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Oral History Interview with Fatima Shama
Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.39
Interview conducted by Liz Strong on September 17, 2018
at the Fresh Air Fund in Midtown, Manhattan

STRONG: All right, so today is Monday, the 17th of September, 2018. My name is Liz Strong. We’re here for the Muslims in Brooklyn project for the Brooklyn Historical Society. Fatima, why don’t you just introduce yourself, and then tell us when and where were you born, and we’ll go from there.

SHAMA: Okay. I’m Fatima Shama. And I was born in the Bronx in 1973 to immigrant parents.

STRONG: Tell me a little bit about who your parents were and about your childhood.

SHAMA: So my parents are -- my dad is Palestinian. Born in the West Bank of Palestine, in 1934. And -- in a town called Deir Dibwan. And migrated to Brazil in 1948 as a teenager. He’s was the youngest of -- he was the youngest male of five males -- four males and five sisters. But the youngest male. And his brothers were recruited into the Jordanian army to fight in the Arab-Israeli War. And his father said, “You have to go. And send us word when you arrive.” And like many he made his way to the ports of Beirut and boarded a boat, really having never left, as I -- as he retold those stories -- never left his town. And I think he’d probably gone to the big cities, you know, of Ramallah and Jerusalem, you know, maybe once or twice in his youth. And got on a boat and landed in Brazil, actually, as a teenager. And then while being in Brazil did a bunch of odd and end jobs. But basically, like, grew up formidably.

And in his twenties by the time he was in his twenties he was in Rio. And actually in a town adjacent to the town my mother is from. So my mother’s Brazilian, from Rio de Janeiro. And worked -- was a nursing student and -- or hoping to become a nurse, but worked in a bakery to help support her family. And my dad would come in and see her. And she knew he owned -- he and someone el-- some -- another Arab -- owned a
furniture store. So at this point he had enough in his journey from a teenager to being in his early twenties that he and someone else, probably several people, had sort of chipped in and bought a business. And they were selling furniture and, like, bedding and curtains and... And so my mother wanted to buy a -- or the story goes -- she wanted to buy a -- a buffet for her mom, like, to put her plates and cups and things. And my dad said, “I’ll give you a great discount if you have coffee with me.” And I think she says at first she thought it was terrible, and then of course she thought she needed a discount, and so had coffee with this “turco,” which is what the Arabs were called in Latin America, certainly in Brazil. Because of the Ottoman Empire, they were called Turks. But -- so she had coffee with the “turco.” And they then became friendly and I think a couple of years later -- I don’t know how long their courtship lasted -- but they married, and the opportunity to come to America was exciting and great, and they came to the Bronx. In 1962.

STRONG: And you were the youngest of five?

SHAMA: I’m the youngest of five.

STRONG: Okay.

SHAMA: Yeah.

STRONG: Tell me what that was like.

SHAMA: I think my parents first came to this country. They lived in an apartment in -- in -- in the South Bronx with many other families. They lived in a room, right, and shared an apartment. So by the time I was born we lived in a house in the Parkchester/Soundview neighborhood of the Bronx. I had two older brothers and two older sisters. We had a lot of family, my dad’s family. So we lived in this very interesting neighborhood with a bunch of Palestinian families from neighboring villages and our own village right around us, like, within a three- or four-block radius there were probably about eight to 10 families. Some of which were like us, like, the mother was not Arab and the dad was Palestinian. Some -- maybe two -- the mothers were actually Brazilian and the dad was Palestinian. But -- so I grew up hearing -- my dad spoke Portuguese fluently. So we spoke Portuguese predominantly in our home.
But because we had a lot of our Palestinian family around, I grew up really hearing Arabic and sort of being raised in that cultural reality.

My -- the schools in our neighborhood -- or the public schools in our neighborhood -- were not very good, and my mother, who's Catholic, and my dad, Muslim; my mother observant, my father not so much -- my -- we went to Catholic school. We were all baptized as children, all of my siblings and me, and had godparents in the traditional Catholic tradition. And we -- we went to the local Catholic school. As did all of my Arab cousins, right? Like, our -- all of my cousins went to the same school. We all went to Blessed Sacrament [School] in the Bronx. And -- I -- I don't know. I mean, I then went off to --

I would say that I was raised in a very culturally -- very culturally rich Palestinian community, in that, my father left in the late '40s. His sisters, I guess, left, and some of his cousins and brother left a little after. But whatever time period they left the region was the time period we were being raised, right? So if it was 1960s when they left, the traditions of the 1960s were the ones we were following, right? So we went to a lot of weddings and, you know, lots of engagements, and we had lots of big community dinners, and it was all about our village and our tribe. And, you know, it was -- I remember it fondly, but now that I think of -- I mean, I think it's pretty interesting how comfortably connected we all were to this thing that we didn't even know. Like, you know. I just knew of it as “back home,” and I -- you know, or in Arabic you say “Li-Blad”, right? Like, the -- “the country.” The -- you know. And-- and that’s what we knew. I’d never met my grandparents, my father’s parents. But knew my aunts and uncles and my cousins. And it was just very much a part of our lives. My entire Brazilian family was in Brazil. And so we would go for summers, but it really was this, like -- we’d go, we’d see our family, and we’d come back to this really richly intense, you know, Arab community -- Palestinian, very Palestinian community. And I’m not sure I thought it was -- although I thought it was a little weird [laughter] that we had this -- you know,
we went to Catholic school, and my mother was Catholic, and -- and probably when I was in the fifth grade, there -- the community sort of decided to run, like, a little Muslim school. And -- in somebody's basement. And I remember we would go to this Muslim school on Saturdays, and we -- my family -- my siblings and I -- went to church on Sundays. And I remember just being like, “Oh my God, this is way too much.” When high school came I dec-- I, like -- my two older siblings had gone to public high school, and I just followed their path. I went to a public high school. I was pretty delighted by, like, the ability to just be done with religion seven days a week.

STRONG: And it was in high school that you started dancing dabka?

SHAMA: Yeah. [laughter] So --

STRONG: Tell me that story.

SHAMA: So my oldest sister, who is nine years older than me, was a student at NYU [New York University] and decided to -- took a class herself at university and then was introduced to and exposed to -- I want to say -- it wasn't ADC, which then -- which was called the Arab American Anti- I guess it’s Discrimination Committee? But it was something like that. But it was really for college students, right? It was this sort of national network of Arab American college students who were -- who could, like, be a fellow for the summer and go on this trip to the West Bank and Jordan. And my big sister went on this trip. And ironically, as she was going on this trip -- I think she was 20 years old or -- 20. I think she was 20, 21. We -- and we had actually -- although we knew what village we were from, I think because most of the region was sort of confused, this sort of Palestinian-Jordanian thing, depending on the time, it was fortuitous to say, “Oh, like, we’re Jordanian. Oh, we’re Palestinian. Oh -- “ You know, just this -- there was just such confluence. You sort of -- it wasn’t always clear, but you knew what village you were from, right? So we’re from Deir Dibwan, and that’s what stuck, right? That’s where we were from. And you say what -- you know, what house you’re from, if you will, in Arabic. It’s “dar meen”, you know, “Dar” so-and-so, “Dar Ali” in our case. And so my sister went on this trip, and sort of this whole new world awakened, for her but for us, right? Me being the youngest, right, it awakened for her. And then she
came back, and, you know, was basically, this reality of, you know, Palestine under occupation and -- and this rich world that our father was a part of that we had never -- I mean, again, it was this -- we were in the Bronx, right? We had no idea what was happening in this place that we referred to as “Li-Blad,” right, to that -- you know, the homeland, to the country.

And so my sister connected with a bunch of other Palestinian Americans living in New York. And through that was this really net-- rich network in Brooklyn, in the Sunset Park neighborhood of Brooklyn. And so, you know, at, like, the ripe age of 12 and 13, I was traveling to Brooklyn regularly with my sister. Or we were going to demonstrations, or we were doing, you know, walks to raise money for something in Palestine, for refugee camps or for -- you know, that world started for me at a much younger beginning than it had for my sister.

