

DA 002

Interview 2002

JW: Where were you born?

02:00:51 Ok, um my family comes from Yemen, and I was actually born in Yemen and I came to the United States at the age of three. Um, my father traveled before us um in the early 60s. He got a job, got his residency card and then he applied for my mother and I to come to the United States. So we came um in the early 70s. And I was 3 years old. Uh, I have no recollections of Yemen, the country that I was born in.

02:01:25 The only thing I remember, which is interesting somebody just asked me the other day was actually going on the steps into the plane um. And I remember the steps being very high and in between them there was this hollow space and it was really really windy and I remember my mother holding my hand and dragging me up those stairs, and I was scared that the wind was going to blow me through those (laughs) hollow steps. Um and that's all I remember.

02:01:57 Getting to the United States, though, I remember we got into Buffalo, New York, where my father decided to live, um, at nighttime, and I was asleep. The following morning I woke up (clears throat) I went to the window, I guess something that I normally did. And I looked outside the window and there was this huge blanket of white everywhere. And I started running around the house, and I was screaming to my parents, you have to wake up, there's sugar everywhere. You just have to wake up.

02:02:31 Uh, we have to go out, we have to get the buckets, we have to get the pans, we have to fill, fill them all up with sugar, you know? Uh, my parents are looking at me and giggling and I had no idea why. And my father is like, honey, it's not sugar. It's not sugar, And I said, well, what do you mean? He said it's not sugar, it's snow. I said, no this is America. This is where everybody comes and this is where you have everything you want, and now I have sugar. (Laughs) And my father's like no, it's, it's snow.

02:03:00 And he tried to explain to me what it was. Uh, finally he opened the window, he let me touch it. Uh, I touched it. Of course it was cold. And then I said to him, well, can I taste it, because it just might be (?) you know, cold sugar. And of course I tasted it, and to my disappointment it tasted like nothing. So I guess you would call that my first culture shock (laughs) was finding out this blanket of snow was, was snow.

JW: When you found out it was cold?

02:03:36 Oh absolutely, it was (JW). I never experienced cold, even you know while I was growing up, I always hated the winter because it was just so cold. I guess because I was used to the heat. Um, and it was very hard to realize that you have to dress appropriately for the weather. Um, but slowly but surely you know I learned, I learned how to deal with it.

JW: what about your parents?

02:04:05 Um, my parents, my father um is much older than my mother, he had two previous marriages and the first one he was divorced, the second one he, his wife passed away. And then he married my mother. There's I think about a 15 or 20 year age difference between the two. Um, and their really great. I guess you know they really tried very hard to give my brothers and my sisters and I a really good home. (clears throat) An opportunity to get an education and to really have a better life in the United States.

02:04:43 Um, when we came to the United States my parents only had me (clears throat) and then all of my siblings were born here. Um, and I remember, you know at night when my dad used to come home from work. He actually worked for the Ford motor company, um as a steel worker, and um you know he was just so happy to have my mother and I there and I remember in the middle of the night when he'd come home, he'd come and he'd find the blanket off of me, and he'd put it up, first he'd kiss my feet and then he'd put it on me.

02:05:14 And I always wondered, why does my dad kiss my feet? (laughs) I found that to be a strange thing, but um he would kiss my feet, and then put the blanket on me and he was just so happy

that we were there uh with him and um we were living in upstate Buffalo and. That you know we were having a better chance to have a better life, um, in the United States.

- 02:05:39 So, while I was growing up, when it was time for me to start going to school, one of the things that my father was always telling me was try to be like everybody else. Uh, you know, look at how everyone is dressing, we'll go out, we'll get you clothes. Uh, don't talk too much about where we're from and who we are, and just try to be like everybody.
- 02:06:02 And I never understood why my father was always telling me that. Uh, but I learned the hard way. I remember in kindergarten (clears throat) when everybody was talking, uh, about their family and, and the tradition that they celebrate uh, everybody was talking about Christmas. Uh, and everybody was talking about Easter and, and there was no one there who had a different story. And I understood why my father was telling me not to because I would have stood out.
- 02:06:37 Uh, so I never talked about any of our holidays or, or anything. And at that time I really didn't know much um about our holidays because I was really young, but as the years went by and I was uh, in fourth and fifth grade, I truly understood what my father was talking about. Because there were times that you know, girls in the playground or at gym would tease me because of my skin color. Uh, or my hair, because I, I had really nice curly hair, uh, and everyone else had blond straight hair or you know, brown straight hair. And I sort of understood what he was talking about.
- 02:07:13 Uh, and it was painful, you know, not to really acknowledge who I am but try to be like everybody else. Um, (clears throat) I guess the rude awakening for me about my own cultural and religious identity was really when I went to middle school, uh when a lot of my friends started to date, uh hang out and what have you. And, (clears throat) when I spoke to my parents about going out, that a lot of my friends were going out and there were gonna be boys and girls and some of them had boyfriend girlfriend and my father's eyes just (?) he's like you can't go.

- 02:07:50 And I'm like what do you mean I can't go? He says well we don't do that kind of stuff, you know, we don't date in our culture, we don't date in our religion and I said to him well, all of these years you've been telling me to be like everybody else and now I want I want to continue being like everybody else, and you're telling me that that's not what we're supposed to be doing.
- 02:08:09 Um, (clears throat) so he started explaining to me you know, our cultural traditions, um our religious traditions, and I sort of understood where he was coming from because it was something that I always deep down inside wanted to learn about and wanted to actually embrace, but my parents really never gave me the opportunity to teach me all about it. Um, particularly when there were holidays, Islamic holidays, we really didn't celebrate them. Um, I recall my parents fasting uh, in the month of Ramedan, but they never really like said you need to fast, this is really important you know it's a part of our religion. Um, it wasn't a big big thing.
- 02:08:52 Um, and I remember there were days where we had our holiday and you know my parents gave me the option of going to school or staying home, uh but it wasn't something that you know they encouraged me to go to school and talk about or even come to school and talk to the other children about.
- 02:09:10 So I felt in a way (clears throat) deprived of uh, my cultural tradition and religious tradition, because, uh, you know, the unfortunate thing that happens in the United States that people come here and they want to assimilate (clears throat) and become like everyone else. Uh, that you lose, you lose that essence of who you really are.
- 02:09:34 Uh, and so it was a struggle being a teenager, you know when everybody else was doing all of these wonderful things um, but I held back, uh my parents were wonderful in terms of letting me hang out with my girl friends when they knew there weren't any boys there. Um, and I always had a house full of friends, that wasn't an issue you know my parents loved the fact that I'd invite my girl friends over because then they had the opportunity to keep an eye on me.

02:10:04 Um, and then one day in 7th grade, I decided to wear the hijab, which I'm wearing right now. And uh, it was out of fascination. Uh, it was also inspired by the Sunday classes that I was taking uh, to learn Arabic. That was one thing that my parents were really uh, very focused and making sure that we were all able to do was to be able to speak Arabic, read and write Arabic.

02:10:34 And uh, I was going to a Sunday school for as long as I can remember. And uh, one day we had a special guest who came to the Sunday school and who was talking about modesty and the religious uh background of being modest. And you know, and the way that you would dress for it, and I decided one day to wear the hijab. And I didn't wear it in this fashion. I wore to the back and I wrapped it around my head.

02:11:00 Uh, and I went to school and everybody was looking at me so strangely. And I remember some of my friends telling me, take that thing off, what are you doing with it? Uh, and I said well, you know, in my religion, one of the things women, you know, are asked to do is wear a hijab. And she's like you look silly, you know, that's not you, take it off.

JW: how did that make you feel?

02:11:23 Oh, it made me feel awful because I felt that she wasn't accepting me for who I'm trying to express to be. Uh, and as the day went, everybody was looking at me strange, and then that friend of mine spoke to a few other friends, and , and they were like, you know, if she doesn't take that off, we're not gonna hang out with her. And I was like oh, my god (laughs) I couldn't believe it. And then it was the end of the day. Uh, and one of the teachers said to me, uh, why are you wearing that? And I started to explain. He said, well, did you know that you know women in that culture are oppressed? By wearing that?

02:12:04 And you wearing it, uh, shows that you know, you're inferior and, you know, you uh, this is America, you know, you can wear whatever you want. And you come from a different country to, to be who, you know, to be American. Uh, and uh, if I were you I wouldn't wear

it. And I was just so crushed. Uh, because of all people, I was hoping that he would be the most supportive because he was always supportive uh, with everything.

02:12:36 But for him to tell me that you know, it's something that makes me inferior, just like really devastated me. And you know, I still remember, and that was the first time that I actually somebody every used the word inferior with me in such a way that it just, it still sticks in my mind. Uh,

JW: did you acknowledge the contradicton of coming to America to express who you are?

02:13:04 I were I was, but he told me that people come to America to get away from all of that. And, you know that, that conversation that my father had with me over the years when I was younger started lingering in my mind and I'm like now I see what my father was really talking about. Is that people really can't accept change. Uh, and therefore you have to be like everybody else or stand out and be ridiculed.

02:13:35 And I remember that day uh, after class. I was too embarrassed to take it off in the classroom after class. Uh, before uh, dismissal I went into the bathroom and I'd take it off and I'd let my hair out and it was (?) crushing. It was crushing. But that was the very last time that I ever had any thoughts about wearing the hijab. And I think you know, that day made me say to myself I'm, I'm never gonna wear it again, because this is what happened to me in one day, let alone if I wear it all the time.

02:14:10 And um, so the following day I came to school (JW) Oh I remember, I remember coming home that day I was really crushed uh, and my mother was asking me uh, why was I so down? And I didn't tell my mother because that day I didn't wear the hijab leaving the house, I wore it after leaving the house waiting for the bus. Um because my parents were always concerned with making sure that I don't stand out. Um but then you know I told her what happened and she said well that's why your father and I are always telling you that you really shouldn't be bring attention to where you come from, or who we really are because people

are not accepting of different cultures, different traditions, different races, um and basically everybody wants to be like everybody else.

JW: do you remember why you chose that day?

02:15:10 I remember why I chose that day, it was because of of that guest speaker who came and who inspired me. And he was he was talking about you know modesty and how important it is for both men and women to dress modestly. And one way for women to dress modestly is by covering their hair, which their hair gives them the most beauty. Um and you know giving that sacrifice of of leaving your hair out um shows that you are you know, abiding to god's wishes. Um and that you are trying to be a better Muslim.

02:15:48 And I thought for me that time was really important because with all the issues that I was dealing with as a teenager you know and also finding out I couldn't date and you know do a lot of the things that everybody else was doing. Um, I sort of I you know I I felt like I had two identities. One identity, you know, existed in school, and then the real identity the true (?) identity that I had existed at home. I you know, I felt like I was living two (?) you know, double lives. Uh, and I hated that. I hated that, because as I was growing up, they always clashed.

02:16:27 Um and and things were you know were always you know little things would come up in school and people would notice a difference. And uh, I think that what was the most devastating was people were not tolerant when I was growing up. You know, in upstate, they were not tolerant at all. You know, if anyone even if you were white, uh, because where I grew up it was predominantly white, if you had something on you know, if you had an orange shirt, they'd laugh at you.

02:16:58 They're like what are you doing with an orange shirt? You know that looks so ugly you know, you look so tacky um, it it was just really, it's amazing because I think if I still lived in that world of intolerance I'd be devastated now. Um, but people were so intolerant of of one another. Um particularly of of people of color, um, cultural backgrounds.

- 02:17:24 And um, it was hard and I felt like as I was growing up I was always trying to please everybody around me, you know in school and then at home, and it was very hard. It was very hard, very very you know very strenuous you know on on my identity. And um, I guess the time that I finally came to rest about who I really was was when I came to New York city.
- 02:17:58 Um and I think that for me was the most incredible experience uh particularly when I got to New York and just being out on the streets and seeing people from all different walks of life, I'm like where am I? You know, this is truly not the America that I I've grown to know but um, it's just incredible meeting people of color from all different countries, not just African Americans, um, meeting people from China, Japan, India, all different countries.
- 02:18:32 And I think was incredible was the first time that I saw an Indian woman wearing a Sari and you know, as I was watching her walk you know and I started looking around me in the entire environment where I was standing, and no one looked at her, no one stared, um no one stopped to talk. She was just you know going about her business and so was everybody else. And I realized that people in New York City were not caught up in whose wearing what or what do they look like, but just accepted everybody for who they were. Um, and I think for me that was the most, you know, incredible experience to see that and um.
- 02:19:17 How did I come to New York City? it's a it's a very good story to tell I guess. Um, when I was growing up, I was about 16, and one of the things in my culture, cultural tradition and religious tradition is that we don't date, but one of the things that we do is uh, we have engagements. Uh, and during the engagement, you get to have a courtship where you're, where you're chaperoned. And uh, there were a couple of gentlemen who came to ask for me who were, you know, 19, 20 years old, from within the community. From the Arab Muslim community, and I kept saying no because I was not interested.
- 02:20:00 Uh finally, uh, a friend of mind had gotten married and she had family who lived in New York City and all over, and they came. And Naji, who's actually my husband today came to

this wedding, and uh, when we were at the wedding, he stood out to me as someone I've never seen. Uh, and then I took an interest when I saw him, and amazingly enough, he took an interest when he saw me and uh, he spoke to his dad that very evening uh, of who was I and what family I come from. And he said, well, you know, they're from so and so family and uh, her father's and old, old friend. We grew up together.

02:20:44 And uh, that, the next day his father actually called my father and he said, you know, can we get together? I'd love to see you um we're here another 2 or 3 days in Buffalo um and then we're gonna go home, um can we get together? And my dad said sure, why don't you come over, and we'll have lunch. And um, they came over and uh, you know I was surprised, I, I didn't know they were coming over, but my dad had said, you know, old friends are coming over, they're from New York City. And I thought that was the last time I was gonna ever see him (laughs).

02:21:19 And to my surprise uh, you know they came. They had lunch uh, and I really was too shy, I was too embarrassed to, to sit around like in front of them because I, I really didn't know them. Uh, and so you know, that gave my father the opportunity to know about him, his father, what they were doing, what they were up to in New York City and what have you. They left. Uh, a couple weeks later.

JW: you guys never interacted at all?

02:21:47 No we just, well, I guess we did because when he walked in he smiled at me and I smiled at him but that was it, you know. Um, a couple weeks later his dad calls up, and he said you know um, when we came over that day your daughter left such a lasting impression on my son, and he's been bugging me call and ask if she's engaged or is she interested in an engagement or, or anything of that sort. And, um my father told him well let me get back to you, let me speak to her and see what's you know, let's see.

02:22:24 So my dad spoke to me and um, you know of course my father was like you know, she's so picky. (?) I remember him talking to my mother in the kitchen, she's so picky and you know

he's really a nice boy, and you know I already know she's gonna say no. And I'm like sitting back there and I'm like oh dad, you don't know (laughs). So I remember my mom approaching me and telling me that they were interested to come and it was just another meeting time um, and it's nothing etched in stone and you know if I wasn't interested um, but they needed an answer from me if I was, I would be interested in meeting him you know otherwise they were gonna just tell him, don't bother to come.

02:23:10 So um, I said to my mom I said ok, you know what the heck, I'll I'll meet him, what's the worst thing that could happen. So they came, it was actually a three-day weekend, I think it was, I can't remember sometime in February or March, I can't even remember. Um, they came and uh, I remember that day we we made lunch, there were other relatives of mine who lived in upstate um who came over. Um, and my mom was like you know what, I don't want you to worry about helping me just, you know, be a part of the event.

02:23:26 And so I remember sitting across from him, but not directly, a little further, and I remember him you know stealing looks at me and I remember stealing looks at him (laughs) And then um, as we were eating people were talking and my father was sitting there and he was asking questions, pretty much questions that he knew that I would be interested in asking, um you know, what are you doing? You know are you going to school? What are you studying? What are your plans for the future? Um, you know what are what are your hobbies?

02:24:21 And so I'm sitting there listening and uh, you know my poor husband was just like sitting there nervous because he felt it was an interrogation (laughs) rather than this, you know, you know luncheon. Um, and then afterwards people started leaving and it was just us uh, and we were sitting, uh, my parents, his parents, um, my brother um and a good friend of the family and just really having conversations, regular conversations. And we didn't, I was too embarrassed to ask him directly anything, um and he was the same way, very shy to ask any thing as well.

02:25:02 Um, and so they stayed the day, uh, they went to a hotel, they came back the next morning. And um, his father said to my father, he said you know Naji's really interested, um and we

were hoping that the two of them we going to get a chance to talk, but you know, your daughter is as shy as my son (laughs) but he's very interested and uh, we don't know how your daughter feels about this but um, if you can let us know by the end of the day, um because if she is interested um then we'd like to you know formulate an engagement between the two where then they'll really get the opportunity to get to know one another.

JW: What does that mean?

02:25:52 Well yeah, the formalization is basically both parties agreeing to get engaged. Uh, and the engagement would be getting an engagement ring uh, having a courtship. You know, getting to know one another better. Um, and then eventually you know, as time progresses you, you decide on planning for the, the wedding, and when that time comes, both parties are asked again if they're sure they, they want to marry one another. And uh, majority of the times, yes. But there have been cases where people have decided not to. Uh, so they break the engagement and then they never get married. Um, so that evening

JW: how do you describe that moment?

02:27:05 Well uh, that moment I guess for me um is not as such a, I don't want to use the word serious, it's not such a you know, a huge concept in my mind or a fearful concept uh in my heart to say that oh my god I can't get into this, because one of the things I guess growing up in this kind of cultural tradition is that you know, from a young age you know that's how um in your culture, in your religion, things work out.

02:27:40 Um, so it wasn't a terrifying experience, but it was something that I was prepared for over the years because I saw a lot of my friends and and relatives go through the same procedure um and it wasn't a scary scary thing for them and so it was something normal to me. But I understand for someone whose not a part of the culture or religion would find it to be a terrifying thing.

JW: you had a connection

- 02:28:21 Oh, I absolutely had a connection. (?) It's amazing because, and and it's funny if my husband sees this (laughs) 'cos I don't think I told him. For me, actually it was love at first sight, truly. When I, I saw him that very first evening at that wedding, I was like oh, my god, who is this man? um And of course you know I couldn't express it to my parents uh because it wasn't appropriate. Um, I, I remember sharing it with my friend who then you know she said well you got what you asked for (laughs).
- 02:28:59 Um, but um, That very evening when my dad asked me, he said, you know, I don't want you to give me a quick answer. You know, this is an important decision. Uh, they want to know by tonight, but I'm just, tonight when they call I'll tell them we'll let them know in the morning. I want you to sleep on it. And I pretty much had my mind made up. I think if my father didn't give me the time to think about it, I would have given him the answer. But I said, OK, I'll wait 'til the morning. Uh, and I, I gave my father the answer, I said, yes, I'd be interested.
- 02:29:31 Uh, so, and they (?) came over that afternoon. Uh, he had a ring for me and a watch uh, and we formally sat together uh, we started to talk. Uh, he put the ring on me. Uh, and we sat there and we were talking, both my parents were there, my brother. And we were talking. What were we talking about I can't remember, because I was so nervous that I was talking to him (laughs)
- 02:30:00 And I guess what was incredibly interesting about our our relationship was that it was a long distance relationship. He lived in New York City and I lived in upstate. And so he would call me, he used to call me 3 or 4 times a week, and we'd have long conversations on the phone, which really gave us an opportunity to get to know one another better.
- 02:30:21 Uh, and when he did come to visit he used to come down to visit on a monthly basis. Sometimes biweekly depending on, on his job schedule. And uh, we'd spend like 3, 4 days together. Uh, and when he was there, it, we really didn't have, you know, privacy to really, uh, get to know one another uh, but basically it was chaperoned. You know, we'd go out to

the movies, dinner, you know, sitting in the living room, my brother and his wife were there, or my sister and her husband or you know, my younger brother or sister. We were never left alone because uh, Islamically you're not supposed to be left alone if you're not married.

