

Interview 23

This interview was conducted by The Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center (MEMEAC) of The Graduate Center, City University of New York (June 2002 – June 2003)

Gender of respondent: Female

Age: 24

Q. I would like to start by asking you a few questions about yourself. Where were you born?

A. In Afghanistan

Q. Where did you grow up?

A. Here in New York.

Q. How old were you when you came to live in the United States?

A. I was about 5 years old. Yeah, I was five.

Q. Where was your father born?

A. He was born in Afghanistan, in Kabul.

Q. And how about your mother?

A. She was also born in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Q. What do you consider to be your ethnic background?

A. I consider myself to be Afghani.

Q. And what is your religious affiliation?

A. I am a Muslim.

Q. How old are you now, if you don't mind?

A. I am 24 years old, going onto 25.

Q. Are you a U.S. citizen or a permanent resident?

A. Oh, I'm a citizen.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. I have an Associates degree from [name removed]. And I also went to [name removed], for about a year.

Q. What is your job title and if you can explain briefly what is it exactly that you do?

A. I'm an entrepreneur and I sell fabric.

Q. I'll go ahead and ask you a few questions about the experience of September 11th. Where were you at 9am on September 11th and how did you hear of the attacks?

A. I was opening the store with my husband and I heard about it from a neighbor next to us. He said that an airplane hit the World Trade Center.

Q. What was your first reaction?

A. I thought just a regular airplane was flying low and it was an accident.

Q. And then what about the possibility of the terrorist being ... did you think it was a terrorist attack? What came in your head?

A. No, I didn't. Just when the airplane hit then I was like, Oh, definitely it was planned out.

Q. So did you think that it was a possibility of it being Arabs?

A. Not Arabs, not.

Q. What came into your head?

A. Not Muslims because of present ... or because of all the things that was going on before.

Q. What is your most vivid memory of September 11th?

A. The second plane hitting the tower.

Q. Were you seeing that? Did you see it?

A. No, just the airplane through TV.

Q. Anything that stands out in your mind that you think you could never forget on that day?

A. On that day, walking on the bridge coming home, the City being shut down. And that's about it.

Q. What were your feelings about what happened immediately afterwards? Did you feel anger, pain, grief, sadness?

A. I felt very confused. I felt very confused because I was sad because I was living here and that was a part of ... a part of me, the Twin Towers. At the same time I didn't know what to think because--you know--because Muslims did it. I also understood their side because of... .

Q. So at that point you knew it was Muslims?

A. Definitely I had a sense because who else was going to do it. Who else was against America as much ... as much as the Muslims because they are constantly, like, attacking ... making threats... .

Q. Did you feel any guilt being a Muslim?

A. No, definitely, because I know I don't think like them and I wouldn't act the same. But I felt really sad because at the same ... no matter how much anger they had, I don't think they still had the right to take away so many lives of innocent people that had nothing to do with it.

Q. Have your feelings changed since the event?

A. No, no. No. They've been the same just that it wasn't ... I don't think they should have did what they did in that ... in that way.

Q. When Americans asked you about your ethnic background or origin before September 11th what did you tell them?

A. Before September 11th?

Q. Before September 11th when somebody asked you what is your ethnic background what would you say to them?

A. That I'm Afghan--Persian--Afghanistan. You know?

Q. What about immediately after 9-11 if someone asked you the same question?

A. A lot of ... actually, people didn't ask me, but when they did I said Afghan.

Q. And what do you say now?

A. The same, that I'm ... I'm from Afghanistan. Actually, people ask me--some people asked me today, I said Afghanistan and they were very interested. Yeah. I tell them.

Q. Have your feelings towards the United States changed in any way ever since September 11th?

A. No. I still feel the same. It's not like I'm against ... it's not like I'm against them or I was against them. As much as I sympathize with them, I understand ... I understand both sides. That's why it's more harder for me because I understand both sides. I understand America--I'm living here. It's a part of me. The Twin Towers were a part of me. I used to go to school there for--you know--three years. I used to see those every day. I had memories with them. But at the same time, I understand ... again, Muslims are also being attacked all over the world all the time. All the Muslim countries that are out there,

they're always being put down or shut off or being turned against the whole world. So I still feel the same. It's not like it's bad or good--you know--against America.

