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Oral History with Stacey Salimah-Bell
Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.48
Interview conducted by Liz H. Strong on October 9, 2018
at the narrator's home in Ditmas Park, Brooklyn

STRONG: Today is Tuesday. It's October 9th, 2018. My name is Liz Strong. I'm here for the Brooklyn Historical Society with Stacey Salimah-Bell. This is for the Muslims in Brooklyn public history project. Stacey, just to get started, tell me a little bit about where and when you were born and your memories of life growing up.

SALIMAH-BELL: Sure. So I was born right here in Brooklyn. I always say that I was Brooklyn born, Brooklyn bred, and when I die, I'll be Brooklyn dead. And hopefully that's not for a long time off. But I was born in St. Mary's Hospital, [date redacted for privacy] 1963. And St. Mary's Hospital is in what used to be considered the Weeksville section of Brooklyn. It is a historical Black community. It was started by James Weeks. I don't know exactly when, but he purchased property and free African Americans owned homes there. And I think at some point in the '70s, they discovered that there were four homes, or several homes, still standing, and I remember playing in the old buildings, finding old artifacts, not knowing what we were actually playing in. And years later, they started the Weeksville Foundation, and there's an educational complex there. Berean Baptist Church is right there. So I remember the area around the hospital really well. I had an aunt that actually lived in Kingsborough Projects. It was a housing project, NYCHA development. And so I remember just walking around the corner, and looking at the building that I was born in, and just wondering which room it was, and where my bassinet was.

STRONG: Tell me about your family history a little bit. I know you said they'd been in Brooklyn since the '20s or '30s.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. So we have some family that's been here since the 19-teens, 1920s. They came up during the Great Migration out of the South. This portion of my family came from South Carolina, and surprisingly, they never went to Harlem. They

bypassed Harlem all together. They settled in Brownsville on Thatford [Avenue] and they were able to buy a home there for two reasons: because when they went to look at the homes, which were just being built at the time, someone thought that they were Jewish, not Black, because they were very fair skinned, even though they had very curly hair. And they came from a family of landowners and had sold some of the land so that they could start migrating north.

STRONG: Wow. So when you were young, your grandparents lived here, right, and had you had a relationship with them?

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. By the time I was born, and even -- my mom was born in South Carolina, but came to New York as an infant, and she had come because she had great grandparents -- not great grandparents -- great aunts and uncles that were living here. They were basically in Bedford-Stuyvesant. They were on Decatur Street, some on Bainbridge. And, so, yeah, my grandparents were already here when I was born. We lived in a brownstone, and we lived on the back of the second floor, and my grandparents had the first floor. My aunts had bedrooms the front of the second floor, and then we had family on the third floor and fourth floor, as well.

STRONG: That's amazing, --

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah.

STRONG: -- the intergenerational living. Did you tell me you had, like, a special relationship with your grandmother, as well?

SALIMAH-BELL: I did, yeah. I was her first born. I also have -- my legal name is Stacey Griselda [phonetic]. And so Griselda is her first name. And it wasn't a name that I liked very much growing up because I found out that it was the name of one of the -- Cinderella's stepsisters.

STRONG: [laughter] Oh my goodness.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. [laugher] But it was also my grandmother's name, so I've had, like, a love-hate relationship with that name. But, yeah, I was the first grandchild. They owned several business along what was Reid Avenue back then. And it's now Malcolm X Boulevard. And I remember, even when they changed the name, it was hard for me to

say Malcolm X, despite, when they changed it, I had already become Muslim or reverted back to Islam, as we say. But, yeah, it was on -- they had a general contracting business, they ran a bar and grill, and they also had a grocery store, which they named Stacey's. Mm-hmm.

STRONG: Did you also say that you had Gullah family members?

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah, so they came from --

STRONG: Talk to me about that.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. They actually came f-- my grandmother, Griselda, her mom was from the seacoast of South Carolina. She was from Charleston. And I remember going down to visit with her before my grandparents migrated back south, and I could never understand anything that she said. And at first, I kind of associated the way that she spoke with Jamaicans that I knew here. And at that time, there weren't too many West Indians in Brooklyn, but that was as close a relationship as I could find with anyone that I would hear speaking that way. And, of course, years later, we found out at this was the Gullah culture. They -- of course, they called it, back then, Geechee, which we kind of got away from that term. It was -- at one point seemed to be a derogatory term. Yeah. But she was 100% Gullah. She made the baskets, which we have all over the house.

STRONG: Wow. She made all of these?

SALIMAH-BELL: No, no. She didn't make all of these.

STRONG: Oh, oh, oh.

SALIMAH-BELL: This is the oldest one that I have.

STRONG: Yeah.

SALIMAH-BELL: And she actually taught me how to do it, but I don't remember. Yeah. So it's something that I'm trying to reclaim. My mom never learned, and even her mother never learned, because they were always working at that time, and it was something that you had to have time to sit and do. But I'm glad that she did teach me, and I have memories of canning fruits and vegetables with her. And we would sit out on the road and sell the things that she made. My mother and grandmother would be horrified

when they came and they saw me sitting on the road with her selling things because they hadcome so far. For them, it was kind of like a step backwards to have me barefoot in the road with little pigtails, selling baskets and fruit.

STRONG: [laughter] What was it like for you when your grandmother moved away?

SALIMAH-BELL: Oh, I was devastated. I was 10 years old and I was absolutely devastated because I was at her house constantly. My mom went back to graduate school when I was probably about eight or nine, so my grandmother would come from Bedford-Stuyvesant because, by that time, we had moved out of her home. We were in Bensonhurst. And my grandmother would come from Bedford-Stuyvesant every day to pick me up from school. And then, when my mom got home, she would drive me from Bedford-Stuyvesant back to Bensonhurst and we would do the whole process all over again. On the weekends, I would basically spend the whole weekend with her. And it's kind of the same relationship that I have now with my granddaughter. Babysitters are hard to find, hard to trust, so if you can find a family member to do it, then that was the way to go.

STRONG: So you also said that you would spend summers with her when she moved to South Carolina?

SALIMAH-BELL: So when she finally moved back to South Carolina, we did go down for the summers. And I actually got to spend more time in the South than my mother did, because when my mother was growing up, her parents didn't want her in the South, going through the Jim Crow era segregation. By the time in '73, when my grandmother moved back, it had already -- the Civil Rights Act had pretty much taken effect. You could still see some things going on because I remember going south and my cousins were telling me, "Oh, we're going to school with White people next year." And I was like, "Hmm, well, I go to school with White people all the time." I'm like, "In fact, I'm the only Black person in my class." And they would ask me questions like, "Well, what are White people like?" I mean, they knew them, but they knew them from a distance, and they knew that they had a place, so to speak, and I didn't have that sense at all, being from Brooklyn. So, yeah, it was really strange. But I went back at a time -- Alex Haley

had just written the book *Roots*. And as a little girl, I remember reading this big, fat book. And when I went down, I told my grandmother, "Well, I want to find the Kunta Kinte in my family." And she's like, "Well, I don't know who Kunta Kinte is, but I can take you to cousin Cora [phonetic] and see what she can tell you. And so she would take me every morning to a different cousin's porch, and sit me down, and I would have a little pencil behind my ear, and a notepad, and I'd have my recorder. And it was a little tape player with a cassette tape. And I would record what they were saying, and I would ask them questions, and I got a lot of information about our family. I was able to get information about our family in the South probably back to the 1790s.

STRONG: Oh, wow.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah.

STRONG: What were some of the stories that stand out?

SALIMAH-BELL: Some of the stor-- oh my gosh. There were so many of the stories. There was one story where one of my great-great-grandfathers went to buy a mule one morning and he never came back.

STRONG: Oh my god.

SALIMAH-BELL: But, you know, these stories were just that. They were stories. When I move -- fast-forward, and now I'm able to use the documents that are available to us at the National Archives, and now you c-- I can sit down and -- at my home computer and go through census document after census document. The story was partially true. He did pick up and leave. We don't know whether it was to buy a mule or not. But he moved to Georgia. And now, being the historian that I am, I realize why he picked up and moved. It was right at the end of reconstruction. He had a very vocal part in the Republican Party in the State of South Carolina. And it was something called the Hampton Election of 1876, where, basically, the electoral votes were erroneously thrown to the president. I think the president was Rutherford B. Hayes, if I'm not mistaken. And what they promised to do is -- South Carolina said, "If we give you our electoral votes, then you pull the federal soldiers out of South Carolina, and basically, let us do what we need to do." And that's precisely what happened. So it ushered in Jim

Crow. It ushered in terrorism. It ushered in the Klan. And the people who had been active had to pick up and leave. So we did find him in Georgia. And there was a school there named after them. He was a preacher. They were teachers, a very prominent family, but he could not stay in that small town in South Carolina. And it may seem like, well, Georgia and South Carolina are so close. That wasn't far to run. But back then, it actually was. We didn't have the connectivity to people or the ability to reach out and find people like we do now with all of the social media. So it was far enough for him to get away and start a new identity.

STRONG: Wow. So *Roots* started a whole passion in your life.

SALIMAH-BELL: It started a passion, I think, not just for me, but for Americans, in general, of -- I know so many people, White, Black, and otherwise, who -- it sparked for them that quest to want to know, and I think, probably more so in the African American community because Alex Haley told our story. So, no, I didn't find Kunta Kinte, per se, but I did get back to one of my ancestors, actually, two ancestors, who, on the 1870 census, it says that they were born in Africa. So I don't know what their African names were, but it puts me that much closer. And then, today, with science, with DNA, that door is opening even wider for us. It's something that was taken from us, and just the idea of being able to make that connection back, it's real now, where, for a long time, it really wasn't.

STRONG: Have you done the DNA testing?

SALIMAH-BELL: I have done the DNA testing.

STRONG: Oh wow.

SALIMAH-BELL: I have.

STRONG: What did you learn?

SALIMAH-BELL: It's all over the place. So --

STRONG: Yeah.

SALIMAH-BELL: I've found -- what I'm learning is that DNA, it opens doors; it closes doors. The science is not where we need the science to be, and these companies are basically proprietary. So they have an interest in getting more customers. Some of the things

they say are not necessarily as things seem. It's not as easy as taking a DNA, and then the whole world opens up to you. You've got to do your homework. You've got to still create this paper trail. You've got to impose the scientific results on history. You've got to look at all of these different things in order to find out more about who you are. But the one thing that stands out to me, that I find very, very funny, it's one commercial for one particular company. And the man says that he was German, but then after doing a DNA test, he's trading in his lederhosen for a kilt. And I'm like, well, just keep your kilt. If that's who you are culturally, then your DNA is who the people before you were. It's not who you are.

STRONG: Yeah.

SALIMAH-BELL: So you are still who you are, even after the DNA. So I'm not going to run out and by a Yoruba headdress because I know that, especially being African American, that I am a product of any number of people from West Africa, not just one particular lineage. And being a female, by DNA would only give me one particular lineage, which would be my mother's mother's mother's mother. So you've got to take it with a grain of salt. It's fun. It is entertainment. And you can use it to make connections, but you've got to be just very careful with it, as well.

STRONG: Yeah. I want to hop back to this really curious 10-year-old girl because it was around that time that you also read the autobiography of Malcolm X for the first time.

SALIMAH-BELL: I did. Yes.

STRONG: Or was it even sooner than that?

SALIMAH-BELL: No. It was around that same time, actually. I think I probably read the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* first. And that's where I first heard the name Alex Haley because Alex Haley, if I'm not mistaken, he wrote the preface to the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. I know he wrote -- it was -- he wrote something in that book, and that's where the name kind of jumped out at me, so that by the time his book came out, I was like, oh, okay. If he's writing this, then it must be something kind of like the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, although I knew that, you know, the autobiography was not fiction. And so one thing did absolutely lead to the other.

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STRONG: Tell me about discovering the autobiography and what that book meant to you, or how it changed your worldview.

SALIMAH-BELL: Sure. So my parents had all types of Black literature. And I hate to even call it Black literature because it's American literature. But if you walked into any bookstore or library that would have it at that time, it would probably have been categorized as Black literature. We used to take a trip up to Harlem about once a month, once every two months, to Liberation Bookstore because, at that time, there were no so-called Black bookstores in Brooklyn. It was hard to find books where the people looked like me, where they told our stories. And, of course, a lot of the books were books that were probably not appropriate for a eight, nine, or ten-year-old, but my parents let me read whatever I wanted. They never restricted me in reading anything. A lot of it, I didn't understand to the extent that I understood it going back and reading it as an adult. I could read the words. I could say the words. I knew what the words meant individually. But just comprehending the themes around the books, I probably didn't. But Malcolm X's book, it was clear. It was plain. It was simple. It was just a story of his life, and how he came to Islam, and how he came to the Nation of Islam. Around that same time, there was a lot going on in the Nation of Islam, and I met a friend -- I started meeting friends who were Muslim.

The first friends that I met who were Muslims were probably, like, from Syria. Not too many people from Egypt or Palestine, more Syria and Lebanese. And a lot of them even came from mixed families, where one person may have been Christian, another Muslim. The other introduction that I had to Islam is I had a cousin who lived in Weeksville, in the Kingsborough Projects, and she married someone who was a Black Muslim, and by "Black Muslim" I don't mean that he was a member of the Nation of Islam, but that's how Muslims from the Middle East categorized Black Muslims at that time. They would call you out for your skin color, as opposed to just being Muslim. And he was actually the one -- he gave all of us Muslim names and he was the one who gave me the name Salimah. And it was the first time that I had seen a Qur'an, and it was

opened. I don't remember which surah it was opened to, but it was on a wooden stand, and it was open. And I remember seeing it just sitting on a table, and I went over to look at it, and he told me, "Oh, no, well, you can't touch it." And so, automatically, I wanted to touch it. If someone tells you you can't touch something, I want to. So he says to me, "Oh, no, well, you have to be -- you know, you have to be clean if you're going to touch this book." And, you know, he explained to me, so he says, "I can show you how you can go -- you know, you're going to wash and then you're going -- then you can read it." And thank God, of course, it was a transliteration, so it had the transliteration, it had the Arabic script, and then it had the meaning in English. And that was the first time that I'd actually touched it and started reading in it. And I read the transliteration first, not even knowing what it meant. And he said that, "Oh, you read that so well." And, again, I didn't know what the words meant, but it just sounded nice when I heard him say it. And then, it kind of like -- I just planted a seed and didn't come back to it for a while. Then the -- reading the autobiography of Malcolm X, it didn't -- at that point, it wasn't a Muslim story to me. It was more an African American story. And it wasn't until later that it became a spiritual story.

