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Oral History Interview with Debbie Almontaser  
Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.19  
Interview conducted by Zaheer Ali on May 14, 2018  
at Brooklyn Historical Society in Brooklyn Heights, Brooklyn

ALI: I'm Zaheer Ali, Oral Historian at the Brooklyn Historical Society, and I am here with Dr. Debbie Almontaser -- did I say that right?

ALMONTASER: Yeah, that's fine.

ALI: And this is an oral history interview for the Muslims in Brooklyn Project at Brooklyn Historical Society. We are here at Brooklyn Historical Society. It is Monday, May 14th, 2018. Now if you can introduce yourself, stating your full name and your birthdate.

ALMONTASER: Yes. My name is Dr. Debbie Almontaser. I was born on [date redacted for privacy], and I'm actually very happy to be here [laughter] to finish my final interview. Yay!

ALI: So when we left off the first part, you had -- you were telling the story of driving past the demonstration that was taking place in support of you, and then you talked about the work that you were doing visiting schools, and how people were expressing their support of you. So if we can pick up and talk a little bit -- you had just met with an attorney -- and tell us what transpired with that case and how it was resolved for you.

ALMONTASER: Okay, great. So I actually had been contacted by seven lawyers, and I met with a couple of them. And the ones that I met with were more egotistic about using this opportunity to create a platform for themselves, versus really seeing what happened to me and how it was important to rectify the issue. And then I finally met with one lawyer -- his name is Alan Levine -- who had reached out to me, but he wasn't very aggressive, and he said, "If you ever want to talk to anybody, I would be happy to listen and give you my, you know, guidance." And so some other people who knew him were telling me that he was a really great person -- really cares. So I met with him. And I remember going to his office on a Sunday afternoon, and I sat with him for five hours. And I told him everything that had transpired.

But when I first arrived to his office -- which is something that I will never forget -- was, he buzzed me in, I came through, and then he opened the glass doors for the main hall of the offices and he bowed down and he said to me that it was an honor and privilege to make my acquaintance. And I didn't even know what to do with such a greeting -- he was old enough to be my father -- and to be welcomed like that. And he said to -- he also said, "I would like to be a part of the course of history that rights this wrong that has been done to you, especially by members of my community, and I just wanted to start by apologizing for what they've done to you." And I was very emotional by that, because I never internalized what happened to me as a form of -- you know, that it was generally done by the Jewish community. It was a small number of individuals who had political agendas who were Jewish and decided to do what they did -- but never held a grudge against the entire Jewish community. I was always able to -- you know, to be able to decipher that -- and also knew that what had happened to me wasn't necessarily directed at me as just the individual, but this was a geopolitical war, and I happened to be the target -- and the bigger battle here was, you know, Islam and Muslims in the West, and the way that they've been vilified, and the way that, you know, right-wing, neoconservatives -- the Islamophobia industry -- have simply decided, you know, to make this their crusade against our community. And so I was able to always remember that, and I think that helped me get through the whole ordeal.

So I met with Alan for five hours, and it was just really amazing. And he told me at that point that I did have a case and that I needed to just go home and think about it. And he explained to me what -- you know, what it would require. And he said to me -- he said, "I would do this pro bono. I'm not interested in being compensated. I just want to make sure that you get the justice that you deserve. But sleep on it -- no pressure. This will require a commitment from you, from your family. It will have emotional impact, and you have to really be ready for this. Your family has to be ready for this."



And so I went home and I discussed it with my family. And I gave it a couple of days of thought. And then I eventually called Alan back and said “I want to -- I want legal representation, and from all the people that have contacted me” -- excuse me -- “you’re simply the best person that I think would be able to help me through this ordeal.” And what was really incredibly amazing about Alan was, he was also married to a woman named Donna Nevel, who was a community psychologist and organizer. And so she was a member of the -- the Communities in Support of the Khalil Gibran International Academy Coalition, who actually did that huge rally outside of Tweed. And so all of these people came together, created this robust coalition of organizations and individuals that just did incredible, incredible work around the issue. They raised money for a media campaign; they crashed every DOE [Department of Education] press conference; they organized rallies; they organized press conferences; they did everything around the lawsuit to help support the lawsuit, to change public opinion. It was really, really powerful. So --

ALI: So just to be clear -- the lawsuit was against -- on your behalf against whom?

ALMONTASER: The New York City Department of Education; New York City Mayor Bloomberg; Joel Klein; as well as New Visions for Public Schools.

ALI: And you were still employed?

ALMONTASER: I was still employed by the New York City Department of Education.  
[laughter]

ALI: How was that? [laughter]

ALMONTASER: It was quite interesting to be sitting in the ivory tower at the same time suing them -- interesting to be in the same building that the chancellor was on the fourth floor and I was on the second floor. [laughter]

ALI: How did people respond to you?

ALMONTASER: People were receptively welcoming. It was interesting -- when I was in Tweed, if people saw me in the main areas of the building, they would actually look around to see who was there before they would actually say hello to me, which was really sad. If there were people, people would give me a wink or a smile. [laughter]

Because, I mean, the -- you know, the climate at the DOE is -- it's like -- it's the worst in any of the city agencies. People are terrified to open their mouths. People are just afraid to stand up. And a couple of times, I ran into some women in the women's bathroom, and there, they would actually engage me in conversation and -- to just say to me, "Oh my God, you're such a hero. We're so proud that you're standing up. We can't believe that you're here." And, you know, "We're praying for you." You know, "What they did to you was really awful. And we just -- we're so proud to know you and honored to know you." So it was really, really very touching. And then if -- you know -- so at that point, I was, like, the director of special projects. I was a part of this school team that actually went out from the Office of Youth Development to do school climate reviews. And so teachers, administrators, would realize who I was and were just very happy to meet me. So it was a really, really interesting time.

ALI: So when you set out to do this, what was your objective -- or what were your objectives?

ALMONTASER: When I set out to --

ALI: With the lawsuit.

ALMONTASER: With the lawsuit. So everyone who found out that I so-called -- in quotes -- "resigned" didn't believe that I resigned. And it was actually, like, immigrant groups, social justice groups, activists -- everybody who knew me based on the work that I was doing with them after 9/11 knew that there was something seriously wrong. And they saw the turn of events over the course of the week, and they all were like, "She was forced to resign." And that was actually what happened. And I was given an ultimatum: it was either me or the school wasn't going to open.

And so my objective at that point when I sat down to put that letter together was, it was never about me, the individual; it was always about creating this institution that will become a part of New York City history -- perhaps US history, as well. And I put that letter together with great pain. And I was given the ultimatum -- you know, I was given the direction that it had to be in by 8:00 a.m.; it was going to be announced by the mayor on his 10:00 a.m. show. And it was like clockwork, and I had to do damage

control, because I had to let the staff know and I had to, like, keep up a good front. As much as I was in so much pain, all I kept thinking about was, this school has to open. This school has to open. And so once the school opened and I was able to say to myself, Let's let the dust settle; maybe we can re-- you know, re-engage in the conversation now that things are calm. But nobody wanted to talk to me. The chancellor didn't want to talk. The mayor didn't want to talk. No one was interested in any conversation.

And then at that point -- before we even filed the lawsuit -- Alan Levine actually wrote a letter to the chancellor and said, "We'd like to" -- you know, "I'd like to discuss this before we file, if there's a way that we can remedy this situation." And this is what I loved about him -- he wasn't looking for the jugular, you know, vein -- he was like, "Let's try to fix this situation." You know, in multiple ways. And they were not interested. They had their lawyer respond back, calling me a lightning rod -- that it was a lightning rod, and therefore they did not, you know, want to engage in any negotiation or conversation.

And at that point, that's when we really decided to go forward with it. And in addition to that, we announced it. So Alan and the coalition organized a press conference on the steps of City Hall. I finished my work at Tweed, walked around the corner, [laughter] and I remember that day I was, like, so terrified of doing all of this. Like -- you know, like -- I wasn't -- I don't know. There was just -- I was so anxious. Not that I was, like, scared of, you know, coming out publicly, but just thinking about the whole thing. And then also, I would say, knowing how people shivered at the DOE of the thought of doing something like this -- and that I was actually challenging the status quo in the school system was quite a -- you know, quite interesting and terrifying. And then knowing that when I went public, that was going to change the course of everything. Because prior to my going public -- and even my engagement with the mayor's office and the chancellor -- they were, like, trying to appease me in every which way to -- for

me just to let this go and just do whatever I wanted to do at the DOE and collect a \$125,000 salary and all that great stuff. And at the same time, I was like, "I'm not going to be bought. Because today it's me; tomorrow it's going to be someone else if somebody doesn't stop this."

And after praying for a long time on it, you know, and just praying and praying and saying, God, please give me guidance as to what should I do -- you know, like -- God, like, just laid everything out for me to make it easy for me to go forward. When I met with those lawyers, I was like, this is crazy. You know, this is all about them, not about me and what actually happened. And I wasn't interested. And, you know, Alan came into the picture; he presented in a different way. It was a -- more of a social justice -- from a social justice lens. It was about a movement; it wasn't about a person. And that was really then when I felt that God had given me the -- the signal -- the green light -- that this was the right thing for me to do.

And so standing on the steps of City Hall -- you know, putting together my speech the night before, practicing it, and standing there and telling my story was -- was just really, really powerful. And as much as I was nervous, I was able to articulate it really well. I was in awe to see the number of people that came out at that point. [Letitia] Tish James was the city councilwoman who came out and stood with me and spoke at the press conference. Robert Jackson came out and spoke at the press conference. John Liu came out and spoke at the press conference. It was just really, really amazing to see a bunch of people feel a sense of social responsibility around this issue.

And so after we -- you know, we announced what had happened, we filed the lawsuit. Of course, it made news. And from that day on -- like, I was always -- literally, two, three times a month I was in the news -- you know, whether it was the paper or, you know, TV. I couldn't really go anywhere without being recognized. And even before, you know, making that announcement, I was still -- there were a lot of people who were

recognizing me. And -- and there were -- you know, there was one or two people who sort of were aggressive while I was working at the DOE, and I was like, Oh my God, this is so crazy.

ALI: At your job?

ALMONTASER: No, not at the job -- like, in the area.

ALI: Tell me -- tell me something that -- that happened.