Q. Ever since September 11th has your level of political awareness changed in any way?

A. No, because I've always been into politics because of my father. He's always watching the news, even before September 11th, always watching the news in the morning and at night so I was always watching. And but at the same time it did go a little higher because I was buying the newspaper every day and I was collecting little articles on Afghanistan. And that's it.

Q. Have your feelings changed towards the domestic policy or the foreign policy that?

A. No, because I know that ... no, not really.

Q. Do you feel a sense of belonging to the United States ever since September 11th, I mean, knowing that...

A. Oh, definitely. I feel a sense of belonging even more after September 11th because now I know that America is helping out Afghanistan in that they are helping to get the Taliban out and to help the children and the women there.

Q. So do you feel at home here?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you think that there has been a change in the way people from the Middle East and South Asia in the U.S. are treated since 9-11?

A. Yes. Yeah, especially Arabs. I see them ... I see racist marks happening towards them just...

Q. Like what?

A. People staring at them or people keeping distant from them. Especially owning a business you constantly see ... you constantly interact with different races, different people. So when I see people with an Arabic ethnic background and then I see other people around them, they ... they don't associate with them as much as they did before.

Q. Have you personally experienced any backlash since 9-11 such as harassment, racial profiling or discrimination?

A. No, none at all. Actually, I got a lot of support ever since September 11th which is completely the opposite of many people have been receiving. In the store a lot of people knew that me and my husband were from Afghanistan. After September 11th happened a lot of our customers came back and was hugging me and my husband and always checking up on us that if we are okay, if people were bothering us. Our neighbors were very supportive. They were always asking us are you guys okay? Is anyone harassing you guys? We haven't got any pranks, any phone calls, anybody saying anything. Actually, I've gotten a lot of support which is surprising. I thought I wasn't.

Q. And why do you think that's the case?

A. Because people know the truth about the Taliban. They know that Afghanistan didn't attack the World Trade Center. I was--you know-- the so-called ... they say the Hams group or these people that call this thing Jihad, or Osama Bin Laddin and his people, and they know that they're not Afghan, especially the Talibans. They're not Afghan. So...

Q. So you've experienced no discrimination whatsoever?

A. No, not at all. None at all. Actually, I've gotten a lot of support.

Q. Has any member of your family experienced any backlash?

A. Not that I know of, except one of my [name removed] ... which [knew] one of the people that was in one of the airplane; I think one of the guy's names was [name removed]. So the cops did come to his store and they did like a ten year background check and did ask him questions about his--you know--ethnicity, where ... how long have you been here, all those questions. And also one of my uncle's friends he is from ... he's Pakistani and he's ... he's a teacher, an Arabic teacher, so he's ... he has a long beard and he dresses in ... he has this long robe that identifies that he's a Muslim, and he wears that *cufy*, which is a Muslim hat that men wear . And I know the cops came to his house and, like, threw his chairs around and opened his files without his permission. And I know his wife got harassed and that's the only case that I know. But other than that, nobody else; nothing else.

Q. Do you think that the Middle Eastern and the South Asian organizations have been effective in handling the backlash against these groups after 9-11? Do you think they have managed to organize and mobilize the community politically?

A. To be honest, no. I feel like a complete failure because I don't see people handing out fliers about what Islam is about. I don't see people organizing events to ... to talk about Islam and what Islam is really about. I don't see people any organization in any ... any ethnic background that has to do with Muslims that they have had meetings or gatherings. Maybe I'm not aware, but I haven't seen it. It's not on the news. It's not in the newspapers. I don't see anybody gathering any kind of event to inform people about Islam or about the people of Afghanistan. Actually, what I've seen is more Christians handing out pamphlets and books and things about their religion which I think Muslims should ... from other

countries I think they should have organized or did something about informing people about what real Islam is and not about what people have made us out to be about.

Q. Have you joined any ethnic or religious organizations since 9-11?

A. No.

Q. In your opinion, what is the nature of the relationship between your ethnic or religious group and others in the United States at this time? Are the relations between your religious group and other religious groups more tolerant and harmonious of each other or are they more strained and oppositional?