STRONG: So tell me about that transition after the seed was planted. You said it was sometime in high school or middle school?

SALIMAH-BELL: In high school, yeah. So I met a friend -- her name was Samira [phonetic] -- and she was from Turkey. And she did not wear hijab, but there weren't too many people that I knew that wore hijab besides the Nation of Islam and other Black Muslims. And I went home with her. We were working on a project. She had come to my house. I went back to her house. And I was speaking with her mother, and we were just talking about different things and, you know, why they didn't eat pork. And the mother says, "Oh, well, because, you know, it's not allowed in Islam." And she would explain to me what Islam was. And then I told her. I just -- like, "Well, I want to be a Muslim." And I remember the look on her face like, oh, I don't know. Like, I -- like, you're still living at home with your parents. They're both Christian. You know, I don't know if I should be doing this or if I should even be, you know, teaching you these

things. And then, something in her heart just says, "You know what? If you want to be Muslim, you have to say these words. You have to believe these words". She says, "I will give you shahada." And I can remem-- I remember she was very hesitant to do it out of respect for parental rights and parental controls, but she did it. And so that's when I officially became Muslim. I didn't know what all that entailed, but I would start a journey of learning more and more as I got older.

STRONG: In the early days, this was a private journey, right? You didn't tell your parents?

SALIMAH-BELL: It was a private journey. I -- yeah. Oh, no. I did not -- I absolutely did not tell them what had happened. Yeah. Because then they would've been upset with her, you know, for doing that. I mean, what parent wouldn't be, if someone takes your child and tells them, "Okay, well, you're going to be this religion," or, "You're going to be that religion," against your will? And I came from a Christian family. Now, the odd thing was my mother never went to church. I can't ever remember her taking me to church, but I just kind of knew that they -- this wouldn't sit too well with them. My grandmother s-- who went to church all of my life -- she grew up United Methodist, but ended up converting and becoming baptized as a Baptist when she married my grandfather -- she was the one that I was the least worried about because I think she understood me, she knew who I was, and whatever my spiritual path would be, I knew that she would support it 100%. She may not have preferred it, but she would have supported it regardless.

STRONG: Did you tell her?

SALIMAH-BELL: Not at that time. So, eventually, when I did start practicing, I did tell her. And she just asked me, "Well, is Jesus in that Muslim Bible?" And I said, "Jesus is in the Muslim Bible, Grandma -- it's called the Qur'an -- is mentioned more than the Prophet Muhammad." And she's like, "Well, okay, then." And she just left it at that. [laughter] Yeah.

STRONG: What connected with you about Islam? Why did you choose it?

SALIMAH-BELL: I used to ask a lot of questions when I went to church.

STRONG: [laughter]

SALIMAH-BELL: Some of the questions I would ask out loud, and then I would just get a look from the person because maybe they didn't know the answer. And other questions, I would just sit and ask in my head. So there are two paths, or two tracks, I think, for me. One was what's logical and what's not logical. And we all know that faith is c-- is sometimes just not logical. People believe because they believe, and that's it, and that's all you need to believe. I think -- but the first step was just trying to figure out, okay, the whole concept of the Trinity, and no disrespect to people who believe in the Trinity, but I just couldn't wrap my head around the concept. And if I asked a question, not mockingly, but just truly trying to figure out if Jesus is God, and God died, who was God at the time that Jesus died, and if Jesus was the son of God, then how are the son and J-- these are just simple questions. And yes, I understand, either you believe or you don't, plain and simple. But at that point, I just didn't believe, and I was trying to use logic to work my way to believing or to get to that answer, and I never made the connection between the two. Now, again, I will say that if you are a believer and you c-- there are many concepts in Islam that someone could sit and say the same thing about, or the same thing for. So at that point, it just becomes a matter of faith. And it was just a little more -- it spoke to me just slightly more.

So I -- there was no logic in faith. You believe because you believe. But that little girl in me never got the answers that I needed to get. And so I was kind of guided on a different path. So Samira's mother, when I started asking questions, she kind of had the right answers at the right time. And it could've easily have gone another way. I could've come across a Muslim imam, and when I asked these questions, "Well, why are women perceived in Islam as being not as important as men?" He could've answered it in a way that would've turned me off completely. But I think, ultimately, our creator spoke to my heart, and that's what led me to Islam. Sometimes, we, as people, make religion so complicated, and it is so not complicated at all. And I even say sometimes that, like -- I'll have people -- and I've given people shahada, people at the masjid, people that, you know, I've come to know who wanted to be Muslims. And one

of the first things they may say to me is, "Oh, well, I want to be Muslims because Muslims are so this or they're so that." And I'm like, "Oh, no." I'm like, "People are people. It doesn't matter if they're Christian people, or Muslim people, or Jewish people. So if you want to be Muslim based on the actions of people, then maybe you need to rethink that. But if you want to be Muslim because God is speaking to you, that's something totally different." So, yeah. Muslims can make things hard, just like Christians can make things hard. So Muslims sometimes get on my nerves, but I love Islam.

STRONG: Talk to me about what it was like for you in that decade when you were Muslim privately. How did you practice? What was the experience like? Anything you want to share.

SALIMAH-BELL: It's almost like my life now because I went through a period where I did wear hijab, when I eventually came out, and now, I no longer wear hijab, so it has receded. It's become more private. It's become more personal than when I wore hijab. So, you know, now that you're asking me that question, I'm seeing the parallels between then and now. When I first took my shahada, again, it was much more simple. It was so much easier for me to be Muslim because there weren't 1,001 manmade rules. A lot of things in Islam are clearly cultural and people just don't get that. Even Muslims sometimes don't get that. Basically, to be Muslim means you submit to the will of God. We always say that people created religions. God didn't create religion.

So we have a saying, as Muslims, that everyone is born Muslim. Everyone is born -- meaning the -- in submission to our higher power, in submission to our creator. And then some people may stray away from that, and then other people, they stay on that path. So people who are so-called "born Muslim," they never have that transformative experience, because they think, "OK, well, I was born this way, so this is all I have to do, wear the hijab, make prayer five times a day, give zakat, which is your alms or your charity. I'm Muslim. And it's more, again, of a cultural identity for them than a spiritual identity. But when you revert, usually, it's kind of the other way around. It's akin to

what I would say in the Christian experience, when people become born again, when they go to church that one Sunday, and they go up for the alter call, and the pastor or the priest prays over them, and that's their new birthday. They're born again in Christ and then they move on from there. It's more of a spiritual experience. And sometimes I think that people who are born Muslim, even though we're all technically, in our faith, born Muslim, they don't get that connection. And so I think it's an advantage that sometimes we have when you revert to Islam, because you're able to put everything out on the plate and kind of look and see, before you just dive in. You're putting the things on the plate for yourself, as far as -- rather than someone just feeding it to you. So you get a better understanding of it and you kind of savor it a little bit more. So that period, in the beginning, I think, is what Islam -- and what God intended Islam to be. It was simple. It was pure. It was just a love of the spirit, a love of the reading of the Qur'an, a love of reading the words and without all of the extra stuff that people put into it. And I think that's where I am probably now in my faith.

STRONG: So talk to me about coming out, as you put it.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. So I remember I wanted to -- and I was coming home from work. There was so much traffic. I was working on Rikers Island at the time. And I was -- like, it didn't matter which way I went. I got off of the Van Wyck to get on the Interborough at that time. It's now called the Jackie Robinson. There was no good way to get home. There was just traffic all over the place. So I ended up, somehow, on Fulton Street in front of a masjid, and I just parked the car. And I'm looking, and I can hear the adhan, and that's the first time that I heard the adhan, and I said, "You know what? I'm going to go in and I'm going to actually make prayer." That was the first time that I'd made prayer inside of a masjid. I had on a actual -- it was a sundress, a long dress, and I had a shawl, but I didn't have a shawl that was big enough to cover my shoulders and my hair. So when I went and I looked in the door, there were sisters inside, and they invited me in, but of course, they gave me an overgarment because I wasn't properly dressed for them to make prayer. And I explained to them -- I said, "I'm hot. I'm thirsty. I've been driving in circles. I've been driving in circles. I'm just trying to get home."

So they're like, "Here, take some water." And we just started talking. And then I said to them, "Well, I am a Muslim." I said, "I took shahada." And I explained the story of Samira's mom. And they says, "Well, you need to take shahada again. Let's do it now. And then you make your first prayer." And I took shahada that day and I came home with a hijab on. And then I started wearing it from there. There was an obstacle at work, though. So I guess we can talk about that in a sec.

STRONG: Yeah, I have a few more questions --

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah.

STRONG: -- before we get to that part. You were already married by that part, right?

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

STRONG: And did you share a faith with your husband, or --?

SALIMAH-BELL: He, too -- he wasn't brought up going to church. I mean, he -- there was a small church, a small Baptist church in Bensonhurst that he would go to every once-in-a-while, and then his older two sisters, I think, went to a Catholic church because they had friends that were Catholic, and they were actually confirmed as Catholics, but his mother was not one to go to church, either. So he didn't grow up in any denomination, so to speak, but they were just, I would say, marginal Christians, probably. So, yeah, I had spoken with him about it, like, when we had first gotten married. But also, at that time, there was a movement in Brooklyn among young, urban Black guys that was called the Five Percenter. It was a pseudo-Islamic group that they had all become, you know, part of. So he was kind of aware and in tune with it.

STRONG: Tell me more about that.

SALIMAH-BELL: Oh, okay. Well, he would have to tell you about that. But I mean -- [laughter]

STRONG: Okay. But when you say, "aware and in tune," like, he had friends who were --?

SALIMAH-BELL: He had friends who were Five Percenters. And Five Percenters -- although traditional Muslims would consider them not Muslim, I am never one to say who's Muslim and who's not. That's between them and their creator. But, yeah, it was the Five

Percent Nation. A lot of Islamic -- like I said, it was a pseudo-Islamic movement. It was started by someone who I think was originally a member of the Nation of Islam, and then created his own offshoot.

And it was a way of empowering Black men. It was a message that they needed to hear because they weren't hearing it. It was much like the way the Nation of Islam started in the '20s, and the Moorish American Temple started, just a message of empowerment. The attributes of the faith may have not -- gone kind of astray, but it was what they needed to hear at that time, which is why, even to this day, when I hear Muslims who are not necessarily indigenous, as I say, from this country, and Black, if they disparage the Nation of Islam, I will not stand for that, because a lot of the Muslims who immigrated to this country back at that time, in the '20s, when the Nation of Islam started, they were not particularly nice to Blacks. They were just as -- what's the word I -- they -- we'll just leave it. They were not as nice. They did not do outreach or dawah, as we call, in those communities. They were busy trying to assert how White they were, so they wouldn't get treated like being Black. So, yeah, there was no love between the two communities at that time. So how dare you turn and say that these people, they're not practicing Islam correctly? Because you didn't help them, you didn't teach them, you didn't help them along that path or on that journey.

STRONG: So when you told your husband about your faith, he kind of had this as the background to help understand it?

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah, exactly. Right. He already knew from the Nation of Islam, from -- and, you know, friends in the Nation of Islam, from friends who were Five Percenters, and he was a Five Percenter for that brief moment. So it was easy, already, for him. He didn't eat pork, and that was, like, one of the biggest things with the Nation of Islam and the Five Percenters. It was about the diet, the lifestyle. So it was easy when I spoke to him about it.

STRONG: And how did you decide with your kids? How would you teach them about --?

SALIMAH-BELL: They were still young. They were still very young at that point. So it wasn't like we had made the decision one way or another. And they had -- this neighborhood had so many Pakistanis. They went to school with kids from Southeast Asia. They had friends from Egypt. So for them, it was no big deal. It was a matter of just, at this point, we're going to start sending you to madrasa, which is just to learn prayers. And one thing that I always said for them is, while they lived in my house, they would live under my faith. But just like with me, I had to find my own path, so how could I be upset with them if they found their own spiritual journey? So as long as they were up to a certain age, I wanted to give them that foundation. And then, from there, it's up to them. Of course you hope that your kids are the same faith as you, but if they're not, I just want them to be happy in doing whatever it is that they're doing, whether that's faith, work, family. So that's pretty much how we approached it with them. We taught them the tenets of Islam. They actually went to an Islamic school for a while because it was a better choice than the options that we had. And then, when they got older, they can do what they want.

STRONG: What was the Islamic school they went to?

SALIMAH-BELL: They went to Al-Madrasa Al-Islamiya, which is -- Sunset Park. It's, like, on 53rd Street and -- what's that? Third Avenue? Mm-hmm.

STRONG: And they had a good experience there?

SALIMAH-BELL: They did. Yeah. They did. They learned and that was the main thing that I -- it was more about the academics for me than anything else. I needed them in a place where the academics were excellent. But also, I needed them around a group of kids who I knew were doing good things. And that's not to say that all Muslim kids -- they go through the same things that all kids go through, but I needed them in a controlled environment at that point. There was a lot going on in Brooklyn at that time that I did not want them exposed to, so we controlled it as long as we could. And then, when they went to high school, they were strong enough to stand up to whatever the elements were that were out there.

STRONG: And they were living in this neighborhood, near Cortelyou, at the time?

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

STRONG: Interesting.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah.

STRONG: Also, do you remember the name of the masjid where you took your second shahada?