ALMONTASER: So -- so one gentleman -- we had gone out to lunch, and one gentleman saw me, and he recognized me, and I was with a colleague. And he's like, "You're that -- that -- that T-shirt lady." I was like, "What?" "The T-shirt -- that Intifada T-shirt." And he's like, "They did the right thing by canning you." And I was like, Oh my God, I can't believe this. I did not even want to engage him, because he -- the way that he was just, like, talking to me -- like, I just -- I just was -- I ignored him. But I was, like, terrified. And I was like, imagine if I was by myself and that person didn't say to me, "Come on, Debbie. Just ignore them. Let's keep it moving." Like -- yeah, I don't even know what I would have done. Because I was already beaten up and bruised from everything that had happened, and then to have somebody say that. So I went back to the office, and the director there -- like, the person that was with me saw that I was really shook up by it, because I was like, I don't even -- like, I don't even know if it's safe for me -- like, if this guy -- like, what if somebody else approaches me. And so she's like, "You need to speak to the director, and I think that you should actually be able to -- they should actually provide you transportation to bring you back and forth." So the DOE actually provided me a car -- a car to take me to work and bring me home every day. This is before I announced the -- the lawsuit. So it was -- so we announced the lawsuit, like, mid-October --

ALI: Of what year?

ALMONTASER: Of 2016 -- sorry, of 2007. Yeah, 2007. Oh my God, it's almost -- yeah, it's over 10 years already. Yeah. So after that, I talked to her, and she was like, "Absolutely. We'll make sure that there's a car that picks you up and takes you home nightly." And so we did that for, like, about a month. Maybe, like, a week before I decided to go forward with

the lawsuit, they were, like, you know, "Things are probably better now. Everything" -- you know, "You should be okay." And I was like, "Okay. Fine." And so I did start traveling on my own. But then we went public. And then, of course, it picked up again. But nobody at that point -- which was really interesting -- nobody harassed me -- after they found out, like, what the real story was. And it -- then it was a game-shifter. It was like, people were very supportive. They're like, "Oh my God, that was terrible what they did to you." So anybody who recognized me on a platform -- subway platform or in the street, they would just tap me and say, "I'm really sorry about what happened to you. This is really awful." So it was really very -- it was very affirming to see, like, there were a lot of people who were supportive.

ALI: How did the case get resolved?

ALMONTASER: So the lawyer filed on the First Amendment claim that I should not have been forced out based on free speech. And then he also filed an EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] claim at the same time. And so the free speech piece was actually consistent and ongoing, and what we -- what he added was, because there was a whole principal process, of who was going to become the principal -- so he put an inju-- he actually requested for an injunctive relief, which actually would stop the DOE from actually hiring -- hiring anyone. And so when we had announced the -- at the press conference, I also announced that I had filed for the job. So the way that it is, even though you're the founder of the school, you still have to go through a process to get appointed. And so they opened up the process, and a whole bunch of other people applied. And then I was encouraged to -- by the lawyer to also apply. And -- which I did.

And so we filed the lawsuit. The injunctive relief was actually put on the process for them not to be able to hire. We had gone for the first hearing. It seemed that the -- the judge was supportive and on our side. But -- I can't even remember all the details of the number of times that we went. Long story short, the final one, they had actually ruled in favor of the DOE -- which we were all very shocked. And then we appealed. And we went to the appellate court -- I can't remember the details. I don't know if we -- yeah, I

don't remember if we did. Yeah, and I'm confusing it, because there was another appellate court.

So [laughter] while I was suing the DOE, the mayor and all of these people, the crazies also were suing me -- the Stop the Madrassa Coalition -- the people that were after me and the school -- that created the hysteria with the T-shirt. In 2008, the *New York Times* decided to do an exposé on my story. And they started in December of 2007; it didn't get published 'til April, because she was -- Andrea Elliott was interviewing everybody and their uncle who knew me for the last 25 years, so she was traveling all over the country to speak to people about me -- which was nuts. [laughter] So they -- I was actually on the front cover of the *New York Times* in 2008. It was really powerful. And then it was a page-and-a-half spread inside the main paper. And then they also had videos that were actually created. So she interviewed some of the crazies. So -- Daniel Pipes, Pamela Geller, Pamela Hall, Sara Springer.

When that article came out and they were -- it looked like they were crazy, they were bent out of shape. They contacted Alan, my lawyer, and said that I needed to retract the story and issue an apology, or they were going to sue me. So Alan, at that point, called me up. He says, "I have something to share with you. Why don't you come down. Let's talk about it." He spoke to me about it. He's like, "It's not going to stand in water, but they probably will. You know, but you have to decide what you want to do." I said, "I'm not apologizing, and I have no control about what the *New York Times* writes. They can take that up with the *New York Times*." They're saying I defamed them? They're the ones that defamed me.

So they actually filed a lawsuit. So I was battling two lawsuits. And the lawsuit that they filed against me was in the Brooklyn court. And the *New York Times* -- they actually issued a press release -- the *New York Times* covered it. I was so angry with the *New York Times* giving them the credence. But God works in mysterious ways, because they

did so, and then Victor Kovner, who was a prominent lawyer in New York City, saw the article and started to call people all over the city, saying, "Does anybody know her? Please put me in touch with her. I am so outraged that these people are suing her. I want to represent her pro bono. Can somebody please put me in touch?" And so they put us in touch. I went to meet with him. He was so gracious and wonderful. And he said to me -- he says, "I want to start a new page in your story by ridding you of these miserable people, and I'm going to take the lawsuit. I'm going to take it on pro bono and make sure that you get the justice." So Alan coordinated with him, because he was working closely on my suit and it just made sense.

And so they hired -- the lawyer that they had was David Yerushalmi. I don't know if you know who he is. He is the lawyer that was the guy that's behind the whole sharia thing all over the country. Yeah. David Yerushalmi. Crazy, crazy-looking guy. Amazing that he can actually practice law all over the country. [laughter] But he was their lawyer. And so we -- we had gone in. We won. So they appealed. It went to the court of appeals, which actually was -- like, here, across the street from you guys. You know the courthouse here? We were in there. And it was actually a five-judge panel. And they mopped the floors with them. They were like, "She defamed you after what you guys did to her?" And they're like, you know, "We're dismissing this. Don't even try to appeal. This is outrageous. You should be ashamed of yourselves." Blah blah blah.

But that actually was an ordeal of -- a year-and-a-half ordeal. So I was dealing with that ordeal; I was dealing with the other ordeal of [laughter] -- of the lawsuit. And it was just mad. It was mad. So everywhere and anywhere I went, people recognized me. I've had some really cute and funny incidents of people recognizing me. There were also a bunch of documentaries that were made about my story, so that one of them was *Intifada NYC* by David Teague, a really great documentary that chronicles the whole situation; another one by HBO, which was called *Shouting Fire: Free Speech -- Stories of*



*Free Speech* [Shouting Fire: Stories from the Edge of Free Speech] -- I forget. It's a really long title.

ALI: Tell me one of the -- you said you had some cute --

ALMONTASER: The stories.

ALI: Yeah. Tell me one of those.

ALMONTASER: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So I was riding the train one day, and this woman kept looking at me and smiling and looking at me and smiling. And I was like, Okay, she probably recognizes me. So then finally, like, two steps before I was getting off, she finally worked up enough courage to ask me if I was who I was. [laughter] And I said to her, "Yes, I am." She's like, "Oh my God! I've been following your story. I can't believe that you're on the train -- you ride the train -- that you're on the train with me." And she's like, "I was just so outraged, and I saw the documentary, and I've been following it in the paper. I just can't believe that you're riding the train." And I said to her, "Yeah, I ride the train back -- to work and everywhere." And she's like, "I don't know why I thought, like, you probably have, like, a driver." [laughter] It was so funny. [laughter] She's like, "I never imagined you being on a train with people. [laughter] So I was like, Okay, that's pretty cool. That's pretty funny. So I thought that was the sweetest little incident.

And then there was another time that I was on the train and it was a couple who were sitting directly across from my husband and I. It was, like, 10:00 at night. And the woman and her husband were whispering at each other -- and looking at me and whispering and looking at me and whispering. And then, like, finally, her husband was like, "Well, why don't you just ask her?" So then she asked me. She's like, "Are you -- were you in a documentary any time soon -- you know, in the last couple of months?" And I just looked at her and I smiled and I said, "Yeah." She's like, "Oh my God. I can't believe that you're on the train with us." She didn't say, I can't believe you ride trains, I thought you'd have a personal driver, but she's like, "Oh my God! Your story was so

amazing. I can't believe what happened to you. We're so proud of you. And any way that we can support you, we would love to support you."

And at that time, people were not, like, on -- you know, on Twitter and all that kind of stuff. I was on Facebook, but I really was very reserved in terms of, like, what I wrote because of the lawsuits, because I really couldn't do any kind of speaking or engaging in conversation about it. But it was just really amazing. And then I had actually gotten tons of letters on Facebook of support -- people just writing me from all over the country and just telling me, you know, how sad they were for what happened and that they really are proud to know of my efforts. It was just really, really beautiful to get all of these letters and messages from all over the country.

ALI: So how did the case come to a close?

ALMONTASER: So the case -- so the First Amendment case continued. In 2010, the EEOC ruled in my favor. They released their determination, and they determined based on interviewing everyone at the DOE and New Visions that I had actually been forcibly removed, based on a small segment of the community who rallied against me and pressured the mayor and the DOE to force me out of my position, based on race, ethnicity, and nationality, and religion. And so the determination ruled in my favor for retroactive salary, to regain my position at the school, and for the DOE to basically rectify everything else that transpired. It was truly a dark day at City Hall and the DOE when the ruling came out. It was pretty amazing for me. At that time, I was actually already at -- I was already at Benjamin Banneker Academy at that point. So it was pretty cool -- to see that article. So the article -- yeah, so it happened in March, and then in -- yeah, March. Yeah, so the *New York Times* article happened in 2008; the vindication happened with EEOC in March 2010.

