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Oral History Interview with Asad Dandia

Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006

Interview conducted by Liz H. Strong on February 16, 2018

at the New York University Office of Global Spiritual Life in Greenwich Village,
Manhattan

STRONG: I'll say today is Friday, February 16th. Is that right? 2018. My name is Liz Strong.

I'm here interviewing Asad Dandia for the Brooklyn Historical Society's Muslims in Brooklyn Public History Project. Asad, thank you. Just start by saying when and where you were born, if you wouldn't mind.

DANDIA: Hi. My name's Asad. I was born [date redacted for privacy] 1992 in Brooklyn, New York.

STRONG: Tell me about your family and your life growing up in Brighton Beach.

DANDIA: Okay. Well, my, my father and my mother immigrated to the United States in the early '80s. I was born in the early '90s. Growing up in Brighton Beach, I grew up in I guess what I would call a Muslim enclave in, surrounded by Little Russia. We had our local mosque, our doctor, our dentist, our grocery store, our school. So it was a very tight-knit community. Everyone knew everybody else and it's still more or less the same up until today.

STRONG: So siblings, friends? What --?

DANDIA: I have a younger sibling, Zainab Dandia. She's two years younger than me. She's lived with me all my life. She actually got married very recently. She's living with her husband now in Rhode Island. Friends, I would say everyone who went to the local mosque with me was a friend. So quite, quite a few of those.

STRONG: Tell me about the local mosque. What was it like there? What was it called?

DANDIA: The local mosque is the Islamic Center of Brighton Beach, otherwise known as Masjid -- which means mosque in Arabic -- Masjid Omar. It's been there for as long as I can remember. I am pretty sure it was there since I was a young child. And it's where I used to go after school to learn how to read the Qur'an, to learn how to pray. And it

served as a great sort of social institution for me to build friendships with other Muslims in my neighborhood, which was a predominantly Pakistani neighborhood.

STRONG: Where'd you go to school?

DANDIA: Elementary School, I did PS253, which is in my neighborhood. I transferred to PS188 into this -- this sigma program, which is I guess you could the equivalent of a specialized -- like a special talent program. And so I transferred to PS188, which is in Coney Island. So I had to take a bus there. For junior high school, I went to the Bay Academy, which is also a walking distance from where I live. Its rival school is, is Mark Twain, and it's also considered one of the higher junior high schools. For high school, I went to Madison High School, which is in the Midwood area of Brooklyn. It also happens to be the alma, alma mater -- is that -- did I say that right?

STRONG: Alma mater or something like that.

DANDIA: It also happens to be the alma mater of Bernie Sanders, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Chuck Schumer. So a lot of, lot of Liberal Brooklynites end up going to that school. For college, I -- should I go into college?

STRONG: Let's, let's wait on college, because the college is also a turning point in your story. Mostly I was curious is like, what were your experiences of building community when you were young? Did you find it through school, or mostly through your neighborhood, mostly through the mosque?

DANDIA: Building community -- I like to think of community as a multi-faceted entity. So I would say it was a nebulous between the school, the mosque, and other social networks that we had. Because we were an immigrant community and we largely still are an immigrant community, we tend to gravitate toward one another much more strongly. And so building community was something that, that, thankfully for us, came naturally, Pakistani Muslim Americans. Although I, I, I do have to say that there have been challenges and obstacles, given the fact that I grew up in a different cultural milieu than my parents. You know, I'm sort of like the American child. My generation is I guess what you'd call the bridge generation between the culture of back home and the culture here. So there were some barriers connecting with the adults, but they

appreciated the fact that we were sort of, I guess, puncturing our own unique identity, you know, while not completely giving up, or completely abandoning the past in this new sort of landscape that we find ourselves in. So community, it's, it's -- it was something that was easy, but all -- but it also had its challenges.

STRONG: I'm curious when you say you're the, you're the bridge generation and there were some communication barriers between you and your parents. Can you give me like a specific story or an example that would amplify that?

DANDIA: So I can give a recent example, I guess, or an example that many Muslim Millennials of my generation who share a similar story to mine can probably relate to: the issue of marriage. So, you know, I'm -- today I'm 25 years old. You know, my Mom's already talking to me about like potential suitors and you know, asking me when I'm going to bring home you know, a potential wife. Whereas in the culture here, I guess in the United States, 25-year-olds, at least to my knowledge, most 20, 24, 25, early twenties, folks are not really thinking about marriage per se, right? They're thinking about relationships and how to create those relationships. So that's one major barrier that I've found, or one major sort of divergence that I've found between sort of the, the environment where I grew up and the environment that my parents grew up in.

Structure the --

STRONG: How are those conversations going?

DANDIA: They're fun. They're --

STRONG: [laughter]

DANDIA: You know, you know, people say that, that the -- these are like challenging and like negative conversations. For me, they're like funny because my Mom always says it in a, in a sort of like a friendly, joking manner. Like, "When are you bringing her home?" Or she'll see me texting on, on my phone and like my, my friend will send me like a meme and I'll be laughing at the meme, and she'll think I'm talking to a girl. And like, you know, "When are you going to bring her home?" That kind of stuff. So they're funny. I enjoy them, but I also, you know, I also try to communicate to my Mom in, you know, in the same friendly manner that "it probably won't be the way, you know, you're

anticipating it to be.” So these are interesting conversations and I’m, you know, I’m glad that they’re taking place. Yeah.

STRONG: Tell me a little bit about your experience of your faith community growing up and your faith education. When we spoke on the phone you said it kind of evolved over time. So I’d like to get sort of a picture of, of what it was like for you, and what was important to you, and what stood out.

DANDIA: Personally?

STRONG: Yeah.

DANDIA: Okay. Well, I’ve been, I’ve been -- I guess my Mom and my -- my Mom and Dad have been sending me to the mosque for as long as I can remember, perhaps since I was, I don’t know, 10 or 11 years old. And you know, when I was young, we really did -- we didn’t see going to the mosque as something that was you know, being imposed on us, something that we had to do that we didn’t really want to do, sort of like school. For example, we -- you know, back then, I was a big fan of like the WWE, you know, world wrestling. You know, we were all like young kids and we were into, we were into that kind of stuff. And like going to the mosque would mean like going to the back, you know, when the Imam wouldn’t see and having like wrestling matches, and you know, playing tag, and like running around, and committing all sorts of like shenanigans as, that 12-year-olds would do. So it was really -- it was seen to me, retrospectively looking back at it, it was something that I saw as essential to my childhood growing up.

And it did have an impact on my faith because I feel that that social component of the House of Worship allowed me to sort of embrace faith more easily than your average Millennial would. And I feel that that -- that had an impact on me going forward because you know, after a while, I started asking these questions, you know, attending more like formal classes, you know, learning about theology, and law, and scripture, and interpretation. And over time, my understanding of these, you know, very vast, broad concepts became more sophisticated as I went through college, and as I graduated. And I’m sure we can talk more in depth about that.

STRONG: What kind of questions were you most excited about or most passionate about?

DANDIA: Well, when I was young, I think the questions that excited me most were probably questions related to my role in the world, and particularly stories. So I was really big on stories, and I like hearing stories about prophets. And you know the Qur'an, the Qur'an shares a lot of parallels with the biblical narrative on pretty much -- a good number I would say, good number of prophets or biblical figures who are mentioned in the, both the Old and the New Testament are also mentioned in the Qur'an with slightly different narratives. And so I really enjoyed reading about the various ways that the, that the different religions talked about, you know, Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Noah, Moses, Jesus. I always like to say that -- well, you're not an Apple user, but Islam is sort of like the newest IOS update from Judaism and Christianity. It IOS 3.0. I'm not sure what the Samsung equivalent is.

STRONG: If there was one I wouldn't know [laughter].

DANDIA: Yeah. So it's -- I always like to -- the, the comparative component of faith and religion, what brings them together, but also where they differed. And I found meaning in learning about that. I found meaning in learning about eschatology. So the study of, you know, the end of times. That was always something that was fascinating to me. Like, you know, where the world is headed. You know, and when you're young, sort of teen, pre-teen, you kind of like learning about like mysterious components of the world. And so for me, like where the world is headed, you know, what's going to happen, you know, as we move forward. And the, the, the mysteries of it all were things that really captured me.

STRONG: Any teachers or mentors that you remember from a young age that kind of encouraged you in these directions that you were excited about?

DANDIA: Yeah. So actually, two teachers who actually happened to be co-plaintiffs in the lawsuit with me, they were actually also -- when I was young I used to attend some of their lectures, which is fascinating because in -- I had no idea that -- as a 14-year-old attending their lectures that years down the line I would also be sitting as a plaintiff with them on a lawsuit. So Imam Hassan Raza, who happens to be one of the plaintiffs,

and Mohammad Elshinawy, who is also another plaintiff -- I think he's, he moved now to Pennsylvania, but he's, he's always taking trips back here to New York. They were, they were our local -- they would often come to -- for example, Hassan would come to you know, my local mosque in Brighton Beach.

We actually had two local mosques, both within a block from me. One was behind the building where I lived and one was in front of it. So I had the opportunity to go to both. And he would come to the other one and he would give us, you know, talks on jurisprudence, and law, and theology, and eschatology. And at the time, he was I think 23 or 24. So younger than me at the time when first began to teach. This is like 2006 or 2007. And I learned a lot from him.

You know, Elshinawy, I learned a lot from him, as well. We also usually go to these other classes across, you know, across Manhattan, Queens, the city to perfect our Qur'an recitation, to learn on a deeper level what you know, our, our, our faith was all about. So I went around quite a few places, but those two had, had an, had an impact on me when I was much younger.

STRONG: So just for the record, what was the name of the other mosque? Not Omar, but the other one.

DANDIA: So the other one, I think the other one was actually older than Omar. It's called Masjid or Mosque Arqam, A-R-Q-A-M. And I believe that one was founded probably earlier, but right now, as of late, they've been going through construction. So I'm not sure if it's -- the full prayer space is being used at the moment. I think they've -- part of the mosque is going under some major construction. So the, the only -- they're a small prayer space right now.

STRONG: Okay. So, so this was roughly in like your teens, your fourteens, fifteens?

DANDIA: I would say early teens. Yeah.

STRONG: Interesting. So how did that influence you moving forward into college? And what did you want to pursue at that time?

DANDIA: So in college, so I went to Brooklyn College for you know, two years of my life.

And I was a political science major. So one of the, one of the things that really captured my interest was how faith interacts with the public and political sphere, and particularly in the Middle East, and sort of the surrounding regions. When I was in college, the Arab Spring started. So around 20-- I started college in 2010.

STRONG: Oh, wow.

DANDIA: The Arab Spring was at the very end of 2010, going into 2011. And the protests were taking place in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria, as well. And that's what really got me motivated. I was taking a class at the time when the Arab Spring was happening. It was a class called -- it was a class on Middle East politics. I think -- yeah. It was called Middle East Politics and -- or Middle East History. I can't remember. It was something on the Middle East. And my professor was, I think he was a PhD student at the time. His name is Hisseine Faradj, Egyptian. And that was my first exposure to, for example, Edward Said, you know, critical theory, post-modernism, Orientalism, post-colonialism, imperialism. Like these ideas that you know, are often you know, engaged and talked about in the Academy. That was my first exposure to them. And that's when my understanding of faith became a lot more sophisticated because I was able to tie it together, not just to personal rituals and practices and theology, but also the world around me, and how the world around me shaped the way my faith is interpreted, both by Muslims and non-Muslims. And I also took a class called Islam and Modernity with the same professor. And you know, I was really exposed at that point to European philosophical thought. And it really opened my eyes to more deeper layers of understanding.