SALIMAH-BELL: What was the name of the masjid? Yes. It was called the Masjid Al Muslimeen. And it was, yeah, right on Fulton Street near maybe Ralph Avenue. Yeah. It was a very small storefront masjid. And then they lost that storefront. I think they moved around the corner into a basement space. And I don't even know that they're still in existence anymore. I will occasionally see one of the girls. She still lives in Brooklyn. And we'll run into each other occasionally at different functions.

STRONG: So what mosque did you go to regularly? What became your --?

SALIMAH-BELL: That would be Masjid [Abdul Muhsi] Khalifah.

STRONG: Okay.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah.

STRONG: Tell me a little bit about Masjid Khalifah.

SALIMAH-BELL: So I had done what we call basically masjid hopping, you know, trying to find a place. There are lots of masjid, which would be the plural for "masjid," in this area. But the one thing that was really shocking to me is I would walk in and there was no place for women to pray. And I found, again, that was a cultural issue. Even though, to me, it's an oxymoron to say a Bengali masjid or Pakistani masjid -- yeah. They -- the -- certain cultures didn't provide places for women to pray. And the reason that they give is because it's not mandatory that women go to Friday prayer. But even in the Prophet's Masjid, there was a place for women to pray. And if they provide a space for you to pray, it's usually some little corner, some little section that's not comfortable, or you can't bring kids. So, in other words, they're telling you, stay home; we don't want you here. So being an African American, with a grandmother who was Baptist, and watching the women in the Baptist Church do what they do, of course that did not sit well with me. It didn't sit well with me at all.

So someone said to me, "Well, go to Masjid Khalifah." And sure enough, I go on Bedford Avenue and I see this huge building, and I come to find out it used to be some type of -- in the '20s and '30s, it was some type of entertainment venue. And when you walk inside -- because they've got the cultural building -- they have a beautiful hall, and then they've got a huge space for the masjid. And in the masjid, in the musalla, which is where the people pray, there's no division. The men do pray up front and the women pray behind, but there's no wall blocking us off from seeing imam or from just enjoying the whole musalla and what the musalla looks like.

There are clearly two separate entrance-- we all come in the same entrance, but then you go separate ways, to the men's area and to the women's area. But everything is pretty much out in the open, so I was much more comfortable with that. And also, again, because you would have the Bengali masjid, the Pakistani masjid -- I'd even seen a masjid that said, "Nigeria masjid." And now I understand that, when you give a khutbah, which is like the sermon, people do need to understand it, so I can see where people from Bangladesh would say, oh, this is Bengali, so perhaps the clippard is given here in their native language, so that they understand it, and the same with any other cultural group that comes here with their own language. But here, I knew that the khutbah would be in English. I knew that when he had festivals, the food would look like the food that I ate when I was younger, minus the pork, of course. Even the way that we dress, the way that we wore hijab, it was just home for me. It just felt more comfortable, and not because the majority of the people were African American, because clearly, we have people that come in from other cultures, as well.

But it was -- it just felt more like home. It was a surrounding that was familiar to me. They had committees and the women worked on these committees. We were not pushed to the back. And I think that's because, again, a lot of us came from a tradition of Christianity, where we see women working, and doing, and not taking a backseat,

necessarily, to the men. The men in churches may have been the deacons when we were growing up, but the women were clearly there to let Deacon so-and-so know, no, we don't agree with that, so you need to change course.

STRONG: Okay. So now I want to go back a little bit and get a sense of your career. You became involved in correction after banking. Is that right?

SALIMAH-BELL: Mm-hmm.

STRONG: So tell me that story about that transition.

SALIMAH-BELL: Sure. So I was working for Manufacturers Hanover Trust, which, of course, now is defunct. I think Manufacturers Hanover Trust was bought out by Chemical, which was bought out by Chase. So, you know, I was working for Manufacturers Hanover, and I was moving up pretty quickly, and I had also taken civil service exams. And the reason that I had taken the civil service exams -- should I stop?

STRONG: Yeah. Just a moment.

SALIMAH-BELL: Okay. Steve?

STEVE: Yes.

SALIMAH-BELL: Come. It was the noise.

STRONG: Hi, I'm Liz.

SALIMAH-BELL: This is Liz.

STEVE: Hi. Hi, Liz. How are you?

STRONG: Nice to meet you. So you were just talking about the bank, how it had been acquired by a bunch of different things.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah.

STRONG: And you were moving up the ranks.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. So -- but then the stock market crashed in October of 1987 and I needed a job. So I had taken several civil service exams: Police Department tests, Correction Department test, probably Probation, Parole, and I called each of the applicant investigation units to see, you know, well, where am I on the list. And I knew the Correction Department had called me already and I turned them down, and so I called them and said, you know, "Is that job still available?" And they were like, "In fact,

we have a class going in." I think it was, like, two weeks. I'm like, "Well, I don't want to do two weeks because I didn't get laid off yet." And the boss that I was working with said, "Just try to hang in there as long as you can. Stay so that you can get your bonus, at least, and then you'll leave." So I went into the academy in December of 1987. My appointment date was December 10. And I thought that I would stay for a little bit and then go back into banking, or go back into private industry, but I stayed for almost 21 years.

STRONG: Tell me some of your first impressions of working in correction.

SALIMAH-BELL: Oh, Lord.

STRONG: Right?

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. So I already told you that I grew Bensonh-- [laughter] I grew up in Bensonhurst. So I used to get teased a lot by friends who were African American. And I actually didn't have that many African American friends growing up. I -- again, I grew up in Bensonhurst. I was the only Black girl in my class, probably up until fourth or fifth grade. And so it was a culture shock for me, needless to say. I would get teased for talking White, for dressing White, for listening to White music. And going to work in the jails, I was assigned to the correctional institution for women, which was, like, the worst place to go if you were a female officer. It was bad because the women challenged you in ways that they didn't challenge the men.

And surprisingly, at that time, male inmates didn't challenge female officers because they were afraid of the repercussions behind their actions, so they just pretty much wouldn't do it. Not to say that it would never happen, but they kind of knew that that was a line that you didn't cross. But the women never got that message, so they were constantly in your face. So if I gave them an order, they would look at me like, why does she talk like that? Like, what's her problem? Where did she come from? If I said -- like, "Well where did you grow up?" And I'd say, "In Brooklyn." Like, "Well, what part of Brooklyn did you grow up in?"

Salimah-Bell, Stacey, Oral history interview conducted by Liz H. Strong, October 9, 2018, Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.48; Brooklyn Historical Society.

And this is even coworkers who would kind of look at me strange. And I would say in Brooklyn, Bensonhurst. And automatically, they would say, "Oh, well, Marlboro Projects?" And I'm like, "No, not the projects." So it was weird, like, getting challenged because you didn't live in a housing project in Bensonhurst, where clearly, the majority of the African Americans at that stage who lived in Bensonhurst did live in the housing projects, although my husband's family has been from Bensonhurst since the late 1800s. There was a large community of African Americans who were always there. His parents were there. His father mustered into World Word II with the JCH [Jewish Community House] on Bay Parkway. So, yeah, it was just a culture shock.

This was the height of the -- rather, the beginning of the crack epidemic in the late '80s. And they had to build jails faster than they ever built jails before. They started putting trailers and these, like, bubble-like tents that you usually see over tennis courts on Rikers Island, start housing this population that doubled, and tripled, and quadrupled within the span of one or two years. So there was a lot going on. There was a lot going on. They hired more female officers than ever before. Of course there were always officers of color, but we became more of a force at this point, and a lot of them started moving up through the ranks, so the complexion of the department started changing. And of course this is was a time before EEO [Equal Employment Opportunity], before EAP [Employee Assistance Program]. This is before Anita Hill. So there was definitely a lot of sexual harassment going on. It was par for the course. There was no hashtag MeToo back then. That's just what it was, similar to a lot of the stories that we're hearing about now in the press, women just had to deal with it, and I had to deal with that. So it was very, very, very difficult.

STRONG: You didn't deal with it, though. You sued.

SALIMAH-BELL: I did sue them, but I still had to put up with it and deal with it. Yeah.

STRONG: Yeah.

SALIMAH-BELL: So, in addition to the regular -- just harassment from male supervisors -- and it didn't matter. It came from Black supervisors, White supervisors, Spanish

supervisors. It came from all different ways. And one of the other things that I had to deal with, which I had never dealt with at that point, is how you deal with harassment from another woman, because at that time, that's like -- I don't know if it was the beg-- it was -- definitely wasn't the beginning of the LGBT movement, but it was maybe somewhere in the middle. But the whole movement wasn't where it was, so we hadn't really been socialized or taught to deal with that.

That was a whole nother avenue that came into the whole thing. It was like -- especially in the woman's house, you did have a number of women who were gay, and they would say that the straight girls came to work with their uniforms on so that we didn't have to get dressed in the locker room, because a lot of the behavior of the men -- it was mimicked by some of the women, especially the women supervisors. So it was a difficult environment. You're dealing with all of that, and you're dealing with inmates, and you're dealing with a crazy work schedule.

So I said before that they had hired a lot of women. They hired more women then than they had ever hired before. And when you're hiring women who are in their mid-twenties to late twenties, women are getting married; women are having babies. So they're hiring us to kind of help out with the overtime, and what ends up happening is we go out on maternity leave, which is technically sick leave, and the Department of Correction, the Police Department, and the Fire Department in New York City, they had really lucrative sick leave policies. It's because the job was dangerous, and they wanted to make sure that if someone got sick or injured at work, that their families wouldn't be put in financial ruin because of it.

So you basically had a policy where you have 365 sick days a year. That's every day of the year. So you will get paid your regular salary. But the thing about that is that, when you do call in sick, you've got to stay in your house. They'll give you four hours out every day, and they call that recreation time. And you also get time out to go to the

doctor, physical therapy. At that time, they even gave you time to go grocery shopping, but you'd have to call a unit where they would actually log you out. And when you come back to your house, they log you back in. So it comes with the caveat. So the department is paying us for being out on maternity leave, and they're still paying overtime, so it's, like, defeating the purpose of hiring all of these women. And this is the way that I kind of logically justified their actions.

So what they started doing is they would call women into the Health Management division, and they would tell them, "Well, why are you having the baby now? Why don't you wait to have the baby?" So when I was called and I was told that, esp-- and they would do this especially if you were on probation, because if you were on probation, you were much more -- it was much more -- it was easier for them to kind of sway you one way or the other. So when -- I remember when the man said that to me. And I'm sitting here, looking at this man like, "How do you get unpregnant?" is what -- my words to him. And he says to me, "Oh, well, Stacey, you're a very smart girl. You know what to do." And I said to him, "So, are you telling me to have an abortion? Is that what you're telling me to do?" And he didn't say anything.

And this fight was not about whether you believed in abortion or not. The fight was about, how dare you tell me when to have a baby? You don't control my reproductive rights and you don't use that and dangle it over my head. Because basically, what they were saying is, you know that you're going to get fired at the end of your probationary period if you don't have the abortion. So a lot of girls actually did it, and a lot of these girls did it because they already had two or three kids. A lot of them were single moms. And this job was a way for them into the middle class. The Department of Correction, back then, the base salary may have been about 25, 26,000, but you made $50,000. And in 1987-1988, that was a lot of money. I don't know exactly what the equivalent is, but I'm thinking it was probably the equivalent of making about 100-125 now.

So a lot of these women were like, you know what? I'm just not going to have the baby. And what they would offer them as an incentive is they would say to them, "We'll give you a really nice position. We'll give you a steady tour," meaning that you don't have to work rotating tours. We'll let you work Monday through Friday and 7:00 to 3:00. And if a woman already has two kids at home, and she's a single parent, and she's like, "You know what? I'll do this, make the sacrifice that I can be home with my other two kids." A lot of them did it. When they said it to me, it just didn't sit well with me, and I had other options. And I'm thinking, you know what? You go ahead and fire me, then, because if you fire me, I'm going to sue you. And it didn't even come down to that. I ended up just suing them. Yeah. I'm like, this is so wrong. And then coming from the family that I came from, a family who went to the March on Washington, who spoke up, you know, during the Civil Rights Movement, I just knew I'm not doing this.

So they started a class action lawsuit, and we were about 35 in the lawsuit. There were many more, but what happened was, we didn't know if we would settle out of court or not, and there were women that they felt would not make good plaintiffs in court. Had the case gone to federal court, they were saying that some of the women had numerous abortions prior. Some of the women had too many kids to be not married. And these were all value judgments that would've been made against them, victim shaming, if we had actually had to testify in a federal court. And the federal court -- and I believe it was the Southern District from New York, is made up mostly of White men. So these men would've sat there and judged these mostly Black and Spanish girls, thinking, "Well, she doesn't need any more kids, anyway." So a lot of the girls opted, again, to have the abortions. And then, the girls who didn't have the abortions, but wanted to become part of the lawsuit, they couldn't because of that.

STRONG: And you were chosen because --?

SALIMAH-BELL: Well, I was married, which was number one. There were only a few of us that were married. They felt that I can articulate what the case was about. I had already a college degree. So they considered me one of the better of the plaintiffs, although I

hate that they would say it and put it that way, because it goes back to the thing, like, I would meet prostitutes in central booking, and -- even on Rikers Island, and they would say that they were raped by this person or that person. And then I would have other women say to them, "Well, how could you be raped when you're selling it?" And one has nothing to do with the other. You're conflating two different issues. So they were sex workers. A lot of them not by their -- by choice. And some of them, it was rape every night, even though they got money for it. And then, other times, people would just rape them. So you're, again, shaming the victim because of what they did or what -- so-called, the part that they played in what happened to them. And that's kind of what went on in this lawsuit. I didn't like it, but I had to look forward to the bigger picture.