And so -- so I -- at, like, 14 or at 15, I started to do dabka with a -- with -- there were two twin sisters. There were twin sisters -- two women, two sisters -- who lived, actually, in Westchester, whose mother was German and whose father was Palestinian, prominent - - also -- Palestinian family, who -- who were teaching dabka, who were -- who actually had danced ballet seriously for years, were dancers, but had also learned dabka. And they, along with brothers and -- I mean, it was very interesting, as I think about it now. I mean, these are all very prominent people. The Barghouti brothers were part of this nuance, and -- and it just was this outlet of mine at a young -- really, at a teenage -- a teenage years. And I was part of it. I was part of this dance ensemble called Al-Watan [phonetic] and sort of being trained. And at 16 -- I was 15 turning 16 -- I was part of a -- a delegation from the country called Palestinian American Youth. And it was Palestinian American teens from across the country who were going on this trip to Palestine. And I -- it was my first time going. I was -- I think it's, like, one of the -- [laughter] I don't know, it was, like, one of the most tur-- it was a big turning point in my life, right, to all of a sudden -- although I, again, was raised in this very richly -- to me it was culturally
very rich. But all of a sudden I was part of this community of Palestinian Americans from across the country -- Chicago and Houston and Dearborn and Ohio, Youngstown, Ohio -- where, you know, as far as I was concerned, you know, Palestinians I knew were in Brooklyn, in the Bronx, in Yonkers, and in New Jersey. Like, I was like, “What do you mean, there are Palestinians in Chicago?” Like, you know, you just -- you just don’t know until you know. So -- yeah. That was --

STRONG: So what was the relationship between the activism and the dance? Were these separate groups or just sort of everybody was kind of in the same networks?

SHAMA: We were all in the same network --

STRONG: That makes sense.

SHAMA: -- right? So -- so, you know, you would -- the dancing was -- was a form of organizing in some way, was a form of entertainment, but the entertainment was a -- you know, was regul-- I mean, it was also cultural, right? Like, this is deeply Palestinian dance, you know, folkloric dance. And so, you know, it was holding on to our roots and really passing on -- passing the baton on to making sure we all knew the music and knew the songs, and the songs were all nationalistic, and -- and the dancing was -- I mean, we performed regularly at, you know, fundraisers for, you know, the political reality, the nationalistic reality of, you know, “I’m fighting for Palestine.”

And so -- and -- and I did that all through high school, and while I was in college, actually. Probably through my junior year in college. It might have been my last performance, was when I was a junior. And it was actually when the -- the Brooklyn Museum hosted an Arab arts festival. I think Al-Watan came back together to perform for this Maharajan Al-Fan. And that might have -- that -- that certainly was my last performance. But, you know, we ended up creating, like, two dabka ensembles because there was the, like, more senior group, and then there was a second group, and -- so -- and we traveled across the region. Like, we traveled [laughter] a lot to do these performances -- at conferences, at -- at -- you know, it was -- it was -- but it was very, very -- it was very nationalistic. I think it was all -- but it very much created -- although --

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- and it was very much, like, a focus on our identity as Palestinian Americans, as Palestinians, as you know, through this lens on the arts. Or this artistic form.

STRONG: Tell me a little bit about Sunset Park at that time, when you were sort of away from your family in this far-off borough.

SHAMA: Yeah!

STRONG: What are your memories of it?

SHAMA: I mean, I had a lot of my own family who lived in Brooklyn, although they weren't part of this. I mean, my sister, my big sister, my -- my -- you know, there were three girls. We were always together. And so -- and I grew up in a very Latino community in the Bronx. And so -- in the Sunset Park neighborhood it was, like, Palestinians and Puerto Ricans, and in my [laughter] neighborhood in the Bronx it was Palestinians and Puerto Ricans. And so it didn't seem so unusual. Like, we were just in a different part of the city. We were very much this, you know -- I mean, sometimes you couldn't tell who was the Palestinian and who was a Puerto Rican, right? Like, we sounded a lot like one another. And I certainly grew up speaking Spanish because of my family's reality and -- and community. You know, my parents' friends were very much our -- our network of neighbors and -- many of whom were, you know, Puerto Rican or Latino and -- so -- and my parents obviously spoke Portuguese all the time. So to me, I didn't think much of it. I mean, I sort of -- I don't know. I mean, it was just -- I mean, there were -- this was definitely, though, a politically connected community, versus the Palestinian community that I was regularly in touch with in the Bronx was very much cultural.

STRONG: Oh, interesting.

SHAMA: And -- and -- and, you know, I wouldn't say that they weren't political, but that wasn't the lens that I was necessarily attuned to. I will say very thoughtfully that the women I saw in Brooklyn, right, whether it was through my sister or these -- the Rimawi sisters or several of the other women who were organizing and leading -- these were extraordinary women who were all either college students or graduate students or PhD candidates. And -- and I didn't see that in my community in the Bronx. Many of the women were housewives, many of whom got married very young. You know -- so -- so
the reality for me was my Brooklyn connection was my aspiration, right? Like, I wanted to grow up and be like those women, right? Like, I was gonna go to college, and I -- and I knew it was possible. Whereas in my Palestinian neighborhood in the Bronx, the women were not those women. They were women who were -- you know, my cousins and I were being raised to get married and to get a good marriage. And my network in Brooklyn was this community of extraordinary Palestinian American woman who really became role models for what my opportunities could be. Even as a Palestinian woman, right, or a Palestinian American woman. Like, whatever I heard growing up was really being redefined by these extraordinary women.

STRONG: So when you did go to college, was that a disruption of expectations in your family, that you were choosing education and a professional career over the track of getting married?

SHAMA: Not to my immediate family.

STRONG: Got it.

SHAMA: The other thing I will say about my community in Brooklyn was it wasn’t religion, right? It was definitely political, nationalistic Palestine, right? There wasn’t a conversation about were you Muslim or Christian -- in fact, I’d never heard that kind of stuff, right? Even in my community in -- in the Bronx -- like, we -- we were Palestinian. Like, I guess there was a normal assumption we were all Muslim, but there was never this, like, “Are you Christian? Are you Muslim?” kind of thing. Ever. I -- I mean, I -- I heard that in college. I had never heard someone ask me -- actually, I heard it in college but more older, not my freshman or sophomore year. Like, there was just never -- when you were -- when you were Palestinian or when you said you were Arab, nobody -- I mean, because my name, now that -- you know, such a sort of dead giveaway in its own right -- but nobody ever asked that question. So it’s interesting to me. But in my -- so I go -- in my -- in my home, my father and mother -- I mean, I had a sister who was already at university and -- you know, so I was the third one. So I was definitely going to college. It was a matter of where. And the fact that I went away to college definitely was a bit of a first. The idea was I would stay local, or most of the women in my
community that did go to college went locally. My sister went to NYU. My other sister went to City College [of New York]. Like, it just -- you go local. You don't go sleep away at college, right? But I did. And so that was a bit of a -- it rocked the boat a bit. Not to my father, per se, but to our community, it was a little like what -- you know, “We're losing our girls, if this is the way it starts.” But I went away to college and came home regularly.

But also -- you know, it was a place for me where I start-- I studied Arabic at university, and so I found a natural community, obviously, of people interested in Arabic. And in some reality that was a political lens. I also very early on my college career started doing Arab-Jewish dialogue, somehow. I don't even know how that started. But I was, like, very eager to be part of a -- a conversation. And I took a class that -- about religion, the society of religion -- sociology of religion -- that I thought, “Okay, well, I mean, my dad's Muslim.”

And my dad, as we got older, got more observant as a Muslim. And my mother, who's amazing and identifies very comfortably as Catholic; my father, who was also -- who's passed on -- also amazing, now that I'm grown up and I realize how amazing people are. My father would drive my mother to church. Like, you know, my mother went to church every Sunday. My dad would make sure, you know, that she was there and that she could go. And -- and my mother fasted. Ramadan, right? My dad didn't fast, and my mother did, right? 'Cause it was so important to her that she was showing us something that was so important to him. And to our culture and community. So I grew up in this -- what I think the world [laughter] could use more of, in this, like, sort of, you know, pluralistic, idealistic, extraordinary mélange of language and flavors and traditions that all sort of worked, right? Like, I -- I didn’t think -- I didn’t think it was weird until someone pointed it out to me, and I still didn’t think it was so weird, right? Now I definitely know it wasn’t weird. I think it was perfect.
So I go to college, and I end up taking this sociology of religion class in my -- amid my pre-med requisites. And the professor basically recognizes my name and says, you know, “Salaam alaikum.” And I think, “Oh my God, why does this man -- what is -- you know, what’s happening right now?” And he created a semester focused on Abrahamic traditions. And what I didn’t know about Islam on that first day I was sure to learn, because, you know, in a seminar of less than 30 students, I needed to know, right? It wasn’t like I was in a lecture hall of 400 where nobody was gonna ask me a question. This man was gonna ask me a lot of questions. And expected me to know it. And I didn’t want [laughter] to let him down. So I started to read voraciously. And in that reading sort of learned this extraordinary reality of a tradition that I -- I don’t know. I fell in love. I fell in love with Islam.