After that, I figured I wanted to start all over. I was a little bit confused existentially because of all the information overload, I guess. So I transferred to a community college, Kings Road Community College[EL1], which is in my locality. It's walking distance. And this was around the time that MGB was starting up. And so I wanted to get involved in service. And should I keep going or --?

STRONG: Yeah. Let's talk about Muslims Giving Back a little bit. It wasn't called that at first though, right?

DANDIA: Yes.

STRONG: Okay.

DANDIA: Okay. So MGB. So it was originally called Fesabeelillah Services of NYC. A brief translation: so fee sabilillah means in the way of God, or in the path of God. So, for example, in Islamic lexicon it would be, for example, you would say you were giving charity fee sabilillah, in the way of God, or to serve God essentially. And so that was originally started I think in 2011. I would say like November 2011-ish. Actually, don't take my word on it because I -- [0:16:42]

STRONG: We'll double-check.

DANDIA: Yeah. It was started in 2011, but I can't remember the exact date or the exact month because it's been -- I'm getting old.

STRONG: [laughter]

DANDIA: So that was started originally, and I was one of the original board members of it. And I was responsible primarily -- because I had a network sort of with, with youth, and with college students -- I was primarily responsible for reaching out to folks. We eventually changed our name to Muslims Giving Back. We just felt that that was more of the, I guess, spelling-wise, marketing-wise, just for understanding, a lot more easier on the, on the tongue for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. And that was around the summer of 2012 that we became MGB.

And the whole idea was, you know, faith in service. So faith not just as, you know, prayers or you know, liturgy, but service to people and to humanity. And you know, we were undergrads at the time, 19, 20 years old. This was how we knew what -- this was what we knew that we were capable of doing. You know, gathering together like our allowance or whatever money we were making from like, you know, evening jobs that we were doing, \$10 bucks each on a Friday. Buy groceries, deliver them to families. And from there we kind of picked up the pace.

STRONG: So what led to the idea of making this an organization rather than just a group of people who all went to the same mosque, and meeting up after prayer on Friday?

DANDIA: I think the idea was that number one, we, we, we saw that, as, as a group of youth, the potential that we had. Social media really helped magnify that because it gave us a lot of exposure. And it showed us that we would probably be able to have a lot more credibility as an official organization, as opposed to being like a collective of like young kids, just like putting money together. So we figured, you know what? You know, it would increase our credibility, our authority, our ability to receive grants, funding, to operate more efficiently.

And just also because part of it was we were, we were kind of, you know, we were zealous youth and we were very upset with the way that our leadership in our organizations were handling these kinds of things. We felt that there was too much bureaucracy and that we could overcome that by giving direct service to families. And we were like, you know what? Screw the establishment, screw the leadership. We're going to do our own thing. We're going to serve the people that really deserve to be served. And this is why we're doing what we're doing. [laughter] And so it's funny. You know, looking back at it, I kind of laugh at myself, but I, I see where I was coming from. And so then we, we decided to become an official non-profit for that reason.

STRONG: So tell me a little bit about the bureaucracy you're referring to. What did that look like? How did it slow down what you were hoping to accomplish?

DANDIA: So like you know, when we, when we think about like the non-profit, industrial complex, you know, you think about the overhead, the salaries and you know, all of the things that go into a -- maintaining a non-profit. Sometimes that diverts from the service and from the acts of service. And that was one thing that we always tried to avoid. So up until this day, actually, all of our community donations go toward whatever it is that we're -- we're a 100 percent community-donation based. So all of those -- every -- we take great pride in the fact that like every penny goes toward the

family that we're serving, and we're not making a salary from any of it, or we're not -- there's no like overhead at all.

STRONG: So the people who run it are entirely volunteer.

DANDIA: Yes.

STRONG: Wow. Why the focus on food early on? Why, why did that seem the, the best course of action?

DANDIA: So it, it felt like we had a lot of -- actually, it didn't feel like it. It was a fact that there were a lot of undocumented people in our community. And so poverty was a huge issue. I myself come from like a poor, working-class family and sort of this like immigrant, conservative immigrant enclave. And we noticed it. We noticed, you know, we noticed that if people are undocumented, that means they're not -- they're not receiving any sort of welfare or government aid and whatnot. So let us at least try to mitigate one expense that people had, which was a, you know, a basic necessity, which was food. And so some of the foods that we decided to buy for people, different kinds of beans, rice, lentils, cereals. Sometimes we would get milk and meat, usually on the Eid holiday when meat was being distributed. We, we would distribute meat all across you know, New York to different families. So really, what, what we felt that was the necessities, but also if we had enough money left over, snacks, cookies, biscuits, that kind of stuff. And we felt that by covering these basic necessities that at least it would relieve the -- that expense for whatever family that we were serving. And maybe they could spend their money on something else like notebooks, or furniture, or whatever it was that they wanted to buy.

STRONG: Yeah. Just to add, even for people who are documented navigating services --

DANDIA: Absolutely.

STRONG: -- is a huge amount of time and labor. Did you find that you know, existing food banks weren't necessarily providing halal options, or you know, were falling short in some way?

DANDIA: Well, we didn't even know that any existent food -- existing food banks in our community.

STRONG: Oh, wow.

DANDIA: Looking back, I, I can't think of one that was there in a -- in my particular locality and the locality of some of our volunteers. Some of our volunteers also came from Queens, other parts of Brooklyn. We weren't all from Brighton Beach. And none of us really knew of any existing food banks that were providing that, wasn't even a thought. And so we really felt that we were filling that need.

We even rented out a storage facility. Each one of us was responsible for like monthly dues, for helping contribute towards the storage facility. There's that in Coney -- Coney Island we sold a lot of -- store all of our food there. At first the storage facility you know, one of the smaller ones that was about -- I can't -- you could fit me, two of me into it. And then eventually we got one garage-size sort of facility where we actually we even brought cabinets, and we put them inside and we placed all of our bags of food in there. And then on a weekly basis, we'd have two or three of us who would have cars. We'd take rotations every week delivering food to the different families. Had a database of their names, their address, their phone numbers, what they needed. And that's how we did our work.

STRONG: Tell me about your role as like the outreach person. What, what did that look like?

DANDIA: So I -- I wasn't just outreach. I was also -- in the earlier days, I was on, I was vice-president. And so also I, I did treasurer, the position of treasurer for a while. I guess people saw that I was very good with communication, and very good with speaking and reaching out, and I don't know. People tell me I'm charismatic. I'm not the one to evaluate that, but they said, you know, they saw that I had that sort of knack for talking to people. And so I was the one who became the go-to person for the organization in a way. And so people would reach out to me saying how, how can they help? What can they contribute? "Are you accepting clothes?" You know, what are you, you know, what are you -- are you doing anything for this cause or that cause? "How can we volunteer?" And of course, I would, you know, let them know what we're doing and were capable of doing. I'd also reach out to other volunteers. And it was good. It was really fun because

you build a huge network, but you also build real friendships with people. And you, the community sort of enlarges and becomes enriched through that.

STRONG: How were you reaching people? Was it mostly through social media as you mentioned earlier? Or other means?

DANDIA: Primarily through social media, but we would also go to events at different youth centers and mosques in Queens and -- Queens and Brooklyn primarily, sometimes Manhattan. And we would -- sometimes we would ask if could speak on a panel. Sometimes we would ask if we could join a pre-existing panel, or an event, or a workshop. We would go to college MSAs, so Muslim Student Associations. They would allow us some time and some space. They would sometimes even raise funds for us if that was feasible. But social media was the primary driver. And for our crowd funding efforts, it still is the primary driver.

STRONG: So did it go from you know, people just in your neighborhood to this multi-borough network?

DANDIA: It really happened -- it happened faster than most of us were able to even keep up with. In fact, we have -- there was, I think, a group of people. I think it was in another state, like North Carolina or something, that caught up on our work and they wanted to start up their own branch. There were some friends in Long Island that we knew who wanted to start up their own branch. And so they brought their own storage facility and they started doing events in their own locality.

And I think it just like, you know, service and giving is, is contagious. And so when people saw that, "Wow, this is a lot easier than it sounds, you know. Why don't we start something like it?" It just happened. And some of us, right now, for example -- I'm not too involved with this project because I'm caught up here at NYU, but they just helped fund building like a mosque in Peru. So there's a Peruvian Muslim community that was really struggling, you know, with you know, basic funds to conduct services at the mosque. And so they, they actually went -- some of our members went over there to

South America to help essentially, help them construct their community. So you can say we are, [we've] almost gone international in a way. Yeah.

STRONG: It's certainly moving in that direction.

DANDIA: Yeah.

STRONG: That's exciting.

DANDIA: Yeah.

STRONG: So around this time, 2011-2012, you were at the community college, right?

DANDIA: So 2010 to 2012, I was in Brooklyn College.

STRONG: Okay.

DANDIA: 2012 to 2014, I was at Kingsborough Community College. Yes.

STRONG: Okay, great. So this was right around the time you're talking about where you're learning about, you know, post-colonialism --

DANDIA: Yeah.

STRONG: -- and taking your studies in that direction.

DANDIA: Mm-hmm.

STRONG: Did you know at that time that you were interested in you know, studying theology and politics in more depth? Or were you still just exploring?

DANDIA: I was definitely interested. I wasn't sure if I wanted to study you know, either one of these things, you know, going into graduate programs or like overseas or something. But I was -- it was definitely something that was of interest to me.

When I was in the community college, I was studying -- because it was something that I saw as part of my service work -- I was studying mental health and substance abuse counseling, as well, because I saw as something that would supplement the work that I was doing with Muslims Giving Back. And a professor of mine told me about this -- I don't remember her name [Susan Ednie]. And I, I really should because I'd love to go back and visit her one day. She was an -- she was, she was old enough to be retired, but she had so much energy in her, she was actually a -- a formerly-incarcerated individual. You know, this elderly, sweet White lady. And she said, you know, she informed me

about this -- it's, it's CCTOP, Community College Transfer Opportunity Program, where if you're a student at a New York community college, or a community college in a local area, you're able to transfer to NYU, transition and the scholarship would essentially cover your education based on your merit and your need. And she told me that I should apply for it. And it's because of her that you're sitting next to me right now in this space. And so that's when I became aware of that opportunity. And I submitted the essay, and she wrote a recommendation, and I got accepted to complete my undergraduate degree here at NYU.

STRONG: And that was a, a focus in social work, as well?

DANDIA: Yes.

STRONG: Or community organizing?

DANDIA: Yeah. So the major is known as social work here, but because social work connotes you know, clinical type work -- which I, I did to a certain degree. But my -- the social work that I was interested in and that I primarily focused on was community organizing. So bringing folks together on issues of shared concern, usually related to civic liberty -- oh, sorry. Civic engagement, social justice, education, cross-cultural understanding, that kind of stuff.