And so then they also referred it to the DOJ [Department of Justice] -- and so for the DOJ to actually consider filing on my behalf. So at that point, I met with the DOJ and I met with Alan, because he continued in the whole process with me. And actually, the

DOE was not interested in negotiating. They were like, "Nope. She's not coming back. We don't care." You know, "Go ahead and sue." So at that point, we met with the DOJ. And, you know, I asked them -- I was like, "What would this require? How long will this take? What would I need to do?" And literally their response was, "It could be, you know, six, it could be eight years. We're not sure. But, you know, litigation takes its course, and, you know, so that's something that you need to think about."

So I actually went home and I thought about it really long and hard -- because it was already 2010; I had been fighting from 2007. And every time that my family and I went out to dinner -- because -- because I was always in the press -- people always recognized me. If we went out to dinner for a birthday or any kind of social gathering, somebody would recognize me, come over and chat with me, and say, "Well, how's your lawsuit going?" And I could just see on my kids' face that it was just like, "Oh, why can't we go anywhere and not have to think about this gray cloud." And I just -- they never complained, but I knew, like, it was getting to become, like, really tiring for them to sort of live in that moment. Like, every time anybody saw me, it was in that moment -- you know, it was talking about that moment.

And so at that point, I prayed, and I consulted with my husband. And I said to him -- I said, "You know what? It was never about money for me. It was never about -- you know. It was just getting vindicated and having the actual truth come out. And I don't feel like I should go forward. I think that it's time for us just to move on." So his response was, "It's up to you. Whatever -- you know, we're in it already. It's up to you." I spoke to my children that I was not planning to move forward. They were like, you know, "Are you sure?" You know, "You're a fighter." I was like, "It's time to move on."

The other factor that came into the decision also was, I was already in my doctoral program at Fordham University. And then the whole aspect of going back to the school -- you know, I would have been, like, the fourth person going into the school. The

school was really in, you know, a lot of upheaval in terms of being able to -- to succeed. Because it was, you know, leader after leader, and, you know, the school wasn't growing. And I was like -- you know, for me to go back -- the other -- also -- factor was, Bloomberg was still in office, Klein was still in office, and it was like, they're not even going to let the school be what I really wanted it to be -- because, you know, after they removed me, they curtailed a lot of the things that the school was supposed to be doing. And at that point, I was like, I'm not going to lead a school that's a shell of a school, versus being something that I really wanted to be.

And so then, I announced that I wasn't moving forward with the lawsuit -- that I was happy with the vindication of the EEOC, and that I was moving on with my life and -- and leaving that part of my life back. And I can't begin to tell you how liberating that was -- to just put all that behind me and be able to live and be able to speak freely, to talk about the issues I cared -- because I really wasn't able to do any speaking publicly on anything because of the litigation.

ALI: So let's fast-forward to your activism.

ALMONTASER: Yeah, so --

ALI: And tell me how -- I don't want to say tell me how you started getting involved, because you've been involved for a long time -- but tell -- talk a little bit about your involvement in the last presidential campaign --

ALMONTASER: Sure.

ALI: We'll start there and kind of move forward.

ALMONTASER: So I actually became politically involved during the Bloomberg administration. I was one of those crazy people who thought, Oh, it's okay to have a third term. You know? So -- big mistake.

ALI: You were advocating for --?

ALMONTASER: Well, so we were -- you know, I -- I was in support. We -- like, we were friends and everything. And it just -- it just turned sour. [laughter] I was in City -- actually, City Hall and Gracie Mansion. I have tons of pictures with Bloomberg. And

then, of course, what happened with the school was just -- it was just crazy. And so, you know, I was -- and before the school, it was very friendly. I supported for his second term. And then when the whole idea of, like, the third term came up, before the elections, I was like, Well, it's not a bad idea. But I'm glad that we don't have three terms anymore. Thank God. But -- so I -- based on my political involvement then, I just realized that the next time around, we needed a big change. And so I was aggressively involved in the mayoral race, did a lot of political organizing, supported [Bill] De Blasio when other people were really not interested in supporting him. I actually shifted from the mainstream Muslim community, who supported John Liu, where I was -- you know, stood alone in supporting De Blasio publicly, because I felt like he was going to be the most viable person. And he did. And everybody was like, "Oh, we should have listened to you." But it's all good.

And so after that, I also then became involved in the -- the presidential race, and felt the necessity to actually be involved and engaged in that. And because of all the work that I did in the mayoral race, the City Council race, people started to identify me and contact me. So the [Hillary] Clinton campaign contacted me. And they were like, you know, "We'd love for you to work with us. We'd love to have you as a Muslim surrogate." You know, "You're widely known and respected, and we really want to get Muslims on board to support us." So I actually became a surrogate before the primaries. I did the work that I was doing, focused specifically on Muslim communities. I wasn't, like, on social media and making a big blitz about it, but just really had, like, one-on-one conversations with individuals, with leaders, going to mosques, going to community centers, and just speaking about, like, the importance of getting out to vote -- and being very transparent that I was supporting Hillary.

You know, and I knew that there were a lot of people who were supporting Bernie, but I also said, like, We have to be realistic. Do you really think that, you know, we as a country can actually provide every person free college? Like, how is that even

financially possible? Like, I want Bernie Sanders to give me a plan of how that would actually happen. And if he can, and it's realistic and doable, I'll be the first to say, "Let's support Bernie." And so a lot of my talking points were, like, they're all great ideas that he's coming up with, but there's no tangible, concrete plans of how these things are going to be crystallized and actually concretized into tangibles. And for the most part, a lot of people were like, "You're absolutely right." But, you know, some people were just hung up on the emails and all the hysteria that was taking place.

So after the -- after the primaries, people started -- you know, were like, "Okay, it's better her than Trump" -- in our community. So I felt like at that point, I had gotten a whole lot more steam -- of being able to -- to get people. I was able to help actually get a national Muslim director get hired, who actually is Farooq Mitha, from Emerge, which is now called Engage -- a national organization that I was on the board of. So he was their national Muslim outreach director, which was really powerful, and he was traveling all over the country. And so he was doing that; I was doing as much as I could, also, on my own personal time. And all things came to full circle at the National Democratic Convention.

ALI: Tell me about your experience at the convention.

ALMONTASER: Oh my God, that was so amazing. So amazing. When I think about it, I'm like, Oh my God, did that really happen? So I was contacted by Huma Abedin 10 days before the convention. And she's like, "We want to feature you. We'd love for you to do it. I know it's a big thing that we're asking you -- it's a big favor. We don't know -- were you planning to come, not planning to come?" And actually, I was, like, contemplating of whether to go, not to go. And I was like, maybe I'll just go for a couple of days, you know? And you know how those conventions -- I don't know if you know, but they're, like, really huge, and it's really exhausting. And forget about even finding a place to stay. Like, the hotel that I stayed in was, like, 20 minutes away from the convention site. So when she contacted me, I was like, "Sure." And she's like, "Well, this is the segment that we want you to be a part of." You know, "There'll be people who will follow up with

you that basically will facilitate the conversation and let you know and, you know, help you craft your statement and all that good stuff.”

So -- so things were just not happening quick enough. Like, there were a lot of conversations, but nothing materialized -- like, an official email saying that “you’re invited.” And I was just, like, so nervous about, like, it not materialized. And I was like, this is not going to happen. I was like, this is not going to happen, this is not going to happen. The people -- like, it was all conversations -- no emails, no written communication. And I said to her -- I said, “Am I getting a formal invitation?” She’s like, “Yeah. Somebody will follow up with that.” Literally I did not get that formal invitation ‘til, like, two days before I was supposed to be there. But all these conversations were happening.

And then I had written my speech and they asked me to send it to them. I actually omitted, like, most of the stuff about the school, because I was like, I don’t want that to become, like, you know -- you know, a controversy at the -- just talked about the bridge-building work, what I was doing after 9/11, etc. It was bounced back to me, and they were like, “Well, we know that you’re the principal of this school, you know, and it was all about teaching tolerance, and we really want you to use that as your title.” And I was like, Oh my God, I can’t believe this -- could not believe that that was, like, what they really wanted me more to focus on. So I was like, “Okay.” So then I -- I revised that and I sent it to them. And then I didn’t get it back. And then I got the formal notice saying, you know, “We’re really happy.” You know, “You’ll be staying at this hotel, blah blah blah.” And then I was like, Okay, where is my damn speech, people? Where is my damn speech, people? [laughter] Did not get the speech until, like, I think, the day before -- that I got there -- that finally, like, somebody was like -- I was like, “Hey, I never got my remarks back.” They’re like, “You didn’t get it back?” I was like, “No.” And then they were like, “Oh my God! We’re going to get it to you.” So they got it to me that night -- the night before we were, like, going on.

And then they had me actually get there the day before, and they had us do a dry run. The practice for my one-and-a-half-minute -- whatever that amount -- was, like, three hours. Because I was a part of a segment that was celebrating the diversity of America, so there was a representative from Atlanta; an undocumented woman who was actually in the military -- US military; a Native American Indian; someone in the LGBT community -- like, all the diverse minority groups in the United States were a part of this segment, which was really, really powerful. And so they had to assemble us; they had to -- you know, we had to read our speech from the teleprompter -- all that good stuff. It was really, really fascinating. And I was so exhausted by then. It was like, Oh my God, this is exhausting!

And so then, later that evening -- I think it was later that evening -- or the next day? I can't even remember the exact order. So then, the final and real thing actually happened, and it was just really, really very moving. It was extremely moving. Because New York sat, like, directly across from the stage, so when I came out, all of the -- the New York state elected officials saw me. They got up; they were screaming, [laughter] they were yelling. They're like, "Debbie! Debbie!" It was so cute and beautiful. Nobody else from any of the other -- the people that were on the stage with me actually got such a warm -- warm and wonderful greeting like that. So it was really, really awesome. Yeah. And it was just really -- like, I was emphatic about greeting everybody with salaam alaikum. They didn't -- they didn't question it. They were like, "Absolutely. Do you thing." I also said that I was proud to be an American Muslim, and I said it really loud, and people started screaming and clapping. It was just really -- it was a beautiful, beautiful moment.

ALI: So let's jump to November.

ALMONTASER: [sigh] Ay yai yai.

ALI: Election Day. Tell me -- tell me what your experience was on Election Day.



