her, so she had to practice her English with me, because my parents knew very little English. What was interesting about that is my father didn't allow anything but Spanish to be spoken in the home. It was always a very unique dynamic there.

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Isa Parada 02:19

Right around the start of my middle school years, my father decided to move to Houston, Texas because he saw that the price of living here was way cheaper, even to this day. He thought that also it probably would be a safer environment here in Houston than it was in New York, which at the time, no one thought that Houston in the early 90s was going to become one of the crime capitals of the United States at that time. So it was a surprise. Once I was in my middle school years, the things that I started to see and deal with, from the age of twelve all the way to the age of nineteen, those challenges that they weren't prepared for, that they thought they were avoiding by leaving New York to come to Houston.

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Isa Parada 03:21

But at the age of fifteen, my father, being with the wrong crowd, he was arrested and sent to prison for twelve years on conspiracy to sell. It was a federal offense. Actually, the DA raided my parents home apartment at the time. All those things were very traumatic, just in that environment, dealing with I was dealing with, what I was listening to in music and hip hop, what I was watching, my friends I was around, a lot of that. I was fifteen years old, so that had a major impact on my worldview. But kept pushing forward, trying to - one thing that was a saving grace, you could say, from not getting too deep into what I was doing in my teenage years, there was always something consciously telling me to avoid what my father just got into, meaning jail, even though I put myself in positions where I could have gone to prison, and just being around the wrong people, certain moves that I made, made it a little, you could say "wiser" in the way that I would would move and deal with certain things to avoid going to prison.

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Isa Parada 04:49

That was a lot of my upbringing, from from living in New York to come down to Houston, which was definitely a different environment. I mean, when we came down here, me and my older sister were like, "Man." Especially before social media, you would think that, Houston, being in Texas, cowboys, you see horses, people riding them, and cows everywhere, and just farmland. That's what the idea was. One of the first commercials that we ever saw, we sat down in our new apartment, and turned on the TV, was some old muffler commercial. You could tell it was like ten years old. You could tell that in the 80s that was made. At the end, I'll never forget it, we looked at each other, at the end of the commercial was, "We have the hee-haw in your motors and transmission." Something like that. It was some very country commercial, and we were just like, "Man, we're in Country-ville."

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Isa Parada 06:00

So that dynamic was very unique coming from New York to Houston. The vibe was different. Obviously, Houston is a spread out city. You don't walk much, especially even back then. That's changed a little bit in certain areas. But walking in Houston, just dealing with people, even the environment when it came to - which is not the case now - it was very segregated, even in school, when I came down to Houston. I remember even Vietnamese with Vietnamese, Latinos with Latinos, African Americans, Whites, South Asian, people were just completely with their own group. I found that to be very unique as well, just trying to fit in, just being a teenager trying to fit in. You're trying to figure out, why is it like this? Because in New York, where I grew up, it wasn't like that. It was just people in the neighborhood, just from all backgrounds, we'd just kick it and grew up like that. That was definitely unique.

I Isa Parada 07:10

To this day, we still call ourselves New Yorkers to a certain degree, even though I got married to a Texan. There's no affiliation when it comes to sports teams in our home. No Houston, no Dallas, no nothing. Has to be New York. I have eight children. I got married young, when I was twenty. I have eight children. Seven of them basically don't affiliate with any team or they're down with their father in representing New York, except my youngest son. His mom has affected him in that way. He's claiming Houston. Yeah, that's just the unique background, interesting background that I have just coming from New York to Houston, and just seeing the environment change in Houston from a very segregated city to now one of the most diverse cities in the United States, maybe the world.



Rimsha Syed 08:23

Yeah, so backtracking a little bit, how long were you living in New York? What was your surrounding community like there? It seems like you still have a pretty strong connection, so I wanted to hear a little bit more about those years in your life.

I Isa Parada 08:38

Sure. I lived in New York a little over eleven years, almost I was twelve. I would go back in the summers during high school. What was unique about living in New York was it was a tight-knit community when it came to, especially the church that I attended. What was unique for my parents, it was that coming from El Salvador, obviously, you're hanging with only Salvadorians. When you come to New York, and you meet people who speak Spanish, it's from everywhere. From Puerto Rico, Cuba, Dominican Republic, and then you have, of course, the Central American countries, Costa Rica, Panama, El Salvador, and then you have Colombia, Venezuela, so that was unique. Being amongst Latinos that were from diverse backgrounds, for them. For us, we just grew up together. But it was definitely interesting just being able to interact with people who spoke Spanish, but with a different accent. Obviously the foods were different. What's called my godparents - when you get baptized in the Catholic Church, you have godparents - they were Colombian, so I had to experience all these different unique cultures within the Latino community. Then you have your Jewish friends, you have your African American friends.