A. I see it in a way a little strange because of what's happening in Palestine between the Jews and the Muslims there. At the same time America's helping out Afghanistan as much as they can, I guess. But I don't see anything personally.

Q. What do you feel that members of your community can do to improve relations between other religious groups?

A. I think they could definitely, definitely hand out fliers explaining what real Islam is about, what's ... what's really the Koran about and what Allah really has intentioned for all us human beings to be and to do in this world and not just what these Taliban or four people that feel a certain way about Islam turned out Islam to be about, which is really not ... I think they could definitely organize meetings not only among Afghans but about a town meeting with ... with their neighbors or American people gathering with the Mosques and being informative more about what is Jihad, what is our purpose in this life, what are the basic teachings of Islam what does even Islam stand for. I don't see any of this being promoted in any way.

Q. Okay.

A. Not only handing out things, town meetings, fliers, books, even TV reporting. I don't see anything.

Q. Given your understanding of the status of the Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrant groups in the United States here after 9-11, would you encourage people from these countries to emigrate to this country after what has happened?

A. I ... If they have a country that they're currently living in that they can make a living in, I mean, living wise ... what I mean is that if they can provide food for themselves, a good family health, no I wouldn't because you come to America with false hopes and dreams. We work just as hard. We work just as long hours. We have the same--you know, --hopes that they do in their country. We're all living one life. It's just different opinions about the countries that they have. But if they can't make it, --if they ... if they are in a poor condition in their country, yeah, I would ... I would encourage them to come here. And I wouldn't encourage them to come here and have the same mentality that they do if they're ... if they're being ... if they're ignorant about Americans and about Islam.

Q. So far we've talked a little bit about the negative consequences. Were there any positive consequences in your view after 9-11?

A. Definitely. Before when people used to ask me where I'm from I used to say Afghanistan, people used to say what is it even though--you know--they ask me where I'm from--of course I'm going to be from a country, not a planet. But now people ask me, Oh, are you from Herat or Tora Bora? They even know the cities. Not only they know the cities, they know the towers and the streets more than I do. I see a positive outcome because I see that people are more informed of Afghanistan. People are more informed [informed] about Islam.

Q. Right.

A. People are more informative about who the Taliban are. And the most important thing--the most positive outcome in my mind that's always standing out is the positive outcome for the Afghan women and children in Afghanistan. There are people who are going back and helping and that troops are there and that they are trying to provide food and shelter and ... and tents and stuff like that, for the people and that children can go to school now and that Afghan women can go back to working and shopping and basic ... basic little freedom things that we take for granted here.

Q. Why do you think the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon happened? Do you think that the Muslims in the Middle East hate America or what do you think the reason was for the attacks taking place?

A. I personally don't know what are their reasons. To my knowledge I think it's just ignorance. I think there ... it's their own personal experience reflecting upon September 11th and what happened, I personally don't think that... I think that they have a lot of Anger towards America because of the political things that are going on around the world, because America's not helping out the Muslims. And I know why Osama Bin Laddin is so angry at the Americans, because they came into Saudi Arabia and he wanted the American troops out of there. And it just started, I guess, from there.

Q. What do you think the U.S. can do to resolve the problem of terrorism directed against it?

A. I think they can play a big role by--not to say it in a bad way--no to say that they should mind their business--they should be politically involved around the world. America has a big influence and a very important to all of us around the world. But at the

same time they shouldn't be instigating between two countries as much as I see that they are. For example, I see them taking sides with certain ethnic backgrounds than the other, and not only between Muslims and Jews. I see between ... all around the world that they're always siding with one and leaving out completely the other. For example, in Afghanistan when the troops left Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance and the other Afghans were crying out to the United States saying--you know--there are these people coming into Afghanistan, invading. Help us and do something about it. They didn't ... they didn't until this is what happened, until these people came over and took a land that was that was not being controlled by any president or any government.

Q. Are there any other issues or points that you would like to comment on which we have not mentioned?

A. No, not really. Just that don't believe everything that the media tells you and what all the newspaper tells you because what really goes on behind the media and the newspapers is a complete different thing than what we ... what you just hear and see especially about the Taliban; especially about Afghanistan; especially about Islam. Just always ... just don't believe what you see and what you read.

Q. Well, thank you very much for your time and cooperation.

A. You're welcome