STRONG: What drew you in? What about it?

SHAMA: Women! Right? So I happened to find, of course, writings by Fatema Mernissi, a Moroccan scholar of Islam who really wrote some very extraordinary texts on, you know, the role of women in Muslim society and the role of Islam and sort of highlighting the role of women in the Prophet’s reality. His wife Khadijah [bint Khuwaylid] and how she in fact was, you know, his boss and the breadwinner and how she was his confidante and helped him for -- you know, and so, raised in a community -- right, so first I had seen what powerful women look like in my Brooklyn community. And then I knew what subs-- what -- respectfully to my father’s family -- subservient women looked like in this cultural landscape. And I really remember my aunt saying -- who’s passed away also -- saying -- [laughter] saying, “It’s against our religion to go to college.” And I remember feeling indignant. I remember reading in my -- and part of this was, like, almost like I was gonna come home and prove everybody wrong, right? Like, whatever they were saying to me about our religion, I was just so determined to prove them all wrong. And -- and there was -- there was one thing that I read about the importance of women in particular being well educated, because they would pass on their knowledge to their children. And so in a home, the power of a woman being well educated was so important, because that was the future of your children. And I
remember coming home for a weekend and waiting for my aunt to come over and me feeling like, “Now I’m gonna show you.” And I remember her looking at my dad, being like, “I told you this was a bad idea. Like, why did you send her away? Like, when they’re here you can control them. Now she’s out of your hands and, like, you can ha-- you have no control over what’s happening.”

But I -- I mean, I just -- I learned. I just learned about the richness of -- of our tradition and the richness of women, and -- and, you know, and -- you know, I think folks said, “Well, like, it’s who you read.” And that’s possibly true. But that’s who I also learned about Islam, right? I -- I was raised in a very Catholic-dominant community. And so I knew about Catholicism. And, you know, so someone would say, “Well, like, they force you to wear hijab.” I’m like, “Well, actually, they don’t force you to wear hijab. It’s your choice, A; and B, if you look at all the nuns, they’re all wearing habits. So, like, I don’t know why you’re gonna pick on this tradition when there is choice, and we are universally all followers of God, and in fact you don’t have to give up your life to, you know, commit to -- you know, to -- to sort of be a disciple, right? In other words, I can live my life, get married, do all that I need to, and still be a believer and actually choose to live my life.” Like, so -- for me, I sort of had these moments of being able to compare, but also -- also the clarity with which -- the clarity with which Islam is -- is sort of outlines a fulfillment of life, right? So everything from, you know, the equity in a relationship to this reality of -- of -- of justice and the sort of social justice lens. You know, and -- and for me I would regularly analogize my two realities, right, these -- and, you know -- and learning that my father as a Muslim who chose to marry a believer, you know, one of the traditions, like, hadn’t done something wrong. But I think growing up I sort of saw that we were the foreigners’ daughters. And, you know, what was so -- like, why? And so to me it gave a real -- it helped define a huge reality of what I had witnessed and experienced and wanted, actually, for myself.
And so I don’t think my parents had a clue of what was happening to me in school. But I started to observe. I started to fast. And I started to pray. And -- and so -- I never -- I maintained a pre-med reality, I think, through my sophomore year, but then I became a sociology major. Which disappointed my dad greatly, but --

STRONG: Oh, no! [Laughter]

SHAMA: -- it all started with that sociology of religion class. And I’m sure the professor has no idea, [laughter] but -- if he’s still alive. But -- anyway.

STRONG: Had you identified as Catholic before, or did you just go to Catholic school?

SHAMA: I think we did because it was -- you know, we were baptized and I had, you know, done my Holy Communion and confirmation. And so it was just my reality. And again, it wasn’t anything that we talked so much about. But it was a reality for us. What’s really interesting, as I think back -- my mother would say -- every day my parents did this. And I -- at some point we realized that -- my siblings and I, I think, must have talked about it -- but my mother would say all the time, you know, “Durma con Deus”. When we’d kiss her good night, you know, she’d say, “Durma con Deus,” which is “Sleep with God,” right? And then my father [laughter] would say ”Allah Maeak” which is “God be with you.” And they would say -- you know, when we’d leave the house -- when we’d leave the house my mother would say “Vai con Deus”, right? “Go with God.” And my dad, you know, would say, “Allah Maeak,” right? Like, all the time. And I remember joking. I was, like, I don’t know -- I was a teenager and so obnoxious -- but 17 or 18. And I wanted my dad to say, “I love you.” And I was like, “Daddy, say ‘I love you.’” And he would -- you know, and he kept saying ”Allah Maeak.” And I was like, “No, no, no, you have to say ‘I love you.’” And he was like, “I love you. Allah Maeak.” And I was like, “Why do you have to always say that?” Of course now I recognize it was so much more powerful when they were combined versus my indignant teenage behavior.

But -- but they always -- this re-- this reaffirmation of God from their tongues, right, both in their own linguistic realities, was so much a part of our upbringing, right? My siblings and I talk about this so much, actually, is that this presence of God being with
us in -- in -- you know, my parents didn't make a distinction, right? You know, whether it was Deus or Allah, right? Like, they didn't -- so I didn't ever think there was a distinction. And so I think now -- I don't know. I mean, it just -- I -- I don't know what I identified a-- I mean, I did go to church. After I came back from my -- when I was 16 years old, and I came back from my first trip, from Palestine, I went to church, 'cause my mother said, "You have to go and pray and be thankful that you are back safe."

Now, when I -- when I went on this trip and was a teenager, I stayed with a Palestinian Christian family in Jerusalem before I joined the entire crew. And I went to church with them and heard church in Arabic. And I remember being like, "Oh my God. This is so interesting." And with our group we met both Palestinian Christians and Palestinian Muslims and went to the Dome of the Rock and just -- so for me I think at 16 I was all of a sudden aware of being part of this extraordinarily rich community of people that could not be defined as one thing, right? With such extraordinarily historical roots and rich traditions and amazingly generous spirit. And -- and it -- and it was the intifada, right, the -- you know, the -- it was underway. And I -- you know, I remember being, you know, this American teenager amid all of this, knowing -- or learning -- the role that the US had played in all of this. Being stopped by Israeli soldiers and, you know, being yelled at or being spat at or our passports being taken away because of who we were, not because we had American passports, right? We were, like -- I remember this young woman saying to me -- an Israeli soldier saying to me in her very perfectly Brooklyn accent, like, "You’re in my country now.” And I was like, “Your country? Like, aren’t you from Brooklyn? Like, are you kidding me?” So, you know, all of those things forming my opinion.

And so I went to church, as my mother told me I had to, to light a candle and be thankful. And I said to the priest, “Why don’t we ever, like, say -- when it’s the time for ‘Lord, hear our prayer,’ like, why don’t we ever say, like, ‘We pray for peace in Palestine, or peace in the Middle East’?” And he, like, yelled at me -- Father O’Shaughnessy
[phonetic] yelled at me and said, like, “Fatima, we don’t bring religion -- we don’t -- we don’t bring politics into religion. We don’t bring politics into the church.” And I was like, “I’m not telling you to bring in politics. I’m just saying, why aren’t you asking for peace? Like, we ask for people who are sick. Like, these people are under siege. Like, why don’t we ever say that? Like, I met Palestinian Christians. Like, why wouldn’t you -- you know, I went to the [Church of the] Holy Sepulchre. It’s the ch-- “You know, like, I remember, like, wanting to debate Father O’Shaughnessy. And he just -- and I looked at my mom, and I said, “I will never come back here again.” And so I didn’t. I didn’t go back to church after that day. And she, to her credit, didn’t try to push me too either.