I Isa Parada 10:22

Then when I would go visit my one of my uncles in another city called Flushing in Queens, then I got to hang out with a whole different crew of people who I really connected with through my high school years. When I would go back in the summers, I would hang with them. That was very unique, because that gave me a connection to just the urban flavor of New York, especially in the 90s, when hip hop was becoming more mainstream. It still had an underground feel to it, but it was just living the environment, going out there and people breakdancing, people freestyling, just hanging with your crew, people who are older than you. So I got to see and grow up real quick, things that, again, were nice in the sense of the diversity and just the artistic vibe of hanging with people from different backgrounds. But also you get to see some of that criminal element, which wasn't always that positive. It plays a role and impacts the way that you think.

I Isa Parada 11:41

But in that process, I got to listen to people who were seventeen, eighteen years old, talking about wanting to improve their neighborhood or elevate their mental state to be more positive, and to get out of what we called the hood, right, the neighborhood that your parents been living there for twenty, thirty years, and you want something better for yourself. So it was interesting seeing this different flavor and environment that to this day still has an impact on me in the way that, you can almost say, how I view the world in many ways. In being back in my neighborhood here, where I grew up in Houston, in trying to make a difference with the IslamInSpanish team in our own neighborhood where we weren't doing things that were so positive. Some of that positivity from New York, I still tried to bring it back here to Houston, which the diversity that was there now has become more diverse over here. So that's why, even though I may have some affiliation when it comes to sports when it comes to New York, Houston is a place where I definitely don't plan on ever moving. I'm thankful that I'm able to raise my children here, for them to grow up in an environment that generally is healthy being Latino and being also Muslim.



Rimsha Syed 13:23

Right. So I know that you mentioned being raised Christian, I wanted to hear what your personal connection to religion felt like at the time as you were growing up.



Isa Parada 13:39

So you grew up listening to your parents tell you what is the correct way of worshipping God. Of course, most people, they follow what your parents are going to be preaching to them, telling them, advising them, etc. And being involved in the church, I was an altar boy, which, for people who may not know, that's usually young boys who help the priest in the prayer service. So I was involved in the church that way, so you have to be a little bit more knowledgeable than your average eight, nine-year-old on just what you're believing. I was taught early on to read. My dad was very adamant about me reading in general. Outside of just reading history books and things like that, I would read the Bible as well. By the time I was twelve years old when I came down to Houston, being the shifting of the environment, even though the apartment complex I lived in, in Alief in Houston, it was literally right next to the church that we attended. But something had changed. The environment changed. Maybe it was my age, the people I was hanging with. Little by little I stopped connecting myself to just going to church, and even my parents weren't so adamant about me going there. By the time I was going into high school, they wouldn't press for me to go.




Isa Parada 15:34

So, with all that, I just stopped attending church for the most part, and just started to read into other ideologies and theologies, even young, I was thirteen, fourteen. I first came across Islam from two people right before I went into high school. One was a young guy in Philadelphia, who I happened to come across because one of my homeboys in the neighborhood became Muslim, at thirteen. So that was shocking. Like, what? What was that and why? Then when I went to New York, this is right before the movie, Malcolm X came out. One of my Dominican friends, we were just walking in New York City, and someone says, "As-Salaam-Alaikum," to us, and that's the greeting of the Muslims, and he said, "Wa-Alaikum-Salaam." And I asked him, "Are you a Muslim?" and he's like, "Nah, I'm not Muslim man. But you know, Islam is -" again, he's seventeen, and he sounded like he was speaking deep. I don't know, maybe my immaturity. But he just started telling me a little bit about what he knew about Islam, and he told me to read the Autobiography of Malcolm X. I read it, and that changed me. I was like, "Whatever Malcolm was on, I want

to be like that when I grow up." But I was fourteen, so I wasn't ready to give up whatever I was dealing with to become the disciplined person that Malcolm was at the time, obviously, after he went through what he went through growing up.

 Isa Parada 17:26

That was the connection that I had in my early years, and then just slowly moving away from those morals and values that my parents had taught me, whatever I learned in church, and my parents started to see me. They were concerned, obviously, in my environment, they did attribute that to me, leaving off God in my life, which I'm sure that has something to do with it. You can't be dealing with criminal activity and being conscious of God. But there was a time period where I knew I had to make a change in my life. That was around when I was nineteen years old, where I couldn't continue to live this way and be safe. My younger sister, who at the time, was twelve, she had turned the age that I, when I was twelve, started getting into these negative situations, so I knew I had to make a change. That's when I returned back to reading the Bible again and then just researching more about God. So I was comparing Christianity to Islam and reflecting upon what are the changes I needed to make and what was the best fit for me in order to become a better person and change my lifestyle.

 Rimsha Syed 19:04

I'd love to hear some specific parts of Malcolm X's wisdom and journey that really stuck out to you.

