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Oral History Interview with Fatima Shama
Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.45
Interview conducted by Liz Strong on October 2, 2018
at the Fresh Air Fund in Midtown, Manhattan

STRONG: Okay, Tuesday, October 2nd, 2018. Liz Strong and Fatima Shama again for the
Brooklyn Historical Society's Muslims in Brooklyn Project. Thank you so much for
meeting me again.

SHAMA: I'm happy to be -- the chance --

STRONG: I'm glad we can give your stories the time they really need. So let's just dive right
in where we left off. You had been asked to run the Greater Brooklyn Health Coalition.

SHAMA: Yeah. So Rabbi Bob Kaplan, who plays a pretty significant role in my journey, calls
me one day and says, "I have a job, and I need someone. We have this coalition in
Brooklyn, and it needs some leadership. It's ready to go to the next level." I remember
saying to him on the street on my cell phone, "Bob, I don't -- that's not what I do." He
was, like, "Actually, can I get you to go have meetings with these people?"

So I went to a meeting at Brooklyn Borough Hall with the then Deputy Borough
President Yvonne Graham, who's amazing, a woman named Sharon Browne, who's
deputy executive director at a very large community-based organization CAMBA, that
was incubating and supporting. Then there were several other board members of this
Greater Brooklyn Health Coalition. So a gentleman who was at Coney Island Hospital,
Brian Palmer, an incredible man in the Asian community, Luther Mook, Bob was there.
I want to say there may have been a couple of other people. But those were very pre-
eminent folks at the start of my journey at the Brooklyn Health Coalition. And it was
really a very brilliant model, actually, of recognizing that there were a number of
communities in Brooklyn around, where health issues were really their primary
concerns. And predominantly immigrant communities, but really all communities,
right, who were in these under-resourced, underserved narratives. The idea was to
actually bring this community of people, of organizations in particular -- both hospitals and community-based organizations -- with government, right?

So I was sitting in this room where institutions were represented, community-based voices were represented, and government was represented, right? Local government. And the role that this triangle can provide in the support of its communities. And it was using health as that lens to say, these communities all have a lot in common, and access to health, equity around health -- although we weren't using the word "equity," we were definitely using "access" -- was critically important. And they sort of gave me a bit of a mandate, and then I just, after a couple of conversations, agreed to take on this amorphous thing and give it form and shape and leadership.

And -- and so I joined -- CAMBA was the incubator, so I became a staff member at CAMBA, and worked for my amazing boss, a woman named Sharon Browne, who, and under the leadership of Joanne Oplustil, who is the CEO there, an extraordinary organization with extraordinary leadership -- again an extraordinary community of women leading. And at that point, or at this point I had really sort of -- I believed in the sector and really wanted to be in the sector, right? So to me, I wanted to be in the public. I wanted to do work in the nonprofit space. And I really cared a lot about -- and I was eager to take on a challenge, so I wasn't quite sure how I was going to do it. But I was excited to figure it out.

I mean, I think I walked into this organization, we may have had, like, $40,000. And four years later, we had over $700,000 in grants and support, and we'd created this robust coalition of partners, and a really great board, and all these great synergies. And I was speaking on panels like crazy around health and healthcare access, and cultural competency and health literacy. And it was incredible, right? I worked for amazing people, never doing direct service work, really doing a real coordination policy kind of job, really pushing the envelope as an advocate for communities, but in my style of
advocacy, which actually was always being at the table and trying to convene, and help people see the perspective from a different side. I'm not somebody who -- I am not somebody who necessarily goes out and marches or challenges or threatens, but rather sort of uses convening opportunity to really have people's voices heard at the table. And to me, I think there's great influence in that.

And in -- it was 20- not even, 2006, December 2006, December 2005 -- I'm trying to think about this. Two thousand five -- I got a call from the mayor's office, asking me to meet with some folks regarding health, and an idea that the city had around health and healthcare access, and having heard some of my comments -- somebody had heard me speak. And I remember thinking, like, what? So I did. I went and had these two conversations with folks at City Hall, former health policy advisor and the chief of staff to Dennis Walcott, who was the deputy mayor for health education community development, the sort of big portfolio, human service. And then I was asked to come in to do this project, to really look at health literacy, actually, and language access, as a lens to what it means for communities in accessing healthcare and healthcare outcomes. And it was funded by -- it was a grant-funded role by the New York Community Trust, so I was sort of only given a year of an opportunity. And my board at the Health Coalition said, "We think it would be great for you to do this." When you get called to work for Mike [Michael] Bloomberg as the mayor, you sort of don't turn it down. So they were amazingly supportive of me. So I joined the Bloomberg administration in January of '06.