And one of the things that we wanted clearly is we wanted policy to change. And then, right on the heels of this -- or maybe it was simultaneously. I can't remember exactly which -- the Anita Hill hearing started coming out. So it's finally putting this kind of on the map. And I -- just thinking back on it, I can't r-- believe that, in my life, I worked at a time where there was no sexual harassment policy, where there was no EEO. Like, that's, like, amazing. I am over 50, but I'm not 60 years old yet. So this is recent history. Well, last week at the Kavanaugh [laughter] hearings. But this is still an ongoing issue with us today. But, yeah. So we did end up settling out of court. And I don't remember if they brought a couple of more plaintiffs on at that point. I can't say for sure, but probably not. And there were just certain measures that we wanted written into departmental policy to protect us and to protect future generations of women. And there were women today who still benefit from those policies. So I don't regret doing what I did. Now, as you know, it's hard, when you're working in law enforcement, when you're looking for a paramilitary organization, to speak up and say something against the department. Sometimes they may see you as a snitch. But I think that eventually -- I earned my respect. I was a good officer. I went to work every day. I did what I was supposed to do. And no one could say, "Oh, she's a slouch," or, "She doesn't do this," or, "She doesn't do that," because my work record spoke for itself.

STRONG: So you told me that, once you settled, you had to be very careful about considering where your job placement would be, --

SALIMAH-BELL: Definitely.

STRONG: -- because of retaliation. Tell me a little bit about that.

SALIMAH-BELL: So, as part of the settlement, actually, the attorneys were very good at that, and they said, "You know what? We want to make sure that we include in their stipulations where they would work, what their tours would be," because if they hadn't, they could've transferred us from jail, to jail, to jail. It would've just been chaos. So, yeah. Originally, I thought I wanted to go to the Brooklyn House, but I went there for a week, and I'm like, okay, no, this is not going to work. This place is a zoo. Despite it being in Brooklyn and in close proximity to home, it was a jail that was -- at that point, before they renovated it, it looked like something out of a James Cagney movie. Yeah. It was not a pleasant environment, not for the staff, not for the inmates. So they were just building a new jail in Manhattan next to the tombs. And I said, "Well, let's try that one. At least the building is new. They'll have A/C." And that's one thing. Like, when you hear stories of correction officers wanting the inmates to be kept in subhuman conditions, don't believe the hype. We love the inmates to have air conditioning, because if they have air conditioning, we have air conditioning. [laughter]

When they have things to do, different programs, whether it's basketball, weightlifting, or what have you, it makes our jobs easier. We advocate for them to have everything that they could possibly have, so that our days are a lot easier. So Manhattan House was this place. And they're like, "Stacey, you should go there." And I'm like, "Fine." And they did. They put it in my stipulation that I would work there, and I would work Monday through Friday, 7:00 to 3:00. They didn't say where I would work or what post I would have, but the supervisors that came there, they recognized that I was a pretty smart person, that I had a lot of different skills, and they used that to their advantage. So I had some really nice posts and positions while I worked there.

STRONG: So after this is when you started advocating for accommodating religious dress on the job, right?

SALIMAH-BELL: Yes. It -- yeah. It was actually -- it was after that. So I was actually working, at the time, in the special unit. I was working the classification unit, which happened to be back on Rikers Island. And I would wear my hijab into work, change into uniform, take it off, and then, when I went home, change back again, put it back on. And finally, we -- and the department had hired a lot of imams to minister to the Muslim inmates. A lot of inmates have the same experience that Malcolm X had when he was incarcerated. And so they originally would hire immigrant imams. And then they kind of stopped with that because the majority of the inmates were not from other places; they were African American. And this is something that the inmates wanted. They said, "We want imams that look like us. We want imams who speak English. We want imams who understand our culture." And so they did. And they hired one in particular, a phenomenal spiritual advisor to so many staff and inmates alike. His name was Imam Abdul Jamarj Jalil [phonetic]. And he supported staff, he support-- well-respected man -- supported the inmates. And, you know, we went to him and said, "Listen," you know, "We -- this is something that we want to do." So with the support of ministerial services, with the support of other people of other faiths -- we didn't just make it a Muslim issue. We wanted to make a religious freedom, or reasonable accommodations, issue.

I have a friend, Joel Yaskowitz [phonetic], who's since passed away. He was in the Maccabee Society, which is the fraternal organization for Jews in the Department of Correction. But he was also one of the founding members of GOAL, the Gay Officers Action League, in the Department of Correction. And Joel, he caught it. He had such a bad time. They painted his locker pink once. He really went through it. But I give him the utmost respect because he stood his ground and he did not -- when you looked at Joel, he was, like, this nerdy, kind of paunchy, you know, White guy. You wouldn't think that he had it in him, but Joel was one of the strongest officers that I knew at that time. And I'm like, if he can go through that, then we can most certainly back him in wanting

to wear his yarmulke, and we'll have the benefit of wearing the hijab. So Joel had decided, well, you know what, I'm just putting it on. I'm going to wear it. What I didn't know at the time -- and he later came out with it -- was that Joel was sick. He was HIV-positive.

STRONG: Wow.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. And he had since passed away. But he, again, was at that -- he backed us 100%. We backed him, as far as wearing the yarmulke and wearing the hijab. And we had a very good chief of the department at the time. We were in the process of changing over our uniforms. New York City police and correction used to wear this kind of -- a lighter blue shirt with dark blue pants. And they were going back to the uniform of the '60s and '70s, which was all navy blue, the uniform that they're still wearing now. And so a whole new uniform code was being written. And the chief of the department wrote in the religious headwear right into the uniform directive, so that when it came out, when the directive came out, it was already okay to wear it. But what he also allowed us to do was -- we were wearing it. I wore hijab, but he said it had to be navy blue or black, had to match, you know, the uniform. And it was the same with the yarmulke. If you were going to wear the yarmulke, or the kufi, it had to be navy blue or black.

And then other departments used that as precedent for themselves. My husband worked for the Transit Authority, and there was a female bus driver who was Muslim, and she wanted to wear her hijab in uniform, and they were giving her a hard time. So a group of us went with her to her union headquarters and showed them pictures of us in uniform, wearing it, so that their union knew what to do to help her. When they presented it before the Transit Authority, we stood right there with her at a press conference, letting them know that if a correction officer can wear it in uniform, there's nothing that should prohibit a driver from wearing it. And then my husband even would wear his kufi to work. And because of Steve's personality and who he was, they didn't challenge him. They didn't challenge him. And they also didn't challenge the

Jewish men who wore yarmulkes, so how would you then challenge a woman for wearing a religious headdress? Because that would be sexism. So there was a lot -- yeah, a lot going on at that time.

STRONG: So at the time that Joel started wearing his Yarmulke, did you also just start wearing your hijab, or did you wait for the new ri--?

SALIMAH-BELL: I didn't at first. I waited. I was waiting for a while. But then, once we found out -- because I was -- I mean, I was tired of fighting. You just get so -- and I was known as the one, "Oh, she sued the department." And for some officers, that became -- like, I guess they kind of looked up to me because of it, but it becomes a burden after a while because everyone who has a grievance wants to come to you. "Oh, Bell, what did you do when you sued the department? Because I want to sue the department because they didn't have bologna, you know, in the lunch line the other day," or, "I want to sue the department because of this," or, "I want to sue the department because of that." And everything isn't a lawsuit. Like, I would say to some people -- and you -- I became kind of an advisor, so to speak. And I would say, "Okay, did you speak to them?" Like, [laughter] I had one officer, "Well, I want to sue the department because I need to wear orthopedic shoes." I'm like, "Okay. Did you speak to somebody in the jail about your need to wear orthopedic shoes? Did you go to the Health Management Division and maybe get a note saying that you have to wear this particular type of orthopedic shoe?" Our uniform shoe was basically a black Oxford. It could be patent leather; it can be regular leather. But if you have some type of need to do something different, let's first try to use what's at our disposal. Let's try to use what we have in the department as a grievance process, probably. And then, when all of that fails, you go to federal court and you sue the department. So, yeah, it got kind of tiresome with everybody wanting to sue the department. "Oh, go ask Bell. She knows about suing the department."

But, yeah. I was just like, "Okay. Let me just see what's going to happen with Joel, and then we'll go from there." So what ended up happening was between the people at Ministerial Services and Joel wearing the yarmulke. The chief let it be known that --

don't write anyone up for being out of uniform if they're wearing this head covering, as long as it's not bright red, orange, green. It has to be black or blue. And then, he eventually came out with -- I think it's what we called an operations order, basically something -- a sheet of paper from the chief of the department, saying these officers can wear this religious headgear, but it has to be black or blue. It gave what the parameters were for wearing it. And then, when the uniform directive came out, right behind that, it was written into the uniform directive.

STRONG: What was the chief's name?

SALIMAH-BELL: I think it was Chief Taylor.

STRONG: Okay.

SALIMAH-BELL: Eric M. Taylor. Yeah.

STRONG: And what were some of the other requirements? I think you mentioned, like, equipment, gas masks, anything that might've gotten in the way.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah, so one of the -- well, what happened was we didn't have the gas masks at the time. Gas masks came a lot later. But they wanted just to make sure that it wouldn't impede us from getting a proper seal around our faces. And it wouldn't. We just pushed it back. We were able to fit the riot gear on with it. The helmets came over our heads with the scarves. As a matter of fact, what a lot of officers would do is, because we're not assigned our own helmets, when the bell goes off, and wherever you are, there are certain officers that have to run to what we call the war room. You've got to go to this station and you have to suit up.

And what a lot officers do is they walk with handkerchiefs or bandanas in their pockets to put on their heads first, before they put that helmet on, because we don't know who had it on last, when it was last cleaned. [laughter] You know, so they would purposely put on a scarf before they put that bandana -- I mean, before they put the helmet on. And that's male or female. So, yeah. The scarf -- we just had to prove that it didn't impede us in any way. But later on, when it came to the gas mask, what happened was,

so, there were some Christian officers -- my class A uniform, my dress uniform, when I came on in 1987, it was a skirt.

STRONG: [laughter] That's right.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. It was a skirt and pumps. And the tie was, like, this little cross tie. And the males had a regular, traditional, knotted tie for the men. So, clearly, there was a distinction between male officers and female officers. The Christian officers, they were still wearing their skirt because they felt more comfortable with it. Not all, but you have some denominations where the women cannot wear pants. And so, when the new uniform directive came out, they wrote the gender bias -- is what it is -- out of the directive. Class A uniform for male and female were pants with our jackets. We wore the same cap, the same tie. And some of the Christian officers had a problem with them writing the skirts out of the directive. The problem -- and we supported them 100%, but the problem came in because they couldn't put the riot gear on. They couldn't put the straps around their thighs because of the skirt. So they said, absolutely, the skirt had to go. What they eventually did, though -- and this was something that was not official -- we had our clear uniform directive. It made no gender differences between what the uniform -- what the official uniform was.

Some of the women went -- and I can't remember who the chief of the department was at that particular time, but they went and had culottes made. So it was actually a split in the skirt, and it had the flap in the front that made it still appear to be a skirt, so that they could get the riot gear on through it. And people did not give them a problem for wearing that, although, if you came through the academy, if you were probationary, you probably would not get away with doing that. So eventually, the skirt did phase itself out, or the culotte did phase itself out, as those officers retired and left the job. And at this point, women cannot wear the skirt. They don't even sell the skirt any longer as part of the uniform. You would be considered definitely out of uniform if you wore the skirt and pumps. Yeah.

STRONG: I'm curious: You mentioned that many of the inmates would be Muslim, as well, and need certain services. What kind of accommodations did they have for religious dress, --

SALIMAH-BELL: Oh.

STRONG: -- or did the women have?

SALIMAH-BELL: The female inmates, you mean?

STRONG: Yes.

SALIMAH-BELL: Oh, no. They definitely -- they wore their hijab. They -- yeah. They -- because, remember, Rikers Island is technically a detention complex, so they wear their civilian clothes inside of the jail. So whatever civilian clothing they had to wear, that's what they wear. If a woman takes shahada in jail and doesn't have anything that's modest, then the imam or the person assigned to her jail in charge of ministerial services would make sure that she gets something. They would make sure that they had scarves. I've donated old clothing to the jails.

STRONG: Okay, great. You also shared a story at one point that you had been called out of roll call for wearing a hijab at some point. Was that before the --?

SALIMAH-BELL: That was before the directive came out.

STRONG: Tell me that story.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. So basically, I had put it on, and I was told -- we have roll call bef-- the beginning of every tour. And Joel and I were not working in the same jail at the time. We started out working in the same jail. But I had gone to work at a different unit and we have something called redeployment. So when you're assigned to office duty to help cut overtime, they'll send you once a week to work at some other location. So as -- I can't remember what the jail was, but I was sent to work at a jail. And of course the supervisors there didn't know me, didn't know why I had the scarf on. They could surmise, okay, well, maybe she's Muslim. I don't know. But I was called off of roll call and he wanted me to give him a report as to why I was out of uniform. And of course, being the snarky me that I was, I just wrote in my report, "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm not out of uniform," because there was nothing technically written at

that point. And then he asked me for an addendum to the report. And we just kept going back and forth. [laughter] So, finally, I called my supervisor, and I'm like, "Do you know so-and-so?" He's like, "Yeah." I said, "Well, he's over here, harassing me because of my hijab. Could you please give him a call?" And he's like, "Yes." And he called, and then said, "Listen, just, you know -- why? Like, why are you even -- what's the point?" And from that point on, that particular supervisor just kind of looked at me with a side eye. Yeah. But we had an agreement. Yeah. [laughter]

STRONG: I'd like to learn a little bit now about the founding of AMLEOA [American Muslim Law Enforcement Officers Association] --

SALIMAH-BELL: Sure.

STRONG: -- because you're one of the original members. Tell me that story.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. So I was working central booking. The new uniform directive had been out for a while. I think this was in 2000. So I was in uniform and I had on a navy blue hijab in uniform, blue shirt, blue plants. And this police officer comes in, and he was dropping an inm-- a prisoner off. He had made an arrest, you know, his collar. He was bringing him into central booking so that he can get processed for arraignment. And he looked at me and he, like, did kind of a double take. He's like, "Wait a minute." And he stood back, and he points at me, and kind of like whispers, "You're Muslim, right?" And I said, "Alhamdulillah," which means, like, yes, I'm Muslim. All praises due to God. So he s-- gave me the greeting back. And he says, "Oh my goodness. He says, you know, "This is beautiful." He said -- and then he's like, "Oh, sister, I'm not trying," -- you know.

