

**TAPE # DA.1103.0100.1**  
**Debbie Almontaser**  
**November, 2003**  
**JIM WHITAKER, Producer/Director**  
**PROJECT REBIRTH**

01.02.02 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Could we start with Ramadan? Please speak to me as you would a layperson.

01.03.04 .DEBBIE : Uh, I guess uh, I'll start off by talking about the uh, the tradition of Ramadan. Uh, as a Muslim, I fast Ramadan, which is a 29 to 30 day fast from sunrise to sunset. Uh, Ramadan starts by the sighting of the moon uh, which people across the world look for uh, based on the calendar that they keep.

01.03.31 We follow a lunar calendar. And uh, once they sight the moon in the US, uh, all the mosques are called across the country, and people then you know, announce it at their mosques that evening, like all the phones are busy because everybody's calling their mosque or a Muslim organization to check if tomorrow's the day. Uh, so once they've sighted it you know, we know it's Ramadan and we go to the mosque or any center that performs the nightly services uh, which are called (tadaweah?) which uh, is a prayer service that you're engaged in for about two hours.

01.04.12 And in these prayers, what they do, the, the leader, the imam of the prayer uh, recites the Koran. And in that period, in those prayers across the 20 to 30 days, uh, what he hopes and the congregation hopes is that he completes the entire Koran by the last day.

01.04.37 Uh, and the reason for it is when the prophet Mohammed uh, was around over 1400 years ago, he used to fast before he even got the revelations about Islam. Because it's believed in history books that uh, Ramadan was practiced by Christians and Jews.

- 01.04.59 Uh, but it had its different forms. Uh, but it was always there as Ramadan. And Ramadan meaning that it's a fast, you know, for worship. And uh, one Ramadan, the prophet Mohammed uh, actually was fasting and he chose to go to uh, this cave in Saudi Arabia.
- 01.05.26 Where he used to go for meditation, reflection and for solitude, and to become closer to God. Uh, one day in Ramadan, he actually got the first revelation of the Koran. Uh, and so that's when he realized that his destiny was to become a messenger, a prophet of God, to pass on God's word. And so over 23 years, he received revelations uh, from the angel, Gabriel, who is also the same angel that came down to Mary when telling her that she was going to have a son named Jesus.
- 01.06.06 Uh, so during that time, the prophet Mohammed made it, you know, something that everyone who decided to become Muslim to uh, to fast. And so during the last, I would say, two years of his life, and it was uh, after the completion of all the revelations of the Koran were given, the uh, angel Gabriel (CLEARS THROAT) used to come down and recite the Koran with the prophet, Mohammed, to make sure he had it all memorized from beginning to end.
- 01.06.44 The way that it was revealed. Uh, and at that time also, the prophet Mohammed really was not a learnerd person. He didn't read or write, but it was all based on his memory, memorization and when he would get a revelation, he would come back and recite it to those who were sitting with him, who were a part of his inner circle, and they wrote everything down.
- 01.07.07 And they also memorized it. And the word Koran means recite. Uh, and the whole idea, you know, sent by God, is that if you continually recite it and you memorize it, then you'll never lose it. And it was something uh, that God felt that people needed to do.
- 01.07.27 Because all the scriptures that were given to Abraham, to Moses, to Jesus, etc., were constant, were destroyed over years, and there was nothing that was truly uh, you know, kept uh, in the same exact form that it, it was sent down to those prophets. Uh, so this was a way never to lose it, if you recited it and you memorized it.
- 01.07.54 Uh, so those two years, the prophet, the angel, Gabriel, would come down and recite it with uh, the prophet, Mohammed. And so that became a tradition for Muslims following uh, to do the same thing, to recite the Koran, you know, during the month of Ramadan for whatever it took, 29 or 30 days of fasting. Uh, so the significance of Ramadan is, it's a time for

reflection. Uh, and soul-searching. It's a time for people to reflect about their past year from the last Ramadan.

- 01.08.32 What went well, what didn't go well. Uh, and what I mean what went well and what didn't go well, you as an individual, how did you carry yourself? You know, how did you treat your family, how did you treat your co-workers. How, how did you function in society? Uh, you know, were you someone who was caring and nurturing and helping others, or were you self-absorbed uh, and worrying about yourself.
- 01.09.00 Uh, so it's a time that really connects (?) you with the world around you. And the intention of fasting without having food, from sunrise to sunset or water, uh, is to reconnect you with those who are less fortunate (?) than you. Those who don't have food, such as homeless people or people who are dying of hunger in different parts of the world, it's really a time for you to feel the hunger pains uh, a time for you to reconnect, you know, with everything that God has given you, that's sacred.
- 01.09.38 And to really appreciate, appreciate everything that you know, you have been, you know, given and you have accomplished. Uh, it is also a time that Muslims also have to, to give charity. Uh, they have to give 2.5% of whatever their total earning is uh, and if they have jewelry, then gold or diamonds. Uh, they also have to give charity based on that, because that's considered, you know, as wealth as well.
- 01.10.09 Uh, and to also just feed, feed people. So one of the traditions is to actually host at your congregation you know, uh, the dinner. You would pay for it and whatever amount of people were there, they would eat. Uh, so it, it's two-fold.
- 01.10.29 It's one where you are you know, there with your family and you're celebrating the holiday. And then it's also being a part of the bigger community, the Muslim community. Uh, and what's wonderful about it is that during the whole entire year, people are working and so you know, absorbed in their daily routines. But Ramadan is like the time that comes and, and makes you really stop and makes you, you know, create a block chunk of time for, for reflection, for prayer.
- 01.11.04 For devotion. Uh, and it's not that you, you know, you choose solitude to be by yourself. The whole idea of it is to be with your family, to be with other people of your community uh, and to celebrate it together. So traditionally, families have the break-fast dinner. Which is

about 4:30, 4:45 uh, in the evening, where they come together around a table and, and break their fast together.

01.11.33 And then have the sundown prayer and then continue eating. And then about an hour and a half afterwards going to the mosque. Uh, and performing those evening (taraweah?) prayers, which take two hours. And that's a part of the bigger community, you know, being with other Muslims from all ethnic you know, and racial backgrounds uh, to join them in unison and prayer, you know and to listen to the Koran for 29 or 30 days being recited.

JW: The breaking of the fast is something that happens every day?

01.12.11 DEBBIE : Every night, yeah. From, at sunset. And it differs from day to day. When we first started Ramadan, it was around 5:55, and now it's about 4:43. So it's like the days are getting shorter. Yeah.

JW: Every night you also go to the mosque?

01.12.40 DEBBIE : I try to. Uh, I, I've gone I would say the first three weeks of Ramadan. And this past week uh, has just been a challenge to go, because I had some meetings that I couldn't help not to go to. Uh, and some interfaith uh, uh, break fast dinners that I had to attend.

01.13.02 Because I was speaking or because I was an invited guest. Uh, and so in a sense, I was you know, participating with other Muslims and non-Muslims who were there, you know, to learn about Islam and Ramadan, etc. Uh, but I, I certainly miss the opportunity not to be home with my family uh, and not get the chance to, to go every night this past week, you know, to make the prayers.

JW: Had your family being doing that?

01.13.33 DEBBIE : Well, uh, my family just about every night has dinner together. There are days that my husband's working. Uh, (that are?) just, we can't help it. But he, you know, we prepare something for him or he'll grab something at work. Uh, and my sons are usually

there. My daughter's usually there. And uh, my daughter's last day of school because she attends an Islamic school was Wednesday.

01.14.01 So the last ten days of Ramadan are a time of, of reflection. Uh, and a time for a person to really to capture those ten days before Ramadan is over. And many Muslims decide to, to take (CLEARS THROAT) time off from their jobs if they're able to, or if they're students, you know, not go to school, etc. Uh, and just remain in a space.

01.14.29 It could be your home, it could be a mosque, it could be a center where others uh, are doing the same thing. And basically what they do is they refrain from going out, but just using the time to be indoors, to pray more, to read the Koran more, and to engage in conversations and discussions to better yourself as an individual. And uh, she spent last weekend at the Muslim Youth Center, because they offer that for youth.

01.15.01 And on Wednesday, which was her last day of school, she decided that she wanted to, to do that from now until the holiday Uh, except for today because she uh, she called me two days ago and said, by the way are we gonna go holiday shopping, you know, for, for Eid? Uh, are we gonna go get (?) I said well, you chose to, to you know, to, to be in (iticof?) that's what it's called. You know remaining in solitude and, and one place.

01.15.30 She said yeah, but if I don't, you know, if I don't make the time to go, then I won't have anything to wear for the holiday. (LAUGHS) Like ok. So we're actually supposed to reconnect this afternoon to go out and buy some dresses for the holiday. Uh, yeah, so, you know, there is this opportunity where it's not a must that you have to remain indoors. But it's really you know, a self-reflective you know, tool that you decide, you know, to use when you feel that it's, it's most fitting.

JW: When is the official end of Ramadan?

01.16.07 DEBBIE : The official end maybe Monday or it may be Tuesday. And again, it's depends on the sighting of the moon.

JW: What does that mean?

DEBBIE : It's the day of feast.

JW: The sighting of the moon?

- 01.16.20 DEBBIE : Oh, what does the, so the sighting of the moon really starts and ends the month for Muslims. So we keep track of a month by the sighting of the moon.
- 01.16.32 And there are people, for example uh, my mother-in-law can actually tell you how old the moon is. You know, just by looking at it with the naked eye, she could tell you that it's a week old, four days old, you know, a week and a half old. Uh, because this is something that she grew up with, you know, in the Middle East, counting the days, keeping track of, of the month.
- 01.16.56 Uh, and so this is a ritual you know, that we have, you know, taken down for generations since the prophet Mohammed to keep track of the months. Uh, so basically what it means is (CLEARS THROAT) to go out into an open space, particularly on a high hill, uh, and if it's a clear night, you can actually see a small sliver of the moon. And once you see that small sliver of the moon, that means that it's the day one of the new month is starting.
- 01.17.26 So if this day one is uh, witnessed tomorrow evening, then that would mean that the (?) fasting is over and the holiday, the day of feast is on Monday. But if they don't see it tomorrow night, Sunday night, and they see it on Monday night, then the holiday will definitely be Tuesday. Uh, and Muslims can't fast more than 30 days. So whether we see it or not, once we've done the 30 days, we can't go past it.

JW: Why is that?

- 01.18.03 DEBBIE : Uh, it's, it's just a rule.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: I didn't realize the roots of Muslims, Christians and Jews come from the same place.

- 01.18.29 DEBBIE : Well, it even gets more interesting because there is so much parallel between Judaism and Islam and Christianity. Uh, Islam is, is an offspring of Judaism and

Christianity. Uh, Islam believes in all the prophets, Abraham, Jesus, Moses uh, Jacob, Isaac, they're all recognized and respected uh, in Islam. And are mentioned over and over in the Koran, which is the holy book of Muslims uh, which was revealed to the prophet, Mohammed.

- 01.19.05 It's there, it's all there. Uh, and Christians and Jews are considered people of the book because they, too, when they had Moses and Jesus uh, received scriptures. And so those scriptures are from God. And that's why they're considered people of the book. Uh, so there's a great deal of parallel.
- 01.19.27 And I guess the part that I love the most about Ramadan is when it uh, falls during the same time as Thanksgiving uh, because I feel then the whole country is observing in this time of reflection and thankfulness uh, for what they have. And it's you know, joining Muslims in a, (?) to be a part of that tradition of being grateful, you know, for just one day where Muslims are doing it for 29 to 30 days.
- 01.19.57 Uh, and it's (?) quite, it's quite moving. You know, to know that families are stopping what they're doing and engaging in, in that weekend uh. The only thing when it does fall on Ramadan is that I can't have turkey. And it's not a religious thing, but it's just too much to, to prepare. Uh, a turkey and everything else that goes with it, and then, you know, what we generally make for Ramadan. Uh, and then you just can't everything (LAUGHS).
- 01.20.28 And Thanksgiving, actually, you can eat as much as you like. But then during Ramadan, you think you're gonna eat so much, but once you break your fast, you know, you have to really eat in moderation so you don't have a stomach ache, so you don't get a headache. Uh, and so that way you don't get tired, because what happens is uh, your body uses so much energy to digest the food. Uh, and you want to keep yourself not that full so that we will be able to perform the prayers, which take place an hour and a half later.

JW: Why is it important (when those two dates fall together?)

- 01.21.03 DEBBIE : Uh, the importance of it for me, I guess, is the fact that everyone has the same thought, you know, and the same feeling in their hearts uh, the gratefulness, the thankfulness for you know, existing in the world, for having the wealth, having your family, the health, you know, uh, and just remembering others.

01.21.28 Uh, so I feel like it's something that I can truly relate to people who are non-Muslim in the United States that day. And for them, they could truly relate to Ramadan. Uh, and what it symbolizes for Muslims.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: We'll go shopping for a dress?

01.22.29 DEBBIE : (MID-STATEMENT) you're gonna laugh because she has a hard time uh, having me with her friends (LAUGHS). She feels that I'm too uh, to uh, what's the word? That I'm not serious like a mother should be. (LAUGHS) I don't know what that means. But uh, you know, 'cos I joke, I tease them and she's like Mom, you know, you're gonna hurt their feelings. I'm like no, they're not, these are not fragile girls. You know, and so they, they think whatever I say is really funny and she's.

01.23.00 I don't know. I guess it's a teenage thing, who knows? (CLEARS THROAT) but a couple of them are supposed to join us, so we'll see. And if they decided not to, then it just maybe the two of us.

JW: We're going to the market?

01.23.18 DEBBIE : Right, we're gonna go to the market. I have to start shopping uh, for the holiday, which may end up on Monday or Tuesday. And uh, I am going to be working, you know, either one of those days. If it's Monday, then I won't go to work.

01.23.34 Uh, but if it's not, then I'll go to work on Monday and take off Tuesday. And so it's just too much to try to do on a workday. So we're gonna go shopping and prepare for that.

JW: Do you ever feel stretched thin?