STRONG: Let's go back just a second, because I'd like to get you to paint a picture of what were the major barriers to access in Brooklyn? What were the major health issues at the time?

SHAMA: Yeah. So it was definitely -- so it depended on the community, right? I mean, it was very interesting. Brooklyn, if considered a city on its own, would be the fourth largest city in the country, right? But it is a borough, or a county, amid New York City. From its diversity perspective, it's an extraordinary place with amazing resources. But from a
healthcare access perspective, it sits in the shadow of Manhattan, right, from institution perspective. But for communities that are truly underserved, that doesn’t matter, right? So if someone knows how to navigate the system, they’re going to find their way to wherever they need to. But for our communities that were really struggling with extraordinary disparities -- so Brooklyn had the largest, or had the highest at the time, infant mortality rate in the state, certainly in the city. But by that, we mean that before, seven out of ten babies -- seven out of a thousand babies -- were dying before the age of one in Brooklyn. And it was predominantly in Black women. And it could be in Caribbean women, it could be in African American women. But it was this concentration in Brooklyn.

And there was a group called Brooklyn Perinatal Network, led by this extraordinary woman, Ngozi Moses, and Denise West, who for me, I had never heard of this before, right? I talked a lot about maternal and child health, but I had never heard of this concentration in the community, right? And the bigger question was around perinatal care, it was about prenatal care and access. And why weren’t our communities getting access? And why didn’t our women fundamentally know about the prenatal care assistance program, right? Free prenatal care for all women. Once you’re pregnant, you get free care.

And so that was one area. The realities of cardiovascular disease, totally affecting women -- affecting communities very differently. The extraordinary effects of smoking, right? So New York was going through its own public health agenda, but in the Chinese community and in the Russian community and in the Arab community, smoking was so prevalent that it didn’t matter how much anti-smoking was happening in the city, it wasn’t penetrating these communities, right? So there was a focus on, what do we have to do here? Rising rates of asthma, rising rates of obesity -- all of those things existed. But there were these issues, right? Mental health wasn’t even being discussed -- still seriously taboo. What we fundamentally understood was, A, insurance
was a big issue. Some communities had access, some didn't. That was the start of actually the state's really proactive thinking around universal care, in some ways, in the State of New York for children. So we had all children under the age of 21 having access to health insurance, irrespective of status-- huge. The agenda was being pushed around parents in particular as well, or families having health -- so, all right, the state was doing a great amount of work on making sure we were enrolling children in particular, and families who were eligible -- that was a big agenda. That was a big organizing factor. Different communities -- certainly the senior communities, so seniors -- community in the Russian community, and the seniors in the Chinese community. Great organizations trying to serve different needs. Interestingly, both communities serving as caretakers for their grandchildren -- what did that mean? What was their awareness? What was their knowledge? Right, so different communities have different issues.

But when they sat around the table, we all found the common threads over and over again. Fundamentally, it became a reality of, how do we combine our voices so that we actually are a much more thoughtful coalition in advocacy, right? So I spent a good amount of time there. But one of the things that I think I learned was this nuance of the reality that culture matters in a service delivery perspective, and in particular when you're serving communities that do have nuances, right? So for some members of the community, it was language. For some members of the community, it was -- you know, I remember learning a lot about how the Chinese community felt when they walked into a health institution. How communities were being received when they walked into communities. How people were picking their caretakers or their doctors, based on language spoken, based on who was there, based on the sort of -- so this is where-- for me it was a really rich learning experience around what I had already experienced in my own family, or even in my work at the Arab American Family Support Center -- people, you know, there are affiliations that you have that make you make choices, that help you make choices. But how does the institution, how does the city, how do

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organizations put all of that aside, or actually include that in their planning so that they are a much more customer, consumer-friendly, patient-friendly institution really focused on health outcomes? And for me, it became a big issue around language, when everywhere you go, we started to look at limited English proficiency. So if the *New York Daily News* was written at a third-grade reading level, and hospitals are printing out these booklets on diabetes, the reality is, nobody's reading this. And you're not even talking to our communities in a way that they can understand.

So I must have been someplace that heard this conversation about health literacy that really sort of solidified for me that if literacy is that thing that you act upon, right, it's the information you can act upon -- well, nobody can act upon this because they don't understand it. They're either limited -- they have limited literacy in English, or they're limited English-proficient, and further limiting their ability to sort of navigate using these tools that we weren't translating, that weren't written in a basic sort of framework, in a more plain English frame.