STRONG: [laughter]

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. He says, "No, I'm just saying that, you know, sister in uniform, with hijab." He says, "This is a great thing." And he introduced himself and he said how he had a brother-in-law on the job. He had cousins or nephews in the Marines. He was a Marine, himself. And, of course, this was Adil Almontaser. So we start talking. I'm like, "You better lodge your prisoner and get back to work, is what you better do." But we were talking, and he's like, "You know, we're starting this organization." And I'm like,

"That sounds great." I said, "Count me in." And I said, "But you know that we had an organization years ago in the Department of Correction." He's like, "Find those brothers and sisters and bring them along." So he gives me the address, we exchange numbers, comes to find out we don't live too far each-- from each other. He has an aunt that lives right up in the same neighborhood, you know, as us, not too far up the block from me.

So we called our first meeting and it was in his garage. And we're all trying to decide, like, how we want to be structured. And the first thing we had to do was have our mission. You know, what's the mission of the organization? So, long story short, we get all of that done. We found someone to incorporate us. And of course they want to make me secretary. So I'm like, "Oh, yeah. I have to be secretary because I'm the only female officer here?" And we would rib each other, you know, back and forth, but I'm like, okay. It is what it is. I'll take that. So we keep holding regular meetings and we finally get our certificate of incorporation.

And if I'm not mistaken, it was, like, a week or two before September 11th, 2001. So of course that just put a whole nother light on what our mission would be, on the work that we needed to do. Of course, right after September 11th, right in this neighborhood, people were afraid. People who were Muslim, they were afraid. People who were not Muslim were afraid of Muslims. It was just a lot of fear. And we knew that if we let that fear take hold, then, as they say, they would've won, meaning the terrorists would've won. So we knew that we wanted to do outreach in the community.

STRONG: Okay.

SALIMAH-BELL: I'll wait for him. Yeah.

STRONG: Let's pause.

[Interview Interrupted.]

STRONG: You were saying that, after 9/11, there was a different need for this kind of organization. Tell me more about that.

SALIMAH-BELL: It -- yeah, definitely, there was a need for this type of organization. I think, first, for us -- I remember September 11th. I was in a unit. It was only one block south of the World Trade Center. So as it was happening, the first plane hits, and I'm thinking it was, like, a private jet because I -- we'd heard about John Denver's jet. JFK was another one. We hear about, you know, people in these private jets. And I remember saying to myself, oh my goodness, another private jet. You know, why can't they just book a commercial flight and take the commercial flights? And that's what I'm thinking. But then, I'm like, hmm, I don't know. We went outside of our building. I was standing literally under the first tower that was going to go down, and I looked up, and it was the shadow that came over my head, and it was the second plane, going into the building in front of me. And it was this huge -- it was so close that I could look up and see, like, the numbers written on the bottom of the plane. So of course it cast a dark shadow over my head. And then it goes into the building and it tilts sideways, so it can get more of the building.

That's when I knew. And I remember thinking, oh my God. And then my second thought was, please don't let them be Muslim. Please don't let them be Muslim. And I w-- didn't scream. I was just in shock. And I was, like, frozen in place for a minute, so I literally just ran back down Washington Street into the building that I was assigned to and started telling people, "Get out of the building. We don't know if there are more planes coming. Get out of the building." And as I'm saying that, I realize now people are staring at me. And I'm like, "Why are they staring at me like that?" And then I realize, like, oh my god, it's my hijab. I'm like -- I'm wondering if they're thinking that I know something about something else coming, or whether I had something to do with it. And so the crazy part was they probably thought I did know something. I -- that I did -- yeah. And they were listening to me because they were like, nope, if she's saying get out, we're getting out.

So we're all standing down, and now, the fire trucks are starting to come. So we had one

-- he was an assistant deputy warden. His name was Tommy Hall. He told the officers assigned from the Department of Correction, do not go into the tower. And we were kind of pissed at him because we're like, we need to go in and help people. And he's like, "Don't go into the tower." So now we're furious because we're standing on the plaza, but he's not letting us go in. So a police captain comes and says, "Oh, we need as much help as we can." You know, "Clear these streets. The fire trucks have got to get through." So that's what we started doing, just standing in the streets, clearing the streets, telling people, "Go back," because -- I don't know what it is about human nature, but when there's a disaster, people want to go look and gawk. And, like, this is not that day. And we had no clue that the buildings were going to come down, but we just needed to keep the area clear. And we're telling people, "Get back, get back, get back." And they were. And I'll never forget it. This one fire truck goes through, and I can see the man's face, and he just looked down at me, and he gives me, like, the thumbs up sign. And then, the next time I saw his face, it was one of those 343 faces of the firefighters who died. His face just kept haunting me. I didn't sleep, when I finally did make it home, for literally a week. I had to go to the doctor to get something because I was just so on edge.

So, that day, we kept the streets clear. The buildings come down. I had my hijab on and I had to take it to cover my nose because it was, like, a cement dust. It wasn't smoke. People say all this -- it wasn't smoke. It was as though someone opened a bag of fine cement powder. And I just thought I was going to die that day. And I actually, like, saw my headstone, like "October 3rd, 1963 to September 11th, 2001." And then, the funny thing -- and I won't say "funny," but ironic, is when I drove in to work that morning -- because we had parking there -- it was such a beautiful Tuesday morning. It was a gorgeous day. And I looked ahead and I was, like, just, wow. Like, I can appreciate nature. I love driving Upstate New York, seeing the Catskills, the Adirondacks, even going up to Niagara Falls. But then I saw the city skyline out before me. The sun was shining. And I'm like, that's God's wonder, too, that we were able to build that, that we

were able to make this, that God gave us the skills, the knowledge, the creativity. So I can appreciate kind of both. And that was the last time that I saw those towers standing.

So we -- when I couldn't breathe anymore, I just dropped to the floor. I'm like, I'm gonna just pray. There's nothing else for me to do but pray. And when I got on my knees, I felt water, and I kind of just followed -- crawled toward the water. And what it was, it was, like, a fountain in Battery Square Park, because I had made my way back down to the Battery. And I was able to clear my throat and my nose. And then I just took the hijab and wrapped it around my face, so that I could breathe.

Then we start hearing cries, people crying. And you couldn't really see much, but someone saw my uniform and came toward me. And they were like, "Officer, officer," you know, "What are we going to do?" And I'm like, "Well, just come, stay -- we'll stay together." And a group of us just started grouping together. And then I saw some of the other officers from one of the -- from the unit that I worked in. We didn't see the man who told us not to go into the tower, but thank God he told us not to go into that tower. And we decided we're going to just start getting people together, and let's take them down to where the ferry is, to get them inside of the terminal. But there was a restaurant down there, and the restaurant owner had opened the doors and said, "Just put everybody in here." There was also a group of school kids who had come down to see the Statue of Liberty. We found most of them and started putting them in the restaurant. So at this point, there's, like, no one left outside, and we're just stuck down in the restaurant.

Eventually, one of our radios -- we had a police radio and we were able to start getting communication. So that's when we find out we're under attack. We also heard -- and it was really scary -- I guess it was NORAD [North American Aerospace Defense Command]. They were responding. So there were fighter jets in the air, but we didn't

know if we were being attacked or if it was NORAD, and that was really, really scary. So having gone through all of this -- and the crazy thing was -- not to say that there weren't other Muslims in the area, but I don't know that there were any other Muslim officers in that area, Police Department or Fire Department -- I mean, or Correction Department.

And clearly, with the hijab on -- so, by the end of the day, the hijab and come off. I had to wash it a hundred times and keep putting it around my mouth. There were boats that came in and we put the kids on the first boat. We -- the officers that were down there took the last boat off, and it took us to Brooklyn. We got off kind of near where Brooklyn Bridge Park is now, and we were able to walk up Atlantic Avenue to the Brooklyn House. And my husband was at the Brooklyn House because when all of this had happened, he took his bus, got our boys from school, put them in the house, and then he came back to look for me. He took his bus back to the depot and got his truck to come to look for me, but of course he couldn't get over the bridge. So the only thing he knew to do was go to Brooklyn House and see if they had heard from us. But this was probably 8:30, 9:00 that night. And when I -- he had this grill on his truck. I did not like that grill. I thought it was so ghetto. But I was so happy to see the grill on that truck, waiting there. So a group of us got in and he was able to drop us all home for the night.

And the next day, again, I did not get up. I didn't care if I was AWOL. I didn't know what to do, where to go. I was just in shock. And I stayed awake -- it poured that next day. And then finally, he was like, "Your car." And I'm like, "Oh, yeah." The car was still parked down there. So we went back that Thursday to try to see if the car was still there, and it was, but it was covered with this thick layer of stuff. And the Sanitation Department had come out because they were starting to condemn the vehicles that were left and anything that was outside. And I'm like, "No, my car was paid for." I'm like, "I paid the final car note on it." I'm like, "Don't condemn my car." I showed them

my shield and they're like, "Okay, fine, not a problem." But we weren't able to get it started because of so much stuff that had settled in it. So they opened up the trunk, and they blew out a lot of the dust, and were able to get it started. And I went right to Bay Ridge Volvo, and I told them where the car had been. I didn't want anyone getting contaminated or getting hurt, you know, from the dust. And the dealership was like, "Don't worry. We have it." They cleaned the car inside-out, the engine, and they never charged me for it.

Now the crazy thing is, like, I didn't have the hijab on when I went to drop the car off, and they said they weren't going to charge me, and I didn't have it on when I picked it up. A week later, when I went back, the reaction was, like, totally different. Now it's kind of starting to sink in to people that these were Muslims, and now, the reactions toward me, toward other people, it's starting to change. So definitely, we needed the organization. We needed women to know what to do, what their rights were. I think the whole Muslim community went through a period of shock, whether they were there or not. People tend to withdraw. They become -- some much more just closed, which, at that time, probably wasn't -- it didn't have the appearances of being a good thing. People were afraid to give information, not to say that everybody had information. I mean, just because you're Muslim, it doesn't mean you know everything that some Muslim terrorist organization is doing.

Yeah, it was just a hard time. It was a hard time. And we wanted to kind of be a bridge between the community and the Police Department. And it was -- even that, in and of itself, was very hard, because a lot of the people in the Muslim community didn't necessary trust us, but then, we had coworkers that didn't trust us, either, so it was a hard position for us to be in. But we forged ahead. A lot of good people here in Brooklyn that supported us, that supported the Muslim community.

Again, a lot of outreach, both just explaining who Muslims were -- and the one thing --

it's a pet peeve of mine. Oh my gosh. When people say, "Oh, Islam is a religion of peace." I'm like, okay. Every religion will say that, but Muslims are not always peaceful, just as Christians are not always peaceful. I'm like, let's not use that as a tagline, especially now, because it shuts people down. They're going to look at you like you're crazy. People who are Muslim just flew two planes into two of our country's landmarks and you're going to say that they're peaceful people. And then you'll have Muslims say things like, "Well, they weren't Muslim." So, to a non-Muslim, when they hear that, what they're thinking is we're saying, "Okay, they must've been Christian," or, "They must've been, Jewish, or Hindu, or Buddhist." That's not what people s-- mean when they say that. What they're saying is, they weren't real Muslims or they weren't good Muslims, if they were doing something like that. They could not have been worshipping the same god that I worship if they would do something like that. So, yeah, the organization had -- I say, instead of having the birth of, let's say, a human baby, where you get a crawling period, and then you get to be a toddler, and then you finally get your strong walking legs, we were more like Giraffes. We were born and then you had to hit the ground running. Yeah.

STRONG: Talk to me about any examples you have about community meetings or conversations. Give me something specific from your memory about what that outreach looked like.

SALIMAH-BELL: Sure. So of course we hear a lot -- we heard a lot from people who didn't know where their sons were, or who didn't know where their husbands were, because they were being taken, not necessarily to Guantanamo Bay, but people would disappear, and you didn't know what happened to them. You had wives who did not have jobs, with kids at home, who didn't know how to navigate the American social services systems and other organizations that were here to help them. And I remember specifically doing one -- it was actually a press conference, and it was outside of the Detention Center, the Federal Detention Center right here in Sunset Park. And, you know, we were saying that, you know, we can't promise you the world. We are law enforcement officers and, you know, we are speaking out. We're saying that what's

going on is wrong, especially when there's no due process.

And I remember a woman -- you know, she was just staring at me. And at first, I'm thinking she's staring at me like, oh, you all are a bunch of liars. You're working in law enforcement. You're working with them. But after I spoke at the con-- at the press conference, she made a B-line for me. And she's like, "My baby has no milk." She says, "I don't know where my husband is." And she said, "My husband is not involved in any of this." She said, "He is here illegally, but he's not involved in this. My baby has no milk." And I'm looking in my purse to see if I have any cash, like, to give her money. I had no cash, you know, to give her. But then, I had to re-- just rethink the whole process. If I give her money right now, that still doesn't help her in the long run. And so, at that point, we did have to start reaching out to other organizations. And it was just a really, just, again, an odd period, because you have some organizations who are Arab organizations. And then you have other organizations who said they were Muslim organizations, but they were more Arab organizations.

I don't want to say that, as an African American Muslim, I experience less, but the issues were definitely different. I would have people in my family, "Now haven't you had enough of that Muslim religion?" You know, things like that, it made them more eternal. I think people probably -- unless you were perceived as what they thought is "other" wouldn't accost you on the street as quickly as they would someone who's clearly of, say, Southeast Asian or Arab descent, because I have my Brooklyn game face and I will put it on with hijab or without hijab. [laughter] Like, don't mess with me. Although, one morning, going back into work, when our unit was open -- we did have to get right back there.

A week later, we're back at work, and I took the train in because there was just so much going on down there, and we were working ground zero. And that morning, a man s-- he just spit at me. He spat on me. His spit was right on the front of my shirt. I had my

full uniform on underneath my abaya, the garment that I had on over the uniform. And I did that because some of the facilities were down, so I started wearing my uniform in to work. And I would just put an overgarment over it. And I'm standing there, like, in tears. I wanted to punch him in his neck. I wanted to take it off and let him know, I could lock you up right now. And of all the people on the train, it was one woman who stood up and said something to him. Everyone else just sat there and watched him do it. And I think it hurt more that people said nothing and did nothing. And that's scary. That's the scary thing.