01.23.49 DEBBIE : A great deal of times (LAUGHS). Uh, there have been actually evenings where I knew I was gonna have a crazy week, that I would get home from services at ten and then cook from ten to one. Just for the next two or three days because, you know, just to make sure that there's food, you know, 'cos not everything, you know, you can't prepare

everything within an hour. Sometimes I get home from work at 4 uh, so it's not enough time to prepare.

JW: Can we go back through the year and talk about January?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

- 01.25.52 DEBBIE : In June, 2002, uh, the Citizens Committee had this grand for a thousand dollars. Uh, it was for I think from a thousand to fifteen hundred, but uh, we received a thousand dollars. And I remember a good friend of mine who also does uh, a great deal of work with the community post-9/11. Uh, Adam Carroll called me the afternoon of the deadline of this grant, and he said, Debbie, you know, you and I have not yet connected, and I just realized that the deadline for this grant is this afternoon at 5 o'clock. And I said, Ok, forget it, we're not gonna make it. He says, yes we are, we're gonna do this right now.
- 01.26.29 And we spent an hour on the phone composing this grant (LAUGHS). And he was at his computer typing away. We just, you know, came up with all these ideas, but I did want to do a mural. Uh, I was really fixated on doing a mural. Uh, and because I had engaged in another mural with one of the schools uh, I don't know if I mentioned that one to you (~I~) at PS 230. Uh, PS230, and I have actually a video that you can see of this mural and the process.
- 01.27.04 Uh, post-9/11 was having some tensions. There was a, there's a large Muslim community there from the South Asian area. And uh, parents weren't coming out, parents weren't you know, bringing their kids to school. Uh, and they felt very much isolated and intimidated. And it's not because anyone was harassing them.
- 01.27.28 Uh, but they didn't know how to, how people would respond or react to them because they knew they were Muslim. And during my work uh, I went in and I did a lot of cultural sensitivity with the students, as well as with their families. I did parent workshops. And the culminating uh, activity was to create a mural that would reflect the diversity of the school. And uh, the art teacher, who actually lost her brother in Tower number one uh, wanted to do something, you know, with children around art to just celebrate the diversity.

- 01.28.10 And uh, she was running against a great deal of stumbling blocks, and when I found out that she also wanted to do a mural, I, we connected. She told me what was going on. I was able because of the, my capacity at the district office, was able to get people to, to stop what they were doing and pay attention to this project and how important it was to do.
- 01.28.35 And so uh, we spent a month, the month of June, getting parents and their children out to create this mural. Which now, you know, still exists in the front of the school building uh, that reflects the diversity and the part about that mural for me was uh, the openness and sincere-ness of each and every family to learn about other families that go to the school. and to develop a sense of community was so powerful.
- 01.29.10 Uh, one of the things that I decided to do and I don't even know how I got this idea. But I met this woman at the New York Historical Society and she was a film maker. And she said, you know, if you ever think of any project, you know, I'm a freelancer and I would love to do something with you. So I called her up. Didn't know this woman from anywhere.
- 01.29.30 Nobody knew her that I, you know, that I knew. And I called her up and I said I have this great project, you know, I want you to give me an estimate what it's gonna cost. I really think it's powerful to document this process. And uh, she gave me a budget of \$2300, and I tried to get money from my district, couldn't get the money from there, there was no money available. Uh, called a couple of friends, you know, threw the idea around hoping that they would say well, I'd be happy to donate \$2300.
- 01.30.02 Nobody you know, nobody offered. And uh, it was just two days before the mural was gonna start. I just by chance spoke to Tom Rydock from Educators for Social Responsibility who I was also collaborating with in doing this work. And I told him about the project, and he's like well, that's a great idea. That's amazing. Uh, I said, yeah, but I, I have no money to pay for this to be documented.
- 01.30.32 He said, well, tell me how much it is and what do we need to do. And he took it over. He, he had a grant through JP Morgan and Chase and uh, we paid the woman, the producer and she documented the process. And what I wanted to be captured in the process was what the families were thinking and why did they choose the objects uh, that they decided to put on the mural uh, that tells their story and who they are and where they come from.

- 01.31.06 Uh, and so we interviewed uh, a large group of parents from all different ethnic and religious backgrounds uh, about what this project meant to them and what, what was the significance of their contribution to it. Uh, and it came out to be a beautiful, beautiful 20 minute video.
- 01.31.29 That we actually show to different schools on how to build community and how to bring people together. Uh, the most moving for me was to see uh, some of the South Asian families, particularly those that were Muslim, uh, to take such pride uh, and joy in being a part of it and to be really open uh, in telling their stories and not feeling intimidated, so.
- 01.31.56 You know, the project in a sense gave people the opportunity to heal. Uh, and for me, at that time as well, it was also I felt like I was going through a healing process just by watching and hearing other people uh, reach you know, their goal of healing. Uh, it, it was an incredible, incredible experience. Uh, and (you know?) there's one part where this little girl was painting the globe and uh, you know, the film producer asked her, she said, you know, can you tell me what you're doing?
- 01.32.33 And she said uh, I'm, I'm painting, I'm painting the globe. And she said, well, why did you decide to paint the globe? Uh, she said, well, somebody else had started it and I just felt like I, I wanted to finish it uh, because I, you know, I feel the world needs to feel better. And uh, and so the way she said it, making the world feel better, yeah, I feel like I'm making the world feel better.
- 01.33.00 And uh, when we were reviewing the footage to come up for a title uh, it took us like two days to try to come up for a title for the video. And then while we were just watching it and listening to sound bytes, that was a sound byte that just jumped at us, making the world feel better. Uh, and that's what we named the video. One School's Story, Making the World Feel Better. Uh, so it was pretty uh, such a powerful experience.
- 01.33.28 I have actually been invited to different uh, youth organizations uh, the YWCA, YMCA to show it on bringing community together and working on such a project, etc. Uh, so after engaging in that mural, I, I wanted to do more murals. And it, you know, I said I have to do something over a summer. And so this grant we wrote and uh, we got word back in like two weeks that we were getting a thousand dollars (LAUGHS) not that it was much, but you know, it, it was something.

- 01.34.07 And uh, I was able to get a muralist to uh, to come on board. Uh, I was able to get (?) the materials donated uh, for the mural, and what I decided uh, for the mural was to have a portable mural. Uh, and so we did it on canvas.
- 01.34.27 And my intention for it was that it was something that I wanted to show case wherever, you know, we had an opportunity to do so. So it's about 35 feet long, about 7, 6 or 7 feet in width. And uh, it's an incredible mural. I wish I had pictures. Uh, so what we did was we had to uh, come up with a workshop.
- 01.34.56 Uh, and the grant specified that it was something that you would do within the community to bring understanding uh, and community building. And so we uh, did the mural at the Muslim Youth Center, which you have been to. Uh, it was some of the youth that were attending there, and we also extended an invitation to kids that lived in Benson-Hurst and the area surrounding the center. And uh, I also spoke to the church and the neighborhood and some of my other friends who are Christian and had them uh, ask some of their youth to participate uh, and then some of the Jewish community that I knew and I asked them to, ask the youth to participate.
- 01.35.46 And so we had I would say about 10 or 12 who were Christian and Jewish, and then kids who were uh, from the Muslim Youth Center, and then some kids from the neighborhood. Uh, in the group we also reached out to children whose fathers were detained uh, post-911, who were being held uh, without charges, without any legal assistance, etc.

JW: Were there a lot of people nearby in that category?

- 01.36.27 DEBBIE : Uh, it was for the, the broader community in that area, Benson-Hurst, (~I~) but then I also wanted, you know, some Christian and Jews to be a part of it as well, so I reached out to some of the churches and synagogues (~I~) that I was familiar with.

JW : Was it in the area?

- 01.36.48 DEBBIE: It was uh, they were actually folks who lived in Brooklyn (~I~) and uh, Adam, who wrote the grant with me uh, you know, he said to me, this would be so great for these kids to be engaged in something so healing.

- 01.37.04 Uh, and my intention also for inviting them was I wanted other people to hear their stories, you know, to, to understand uh, what these kids were going through, what their families were going through. Uh, and then to help kids who were not in this situation who were non-Muslim, who were non-Arab uh, who were non-South Asian, to understand how this is affecting these kids and their families.
- 01.37.32 Uh, so the date that I chose to, to launch this project was actually August 11<sup>th</sup>. And uh, I purposefully chose August 11<sup>th</sup> because it was a month away from September 11<sup>th</sup>. And the workshop uh, that Jill Strauss and I, who is a great friend that I met after September 11<sup>th</sup> uh, and we both started working together because she has a peace education background, she was a teacher, and she was doing a lot of cultural sensitivity work, conflict resolution work.
- 01.38.06 And it was just something that was so natural and, you know, I had, start a sentence, she'd end it and vice versa, and we worked really, really well. And so we planned the workshop around uh, the you know, September 11<sup>th</sup>.
- 01.38.26 And I remember sitting with her the week before trying to figure out how do we do it without, you know, making the kids become emotionally distraught, uh, without, you know, getting them very upset and they may want to walk out and you know, not deal with this. Uh, it took careful planning of how, how to do it, how to help them see such a tragic event uh, and reflect about it. And how has their life changed from then to August 11<sup>th</sup>, and what did they see for the future.
- 01.39.01 Uh, so we had them sitting in groups, mixed grouping, uh, and that was very important, because we wanted them to meet other folks and have other children hear their stories, and they hear their stories, etc. And uh, we spent an hour, we gave them an hour and we gave them three questions. Uh, you know, where were you on September 11<sup>th</sup>, and how did you feel when you heard about September 11<sup>th</sup>?
- 01.39.30 Uh, what are your thoughts today about September 11<sup>th</sup>? And you know, the anniversary's coming up, you know, what are your thoughts about the anniversary? Uh, and so each child at the table had the opportunity to answer. And uh, there were a few kids at a few tables who started to cry.
- 01.39.55 They really you know, didn't want to talk about it, or it was too emotional. Uh, but the spirit that day, because we did a lot of community building activities prior you know, getting them to know one another, uh, you know, building this unifying relationship, because they're

youth, regardless of their religion or ethnic background. Uh, but some kids felt comfortable enough to share, and those kids who were having a hard time sharing, were actually the Muslim students.

01.40.26 They were the ones that cried. And uh, it was interesting, because I, you know, I was taken by surprise uh, that some of them were just so, so hurt. You know, and were so emotionally uh, moved by what happened or just uh, it was interesting for me. I didn't expect it.

JW : Why not?

01.41.00 DEBBIE : I don't know, I don't know. I was just surprised uh. I don't know. I still can't figure out. You know, and I guess I was surprised by the whole group, too, because we were so careful in how we worded the questions. Uh, we were so careful in making sure that we built community. I guess why I was surprised was because I didn't know where (?) you know, why they were crying. Is it because of feeling guilt?

01.41.31 Uh, that they were Muslim? Is it because someone in their family may have been affected? It is because uh, I was surprised, I guess, because I didn't understand where it was coming from for them. Uh, and especially for the fact that, you know, throughout my work, I, I've witnessed a lot of youth as well as children as well as adults feeling like they had something to feel guilty about.

01.42.00 Uh, you know, and embarrassed and ashamed. Uh, and so I think that's where my surprise was, was it that or was it something else?

JW : Was it because it was in children as opposed to adults?

01.42.31 DEBBIE : So I, I was surprised by that. And uh, so as, as other members of the group were sharing, those who were upset were able to share, and one of the children uh, happened that day to have her brother in school there uh, in, in the city, not too far from the Trade Center. Uh, and her father. And her uncle uh, working there.

01.42.56 And she uh, reflected you know, the intense moments of not knowing if they were safe, if they were gonna get home, if you know, how serious the situation is, is it just the World Trade Center area that was you know, bombed. Was it other places, was it gonna be other

places in New York City? And uh, she'd you know, she retold those feelings uh, how terrifying it was, you know, to hear and watch and then, you know, think and speculate that much worse was gonna happen.

01.43.34 Uh, and so she, that, that's what upset her, just rethinking about those feelings. Uh, another child uh, had (?) that, that had cried when sharing in, in his group, he talked about uh, the fact that his name, you know, was Osama uh, you know, and uh, his last name was Mohammed.

01.43.58 Uh, and you know, he was never gonna, his life was never gonna be the same again. Uh, Osama Mohammed. Uh, and people will know he's Muslim, and you know, and will torment him. And that's what happened. You know, he, he just you know, once he knew that the people, you know, who did attack the Trade Center were Muslim, that's what he was fearing. Uh, and he was just crying for you know, the ridicule that he's been feeling and how he felt.

01.44.30 And, you know, if September 11<sup>th</sup> never happened, you know, he wouldn't be feeling this way about himself. Uh, so that saddened him, you know, and he cried. Uh, and (~I~) he was about 12, I think about 12 or 13. Uh, and then you know one other child, you know, just uh, was just terrified, you know, for her life, for her family, for everybody and you know, thought that everybody in the US was gonna be under siege, and you know, when reflecting she was like you know, I didn't want to leave my house, I didn't want my parents to go out, I didn't want us to do anything.

01.45.09 I just wanted us to be home, and so she shared her, her fears. And that's what made her cry. And uh, uh, you know, when we asked them what are your feelings today, she still felt that, that fear, but she was able to go to school, you know, to go on about her life. But yet still has this fear looming.

01.45.30 Uh, so after the kids got that opportunity to share, and those kids who were carrying shared, I think that the most important learning uh, experience that took place that day was uh, that many of the non-Muslim, non-Arab, non-South Asian students or youth that were sitting there listening to this, had never had the opportunity to hear this community share their feelings.

01.45.59 Uh, so one young woman, you know, and out of pure, you know, uh, ignorance uh, but not in a malice or vicious way, said, well, you know, I never thought that Muslims thought that way. I thought they were happy this happened. Uh, I didn't think, you know, that there

would be some people like all of you here today that were so affected by it and so hurt by it. Uh, so for her that was a learning experience, that you can't generalize.