So that became a big organizing and reality tool, or a reality that became an opportunity to sort of shape new tools for communities and for access. It was really about making sure people knew they were welcomed in institutions, not for emergency purposes only, but really in a proactive sense, right? Making sure every child had a doctor and had annual visits, rather than looking at the emergency room as their point of entry for preventative care. And the city was -- Tom Frieden was the commissioner of health. And he had just created a Take Care of New York agenda of ten points. And on that were several things that we were able to use. So one of them was, everybody should have a primary care provider. That was incredibly important for children. But with that came a lot of other things, right? So smoking was on that agenda, movement was on that agenda. Asthma was on that agenda. So a lot of important things on that Take Care of New York agenda, which then became a rallying opportunity for us, both
from an advocacy perspective, but from a platform perspective, right? You can say we
should have all of these things, but here are the barriers to access.

STRONG: So thank you so much for that.

SHAMA: Yeah.

STRONG: For time we kind of have to skip through a couple of things in the Bloomberg
administration, but there’s an important turning point when you were senior education
policy advisor, when you confronted him about some of the things he had said publicly
about Israel. And that took you into the next stage of your involvement. So tell me that
story.

SHAMA: Yeah. Bloomberg would have annual interfaith breakfasts at the end of the year.
And every December 31st, there was an interfaith breakfast held at the New York
Public Library. To me, it was one of the most significant annual events that he did. And
this is, to me -- you know, I am a huge fan of Mike Bloomberg as mayor, as individual,
as person. But there was leadership constantly.

So I had already had an issue with the way that the language had been publicized in
press releases around the mayor's unequivocal support for Israel, and its bombing of
Gaza. And I just remember saying to his communications person, like, "You have to be
more mindful of the language. There are innocent people dying on both sides of this
conflict, and at a minimum, you should acknowledge that." This is a man who leads in a
city that is incredibly diverse. And he might have a -- he has every right to have his
opinion. But people have differing opinions here. And at a minimum, we should
acknowledge that there is true -- that this is an issue that is deep, and that lives are
being affected in a variety of ways, and not just on one side of this conflict.

So his communications person and press secretary were really actually -- we had a
great debate about it, but a really good conversation. The interfaith breakfast
happened. And in the room were leaders in the Muslim community, in the Arab
community, in the Arab Christian and Arab Muslim community. And a variety of
people. And nothing was mentioned about the loss of lives on either side. It was completely silent. And it was hurtful, and it was incredibly hurtful to the Arab leaders in the room, Christian and Muslim, right? And they had already at this point known who -- you know, they knew who I was and that I was in City Hall, and that I was working for the mayor, and that I had opinions about this. These are many of the people who had seen me grow up in Brooklyn or knew my work at the Arab American Family Support Center, or at the Coalition, right? So these are folks who have known me in my iterations and in my chapters.

And so I remember going back to City Hall and saying to the communications director, like, "This is crazy. This was an incredible moment, and we did nothing about it. We have to do -- we have to be more mindful about the language that we share and the things that the mayor says." And to their credit, several of the folks in the room, and really right around the mayor, went over to him and shared my concern. And he sort of was, like, "Wait, what? I'd love to hear this perspective. Who is raising these things?" So then I was called over. And he had known me in one context, but he didn't know me in this other context.

So he had known me as the education person. He had heard me speaking Spanish, so he was, like, "But wait, what do you have to do with this?" And I was, like, "I'm half Palestinian." And he was, like, "Oh, I didn't realize that." I said, "Yes. I'm born and raised in the Bronx, but I'm half Palestinian, half Brazilian." So he said, "Okay, what should I be saying?" And I said, "You know, there are lives being lost on both sides of this issue. And innocent lives, children. And infrastructure that a community is trying to rebuild time and again, that's being just blown to pieces. You don't have to acknowledge the actual conflict. But the reality that people can't live their lives amid this on both sides is important to note."
And to his credit, he could have done a lot of things, right? He could have said, like, "That's foolish, and I'm not going to listen to you." And he sort of processed it, and said, "Okay, great, thank you." And then started to ask me a series of questions, right? And willingly got on the phone to speak to a couple of people, who gave him some unique perspectives. Other leaders, a couple of folks who were leading lawyers from Human Rights Watch, and a couple of religious leaders, so I was able to connect him to at least three different people who he spoke with, who gave him their own perspectives that were New Yorkers, supporters of his, of his administration.