ALMONTASER: Oh my God. So Election Day -- I was actually a poll watcher in Bay Ridge. I signed up with Common Cause, and they were like, "We need you. We want you in Bay Ridge, because it's going to be crazy there." And I was like, "Oh my God. You're sending me to Bay Ridge." And then they sent me to a place that really was, like, heavily Republican. And the whole idea was to be there, so that way, some of the Muslim community members that had to go vote there were not feeling a sense of intimidation. It was awesome.

And there was this guy that came in, was wearing a T-shirt that basically said, "Jail Hillary." I can't remember exactly what it said, but they wouldn't let him into the -- into the -- into the voting room. They made him cover his -- zip up his jacket. Then he came out and he was like, "What are you doing out here?" And I was like, "I'm here just to make sure that everybody is able to get inside and get their vote and they're not being harassed by the poll workers or anybody." He's like, "Well, you know, in that case, I was being harassed." And I was like -- and somebody already came out and told me about him and his shirt. And he came out and his jacket was a little open -- I could see, like, Hillary's face, but I was like, Is he a supporter? Not a supporter? I couldn't figure out, but I was like, He's probably Republican.

So he was like, "I got harassed. I went in there; they made me button up my jacket. I don't understand why I can't be -- you know, let people know who I'm going to vote for." And I was like, "Well, that's -- unfortunately, that's the law. You're not -- you're supposed to walk in on -- it's neutral ground, and nobody should go in with anything -- buttons, blah blah blah." So he was like, "Well, that doesn't help me, because, you know, people need to know." You know, "Hillary needs to go to jail, and I proudly voted for Trump." And I was like -- with a smile on my face -- I'm like, "I'm glad you exercised your voting right. That's the most important thing."

ALI: Now how did you -- did you feel -- how were you feeling in terms of your mood at the time? Were you optimistic or just --

ALMONTASER: Oh my God. I was very optimistic during the day. Because I had seen so many members of our community come out and vote, and I was like, Oh my God, this is so amazing. So I was at actually two different sites that I broke up my time with. I was also so tired, because of all the traveling and everything. I literally -- that day, I started to feel like my whole immune system just, like, breaking down on me. But I was very optimistic. I was actually quoted in an article that day. And then -- so we finished all the poll watching. And I had actually been already dressed and ready to go to the Jacob Javits Center. I had actually gotten VIP tickets for myself, my husband, and a couple of -- excuse me -- a couple of friends who wanted to be there. We were in the VIP section, which was really awesome. Got to meet a lot of high-ranking officials --

ALI: In the Javits Center -- this was the --

ALMONTASER: The Jacob Ja--

ALI: -- campaign headquarters for the night.

ALMONTASER: Yes. Yes. The victory party location. Getting there and walking into the space, it was just so powerful. And it was just, like, so symbolic, right? You know, being able to break that glass ceiling -- you know, just that place, that location, that metaphor. And then just all the people that we were, like, seeing. And it was really festive when we first got there -- people were drop--, you know, drinking, laughing, talking, networking. And then I would say, like, around 9:00, the mood started to change slowly. Slowly, slowly. And then, like, people were not talking anymore. Like, you could literally hear a pin drop. People were just, like, glued at the screens in that space. And there were people who just -- like, there were no more seats to sit -- that were sitting on the floor, because they were like, oh my God, this is crazy. They didn't even have enough chairs at the Javits Center that day. People were sitting on the floor. Long faces. You -- the tension in that room -- you could literally cut it with a knife.

So about 11:30, my husband was like, "This is not good at all, and I don't think I want to stay here for the rest [laughter] of this." And I was like, "Well, let's see. Maybe things will change." He's like, "I don't think anything is going to change for the better." And

then the people that came with us -- they were like, "Well, we want to stay, just in case." And I looked with my husband, and I, like -- I saw that he was already in distress, and he did not want to be in a space of disappointment. And at that point, I was like, "You know what, guys? You can all stay. You've got your tickets. I think we're just going to leave, because we're not feeling it." You know, and there were other people that were leaving as well -- we weren't the only -- only ones.

So by the time we made our way out, it was probably, like, 10 to 12:00 [a.m.], and, like, reporters were swarming outside of the Jacob Javits Center -- like, following people, running after them to ask them why were they leaving. And [laughter] it was pretty crazy. Anyway, we had gotten home, and I opened up the TV, and then my husband was like, "You're kidding. You're going to watch this?" And I was like, "I think I need to." And he's like, "I don't think you need to. I think you need to sleep, because you're not well. And let's just wait 'til the morning -- what happens."

So we got home probably -- it was, like, probably about 1:30 [a.m.]. But then my phone started buzzing. There were a lot of youths that were actually texting me -- sisters that were texting me -- and they're like, "Oh my God! What does this mean? Is he really?" -- you know, "He really won? What is Hillary doing? Is there going to be a recount?" Like, all of these questions. But the ones that were the most heartbreaking were actually of youth saying, "Should I go to school tomorrow? I'm really afraid to go to school tomorrow. I don't know what this means. What's going to happen to us?" Like, those were all the emails that were just -- the text messages -- that were just, like -- you know, they were just, like, heartbreaking. And it was like, Oh my God, I can't believe this. And as much -- like, seeing the terror that they were feeling, it of course, you know, ignited the terror in me. But at that point, I was like, well, I can't -- you know, I can't -- I can't be terrified. Like, they're -- the reason that they were texting me and reaching out to me is because they think I have the answer -- which I was like, where the hell -- what the hell is the answer? [laughter]

So, I mean, I basically texted them all back and I said, "Yes. You have to live your life. You have to go to school. Don't be afraid. You know, just be vigilant. You have to go to school. We live in America. It's a democracy. And, you know, he is the rightful president. You know, we have to understand that there is a bigger -- there is a bigger, you know -- there is a bigger picture here. You know, and Allah willed this." Especially for all the Muslim youth, you know? You know, "Allah is the planner of planners. We may want one thing, but something else happens. And he is the best planner for something. And there will be -- there is some wisdom in this whole situation, and we just have to strengthen our iman -- our faith -- and just -- and -- and -- and be strong through this." And that was literally my message that night to everybody that I had to, like, respond back to -- adults, young people, sisters -- everybody, just to give them some kind of reassurance.

And I eventually then went to bed -- I would say probably, like, four in the morning. And they -- I didn't even look at the news anymore to see, like, when she was going to come in and -- and do her -- her succession -- what do they call it? Succession?

ALI: Concession.

ALMONTASER: Yeah, concession speech. So I, at that point -- I didn't really care. I was like, It's over. I woke up the next morning. I had actually received an email inviting me to -- to go to it -- to her -- where she was going to actually announce. And I was like, I'm not going. I cannot be in that room -- to get such disappointing news. So -- so I watched it on TV. I was like, I can't be there in person. It was just so depressing. And it was really, really depressing. Her speech was beautiful. She really held it together. She -- she looked -- you know, she looked -- she had it together. And I was just, like, sitting there, and like, I can't believe this is actually happening. That's all I kept saying to myself -- I can't believe this is actually happening.

And so then that afternoon, it wasn't -- it was, like, around 10:00 that morning, after the show, I get an email from all of our interfaith partners at MCN [Muslim Community Network], and they're like, "We're putting together a sing-along and therapy session at Washington Square Park. We'd love for you -- MCN -- to be a part of this." You know, "These are all the organizations, and, you know, we want MCN to be a part of it, as we work with you guys all the time." And we're like, "Okay, let's do it." So we sent out a blast to all of our people. And then we had, like, close to 1,000 people who showed up, like, at 1:00 -- 1:00 or 2:00 -- at Washington Square Park, where, you know, religious leaders, activists, just started speaking. But it was mostly all just leading in chants and song of, like, healing. And it was so beautiful.

And -- and then the minister at Judson Memorial Church saw so many people crying -- like, people were crying while we were out there. And she's like -- she announced, "We're going to go back to the church if anybody feels like they need to -- to speak -- you know, have some time to talk and reconcile and what have you. We're welcoming everybody." So we all -- the majority of the people went back to the church. And then we broke up into small groups of four. And we had a facilitator who just did, like, this healing circle, where there were questions that were being asked, and people had a chance to respond to them.

And so I sat in a circle that had a rabbi and two ministers -- actually, two rabbis and two ministers and myself -- and just laypeople. And it was so sad to see one of the rabbis and one of the ministers, like, really breaking down and crying. Like, I felt broken, right? And I thought every Muslim across the country felt broken. But then when I saw these people, like, broken, I was like, oh my God. This is not just, like, a Muslim, like, being terrified because he said he was going to do a Muslim registry and a Muslim ban. Like, people were really, like, devastated.

And as we were -- people started talking. And you know, like, the rabbi that was, like, sobbing -- literally, like, tears, and -- it was so emotional. He was like, "I'm terrified that he's going to press the nuclear button." And I was like, oh my God. Like, That didn't even dawn on me [laughter]. All I was worried about was the Muslim registry and Muslim ban -- and, you know, not to think of, like, the nuclear war button -- that this, you know, trigger-happy guy is all about. So at that moment, it just made me realize, like, we're not in this alone -- and that we're not the only ones feeling like this -- that there are so many other people across the country that are feeling like this. And so after that session, we convened the organizers of that singalong, and we all agreed that we needed to keep the church open for the whole week, and just have these sessions. And so we kept sending out information and just inviting people to come. And alhamdulillah, members of the -- the Muslim community came. And it was so important for them, like, to see non-Muslims feeling the way that they did and just really give them a sense of reassurance and, like, we're not in this alone, we're going to get through this together. It was a very healing moment -- you know, to actually do that for that whole week, and then we did it a couple of weekends -- that we kept doing it on Saturdays and Sundays.

But was interesting also -- like, that morning, I had also gotten, like, a bunch of emails from elected officials, a bunch of emails from -- and text messages from clergy all over - - like, saying, "What can we do? How can we support your community? This is so terrifying. We're so upset. We can't believe this." And all I kept telling them was, Just show up in places that you know Muslims are -- you know, your local -- you know, your local store, your local restaurant -- and just let them know that you are in support -- you know, your local mosque.