 Isa Parada 19:13

Wow. So one of the first things was just to see how a person can make constant change in their life. Always searching for either truth or searching for just a better way of living, and not ever being satisfied in where they are, always trying to improve. What I mean by that is when I looked at the life of Malcolm X, he didn't allow him growing up - for example, his father getting killed when he was young, his mother being institutionalized in his preteen years, going to foster homes - he didn't let that - it affected him, no doubt, but it didn't stop him from becoming the person that he was. When he went to Boston and New York and was a criminal, and he openly says that. Even in that environment, there was a code that people would live by amongst themselves, amongst the environment that you were in. If you didn't live by that code, then people would look at you as foul, or something wrong with you. There was a certain level of consciousness in that, which helped him out as he grew older, than went to jail, and got out of jail and changed his life, and found a lifestyle that completely changed him for the better, and allowed him to uplift himself, uplift other people in the different urban areas that were around the United States.

 Isa Parada 21:26

But even with that, some of the messaging that he realized wasn't for him, and his viewpoint wasn't correct, slowly, but surely changed all the way to becoming Muslim. And still, in his final years, was still talking about finding ways to not only impact the local neighborhood, or just neighborhoods around the States, but also how to impact the world. So I saw that Islam had a lot to do with his change and discipline, and that was always intriguing to me and me, coming from a similar background growing up, coming from a decent neighborhood, and then going to a rougher neighborhood, and then my father going to jail. Then all of the things that I was dealing with, with police harassment, and also my criminal activity, then knowing that there's a lifestyle change, something has to change before you put yourself in more harm's

way. Then that's when, in my investigation of Islam, there was a lot of it that I was viewing it from the lens of how Malcolm was looking at it. For me, I was like, "Wow, so Malcolm was looking at it this way. This is what he's talking about justice. And this is what he was talking about improving oneself, and the discipline." I was just seeing all of that in Islam, so that's why it became easy for me, at the age of nineteen, a little bit before I was twenty, to make that change. That's how Malcolm impacted me then and still impacts me to this day.



Rimsha Syed 23:21

Thank you for sharing that. Speaking of growing up in a hostile environment, as well as your father being in jail for some time, how do you think those experiences have led you to where you are today?



Isa Parada 23:41

Well, the one thing that even though anyone who makes it out, makes it out as a healthier person from living a criminal lifestyle. You're, number one, thankful you made it, because a lot of people that I knew, did not - going to jail or dying. Another perspective is that - you don't think about it until later on - being able to come out of that environment, it does give some hope to some other people when we're dealing with community, you're able to connect with with different types of people. People who didn't have a healthy upbringing. And I did for the most part, up to the time my father went to jail, which really that's when it became very tense for me. I got to live some time with two parents and some time with one parent. So you're able to connect with people in that way, be able to connect with people who are raised in a home that's based off of faith. You connect with that, and also a home that is not. Then when it came to the matter of my father going to prison, you learn also, you're not going to start to judge people for the errors that they make. They've already been judged by the court of law, so you're able to be a little bit more empathetic if they're trying to make a change in their life. There's a lot of people come out of prison who want to make a change in the way - in what we deal with community here. Those things impacted me.



Isa Parada 26:00

But also, I learned something with dealing with this matter, and with my father, especially going to prison. My daughter, she wrote a story basically. She had an assignment, that talked about injustices within the justice system here in the States, and she had come across a few articles and documentaries about how there's been people who've murdered their spouse, or they raped, sexually assaulted people, and they only get ten years, five years, and my father, for conspiracy to sell, he didn't sell anything, it's conspiracy to sell, he got thirteen years. So you learn right away, there's certain issues that need to be improved within society. You look at it on a macro level, that way, how you want to impact society or make a change within people in your neighborhood, or individuals' lives? But even in from the micro point of view, just learning how to be a better husband, to be a better father, to be a better son. That definitely has driven to break the cycle of some things culturally that you learn within, not all Latino backgrounds, but I'll say in many, being more specific, Salvadorian homes.




Isa Parada 28:04

It's taught to the women that their man is going to cheat on them, and you just have to get used to it that your man is going to have a woman on the side sometime in your marriage. That's a very unhealthy, obviously, way of teaching your daughters how to look at men. Then of course, the men are expected to do

that. It's a drive - I don't want to be that. I'm not gonna let my culture or whatever people think I need to be, do - I'm not going to be that way. You're driven to be, like I said, a better husband. Being married twenty-four years, I'm driven to constantly improve. A better father, raising my daughters differently, my sons especially differently in that, never to think like that, but telling them that this is what is taught in many of our people's homes. And that does affect on people in that society, and then of course, affects people here too.