But the contact was larger. You know, he sort of had a, "I had no idea" moment, right? And to his credit, which is the thing to acknowledge about this extraordinary man, was that he always then asked more questions, right? He was never someone who thought, I know the answers, don't tell me, he was always, or is always, the person who would say, like, "Okay, so actually, fill in this gap for me. I don't understand. Tell me a little bit more about this."

And so we then -- he started to ask me questions, we had more conversation. He saw me as someone who, I think, whether it was in the Arab community or in the Muslim community, or in the larger community, since I spoke several languages and would randomly be pulled in to give tours in Spanish or Portuguese, or something else, and was penetrating communities differently. And because the Muslim diaspora is, in fact-- the community is large, and we represent so different communities that it's easy to be able to know and care, more importantly, about a very large community of New Yorkers. And I was regularly the person who, at policy discussions, was talking about the voice of parents, and the voice of -- the diversity of our communities and parents and access. So ironically, many of those things that I did on health, I was now parlaying in education. And if folks were paying attention, it was clear to them that what mattered to me most were children and families, and really respecting and acknowledging the diversity and the breadth and the experience and the reality, but

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really the brilliance of our communities in New York. And not that parents don't care about their children, or not that people don't care about issues, but rather, how do we communicate and engage them in those conversations?

So I was consistent, I hope I'm consistent in that. But he had an experience with me that probably saw that a lot more, you know, in either hearing me present on education, hearing my sort of unapologetic commitment to making sure parents were never neglected, but really engaged, you know, both as the daughter of immigrants, but somebody who knew. Like, I know what my parents felt about education. I would challenge people when they would say things like, "Well, parents don't show up at parent-teaching conferences." I'm, like, "You're making that statement as if parents don't care about their children. That's such a false statement, it's an ignorant statement," right? Because as a parent, we all care about our kids, whether we know that's the place we should show it, whether we know or have the time to be there, whether we feel comfortable or welcomed in a school community, whether we know that I can communicate with a teacher, right? So all these perspectives that people were just disregarding, I was now forcing people to acknowledge. And to his credit, and to the credit of many others, they sort of saw that.

So I was, in August of 2009 actually -- actually in May 2009 -- June -- the commissioner of Immigrant Affairs at the time stepped down. And we were working on the reauthorization of mayoral control. So then the mayor asked me to step in and become the commissioner of Immigrant Affairs.

STRONG: During this time, the campaign for Eid holidays in the public schools came up.

That started while you were in education?

SHAMA: In education.

STRONG: So walk me through that battle and how it communicated with the administration.

SHAMA: Yeah. Yeah. So I was -- you know, it's a very powerful reality around possibilities and potential. And I don't know if our community understands this, but I think to have
access to City Hall and the people in City Hall is a great opportunity. And generally speaking, that's what lobbyists help do, right? That's what very well-oiled machines help do. Our Muslim community didn't have that. They had me, right? And they were organizing brilliantly, brilliantly on the city council side. And using the city council thoughtfully to sort of put pressure on the mayor, the problem with that is that actually, what you do is, you push someone into a corner, right? And from my advocacy lens, that's one strategy. But unless you're actually watering the plant on both sides, you're tilling the soil on both sides, your seeds will not grow, right? So they were having great success on the city council side, in getting the city council to pass a resolution to acknowledge Muslim holidays in the school calendar, right, in the [New York City] Department of Education school calendar. What needed to also happen was the advocacy around unions, since the labor contracts and labor realities required a lot -- there needed to be some focus on the Department of Education and how they would sort of realize this from 180 days' school.

And then there was the mayor. So there was this four-pronged approach. I think they were super successful on the city council side. I don't know how much was happening on the labor side. I don't think a lot was happening on the Department of Ed side. I think there were people at the Department of Ed who were really shut off and cut out -- you know, really not interested in having the conversation, so they sort of pushed it away regularly. And then there was the mayor's side.

I provided a tremendous amount of access to a large community of people, where members of the Muslim community were invited regularly -- regularly -- there were several meetings that they were invited to, or that they had requested that I facilitated, that allowed them to share with the mayor their feelings and thoughts about the importance.
So from when this conversation had first started with Mike Bloomberg as mayor, with Mayor Bloomberg, to where I know we had gotten it, it was a huge evolution, right? This very visceral pushing of, the city council's going to make me do this, and this visceral, like, "I'm not going to do this." To my sitting with him and others and helping him understand, you have an opportunity to help a community feel welcomed here, to help a community feel acknowledged. The reality that they want, just what everyone else wants, is nothing you should actually be angry about, but really welcome, and understand that they believe in you so deeply that they believe in your ability to recognize them as a community. And for that, you should acknowledge that. I think it was those kind of conversations where he would sort of sit back and say, like, "Oh, that's a really good point." And I was, like, "Just understand" -- and amid this was the sort of 9/11 realities of what was happening, right? So he got to know this community in a very different way, right? He got to know them as New Yorkers. He got to know them as Americans. He got to understand the breadth of this community, their traditions, their passion, their commitment, not only to this country, to New York, to their children. To being a richer fabric of our democracy.