But -- so I don’t know if one would say -- although there were -- people might have said, “Oh, you converted.” I don’t think I ever converted. I just think I found this other side of me and decided to pursue it. And in my home, my siblings and I all did something differently. My oldest brother was married in the church. And my oldest sister, you know, followed a Muslim tradition. My -- you know, so we all sort of did something different. But again, I think we were surrounded by this gorgeous affirmation of God and the presence of God and faith. And so I don’t know if my parents necessarily cared if we picked one tradition over the other, just in this realization that we needed to make sure that we were centered on this -- and I feel like they said that to us, actually. As I got older and decided to, like, ask more questions, I think they were, like, “We don’t want you to pick and fight. Like, we wanted you to know that this was important, that you had values you were responsible to, that there was a higher being you should be thankful to.”

STRONG: Thank you. That’s beautiful.

SHAMA: Yeah.

STRONG: Take us through college a little bit. Is this also the time that you found your way to Arab American Family Support Center?

SHAMA: Yeah. So -- [laughter] so -- so I’m studying Arabic. I go to -- I go back to Palestine, actually, the summer of my freshman to sophomore year. And I study at
Birzeit University. I study Arabic and a bunch of other classes. I’m living at Birzeit. Loving life as a 19-year-old. And also, again, having this moment of being, like, “Okay. It’s 1992 here, and everybody is so modern and so extraordinary, and look at all of these women. And back in the Bronx, it’s still 1970. Right? Like, what is going on?” And I remember, [laughter] like, saying to my dad, like, “You know, Baba [dad], everybody else has moved ahead except us. Like, even the people in Deir Dibwan are living a much more progressive life than we are in the Bronx.” And -- you know, and he’d be like, “Okay, stop it right now.”

But I was deeply connected to my identity and my community. And deci-- so -- so that was the summer of 1992. The summer of ’93 I had the opportunity to be an intern at UNICEF [United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund], and was working in their maternal and child health division. And all of a sudden was exposed to, you know, the public health reality or social workers, and I thought, “Oh my God, I love this! Like, this is really what I want to be when I grow up. I don’t-- I’m not gonna be a doctor.” I’d already decided that. “But I want to do this.” And as I thought about what do I do my junior year, I -- I guess between the -- between my sophomore and junior years -- that was entering my junior year -- I had gone to some career panel. And Emira Habiby Browne was on this panel, talking about being a social worker and working -- and starting this Arab American Family Support Center and working for her community. And I remember going up to her after, introducing myself, and she basically -- I think, if I’m -- like, invited me to go be an intern. Or -- or, you know, like, write her. And I did, and I went the summer of my junior year. You know, 19-- the summer of ’94, I was an intern at the Arab American Family Support Center. And at that point, you know, I was sort of like, “I’m gonna go get an MSW/MPH [Masters of Social Work/Masters of Public Health].” Like, I was pretty clear. I’m sort of a total planner.
And -- and I loved it. I worked in Brook-- I was back in Brooklyn. And was traveling from the Bronx to Brooklyn every day. The Arab American Family Support Center didn't even have a building. We were working out of a church on Pacific Avenue and Fourth -- on Pacific Street and Fourth Avenue. And -- and we were doing predominantly child welfare work. I was working with a gentleman who was part of that dabka ensemble. He was a social worker now and on the staff, so I was sort of reconnected to these, you know, politically amazing Palestinian leaders who were, you know, my exposure. And it -- it was just -- it was a really powerful summer that really helped define what I wanted to do. I finished my senior year and was thinking about grad school and returned -- graduated in '95 and returned to work at the Arab American Family Support Center. And returned to work for Amira. And at that point we had one social worker, a receptionist, and Amira and me. [laughter] And we had some ESL [English as a Second Language] teachers and -- you know. So we had a little storefront, now down the street, on Fourth Avenue still, in -- we were off of St. Mark's Place and Fourth Avenue in the -- in Brooklyn. But I -- I worked there for two years. And it was extraordinarily formidable in my professional development.

STRONG: And you met a couple of important mentors while you were there, right?

SHAMA: Yeah. Yeah. So the receptionist is a woman named Sakiba Amustafa [phonetic], also Palestinian. And Sakiba was, like, the mother of the office. She had four kids herself, also from a neighboring village. Observant Muslim woman. She had a daughter who I think she and I are the same age. And so -- but Sakiba was, like -- literally -- like, she was -- I mean, she could've easily been my aunt, in full disclosure, right? And very much was a part of my reality, of -- you know, she would go to the mosque down the street, and I would go with her, and -- I mean, she taught me so much. She was as celebratory of my, like, moth-- I mean, she herself had family members who had also married Brazilian women or, like -- she -- she just -- again, it was this very real Palestinian narrative of people who had lived in Latin American or -- and -- so it was funny. She was a very important part of my sanity and my development,
both as a believer, in a pluralistic sense, and in my, like, growth, actually, you know, as a sort of young woman.

STRONG: Tell me something you learned from her that you still use or rely on today.

SHAMA: Oh, my God. Probably some recipes. [laughter] Sakiba taught me a lot about religion, actually. And modeling. She was a role model. Community to commitment -- commitment to community. Kindness. I mean, so much. Really. So much.

STRONG: Give me an example of what she taught you about religion.

SHAMA: So Sakiba taught me several prayers to say when you were, like, nervous or, you know, wanted God to bestow you with certain things. She taught me several things to say when it’s Ramadan and you’re fasting and you break your fast. They’re called duas. So she -- she just taught me -- and I -- actually, it’s so funny. She gave me this little prayerbook that had the -- that has the third of the Qur’an. I still have it. With all my, like, little notes that -- Sakiba would say, like, “This is how you read it this way, and this is what it means.” I literally still have it.

STRONG: That’s really beautiful.

SHAMA: It’s really special.

STRONG: So --

SHAMA: It’s all, like, taped up in many ways. [laughter] I mean, she would crack up if she knew it. But -- I should tell her.

STRONG: Keep it forever.

SHAMA: Yeah.

STRONG: So how long were you at Arab American Family Support Center? What were some of the important roles you took on there?

SHAMA: So I was there for two years. And I -- you know, in a small, community-based organization with five -- with less than five employees -- or six, I think. We grew -- we grew extraordinarily while I was there, which is amazing -- you know, we were -- we were largely funded to do child welfare work. But with that child welfare work comes a reality of a number of other things. And once you start serving the community, their needs really grow. And so we were doing English-language classes. We started to do
citizenship classes. We started to learn that a lot of the child welfare realities unfortunately included issues around domestic violence. We started to hear the voices of our young people.

And -- and as someone who lived in this bridge, right -- we were hyphenated, right, so we were, like -- I mean, again, this reality of, like, our -- our parents always wanted us to be Palestinian or Arab, right, from, like, the motherland. And we were Americans, right? So as kids we were, like -- we were hyphenated. But there’s a bridge. There’s a total bridge. And I understood that deeply well, probably of all of the staff, partly because that was my reality. And so young kids would come in, and they’d start saying, you know, in family counseling sessions, “This is what’s happening, this is what’s happening,” and I would say, like, “Yeah, of course that’s what’s happening. Like, that’s our life.”

And so -- so it became everything from -- so my title, you know, was, like -- first it was executive assistant. But then I started to, you know, help write the stories and the PR and join -- you know, represent the organization at meetings of advocacy groups, and so a group that I continue to work very closely with and started my work with was the New York Immigration Coalition, right? So, you know, 1995 I was going to the New York Immigration Coalition’s meetings, and my first proposal that I wrote at the age of 22 was to the New York Women’s Foundation for, you know, an Arab young youth -- you know, youth voice proposal around girls, and was funded for $75,000. It was a two-year proposal, funded for 20 -- $75,000, right? So these were, like, really big moments in my professional -- I had no idea, right? I didn’t even know this entire world existed. But I knew -- I was now in it, and loved it -- and was doing it, for my community, for people who were very much like my family.

And -- you know, and -- and the domestic violence work was really painful. Because a lot of it was, agai-- was sort of -- the -- the language that was used or that we kept
hearing from women was this was happening because it’s okay, the religion, like, this is what has to happen. And I remember all of a sudden going back to this, like, “No no, no no, that’s not in our religion. That’s not in our religion.” And actually, that’s something I will also credit Sakiba to, because as a woman who was observant, who was so thoughtful in her language and was able to -- with our own members of the community -- you know, she wore hijab. And she could say, like, “No no no, no, that’s not actually what the text says.” You know, and give them confidence and -- and be an advocate and -- and so, you know, I decided I needed to continue to do this work.

