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Oral History Interview with Linda Sarsour

Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.50

Interview conducted by Zaheer Ali on October 17, 2018

at Brooklyn Historical Society in Brooklyn Heights, Brooklyn

ALI: I'm Zaheer Ali. It is Wednesday, October 17, 2018. I am the oral historian at Brooklyn Historical Society and the project director of Muslims in Brooklyn. We are here at Brooklyn Historical Society for an oral history interview with Linda Sarsour. Linda, if you can introduce yourself to the recording, giving your full name and when and where you were born.

SARSOUR: My name is Linda Sarsour. I was born on [date redacted for privacy] 1980, in the best neighborhood in Brooklyn, Sunset Park.

ALI: Why was it the best neighborhood? Tell me about it when you were growing up.

SARSOUR: It is the -- it is the place that I wish everybody in the United States lived in. It is one of the most diverse communities in New York City, but also it reminded me of the villages that my parents came from, and my mom and -- and -- and dad who came from living under military occupation in Palestine, from a very small village called al-Bireh in the West Bank. My parents believed that our Sunset Park neighborhood was al-Bireh. Not only was it home to a very large Palestinian community that also shared the same village my parents came from, but even the way in which we interacted with our Puerto Rican neighbors, Mexican, Ecuadoran, Honduran neighbors, there was, like, a community feel to it. You -- you know, your parents yelled at other people's kids. You know, your -- your kids, if you weren't home, someone else picked up your kids from school. There was just this, kind of, village feeling that I think my parents yearned to find when they came to the States, and they absolutely found it in Sunset Park.

ALI: What were some of the kinds of landmark, or institutions, or mainstays, or hangouts, that you remember growing up?

SARSOUR: I lived right around the corner from the actual Sunset Park, which was a park, and there was a Sunset Park Recreational Center where they had a big gym. You

played -- you could play basketball. They had a handball court, which was something that I grew up playing. And just the stoop, like, on the -- that typical, stereotypical, like, Brooklyn kid that hung out on the stoops with all the kids from my same street that I lived on. So really, it was, like, if we weren't at the park, we were just sitting outside on the stoop, walking up to the corner store, getting your little 25 cents juice, your little pack of chips, and hanging out with your friends.

ALI: You -- you mentioned your -- your parents' background. How -- how impactful was -- was that, your heritage, on you growing up?

SARSOUR: My heritage as a Palestinian, actually, was -- it was interesting. It was either, people didn't really understand where we were from, and even when people knew, they were -- oh, they were, like, oh, right, Palestine. Like, it wasn't, really, back in the '80s -- like, no one really, actually, understood Palestine, where it was, and not -- not particularly those that I lived with in the neighborhood. So it was actually fine. It was, like -- it wasn't, like, you know -- it was interesting, but it wasn't, like, a topic of discussion. And I think for me, my heritage only became more clear to me and to people around me as I got older and as I got -- as my identity became more politicized based on current events that were happening. But I was cool. And, you know, back in the '80s and the '90s, like, the -- the usage of Palestine and, like, the PLO, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, was actually used in hip-hop. So, in fact, hip-hop made Palestine cool, I guess you could say. And so for me, it was just -- I grew up in a -- also a Palestinian community in Sunset Park, so I -- I had a community that I felt whole in as a Palestinian. And then when I didn't, and I was, like, hanging out and being around other people, it just didn't matter to -- to -- to them or to me, that I had to make sure they knew that I was Palestinian.

ALI: What -- what were some of the things you -- you, kind of, did, with either your family or members of the community, that you think brought that sense of home -- or at least for your parents, brought the sense of the village to Sunset Park?

SARSOUR: I mean, my parents were very involved here in Arab American and Palestinian American organizations. We -- I went to, like, a -- a Saturday, Sunday school, which was

-- where I learned how to read and write Arabic, and I also learned Palestinian folklore dancing. My uncle, my mother's brother, actually was the instructor, taught me Palestinian folklore dancing, and when I grew older, I actually became the instructor myself. And I taught, actually, Palestinian folklore dancing here in New York City, and I -- I just had this -- my parents were -- inside the house, we were very Palestinian. Everything about who we were was, we're Palestinian. In fact, my parents were secular, not very religious, and -- but they were very adamant about this idea of understanding that you were Palestinian. What did -- what does that mean? What is the history of Palestine? What is your role in, kind of, living out in this world Palestinian?

And the village mentality came for us, because in Palestine, when you go to our village, your parents don't care about you. They let you run the streets, because they know that the neighbors are going to watch out for you, and that everybody, kind of, knows each other. That's, kind of, how it was on my block. Even though the people on my block weren't all Palestinians -- there were Yemeni. I had a lot of Puerto Rican neighbors, Dominican, Ecuadoran, Honduran neighbors. Like, my mom let us run in the street, and the -- like, on our street, and she would know that if I was, like, messing around, or my sisters did anything, that -- that the Mexican mom up the block was going to, like, let her know. Or the Yemeni mom, you know, two houses down from us was going to say something.

So it really was a community feel. Like, I felt like all the moms in the neighborhood, like, we -- I actually used to call them auntie, because -- and they used be, like, "Why do you call me auntie?" And I'm, like, "That's just how we do in my culture. If you're older, my mom makes us call you auntie." And that -- and it -- and it really was that feel. People sharing food in the neighborhood, especially when we would have block -- we had -- my street always had block parties. We had a block party every weekend starting in, like, June, July, August. Every weekend, we had a block party. And just watching the

moms come out and share food across the street, like, it always reminded my mom of being in Palestine.

ALI: What were some of your favorite foods to eat growing up?

SARSOUR: Man. My favorite food was, on 49th Street, in -- on Fifth Avenue in Sunset Park, it still is there now, is a Charlie's Pizzeria. That was, like, my go-to spot. And it was, like, real Italians, like, you know -- now they're on, like, the third generation. So pizza was something that I grew up eating a lot. And it's because my mom had seven kids. It was, kind of, a easy thing, especially if my mom had a lot of errands to run. So we, kind of, got used to that.

But growing up, I -- my mom's Palestinian food. My mom is an excellent cook, and she would make, you know, stuffed grape leaves, and stuffed squash, and maqluba, which is a very distinct dish that Palestinians make, which basically means upside down. You just cook rice, like, in layers. You cook, like, chicken, fried vegetables, and rice in layers, and then you flip it over when it's done cooking, and it looks like a cake, and that's, like, my favorite thing that my mom makes and grew up on. You know, eating also -- being in a neighborhood where there's a lot of street food. Eating, you know, empanadas, and being able to, like, literally, go down on the street -- literally, on our street corner, and buy, like, corn with mayo, and -- and -- and cheese, and picante, and being able to experience other people's -- or -- or our community's food, that was so readily available to us, and it was also cheap.

So we lived in a community where food is still very accessible, and we are actually able to afford, so we don't have fancy coffee shops in -- you know, in Sunset Park, where you're -- where you're buying a coffee for, like, five dollars. No, you actually can still buy a coffee for, like, a dollar at the local deli, and that's, kind of, what makes Sunset Park such a wonderful community, not only from the past, but into the present.

ALI: You mentioned you had a number of siblings. Where -- where were you in the line of siblings?

SARSOUR: I'm always number one. I was the oldest of seven children. When my -- when I was 10 years old, I was already the oldest of the seven. So just being -- imagine being 10 years old and having six siblings that were younger than you.

ALI: What -- what kind of -- did that grant you or give you any, either responsibilities, or what advantages or challenges did that give you as -- as the oldest of -- of all those children?

SARSOUR: I think it came with challenges, but definitely a lot of responsibility, and -- and definitely a lot of training for who I am today. I mean, to be, kind of, quote, "the leader" of, you know, six people at a very young age, with a mom who spoke, at the time, almost zero English. I was the translator, I was the social worker, I was the one that helped my sisters and brothers with their homework. I was very responsible and very mature for my age, because I had to be.

My mom would have to go to grocery shopping. She can't take seven kids under the age of 10. So I would, literally, be, like, the babysitter at 10 years old. And my mom would have to give 16 rules, because if you say anything, if you -- if you -- if you misbehave, then they're going to call child services, and then the government is going to come take you, and all these kinds of things. And imagine having all that pressure, and having to figure out how to monitor and manage your six siblings, hoping that your mom came back and the government didn't come [laughter] take us.

So I -- I just grew up with a lot of, you know, almost forced leadership that I had to have, and was a big support to my parents. And I continue to be, but my parents will always remind me, like, I help my dad, like, read mortgage papers, because my dad only has a fifth-grade education. My mom doesn't have a high school diploma. So, yeah. So it was a great experience, but also challenging, because I didn't get to do everything that I wanted to do as a child, because I was -- had all these responsibilities.

ALI: What were -- what were some of the strategies you used to manage or motivate your siblings that you think has stuck with you?

SARSOUR: I was always, like, a delegator and a supervisor from a very young age. So for example, I used to do this thing where I would get a piece of paper. Then I would write, for example, like, living room, dining room, kitchen, bathroom, hallway. And then I would rip it up, and then I would give -- everybody would pick a -- pick a piece of paper, and then whatever you picked was your job to do. You'd have to clean the living room if you got the living room. And then my sisters, one day, were, like, "Wait a minute. But you didn't get one." And I would be, like, "Well, of course I didn't get one, because I'm going to supervise and make sure that you all do your job right."

And so it's, kind of -- it, kind of, went with me. Like, I -- I've always been, kind of, a good delegator. I always set you up for success. Like, you know, I gave people the right things to do, and -- and -- and -- and always had that type of, you know, authorit-- like, I had this authority about me, that I can just, kind of, tell you what to do, and I don't know why you would, but you just would do what I say. And it was something that my sisters, in particular, remind me all the time. They're, like, "I cannot believe that I actually would listen to you, and actually take your justifications for the questions we'd ask, and we would just go with it." And yeah, so I think that growing up, having that leadership helped me.

ALI: So you've mentioned -- you've talked a lot about Sunset Park. Were there other parts of Brooklyn that you spent time in?

SARSOUR: I spent a lot of time in Crown Heights. My father was a business owner for about over 40 years, on a street cor-- a particular street corner, on Troy Avenue and Montgomery, right off of Eastern Parkway. And he actually had a -- a -- a little bit bigger than a bodega called Linda Sarsour Spanish-American Food Center, and it was named after me. And I still have, like, a photo of the -- of the outside. And so what would happen sometimes is that my mom would have to go help my father at the store, and she wouldn't want to leave us home for multiple hours, so we would actually go to my father's store. And I was -- also, sometimes I'd work there part time, and, you know, work on the little lotto machine, and, like, on the cash register.

And it was really a great, kind of, window into the world that I was going to end up working in, because as you probably know, Crown Heights was largely African American, Caribbean, and some Puerto Rican, or old Puerto Ricans that lived there, and being able to, like, you know, while we finished our homework, we would go run around the street. And right across from my father's store was a school, so there was where I, kind of, grew up.

Although I lived in a community in Sunset Park that didn't really have a lot of Black people. There were some Afro-Latino, some Black Dominicans, but actually not as many. But it -- but Crown Heights was predominantly Black, so that was where I was able to interact with Black people, reminding myself that I, kind of -- like, it -- it was apparent to me that I lived in a segregated city, because it -- you just don't see Black people -- or at least at the time, in the '80s, you didn't really see Black people in Sunset Park. And I was able to spend a lot of time in Crown Heights amongst the predominantly Caribbean, African American community.

ALI: Do you -- do you remember how you bridged that, that, kind of, initial unfamiliarity?

SARSOUR: It, literally -- me and my sisters rolled up to a schoolyard, and, you know, we were five -- we were five people. [laughter] And I remember my little sister was really, really young, maybe, like, four or five. I had her -- I was holding her hand. And I strolled up to a -- a schoolyard, literally, right across the street, and that's it. And it's, like -- it -- it's -- it -- it reminds you about this idea of, like, kids don't hate, you know. So we walked in, and kids came up to us, like, "Oh, where you from?" or whatever. And I'm, like, "Nick is my dad" -- which is what they called my dad in the neighborhood. And then a lot of kids knew my dad. They were, like, "Oh, look!" And they would go around in the school. They were, like, "Yo, those Nick's daughters," or whatever. And that's it. And you just started playing.

And then everybody, kind of, did their own thing, and it was just such -- it was

seamless, and it was natural for me to -- and it -- it felt, like, natural, and that's, kind of, what it was. And it was great just being in that neighborhood. I learned how to double Dutch, you know, playing also handball with local kids there. And, you know, going into my father's store and, like, grabbing stuff for my friends, you know, hoping my dad wouldn't see what was going on. I'm sure my dad knew, but we would go and -- and -- and -- and get some snacks for our friends. And it was -- it was really, like, a joy of my childhood.

ALI: So tell me about your primary and secondary school experiences. Where did you go to school?

SARSOUR: I went to Public School 169, which is, literally, right across the street from Sunset Park, and I went to a school that, again, diverse. Asian, Latino, and Arab were the predominant groups in that particular school. And I went to a -- a -- what -- what -- what -- what was called at the time John J. Pershing, I.S. 220, which was also in Sunset Park. And then, again, very diverse school. In John J. Pershing, actually, a lot of kids were bused from central Brooklyn, so that was my other opportunity to, kind of, build with -- in particular with Black kids who were being bussed from another part of Brooklyn that I would probably not otherwise be able to interact with.