And so although we did not make the change for Muslim school holidays, I believe that their engagement with him, with members of our administration, with their engagement in the New York political infrastructure, helped set up a variety of things. Because I do think that when the Ground Zero Mosque debate went down, Mike Bloomberg was unrelenting, unmatched in his absolute voice and commitment. And I know that a lot of it had to do with the fact that he had now met so many extraordinary Muslim Americans, New Yorkers, who had such strong feelings about how much they loved the city. So when he spoke from passion about knowing this community, he spoke realistically, right? So what was two years before, he didn't know a community. And in a process of getting to know a community, he was unrelenting, focused on ensuring their comfortable protection and integration and reality of rights in our city, and beyond, right?
So it was pretty incredible to sit back and watch, but also acknowledge that a community's voice truly mattered. We didn't get Muslim school holidays, but I would sure -- you know, and I spent a lot of time with an organizer saying, you need to work on these people, because it isn't going to happen if this doesn't happen, right? So again, my advocacy style is different. But I would talk to a lot of folks and say, you need to work on these people, you need to work on these people. Like this is -- you know. And so to their credit, they had worked on Bill de Blasio, and they had worked on all the individuals running for mayor, so that when the time came, those candidates were ready.

But I would say a good amount of that work was done, the sort of change really takes time, right, but the yes we can is real. But getting everybody to understand that the time is here and is now, I do think that Mike Bloomberg truly helped make that happen when he made some very extraordinary statements about religious liberties and about our community, and about the Muslim community being a very important community in the fabric of New York. You know, that was a ripple effect that happened, that made it -- you know, I mean, we started to host Ramadan Iftars in Gracie Mansion, and had full-on prayers in Gracie Mansion, right? And call to prayer in Gracie Mansion. A hundred and fifty people, call to prayer. I mean, it was an extraordinary -- it was extraordinary for him, it was extraordinary for me. I think for members of our community that were there, it was an extraordinary experience. So his leadership, to me, is unmatched on how we moved a community to true fabric and breadth. I was the first Muslim appointed commissioner in the history of New York, in the history of New York City. That was him.

**STRONG:** That was you.

**SHAMA:** I mean, yes, it was me [laughter]. But he put me in that position and then empowered me, and then listened, right, and then supported me to be able to both do, but -- you know, I mean there's a lot of people who give you power, or give you a seat.
He not only offered me a seat at the table, he invited my opinions and thoughts. And that's leadership.

STRONG: And you gave them. And that's leadership, too.

SHAMA: Yeah.

STRONG: Just to underscore again.

SHAMA: Yeah.

STRONG: Just -- you know, you brought up the first Iftar in Gracie Mansion. That was your first year as commissioner.

SHAMA: Mm-hmm. I was appointed August -- early August. And I think the Iftar was September or October. But it was -- yeah, it was our first big moment. It was my big coming out party in some ways. [Laughter] It was very special. It was very special. And he is remarkable. And for him, it was a big deal, and for the community, you know, I hope it was momentous, to be able to do what we can do when we are in those seats is incredibly important. And never coveting that is incredibly important, right? So I knew every day I had a responsibility to my principle, right? I was very clear for whom I worked, and I was honored to be in that role. But I also wasn't going to not to be true to myself. And that's the thing I appreciated most about him, was that he allowed many of us to be both. And sometimes it was hard, and sometimes it was really easy. But I was able to bring my community as an important part of New York, an important part of the city's fabric, and to celebrate them as richly as any other community gets celebrated at very important moments. And so, yeah.

STRONG: What are some other proudest accomplishments from your time as commissioner?

SHAMA: Oh, boy. I would say that -- so I move into this role. We do the Iftar, those were community-focused. We had the chance to get the mayor to visit mosques and meet with members of the Muslim community many times. But in addition to that, to me what was really important was -- you know, and I think at some point members of the community criticized me in saying, look, I didn't do enough for our community. But I'm a New Yorker, right? So I want to be clear about that. I'm a New Yorker, and I'm the
daughter of immigrants in this city. And I think there are a lot of people like me. So for whom I work are actually the children and families in this city that I believe look a lot like mine, right? Parents, or people who come as strivers, hoping for a different reality, hoping for a new reality, for their children.