02:31:03 Uh, so we had a nine-month courtship. Uh, so I think it was about 5 months after our engagement we decided on a date. Um, and I remember it was interesting when we did decide on a date, before both of our parents agreed they sat us both down and said you know this is a really important decision you're making here that you wanna have the wedding in October um, you know, we want you to think about this, and tomorrow we want you to tell us what's on your mind. You know are you sure you want to go through with this, and because you will be living with one another for the rest of your lives. You know? (laughs).

02:31:42 That scary conversation and uh I remember that, I remember that night actually, I was like oh my god, imagine if he changes his mind. (laughs) And um, and I and I said no, I can't think that way um. And then so the following morning came, I reported to my parents that I, I was sure that this is what I wanted, um and he spoke to his dad and he was sure that's what he wanted and they both of course our parents both spoke.

02:32:11 I think what's so incredibly you know interesting about our our cultural tradition of doing it this way is that our families are so very involved um in the process of helping us um, you know find one another um and really scaffolding the relationship and and letting you know both of us know that even though that we're young that they they are there for us to help us through all the struggles that you would struggle with as a married couple.

02:32:42 Um, and then I remember that evening I said to him so did you get back to your dad and he said yeah and I said oh I got back to my dad. (laughs) Um and I said what'd you tell your dad, he said well what do you think I told my dad, and he said what'd you tell your dad? I said what do you think (laughs) It was pretty funny, so um.

02:33:00 So we went ahead. We, we planned for the wedding, and I think then this is the really the funny part. There was this big debate between both parents where the wedding should be,

whether in New York City or in Buffalo. (laughs) And I remember my um my father's like well I have a lot of friends and family here it it would be you know very very untraditional not to have a a party for my daughter in my home town. And my father-in-law said the same thing, he's like everybody knows me in New York City and this is my first and only son, I have to throw him a wedding. (laughs) So there was this huge debate between the two, it became like a family fued, you know.

02:33:42 Um and so my husband and I just stood to the side and we were just letting them you know at it and and eventually uh we were talking and and so my husband said to me he said you know it's our wedding (laughs) We should be the ones to be able to decide um where where to have it and I said to him well I'm I'm just gonna tell you that I would be crushed if we didn't have it here. And he said well I really don't care whether we have it here or there, it's fine with me wherever we have it, but I know that it would devastate my parents if we don't have it there.

02:34:24 And so as we were sitting there talking, I remember him saying, he said, you know, I have a great idea. And I said, ok, what is your great idea? He said, we'll have two weddings. We'll have one here and we'll have one in New York. And all we have to do is wear our uh, you wear your gown two days and I'll wear my tuxedo two days and the problem is solved. So he proposed the idea to both of our parents, and I remember his father and my father looking at each other and they're like, hey, that's a great idea. Why didn't we think of that (laughs).

02:35:03 So everybody was happy so it's hysterical because um I go through the motions of having you know of having the wedding twice you know of him coming to my family's home and picking me up in a limo and then going to the reception hall um. And then when we got to New York City we did the same whole thing over again um except that it wasn't we didn't have a home there but my cousins lived there, so he had to come pick me up from my cousin's in the limo to the reception hall. We had to take the pictures over. We had two cakes (laughs). It's funny, so when I tell people they just look at me like, you had two weddings, and so when I tell the story behind it they um they find it amusing.

JW: was that the first time you went to New York?

02:35:53 Um, actually not, I went I remember when I was very very young, um I went to visit my cousin who lived in Brooklyn and um and I was there for maybe 4 or 5 days. And I really didn't get a chance to see much of New York. I remember going to the Empire State building which I was miserable um I remember going to the Statue of Liberty, um and I remember climbing stairs and I hated it. Um, but that was it, I really didn't didn't see you know the the (?)

JW: you said you remembered one of the first times you came to NY

02:36:36 That was when I was much older that was actually after I got married yeah (JW) But when I did come when I was little I really didn't I guess maybe I wasn't old enough to to really see the scope and sequence of New York as it is today, or was 22 years ago when I finally came.

JW: Tell me about your son

02:37:08 Um, gosh, where do I begin? Where do I begin? So after I got married, I moved to New York City. And uh, I, I started looking into actually going to school. And um as I was searching and looking what what program to go into, Uh undergrad program to go into um I think it was about 7 or 8 months after getting married, I realized I was pregnant.

02:37:49 And um it was it was we were both extremely happy, um but I remember my mom was like so stressed. She's like you're so young you know how you know you should've been careful and um you're just you're too young. And I'm like mom don't worry and um I remember my husband's family actually um just so they were so happy because my husband is the only son out of 6 out of 7 kids he's the only son he has all sisters. And they were just so extremely happy because they always they knew that my husband was gonna have sons. It's pretty scary.

- 02:38:33 And um I remember then when he was born how happy everybody was so extremely happy. Um my father in law was just like every time he'd see me afterwards he'd cry in the hospital and he'd go to the nursery and he'd cry and he'd come back and he's crying and um so it was incredible.
- 02:38:54 And uh I remember being in the in the hospital room and and I was holding him actually and standing with him and I was holding him this way and the nurse was there because I was nervous of not holding him right or what have you. And she's like just hold him and make sure you have your hand um on his back but also holding his head up and um you know holding it to make sure it doesn't wobble to any direction and as I was holding him, he started lifting his head up you know straight up to look.
- 02:39:25 And the nurse is like my god this baby is just incredible, he has such a will to just to hold his neck still like this. And I said is that ok is that wrong? She said it's fine just you know make sure it doesn't wobble backward and and I was like ok, why do you say what you said? She said well generally babies don't have the energy to hold their heads up so still, um but uh, he has such a will. And um I remember that you know the word will from that day.
- 02:39:57 Um and as he was growing up he was just truly an incredible incredible little boy um I guess what made him so so exceptional from any children that I'd know was that he was always so mature so mature, as a little boy he was very mature. Um you know if we went anywhere people came over he was very um you know. He he wouldn't get up and play with the other kids and and get crazy and wild um or you know get into anything. He he was just really good natured, very um disciplined, which I can't take any credit for (laughs).
- 02:40:40 Um it was just his nature, and always when people would ask his age you know I'm like no, he's only. Um so they were always shocked to know that he was so young. Um , even with toys he he wasn't really a big toy fan. I remember you know there was this time where the G.I. Joe's were such a big thing and uh I, I used to buy them for him and he didn't play with them like all the other kids did.

02:41:07 But um one of the things that he used to love to do is actually find out how the arms and the legs and the hands suck inside the torso. So um I remember finding um a few of his G.I. Joe's just like totally disassembled um out of curiosity and I and I asked him and I said well he said to me, he said mom I'm just so fascinated how it's held together. And I wanted to know what was inside of it holding it together.

02:41:36 Um and that was interesting and I said to him well what what was holding it together and he said all these rubber bands that are stuck into a specific place and and I'm like ok so (JW) yeah, so I said ok, no more G.I. Joe's. (laughs) Because it just bored him. Um, he loved video games uh and basically that what it, but uh I think what was just so astonishing about him is just you know his matureness which um, which quite frankly you know it it concerned me I guess because when all the other kids were playing um and doing all these activities he he wasn't he didn't find it appealing.

02:42:17 Um I guess the only thing that he found appealing was actually having a dirt bike and going up hills and down hills and which was scary for me because I didn't know how he'd uh be about you know afterwards after being in a trip like that um. So when he was in highschool.

JW: How would you describe him, is he a thinker?

02:42:43 Oh he's an extreme thinker extreme thinker. Um, you know because of his matureness he he always thought about things in such a way the children his age wouldn't have thought of it, or thought about it that way. Um and uh he was very exceptional in school. You know even his teachers uh used to say you know he's so mature, we can't believe he's this age because his thinking and his mentality.

02:43:12 And um you know and he was always the first for teachers to call upon when there were special projects taking place because they knew that he can handle the responsibility. Um I remember him in highschool being involved in a lot of um events after school where time you know at times he didn't get home 'til 9, 10 o'clock because he was working with teachers on it and what have you. Um and I think what was really wonderful about him in

school was he had a passion for science um and technology. Um and that was something that he was really really um excited about.

02:43:52 And so finishing highschool, he was going through a lot of you know decisions of what he wanted to be, he wanted to go into aeronautics school, he wanted to be a pilot he wanted to do this, he wanted to do that. And so, we were trying to look for high school for colleges for him and he said you know Ma, I'm really very undecided. I don't know what I want to do. And um I said to him well you know you can't you can't sit back and not do anything. And he said just I need, I need time you know I'm gonna graduate, but I just need time and I will decide then. And I'll let you know what I wanna do.

02:44:35 So I remember that summer after he graduated, um, he decided he wanted to go to work. So he was looking around for jobs and of course everything was minimum wage. And I said to him I said you know you can't expect to get a great job if you don't have a college degree. And he said you're absolutely right, um but he said I'm gonna keep looking and if not I already know what university I want to go to and I'm sure I'll get accepted in the city and what have you.

02:45:04 And I remember it was the middle of August when I finally said to him I said you know what that's it it's September's around the corner, you haven't found a job, you haven't really you know decided what you want to do. And you're certainly not gonna stay home and watch the house while we all go to work and go to school, so you have to make some choice serious choices. You're either gonna find a job even if it pays five dollars an hour or you're gonna go to school or you're gonna join the Marines, Army, Navy whatever. But you're not staying home.

02:45:42 And I think that was probably the time that I found him to be the most like, undecided because he was such a thinker um and so mature, but you know. And I wonder that you know because he never really gave himself the opportunity to have a childhood like everybody else that it just caught up with him that summer. Um and uh I remember my husband and I were like what is going on with him, he's not like this, you know, why is he um so undecided?

02:46:13 And I guess the most spookiest thing happened the following day after that conversation with him, and my husband was sitting there and he just he started laughing because I gave him all these choices (laughs). And so the following day, he actually went to um the US Army recruitment office and uh he spoke to someone there and the placement officer that was there said, well you know son I'm just going right now to to give a placement test to a few gentlemen who just um were interested. Why don't you just join us and take the test and see how you do.

02:46:50 And so he went with the recruiting officer, he took the test. He came home that evening and he was telling his dad and I and I thought it was a gag. You know I thought he was pulling my leg. And he said well, I have great news for you guys. I decided what I want to do. And my husband said yeah, what is it? He said I'm gonna join the Army. And I'm like you're serious. And he said yeah, I said wait a second, he said yeah I went today, I spoke to a placement officer he was going to give a test, he invited me to take the test.

02:47:22 And I'm like this sounds a little too fishy here. Why would he invite you, first of all in the real world you set appointments, you have to fill out applications. He says Ma, I don't know that he just took me, and he's gonna call me back tomorrow with the results. So if anybody picks up the phone make sure you take the message. And I'm like I you know I was still really thinking it was a gag. So the following day.

JW: do you think he did it because

END OF TAPE

TAPE # DA-003

DEBBIE ALMONTASER

08.26.02

JIM WHITAKER, Producer/Director

PROJECT REBIRTH

03.00.01 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Do you feel that conversation you had resulted, I mean, do you think his actions were a reaction?

03.00.23 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (LAUGHS) Well, that, that evening when he did come home and tell us that he took the test, I was in shock, and I thought it was a gag. Uh, and I kept telling my husband, he's just pulling our legs. He, he's probably just doing this to see what we're gonna say and do. The following day the placement officer did call. And I picked up the phone and uh, I remember him saying to me, ma'am, uh, this is Sergeant so and so, uh, and I'm calling to, to speak to Usef to tell him his results from his uh, placement test, and I'm like yes.

03.00.58 And I said, well, Usef's not here, but I'll be happy to take a message, this is his mother. And he said to me, he says, well, ma'am you should be very proud of your son. He did such an excellent job on his test I couldn't believe it. He did better than many people who are much older than him uh, taking this test and uh, the, the boy has potential. And we sure hope that you would you know, pursue letting him have this career. Uh, and stand in support of him. I said, really, well, how well did he do?

03.01.30 She said he, he said to me, he only got uh, two wrong which is really incredibly uh, you know, interesting, because generally people really miss out on a lot, but we still accept people as long as they don't fail. Uh, I said, ok, well, I'll give Usef uh, you know, the uh, your, your message. And uh, my husband came home later that afternoon. I said, he's, he's serious, he did go.

- 03.01.58 The sergeant called me and he told me about his scores and how wonderful he did, and uh, he has potential. And I said, what have I done? Uh, I said, when I said that to him I was just, I was really just, I didn't think about what I said. I told my husband, I said, I was just saying it because I, I didn't want him to think that we were letting him off the hook from going to college. And uh, my husband's like, ok, well, Army.
- 03.02.28 Uh, and he said, let me call my nephew and ask him what, what does the Army entail. So he called my nephew, who's actually a Marine, and uh, he said to him, he says, look, you know, he went and he did this, and my nephew's like, well, that's wonderful, you should be proud. And my husband said to him, well, not just yet. What does a person do in the Army? Do they travel oversea, do they go to war? And my nephew said, no, they're just national. They're there for disaster relief.
- 03.02.58 Uh, like the Red Cross, you know, if there's a hurricane or a snowstorm or whatever, they're generally asked to go and, and be a part of the rescue mission. So my husband said to me, he said, look, it's not that bad, he can go in, do his two years and then just be a reservist where he goes monthly uh, and does his two weeks a year and uh, he'll get benefits, it'll help him pay for college. Uh, and it would be a really a great opportunity for him.
- 03.03.31 So that evening, when my son came home I gave him the news. He was just so excited. He was like, wow, I did really that well? And, and I'm like yes. And I said, are you serious, you want to do this? I said, because I never can imagine you uh, in uniform and, and doing that kind of work. He said, well, Mom, I, I can imagine myself. I think that this is my calling. And uh, he went back to the recruitment officer.
- 03.04.00 The, the recruitment officer said to him, because he was underage that we had to sign him in. And so my son, of course came home and prepared us because he really saw that I wasn't thrilled about this decision. I really wanted him to go to college. And uh, he said, Ma, I really want to do this, I want you to support me. You know, this is something that's really

important to me. Uh, you know, I know that you're blaming yourself for giving me the idea but really you haven't given me the idea because I was thinking about it.

03.04.32 And uh, especially after my cousin, who is uh, a Marine, he said to me, uh, I really, I, I'm so proud of the person he's turned out to be. And he's so focused and he's so uh, professional, and I think that maybe this is a way for me to start my career in whatever I plan to do. And uh, he said to me, he said, you know, I can't sign myself in because I'm 17.

03.05.01 Uh, and I need your permission as well as Dad's and this is something really important to me and I want you guys to sign me in. So.

JW: Was that hard?

03.05.11 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, it was so hard. And I said to my husband, I said, you know, I never in a million years thought that one of my kids would want to serve. Uh, and I said, it has nothing to do with you know, uh, you know, being of a different culture or religion or anything of that, but it just, the fact of, you know, being in some type of military uh, position uh, is really against my moral and ethical uh, upbringing.

03.05.48 And, and my own personal feelings about you know, military or war or any of this sort. And my husband said to me, said, well, I don't think he'd ever get involved in anything of that sort. You know, especially since he's in the Army, he's really a national and you know, asked around, and basically if we ever go to war, uh, the Army reservists would be the last go to.

03.06.15 And he said, quite frankly, in this day and age, I don't think we'll ever see a war that, you know, he would be sent off to. So uh, my husband realized that this was something that my son wanted to do.

03.06.29 And he said to me, he said I know it's hard for you to accept, but he's only gonna do this two years and then he's gonna be a reservist, and he's, and, and that'll be it, and he'll go to

college, he'll do what he needs to do. And I don't think that you should worry about it, and I think that you should support him because this is something he really wants to do. So
(~JW~)

JW: Did he ever talk to you about besides, and I understand this sort of uh, idea of the formation of a man and how that it was appealing to him and the focus and all that. Did he ever talk to you about which is, especially at that age (?) did he ever talk to you about the uh, either the consequences potentially as you were worried about them, or about serving for the United States?

03.07.22 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Uh, I remember also that day when he was talking to me that uh, in him stressing how important it is for him to do this. I think a lot of it had to do with some how that it would earn him some type of, of stature. Uh, as a young man. Uh, in uniform. Uh, and that it would give him some type of prestige uh, and that basically he wanted for himself what he saw my nephew was getting out of being uh, you know, a Marine.

03.07.54 And uh, and he thought that what my nephew was doing gave him such a potential and he wanted to have that potential as well. And when we were, when I, when I was trying to let him understand how I was feeling about it, uh, you know, my fear of ever going to war and he'd be called out to the war grounds, uh, and he said, I remember him saying to me, he said, Mom, that'll never happen. That'll never happen, you know? We live in such a time that that'll never happen.

03.08.28 And uh, I don't think I'll ever be sent off to war. Uh, and I'm only gonna be a reservist. I remember him like trying to give me as many reasons as possible to let him, to join. And he's like I'm gonna be a reservist. You know, I'm not committing my whole, entire life to the Army. It's just to do this two-year thing, and then come out and then go to college and do what I need to do. Uh, and he said, but it would really, it would really give me uh, the opportunity to come out you know, like a man.

- 03.09.04 Uh, who's already been prepped and polished for the world. And uh, you know, uh, after that conversation I said to him, I said I really need some time to think about it. I said, because you know how I feel about violence, about war, uh, and the fact that you want to do this. And I think a lot of it also had to do with the fact that he himself, he's very patriotic, uh, and I, I would say that for my whole, entire family.
- 03.09.36 Uh, because I guess growing up in the United States uh, and being here and knowing and realizing uh, how fortunate we were to grow up in the United States and be able to have a better life compared to the lives that our ancestors or other family members were having in Yemen.
- 03.10.00 Because my husband's also from Yemen. Uh, you know, growing up in the United States without the hardships, you know. I mean, many of my father's relatives, his brothers who didn't end up coming here or his cousins, basically uh, have had hard lives there. They've always counted on the family in, in America to help them by sending them money uh, to help support them and their children, beside whatever they had in their farm lands to support them.
- 03.10.33 Uh, you know, they didn't get the opportunity to get an education as we did here. And uh, so I was always grateful you know, grateful for the opportunity uh, that we had been given you know, to, to be a part of this country.
- 03.11.00 Uh, to have everything that we can possibly have to, to really feel successful uh, and as a part of the whole. And uh, you know, as when they were (?) when my kids, all three of my kids were growing up, we were very, especially because we lived in New York City, they got an opportunity to know everybody. You know, they were in a very diverse school. Uh, they had Jewish friends, they had African American friends, Latino, from everywhere. And it, it was wonderful to have them have that experience, because when I was growing up, I didn't have it.

- 03.11.32 Uh, and for them to grow up in such you know, a diverse uh, community, uh, really made them very well-rounded young, you know, young teens. And uh, I remember, you know, my son loving to watch baseball. You know, the Yankees. Uh, I remember the (?) Fourth of July in my family is just like a big holiday.
- 03.12.01 Uh, you know, and I remember (CLEARS THROAT) my husband uh, the boys would particularly say let's go buy fireworks, Dad, you have to buy fireworks for us. And uh, you know, so they traveled to God knows where and buy some. And they just used to love lighting them. And I remember Usef uh, I forgot what it is, what it's called, but it's this thing that you know, you light it up and then it shoots up red, white and blue. That was like his favorite. And uh, I remember he, he would say, you know, he's, he would say to me, some of them are duds, Mom, because they don't shoot the colors uh, in the right order.
- 03.12.38 And so I'd always have this debate with him and, and say well, what's the order? And he would say, red, white and blue. And I said, well, how do you know? Because it could be blue, white and red. And he's like, no, no, Mom. And he's like, you know, and I said, either direction that you look, you know, it's, it's appropriate to say either. And he'd say, no, it's red, white and blue.
- 03.13.00 And I'd remember he, him lighting that up and waiting you know, to see what color would come out first, the red or the blue? (LAUGHS) Uh, and I remember the funny thing is, I remember when Guilanni, uh, Mayor Guilanni was on board and he uh, illegalized fireworks in New York. Uh, Usef was so devastated. Truly devastated. He's like, he's not American (LAUGHS).
- 03.13.29 You know, it's the Fourth of July, we're supposed to celebrate Independence Day and him not letting us do so is unpatriotic. Uh, it was just so funny to hear him talk like that. And uh, you know, and I would tell him, I said, you know, I think it was the best thing that happened because fireworks are dangerous, they can start fires, they could do this, they could do that. He says, Mom, not if you're careful. You know, so, that's what I mean about his maturity.