STRONG: What interested you in community organizing? I mean, obviously your work with Muslims Giving Back is going in that direction, but how did you channel that into your focus in school?

DANDIA: Well, by the time I was at NYU, the lawsuit had already been filed.

STRONG: Oh, that's right. Okay. So we should go back a little bit [laughter]. Tell me, you know, while you're at Brooklyn College, this is when the person who later came out as an informant first contacted you, right?

DANDIA: Yes.

STRONG: So tell me about that experience, getting to know him, what he was like.

DANDIA: So I was contacted I think around March, early March 2012. So it's almost been six years. And it was through Facebook, social media once again, our good friend. And so he messaged me -- I don't particularly remember exactly what he said, but something

along the lines of that he's looking to you know, participate in our community. He's looking to do good work. You know, he wanted to get involved with folks. And he was based out in Jackson Heights and Queens. So it was kind of far from Brighton Beach. But I said, "Yeah. Sure. You're more than welcome to our local mosque, you know, meet with some of our friends. And you know, you can come with us to feed families and buy food and whatnot." And so he would -- he came, he came on a Friday. I introduced him to some friends. We had Chinese food together in our local, local community. There was a No-Pork Halal Kitchen there at the time. And that's when real --

STRONG: Out in Brighton Beach or downtown?

DANDIA: Brighton Beach.

STRONG: Oh, really? I didn't know that.

DANDIA: There, there's one downtown. I know which one you're referring to. There was one in Brighton Beach. It closed down unfortunately. It got replaced with a halal gyro place, which is just as -- I, I, I eat from there just as much, but it would be nice to have a nice Chinese, Chinese restaurant there.

STRONG: Sorry to interject.

DANDIA: No, not at all.

STRONG: That's awesome.

DANDIA: Yeah. It was the other, the one other one in Brooklyn. And so he stayed with us for quite some time. He would come to all of our events.

At the time, you know, the, the conflict in Syria started to take on more violent proportions. And we were raising money for refugees at the time. So we were selling wristbands. And I gave him -- I think I gave him like 10 to 20 wristbands. And they were five dollars each. They're like those Livestrong wristbands. And he came back pretty quickly with the funds telling me that he sold them all. And I'm like, "All right. Wow. You know a lot -- you must know a lot of people if you're able to sell, you know, 10 to 20 wristbands for five bucks each to you know," what I imagine were mostly undergrads. He wasn't a college student at the time.

So he was with us for, for most of our events. He would come to every lecture that we attended, every workshop, every training. Usually would show up late. Later we found out why. But eventually, in October, time -- sometime early October, he confessed publicly on Facebook to being an informant for the NYPD. That's when things sort of blew up. Yeah.

STRONG: Why was he late?

DANDIA: So he would come late to events so that he could get a glimpse of the attendance sheet, and take photos of everybody's -- names, and emails, and numbers of everyone who came to the event so he could send it off to his handler.

STRONG: Holy cow.

DANDIA: Yeah. So he came deliberately late just so he could -- and we thought, we just thought it was a commuting issue, but there was a method to the craziness. Yeah.

STRONG: So what did you think about him as a person?

DANDIA: I thought he was a troubled person seeking a better life. So he, you know, he -- from what I knew of his past, you know, he got kicked out of school. He got into some fights. His family's originally from Bangladesh. So he, he grew up in a Muslim family. You know, he, he had a history of drug use, drug abuse. You know, I assumed he may have had you know, a mental illness, which was later confirmed for me.

So I just really thought he was you know, sort of socially off, trying to figure himself out, a little confused, existentially confused. And so I kind of let that go and I -- some of my friends would come up to me and say, "What's up with this guy? Why is he so weird? Why is he so awkward?" Close to the end -- when I say close to the end, I mean close to before he confessed -- folks came up to me saying that he believed he was a spy or an informant. And I shrugged it off. I was like, "No. That can't be. He's just a confused kid." Of course, they were later vindicated after he confessed and I, I felt like the dumb, the dumb guy for being like, assuming the best and you know, whatnot. I

was, I was sort of like the nice guy and I still kind of am. You know, making excuses for people all the time. But that's what I thought of him.

You know, when he would meet folks immediately, when I would introduce him to new friends, he'd be like, "Can I get your number?" Like right away, you know. Boy or girl, right? It wouldn't matter. He'd be like, "Can I get your number?" And essentially the reason why he wanted the number is so he could send it off back to his handler, his police handler. And folks found that kind of awkward. You don't usually ask people for their numbers the moment you meet them. But again, I just attributed it to like a social deficiency. And so that's what I thought for most of the time while he was with us.

STRONG: Wow. Tell me about reading his Facebook post. What did it say and what did it make you think?

DANDIA: I still have it saved. You know, for the memory. He wrote something about the NYPD using him as part of a, what he called a Ponzi scheme. And he recalled that when he was working as an informant and going to different lectures and events, he saw other people who were informants there. In other words, there were more than one of him and he saw those people. And he assumed that they were sent to spy on him, and he was sent to spy on them.

And he thought that the NYPD was duping him, right? And he finally got sick of it and so he confessed. But at the same time, he wasn't really a friend of us either. He wasn't doing it out of benevolence toward the community that he was spying on either. He sort of, he sort of wrote about us as if we were like you know, gullible people for believing in religion. So he was very like anti-religion and, and whatnot. And so he was kind of against us and the police in a way. And for him, I think this was just a way of expressing that. Of course, again, mental health issues, a lot of problems. These are usually the, the people and the profile that's often targeted by the police, the type of person that they would want to hire as an informant.

So we later learned that he was caught on drug possession charges or something like that. And they told him either you face a certain number of years in jail or you spy for us. Originally they wanted him to spy on a narcotics group, but he said he'd -- [laughter] he said he didn't want to spy on his own people. So he spied on Muslims instead, which is funny because he grew up Muslim. And so that was what we wrote in his confession.

STRONG: Wow.

DANDIA: Yeah.

STRONG: So I, I believe the AP story about NYPD surveillance came out in 2011, so --

DANDIA: Yes. Correct.

STRONG: -- just a little bit before.

DANDIA: Yes. So the AP story that came out in 2011, that was more of like a general report about like the fact that there is surveillance activity, and like some 15,000 plain clothes officers in the tri-state area, including outside of what, what's their jurisdiction, meaning in New Jersey. And so this was about a year later.

STRONG: So when people were suspicious of this, it was because people in the community sort of already knew that this was happening.

DANDIA: Exactly. Exactly. Yeah.

STRONG: Were there any suspicions of surveillance before that story broke, or was it all after?

DANDIA: Yes, there were. Again, I -- as I mentioned, friends approached me believing that he was an informant before he confessed himself.

STRONG: Oh, I mean before the AP story came out.

DANDIA: Oh, before the AP story came out? I always like to think that there's sort of like an implicit -- I think back then at least we would always used to have this implicit -- implicitly-understood that we are being on spied on. There was sort of like this assumed thing. We wouldn't always verbalize it, but it was kind of assumed and you would be able to tell by the way people were talking, especially when political issues came up, particularly about like the Middle East and South Asia.

And you know, there were times when people would be very tense. Or people would say, "Let's not talk about this. You know, maybe it's -- this is not the time and place." So there were definitely -- it was sort of like an assumed thing that we are being spied on. This is a post-911 world now, Patriot Act, you know, all of these sorts of infringements on, you know, on our rights are taking place. We just don't have -- just because we don't have confirmation doesn't mean it's not happening. And so it was kind of assumed. Yeah.

STRONG: What did that kind of caution lead to in the community? What kind of changes did you see?

DANDIA: A lot of community members -- for example, I remember in Hunter College -- I wasn't a student there, but I remember like in, in front of the MSA, the prayer room door there was a sign that said, "Please, no political discussions in the prayer room." And you know, if you know Muslims and Arabs, that, that's like 75 percent of our conversation. So it's like what, what are we going to talk about? The rest is about marriage. And so, yeah. And so it was very chilling because we didn't know who to trust and who to speak to, whether the guy praying next to me is an informant or a friend. And that really deteriorates the social cohesion of a community, right? And that's not something you can really measure tangibly. At least not, you know, at least not in the conventional ways. And so it really created an environment of distrust because the people who were supposed to be protecting us were the ones who were spying on us, right? And so it was like who do we go to for help if not the police, right?

And so general climate of distrust, of social deterioration, of uncertainty, of you know, political acquiescence. You know, people, people would be too afraid to write or speak, or talk, or post about policies that we felt were harming Muslims, whether domestically or -- or foreign policies. And you know, we just put our heads down and kept walking, metaphorically speaking.

STRONG: And during all of this time, you have this backdrop of, you know, you're very interested in the crossroads of politics and faith. The Arab Spring is happening. You're, you're an outreach person. You know, part of what you do is meet new people that you've never met before. So how did that climate affect you personally?

DANDIA: Oh, the climate, it -- it was so interesting the way that fate willed that I acquire my sort of, I guess in today's parlance, political wokeness, at the same time when you know, there was all this happening. Funny story, when the -- you know, the revelations, the AP revelations came out, you know, I was taking the class on you know, the Middle East that I mentioned to you earlier at Brooklyn College, and our professor, he pulled up like, you know, we had like a little -- what are those? He had a projector in a, on the board. He, you know, he projected the article about surveillance and it mentioned specifically that a Arab or Muslim professor in Brooklyn College specifically was being surveilled. He was like, "That's me, because I'm the only one who fits that description." And he was in -- I think he was like the only guy in the political science department, whatever. And he, he sat in front of our classroom and he said, he said, "I'm sorry, but for those of you who are auditing this course, I'm going to have to ask you to leave, because you know, the fact that surveillance is taking place and we aren't sure if you know, essentially you're a spy or not. And so unless you're officially registered, I'm sorry, I'm going to have, have to ask -- I don't want to do this and I hate to do this, but for my own sort of security and my own sense of comfort, I'm going to have to ask you to leave." And it was so, so painful to see students pack their books and get up and walk out of the classroom, never to be seen again in, in that classroom.

And that was a type of academic environment that it, that was created. You know, all of these uprisings were taking place in the Middle East and our -- here's our, here's a professor, you know, someone who's, you know, in a dignified position in the university, you know, himself, feeling chilled, right? So it was a tough, you know, it was a tough time period to really navigate and balance. Very difficult for all of us.

But I, you know, I kept reading and I kept doing what I was doing. I didn't stop. A lot of people told, told us to stop. A lot of people told me to stop and I kept telling myself I'm not doing anything wrong, so why stop? Of course, that got me into a lot of fights with you know, neighbors, friends, sometimes even parents. But you know, the word kept going.

STRONG: Give me an example of one of those conversations. Why did people try to convince you to stop? Were they scared for themselves? Were they scared for you?