And for that, that’s who I work for, right? I don’t pick a community. I am incredibly proudly a New Yorker, I’m incredibly proudly an American. But I am very deeply proud of my ethnic roots and that narrative, and what I believe that means for people. And I don’t take sides. And that’s very important to me. I don’t take sides. And I won’t take sides. I don’t say the Latino community is more important than the African American community, or that the Chinese community is more important than the Russian community. It doesn’t matter, actually, because united -- you know, out of many, we are one. So for me, I was always fighting for the one, right, for all of us, to make sure we all got the same thing.

So in that vein, I think we did many things. I hope we did many things for our communities, because I had done workforce development, because my dad was a small business owner, and sort of started his life in America as a street vendor, because I had seen my parents, and I had worked on healthcare issues, and saw my parents navigate both health care and education. I had a perspective, and I had done this policy work. I had a perspective in all of these places that made me unique to the conversation and to the role. I also understood that the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs had to actually be an advocate on the inside, but really think about what can it do to help our city agencies better serve New Yorkers.

So I think we actually reframed the narrative of a department, of an agency. Then we just hammered away at things, right? We just saw opportunities. And to the mayor’s credit. And to many people. I had amazing mentors, Dennis Walcott, to me, is one of the most amazing people in my life for this city, but also in my life, because he was both a role model, but a voice. And many like him in the administration, but he was
incredibly important for me. We sort of tried to tackle things that would better the lives of immigrant New Yorkers, or the children of immigrants here. So it was everything from looking at naturalization and providing free legal services so that families can be naturalized. It was everything from, you know, creating a campaign with New York City public hospitals around welcoming, and putting out open letters to immigrant communities about, hospitals are here for you. Please don’t be afraid of us. Come. Same thing with the education school system. Creating a new welcoming framework within the school community, talking about what school safety looks like, so when a parent walks up and there’s a school security guard asking for ID, if a parent doesn’t have that, what does that mean? Is that a barrier to entry? Working with our small business department around immigrants, you know fastest-growing small business owners. What do we do to support them? Looking at the day labor reality, right? There are people who stand on street corners, what are their rights? Do they have rights? Of course they do. What are they? What are we doing to help them? Street vendors, people who stand on the corners trying to sell -- they’re an important fabric of this city. Do we acknowledge that? Don’t we?

I feel like we did everything from quality of life to sort of enhancing policy, to -- you know, I think I was the third commissioner appointed, and I was building on what was done by my predecessors, but having -- because I came from the sort of policy space and the service delivery space, I was able to sort of navigate both city government differently, but really to try to push this conversation about integration. And because of that, both Bloomberg’s voice on immigrants and immigration was incredibly powerful in the country, because we’re New York, and we were able to be a real demonstration. We started to become a real model for cities across the country. So I spent a lot of time in my later years as commissioner, helping cities around the country become -- to formally create offices -- focused on immigrant integration, and different places called it different things, so in Houston it was the Office of International Communities. In Boston it was the Office for New Bostonians, right?
So there was different agenda being created. But we helped cities across the country and globally really think about an integration agenda. And before I knew it, I was a sort of pre-eminent voice expert on what migration looks like, what integration really looks like. And I would say this a lot, right? Immigrants are a local issue. Immigration is a federal issue. So how do you, in your local reality, help support the communities that are coming? And because in the global landscape, and in some parts of the country, the communities that were coming were largely Muslim -- I had an added value at those conversations to help provide context, right? So in a place like Torino, Italy, where they had a lot of Turks coming in, what were they doing around integration? And places in Belgium where there was a lot of North Africans, and they were sort of overwhelmed by, quote-unquote, "this Muslim community" -- you know, what should they be doing?

So I was brought in to not only talk about what integration looks like, but we talk about this community, and what does that mean? And how do you -- and I remember saying many times, are you engaging the religious community? And they would say, like, "No." Like, "There is a separation of church and state." I was like, "I'm not asking you to adopt, but recognize that you actually have a council of ministers, or you have engagement with certain religious communities. If you're not engaging this religious community, you're doing that community a disservice, right? You just need to make sure you're including them in the table, or at the table, in your conversations. They're your --" and the systems are different. But it was the ability to be at many conversations to enhance.