And then I went to John Jay High School, which no longer exists. It's been, kind of, shut down and reopened into, kind of, three, almost, like, charter-type schools. And I went to John Jay High School because it was my zone school. And it actually is in a different neighborhood, in Park Slope, and the reason was, at the time, there was no high school in Sunset Park. So all the Sunset Park kids had to figure out whether they went to Fort Hamilton High School in Bay Ridge or whether they went to John Jay in Bay Ridge, but in fact, my official zone school was John Jay.

ALI: John Jay in Park Slope. Yeah, yeah.

SARSOUR: John Jay High School in Park -- Park Slope. And so I actually had applied to go to Midwood High School, and then my parents were, like, "Oh my god, Midwood's so far away. How are we going to let our first daughter go all the way to Midwood?" I'm,

like, “Lady, you get on the train. Whether you get off the three stops later or two stops before, still -- I still got to travel.”

But eventually, I went to John Jay. And I remember before -- the summer before I went, the neighborhood kids would be, like, “Oh, where are you going to high school?” I was, like, “Oh, I’m going to John Jay.” They were, like, “What?” And I was, like, “What do you mean?” Because, you know, I didn’t have older siblings to understand, kind of, the context and the political dynamics that were coming with high school. And they were, like, “You mean Jungle Jay?” And I was, like, “What do you mean, Jungle Jay?” And they were, like, “Yeah, that’s what they call John Jay.” And I’m, like, “Why would they call it that?” And they were, like, “What do you mean? It’s a gang school.”

So when I went to high school in the ’90s, John Jay was a gang-infested school. In fact, it was what they called a stronghold for the Latin Kings at the time. And -- and we had a lot of, apparently, adversaries coming from, like, Erasmus High School out in central Brooklyn, Bloods versus Latin Kings. It was just the whole hot mess thing that I didn’t understand, because I didn’t really grow up understanding gangs and things like that.

So my -- but -- but contrary to all of that, I actually had a wonderful high school experience. I actually graduated high school in three years instead of four years, and I had wonderful mentors at my school, most of whom were African American teachers that I had, including one that I remember so vividly. He was an assistant principal and also a math teacher, Mr. Harris, and who, like, beli-- just believed in me. He was, like, “There’s something about you. I’m going to hear -- I’m going to hear about you one day.” And then I would be, like, “Okay.” But -- and just had a really great experience.

So while there was violence in my school -- we actually had, believe it or not, NYPD [New York City Police Department] officers in our school before there was any-- any such thing as the kind of NYPD school safety that we see now. My schools had -- my

school had bars on the windows, like you went to prison in the morning. We actually had to put our book bags through, kind of, airport scanner machines, plus we went through metal detectors, plus we were wanded down. And Black girls in my school had their hair checked. They had us open our mouths to see if we would bring blades, like the little thin blades. It was really some serious stuff, but I -- I didn't have context, so for me as a young person, I was, like, "Oh, I guess they do this in every high school." Apparently, they didn't do that in every high school. They just did that in some high schools, [laughter] and apparently it was in my high school.

So that was, like, when I reflect back on my high school time, it -- it also connects to who I am and what I do now. I -- now I understand what people meant when they said -- when they say "school-to-prison pipeline." That's exactly what I experienced. I -- I watched kids fight, and NYPD arrest them inside of my school, like, within the confines of the sanctuary that was supposed to be school. But it still never occurred to me that that wasn't what was supposed to happen. And so I saw a lot of incidents that, when I think about now and reflect on now, I -- I, kind of, see how there was a, like, evolution into where we are now around mass incarceration and what it looks like. What was different about me being a young, light-skinned Palestinian girl from Brooklyn who did not wear hijab, versus Black and Brown young people in my school who had a whole different experience than I did.

ALI: And we can talk about this in -- in -- you know, when it fits, but when did you start wearing the hijab?

SARSOUR: I started wearing the hijab when I was 19 years old.

ALI: Okay.

SARSOUR: So that was, like, two years after high school.

ALI: Okay. So we'll -- we'll get to that. So what -- what did high school Linda imagine for her future? What -- what were you striving to do at that point in your life?

SARSOUR: I was ready. I had my whole life figured out. I had watched that movie, *Dangerous Minds*, with Michelle Pfeiffer, [laughter] and it was basically a movie about

this, you know, high school English teacher who goes, like, quote-unquote, “to the hood,” and she, you know, starts really investing in young Black and Brown, kind of, disenfranchised youth, and basically teaches them about, you know, the potential that they have. And she was able to inspire them, particularly through writing and poetry.

And that’s really my -- that was my dream. My dream was to be a high school English teacher. I wanted to go back to my old high school. I had a dream that I was, literally, going to teach at John Jay High School, and I was going to inspire all these kids, and almost -- almo-- what my dream was, to go, kind of, inspire the younger kid-- like, the -- the -- the -- the younger selves of the kids that were my age when I was in -- in -- in high school, and remind them, like, “You are worthy, and you are beautiful, and eloquent, and we’re going to show the whole world that you’re eloquent.” And that was, literally, my dream. I was, like, oh, you know, I go to work eight o’clock to three o’clock. I’m going to get married, and I’ll have kids, and be home at 3:30. Then I’m going to have summers off, and Christmas vacation. So I had it all planned out. And then, unfortunately, things took a little bit of a turn, and I am not a high school English teacher right now.

ALI: What -- how did they take that turn? Tell me.

SARSOUR: So I, you know, finished high school a year early, and I, you know, obviously, started college. And then -- and then I was a college student on September 11, 2001. I was on the Kingsborough Community College campus, sitting in a chemistry class. And my professor was a old dude, like, probably, like, in his late '70s, very strict. I used to almost have anxiety going to his class, because he -- he was so strict. And one of the things at the time -- as you know, cell phones weren't, like, everybody's thing. Like, I'm that old. So -- but I did have a cell phone. And I remember him. He would be, like, “If you answer your cell phone, if I see that you have a cell phone, if” -- you know, people still had beepers at that time. He was very strict about this idea of electronics in the classroom.

And then that morning, on September 11, his phone rang, and we all heard it. And it was so shocking to us, because here's a guy who spends every day for the first 10 minutes explaining to us why he can't see our electronics, and why we would be -- he would, literally, dis-- like, tell us that he would withdraw us from the class. It was really, like, serious. And all of a sudden, his phone rings, and he got startled. We got startled. And he picks up his phone. And I'm just, like, this is really weird. Walks out of the classroom, and just never comes back. And we sat for about 15 minutes waiting for him to come back. He never came back.

My -- you know, my fellow students and I walk out of our chemistry class into the larger campus, which is on Sheepshead Bay, which is, like, right across from Manhattan. We're on the beach, which is how -- where the campus is stationed. And then we go out into the, kind of, outdoors. And the minute we step outdoors, literally, it's snowing paper. And I, like, put my hand out. I was, like, this is, like -- I, literally, thought the world was ending, because the whole thing just felt eerie. Put my hand out, and I, literally, was catching paper that was, like, burned around the edges. And I was, like, this is really weird.

I go up to the security, like, little kiosk, when you first enter Kingsborough Community College campus, and I was, like, "What happened?" The poor guy was, like -- because, you know, back in the day, there was no Twitter. There was no -- we didn't have, like, flat-screen TVs in our -- our school to watch MSNBC or whatnot. And so the -- so the security guard says, "I don't know exactly, but I just know that airplanes hit buildings in Manhattan." And that's all that they knew. And I already felt, like, oh my god.

There was no public transportation, so I had to walk all the way from Sheepshead Bay to Sunset Park. And I walked through Sheepshead Bay all the way, like, through Bensonhurst, and then eventually got to Bay Ridge, and then to Sunset Park, which is where my parents lived, but I was living in -- actually, I was living in Bensonhurst at

the time, but I -- my kids, who I had, were with my mother. When I walked through Bay Ridge, which is home to the largest Arab American community in the state of New York, and one of the largest Muslim communities, I already wasn't sure what to think about what was happening, and I had a lot of time to reflect, because there was no public transportation. And cell phones didn't work. You couldn't really talk to anybody unless you talked to people on the street that were also walking with you.

When I got to Fifth Avenue in Bay Ridge, there were stores that were closed. And I looked around, and I was, like, well, okay, so airplanes hit buildings in Manhattan. Like, what does that have to do with our people all the way out in southwest Brooklyn? Why are people's -- why is -- it was just -- the whole thing just really bothered me. But I was, like, what's going on? And then I made -- then I started feeling that thing in my stomach where I felt like I -- I was nauseous, like, this is just -- something's not right.

And then I walked by the mosque. And I -- our mosque, the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge [Masjid Musab bin Umayr]. There was a gate. I didn't even know that the mosque had a gate, because they never had a gate. Like, I'd never seen the gate. But that really, really, really triggered me. So anyway, I kept on walking. So the mosque is on 69th Street and Fifth Avenue. I walked all the way to 45th Street.

And I had got to my mom's house. And my mom was running out of the house without her hijab on, getting into her car. And I was, like -- and I said to my mother, "Where are you going?" And then she's, like, "I got to go pick up your brother from school," who was going to M.S. 51 at the time, in Park Slope. He was, like, in an honors program. And I was, like, "But you don't have your hijab on." And then she's, like, "We can't wear it right now." And I was, like, "What in the hell is going on here?" Because by that time, I still didn't know what was going on.

I walk into the house. My son is about two years old at the time, a little older than two

years old. And I walk in, and this kid jumps up, and he's, like, "Mom, fire! Look at the fire!" And I'm, like, okay. So that -- that was my moment. I sat down, and there you saw the continuous images of airplanes hitting buildings, and then finally the -- the, kind of, chyron on the bottom of the screen, basically, being, like, "Muslim Terrorists." And I was, like, oh my God. And then it all connected. I was, like, no wonder I was feeling this, and no wonder the businesses were closed, and no wonder my mom's going out without her hijab. And it, kind of, all came crashing down on me at that moment.

And then about a week or so after that, a little over a week after that, at the mosque, my family went to -- we either went to the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge on Fifth Avenue, or the Beit Al Maqdis Islamic Center, which is in, kind of, the -- on the cusp between Sunset Park and Bay Ridge, on Sixth Avenue and, like, 64th Street. And then I remember this woman crying, coming to the masjid crying. And I'm, like, what's going on here? And, you know, I speak fluent Arabic, so I, kind of, got into the mix where there were -- women were crowding around these other women, and they're crying. And I'm -- and people are, like, "What happened?" And these women were, like -- they all lived in the same building in Bay Ridge. And apparently, NYPD intelligence officers and other types of agents came into their buildings and basically were going around knocking on different people's doors -- and our people don't know their rights, and in fact, opened doors for the law enforcement agents. And they basically were snatching up people's husbands and people's older sons, or their fathers, and what they would say to them -- "Oh, don't worry. You know, they'll be back." And then these women were claiming that it was almost four to five days since the -- since they last seen their loved ones.

And so I brought them to the, like, imam office, and then we're -- I was, like, "I don't know what's going on here." And of course, our imams are not trained, either. And many of them, as you know, particularly the one in Sunset Park, they -- they come from Al-Azhar University. They're Egyptian. They're, like, immigrants. They have no idea. In

fact, they're -- they're shell-shocked, because they come from authoritarian states where they're, like, "I didn't know this happens here in America." I didn't know this happened here in America, to be honest. Like, I was a very naïve young person. And to be, like, "This doesn't happen in my country."

And then all of a sudden, went from, like, high school English teacher mode to, became a translator. And I started translating for women, helping them connect to legal services. And at the time, a family, kind of, cousin, but very -- very dear friend of my family, had founded an organization called the Arab American Association of New York. And she also had -- was working at a hospital, the Lutheran Medical Center at the time. Now it's called NYU [New York University] Langone. But in -- in -- in the -- in -- in -- at the time, it was called Lutheran Medical Center. And she was a patient relation rep. And because of her position as patient relation rep, and as an Arabic speaker, all of a sudden, while she's supposed to just help patients navigate the hospital, she became, like, the person that people went to, to the hospital, to be, like, "They took my husband. They came to our home."

And so she became -- began referring these people to this new organization, that, by the way, did not know what it was doing. So it wasn't like an organization that had been set up with all the resources. It was just this idea that we needed something to work with in our community. And she called me up, and she's, like, "What are you doing?" And I was, like, "I don't know. Like, I'm a college student. Like, what do you mean, what am I doing?" And then she's, like, "I need you. You speak English. You speak Arabic. You're from this community. You know a lot of these people. We -- we just -- you just have to come."

So in those moments, the community that I grew up in, you don't really say no to people in your community, and not anybody that's related to you, nor someone that's very dear to your family. And so I showed up at the Arab American Association of New

York, just a few months after 9/11, and there was when I discovered that my country and all the things that I learned about historically were actually the present. And I felt so naïve knowing that this wasn't just happening to my community, and then my horizons got broadened. And so I, literally, pivoted to all these things that I had to learn so quickly to help my people.

Certified interpretation, so I became a certified interpreter, both Arabic interpreter, but specifically around medical interpretation, mental health services, you know, doing counseling services. People were engaging, you know -- in the course of the year and a half, even, after 9/11, I started seeing increased cases of substance abuse within the Muslim community, even knowing that people will say, "Oh, we can't drink, we can't do drugs, because it's against our faith." But people did-- weren't finding outlets, and we didn't have outlets in the Muslim community, so being able to learn and pivot really quickly. Reading policy, trying to understand how government works. Like, there was nothing. Like, I came to a community where there was -- there were mosques, there were Islamic centers that were built, and I always am grateful to our elders who built that type of brick-and-mortar infrastructure, but that's all they had. There was nothing else there, so I was almost, like, overcompensating, trying to absorb as much information as possible.