 Isa Parada 29:05

So, all of that, all of these experiences have helped, I believe, ground me and made me more focused and driven in trying to improve myself and those around me, but always recognizing that I'm "and that's the beauty of working with a team of driven individuals is that you need a team to accomplish certain goals. Maybe some people may say lofty goals that you have, because there's imperfection in every human being. So whatever those imperfections are either personally or just in a work environment, you're able to uplift each other, with the team that we have here at IslamInSpanish all the way to your home, with your siblings, your parent, your spouse, even your children. That's how those experiences impacted me to this day.

 Rimsha Syed 30:06

That was very well put, and I know that many people are inspired by what you have to say. You mentioned officially converting around the age of twenty, and I was curious if you had a specific memory tied to that day?

 Isa Parada 30:24

Memory? Yeah, I do. A couple of weeks before, while I was doing my research, I was working at - it doesn't exist anymore - a video store, like Blockbuster. A young man comes in, meaning my age, young at the time. A guy comes in, and he sees that my birth name is Christian, and he says, "Christian, that's a good Christian name." So automatically, in my mind, I'm thinking, "Man, does this guy want to preach to me Christianity?" Because at that time, I decided Christianity was not for me. So I'm just looking at him like, "Nah, I'm not in the mood to hear about someone preaching to me." It happens from time to time. There wasn't anybody in the store. He asked me, "So what religion do you follow?" And I say, "My parents are Christian and Catholic." "And what about you?" And I don't know why I said it, but I just told him, maybe just to get him off my back, said, "I want to be a Muslim." And he was just shocked. He was like, "What?" And he goes, "I'm Muslim."

 Isa Parada 31:53

I was like, "Okay, this is weird." So anyways, from that moment, we got acquainted, and we went out to eat, and one of my older homeboys, one that was looking into Islam too, we went out to eat with him. After a couple of weeks, he was like, "I think you guys are ready for Islam." There was still some hesitancy there, because you don't even know what that really means. Being young, you're trying to figure out, do you need to be perfect to become Muslim? There's a certain - looking at Malcolm X, always as an example, I was like, "Man, I have to be perfect like him. I don't know if I'm ready to be perfect like him." Of course, no


one's perfect. But when you're looking at a quote, unquote, "idol" that way you're like, "Man, I can't live up to that person's lifestyle and how he lived Islam." But eventually, it just was like, "Okay, let me do it."

 Isa Parada 32:53

So we went to a mosque, we prayed the final prayer of the day, it was at night, and there was a group of people from Malaysia and Bangladesh visiting. There was some kind of conference there. So mind you, you still have some stereotypical viewpoints of what Muslims are, how they look. In that specific mosque, you have people who had turbans, the long robes, and all of a sudden, they tell you to sit. I was told with my man to sit in the back of the mosque and just wait. So we're waiting there, we're like, "Man, we don't know what's going to happen." All of a sudden, you start seeing over 200 men surround you, like I said, with the robes, with the big beards. Some of them have even like little eyeliner, it's called kohl, under their eyes. You're just trying to figure out, what is going on here? It's just weird. Some older gentleman who was the religious leader of that mosque, sat in front of us and just asked us a few questions. Then we took the testimony of faith.

 Isa Parada 34:21

What really hit me was after taking the testimony of faith, they ask you - and this is not an obligation to do when you become Muslim - but they just asked, "Do you want to change your name?" I already in my mind had thought of changing it to Isa because Isa means Jesus in Arabic. I was named Christian to follow Christ, so I changed my name to Isa. So after that - and my friend became Yusuf - we got all these hugs from these 200 men, so that was weird because you don't hug men, right? That's just not what you do in the neighborhood. You shake hands, you might give a little shoulder, like a quick hug like that, but you're not hugging like a big bear hug. So I got 200 of them. And seeing grown men crying because you became Muslim was also strange. I was given a few oils, which has a unique smell when you're used to smelling it, right? It's like cologne - smelling, but it's real thick. You're just getting all these gifts, and you're just feeling like, "Wow, man, these people are so welcoming, and some of them don't even speak English. But they're just happy that I made this choice." So I just remember looking at the world differently, starting that night. Definitely was like a certain weight was lifted off my shoulders or whatever things that I did in the past, I was wanting to let go and move forward. Been a Muslim ever since.

 Rimsha Syed 36:06

Yeah, that's a really lovely story. How did your family and friends initially react to you converting, and how are those relationships now?

 Isa Parada 36:18

My father was in prison at the time. He thought that I joined some terrorist group, unfortunately, just what he remembers, just watching from the news and movies. Especially in the 80s, there were a lot of Delta Force Chuck Norris terrorist movies, hijacking planes, all that stuff. So he's just like, "Man, my son is gonna become a terrorist." So I was shocking, because I told my father, I reminded my father what he taught me about reading, and to have an open mind, and that I would never go into something blind. So that calmed him down a bit, because he remembered what he advised me, and I just told him to read a little bit about Islam, and he saw that that wasn't the case. He met some Muslims in prison, and he saw that [they] were

actually American. That calmed him down a bit. My mother and older sister were very hurt. They thought - well, I did not believe that Jesus Christ was my Lord and Savior. That really pained them, and they would just pray for me. It was a painful, I would say, couple of days for them. Once they calmed down emotionally, one of the first things I did was have my mom read a chapter of Mary in the Qur'an. Her name is Maria, so I told her, "People know me as Isa, as Jesus, and you're Maria, so we have a deep connection that way, just like in this chapter of the Qur'an." After she read that, she calmed down a lot.