So the rabbi, Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, who is the rabbi of Beit Simchat Torah in the Village -- in Chelsea, actually -- contacted me, and she's like, "We want to -- we want to show up. What -- where should we go? What should we do?" And I said to her -- I said,

you know, "The most directly impacted right now are youth -- college students and youth who are, like, just so confused and terrified by this whole incident." So they showed up at the Islamic Center of NYU [New York University] with roses. And they gave them out that afternoon. And they continued to go every Friday. And they're still going every day. They weren't going every Friday with flowers, because that was a little too much -- expensive. But on the one-year anniversary -- that Friday that came after the election day -- they went back again with roses. But they still show up every week -- between 10 and 15 people from that synagogue with signs -- "Standing with our Muslim neighbors." And what's come out of that is, you know, Khalid [Latif] is really great about welcoming people. They'll stand out there, and then they'll go in and they'll listen to the Friday prayer service. They'll break bread with the community. They've actually had someone go in and do teachings with them at their synagogue to help them better understand Islam. It's just been really, really, incredibly healing -- and an opportunity for, you know, all of the communities to get to know each other really well.

ALI: One of the first things that the new president did was to make good on his promise to attempt a -- a Muslim ban. The first was announced at the end of January of 2017. It was a Friday. Tell me -- tell me what that day was like for you.

ALMONTASER: Oh my gosh. That day was crazy. It was actually January 27th. And that day actually was Holocaust Memorial Day -- which I was like, what the hell? Like, how insensitive could this man be to announce it on that day? And there was speculation -- because I'm a part of a national MASA [Muslim, Arab, South Asian] organizing list -- that he was going to make due on his promise. So we were, like, already speculating two weeks prior to that and just waiting -- like, when is this going to come through? When is it going to come through? And so I was actually in Lower Manhattan at a gathering with the -- with Arab Americans who were actually voting for an art piece to be displayed in Lower Manhattan in the area which used to be called Little Syria -- where Arab Americans first arrived and -- and called their home in the United States. And so the announcement was made. I was there. I was representing the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee. I had to wait because I had to speak. And

all I kept doing was looking at my phone -- text messages, emails -- like, updating me. It was so crazy. And then Dr. Sarah Sayeed was there. And she was, like, monitoring what their response at City Hall was going to be. And she's like, "They're going to do a press conference." It was just nuts.

So anyhow, that night, I was like, I can't believe this is happening. How could this be? How can this man do what he's doing? And then text messages -- I had gotten so many text messages of, like, "What does this mean? What's going to happen to us? Are we safe?" You know, it was nuts. So when the list of all the countries came out, of course, then, like, the Yemeni community was just like -- like, all the text messages from the Yemeni leadership -- and individuals like -- you know, even my own family -- like, "What does this mean? What are we going to do?" And then I just responded to everybody, calming them down. And then the Yemeni American leadership -- I was like, "We need to have an emergency meeting tomorrow -- tomorrow night. Find a location and get as many people out, because we need to figure out what the heck we're going to do. And we need to educate people on what this means, because everybody has to contact the people that they know, tell them not to travel, and what have you."

So that's [sigh] -- that night was nuts. I could not believe it. I didn't sleep that night. I just -- I was still in a state of shock, if that even means anything. And then monitoring the email list -- and then everybody's like, "We all have to get to the airports." So that following morning, I was actually going out for an interview with Bill Ritter. Was it that morning? No, it wasn't that morning, because I -- the Bill Ritter actually -- I don't even -- oh, it was some -- I don't even remember. It was some interview -- some TV interview at CBS or NBC -- one of these two. And I was like, Okay, I have to do this. So did that, and then I hightailed it to the airport -- took a Uber from the city all the way to -- to the airport. And to get to the airport and just to see the sea of people -- both in the airport at Terminal 4 and outside of Terminal 4 -- was so amazing. And the driver was not able to drop me off as close to Terminal 4, so first, I went inside, and I was like, "Where are



all the protestors?" And they're like, "Oh, they're outside -- all the way down." So I was walking through, but I already see, like, lawyers with their laptops set up sitting on the floor, and I was like, Oh my God, this is so crazy.

So anyway, I get out, and I see this sea of people in that driveway area -- the parking lot area. And it was so amazing. And I was actually not able to -- to get into where they were, so I had to, like, walk all the way down -- and -- and then be able to get around. As I was walking in -- walking along that gate, people were like, you know, cheering and chanting. And everybody was, like, giving me a high-five -- those people that recognized me -- that I was there. It was just so -- it was -- it was a beautiful moment. But it was also very sad. And so we were out there just monitoring the situation. We started to get word that there were people who didn't speak Arabic, that we needed more Arabic lawyers, so I was on my phone, texting people that were lawyers. I was like, "We need as many lawyers -- please come down if you're certified -- you know, if you are certified to practice in the Southern District and whatever other districts." And alhamdulillah, there were so many lawyers that saw my emails that just simply, like, dropped everything and came out -- and set up shop there.

And we were literally there -- I was there till like 9:00 that night. It was so cold. So, so cold. You know, there -- the media was there. It was so much media. I got to speak. There were other organizers and people who were involved, like the New York Immigration Coalition -- the statewide immigration coalition. It was just really powerful. And the beautiful part was -- also, like, our, you know, interfaith community came out, so there were ministers. The Jewish community -- after sunset, they actually came out and they did a prayer service there. It was really, really powerful. And then I headed to Bay Ridge for the Yemeni American community meeting. [laughter]

ALI: Yes. That's -- this is -- this community, I think, had been fairly invisible in a lot of the conversations about Muslims in America, right?

ALMONTASER: Yeah.

ALI: But at this moment, became increasingly visible, so -- with a massive demonstration. So tell me the -- the history of how this came about.

ALMONTASER: Yeah, absolutely. So that night, I got to the space, and I had already been, like, bombarded by media -- the *New York Times*, the *Daily News* -- a whole bunch of reporters are, like, you know, "We want to know what the Yemeni community is thinking, how they're feeling." So the *New York Times* reporter came with me to the meeting. We had her -- first we met and we strategized in terms of what we needed to do. Fifty leaders from all of the five boroughs showed up. We broke it down for them in terms of, like, what this means, what they should tell their family members, and what we need to do going forward. We talked about the importance of educating the community, doing town halls, Know Your Rights trainings, which we were going to do one in the Bronx and one in Brooklyn. And then we basically said, "You all know now what you need to tell people. Pick up the phone and call people, so people who are not on social media -- savvy, and all of that -- because we really need to get this information to them. And, you know, we'll do the first, you know, Know Your Rights, and then we'll come back, you know, and do the next one and just keep at it."

So one of the bodega owners who was at that meeting went to a gathering that Sunday night where a bunch of bodega owners came together. They usually hang out and, you know, they have khats and -- never mind, I won't get too detailed into that. But anyways, smoke shisha and just chill out. But sadly, that night, the mood was not a chilling out mood. They were all just very upset and frustrated -- scared, devastated, didn't know what the hell was going on. And so one of them was like, "We have to stand up." You know, "Now we know what we need to do. We've got to stand up. We've got to defend our rights. And we need to let the world know that we're part of this country, we are contributors, we pay taxes. You know, we're the heart of many communities across the country." And then one of them was like, "Well, why don't we do a strike?" [laughter] So they talked about it and they all were like, "Okay, well why

don't you call Debbie and asks her what she thinks. If she thinks it's a good idea, then let's do it."

So then they call me Monday morning -- Zaid [Nagi] calls me up. And he said, "You know, we met the other night -- last night -- and, you know, we talked at length about how devastated we were, and the idea of, you know, a bodega strike came up, and everybody unanimously said, 'Call Debbie and get her approval and see what she thinks.'" I was like, "Okay, well how many stores are you thinking to close?" And he's like, "Oh, maybe two, three hundred." I was like, "No. Can you guys deliver 1,000?" He's like, "Well, that's, like, a lot," and, you know, "We don't know." I was like, "Okay. And where -- like, when you close the stores, what are you guys going to do?" And he's like, "Well, we were thinking to get Widdi Hall or some banquet hall and just, like, do a town hall and let people speak." And I was like, "But who's -- who are you trying to send a message to?" And so he was -- at that point, he's like, "Well, we really didn't think about, like, in detail -- great detail about what we would do."

So I said to him -- I said, "If you guys are going to do a strike, then we need to do a press release, we need to do it in a big, open public space so the world could see -- because the message you want to send is to Trump and the government and the people that you refuse to live in the shadows of -- you know, in this country." And he was like, "Okay." He says, "So what do we need?" I said, "Well, we're going to need, you know, to get a permit -- identify a place, a permit. We're going to need a budget -- you know, for a sound system and a stage, that might be, like, three to five thousand dollars -- and then for posters -- you know, and to get people to close their stores." And he said, "Okay, well, I think we can maybe get people to donate." I was like, "You have to get people to donate to make this happen." So then I said to him -- I said, "When do you guys want to do this?" And he's like, "Thursday." I was like, "Three days away from now?" And he's like, "Yeah." I was like, "Are you crazy? How are we going to do all that? You know, we need to find a place, we need to get a permit." And he's like, "It has

to be Thursday.” So I said to him, “Okay. Go back, tell everybody I think it’s a great idea if they can close 1,000 stores. And if they really think that they can close 1,000 stores, we could do this. I will find a space, I will get a permit, and then I just need you to fundraise. You need to get money -- you need to get people to donate money.”

So then he went -- he went back. This was, like, 11:00 in the morning on Monday. I was like, “You’re crazy. You want to do it on Thursday.” He was like, “It has to be Thursday.” I don’t even -- I never even asked him, like, why it had to be Thursday, but I think God was in -- in play here, because the following day, Judge Donnelly at Brooklyn Borough Hall ruled against the ban -- actually, that night, after we were protesting -- in the middle of the night. So he went. I checked to see if -- if Washington Square Park was actually available. It was not available that day. I started to, you know, look for Foley Square. I was like, all right. Let me just stop this. Let me call Eric Adams, and let me make him do this -- help us do this, so that way, there’s no costs incurred -- like, so the steps could be our stage. You know, Brooklyn Borough Hall has all the equipment that we need to make this happen. And honestly, the best place to do it is Brooklyn Borough Hall, because of our roots as Yemeni Americans being in -- in Brooklyn Borough Hall.