And that was my first unfortunate introduction into my own personal activism in New York around these things that impacted my community. But I did grow up in a family where my parents were Palestinian, so I did have a little bit of, at least, Palestinian activism in my family. I went to the protests as a kid. My parents, you know, we went to this -- this, like, Islamic school where we learned about our culture and learned about not just the culture of Palestine, but in fact the -- the politics of occupation, and the Nakba, which is the catastrophe. So I did have a little bit of that in me, but the, kind of, hands on experience didn't come for me until that really tragic and horrific day, when I went from being Linda the light-skinned Palestinian girl from Sunset Park to being a

suspect in the same city that I loved and -- and grew up in, and literally -- like, Brooklyn, for me, is like a human being. Like, I love it, like, so much. Like, I'm so offended if someone tries to make a snarky remark about Brooklyn. Like, that's how I feel about it. But at that moment, I just was so disappointed in -- in how my city was treating -- and my borough, in fact, were -- Bay Ridge, in particular, was one of the hardest-hit community by law enforcement agents, not just around the time of 9/11, but moving forward around NYPD surveillance.

ALI: So I want to make sure we're placing some things. What was the Islamic school you went to when you were growing up?

SARSOUR: I went to public school --

ALI: Yes.

SARSOUR: -- full time --

ALI: Yes.

SARSOUR: -- but I went to Islamic school that was a little bit nontraditional, in the sense that it wasn't at a particular building. It was, a Palestinian community would rent the public schools during the weekend. So they would pay the Department of Education to rent the school. So I went to two different schools. One was on, like, 92nd Street and Fifth Avenue, right by the little Popeye's in Brooklyn, in Bay Ridge, and then I went to -- they had rented another school that was in, like, Dyker Heights area. And then there was a time, for a little bit a period of time where I -- about, maybe, two years, where I went to Masjid Al-Farooq, which is on Atlantic Avenue. They had a second floor that our people were able to rent out, also, for, like, Islamic -- for, like, Islamic school.

ALI: Okay. And you -- I think you -- you talked about this, the person that recruited you. What was her name?

SARSOUR: The person that recruited me into this work was a woman who is -- was my mentor. She was someone I grew up around. Her name is Basemah Atweh, and she was one of the most remarkable human beings that you would ever meet in your life. She was a, kind of, nontraditional, in the sense that she was a divorced woman from a very traditional, conservative community, who lived on her own, who was a single mom, had

a son who was actually my age. And she really gave everything that she had to -- back to our community. She struggled, you know, as a single mom, and, kind of, in her marriage and in her divorce, and she want-- she didn't want anyone else in our community to -- to, kind of, go through that, so she was one of those people in our community that would open their homes to victims of domestic violence, because we didn't have a shelter. We didn't have places for women to go, and particularly for Muslim women who didn't feel safe going to tell men at the mosque that they were being abused by their husbands. She was a woman who no one went without -- like, you went to her. She figured it out.

And so she recruited me, and I, kind of, was under her wing. She was actually the first executive director at the Arab American Association of New York, while still maintaining a job as a patient relation representative at Lutheran Medical Center. And I learned everything from her. She taught me, you know, to, kind of, stand up to the patriarchy in the Muslim community. She was a woman who did not wear hijab, and -- and -- and, you know, was fine. And she was, like, "I'm still Muslim." Like, you know, and -- and really taught me -- gave me just a bigger perspective on life. She was a very -- a woman who challenged spaces that she was in, but she was also eloquent in a way, and wasn't, like, aggressive, in the sense that she just -- you know, she would come and stand her ground in a way that was just -- I was in awe of her all the time.

And she was a -- a woman who, you know, was a, kind of, a big woman, you know. She weighed about, maybe, close to 400 pounds. But there was something always so light about her. She was the life of the party. She was blonde. She always -- her nail polish matched her outfit. She was the best-dressed woman you ever saw. Not a woman with a lot of means, but always looked primp and proper, like she was, like, a fashionista of, like, our community. And she was bubbly and joyful, and so she -- she was, like, the right person who came at the right time and opened an organization at the right time, and partnered up with a doctor in our [laughter] community, who, in fact -- believe it or

not. This is how intimate my community is.

Dr. Ahmad Jaber was one of the cofounders, also, of the Arab American Association of New York, so Basemah, who worked at the hospital, kind of, partnered up with him. And he was a person with a lot of resources, but also the most generous donor in our community. I mean, this guy has established pretty much every organization that you know of in Brooklyn, and has maintained them financially without ever saying that publicly. Like, I'm saying that on his behalf, because he would never tell you that.

And he was also my OB/GYN, and my mother's OB/GYN, so he delivered me when I -- he was the first person to hold me when I was born, because he was my mom's OB/GYN, and then becomes my OB/GYN. But before he becomes my OB/GYN, he's also an imam, so he also marries you in the community. So this is a guy who's, like, a one-stop shop. And it's -- and he just becomes, like, a core part of your family. Like, you can't get around him. Like, hello, he, like, delivers your kid. Like, what -- what are you going to do, you know?

And so they partnered up together. So they were such a perfect partnership. Dr. Jaber is a very, like, quiet soul, and humble, and just wants to do good work. He's one of those very religious folks who believes in this idea that you're put on this earth to do good, and that eventually, you know, in the afterlife, you know, you're going to find this, like, whatever he thinks he's going to find there, like something amazing. [laughter] And so he has given everything to the community, and he partnered up with a woman who has given everything, so one who has a lot of means, one who doesn't, but both generous equally.

And so we worked together, so they were both my mentors. And Dr. Jaber is, you know, him in addition to my father, who had five daughters, also taught me what it meant to be a strong woman, and Basemah taught me to be a strong woman. In fact, Dr. Jaber is

somebody who would be seen as a very traditional elder in our community, always encouraged me, always motivated me. And he would actually, like -- we would be in a meeting with elders, and someone might seem a little disrespectful, and he'll be, like -- like, he'll look at me, like, "You better say something," like, "Don't let them talk to you like that." And it -- it -- we -- it -- it was, like, such a -- a -- a beautiful, like -- they were a duo, and everybody knew that.

And then in 2005, something really tragic happened. It was -- it was, like, tragedy in the face of, like, triumphancy for Arab Americans in the United States of America. So ACCESS [Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services] is the largest Arab American social service organization in the country, and it is located in Michigan. And they were able to come together to say, "We need a place to preserve Arab American culture in this country." And they basically were able to put together a campaign, and raise about \$13 million, and in fact, opened the first Smithsonian-recognized Arab American national museum in Dearborn, right across from Dearborn City Hall. So that was going to be that moment for us as an Arab American community, like, a triumphant moment, and a lot of, like, you know, excitement was all around the country. And in fact, we, as Arab American Association of New York, were -- were a, kind of, a -- a -- a sister organization to ACCESS, so we were invited to come to the grand opening. And it was a very fancy -- you know, dignitaries from all over the world came.

So me, Basemah, who -- my mentor and the current executive director at the time, and another two women, Angie and Mona, basically, took a road trip from New York to Dearborn. Dr. Jaber and his wife at the time also went, and they were in another car. And we went, and we got there on May 4, 2005. The event happened on May 5, 2005. And it was beautiful. And it was -- I was so proud. And I was young. I was 25 years old. And so much things were happening in my life. Everything was moving fast. But here I was, even more proud than I ever was to be Arab American, and it was beautiful. And

we had a wonderful time, a joyous time together.

And then we were driving back to New York. And Dr. Jaber and his wife at the time drove ahead of us. And myself and Basemah and Angie and Mwena, you know, went shopping first in Dearborn, because you got to pick up all the good stuff that they had Dearborn. And then we drove back, and then on the morning of Friday, May 6, 2005, I was driving. I was the driver of the car, and we were driving through Danville, Pennsylvania, and there was some construction on the road, and there was, like, a barrel that had fell over, and there was a big truck who -- and the truck thought that, without realizing how large they were, and that there were other cars in other lanes, tried to go around the barrel, which meant that they were -- if they had to go around it, it would mean that I would have to move, and -- except that there was no place for me to go except fall into, basically, like, a little ditch type thing on the highway. And this is a major interstate, 80.

And our car flipped over a few times, and it must have -- what must have happened is Basemah must have gotten really scared and opened the door, and, kind of, fell out of the car. And by the time we ended up straight up, we had flipped maybe three times. Basemah had been out of the car. Angie was stuck in between the seats behind me. And Mwena had also flew out of the car, a very small, petite woman who must have, kind of, flew out of the car window. And here I was, the only one that was wearing my seatbelt. And I was able to remove my seatbelt and get out. And I saw Basemah laying on the ground, and she just looked just as beautiful. Nothing, no scratches on her face, just looked like her regular self, except at the moment, she was struggling to breathe, and actually was telling me that she couldn't breathe.

And then I had to get back to the top of the highway and try to signal for some support. So a young White man and his girlfriend, who had a pickup truck, stopped and saw me. I was -- I actually didn't say anything, because I was so out of breath, and they -- I, kind

of, pointed down, and they saw what was happening. Then, you know, all -- next -- next thing you know, it was like a scene out of a movie. Helicopters, all kinds of things that I -- even apparatuses I have never seen before, to try to help revive Basemah on that -- on that -- in that location. Ripped her clothes off, did the, kind of, you know, electric -- electric shocks, and did everything that they could. They took her to a different hospital. And me, Angie, and Mwena went to the same hospital, and I had to, you know -- I was the only one that, kind of, like, had some sort of mobility at the time, and then had to start calling people's families, and being, like, you know. And Basemah was, in particular, the hardest phone call I had to make, and I actually didn't make it directly to her family, which were my family. I actually called my own father, and I was, like, "This is what happened."

And so, you know, Basemah's, you know -- as you know, in Islam, you know, once -- once she passed away, they immediately transported her back to -- to New York City, to Brooklyn, and her funeral was actually just immediately the next day, on Saturday. And it was at Beit Al Maqdis Islamic Center. And it was the most amazing sight that I've ever seen, in the sense that everybody was there. It was like a protest. Like, the whole streets were shut down. People, African American, Latinos, Asian Americans, Jewish folks came. The entire Muslim community, like, showed out. South Asians, African American Muslims. Like, they couldn't fit the people in the mosque. They couldn't fit them in the street. Cops had to come shut down the streets, because that's exactly who she was. She was a person that brought people together. She was someone that you knew her presence in the room even if she didn't open her mouth.

And that was a really tragic moment. It was a -- a big moment of trauma for me. And I -- it happened on Friday morning, and on Monday morning, I was in the office at the Arab American Association. Everyone was, like, "What the hell are you doing here? You just came out of a really bad accident." I said, "This is where Basemah would want me to be. I got to finish her work." Because it wasn't about me at that moment. I came

because I was called to be there, and I see the work of the Arab American Association of New York as a continuation of her work. And so for the many years after, I was the executive director of the Arab American Association of New York, up until about June of 2017.

And I gave every -- I had also my own jobs that I did just for -- because I had to feed my family, but I had to figure out ways to invest in building that organization, because I wanted it to be successful, and to really be her legacy. And -- and for us in Islam, for her -- for it to be her sadaqa jariya, which is, like, her continued charity in this world, although she's not -- no longer here. And I took that organization in 2005 from a \$50,000 budget to over a million dollar budget, hired lots of folks from our community, and young people, and mostly women, which I know is what her passion was. And many of the women who work for us, particularly in administration and administrative, these are women who are -- at some point were victims of abuse, or women who are -- were immigrant and didn't speak a lick of English, and all -- and then because they went through our adult education program, now are in a place where they can work and help feed their families, as well.

And I gave everything to that organization. I still do. I love it, also, like it's my child. Like, I grew up there. It's where my activism was born. It's where I understood my potential. It's where I understood what my purpose was. It's also where I met other marginalized communities. It's where I built a sense of coalition, where I understood what real allyship looked like, where I also challenged my own community around anti-Black racism, where I challenged my community on misogyny and patriarchy. It was a place where I did a lot of things for 12 years.

And so that organization is a legacy organization of a woman who came to Brooklyn in the '70s, and she is no longer with us, but that organization is her legacy, and I -- and I tell people that everywhere I go. It's -- they're, like, "Oh, you did such a great job with

the organization.” I said, “It’s not about who does a great job. It’s about whose initial idea was it, what was the intention behind it, what was the purpose, and I’m just helping it live out the purpose that it -- that it” -- so that’s -- that was Basemah, and Dr. Jaber, and Arab American Association of New York.

ALI: So the -- it seems like the period that follows -- or part of that period, and also the period that follows, can be almost chronicled by a series of campaigns. And I guess as a lead up to that, I’m -- I’m interested. You talked about a lot of challenging patriarchy. And I’m interested in how you navigated the spaces that you were in, both within the Arab American, Muslim American, greater New York City communities, as a young Palestinian American Muslim woman. So there’s age, there’s gender, there’s ethnicity, nationality, there’s culture. Tell me, how did you navigate? Where did you find yourself in the intersection of those things?

SARSOUR: I just -- I -- I had a whole, like, complicated, kind of, way in which I showed up in the world. I was -- you know, I was Palestinian, but I was also from Brooklyn, so I had this, like, edge about me that a lot of women in the community didn’t show in the same way that I did, and I couldn’t help it. It was, like -- it was, like, just natural for me. This is just who I am. I also didn’t grow up in a family where people told me to be quiet. Like, we were a loud family, and we were -- we lived on a Brooklyn street with a lot of other loud families from other loud cultures.