DANDIA: So a friend of mine, apparently he knew someone who was working with you know, the police. And the person told them that -- this was before our, the volunteer confessed, before Shamiur confessed to being an informant. A few months before actually. He said, "I need to speak to you." And you know, he met with me privately in -- you know, we met in, in a, in our community. He said, "We're being watched. And I have confirmation, you know, based on some, from like folks I know inside the police that we're being watched. And we need to essentially stop what we're doing." We had a major event coming up for June at that year. So this was in April he sat me down. An event coming up for June. He said after that event, because, because we'd already put so much into planning it, that, "After that event we need to cease this organization and stop what we're doing, because I, I don't want to risk it."

And were all like 18 or 19 year old. When you don't -- when you tell someone that age that they're being watched, of course, you know, people are going to be like, "Yeah. I don't want to do this anymore." And I was like, "You know what? I, I, I think you have a point and I'll take it into consideration." So that's an example of a conversation that I had.

STRONG: And the ones that devolved into fights that you mentioned?

DANDIA: So like sometimes my parents would, you know, would say you know, "focus on your education. Focus on getting a good career and whatnot, you know. You're spending too much time doing service. It's going to detract from your academic path. And it's, it's, it's going to put too much of the spotlight on you. So we want, like we, we

would appreciate it if you would either cut down or like stop doing what you're doing. Even if it's -- we know what you're doing is good and we trust you, but we also care about you. So like, you know, we're asking you to sort of curtail some of that." Yeah.

STRONG: How did you decide to do the opposite?

DANDIA: I'm pretty hard-headed.

STRONG: [laughter]

DANDIA: Being, being a native Brooklynite, it's kind of part of the package of who we are.

So I was like, "Yeah, sure," you know. Kind of like when you know, a parent lectures you, you're like, "Yeah. I agree. Sure. Fine. Okay, Mom. Thank you." That kind of stuff. And just kept doing what we were doing [laughter]. Like there's no other way to describe it. We just kept doing what we were doing. And you know, the word kept going.

STRONG: What about support? Did you have any conversations with people who felt like they wanted to support you or like you were doing the right thing?

DANDIA: Oh, yeah. They were, they were equally -- there were people who wanted, who definitely wanted to show support and say like we're, you know, we're, we're doing good work. Let's keep doing what we're doing. So it was sort of a tug-of-war and I was stuck in the middle of it because I was sort of the face of the organization. And I didn't really know, or I didn't have the leadership skills yet to, to make those decisive decisions as, as to whether we should stop or whether we should keep going. And you know, caught in between. And this is still, again, before the informant confessed. After he confessed, a different set of conversations took place. But it was a constant battle.

STRONG: Yeah. When he did confess, you said that's when things blew up. What does that, what does that look like?

DANDIA: When he confessed, I remember posting on Facebook apologizing to people for saying that -- you know, "I'm sorry because I introduced him to all of you. And I didn't mean to do that to you and bring that pain into your lives." So I felt -- there was a lot of guilt that overwhelmed me at the time. People were giving -- sending me phone calls. Someone called me and said, "Don't worry. This is what happens. It's okay. We didn't

do anything wrong. We'll be all right." Eventually the AP got a hold of it. The same reporter who wrote the 2011 piece got a whole of it, Adam Goldman and Matt Apuzzo. They got a hold of it and they wanted to speak to me for their -- you know, they, they wanted to do a write-up about this.

Our mosque, which was sort of -- Omar -- which was our sort of like funding center, we put up pictures of the food that we raised -- oh, sorry. The food that we raised money for like on a little board. But like our Imam, who was also like -- he, he was an immigrant himself and you know, wasn't -- himself wasn't fully acclimated with the you know, the climate here. He asked us to stop raising money. And I think that was the message he got from the people above on the board. Said to me, "So stop raising money. We don't want any more trouble here." So our mosque asked us to stop raising money and so funds went down, support went down. People were afraid. People were terrified.

Of course, I was contacted, then I was contacted by CUNY CLEAR and the ACLU. And then we started preparations for the lawsuit.

STRONG: So in the, the profile that the AP did, did they ask you just about this experience, or did they ask you also about the fallout for your organization? What were those conversations like?

DANDIA: The AP did write an article and you could probably find it. They, they were more concerned with the actual informant component of it than you know, how it impacted my organization, from what I recall. It was really the attorneys who contacted me who wanted to know the whole details of how it impacted the organization.

STRONG: Okay. I read a story that was more of like a profile on Shamiur himself and it had like a quote from you. And I was wondering if there was another one. That may be the same one we're talking about.

DANDIA: I've done a lot of stories since then, so --

STRONG: [laughter]

DANDIA: I can't give you a word on it, but probably. I mean --

STRONG: Probably.

DANDIA: Yeah.

STRONG: Okay. Sorry. So it was after they did that piece through the AP that CLEAR contacted you. So what were those initial conversations like?

DANDIA: So CLEAR contacted me through someone that they were working with, I think on another separate issue. And I was contacted by Diala Shamas from CLEAR. She's, she's -- now I think she's, she's either in Stanford or in, or in the West Bank somewhere working. Really big on civil rights. She contacted me, you know, into her office and she sat-- and you know, they sat me down, asked me about my story and then said, "Hey, we're working on this lawsuit. We've been working on it since 2011, since the AP reports came out. We believe that your story would be a powerful component of it. And it would have a strong impact on our case. We would like to onboard you. We'd like to have you join us." Right? Sort of like when the Avengers go to like Iron Man and try to say we, you know, join our team or something like that. And that's what, that's what that, that kind of felt like. And I was like, "You know what? I'm interested. Let's talk."

And so this was now -- he confessed in October. We're now in like fall 2012, November-ish. And we had, we kept having meetings, like at least once per month going into the next year. And in those meetings I would detail sort of every single specific component of you know, what brought me up to that point, including friends who knew people in the NYPD, who confirmed for them that we were being spied on. One of them was actually a police officer who confirmed this for me. You know, he went to his precinct and he saw photos of me. And then he came to me and he told me, "This is what I saw," and whatnot. So it was a terrifying experience, you know, and, and so I detailed all of this. The interactions, the meetings, meticulous details of what we did, to the point where it was like borderline creepy. You know, like we were showing text messages and, and you know, all that kind of stuff. And that went on for a few months until we officially filed. In June 2013, we officially filed.

STRONG: So were you having these conversations one-on-one or were the other plaintiffs in the room, as well to share stories?

DANDIA: One-on-one at the time. All the plaintiffs weren't confirmed yet because they -- it was a class action lawsuit. So what that essentially means is that it's on behalf of the community. There are multiple plaintiffs involved. I didn't know the full extent of that because I think some of the plaintiffs were still working with the attorneys, trying to figure that out. Eventually I got the idea and I figured out who they were.

And I was mostly meeting in the, the CLEAR office in Long Island City and I think once we went to the ACLU office, which is I think down, like the finance district or something, downtown Manhattan, not far from here. And, yeah. That, that's what those meetings looked like.

And then in June -- Tue-- I believe it was a Tuesday morning, going into the afternoon, June 18th, 2013, on Facebook they made it a surprise announcement. So they -- no one was -- the community was not told what the announcement would be. They were just told that a bunch of Muslim organizations had a major announcement for the community. It's going to be a big surprise. "Everyone meet in front of One Police Plaza, 10:00 or 11:00 a.m.," something like that. "And we encourage media, activists, organizations and everyone to --" all the major leaders knew about it. So Linda Sarsour, who's a good friend, she knew about it. Some others were already aware of what was going to happen.

And you know, we had myself. We had the plaintiffs. We had the attorneys give their speeches. They had me give a speech. I don't think I've ever, even up until today -- maybe not, not up until today -- but I don't think I've ever given such a high-profile speech before. I mean, I've given sermons now which may compare to it, and we'll talk about that. But this was like --

How old was I in 2013? I was 20, 20 years old. Twenty years old, you know. And I'm standing there. And next to me are like our sort of local and national Muslim leaders, powerful civil rights attorneys, co-plaintiffs, journalists, activists, people from sort of all over the country really. And then in front of me I see literally like a dozen cameras. So CNN, NBC, AP, Al Jazeera, all the outlets you can think of in front of me. And around them was a huge crowd. And in front of me was a mic and I had one sheet of paper that I had to read off of, a pre-- a speech that I prepared.

[laughter] And I recall, I was reading through the speech and I almost like broke down crying because like I, I, I remembered a particular moment that really had me upset. And I remember putting my head and just like taking a deep breath. I heard all the cameras clicking because they wanted to capture that moment. I was like, "Crap. Really, guys?" And you know, so I -- after that speech I've never been nervous to give a public speech. I think that's what really -- I told myself I'm never going to give a talk like this ever for the you know, for the foreseeable future. And so I've never been nervous to give a public speech since then.

And so what was funny was that right after that lawsuit I had to head to the airport because my family was flying out to Makkah and Madīnah for the minor pilgrimage, the Umrah trip, which we were going to, we were going to spend 10 days there. So it looked kind of funny that I just sued the police and now I'm going to Saudi Arabia. [laughter] Narrative-wise it's kind of funny. My Dad was saying -- you know, I was going with my Mom and my sister. And I remember I told my Dad that "I just sued the police. They might call you."

STRONG: The police might call you?

DANDIA: Yeah. I said, "I just sued them. They might call you. Just FYI." And so you know, we did our thing. Friends dropped me off to the airport. I remember when I got my ticket at the airport, you know, and I got the quadruple S, which stands for Secondary Selective Security Screening, something like that. And you know, I told my friends

right before going in, like “I got selected for random security.” And they, they gave me the moniker -- my nickname was Ace. So they gave, gave me the moniker, Malcolm Ace. [laughter] “Malcolm Ace’s last words in the country, ‘Guys, I got selected for random security screening.’ Farewell, Malcolm Ace.” And then I, you know, hopped on the plane and went through the security checks.

And eventually you know, we flew through Egypt. We landed in Saudi Arabia, stayed there for 10 days, came back 10 days later. Of course, I was interrogated very heavily here when I landed. My Mom was there. I could handle myself. I was able to hold my own. But my Mom and my younger sister with me, were with me, and my Mom was like panicking, going crazy, telling me -- telling like the officers -- it was Customs at the time. Telling the Customs officers that you know, “Give me a phone. I want to speak to my husband,” who was waiting outside at the airport. You know, she was really worried that they would like plant something in our suitcase and say “look what we found” and whatnot, because they went through all of our, our --

They, they, they take you into this like room where like all the Brown people sit. And they have always one like token White person there. Poor guy. And they open up like your suitcases. Not just your like, your carry-on, but like your suitcases. And they go through like your dirty underwear and all of that. And they check your books and you know, everything. It’s really embarrassing and humiliating. And they ask you questions in the process.

So at the time, when I flew back, it was like June 30th. And I think the President of Egypt was like going to be overthrown, like a coup or something at the time. And when I landed, like the Customs officers were at the door of the airplane checking everyone’s passports. They saw my sister’s passport -- and you know, they saw her last name. They said, “Are you with someone?” And I, I figured it out. I was like, “Yeah. She’s with me.” And they’re like, “We need to speak to you. And what were you doing in Egypt at the

time?" I was like, "No. I wasn't in Egypt. I went to Saudi Arabia." It did not help my case saying that.