- 01.46.30 You know, that you have to hear people's story. You have to talk to others to, to develop an understanding. Uh, and so that was (?) a very powerful uh, moment when we were processing the whole, you know, activity for her to so bravely say that to the whole group uh, was very powerful. Uh, and it was because she felt safe in the community to be able to say something like this.
- 01.46.57 Uh, and then some of the other kids uh, particularly some of those who cried and others, uh, at the end, thanked us for giving them this opportunity, because they never had the chance to really talk about what happened. And how they were feeling and how it affected them, and you know, or any, anything like that. They didn't get that chance. And you know, one child uh, said to us, you know, I feel like you've lifted a mountain off my back uh, by giving me this opportunity to hear others uh, and to be able to share how I was feeling.
- 01.47.33 Uh, and that was very, very moving. So what we did uh, (CLEARS THROAT) following that is that we had lunch, and they got the opportunity to socialize some more. And we culminated uh, the day by asking them what are their hopes and dreams for the future. And the muralist uh, that we had gotten to do that with them brainstormed uh, some words from them, what does it mean to them, hope and their dreams for the future.
- 01.48.03 And uh, she charted all of their words. And following that, you know, she asked the kids to really look at the chart and you know, take some of the words that were there and that meant something to them that moved them and create an image, an image that, you know, that speaks about the future for them.
- 01.48.27 And uh, kids got the opportunity to start sketching, and some of the sketches were, you know, quite interesting, and some were, were quite horrifying. Uh, and the ones that were, I would say, horrifying were the ones that captured the uh, captured the World Trade Center, you know, it collapsing. Uh, you know, people jumping out of windows. Uh, you know, really graphic.
- 01.48.58 And uh, it was pretty, you know, sad, uh, because those kids were still in that moment. Uh, but it, you know, it was almost a year since, but yet were still in that moment. Uh, so we sat with them, and we talked, it was just a few of them who, who had, you know, drawn such images, and we asked them, you know, how can you, you know, how can you move on from

this image? You know, how can, what can you see, you know, that, that is positive, that is beautiful, that is hopeful. Uh, for the future.

01.49.35 Uh, so one of the children actually then drew and it was on the same page, he drew uh, a tree, and in that tree, you could see the, the Twin Towers, and so the, the tree is going like this, and the Twin Towers are just like cracking in the middle and just falling. Uh, and it's so hard to (?) you know, describe. You have to see the, the images.

01.50.05 But uh, for him, what it symbolized was that you know, from destruction there is regrowth, and the regrowth is this beautiful tree uh, that just takes over most of the, the canvas. Uh, and so that's what it symbolized for him. Another child actually drew uh, and this is the one that really moved me a great deal, two towers, and people jumping out and you could see, you know, the smoke and what have you. And in between, he drew a heart connecting the two, and over the towers high above were two large eyes.

01.50.45 And out of these eyes were tears coming out. And when we asked him to describe to us what, what was the symbolism in his picture, what did this picture mean, and what are the eyes, what did the eyes signify, uh, he said the eyes were God's eyes.

01.51.02 And that God was watching what had happened, and he was crying that his people are behaving in so, in such a way uh, that they did something so horrible. Uh, and uh, so that was very powerful. (STOPS)

01.51.23 END OF INTERVIEW # DA.1103.0100.1

**TAPE # DA**  
**Debbie Almontaser**  
**November, 2003**  
**JIM WHITAKER, Producer/Director**  
**PROJECT REBIRTH**

02.02.01 PICTURE UP

02.02.01 DEBBIE : (MID-STATEMENT) so it, what I've had uh, what I've been doing is actually taking it to different places. It's been in a synagogue, it's been at a church, in a few, actually, churches and synagogues. Uh, it was at the September Space, I don't know if you're familiar with that here. It was there actually for, for September 11<sup>th</sup>, and we just took it down, I think, about three weeks ago, or two weeks ago.

JW: What does all this emotionally mean to you?

02.02.38 DEBBIE : What is emotionally for me? (~I~) I, I don't know what emotionally for me.  
(STOPS)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

02.02.59 DEBBIE : I guess well, I don't want to say I guess. Why do I keep using the word, I guess? Uh, after doing the mural with the school, it was just so gratifying to see the, the mere joy and happiness uh, that it brought people. And I truly, from that experience uh, realize that art is healing. And it's truly, truly healing.

02.03.26 Uh, there was one parent who participated in that school, in the mural, and uh, she in her interview said that she's never picked up a paint brush in her life. Uh, but when you see the image that she created, it's incredible. Incredible. You'd think she had painted since she was a little girl. Uh, you know, she's from South Asia. I think she's from Bangladesh. But she was very honest and open uh, and for her to share that was very moving.

- 02.04.01 Because you know, what she was feeling uh, came out in, in the image that she drew. Uh, and from that point on you know, as an educator, I've always been told that art is a form of healing, that it's a great thing for kids to be engaged in. Uh, and yes, I believed it as theory. But uh, once I truly had other folks and myself engaged in it uh, as a practice, I really uh, am a firm believer that it's a uh, great way to heal.
- 02.04.35 Uh, and so I think for me uh, the importance of it all is just you know, bringing happiness to people. Helping people uh, you know, find a you know, a closure to something in their lives, you know? And uh, the mural that I did at the school uh, it was twofold.
- 02.05.02 It was to build community, but then when I heard of the art teacher's story you know, the loss of her brother uh, I made it, you know, I made it my business to make that mural happen. You know? I wrote letters uh, drew a plan of what it was gonna look like uh, speak to like 5 different people, make them listen to me that this was something important that we can't keep putting off, that you know, we have to get approval to paint on a wall.
- 02.05.33 Uh, I was driven, truly driven. And then to, to also come up with the funding. Uh, I was truly driven 'cos I felt like this was so important to her, and it was something that I can do for her. You know, uh, and be a part of for her as well as the other families that were you know, going to participate in this project.
- 02.05.57 Uh, she's also interviewed on the (?) you know, on this documentary, and it's very, very moving, uh, to hear her story. Uh, and uh, I remember the first day that we met uh, to talk about the mural. I had no idea about her brother. And I just happened to ask her it's amazing that you wanted to do this since December, and uh, you haven't really progressed, you know? Uh, could I ask why, why are you so committed to this project?
- 02.06.32 And that the story about her brother came out. Uh, and she you know, she had said, you know, if there is anything that I know my brother would be proud of, uh, is to know that I'm working with people from different parts of the world to create a beautiful image. And uh, it was just so moving, and I just could not bear the fact you know, that she couldn't do this.
- 02.06.58 You know, so I know in her heart, in her mind, that this was something for her brother. Uh, and so I felt like this was my way of giving to her to give to her brother, by supporting the project.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: You're quite a driven person.

DEBBIE : I know. Sometimes I'm too ambitious for my own good.

JW: What drives you?

02.07.29 DEBBIE : What drives me? Passion. When I'm passionate about something, you know, uh, I don't give up very easily. Uh, I don't give up very easily and I sometimes I surprise myself on how resourceful I am (LAUGHS). I truly surprise myself, you know, and when I sit down or when I'm laying in bed at night and I, and I just reflect on my day and I'm like wow, I actually did that. I can't well, how did I come up with that idea?

02.08.03 LAUGHS) Where did that come from? Uh, and uh, yeah. And it's, it's passion, just my passion and uh, you know, and, and deep convictions to, to things that really, really move me. Uh, and just my, uh, I guess also what drives me is the fact that I know that I have talents that, that can help others, you know?

02.08.32 I know uh, and I don't know how I know this, but I, I still am trying to figure out how do I know this? That you know, the way that I interact with people, the way that I am able to you know, talk and articulate ideas, that somehow I can be persuasive. Uh, and. It was interesting.

02.08.56 Because yesterday, this, this is really uh, it's very moving, I was sitting with uh, a co-worker who just began the same time I did at this new job with the department of education. And we were actually uh, at a luncheon held by the superintendent at her house. And uh, I got to sit with this woman who, I always uh, I gravitated to her you know, for who she is, and we finally both got the opportunity to sit.

02.09.29 You know, it's only end of November, almost, and we started in September. But we never had this chance to really talk about other things, and what we do in the office. And uh, as we were talking uh, just getting to know each other, you know, talking about our houses, refinancing our mortgages and you know, where we live and the shape of our houses, etc.

02.09.56 And uh, (?) out of the blue she just turned around and said to me, did anyone ever tell you that you just, you have this you know, this calmness and, and this solitude and this you know,

thing about your voice. You know, that makes people gravitate and just want to listen to you that you mesmerize people? (LAUGHS) and I looked at her and of course I blushed. I was embarrassed by this. And she said, I'm sorry if I put you on the spot or if I made you, you know, embarrassed.

02.10.27 Uh, but she said there was just something about your voice that uh, that just is so soothing and so calming and, and, and you know, just makes, makes me want to just keep listening to you. I don't want to talk any more (LAUGHS). So uh.

JW: It's very true – I've said that independent of this.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

02.11.12 DEBBIE : So yeah, so she said that to me. I said, well, uh, a couple of people have uh, in the past two years have said that to me. And she said, really? And I'm like, well now that you bring it up (LAUGHS) you know. Uh, yes. And she said, so where, you know, you know, what (?) she started to ask me, so what do you do?

02.11.33 You know, and she knew that I was Muslim. Uh, she knew that I was Arab because uh, she talked about going to Egypt. And she said, are you from Egypt. And of course I said to her, no. And what have you. So I told her that uh, after September 11<sup>th</sup>, I've done a great deal of talking and speaking at uh, churches, at synagogues, on panels, etc.

02.11.58 And uh, and I mentioned to her, I said, you know, uh, and sometimes it's even gotten me into trouble (LAUGHS). And so she, she said, oh, really? And she didn't want to pry. I said, well, you know when you're talking against issues, when you're talking you know, about things you, you know, don't believe in uh, it, it could be something that could be troubling, you know? And uh, you know, sometimes it's just gotten me more busier than what I want to be.

02.12.27 Uh, because I can't say no to speaking at a church or a synagogue or for any organization because of how important it is, you know, to have people hear you know, about Muslims and Islam and Arabs. And, and the impact that people have gone through post 9-11. And uh, so, so that was it. So it, but it was really funny for her to say that.

JW: Before 9-11, did you do that at all?

- 02.12.59 DEBBIE : Uh, before 9-11, I didn't do it on a big scale. I remember and it's because of my affiliation with a dialogue project uh, which is uh, an organization that brings uh, Arabs, Jews, Christians, Muslims and interested others to talk about the Middle East conflict. Uh, and the purpose of bringing people together was to help develop an understanding of the individual.
- 02.13.28 Uh, helping people get away from generalizing about Arabs or Muslims uh, or generalizing about Jews uh, and the way that is reflected by, by the Israeli government. Uh, helping people see you know, people for who they are. Not based on you know, this bigger representative force. Uh, really helping people connect with their neighbors. And that's what the, the goal of the dialog project is, is to really bring neighbors together, you know, to be able to hear and understand one another's stories.
- 02.14.06 And, and you know, become real, real friends, real neighbors. Rather than you know, oh, he's an Arab. I wouldn't talk to him because Arabs are just you know, or he's Palestinian. I wouldn't talk to him because you know, they're fanatics. Uh, etc. So that started before September 11<sup>th</sup>, and uh, I did a few presentations for some of the circles that we were working in.
- 02.14.34 And I spoke at a synagogue where we were actually trying to recruit people to become a part of the circles. Uh, and then of course you know, in my profession pre-9/11, I was a literacy staff developer. Where I trained teachers in reading and writing, elementary teachers.
- 02.14.55 And so every six weeks I ran workshops for teachers where I would have like 40 to 50 teachers coming to do a whole day training on reading or writing. Uh, so I think that prepared me, you know, not having stage fright, you know, speaking to a large audience. Uh.

JW: Do you think there's a fate to the preparation of all that?

- 02.15.20 DEBBIE : Oh, my gosh, there is, there is. It's, it's uh, it's quite interesting because I've shared this with a few friends. When I started teaching, uh, one of the rules and regulations with the department of Education is to do 60 new teacher credits, and that is actually hours.

And uh, there was this one workshop uh, or course, that was being given that was in conflict resolution. Uh, and which is a very broad thing.

02.15.59 And I remember when I saw that it said 25 hours, I was like yes. (LAUGHS) Twenty-five hours, all in one place, all in the same day, I'm doing this. And uh, I applied for it, I attended it. It was the most incredible training that I'd received as a new teacher. And I remember, maybe it was like in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> session, I was sitting there, and I remember this so vividly. And I said to myself, I wonder if I will ever, every truly use all of these techniques I'm learning.

02.16.29 Uh, in conflict resolution in my, you know, in my work as a teacher. Uh, and I remember thinking that. And post-9/11, when I started doing this work, I was like it's, it's truly fate, you know? You know, God you know, in his own mysterious way, you know, prepares you far in advance for things. You know? And uh, it was really, it was quite chilling when I realized that.

02.17.01 You know, and I started to do this work that one, you know, and, and actually using some of those techniques, you know? Uh.

JW: What kind of techniques so you use and when do you use them?

02.17.13 DEBBIE : Right. Well, uh, I, when I came to this revelation it was the active listening skills, you know? Being able to hear the other person, even if you don't want to hear them uh, but being able to do so, you know, out of respect for them as a human being.

01.17.32 Uh, and being able to hear what they're saying uh, and reflect what they're saying. You know, be able to, to paraphrase uh, but paraphrase with the reflection of their feelings. Uh, and that is the most difficult thing to do. If you have this mindset or if you're angry at someone, you know, you, it's very hard for you to cross over the line, to really hear what that person is saying, and be able to interpret uh, and internalize what they're feeling.

02.18.07 Uh, and uh, you know, this was something that was dealing with post-9/11 with people uh, in the community who are feeling very angry at Muslims. Uh, and couldn't hear what people were saying because this defense mode or you know, this anger uh, wall that they put up.