And so when I became, quote, a -- a, quote, “activist” in the community, and I started showing up in the, kind of, more organized spaces, you know, if I saw something that I didn’t think was right, I spoke up. And for a lot of people, they were not used to that. And so in the beginning, people were very specific. They were, like, “Look. Who do you think you are?” And, you know, at the time when I show up in the community, you know, I’m 21 years old. Like, I’m -- I’m very young in comparison to the next, kind of -- so I’m 21, and then the next, kind of, quote, “activist” in the community that was, like, had a leadership position was, like, 60. So here I was trying to navigate. Not only was I very young, and people thought I didn’t know what I was talking about. Who was I?

Where did I come from? Although I was from their community, but in the sense of, like, where did I come from that I thought that I can come and try to, like, strategize for our community? And so I struggled.

I mean, I remembered -- I remember this one particular meeting that I had at the mosque, where it was pouring rain outside. Like, I'm not even exaggerating. It was like a monsoon. And I walked all the way home in tears, like, the -- the rain washing my tears away, because I couldn't believe how, like, disrespected I felt in that space. And I was, like, why is it the -- this the case?

And I remember going the next day to speak to Dr. Jaber. And I sat in his office, and I cried, and I'm, like, "Why? Like, what is -- what's the problem?" And he really sat me down, and he said to me, "Look." He said, "These are not bad people. These are people who grew up in this kind of culture." This is all that they know. They grew up in a patriarchal society, whether they -- whether here in this community, where they, literally, came from one country to another, almost, village, where they, literally, couldn't even disrupt their mentality, because they found other people just like them. He's, like -- he's, like, "You can't change people overnight." And he's, like, "If you're going to cry every time, you know --" and he, kind of, put me in my place a little bit, in the sense that he was, like, "Don't give up." Like, "You have to -- we got to meet these people where they're at, you know, and we're -- we can't, like, hit them over the head with this."

And that really stuck -- stuck with me, because it allowed me to understand that, look, I don't have to, quote, "fight" the patriarchy. I have to help people unlearn the patriarchy. And so my approach is different than a lot of activists in our community, that I still call people uncle. That's okay. I don't feel less than because I call a man uncle and give him, kind of, a level of respect. I also sometimes -- you know, one of the -- one of my strategies in the community is to, basically -- I cook up the campaign, and then I show

up in the space knowing exactly what my campaign looks like, but I make people feel like they were part of my campaign. You want to -- you want to be -- act like you -- this was also your idea? You know what? It's your idea, too. Because for me, it ain't about whose idea it is. It's about, we need to do this for our people.

So people -- many, quote, "feminists," or people who say that they're feminist in our community, may not -- don't -- don't agree with my approach. They think that I may be, in fact, catering to the patriarchy. But it's about productivity for me. It's about how far can I get, and how deep can I get into the Muslim community, and what type of platforms can I get to actually put forth my messaging. Which is why I get questioned all the -- they're, like, "This is really weird, but how does Linda get to speak at the main stage on -- at the Islamic Society of North America, at the ICNA [Islamic Circle of North America], which is a very conservative organization, the MAS [Muslim American Society], and some of these very large, 20,000 people conferences?" In fact, believe it or not, I -- I just spoke at a Ummah conference, which is the Shias. I mean, the Shias give me platforms.

It's because I don't criticize the non-choice that they had growing up in patriarchal societies that were often, if not 99 percent, led by men, and this is all that they know. And so for me, I will -- will -- will go into spaces, and I will still say what I believe. So it's not that I go in there and say that I don't believe it. My lectures are public. I talk about reproductive freedom. I talk about all types of progressive issues and spaces. And I don't get shunned, because we're growing together as a community, and I believe in people's potential to evolve in our community. And I have seen our community evolve, in a way.

So for me, you know, I've navigated it in a very strategic way where I have the utmost respect amongst my elders. In fact, my elders will call me and ask me about my opinion about things. And I always laugh. I'm, like, "You know you -- you wouldn't have called

me 15 years ago.” And they laugh. They’re, like, “Why don’t you just let me talk to you right now and stop bringing up old stuff?” But I think that I’ve actually found myself, and when I compare myself to others in our community, just -- there’s a level of productivity, not because I’m smarter, not because I’m better than anyone. It’s because I’ve been able to navigate a community and still see the potential in them, even when I’m heartbroken or hurt by them. And it’s because I believe that it’s not their intention to hurt. It’s that they have centuries-old patriarchy that they, too, themselves are unlearning.

ALI: So I’m going to ask for a story on both sides -- both ends of the spectrum, and I’ll start with the negative. Can you tell me a story where that -- that didn’t work, where you felt like, “I have to just cut my losses at this point and move to another space”?

SARSOUR: Oh, yes, definitely. So we had a situation in -- where -- in Brooklyn, we hold one of the largest Arab American festivals, called the Bay Ridge Arab American Bazaar. And we have two festivals, one in Manhattan, the North Af-- the Arab American North African Street Festival, and then we decided to do one in Brooklyn, because the North African and Arab American Street Festival was more for people to experience our culture, versus the one in Brooklyn, which was about celebrating ourselves, and having a space for us to celebrate.

So we were originally doing it in partnership with a Muslim organization in our area. And one day they came and said, “We have some new conditions for this event. No music.” We were, like, “What? How do you do a festival without music?” No music, no folklore dancing, a whole bunch of, like, different things. Can’t do this. Women this, women that. I was, like, hmm-mm. So one of the reasons why there was -- it was -- it -- it was -- it could have been an easy, like, “All right. Cool. You don’t got to do the event with us.” The problem is, they were the financiers of the event. So basically the choice was -- or at least that’s what they were trying to put forth -- was basically, like, all right. If y’all don’t abide by our conditions, then we’re pulling our money. And it was only about two months before the event was about to happen. And this is an event that

costs about \$20,000. It's not cheap to put on.

And so what happened was, I made an executive decision, and, kind of, overrided my board, by saying, "Okay. Guess we're not going to be doing this event together." And in two months, I have to figure out how to get \$20,000. And my board was, like, "What?" They were, like, "Well, what if we would have negotiated?" I was, like, "Look, it didn't seem like there was a negotiation there. Because I'm not going to negotiate music." I'm Palestinian. Like, you better believe there's going to be Palestinian folklore dancers. Like, you can't have a festival celebrating culture -- food is part of it, but music is part of it. And in fact, the type of music that we were putting forth, in particular, was a lot of, like, you know, like -- for -- for example, Palestinian folklore is a very political, like, you know -- it wasn't like we were just putting up, like, you know, some, like, you know, I don't know, like, some, you know, music about, like, drugs and sex, right?

So it wasn't -- I wasn't really quite understanding where they were going with this, but I think it was a level of, like, this organization's being led by women. They seem to be succeeding, so we somehow have to assert our little authority and power to, kind of, remind them where they stand. And that's, kind of, how I interpreted it. And of course, my board thinks I'm dramatic about it. But I really did feel that.

And I separated ways, and I made a decision. And my board was, like, "Okay. I guess we're just going to have to do this on our own." And we did it. And it was beautiful, and successful, and we were able to bring forth sponsors and, kind of, explain the situation to folks. And it was actually the most successful bazaar, at the time, that we'd ever had. And we've actually done that bazaar by ourselves as an organization ever since then. And that was about, maybe, seven years ago.

And so that was my moment where I -- I decided to say, well, maybe I have power, too. Maybe I have influence, too. Maybe -- maybe I got to the level where I can, too, go ask

people for money for things like this. And I did. And it was, you know, a moment in my life where I transitioned from feeling like I was, quote, “just a servant to my community,” but in fact also a leader in my community. And -- and -- and it didn’t all, you know, technically go -- it didn’t go well, in the sense that there was a little bit of tension that even continued a little bit after that event. But eventually they got over it, and realized, like, if you can’t beat her, join her, kind of, situation. That’s, kind of, where I’m at in the community.

ALI: So let’s go to the other end of the spectrum. Can you tell me a story or an experience where you pushed, and it was transformative for the people you pushed on -- on an issue that maybe they resisted?

SARSOUR: So many issues. I really, really -- I love the community that I come from, because I feel heard. And on many issues -- you know, for example, there’s been a lot of questions in the community, as you know, on things around homosexuality. And it -- it has become, as you know, at -- at one point, a very taboo issue to discuss in our community. And really trying to navigate, what does it look like for us to show up with LGBTQ communities, particularly around some of the social justice work, and being able to have members of our community actually sit with and build relationships with, and me bringing people into our community.

The bottom line is, in this -- in -- in someone who is not -- who is not LGBTQ, they are the first people who come and stand up for our people every time. And so -- and I mean, obviously, non-Muslim LGBTQ people. So being able to sit with, like, imams in our community, and leaders in our community, and say to folks, “Listen. Let’s get -- let’s -- let’s be clear about it here, because I want to understand, because, you know, I’m not an Islamic scholar.” And I actually have been able to say to people, “Look, my understanding in our Islam is that everybody’s created by God, and everybody deserves to be treated with dignity, and love, and respect,” and everybody agrees.

And to the point where there was about to be some public opposition to same-sex

marriage in New York. And I sat people down in an emergency situation, and I was, like, “No, you’re not going to do that.” And then being able to explain to Muslims that -- particularly older Muslims, obviously, and more conservative, traditional Muslims -- like, wait a minute. Let’s be clear about what’s going on here. Marriage is not a religious right in America. It is a civil right. And so when you stand up and say that you don’t support this piece of legislation, what you’re basically saying is that you don’t support someone else’s civil rights. And it was a transformative moment. They were, like, “Oh. I see what you’re saying.” And I said, “Look. People who are LGBTQ don’t care that the government recognizes who they love. I don’t care if the government cares about who I love, either, and I’m not LGBTQ. This is about a matter of civil rights and benefits.” I said, “You know, if someone’s dying, health proxies, health insurance. You know, if someone passes away, life insurance.” And it really -- it was, like, literally, like, an enlightenment. They were, like, “Oh, I never thought about it like that.”

And it’s been really continuous conversations. You know, even when, like, the Orlando shooting happened, being able to think about, what does it look like for Muslims to show up in solidarity with LGBTQ people, and being able to meet people where they’re at. Like, I’m not asking you, yet, to change your religious beliefs about an issue. But is there a way we can coexist and make sure that when people of any community, of any marginalized group, or any group, but in particular LGBTQ people, can they, in fact, feel, just, whole around us, and feel safe? And I think that type of framing for our community is transformative.

And I’m very proud of our community, in the sense that, you know, on issues of Palestinian solidarity, community -- you know, as part of our coalition with Communities United for Police Reform around issues of anti-Islamophobia, we work publicly, clearly, in -- in -- in -- in coalition, including some of our most revered leaders. Like, you will see, like, Imam Talib [Abdur-Rashid] in a press conference with, you

know, around an issue, around, you know, stop and frisk or surveillance, and he'll be standing next to, like, a Black trans woman. Now, mind you, there might be differences in opinion about certain things, but at that moment, we find a common ground on an issue that -- I know damn sure well Imam Talib believes that nobody should be stopped and frisked by the police department just for the sake of who they are or what they look like. And I think getting our community to that place has been extremely transformative for me.

Another issue is around abortion. And it's the -- you know, we -- people here, and in -- in the Muslim community, particularly those who are elders and -- and -- and conservatives, are, like, you know, pro-abortion. I'm, like, "Whoa, whoa. Everybody stop." And being able to sit down with them. And I actually had to do this recently around the Dr. Abdul El-Sayed gubernatorial race, where some Muslim Michigan -- Michigan Muslims were very, like, "Oh my god, he supports abortion. I don't -- we can't support him, because that's haram, forbidden." And I sat down with, actually, some imams at the Imam Council, believe it or not. And I said to them, "Let's have a conversation here. Hold on."

I said, "In fact, Islam is the most progressive when it comes to issues of abortion. Second of all, there is no pro-abortion movement in America. That's the right wing, alright, the same people who don't like Muslims, who use terms like pro-abortion to divide our movement and confuse the people." I said, "I am not pro-abortion. I don't believe that women should be getting abortions left and right. But what I am, is I am pro-choice." And when explaining to scholars, and saying, "Pro-choice for me means that I actually respect the woman highly if she chooses to keep her child, but I also respect a woman who has an heart-wrenching, emotionally involved decision. For whatever decision, whether it's her decision that she makes with her partner, whether it's a decision she makes with her doctor, to have an abortion." And in fact, in Islam, there's very clear parameters around abortion.

And being able to see another enlightenment where people say, “Oh, okay.” And I -- and I would say to the imams, “Just be -- just -- you know, tell me if I’m wrong.” I was, like, “Is abortion prohibited in Islam?” “No, Sister Linda, it’s not prohibited. There are some parameters.” “Exactly.” So we’re not saying that we have, like -- we’re giving out coupons for ladies to go out and get abortions. And being able to really meet them where they’re at, and sit with them, and actually take the time to respectfully have a conversation with people. I see transformation in our community. I believe in our potential as a community.

ALI: How do you decide -- or how did you decide to -- to get involved in an issue? What -- what is the switch that says, this is -- this is important to me?