I Isa Parada 38:14

Eight months later, I got married to a convert as well, African-American sister. So there were family members calling, talking about how disappointed they were talking about how my parents didn't teach me Christianity correctly, which was shocking, because they knew I was the most involved - from their point of view - nephew in the church. So they just didn't know how to react. Even some neighbors who would go to church with my mom, some of them called me anti-Christ. I was very like, "Man, they saw me acting a fool and disrespecting and coming home all hours of the night, and now I'm trying to change my life for the better, and I'm a terrorist, anti-Christ, don't talk to your cousins about this." It was real, like, "Wow, religion does have a major impact on people this way." It threw me off a bit.

I Isa Parada 39:21

My friends were shocked. They were a weird, strange scared. They knew I was a bit crazy on the streets and all of a sudden, I went cold turkey. I mean, I went from smoking and drinking from the age of twelve to cold turkey. Thankful to God that I haven't touched any alcohol since I was nineteen, or smoke any type of drug or sell anything since I was nineteen years old. I went cold turkey. Not everybody does that, and I just did. So I did it, and then I stopped hanging out and I stopped doing certain things that I was doing. Some of them, I even brought them into that type of criminal lifestyle. So they were shocked, like, "Man, what the heck did he just do?" Some of them wouldn't talk to me anymore. They just didn't know how to react to what I just did. But eventually, I think once I got married and obviously the first few months in, that's when I think everyone knew I was real serious about what I was doing. Some of my friends came back and cordially were just asking what the reasons I became Muslim, and I told them, and some of them accepted Islam, and some of them didn't.

I Isa Parada 40:53

Then family members, once they got to meet my wife, and they got to see that I was serious about changing the way that I was living, they eased up a lot. My father, obviously, to this day loves his daughter-in-law, and my sisters sometimes say they get jealous of my wife, because it's like a third daughter for my mother. It did change a lot of things for the better, for the most part. Even to this day, a lot of these uncles or aunties that were disappointed in me then, they see that I'm a lot healthier. Again, it's not about judging, it's just what they say, "You're a lot healthier than a lot of our children." You can tell that they want to say sorry, but I just let it go. It was in the past.

I Isa Parada 42:05

My mother-in-law was a different story because my wife being a convert, it was tough for her. We had some struggles for the early years of being Muslim with my mother-in-law. She was very unhappy to say the least, that her daughter married a Salvadorian - so she thought that all Salvadorians cheat on their

wives. And being Muslim, I was going to abuse my wife. She had these stereotypes in her head, so she was scared for many years. I mean, she said that she was scared for her daughter. I happened to move to Saudi Arabia to study Islam, from 2002 to 2009. My mother-in-law, for many years, would imagine that I was leaving my wife in a desert somewhere. So there was a lot of these angst that we had growing up as Muslims. But eventually, when kids start coming into the picture, grandchildren, and you see that you're fairly just normal people just trying to be better, people again ease up a lot more. They may not agree, obviously, in your decision to become Muslim, but the level of respect that we have for each other now, where my older sister and my mother come to some of our programs here at the IslamInSpanish Centro Islamico, the center that we have here in Houston, and my nieces who are not Muslim come here. We have that loving environment where we're able to disagree on some things, but we still love each other because we're family. It's been a very unique past few years, just dealing with the ups and downs of just life, but try to take it in stride.



Rimsha Syed 44:11

How did you meet your wife?



Isa Parada 44:17

[Laughs]. [Indiscernible audio]. So I knew her brother. We played football together. In our high school, the year after I graduated, some students there started what was called the MSA, Muslim Students Association. They started actually doing Friday sermons. We have our day of congregation on Fridays. The Friday sermons started to happen in my old high school, and one of the teachers was Ms. Nasir. She taught one of my wife's friends. She had been visiting the classroom one time, and she asked her why she wore the head cover, the hijab. So my wife started asking, why did she wear hijab? And she's African American, so they connected that way, African-American, hijab, and she started asking questions. Then she invited her to come to one of the Friday sermons, and I think she went to a few. Right before she graduated, I happened to be there. I wanted to see a Friday sermon in my school. I was like, "Wow, this is happening here." I was there, and she became Muslim. I remember her brother's name, and I'm like, "Oh." So you start to ask certain questions, and you find out her situation wasn't healthy at home, when she came out with becoming Muslim. Yeah, so just was like, "Okay." You find out, how do you get married here? Because in Islam, you're not gonna go dating or anything like that. So there was a local religious teacher in one of the small mosques in our neighborhood, and he helped us through the process. June 28 of 1997 we got married. We're going to be twenty-five years in June.