02.18.31 Uh, and, you know, it, the techniques that, that I learned, you know, in conflict resolution is how do you help people overcome those barriers? How do you help them, you know, be able

to really hear and reflect what the person is saying and feeling. Uh, and, and that was, that was very challenging for me after September 11<sup>th</sup>, because you know, I was always walking into a church or a synagogue or any meeting space uh, and not knowing whom my audience would be. And how they would react to me. Uh, you know, and uh.

JW: Do you have any memories or instances of particularly confrontational happenings?

- 02.19.12 DEBBIE : Uh, there was one uh, there was one that was very confrontational. And uh, I was uh, I was very frightened by it. But I also at the same time knew that I was safe because there were people there who knew me, who respected me, and who would, you know, protect me if, if it came to that.
- 02.19.33 Uh, and it was uh, it was actually at a non-violence training that I had attended uh, that uh, I was invited to help uh, the people being trained to understand the cultural and religious nuances that Muslims uh, you know, were uh, practicing, you know. For example, the hand shaking you know, is it permissible, is it not permissible.
- 02.20.01 The body contact between a, a woman and a man who's you know, non-Muslim etc. And so I was there almost as the expert to help them understand like what are the do's and don'ts. Uh, and the person uh, that had come to that you know, nobody really knew him in the group. It was about a group of 40 people or so. Uh, you know, he sat through it, and then when it was my part to talk, when they were asking these questions.
- 02.20.31 Uh, you know, he like totally missed the boat of what this training was about. The boat was to train people to help people who are being you know, who are under attack you know, with the backlash. And so these people were actually getting prepared to walk children to school, to go grocery shopping, to escort people to the doctor or whatever, you know? Who are Arab, Muslim or South Asian or perceived to be. (~I~) Post 9/11.
- 02.20.59 And uh, (CLEARS THROAT) when he realized you know, what this was all about you know, he uh, he just you know, he started blurting out and, and yelling and, and carrying on and uh, you know, I was like did I trigger him? I don't know what I could have possibly said. Uh, but then uh, people had a, they, he had to be escorted out, you know, and you know, and I never saw that person again.

- 02.21.27 I don't know if that person was you know, sane or had issues, but it was you know, really, really frightening. Very frightening experience. Uh, and then people who were there were very supportive and like you know, nobody knows him from the community. He's never been to this church before. He must just have been passing by you know, and not understanding, you know, how to react. Or is very angry. Uh, but other than that, I have not had any uh, you know, any negative experiences.
- 02.22.04 Uh, except one other one, but that wasn't that big of a, well, it maybe for him. Uh, and this actually happened fairly recent. Uh, I was invited to uh, a Rosh Hashanah service to speak with the rabbi. Uh, the night before. And uh, we both prepared our presentations together.
- 02.22.29 She had asked me to do it because she felt that you know, her congregation needed uh, an uplifting and moving experience, and what, what would be the most moving than to have someone who's Arab and who is Muslim to help them, you know, see that, you know, not all Arabs and not all Muslims feel the way they do about Israel uh, and about Jews.
- 02.22.56 And uh, uh, we focused our, our presentation around uh, Hagar and Sarah, from the Bible and from the Koran. And we retold the story of the two uh, based on our own faith traditions and uh, what was amazing was the parallels, you know, between the two stories were so amazing. They were so similar. Uh, but there were a few things that were different. And uh, we then got talking about the tough issues between the Arab and the Jewish community and what's happening in Palestine and Israel.
- 02.23.36 And uh, the question that she had asked me uh, was uh, and you know, what do you think of Israel as a Jewish state? And uh, my response to her and you know, when we were preparing I said to her, I said, you know, I want to do this and I want to be true to myself. And at the same time I do not want to disrespect you know, your community uh.
- 02.24.02 You know, this is a service you know, uh, this is uh, you know, a religious service that I do not in any way want to you know, turn bad. And uh, she was very open and understanding, and I said to her, I said, you know, what I, what I think of it you know, it's a state.
- 02.24.27 You know, I acknowledge it as a state, but do I acknowledge it as a Jewish state, I don't. Uh, I said, because based on what I know about Judaism, uh, I have great deal, a great deal of respect you know, and admiration for the Jewish teachings. And I know that in Judaism you know, there is you know, no oppression. Uh, that there is this you know, sense of

community caring for the other, caring for the stranger uh, feeding the stranger, helping the stranger.

- 02.25.04 Not oppressing, not discriminating. Uh, and I started to, to share with her some of the different lectures that I've done to and heard rabbis speak you know, on issues of discrimination and how uh, it is not tolerated in Judaism to be unjust. Uh, and that justice must prevail for all, regardless of the race and religion.
- 02.25.28 And I said to her, at this point, Israel is not there uh, you know, and I hope and pray that one day it will be. That it will uh, you know, follow its religious doctrine. Uh, and that's I think when there will be peace. And uh, she was just so moved by my response because I, I think at one point she was expecting the worst (LAUGHS). But when she heard my response and when we were having the conversation she was just so moved, and you know, she said to me, she said, you know, I feel the same way.
- 02.26.00 You know, that we're not, we're not, we're not following our religious doctrine, and maybe if we were we wouldn't be in such a conflict. Uh, so I said to her, I said, you know, do you think that people who will be attending the service will be offended by this, because I do not want to offend anyone, or disrespect anyone because it's a holiday. Uh, and if you do think so, then you know, I don't want us to, to go down this route, you know?
- 02.26.28 Let's keep this conversation neutral. And she said to me that she didn't think people would be offended by it. And uh, it was interesting. There were over 500 people at this synagogue. Uh, and uh, I knew a few of the people, and I guess before the event, I wasn't so concerned. I was really happy to do it. And I thought it would be such a, a great thing to do. And I, remember I was talking about my ambition, how ambitious I am.
- 02.26.59 Sometimes like I jump head-in (LAUGHS) and not think about what I'm getting myself into. Well, the night before I started thinking about the (?) you know, the 600 people 'cos that's the estimate she had given me. And then what if one of those people, you know, or what if 10 of those people don't like what I have to say? And I was so nervous and (?) that night, I couldn't sleep because I was just so nervous. But I kept saying to myself, I have to be true to myself.
- 02.27.27 You know, I, I cannot go up there and speak in front of 600 people and put on an act, you know, about something I don't believe in. And uh, I, you know, stuck you know, to my ground. And I did it, and there was just one man who didn't like my comment about not

recognizing Israel as a Jewish state. He was really angry. And that I know people walked him out.

- 02.27.55 And uh, I was able, I was calm and I was collected and I was able to continue what we were doing. And I guess the most moving uh, moving part of this whole, that experience was afterwards uh. We, before actually before we ended, we both uh, we both shared our hopes and dreams for a better future. And she shared what she would like to see her community do, and I shared what I'd like to see my community do.
- 02.28.29 And uh, it, it was (STUMBLE) very moving, it was a very moving thing to do. Uh, and I know at that time, that I, I was very emotional about what I was saying, because it was so something that I really wanted so badly to happen. You know, to have peace, to you know, have people working together to better understanding one another and importantly for each of us, the rabbi and myself, to continue educating our communities about one another.
- 02.28.59 And creating opportunities to come together to develop an understanding and respect. And uh, after, after saying that uh, everybody got up and clapped for me. Everyone in (?) the entire synagogue. I was so moved. It was incredible. I've never, I've never had a standing ovation (LAUGHS). And uh, so they're crying and then I was happy that it was also over, that I did not offend anybody. Uh, and everybody stood up and they were clapping for at least, I would say, five minutes, maybe shorter.
- 02.29.33 But it felt that long, or longer. And uh, and I was, I, I said to them, I said please sit down (LAUGHS) you know, you don't have to do this. And I said, I never (CLEARS THROAT) and this is the silly part. I say never, you know, ever dreamt that you know, during my lifetime I would actually get a standing ovation, so. You know, thank you so much, you know, for having me uh, for listening to me and uh, for giving me such a, a warm and wonderful experience.
- 02.30.06 Uh, and so I was embarrassed later that I, I said I never thought I'd get a standing ovation (LAUGHS). But you know, it, it went well. People laughed. Uh, yeah, so that was the, the most moving part, you know, for me. Uh, to actually you know, get into a controversial, controversial subject, and be able to, to really talk about it with dignity uh, and not compromise in my beliefs and my thoughts. And my ideas.

JW: I hear you standing up for yourself?

- 02.30.54 DEBBIE : (LAUGHS) You know, I was thinking about that last night, too. Uh, I'm so tired, I'm so tired. (PAUSE) You know, I'm so tired that it has, you know, that I've, that I've you know, been put into that (?) uh, I have to speak for thousands, for hundreds of thousands of people who are Muslim who are Arab.
- 02.31.34 You know, who have become you know, a targeted community. And it's not that I don't want to do it, but it's just so draining, 'cos you know, at every moment I have to watch what I'm saying uh, and how I say it, and how I'm perceived. Uh, you know, 'cos I feel like I can, my words can affect my community, can truly affect my community.
- 02.32.04 Uh, for the worst. And so it's, it's a, it's a huge responsibility that I don't know how I've uh, uh, you know, that I've taken on. And uh, (?) but I just don't know how it, it's me.
- 02.32.34 Why, how did I become the chosen one? I don't know. Uh, it also goes back to what we were talking about you know, my voice. And people gravitating to me. Uh, we had a friend who came over uh, and he is from the Middle East.
- 02.32.58 And uh, a very learned man uh, very respectable. Uh, and my husband showed him a video that I was on uh, I was profiled by Japanese TV for a show called New Yorkers. And uh, my husband showed it to him, 'cos he spent the night over. And he told my husband, he said, you know, your, your wife is a (daiah?) and the translation for that uh, the translation for the word (daiah?)
- 02.33.38 God I can't, I can't even find the right word to give you, but it's someone who has a calling, you know, who has a calling. Uh, who can, whom can move people, who can get people to listen to her who uh, you know, who is very you know, and he was telling him, he said, she's very gifted.
- 02.33.58 You know, she's very gifted and uh, you should support her uh, you should uh, continue to encourage her uh, because she has this gift. So I remember when my husband shared this with me, it was like oh, brother, he's uh, you know, another person saying this to me. But uh, this is something that I, I constantly you know I'm faced with.
- 02.34.27 Uh, I was invited to be on a panel a few weeks ago, and it was at a church. And uh, the, the panel was of different faith backgrounds talking about what does your faith say about peace? And uh, I was the person that was called on to do it as a Muslim. And uh, when they, I

remember when they called me and I said, well, I'm, I don't have you know, a religious degree you know, in Islam. Islamic studies degree or etc.

- 02.35.08 I said I am someone who knows a lot, but I'm not an expert, and maybe I should give you someone else. And I remember the woman saying to me, we really want you. And uh, she said, you know, it, it just, it would be great, you know, we don't want a man because that's you know, generally uh, in the Muslim community is that you, someone who's the, has scholarly background is usually a man.
- 02.35.35 There aren't that many women, yet, who have you know, taken Islamic studies as uh, as a subject or to become scholarly. There are, don't get me wrong, there are, and I can name five on you know, in my hand. But that, none of them live in New York City. Uh, and so I was invited uh, it, it went really well.
- 02.36.00 It was wonderful to hear how the different faith traditions had so much in common around peace and, and uh, following that, after our presentations, the pastor, the minister I think it was the minister, minister of that congregation, came over and he thanked me and, and just you know, I was telling me about how wonderful it is to listen to me.
- 02.36.28 And uh, you know, how moved he was and touched by my words and my sincerity and, and my wisdom, and I kept saying to myself, what wisdom do I have (LAUGHS) that this man thinks I have, and uh, and he said, you know, you must be asked a great deal to speak at different places, but I really, really would love if you can come and speak to my congregation on a Sunday morning. They need to hear you. My congregation needs to hear you uh.
- 02.37.03 They need to hear you and, and they just, they need someone to uplift their spirits and, and give them hope. And uh, when he said that to me I said to him, I said, I, I really how can I possibly give your, your congregation hope, you know? Uh, and lift their spirits, you know? If you want me to talk about Islam, I just don't see the connection about being Muslim, about Islam.
- 02.37.01 He said there is, there is, because you know, you bring the message of peace by your demeanor uh, by the way you carry yourself and, and just by being you. And uh, I was very moved by his words. And I told him I would do it. You know? And so uh, in fact I got a call that I have to return. The person who's organizing it.
- 02.37.59 But uh, as I had mentioned earlier, I'm just like it's tiring. It's so hard not to say no. Uh, I feel if I say no, then there won't be the opportunity for people to learn and, and develop an

understanding. Uh, and then when I try to refer other people that I've, in my travel uh, I've met other Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds who are just as you know, amazing and even much more experienced and, and wonderful.

02.38.38 Uh, and I always get you know, well, no, we really want you. And you know, if, if we have to work around your schedule, we'll do that. You give us a date and we'll organize an event around your time. And uh, you know, it, at times, you know, it's the most flattering thing, but then sometimes I just feel so burdened that I have to, I have to be the one you know, to do it.

02.39.06 And it's not that I don't want to do it, but sometimes I feel like I've reached my breaking point. Uh, I felt that way on September 11<sup>th</sup>. (PAUSE) When we uh, (PAUSE) when we were actually at the, walking in the vigil.

02.39.30 And uh, as I was walking I was trying to identify with other Muslims in the group, or Arabs, or anybody that looked anything comparatively you know, similar to me. And there weren't that many. There were people who were there because I remember when we started at Union Square, there was at least a group of 25 or 30 people uh.

02.39.59 But then, you know, the crowd was so large and people dispersed that I really didn't see any, you know, in front of me or back or me or the side of me. And I would look at far back as I could try. And I wouldn't see uh, I didn't see anybody. And so a part of me at that point was feeling like, you know, why aren't they here, too? Why aren't people standing up? You know, why aren't people you know, a part of this?

02.40.29 And I know, you know, and I know the answers to some of the, the whys that I ask. And at times I try to deny that they're there. And I know that a lot uh, in some of these things that I deny a lot are that people are afraid to be at certain events such as this, you know? Uh, because they are Arab or Muslim or South Asian or uh, because they don't know how people may react to them in the, you know, in the group.