Another really important thing just on the Muslim voice piece was, having sat at different tables, I recognize that funders had a different perception of Muslims. So one of my greatest realities, time and again -- that I still haven't solved, but I will -- was this nuance that when we had big issues in the city, we would invite these coalitions to the table. So the UJA Federation [United Jewish Appeal-Federation of New York] would
come to the table. And the Federation for Protestant Welfare Agencies would come to the table, and Catholic Charities [of New York] would come to the table. The New York Immigration Coalition, thankfully, over time was brought to the table. But all of these big voices. So I would sit there and I would say, "My community isn’t here." The voice representing the Muslim community. The Hispanic Federation was there, [Coalition for] Asian American Children and Family was at the table.

But who was representing the voice of the Muslim community? I really started to understand that we were misunderstood, largely because we were so diverse. And religion is our unifying reality, but not everyone has that shared reality around education, although I think we do. There was just -- it was not its own thing. And I kept wondering, does it need to be? Should we have a Muslim Federation where all of these organizations that serve Muslims in one way, shape or form are part of this larger entity, that at a minimum has a seat at the table, it’s advocating on behalf of their community. I tried to do it. It became a bigger task and not enough time during my time. But it was enough of a conversation I was able to start having with funders, because I was at a different level. And because of that, it allowed me to create a day for funders to better understand Muslim New Yorkers.

So we had a full day of learning where we invited foundations, and foundation staff to tour, a tour of Muslim New York where we went and met with African American leaders in Harlem, West African leaders of the Muslim community then went into Queens and met with South Asian leaders in the Muslim community, or that were serving members of the Muslim community, they weren’t Muslim, per se, themselves as community-based providers, but they were serving and understood.

And from there we went to Brooklyn and met the Arab community. And along the way, we definitely missed, right? We didn’t meet the Indonesian community. We didn’t meet the Turkish community. We didn’t meet the blossoming Latino Muslim community.
Then we ended our tour at NYU [New York University], where NYU under John Sexton’s leadership did a really great robust support about the Muslim community, and Khalid Latif, the imam there, was creating an extraordinary -- has created an extraordinary community, a welcoming community, really thoughtful around Muslims and students, but really a larger community. So we ended the tour there. I mean, that was unprecedented, right? That never happened. It was both because of my role, because of my commitment, because of these gaps that I saw that allowed me to call different colleagues and say, I have an idea. What do you think? To their credit, some of these people are my dearest friends today, and mentors, you know. They said, "You know, that's a great idea. Let's do this." How much change was made? I don't know. But I hope we made change.

STRONG: As you touched briefly on criticisms you encountered, I wanted to bring up one specifically to see -- or give you a chance to speak to it directly, which was the AP [Associated Press] story about NYPD [New York City Police Department] surveillance that came out in 2011. First of all, how did that story impact you personally, when you heard the news?

SHAMA: You know, it was one of those moments I think I just referenced a little ago that said, I understood who I worked for, and was given a chance to be true to myself. But some of it was hard, and some of it -- and those were hard. Those were really hard. They were hard for a lot of reasons. I will say from two perspectives. The first perspective is the just sheer violation of a community's rights. The second we-- among the perspectives to recognize was that it was, in fact, an inherent demonization, right? Whether it was intended to be that or not, it just made members of the community and others sort of look at this community and think, clearly there's bad among them. Or they're bad.

The one bigger struggle, I will say, is that even when meeting with leaders in the community, there were lots of leaders in the community across the community that said, you know what, there aren't always good people among us. And maybe we can't...
find them all. And maybe you need to help us find them. And we have nothing to hide. So come search us. Come do what you need to. And that was hard, because when we're trying to organize voices, there were two very serious camps around this; there was the, like -- don't come into our mosques -- and then there was the other -- we have nothing to hide, come in. We have nothing to hide. And actually, if there are bad people here, we want you to find them.

So I sat in the middle of that, trying to make sure both perspectives were both heard and respected, but really almost wondering, like, oh my God, how do we navigate this? Actually, it was not different than any of the other conversations, right, whether it was the conversations we were having with members of a broader community in the city around Stop and Frisk, right? We had members in the African American community who felt so strongly against Stop and Frisk, and then we'd, like, meet with a list of a larger group, and then they would say, like, well, you know, someone has to take control of the situation. And we would be, like, what is going on, right? And I would have those experiences.

The NYPD thing was a painful reality. And the truth is that the NYPD, in its own reality, is such an extraordinary and huge institution that it is, itself, in some ways impenetrable. So I could meet with Ray [Raymond] Kelly and I could meet with the mayor and I could talk about what this was happening. But it's a paramilitary organization that has deep connections to the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]. Like, there was so much happening, that in some ways, did I actually know what was happening? Were we fully as close to the center as I might have been? Did I really know?