Rimsha Syed 46:46

Wow. Transitioning over a little, I know that you were an imam for some time in Sugar Land before joining IslamInSpanish. I'd love to hear about how you got there and how that experience was for you.



Isa Parada 47:05

When I graduated from the Islamic University of Medinah in Saudi Arabia, my background is in theology and I learned the Arabic language. Before graduating, there were a lot of mosques in Houston. People already know me. In the summers I would come back and give sermons and do classes and teach Arabic. So people already see me grow up and being very - even before I went to Medinah - heavily involved in

youth programs, advising youth and mentoring youth. The community had known me. So there was a few offers to become an imam/educational director of the different Islamic centers here in Houston. So when I arrived, I had a lot of job interviews.

I Isa Parada 47:58

But what was unique was I had known the founder of IslamInSpanish since the first day he became Muslim. We're from the same neighborhood, we had a close relationship, we would still be in contact throughout the time I was in Saudi Arabia, we visit some times, and of course, we would hang out in the summers. He came to me and said, "Listen, would you want to work with me? We're thinking about opening up a center as well. You want to be the educational director?" I had turned down all the offers of the mosques to go jump on onto this endeavor. For one year, we were dedicated to educating Latinos about Islam in the Spanish language, but also working towards opening up what's called a Social and Media Center. Different. We named it Andalusia, for what's called Muslim Spain, after that. In that first year of developing and just working on that project, I came to realize that I just wasn't ready to fully focus on building a project, because I still had this drive to want to teach. I really wanted to go on that side.

I Isa Parada 49:37

So I decided to look into these different offers that I was given to be the imam. The mosque in Sugar Land, the Brand Lane Islamic Center, they were the first ones who called back. Actually, they had reached out as well. I remember at that time period, they were just seeing if we wanted to work with them as an organization, but I wanted to see if I could do something with them more on a full time basis, and still volunteer with IslamInSpanish, so I decided to do that. From 2011 to 2016, I was the education director of the Brand Lane Islamic Center. In those five plus years, it was a wonderful experience, because I was able to - number one, I was the first indigenous imam ever to be hired. Because the Brand Lane Islamic Center's under an umbrella organization called the Islamic Society of Greater Houston, which started in 1969.

I Isa Parada 50:59

Up to that point, in its forty plus years of existing, it never had an indigenous religious teacher, or imam, or education director. They were trying to change that, so when I was hired, an actual neighbor of mine, who I studied with in Medinah, from New Jersey, got hired not too long after that in the north side of Houston. I'm in the southwest. So that had an impact, I believe, in the community, because they got to see someone who was a convert actually lead them from an educational standpoint. I will always appreciate that opportunity given from the leadership at the time. They were very helpful. I let them know very quickly that I'm here as a resource and as a team member, right. We're here to work together, so that made it easier for them to know that they are open to, obviously, advise me. Sometimes people feel intimidated by the the title "imam" if could be across the board, it could be rabbi or guru or priest or pastor. Sometimes people can be intimidated in maybe wanting to give you some positive feedback, or constructive criticism, and they won't do it. I was trying to be very open with them, the way that I was mentored from my teachers, overseas and locally, was to always leave the door open for people to give you advice.


I Isa Parada 53:05

That helped out in that process. I did a lot of programs with the youth. With IslamInSpanish, we worked together on a program called "What Your Neighbors Think of You and Why." This was a way to inform the

community that we had to be a lot more welcoming when people come into the mosque, and hosting them, and not judging them. Changing the mindset, this is not what Islam - the way that certain mosques run, or had run at the time, they weren't welcoming places, not only for people who are not Muslim, but then for the younger generation, or people who don't look like you. We were still working with IslamInSpanish in developing these type of programs within the community, which they were always very welcome and very open. Even when we did open houses, inviting people who are not Muslim to learn about Islam, especially in Spanish, again, still having that working relationship with IslamInSpanish. The community in general was very open. Even when you had some community members not like the change, there was enough elders and leaders in the community who were able to, let's say, listen to those voices, but not let them affect the general community.

 Isa Parada 54:32

But after five years of working in that environment and already having the discussion with the IslamInSpanish team about actually opening up an Islamic center that we had thought about from one time me and the founder, Jaime, were walking around our neighborhood and dreaming of doing it back in 2005. We asked the community of Latino Muslims here, we had a big gathering with them, and we asked, "Do you think you guys are ready for it?" and it was unanimous. 2015 we started working on that project, it opened up in January 30 of 2016. But I will still a volunteer, coming twice a week, teaching. But there was a moment when we were trying to open up a center in Dallas, an outreach center. We traveled together as a team, and that's when I came to realization that I want to go a hundred percent in on this with the rest of the team, not just volunteer or be an advisor from the outside. So that was the shift from being an educational director/imam at the Sugar Land mosque to coming into this project of IslamInSpanish and the Centro Islamico.