02.41.05 Uh, some of them are just not feeling safe because of their you know, legal status. Maybe they're not documenting, not documented uh, or just not feeling safe because of, you know, some of the things that have been passed down by our government. You know, with the Patriot Act etc.

02.41.29 And I know that these are uh, justifiable reasons, but I'm angry, you know, that people have to be, that you know, are so uh, afraid by all this. That they, you know, don't have enough, I

don't want to say courage, but they don't feel safe enough to be out there. Uh. (~I~) I feel very lonely.

02.42.01 Are you asking about me? I feel very lonely. I feel very lonely and I remember that, that day when we got to the site and I just stood there and I kept looking to identify with others. And there weren't any. And a good friend of mine uh, and her partner were both there. And uh, as we were talking, it just, this all came out of me, you know, how I was feeling so tired and uh, and lonely.

02.42.35 And uh, you know, Abby was so comforting and, you know, she helped me understand that sometimes that you know, these things happen to certain people, and that it's normal for me to feel this way. Uh, and not to, to give up on what I believe in. Uh, or run away from it.

02.43.00 Uh, and just keep the spirit and, and try to connect with others as much as I could. Uh, but yeah. It's, it's been you know, it's been uh, quite a, a, a challenge as well as a learning experience.

02.43.27 Uh, and I just hope and pray that you know, that I can continue and not break. That's, that's what's really concerning me, is just reaching my breaking point. Uh, and so you know, this month for me at Ramadan uh, has been it's been like my, my escape of all of this, just trying to reflect and to regroup you know, and to just to pray to get the energy, you know, the energy and the sophistication and, and the knowledge to continue this work. (STOPS)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

02.44.18 END OF TAPE DA.1103.0200.2

**TAPE # DA.1103.0300.3**  
**Debbie Almontaser**  
**JIM WHITAKER, Producer/Director**  
**PROJECT REBIRTH**

03.01.00 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

- 03.02.12 DEBBIE : That day was uh, I will never forget that day. I will never forget that day as long as I live. Uh. And it's interesting, you know, how it, how and when it happened. Uh, it was January. It was uh, January 21<sup>st</sup>. It was the day after Martin Luther King's birthday. Uh, that Monday, Martin Luther King Day, I believe it was that Monday or the Sunday, I can't remember, we had gone to uh, my husband and I had gone to the uh, the big demonstration in Washington.
- 03.03.04 Uh, that was being organized by ANSWER: United for Peace and Justice. A whole slew of uh, peace organizations uh, that were protesting against the war on Iraq, against the war uh, on terrorism at home that has been literally affecting Arabs, Muslims and South Asians post- 9/11. And uh, I remember that day, the weather report was supposed to be very, very cold uh, in like the teens.
- 03.03.39 Uh, and we were so dressed, well-dressed, like 3 layers of socks, boots, sweaters, turtlenecks, jackets. And when we got there that day, it was cold, but at the same time we didn't feel the cold, because there were so many people.
- 03.03.59 I would say at least 500,000 people were out there. Uh, all speaking the same language, all there for the same cause. Uh, and all just really wanting to make a difference, you know, and make a change you know, in our, in our country's legislation and, and the way that our country has uh, just taken a detour from what, you know, we as Americans have been brought up to believe.
- 03.04.30 You know, in the freedom to speak uh, a freedom to live and pursue happiness. You know, freedom of religion. Uh, all that, you know, has become compromised since September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Uh, so we came back that evening and just going about you know, our regular daily life routines.

- 03.05.00 Uh, getting ready for work, going to work that day. And uh, coming home to find out that there were two investigators who came to my house and uh, what was the most painful for me was to know that my kids were home alone. Uh, my husband wasn't there yet. Uh, they were all home, I wasn't home.
- 03.05.29 Uh, they knocked, they rang the bell. My younger son, Mohammed, answered the door and they asked, they said, you know, we're private, we are uh, investigators uh, from you know, NYPD intelligence, etc. They started to explain that they were a part of the FBI as well as the New York police department. And uh, my son said, can I help you?
- 03.05.59 And they're like, yes, we're here to speak to uh, Debbie Almontaser. Is she available? And so my son said to them, no, she's not, she hasn't come home yet. And my older son, Yusef uh, walked over to the door and, you know, they showed him his badges again, and he said, you know, can I help you? Is there anything wrong? Is my mother OK? Uh, like you know, they're you know, we're, you know, we're not here to give you any bad news or anything. We just wanted to speak to her.
- 03.06.30 And uh, my son walked out of the house and spoke to them on the porch. He said, you know, I hope everything's all right. You know, I'm very concerned, you know, can you tell me what you'd like to see her about? She's not home, she'll be home in a couple of hours. And he uh, told him, well, you know, we just wanted to talk to her because uh, we had received a tip uh, that she was, you know, saying anti-American things.
- 03.07.02 Uh, and bragging about one of her sons going to Yemen and to train. And uh, my son looked at him and laughed. He said, you know, where you know, we're not that kind of family. Uh, you know, my mom, you know, would never say anything anti-American. Uh, you don't know my mom. Uh, and he said and, and about my brother, about one of her sons, you know?
- 03.07.32 And they said, yeah, your brother. Uh, you know, he was bragging he had gone to Yemen and train. He said, my brother and I both have gone back there uh, for summer vacation, but we don't do that kind of stuff and, you know, that's, that's crazy. And so they asked him who he was. He identified himself. Uh, they asked him what he did for a living, and he told them that he was a National Guardsman.

- 03.07.59 They asked him for, to show his ID. He did. They asked him about which unit he was serving in, who was his commanding officer, etc. And uh, they said, well, you know, it's great to talk to you, you're really a fine young man. Uh, can you please have your mom call us when she gets in, 'cos we, you know, we really need to talk to her. So uh, my husband got home before me and uh, my son gave him the news.
- 03.08.31 Uh, and my husband decided to call. And uh, the uh, agent said to him, you know, sir, we really don't want to talk to you, we want to talk to your wife. So just have her call us when she gets in. And you know, it was very painful, you know, for my husband, you know, to know of this, you know, that they're coming to look for his wife, and feel so powerless.
- 03.09.01 You know, utterly powerless. And uh, and not be able to know why, you know, your asking about my wife. Uh, so during all of this, a, my friend, Jill, was also meeting me there to, to work with me 'cos we were gonna do a cultural sensitivity training later that week.
- 03.09.27 Uh, she had come after they had been there, and so she heard like all the racket with my kids, what's going on? What's happening? Uh, and then Naji was like trying to calm them down because he didn't want them to be so overly upset 'cos when I got home, he didn't want me to get upset or frightened. Uh, I get in, and so he, you know, just casually told me uh, you know, there, there were some people here to, to look for you and they wanted to talk to you, and I said, who is it?
- 03.10.01 And he said, well, they're from the intelligence department. Uh, and they left their number, and they want you to call them, they want to speak to you. I said, well, what's it about? And he briefly told me what my son had told him. And (CLEARS THROAT) I said to him, well, I'm not calling without a lawyer. And my son uh, my oldest who's like Mom, these are really nice people, you know, I don't think you should be concerned. You know, they just got a tip and they just want to talk to you about it.
- 03.10.34 And I don't think that you should feel like you know, you have something to worry about. I said, well, I understand what you're saying, but you know, I've spent months and months helping people understand that they should not speak without lawyers. That they need representation uh, and educating people about their rights. And now I'm gonna go and not you know, do what I preach?
- 03.11.00 I said that's unethically wrong. Uh, and it's my right as a citizen, American citizen, to have legal representation. And uh, I remember uh, the feeling that I had when I walked into my

house and then looking at my husband and uh, when he approached me to talk to me like there's this way about him which when he's about to give me bad news, he's you know, like I could tell he's gonna give me bad news.

- 03.11.34 And uh, you know, I remember like when my grandmother died, he was you know, very, just very, trying to make me laugh. Uh, you know, to get me comfortable and relaxed. Uh, and then just tell, you know, tell me the news very casually, like without any alarm. You know, and then I have to ask him like again, you know, what are you telling me?
- 03.11.58 Uh, you know, and he's like well, your mom called and you know, your (?) grandmother passed away. And you know, in that same way that day, that's how he broke the news to me. He says, you know, uh, while you were at work and uh, the boys were home and somebody had come over and they were looking for you and they wanted to talk to you, they're from intelligence department. And he said, and I called and I wanted to see what it was about, and, and I was like I can't believe this is happening.
- 03.12.31 Are you serious? You know, I was like questioning like uh, like it was a dream or you know, unreal. And uh, I was pretty shaken up. I was so shaken. Uh, and I, was just a million and one things were going through my mind and like why me? What are they coming to look for me for? What's this about? And what's going on? And you know, I'm thinking, do I have any traffic violations?
- 03.13.00 Do I have any (LAUGHS) you know, I know I didn't put in for my taxes for 2001, and you know like all of these crazy things were just going through my head, and you know, my husband and my son are like, just call and get it over with and see what they want. Well, I'm like, no, I'm not calling without a lawyer. And I remember sitting there with my cell phone scrambling you know, scrambling through, you know, my phone book to, to find uh, Omar Mohammadi's phone number uh, who is a good friend. Uh, an ally.
- 03.13.36 Uh, and who is an immigration lawyer as well as civil rights lawyer uh, who I was doing a lot of work with. I was organizing getting him to speak at trainings to the Muslim community about knowing their rights. Uh, etc. And uh, it was just by chance that I had his cell phone number, because I had had a conversation with him about 3 or 4 days ago, and it was still in my phone book.
- 03.14.04 And uh, I called him, and he returned my call shortly after, and I told him what was going on. And he said to me, he said, well, do you know if this is a target, you know, or is it

informational investigation? I said, I don't know anything, you know. I have just come home, they have been to my house, they spoke to my son, they've left a number and they're expecting me to call.

- 03.14.31 And I want to know what you think I should do. Uh, he says, well, do you want to set an appointment or try to have a conference call? I said I want to get this done and over with tonight. And it was about 6 o'clock by then. Uh, I said, I, I cannot spend the night without knowing why they came to my house. And uh, he then took the number of the uh, the agent and he called him and he asked if it was a target or informational.
- 03.15.04 And uh, and what he meant by target or information was it about my son, what was this all about my son? And getting more information about him, or is my son become a target for an investigation, etc. And so the agent explained to him that uh, it was just uh, you know, a small thing based on a tip that they received in October that they had to follow up on and they just needed to let me know of what was said and to speak to me.
- 03.15.40 Etc. So uh, he proposed the idea to them of having a conference call. And uh, he got back to me uh, he said they, you know, they agreed to have a conference call. I'll set it up. He said, you know, how are you feeling? Are you ok? I said, I'm a bit shook up. He says, well, they're just gonna basically ask you some informational information about you, where you work, you know, typical stuff like that.
- 03.16.10 And uh, and then they're just gonna get into the conversation and it's, it's supposedly this you know, tip that they got in October, you know, about your son and they're just following up. It you know, it's nothing that I think you should be overly uh, alarmed about.
- 03.16.27 And uh, he said, ok uh, he said just answer the questions, you know, stick to the topic and you know, and we'll take it from there. So he did the conference call uh, all three parties were on the line. And uh, the agent asked me for my name, and I gave him my name. Uh, he asked me for my date of birth, he asked me for what country I was born, he asked me for my home address. He asked me my (?) profession.
- 03.17.03 Uh, how long have I been in this profession, what did I do before this profession? You know, did I live any other houses before that? Uh, and what was interesting was he kept asking me where was I born. He asked like twice and I answered it again, and then the third time I said to him, I said, you know, you've already asked me, this is the third time. You've already asked me three times where I was born.

- 03.17.30 Uh, and I don't know why you keep asking that question. Uh, then he asked for my social security number, and uh, I said to him, I said, you know, I'm finding these questions a bit uncomfortable right now. Uh, you know, I don't feel like I need to give you my social security number. You should have this information already. Uh, you know, if you are investigating me or my son or whatever, you should have this information all ready.
- 03.18.00 And so then my lawyer uh, jumped in and said, you know, my, my client has every right to uh, to feel this way. You know, we live in a very cautious time and, you know, people are being prosecuted and uh, antagonized for you know, all sorts of reasons and, she's, she's very cautious and I understand. So the agent says to him, he says, well, and to me, he says well, how do I know she is who she is, how do I know she's not your wife? You connected us on this call.
- 03.18.35 Uh, and so my lawyer said, can you please answer the question? And then I gave him my social security number. Uh, he asked me where I grew up, I told him where I grew up. And immediately, as soon as I had said Buffalo uh, upstate Buffalo, he said where, exactly, in upstate Buffalo? And I said in a small town called Lackawanna.
- 03.19.00 And he says oh, so do you know those guys that, that are being held up there? And I said, no, I do not know them. He said, wow, you know, it's such a small community, it's a small town. I said, yeah, it's a small town of, you know, at least over 30,000 people you know? That does not mean that I may know them. Uh, I grew up there, I went to high school there, to school and high school, and I finished, and I moved to New York City to do my undergrad and move on with my life.
- 03.19.34 And I've been here for over 23 years. I wouldn't know these guys, because these guys are very young. Uh, and he said, well, ma'am I'm not, you know, I'm not trying to, you know, to uh, say you do or push the subject. I was just curious, please don't get me wrong. I said, well, I'm just telling you the facts as they are.
- 03.19.55 Uh, and I think he asked me all the questions and I was so irritated because it was just so, I was feeling like it was so petty, you know? All of this information I'm sure they knew all this. And I said to him, I said, well, can we really get to why you, you came to visit me? You know, I'd like to know why were you here at my house looking for me? Uh, and he said, well, ma'am in October we had received a tip uh, from someone that they had overheard you uh, saying anti-American things.

