conversations with the women of oasis

EXCERPTS FROM ORAL HISTORIES COLLECTED BY PRINCETON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS // NOVEMBER 2018
Compiled here are excerpts from interviews with five women in the English as a Second Language (ESL) class at Oasis. The interviews are wide-ranging, but all have at their hearts the relationship of language and immigration to these women’s experiences, as well as the role played by Oasis in their lives. A recurring theme emerged across the five interviews: the importance of Oasis both as a way to access education and as a crucial space for the women to feel valued, supported, and empowered on their own terms. Oasis offers something rare in these women’s lives: time and space just for them.

About Oasis
Founded in 1997, Oasis started as a soup kitchen for women and children in Paterson, NJ. Over the years, the organization has expanded to offer a plethora of services to women and children in the Paterson area, from programs supporting basic needs, to social service provision, to an array of educational and enrichment programs. Now located at 59 Mill Street in Paterson, Oasis programming helps support and empower hundreds of women and children each year.

Mission
The mission of Oasis is to change the lives of women and children by breaking the cycle of poverty through compassionate programs designed to feed, clothe, educate, and empower women and children in need.

The interview process
This project is part of a collaboration between Oasis and the Program for Community Engaged Scholarship at Princeton University. The interviews were conducted by Ysabel Ayala, Anna Jurew, Alexandra Levinger, Fares Marayati, and Kate Reed in November 2018.
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What does Oasis mean to you?
My friend first bought me here with her to Oasis, when I was applying for citizenship. I loved it so much from the beginning. This place has helped me so much. After having my daughter, when she was only 4 months, I also had a two-year-old and a one-year-old. Their teacher at Oasis would help me carry my youngest and help get me home in the car. Oasis helped me carry the weight of raising a family, and all the worries that came along that. Through helping me with other aspects of family life, they gave me the motivation and time to learn and do what I wanted.

The teacher helped me tremendously with studying for the citizenship. They did everything to help me with my children as well. I was never afraid to leave them at Oasis, because they truly make you feel comfortable and reassured that everything is going to be ok. Oasis has truly become like my family. They alleviate the stress and the loneliness. Instead of sitting at home doing nothing, you can come here with your kids, the kids have fun and have a great time and I am also able to do things that I enjoy and make friends.

What does language mean to you?
Language is so incredibly important. It is very very very very important. Without language, you are both deaf and mute. Without language, there is nothing. Language is the necessary tool to study, work, or do anything. If you want to understand people, talk to people, do anything with people you need language. In Clifton, there are a lot of places with Arabic translation and Arabic-speaking people. It really changes how I feel entirely around places and people, once I hear Arabic I am more comfortable. Even now, when I walked into this interview and you told me that you spoke Arabic I felt so happy. Regardless of how hard you try, your mother tongue will make you feel more comfortable. When you speak the language well, you are able to express what you feel, what you want. It’s hard when you understand half and miss the other half, or when you risk saying the wrong thing and being misunderstood. It’s different. The most beautiful feeling is when you run into someone who speaks Arabic, who speaks your own language. I am working hard to learn English because I know that it will become just as beautiful, once I learn how to speak English well.
How has life as a mother and woman change since moving to the US?

Everything changed. I matured so much. Life is different here. You learn so much – the diaspora, the alienation teaches you. In Egypt, I was spoiled, living around my mother and my father. When I moved here I became the mother, the leader, the matriarch, the role-model. If you lead the way properly, your family will follow, and if you stray, they will follow. When I was in Egypt, I had so much less responsibility and was so spoiled. I would eat, drink, and sometimes study sometimes not and I basked in my family’s support. Life has just changed completely. And praise be to God, it has changed to the better. I am very happy in my life here, my marriage life, my family. I really love my family, like if I could give them my soul I would. I hope that they grow up to be a million thousand times better than me.

Has your life changed since you started English classes at Oasis?

Learning English makes me feel like the US has become my new home. Language is so important as part of that feeling. When you speak with someone, your neighbor, in English, you can begin to truly feel like you’re at home, that his new place that I live in can become the same as where I grew up. The people here are very respectable, but the language and the impression are just different. But language, is just so important, in everything. In raising the children, like for example going to their school and communicating with their teacher, you need the language. Being dependent on translators does not always convey what is inside of you to the same extent, or express your emotions or ask what you want to ask. Because of that, learning language is so important. In order to truly feel happy here, you have to be on equal footing as the people here when it comes to language, in order to live with them.

I am still not completely independent linguistically, but I can manage the basics in public life, for example going shopping. I can speak a little bit, but now I am able to understand, I am no longer deaf I am able to listen and understand what is being said around me. Sometimes when I run into a word or two that I don’t understand, I ask my children and they help me.
What does your family think about you taking classes at Oasis?