It wasn't scary for me, so much, personally, because if someone, at that point, would've come for my life, I have a firearm. I pray, God, I never have to use it. But I was prepared to defend myself, not against spit. The spit wouldn't kill me. It hurt. It's humiliating. But do you shoot somebody because they spit at you? Absolutely not. So that was one that I just had to stand there and take. And I hope that he felt good about what he did. I hope that that helped him in some way, shape, or form. But the fact that people did nothing, except for that one older woman -- that one old lady was the only one that stood up. And so that kind of showed me -- it kind of set the stage for what we see today, almost. It showed me that, as much as I love this country -- I have no other country to go back to -- I -- there were things that were clearly not nice, and that it's so easy for us to slip back to that post-reconstruction era to the things that my family went through back in the 1800s, to the things that they had to escape from.

I remember about a year or two ago, I recently started saying things like -- they would say, "Stacey, well, you speak Spanish fluently. You speak some Arabic. Like, where is your family from?" And I say, "Oh, they were refugees here." They're like, "Oh, really? Were they refugees from Africa? Like, where were they from?" I say, "No, they were refugees from South Carolina. They were escaping terrorism, the terrorism of South Carolina, and that's why they came here." And people would look at me in a kind of strange and odd way, but what they don't get is that it's the same experience that --

when my Gullah great-grandmother came to New York City, this was just as foreign to her as an Egyptian woman coming from Nubia and landing in New York City.

This was all new. She spoke a different language. She literally spoke a different language. Most of the southerners came here and they had heavy accents, and they were teased because of it, but it was a totally new environment. So if people think that African Americans don't get the immigrant experience, oh, we get it, but we just -- our experience is usually not acknowledged as such, but clearly, it is.

STRONG: I have to ask you -- you brought up the mass arrest that took place, and detention of people who were immigrants, documented or otherwise. There was a lawsuit about treatment of those detainees, I think, especially at the Brooklyn Detention C--

SALIMAH-BELL: The Federal -- Mm-hmm.

STRONG: Yeah. Did you see any kind of living conditions from your perspective as a correction officer? Or what was going on then?

SALIMAH-BELL: No, because I wasn't assigned to those facilities.

STRONG: Okay.

SALIMAH-BELL: Those were federal facilities.

STRONG: That's right. Okay.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. And I worked in the city facility. What I will say is most officers, as with most professions, they get up every day. They want to go to work. They want to do their job. They want to come home the same way that they went to work, meaning no injuries. They don't get up in the morning thinking, oh, I'm going to go to work and beat up some inmates today. It's usually -- it doesn't happen that way. Most violations occur -- and I realize this even as a supervisor, when I finally did get promoted. What happens is, we have directives that guide our behavior. So you have a use-of-force directive. And the use-of-force directive may s-- indicate that you can't strike someone in the head. Anyone who's been in a streetfight or a fistfight, you just start swinging. You go for what you know. Now, when you're in a correctional setting, you've got to let that go out of your head, because if you're swinging, and you strike an inmate in the

head, they will say that that's a non-permissible use of force, or excessive, even, use of force.

We're human. We're people. We're not robots. And you're going to try to defend yourself any way that you can defend yourself. Even things -- let's say, for example, if you have keys in your hand. And clearly, almost every department the United States will say that you cannot strike inmates with equipment. If you're a female officer, and you have these keys in your hand, and you have a six-foot-two inmate coming for you, you might strike them in the head with your keys. Now, the directive says that you can't do that, so that may well be considered an excessive use of force.

So, okay, with that said, are there officers who are abusive? Of course there are. But it's not like -- again, people don't get up in the morning and say, I'm going to -- who does that? That's sadistic. I'm sure, yeah, there are one or two, but you ferret them out very early on, because they become a liability, not just for the people that they work around, meaning the inmates. They become a liability for the other officers. They become a liability for the department. Most people get up in the morning -- they just want to earn a living so that they can pay their mortgage and have little Jim Bob take -- you know, go to baseball and take the kids to Disney, and that's it. That's what they want to do.

And most law enforcement officers -- I find it kind of ironic that they're so altruistic about what they do. "Well, we want to help people." And in the academy, you really see that. It's not until they're doing it a couple of years that they realize, okay, I don't know if I'm helping anybody here, that they become so jaded. You know, so is it a slippery slope? Clearly, it is. So I can't speak to what went on in those federal detention facilities. But what I can say is this: We all saw what happened in some of the prisons that were run by soldiers overseas. And I think that it's a scary thing when I see military and law enforcement kind of merging. I remember after the first -- I think it was during Desert Storm, as a matter of fact. The department got surplus Army

equipment.

We had Sherman tanks on Rikers Island. And I'm like, what are they going to do with those tanks? We had so much military equipment. And that was just on Rikers. That's on -- where we know that the people are prisoners. Are there innocent people on Rikers? Of course there are. But believe me, they're not all sitting on Rikers Island because they're choir boys and Boy Scouts. They absolutely are not. Every time you look at the news and you see someone who did something heinous, guess where they're going: to Rikers Island. So when you get 500, 600 people who've done heinous things in the City of New York assembled in one place, what makes you think that they're going to stop because they're in jail? What makes you think that the behavior stops? It does not. And it has to be controlled so that the staff, again, get to go home to their families, and so that the inmates, once their cases are adjudicated, get to go home to their families, or get to go to upstate prisons.

STRONG: To walk it back a little bit from the extreme examples you just gave, when people were being arrested in these mass arrests that you referenced, it was for immigration crimes, not for aggressive crimes. And in some cases, they would be put in general population, which, as you mentioned, might be a dangerous place for them to be. And you also gave examples of times when you, as a visibly Muslim woman were experiencing bias and lashing out from civilians. I wonder if you saw any situations where inmates were showing bias to other inmates who were Muslim, or who were immigrant, or where officers might've been showing bias to detainees.

SALIMAH-BELL: Oh, absolutely not. So, remember, on Rikers Island, we didn't hold the immigration detainers.

STRONG: Got it.

SALIMAH-BELL: And even some of the people who were disappearing and being arrested, it wasn't even on what they call the immigration detainers. It was under the Patriot Act. So there was no reason -- they didn't even know, a lot of times, why they were being held because they weren't given due process. And again, that's the federal system,

which is a totally different system. And it is a scary system. It's scary for people that even work there. I have one friend who actually works in the federal jail. And she actually worked in that particular federal jail. And she was like -- you know, when I asked her about it, she's like, "Oh, they're just like other prisoners." And a lot of times, they might get put there for a day or two, and then they were shipped out to other places. And where those other places were, we do not know. Could've been Guantanamo, could've someplace out west. Who knows what happened, where they were sent? That, we don't know.

But one thing that I do know is that, okay, so the inmates, they have a whole classification system. I worked in a classification unit on Rikers Island. So when we say, "Oh, the," -- you know, "We don't want kids in adult jails," kids and adults are never mixed together. Again, it's a liability for the Department of Correction. It's a liability for the staff. Nobody wants to even risk that. And believe it or not, the liability is not so much because the adults will become predators to the kids. It's actually the other way around. Some of the most violent people on Rikers Island are the adolescents, and it's always been that way. Once people hit a certain age, they tend to commit fewer crimes. And generally, that age is around 35. In the classification scoring system, at one point, if you were over -- I think the age was 35; it may have even been as low as 30 -- you actually lose points for being older. Older people, we don't run as fast, we can't jump as high, you just don't do the same things that you do in your adolescence.

Adolescents are fearless. They think that nothing can happen to them. And if you just look at the last week in New York City history, some of the things that have gone on in the news, some of the worst crimes were perpetrated by 14, 15, and 16-year-olds, because that's the age where they're trying to assert themselves. They're trying to find out who they are. And, yeah, they become very violent at that age. So they're not mixed in for that reason. And I'm guessing, in the federal system, it may be the same; it may

not be the same. But clearly, these men and women, the Muslims that were rounded up, were not even part of the federal system.

So if the federal system does have a classification, which I'm sure that they do, they were outside of that because they were picked up under no criminal law, no vehicular traffic law. No. They were picked up because they were Muslims and they may have been suspected of being terrorists. What led to those suspicions, who knows? It could've been phone calls back to family in Egypt. It could've been -- just, you know, you purchased the wrong firearm at the wrong time. Who knows? But there -- people were missing, people were disappearing, and families were affected by it. And this is outside of the regular immigration process.

STRONG: Thank you for exploring that with me. Back to AMLEOA, was there any help you guys were able to provide in finding people or reaching out to service organizations?

SALIMAH-BELL: We were not able to help them as far as finding people. That was outside of the parameters of our jobs. As much as we would have liked to use the resources at work, we knew that that was absolutely a road that we could not go down, because we still have families, we still have mortgages, we still have kids to get through college. Our kids still wanted to play softball, as well. But what we could do is put people in contact with resources, with attorneys that we knew. And so there was like, yeah, a whole network of people that were willing to help, and basically, attorneys. Leave that up to them. Law enforcement, some of us may go off and become attorneys, but we were not attorneys, and we didn't want to get into an area that it was beyond us. So we would make referrals often, and if we could, provide support, like gift boxes during Ramadan. Yeah. Even -- we did things during Thanksgiving. We did things for Christmas. We would collect toys and give toys out at hospitals or in communities where they were needed. So we tried to support them in that way and make the referrals.

We even did fairs where we would -- we had one fair, we did it right at Al-Noor School. We had different city agencies come out, from the agency that handles immigration, to the library, to hospitals, social service agencies. We had legal aid. The District Attorney's Office came out. We had -- the whole schoolyard probably was filled with about 40 different agencies, nonprofits that were in the community to help. And we did it at Al-Noor because Al-Noor was a place that was known to the community, it was easily accessible by train, and people could come, and they did. They came and they walked away with shopping bags full of information, and resources, and things that they could use to get help, whether it was someone who had been taken because of the Patriot Act, whether -- they didn't know whether they were able to apply for food stamps, where they can get milk by applying for WIC [Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children] until their husbands came back home.

STRONG: So you've described the outreach you're doing to civilian communities. Talk to me a little bit about what you did to educate law enforcement organizations. How did that work?

SALIMAH-BELL: Sure. So that's something -- and we had a lot of support in doing that from other fraternal organizations. There was a fraternal organization that I belonged to before AMLEOA, and it was the Guardians Association. So the Guardians, they were the organization of African American or Blacks in law enforcement. And likewise, I had mentioned the Maccabees, that Joel Yaskowitz was a member of. That was -- the fraternal organization for Jewish officers. We had the Colombian Society, which, yesterday, they marched in the Columbus Day Parade. We have the Emerald Society, which is for the Irish officers, and the Steuben Society, which is for the German officers. So almost every ethnic group has a fraternal organization within law enforcement. So we kind of wanted to be that organization for law enforcement.

But because of September 11th, it kind of, again, shifted and changed our focus. So within the department, we needed to, first of all, find out, how many Muslims are there in the Correction Department and in the Police Department? Come to find out, more

than we ever thought. And then we have some that we could call secret Muslims. They didn't want anyone to know, and that was fine. Again, I had my own experience with being a secret Muslim. The numbers were way higher than we ever thought. The Muslims in the Correction Department were a little bit more visible because we had organized a little bit earlier, under the previous organization, Islamic community of law enforcement officers. So we pretty much knew who we were, but we got more and more, now, Southeast Asians and officers of Arab descent. The first officers in the Correction Department that openly professed to being Muslim were the African American officers. We have now even women in the Correction Department from Southeast Asia who are Muslim and who wear hijab in uniform.

So, yeah, we set up that way. We wanted to do things like march in parades, show our Muslim pride. We wanted to do things like the food pantry drives. We wanted to do things like a janazah committee, meaning -- the Emerald Society, they're known -- for any officer that transitions, they always come and they play the bagpipes, and it's kind of haunting when you're standing at a member of the service's funeral, and the Honor Guard is putting that casket into the back of a hearse, and those bagpipes are blowing. It provides comfort to the family that's assembled because what they're seeing is, my God, all of these people have come out. It's a sea of blue. The secret about that is, a lot of times, you would go on a funeral detail, you don't know the person that passed away. You can't possibly know all of these officers. But what happens is, each jail is required to send a certain number of officers -- it's usually a good bus load -- to go to that location. And, yeah, you show for the family. And it's a good support for the family.

So, as Muslims, we had to start looking at certain traditions. Are the bagpipes okay at a janazah ceremony? What would happen when we have this whole detail of officers come in to a masjid? They all have to remove their shoes. But if you've got 300 officers removing their shoes and they're all wearing the same shoes, that's going to be a problem. When they go to retrieve the shoes to go home, someone's going home

without shoes on when all of the shoes look the same. So we wanted to talk about things like this in advance before the first Muslim officer transitions. And all of us would tease, like, well, I hope it's not me. Like, it's not going to be me. I'll be there to help organize things, but it won't be me. But whoever it is, I mean, that's something that we're going to all face one day.

So, yeah, we wanted to do things more as a fraternity, have picnics, have outings just with ourselves, and again, provide a support to each other. Were there problems? There were problems in some instances. But because they knew that we were there, people didn't speak on the problems. And I would say the problems are similar to African American officers who work in the police department. There are clear biases, and there are things that need to be changed, and we are making headway. But with organizations such as the Guardians, things have started to move forward, definitely.

STRONG: So AMLEOA no longer exists, right?

SALIMAH-BELL: No.

STRONG: Okay. So Muslim officer societies in the NYPD, and then you helped found MECCA [Muslims Employed in City Corrections Association] in correction?

SALIMAH-BELL: Yes. Mm-hmm.

STRONG: Tell me that story.