 Rimsha Syed 56:08

How do you think having that physical space, Centro Islamico, has benefited the Latino Muslim community so far?


 Isa Parada 56:20

Ever since our first open house, me, Jaime, we did back in either late 2001 or early 2002, and just different programs that IslamInSpanish was doing around Houston. It was, for the most part, outside of having a social end, it was called Andalusia Media Center, was more focused on the media side of things. Really, IslamInSpanish was just a nomadic project moving from place to place, trying to work within the Muslim community, to assist them in just inviting people to Islam. But we noticed that, again, just the certain cultures or environments of certain Islamic centers were not open, or were not as welcoming as we wanted them to be. With all of our years of advising, doing programs, preaching this change of mindset within the Islamic centers, when we opened up the center in 2016, now it was time to all that theory - some application, as I said, we tried some of it in other mosques - but all of that, now, we had to put it into action, one hundred percent, full time. It wasn't just moving from place to place. We had our own place.


 Isa Parada 58:01

Having our own place then made it real easy for Latino Muslims, and Latinos in general in Houston, to know there's a physical place that I can, number one, go as a new Muslim to learn, meet people just like

me, speak the language that I speak, bring my children as well and my family members. What's unique is because a lot of Latino Muslims are not married to Latinos, so your children speak English and Spanish. So do their spouses, like my wife. She speaks Spanish, but she prefers to learn in English. That's her mother tongue. So there's bilingual programs here, so we're able to have an environment of our own. This comes with a certain feel to it so that when I bring my non-Muslim family member, or friend, or colleague, or neighbor to the center, you have people hosting them, giving them a tour, sitting them down, serving them. All of what Islam teaches us on how to be without any cultural hangups, we were able and are able to implement it, when we started and up to this moment.

 Isa Parada 59:25


Then people, meaning the new Muslims, or just people who have been Muslim for a while and Latinos, they were able to then take on the same role of anytime someone new comes in, it doesn't have to be four or five people from the leadership to do it. It becomes everyone doing it, from young to old, men and women, right? If it has to be in Spanish, we have people who speak Spanish. If it's English, we have people who speak English. Sometimes you got someone who speaks Urdu because someone married someone who's Pakistani or Indian. One of our first guest speakers who's now a constant in giving sermons here, he's half Palestinian, half Mexican. So if we need someone to speak Arabic, we have that. We have one of our educators who's Chinese or Taiwanese, who speaks Mandarin. There's been people who've come into our center who only speak Mandarin or prefer to speak Mandarin. What started to happen is not only with the Latinos, right, from different people and different backgrounds started to come in.

 Isa Parada 1:00:32

But what happened was Latinos felt like, "Wow, not only do we have something of our own, and there's a flavor here of some Latino touch to it. But it's not just for our people. It's not just for people who speak Spanish." It might sound cliché-ish, it's for everyone, but it truly is, because we do have that diversity of just the city in itself as being diverse, but within our own congregation. But it did make them feel a feeling of - positive, I don't want to say pride because pride could come off wrong, but being proud of something that our community did, that's established and it's still going. Once a group of people can do something that's either never been done before, or it hasn't been done in many decades, then people believe that they can do it, too. It's had a major impact on Latinos all across Houston, knowing that there is a place that they have their own, but when they come in, they bring their family, they know that they're not just going to meet their own, they're going to meet people from all over which is what Islam is supposed to be. People from different backgrounds, different groups, as God says in the Qur'an, to get to know one another.

 Rimsha Syed 1:02:09

Yeah, I couldn't agree more. I think anyone would agree that IslamInSpanish is breaking boundaries and creating diversity within the Muslim community that, here in Texas, that may not have been so evident, say a hundred years ago. I just wanted to ask where you see the community heading in the future if you have more plans of expanding, more programs in mind, etc.

 Isa Parada 1:02:36

Sure. So we have our Islamic Center here in Houston. We were renting a place from 2016 to 2019, and

then we had to vacate that place because the owners of that building were going to expand and had to make some changes. So we found almost two and a half acre land with already a brand new - well, at the time it was only ten years old - warehouse building. 10,000 square feet, literally a six, seven minute walk from our old high school. Under the water tower that say - the neighborhood we grew up in is Alief. Literally right next to it. We couldn't get more Alief than that. So the organization has a place of its own. Now we've been here for two years. Obviously the pandemic slowed things down in the build-out of the inside and some things that we're planning to do outside. But the point is, is that we're working on that part of the expansion of the building, but also the programs that we're doing.