03.13.56 When, whenever you have some type of conversation he always had like this you know, sane reason that you know, it's ok if you do it the right way, or something like that. And uh, I think that had a lot to do with him making that decision. Uh.

JW: You talked about go ahead, what were you going go say?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I'm, I'm just thinking. Go ahead.

JW: Well, what were you thinking about?

03.14.23 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I, I just thinking about, I was thinking about him and, and all of his activities of uh, you know, even as, as young as he was, I remember, I remember him one day uh, offering to actually cross an old lady across the street. You know, it was he and I, and uh, and his brother. And uh, there was this old lady who had bags. And, and he said to her, he said ma'am, can I help you? You know, because he saw her and I noticed, too, but it just didn't strike me to say why don't one of you help her? It didn't' strike me, and as we were standing, he, as we were walking behind her, he saw her struggling with the bags.

03.15.03 And he knew that when we would cross it would take her a long time to cross. And I remember him saying to her, ma'am can I help you with your bag to the other side of the street? Uh, and uh, I remember her looking at him, and so generally, you know, I thought she would look at him and say, you know, maybe this kid wants to steal my bag or something. But she looked at him and smiled (CLEARS THROAT) and she said, well, thank you, son, I would love it if you can help me.

03.15.30 And uh, you know, he took one of the bags, and I was walking with them, and when we got to the corner, uh, he, he, she stood there and he was giving her back the bag, and, and he said to her, he said, you know, we're, we're walking down this block. Are, you know, if you're walking down this block, I'll be happy to carry it for you uh, to where you're going uh, because we're walking to the next block.

- 03.15.58 And uh, I'm just looking at him. You know, he was like 9 or 10 years old, and I was just looking at him and I'm like, my goodness at you know, where, where is this coming from that he is just so compassionate? And uh, she said, well, you know, I'm, I live in the middle of the block, I would love if you do that. Uh, and as so as he was walking, I started talking to her. I said, you know, it's nice that we bumped into you. I never knew that you lived on this block, because we live on the next block. And so she's talking to me. She said, do you know, you have such a, a great young man.
- 03.16.33 He's really wonderful. Uh, you've done such a fine job raising him, and you know, deep down in my mind, I've never asked him to, to ask old ladies if he could carry their bags (LAUGHS). But uh, but I'm just uh, I am so, I was moved. And so when we got there, she tried to offer him money, and he wouldn't take the money. He, he wouldn't take it, and I you know, that really made me very proud, because it was genuinely from his heart that he was doing what he was doing.
- 03.17.04 Uh, not for a profit or, or anything of that sort. And I think that what, what's incredible about Usef is the fact that he is so compassionate. Uh, and he's so helpful. Uh, you know, anybody, anywhere, you know, he (?) he over-extends himself. You know? Uh, I mean, I remember someone having a flat tire like two blocks down from our house and uh, it was actually a woman.
- 03.17.35 And uh, he went over and he's like ma'am, can I help you? And she said, well, I'm gonna call AA and (?) he asked her what was the problem? And she said, well, uh, I think I have a flat, you know, and he said, well, I, I can change it for you. You know, and he did it. And uh, she tried offering him money, and he wouldn't take it.
- 03.17.56 And it, it's just I feel like whenever there is something and he's there, that he, he finds that he has to help. Uh, and I think that, that is just the most incredible thing about him, and the thing that makes me the most proud is to know that he's so caring and compassionate. Uh, towards other human beings. Uh, I mean, even in terms of animals. I remember him uh,

sneaking out food for the cats that were in the alleys of, of the building that we were living in, you know.

- 03.18.30 And uh, and that was pretty funny because he'd open the screen of, of the back window and throw food out there, and I would wonder where is, you know, the left over chicken or (LAUGHS). And then when I started to see bones collecting out there, I sort of put two and two together and I asked, you know, who, who did this, and, and it was of course him. He said, well, Mom, you know, I always hear them crying at night and I feel sorry for them. So I, I just threw some of the food out there.
- 03.19.00 Uh, I also remember one time which was hysterical. Uh, he was in 4th grade and uh, he decided to take home the ducks. And he has allergies. He brought home the ducks from school over Christmas vacation because nobody wanted to take them home. And uh, he finally said to his teacher, he said, you know, even though that I have allergies, I'm going to take them home and I promise I will take care of them.
- 03.19.29 And there were three ducks that were in this huge cage. They're just literally like stunk up the house (LAUGHS). On a daily basis. And I remember him like caring so gently for them, taking them out uh, and cleaning up their cage and feeding them, and of course sneezing all over the place when he was doing all this. Uh, but he just, he, he was compelled. You know, and I said to him, I said, well, why don't you at least keep them in the basement uh, at night and then bring them up in the morning so that we can at least sleep without having a stuffy nose.
- 03.20.05 And he's like no, Mom, I can't. uh, that would be so inhumane. And I'm like, honey, I'm not asking you to leave them in the cellar, which is not finished, but in the basement, which is finished. It's beautiful, there's a lot of light. Uh, and he's like, no, they, they should, you know, I should have them close by if they need anything. And I mean, it was funny. I said to him, what can the ducks possibly ask you to get them? You have their water, you have their food in there. Uh, and it was incredible. He spent a whole week (LAUGHS) a whole week sneezing and, and coughing uh, over the ducks.

03.20.41 Uh, so that was quite interesting, and I remember his, I, I told his teacher and he said, you know, Usef is just amazing, truly amazing. That uh, and he said I know why the other kids didn't want to take them because they are a handful. You know, to care for and, and they do make really bad messes and they need somebody you know, to always care for them.

03.21.05 Uh, and Usef really uh, I'm, I'm really, really proud that he did this. Uh, so it was gratifying to hear someone else acknowledge that they saw what I was seeing. So I think a lot of his compassion uh, and his, you know, sense of, of the world and helping really made him make this decision to go into the Army.

JW: When you think of the Army (?) you know?

03.21.34 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, gosh. I, you know, when I, I was thinking oh, my god, what's my son gonna get into? Uh, but you know, I remember his, the placement officer coming with all of the paperwork, and him trying to reassure us. And uh, you know, my son went to get us something to drink from the kitchen, and he, the, the sergeant was actually whispering to us, he said, he said, you know, your son has potential.

03.21.59 Uh, he is really, really smart. He's got a good head on his shoulders. Uh, he is strategic. Uh, he has a lot, you know, to offer. And I really, really recommend that you support him on this, and he could go really, really far with this. Uh, and he said, you know, some people are made for the Army and some people aren't. And I will tell you your son is truly made uh, to serve his country.

03.22.29 And uh, it made me feel good to hear that. Uh, but I still wasn't you know, wholeheartedly in support of it, but I did it because this is what he wanted to do. So I remember signing those papers. Uh, and then him going to boot camp. And uh, when we went for his graduation, he would call us every few days uh, once a week, he would write us letters and he would tell us about all the wonderful and great things that he was doing.

- 03.23.01 Uh, you know, and he was just so ecstatic. Even on the phone when he would tell me all the things that he was doing, you know, the uh, the jogging, the weight lifting, waking up 4 in the morning, getting ready and the food. Telling me about the food they were feeding him and how much weight he's gained (LAUGHS) It was amazing. So I remember when we went up when it was finally time for him to graduate from boot camp and I was just astonished to see how big he got.
- 03.23.33 You know, in height and width, and muscular, and I was like what have they been feeding you that we didn't feed you at home? And he said, well, they're giving me and I, I forgot what this bar is, this like two thousand calorie uh, you know, candy bar that they eat that's filled with tons of fat and proteins and, and what have you. He says, well, we eat this plus we get all these meals, and he said, and the trick is Mom, that you have to eat your food in five minutes and you're out the door.
- 03.24.03 And I said, are you serious? And he said, yes. And I remember when uh, he had a night that we were able to take him out, and as we were sitting there eating dinner, he was literally shoving everything in his mouth, I'm like Usef, you're gonna choke. And he's like no, Mom, I'm used to it. I said, well, please don't eat fast because you're giving me a stomach ache watching you (LAUGHS). He said, Mom, I'm so used to it because this is what they expect.
- 03.24.28 You can't sit here and, and you know, you have to eat fast because you have to move. You have to go do the next thing. And I, I started to really being concerned about that because I, I thought that was so unhealthy. Uh, I said to him, I said how do you even digest your meal? He's like I'm used to it, don't worry. Uh, but I think what was the most incredible experience of him joining the Army was when we went for the uh, his graduation from boot camp.
- 03.24.58 And uh, sitting in the audience throughout the ceremony was really, it was really incredible. And as I looked around uh, I saw no other Arab families. Uh, I saw no other ethnic backgrounds. Uh, I saw some African Americans. Uh, a lot of white American folks, and it

was very interesting. And, and it was interesting to see how people were looking uh, at my husband and I, particularly me because I stand out wearing the hijab, and people were smiling.

03.25.32 They were very, very nice. Uh, you know, all of his drill sergeants that were there were very complimentary towards him and very respectful. And you know, telling my husband and I how proud they are to have him and how honored they are to meet the parents of Usef. Uh, and you know, telling us what a wonderful person he was, and what a great job he was doing.

03.26.01 Uh, and I remember sitting in the audience, and the graduation and uh, they sang American the Beautiful. And I think I guess uh, this is so corny (LAUGHS). But my favorite song is actually America the Beautiful. You know, from childhood, I always loved hearing it. Uh, loved hearing it a lot.

03.26.26 And then sitting there (~JW~)

JW: Why?

03.26.29 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I have no idea. But uh, I guess, you know, being that you know, it goes back to my sugar, sugar experience. Uh, and the fact that you know, when I was coming to the United States, my mom would always talk to me about we're going to America. You know, America is such a great country and you know, we're gonna be with your dad and we don't have to worry about struggling. We're you know, you're gonna get to have whatever you want. And so I guess that conversation always stuck with me.

03.27.00 And uh, even when I was younger, you know, uh, and there were times that, that I was unhappy about anything, my mother would always go back to that conversation and say, you know, it could be worse. We could be back home, you wouldn't get the opportunity that you are here. You wouldn't have the friends that you have here, you know? You wouldn't know of a car, of traveling of, of having all these beautiful clothes.

- 03.27.27 So (?) uh, you know, it was always a touch of that, going back and forth. And uh, I remember sitting there listening to the song, and uh, you know, it just, it really, it gave me such pride uh, and dignity to know that my son was actually, you know, an (?) in the Army. Uh, that he was graduating with honors uh, in the US Army.
- 03.27.59 It just uh, you know, I remember my heart just fluttering and, and filled with so much joy and you know, as we were sitting there, you know, my husband, uh, I was crying. And my husband was just holding my hand and you know, rubbing it. And I mean, he's felt, I know he felt the same way. And as they were calling them to give them their certificates uh, it was incredible. Uh, you know, and the speeches that all of the drill sergeants gave, and the major and all the folks there, it was just so, it was incredible to, to know that my son was a part of such a, a huge uh, community who was going through the same thing.
- 03.28.43 And I (?) you know, it also made me feel like, wow, we truly, truly are a part of this American dream. American fabric. Uh, my son is a part of the US Army. And uh, it was just amazing. Uh, you know, every time that I look at the pictures uh, of his graduation with us and him.
- 03.29.07 And uh, him alone uh, it was just so, it's such an (?) it was an incredible time in his life, and I think an incredible time in both his father and my life. Uh, to you know, to have this, this pride of him making such a decision. Uh, and then finally accepting it.
- 03.29.29 Uh, and seeing it as a reality on, on that graduation day. And everyone in my family just being so proud of him and you know, making this decision and I mean, even his sister, she, you know, she was just so, so, so proud. You know, and she was really young. She was 11. Uh, and she would tell everybody that he was in the Army.
- 03.29.55 She had his pictures in her wallet. Uh, you know, would uh, even in the middle of a conversation with friends, she'll just come out and say, oh, I really miss Usef. And people would say to her, who's Usef? And she said, oh, he's my brother, he's in the Army and she would start talking (LAUGHS). And you know, I, I sort of felt like this was something for

her that she needed to express, because she was as well uh, very proud of him. Uh, so
(~JW~)

JW: Did you uh, I assume that uh, one, I'm sort of going back in time here, after you got married uh, at what time did you, you being to fully, fully, fully embrace (?) the last time we were speaking about this, you said you were in 7th grade and you (?) So what, what changed that?

03.30.50 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Ok. Uh, when I, when I came to New York City, I was living here for, I would say, about 4 or 5 months. And uh, you know, as I was traveling through the city looking for uh, an undergrad program uh, getting to know people, I was astonished with the diversity in New York City. And uh, one day I was on Atlantic Avenue walking, and these three African American women were walking towards me. They were up the block, and they were walking towards me.

03.31.31 And as they were walking I was just so at awe with the grace and beauty these three women had. And as they got closer, I realized that they were African American, I really couldn't tell from a distance. They were wearing long gowns and they were wearing a hijab. And uh, I was just uh, so intrigued by their, their presence and their beauty and their grace.

03.32.01 When they finally came towards me, I don't know where I worked up the courage, but I did. And I said to them, are you Muslim? And they said to me, yes. And I said, well, as you were walking towards me, I was just looking at you ladies, and you are just such a beautiful sight to see. And uh, I am so honored to, you know, to, to make your acquaintance. And so they asked me my name, and I told them my name.

03.32.30 And uh, they said, well, we are going to the mosque on Atlantic Avenue. You're welcome to join us. And I said to them, well, I'm not, I'm not really appropriately dressed. I don't know if I'd be welcomed there. And they said, they said to me, of course you'd be welcome there. Nobody's gonna say no to you and you can come with us. Uh, and I told them that my name

was Debbie. I really didn't tell them I was Muslim or I knew anything. Uh, because I sort of felt like embarrassed, because I was but I didn't look it.

JW: You mean you weren't dressed?

- 03.33.03 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I, I was wearing jeans and a tee shirt and my hair was out (CLEARS THROAT). And uh, I said, well, Ok, I'll, I'll join you for a little bit. What's, what's going on, I said to them. And they said, well, we're having a class and it's for all women who are interested to learn about Islam uh, and we're just heading that way. You're welcome to join us for a few minutes, you know, if you'd like.
- 03.33.29 Uh, so I actually joined them and it was funny because that afternoon, I was just, I was out for a walk. I didn't really have anything to do. Uh, so I did join them. And I was astonished to walk in there, and then see Latino American women uh, Caucasian uh, Muslim women sitting in that circle. And women who were Arab and, and South Asian. And I sat there. And they started talking about, you know, their own experiences and what brought them to Islam.
- 03.34.04 And uh, it, it just really gave me goose bumps. Uh, and they asked me what, what did I know about Islam? And I really uh, you know, everybody there was sincere about, about their experiences. And I said to myself, I have to tell them that I'm Muslim. (LAUGHS) And so I said to them, I said, well, you know, both of my parents are from the Middle East from Yemen and uh, I grew up upstate Buffalo.
- 03.34.32 And uh, my parents are Muslim, and I guess that would make me Muslim but I just don't practice. Uh, and you know, I started talking about my experiences in upstate, and they were very, very supportive and they said, well, we can understand that. You know, living in such a suburban area. Uh, you know, can have that affect on you.

03.35.00 And uh, you know, we just, they kept talking and they invited me to the next session was, which was the following week and I said ok, uh, I'll, I'll try to come. And that whole week, I just couldn't get that vision of those three women on the street out of my mind. (~JW~)

JW: It was affecting to you?

03.35.21 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Extremely affecting, and I think what you know, what was affective about it was when I was staring at them, I was also staring around to see who else was watching them or who noticed them. And truly no one noticed them coming. Uh, or looked at them in any way that would be (CLEARS THROAT) you know, offensive. Uh, and I think that that was really when it clicked for me that, truly, New York City is a place of diversity, and a place of acceptance where anybody could dress anyway they want uh, express themselves any way they want.

03.36.02 And not feel that they will be ridiculed uh, or in any way uh, put off by anyone. And so I kept going back, and eventually about three months later, I, I had started, well, I was telling my husband about this, and he was like ok, great. If you know, if you want to, if you find this something that's meaningful to you. Uh, finally 3 months later, I uh, I came back to him and I said, you know, I, I'm really thinking about wearing the hijab.

03.36.35 And he looked at me a little strange, and uh, I said uh, you know, I really admired these women for, for doing it and not feeling intimidated or you know, and they're just, they're being them, their selves, and they have you know, a self identity that is different from everyone else's and I want that. I want to.

03.36.58 I want to have an identity that shows who I am rather than being like everybody else. And he said to me, well, whatever you want to do uh, I support you. And I will tell you it was the most difficult thing to actually try to wear the hijab, because I guess growing up without wearing it uh, and then trying to put it on, it took a long time for me to finally cover my hair. It took about maybe six months afterwards. I would just wear it as a shawl, but my hair would be out in the front.

- 03.37.31 You know, sometimes it would slip and fall on my shoulders. And then finally one more thing I just said to myself, you know, I, I have to make the decision either to cover all the way or to take it off uh, because I'm not fooling anybody but myself. And I got the, I don't know how I got the strength, but I did it, and I wore it all the way. Uh, I was still going to the support group with these women, and really they were just so inspirational.
- 03.38.03 And, and they were very encouraging and they were so proud to see when I came back wearing the hijab all the way. And uh, and 'til this day I have some contact with a couple of them. And uh, it was empowering, it was truly empowering, and I think also when I was going to school, and then I also had my son, uh, it was very difficult because I didn't know how people in the university would perceive me.
- 03.38.33 Uh, you know, even getting a job, what would it be like? Uh, and I really didn't work. I, I went to school, and as I was doing my undergrad work nobody really singled me out or made any remarks or uh, looked at me differently. It was so incredible because that's where I thought I would probably feel the most tension or get some type of discrimination, but I didn't.
- 03.39.01 And I think that was the most rewarding thing, uh, for me was to see that you know, it wasn't an issue. You can wear whatever you want uh, and not have to feel like you should be like everybody else. Uh, so it was an experience. You know, and uh, I have been now wearing it, I would say now over 20 years. Uh, I'm extremely happy. Uh, I feel empowered.
- 03.39.30 Uh, you know, and I personally I firmly believe that it's helped me get where I am in my career. Uh, because (~JW~)
- JW: Tell me about that career.
- 03.39.42 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Uh, well it's quite interesting. When I was going for undergrad uh, I wanted to be a public advocate or a lawyer, so I had a lot of political science course.

And when my kids started going to school particularly Usef uh, I became very involved in the PTA.

- 03.40.02 And uh, very involved. I was one of the PTA members, I was doing translations, I was in classrooms, I was always called upon to help parents who didn't speak English, what have you. And I was just very well-perceived uh, and very well-respected in the school. Uh, and basically the school was just yearning for diversity uh, particularly of Arab and Muslim descent, because they really had no one help them communicate.
- 03.40.33 And uh, finally one day the principal said to me, he said, you know, Debbie, you come in here so often and we always call upon you and we don't have anything to offer you. I have this position coming up as an assistant uh, a teaching assistant position. I would love to offer it to you, at least to somehow compensate you for the translations you do uh, you know, and the support that you give kids in the classrooms who don't speak English.
- 03.41.03 Uh, and it would be something to pay you for, for the work that you, you're doing for us. And basically I said to him, I'm not really interested uh, you know, I'm still doing my undergrad work and uh, it's, you know, it's not a big deal. I don't mind doing what I'm doing. And uh, eventually people were like no, you have to do this. It'll be great, you know, you're here anyway.
- 03.41.28 And I don't know how but I ended up taking the job. Uh, so I was working part time, in the school. And I was going, I was doing my undergrad work and I was also being a mom, for two. My, my two boys. And you know, it goes back to what I was telling you about how supportive the families are. My in-laws were there. You know, they, they took care of my kids, they did everything that I can possibly uh, ask for.
- 03.41.38 And uh, in addition to that we also had a live-in nanny, which made it really helpful. Uh, and, and took it, and I kept going to school. And uh, one day my husband just happened to come into the school and he saw me with, with some children talking to them. That was

actually 4th and 5th graders at lunchtime, and it was uh, it was around the holiday Ramadan, and I was explaining to them, you know, the, the tradition, the culture, the religion.