- 03.20.36 And bragging about your son uh, going to Yemen to train and then coming back uh, to the US and is now a National Reservist. And (?) in the Army. And it was just, I was so disgusted. And uh, because they had told my son another story and they were telling me another story.
- 03.21.00 And uh, you know, they asked him as many questions as they possibly could. And when they started talking about my son who's you know, a National Guardsman, uh, you know, I, it struck a nerve, because it's like you know, he's my oldest uh, he's gone through so much and you're asking about him?
- 03.21.27 I mean, I didn't say that to him, but uh, I said, well, can you tell me a little more? He said, well, you know, that you had been bragging about that. And I said, well, who is this person that, that said this? He said, well, I don't have that information and, and generally they don't reveal the source. And I just happened to have been given your case. And uh, I said to him, I said, and when was this called in? He said, in October. And I said to him, I said, well, I have to tell you, uh, I'm very, very concerned, as a US Citizen, that you are following up on a tip or a complaint or anything how many months later?
- 03.22.07 I said, this is January. You know, and you're supposed to be protecting our welfare? You know, and our safety, and you're following up in January? Uh, he said, well, ma'am, you know, we didn't really take this seriously because uh, you know, it's, you know, it's just someone calling and (?) saying they overheard you.
- 03.22.29 I said, well, you're quite right that it is petty, you know, that they overheard me saying things. Uh, but I just don't understand why that took so long to be followed up on. I'm very concerned. Uh, and he said, well, ma'am, we get so many calls, etc. And I said, ok, well, can you exactly tell me what you want to know about this? And, and I had mentioned to him, I said, you know, this is totally ridiculous uh, that I would say anything anti-American and uh, that my son had gone to train and you know, is now, you know, in the Army for other reasons.
- 03.23.10 Uh, so he said to me he said, ma'am, you know, I understand where you're coming from, but I need you to verify these accusations for us. Are they true or they're not true? And uh, it was very, very hard. It was very emotional for me to talk about uh, about my son.

- 03.23.34 You know, and I said to him, I said, do you have any idea what my son has done uh, within the past year and a half? Do you have any idea? And he said no, ma'am, I don't know. I said my son was activated on September 11<sup>th</sup>. He had to report to his unit, and the following day, 6 AM was at Ground Zero.
- 03.24.06 There to be a part of the rescue mission, to patrol the area, do to whatever needed to be done. And you're asking me about his loyalty to this country? You're asking me about him training somewhere and coming here to, to cause destruction?
- 03.24.27 And you know, I remember it was so painful to sit there, you know, you know, I was so appalled. So appalled to hear such crazy things about him. I said you have no idea how loyal he is to this country. His responsibility was to serve for two months at Ground Zero, but because he was so moved and so touched uh, he felt that he needed to continue being there. Uh, this was his city, this was his home.
- 03.24.59 Uh, this was very important for him to be a part of this. You know, to help you know, understand what was happening and, and to help people. I said I can't believe that you're asking my son's loyalty to this country. I said he has been honored by the governor, by the mayor. He met President Bush who shook his hand and thanked him for being there for his country and you're asking me for my son, about my son's loyalty?
- 03.25.29 Uh, and he just you know, he said, ma'am, you know, I'm just, I just needed to have this conversation. I'm not asking about his loyalty, but these are the directives that I have gotten, and I have to follow up. And uh, I said to him, I said, well, you've met my sons. Do my sons look to you like they can cause havoc? And he said to me, no, ma'am, not at all. And I met your oldest son uh, the National Guardsman and he's a, a quite an amazing young man.
- 03.26.01 Very articulate, very responsible and you should be very proud of him, and your other son as well. So then we got to the, the second part of this uh, which was you know, the uh, anti-American things. And I said to him, well, can you tell me some of the things that, that I may have said that are anti-American? And he says, well, we don't have anything written down or quotes or anything, but this person just reported that you, you know, you were saying anti-American things.
- 03.26.33 And I said, well, for the life of me I can't ever think of a moment that I may have said anything anti-American, nor do I have anti-American sentiments, nor do uh, you know, nor do I even see, you know, myself ever engaging in such a conversation in private or in public.

- 03.27.01 I said, there seems to be a very big misunderstanding here. This is my home. This is my country. Uh, I don't think I'd ever, every say anything uh, against my country. Uh, because I know no other place than this country as my home. My family has come from the Middle East, but that's their country. This is my country, this is where I've chosen to raise my kids, to create a life for myself, to pursue an education and career.
- 03.27.35 I don't see myself going anywhere. And I said to him, and for that matter, you know, I resent the fact that I have to sit, stand here and justify my loyalty to you. My loyalty to this country is exemplified in my work as an educator, in my work as a community advocate and activist uh, in everything that I do.
- 03.28.07 And I find it very, very difficult to stand here and have to tell you this, you know, and explain to you what my rights are as a citizen. Uh, I have every right to dissent to things that my government is doing. Do I see eye-to-eye with my government and the policies that are being uh, passed?
- 03.28.29 No, I don't, I said, but do I see eye-to-eye with other Americans who believe in this country, who believe in the US Constitution and what it offers to people living in this country? Yes. That's why my family came here, and that's why I grew up in this country. Because I knew that I had an opportunity to have a better life. And to life in a country where I could have religious freedom and freedom of speech and pursue happiness.
- 03.28.58 Uh, and I explained, I said, you know, yes, there are things that I dissent. I dissent the fact that we have a president who wants to go to war with Iraq, an unjustifiable war. I dissent the fact that our government is targeting Arabs, Muslims and South Asians on the, based on this war on terrorism. I resent all these things and I dissent them because that's not what this country is about. It's not about alienating a community and targeting them.
- 03.29.30 And picking them up and detaining them and torturing people. I dissent the fact just like thousands of other Americans across the country dissent this, and I think as a citizen I have every right to do so. And so he basically uh, he said, ma'am yes, absolutely you have every right to do so, by all means, it's your right as a citizen.
- 03.29.58 Uh, and uh, you know, I understand where you're coming from. You know, it's just we have to follow up and, and do what we're doing and uh, you know, you had to be notified. And he asked me if he had ruined my evening He thanked me, he said, thank you for being cooperative, you know, I know this was difficult. Blahblahblah. Uh, and uh, you know, uh, it

was great to talk to you, it was also great to talk to your sons and this was the part that was really eerie, that made me very uncomfortable.

- 03.30.36 Was that uh, he kept talking about my sons, you know, nice young gentlemen, very mature, great heads on their shoulders, and you should be very, very proud of them. And they will really make something of themselves and you'll be proud of them. And uh, you know he kept repeating himself. And it was like yes, I know, I already know that, thank you.
- 03.30.57 And he asked me if he ruined my evening, and I said yes, you have ruined my evening. I said this is not how you would typically want to come home from long day of work and, and you know, find someone coming to look for you. Uh, and he thanked me and uh, he said to me uh, you know, thank you very much, you know, you have our number if you have any questions or if you want to contact us, feel free to do so. I said I very much think I won't need to contact you, but thank you anyway.
- 03.31.31 And uh, so we hung up. Uh, then my lawyer and I were on the phone. And my lawyer started saying to me, Debbie, you didn't have to say all that stuff (LAUGHS). And I'm like what do you mean? And he's like, I had said to you just answer the questions, don't get too you know, involved, you know, yes, no uh, you know, brief. He said, you didn't have to like justify uh, you didn't have to you know, voice your dissent.
- 03.32.02 I said, no I wanted, I wanted him to know what my politics were. I have nothing to hide. This is how I feel and I think I have every right to do so. I said, I'm sure if they have investigated me and they've done their homework, that they have seen me and heard me at demonstrations speaking against these policies. And what it is doing to our community. Uh, and I think it's important for me to be open and upfront about this.
- 03.32.28 I have nothing to hide. Uh, and then so he said, well, I know and I understand, but in the future, you know, just be brief as possible 'cos you don't know, anything can be used against you and I was like oh, great, you know, uh, now you tell me this. And you know, but uh, he was joking, he said, well, no, if you would have said anything that sounded bizarre, I would have stopped you. You know? Uh, so that was over. I felt relieved. Uh, but it wasn't over. It wasn't over.
- 03.33.02 Uh, you know, the trauma that my family was put through was beyond belief. You know, beyond belief. Uh, my husband that night, you know, was just in a daze the whole night.

And uh, just couldn't believe you know, that something like this would happen, could happen. And uh, you know, we sat that evening and we were eating.

- 03.33.30 I told him, you know, what the lawyer had said, you know, that this should not you know, stop my uh, my engagement in community issues. Uh, my engagement in protest uh, and organizing to educate people about the Patriot Act and about people helping people advocate for themselves. And he, he didn't say anything, but uh, you know, he had a hard time sleeping that night, and so did I.
- 03.34.04 Uh, I remember vividly I had dozed off and he was very close to me, and I, I had a nightmare but I can't remember what it was, but I know that it had to do with this whole experience. And I, my body, my whole body jerked and he woke up. And he was asking me if I was Ok, what was it, what did I dream about and I, I didn't want to tell him that it was a nightmare, but I just couldn't explain what it was.
- 03.34.31 Uh, and you know, I let it go. Uh, he couldn't go back to sleep. He got up uh, and washed up and he just you know, prayed. He started to pray, it was like 2, 3 in the morning, and he was praying and I dozed back to sleep and he was still praying. Uh, the following day he was still very shook up.
- 03.34.57 Uh, that very evening after the call uh, my younger son uh, and my older one had gone out and he came back later. I didn't see him 'til the following day, but my younger one was so traumatized by this because he was the one that opened the door and uh, I remember him, you know, pacing in my bedroom. And he's like I can't believe this, that they're turning on you, Mommy, they don't even know who you are, and, and what you do for the community and what an ally you are and you're trying to bring peace to everybody.
- 03.35.32 And uh, you care about this country and you're doing everything you know, in the name of this country. And, you know, you love this country more than you love anything and you find, this is your home and you know, they're treating you like this. And uh, he's like you know, I'm not gonna let them do anything to you if they're even thinking to come take you away. Uh, and I'm like you know, I hear him and I feel his pain and I was telling him, honey, that's not gonna happen.
- 03.36.02 That just doesn't happen that way. Uh, it doesn't happen that way. Uh, my friend, Jill, was also there and she was just like in a total you know, shock and daze and she was just like, you know. And I had to like turn around to her and say, Jill, are you OK? And she's like yeah,

Debbie, but I'm just, I can't even begin to tell you. I've never heard or experienced or saw anybody go through this.

03.36.28 And uh, but what was painful was to see my son felling this way. It was so painful to hear him uh, and to see him pacing. And then you know, saying that I won't let them take you away and, you know, over my dead body and just calming him down. And then my husband was like trying to calm him down, too, and you know, he was just like, he kept going at it. And uh, you know, it was like nothing could stop him and then my husband yelled at him. He said, can you please stop? Enough of this.

03.37.00 You know, you're not helping all of us by, by continuing this and then my son just stopped in his tracks and uh, he calmed down and uh, you know, I said it doesn't happen that way. They can't. I said, you know, people know of me, people know about me. They just can't come and decide to do something like that to a person that's a high-profile person. And uh, he calmed down.

03.37.30 We sat for a little bit uh, yeah, this is actually before I called. This is while we were waiting for the lawyer to call me back and to set up the conference call. That's what that, that was that part. God it's so hard to try to tell story (?) you know, in order. Uh, my friend and after I had the conversation with the lawyers you know, she left. She hugged me and she said, you know, I, I can't even you know, expect you to work now, and don't worry about the workshop if you know, if you feel up to it and you want to get together within the next two days we'll do so.

03.38.08 If not, I'll just do it by myself. You know, I think you need just time to be with your family. And uh, and so I ended up I don't remember if I did the workshop with her or not, but uh, the following day uh, you know, it, it was just very scary.

03.38.28 I, I started feeling like I was being watched. Uh, I was, I, I got to the point where I was feeling like I'm being watched everywhere. Uh.

JW: Did you see people?

03.38.42 DEBBIE : No. I didn't. but it was just, it was just really scary. Uh, and I, I guess what made me feel that way was that uh, this was a tip. This was somebody, it could have been anybody.

03.38.58 It could have been a neighbor, it could have been someone who saw me in public. It, it could have been anybody. It could have been somebody that knew me. Uh, who knows? Uh, and uh, you know, I remember the following day calling another one of my friends who organizes with me, and I told her what happened and she was just in shock. And she said, Debbie, you have to tell people that this happened to you.

03.39.28 You cannot keep shut about this. You have to protect yourself. And uh, I said to her, well, I, I don't know what you mean. She said, people need to know this, because if you are picked up and nobody knows that you know, this has already transpired, you don't know, you know. You could be a disappeared. And you know, her call then (STOPS)

JW: What do you mean disappeared?

03.39.54 DEBBIE : Just being picked up and not, not anybody knowing if I'm picked up or given information that I am. Because the Patriot Act has given people, has given the government that opportunity to do so. Many of the people who were picked up post-9/11 and detained, some of their families didn't even know they were detained, because they did not release the names of the people being held.

JW: And a family never knows where they are?

03.40.19 DEBBIE : Yeah. And some families uh, because of their illegal status in the country were afraid to go to the police department and report their loved one missing.

03.40.34 You know? Because they were afraid for their own you know, safety to remain in the country.

JW: How do they find out?

03.40.44 DEBBIE : The way that people have found out was some of the organizations uh, DRUM, which is Desi's Up in Rising, I forgot the title, it's DRUM, that's the acronym. Uh, IGNA, which is another organization that was going into the detention centers and visiting some of these people that were being held.