And you know, we talked about -- not talked about. They interrogated me about you know, my trip. You know, did you go -- did you cross over into Yemen to get military training? You know, do you have any military training? I said, "Look at me. Do I look like a guy who -- like, come on. I read books. That's, that's the type of guy I am." And so they kept us for a couple of hours there. We even bumped into our neighbor who was also -- yeah. She was coming from like Canada or something, completely different trip. We bumped into her there. It's a small community. You know, I --

Once we finally got out and my Dad came up to me, he said, "Guess who called?" [laughter] And so that was really tough. But I came back. I logged on to social media. I saw the support that we had from the community and it made me feel really hopeful for the future.

STRONG: What kinds of things were people saying that made you feel hopeful?

DANDIA: Oh, "I'm really proud of Asad for standing up." "I'm really proud of what he's done." "He's making our community very hopeful." You know, "it takes a lot of courage for someone as young as him to stand up to the world's largest police department." That kind of stuff was really comforting to hear and to read, that we had that kind of support.

STRONG: Tell me about before this announcement that you guys were filing the suit. Did you tell your family what you were going to do and what did they think about it?

DANDIA: To a certain degree I told them. To a certain degree I held it back. Funny, when we were in Saudi, Saudi Arabia, the new -- I had some family in Mecca, as well. You know, they immigrated there from Pakistan several decades ago. And it appeared in the news there. So like my cousins there were talking -- like one of my cousins there was, who was working there at the time was talking to me about. He's like, "Look what I read in the news. Is that you?" And it was, it was hilarious. It was like, "Oh, damn." I didn't

know it traveled so fast, but we're in, we're living in a world where news travels that fast across you know, across continents.

So, yeah, of course, my family was like, "What the hell did you just do?" Right? At the same time, you could tell there was like a glimmer of like pride that their son actually did that, as well. And difficult conversations took place, but at the end of the day, I think they're proud and I'm proud of like what we did looking back.

STRONG: When you say they asked you what the hell did you just do, was it out of concern for you, out of concern for the community, out of concern for them?

DANDIA: A little bit of both. Yeah. It's -- you know, you're suing the police. What if they come after you? What if they bother us? What if they harass you? What if they take you to jail? You know, they knew of all the stories of like people who were being entrapped, and you know, what -- you know, how vicious the police can be with people of color. And so it was like genuine concern.

It was like you know, these are immigrant parents who came from a foreign land so that their children could have a better life. They themselves weren't too familiar with you know, things here or the way things work here. And so, of course, it was like, as any parent -- I mean, imagine how a parent would react knowing that there, that there was an informant who slept over at their house. Because I bro-- invited him over to my place, and he slept over, and he met my family. And you know, now the son who was spied on is suing the world's most powerful police department. Think about it from the perspective of a parent. It is kind of terrifying. So I -- it's understandable why they felt the way they felt. I'm not going to like rag, rag on them for it. But it is what it is.

STRONG: But you think their views changed as things progressed?

DANDIA: Yes. Yeah. Especially now that we've reached a settlement and you know, I'm being interviewed all over the place. And now they're, they're talking about how "you have way too many friends. You know way too many people." Like wha-- my Dad used to jokingly say, you know, "When can I book an appointment with my son?"

STRONG: [laughter]

DANDIA: You know? And so they've definitely warmed up to it, the fact that their son is like this aspiring -- I say aspiring because I don't think I am yet, like activist, scholar-type person. And so it's much easier to have those conversations with family and friends now, seeing the results and seeing the support that we've gotten since then.

STRONG: Yeah.

DANDIA: Yeah.

STRONG: But it took about three years. So tell me about the, the time in between filing and -

DANDIA: Sure.

STRONG: --eventually hearing how it would all turn out.

DANDIA: So 2013, we filed. 2014 I was a student at NYU. You know, I was there from 2014 to 2016. So in that sort of process, I was you know, exposed to a whole different academic scene, obviously a lot more rigorous, a lot more challenging, a lot more I guess comprehensive. A lot more resources were available to me. So I started getting involved in activities here at the Islamic Center. People trusted me to -- like the Imam Khalid Latif trusted me to give a Friday sermon here. You know, I think the first one I gave was December 2014. So within two months of my being a student here, I, you know, you started in -- I started in September 2014. Within two months I was giving a, like a sermon to a congregation of like some like 800-some people.

And you'll notice as we, you know, once we're done here that this is the overflow room. And then the, the actual sermon takes place in the, what's called the Grand Hall, I think. It's a multi-purpose, carpeted space which can fit several hundred people. And then this is an overflow room for the people who can't find space upstairs. And then it's also live-streamed. Like hundreds of people watch it from home. And so I gave a sermon to all these people in the community. And I shared some of my story. And this was right after the Michael Brown case had taken place, the lack of indictment. And so I -- I very much connected faith to social justice. And that was like very well received

throughout the community. Every day someone would come up to me, like, "Oh, did you give a sermon? Did you -- were you the guy who shared your story? That was so inspiring, so fascinating. Tell me how you do it."

And it was like, I was like, wow, you know. I found community -- I found another community here, right? I couldn't -- not to say I found community because that would suggest I didn't have one before. But I found another community here, a bigger community, a more diverse community, because this wasn't the same sort of like working-class environment I grew up in. This is NYU. You know, most people here are like politically, socially progressive. And it's a different setting. And you're sort of clashing, but clashing not in a negative way, in a good way with a very diverse group of people, you know.

On this floor -- this is the Center for Spiritual Life where we're sitting right now. And this floor has impacted me in such an enormous way. You'll have, just like in this hallway, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, atheists. The school has 60 chaplains, including a humanist chaplain for people who are atheist who, who, who want to find that.

And so what I was exposed to really, really further developed me. And being the, sort of the social work profession, where now I was learning about theories of social justice and how to apply them, and working in community organizing, and serving as sort of a fellow here at the Center for Spiritual Life really transformed me in ways that I can't describe and I'm very appreciate of.

And so this was all happening while I was in the midst of this lawsuit, which was still ongoing. And we were still having meetings with the attorneys. And the attorneys were noticing how I was growing and changing. So they got to, got a sort of a glimpse into my spiritual and political transformation, as well.

And I think in 2016 was when, you know, they came to like a, a tentative settlement deal with you know, the defendants, the NYPD. And I remember this was a beautiful day for me. This was the day of the Democratic primaries, you know. And it was, it was a Tuesday, Tuesday morning. And in the spring of 2016, beautiful spring day. And it was also the day of our court date.

So I remember waking up 6:00 o'clock in the morning, going to my polling station at 7:00 a.m., voting for Bernie Sanders, and then heading off to court to fulfill my civic duty. So I felt like a real patriot at the time because here, yeah, I just voted and now I'm going to court. I'm going to testify in front of the judge. You know, my whole community's going to be there. You know, all the lawyers are going to be there. All of our, the, the big Muslim activists are going to be there. People who have been with me for years are going to be there.

The judge actually -- so I'm sure you've read this, that the Raza lawsuit has got subsumed under the, the Handschu Guidelines. So like the, the -- there, there's a woman named Barbara Handschu. She was part of the, some -- I think it was an activist coalition. Like something like in the '70s. And she essentially filed a lawsuit against the NYPD for similar grievances related to surveillance. And so the judge in our court for the Raza case was the same judge for the Handschu case --

STRONG: Oh, wow.

DANDIA: -- in the -- like 40 years ago. And now he was presiding over this one. And, and the, sort of the settlement stipulations that we were going to get out of this one would get sort of added on to the Handschu Guidelines that were already in place with the NYPD, so additional stipulations. When I walked in, I saw Barbara Handschu.

Right. Crazy. So the same activist who sued 40, 30, 40 years ago was back here in solidarity with another community, right? For the same things, the same reason, with

the same judge. And so it really showed me that the fight goes on, and I'm part of that long trajectory of you know, the fight for social and political justice. And to be a part of that was something that was very, very, very I guess thrilling, but also like, like I was honored to be, to be a part of that. It was a privilege.

I remember testifying in the courtroom. And you know, people are looking at me. And you know, I saw some tears. You know, I, I made a joke. I said, you know, "Our friends and I, we've been interrogated, harassed, and profiled by so many law enforcement agencies that we have the entire alphabet covered. NYPD, FBI, JTTF, DHS. We have essentially got the whole alphabet covered at this point." And everyone laughed and broke into you know -- it was dark humor, so it was like you know, you know, that kind of laughter. I'm big on dark humor, by the way.

STRONG: [laughter]

DANDIA: And you know, after that finished, you know, there was a young journalist who wanted to like follow me going back to school after we filed the lawsuit. So she literally had a camera facing me, like as I left the courtroom, and came all the way back to school on the train. So she was filming me on the train. She wanted like a day in the life sort of. It was doing like a journalism project, a day in the life of you know, whatever. She filmed me coming all the way up to school to go to class.

And afterward, you know, when, as the judge looked over the settlement, he came to the conclusion that it didn't do enough to protect the community. In other words, the stipulations needed more, which is very rare to hear a judge taking the side of the plaintiffs in that manner. And I guess he was tired of presiding over a case like this for you know, 40-some years. And so he, he, he was like, you know, "You all need to go back and add more to this." So they added more and then I think we -- we reached a final settlement in like early last year, 2017.

STRONG: Just to go back a little more. You mentioned how the lawyers saw you change and grow, which made me wonder what was your relationship like with them? And how did those interactions grow over the years?

DANDIA: I see them now as like -- so one of them, Hina Shamsi, she's the National Security Director at the ACLU, very powerful person in the organization. She's also Pakistani. So we can speak in Urdu sometimes. And I would always speak to her and about her as a, as a mother, like a second mother figure. And she would laugh and like sort of get offended. She'd say, "I'm not that old, okay? I'm your older sister." So she would -- like an older sister figure. There was also Ramzi Kassem. He was also someone who I saw as an older brother and you know, they've written me like recommendation forms for like you know, different programs that I'm applying to.

And so it became a friendship. You know, I've appeared with them on panels. In fact, this summer, I was -- I'm invited to a panel at Georgetown with Hina at a conference called The Color of Surveillance or something like that. And she and I are going to speak on a panel and you know, the conference organizers are paying for our flight there, and offering us like a very hefty honorarium, and really wanted us to speak there. And I've done so many of those with them. You know, to the point where, like I speak to them on a first-name basis. We text each other. WhatsApp. Email. A lot of times when folks want to speak to them, they go through me.

STRONG: [laughter]

DANDIA: So I'm like the secretary now because they, they know a -- they know a response will come if it comes through me. They'll be like, "Hey, I need to contact Ramzi. Can you get in touch with him for -- can you expedite that process for me?"

STRONG: [laughter]

DANDIA: You know, sort of say -- they have hundreds of clients, you know. Hundreds of Muslims go to them because they offer their services pro bono. Immigration, travel ban issues, surveillance. They handle all of that for like the entire Arab, Muslim, South Asian community in New York City. That's a lot of people. And so it feels kind of, you

know, I feel kind of special in the fact that I can just like text them right now and be like, "Hey, how are you? What's up? Can we talk and get a coffee?" And they'll try to make time for me in that way, in that sense.