And at that point I had decided maybe -- and I had heard from others, you know, like, “Are you gonna go to law school? Like, you would be a great lawyer.” And -- so -- so instead of getting an MSW/MPH I went to law school. And so I left the Arab American Family Support Center in 1998 and went to law school. Ninety-seven, actually. That was my last summer. I started law school in September of 1997.

STRONG: A few more questions before we move on.

SHAMA: Yeah.

STRONG: I’m very interested in a couple of things you said. What kind of response or support would you be able to implement for domestic violence? ‘Cause in my head it’s sort of a balance between law enforcement solutions, community solutions, in-home counseling. What -- what was the response that the organization took? How did they help people?

SHAMA: So I think that the response that the organization took was really focused on community --

STRONG: Okay.

SHAMA: -- and on religious leaders, right? And so I think it was very much helping support the women, trying to do some counseling, and really reaching out to religious leaders to help with their messaging. I will say that we had some members of the community -- women -- some of our clients, we helped move them into shelter because they were in such complicated circumstances. And I remember being a part of the team that helped
do that -- and ‘til today remember and know those organizations that have come to
work with them. You know, so -- so -- you know, I -- it’s pretty interesting to think about
being 22 in Brooklyn at this organization. The names of organizations we were
regularly talking to or leaders that we were regularly -- that I was listening to, and then,
you know, many years later I came to work with them again in different -- different
chapters of my journey. But around domestic violence the time I was there was much
more focused on counseling and organizing with faith leaders. I think the organization
did a ton of work -- still does -- a ton of work around a different reality. But then that’s
what it was really focused on.

And I remember -- you know, many -- unfortunately many of the women came to us and
sort of, you know, clouded the justification of what was happening. And, you know,
coming from our community, you -- and fortunately, it wasn’t something -- I thankfully
never saw it in my home, right? My parents had a very different relationship. But we
knew -- like, we knew that it was happening in other people’s homes. I -- you know, I -- I
-- I know that there were families that -- and I know the role my father played, actually,
in interceding and talking about, like, “That’s not what we do, and that’s not --” You
know, my father was -- my father was an elder, right, in our community, and was
regarded for that. And -- so it wasn’t unusual for me to hear someone say -- or to even
say, like, “I have these man-- I have this -- these children, what am I supposed to do,
and my family’s expectations? Like, I just have to tolerate this.” Kind of thing.

So I think the organization was at a -- you know, we were just starting. So it was at a -- a
very critical moment to figure out what this path would look like. And I think during
my time the path was very much counseling and advocacy, you know, through one
avenue. Resource development -- child welfare was a big one, right? You know, the
reality that if this violence in the home didn’t stop, children would be taken away from
you, and making sure faith leaders understood, like, it’s not that the government wants
to take those kids away. Kids are being exposed or being victimized in this
circumstances. So I think there was a lot of education and a lot of dialogue that was happening. I think the probably deeper work happened later.

STRONG: I’m so interested in this, not just from a domestic violence perspective but mental health --

SHAMA: Yeah.

STRONG: -- how religious leaders stepped into that role. ‘Cause they aren’t exactly service providers, right? They’re more like teachers and counselors? And how did working with them go?

SHAMA: So I -- I would say I don’t know if we were amazingly successful with every single one, but I do think that we were successful over time. And I’m also gonna say that, you know, at that stage, right, I don’t know how successful we were. I would say that as I think about it and reflect on it now, I’ve had many years under my belt where we’ve continued to have this dialogue. I think the evolution of the dialogue has really enhanced the role of religious leaders. In just all things human service, right? And so -- and I then understood the power of the religious leader; now understand -- and value -- I will say now I think religious leaders are incredibly important partners in all of our service delivery realities. I’m a huge believer in that. And it might start -- it actually may be very well because of -- of my time at the Arab American Family Support Center. Like, I don’t know if every -- and I think Sakiba was hugely influential in that reality, right? She found -- she knew who the right leaders were and engaged them, right -- community leaders -- and then engaged them to help us talk to faith leaders. And -- and they were, you know, leaders in the -- in the Muslim community.

The other thing I remember as -- in my time at the Arab American Family Support Center was once again this -- this reality that Arabs were a people not defined by our faith, right? So we had people coming to us who were Christian, and we had people coming to us who were Jewish, and people who were coming to us who were Muslim. But they were all Arabs, and they all spoke Arabic, and we all had this thing in common. But we were not -- like, once you walked through the door, that’s what defined
us as a community. It wasn’t our faith. And, you know, yet again I had this moment of being like, “We’re so much richer,” right? “We’re such a rich people.” And feeling really proud of that.

STRONG: Did you say you also did the first youth conference?

SHAMA: I did. Yeah.

STRONG: Tell me about that.

SHAMA: So -- so at some point in all of our work, part of this was, like, who as young people we had exposure to. And because I had at this point -- because of my dancing or my activism had met a lot of other Arab American young professionals, I knew that we had all this thing in common of being bridgers, right? And we didn’t all necessarily know. Some of us had exposure to what we could be when we grew up. But some of us didn’t. Most of us didn’t. And -- and so basically I used my friends, and -- and knowing that one of the challenges in our community were that our kids didn’t see -- they, like me, right -- when I was in the Bronx I had exposure to what I thought was going to be a life of being a wife, right? And -- but had had -- I had this chance to see something else. So that’s what I heard, right? I heard all this, like, “I don’t want to go-- I don’t want to be -- I don’t want an arranged marriage. I don’t want this.” And even for our kids, you know, the boys were saying things like, “I don’t want to own a grocery store. I don’t want to work in a grocery store.” Because that was our exposure.

And so -- so I went and found -- you know, I sort of -- literally -- you know, called my friend who was a fashion designer or a journalist or a medical student or, you know, someone who -- he was a -- you know, a dancer and a musician. And the man who’s marri-- who I’m married to today, who was in IT. And, you know, like all of these folks who, like, did these little classroom conversations and then were on a panel. And we had a keynote speaker -- and Assemblyman Felix [W.] Ortiz, who’s still assemblyman, funded it. We did it in Sunset Park, in a junior high school in Sunset Park. He came. He was our keynote speaker. So it was -- you know, it was a first Arab American youth
conference. It was, like, nineteen ninety -- six? Yeah. Maybe ’97? Like, the spring of 1997? Yeah. Yeah.

STRONG: And because you slipped it in: how did you meet your husband?

SHAMA: My husband and I were introduced by our sisters, who were part of this sort of Arab American college students/young professionals. And my -- my sister and his sister were part of this sort of circle -- actually, of the ADC, the Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee. And my sister met him. And I love to dance, and he loves to dance. And neither one of us drink, and -- you know, and -- I'm not -- she met him, and his sister met me, and I think everyone agreed that perhaps he and I should meet. And we did. And many, many years later we got married. But we met -- we met when I was an intern at the Arab American Family Support Center, when I was a junior in college. So.

STRONG: We'll have to come back to that story.

SHAMA: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

STRONG: And, you know, just for time, I'm afraid we have to race ahead through law school.

SHAMA: Yeah.

STRONG: But you didn't stay there.

SHAMA: No, I started. And realized that I knew that I was gonna end up doing work, like, for the Legal Aid Society or -- you know, I was going to be a public interest lawyer. That's what I wanted to be. I remember really disliking my classmates and thinking, like, “Are you kidding me? Like, these are the people who grow up to be the, in some ways, decision-makers or, you know, advocates?” And -- and -- and law school loans. You know, so, like -- you know, I was gonna walk out of law school with over $90,000 in debt. And I just had a -- I just had a moment of -- I probably got cold feet is what I had sort of after being there. But I just was like, “I -- I'm not sure I want to be this when I grow up. Like, I -- I -- I didn't think it was this.” And I had great professors, and the dean of the school, you know, was so supportive and said, “Why don't you just take a break and, like, think about this. Because,” she says, “you know, like, I'm the dean of a school, and I -- but I too didn't want to be a lawyer. Like, there's a reason I'm not a lawyer, and
I’m here. Because many of us have this awakening a little too late. And maybe you should think about this.”