- 03.41.08 Uh, and they provide them with some food or some you know, things, and some support. And uh, were able to, to be able to share with others, you know, So-And-So's being held here. And you know, etc. And those that were actually taken out of their homes, picked up out of their homes, their families obviously know.
- 03.41.30 But those who were picked up uh, you know in the street or at their jobs or wherever they were, people didn't have any idea. So uh, I then uh, contacted uh, the ACLU, and I shared with the executive director uh, what's her name?
- 03.41.57 Uh, Donna Liberman, my experience. Uh, I called the Center for Constitutional Rights and I shared my experience with uh, Bill Goodman, who is uh, a lawyer there. They uh, documented everything that, that transpired, what was said and what was done. And uh, they uh, their, their advice to, to my husband and I was to make this public.
- 03.42.29 You know, that an American citizen was being targeted uh, based on this legislation of tips. And uh, you know, that this war on terrorism is really getting out of hand. Uh, and that people who were citizens of the US should not falling victim as well as the immigrant communities. And uh, CCR (?) Center for Constitutional Rights uh, recommended that we write a letter to the mayor and the police commissioner uh, bringing this to their attention and requesting to meet with them uh, on this matter.
- 03.43.15 And uh, you know, dealing with it, that this should not have happened to me per se. Uh, someone who's very well-known and recognized uh, to fall into this category.
- 03.43.30 And uh, I wanted to do it. Uh, it was something that I felt that I needed to do to bring closure to this whole situation, but my husband was not ready to do it. And uh, he couldn't, he couldn't deal with, with what would come next.
- 03.43.58 Uh, you know, would there be retaliation, would there be scrutiny by the broader community, you know, if this became public information. Uh, they also had recommended to do a press release uh, that this was (?) that this had transpired with me. And uh, my husband was just frightened of what would come next. Uh, he was very frightened that it would, you know, cause more harm than good.
- 03.44.30 Uh, that maybe then you know, they'll really harass me or do something. Uh, it pained me, it pained me that uh, I couldn't convince him to do it. Uh, and.

JW: (Did you have any doubts about doing it?)

- 03.44.47 DEBBIE : Any (~I~) I did and I didn't. Uh, I was more for doing it because it would become general public knowledge, and I know that the public would not sit back and take this easily.
- 03.45.08 Uh, that I would have support uh, and that I had absolutely nothing to hide or fear. You know? Uh, you know, that that, I was harassed for no reason. You know, and uh, but it was hard, because while I was trying to push this to take place, I was also frightened of what if something could really happen, you know?
- 03.45.37 And I thought of other political prisoners, you know, and how they've served years and years, and everybody's out there protesting for them, but it, it got uh, it, they're still there. Uh, so there was that fear and doubt, you know, but then I kept thinking, well, I'm a woman. It may not happen that way .
- 03.45.59 Uh, but uh, after a great deal of conversation and seeing how this truly shook up my family, uh, I had to respect and honor my husband's wishes of not going through with it. And uh, you know, this is the way that he found closure in dealing with it, was just letting it go, pretending it didn't happen or it did happen but we're, we're moving on beyond that.
- 03.46.31 Uh, but at the same time, he was also very, very concerned about my political involvement. Uh, he was always, always urging me not to speak publicly at demonstrations and at rallies. Uh, he was always uh, asking me to just be careful about the conversations I had in public, you know, you don't know who's listening.
- 03.47.00 You don't know who could take things and turn them around and use them against you. Uh, etc. And uh, you know, he was very, very, very traumatized by this, as well as my kids. And my kids after that happened, they spent like two weeks calling me, different times of the day and just saying, hey, mom, so where are you?
- 03.47.30 Like all three of them. That was like the famous line, so where are you? Uh, I'm like I'm at work. You know? I'm at the store or you know, I'm still at work. You know, but it was almost like they had to check to make sure I was somewhere. And that I was safe and that they can reach me. And it was very, very terrifying to see what they were going through. Uh, this feeling of insecure-ness and, and sense of you know, loss. That (?) they're gonna lose their mother.

- 03.48.04 Uh, was very, very frightening. Uh, truly frightening. Uh, and I hated to see my family feeling this way. I hated to see them feeling so insecure. Uh, and questioning like everything that we did as a family. Uh, you know, just well, (?)
- 03.48.34 I didn't know what the hell I just meant by that questioning what we did as a family. I guess, you know, going to demonstrations uh, I, my kids stopped going with me. They didn't go, uh, they didn't want to be involved at demonstrations. Uh, I mean, my daughter was always at most of them with me, and she's in pictures, you know, local newspaper pictures. But beyond that, that was it, you know, there was just, they didn't want to go there, and uh, it was quite painful.
- 03.49.06 It was quite painful to be able to, not to be able to continue doing uh, what I really felt like I needed to do. Uh, and I know that uh, it was hard then to constantly receive calls from people who were organizing and going to demonstrations and rallies and asking me to go with them.
- 03.49.29 And then I have to say well, you know, I'm not going. I have this, I have that. And uh, I basically started to book my days with other things to do, other than going. Uh, I remember the February 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> demonstration that took place here in New York. (STOPS)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

03.49.54 END OF TAPE # DA1103.0300.3

**TAPE # DA.1103.0300.3**  
**Debbie Almontaser**  
**JIM WHITAKER, Producer/Director**  
**PROJECT REBIRTH**

03.01.00 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

- 03.02.12 DEBBIE : That day was uh, I will never forget that day. I will never forget that day as long as I live. Uh. And it's interesting, you know, how it, how and when it happened. Uh, it was January. It was uh, January 21<sup>st</sup>. It was the day after Martin Luther King's birthday. Uh, that Monday, Martin Luther King Day, I believe it was that Monday or the Sunday, I can't remember, we had gone to uh, my husband and I had gone to the uh, the big demonstration in Washington.
- 03.03.04 Uh, that was being organized by ANSWER: United for Peace and Justice. A whole slew of uh, peace organizations uh, that were protesting against the war on Iraq, against the war uh, on terrorism at home that has been literally affecting Arabs, Muslims and South Asians post- 9/11. And uh, I remember that day, the weather report was supposed to be very, very cold uh, in like the teens.
- 03.03.39 Uh, and we were so dressed, well-dressed, like 3 layers of socks, boots, sweaters, turtlenecks, jackets. And when we got there that day, it was cold, but at the same time we didn't feel the cold, because there were so many people.
- 03.03.59 I would say at least 500,000 people were out there. Uh, all speaking the same language, all there for the same cause. Uh, and all just really wanting to make a difference, you know, and make a change you know, in our, in our country's legislation and, and the way that our country has uh, just taken a detour from what, you know, we as Americans have been brought up to believe.
- 03.04.30 You know, in the freedom to speak uh, a freedom to live and pursue happiness. You know, freedom of religion. Uh, all that, you know, has become compromised since September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Uh, so we came back that evening and just going about you know, our regular daily life routines.

- 03.05.00 Uh, getting ready for work, going to work that day. And uh, coming home to find out that there were two investigators who came to my house and uh, what was the most painful for me was to know that my kids were home alone. Uh, my husband wasn't there yet. Uh, they were all home, I wasn't home.
- 03.05.29 Uh, they knocked, they rang the bell. My younger son, Mohammed, answered the door and they asked, they said, you know, we're private, we are uh, investigators uh, from you know, NYPD intelligence, etc. They started to explain that they were a part of the FBI as well as the New York police department. And uh, my son said, can I help you?
- 03.05.59 And they're like, yes, we're here to speak to uh, Debbie Almontaser. Is she available? And so my son said to them, no, she's not, she hasn't come home yet. And my older son, Yusef uh, walked over to the door and, you know, they showed him his badges again, and he said, you know, can I help you? Is there anything wrong? Is my mother OK? Uh, like you know, they're you know, we're, you know, we're not here to give you any bad news or anything. We just wanted to speak to her.
- 03.06.30 And uh, my son walked out of the house and spoke to them on the porch. He said, you know, I hope everything's all right. You know, I'm very concerned, you know, can you tell me what you'd like to see her about? She's not home, she'll be home in a couple of hours. And he uh, told him, well, you know, we just wanted to talk to her because uh, we had received a tip uh, that she was, you know, saying anti-American things.
- 03.07.02 Uh, and bragging about one of her sons going to Yemen and to train. And uh, my son looked at him and laughed. He said, you know, where you know, we're not that kind of family. Uh, you know, my mom, you know, would never say anything anti-American. Uh, you don't know my mom. Uh, and he said and, and about my brother, about one of her sons, you know?
- 03.07.32 And they said, yeah, your brother. Uh, you know, he was bragging he had gone to Yemen and train. He said, my brother and I both have gone back there uh, for summer vacation, but we don't do that kind of stuff and, you know, that's, that's crazy. And so they asked him who he was. He identified himself. Uh, they asked him what he did for a living, and he told them that he was a National Guardsman.

- 03.07.59 They asked him for, to show his ID. He did. They asked him about which unit he was serving in, who was his commanding officer, etc. And uh, they said, well, you know, it's great to talk to you, you're really a fine young man. Uh, can you please have your mom call us when she gets in, 'cos we, you know, we really need to talk to her. So uh, my husband got home before me and uh, my son gave him the news.
- 03.08.31 Uh, and my husband decided to call. And uh, the uh, agent said to him, you know, sir, we really don't want to talk to you, we want to talk to your wife. So just have her call us when she gets in. And you know, it was very painful, you know, for my husband, you know, to know of this, you know, that they're coming to look for his wife, and feel so powerless.
- 03.09.01 You know, utterly powerless. And uh, and not be able to know why, you know, your asking about my wife. Uh, so during all of this, a, my friend, Jill, was also meeting me there to, to work with me 'cos we were gonna do a cultural sensitivity training later that week.
- 03.09.27 Uh, she had come after they had been there, and so she heard like all the racket with my kids, what's going on? What's happening? Uh, and then Naji was like trying to calm them down because he didn't want them to be so overly upset 'cos when I got home, he didn't want me to get upset or frightened. Uh, I get in, and so he, you know, just casually told me uh, you know, there, there were some people here to, to look for you and they wanted to talk to you, and I said, who is it?
- 03.10.01 And he said, well, they're from the intelligence department. Uh, and they left their number, and they want you to call them, they want to speak to you. I said, well, what's it about? And he briefly told me what my son had told him. And (CLEARS THROAT) I said to him, well, I'm not calling without a lawyer. And my son uh, my oldest who's like Mom, these are really nice people, you know, I don't think you should be concerned. You know, they just got a tip and they just want to talk to you about it.
- 03.10.34 And I don't think that you should feel like you know, you have something to worry about. I said, well, I understand what you're saying, but you know, I've spent months and months helping people understand that they should not speak without lawyers. That they need representation uh, and educating people about their rights. And now I'm gonna go and not you know, do what I preach?
- 03.11.00 I said that's unethically wrong. Uh, and it's my right as a citizen, American citizen, to have legal representation. And uh, I remember uh, the feeling that I had when I walked into my

house and then looking at my husband and uh, when he approached me to talk to me like there's this way about him which when he's about to give me bad news, he's you know, like I could tell he's gonna give me bad news.

03.11.34 And uh, you know, I remember like when my grandmother died, he was you know, very, just very, trying to make me laugh. Uh, you know, to get me comfortable and relaxed. Uh, and then just tell, you know, tell me the news very casually, like without any alarm. You know, and then I have to ask him like again, you know, what are you telling me?

03.11.58 Uh, you know, and he's like well, your mom called and you know, your (?) grandmother passed away. And you know, in that same way that day, that's how he broke the news to me. He says, you know, uh, while you were at work and uh, the boys were home and somebody had come over and they were looking for you and they wanted to talk to you, they're from intelligence department. And he said, and I called and I wanted to see what it was about, and, and I was like I can't believe this is happening.

03.12.31 Are you serious? You know, I was like questioning like uh, like it was a dream or you know, unreal. And uh, I was pretty shaken up. I was so shaken. Uh, and I, was just a million and one things were going through my mind and like why me? What are they coming to look for me for? What's this about? And what's going on? And you know, I'm thinking, do I have any traffic violations?

03.13.00 Do I have any (LAUGHS) you know, I know I didn't put in for my taxes for 2001, and you know like all of these crazy things were just going through my head, and you know, my husband and my son are like, just call and get it over with and see what they want. Well, I'm like, no, I'm not calling without a lawyer. And I remember sitting there with my cell phone scrambling you know, scrambling through, you know, my phone book to, to find uh, Omar Mohammadi's phone number uh, who is a good friend. Uh, an ally.

03.13.36 Uh, and who is an immigration lawyer as well as civil rights lawyer uh, who I was doing a lot of work with. I was organizing getting him to speak at trainings to the Muslim community about knowing their rights. Uh, etc. And uh, it was just by chance that I had his cell phone number, because I had had a conversation with him about 3 or 4 days ago, and it was still in my phone book.

03.14.04 And uh, I called him, and he returned my call shortly after, and I told him what was going on. And he said to me, he said, well, do you know if this is a target, you know, or is it

informational investigation? I said, I don't know anything, you know. I have just come home, they have been to my house, they spoke to my son, they've left a number and they're expecting me to call.

- 03.14.31 And I want to know what you think I should do. Uh, he says, well, do you want to set an appointment or try to have a conference call? I said I want to get this done and over with tonight. And it was about 6 o'clock by then. Uh, I said, I, I cannot spend the night without knowing why they came to my house. And uh, he then took the number of the uh, the agent and he called him and he asked if it was a target or informational.
- 03.15.04 And uh, and what he meant by target or information was it about my son, what was this all about my son? And getting more information about him, or is my son become a target for an investigation, etc. And so the agent explained to him that uh, it was just uh, you know, a small thing based on a tip that they received in October that they had to follow up on and they just needed to let me know of what was said and to speak to me.
- 03.15.40 Etc. So uh, he proposed the idea to them of having a conference call. And uh, he got back to me uh, he said they, you know, they agreed to have a conference call. I'll set it up. He said, you know, how are you feeling? Are you ok? I said, I'm a bit shook up. He says, well, they're just gonna basically ask you some informational information about you, where you work, you know, typical stuff like that.
- 03.16.10 And uh, and then they're just gonna get into the conversation and it's, it's supposedly this you know, tip that they got in October, you know, about your son and they're just following up. It you know, it's nothing that I think you should be overly uh, alarmed about.
- 03.16.27 And uh, he said, ok uh, he said just answer the questions, you know, stick to the topic and you know, and we'll take it from there. So he did the conference call uh, all three parties were on the line. And uh, the agent asked me for my name, and I gave him my name. Uh, he asked me for my date of birth, he asked me for what country I was born, he asked me for my home address. He asked me my (?) profession.
- 03.17.03 Uh, how long have I been in this profession, what did I do before this profession? You know, did I live any other houses before that? Uh, and what was interesting was he kept asking me where was I born. He asked like twice and I answered it again, and then the third time I said to him, I said, you know, you've already asked me, this is the third time. You've already asked me three times where I was born.