And you know, they're -- Hina's working on like, or worked on like the no-fly lists. So they're working on other lawsuits, like no-fly lists, getting people off that. And you know, interrogating the, the premises of why people are even put on that without giving -- being given an explanation. Ramzi has clients in Guantanamo Bay. So like the prisoners in Guantanamo Bay. He flies out to Cuba every other like month or so. You know, Diala, she's involved in like Palestine activism. She herself was from, is from the west -- East Jerusalem, I think. So they're involved in a whole host of other things, along with you know, this particular case. And so it's very meaningful to be a part of that history.

STRONG: You said they became like extended family. Did they get to meet your family and what were those conversations like?

DANDIA: So I don't think they've actually -- funny story. We've never actually had the opportunity for them to meet my parents. But they, they, they both know of each other. And you know, we joke with them, saying that you know, "Don't worry. I'll invite you to my wedding for sure and you'll get to meet all my friends and family." And so they haven't had the opportunity yet, but they all know of each other. And they're like, you know, very -- they speak in very high terms about the other. Yeah.

STRONG: Were your parents there the day you testified?

DANDIA: No. So we were at -- they were preparing for the flight. So we had a flight to Saudi Arabia that very morning. And so they --

STRONG: The day you testified, as well?

DANDIA: Yeah.

STRONG: Oh, wow.

DANDIA: So it was literally the day of. And they actually wanted to make it a few days later, but I told them I have a flight, so they sort of made it earlier. So June 18th, that was the

day of our flight. Literally, I, I -- after I gave that speech in front of One Police Plaza, my friends were driving me to the airport. My parents were already there because they wanted to make sure that everything was taken care of, the luggage was there and all of that. So they weren't able to come, but they went straight to the airport and I met them there afterward.

STRONG: I thought the, the speech in front of One Police Plaza was different from the day that you went in and testified.

DANDIA: No. It was the same day.

STRONG: That was the same day.

DANDIA: It was just a few hours later, my flight.

STRONG: Wow.

DANDIA: Which is what made it so intense. It's like he just sued the police and now he's going to Saudi Arabia, which is like, whoa.

STRONG: Holy cow.

DANDIA: Yeah.

STRONG: So --

DANDIA: I live life on the edge.

STRONG: [laughter] Kind of tempting it.

DANDIA: Yeah.

STRONG: Hard-headed.

DANDIA: Yeah.

STRONG: How, how were your studies going at this time? Because you're still a student. I mean, how, how are you managing all of this?

DANDIA: So 2013, I was still at Kingsborough. So when we filed I was still at Kingsborough. Then I went to NYU in 2014. You know, the lawsuit was still happening.

I'll have to be honest. I struggled. Transitioning from a city college and a community college to a private university, and coming from a community where -- like, most of the people who grew up in my community either barely passed college or didn't pa-- like

didn't finish college. And so my community didn't have the resources to prepare me for this sort of education where -- I met folks here who were talking about like, "Oh, you know, my Dad, you know, he just published a new book." Or, you know, "My Mom's like," you know, you know, "He's an electrical engineer." Or, "My Dad's a chemist." And you know, "My father works for this," you know, my, you know, "My father's a hedge fund manager."

And you know, I'm just like, "Well, yeah. My Dad works like a menial job." And you know, or like, the quintessential immigrant story. You know, we kind of live in a small little apartment together. And you know, I don't get to travel all over the world like that. But we did -- I did get to do some traveling while I was a student here thankfully, some subsidized trips and whatnot.

And so it was really intimidating. Grades fluctuated here and there. You know, sometimes I had to ask for extensions on papers. You know, I wasn't adequately prepared all the time. Things got lonely sometimes in classes, but having a community here really helped. And I always tell myself had I not had that community support, I probably wouldn't have made it up, up until this point where I am now as a -- like as a grad student. So that was really helpful.

I would say the community, community was a, a detriment to my education because sometimes I spent too much time in the community --

STRONG: [laughter]

DANDIA: -- which like made me fall back on my grades, but it was also like a powerful support, because it -- they helped -- it was something I could fall back on you know, when things, when times were rough.

STRONG: And when you say community you mean here, right?

DANDIA: Yes. The Muslim community, the interfaith community, the activist community, my local community, multiple communities. Yeah.

STRONG: So you're hopping all over the place.

DANDIA: Yeah.

STRONG: [laughter]

DANDIA: Like a bunny.

STRONG: And how did that shape your studies? I mean, we sort of backtracked to this point when you started to say, you know, community organizing. How did that shape your interest in doing that?

DANDIA: So as an undergrad, I -- so I was accepted as a fellow here at the Center for Spiritual Life, which essentially meant I was part of a cohort of other undergrads who were placed in different non-profit organizations that were doing work related to like faith and justice, or faith and service, or faith and -- something connected to faith. And I was placed at the, the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding in the Conflict Resolution Department, where I would essentially communicate with -- my job was essentially to document and to communicate with peacemakers, these individuals who were, who they call peacemakers, who are working in -- who are from conflict zones. So they're not like people who are from the States traveling elsewhere. They're people who are like indigenous to the conflict zones they work in and are working toward, toward resolving issues that their communities were facing. And so my job was essentially to communicate with them. So I would communicate with people in Cuba -- not Cuba. Sorry. In Latin America, in you know, the Middle East, in central Asia, and south Asia, even in the United States. And it was just so fascinating and humbling.

And at the same time, I was a youth organizing intern with this organization called Make the Road New York, which is the largest immigrants-based grassroots organization in the tri-state area. And they focus on immigrant issues. And I worked at a school called the Bushwick School of Social Justice.

Sorry. I'm just answering this text for my Mom.

STRONG: [laughter] That's fine.

DANDIA: Immigrant -- Bushwick School of Social Justice, which was like very much in line with what I wanted to do. So I was teaching social justice workshops to high school kids. And those workshops would ultimate culminate into what was known as The Social Justice Expo at the end of the year, where they would take some of what they learned and create -- sort of like a science fair. Right? When you have those tri-boards, except like social justice. So they would pick one issue. They could -- like a problem and a way of addressing it, and different ways they could do it. And they would do it an expo, which was held here at NYU. And I would recruit judges to help grade it and to essentially you know, give awards out to students. And that was really rewarding.

In 2015, I was still an undergrad here. I was transitioning from junior to senior year. I went to the West Bank in Palestine. And I was there for two months on a trip to study -- actually, let me backtrack. Spring of 2015, I went to NYU Abu Dhabi on a global interfaith trip here. So NYU has campuses all -- have campuses all over the world. There was in Abu Dhabi, which is in the United Arab Emirates. And we went to explore essentially interfaith and justice on a global level, and to have like difficult conversations around that. And so my cohort was people of all different faiths coming together to go there to have those conversations.

In the summer, again, I went to the West Bank in Palestine for two months. I stayed with a host family in, close to City of Hebron, which is like very impacted by the Israeli occupation. And I was there studying Arabic and teaching English. Being Muslim made it a lot easier because I was observing Ramadan there. So I had Ramadan meals in the morning. And in the evening I got to pray in Jerusalem. I saw Bethlehem.

I created like a whole like -- like a, a photo series on my Facebook that friends were following. And I took hundreds of photos. And I documented -- like every little rock there had like a piece of history. Of course, it's the Holy Land. And so I documented all of it. I wrote a few articles for the school paper on that.

I came back here. I continued the work that I was doing with Make the Road, continued doing the activist work. I helped co-found this organization called the Syrian Refugee Awareness Week, or Syrian Refugee Organizing Committee under the Center for Spiritual Life. And we organized around Syrian refugees. In fact, our work, the organizing that we did, we created a Syrian Refugee Awareness Week. We recruited activists, journalists, academics, Syrians -- particular focus on Syrian activists, raising awareness to our campus community of 50,000 students on the Syrian, Syrian crisis. Our work is going to be published soon.

STRONG: Oh, wow.

DANDIA: So there's going to be -- there's -- I don't remember the name. But essentially, I think the Interfaith Youth Corps, something like that. It's, it's an organization that focuses on interfaith issues. They're publishing a, a handbook for interfaith organizing or faith-based organizing on student campuses, to serve as sort of like a rubric or a guideline for people who want to organize successfully on campus around issues that are guided by their faith.

And so Syrian Refugee Awareness Week, they asked us to send them like, sort of like a one-page report of how we did it, what we did, and what it looked like, what the budget was, all of that, right? The details of how you organize it, and to send it in, potentially to make the cut. And I just got an email this past week saying that they made the cut. It's going to be published. So I'm going to be like a published you know, organizer. So that was really nice.

You know, I got to graduate in 2016, and then I started working. You know, I worked with the Cordoba House, which is a faith-based organization based in the Interchurch Center on the Upper West Side, right by Columbia University. So the Interchurch Center is the building that's known as the God Box, right? Because it houses all of these like social justice-y, progressive, faith-based organizations. And the Cordoba

House was founded by Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, who is known for the Park51, 9-11 mosque, whatever it's called. When he wanted to build --

STRONG: They were building a community center down there.

DANDIA: Yeah. So he was the one who was sort of in charge of that. That never really fully blossomed, but he started this Cordoba House, which essentially was to promote and advance what they describe as an, a compassionate, authentic American-Islamic identity. And that's done through cultural and social events, interfaith work, civic literacy, that kind of stuff.

And so I got involved with them. I was program manager with them. I still work them actually, but this time I'm, I'm working with them part-time as a Sunday school instructor where, where we rent out a space at a Jewish temple not far from here. It's on like 18th Street, close to Union Square. And we teach Sunday school. And our Sunday school is very, very, very different from your conventional Islamic Sunday school. It's, you know, we, we teach about identity, and you know, history, and make it very relevant to contemporary times. So we don't just teach like conventional, traditional Islamic knowledge, but like very relevant, modern issues, as well. And our, our kids are -- anywhere from like five to fourteen, and they're split up into different classes. I have the older group. So kids who are you know, learning about faith around the same time that I was really learning about faith. You know, I see myself in them in many ways.

And yeah. I was in the middle, in the midst of applying to grad school for Middle East and Islamic studies. The, the degree is technically called Near Eastern Studies for master's students, which is -- Near Eastern is just an antiquated way of saying Middle East. I'm, I'm in that program right now.

I'm working also part-time with the Muslim Community Network, MCN. Our office is based out in Judson Memorial Church, which is literally across the street from here, that big church. And we focus on cross-cultural education, civic engagement. So my

job is essentially to connect different houses of worship to Muslim institutions to build a meaningful and sustained relationship based on shared interests and values.

I also run -- with MCN, I also run a Muslim male mentorship program, the only one of its kind in the city. So we pair up Muslim men, professional men, people who are known for their outstanding work in the community, with young 14-to-18-year-olds who are still figuring out their identity, their personal, professional, spiritual, academic goals. And so they get paired up with a mentor who sort of like serves as their big brother and guides them along the way to figure out, you know -- or to help them facilitate their growth.

And so it's really rewarding to do what I'm doing. I'm glad to -- I'm still glad to have been part of the lawsuit. Muslims Giving Back is operating out, operating out of a new center now, known as Muslim Community Center, MCC, which is 33rd and 3rd in Brooklyn. They have soup kitchens, food pantries, feeding the homeless every weekend.