SARSOUR: Every campaign I’ve ever worked on is based on someone who came to us that was directly impacted by that issue. There’s just no random -- like, this sounds like a good campaign. So anywhere from the Muslim school holidays campaign, which was started by -- or the impetus of that campaign was parents who were outraged that the New York State Department of Education scheduled exams on Eid al-Adha. That’s how it all started. It started from parents being outraged and directly impacted. In fact, you know, many of us were impacted, and our six siblings were impacted, as well. So that campaign emerged from that.

NYPD surveillance really came from this idea that we’ve always been saying we’re under unwarranted surveillance. No one else believed us. But it -- but -- but thank God there was the Associated Press came out with that exposé on the New York Police Department, which really became the validator and the justifier for us to start a campaign. Because before that, everyone’s, like, “You’re paranoid. You can’t prove that you’re being spied on.” And they’re right. They -- how do you prove that you’re being spied on? So my -- my -- the campaigns I’ve always worked on have always emerged from directly impacted people.

ALI: What -- well, let me ask this. What has been the role of mentors -- and we've talked about some. But I think -- I'm thinking of groups like the Gathering for Justice, and the Justice League, which I -- I know that you've been involved in. Can you talk a little bit about how you became involved with them, and your work with people like Harry Belafonte?

SARSOUR: So I got to the Justice League through a friend of mine named Marvin Bing. And it was -- it stemmed from my work on the 2012 silent march against stop and frisk. It was, like, the Father's Day silent march, and it was beautiful, and huge, maybe 40,000 people. And again, continuing the building of relationships across communities. You know, I worked with Marvin Bing, who, at the time, worked at the NAACP.

He was also a mentee of someone who I greatly admired and worked with as well, the late Bill [William] Lynch, who was a -- a -- a very admired political -- in New York City from the days of David Dinkins. He ran John Liu as a Asian American citywide candidate, and John Liu wins and becomes comptroller. And Bill Lynch had this idea, or this philosophy, about coalition building. He was, like, "Black people are not going to get free on their own. The Asians ain't going to get free. Y'all need to get this together." And John Liu was one of those examples where I got to watch his work, where he brought people from all over the city around this one candidate, and through him, met Marvin, and then got into the stop and frisk march.

And then after that, Marvin invited me to a meeting at the -- in the first floor of the 1199 building on 43rd Street in Manhattan. And I -- he said, "I want you to come meet some of my friends, and we're thinking about starting this thing called the Justice League." And basically, the Justice League was a group of peers, all in the same age group, superheroes in New York that, kind of, stem from different issue areas, but mostly around, obviously, Black and Brown issues. And who are just going to -- got to create, like, a consortium of people together. So you know me, you know. Marvin's a friend. I was, like, "Sure, I'll show up."

So I show up, and that's when I walk in and I fall in love with a woman named Carmen Perez. So Marvin had facilitated that meeting with Carmen, who was the executive director of the Gathering for Justice, which is an organization founded by Harry Belafonte. And the idea of the Gathering for Justice is exactly what it sounds like. Harry Belafonte actually created an actual gathering, where he brought, you know, Ruby Dee, and a whole bunch of his elders, and, kind of, some of the more, you know -- Diane Nash and folks, together in a room with young people. And it was, like, "Y'all need to sit together, and we got to all figure this out, because we are in a bad situation."

And -- and -- and the reason why he did that gathering is he was sitting in his hotel room one night and watched a -- was watching the news and saw a little girl getting handcuffed in a school. She was, like, six years old, and they said that she was acting, you know, disorderly. And it moved him. And so he wanted to start a national campaign to end child incarceration, which then led to the Gathering for Justice, the physical gathering, and then became an organization that now Carmen Perez leads.

And the Justice League is an arm of the Gathering, which is a national organization. The idea of the Justice League was for us to bring our peers together and work specifically on criminal justice reform issues in the state of New York. And it was a -- another transformative period of my life, to be in a space outside of my own community, be seen as a thought leader outside of just being the Muslim activist, or, she's doing this for the Muslims, and really getting deeper into working with Black communities, going to the Bronx. I mean, going into the projects of, you know, you know, in central Brooklyn, and -- and -- and -- and just, kind of, recommitting myself to Black people in particular through the work of the -- of the Justice League.

And then from there is when I met Tamika [Mallory], who, at the time, was working for the Reverend Al Sharpton at the National Action Network and, kind of, was finding her

own voice, and wanted to be her own voice and not be in the shadows of the Reverend Al, and eventually leaves the National Action Network and, kind of, joins our crew at the Justice League, which is where this -- this, kind of, three-way friendship emerges.

And that has -- that friendship in particular has been very transformative for me, and I wish that people can experience the type of sisterhood that me, Carmen, and Tamika have. Not only sisterhood in the sense of just, we're friends and we love each other, but just standing up for each other's communities. I mean, Tamika has taken so much hits for being -- for going to Palestine, for standing up for Palestinians, because of her deep relationship with me, you know. Tamika has taken a lot of hits for decisions that she has made to say, you know, for example, that she may not agree with the Minister [Louis] Farrakhan on stuff, but she will not denounce the Minister Farrakhan for many reasons that she has come -- so she's really taught me what it means to be, kind of, strong and free, and standing your ground. And Carmen is a healer.

And so we have this trio with everyone brings something different to the table. I'm, kind of, the strategist, more so, and, you know, let's -- this is what we're going to do. Tamika is the messenger -- messenger and, kind of, the messenger around the campaigns. And then Carmen is the person that brings the healing to the work so we can sustain ourselves moving forward. So that -- that's how that Justice League family started for me.

ALI: What does that mean, the -- the healing to the work? Tell -- tell -- tell me why that's important, and what that has meant in your case. What does that -- what does it mean that you've done to do that?

SARSOUR: So for example, anytime we're together and doing direct action with Tamika and Carmen -- I mean, Carmen straight up does, like, the sage -- she sages us, you know. We do a lot of reflection, you know, intention making when we start an action or start a meeting together. It's interesting, because it's something that almost, like, aligns with me as a Muslim, like, putting my intentions forward.

Carmen's also a person that will stop us in the middle of something where she feels a sense of tension coming up. She doesn't like tension. She believes that when you start feeling that negative energy, that we have to stop. We have to point it out. Where is it? Fix it. It's been very healing for me to be aware of that tension.

When I was organizing originally in the Muslim community, because I come with a lot of energy and a lot of -- I was -- I never used to be aware of that, and so sometimes I used to fall into the negative energy in our community. Sometimes, as you know, you know, there's folks in the community who I have evolved with, and I have grown very close to and very respected by them, and I also respect them, but there's some people in the community that I just don't organize with, because we just haven't come to that place. And I think it's because I -- I didn't have a Carmen in my life, so I allowed negative energy to, kind of, overcome me, and never stopped to say, "Wait a minute, why is this even here? This is not worth it." And I just was young and naïve, and just didn't know.

But Carmen has -- I have become much more mature, being around Carmen in the work. Like, nothing's worth it. Taught me calling culture versus call-out culture. You know, I'm from Brooklyn. Brooklyn's a call-out culture. [laughter] You know? And that's, kind of, how, you know, you come up. You're, like -- you know, Brooklyn goes hard. Brooklyn don't take shit. But I figured out how to not take shit without having to call people out, particularly not those who are supposed to be my people. And I think Carmen taught me a lot about what that looks like.

ALI: So let's talk about some of the campaigns. You've mentioned some of them. Tell me about your involvement in Black Lives Matter.

SARSOUR: So I think for me, Black Lives Matter was more a solidification of who I already was and what I already believed, and also what I believed as a Muslim. You know, I -- many mentors in New York City, as you know, from Imam Talib to Imam Siraj Wahhaj,

and being around Imam Abdul Qadir, and just being around sisters in the community, like, Black people were always my people. And I, as an adult, ventured out of my own, kind of, closed Muslim community, which was predominantly Arab, in southwest Brooklyn, to go to, you know, Bed-Stuy, to go to Harlem. And -- and -- and see that I actually belonged to something much larger than myself, and in fact have been very impacted by Black culture, and Black Muslims in particular.

And not to be cliché, but also, you know, being inspired to, kind of, almost, like, renew my Muslimness through the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Like, I'm very moved by this idea of redemption, and inspiration, and speaking truth to power in the context of Islam. So that was always a thing for me. And I, again, you know, grew up playing in Crown Heights with Black kids. I went to school with Black people. And I always felt loved and respected and whole around Black people. So that was always something I felt inside. I -- maybe I didn't have the words for it, or in the way that Black Lives Matter, kind of, encompassed what it exactly -- I was feeling, and -- and even in the criminal justice work that I was doing before the, quote, "#BlackLivesMatter" hashtag. I was doing police reform work in New York since, like, 2006. So it was just never something that I was, like, Black lives matter.

And so Black Lives Matter, as you know, was a campaign, and more like a hashtag, that came with, kind of, Trayvon Martin's murder. And then, unfortunately, has lived, because we kill Black people all the time in our country. And for me, that awakening moment that was really, like, the shock factor for me, where I, kind of, was, like -- where I understood about, you know, this idea of, like, no respectability politics, like, just say it like it is.

I was radicalized in 2014 when Mike Brown got killed. And I have a son who is the same age as Mike Brown, and, you know, hearing, you know -- and hearing, like, kid in Ferguson, you know -- like, I didn't even know there was a place named Ferguson --

like, that's just how -- how disconnected we are. Kid walking home, and getting shot, and just hearing that story. There was something about it. I don't know. There was something that just left me uneasy when I heard that. It wasn't just, for me, an ordinary, like, Black person gets shot, because that was something that was normal. It was here -- normal in New York City, too. But then I was, like, what? He laid outside for four hours in the hot sun? No ambulance came? Wait a minute. After he laid out in the hot August sun for four hours, then on top of that, you throw him in the back of an SUV? There was something about it that radicalized me. It was, like, not only did you shoot an unarmed Black kid, but then you -- you treated him, in front of the whole world to watch, as an animal, literally.

So I immediately -- my mind just -- I immediately called up a young brother that I knew lived in St. Louis named Mustafa Abdullah. He was an Egyptian American activist who worked at the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union]. And I immediately picked up the phone. I said, "What in the hell are the Muslims in St. Louis doing right now? Because I know for damn sure well, because I've been there many times, that the Muslims own all the bodegas, they own all the hair supply and beauty supply stores. I know them." I said, "What in the hell are the Muslims doing right now?" He got a little caught off guard. He was, like, "Um" -- you know, because it just happened.

And he's wonderful. I mean, he's actually one of the -- one of the folks that sued the -- the -- the local Ferguson Police Department over some protesting rules around sidewalk and things like that, trying to help, kind of, make the -- the rules a little more flexible for protesting. And he's just -- was working day and night. But he never thought about that Muslim -- because he -- he was working at the ACLU, not on the behalf of Muslims. He was just an organizer.

And I was just, like, "What -- what are the Muslims doing?" So I, literally, went to Ferguson. I got up. I went in a airplane. I went to Ferguson. And my role -- I had to find

a role for myself, because I was not there to take the space of Black people, particularly not those that are the most directly impacted in Ferguson. I had to find a space that I was going to contribute to, and my space was to go put together a group of Muslims and visit every store owner in the Ferguson area, and just be, like, "What's your role? What are you doing?" You know? And a lot of these people were worried about -- "Oh, you -- oh, excuse me. You're worried about your store being looted or your store being burnt down. Did you ever think about why you think that?"

There was a -- there was a man there, a uncle, who owned a store that he created a space -- he's a Palestinian guy, elder, who created a store. He has a store on a street corner in -- in, like -- a little bit, like, maybe about a couple of miles away from Ferguson. And made it into, like, a café. And it was, like, a regular bodega, but it also -- he made a café. And the reason why was, he wanted it to be a community space. He had built very close relationships with Black people in his neighborhood. So he was, kind of, like, a model business owner. Sponsored local events, did sponsor-- like, sponsored cleanups in the neighborhood. Like, actually, the couple of streets around his store are beautiful, and people are just hanging out in the store. Like, you could tell, like, he was that community guy.

And I actually asked him to help me do, like, a little, kind of, organizing around these small businesses, and, you know, had really great conversations with people. And then when we went back for Ferguson October, we went around the stores and put up the posters in these stores for Ferguson October. Now, that doesn't -- that doesn't mean that we, you know, I mean, you know, like, eliminated all this anti-Black racism amongst many of these business owners, many of whom are Arab and South Asian who come to Black communities. But I think what we did was, we had a conversation they never had to have, or never felt like they needed to have, or maybe no one just had with them. And I feel like opened a different type of consciousness among some of those business owners, as well.

And I also felt connected to Ferguson because I remembered that there were these young kids in the Gaza during the same summer, where they were being bombarded with missiles from Israel. Still figuring out ways to find little, you know, cell phone signal to -- to send messages on Twitter to the kids in Ferguson about how to create makeshift gas masks. And I was thinking to myself how shameful that kids living under a siege and barely have internet access have figured out how to show empathy and solidarity across the world, but here we are, Muslims and Palestinians in every corner of this country, and we're not showing that same solidarity to the people of Ferguson.

And so during Ferguson October, there was a big Palestinian contingent that came out in solidarity from Palestine to Ferguson, or from Ferguson to Palestine, and it was beautiful. And got to build with a lot of people in Ferguson, and I'm still friends with many act-- many Ferguson activists. In fact, one who converted to Islam, Tef Poe, who's a hip-hop artist and from that area. And so it's been -- that was really, like, a radicalizing moment for me around this idea of Black Life -- Lives Matter. What does that mean, exactly?