So I picked up the phone that afternoon, I called him, and I said, “Eric, I need you to do me a big favor.” I explained to him what it was. I then explained to him how Yemeni Americans -- when they first arrived to New York, they actually lived in the Brooklyn Borough Hall area -- on Court Street, Atlantic Avenue -- they opened up their stores, their restaurants. Anywhere you go in the United States or in Yemen and somebody asks you, “Where do you live in the US in New York,” you would say, Borough Hall [with an Arabic accent], and everybody just simply knew that that was Borough Hall. And when I told him this story, he was like, “Oh my God, Debbie, I had no idea.” Because his initial reaction was, like, “Well, we can help you find a place in Bay Ridge.” I was like, “That’s not -- Bay Ridge is not the home of the Yemeni American community. That’s not where their roots began.” And then when I explained it to him,

he was like, "Oh my God. I did not know this important history of Brooklyn." He's like, "I totally understand and I really want this to happen. I'm going to let my staff know. They'll contact you. We're going to make it work."

So his chief of staff calls me. She's like, "What do you guys need? What is this going to be -- you know, we also have Chinese New Year happening in the courtroom, so we've got to figure out how we're going to make this all work, because we have multiple events -- and how many staff you're going to need." And I was like, "Oh my God, this is so crazy." So we spoke to their communications person -- so this all happened -- I talked to him Monday afternoon -- in the evening. Then, his staff -- his chief of staff Tuesday morning. Then, the communications person Tuesday night. And she was like, "We still have -- do not let the community know that we're going to do this, because we still have to figure out manpower -- who we're going to be able to dedicate to this, so we're not firming anything up yet until we -- we want to do it, but we just have to figure out how to do it." And they asked me, "How many people do you think will show up?" So I said, "Oh, 1,000 -- the most, 2,000 people." [laughter] That was an understatement -- an absolute understatement.

So Tuesday night, we finally wrapped things -- everything was finalized. They're like, "Okay, we're going to do this. We're going to provide you the sound system. We'll have the guy who does all the equipment -- he'll be out there with you. Our communications director will be out there with you. And, you know, we should be able to be good to go." So -- worked on the press release. We did a joint one. We released it on our end, and then the borough president sent one -- an additional one out. And when we sent it out on Wednesday at noon, the media started -- it was incredible. People were calling me from all over the country -- and emailing -- I gave my phone number and email. And then ReThink Media actually was assisting, so she fielded a lot of the emails and -- and figured out who we should talk to and not talk to.

And at that point, I had already let Zaid know -- I was like, "It's a go." Tuesday night, I was like, "You need to get these posters up and out of here, in all of the stores. You've got to figure out a plan -- how you're going to disseminate them. Send me the flyer." I sent them some of the language that needed to be on there. They sent me the -- the flyer. And I was like, "It's got typos." Like, "Who put this together?" And they're like -- I was like, "You need to get it revised ASAP and get it back to me within the hour." So Zaid says to me, "Well, we can't. We've got to wait till the morning." I was like, "What do you mean, you've got to wait till the morning?" He's like, "Because the guy that created it is in Yemen." I was like, "What?!" [laughter] So he's like, "Yeah. We had a volunteer who does -- you know, design work who volunteered to do this." So it was -- I was just, like, going crazy. I was like, "We've got to get this right. These things have to get printed and they have to be disseminated."

And so what was really powerful was, Zaid contacted -- so there was Zaid, myself, Abdul, and Abdulkani.

ALI: Who were these last names? Give me their last -- these people again, with last names.

ALMONTASER: Oh, sure. So Abdul Salam Mubarez -- he was one of the organizers.

Abdulkani Bahaibah was also one of the organizers. Zaid Nagi was the man with the idea who contacted me that Monday morning. And myself.

So I -- I call them up, and I was like, "You guys need to figure out how you're going to get the word out." So Abdul Salam said, "Don't worry. I'm going to call all the influential leaders that I know across the five boroughs, and we'll get them to call people. So we'll do the phone thing." I was like, "Okay, this is interesting." Like, I haven't heard that strategy in a long time. He's like, "We've got this." So that was his part. Zaid worked on the flyer and then actually getting boots on the ground. So they printed them out. And he actually had five teams -- one in each borough that was actually taking them and delivering -- they were literally delivering the flyers, like, till 2:00, 3:00 a.m. in the morning -- to stores. It was really powerful. And then -- then

Abdulkani was, like, doing all the logistics. We were going to pray at Borough Hall, so he was getting us the -- the tarp mat to put on the floor. He was getting us the imam who will lead the prayer. And, like, get us, you know, the jackets for -- you know, like, security and all that kind of important stuff that you need at rallies.

And so then -- Abdul Salam also then -- I said to him -- I said -- and Zaid -- I was like, "I need stores that I'm going to send the media to, because they're going to call me once we put that press release out. They want to go to a store and see the store close. They want to speak to people -- how they're feeling. We need to get people -- impacted people." So they all helped me identify people who were directly impacted to be some of our speakers. And so we had 50 percent women and 50 percent men who spoke that day at Brooklyn Borough Hall. And then Naji, my husband, actually helped with the outreach to elected officials. He text messaged all the elected officials he had on his phone to come stand with us and be there. And it was really powerful.

So I had 10 or 12 store owners that were willing and able to speak with the media. Within that number, there were two or three that were 24-hour stores -- that never closed. There was one store that never closed for, like, 25, 30 years; another one, like, 20 years. It was just really fascinating. And of those two stores, when they went to lock the lock, the lock fell apart. So they had to go to the hardware store, get the lock. And there was actually video footage of this happening -- you know, where they were trying to lock it and -- and it fell apart, which was really beautiful.

And then everybody -- all of the bodega owners who were interviewed got a chance to tell their story -- of like -- whether it was their wife, their daughter, their mother, their brother -- it was just really very moving to see how the ban impacted literally every person. Even people who were living here -- like, second- and third-generation Yemeni Americans -- they were still affected, because there was some family member or relative that was affected. And my own family -- my husband's brother -- step-brother --

his wife was actually stranded in Jordan. He wasn't able to bring her, because her paperwork was basically disrupted by the ban. But his two oldest daughters, who were naturalized after birth, were actually able to evacuate from Yemen and come here and live with his -- his sisters while he was trying to get his wife and two other children. So it -- it's just -- it was really, really -- it was an interesting moment to just see all this.

ALI: So tell me how the -- the turnout. Tell me the day of.

ALMONTASER: Oh my Lord. So -- so the media cycle lasted 24 hours -- the day before and throughout. I literally didn't get a chance to sleep the night before. We -- you know, we had a conference call, and I had a couple of sisters who -- I was like, "I need you guys to help man the Facebook page now that we've made it live, and any media, just direct them to me." So thank God the two sisters were able to do that for us. And it was really interesting, because on Facebook, this woman who was a law student saw this and decided to do a GoFundMe, and she raised, like, \$9,000. And her intention was to give it to the bodega owners. And after the bodega strike, we had a conversation, and we're like, "Which of the 1,000 -- how are we going to divide it up between 9,000 -- you know, 9,000 between 1,000 bodegas?" And of course, nobody wanted the money, so then we gave it to CUNY CLEAR [City University of New York - Creating Law Enforcement Accountability and Responsibility] to do immigration work.

But -- so anyhow, I was still doing press work. We decided that the stores were going to close from 12:00 to 8:00 p.m. And the original idea was for them to close from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. And then we had some of the store owners who were like, "You know what, we can't do this to our customers who come in in the morning for their coffee, their paper -- and kids get their snacks in the morning -- and then for us to shut down at that hour is going to disrupt their day. Let's do it from 12:00, and then we'll do it to 8:00 p.m. And it's okay if, you know, we don't make money at the -- you know, it's fine that, you know, we're going to lose people -- at least people will know at 6:00 p.m. to get their milk and toast and whatever from somewhere else, but it's a rude awakening for people to actually wake up and find their bodega closed." So we're like, "Okay." So of course



some of the press didn't, you know, like that answer. They're like, "Oh, they just -- they didn't want to lose money that morning," and, like, whatever.

So they shut down from 12:00 to 8:00. Those of them that were in Brooklyn actually shut down at 12:00 and made their way to Brooklyn Borough Hall. At 12:30, I get a call from Brooklyn Borough Hall saying, "There are 50 men outside. Why are they standing outside in the cold? Did you guys give them the wrong time for the rally?" And I'm like, "No. Are you sure?" And they're like, "Yes. They look Yemeni." So I was like, "Can you send somebody out there to verify?" So they did, but the person couldn't communicate with them, because they were all talking Arabic. And he -- they came back and they were like, "They're definitely Yemeni. They closed their stores. But we don't know why they're there, because we couldn't really communicate with them." I was like, "All right. Just -- don't worry about it. I'll send somebody." At 1:00, they called me back, and they're like, "Now there are 200 people out there." [laughter] I was like, "What?" And they're like, "There are over 200 people out there. You guys gave the wrong time. This is going to be a disaster. There will be nobody here at 4:30. You need to come over here and tell people to go away -- go stay somewhere warm and come back at 4:30."

So my poor husband, who actually was working that morning -- he had come in to work at, like, 5:00 in the morning, and he came home and he was like, "I'm going to just take a nap," and I was like, "You can't take a nap. You need to go to Brooklyn Borough Hall. You need to figure out what the hell is going on with these guys. Why are they there? Tell them to go to the local mosque. Tell them to go to Starbucks. But they can't -- they're going to freeze to death" -- [laughter] -- "if they stay there." So he was like, "Okay." So he went over there and he spoke to them. And they're like, "We know. We know we're supposed to be here at 4:30." He was like, "Why are you guys here?" And they're like, "Because we wanted to start early." He's like, "But it's cold. Go to the mosque. Go make your prayer." And they're like, "Don't worry about us. We've got this." So the Yemen Café actually closed that day, too -- which is down -- down the

street. Otherwise, they would have gone there. But they closed in solidarity, which was really, really powerful.

So my husband calls me up. He was like, "Don't worry. They're not going anywhere. They're going to be there at 4:30. They promised me they will." So I called up Borough Hall and I was like, "They're not going anywhere." You know, "They don't want to go, but they're going to be there for 4:30." So I finally make my way over to Brooklyn Borough Hall at 3:00 and there were literally 1,000 -- over 1,000 people there. I was, like, totally in shock. I was, like -- the whole entire plaza was filled with men. And I was like, Holy moly! Where did all these people come from? And I was like, Oh my God! So I took out my phone and I took some pictures. And as I was, like, walking to go into Brooklyn Borough Hall, they all assembled themselves and they prayed the late afternoon prayer. There was no tarp mat -- nothing. They just literally prayed on the pavement. It was so powerful.