They have this thing called Project Transform, where they find like a -- a very desperate family who needs help financially, and to do sort of like a home makeover for them, where they raise a couple of thousand dollars, and they'll buy new furniture. Or they'll, they'll cover the rent for the family's next year or six months. And they have, in addition to that, they also have lectures you know, in the mosque.

The venue is a beautiful venue. You should visit one day. We hold interfaith events there. You know, we have a basement. We have a, a main floor, as well. And so it's a free space for, for me if I ever want to host an event in Brooklyn.

And I'm still involved with the ICNYU, the Islamic Center at NYU, doing a whole bunch of other extracurricular activities here, advising the young kids here. So I'm very

much involved and very well-connected to New York's Muslim community, to Brooklyn's Muslim community.

This is the borough that essentially made me who I am. It's the community who shaped me to the person I am today and I very much take a lot of pride in that. And you know, because this is the, it's the only community I've -- the first community I've known and really the only place probably on the planet that I could comfortably and confidently say is my home, which is Brooklyn. And that's where I am right now. Yeah.

STRONG: Finish your text and then I'll, I'll talk.

DANDIA: Sure. Sorry. Okay. Done.

STRONG: Okay. Good. I noticed as you were listing all of these billions of things you're doing, there, there emerged a theme of interfaith work. So I'd love to learn a little bit about you know, why did you go in that direction? And what is -- what matters to you about building connections church -- churches of different faiths?

DANDIA: Well, I'm very much -- a few things. So, I mean, to begin with, I, I've always had an interest in learning, because I, I've always grown conscious -- growing up I was very conscious of my own faith. I've thus had an interest in learning about how faiths of other people impact their lives, and their experience, and what, what it means to them.

And so interfaith to me is important, not just because you know, it provides an avenue to make friends, but because it's also very rewarding in such a way that it enriches my own faith understanding. So sitting in a room with you know, Christians, Jews, even atheists, you know, non-believers, or even agnostics, and to hear about how their experience with faith or lack of faith impacts the way they operate in this world and the way they do their service, has in many ways enriched my own.

You know, I'm still a, a -- I consider myself what you would call a believer. You know, I believe in you know, fundamentals of like what you would call Islamic theology, but also like I -- my faith is one that tells me, or I see my faith as one that tells me to go out

and seek the other, right? Seek myself and the other. Or you know, the common theme, especially with the Abrahamic faiths is that we're all fashioned in the image of, of God, right? And to seek that, right? To seek that divine presence in the other. And so that's something that has -- I've been doing ever since God knows when. And now I'm doing it professionally and I'm getting paid to do it. So that's kind of fun.

Of course, there's obstacles and challenges from the community you're working with and the community that you're -- your own community and the community you're working with. Sometimes there will be like reluctance to work with certain congregations, based on either local or foreign politics, or lack thereof. Sometimes there's just you know, is it worth it? What do we gain from it? That kind of stuff. But these are important. The fact that these conversations are taking -- the fact that these conversations are taking place I think is important because it means we're thinking about things, and we're, we're not sort of being complacent. We're being active and pro-active thinkers, and contemplating over these tough issues.

And the Muslim community specifically and uniquely -- you know, one thing I've noticed is that we have characteristics that are unique to us that other faith communities don't have. So I'll start with the, the challenges. Number one is that we don't have too many institutions, right? So, for example, you know, we don't have any, a Muslim equivalent of like the, you know, Jewish Federations, right? Which essentially are able to fund hundreds of thousands of dollars to different congregations, you know, across the country. We don't have large pacts. We don't really have -- we do have some. Now, not to say we have nothing. But we don't, we don't have it to the same extent and to the same degree.

So, for example, New York City, a lot -- it's very possible -- you know, you go into a synagogue, for example, and every single person in that synagogue -- let's say it's a congregation of about 50 to 60 people -- very likely that everyone in there is third

generation, second generation, someone whose family has been here since the late 1800s, early 1900s. Very well-acclimated and assimilated into the environment, have a strong social support system, relatively well-off economically. Whereas if you go to a mosque in, in New York City, it's very likely that everyone in there is an immigrant who arrived in the last 10 to 15 years. Struggling to speak English, struggling to make ends meet, struggling with a whole host of other issues.

You know, and we are, we're only one percent of the country's population and we're already the most diverse racially, ethnically, nationally-diverse community in the United States. This was the recent Pew statistic. And we're also pretty, growing pretty fast, as well. But being diverse also means that we inherit the traumas of all these communities, right? So we're still -- and a lot of us are immigrants. A lot of us are refugees. Some of us are coming from countries that are waging wars against each other. Some of us are coming from places where you know, our parent lived under occupation, or dictatorship, or a monarchy, or you know, a failed state, right? Colonialism, imperialism, all of these things impacted the way our faith is interpreted and sometimes exploited, right?

And so you're bringing all of that into one little mosque. Now, think about that and think about how, how, how much you know, untangling that requires. And so these are issues that we are facing. And these are issues that I want other faith communities to be exposed to and to know that you know, it's not going to be -- for example, it's not going to be easy for you know, the average Muslim to you know, come to a, you know, an event on a Thursday night to talk about interfaith of humus because most of -- a lot of us are still struggling to make ends meet. And you know, it's something that, like taking a train to downtown Manhattan to do that kind of stuff is not easy, right?

I lucked out because I got a scholarship and whatnot. But I come from a community where like that stuff doesn't really happen. And so being a part of that -- being exposed

to that and, and you know, showing that to others, but also being a part of the process of building those institutions, and working with other faith communities where they say, “You know what? We’ve been where you are right now. And we can help you to build your institutions because we’ve been there 70 years ago, 80 years ago, a 100 years ago.”

And so I, when I say I’m part of the bridge generation, like I’m part of that generation that’s going to set those like institutions and help build those institutions. And that’s really exciting, you know, to be a part of that history, and to be a part of that struggle. And you know, I, I went on a tangent. I’m so sorry. I don’t even where I -- what the question was.

STRONG: Follow where you’re going. I like this idea.

DANDIA: Yeah. And to be a part of that process of institution building, and community building, and carving our place in you know, the American -- I don’t know what you -- what would you call it? The American melting pot. Some people like to call it a fruit salad. It depends on what perspective you take. But you know, like carving our place in this country is something that is really thrilling. It’s exciting. It’s empowering. It’s rewarding. It’s spiritually rejuvenating. And it’s just something that I’m really honored to be a part of through multiple fronts, be it you know, the fight for justice, be it you know, civic literacy, be it through spiritual growth and engagement, be it through language. You know, I’ve studied a few languages. And so I’m really excited to be a part of all of that.

STRONG: How do you think you have personally been changed by encountering the other? Like your own beliefs, your own outlook?

DANDIA: So when I was younger, and I’ll give you like an age range. I guess like you can say anywhere from like late teens, I would late teens, early twenties, very, very early twenties, 20. Like I would say anywhere from like -- the undergrad years. I would say 18 to 22. I’m not too much older than that right now. But my understanding of faith was not as sophisticated and nuanced as it is now.

It's a lot more complex. I'm a lot less certain I -- I would say about -- I mean, I do have some fundamentals that I believe in, right? But I'm a lot less certain about a whole host of peripheral issues which I thought were fundamental, but are really secondary and are really things that are interpretations or things that have not been essential components, but things that have been shaped as a result of you know, sociopolitical, socioeconomic circumstances, and that are subject to change as you know, time progresses.

So my understanding of faith is a lot more sophisticated. It's a lot more nuanced. It's a lot more rich. It's a lot more multi-layered. It's a lot more uncertain.

And I prefer that. I prefer -- how do I phrase this? I would prefer a humble uncertainty over an arrogant conviction, if that makes sense. Right? I'm not going to say I have no convictions, and I have no beliefs, and no, nothing at all, but the fact that I'm open to learning and exploring. Even things that like discomfort me and challenge me, and put me in situation where it's like, "Wow, you know. I just read this entire book, and I hate the author, and I hate what he, what they have to say, but I'm happy that I did it, because it helped polish what I believe." Like it helped me polish my beliefs and somewhat maybe tweak them, you know? So, and that, that has had a positive impact on me. And I appreciate that.

STRONG: Give me an example of something that, that's fundamental versus something that was fundamental and is now more, as you say, secondary.

DANDIA: Hmm. Okay. Let's see. All right. I guess broadly speaking, so when people say, for example, you know -- the, the big debate, right, is Islam compatible with like X, Y, Z modern issues, right? Secularism, democracy, you know, the more macro debates that take place. You know, the nation state, that kind of stuff. And as a student of the Middle East and you know, Islamic, the Islamic intellectual tradition -- oh. Even easier example I think. Let me --

STRONG: [laughter]

DANDIA: Because that's too big of an issue. Backtrack. So a lot of times there's -- the community right now, the Muslim community in the United States, and even you could say globally, a lot of us feel like we're under siege, right? Islamophobia, foreign policy, American foreign policy, occupation, dictatorship, that kind of stuff. And so because we feel that we're under siege, a lot of times we go into this retreat where we close ourselves off to ideas that appear foreign to us, right? Because things that appear foreign to us, right, are things are by design going to destroy our sense of coherency in our faith, in our fundamentals. And we sort of push these ideas away, right? We refuse to even engage with them, for example. We need pure, unadulterated faith, right? Right?

The puritanical approach that you know, every sort of faith tradition has it, has, has its own version, right? Like we need the pure faith. And only through this pure faith will we find solace, and community, and redemption, and salvation from you know, all of the external evils facing us. And that's a narrative that you know, shapes your perception of who you are and what the world is.

But you know, taking courses in, about the Middle East, and taking courses in Islamic studies, and reading a whole host of books on these topics, and speaking to different faith leaders and organizers, I realized, and I learned that, historically speaking, Islamic societies thrived, and advanced, and succeeded the most when they were interacting and encountering other ideas, and enriching themselves through it.

So like specific examples I can give you -- for example, like in the Abbasid period, which is like over 800 years ago, right? Regarded as like the Islamic golden age, a lot of the thinkers, right? The world's biggest library was in Baghdad at the time, and remained as such for hundreds of years. A lot of the major thinkers that we think about in Islamic thought were enriched, or their understanding of faith and their

understanding of theology was enriched by Greek thought, right? And a lot of them took classical Greek literature and they translated it, right, into Arabic, and into other languages, and sort of distributed it to their you know, civilization. And some scholars even argue that this is what led to eventually the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, because these translations were brought over to Europe. And then Europe engaged with them, as well, right?

And you study Islamic intellectual history and you realize that there's no -- or at least, I believe that there's no dichotomy between east and west. A lot of times that's like Islam versus the West. Or Islam versus democracy. Or Islam versus this. I don't think, I don't really think there's that, that dichotomy. Or at least I don't think it has to exist because the world, especially in today's day and age -- globalization, social media, the internet, new technologies -- ideas are constantly in flux. Ideas are nebulous. And they're constantly being exchanged with one another.