They're happy. I've had almost 14 years in Oasis, but this is my first school...Oasis is my first school. I never went anywhere else, I didn't take any English classes or anything. This is my first school here in America. And here I meet amazing teachers, I love them. I love to come here and coming here is my own time...my own pleasant time.

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Does anyone ever ask about your muslim faith at Oasis?

No, as always they respect everybody, like every religion. I like it...when I was first here I was like "Oh my gosh I don't know them or how they talk or their culture" or "I'm wearing a scarf they will laugh at me," but it's completely different...they're very friendly.

What was it like for you to come to the U.S.?

Life is different here from my country. I was a student before I got married and then I had baby then I come here, like everything is different...especially the language. When my baby needs to go to doctor, my husband always has to go with me because I understand English but I don't talk. I think if I talk then it's maybe wrong or people will laugh at me, so he always goes with me when I go to doctor or shopping. Now it's okay.

What is it like at Oasis? How is it for you to talk to people from all these different ethnicities and languages?

It's interesting to me. I'm here and I meet lots of people and I like them..they're friendly. It's a new thing for me because I never used to go outside a lot...I was a complete housewife, so coming here is fun for me.
And for your children, did they grow up speaking English and Bengali?

Yeah both, but they talk English mostly. This makes me sad. My kids only listen to English songs. They don't understand Bengali songs, they don't like it. They're like, "we don't know what they're saying!" Sometimes, my daughter says, "I like this music but I don't understand it."

Has home changed from Bangladesh to here?

Yeah, a lot. in my country you can have people help you, but here you have to do everything all by yourself. It's hard... but I still manage, you know. You have to do the cleaning, cooking... as a mom of 3, I don't have my time.

Do you feel like the U.S is your home?

Yes, and still I miss my country. So I have two homes... I feel like I have two homes. My own family is here and you know, my siblings are over there, so my childhood, my student life, every memory, every good memory, everything in Bangladesh. And here is a new life with my kids, my husband, so it's a different story.

And do you feel that your life has changed because of Oasis?

Yes, yes of course. Before here, I didn't go anywhere, I didn't work. I'm just a complete housewife with my kids and the chores. When I'm here I'm a student. I can say I'm a student...and my little one is happy now, he says, "we're 4 students now!"
What does Oasis mean to you?
I am feeling happy. I am not confused. I am talking...This time [at Oasis] only me. Do you know? This time nothing for house, nothing for children, nothing for everyone. Only for me. And then for my friends. [It is a] special time.

Why did you first come to Oasis?
My friend saying because this school free. Because only my husband worked. Very [hard] for me. Because one people worked, mortgage, and rent, or whatever, yeah, a lot of, because three people, three children, and then one people is going to the university, a lot of...I need a lot of money. And then yeah, I said my husband, my [youngest] children is seven years old, she is going to do starting for school, and then came to Oasis, I am starting for Oasis. And Oasis is free, no money, because I am looking for, three, four years ago, I am looking for ESL class, too much money, 200 dollars every weekly, oh my God. Not for me. Not for me. And then starting Oasis. I love Oasis.

I am feeling happy. I am not confused. I am talking. [Oasis is a] special time.

What was it like living in the U.S. before learning English?
I am walking, I am scared because I don’t speak English. What do you say for people? She is asking for me, I.... What do you say? I don’t understand for him or her very well. Do you know? I am so scared first time came to United States.

[I was always] only waiting for my husband. If you shopping waited for my husband, if you need bread, or water... I am looking for, everywhere is nothing for bread, or water, my son very hungry in the morning time...Tarzan! First time, came to the US, I am understanding for Tarzan...Yeah because he is understanding, not understanding sometimes. For Tarzan...everyone is differently, do you know?
As a mother, how does language affect your relationships with your children?

My older son very good person. He is understanding for me everything because he and I am growing up together. I am 18 years old he was born, and then yes, very earlier, and together growing up, my mom and my dad helping for me, helping for him, and then yeah for friends. For my best friend. My son. My son. My children’s parents is my older son. He is saying everyday, yeah, please school calling me, yeah I know, but you calling for him or her teacher. Yeah. Okay, mom, please, learn English, ok, I am learning. I said.

[Homework is hard with my younger son.] Because sometimes I don’t understanding for, because times ok, I understand but is [drawing division problem on paper], there is differently for my country. I don’t understanding this sign. This year, very hardly. He is third grade. Division. Division is very hardly. Division last month and then he is saying, I am looking for problem and then I am reading, and “no, you not good English, please, don’t read me” ok, ok, please, I am helped for you, please listen, listen for me, and then I am helping for him sometimes is my son, my older son, helping for him but his time is not enough. He is going to do for, yeah my children going to sleeping time is 8 o’clock, sometimes my son is coming to do for 10 o’clock, yeah. Nothing help. But I am helping for him and her

Has your life changed since you started English classes at Oasis?