SALIMAH-BELL: Sure. So as I had mentioned, we had the American Muslim Law Enforcement Officers Association. We kind of saw that as a national organization, not a fraternally recognized departmental organization. If your fraternity -- fraternal organization is recognized by the department, there are certain things that you can do and certain things that you can't do. It's a fraternity. It's a fraternal organization, so it exists mostly to serve the members, the members of the service in that particular department. After September 11th, we -- you know, you reach the point where you just get tired of telling people, "We're not all terrorists." You get -- ah, you just become so tired of it. And so, after a while, you just stop saying anything.

And then, you'll hear the complaint, "Oh, they never speak out against terrorism." And we're like, what? Are you kidding me? We always speak out against terrorism. But of course, rather than broadcast a group of law enforcement officers speaking out against terrorism -- I remember specifically one press conference -- and I can't remember what the press conference was about, but they asked me if I would step in the back. And the reason was they didn't want to see the hijab in uniform because, with the brothers, it wasn't clear that they were Muslim. But if I'm standing right there in the front, it's clear that this is a group of Muslim officers.

So, yeah, they didn't want to broadcast that. But if you find some lunatic somewhere who is saying that America is the great Satan and should, you know, go down, and burn in hell fires, of course, that will make the 6:00 news. So, again, you just get tired of it. You get tired of it. And after a while, I know personally, I didn't want my identity to be defined around what we are not. I wanted my identity to be more of what we are, and a truthful, what we are. I'm a peaceful person. Are all Muslims peaceful? Probably not. It's the first thing that we say when we greet each other, as-salaam alaikum, may peace be upon you, but I think sometimes people just say it by rote. They don't mean it. I don't say it unless I mean it. I want you to find that peace. And I don't know if it's -- well, I do know. It's a combination of age, being retired, that I am so at peace right now that, again, I don't have to prove anything to anybody.

I was teasing my friend. My birthday just passed. And she was telling me of an incident that she had. And she happens to be a member, as well, of MECCA. She retired from the Department of Correction and she's Muslim. And she says, "Oh, yeah, so the person said this." I said, "You know what?" I said, "If someone walked up to me on Cortelyou Road and says, 'I'm going to punch you in your face,' I would just say, 'Here, go ahead, punch me.'" I mean, whoa, I'm not even going to fight back. For what? Like, what -- if it feels good for you to punch me, if it makes your day for you to punch me, then go

ahead, lady. I'm like, whatever. I am so over it. And I think that a lot of Muslims, like, just feel that way. Like, no, we're not going to constantly, "Oh, we are not terrorists. Oh, we are a religion of peace." We're done. You know who we are.

Any thinking person -- you already know what the truth is. You know that all Muslims are not terrorists. Okay, you know that we have Christian terrorists, that we have Hindu terrorists, that we have terrorists of all stripes. We will not turn our eyes against what Muslims have done, but nor will we turn our eyes at what Christians have done, or Hindus, or anyone else. People are people, period, end of story. And I prefer to just leave it, you know, at that, and at this stage.

So, yeah, MECCA was more -- looking more introspective. It was coming back to what we originally wanted AMLEOA to be, a fraternal organization to support the needs of the people who are members of the organization. If someone's mother is sick, can one of us go and perhaps read Qur'an to her while she's in the hospital because you're working a 3:00 to 11:00 tour? If someone's wife has a baby, let's try to put together an aqiqah, or a naming ceremony for the baby. Let's provide each other the support, so that we can get this next 20, now 22 years of this God-forsaken job. So that's the type of organization. And, yes, of course, community outreach. Occasionally, if you want to find out what Muslims -- who Muslims are, or what Islam is, sure. Not so much from a perspective of proselytation, but just, you want to know, education. Yes, let's do our Ramadan toy giveaway.

So that's where we wanted to be in August of 2001, before September 11, and I think now we can get back to that. And yes, now we've even worked out what a janazah would look like for a member of service. How do we navigate the shoe question? Again, the 300 pairs of shoes, so that officers can get their shoes back? You can give them a bag that they can hold onto and take the shoes in with them, or they can cover the shoes.

You know, so, yeah, we've kind of looked into all of that, and I think it's a good place to be.

STRONG: So shortly, just a year, or a couple of years after MECCA was formed, you retired.

SALIMAH-BELL: I did. Mm-hmm.

STRONG: So you had mentioned at some point you kind of came back to a more individual practice of Islam. You stopped wearing hijab. When did that happen and how did that transition take place?

SALIMAH-BELL: I think I fully stopped wearing hijab probably around 2010, 2011.

STRONG: Okay, not that long ago.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. So right after I retired, like, I would be around the house, and I'm going out to water my garden, and I realize, oh, I didn't put my hijab on. And I run back inside, put it on, and go back out again. And then, I'm like, okay, this is ridiculous. I'm not -- I'm just around my house. And then I remember my neighbor, who happens to be an observant Jew, she says to me, "Oh, you have beautiful hair." And I'm like, what is she talking about? And I realize it wasn't on. [laughter] Yeah. And then I became -- it was odd at first, but then I became a little bit more comfortable. And the other thing is that I had time on my hands, and I started, once again, reading everything, reading the Qur'an not just during the month of Ramadan, which is when Muslims traditionally read it from back to front, or rather -- yeah, back to front. Is -- I read, I read, and I read. And I found more books, and I read. And my whole perception changed. At one point, I believed that it was mandatory for me to wear it, and I wore it, and it served me well at that time. It projected to the world that I was Muslim.

And then, at one point, to me, like, I'll never forget. I saw little girls walking down, and I called it hijabbing and de-jabbing. So I saw her walking. I think she must've gone to the junior high school over here. And I see her sneak over here, and she takes off her hijab. So that was the de-jab. [laughter] And then I see her in the afternoon come back, and she re-jabbed. [laughter] She put it back on again. But the thing that I noticed was her pants were so tight and she had on a tight shirt. And I'm not judging her. I'm not at all.

But the whole point of her hijab was just to say, "I'm Muslim." That was the point of her hijab, because technically, if you're going to wear it, and when I did wear it, I believed that you wore it for modesty purposes. So there was nothing modest about her bottom half at all, but her parents prob-- let her go out of the house like that as long as she had this hijab on. And I knew a lot of little girls like that: tight jeans, tight shirts, but they had that hijab on, and hijab was all that mattered. A lot of these girls don't pray. A lot of them don't know how to pray. But that hijab, it just lets the world know that you're Muslim. They can wear a button that says, "I'm Muslim," as far as I'm concerned, but if that's important to their parents, and that's what they need to do, again, not sitting in judgment.

But for me, because my clothing became much more comfortable -- not necessarily tighter, but just more comfortable, I started wearing things that I would not have worn five, six, seven years before. I'm older and I tease, "Oh, nobody's going to catcall me in the street any longer. Nobody wants me anymore." But, you know, like -- I'm like -- I'm over it. And then I also came to the place that, when I would ask Muslims, I'd even ask friends, "What is the hijab for?" Some of them would go into this whole diatribe, "Oh, it's a protection for me, because then men don't see my body." I'm like, I'm not responsible for what men are thinking. It is not my job to be responsible for what he's going to think. He's going to think what he's going to think whether I'm wearing a bedsheet or whether I'm wearing a bikini. Not my job, not my responsibility.

And I hadn't read one place -- and I always say -- may Allah forgive me, or astaghfirullah -- in the Qur'an, where it says I have to wear it, except for when I pray. When I pray, I wear it out of respect, much like nuns always wear, much like in the Eastern Orthodox Church, you don't walk into a church unless you have a little kerchief on your head. When I travelled to the Vatican, women were being turned away from entry because their shoulders were bare and they had on shorts. So there was a little stand that you can buy a little wrap-around shawl. When I was in Paris, to go into

Notre Dame, it's the same thing. To go into the Sacre Coeur, it's the same thing. You've got to -- just showing respect. And I realize that a lot of these traditions, I looked at the history, I looked at the men who wrote these edicts 800 years ago in Arabia, and I realized that the Qur'an is -- for me, is not stagnant, that it's a living book, much like the Bible is living. I'm not saying that Muslims have to change because I don't know that the Prophet Muhammad would recognize his people, would recognize us today, because we veered so far off from, perhaps, what his original plan was.

So, yeah, for me, I don't -- again, I don't need to prove to anybody -- the lady on Cortelyou, she can punch me in my face, and I'm going to just let her, and I'm going to get up and say, "Ouch, that hurts." And I'm going to come home and put ice on my eye, period, end of story. And it's the same thing with my faith. My faith is mine. It's personal. No one gets to tell me, except God, how I need to live it. And that's pretty much where I am right now.

STRONG: Do you still go to mosque, or --?

SALIMAH-BELL: Oh, yeah. Mm-hmm.

STRONG: Okay. So there is still a community aspect to it. Yes. Okay.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yes. Yeah. Yeah. And it's, again, seeing my community. It's praying in community. That hasn't changed for me. That hasn't changed for me at all. But it's just how I live it. So people say that Islam, it's a -- it's not a religion, it's a life choice, it's a way of life. And it is, and more so now than even when I was wearing hijab. Wearing hijab, I had to prove to everybody that I was Muslim because I was seen by other as -- Arab Mus-- by Arab Muslims and Southeast Asian Muslims. And it was so odd because I would be in full Muslim dress, clearly, and if I offered the greetings to someone, there were times where they would say, "Oh, you're a Muslim."

And I'm standing there, looking at them, like, no, I'm just wearing the hijab as a fashion statement. So, again, it's no longer a need to prove to anybody anything. And that's why I choose not to wear it today. But at the end of the day, again, when I ask most

Muslims, "Well, why do you wear it?" they -- I get all kinds of answers, but the one. And this is, again my personal feeling, and the one time I will judge. To me, if you are wearing it, there should only be one answer, and that answer should be because God commanded it, period, end of story. That's it. Not because, oh, so men won't look at you, oh, because it's a protection, oh, so that you don't tempt men. That's all nonsense. It should be one answer, because you believe that God told you that's what you need to do, just like I know that God told me not to eat pork. I won't eat it. But I don't know that God commanded us to wear hijab, except for when praying, period, end of story. That simple. No need to justify anything else. If God says, "Oh, you need to wear a tulip on your head," and that's what you believe, then do it. You don't need to justify it for anyone. As long as it's not harming anyone else, and it's not hurting you, wear your tulip. [laughter] Yeah. I'm just so much easier.

STRONG: Yeah. You know, as you were talking about seeing the schoolgirls go by, I realized I haven't asked you yet about Girl Scouts, --

SALIMAH-BELL: Oh, mm-hmm.

STRONG: -- which is something you're very, very involved in. And I'm especially interested in the Muslim girls' group that you did for three years.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

STRONG: Tell me that story.

SALIMAH-BELL: Sure. So, again, this was right after September 11th. They built this beautiful community center, and they built it in Bensonhurst. They built it just blocks from where my husband grew up and blocks from where I grew up. So it was home for me. I had been in that building so many times. It was the old colonial mansion. It was a catering hall. I had been to numerous bat mitzvahs and bar mitzvahs there, growing up, sweet sixteens. So when the Muslim American Society purchased this building, renovated the building, and opened it up as a Muslim youth center, all I could say was alhamdulillah, which means all praises due to God. Great that, you know, these kids now have someplace to go. They can be safe. It's on Bath Avenue, right across the street from the 62 precinct, which I know well, growing up in that neighborhood. And

the park is right there next to it. And they said that they wanted to do -- you know, get the kids involved in different things.

And don't remember if it was Adil, if it was Ahmed [Nasser], or who it was. They're like, "Well, get Salimah. She knows about Girl Scouts." And that's the name that they call me, Salimah. And I'm like, sure. And I had -- my friend that I was just telling you, who's also a member of MECCA, her daughters were of Girl Scout age. And she was working 3:00 to 11:00 tour, so a lot -- they would spend a lot of time here with me. So I'm like, "Yeah, sure, we're going to go ahead and we're going to start this troop up." We had over 100 girls. We had women coming, "Oh, Sister Salimah, please put my girl in Girl Scouts. I want her to be strong like you." And we did so many wonderful activities with the girls.

I do have to say that we would go places and people would stare. And particularly, when the -- we would come across Girl Scouts from Staten Island, Queens, Long Island. Yeah. They would look at us like we didn't belong. I had one leader say, "Why don't you start your own Scouts?" Should I --?

STRONG: No, that's actually fine. Please continue.

SALIMAH-BELL: "Why don't you start your own Scouts?" You know, "You don't belong with us." But the council supported us 100%. I'll stop. [laughter] I think he must be going to get Amaya from school. [laughter]

STRONG: Yeah. It was just very sweet. It was like in *Looney Tunes*, when somebody's trying to sneak by.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah, but you can hear them. [laughter] Old house. You're going to hear the creaks. Yeah.

STRONG: Oh, it's wonderful.

SALIMAH-BELL: No. Yeah. So we -- like, we did Scouts on Friday evenings. Lots of fun things. The one thing that I loved about -- not the one thing. There were so many things. But one of the major things I loved about doing scouts there is I got -- I brought

some of the African American girls, we had Pakistani girls, we had Arab girls, we had African girls. And the one thing that's great about this country, when Muslims converge, is you start to see what's cultural and what's Islamic. When those girls sat in a circle and I asked them one question, "What do you eat when you break fast during Ramadan? Do you eat something traditional?" So the West African girls were like, "Yes." There were clearly things that were the same. And we knew that those things were the Islamic things. So when someone says, "I break my fast with dates, with water." That's something traditional that the Prophet Muhammad did.

But then, when we start diverging -- but for my iftar, my meal, what I have, is, "I have rice and beans." That came from the girl who was Puerto Rican. "I have platanos maduro." That was from the girl who was Puerto Rican. From the Black girls, "Well, my mother made mac and cheese," or, "She fried chicken," or, "She had baked r-- you know, roasted, baked chicken. We had greens." And then some of the girl-- "Well, that's not Muslim." And I would say, "Who says?" Clearly, it's Muslim. We eat different foods. We're supposed to have our culture. And that's something else that the Prophet Muhammad said to the ummah. So Islamic is breaking it with the dates and the water. Everything else that we did was not necessarily Islamic. It was your culture. And what happens there is the girls start to get insight. Like, they understand why they're doing things. And then they can decide for themselves what they will keep and what they will get rid of. But clearly, it's nothing wrong with keeping those cultural traditions. But don't pass it off as Islam. And now they know that it's not.