03.42.32 Uh, and the importance of it for, for Arab Muslims and how we have to be supportive and respectful. And he said to me later that afternoon, he says, you know, you want to be a public advocate or somehow helping people. And I know that you want to make change. Uh, and he said, you know, this is where you can make that change. And I looked at him and I'm like what are you talking about?

03.42.58 He said to me, you can make change through children. You know, you talking to those kids, and me watching you from a distance and listening to the conversation that you were having with them, and the impact that you had on them, and how they were so engaged and mesmerized by what you were saying and how they found it so important uh, and so special to have you talk to them about this culture, was so powerful.

03.43.31 And he said, this is your calling. You know, this is where your work should be is with children uh, helping them understand people and the world. And uh, I, you know, I, I can't even capture it the way that he said it, but uh, when he said that to me I was just so amazed. And I was like, really? And he said, yes. If you go back and you ask those kids, they will probably be able to tell you everything you told them.

03.44.00 Uh, so I guess from that conversation I decided to go into teaching. So I ended up changing my major uh, I graduated I think with like 160 something credits. It was ridiculous (LAUGHS). Uh, and I went into education and I started teaching. And I actually taught in the school where my kids were going to school. Uh, and the administration was just so thrilled, you know, to have me there as an asset to the school as well as to the community.

03.44..34 And uh, I taught there a couple of years. Uh, and then I went off to another school and I taught a couple of years. Uh, and then I was asked by the superintendent to uh, become a professional developer in literacy. And so I traveled across the district to do professional development and literacy reading and writing.

03.45.01 Uh, and from there, uh, as I was doing all of this, I was also, earlier, actually I worked on a special education masters, because I was very, I was very uh, touched by working with children with disabilities, and I wanted to better understand children. Uh, and then as a literacy staff developer, I did another masters in reading, to be a reading specialist. I thought it was important to have some kind of solid backing in my background.

03.45.32 And so after three and a half years of doing staff development, I decided that I wanted to go back into the classroom. And I made this decision (STOPS)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

03.45.45 END OF TAPE # DA-003

TAPE # DA-004

DEBBIE ALMONTASER

08.26.02

JIM WHITAKER, Producer/Director

PROJECT REBIRTH

04.00.04 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: So you?

- 04.00.11 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: So uh, as a literacy professional developer, the last year that I was doing that, uh, I was also chosen uh, after such a tedious process, uh, I still to this day am amazed how I was chosen (CLEARS THROAT) .
- 04.00.28 There was a leadership program that was offered in the district to become a future leader in the district in an assistant principle position or (?) a principal position. And uh, the district was actually paying the entire program. And uh, the training was with District 2, which is an incredibly uh, wonderful and excellent and outstanding district in New York City.
- 04.00.57 And so a few of my friends told me about it, and they're like Debbie, you should apply and I said to them, I said, I really don't want to. I don't think I'll get it. Uh, I can't ever see myself becoming a principal or uh, you know, getting such a position and they're like don't worry. Just apply. So I went through the process. I had to write an essay, I had to get three letters of recommendation, submit all this and then wait for a call. So I did all that, and I got the first call and they asked me to go for the first interview.
- 04.01.32 Uh, the interviewers were actually the University and the two districts. And uh, I was very nervous. I was like Ok uh, you know, this is probably not gonna work out but I'll do it. I made the first interview, and I was called for the second interview. And you know, that saying when sometimes you don't know what you're getting yourself into? (LAUGHS) Well, I got myself into this program. I made the final interview.
- 04.01.59 Uh, I was very amazed because uh, I really didn't think that I, I would get into the program, because it was very competitive and uh, and you know, deep down inside, I always felt like maybe as an Arab American Muslim, I may never get position such as assistant principal or even principal, because you know. Quite frankly uh, here are those issues, you know, of racism and what have you uh, and competitiveness in terms of such kinds of positions.
- 04.02.34 Like I knew that if anything I would probably get the opportunity to be uh, you know, an administrator through the district doing some type of coordination or what have you, but I

just never, like I always feared that parents might say no, we can't have an Arab Muslim uh, as a principal.

04.02.57 Uh, but quite frankly uh, you know, the people who are in charge of the district that I have been working in have been so supportive of me and uh, and really very respectful and admirable uh, towards me. And uh, I got into the program, and as I was going through the program uh, you know, I was treated in such a way that I've never been treated in my life. Uh, you know, it's so, it's you know, little icky.

04.03.29 Uh, they treated me like such an elitist. Which I've never had that kind of feeling uh, throughout the program, because everyone who's chosen for this program from the 3 districts that participated were like the cream of the crop, the best of the best uh, in, in this professional line. Uh, and it was really scary in the very beginning to know and accept that I was like one of the five chosen. You know? The best of the best.

04.04.00 Uh, and I remember when we went for the orientation, when the director of the program was talking to us, and she's said, she goes, you know, you all didn't get here by accident or by default, but you are here because of your outstanding commitment to education and to the line of work that you do. And because you have stood out in your district for being an outstanding educator. So I want you to remember that.

04.04.30 In every coursework that you, take that you are not here by accident but because of your merits. And I was like, oh, my god (LAUGHS). It was quite scary. And it was such an intensive program (~JW~)

JW: It must have made you feel good?

04.04.46 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, my god it made me feel incredibly good because uh, you know, I always had this doubt about myself, even when I was younger, and I remember having a really bad experience in 3rd grade uh, (CLEARS THROAT) doing math. And I remember you know, my teacher saying to me, oh, well, you know, it's, it's no big deal uh,

you know, you'll just get a job where you don't have to do a lot of adding and subtracting, and that hurt.

04.05.12 Uh, and then I remember you know, later on (CLEARS THROAT) I think it was 5th or 6th grade and I wrote this essay. And I got it back and it was all filled with the red marks everywhere, and I was just so crushed. And uh, you know, when I asked the teacher what can I do to, to improve this?

04.05.34 And you know, she said to me, well, there's nothing really you can improve, you know, somebody from your cultural background and you're a second language learner, it's just something you're just gonna have to deal with all your life. And, and I looked at her, and I'm like what do you mean? You know, what can I do to make it better? Can I you know, what should I do? And she said, well, just, you know, don't write as much.

04.05.57 Write when you have to, but. And I was so crushed. So totally crushed. Uh, (~JW~)

JW: So they said you couldn't do math and you couldn't do (writing?) and now?

01.06.19 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: And it's incredible. And uh, but what, what was amazing for me was even though that I heard these things, I have no idea how I persevered and how I just kept going. Uh, and how I just, I believed in myself. It's so scary. I truly believed in myself that I can accomplish whatever I set my mind to do.

04.06.31 And uh, even though that I struggled at it, you know, I still did it. And I, I think that's one thing that my husband, whenever I'm down about anything, he says to me, he says, you know, for the, the effort that you put in everything uh, you deserve credit just for that. Because you are just so, you are so compelled and you are so devoted that that's what the important thing.

04.07.01 Uh, but I, I never let it, let it, you know, take me down. And uh, I went into the graduate program. I was fine. The undergrad, you know, my writing improved despite it. Uh, and in

fact it was my first uh, English course that I took and, and I will never forget this uh, I'll never forget this uh, professor, (?) his name is actually uh, Steven Marino.

- 04.07.31 He just made such an impact in my life, in my writing life. Uh, I was so nervous to take this class, but I had to because it was one of the core requirements. And uh, I met with him in his office, and I said to him, I said, I am just gonna tell you that I am really terrified about taking your class. And I said to him, (?) it has nothing, absolutely nothing to do with you, but it has to do with an experience I had when I was younger. I was told that I couldn't write and I shouldn't write unless I have to.
- 04.08.02 Uh, because it was something that I will never be able to master. Uh, and I said, you know, in high school uh, I did do writing and I always had someone proofread it, and I think that it got better uh, because it wasn't so bad. Uh, but now being in college I'm terrified, because I don't know what you're gonna think of me. And uh, he said to me, you know, I am so glad that you came and you had this conversation with me.
- 04.08.29 And uh, I promise you by the end of the semester you're going to love writing. And uh, I kept thinking about that, I guess, when I was doing all the assignments for him, that he promised me that I was gonna love writing at the end. And uh, we, you know, we developed a really great student-teacher uh, relationship. Uh, I would see him in his office. I showed him uh, I (?) submitted my first writing and uh, you know, he gave me some feedback.
- 04.09.02 It wasn't as bad as I thought. Uh, and uh, he gave me a lot of advice. He referred me some, to some books. Uh, that he had that he had used personally. And he went over a lot of techniques with me, and it was just incredibly amazing. And I thought like I was gonna get a D in his class, and I was amazed that I had gotten a B+.
- 04.09.28 Uh, and that was actually devastating for me, because I always, I always try to strive for an A. and uh, but the (?) incredible experience with Professor Marino was that uh, that I did leave his class loving to write. And I was keeping a journal. Uh, and within all my other

classes I was doing extremely well in writing reports and submitting things. Uh, and then I ended up taking even more courses with him.

04.09.59 And I actually graduated with a minor in English. Uh, where I studied different uh, literature in different eras. And uh, creative writing with him. And I was just so, so incredibly inspired by him uh, and the way he taught. Uh, and, and the, the human being that he was. You know, he really treated each and every one of us so (?) you know, delicately and, and made sure that he nurtured our, our ego.

04.10.31 Uh, our self-esteem. And uh, the last class that I finally took with him, I got an A+ (LAUGHS) And I said to him, I said, you finally gave me the A that I wanted. He said, because you finally uh, you've reached the peak, you know, that, that you deserve to get that A. Not that you didn't deserve it before. But you have finally reached where you wanted to go.

04.10.59 And uh, you know, every now and then I give him a call. Uh, in fact I should call him soon. I spoke to him maybe about 3 years ago, and it was funny because somebody he knew from the, the college bumped into me, and he's like, you know, we were just talking about you, Professor Marino and I were talking about you. You should give him a call. And uh, so he really played a big role in my life uh, professionally, to really inspire me and, and really develop my self-esteem and believing that I can write.

04.11.32 You know, that no matter what Miss Nagel said about me (LAUGHS) all those years ago that I could write. Uh, and you know, that I, I should pursue it. Uh, so I became a literacy staff developer and the first two years I was teaching creative writing in elementary school to teachers uh, how to teach children to write creatively. Uh, and it was incredible.

04.11.57 So within this leadership program that I was in uh, I decided the last 3rd year of professional development to go back to the classroom, because this program was actually preparing us to become administrators. And I wanted for the very last time to experience being in the classroom as a teacher. Uh, to recapture that uh, bond between a teacher and a student.

Because as (?) as a staff developer, you really don't have that, you build bonds with teachers, with adults.

- 04.12.33 But you really don't get the opportunity to work with children, and, and have that relationship. Uh, so I decided to actually go into, back into the classroom. And I made an appointment to speak to the superintendent and her deputy. And uh, I told them what I was thinking about, and they looked at me strangely and, and I gave them my reasoning of how it was important for me to go back uh, to recapture the feeling of being a classroom teacher, to help me then become you know, uh, an administrator who can, you know, actually say I know how you feel.
- 04.13.11 And when a teacher does come to me and say I've just had it with this parent or I've just had it with this child uh, that I can actually you know, what this teacher is feeling and experiencing. Uh, (CLEARS THROAT) and they were very , they really admired my decision.
- 04.13.29 Uh, and I also told them that I wanted to, to look at the new curriculum that was being uh, implemented through the state. I also wanted to get myself reacquainted with the uh, new math program and the science program, and they really admired my decision uh, to really go back and, and experience all this. Uh, in a different way. And uh, September 11th, I was actually in a classroom teaching.
- 04.14.01 Uh, I was extremely happy about going back to teaching, because I remember in July and August I was going to all these flea markets to buy things to decorate my class. And I spent the last two weeks of August decorating and painting my classroom and, and preparing it and buying things to make the children feel comfortable. And, and what have you. And I remember walking my kids in on September 6th, I think September 6th school started.
- 04.14.29 It was 3 days before September 11th. (~JW~) It was actually the 3rd day, yeah. And uh, walking my class up and opening the classroom door and then watching them say, oh, my god, this classroom is so beautiful (LAUGHS). And they walked in and they were just like

touching things like so delicately because it was so clean and, and so painted and, and so colorful and, and so homey.

04.14.58 And uh, we sat at the carpet and you know, the kids are like we've never been in a classroom that looked like this. What did you do? I said, well, I spent the first two weeks, the last two weeks in here. And uh, we were getting to know one another, who we are, what we're about. Uh, hearing each other's stories, trying to develop classroom routines. Uh, and it, we really started off in such a great way.

04.15.26 And uh, then, September 11th, I remember it so vividly.

JW: Can you tell me that vividly?

04.15.34 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, gosh. Uh, I remember that morning, waking up. I even remember the clothes that I was wearing, that's how spooky it is. Uh, I was wearing uh, black slacks, with uh, uh, a black shirt, sleeveless shirt under over, and then this black, long (torjet?) fabric shirt with swirls of black and gray and (?) no, it's black but it's swirls of purple and gray all over, and everybody loves this shirt that I wear.

04.16.10 And uh, wearing a baby blue hijab, which people always compliment me that I look great in baby blue. And it was 8:35. Uh, I went into the office, I got the folder for attendance, and I walked out really feeling great because that day, the sky was just so blue.

04.16.31 And the sun was out, and the air was really crisp. It wasn't humid or hot. And as I'm walking out of the building, I remembered, you know, breathing this beautiful, clean air. Uh, and taking a deep breath before walking over to the classroom line where my, the class line where my kids were lined up. And they were all lined up and ready and happy to start the day.

04.16.57 And I remember us actually being the first class to walk into the building, because they were so quiet and ready. Uh, and the administration always called the lines that were standing the

quietest. And we walked in. Uh, and I remember the kids just, you know, having really great conversations. Everybody was in a great mood. We walked in, got into the classroom. Uh, they were doing the problem of the day, which was a math problem that I set for them at the carpet area.

04.17.28 They all sat there and they were working on it for ten minutes while I was taking attendance. And uh, I went over and we started to solve the problem. And uh, I remember sitting there complimenting one of the kids and saying to them, wow, it's only the third day of school and you really uh, are doing such a great job with this uh, problem. It's you know, I remember it was like a 3 or 4 step math problem that you had to do this before you get that. And, and this, this young boy was just really doing such great job.

04.18.03 And it was about I would say around 9 o'clock, someone from the parent association came to the door and she knocked, and uh, she came, she didn't come in, she said, can I speak to you at the door? So I, I gave the marker to one of the boys and I said, why don't you finish the problem with, with the rest of the group 'til I come back.

04.18.27 And she said to me, she said, uh, we have just found out that uh, one of the towers has just been hit by a plane. Uh, and we don't know how it happened, but we're speculating that it was an accident. And uh, my heart dropped. And I just, I couldn't believe what I was hearing, I was like, my god. And uh, she said, we really don't want to alarm the kids. We're going around to the classrooms.

04.18.57 We want for the teachers to keep the kids in the classroom for as long as possible until we find out what's happening. Uh, so just keep the kids in the room and don't tell them anything. And uh, you know, she just, I remember her you know, holding my arms because she saw that I was like, you know, shivering already. And uh, she, she said, you can do it. And I barely know this parent, but she said to me, you can do it.

04.19.29 And so I took a deep breath. Uh, I put a straight face on, and I walked over to the carpet and I went over with the kids what they were actually uh, the problem. And I said to them, ok,

great. Uh, and generally what they do is that they go back to their seats and they do independent reading. And I said to them that morning, I said, you know, we're gonna change the, the routine a little today. Uh, I'm gonna read to you guys a story. And uh, it was actually reading to them this book called Hundred Dresses.

04.20.02 Which is a story uh, about a girl, it was like, in the early, I would say maybe '20's. Uh, and it's about a girl whose family's from Poland and they moved to a town, and she is ridiculed by all the children in the town because she's from Poland. She couldn't speak proper English, she had a funny name. And she was poor. Her mother had passed away, nobody knew what was happening with her mother.

04.20.31 Uh, but basically it's a book about immigration and really understanding and knowing how we all uh, (?) go through issues in our lives. Uh, and how important it is to tolerate and respect people from different cultures, no matter how they talk or how they dress or what their socio-economic status is. And so I asked, you know, I said, we're just gonna do things a little differently. I'm gonna read to you first today.

04.21.59 We're gonna uh, read A Hundred Dresses. And uh, I remember us sitting there reading to them, and my mind was like at what happened outside. And also with them, because I kept saying, God you have to give me the, the strength to keep doing what I'm doing. Uh, a few minutes later, in the middle of the story, the same parent came back and uh, (~JW~)

JW: Why did you choose this story?

04.21.33 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I chose that story uh, because it was a story that I generally did with kids in the beginning, to build community and, and a sense of uh, of you know, responsibility to, to one another. To develop understanding that we're all different but we all have to respect one another.

04.21.57 Uh, so it's a book that I've used over the years and, and it happens to be one of my very favorite stories, and even the kids, all kids who I've read it uh, it's always left a lasting

impression on them of how important it is that we respect uh, and accept one another for who we are, just regardless of our race, color, creed, religion, language. Uh, and it was something that was planning to read, not that it was, that I picked it for that day but it was a part of my uh, planning for the beginning of the school year was to read that book.

04.22.33 Uh, and as I was reading the parent came again, and uh, she called me over to the door, so I, I just asked the kids to think about how Wanda was feeling in the story until I come back. Uh, and it, I think it was at a time where the girls were teasing her in the schoolyard because she was always wearing the same dress.

04.22.58 So I went over to the parent and I, and she said to me, well, uh, I just wanted to tell you the second tower was hit. Uh, and we no longer think that it's uh, an accident but it was intentional. And uh, I just stared at her with such a blank face. And uh, she said to me, Debbie, are you OK? And I said, I don't know. I, I don't, you know, I don't know what you're telling me right now.

04.23.31 And she said, Debbie, please uh, don't lose it. Your kids need you because right now this school is, everybody's going crazy. And uh, she said you are fortunate that you can't see anything from your windows. Because my class actually faced the other side of the city. And she said, but all the classrooms that are facing the skyline, all the kids are in the windows.

04.23.59 And some of the teachers are in a state of shock and devastated. And you have to be strong for your kids. And I looked at her and I just, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. And I said to her, do you have any idea how did this happen? She said, we have no idea uh. It has to be an attack. Some terrorist attack. And, and I heard that word uh, my heart just dropped.

04.24.31 And a million things started rushing in my head of, you know, the past terrorist attacks that have happened across the world uh, in the United States uh, you know, Oklahoma. The Oklahoma City bombing. Uh, just a lot of things. And uh, I remember her then uh, you know, holding my arms again. She said, Debbie, look at me.

04.24.59 And I looked at her. She said, you have to be strong for your kids. You have to keep them in the classroom until we give you further notice. So uh, I remember taking a deep breath again and uh, and actually looking out the windows. I was walking towards the kids, and I can see smoke. Uh, that was traveling across. Uh, and we continued to read, I continued to read to them. And then finally one of the kids said, uh, Debbie, we've been sitting here for a long time and you generally don't read to us this long.

04.25.33 And I said, well, how many of you are really interested to keep (?) to keep hearing this story? And some hands went up. And uh, there were a few who didn't raise their hand. I said, well, let's, let's take a vote. You guys, we can either, I can continue reading or uh, you can go to your seats or stay here at the carpet and read independently.