And so many Muslims who believe certain things, right -- right? So this idea that there can exist a pure, unadulterated Islam, right? Or there, there can exist a monolithic Muslim world, right? A billion of us sort of bumped into one. That's a, that in itself is -- it doesn't reflect historical Islam. It doesn't reflect the way Muslim societies conceived of themselves. It doesn't reflect -- it's, it's a very modern idea, right? And I grew up thinking that this is as it has always been, right?

But when you learn about the complexities of history, you learn that there were different Muslim empires living at the same time, right? The Mughals, the Ottomans, the Safavids. And they didn't necessarily conceive of themselves as one monolith, the way many Muslims do today. They didn't necessarily conceive of alien ideas as detrimental to their faith. They were -- a lot of these empires were very cosmopolitan.

The example is always given of Muslim Cordoba, of Muslim Spain, where you know, Jewish theology and Islamic theology interacted, right? Before, before the, the Inquisition, 1492, and you know -- sometimes I forget that Muslims ruled Spain for 700 years. You know, that's something that you, you know, you don't really think about that today, right? But like the fact that that happened and there was so much exchange of ideas, right?

And those Muslims never saw those ideas as harmful to their faith or as detrimental. They saw them as enriching their faith, enriching their theology, enriching their spirituality. And I feel that in the modern day, because we feel we're under siege, we've closed ourselves off to that understanding, closed ourselves off to that nuance. And it's understandable because we're just afraid, right? We're, we're very much afraid. And it's, it's very -- it's a real fear. But I think it's something that we really need to untangle.

And so today, in my spirituality, and because I've had the privilege to be exposed to it on an academic level, which most Muslims have not had the privilege to, I see it as my responsibility to sort of I guess, not see -- I don't like calling myself like a preacher, right? To preach like some sort of gospel, but to sort of disseminate that knowledge and that information that I've acquired to my community.

And so in that sense, I've, I've, I've come to appreciate that it's -- there's nothing wrong with learning and being exposed to quote, unquote, "foreign" ideas because you know, humanity is a nebula of ideas; always in flux, always in exchange. And that's the type of world that I want to see myself live in. And that's the type of world I want to see my community live in. And that's why I'm involved in interfaith and social justice endeavors, not restricted exclusively to my community.

STRONG: You've described these, these worlds that you inhabit. Like you have multiple homes. Like here, this community in this you know, space here at NYU. And then also Brooklyn, and Brighton Beach where your, your parents still are, and your family still is.

And you commute from Brighton Beach to here to, in order to get to class. So in a way you're mediating in your personal life between these two spaces.

DANDIA: Yes.

STRONG: What are the dinner table conversations like at home as you try to bring some of this with you?

DANDIA: Absolutely. You know, my parents have noticed my transformation. My parents are -- that was -- the guy who just peeked in here, he was actually one of my supervisors for Syrian Refugee Awareness Week and he's the one who informed me about me published.

STRONG: [laughter]

DANDIA: And so he probably saw me and he wanted to say hi. Yeah. No, my parents have noticed my transformation. You know, we talk about like these issues and whatnot. And my parents are like very open to like discourse and dialogue. They're not like -- I don't want to say they're not like most parents because that would like -- I don't want to rag on most parents. But I like to think my parents are unique in that sense where I can talk to them about these more macro issues. And micro issues, as well, right?

There's still a language barrier. You know, my parents do speak English. Not, not in a sophisticated way. And I don't speak Urdu in a sophisticated way either. So sometimes there's that, there's that barrier there. But we're able transmute ideas to one another and learn from one another. And the dinner conversations are quite productive in that sense. And so I appreciate the, the fact that I can do that and have that.

STRONG: Can you give me an example of a recent one?

DANDIA: So we actually, we went to Pakistan this past summer before I started grad school. And you know, we were talking about -- so there was, there's an activist who recently passed away. She, her name was Asma Jahangir. She actually passed away this week or last week. She was, she was a, a women's rights, human's rights, civil rights feminist, activist in Pakistan who was working -- you know, she was an attorney. She was a fierce warrior for you know, rights of minorities, for, for a pro-democracy movement, for, for

so much since I think the '70s. And you know, she was, she was sort of like our like Angela Davis and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and like Malala put together in many ways. And Malala herself, being Pakistani, is a big fan of her.

She recently passed away. And you know, I was, you know, I was sitting down with my Mom, and you know, we were talking about all the contributions she made. You know, this was a, this activist -- she was a woman who you know, the more hardline conservatives would often attack her and say she's -- similar to the way many conservatives attack, you know, leftists and liberals here, saying that you're unpatriotic, or you're, you're very much -- you're anti-American. Or, or in their case, like you're anti-Pakistani.

And you know, in, in a beautiful poetic irony, a lot of these conservative sort of preachers or, or, or pundits, activists, whatever you want to call them, when, when they were detained by the state on trumped-up charges, she went up to the court and said it's unfair for you to detain them. So she was fighting for their right to essentially attack her, right? And that was powerful. And that sent a message to them, right? And that sent a message to the country as to what kind of person she was, and what kind of character she had.

And I was speaking to my parents about this and we were like, "This is really inspiring. This is what we should all aspire to do." And my Mom was like, "Yeah. Absolutely right. You know, this is incredible and this is something that you know, we, we need to see more of." And so we have those conversations and we're able to really talk about these things.

You know, and the, and here, in a, I guess in a local context, I'm you know, I would say in my community I'm probably one of the only ones-- in my local community I mean -- who is in a graduate program at NYU. You know, we had a few other -- a few others.

One, you know, one of my friends who happens to be a close childhood friend of mine, he's in Oxford now. You know, so you know, very few people make it that far.

And you know, my parents actually rag on me or -- you know, for buying too many books. You know, like you're -- "that's enough. You have too many books. You're, you're reading too much. Stop." Usually it's like, you know, "Can you please buy a book and start reading?" Like usually that's what parents tell their kids. My parents are like, "You're, you're reading too much. Give us some time." Like that kind of stuff. Like "We get it. You're an aspiring scholar. You know Hebrew. And you know, you can read Arabic. And you're, you know, you want to do all of this stuff, but like give us some time too." So it's fun. It's really fun.

STRONG: Give us some time as in spend more time with them?

DANDIA: Yeah. "Spend more time with us," right? And they're -- like I have this like nice little fez hat, right? This past summer when we went to Pakistan -- you know, my Dad takes great pride in our culture and our tradition, you know, thousands of years of tradition. And we spent time, like we spent a day just buying like traditional clothes and hats. And I think we spent like a thousand dollars' worth --

STRONG: [laughter]

DANDIA: -- on just like traditional like fancy Pakistani like attire. You know, different style, shapes, colors, hats, hats, hats, hats, hats. And for us, that's like a way to connect culturally. But like even like religiously, it's like some people would argue that this could be, this could take on a religious significance. It could take on cultural significance, a little bit of both. And so we have those conversations about religion, about culture, about politics. And it's really fun. And it's enjoyable and I'm happy that we're able to do that.

STRONG: Yeah. To share it through something like shopping for clothes --

DANDIA: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

STRONG: -- is really lovely.

DANDIA: I mean, it's funny. Like I wanted to buy a turban one time and you know, there was a bunch of different styles and whatnot of turbans out there, Pakistan. And my Mom's like you know, "These turbans are for our respected pious scholars. Not impious buffoons like you," essentially. "So no turban for you. I'm sorry. Until you become, until you become a scholar or something, I'm sorry. You're not going to wear that." So it's funny. Like we, we -- they joke, they joke to me in that way. And you know, we all, we all just laugh it off together. So it's really cute.

STRONG: Are you aspiring to a turban at some point?

DANDIA: Yeah. Of course! Yeah. Sometime -- I actually had, I have one which I wear occasionally, you know, after some disputes. But I managed to do it. I do hope to wear one one day.

STRONG: [laughter]

DANDIA: Just for the heck of it.

STRONG: [laughter] That's wonderful. We're coming to the end of our time. Is there anything I should have asked you about that we missed in this long story?

DANDIA: So we spoke about NYU. We spoke of my professional ambitions. I guess maybe I can talk a little bit about what I want to do going forward.

STRONG: Yeah, please.

DANDIA: I'm just trying to think. Like what else was there? There was the MGB. There was the lawsuit. There was --

STRONG: I honestly have a checklist in front of me.

DANDIA: Okay. Sure.

STRONG: We, we got all of it.

DANDIA: We covered it all?

STRONG: Yeah. We did.

DANDIA: Okay. I guess for the future -- and the reason why I really want to talk about that, because I'm looking forward to like hearing this one day in the future. While I do see myself continuing the work that I'm doing, I do eventually hope to pursue a PhD. I don't know where. Likely not at NYU because you know, for the first time in my life, I'm

actually considering you know, the bird flying out of the nest. You know, I've spent 25 years of my life thus far here, and I anticipate I might spend a year or two more. But I think it's time, you know -- this is a community that gave me everything that I have, but I think it's time for me to sort of start anew somewhere, and to really, you know, stick to my own principles and ethics of exploring, but now going somewhere else. Either in another city in the United States, you know, to another university, or perhaps Europe. Spend some time maybe in Asia or the Middle East. You know, and if I'm given the opportunity, perhaps if I can work there, you know -- if possible, even do like a joint law degree with a PhD. That would be really cool.

I do hope to learn a couple new languages. So I've been accepted into a program this summer to study Persian, seven intensive weeks of Persian. I'm just waiting to hear back from the scholarship I applied to so I can officially give them the confirmation. But I do hope to learn a few more languages. I will definitely need them for the PhD.

I hope, you know, in my late twenties, I hope to get married. Let's see where that goes. You know, relationships. Those are complicated and confusing. So figuring that out. And yeah. I hope to keep impacting, you know, having an impact on the world.

STRONG: How do you hope your community will grow in the future as you, as you leave the nest, as you say, and go elsewhere? Pakistani community in Brighton Beach, or Brooklyn and, or NYC larger? What do you hope for that future?

DANDIA: I hope that we will begin to -- the thing, the unique thing about New York City is that there's always an influx of immigrants coming in here. So there's always going to exist that immigrant community. I hope that we will be able to develop the institutions to support those who have integrated, or those who have quote, unquote, "assimilated." Complicated terms. Like this center, the Islamic Center. I hope we can build more of these institutions outside of the university space so people don't have to depend on the university space, and they don't have to be enrolled to gain some of the benefits, even though this is kind of public, so you don't really need that.

I hope we have those institutions. But I hope we still maintain fidelity to who we are and where we came from to our tradition, to our past, to our roots, to remembering who we -- what we were at some point. And to be there for those who aren't able to quote, unquote, "make it" to where we are.

So there's a community -- our own community, of course. Not everyone's going to be able to advance socially and economically. Be there for them, and with them, and to understand them. And to be there for those who come after us. And to be grateful for those who have been with us. So I see my community definitely growing institutionally, socially, economically, and really becoming you know, an indispensable part of the society here. And I am glad to have left my little mark on it going forward. Let's see where that goes.

STRONG: Yeah. Well, thank you so much for your time today. Thank you for coming in and being a part of this. And I look forward to being in touch with you as we go through the next steps.

DANDIA: Yeah. Absolutely. I look forward to this. Thank you for giving me the honor, and selecting me for this interview.

STRONG: [laughter] Well, it is truly us who are honored.