I Isa Parada 1:04:10

Now we have programs that - from from social programs, we have programs focused for young women, a support group for Muslim women, mostly converts, in English and in Spanish. We have a senior citizens support group called Happy Seniors. We have bi-monthly [audio cuts out] not only know converts, but get to know other community members as well. Just hanging out and getting to know one another. We have monthly potlucks. So these social programs help build a cohesive feel to the community, you get to know people from different backgrounds. Actually, this upcoming Saturday, we're having a program, a dinner, to appreciate our family members who are not Muslim. This is the second one that we're doing. Because many times people don't realize how much our families who are not Muslim have to - they have to go through certain things in order, spiritually, mentally, emotionally. They go through certain things when they see their family member become Muslim. Some people support you early on, some people later. We want to appreciate all those family members that have been there for their loved ones.

I Isa Parada 1:05:54

When we did it the first time, it was powerful because you're recognizing the challenges - meaning as a family member that's not Muslim - that I went through. It meant a lot to them. We were happy to have my older sister and the founder Jaime's father-in-law speak on behalf of the organization, saying that they went through certain challenges too, one marrying off their only daughter to a Muslim guy was weird. It was different for him. But for my older sister, her experiences as her little brother becoming Muslim, and on the angst that she had, and seeing us grow together, and they're active members of our community, even though they both go to the same church. But they're active members here and supportive. That really eased up a lot too, [for] the people that were there. We hope to have something similar this coming Saturday. We have these different programs here in Houston. Now we have a person dedicated to doing outreach work. We have a blood drive coming up, we've had the vaccination drive here, feeding the needy, a drive for students, a school drive for children who are in need of school supplies. Trying to get more involved in our community as well that way.

I Isa Parada 1:07:45

Then of course, from the media perspective, we're constantly having people come in from different parts of the world to interview us and to do stories on us. So that's having an impact around the world in how they view Muslims in general, but in different languages in French, and Arabic, and Urdu, and Malay, and of course, English and Spanish. It's been a unique journey. Now we have our own outreach center in Dallas. It's been open for four years now, outside of the pandemic, which of course, it was closed for a few months. The small community of Latinos are doing some work in educating their community members about Islam in the Spanish language. It's different there in Dallas, it's a lot more focused on the Spanish language, so it's unique. Every city has its own unique flavor. People have asked us from San Antonio to

Austin to El Paso, "Hey, when are you opening up a center there?" We were close to opening up a center in Chicago, but we noticed that we had to slow down, because we wanted to make what we have already a lot stronger, build a stronger foundation before expanding. We've been able to expand just from the media, our social media platforms that we have. Been able to reach people from all over the world. So we hope to continue to make that impact worldwide from our social media platforms and the media that comes through to do stories on us, and, of course, throughout the States and locally here in Texas, in Houston and Dallas, we hope to continue to make a positive shift in the environment.



Rimsha Syed 1:09:43

Right. Yeah, this has been such a rich interview. The last question I have for you, seeing as this will be archived and someone might be listening to it several years down the line, do you have any sort of message for them?



Isa Parada 1:10:03

Wow. I would just say that whoever may be listening to this in the future, the hope always is, is that for any human being, that they stay open-minded, and what I mean by open-minded, that you're able to learn about differences in the way that people view the world, approaching it with some humility, where you're open to engage, to know people from different backgrounds, different thoughts or points of view. Because when you're able to do that, and then the door opens to have a dialogue or discussion, it becomes a lot more healthy. It's challenging in this day and age, where social media and just the environment is not open, right, to have this open dialogue in a positive way. You hope that you're able to just impact one or two or even more people, even if it's one, to have that mindset so that when you have this discussion, especially when you're not in agreement, it can be done in a mature fashion.



Isa Parada 1:11:43

And knowing that the world is not black and white. There's a lot of gray. Certain principles you stick by in the way that you view the world, sure, no problem. But then you have to maneuver. If you want a positive society, you have to be able to maneuver in a way where you can stick to your principles, but at the same time, knowing that not everyone's gonna live the way you live your life. But in order how to be a cohesive society is by learning to - I would say you - agree to disagree in a lot of what you do, but you do it in a way where it's healthy. It has to start with a certain mindset of being humble, being open, but at the same time, you can be firm upon what you believe and then hoping that we can impact the younger generation to be that way, so that we can stop some of this madness that we see in our society in certain parts. You hope that you can change it not only in your homes or your neighborhood, but also even shifting that mindset online where most people are going to. Don't stop trying to be a positive influence, even if it's just in your home. You never know how that may impact others outside of that.



Rimsha Syed 1:13:20

Beautifully said. Thank you so much for your time today. This was so, so wonderful. I am going to go ahead and stop the recording now.