And so I -- you know, I -- I sort of took a leave of absence. My parents were so upset with me. I was totally humiliated that I, you know, sort of needed this break. But I couldn’t do it. Like, I just was like, “I can’t sign another $32,000 check.” Right? Like, “I can’t do this loan.” Like, “I’m going to --” And I knew that I was gonna go work. You know, my dream was to work for the Legal Aid Society, and I was gonna make, you know, $34,000 a year, and I was like, “How am I gonna do that?” Right? So I had this total moment of, like, panic. I’m a planner. I’m a total planner. I’m always planning. And I wasn’t sure how I was gonna do it. And so I took a leave. And -- but I never went back. But my journey of working with and for communities sort of continued. I did leave and go to Miami for a bit of a break to join my parents as they were figuring out retirement. And so --

STRONG: Aha.

SHAMA: -- I went to sunny Florida for six months and did, you know, consulting for a private bank.

STRONG: And then you found your way back into community work through RAINBO [Research, Action and Information Network for the Bodily Integrity of Women]? Is that right?

SHAMA: Yeah, so I came back to New York to work with a woman who I had met at the Arab American Family Support Center who was a social worker who was now working -- who was from Sudan -- who was now working for this -- for this group Rainbow, who was led by Nahid Toubia, a very famous Sudanese doctor -- gynecologist -- who was focusing on female circumcision. And the reality of, again, what’s happening in our African communities around -- and Egyptian communities -- around female circumcision. And the definition that people were using around -- through religion. And so I came back to New York and worked for Rainbow. They were a UN NGO [United Nations Non-Governmental Organizations]. And -- and I was really enamored by the work. Again,
sort of like -- you know, focused on this public health dialogue: women -- right, so for me, these themes keep coming up, right? So women and girls and public health and sort of human dignity and human reality and social justice sort of, you know, coming back to life again.

But I will say that I did have a moment in that job where I was still back in New York really trying to find my footing, figuring out, like, do I go back to law school? Do I not? Do I transfer to a New York school? My parents are wondering when am I gonna get married. You know, when am I gonna get -- you know, sort of having my own, like, “When am I gonna get married?” moment. And realizing that I was working on issues affecting international communities, primarily in West Africa, North Africa, and in Egypt. And I knew that those same challenges of the rights of women, the sort of reproductive rights, the sort of social rights, were not things that were unique, right? Like, all of a sudden I had that moment of, like, “Oh my God, it’s --“ whatever. It was 1999 and our communities in New York are living still in 1970, right? And so that moment of being like, but these are the same issues we have here in New York City. And do I address it on an international stage? Do I address it on a local stage? What role do I play? I'm a born-and-raised New Yorker. You know. I care about my community here that's -- how do we change life in our communities here? Like, we're bridgers. Isn't that my responsibility?

And so I -- I realized I didn't want to work on an international development agenda. I really wanted to work on the local agenda, back with our communities. And had the opportunity to go work for a group in the Bronx called WHEDco, Women's Housing and Economic Development. So I -- so I stepped out of the public health space and did economic development. Again -- but I -- but I sort of took it to the, like, I want to work for my community, right? Like, “I'm from the Bronx; I'm gonna do this all --“ you know. And so -- so I went to WHEDco.
STRONG: And is that where you were when you witnessed September 11th and moved to Muslims Against Terrorism?

SHAMA: Yeah. So I was at -- I was at WHEDco, working for WHEDco, when 9/11 happened.

And, in fact, I was helping run a job training program, a workforce development program, predominantly with women, from -- in the culinary arts. And I was on that morning helping our team do a catering for the Starr Foundation in Lower Manhattan. And we had just dropped off breakfast, set it all up for a board meeting. And we got in our van, myself and three of the workers and the driver, and we were on the Major Deegan [Expressway], driving, and the news broke. And we could turn and look towards -- and see the city and see the smoke. And -- you know, and it's interesting, because I remember being [laughter] in that car and thinking, "Please don't let it be Muslims, please don't let it be Muslims, please don't let it be Muslims." And getting to our office and all of us being dumbstruck and -- and like -- like, "What is happening right now?" And scared, and -- and I actually got married -- I had gotten married that summer. So this is the summer of 2011. So I got married at the end of July, living now in the city, with --

STRONG: Two thousand one. Sorry.


STRONG: You said 2011.

SHAMA: Yeah, yeah. Two thousand one. Thank you. Two thousand one. My husband is working for Credit Suisse First Boston -- although it wasn't First Boston then; it was Credit Suisse -- and -- in -- down on Twenty-Third Street. I was all the way in the Bronx. And we couldn't communicate with each other. And although I know he wasn't in Lower Manhattan, we just couldn't communicate with each other. He was able to walk to our apartment, and I went to Westchester, to my mother, who was living ba-- my parents -- my dad had passed away, actually, the year before. My mother -- I was living with my mom before I had gotten married, so I went back to her home. But I remember it was one of those moments that, again -- then of course all the stories came out.
And one of the things that was most crazy for me was I had just gotten married; I was in law school; I maintained a bunch of my friends from law school. And there was an email that had gone out by one of my dear friends, who was at my wedding. And she wrote some really vile stuff about Muslims. And I hit “Reply” just to her and said, like, “You know you’re talking about me.” And she -- you know, I was like, “I'm -- I'm offended; I'm outraged. Like, you -- like, are you kidding? Like, what -- at this moment, this is what you have to say?” And she responded to me in email saying, “No, no, no, Fatima. You’re different.” And I wrote back, and I said, “No, I am Muslim. The people who flew those planes are the different ones. Don’t confuse the two.” And that was, I would say -- and I’d never talked about religion much. But it was one of those moments where I realized, like, “I don't think people know who we are.” Right?

And -- and I must have gotten -- I got an email from a friend -- or there were so many emails going around that one of my activism emails, either mine or my husband’s, said something about this, like, “We're organizing around this, Muslims Against Terrorism.” You know, “If you're interested, you know, as American Muslims, like, we have to take back our name.” Kind of thing. And we just showed up at a meeting at Columbia [University]. Like, it was -- I don't know, it was, like, 9/11 happened, and this was, like, 9/15. And -- you know, September 15th. It was -- and we went to this meeting at Columbia, like, not really knowing anybody or what would happen. And both, like, signed up to be volunteers. And I started to volunteer to talk at -- he and I as couple -- as a couple decided to -- you know, we were really clear, like, you know, we -- they created -- again, just extraordinary cadre of young professionals who had -- you know, we were creating curriculum while we were creating talking points while we were, you know, organizing around, you know, reaching into communities and doing all this kind of work. And -- and we just -- you know, my husband, who's -- you know, has an IT background, like, started to help on some of the IT stuff. Like, it just -- it became a moment. Like, it was, like, we had to take back our name, right? And -- you know, and volunteer and do any and everything. So because I was doing this culinary arts job
training program, you know, we started to make sandwiches and drop them off at -- you
know, at police -- at precincts all over the city and drive it into -- you know, into Ground
Zero.

And -- and it just -- you know, it -- to me, I was -- it was -- I was in -- I’m a New Yorker,
right? Like, this was my -- this is my city. And this happened to us in my city. And --
you know, and -- and you really -- you are reminded how deeply -- I am -- I am
[laughter] very proudly American. And it is that moment where you are reminded.
Like, “Yeah, I’m Muslim, but I am American. And -- and I’m a New Yorker. And you just
can’t do this. Not in our name. Like, you have no right to sabotage who we are as a
community.” And it -- so I actually was working at WHEDco. And what -- WHEDco had
a moment of transition it was trying to figure out, but I was able to basically take a
sabbatical and just commit months to Muslims Against Terrorism. And, you know, I’d
never really talked about religion. I -- I actually, for years, would say, like, it was my
coming out. Like, different people come out at different times, but I came out as a
Muslim at that moment. Because it was sort of my identity that was mine, and I didn’t
really wear it or talk about it. It was mine. It was deeply intimate to me. But [laughter]
having a person who was at my wedding say some stuff all of a sudden realized, like,
this wasn’t a moment to actually keep it quiet anymore. This was a moment to really
just say, like, “Oh, by the way, I’m your neighbor. Oh, and I’m Muslim. Oh, yes, right. I
was born and raised in the Bronx. Oh, by the way, I’m Muslim,” right? Like, it just
literally became -- I started to literally include that into everything I did and said, and
people were like, “Wait, what?” “Wait, what?”

STRONG: What kind of conversations did that lead to?