But on the community side, which was the side I was sort of a part of, handling and managing, I specifically recall being at enough conversations where the voices in the community were different, right? There were people who were -- we have nothing to
hide. And if there are bad people among us, we'd love your help figuring out who they are, because our children and our communities don't want this. We're happy in America, we escaped all this kind of stuff from where we came. We want to be a part, we want our kids to go to school. All of those. Then there was the other side around, well, there's a rights issue here. There is a real civil rights issue here.

And this was where I would say integration was incredibly important. I'm sort of sitting there going, oh my gosh, you have a right to still say, "I don't want this." Or you have a right to say, "You can't do this to us." Isn't America supposed to be different for these reasons? And on the other side, those that were calling out the civil rights, saying -- sort of saying, look at you, you're selling out, but you don't have to name call, either. Different people come to this for different reasons. That was -- it was a very interesting experience. I mean, obviously no real resolution, although there was the creation of an Inspector General's area, and I think some of the people who went on to work on that, someone who I'm very fond of, a Muslim lawyer, knowing that he was in that role working in it, to me was a win, because of his -- knowing who he is, sort of former president of the Muslim Bar Association of New York.

So did good things come out of it? I don't know. But the advocacy did lead to some really important and heated conversations, and actually -- and awareness. Once again, this was elevated to a different conversation, where a whole lot of other people were involved in a narrative and a conversation about protecting a community and their rights. So for me, those are wins. When someone else is now charging and saying, "You cannot do this to this community." We're not the only ones, right? Again, it becomes a - - folks were saying, you know, you can't do this. Not in our name.

STRONG: So, we've run out of time for the interview, so I just want to end on sort of a split question. What do you hope your legacy will be from your time in Brooklyn, and your time as commissioner? And what do you hope will happen next from what you got started, be it the blueprint, or anything?

This transcript is hereby made available for research purposes only.

SHAMA: I don't -- you know, I think that what was started around the dialogue around integration and those blueprints has already manifested in a very different reality for immigrants. I will say that this political moment is making us more deeply understand what voice we need to have as a community. The fact that offices across the country were created, the dialogue around immigrants was shifted, the evidence, just we created abilities for a unique number of cities to truly understand how do they look at their people, right, the human capital in their cities, not from a real asset-based model, and not from a deficiency.

So the mayor of Nashville, Karl Dean, former mayor of Nashville, Karl Dean said something so brilliant when I was at a forum with him in his -- in Tennessee, and he said, "You know, we should be really honored that people choose Nashville. They can choose any other city in America, but they choose our city. What are we going to do to make sure we show them how thankful we are that they have chosen us?" I think that is a reality of framing. Those were his words. But I think being able to be at the conversation, of facilitating that conversation, was really powerful. So I hope that my work -- and I know that enough people that I had the pleasure of working with have now taken this on and lead this work forward. So that is the greatest compliment, right?

Even the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs in New York City today, there have been several folks who have written me or have called me, or have reached out to me and said, like, the work that they have been able to do was possible because of so much of the ground work you did -- committed. And the fact that my advocates, the folks on the outside who were supposed to be prodding when I left government came and said, "Will you join our board? We value you so much." I serve currently on the board of the New York Immigration Coalition, right. I'm not sure that historically speaking, advocates saw their sort of counterparts in government as allies. But I really think that the work that we were able to do allowed me to be an ally for our communities. And so, I hold that dear for many of the advocacy groups that I had conversations with, and
who I continue to support and care a great deal about amid this reality. But in general, the work that they're doing and the leaders in our community are just extraordinary.

On the legacy piece, that's harder. I will say it's harder because my goal is to make sure people have better lives. And I think -- you know, I say this a lot, but when I grow up, I want to work for children and families. Whatever that work looks like, right, whether it's in this chapter where I am here at the Fresh Air Fund doing this work today, or whether it was my previous chapters, or whatever is to come next, right? To be true to myself is to mean that my parents came here with hopes and dreams. And I have to make sure I can both live up to them for myself, but to really to pay it forward, and to make sure that whatever little girl sits in a home in Brooklyn gets to one day do this, because someone paved that way. I hope that's my legacy.

STRONG: Fatima, I thank you so much for your time. I really enjoyed talking with you and learning from you. I just really appreciate it, thank you.

SHAMA: Thanks, yeah.

STRONG: Is there anything I should have asked you before we stop?

SHAMA: No, no. I'm, like, a whole hot mess right now. But yeah, no, this was good. I mean, I hope it's helpful. I have no idea, right. But --

STRONG: Yeah.

SHAMA: Yeah.

STRONG: Well, thank you.

SHAMA: Yeah.