We even discussed the fact -- I would take them to different masjid, or different mosques around the city. And when we go to mine, Khalifah, it was open, there was no division, and the girls were like, wow. But, yet, it was hard -- we were hard-pressed to find Pakistani mosques that we can go to because those women did not go pray outside of the house. So they had to sit. And I wanted them to use the Qur'an. Use it. Go back to the book. And you tell me where it says that this is good or this is not. And so I wanted

them to think about things, particularly the girls who were so-called born Muslim -- because, again, remember how we said we're all born Muslim -- how they just take it for granted. You need to study, as well.

And you need to, once again, know what your cultural traditions are. And it's so important, versus not. When you go to Hajj, you cannot wear niqab. You cannot wear a veil. You've got to take it off. And people don't realize that. So if someone says to you, "Oh, you must cover your face," -- and people tend to call it burqa, which is what it's called in Afghanistan, but it's not called that in Africa. And even in Africa, there are different regions. It's not called that in Egypt. It's not called that in Algeria. It's not called that in Nigeria. But it's not mandatory that you wear that. You can't wear it when you go to the holiest place in Islam. You have to take it off of your face, and some of the girls didn't know that. So hearing different traditions educates them. And you become American Muslim. You begin to establish an American Islamic identity.

STRONG: There's something wonderful about Brooklyn that, like, all of those girls were here --

SALIMAH-BELL: Yes.

STRONG: -- and close enough to the center to --

SALIMAH-BELL: To get there.

STRONG: -- meet each other --

SALIMAH-BELL: Yes. Definitely

STRONG: -- and be part of that group. So, I mean, tell me about your experiences of crossroads and expanding your world in that way.

SALIMAH-BELL: Again, I think that, from the beginning, I kind of looked at Islam as a worldview. One of the things that the Nation of Islam used to say is, "Islam is the true religion for the Black man." That was, like, one of their taglines. It's the way that -- you know, it's the way for us to redeem ourselves. It's a way for us to get to know ourselves. But Islam, Christianity, Judaism, all of them, is -- I would say, if you have to make a true religion for a Black person, they can claim all of them. They all came out of Africa and

the Middle East, basically, so I wouldn't put one above the other. But one thing, again, as -- being American and seeing it from so many different views early on. So my first introduction, Malcolm X, the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and then Samirah. So at different stages, I'm seeing people who come to it very differently. So I think I've always viewed it as being open for anyone. I had a friend at the Muslim Youth Center, Zeinab [phonetic]. She was German-Irish and she happened to have married an Egyptian. So from the very beginnings with me, it's always been a mixed group of people. I've always kind of moved in a world where it was a mixed group. Usually -- I mean, I may've been the only African American, but I had my one Chinese friend growing up. She was always the only Chinese girl, or Asian, for that matter. We always had -- there was one girl. I don't remember where she was from. But she was from the islands. And we were the only others in the school. So I know that feeling of other. Then being Muslim, definitely other. Being a woman in law enforcement, other. Being African American, other. So I think that other, like, just suits me. And I'm finding that other is not so much other.

And it's an uncomfortable position for people who don't know how to navigate it, as we see now with the behavior of some of the people in this country because they fear being other-ized, as I say, when they see so many different people coming, different colors, different religions. And for so long, in this country, White male Protestants had -- that's the default setting. That's, like, the Arial when you're using in Word, or the New Times Roman. To change to Calibri you've got to go and click on it and change it. To change the size -- the font size from 12, you've got to click on it and change it. So for some people, that's kind of disturbing that they've got to do so much to take those steps to switch. And they don't want to be the ones that are going to have to click to be the new normal. They want it to be what they want it to be.

And, again, other is -- it's -- doesn't have to be bad. It really doesn't. Different doesn't have to be bad. One thing that I can't stand hearing -- and I have a lot of friends in the

neighborhood and -- who have children who are multiracial, biracial. One of my sons, again, his girlfriend is Japanese, and that's if they're still together. Again, I stay out of that. [laughter] People will say, "Oh, the biracial children are going to bring a end to prejudice." And I'm like, that's nonsense. I'm like, first of all, that's a lot to put on their heads, but that's nonsense. We've always had biracial children. A lot of it happened because of the history of slavery, and just the h-- even after slavery, the history of how women, particularly Black women, were treated in this country.

No, it's not going to change because people have biracial babies. It's going to change when we make an effort to change things, because the people who hold the power, they are so afraid that we, meaning the others, will do to them what was done to us for so long, that they're holding on, and they'll do anything at any cost to hold it. But I can truthfully say they shouldn't be fearful, really, because, I mean, we don't think the same. And I think there are a lot of good things coming up from the bottom. I have a Girl Scout troop now. We have over 100 girls enrolled. I keep them traveling. My older girls, we took to London and Paris. They've been to Savannah, which is the birthplace of Girl Scouting.

I think one reason why I like the Girl Scouting movement so much is the founder -- her name was Juliette Gordon Low, born October 31st, so we celebrate her birthday on October 31st. She was born in 1864, 1865 to a southern family, again, in Savannah, Georgia. Her father was a cotton -- I forget the name that they used -- prospector. He was a planter. The family held slaves, very wealthy. But this little girl in that family, it didn't sit well with her. She knew that it wasn't right. And so she was married off to this wealthy man, moved to England. He mistreated her. He had a mistress. She found out about it and she wanted a divorce. Her family is like, "Absolutely not. You won't shame us with a divorce." Like, "You'll stay married to him and you'll deal with it." And she was like, "Absolutely not. I'm not doing this." And this is in the 1890s. She's like, "I am not doing this." So she goes to sue him for a divorce. In the middle of the divorce, he

dies, but he leaves his mistress everything. So what did she do? She took him to court and sued for what was rightfully hers. So she ended up with the properties. The mistress got the money. They were living in England at that time.

So she comes back home and then she travels the world. She goes to Egypt. She loved Egypt. She goes to India. And when she goes back to England, she meets Lord and Lady Baden-Powell. And they had started this Boy Scouting movement. And she says, "You know what? I'm going to start something for girls when I get back to Savannah." She goes back to Savannah. She got the house that he didn't want to give to her, which is the house that he grew up in. And she called her cousin and said, "I have something for the girls of Savannah and of all America. Come on over. We're going to start tonight."

So in her parlor, she starts this movement with -- I think it was maybe nine girls around her table, and then finally incorporated in 1912. She, in her first troops, had women who were Jewish -- or girls who were Jewish from the Temple Mickve Israel in Savannah, one of the oldest temples in the country. She had girls from the orphan asylum. She had Black girls. Because she wanted this movement to be multicultural from day one. And this is what this woman advocated for in 1912. She was a contemporary of Eleanor Roosevelt. She was fearless. She had pearls and she sold her pearls so that she could help support the movement. I tell my Girl Scouts now that I'm not selling my pearls, so you all better pay your dues, [laughter] okay, if you want to do Girl Scouting activities. But the pearls symbolize the sacrifice that she made. And it is now the largest organization for girls in the world. And these girls are connected to Girl Guides in Egypt, Pakistan, Jordan, Ireland, Malawi. You name the country, there are Girl Guides there. We're the only ones that call it Girl Scouts in the United States.

And so I needed the girls to see that, that they're connected to a worldwide sisterhood, although some people may believe that we should be worried about only what's

happening in this country. I think all of us are stronger when we look to our sisters overseas and try to support them and empower them. October 11th is the day -- International Day of the Girl. Last year I took the high school kids. We were able to get seated at the United Nations and we sat in on a session. They had phenomenal woman speakers from all over the world. We went to a reception later that night. The girls were just dizzy with the celebrities and the people that they met. But I need them to know that they're global citizens. You can pick up and live anywhere. Yes, of course, the Girl Scout promise says that you're going to honor God and country, but it doesn't say that we can't look to the world around us and become part of that, as well, to make that better. And I have faith in these little ones. They're a strong bunch.

So we have an activity on this Thursday, which is the International Day of the Girl. I'm taking the younger ones this time. They're not allowed to go to the United Nations because some of the subjects and themes are kind of way over their heads. But we're going to be at Grand Army Plaza and they're doing a voter registration drive. So I tell the girls we can't say who people should vote for. That's personal and it's private. And whether their political views align with yours or not, we have to be respectful. But people should definitely exercise the right to vote. We just recently got it, if you look in the scheme of things. We celebrated women's suffrage last year with the girls of all ages at the Museum of the City of New York. And they got their women's suffrage patch.

And it was funny. When I asked the littlest ones, "Well, what do you think women's suffrage is?" And she says, "Cleaning my brother's room." I'm like, "No." [laughter] It was so cute. But, yeah. Now she knows -- and she's, what, seven this year -- what women's suffrage is about. So we've got to raise awareness. And hopefully, yeah, I'm going to say it. I have two sons, but I hope that girls take over, because I think that we can do such a better job, because it doesn't look like the men are doing too good right now.

STRONG: [laughter] No, not right now. Tell me the story of your genealogy badge.

SALIMAH-BELL: Oh, yeah, sure. So the genealogy badge. It was called My Heritage. And that was in the '90s, actually. And they had this program. It was called the Scholars Program, through Girl Scouts. At Barnard College, they would take the Girl Scouts up. They would do two courses in the morning, have lunch, and then do two courses in the afternoon. And this was for the high school-aged girls. It was to acclimate them to the college campus experience, sitting in a classroom for an hour, taking the class, walking the campus. And then, at the end, they have a big graduation program.

So of course I did the My Heritage portion of the badge because, at the time, I served as the Vice President for the Afro American Historical and Genealogical Society, Jean Sampson Scott, Greater New York Chapter. Yes, [laughter] that's a mouthful. So AAHGS, as we call it for short, the Afro American Historical Society, is a national organization, and it is just that. It was started right after Alex Haley came out with *Roots*. And there were chapters in almost every state. The national convention is actually coming up this weekend. And it's being held in Philadelphia, Valley Forge, this year.

And again, we just promote teaching kids, adults about African American genealogy and history. We've done -- we do lecture series at Columbia University where we'll invite speakers in. I will usually have my older girls come out and act as hosts and they serve the refreshments. I also make them sit in the lecture hall and listen. Last year, it was a lecture on Seneca Village. We had Aaron Goodwin come out and I could see that the girls were going cross-eyed because it was like, okay, what is this man talking about? Some village in the 1800s? And it was painful [laughter] for them to sit through the lecture. But I needed them to do it because, again, I want them to see, sometimes even in college, you're going to sit through lectures that are, like, just so not your cup of tea, but you got to, like, just get through it. And one thing I could say is, by the end of the day, they were in awe of the Columbia campus. So this is why Girl Scouts did this

program there.

They've now transitioned it and it's called the Girl Scout Leadership Institute. And we make it more accessible for the way that girls live today. There's a social media component. There's a definite STEM component to it. But pretty much still along the same lines. And it culminates with the girls taking an overseas trip. I know two or three years ago, I had two girls -- they were in the second cohort of the Girl Scout Leadership Institute. And that cohort actually went to Honduras, and they were planting mangroves or something in some -- outside of some school in a village. And the best part of it is, they get a stipend, a $600 stipend. And if their parents can't pay for the trip, then they just keep the stipend from them, because the trip is only, like, $400 or something, so it was very reasonable. But that's the year that I took the kids to Paris and London, so our girls opted to come with us there instead of going to Honduras.

STRONG: So when -- you started this by saying you were doing the genealogy badge at the time that you were the VP. You also mentioned that you were taking your sons to libraries and stuff at this time.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. So, when --

STRONG: Can you tell me that story? That was so sweet.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah. When I was doing my research -- and it was like -- I was working for the Department of Correction then, and I had a steady tour, and I was pretty much off weekends, and the boys both played sports, which my husband coached. But in the offseason, they have their Saturdays pretty free. They would have maybe a music lesson in the morning. I tried not to overschedule them the way I see kids are overscheduled now. But we would go up to Harlem, and we would eat, but they -- I would bribe them with the food. I would tell them they would come with me to the Schomburg. And they were experts at filling out the call slips for microfilm and microfiche, so that I could load it into my microfilm reader. And they have this rule that you could only -- each person could only put in one call slip at a time. But I had three people there, never mind that one was only seven [laughter] and the other was 11.

But I was able to get a lot of research done because they were there, as my helpers, pulling the microfilm for me. They knew how to load the microfilm reader. They knew how to load microfiche. And I didn't know too many little boys that knew how to do that, so that set them up for work in research, which neither of them does now. But at least they knew the process. So now, I can sit on my laptop and pull up a census record. I don't have to go through that process anymore. But it was something that they enjoyed and it was free air conditioning at the Schomburg in the warmer months. [laughter]

STRONG: That's awesome. You have guests.

SALIMAH-BELL: Yeah, I do.

STRONG: Is there -- and we've covered so much.

SALIMAH-BELL: Let's see. Come say hi, Amaya.

STRONG: Hi.

AMAYA: Hi.

STRONG: I'm Liz. It's nice to meet you.

AMAYA: Nice to meet you, too.

SALIMAH-BELL: That's my granddaughter.

STRONG: I'm just interviewing your grandma. I'll set her free in just a moment.

SALIMAH-BELL: [laughter] How was school?

AMAYA: It was good.

SALIMAH-BELL: You had a long day. Yeah.

STRONG: Okay. Well, let's wrap up. But is there anything that I should've asked you that I forgot? We've covered so much.

SALIMAH-BELL: No, I think you covered everything.

STRONG: All right.

SALIMAH-BELL: Like, I'm thinking -- yeah.

STRONG: Well, I should absolutely set you free. [laughter] Thank you so much for your time and for your stories.

SALIMAH-BELL: No. No problem. Thank you.

STRONG: Yeah. I look forward to being in touch during the rest of the project.

SALIMAH-BELL: Sure. Great. And if there's anything that you think, I guess we can come back and take care of that. Yeah.

STRONG: Sure. Sure.