SHAMA: Oh, boy. It was everything from talking to after-school providers to -- I mean, the
other thing that I will forever -- you know, this is what it means to me to be an
American -- but it was, like, the generosity of spirit, honestly. It was this real -- my
husband and I were invited to several homes of individuals living on the Upper East
Side or Upper West Side who basically, like, you know, got all the neighbors in the

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building, you know, like, fou-- you know, there was an article in the New York Times about Muslims Against Terrorism, about our founder, Aasma Khan. And then they -- you know, all these people from all over called and said, like, “Can we get somebody to come talk?” And so he and I were, like, the husband-wife duo -- one of many. And we would go into all of these [laughter] extraordinary apartments and, you know, into houses of worship. And -- you know, and both very clearly say, like, “We’re not, you know, scholars of Islam, but we are practitioners. And we’re happy to answer some of your questions.”

And it was so interesting, because it was everything from, like, “Where were you born?” to, you know, asking Ziad [Mansouri], “Do you wish that she wore hijab?” And he’s like, “No! Like, why would I wish that she wore hijab? Like, there -- if she wants to wear it, that’s her business. But, like, no, I don’t wish that. I mean, like, this is my wife. This is who I married. You know.” And them saying, like, “Well, what do you plan on doing with your kids?” And we’re like, “What do you mean? Like, we’re Americans.” Like, you know -- or “Where--“ -- you know, there’s just so many questions about, like, “Where do you -- do you identify as American?” “Yes, of course.” Like -- it was so interesting, because it was -- it was exposure. It was, like, you know -- and we would say things like “We’re --“ like, “I could be your child’s teacher. Or your doctor. Or your lawyer. Or your neighbor. Or your--” And it was all of a sudden like, “Oh my God, you’re right. You could be.” “Yeah! Exactly. I could be. And so what’s different about that?” “Well, we just never knew who you were.” “Okay. Well, let’s talk about it.” Right? And so -- it was so interesting.

I mean, I remember when -- one -- one dinner -- this was in a beautiful apartment on Park Avenue. And -- and the host said to me, “Do you wear a bathing suit?” I was like, “Wait, what?” And she’s like, “When you go to the beach, do you wear a bathing suit? You know, or is that against your religion?” I’m like, “No no, I wear a bathing suit.”
She’s like, “Oh. Isn’t that against your religion?” I’m like, “No!” She’s like, “Well, I thought women --” I’m like, “Yeah, I think people can do what they want!”

Like, that’s the thing, right? Like, it -- it -- this text can’t define us. Right? I mean, part of this is who we are. But, like, let’s focus on the things that are more -- that we’re more alike than -- than we’re different, because actually if we started to rip apart everyone’s text, we would realize, you know, the bloodshed in everyone’s tradition. But, like, let’s talk about who we are as Americans. And so that moment -- in that moment and that experience, I turned back to another mentor of mine, a man named Rabbi Bob [Robert] Kaplan, who I met when I was at the Arab American Family Support Center. And I’d actually written him to say, like, “Are there synagogues or temples that you can introduce us to, ‘cause I’m now doing this work, and we would love to talk to members of the Jewish community.” And so we stayed in touch and -- you know, and he was amazing and connected me to a bunch of places. And so there I went, you know, on -- you know, whenever they had us, Tuesday nights or, you know, Saturday afternoons. And we would go do these talks, myself and many others.

And -- and then he called one day, and it was February of twenty -- it was February 2002. And he said, “Can you -- I want -- there’s this project I think I’d love for you to work on.” And -- you know, and I remember thinking, like, “What?” And it was focused on public health. And -- and I said, you know, “Bob, I don’t think I can do that.” And he said, “Yeah, I need you to become the -- I want you to become the director of this Greater Brooklyn Health Coalition.” And -- and so many conversations later with many amazing people who I had once worked with in a different capacity as a, you know, newly -- at -- when I was at the Arab American Family Support Center, I went and started to work for the Greater Brooklyn Health Coalition that was incubated and housed at CAMBA, then Church Avenue Merchants Block Association, now just simply known as CAMBA -- an extraordinary, extraordinary community-based organization in Brooklyn, led by an amazing woman -- my director, Sharon Browne,
was amazing. And so there I was, back in Brooklyn, [laughter] working on health, actually.

STRONG: Let’s pause for just a second.

[Interview Interrupted.]

Strong: So in the last 10 minutes I want to ask you a little bit about your marriage and your [laughter] family and your kids.

SHAMA: Yeah. Yeah.

STRONG: So reconnecting with this person. Take me from there.

SHAMA: My husband and I -- Ziad -- we -- we dated for -- while I was in New York, actually. But again, my husband is Syrian -- and Muslim, observant -- but very American. And managed to make all of those things work pretty well together. You know, a college graduate and a professional, and again, I -- when -- you know, like, in my reality of what my Bronx community offered versus what my, like, hopes and dreams were, they were very different. And -- and I definitely was raised in a, like, “You have to marry someone. You have to” -- you know, like, the preference was that I marry someone who was Palestinian. But I had already gone through my own sort of religious experience that to me marrying someone who was Muslim was more important. And marrying someone who not only was Muslim but, like, understood the -- the core of what I celebrated in the tradition of sort of a more progressive reality -- an equitable space of women. And -- and my husband was absolutely those things -- or is those things. And -- so we met. We were introduced and went and saw a show. But -- so we dated. And, you know, I -- I'm -- and it was normal in that that’s what everybody else was doing. Right? I had already had exposure to people in the Middle East, right, to women at Birzeit University who were all dating, and I was like, “Oh, you don’t do arranged marriages?” And they were like, “What are you talking about? Like, that’s the 1800s.” And I was like, “No, actually, that’s right now in the Bronx, happening right now.” And they were like, “Yeah, no.” Right? And so for me I had already had that exposure of, like, that was normal. And I was like, “Someone isn’t picking your husband?” And they were like, “No! We're picking our husband.” And I was like, “Ooh, right. Of course I could do that.” Right?
So of course, you know, I come back; I’m the youngest; my father’s fairly exhausted and was like, “Whatever you do, just, like, do not ruin our family name.” Right? And -- you know, so I kept that loud and clear. But my dad was still of the, like, “Okay, fine. You want to date this person, fine. But I’m gonna give you six months, and then you have to get engaged,” right? “Because you’re not gonna walk around town with this guy and not have a commitment. Like, we’re just not gonna do that.” And I was like, “Okay. But I don’t know if I like him to spend the rest of my life with him in six months, Daddy.” So I kept buying six months. I’d be like, “How ‘bout six more months? I’m just not sure.” [laughter] Finally he was like, “Listen. You can’t keep doing this.” You know, and to Ziad’s credit he, like, went and saw my dad and was like, “You know, I’m serious about your daughter, but I’m just -- you know, we’re, like, 25. I’m 23, like, 24. I -- I’m just not ready to get married.” And my dad was like, “Look.” Like, “You better figure this out, the two of you, but you can’t keep doing this.”

And then I went away to school, and sort of our relationship sort of frizzled -- frayed. We didn’t do the long-distance thing. And then I -- you know, I was a little focused on “We really need to make a commitment if this is what we’re gonna do.” And then I came back to New York, and after being in New York for a little while one of his dear friends -- literally, his dearest friend -- and I ma-- you know, like, we would keep in touch, and I had lunch with -- with his friend, who’s a lovely Jewish man who went to high school with him. James. And, you know, to James’s credit he was like, “I’m gonna work to get the two of you back together.” Like, “This is ridiculous,” right? [laughter] And so -- and so Zi and I saw each other again and sort of at that conversation were like, “Yeah, I don’t think we need to wait much longer.” And -- you know, and I was at that point a couple of years older, and he too had had a couple of years of experience, and we both were like, “Okay!” And went back to -- you know, I sort of went back to my dad, and he, you know, did the same, went to his family, and we both -- and we both started seeing one another. You know, so we started seeing one another again.
And -- and then when he was going to -- the weekend he wanted, or as he was going to ask me -- or propose, as I understand -- right at that time my dad passed away. And so my father -- my father was not there when -- when Zi asked me to marry. Or he -- Ziad didn’t -- he may have asked my father in advance, although I don’t know if he ever did. I don’t think I’ve ever asked him, either. But we got married a year after. My dad passed away in September of 2000. Ziad proposed October of 2000. And we got married July of 2011 -- 2001.

STRONG: Tell me about your wedding a little bit.