04.25.56 And uh, the kids uh, majority of them wanted to finish reading the story. Which for me uh, gave me uh, that sense of security that we were all huddled in one space of the room. Uh, that's for me right there and then, that was so needed, because I just felt like I needed to be around them. Uh, and in one proximity of the room, not you know, all over the room. And I don't know what was you know, going in my mind, but that's what I needed.

04.26.30 And uh, finally (~JW~)

JW: (?) Did it in some way validate your emotional feelings that were going on in your history?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Uh, I'm not, I didn't understand what you were asking.

JW: Well, let me uh, uh, I see an analogy I guess in (?) the things (?) in your story (?) wanted to (?) your experiences as a young child (that experience you told me?) and there's a lot of things that are coming together at this moment, I guess, I can imagine that (it's all connecting?)

- 04.27.07 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah, now that you mention it, yeah. It's all connecting. (~JW~) Uh, it's all connecting. So when we were sitting there finally uh, I, when we, while we were sitting there, there were kids being called from the main office on the PA. And the kids started to like what's going on, why are these kids being asked down?
- 04.27.30 Uh, and then finally I think it was about 9:45 or 10 o'clock, one of my parents came to pick up her daughter, and she didn't call up or on the PA, but she ran upstairs and she was knocking on the door. And I could see the, the look of terror in her face. Uh, and I immediately rushed over to the door and I calmed her down. I said, please the kids don't know what happened. I want you to take uh, your daughter quietly because the kids don't know.
- 04.28.03 And uh, we were notified that we couldn't say anything to them, and she said, Ok. You know, I calmed her down. Uh, and I said to her daughter, I said, sweetie, Mommy's here, you have an appointment uh, she didn't realize to tell you this morning, so pack your things and I'll see you tomorrow. She left. Uh, then another parent came.
- 04.28.28 And there was I you know, I couldn't keep telling the kids everybody has an appointment. Finally one of the boys said to me, Debbie, I need to go to the bathroom. And you know, they have, they kept hearing the PA, the you know, PA. And uh, and they were hearing the ambulances. They were hearing a lot of commotion outside. (CLEARS THROAT) He went to the bathroom and he saw what was happening through the bathroom window because it faced uh, it faced the skyline and he came back.
- 04.29.01 And he didn't like say it in front of everybody, but he, he said, Debbie, I have to talk to you. And I said to him, yes? And he said to me, uh, I saw smoke outside. And the smoke is coming from the World Trade Center area, the twin towers are on fire. Uh, did you know this? And I said to him, I said, well, when that parent came she had mentioned it to me, but she asked me not to tell anybody.

- 04.29.32 And he said, I'm afraid. You know? What's gonna happen to us? And I think at that point like, you know, just hearing a child say that just really uh, you know, it, it scared me. Uh, but I, I have no idea how and where I got the, the energy. Uh, the courage to keep a straight face uh, not to show my emotions.
- 04.30.00 Uh, to be strong for the kids. And uh, I mean, they, and then so many kids were just like being picked up and then finally I only had about uh, 12 or 15 kids. And I said to them, you know, we have to come to the carpet and I wanted everyone to sit in a circle really close. We have to talk. And uh, I said to them (CLEARS THROAT) there has been some type of accident that has taken place.
- 04.30.31 Uh, at uh, in Manhattan with the (?) twin towers. Uh, we don't know exactly how but, what's going on, but uh, I was told that there were two planes that hit, you know, the two towers. And the kids were just they looked at me like their eyes just you know, were glazed. And uh, you know they were just in shock. And they're like how, who, what?
- 04.31.00 And I said, I don't know, honey, I'm here with you. I don't have any answers. When I do I will be happy to share with you. And uh, I said, you know, in a little while we're going to be going down for lunch. What I'm going to do is I'm going to call all of your homes, and make sure that someone comes to pick you up. You know, because they, they were also expressing to me that they were afraid, what's gonna happen, you know, you know, is the school in danger?
- 04.31.30 Is that why all the kids were getting picked up. And of course, I reassured them and said no, that's, that's not going to happen. You're, you're going to be safe. Uh, you're here, you're in the school building, you're with me. I would never let anything happen to you (CLEARS THROAT) and everything will be Ok. And uh, I took them down to lunch. The school lobby was so packed with parents.
- 04.31.58 Uh, there were parents who were crying, there were parents who were running with their kids. It was totally uh, it was so chaotic that it even scared me even more, to see that. Uh, I

walked into the office. Uh, you know, and along with all this, I was thinking about my son. My two sons, actually. Uh, and my husband. Uh, one of my sons was going, my second son was going to school on uh, on 29th Street, East 29th Street, I forgot what the cross street was.

04.32.37 And Usef was actually working at the Hilton on 42nd Street. And my husband was working at his hotel uh, which is in Rockefeller Center. And all three of them I knew were in the city. And I was so worried. Uh, you know, that was like the time that I had to think about my family.

04.33.00 It didn't hit me when I was in the classroom because I was just overwhelmed with making sure that the kids felt safe. Uh, and I called home, and my husband picked up, I said oh, thank god you're home. And I said, where are the boys? He said, well, Usef is here. Uh, Mohammed hasn't made it yet. Uh, but don't worry, he'll get here. So I was afraid uh, because I didn't know what was going on with my younger one.

04.33.27 Uh, finally I called some of the parents for my students. I got them uh, and they said they were gonna come. Uh, and then there were parents, as I told you, the office was so bombarded with parents, and there wasn't enough personnel in the office, and the school has a large Arab Muslim community, and there were parents who were coming in who didn't speak English who were uh, frightened.

04.34.00 And I remember that there was one parent who uh, I knew from the neighborhood who came in crying hysterically. And I took her into the principal's office, I calmed her down, I said what happened? What's the matter? She said, I was just verbally uh, harassed outside. And I said what are you talking about? And she said to me, she said, as I was walking towards the building uh, there was a group of parents standing there and the, one tall man came out and said to me, it's you and your people who've done this to us.

04.34.38 You bastards. And uh, she said, I didn't know what to say or what to do, I just rushed in here, and I started to cry. She said, how can anyone say it's us already when nobody knows? And uh, and I said to her, ok, why uh, I said, people are angry right now, they don't know

how to deal with it. She said, yeah, they're very angry and I understand and I'm, I'm angry, too.

04.35.05 Uh, but now I'm afraid to leave this building with my kids. I'm afraid to go home because if this man said this to me, who else is gonna say what or do what to me? And so she was sitting there crying uh, I calmed her down. I said, ok, I will arrange for someone to come pick you up with your kids. But right now, your kids can't come down and see you in this condition.

04.35.30 You have to pull yourself together, you have to be strong uh, and you have to you know, show them hope. Because uh, if you fall apart, then they're gonna be terrified and scared. Uh, so I finally, she finally calmed down, I finally found someone to pick her up. Her kids came down and the person took her home. Uh, I went down to pick up the rest of my kids that were still in school.

04.35.59 And as we were walking up uh, the stairs, one of the kids said, Debbie, Debbie, I know who did it. And, and I looked at him because uh, I was just like Ok, you know, I guess they, they must have been talking or whatever. It just didn't really dawn on me. And he said, it's those dumb Arabs that did it to us again. It's those dumb Arabs. And uh, so it hit me that moment, you know, I tried very, very hard when the parent was telling me what the parents outside said to her.

04.36.31 Uh, not to make the connection of you know, the, the backlash. And the scape-goating. I try very hard to like uh, void that out of my mind. And then when I heard, you know, my student say this, uh, said, Ok, uh, you know, it's a possibility. So we went upstairs. And I said to them, I said we really need to sit down and have a really serious conversation. I told them that I had called their parents.

04.37.01 And that they were gonna get picked up and that they're safe, not to worry. And I said to them, I said uh, I know that you guys were downstairs and you were hearing some things and some of you have shared with me that you know who did it. Uh, and I said, how, how

did you find out this information? And they said, well, we heard the adults uh, talking and uh, and it's always whenever anything happens like this it's always the Arabs who do this to us.

04.37.34 Uh, the terrorist Arabs. And uh, I said to them, well, that's interesting. I said, do you guys remember the first day of school when we sat and we were talking here in this circle, and we were talking about our childhood and where we come from and uh, and how important it is that we really understand each other?

04.37.57 And so the (?) you know, the kids said yeah. And I said, well, do you guys remember when I told you that I was Arab? And their jaws dropped. And I remember uh, Michael uh, he said to me, he said, well, yeah, that's right, Debbie, but you would never do this. You're a teacher. You would never do this. And I said, Ok. So you don't think I would every do anything like this, I said, what about other people in the school that you know that are Arab, like your class, your peers?

04.38.30 Uh, in different classrooms uh, the parents. And they're like no, they wouldn't do that kind of stuff. I said, but I just want to repeat to you guys what I was hearing you say. And I want you to tell me, I said, I want you to just pretend like you're now totally away from what happened, and I just want you to tell me what you hear and the way that it was said. And I repeated what they were saying. It's those dumb Arabs.

04.39.00 It's all those Arabs who did this to us. Uh, and one of the kids says, said to me, you know, he raised his hand. He said, Debbie, we were saying that it's all Arabs, because we use the word all. And uh, and we shouldn't have done that. And I said, well, can you explain to everybody why you think that shouldn't have been said? And he said, well, because when we do that, we're talking about (?) all Arabs. We're, we're taking Arabs who are good uh, and we're clumping them with those who are bad and who would do such a thing.

04.39.36 Uh, I said, Ok. I said, so do you think you know, that the information that you got, it's only, it's almost 1 o'clock, do you think all this information is accurate for you to, to use it? And

so a few of the kids said, well, no, because we hadn't seen any news. We haven't read it in the paper. Uh, we're just hearing people talk.

04.39.56 I said, so what do you think all of this kind of talk is? Is it something substantial, is it true uh, is it valid to, to go by it? And uh, a few of the kids raised their hand and said, no, because we really, it's speculation. Uh, we don't know if any of this yet is true. Uh, and I said, so if we wanted to speculate uh, and not condemn a community, how can we do it without offending anybody's culture or religion in a way that, that would be uh, suitable to say it?

04.40.34 And so one of the kids said uh, we have reason to believe uh, that the attacks were by men uh, terrorists who may be of Arab or Muslim descent. And I said, Ok, that I, I can you know, it doesn't bother me to hear that. Uh, and I said to them, I said what's important is that I want you to understand that whoever did it, you know, had no right to do it, whether they were Arab, Muslim, South Asian, Latino, any color, race, creed, this was wrong.

04.41.11 And the reason that we're having this conversation is because I don't want you to blame people you know, uh, a majority, a whole community of people for something that may have been done by certain individuals who chose to do something so awful.

04.41.28 And uh, and they understood and, and it was really interesting. And, and so then the kids as we were in this conversation, they started making the connections of how people stereotype others. And one of the kids said, you know, it's like when you hear people always talk about Spanish people. That all they do is eat rice and beans. He said, I hate when people talk like that, because we don't always eat rice and beans, and I don't want people to think about me, that I eat rice and beans when they look at me.

04.42.01 And uh, and then another kid said, well, I have uh, my sister who's a teenager and my brother, and I always hear people talking about teenagers as being lazy. And they're not lazy because my sister, you know, she's really smart and she, she does everything. And my brother's a little lazy but I don't like the fact that people talk about teenagers, that they're all

lazy. And it was just so fascinating to see them making these connections of, of stereotyping uh, communities of, you know.

04.42.36 And uh, and as we were talking uh, one of the kids had, had started talking about African Americans and the struggle that they went through and the discrimination. Uh, and you know, this boy made the connection which was really scary. He said, you know, Debbie, uh, what happened then, you know, I hope doesn't happen again.

04.43.02 And I said, Tim, well what do you mean? He said, well, uh, sometimes people can do mean things to people because of their race or uh, where they come from. And I hope people don't do that. And I said, well, I don't think that'll happen at this day and age. And uh, you know, the kids were still talking. And you know, this same child again said to me, he said, Debbie, uh, how are you getting home?

04.43.3.4 And I said, well, I haven't thought about it, but you know, I'm sure I'll be able to get home. He said, well, I'm afraid for you. And I said, well, what do you mean? Uh, he said I'm afraid for you because uh, if I was Arabic, and I was going home, I would be afraid. And uh, I said to him, well, why? He said, because I think there are gonna be a lot of mean people outside.

04.44.00 And uh, I don't want anything to happen to you. And I said to him, I said don't worry nothing will happen to me. Uh, and I will be fine. And I don't think people would be as mean as you think. And uh, he said to me, uh, I'm really afraid for you. And so like all the other kids started looking at him. And uh, and you know, they were just like you know, having a conversation how they were gonna get me home (LAUGHS).

04.44.32 And I, I said to them, don't worry, I'm gonna call my husband, he's probably gonna come for me, or I'll get a ride from somebody or I'll call a car service. And the kids were like don't take the train, don't take the bus. It was really scary. Fifth graders talking to me like this. Uh, finally the majority of them were picked up. Uh, you know, and at lunchtime when, when they were at lunchtime, I was afraid to, to go outside building.

- 04.45.05 Not because I was afraid that somebody would do anything to me, but I was afraid to see what everyone else had seen. Uh, the classrooms that were facing the uh, the skyline, their doors were open. Kids were at the windows. I can hear people talking, and I was afraid to look over, because I, I thought if I looked over that was probably it.
- 04.45.32 I would be, fall apart. And uh, that afternoon after all my kids were dismissed uh, I called home and my husband said to me, he said there is no way I can make it out to pick you up. Traffic is jammed everywhere, I would get stuck coming to get you. You have to find somebody in the building to get you home. I said, ok, I'll just take the train. He said, no, you can't take the train.
- 04.45.59 And uh, I said to him, I said, well, you know, I'll be fine. And he said I do not want you to take the train, do not leave that building alone. And uh, you know, deep down in my mind like I knew that something of what everyone around me was talking about is possible, but I, I was trying to uh, believe that it's not true. And uh, the principal then came over to me and she said, Debbie, how are you getting home?
- 04.46.30 I said, I don't know, I haven't figured it out. I will just probably take the train. And she said to me, no you can't take the train. Uh, if worse comes to worse and you can't find a ride, stay and I will take you home as soon as everybody is gone. And I said to her, Judy, I'll be fine. And she said, no. I, I can't you know, bear the thought of anything happening to you. And I said, Judy, you're over reacting. She says, no, I'm not overreacting. And as she was standing there, she was looking at me and her eyes started to water, and I looked at her and I said, what, what, what is going on with people?
- 04.47.04 Why are, is everyone overreacting? And she said, Debbie, you can't leave this building. So uh, (~JW~)
- 04.47.20 END OF TAPE # DA-004

TAPE # DA-005

DEBBIE ALMONTASER

08.26.02

JIM WHITAKER, Producer/Director

PROJECT REBIRTH

05.01.00 PICTURE UP

JW: You were talking to the principal?

05.01.05 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah, and her eyes watered and she said to me, you can't leave the building alone. Uh, so she offered to take me home if I would wait for everyone to leave. Uh, and I said to her, I really need to get home because I need to make sure that my family's safe. Uh, they're all home except for my uh, middle son who we haven't heard yet.

05.01.32 But uh, I said I'm sure he's in his school, 'cos my husband was trying his school. And the phones were busy, which every school's phones were busy. Uh, and so she started asking teachers who lived around near my area, and then there was one teacher who actually lived two blocks down from me, and we didn't realize it . Uh, and she was, she went up to get her things.

05.02.00 And I was there. And uh, as I was waiting, you know, I knew that I had to, to face what I was trying to avoid the whole entire day. And uh, I walked over to where the windows were that faced the skyline, and uh, I looked up. And I went to the window and as I was creeping closer and closer uh, I finally looked and all I saw was this just smoke.

05.02.40 You know? Smoke in the sky and I was just in such a shock. And you know, my brain was just like, I, I was so confused. It was like you know, uh, the conversation that I had with that parent in the morning and then her coming to tell me and telling me about the planes hitting.

05.03.05 And then seeing a big ball of snow uh, you know, of smoke there. And just everything was flashing in front of me so quickly and I just, I couldn't understand uh, what was going on. And you know, like in the back of my mind I kept saying the buildings are there. It's just the smoke is covering. This is not happening, this is a dream that I'm gonna wake up from. Uh, (~JW~)

JW: Had anyone told you the buildings had fallen at this point?

05.03.36 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yes, people were, were telling me but all I saw was this huge ball of smoke around them. It just it was so scary it reminded me of uh, movie clips that I saw of the atom bomb. You know, and, uh, Japan. It was so scary. And uh, I was just, I couldn't believe what my eyes were seeing.

05.04.04 Uh, I was just in, in a total, total daze. And I stood there and then finally uh, they were looking for me to figure out where did I go so this person can take me home. Finally someone found me. And she came over uh, and you know, I was in tears, I was crying. Uh, it was really, I was a mess.

05.04.31 And I think that me not looking earlier in the day, I had a feeling that if I did, I would probably fall apart, which I did at 3 o'clock. I did fall apart. Uh, this parent then walked me to the main office. She uh, told Rose that uh, I'm the one that needed the ride. Uh, Rose, you know, like they couldn't take me out of the building in the shape that I was in, so finally uh, I calmed down.

05.05.00 We got in her car. She, she actually went and got her car right in front of the school building. And what was really like, all of this was happening so quickly, and I didn't realize like everybody around me was mobilizing to make sure that I was safe. And it, at that point, it

just, it wasn't all connecting. But now, you know, thinking back about it, you know, her going to get the car, not letting me walk with her to the garage where she was parked. Uh, it just, it didn't, it didn't dawn on me 'til days later.

05.05.32 And uh, you know, when I spoke to my husband, he was telling me, whoever you go with, make sure you don't sit in the front. And uh, I said, you know, I, I just said to him, I said you're being really paranoid. And he said, just don't sit in the front. And as we were getting into Rose's car, she said, Debbie, uh, you know, out of respect, you know, I really, I really respect you.

05.06.01 And I know that you know, I would offer you to sit in the front, but I think it would be, it would be safer for you in the back. And uh, I just looked at her and, you know, I thought about what my husband was saying and what she was saying, and, and everything else that was going on, I just didn't, I couldn't fuss. And I, I had no longer any energy to try and, and say no, this is not happening. I sat in the back and as we were driving, uh, and we were driving for a little bit, she stopped at a red light.

05.06.37 And there was this much older man who was standing at the corner, ready to cross. And uh, he was looking into the car. I had the window up, I didn't have it down. And he was looking and he was looking and he was looking at me with such a look of contempt uh, and he had the light to cross and he didn't cross.

05.07.00 And he just kept there, he kept staring. And, and I was saying in my mind, ok, I'm getting paranoid now, like everybody else around me. We finally got the light and we, we drove. As we were driving, there was another red light that we stopped at. Uh, there was actually a couple uh, who were standing there, too. And uh, and they were looking and the next thing I know, I'm hearing them talk back and forth and pointing into the car, pointing to the back.

05.07.35 And uh, and, and I said to Rose, I said, Rose, I know that I'm probably being paranoid right now, but are those people pointing into your car, you know, towards us? And uh, you know,

she just like looked quickly looked and, and she said, yes, Debbie, but just ignore them. Just ignore them, the windows are rolled up, just ignore them. And you have nothing to fear.