And I think Mike Brown showed us that we don't actually value Black life. And in fact, not only don't we value it, we actually devalue it by treating it like it's not worthy or, you know -- actually, when I say that they treated him like an animal, I take that back, because we probably would treat animals better than that. You know, we would probably see a dead animal -- like, a dead dog on the street, we probably wouldn't just throw him in the back of an SUV, because that's just not what we do with animals in this country. But anyway, that was my radicalizing moment on that.

ALI: So -- so in addition to organizing around the push for the Eid holidays to be recognized by the city, you -- you have done, I guess some would say, more traditional political work. So can you talk a little bit about your work with the -- the Muslim Democratic

Club and MPower Change? I'm not sure how they overlap, or maybe one feeds into the next, but tell me a little bit about your work as an activist in relationship to the local and maybe national Democratic party.

SARSOUR: I'm definitely not a loyal Democrat, so I'm going to make sure that's for the record. But what I realized as I was doing this work and learning from other communities -- because that was really what I was doing. I went and ventured out to see, how are other people in New York City building power for their communities, and building influence amongst the government? And what I realized is, a lot of these communities were -- were not just doing, you know, nonprofit, nonpartisan work. They were being partisan. And we were not being partisan in the same way.

And then I -- then I asked, you know, this young Pakistani American attorney named Ali Najmi, who's out -- born and raised southeast Queens -- came and met us at an event one day, me and Faiza Ali, who is a dear friend of mine and one of the best organizers we have in the Muslim American community. Started having a conversation with us, and we were basically, like, "Is there a Muslim Democratic Club? Like, does that exist?" They were, like, "No." And I was thinking to myself, there's been Muslims here for a really long time. It's really interesting that no one thought of this idea of putting together a Democratic Club. And we asked around and tried to, like, look up old stuff. Asked -- asked all the elders. They were, like, "Nope, never had one."

So we basically came together, a couple of young people in the Muslim American community, and we started the Muslim Democratic club of New York back in two thousand early 2013, which was, and would be, the first ever Muslim Democratic Club in New York City, at least from our knowledge and asking every elder that we knew in all -- in all, you know, Brown, Black communities. They were, like -- there was, like, little Dem-- like, there was a, maybe, Pakistanis or something like that, but to have an actual Muslim one, there -- it didn't exist. So we started it.

And it was a very important year. It was, like, the right time, because it was going to be the first time that New Yorkers would vote in a mayor in 12 years. So we had Bloomberg for 12 years. And in fact, the Muslim Democratic Club, believe it or not, was -- while the Muslim school holidays campaign was a nonpartisan campaign, we were strategic to understand that in order for this to work, there had -- they had to know we had a partisan arm that was ready to do some electoral work.

So we founded it, and it -- it just -- it, like, it flew, because we needed it, and people knew it. And people -- and -- and Muslims, you know, if you want to be a Democrat, and you're not really loyal to the Democratic Party, but you -- you still have some of the values of the Democratic Party, and you're Muslim, this was, like, a -- almost like a home for you to come to. And it was a great place to bring in a lot of Muslim professionals and young professionals who may not want to be part of the nitty-gritty type, you know, street work that we do, but will come and wear their business suit after work, and come to a Muslim Democratic Club of New York meeting, where they meet candidates, and network, and things like that.

MPower Change was an idea that I had for many years, and it was -- it's been discussed many times, in many, you know, Muslim activist circles for a really long time. My thing is, like, I'm -- I'm not only a visionary, but I'm, like, if I am going to have a vision, I'm going to make it happen. And a lot of people will, you know -- there was other people. I remember being part of -- of a space where people were, like, "What if we had, you know, like, a Muslim MoveOn.org type situation?" I was working at the Arab American Association of New York and working as an advocacy director for a national Arab American organization, and I was, like, this is just too much. And I don't -- I didn't feel whole doing the kind of national advocacy work that I was doing.

And I -- I went in to a funder, and I said, "Can -- I need \$25,000." "What do you need \$25,000 for?" "Well, I'm going to bring 15 of my favorite Muslim activists in America to

Washington, DC, and I'm going to put them in a room, and I'm going to come up with something, and I'm going to do it, whatever it is." And, you know, the funder was, like, "Okay." I got \$25,000, and brought all -- some of the best and brightest of our community, I brought -- I had Fahd Ahmed from DRUM [Desis Rising Up and Moving]. I brought Mark Crain, who actually is a senior staffer at MoveOn -- MoveOn.org, and also is a founder of Dream of Detroit. I brought Imam Dawud Walid. I brought Marya Banjee, and Faiza Ali, and Alia Latif, and Jamiah Adams, and -- so I had it all diverse, Brown, and Arab, and all kinds of people, young people, old people.

And I brought them into a room, and I was, like, you know -- "I have the talent, and I need your advice. Like, we've got to come up with something for our community." So we came up with three things, but one of the things was not called MPower Change at the time, but it was the idea of creating a digital online organizing platform to, kind of, connect Muslims around the country in the digital space, which everyone else was doing except the Muslims. So I left my job-- I, literally, had that meeting, got fired up, called up my boss on Monday, and I was, like, "Um, I'm going to resign." And she was, like, "Why?" I was, like, "No reason in particular." I was like, "I'm just going to go pursue other endeavors."

And I had no money. I had nothing. No one had invested in my project. And I just was, like, winging it. And everyone was, like, "You're crazy." And then I went to the Ford Foundation, and someone at the Ford Foundation by the name of Eric Ward believed in me. He was, like, "I know you. When you say you're going to do it, you're going to do it." He was able to get me a fellowship to work on it.

And I started the first Muslim online organizing platform. We have over 280,000 members nationally. And we do a lot of campaigns. Some we've won, and some we've been able to build a lot of awareness around. So it's -- it -- we have a c4 and a c3, which means we could play -- we could do, kind of, more political, partisan work. But it's still

separate from MDCNY, but they are two things that I was part of founding, that -- one came two years after the other.

ALI: So tell me about how you got involved in the 2016 presidential election campaign -- campaign.

SARSOUR: So I was -- the first candidate I ever really loved was Barack Obama, and that was before Barack Obama became the nominee himself. Even in New York, when he was running in the primaries. You know, I wasn't, really, like, on the campaign, but there was something about him. I was, like, this is -- this brother right here is, like -- he's -- he's my people. Like, I think I -- I think this is guy I'm going to support. Although, you know, Hillary was from New York. And so that was my first time I felt personally that I was actually, like, supporting an actual candidate, like, from my heart. It wasn't just, like, I went to the polls, and was, like, oh, I researched, and this guy seems better. No, I actually, like, was, like, Barack Obama. This is -- we're going to make this happen. But I still wasn't involved in the campaign. Like, I didn't have an official relationship with the Obama people or anyone that worked on the Obama campaign.

When 2016 came around, I was just in this position where I was, like, all this anti-Muslim rhetoric was going on, anti-Mexican rhetoric, and I just wanted -- I just felt like I had a lot of things to say, and I wanted to have a platform for it. And I did have a little bit of a platform, you know, where I could do and say things. And one day, a guy from -- at the time was living in Tennessee, Tariq Elmessidi -- and I was watching Bernie. Like, I was feeling it. I was, like, I don't know. He was, like, old, you know. I don't know, you know. But I also definitely wasn't supporting Hillary, for sure, at the time. I mean -- I mean, during the primaries.

And then he calls me up, and he's, like, "Linda, like, what's the problem? You're -- we need your voice right now. And in order for you to get a voice, you have to -- you got to pick a side. You just can't be sitting on the sidelines," right? And he was, like, all in on Bernie. Like, this guy, Tariq Elmessidi was, like, breathing Bernie right now. And so I

went in. I looked around, you know, read -- read some stuff, looked up Bernie. And then -- you know, because Bernie wasn't someone I followed. I might have heard his name a few times, maybe, supporting a bill or whatever, but he wasn't someone that I was, like, consistently following.

And I don't know. I go on YouTube, and I put in Bernie Sanders, and, like, something comes up. It's, like, 1992. And I pull it up, and I watch a video, and I'm, like, wait a minute. This guy is saying, today, on his campaign, things he was saying 30 years ago. Then I watched this other video where I watched him get arrested around housing segregation in Chicago. And he was, in fact, chained to a Black woman. And I was, like, wait a minute. This brother's a little bit cooler than I thought he was. You know? At least he's a man of his action, not just a man of words.

Then Tariq Elmessidi convinced me to endorse Bernie Sanders. And I never did that before. So he, literally, made, like, a meme of me, with, like, my face on it. It was, like, a picture. I had, like, my fist up, and it said, "Linda Sarsour endorses Bernie Sanders." I thought it was cute. Like, I didn't think much of it. Apparently, the Bernie people thought much of it, because a lot of people knew I was an activist, and a lot of people knew who I was. I was probably, at the time, a little bit of a visible Muslim, so I could, kind of, help with that community, as well.

I get a call from the campaign inviting me to some stuff. Started showing up, and I was at the grand opening of the Brooklyn office that they had during the New York primaries. Spoke -- you know, my usual self, whatever, and they were, like, "Whoa, all right, now." You know? Next thing you know, they're taking me around the country. I'm opening, like, rallies in Madison, Wisconsin. And one day, I actually asked the Bernie campaign. I was, like, "Wait a minute. Why do you take me to Madison, Wisconsin, and there's all White people here?" They were, like, "Wait a minute. Did you think we brought you to this campaign because you're Muslim and we think you can only talk to

Muslims? No. You can inspire a lot of people.”

So what I’ll give credit to the Bernie campaign was that they saw me as a whole person, in the sense that they didn’t see me as, oh, we’re going to get her, because she’s going to go get us those Arab Muslim votes, even though that is what I wanted to do. But they actually saw that I had a message that reflected the kind of America that Bernie wanted, that -- that there could be a Palestinian Muslim American woman in a hijab that also supports Medicare for all and free public college education, and a lot of the platform, you know, anti-interventionist platform. You know, obviously, Bernie has a lot of work to do on foreign policy, but in generally speaking, I really did align with him in a lot of his policy platforms.

And then I was also, by the way, told that I can say whatever I wanted, which was really different for me, because I -- my understanding is, on these political campaigns, someone gives you a paper, and says you can’t talk outside these talking points. And here I was. I remember, actually, particularly in Wisconsin, they were, like, “Okay. You’re introducing Bernie.” And I was, like, “What do you mean, I’m introducing Bernie?” They’re, like, “Yeah, you’re the opening act, and then you get to introduce Bernie.” And Bernie was coming late. So this lady, while I was onstage speaking -- there’s a video of it, and you see the lady trying to get my attention to tell me, like, keep talking, because the homie’s late. And I was, like, “What the hell am I supposed to say?” And then I just kept on. And they -- and then, you know, no one ever told me, don’t be too Palestinian. You know how it is, it’s a little contro-- I said whatever the hell I wanted to say.

And during the New York debate, in the spin room, which is basically a -- the media room. I’m not exaggerating. It was, like, a whirlwind, and I understand why they call it the spin room. There’s probably about 500 media outlets there. Bernie chose organizers and activists to be in the spin room, while Hillary Clinton chose Governor

Cuomo, and Chuck Schumer, and [Kirsten] Gillibrand, and had every big politico in New York -- the head of the Democratic Party. And here was me, and, like, undocumented Erika Andiola, and Ben Jealous, who was, at the time, was with the NAACP.

And so for me, the Bernie Sanders campaign was an opportunity to go from the days of Barack Obama, when they -- in Michigan, when they asked the two hijabi women to get off from behind the camera frame, because they didn't want to, you know, ruffle anybody's feathers, even though poor Obama did, you know, find out later that that happened. He apologized. But the point is, that's how the campaigns thought about it. To another presidential campaign, only a few years later, where he's, like, no, you're getting a platform, and you're going to wear that hijab, and you're going to go up there and say -- hopefully I won't get in too much trouble, but you can go up there and say whatever it is that you want. And that 2016 election introduced me to the country, not just as a Palestinian Muslim American woman, but as a progressive, and that I was someone that had a -- an opinion about things that weren't just about Muslims and -- and Palestinians. I thought that was an important transformation and pivot for me, which, kind of, brought me where I am now in 2018.

ALI: So -- so tell me what it was like for you to experience -- of course, we know that Bernie Sanders did not get the nomination, and Hillary Clinton ended up being the Democratic candidate. Tell me what it was like for you to experience election day 2016.

SARSOUR: So I was a DNC [Democratic National Committee] delegate for Bernie Sanders, and I went to the DNC, and got to experience that, as well. And then immediately after we officially, quote, "lost" in the convention, and really, Bernie Sanders, for me, being a class act. I mean, he -- you know, look. Bernie is -- knew what was about to happen, and he pivoted immediately. And it was -- as someone who knows him personally, knew that that was authentic. He was, like, "Look. I don't really like this lady this much, either, but we're about to have a fascist. Like, y'all better get yourself straight." And so watching him, kind of, stay loyal to us to the last day of the DNC, and then going up

there and being, like, "I put everything I got behind Hillary," was a very important moment for me and people that I was organizing with, which then pivoted me to be able to feel like I can go and work and get Hillary elected. And I specifically went to places like Ohio.

ALI: I -- I -- I guess before we get to election day, were there people that you had to convince to make that shift, and were -- you know, tell me -- tell me about a conversation or an incident or experience that you had trying to -- to -- to bring people with you. Because I know that there were people who were, like, "I'm done."