SHAMA: Our wedding was -- we did it our way. He and I both knew that if we -- I knew if my father were alive that I would have had to have a much different wedding with a whole lot more people from all these places that I didn’t -- [laughter] I knew for a fact. I was like, “If Daddy were alive, we would have had to have, like, the entire village invited, because he would have said things like, ‘But we went to their wedding, so of course they have to be here.’” But -- so because he wasn’t alive I sort of got away with some license. And it was -- we did a very intimate religious ceremony just with very dear, close friends and family. Although hysterically -- I had asked an imam who I really liked to perform our ceremony. And he was coming from New Jersey and was in so much traffic he was late and never made it to do the ceremony, to actually perform the ceremony. So my husband’s uncle was in from Beirut, from Lebanon, for our wedding, and was like, “I can perform this wedding,” right? So of course my Catholic mother was like, “Wait, what? This guy who’s at the wedding is just gonna get up and perform the wedding?” Which was hysterical and a mess all at the same time. But whatever. We went with it. We had signed all our papers with City Hall, and so in some ways it was a symbolic thing, but to her, she was like, “Uh, this is not how it would work in the church.” [laughter] I’m like, “I know, Mom, but right now --” My -- I remember telling my older brother, like, “You better deal with this, ‘cause I can’t do this today.” And he was like, “Okay, I got it. I’m on it.”
And it was a lot of dancing. It was a lot of dabka. It was a lot of -- we had -- you know, we had Palestinian band and -- and lots of, you know, sort of -- some of our favorite songs and a lot of Brazilian music and -- you know, it was -- it was -- it was a fun time.

Yeah. I now hear from my friends -- although it's so funny that I never knew this -- but we didn't have alcohol -- we didn't serve alcohol at our wedding. And several of my friends just recently -- like, we were all together, and they were like, "You had no idea we all brought flasks?" And I was like, "Are you guys kidding me right now?" They were like, "No, we totally knew it was gonna be dry, and we all, like, communicated before then," and -- it was very funny to -- I mean, I'm glad I was laughing about it, 17 years later. But I was like, "Are you joking?" And they're like, "No. Like, we totally knew your party would not have alcohol. And so we were all, like, everybody, figure it out. Just buy the little thing." You know -- so -- so they managed. I kept wo-- you know, and then I was like, "Oh, that's why you guys were dancing so much." Anyway. [laughter]

Yeah.

STRONG: Tell me a little bit about your kids.

SHAMA: So we have three beautiful boys. I have a 14-year-old; he's my oldest, Samir. And a 11-year-old, Ibrahim. And my youngest, Omar, who is eight. And each of our boys are named after someone very important to us. So Samir is named after my husband's father, who passed away in 1994. And so my husband was young. I never met my husband's father. So we both lost our dads pretty young. And so Samir's named after my husband's dad. Ibrahim -- my father's name was Musa, Musa Ali [phonetic]. And -- but to name a little boy Musa, which is Moses, is very heavy. And we did want to name him Ali, but I wasn't sure that I wanted it to be his first name. I didn't want Ibrahim -- I didn't want Ali as the first name. Although we -- and my husband didn't either. So Ibrahim is a name my husband and I both really like. And we were also determined to figure out names that would work in Brazil as much as they would in the US as much as they would in the Arab world. But we were pretty focused on symbolic names to us. And -- and so his name's Ibrahim Ali. So his -- he's got the Ali in the middle. But one of my dad's most favorite cousins, and one of the people he talked a lot about when I was
a young person, was a cousin named Ibrahim Ali. So I knew that my dad would be very happy and proud of the name. And then -- I think after hearing “Ibrahim” be macerated so many -- like, it’s just -- for some reason “Ibrahim,” I-B-R-A-H-I-M, is not a name Americans get. It’s always “Abraham” -- “Abraham” or “Ibrahim.” And so by the time we got to Omar we were like, just go for the, like -- let’s just make it easy. And so Omar’s a very common name, and it is -- it is a perfect name for our little guy.

So I have three gorgeous boys, and my children are being raised in this world where they know their grandmother is Catholic. My -- both -- both their grandmoms, my husband’s mom and my mom, are both religiously connected and very spiritually deep in their own traditions. And so my mother-in-law is very observantly Muslim, in all of the most extraordinarily progressively wonderful ways. And my mother still goes to church on Sundays. And so my kids are really being raised, and we are so delighted, in this world that really helps them understand that they are part of something really rich. And very special people in our lives, including a gentleman I mentioned before, James -- you know, Uncle James is Jewish -- and -- and there are people who are mentors in my life that are -- just recently for Rosh Hashanah, a very special family that has been a part of my life -- I was their son’s babysitter -- Auntie Laura and Uncle Bruce were over, and it was right before Rosh Hashanah, and, you know, Auntie Laura talked about Rosh Hashanah, and we all had apples and honey. So -- so my guys are all being raised in this really beautiful space where we really are committed to celebrating our differences and really helping understand. My kids have religious instruction by amazing -- an amazing woman who is their tutor but their religious teacher in Islam. And I think there are days they are super frustrated by it and other days that I hear their recitation and her sharing of the beauty of the tradition with them, and my watching them find their -- centering their -- that’s really cool.

You know, I was just telling someone, I -- for my youngest son, Omar, for the last three years I have gone to his school to do a little presentation on Ramadan. And I take --
there’s a book, a Curious George story, and I take the Curious George story, and we do cards, and I take the US stamp that is the Eid stamp, and I take dates, which is how we break our fast, and I take Arabic date cookies, ma’amoul, and pão de queijo, which is Brazilian cheese bread. And -- because in my house all of those things go together, right? Like, Brazilian cheese bread is as popular as dates, right? And, like, that’s very -- so I think for some people they’re like, “Wait, what?” But in my house that’s normal.

And it’s -- and, you know, my siblings, we all -- they all -- everyone defines our tradition as a family. You know, we’re not monolithic. And in my own -- and in my husband’s family, I mean, my brother-in-law married a woman from Argentina. And so -- like, this -- my children are part of a much richer global experience. And I was part of that, but I wasn’t part of this sort of awareness. I mean, we didn’t -- we knew it, but we didn’t talk about it. And I’m not sure my parents knew how to talk about it, although they were amazing ambassadors of it, and demonstrated it beautifully. We are very aware of it.

I will say that I think the world today is a very complicated place for being Muslim. And we are very mindful about the importance of both celebrating who we are by talking about it, right? And so in my children’s lives we talk about being Muslim. And in their school community I do my best to be mindful about making clear that we’re Muslim. And that there are, you know -- that -- that it’s who we are, and I want them to both be proud, but I also want their classmates and their classmates’ parents to also recognize, you know, that we’re a family in the community. That -- you know, that’s CEO of an organization and that lives -- you know what I mean? Like, I just -- I -- I want to make sure that I’m coloring their image of who we are as it juxtaposes all of the rhetoric that we hear.

I will say that my 14-year-old is incredibly aware of the world we are living in today. And there are moments where it breaks my heart. Because he is pretty clear about this new -- this new -- this new world. And most recently evident when we traveled, and he
was randomly selected and pulled over. And, you know, and I -- as he looked at me and
said, “Mom?” and I said, “It’s okay. They’re just -- they’re just gonna open your bags,
and they’re gonna ask you a couple of questions.” You know, and I think my children
will always be -- because their names are dead giveaways. And -- and I actually had to
tell my son, like, “So now add to that if your skin color was darker, what that
treatment would look like.” Right? Because I wanted him to understand that it might be
bad, but imagine if, right? Imagine if -- the -- the world that we’re living in is completely
based on judge-- on judgment right now. And it’s based on all the wrong reasons of
judgment, right? It’s based on your skin color, on your ethnicity, on your religious
tradition. It’s not based on your character. It’s not based on what you can accomplish or
can’t or who you are. It is -- and so I -- I -- I’m trying to help my son understand, like, “It
is your responsibility to be the best model of you and to live actually in recognition of
who we are as Muslims and Americans.” And I think it’s a complicated time. But an
important one. I’m not quite sure how we’re gonna get over it, but we’re gonna get
through it.

STRONG: On that note I’m afraid we’re out of time.

SHAMA: Yeah.

STRONG: But I really look forward to talking with you more --

SHAMA: Yeah.

STRONG: -- when we talk again. Thank you so much for the time you did have.

SHAMA: Yeah.