- 05.08.00 The doors are locked and I said, well, I don't think they're gonna do anything. And they were just really angry and you could see them pointing and you know, like I was able to read some of their lips, you know, they were saying, you know, these, these Arabs you know, they come to this country, they're infiltrating. You know, they're, they're living amongst us, you know, they're gonna try and, and destroy all of us. And, and I'm like I couldn't believe what I was you know, the lip reading that I was doing, and I was like, ok, I'm getting really paranoid here.
- 05.08.34 Uh, (CLEARS THROAT) finally we drove off. And uh, Rose got me to my house. Uh, you know, right in front of my house. And uh, my husband was actually sitting in the window waiting to see for me to come. Uh, you know, she waited to make sure I got in. I walked into the house and uh, I said, where is everybody? He says, we're all here. Don't worry. And I guess like any other mother, I started calling all my kids, and I started off with Usef's name and he didn't answer.
- 05.09.10 And then I, you know, I called my second son, Mohammed, and uh, he, he ran down the stairs, and I was thinking it was him and Usef. And then my daughter was in the kitchen and she came over, you know, and of course I started hugging everybody because I saw them, and I turn around to look uh, you know, for Usef.
- 05.09.30 And uh, I said, where is Usef? And my husband, you know, he looked down uh, at the floor and uh, I said where is Usef? He said, well, he was here uh, but he's already left. And I said, where has he gone? And you know, with all this happening like from maybe from the afternoon and, and just hearing everybody talking before I got home, deep down in my gut I had a feeling that he was gonna be called.
- 05.10.07 But I kept saying it's not, it's not gonna happen. They're not gonna call him. But it was deep down in my gut. And I said to my husband, where did he go? He said, well, after he got

home, he got all his stuff out, he was pacing. And uh, he got his stuff ready and he called his unit. They told him they would notify him as soon as they got the, the uh, call that they have to report.

- 05.10.37 Uh, but Usef couldn't wait. Uh, he got his stuff and he went up to Orange County. And I think at that moment uh, you know, my heart dropped. And it was like, you know, I, I started reliving the moment we were sitting in my living room uh, with that sergeant and him handing me the pen to sign uh, for him to join the Army.
- 05.11.08 You know, and I was like, what have I done? What have I done? And uh, my husband just grabbed me and he hugged me and he saw that was devastated. And uh, my two younger ones were just like (?) as well in shock, and trying to deal with everything that happened, too. And uh, I just, I told my husband, I said, what have we done?
- 05.11.33 And he said, well, what we've done we've done the right thing for our son. Our son is going to help people. And that is the most important thing. And I looked at him, I said, yeah, he's going to help people, but how do I know that he'll be safe? He's only 19. How do I know that he knows what he needs to do there? And uh, that was uh, it was such a devastating day.
- 05.12.02 Uh, I had so many emotions uh, worrying for him, worrying of what is happening, uh, and not getting the opportunity to actually see him. And I think what was the most devastating part of it was that he works at night, and sleeps during the day. And he goes to work when we're asleep. And I didn't see him like two days before that.
- 05.12.29 And uh, it was like I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye to him. You know? Or, or even kiss him good luck or, or anything. And uh, we went upstairs. Uh, you know, I, I we couldn't even, I didn't even eat that whole entire day, all I had was coffee in the morning. I didn't think about food. Uh, anything. And my husband then finally said, you know, we have to eat, what do you want to eat?

- 05.12.58 I said, I don't want to eat. And he called and he ordered food. We tried to sit down and eat, I couldn't eat. Uh, you know, and then sitting at the dining room table uh, and seeing my son's, Usef's eat empty, I was just like, I can't sit here. I can't sit and know that my son is not here. And uh, you know, I ran upstairs and my husband's like, look, I know it's very hard, but you can't, you can't start doing this in front of you know, Chiffa and Mohammed, you can't. you know, you're scaring them.
- 05.13.36 You know, it's not like he's, he's dead. It's not like uh, anything has happened to him. I, I understand where you're coming from but you can't overreact like this. And it was hard. Uh, it was very hard. For the (?) first few days. And I sat and uh, in the den in my bedroom.
- 05.14.03 And we were watching the news. And, I mean, it was devastating to see what I was seeing. And my husband was just sitting there watching as well. And the following day, of course was, I think Wednesday or Thursday, I can't even remember, I'm getting my days confused. (~JW~)
- 05.14.31 They were in the midst of talking about not having school. And uh, my phone rang about 6 o'clock. And it was the superintendent of, of the district that I worked in. And uh, she had the actually the, the president of the school board call. And he got on the phone and he asked for me, and he said, Debbie, uh, I just spoke to the superintendent and she directed me to call you and ask you to join us in a meeting tomorrow uh, we really need to meet with you.
- 05.15.06 And I said, in reference to what? He said, well, we just feel we need your input on, on this whole situation. And uh, we have no one to turn to but you as a leader of the community. And uh, I remember then all the sudden he's not on the other line, and the superintendent grabbed the phone out of his hand.
- 05.15.30 And uh, you know, she, she started saying, Debbie I need you to come in tomorrow, whether school's open or not. Uh, you're not gonna be in school. I will speak to the principal to cover your class. I need you to come in tomorrow. You need to help us, give us a head's up,

what can we do? Uh, so please. Come. So uh, I hung up the phone and I started telling my husband.

05.16.00 And I said to him, I said, I don't think that I can function for anyone right now because you know, I don't feel stable right now to be able to think uh, to process. To do anything for anybody. And uh, he looked at me and he said, that we'll deal with that tomorrow. You need to do this. We need to go. And he then called back and he said to, to the superintendent, he said, we definitely will come but I just, I want to ask a request of you.

05.16.37 And uh, she said, yes, what is it? He said, well, when we drive there tomorrow, I want you to uh, permit us to park in the uh, district lot. And uh, you know, she said to him, of course, by all means. Uh, is there a reason for it? He said, well, I just don't want Debbie to, to walk a distance walking into the district uh, it would be really helpful.

05.17.03 And uh, I just, it was so scary to, to see people around me like all of the sudden uh, seeing me in danger. You know, and at that point I couldn't, I didn't even see myself in danger. All I kept thinking about was what happened, all the people that were killed. Uh, my son uh, the families, you know, that's where my, my whole thinking was all wrapped around that.

05.17.34 I did not have any thoughts about my own safety. Uh, so we got there that morning. And uh, we walked into the district. She was extremely delighted that we came. And as we were sitting there around a table, I mean, everybody was like really on edge. And basically she was like (~JW~)

JW: What was the purpose of the meeting, did you know at this point?

05.18.03 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yes. It was to give her a head's up of how to deal with this crisis within the community. The community has a very large Arab and Muslim population. And she already, as everyone else, started to realize that there was gonna be backlash. Uh, (CLEARS THROAT) and hate crimes. And she wanted to make sure that somehow people

within the Arab and Muslim community and South Asian community felt safe to bring their kids to school.

- 05.18.37 Uh, and (CLEARS THROAT) and felt welcomed into the schools. And uh, you know, I, I remember sitting there that night, laying in bed, and I was like, I just gone through most of this leadership program that is supposed to make me become like this wizard of strategizing and planning and, and knowing how to mobilize the school and etc., etc.
- 05.19.04 And, and I was telling my husband. I said, I don't know what I can possibly tell her. Uh, that will help. And you know, sitting around that table and everybody just looking up to me uh, and to my husband of like what do we do? What can we do? How do we do it?
- 05.19.27 I don't know where God gave me the strength uh, the ability uh, to think in the way that I did. And you know, what was really scary was that these are top officials who were pretty much looking up to me to like tell them what can they do? Uh, I felt just like such a, I don't know if it's a burden or such a huge responsibly.
- 05.19.58 And uh, as we were talking, I said well I probably what made people the most safest is to know that someone from within their community is there in the school in the main office, speaking the same language, and giving them a sense of, of hope and security. So she said to me, Ok, so we should get people from the community in each of the schools that has a large Arab, Muslim or South Asian community. I said to her, yes.
- 05.20.29 Uh, she said to me, ok, where do I find these people? And I remember sitting there, I said, Ok, I have contacts, I can call them. Uh, she talked about writing a letter to the whole, entire district community. Uh, she shared the letter. She said, please read it, and you know, let me know if there's anything that I need to add or, or take away or (CLEARS THROAT) that will make everybody feel uh, included and safe.
- 05.21.00 Uh, we looked at the letter. It was an incredibly beautifully written, well-written letter that addressed all humanity. Uh, and I said to her, I said it's, it's great. I think the only thing that

we can do is perhaps get it translated in all the languages that we service in the district. And she said, Ok. Who do we get to do this? And I said, I have connections. Uh, of people we can contact to do this. Uh, we did that.

- 05.21.31 Uh, we strategized of how would the teachers, and that was the question that I brought, I said, well, you know, tomorrow the kids will be coming into school. How and what do we say to them? You know, what it will be the role of teachers? Uh, I said, because right now, I have no idea what I'm gonna say to the kids. I know they will come with questions.
- 05.22.00 Uh, they will come with ideas and experiences that maybe we don't even know how to deal with. And so what she did, you know, and this was a protocol from the Board of Ed was to uh, get councilors into classrooms. Uh, do a debriefing with teachers for two hours on what you know, how to handle the conversation, what things, what information to give. How to make kids feel safe and secure, etc., etc.
- 05.22.31 Uh, so basically she, she discussed that. Uh, with us, the protocol from the Board of Ed. And, and the only thing that it really didn't talk much about was uh, the, the uh, the backlash or the blame or the scape-goating of Arab Americans, Muslims and South Asians.
- 05.22.56 And I said to her, I said uh, this is done really well, but I think that it's also important that we talk with kids, that we can't blame everybody who's of Arab, Muslim or South Asian descent for what has happened. Uh, because this is something that has, has affected all of us. Uh, so she pretty much asked me how would I, in my own classroom, talk about it with the kids?
- 05.23.27 Uh, and I shared with her the conversation that I had with the kids. Uh, and she was just truly inspired. She said, you've already did this with the kids? I said, yes, that afternoon, that it, it was a moment that I could not as a teacher let escape. I had to take it as a teachable moment. Uh, and so from there, the guidance councilor, the director of the guidance councilors was there.

05.23.54 She sat down and took notes of the discussion that I had with the kids. And wrote it up in way for teachers to be able to translate into their own classrooms. Uh, (~JW~)

JW: I, I have to say it was an amazing uh, thing the way you did that, given the, it was amazing. I (?) just listening to it, I couldn't believe that you had the (?)

05.24.19 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I still can't believe it today either (LAUGHS). Where did I get all this, I don't know, the strength. That's what it is, not courage, but strength to do it.

JW: But the presence of mind in that moment to make it an interactive discussion uh, with uh, so many things that of course you were dealing with on your own, uh, just remarkable.

05.24.49 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Thank you, thank you. Thank you. You know, it's so scary because I haven't had this conversation in a long time with people, with anyone. Uh, I did you know, because of my love for writing I wrote, I wrote about this after September 11th. Uh, I actually wrote it in October. It was finally that was, uh, it, it was like the only way for me to like unload this was to sit down and write out my feelings. And I wrote this uh, I, I wrote it out into, it was like a 4 or 5 page uh, piece that ended up then getting uh, published in the Gotham Gazette.

05.25.38 And uh, and that was really totally by accident how that happened (LAUGHS). Because I was invited to speak uh, for the uh, Museum of the City of New York for an exhibit that I helped organize. Uh, and I spoke about the current issues. And I spoke off of what I wrote. Not that I took it, but it was what I was thinking.

05.26.05 And then they (?) said to me that it was so compelling and so amazing that they wanted it to be a published piece. And so I submitted what I wrote. And they edited it and put it into their on-line paper. But uh, I think for me that's been the only way to deal with a lot of my own uh, struggles.

05.26.29 Uh, emotional issues was through writing. I, I really you know, and now that I'm thinking about it, I haven't given myself the opportunity to talk to others, but I've given everybody else (LAUGHS) the opportunity to talk to me about their experiences. And the only way that I've personally dealt with it is through paper. Is just writing out my feelings uh, my anxieties, my anger.

05.26.57 Uh, and now sitting here with you uh, I've really been able to, to let a lot of it out. Which I think is a blessing in disguise right now. (~JW~) So I don't know where I left off.

JW: Tell me about your son now. You uh, for the sake of (people?) who will be uh, listening what explain exactly what happened to your son from that (moment?)

05.27.32 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: So on September 11th uh, Usef left the house, went to Orangeburg County uh, to his unit. Uh, September 12th very early in the morning, I think he had said 6 Am in the morning, they reported to Ground Zero. Uh, there he was a part of the rescue mission.

05.27.59 Uh, where they were digging out the bodies, and everything you could think of. Uh, he was also a part of the, patrolling the area. Uh, and then he was connecting telecommunication equipment for the rescuers. And then eventually at the end uh, January, end of December and January, he was driving the, the major who was in charge of the whole set up there, back and forth in the city.

05.28.37 Uh, I guess what, what was really devastating for me as a mother was uh, the days that I would spend waiting for him to call to tell me that he was Ok. Uh, I remember after him leaving that evening, we didn't hear from him for about 5 or 6 days, and those 5 or 6 days uh, felt like the longest days of my life.

05.29.06 Uh, and what's you know, what was scary now to think back, I had no sense of time. I didn't know like when it was nighttime, I didn't know when it was daytime. I didn't even realize

like what the day or the date of the, of the month was. I was, I was pretty much living moment by moment.

- 05.29.29 You know, that whole entire month. And I think even way through like October into November. Uh, and it was, it was so difficult, and uh, I was still going to work. I remember that day, when we were going back (CLEARS THROAT) and the kids were coming in. They came in two hours later. And uh, I went into the building at 8:40. My husband took me in.
- 05.30.00 And uh, walking into the building, teachers were so surprised and so happy to see me. They all came over. Uh, and hugged me and, and asked how everybody was, how was I doing? And uh, you know, and when they'd ask about my kids, I just started to cry because I would think of Usef uh, and. We uh, we did a whole professional development. The principal, the assistant principal and myself, we went over what the protocol the superintendent wanted to take place.
- 05.30.35 Uh, I talked about the cultural sensitivity and making sure the kids understood uh, not to scapegoat or blame (CLEARS THROAT) And uh, finally uh, every time, everyone would ask me, and every time I would think about him, I would cry. And I was just like an emotional basket case.
- 05.31.00 Uh, and what was interesting that day, even the kids in my class were so happy to see me. Uh, they didn't think I was gonna come in. Uh, they all ran up to me and hugged me and you know, one of the parents came up and, and said she was glad to see me. And you know, with all this, I was also thinking, what, what are the parents of the kids in my class gonna think? You know, will they have their own bias or, you know, how will they deal with me? Will they look at me differently? And, and it was wonderful.
- 05.31.29 Nobody looked at me in any shape, way or form. They were very happy to see me. Uh, but basically I was living my life moment by moment. I didn't remember to eat. Uh, I (?) you know, it, it was like somebody had to remind me, did you eat? Did you go to the bathroom? It, it was that, that traumatic for me. And uh, I remember you know, at night, uh, I couldn't

even sleep. I would be laying in my bed with my eyes closed and my mind just going and going and going.

05.32.05 It was like this wheel that just kept spinning. Uh, and at certain times in the night, I, I would think that I'm hearing the phone ring, you know, and I'd get up to walk over and the phone wasn't ringing. Uh, and we heard the first time from Usef uh, and my husband picked up the phone, and he said, Dad, you know, I'm, I'm Ok, tell Mommy that I'm all right.

05.32.31 Uh, it's really bad out here. Uh, but just know that I'm Ok. And, and my husband is like Ok, your mom is right here, she wants to talk to you. He says, tell her I can't talk to her. Uh, but tell her that I'm eating and I'm getting a little bit of sleep. And uh, and I'll call you again soon. And it was, you know, it was so wonderful to hear from him.

05.32.59 Uh, because uh, you know, I didn't, I had so many thoughts in my mind, like thinking to myself, he's only 19. What can a 19 year old uh, know to do, you know, how to deal with this? Uh, you know, how to, to decipher uh, how to understand what happened. And, and that just scared me. And at that point uh, I also had this sense of guilt for uh, for letting him join the Army because and I kept saying to myself if I didn't sign those papers, my son would be here home with me.

05.33.38 Uh, and not having to experience something that will probably be haunting him for the rest of his life. And uh, it was uh, the guilt was the fact that he was 19 years old and he had to experience such an experience. Uh, and I think that that it still something that I'm trying to deal with today as well, uh, even though that he's home now.

05.34.07 Uh, and so he would call and, and what was really, what was difficult was he, even he didn't have a sense of time. Uh, he would call when we're at work and he'd leave messages, and it would just devastate me uh, to, you know, to come home and find a message.

05.34.27 And I remember uh, one day he called and he left a message and I saved the message, and I kept listening to it over and over again. Uh, and it really hurt, and I was crying and you

know, my husband just came in and he's like, you know, you can't keep doing this to yourself. I'm not gonna save the message. I said, no, you have to save it because at least I have something that I can listen to until the next time that he calls.

- 05.35.01 And uh, you know, I saved it for a few days, but then eventually it got erased. Uh, and that was really the only line of communication we had with him. Uh, and then there was another time that he called and we were home, and we told him you can't call during the day because we're all working. And uh, he said to his dad, he said, Dad, you know, I don't even know what time it is or what, you know, what do you do in, in that time of day?
- 05.35.30 And my husband said to him, well, what do you mean? He says Dad, I'm not home to know what time you have breakfast, what time is lunch, what time is dinner. When do you go to bed. He said this is like a totally, it's a world without time. And uh, you know, and my husband said to him, well, what do you mean? He said, Dad, we don't sleep here. And you know, nobody calls you, you know, for lunch.
- 05.35.58 You eat when you get hungry. You sit down to rest when you get tired. Uh, you know, and my husband shared this conversation with me, and, and it just devastated me to hear it. Uh, because you know, he and everyone who was out there was feeling this. You know, was truly feeling this. And uh, I, he finally got the opportunity to come home.
- 05.36.33 And that night was October 6th, I'll never forget that day. And he didn't tell us that he was coming home. And uh, we weren't, we didn't know he was coming. And I remember I was going down the stairs in my house (CLEARS THROAT) It was about 8 o'clock in the evening. And uh, I heard keys rustling at the door.
- 05.37.01 And I was thinking that you know, it could be my husband or my younger one. And I reached over to the door and I opened it (?) and Usef was just standing there. (COUGHS) And I just looked at him, I looked at him, you know, I just, I couldn't even, I couldn't believe it was him, number one.

- 05.37.29 Number two uh, it didn't look like him. Uh, and I just looked at him. His face was really dark. Uh, he had uh, you know, his face just looked so tired. Uh, and so stressed and uh, you know, with so many wrinkles and, you know, he, his boots were scruffy, they were dirty. He clothes, you know he, he smelled smoky.
- 05.38.04 And I looked at him and I said, Usef? And he said, yes, Mom, it's me. And I said to him, what are you doing here? And he said, I just got, I got permission to come home tonight, and I'm gonna, I'm gonna, I have the opportunity to spend the night. And uh, I hugged him. I, I just thought, I was like I thought that I was having a dream or you know, some kind of phenomena there.
- 05.38.32 And I started yelling, uh, I started yelling Usef is home, you know, and, and my husband uh, you know, came down and my daughter was in the kitchen, my, my younger one was upstairs. And they all came down and everybody was just looking at him like who is he, you know, it was just so scary to look at him.
- 05.38.58 And uh, he said to me, he said, Mom, I'm hungry. I'm hungry, what do you have to eat? I said, well, we have, we had, I don't even remember what we had. And I said to him, but I could, I know you're not crazy about that, I can make you something. And he said, no, Mom, I'll eat whatever you have ready. I'll eat whatever it is. And he said, I just want to go up, I want to shower and then I'll come back to eat. And uh, he showered, he came back down.
- 05.39.30 And well, you know, he sat at the table and it was so, you know, we were all sitting there. All sitting there watching him eat. And uh, we were just all in a daze, my kids and my husband. We were just. We just, we were all like in a, in a thinking like this isn't happening. Is this really him? And uh, in the middle of his food, he said, well, am I the only eating?
- 05.39.59 Uh, can I ask why everyone is staring at me? And uh, you know, my younger one, Mohammed, he just looked at him and he said, you know, I'm so happy you're home. Are you gonna stay? And he said, no I have to go back in the morning. I have to leave 6 in the

morning. And uh, my daughter looked at him and said, are you ok, 'cos you look really, really tired.

05.40.26 Uh, and uh, she, he just, he said to her, you, you have no idea where I've been and what I'm going through. And I heard him say that and I started to cry. And uh, and my daughter, she was afraid to ask what did he mean, and, and why, why he said that. And uh, he finished eating. Uh, and he got up and he went upstairs.