SARSOUR: So I think people didn't really believe that a -- that a Donald Trump presidency was possible, and I think people underestimated White supremacists, White supremacy, and Donald Trump himself, and what he was able to -- to bring forth. There was, like, a silent army that we knew nothing about, that was about to go march themselves into those polls. And so I had a lot of convincing to do, of Muslims in particular, many Muslims, who I validly and justifiably agreed with on many issues.

For example, like, look, these are people who want to know why we would vote for someone who, you know, voted for the war in Iraq, and a million people died, and many of whom were American soldiers, too. They wanted to know why someone who voted for the Patriot Act, like, which has, basically, made us, as Muslims, lose all our privacy. Why vote for someone who only spoke about us in the campaign as a national security -- either, you know, in the frame of national security. Like, no one ever -- she never talked about us, about education and health care. Like, we weren't, like, normal people, like everybody else.

So people were upset with her because she is more right-wing on the issue of Palestine-Israel than a lot of people who are right-wing Zionists. Like, she really is very far right on that issue. And so, you know -- and as a Palestinian, like, I had to put my credibility on the line. I was, like, "Look. I don't love her either, but we're about to have a fascist in the White House." And I really did believe that in my heart.

In fact, I was one of the people earlier on with Keith Ellison, where we were, like, “Yo, y’all better wake the hell up,” almost a year before Donald Trump got that nomination, when he first went out. I was, like, “There’s something here. Y’all better pay attention.” I remember, actually -- like, I have a Facebook status about it, and people were, like, commenting, being, like, “Linda, you’re crazy. This guy’s nuts. No one’s going to vote for him. Like, he’s not going to get the nomination.” Okay. I actually screenshotted it once, because I was, like, “I’m going to remind you all that when I say something’s going to happen, it’s going to happen.”

So there was a moment, actually, that I had -- so then, of course -- so I -- I, literally, went around the country having these really difficult conversations, but there was this one conversation that I had that really, like, stood with me, in Ohio. So I go to Ohio. I’m a -- they drop me on some street to canvass. And I’m with this other young woman. And there’s only four houses on the street that we’re going to knock on, and the rest of the houses have Trump signs outside. So I’m walking, walking, and then I look at this porch, and a woman opens the door wearing a hijab, like, an old lady. There’s a man outside. She gives him, like, a glass of water and goes back in. So immediately, I knew they were Muslims. I walk by. I’m, like, why do they have a Trump sign outside? And it was really weird.

So I tell the girl, I’m, like, “Look, I’m just going to go talk to this old man right here.” So the poor girl was, like, “They ain’t on our list.” [laughter] And so I was, like, “No, but they’re -- a woman came out. She’s Muslim, so I think” -- you know. And she -- so the girl was, like, “Do your thing,” but she actually didn’t walk up the porch with me.

So I went up to the porch. I was, like, “Salaam alaikum.” Turns out it’s an old uncle. He’s from Egypt originally. He’s been living here for 40 years, blah, blah, blah. And I’m speaking to him in Arabic. And he’s, like, really, kind of, shocked that I’m even at his

doorstep. And he's, like, "What are you doing?" You know, I'm telling him, I'm, like, "Oh, you know, we're working, trying to get people to remember to vote for, you know, Hillary Clinton," or whatever. And then, you know, we get into a good conversation, enough for me to muster the courage to be, like, "Why do you have a Trump sign outside your house?"

And I said -- I said to him, I'm going, like, "Why do you have a Trump sign outside?" And then he was, like, "Oh." He's, like, "Well," he's, like, "My wife feels safe with it outside." And I was, like, "What do you mean?" And then he's, like, "Well, what if we didn't have a Trump sign outside?" And then he's, like, "Look at my neighbors. They all have Trump signs." And then so for him, a Trump sign outside of his home was, in fact, protection for him. And I never thought about that. I was, like, imagine how many other people have Trump signs outside their house just because they want to feel protected.

So then I was, like, "Okay." So then I felt a little better. I was, like, oh, poor guy, he just wants to protect his house, but he's probably not going to vote for Donald Trump. So I was, like, "Okay, so that means you're not voting for him. That's good." So he's, like, silent. And I looked at him. I was, like, "What?" Like, "Wait a minute. What's going on here?" He goes, "Look." So he started saying to me in Arabic, he's, like, "Look, my daughter." He's, like, "What happens if Donald Trump loses?" And I was, like, "What do you mean what happens?" He's, like -- he loses. He's, like, "No, no, no. Listen to me." He's, like, "What if Donald Trump loses?" He's, like, "What do you think his supporters will do?" And he's, like, "Who do you think that they're going to take revenge out on? It's going to be people like you and me."

So I was, like -- I said, "Uncle," I was, like, "Nobody knows who you vote for." He's, like, "It's not about if people know who I vote for." He was, like, "I just can't imagine what will happen to us if Donald Trump loses this presidency." So that really was a perspective that I didn't really think about, that there might have actually been people

in our country who were so afraid of the alternative, the potential of a civil war or some sort of retaliation amongst Mexicans, people who look Muslim or are perceived to be Muslim, Black people, what other -- other people who are going to be the, quote, "other" that they would perceive not to have voted for Donald Trump. And this guy seriously was, like, afraid for his life. And that just not -- is not something -- I didn't feel like, after that, I could convince more, because he had the vision. He was, like, "This is going to happen."

And so, you know, I continued to do what I did. And unfortunately, Hillary lost in very important states, including a state like Michigan where I worked really hard during the Bernie Sanders primary, where Michigan went for Bernie, and it was the biggest political upset in American history. In fact, every pollster in America said that Hillary would win Michigan by 99 percent. Like, there was -- no one had any other -- like, there was no way around it. Bernie was losing Michigan. And our people gave him that win. Every story was, like, Muslim American vote, the Arab American vote, Muslims, Muslims, Muslims gave that vote.

And guess what happened? Trump won Michigan by 10,000 votes, because I know our people either did not go to the polls, or, in fact, were so, you know, dis-- like, disenchanted with -- with Hillary and, kind of, her record, that they would rather put their name on somebody who didn't have a record, or at least not a physical record, on foreign policy. And I think that's what happened in a place like Michigan.

ALI: So -- so tell me how you spent that day, or -- or the -- tell me your -- the experiences that you felt when the decision was becoming clear, the -- the results were becoming clear.

SARSOUR: I was actually at 30 Rock [30 Rockefeller Plaza], which is by the MSNBC studios in Manhattan. And they had set up outdoors. There was, like, BBC. All the different media outlets were, like, all around, set up their little spots. And I was actually doing an interview. And I was -- there was also a big, kind of, jumbotron that was showing the news, and you were watching the states, and everything was happening. And it was,

like -- in the beginning, I was, like, now we good, right? And then it started not being good.

And all of a sudden, my phone started ringing off the hook. And I picked my phone out of my pocket. I looked at it. And I had my mic -- the lady had miked me up and everything. I looked it up. It was my son. I ignored it. Ignored it again. The thing about it is, my child is not that kind of kid. He's the kid that will call you once. If you don't pick up your phone, he just sends you a message, like, "I'm going out. My friend is here. I'm going to go take \$20 from your drawer," or something like that. He's not the kind of kid that calls me incessantly like that.

By the time I ignored him the fourth time, I tell the lady, "Look, I got to take this mic off, because my kid is calling me, and this must be an emergency, because my kid ain't going to call me four times in a row." I pick up the phone. Two thousand sixteen. My son is 17 years old. He's not a kid. Bawling his eyes out. He's, like, "Why is this happening? What's going on? Why is this happening?" My God, I can hear his voice. Like, my son never cried -- like, my son -- the last time my son cried was, like, he was two. The kid just doesn't cry. I was, like, "What? Don't worry." You know. He's, like, "No!" He's, like, "What do you mean?" He's, like, "Why is this happening? This doesn't make sense!" And he's crying. I'm, like, whoa.

So I, literally, went back to the lady. I was, like, "Look, I got to go." Left my interview. Never did the -- never did -- I had done a couple of interviews. I just, like, stopped, got in an Uber, went straight home. I walk into my house. My daughter is, like, 16 years -- so then we're talking about my daughter's, like, 12 years old, then another one who's, like, 15, and then there's my son. Like, cuddled up in a blanket on the couch. My 12-year-old bawling her eyes out, like, [sobs]. The minute she saw me open the door, she's, like -- and I'm, like, this is really not -- and -- and it just never hit me that it was going to be like this, right? And my daughter was, like, "What are they going to do? Where are

they going to take us?" And I'm, like, "What is going on here?" I sat down and just joined in on the crying, because I just didn't know what to do. I just started sobbing. And I'm watching the -- the news.

And then it -- I stayed up 'til, like, two o'clock in the morning, and then I took a -- a Uber, because I was doing a morning show on a Sirius XM radio, and basically, even when I got to -- because our radio show was going to be from, like, three to six a.m. And I was -- so we're still analyzing, because -- and I -- and I told my kids, "Go to bed." And my kids were, like, "No. We ain't --" like, my kids stayed up all night. Did not go to school the next day. And, you know, around, like, five o'clock-ish in the morning, that's it. It was done. It was over. Like, it was -- like, it was over before that, [laughter] but it was over, over, by five o'clock in the morning.

ALI: What did you say to your kids to either bring them some comfort or prepare them for what you think was coming?

SARSOUR: I didn't have a lot to say at that moment, because I didn't actually have any reassurances myself. I was, kind of, like, we'll -- we'll figure it out. We'll figure it out. But what I did was, the next day -- so mind you, I -- so I hadn't --- so I -- I, you know, didn't sleep that whole night. Go to the Sirius XM radio, do the radio show. Immediately from Sirius XM radio, I went to do Democracy Now! in the morning. Straight to my office. Never went home. My kids, by the way, like I said, didn't go to bed until the morning and didn't go to school.

And the way I was able to talk to my own kids and to my family is not physically. I Facebooked -- I did a Facebook Live from my office, that was widely watched. It -- actually, somebody took the video off Facebook Live, put it on YouTube, and even random people -- I'll be walking in, like, a random part of Oklahoma, and someone will stop me and say, "You know, I had so much despair, but then I watched you on Facebook Live." Like, random people, I don't even know who they are.

And basically, I did this whole Facebook Live. I looked a hot mess, looked like I didn't sleep. I didn't have eyeliner on. It was a mess. And I basically -- something overcame me, and I was basically, like, "Look, it's going to be all right, and this is what we're going to do, and we got to get our people together. It's going to be great." You know, not with those words, but just something -- even when I watched it later on, I was surprised at myself. I mean, I know myself. Like, I -- God gave me a gift. I can be inspirational and motivational. But there was something even more special about that. It was almost like -- like, I felt like God was, like, "Look, people are counting on you to get this all cleared up and -- and give something back to people that they feel like they lost." And I did it. And I -- and that Facebook Live, like, meant a lot. And including to my own kids, who I know watched it.

And then that -- a few days later after elections, I went to one of the -- my favorite conventions in America called Race Forward. Face -- I'm sorry. It's called Facing Race, organized by a group called Race Forward. And in fact, I wasn't going to go, because I was that, like, devastated. I wasn't, like, devastated, but I was so disappointed in everybody, the world, betrayed. I was, like, I'm -- I don't want to see anybody's faces. And I, literally, was, like, "I'm not coming." And they were, like, "But why? You should still come and be amongst your people." It's true. Like, the people that are there are all, like, anti-racist activists. I mean, it's, like, 3,000 people.

And it was a good thing that I went, because what I had that -- held onto that week, I brought it to Facing Race. I was, like, on this big plenary with Van Jones, to the point where Van Jones was, like, "I'm not even going to say nothing, because I got to hear what this lady got to say." Because I just was, like, "Let me just say --" and I basically did a whole, like, lecture to the left. Like, y'all better get your shit straight real quick. And that we have this problem, this problem, this problem, and the -- I'm not saying that we're the reason why, but we just got to figure it out as we move forward from here. And it was very well received in that space.

[loud siren in background] Such a typical New York feeling when you have the sirens in the background. See how mine's just so -- mine's just going to be so original.

[laughter] And it was just a heartfelt moment that I needed to be around my people, kind of, in the movement, and -- and being able to share my heart with them. And I was very honest, and even challenged a lot of people who were in that room with me.

And during this time, some White ladies started a Facebook page, because that's what White women do. They were outraged, and they started a Facebook page. And it was based on a grandmother from Hawaii, an old retired grandma, lawyer from Ohio -- I mean, excuse me, from Hawaii, who literally wrote a little status that was, like, "I think we need to march." That's literally what she said. Never marched a day in her life, but was, like, "I think we need to march."

Next thing you know, lady wakes up in the morning, and it's, like, 20,000 likes on it. And when you're, like, a little old grandma that gets, like, one like, and then you wake up, and your little status goes viral. Based on that, someone creates a Facebook page, calling it the Million Women's March. Yep. And then one of the original White women who were a part of the original group that started the Facebook page -- so let's be clear. That's what the White ladies did. They did the Facebook page -- probably looked around and noticed that they were all White. And she had a little sense to say, "This is not going to work." And it's probably -- and -- and not that it's not going to work. It might have worked in the sense that they could have put a -- put on a march. I won't take away from them that they could have probably did a march. But I think this woman was, like, this is just not going to -- this is not going to be the right message, right, if we're all, like, White women organizing, and most people that are going to come to the march are White.

So that woman called someone that she knew, and then was, like, "Look, I'm looking for some women of color, activists, visible activists, people that also know how to organize marches, because none of us know how to," kind of, situation. And it was Michael Skolnik, who then gave -- said to her, "I know the perfect group. I know the perfect trio. They come in a package, so you can't choose one. You have to take -- if I give them to you, you got to take all three." And the woman was, like, "We'll take them, whoever they are."