Yes of course. English learning is differently changed because… I am feeling for…I am looking for translate. I am feeling… I am feeling pride. I am feeling for exciting. I am feeling for… yes. Yeah. I am feeling trust. I trust. Yeah. I am feeling trust.
Do you feel welcomed by the community in Wayne and in Paterson? Do you feel like you belong?

Yeah, I feel happy, I feel happy. Because I think it’s in relation to before [I immigrated]. [Back in Morocco], it was actually like I lived alone. When I was in middle school, my mom went to Germany, but I was in middle school, so I didn’t go with her. I stayed alone with my uncle. That’s why it was easy for me, anywhere I went, I adapted. I didn’t have any difficulties. I am happy with the neighborhood [in Wayne]. I’m very happy here, it’s a nice, clean area. I think there are some good neighborhoods, some not. When I would go shopping, I would take all three of my kids, and I had a big stroller. I would take one of them by the hand and two in the big stroller when I wanted to go somewhere. Some people wouldn’t help, you know. Other people were good, they would help. This is life, there is bad and there is good, everywhere. Sometimes, people would be mean. When I didn’t know English, they would just say “oh, okay, okay.” They weren’t patient, they didn’t speak slowly, or take time to understand what I meant. And sometimes, we found good people as well.

What has it been like to work with the people at Oasis? Does your family support you coming to Oasis?

They are helpful, supportive. Yeah, they are nice. My sister-in-law, she told me about Oasis. Her niece was here before, that’s why she told me, if I wanted to try to register. My husband supports me. I told him about Oasis, he didn’t know about it. I talked to him about Oasis, and he told me, it’s okay if you want to learn English. Go.

[The people at Oasis] are helpful, supportive. They are nice.
What was the process of applying for citizenship like? Was it a difficult process?

Actually, everything was easy for me, because my husband brought the form, and he filled out the form, and I gave my fingerprints, and after that I got a letter from them, and they had passed my citizenship. … The first time I took a book, it was difficult, very difficult, it was hard. My husband brought me a form in my language, so I could understand the meaning of the books, you know, there is a lot of hard stuff, the Constitution, you know, I didn’t know about this stuff. And I took the form in Arabic, in my language, and I read that first, and then I read in English, and after that I read in Arabic so I understand. If I didn’t understand, I cannot study, I cannot memorize. And when I was home, when I was doing chores, every day I would do listening on the computer. Every day, every day, every day. That’s why it was easy for me.

Do you have a job that you do during the day?

You know, my husband works two jobs. He told me to, my only job is to stay at the house and raise my kids. But after that, I told him, let me try, let me try to find a job, an easy job for me, for the half the day. And one day, when my kids came home from school, they brought a flyer. The school gives us a flyer every Monday saying what the kids eat, and they put a note: if you want to work when your kids are at school, you can call us, you know? And I went to the high school in Wayne, I made an appointment, and I work as a lunch lady. Actually, it’s a hard job. I worked only three months because I broke my ankle … I could not stand, I had to have crutches. It was hard, with three kids, it’s very hard, very hard.

What work does your husband do? Do your children get to see him often?

Before [I joined him in the US] he was a manager in New York. He had a good job, he was a manager, but he didn’t have insurance or benefits. After that he tried to find another job because I came [to the US], he needed to change his job, he needed insurance, so he found a job as a security guard in New York, and he also does [contract work] cleaning, painting, garbage. When my children see him, he talks to them, he says, okay, I want you to learn, because I work hard for you. If you don’t see me, you see your mom, I work hard for you, that’s why. He told my kids, if you need something, I’m going to give it to you. Everything you need, you will find it. But you need to study, study hard. To have a better life, a better future.
How has being a woman shaped your experiences?

This here is woman’s height [gestures at head level]; Turkey, woman is down [gestures lower]. This here is good.

What language do your children speak with each other?

English. Yes, English.

And how do you feel about that?

I feel it’s better. I say, I’m coming alone, [I had] born two babies, [they] grow up, now it’s — learn English — it’s more than learn English. Sometimes I cry… it’s difficult.

From learning language at Oasis, how do you feel that it has changed your life outside of Oasis? In Paterson, or with your friends, or going to the hospital?

Yes, more friends is speaking, is talking. [I] got to — alone — [I] go to hospital, [I’m] talking. No husband is coming; husband is working. I go, [what] doctors say, I understand, I’m talking… Yeah, it’s good.