05.41.00 And I, I said to my husband, I said, you know, this is not, it's not the Usef that left us when he left. He, he looks so old. He looks old enough to be your brother. Uh, and uh, it was scary because the experience truly aged him. Truly aged him. Uh, I went up and uh, I went into his room. He was just laying there. He was knocked out asleep.

05.41.33 And uh, I just stared at him, you know, and just, I kept staring at him and staring at him, and my husband then was looking for me. He came up. I went uh, just the two of us stood there for like probably ten minutes, you know, staring at him, sleep so peacefully. Uh, in his bed, you know, in his blankets.

05.41.39 And uh, it was probably the first time that he slept since September 11th, because uh, he didn't sleep when he was there. Uh, you know, even when we spoke to him, he, he told us there was no time to sleep. (?) And even though they took shifts, he didn't take a shift and, and sit back, he just kept working. He couldn't sit and, and he couldn't sit, he couldn't, he just had to be doing everything.

05.42.31 Uh, he woke up that morning, we woke him up early, I made him breakfast, and I said to him, I said Usef, Uh, do you really have, you, can you maybe come back tonight, and he said no, Mom. I don't have no idea how and why they gave the night, but I'm so happy they did, 'cos I really missed you guys and I missed being in home and sleeping.

05.43.00 And uh, I said to him, I said, you know, how is it out there? And he just looked at me, you know, and uh, what was scary about that look was that it made me remember him when he

was little, you know, whenever there was like anything he needed, advice or he needed up you know, like he, when he would look up to us to tell him what to do or how to take care of something, or you know?

05.43.29 And he just looked up at me and he said, Mom, I can't even begin to tell you. Uh, I can't begin to tell you, and his eyes started to water, and I said, well, what do you mean? He said, it is the most horrid thing that you can possibly see. Uh, and I would never, ever want you or Dad or anybody to see what I saw.

05.43.58 And I said, well, I understand that and I see, we see a lot of stuff on TV. He said what you see on TV, and what you see with the naked eye are two different things. And he, you know, his eyes were just watering and he said to me, he said, Mom, it's like going to hell and coming back. And that's all you see. All day long. And all night long.

05.44.29 It's the same sight that you would see in different light. And I just, I was in shock. And I said to him, I said, well, are you talking to anybody about what you're seeing or what you're feeling? And uh, he said, no, he said you have to. And you have an hour, if you want to talk to me and your dad about this, it's good for you to talk about this. You can't, you can't let what you see in your head uh, keep repeating itself.

05.45.03 And he looked at me, said Mom, I can't talk about it. He said, I can't, and I said to him. What is stopping you? He said, because if I start to talk about it, I think that I will fall apart, and then I can't do anything for myself, for anyone, and I will be an emotional basket, and I'll probably go out of my mind.

05.45.27 And uh, I looked at him and I said, you have to deal with this, but if you're not ready to deal with it now, you have to in the long run. And I sort of understood what he was talking about, because I in the beginning couldn't talk about it, because if I did, I know that I was just gonna fall apart as well. Uh, and what I started doing was immersing myself in mobilizing and organizing uh, and doing community work.

05.46.00 Uh, that's what helped me deal with it was keeping busy. And I knew that that was working for me, and deep down I knew that my son needed to keep doing this and not talk about it and sit and reflect about it, right away. Uh, in order to, to do what he felt was best for his, for the people that were there. For the families. And for his country. (?)

05.46.34 So that morning he left, and uh, as my husband was driving me to work, I don't, I don't even know if it was a weekday or a weekend, I can't even remember.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

05.46.51 END OF TAPE # DA-005

TAPE # DA-006

DEBBIE ALMONTASER

08.26.02

JIM WHITAKER, Producer/Director

PROJECT REBIRTH

06.00.06 PICTURE UP

06.00.17 BARS

06.00.37 PICTURE UP

JW: Has he, has Usef talked to you about it?

06.00.47 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: As of yet, Usef, really doesn't talk much about it. Uh, after he came home uh, on uh, January 31st, it was very, very hard for him to get back to his routines. Uh, getting back to work uh, getting back to trying to live a normal life.

- 06.01.09 Uh, he was having a lot of nightmares. Uh, he was up, he, he wasn't sleeping much. He lost a lot of weight, and uh, I finally sat him down one day to talk to me about his nightmares. And uh, you know, he shared some images that were just really, really scary to think about.
- 06.01.34 Uh, he, he told me about uh, you know, the times that he found certain body parts uh, that within his dreams he would see them, but they would be alive. Uh, he had talked about uh, finding uh, a foot in a shoe that was severed.
- 06.02.00 Uh, and it was woman's foot, and in his dream, uh, he saw that same foot with the shoe uh, and it was walking towards him. And uh, you know, it scared him and it woke him up. Uh, he talked about uh, finding neckties with body parts
- 06.02.28 Uh, (PAUSE) You know, pieces of flesh. Uh, you know, he (?) also had nightmares about him being stuck underneath some of the rubble when he was digging. Uh, and uh, it, in a sense, it was good for him to talk about it, and I told him, you know, what, what is making you dream about these things?
- 06.03.02 Uh, and you know, the parts that he described to me, he in actuality when he was part of the recovery, he did stumble upon these body parts, and uh, I asked him how did he feel when he did, and he said that it, it's just the most gruesome thing that you can ever, every possibly uh, experience. You know, to find a foot in a shoe.
- 06.03.30 Uh, and it was just devastating to him to you know, find it, but in the beginning when he was finding body parts uh, it really, it scared him. Uh, and it, it made his stomach upset and uh, but he said as time went by, somehow his, his brain uh, was just able to deal with it, you know.
- 06.03.58 And he didn't have those feelings that he did in the beginning. But uh, but the dreams now are making him relive the things that he found uh, and the things that he experienced. Uh,

and so he had nightmares for quite a while. Uh, in addition to that he lost a lot of weight, 'cos he wasn't eating. And uh, he was very withdrawn. Uh, he doesn't talk about it.

06.04.30 Uh, I have spoken to him about going for therapy, counseling, he refuses to do. Uh, and his sergeant called some time in March, and I spoke to him. And I said, you know, Usef is not doing well. Uh, emotionally he's not talking about his experience, he won't go to therapy, he won't do anything. And you're probably the only one he'll listen to.

06.04.58 Uh, please, I beg you to speak to him. And uh, he told me that they were having support groups for the men who served there, and that Usef was going to be uh, invited in the circle and that hopefully he'll go. Uh, Usef is very private. He won't share with me like that he is going to therapy or he is in a group. Uh, and he doesn't really like to talk about it at all. He doesn't want to be interviewed.

06.05.30 Uh, he doesn't want people to know what he did. He just wants to, to let it, to let that part of his life pass without talking about it. And I think that for me personally, it's devastating, and it's uh, it's taking a toll on him, because not only has he lost weight, uh, but he's losing hair. And uh, what's scary about him losing his hair is that typically you know, men bald up on top of their heads.

06.06.01 And he's actually losing hair on, on the sides of his head. And uh, we had him go get some tests done, blood work, urine. Uh, and they found nothing uh, physically wrong with him uh, but what they came up with was that it's probably post traumatic stress, and that people when dealing with such a trauma, they lose hair.

06.06.36 And uh, you know, this started some time in February and this, the bald spots are still there, and it's really, it's scary to look at him. Uh, and see them there. And because they've been, become so visible uh, he has been shaving his head bald because he doesn't like the attention that they draw.

- 06.07.01 And uh, this past month actually he didn't go to get you know, his (?) hair cut off entirely. And it grew back. And a friend of mine whose a good friend of the family came over and uh, you know, she said to him, she said, Usef hey uh, I you know, I like the new hairstyle. Uh, I haven't seen other people, but is that now a cool thing to shave you know, spots on the side of your head?
- 06.07.33 And uh, he just, you know, he, he humored her and he said, well, probably. Uh, Ill probably be the first to start a trend. And uh, when he walked away, I told her. I said, you know, Jill those are uh, not purposely put there, but Usef has, has lost hair there, and she just looked at me uh, and she felt so bad.
- 06.07.57 And she started you know, she, her eyes watered and she's like I'm so sorry, Debbie, I you know, I thought it was intentional. And I said, no, he's, he's lost hair and it hasn't grown back. And uh, I don't know what else, what's next. And uh, you know, she was telling me that she knew of someone else who was working at Ground Zero who is going through the same issues of losing hair and losing weight. And uh, I'm really frightened, 'cos I don't know what he could have been breathing down there.
- 06.08.38 So. Usef presently is very to himself. Uh, the only highlight in his life right now is that he bought a car uh, a couple of months ago, a Camero. And he's been working on it, you know, getting it painted, changing parts.
- 06.09.00 That's been really the only highlight in his life. Other than that, he goes to work, comes home, sleeps and does the same routine. In terms of school, he was going to college. Uh, and he actually just started when September 11th happened. And uh, it's on hold for now, 'cos uh, he doesn't feel that he's ready yet to go back. (PAUSE) I don't know what else to say.

JW: Uh, you've said a lot, and I appreciate it. Uh, (?) I'm gonna ask you just a couple more questions (if I could?) Uh, forgive the term because I don't mean it to be slight, but (?) I think it's an easy way to kind of sum it up. Uh, (?) some kind of an accidental, it may not be

the right word, but you've become an activist? I wouldn't say accidental because I think you've been prepared for it maybe. What's that been like for you?

06.10.38 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, uh, I guess my activism started the day of September 11th. Uh, and the way that I, I dealt with the issue with my students uh, and the way that I dealt with that parent uh, who (?) came into the building hysterical, afraid to leave.

06.11.04 And I arranged for her to get a ride home. Uh, the day I met with the superintendent and helped her strategize. Uh, and then in a way of not having what happened uh, keep me home. And feel sorry for myself.

06.11.30 Feel helpless. Uh, like many people within the Arab Muslim and South Asian communities felt. Uh, they were terrified of what was going on and literally barricaded themselves in their homes. And I did not let that happen to me. Uh, I, I couldn't, I couldn't. And uh, a lot of it had to do with the fact that if I did, I would probably go out of my mind knowing that my son wasn't home and was there.

06.12.08 Uh, so my activism was a way to help me deal with my issues uh, around my son not being home and being out there uh, in a dangerous uh, dangerous situation.

06.12.30 And uh, I guess what, what really also started it was the fact that people knew uh, that I was accessible in terms of helping people understand what was happening. Before September 11th uh, I was a member of the Dialog Project, which is actually a group of Arabs, Jews, Christians and Interested Others uh, who come together on a monthly basis to talk about the Middle East conflict.

06.13.04 Uh, and we're each got the opportunity to hear one another's stories. And perspectives. Uh, and to know and understand what each has experienced within the conflict. Uh, and for me personally it's been the most incredible uh, healing process to see people of Jewish decent and of Palestinian descent uh, to go through.

- 06.13.35 You know, in the very beginning there were two gentlemen who were, one Palestinian and one Jewish, who couldn't even look at each other when the other talked, who couldn't even you know, sit next to one another. And within the six months, to see these two look at each other uh, when talking, listen to one another uh, hear one another's stories was an incredible, incredible experience.
- 06.14.07 And I think the most uplifting time for me was when I saw the two hugging each other in comfort uh, was truly incredible. And uh, being a part of this dialog project really helped me grow in a way that uh, that I never thought possible.
- 06.14.28 Uh, because this conflict has taken over the lives of so many, that I firmly believe that people on a grassroots level who get to know and understand one another's story can make a difference. And so within this group, on the, that week of September 11th, my phone was ringing off the (?) hook, by them, by everybody across the city, across the country, asking how we were.
- 06.14.57 And uh, one of them invited me to her uh, synagogue. And at this synagogue there were about 80 people sitting in a circle. And uh, I went to give them a report of what was happening in the community, how people have locked themselves in their homes or not sending their kids to school. Uh, are not going out to shop, are basically just sitting there helpless and uh, as I was sitting in the circle expressing the standing in the circle and expressing this, people were just so touched and uh, so concerned and couldn't believe that such a thing was happening.
- 06.15.41 Uh, I also gave them (CLEARS THROAT) uh, experiences that people experience, such as women, you know, having cans and bottles thrown at them. Uh, children being beaten on the streets. Uh, car services having their cars vandalized.
- 06.16.02 Uh, one man getting severely beaten on the street. Uh, a young man in high school losing his eye shortly after September 11th that he got into with other youth. Uh, people were just

shocked. And uh, they understood how people were feeling and how they didn't blame them for not coming out. And uh, you know, I literally told them that I, too, fear for my life.

06.16.32 And I have not left my house alone since the event. Uh, and I'm pretty much being escorted by my husband back and forth, or by my younger son. Uh, or a neighbor or a friend, but I'm not leaving the house or taking the trains or, or any of this sort, and people were just so compelled.

06.16.58 Uh, to not sitting back and really being pro-active. And uh, one woman stood up, she was a lawyer, and uh, she said, this is outrageous what is happening in our communities. We can't let this happen. We can't let Muslim women, who are minding their own business, who are taking care of their kids, who are doing their jobs, uh, be treated in this fashion or manner.

06.17.28 And uh, she said, we need to declare a day of solidarity or a week of solidarity or a month of solidarity uh, with these Muslim sisters and I am going to be the first to say that I will be happy and honored to wear a hijab in solidarity to make sure that my Muslim neighbors uh, are not impacted or attached or hurt in any way.

06.17.57 And uh, standing there, I, I just couldn't believe my ears what I was hearing. Uh, and then another woman stood up, and another woman stood up. Uh, there was about 5 or 6 of them who said I also want to do that. And one of them said to me, where can we go and buy the hijabs uh, because this is outrageous what is happening, and we refuse to sit back. Uh, it was astonishing.

06.18.28 And that very afternoon, out of the 80 people, about 50 of them came over to me with their cards or pieces of paper with their phone numbers, and asking me to connect them with people who needed any help in any shape, way or form within the community. Uh, and after that, I went to a church and I did the same type of (?) talk.

06.18.57 Uh, and I went to about three or four different churches and synagogues within that week after September 11th. And finally in one of the other synagogues one person said to me uh,

you know, I know Arabs and Muslims on a professional level, but I have never had the opportunity to socialize or really get to know an Arab or a Muslim or even (?) break bread with them.

- 06.19.28 And uh, I think that, he said I think that such an important thing that we need to do. And uh, my husband and I looked at each other, and then at the end, my husband said to me, we need to do something. We have to make this happen. And I said to him, I said how about if we do an open house at our home? We organize it and invite everybody that we have met. And uh, that's what we did on September 23rd, we had an open house.
- 06.20.00 It was a Sunday afternoon from 2 to 8. Uh, where we invited everybody that we met in the (?) different churches and synagogues. Uh, and we had approximately 150 people who came at different times. And we set up in my yard and in my backyard tables and chairs. We had the porch, we had the living room. And uh, basically people came, and we invited some Muslim and Arabs and South Asians in the community who came as well.
- 06.20.32 And uh, it was interesting. At the end of the day one of the members from the Dialog who actually is an Israeli, who was born and raised in Israel uh, you know, he came to say goodbye to me. And he said to me, he says, Debbie, you know, I want to thank you so much for giving me an experience uh, that I've always wished for. Uh, and I never, never imagined that I would have it in America.
- 06.21.01 That an Arab would invite me to their house. Uh, and really let me get to know them and befriend them. Uh, and have an opportunity to see, you know what Arabs are all about. And uh, it was pretty touching, the way he'd said it. He just, he made me cry actually 'cos uh, he was so sincere. And it was something that he was longing for for a very long time.
- 06.21.30 But didn't know how to go about it or who to approach. Uh, from there, with that day, one of my guests was a professor at Colombia at the conflict resolution department. And she brought with her the Christian Children's Fund who came to New York City to assess what

was happening. And uh, they wanted to know what is it they could do to help the community.

- 06.22.00 And I met with them a couple of days later. I invited people from within the different churches who kept calling me in the synagogues, uh. We organized a non-violence training on how to stand up to bias if you were an escort. What would you do and how would you help a person if you were escorting them or if you were walking by, by stander what would you do.
- 06.22.28 And uh, those people that I met at that training came to the event, and they pretty much latched on to me and, and felt like you know, we needed to do work. And I felt the same way. And so I invited them to the meeting with the Christian Children's Fund. The Christian Children's Fund wanted to do something but didn't know how to go about it, who to get to do it and where to start (CLEARS THROAT).
- 06.22.58 And so basically what I did was I took them to the different community areas, the mosques uh, the centers where Arabs, Muslim and South Asians were. They got to listen to people uh, the experiences they had. Uh, and they finally said to me, Debbie, you know, we (?) have seen that all of the victims' families, all of the people in the rescue, everyone is being catered to.
- 06.23.29 But we have noticed that no one has done anything for the targeted communities, the Arab, Muslim and South Asian communities. And we would like to invest in a project, but we would, we don't know how to go about it. And the way that we work is that we find people within the community who are able to mobilize and organize to do the work.
- 06.23.58 So if you or if you can find us someone who can do this we will be happy to invest in a project uh, that will aid these communities. And uh, at the same time I was still teaching uh, and I would leave 3 o'clock, and I would go do this community work. With all this happening uh, and all of these people who kept calling me to be escorts uh, or to do anything, uh, I started collecting the numbers.

- 06.24.36 And I had approximately 200 numbers, and I had no idea like what to do with them. And uh, within this group of volunteers there was one person who was an expert in data base. And so I asked him, I said, you know, I have all this information uh.
- 06.24.59 And I can't keep looking at all these papers and can you possibly put it into a data base for us? And he said, yes. Uh, and the center that I was working closely with was actually the Arab American family support center, that's on Court Street. And I spoke to the director and I said, look. You have all these numbers, I have 200 numbers. We have to do something with them. And her, her center was so overwhelmed with the issues that were taking place in the community that she couldn't even delegate to anybody.
- 06.25.28 And in the process, there were people that were working in the center that left the center because they couldn't deal with what was happening. And so some of the volunteers ended up serving at the center as volunteers. So we created this uh, data base with the escorts. We were calling people who would go to, you know, walk kids to school who would uh, buy groceries for families. Uh, who would take, you know, mothers to the doctor's office, vice versa.
- 06.26.03 Uh, you know, back and forth. Uh, it was incredible. I couldn't believe what was happening. Uh, then we started to have issues with laws. You know, with people being picked up by INS or by the FBI and again, we were faced with this issue of like what do we do next?
- 06.26.26 And uh, somehow I don't know how AL -DEF and all of these, the ACLU and they found out about me and they called me and they're look, you know, we're here, we're ready. We have people who will do pro bono work. We just need to, to connect. Who can we connect with? A next thing I know I was helping refer people, and I couldn't do all this and teach and be home. Uh, I ended up delegating it to somebody from the volunteers who was taking uh, phone calls from the hot line that the Christian Children's Fund put into the center.
- 06.27.03 Uh, so we had that going. Eventually in November uh, I had lost 20 pounds from Sep-

tember 11th up until November. And uh, I was really, I got really sick. I wasn't sleeping, I wasn't eating, I, and I still had no sense of time. I was just living moment by moment, dealing with whatever came up next.