I made my way into Brooklyn Borough Hall from the Joralemon Street entrance. Made it to the second floor, where the borough president's office was. And then, the communications person -- the communications person was like, "Oh, Debbie! It's about time you got here. The borough president wants to see you." I was like, "What?" He's like, "Yeah. He wants to see you right now. You have to go to his office." And he's walking me -- and I was like, Oh my God. What is the borough president going to say? Like, I got really worried -- like I was in some kind of trouble or whatever. Walk into his office, and he's like, "Debbie, we have a serious problem here." And I was like, Oh my God. Like, my stomach just dropped. Like, I was like, he's probably upset. All of these people of here. They've been in the plaza all this time. And then he says to me, "We have a serious problem out here with the damn good outreach you people did." [laughter] He's like, "How you got all these people to come out here at this time in this cold is un-- incredible. Absolutely incredible." And he's like, "You said 2,000 people?

There are probably 2,000 people now. Are you expecting more?" And I said, "I don't know. I don't know what to expect."

Anyway, as we monitored the whole entire time until we came out at 4:30 -- like, the crowd just kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger. But the part that I also forgot to tell you was, the day before, like, all of our allies were calling us -- so, Amnesty International, police reform groups -- all of these, you know, like, groups -- non-Muslim groups that were like, "We heard about it. We want to come. How can we help you?" The Working Families, other unions -- they're like, "Do you need -- you know, do you need security? We have people that are trained. We'll help you with that." I was like, "Yes. We need everybody. Just bring them. We need everybody." And they actually did. They provided us training -- they provided us people who were trained to help with that.

But getting back to the borough president -- he then says to me, "Okay. My staff and I just met, and we realized that -- you know, that -- you know, we're going to need to manage the crowd. And I've told my entire staff that nobody is going to be the best person to manage your community other than you. I know the relationship with the NYPD and the experiences that Muslims have had with the NYPD and I do not want anyone under my watch to have a bad experience here today. So my staff is going to take direct cues from you as to what we need -- as well as the NYPD -- will take direct cues from you on what we need security-wise." And I'm just standing there listening to him, and inside my head, I was like, what the hell did he just ask me to do? I was like, I have no freaking clue how to manage crowds. Like, he literally deputized me. And I'm just standing there with, like, a straight face and a small smile, but inside of me, I was, like, scared. I was like, oh my God, I can't believe he just asked me to do this. I know nothing about crowd control. Like, I was just -- like, my knees were shaking, but I was still able to stand there. And I was like, "Thank you, Eric. I really appreciate it. My

community really will -- will appreciate knowing this." And I was like, oh my God. Help me, God, get through this day. How are we going to get through this day?

And so I had two tasks. One was to manage this crowd and tell them when we needed the help. And then two, I was also the -- the emcee. Like, when we were doing the program the night before, everybody's like, "You're the emcee, because nobody will try to take the microphone from you. You're going to lay the law. You're going to make it happen." And I was like, okay, great. Now I'm the emcee, and now I also have to do the crowd control. It was incredibly crazy.

So finally, 4:30, we're getting ready to come out. And it was -- we purposely did that so we can actually, like, be able to get everybody to pray, and then we start the program -- to get them to calm down. We come out -- and Eric said -- he's like, "What would be the best way for me to come out?" You know, I was like, "Just come out with us." He's like, "Okay, well, we got flags." So he had actually Yemeni flags -- they brought Yemeni flags, too. It was a really sweet gesture. So he had some of his staff come out with American flags, and he came out draped-- draped with the Yemeni flag on his back. So you can actually see the pictures. It was really powerful.

And we walk out through those front doors. And literally, we were not able to walk down the stairs, because the stairs were packed with people. And even before we walked out -- like, his chief of staff and some of the employees came, and they're like, "There are people dangling from the fringe of the ropes for the flags that are hanging outside. This is dangerous. You need somebody to go out there and tell them to come down before they hang themselves." [laughter] So we sent my husband and Abdulkani out there to calm people down and get them off. Like, there are pictures -- you can see people, like, literally hanging off these ropes. So we did that.

So before -- like, we realized we couldn't even -- we couldn't even go down the steps -- to be in the middle, to -- for having the press conference. And at that point, I was like, "Okay. We're going to need -- like, we're going to need to get people off the steps for us to be able to -- to get there." So then his staff, the NYPD, and I, like, started just telling people, "We need you to go down." You know, "Just go down, go down, go down." And we got as many people to go down to give us enough space to be able to stand there. Then we welcomed everybody and we told them that we were going to pray. And we had a person do the azaan [adhan] -- the call to prayer. And he assembled -- then we had the imam assemble himself where he was going to actually lead the people, and it was, like, all the way out far in the plaza. And we had to give him a wireless mic that he had to do it. It was just really incredibly beautiful to see them all lining themselves up.

My daughter came and she had gotten there at that time. And it was so funny when she shared this story -- she was like, "Mom, I got there, and they were just, like, so sweet. They were like, you know, creating these files for me to pass." [laughter] She didn't realize that they were creating the files to get ready to pray. She was like, "They were just so courteous. They just let me pass through. They, like, just filed next to each other." And then she's like, "As soon as I, like, turned around to the corner and then I heard the call to prayer, I was like, Oh, they were just getting ready to pray." [laughter] So it was pretty funny.

So -- so anyway, they all prayed. And I prayed up on the steps with a couple of the sisters that were there -- all the way on the very top of the steps. They finished. The imam then started to decide to give, like, a little lecture. And I was like, What the heck? All he was supposed to do was lead the prayer. The person who brought him, Abdulkani -- he told him, but it's like, you know, imam fever. So the communications person was like, "Debbie, we've got to get this mic back." And I was like, "Yeah. Who's going to go all the way over there and get it? And we need to start this program." Luckily, we had some extra mics. I was like, "Kill his mic. Kill his mic." He's like, "Are

you sure? Are they going to get upset?" I was like, "Don't worry. I'll take the responsibility. Kill his mic." He killed his mic, and then the mic that I had was live, and then we started the rally. We told people to get up. But all the tarp that we bought we didn't get a chance to use. We wanted to actually have all of our allies, like, hold hands around us while we prayed. We couldn't even do that, because the whole entire plaza was packed -- literally, packed.

So at that point, we started the program. We had various leaders from the community speak. We had people who were directly affected -- bodega owners, family members of bodega owners, daughters -- you know, mothers, etc. It was really, really powerful. And then, the most astonishing thing was, we had not gotten that many confirmations from elected officials the day before that they were coming. And as I turned around to look behind me, we had literally over 30 elected officials from all over the five boroughs that came out that day -- that just, like, dropped everything and came. [laughter] Literally, dropped everything and came. It was, like, shocking. I was absolutely, absolutely shocked to see. The one elected official that did not show up, which the community was extremely disappointed with, was Mayor de Blasio. He did not, like, see -- he and his administration did not see the -- the footage and say, "Oh my God, I need to be there." Scott Stringer came out. Melissa Mark-Viverito came out. And she was actually in a meeting with him, and she was like, "I'm going. You should go. I don't know about you, but I'm going there right now." Tish [Letitia] James came out. You know, State Assembly people who were not in Albany -- senators who were not -- and then City Council members -- the borough president of Manhattan came out, Gale Brewer. And, you know, she -- you know, she has difficulty walking, so my husband, like, got her through the crowd, made sure she was, like, in a safe space for her to stand, to be able to speak. It was just so powerful.

And we had -- you know, we had also interfaith partners that we added on the program -  
- rabbis, ministers -- to also greet the community. You know, Amnesty International  
spoke. A whole slew of other people spoke. It was just really, really powerful.

ALI: So -- to wind down, tell me what -- what do you think this event -- or this effort --  
represents in the history of -- of organizing in your community.

ALMONTASER: Oh my gosh. It's the very first time in the history of the Yemeni American  
community that they ever became politically involved. And, you know, it's a rally. It's a  
protest. It's not really political. But it is political, because it was challenging the very  
existence of their livelihood in this country -- and, you know, their opportunity to live  
with respect and dignity with their families. And so in all the years that I've been  
involved with the Yemeni community, I've never been able to get them to be civically  
engaged in that way -- like -- like the way that we did there. Like, there's pockets in the  
community -- that, you know, we started doing voter registration, getting them excited  
about the presidential race, but to the extent that the bodega strike -- like, that was -- it  
was something that basically charged them to understand -- like, if they didn't come  
out that day, if they didn't close their stores that day, and they didn't make that  
statement, then they would have no worth. And they realized that they were of worth  
and value to this country -- and that they were not going to sit back, and that they were  
not going to live in the -- you know, in the shadows.

And for all of those people that came out -- young, old -- it was just so powerful -- and  
those who spoke English, those who didn't speak English. I mean, some of the footage -  
- like, if you look at some of the footage, it's just so powerful -- all the different people  
that were interviewed by the media. You know, there were people that actually decided  
to break out into Yemeni dance there. It was just, like -- you know, like -- and I actually  
just saw this -- when we were doing the national bodega strike that we just did on April  
24th -- that I was looking for footage to -- to put up and just remind people of it, and I  
was like, Oh my God, I can't believe that these 30 guys decided to form a circle and  
start dancing. And they had music. [laughter] Which was really power-- like, they

owned the moment. And the most powerful thing of all of this was, they kept chanting, "USA! USA!" And they brought flags -- Yemeni flags and American flags -- in sizes that I didn't even know existed. I mean, like, if you looked at all of the -- like, the number of flags that were waving -- you know, and especially, like, American flags -- just -- they owned that moment of, like, We're American. We're here. We're not going anywhere. And you're not going to do this to us. That was, like, the message that they were sending that day.