And so they connected Bob Bland with Tamika Mallory originally. And here I am. I'm still at Facing Race. This is the weekend of the -- right after the election. Connected Bob Bland to Tamika. Mind -- mind you, Bob Bland's pregnant. Tamika had to go see her in the hospital to have a meeting with her, to get some things straight, as Tamika would say. Lady's, like, in contractions, and Tamika was, like, "What's the plan here?" And then Tamika was, like, "The first thing is, it's not going to be called the Million [laughter] Women's March. Let's get that straight." And poor ladies -- I got to give them a little credit. They actually did not know, because that's how much the history of Black people and Black women in particular is so erased and not elevated, that they didn't know there was a Million Women's March in Philadelphia back in 1997.

And make a long story short, Bob is in the hospital. She's, like, "Look. Whoever you are, you're great, wonderful. Let's just organize this together." And so me, Carmen, and Tamika are brought in. And we were very specific that we weren't going to be brought in to be tokenized as a Black woman, and a Muslim woman, and a Mexican woman, that we wanted to have leadership positions, that we wanted to be part of strategy, that we wanted to do this and this and that. And the White women were, like, "Y'all do you." Like, "Whatever you need, do it." Because they knew that they needed our resources in the sense of that we actually understand how to organize.

And so I became one of the national co-chairs of the Women's March. And it was

actually, like, you know, for me as a spiritual person, like, God brings things, like, at the right time. Like, I imagine after all of that, what -- what I -- what was I going to do with myself, you know? Like, I didn't know what -- you know. And -- and -- and although I didn't have, like, extra time to be organizing mass mobilizations, I still felt like God gave me that, because it was, like, something that he needed me to do, for many reasons.

And we ended up organi-- you know, changing the name to the Women's March on Washington, after getting the blessing of Dr. Bernice King, which is Dr. Martin Luther King's daughter, so we didn't just go from appropriating one Black march to another one, just to be clear. And she was on a national conference call with us, so people heard her voice say that, "I give you these blessings to -- to name this the Women's March on Washington."

And then we had the march on January 21, 2017, which was the day after the inauguration of America's fascist president. And I, kind of, think to myself now that, what would have happened to our country if there was no Women's March? And to -- and -- and to be very clear, the Women's March was not a perfect march. There was many things that, if I can go back, I would change. It was obviously many White women who came to the march. Many marginalized women who might have not -- who have had old experiences of White feminism, who still weren't sure about who me and Carmen and Tamika were, and how much leadership we actually had -- and there was a lot of questions, and -- and I think that was valid. And we've been, you know, evolving through those questions over the last year and a half, or a little more than a year and a half.

ALI: At what point did you get the sense that this was happening at the scale that it turned out, you know? Because, you know, people call for marches all the time. At what point is there, like, a moment that you can recall where you were, like, oh, snap. This is going to be what this is.

SARSOUR: When we had to rent the entire RFK [Robert F. Kennedy Memorial] Stadium parking lot for buses and also Union Station. So when we bought those permits -- those parking permits, based on the amount of buses that registered to come to the march -- so we actually created a form, basically saying, "If you are going to mobilize a bus, and you" -- because, you know, where the hell are they supposed to park their buses? There's nowhere to park. And the minute I saw the over 2,200 buses, I was, like, well, that's a lot of buses, you know what I mean? And so when you do the numbers, if you -- if you hit 2200 times, let's say, 50 average seat a bus, we were already, like, that's a lot of people.

Now, you know, for us, you know, like, when -- when the -- when the MPD [Metropolitan Police Department] locally, like, the law enforcement agencies and National Park Service were like, "Oh, so how many people do you think are going to come?" We're not going to -- I'm not going to lie to you. We were, like, "Oh, yeah, I don't know. Like, a quarter million people." We actually thought that that was quite impressive, that 250,000 people coming to Washington, DC, the day after the inauguration would be impressive. In fact, a million came. And --

ALI: And you had --

SARSOUR: Sister mar-- we had -- we had over 500 sister marches all over the world, literally on every single continent, including in every major city -- not even in every major city. In every city in America, including places where a women's march was the first march they ever had in their -- I'm talking about the boonies of Arkansas, people were having marches. I mean, some of the marches in places like LA were, like, 750,000. You know, Chicago, New York shut it down. Like, every -- every place you can think of. Albuquerque, New Mexico. Like, not that there isn't already organizing happening in those spaces, but to have mass, mass mobilization, people told us it had never happened in their cities.

ALI: What -- so for many people, they -- your -- your speech stands out. Take us from your perspective what it was like that morning or that day for you.

SARSOUR: You know, just not sleeping for three days, just a lot of anxiety, a lot of -- like, people don't understand the logistics that goes into something that -- of that caliber. I mean, very basic things, like when you're trying to imagine how 2200 buses are going to get into the city, and making sure that people get to where they need to get to, and your speakers, this one's late, this one's airline -- you know, it just -- it was just a logistical nightmare. And -- and I -- and I'm fortunate -- we're fortunate that people don't know that. They actually came to the march and were, like, "This is so amazing and so well-organized." And I was, like, "Great."

But I remember that morning, it was, like, 4:30 a.m., still dark outside. And, you know, we show up to the spot. And there was already people there. And I'm, like, what are these people doing? This doesn't start until ten o'clock in the morning, and people are -- like, literally, were camping out, ready for a march. And so I was, like, okay, this is really interesting. All right.

Then when -- around nine o'clock, or maybe even before that, 8:30, I get up on the -- I just stand on the stage randomly, like the -- the program hadn't started. And I, like, get up on the stage, and I look. And I already, at 8:30-ish, could not see the last person. So by the time 8:30 came, that thing was already done, packed.

And then, you know, as you know, myself -- you know, there was obviously different speakers or whatnot, but of course, me, Carmen, Tamika, and Bob were all going to give some words, you know, as the co -- four co-chairs of the Women's March. And I had to, like -- you know, everyone else, like, was writing a speech and whatnot. I'm -- I'm not ever, like, a speechwriter. That's my other problem. Like, people are going to all -- like, when I'm a grandma, they're going to have to, like, transcribe all my stuff, because I'm just -- they're just never going to find me writing. Even my notebook is, like, six words, but then I just gave a 45-minute lecture, and people are, like, "Can we get a copy of your speech?" "Well, you're going to have to transcribe it."

I wrote, like, four words on a piece of paper. And the first word was "Palestinian," "Muslim," "follow women of color," and I forgot what the fourth thing was. "Follow women of color," and there was one more thing that I had on that paper, but I'll remember in a second. And that's it. That's all I had. Four things. And that's what I went up there with. Or -- oh, "keep your" -- "keep your voice loud," was the last thing. And that's it. Four things.

And then Tamika was, like, "Where's your speech?" And I walk up with this crumpled piece of paper, and I'm, like, "It's right here." She's, like, "What do you mean?" She was trying to explain to me. She was, like, "Linda, do you understand what's about to happen right now? Like, this is your -- this is your shit. This is your moment." Like, "This is some going down in history [laughter] situation." She's, like, "You've got to have" -- I was, like, "I got this. Don't worry." And she was, like, "All right." Everyone, like, had a thing. Carmen wrote her speech out. They were in the back, like, editing their stuff. Someone was, like, typing and fixing. We had a printer in the back. I was, like, "I -- I'm not going to do that."

And my speech, for me, came, like, from the deepest of my inside. And I wanted to be the person that still challenged and also gave instructions, but also used that platform to reinforce who I was, by proxy my people. So when I went up there, I wanted to be very deliberate about saying to everybody in this country that I was unapologetically Palestinian American. And I even said in my speech that I was my Palestinian grandmother who lives under military occupations while this dream manifested. You know, how my Palestinian grandmother could imagine that now she has a granddaughter in the United States of America holding the highest -- like, there was nothing higher than the -- than the Women's March platform. That was, like, ev-- all eyes on us all over the world. And being able to say that I was unapologetically Muslim American, and very clear in my speech that I was also unapologetically from Brooklyn,

New York, and that's a very important part of my identity.

And being able to say to these women, many of whom were White women, that if you want to know that you're going the right way right now, now that you're in the -- now -- now that -- now that we're all in this together, apparently. Now that you're all here. And I say to them, like, "Some of you are -- I'm -- I'm not going to ask you where you were. I welcome you here now." And I say to them, "If you want to know right now if you are going the right way, follow women of color. Because women of color have the most at stake. We know where justice is. And I think you need to follow us to the -- to the -- we know where the promised land is. We may be far from it, but we know where it is." And that was important for me at that moment, and to -- to say to these White women, follow us, we know what we're doing.

And then moving forward and saying, you got to keep your voice loud, and reminding them of who the marginalized -- I said, keep your voice loud for Muslim women, for refugees, for Black women, for Native women, for LGBTQ people, for people with disabilities, for women, like, we need to you to be loud. And, you know, that all came from my heart. I -- I -- I had something to say. And in fact, I did take a little second to basically say, "Look, like, as a Muslim American, nothing -- none of this is new to me. And people have been silent on issues that have impacted my community for the last 16 years. But I'm here now, you know." Kind of, like, I'm not going to forget, but I'm also going to move forward. Now that you're here, I hope that you stay with us here.

And that was my speech. And I think people -- it was a transformative moment for our country to say, okay, maybe she's right. What's the worst that's going to happen? Let's follow some women of color. Now there's a lot of talk around following women of color, follow Black women, trust Black women, trust women of color, trust the most marginalized, center the most marginalized communities. And it really is the only way to do this, and it's something that I try to practice in the work that I do. And I think the

Women's March, for me, was also a message to my Muslim community, that we deserve these spaces that we're in, that I am -- that I would -- will sacrifice to be here on this stage for you -- to be a reflection of you as a community, to show boldness and courage, and really for little Muslim girls all over the country.

And because I was a, quote, "boss" at the Women's March, I was able to bring, you know, Malcolm X's daughter, and Muhammad Ali's daughter. I had Alia [Sharrief], who's a hip-hop artist from Oakland. I brought her down. She was the best performance -- she -- she, like, was better than damn Alicia and Madonna and everybody. Like, I'm serious. Like, she was -- people were, like, "Who's this girl? She's amazing." Got, like, little gigs afterwards. I brought a young undocumented Pakistani girl from Staten Island. I brought Sister Ieasha Prime, who's a -- a revered Islamic scholar and also just a powerful speaker. You know, Zahra Billoo, a civil rights attorney from our community that wears hijab. Like, I wanted to bring -- bring the best and brightest of my community, and the majority of the Muslim women that I put up on that stage were Black Muslim women, because I wanted to reintroduce our country to our legacy, and this is where we come from, and reminding them that Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali were Muslims, and here are their -- their legacy to us is their daughters.

So that was, like, also thinking about what my responsibility was in the Mus-- in -- in -- within the Women's March. It was really, let's be real, center my people. And -- and -- and -- and put forth the best and the brightest that my community has to offer. And maybe the -- maybe not the most traditional of the people that my community would put up themselves, but the ones that I thought were important, the most directly impacted, the most powerful, the -- those connected to lineage. And it was really beautiful, because our community was really proud of me, you know, after that, just watching what, kind of, transpired.

ALI: So one last question. With this national platform that you had, and -- and have now, why are you still in Brooklyn?

SARSOUR: I'm holding on, Zaheer, as much as I can to the -- to the -- to the -- like, I'm holding on by a string. Like, Brooklyn is, like -- it's hard to explain, but Brooklyn is in my blood. It is -- I am one of those people that I can travel to any corner of this world, and people will know I'm from Brooklyn without even having to tell them I'm from Brooklyn. Like, Brooklyn is -- is the -- is a piece of my puzzle. If there was no Brooklyn, I would be not a whole person.

Brooklyn taught me grit. Brooklyn taught me, you know, to go hard. Brooklyn taught me what loyalty, real loyalty, looks like. Brooklyn introduced me to the world. I have been introduced to every corner of this world without having to leave the borough of Brooklyn. Brooklyn has loved me, and -- and embraced me. I -- I will never forget any of my Brooklyn public school teachers, my -- my professors, and people who, like, believed in me.

It was -- it -- Brooklyn gave my family opportunity. I mean, my parents came, literally, from poverty. Had no formal education, and -- I mean, my mom didn't have a high school edu-- didn't get to get her high school diploma, but went up to, like, 11th grade. My father had, like, a basic, maybe, fourth grade education. And he -- he came, and Brooklyn allowed him to work hard and -- and support a family of nine. So Brooklyn just gave me a lot, and I want to stay here as long as I can. I raised my children here. I've chosen to send my kids to Brooklyn public schools. I didn't send my kids to private school or to Islamic school, because I wanted my kids to get the same experience that I have.

I mean, gentrification and the housing market in New York, and particularly in Brooklyn, is absolutely outlandish, but I'm still holding on for as long as I can. So I hope I never have to leave Brooklyn, and if I ever did, it would only be for economical reasons, not for any other reason. But I know that if I ever had to leave Brooklyn, I would be one of those -- I'm going to use a cliché, but you can take the girl out of

Brooklyn, but you can't take the Brooklyn out of the girl, and I'm definitely the epitome of that.

ALI: Well, thank you so much for sharing your story, and you'll never be able to take your story out of Brooklyn, because it's now part of Brooklyn Historical Society, so thank you for that.

SARSOUR: Thank you. Thank you for giving me the opportunity.