- 06.27.28 Uh, (CLEARS THROAT) eventually uh, in October the superintendents knew that I was doing all this, and she said to me, Debbie, you know, I would love to have you doing this on a full-time basis in schools, but I have no funding to do it. And if we can find someone to pay for this, I would, I would support it. And I said to her, I said, well, the Christian Children's Fund (CLEARS THROAT) was looking for someone to do this kind of work.
- 06.27.59 But it wouldn't be on a full time basis because they want someone to do community work and also diversity training. And so she was delighted. Uh, with the fact that this was gonna work out. I wrote the grant, I have no idea what I wrote in that grant. How I, I even got you know, I have no idea how I function because I just didn't feel like I was functioning.
- 06.28.26 Uh, I uh, I forwarded to her, she sent it to the Christian Children's Fund, and they uh, they gave us the grant. And I left the classroom in November, right before Thanksgiving and it was the most hardest thing to actually do. Uh, because I, I really loved my kids, but deep down inside of me I knew that I wasn't giving them my all as I've always done in the past.
- 06.29.01 Uh, I was there for them from 8:40 'til 3, I did as much planning as I could. But I wasn't giving them what I truly believed a teacher should give a group of kids. And uh, the kids were seeing me in the newspaper, actually. The local newspapers. They saw me on Channel 13. And they were just so happy to see the work that I was doing, and eventually I had to break the news to them.
- 06.29.32 And uh, you know, I was crying 'cos I couldn't even figure out how to tell them. I had the two guidance counselors there and I was like, this is the most difficult thing, you know, I said to them, that I have to tell you, but you guys know of all the work that I've been doing. You've seen me in the newspaper, you've seen me on TV. And people still keep calling me wanting my help and wanting me to help them uh, organize and do things for the community.

- 06.30.01 And I just don't know how I can be here with, for you and how I could do all that without literally one day just falling apart and getting really sick. And I said to the kids, I said you guys have noticed, you know, that I don't look like I did when you first met me. Uh, and one of the girls said, yeah, you know, you lost a lot of weight, Debbie, you know. And uh, I said, yeah, it's because I'm not eating, I'm not sleeping, I'm not doing what a person is supposed to do to take care of their body, because I don't have the time.
- 06.30.38 And uh, I said to them, I said I have to make a choice, you know, it's either that I you know, remain a teacher and not do this work and then know that no one else out there will be able to, to do this work. And me not doing this work, I would be letting down a lot of people in the community who look up to me for help.
- 06.31.04 Uh, who look up to me for answers. And I don't know. I, I don't know what I want to do. And I said to them, I said, so you know, I want to have this conversation with you and help you, have you guys help me make the decision.
- 06.31.30 Uh, and as we were sitting in the circle, you know, 'cos a lot of the time as I said, they saw me in the paper, they would ask me what was happening, what did I do? Uh, you know, throughout the two months. And uh, and as we were talking, I said so I have these two choices. I either stay and, and devote myself to teaching, or I have to do what is, you know, uh, important for the community to be able to survive it and continue.
- 06.32.06 And one of the girls in my classroom said, she didn't even look at me. She looked at all the other kids, and she said, well, I know how we all are feeling right now. I am very upset that Debbie has to make this decision. Uh, but I understand where she's coming from.
- 06.32.28 And we can't sit here and be selfish, it was so funny the way she said it, we can't sit here and be selfish to want Debbie when we know that there are other people uh, in her community who need her uh, who need her because they have no one else to go to. Uh, and no one for them, no one to help them.

- 06.32.57 We can't be selfish and say we want Debbie to stay here, because and she said, because if, if anything happens to someone in her community, and I know that I told her, no Debbie, we want you to stay, that I can never live with myself. And I looked at her and I was just in total, total shock. And uh, the guidance councilor just looked at her and she said to her, she said uh, well, what do you mean by that Precious? And she said, well, uh, she's African American.
- 06.33.30 She said, you know, my mom told me about a lot of things that happened when she was a little girl, how people used to get beat up uh, how they were treated badly because they were black. Uh, how they were chased if they were in the wrong neighborhood uh, they were beaten. And she, she went on and on and on, and she said, and I know that right now this is what's happening to the Arab and Muslim and South Asian communities.
- 06.34.03 Uh, and they need somebody to stand up for them. They need somebody to look out of them. They need somebody who knows what to do. And the only person that I know uh, is Debbie. And I think that we have to, we have to make the decision for (?) Debbie, that she has to do this work. And I just, I sat there literally in tears, because it, it was just so amazing.
- 06.34.33 Because I was, you know, that day, that whole week, I didn't know how I was going to have this conversation with them. Uh, and at that point, the grant didn't even come in yet. And uh, I was really, really sick. Uh, truly sick. And uh, she, she said this and then the other kids looked at me.
- 06.35.00 And they, they said to me, you know, one of the boys said to me, Debbie, is this really what you want to do? And I, I said I don't know what I want to do. Uh, I'm, I'm very confused about this. Uh, I said even if I left tomorrow, I wouldn't know, I you know, what would be happening. Uh, and uh, he said to me, he said, well, we want you to choose the thing that will make you feel the most happiest right now.

- 06.35.32 And we know that your son is not home. Uh, you're thinking about him. We know that you know, uh, everything that's happening in the community, and you're the only one that knows how to deal with it, and we think you should do it. And uh, as I'm sitting there, one of the kids said, how many of us think we, you know, Debbie should do this (LAUGHS).
- 06.35.57 You know, and they started raising their hands, and, and the guidance councilor said to me, you know, afterwards. And so you know, after that, they came over they hugged me and I said to them, I said, you know, probably my last day will be uh, the day before Thanksgiving because I'm really, really sick, and I really need to take time to, to let my body feel better. Uh, and they threw a party for me. Uh, (?) November 21st, I guess it was.
- 06.36.29 They surprised me, they bought cake, they brought me flowers, they threw a party for me, and uh, and I said to them, I said, I'm only, I'm not going anywhere. I will come back and visit, I promise. Uh, I promised them to come back for their graduation, which I did. Their 5th grade graduation in June. I went before holiday breaks, uh, and they were calling me most of them used to call me on the phone, if they saw me in the paper, if they saw me on TV or, uh, and just to check up and see how I was doing.
- 06.37.03 And uh, but that, that day was interesting, 'cos the uh, the guidance council said to me, she said, Debbie, you know, you've only been with them a couple of months. And the way that you have helped these kids become such thinkers is incredible. That a decision that you were so worried (LAUGHS) about having uh, you just left it up to them, you know, to discuss and uh, and come up with such an answer.
- 06.37.35 Did you intentionally (LAUGHS)? I said, I, I don't think it was intentional that I just threw it out there. But I said, uh, I, I gave them the opportunity to always you know, talk about what should we do as a class? Uh, and I think that's what helped. Uh, so I left, I left before the break, but uh, at the break, the Thanksgiving break.
- 06.38.02 The grant didn't come in 'til mid-December but I was, I hadn't been sleeping, I hadn't been eating. And I remember on Thanksgiving I was very, very, very sick. I, it was just like, you

know, when your body, you push it for so long, and then finally when you give it the opportunity to rest, it just falls apart. I was, I was literally in such bad condition I couldn't even stand for two days.

- 06.38.33 I was just in bed. I would get up to go to the bathroom and it was like I had to hold on to something because every bone in my body ached. Uh, and I was like that for maybe four or five days. Uh, and it was the only one day that uh, that I felt fine. And that was, I don't, it was one of the days on Thanksgiving.
- 06.39.00 I think it may have been Thanksgiving day itself. Uh, Usef got the opportunity to come home for dinner and uh, we actually that, that day we had the turkey, uh, and my mother in law offered to cook it. And I told her I wasn't really, you know, in a festive mood. Nobody was in a festive mood, but ok, so she said to me. All right, then we won't cook it today. We'll just, we'll wait for another day.
- 06.39.29 And uh, Usef called. Uh, around 1 o'clock in the afternoon and he said, you know, Mom. Uh, I'm gonna come home, I can come home for uh, for Thanksgiving dinner uh, are you guys having dinner? And I just said to him, I said uh, yeah, we're having it, you know, we're, we're cooking and, and meanwhile we weren't cooking but what else can I say to him at that moment. I said are you gonna spend the night, and he said, no, mom, I'm just, I'm getting the opportunity to come to eat with you guys and then I'm gonna go back.
- 06.4.0.03 And uh, I was really, it was such a great day. And uh, I remember my husband, it's like you know, you have to change. Uh, wear something nice. You know, don't let Usef see you that you're really sick. Uh, you know, and be in a better sprit. And, so of course we all got dressed up, you know, and it was amazing. It was a miracle turkey, too, that day (LAUGHS).
- 06.40.29 Because he called at 1 o'clock and uh, I told my mother in law and she took it out and she stuffed it and she put it in the oven, and it was just, it was so incredible. I think it was like a 15 pound turkey and it cooked in like 2 ½ hours (LAUGHS). And uh, and my husband's

like, I know we're gonna have raw turkey today. Why did you rush it? Why didn't you just let it. And I said, look, I checked it. The uh, the thermometer popped up. I think it's cooked.

06.41.01 And uh, we took it out and we sat there and he was carving it, it was just so juicy. Uh, and it was so, you know, tender and it was great it was really great. And uh, you know, we just sat there. You know, we ate, but I, I guess what was the most fulfilling thing for me to actually sit and watch Usef eat, you know? Uh, sit and watch him eat. Uh, and you know, he finished eating and uh, he said he was gonna take a nap.

06.41.36 And he went up and he took a nap and uh, and he left. And uh, and you know, my mother in law and my daughter cleaned up and uh, I just went up and I was, I as I said, I was in bed for about 4 or 5 days, just feeling really, really awful. Uh, and everybody was calling me, and uh, my husband was like, you know, she's not feeling well, she can't come to the phone.

06.42.05 And, and uh, eventually one of my friends who, who uh, I met at the non-violence training came over and she said, you know what this is the best thing that you ever did for yourself was just lay low and give your body time to heal. And so it was like I think the first week of December that I then picked up and we started organizing again.

06.42.34 And uh, we created Brooklyn Bridges, which is basically encompassing all the work that I had described, but became more focused to really meeting the needs of the community, such as escorting uh, doing education and outreach, teach-ins, and churches and synagogues and local organizations where I basically went and did FYI- type of workshop on Islam and Arabs and South Asians.

06.43.05 Uh, and doing civil liberty issues. You know, knowing your rights not only for immigrants but also for people who don't know what the Patriot Act was about and how it (?) impacts all of us. Uh, and then in January when we realized how many people were (?) being picked up and detained, and the number grew to over 1200 people, we were alarmed and we had no idea how to deal with it.

- 06.43.40 And we started to organize demonstrations in front of uh, a detention center on 3rd Avenue and 29th Street, where there were actually 50 men who were picked up and who are imprisoned there, and we didn't have their names, we did not know the charges.
- 06.44.03 And quite frankly, many of them who had families did not know whether they were there or they were in the East river or somewhere. Uh, because there was no way to get the information. Families who were documented, who had resident cards that went to local precincts got no answers what so ever. Uh, and then families who were not documented had no one to turn to, because they were afraid of of getting themselves exposed.
- 06.44.35 Uh, so it was a traumatizing time. Uh, and basically we organized demonstrations every Saturday from January, the second week of January up until June 15th where we did it (?) on a weekly basis. And what was incredible was people in Brooklyn had no idea there was a detention center in the waterfront.
- 06.45.04 People who lived in Park Slope, Sunset Park had no idea. They built it in an area that was all commercial buildings, where there were people importing and exporting equipment and materials. And uh, we used to do marches in the different neighborhoods to the detention center where, you know, every time we did that, people would come out their houses and listen and look to what's happening.
- 06.45.36 And realize what's happening and grab their jackets or whatever and joined us in the march. Uh, so it was quite a way to uh, to attract the public's awareness uh, and joining us in this struggle. Uh, so as of now, because of the summer months, we haven't been, we've only been doing them on a monthly basis.
- 06.46.01 So we had one July 6th, we had one August 3rd, and our next one is actually September 7th. Uh, and as of this point, there are only 3 men who are left at this detention center. And I can't say that we can take credit that they were all released. Uh, some of them were released, some of them were deported, and some of them may have been switched over to different detention centers.

- 06.46.31 Uh, but now our struggle is to really uh, have the detention center know and understand that these people should be treated in a humane and dignified way. Many of, you know, people who were being held there and what was really cruel. When we started doing the demonstrations out there, they, they couldn't get rid of us, so what they decided to do was actually paint the windows of the cells.
- 06.47.01 So the poor men that were imprisoned there couldn't see what was going on outside, because their windows were painted a white. Uh, and therefore they couldn't even see daylight or know a sense of time of the day. Uh, and basically they sleep in cells that are lit 24 hours a day. Uh, their dietary needs are not being met.
- 06.47.32 Their health needs are not being met. And many of them who are in there didn't even get lawyers appropriately. Uh, some of them sat in cells for months until they got a lawyer. Uh, and then, in terms of phone calls, they were only allowed to call out once a month. Uh, so we truly saw it as you know, impeding on their human rights.
- 06.47.58 And uh, one of the things we did through this demonstrating was we were (?) excuse me uh, doing letter writing and uh, petition campaigns, where we had people in the community sign petitions and letters. And uh, we were able to get Amnesty International to investigate detention centers. And uh, they were successful in getting into most, except for this one. This one wouldn't allow them. Uh, but the report exposed a lot of the same type of treatment uh, in different detention centers that were taking place in this detention center.
- 06.48.39 Uh, and what happened after that was we lobbied to Washington and we met with people in the Justice Department and voiced our complaints. And what they did from the Justice Department was actually send people uh, from the Justice Department to investigate this uh, detention center.
- 06.49.01 So as of now, you know, things have changed, you know? Uh, but yet there are a lot of, you know, these three that are still there, really are facing hardship. You know, they are in

solitary confinement. Uh, they haven't really been charged with anything. Uh, uh, two of them, I believe, have some type of misdemeanor uh, that they've you know, admitted to being guilty.

06.49.30 Uh, but have not been sentenced. And so it's just, their days are there and they're just living this way. So uh, and I think what's been extraordinary in all this is that the 1200 that they did pick up uh, none of them had any terrorist links. The majority of them have really just had uh, visa violations, and have been treated uh, so poorly

06.49.58 you know, it's, it's quite scary to uh, to uh, to be a part of a country that you know, you grow up all of your life thinking of it as being a just and humane country. And then to know that, you know, that our government is doing such things that you only hear happening in, in other parts of the world. Uh, it's so terrifying for me.

06.50.30 Like I just had so many uh, mixed emotions. Uh, and at one point I was in a state of denial that the U.S. Government would do such a thing. Uh, but uh, you know, it, it had to hit home, and uh, when I saw it happening to people I knew, that's when it really, truly hit home that this is happening .

06.50.56 Uh, people who are living in my community who were picked up and detained. Uh, and then even my younger son uh, on Memorial weekend was uh, racially profiled on the street. Uh, he got off the, the train, got out of the train and was walking uh, down the street. He was wearing a suit and uh, and a raincoat. It was very nice day. And he got out of his uh, career training program early.

06.51.31 And he noticed that he was being followed by a car that was going really slow down the block. And he turned the other block and the car was still there. And he kept going and the car was still there. And eventually he stopped in front of a movie theater to talk to someone. And uh, (STOPS)

06.51.43 END OF TAPE # DA-006

TAPE # DA-007

DEBBIE ALMONTASER

08.26.02

JIM WHITAKER, Producer/Director

PROJECT REBIRTH

07.00.30 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: So the car was moving slowly down the block?

07.00.39 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: So the car was moving slowly down the block and he sort of realized that somebody was following him. Uh, he turned around the corner, still the same car. Finally he stopped, 'cos he recognized someone, and he stopped to talk to him, and the two agents came out and approached him and said, put your arms out.

07.01.00 Uh, are you carrying a weapon or any illegal drugs or anything? And he looked at them in disbelief, and he said, no. Uh, and uh, they frisked him. They realized he had nothing, they asked him for ID. Uh, he took out his wallet, and he had his career training program picture ID card. And they looked at it, they asked him his name. He told it to them.

07.01.31 They asked him to give his social security card number. Uh, and he was very nervous. And he was able to tell it to them. And the agent made him say it four times in a row, repeat it. And he'd repeat it. Repeat it, and he'd repeat it. And uh, he felt very humiliated. Uh, he felt awful.

- 07.01.58 Uh, they finally asked him for his wallet, they went through his wallet. And they found a card of my nephew's who is actually in the NYPD Community Relations office. And they asked who is he and why does he have this card? He explained who he was. They took the card, they called my nephew, and they spoke to my nephew, they said we have him here. Uh, we picked him up, we just wanted to verify who he is.
- 07.02.32 And uh, my nephew explained who he was. Uh, and he asked to talk to my son. My son was actually outside of the car, and my nephew started yelling at my son, you know, what were you doing trying to get into schools? Uh, and uh, you shouldn't be doing that and blahblahblah. And my son is like, I don't know what you are talking about. And he said to him, uh, yeah.
- 07.02.59 You know, this is what they told me that you were trying to get into some of the school buildings. He said, I was only trying to get into one, and that was the high school that I was attending. I wanted to go see a high school (?) a high school teacher that I had, and I gave them the name and I gave them the classroom number. And I didn't find the door open and I walked away. Uh, and I said, he said to him, if uh, you know, anybody in that school would know who I am, because I was only there a couple of years ago.
- 07.03.31 And my nephew then made my son apologize to the agents. And my son said to him, for what? I, I didn't do anything. And he said, just apologize. So he apologized and they let him go. Uh, two hours later, in a different neighborhood, he was coming home. He got back on the train and he got off the train to wait for the bus to take to my house, and he was stopped again, by a different unmarked car.
- 07.04.02 And he went through the whole procedure, and he said to the agent, he said, look sir, I was just pulled over two hours ago. Uh, they asked for my ID, they asked me if I was carrying a weapon or drugs or anything, I have nothing uh, you're free to you know, to frisk me, do whatever you want, but I have nothing. And so the agents sort of believed what he was saying and he said, Ok, you know, what it is, sir?

- 07.04.32 That trench coat. You look suspicious wearing the trench coat. I don't think you should wear it. And uh, he came home, he was devastated to share this. Uh, I think what was devastating for me as a mother is to, to have my child actually experience how, you know, this war on terrorism is pretty much violating all of our rights.
- 07.04.59 Uh, and it made me think about my own self perhaps wearing a long gown and walking down the street, will I be stopped because I'm wearing a long gown, you know, that I may be carrying a weapon or something. And uh, I guess what was also devastating was when he was telling us about this, Usef uh, looked at him and said, you know, what kind of idiot are you to, to wear a rain coat in an 80 degree weather?
- 07.05.29 You know, how do you expect not to be targeted? If I was an agent I would go after you, and it just uh, devastated me to hear uh, my son thinking along those terms. Uh, and I guess also uh, what's devastating is that Usef does not engage in any conversations. Uh, does not uh, in any support my activism in terms of civil liberties.
- 07.05.59 Uh, he doesn't want to talk about it, he doesn't want to acknowledge that I do the work. If people ask him about me, he doesn't mention about the demonstrations. He's never come out to the demonstrations. Uh, and he's pretty much you know, low key, he does not want to talk about the war. He does, he just is very, very neutral. And uh, a lot of it, I guess has to do with the fact that he is in the Army.
- 07.06.29 And that he feels that this is something that he has to stand by his country uh, and support it, you know, regardless of how everybody around him feels. Uh, and Mohammed went through a lot. Uh, that day on September 11th, he was among the disheveled in the city. Uh, you know, he made it home finally by 4 o'clock, but he was very hard for him to get home.
- 07.06.59 Everybody was grappling to get on a train, and uh, it affected him deeply because uh, he wouldn't go back to school in the city. Uh, he was afraid that something like this was gonna happen again, and that he would never uh, be able to make it home safely. And uh, it was his

senior year in high school. Uh, he refused to go and we saw that it took such a toll on him that we didn't push him to go.

07.07.32 Uh, I tried to look for him a high school in Brooklyn, and because it was his last year, nobody would accept him in the last year of high school. And uh, we ended up putting him in a high school equivalency career training program. Uh, that he was going to. And the reason that he was dressed that day was because he had an interview where he had to dress up and that morning it was raining and chilly.

07.08.01 And he had his raincoat over his suit. And uh, he had no place to really leave his uh, trench coat. And uh, I felt that it, you know, again, he was victimized uh, and this time by, you know, those who are supposed to make sure that he is safe. Uh, so it's devastating, truly devastating to, to have it personally have it happen to one of my own children.

07.08.31 You know, this unfortunate uh, thing of (?) racially profiling people based on their color. Uh, and ethnic background. So.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

07.10.14 ROOM TONE

07.11.24 END OF TAPE # DA-007