And after the bodega strike, I asked some of the -- my fellow organizers -- I was like, "Why did they just keep saying 'USA'?" Like, we had a bunch of chants that we were doing, and they would do them, but then they would revert back to the "USA!" And one of my colleagues said, "It's because they want to send the powerful message that this is their country. And they will keep saying 'USA' in your face as long as they can possibly do so." And I was like, Oh my God, this is so powerful. And I appreciated it at that point, because I was like -- I was like, This is crazy. This has no significance. But it did. It really had significance for them.

And so, you know, the number of people that came out -- men, women, young old -- it was just really, really powerful. And the number of people -- like, allies that came out with these beautiful signs in solidarity. I actually ran into a woman who works in a law firm across the street from Brooklyn Borough Hall, and her window faces Borough Hall. And she said that she started watching the progression of the crowd grow, and she took pictures. She said she had a bunch of pictures of all -- of, like, everything, from when they started growing -- a small, little group of people -- until it just mushroomed into all of Borough Hall. And she said it was just so powerful for her to just stand in her window. Like, she was so distracted, she couldn't even work anymore. Like, all she did was just watch us -- and just took pictures of this. And she was just so moved. And she said she's never, ever seen anything like that in her life, and it was such a privilege to witness it.



ALI: So, one final question: how did this event impact the work that you're doing?

ALMONTASER: So this one event impacted the work that I was doing to really propel my organizing in the Yemeni community. Like, I've always organized in the Muslim community in general and the larger New York City communities, but it really brought me back home -- if that's even the right term to say -- in terms of, like, seeing the potential, seeing the eagerness and the whole idea of people wanting to be involved, wanting to be heard, wanting to participate. It just -- it made me realize, like, my community -- like, finally, my community woke -- woke up, you know? They woke up, and they really want to be a part of this. Like, prior to all of this, every time I would engage them, it just -- it went over their heads; it wasn't important. They were always very respectful; they were always very proud of everything that I did; but this was, like, a game-changer for them. Like, they realized, like, What Debbie's been doing and what we've been very proud of, we need to be doing now. And that's where it took us.

And after the bodega strike, we reconvened the committee. And I got to meet some of the bodega strike owners. And I was like, "Well tell me, like, what's life like for you guys?" Like, "Tell me how you -- what are your issues?" You know, "How do you -- you know, what are some of the things that you struggle with?" So they're like, "You know, we get fines, we get -- you know, work orders against us by the city. The NYPD harasses us." And I was like, Oh my God. All of -- like, all of these disenfranchisements that they're experiencing from city agencies, from the NYPD. And I was like, "You guys need an organization to represent you." And so the committee that organized the bodega -- I was like, "That's what you guys need to do. This is your next step. Take this moment and form an organization to serve the Yemeni bodega owners and merchants." And so I said to them, "I'm happy to help you guys" -- you know, because I have that background, and, you know, I'm doing MCN and what have you. And so then we just started laying the foundation.

And when we got the point -- excuse me -- to actually do the incorporation paper and we needed -- papers -- we needed the names of individuals to go on there, they were like, "Your name has to go on." I was like, "What do you mean my name has to go -- I'm not a merchant, I'm not a bodega owner. It makes no sense for me." And they're like, "We can't do this without you. Like, you're one of the founders of the bodega strike. You have the background and experience. You know, you know, like, what we need to do. We need you to be there." And then they were like, "Well, you should be the pre--" I was like, "No. I am not going to be the president, because that is crazy. That's insanity." I said, "But I will play a board member at-large." And they were like, "No. We want you to be a part of the executive committee." So -- so then I ended up saying, "Okay, I'll be the secretary."

So I'm the board secretary of the Yemeni American Merchants Association, which -- we got incorporated back -- late in the fall. We established a website both in Arabic and English, yamausa.org, which is really beautiful and amazing. And from the summer, when we actually announced to the community -- actually, back in April -- last April -- that we are going to create an organization to support the community, they were unanimously supportive. We did a -- like, a dialogue where we actually brought congressional leaders to talk about immigration and how they can help the community -- we had over 300 Yemeni American merchants that showed up for that at Widdi Hall. They got to hear from a few congressional leaders, City Council members, the borough president. We actually gave him a gift for opening up Borough Hall for us and hosting -- you know, letting us do the bodega strike there. It was really beautiful. And everybody was -- was actually supportive.

And what's really incredible about this moment -- you know, and where it's taken us -- is that we've actually become national. Like, YAMA [Yemeni American Merchants Association] now is known across the United States. Like, in all the mobilizing and organizing that we've done on a national level on the Muslim ban -- with the National

Immigration Law Center, with the ACLU, with the Asian Law Caucus, with Empower Change, and a number of other groups -- like, they're like, "YAMA has to be at the table. YAMA has to be a part of this conversation." And it's because we've owned the moment in always being vocal. You know, from all of the affected countries by the ban, we're the most organized and the most vocal. And so when we did the October 18th rally in Washington, DC, which was a national effort that we coordinated, the Yemeni American community dominated that rally. If you look at the pictures, we were, like, 70 percent of the crowd. And if it weren't for us getting the Yemeni American community to come out on a national level, we would have had a really poor showing. And what was interesting was, we had people who flew from as far as California and Mississippi and Tennessee and all different parts of the country. We had people who actually drove from the eastern region into Washington, DC. I mean, we have, you know, pictures of people that were posting on this Facebook page that has over 200,000 Yemeni Americans on there -- like, literally, in a hotel lobby, praying the morning prayer, because the majority of the people that were there were Yemenis. It was just really powerful. Did I answer that question?

ALI: Yes, you did. Thank you.

ALMONTASER: Yeah. I feel like I say too much.

ALI: No, it's good.

ALMONTASER: I didn't even -- what time is it Zaheer?

ALI: It's 4:10.

ALMONTASER: Well, yeah, I'm not -- yeah.

ALI: So we can -- we can wind -- is there anything else you want to add?

ALMONTASER: I can't think of anything else. I think we've done it all.

ALI: Okay. I think we've covered it all.

ALMONTASER: We've talked about the Yemeni American Merchants Association, yeah.

And I don't know if I mentioned that we did a national one -- over 14 cities -- on April 25th. So in preparation for the US Supreme Court oral arguments --

ALI: [coughs] Excuse me.

ALMONTASER: No problem. In preparation for the oral arguments of the US Supreme Court, we actually mobilized and organized across 14 cities across the United States a one-hour shutdown -- bodega shutdown. And what was really amazing was, it started as a conversation where we were calling influencers in different parts of the country. And they're like, "I'm on board. I'm going to get people to close." We formed a WhatsApp group with the 30 leaders, and I'm on there -- very rarely saying anything. Because it's mostly -- they're all men, and I was just -- me and maybe one other -- no, I think it was -- me and Abeer [Alharazi], who is actually the director of YAMA. We interviewed seven people -- five men and two women -- and she happened to be the most talented of all of them. And so YAMA actually has a woman as a director, leading 6,000 Yemeni American men. [laughter]

ALI: How is the gender dynamic? How have you found that?

ALMONTASER: The gender dynamic within the Yemeni community is really fascinating. There's -- there's this whole notion of men and women living in parallel, you know, worlds. There are women who, like, intermingle and who organize. The number is not that large. We're working to actually break that barrier. But like I've said to, like, the YAMA board, the only way we're going to break that barrier is when you all start bringing your wives and daughters to gatherings and events. So, like, our president is truly leading by example. His wife comes to all functions -- you know, formal functions that we go to, dinners, etc. And then the other guys are still -- you know, they're still -- we're -- we're pushing that.

ALI: Are you finding -- are you finding that the women in the community are -- just -- are they ready for this? Are they wanting this?

ALMONTASER: You know, I think --

ALI: Or is it just also -- like, they also have to get used to this as well.

ALMONTASER: They have to get used to it, too. There are some -- like I said to you, a small number -- that are. But then the majority are not. Like, right now, one of our board members -- he's like, "I have no issue, but I just can't get my wife to -- to come, because she's just not ready for that." And I'm like, "Okay, well, how are we going to get her

ready for that?" So it's really fascinating in that regard -- of, like, helping people understand -- like, we cannot live in parallel worlds. You know, our community needs both men and women. And so it's -- it's -- it remains a challenge, but we're breaking through it. I don't experience any, you know, issues. All of them -- all of the Yemeni American brothers are very polite, very professional, very respectful -- have a lot of admiration for me. It's just, now we need them to, like -- to be more -- you know, to understand the importance of us doing this. And I have faith that, you know, through YAMA, we're going to be able to do that -- to really get them to understand. Like, in order for us to be able to help the merchant -- the bodega owner -- we have to educate the whole family. And that's what we plan to do when we have our space in Bay Ridge -- to really be able to -- to do that and work collectively. There are a number of Yemeni American activists that are well received and respected, as well. But it's just a matter of helping break that mindset -- you know, to really help people see the significance and importance. And I mean, we've come a long way -- you know, where back in the day, when I was growing up, there were a lot of families that were not even letting their daughters go to school past sixth grade. You know, they didn't finish their education, they didn't -- you know, they just -- they got a sixth-grade education, got married, and had families. And since I actually pursued my education and started working, a lot of families have actually allowed their daughters to go and get an education. And the irony now is that we have actually more Yemeni American women educated than we do of men. And the reason for that is, the majority of the young men -- they just go through high school, and they've already been told -- as young as possible -- by their parents -- you know, their fathers -- you know, "When you finish high school, you're going to take over the family business. You're going to be taking care of this bodega store, and I'll take care of that bodega store." And that was it for them. They're like, "Oh, I'm set. I'm going to make money for life." But then the daughters of the bodega owners are all going to college and getting degrees. They're your nurses, they're your -- you know, your accountants. And it's just really fascinating -- that it's actually created, now, a huge divorce rate in the Yemeni community. Because we what we see is, a lot of the

young men are not compatible with the young women because of the education gap. And so one of the things that YAMA's going to work on is making sure that bodega owners and merchants value the education of their sons -- you know, to make sure that they go to school, get an education, and then they can also work in the family business. But they cannot just rely on a high school diploma and be in the family business.

ALI: Fascinating.

ALMONTASER: Yeah. Very fascinating.

ALI: Well, I wasn't expecting to ask that, but I'm glad I asked that question.

ALMONTASER: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ALI: Okay, so I think we're --

ALMONTASER: Yeah, we're good.

ALI: -- we're good.

ALMONTASER: Yeah.

ALI: All right.