- 03.17.30 Uh, and I don't know why you keep asking that question. Uh, then he asked for my social security number, and uh, I said to him, I said, you know, I'm finding these questions a bit uncomfortable right now. Uh, you know, I don't feel like I need to give you my social security number. You should have this information already. Uh, you know, if you are investigating me or my son or whatever, you should have this information all ready.
- 03.18.00 And so then my lawyer uh, jumped in and said, you know, my, my client has every right to uh, to feel this way. You know, we live in a very cautious time and, you know, people are being prosecuted and uh, antagonized for you know, all sorts of reasons and, she's, she's very cautious and I understand. So the agent says to him, he says, well, and to me, he says well, how do I know she is who she is, how do I know she's not your wife? You connected us on this call.
- 03.18.35 Uh, and so my lawyer said, can you please answer the question? And then I gave him my social security number. Uh, he asked me where I grew up, I told him where I grew up. And immediately, as soon as I had said Buffalo uh, upstate Buffalo, he said where, exactly, in upstate Buffalo? And I said in a small town called Lackawanna.
- 03.19.00 And he says oh, so do you know those guys that, that are being held up there? And I said, no, I do not know them. He said, wow, you know, it's such a small community, it's a small town. I said, yeah, it's a small town of, you know, at least over 30,000 people you know? That does not mean that I may know them. Uh, I grew up there, I went to high school there, to school and high school, and I finished, and I moved to New York City to do my undergrad and move on with my life.
- 03.19.34 And I've been here for over 23 years. I wouldn't know these guys, because these guys are very young. Uh, and he said, well, ma'am I'm not, you know, I'm not trying to, you know, to uh, say you do or push the subject. I was just curious, please don't get me wrong. I said, well, I'm just telling you the facts as they are.
- 03.19.55 Uh, and I think he asked me all the questions and I was so irritated because it was just so, I was feeling like it was so petty, you know? All of this information I'm sure they knew all this. And I said to him, I said, well, can we really get to why you, you came to visit me? You know, I'd like to know why were you here at my house looking for me? Uh, and he said, well, ma'am in October we had received a tip uh, from someone that they had overheard you uh, saying anti-American things.

- 03.20.36 And bragging about your son uh, going to Yemen to train and then coming back uh, to the US and is now a National Reservist. And (?) in the Army. And it was just, I was so disgusted. And uh, because they had told my son another story and they were telling me another story.
- 03.21.00 And uh, you know, they asked him as many questions as they possibly could. And when they started talking about my son who's you know, a National Guardsman, uh, you know, I, it struck a nerve, because it's like you know, he's my oldest uh, he's gone through so much and you're asking about him?
- 03.21.27 I mean, I didn't say that to him, but uh, I said, well, can you tell me a little more? He said, well, you know, that you had been bragging about that. And I said, well, who is this person that, that said this? He said, well, I don't have that information and, and generally they don't reveal the source. And I just happened to have been given your case. And uh, I said to him, I said, and when was this called in? He said, in October. And I said to him, I said, well, I have to tell you, uh, I'm very, very concerned, as a US Citizen, that you are following up on a tip or a complaint or anything how many months later?
- 03.22.07 I said, this is January. You know, and you're supposed to be protecting our welfare? You know, and our safety, and you're following up in January? Uh, he said, well, ma'am, you know, we didn't really take this seriously because uh, you know, it's, you know, it's just someone calling and (?) saying they overheard you.
- 03.22.29 I said, well, you're quite right that it is petty, you know, that they overheard me saying things. Uh, but I just don't understand why that took so long to be followed up on. I'm very concerned. Uh, and he said, well, ma'am, we get so many calls, etc. And I said, ok, well, can you exactly tell me what you want to know about this? And, and I had mentioned to him, I said, you know, this is totally ridiculous uh, that I would say anything anti-American and uh, that my son had gone to train and you know, is now, you know, in the Army for other reasons.
- 03.23.10 Uh, so he said to me he said, ma'am, you know, I understand where you're coming from, but I need you to verify these accusations for us. Are they true or they're not true? And uh, it was very, very hard. It was very emotional for me to talk about uh, about my son.

- 03.23.34 You know, and I said to him, I said, do you have any idea what my son has done uh, within the past year and a half? Do you have any idea? And he said no, ma'am, I don't know. I said my son was activated on September 11<sup>th</sup>. He had to report to his unit, and the following day, 6 AM was at Ground Zero.
- 03.24.06 There to be a part of the rescue mission, to patrol the area, do to whatever needed to be done. And you're asking me about his loyalty to this country? You're asking me about him training somewhere and coming here to, to cause destruction?
- 03.24.27 And you know, I remember it was so painful to sit there, you know, you know, I was so appalled. So appalled to hear such crazy things about him. I said you have no idea how loyal he is to this country. His responsibility was to serve for two months at Ground Zero, but because he was so moved and so touched uh, he felt that he needed to continue being there. Uh, this was his city, this was his home.
- 03.24.59 Uh, this was very important for him to be a part of this. You know, to help you know, understand what was happening and, and to help people. I said I can't believe that you're asking my son's loyalty to this country. I said he has been honored by the governor, by the mayor. He met President Bush who shook his hand and thanked him for being there for his country and you're asking me for my son, about my son's loyalty?
- 03.25.29 Uh, and he just you know, he said, ma'am, you know, I'm just, I just needed to have this conversation. I'm not asking about his loyalty, but these are the directives that I have gotten, and I have to follow up. And uh, I said to him, I said, well, you've met my sons. Do my sons look to you like they can cause havoc? And he said to me, no, ma'am, not at all. And I met your oldest son uh, the National Guardsman and he's a, a quite an amazing young man.
- 03.26.01 Very articulate, very responsible and you should be very proud of him, and your other son as well. So then we got to the, the second part of this uh, which was you know, the uh, anti-American things. And I said to him, well, can you tell me some of the things that, that I may have said that are anti-American? And he says, well, we don't have anything written down or quotes or anything, but this person just reported that you, you know, you were saying anti-American things.
- 03.26.33 And I said, well, for the life of me I can't ever think of a moment that I may have said anything anti-American, nor do I have anti-American sentiments, nor do uh, you know, nor do I even see, you know, myself ever engaging in such a conversation in private or in public.

- 03.27.01 I said, there seems to be a very big misunderstanding here. This is my home. This is my country. Uh, I don't think I'd ever, every say anything uh, against my country. Uh, because I know no other place than this country as my home. My family has come from the Middle East, but that's their country. This is my country, this is where I've chosen to raise my kids, to create a life for myself, to pursue an education and career.
- 03.27.35 I don't see myself going anywhere. And I said to him, and for that matter, you know, I resent the fact that I have to sit, stand here and justify my loyalty to you. My loyalty to this country is exemplified in my work as an educator, in my work as a community advocate and activist uh, in everything that I do.
- 03.28.07 And I find it very, very difficult to stand here and have to tell you this, you know, and explain to you what my rights are as a citizen. Uh, I have every right to dissent to things that my government is doing. Do I see eye-to-eye with my government and the policies that are being uh, passed?
- 03.28.29 No, I don't, I said, but do I see eye-to-eye with other Americans who believe in this country, who believe in the US Constitution and what it offers to people living in this country? Yes. That's why my family came here, and that's why I grew up in this country. Because I knew that I had an opportunity to have a better life. And to life in a country where I could have religious freedom and freedom of speech and pursue happiness.
- 03.28.58 Uh, and I explained, I said, you know, yes, there are things that I dissent. I dissent the fact that we have a president who wants to go to war with Iraq, an unjustifiable war. I dissent the fact that our government is targeting Arabs, Muslims and South Asians on the, based on this war on terrorism. I resent all these things and I dissent them because that's not what this country is about. It's not about alienating a community and targeting them.
- 03.29.30 And picking them up and detaining them and torturing people. I dissent the fact just like thousands of other Americans across the country dissent this, and I think as a citizen I have every right to do so. And so he basically uh, he said, ma'am yes, absolutely you have every right to do so, by all means, it's your right as a citizen.
- 03.29.58 Uh, and uh, you know, I understand where you're coming from. You know, it's just we have to follow up and, and do what we're doing and uh, you know, you had to be notified. And he asked me if he had ruined my evening He thanked me, he said, thank you for being cooperative, you know, I know this was difficult. Blahblahblah. Uh, and uh, you know, uh, it

was great to talk to you, it was also great to talk to your sons and this was the part that was really eerie, that made me very uncomfortable.

- 03.30.36 Was that uh, he kept talking about my sons, you know, nice young gentlemen, very mature, great heads on their shoulders, and you should be very, very proud of them. And they will really make something of themselves and you'll be proud of them. And uh, you know he kept repeating himself. And it was like yes, I know, I already know that, thank you.
- 03.30.57 And he asked me if he ruined my evening, and I said yes, you have ruined my evening. I said this is not how you would typically want to come home from long day of work and, and you know, find someone coming to look for you. Uh, and he thanked me and uh, he said to me uh, you know, thank you very much, you know, you have our number if you have any questions or if you want to contact us, feel free to do so. I said I very much think I won't need to contact you, but thank you anyway.
- 03.31.31 And uh, so we hung up. Uh, then my lawyer and I were on the phone. And my lawyer started saying to me, Debbie, you didn't have to say all that stuff (LAUGHS). And I'm like what do you mean? And he's like, I had said to you just answer the questions, don't get too you know, involved, you know, yes, no uh, you know, brief. He said, you didn't have to like justify uh, you didn't have to you know, voice your dissent.
- 03.32.02 I said, no I wanted, I wanted him to know what my politics were. I have nothing to hide. This is how I feel and I think I have every right to do so. I said, I'm sure if they have investigated me and they've done their homework, that they have seen me and heard me at demonstrations speaking against these policies. And what it is doing to our community. Uh, and I think it's important for me to be open and upfront about this.
- 03.32.28 I have nothing to hide. Uh, and then so he said, well, I know and I understand, but in the future, you know, just be brief as possible 'cos you don't know, anything can be used against you and I was like oh, great, you know, uh, now you tell me this. And you know, but uh, he was joking, he said, well, no, if you would have said anything that sounded bizarre, I would have stopped you. You know? Uh, so that was over. I felt relieved. Uh, but it wasn't over. It wasn't over.
- 03.33.02 Uh, you know, the trauma that my family was put through was beyond belief. You know, beyond belief. Uh, my husband that night, you know, was just in a daze the whole night.

And uh, just couldn't believe you know, that something like this would happen, could happen. And uh, you know, we sat that evening and we were eating.

- 03.33.30 I told him, you know, what the lawyer had said, you know, that this should not you know, stop my uh, my engagement in community issues. Uh, my engagement in protest uh, and organizing to educate people about the Patriot Act and about people helping people advocate for themselves. And he, he didn't say anything, but uh, you know, he had a hard time sleeping that night, and so did I.
- 03.34.04 Uh, I remember vividly I had dozed off and he was very close to me, and I, I had a nightmare but I can't remember what it was, but I know that it had to do with this whole experience. And I, my body, my whole body jerked and he woke up. And he was asking me if I was Ok, what was it, what did I dream about and I, I didn't want to tell him that it was a nightmare, but I just couldn't explain what it was.
- 03.34.31 Uh, and you know, I let it go. Uh, he couldn't go back to sleep. He got up uh, and washed up and he just you know, prayed. He started to pray, it was like 2, 3 in the morning, and he was praying and I dozed back to sleep and he was still praying. Uh, the following day he was still very shook up.
- 03.34.57 Uh, that very evening after the call uh, my younger son uh, and my older one had gone out and he came back later. I didn't see him 'til the following day, but my younger one was so traumatized by this because he was the one that opened the door and uh, I remember him, you know, pacing in my bedroom. And he's like I can't believe this, that they're turning on you, Mommy, they don't even know who you are, and, and what you do for the community and what an ally you are and you're trying to bring peace to everybody.
- 03.35.32 And uh, you care about this country and you're doing everything you know, in the name of this country. And, you know, you love this country more than you love anything and you find, this is your home and you know, they're treating you like this. And uh, he's like you know, I'm not gonna let them do anything to you if they're even thinking to come take you away. Uh, and I'm like you know, I hear him and I feel his pain and I was telling him, honey, that's not gonna happen.
- 03.36.02 That just doesn't happen that way. Uh, it doesn't happen that way. Uh, my friend, Jill, was also there and she was just like in a total you know, shock and daze and she was just like, you know. And I had to like turn around to her and say, Jill, are you OK? And she's like yeah,

Debbie, but I'm just, I can't even begin to tell you. I've never heard or experienced or saw anybody go through this.

03.36.28 And uh, but what was painful was to see my son felling this way. It was so painful to hear him uh, and to see him pacing. And then you know, saying that I won't let them take you away and, you know, over my dead body and just calming him down. And then my husband was like trying to calm him down, too, and you know, he was just like, he kept going at it. And uh, you know, it was like nothing could stop him and then my husband yelled at him. He said, can you please stop? Enough of this.

03.37.00 You know, you're not helping all of us by, by continuing this and then my son just stopped in his tracks and uh, he calmed down and uh, you know, I said it doesn't happen that way. They can't. I said, you know, people know of me, people know about me. They just can't come and decide to do something like that to a person that's a high-profile person. And uh, he calmed down.

03.37.30 We sat for a little bit uh, yeah, this is actually before I called. This is while we were waiting for the lawyer to call me back and to set up the conference call. That's what that, that was that part. God it's so hard to try to tell story (?) you know, in order. Uh, my friend and after I had the conversation with the lawyers you know, she left. She hugged me and she said, you know, I, I can't even you know, expect you to work now, and don't worry about the workshop if you know, if you feel up to it and you want to get together within the next two days we'll do so.

03.38.08 If not, I'll just do it by myself. You know, I think you need just time to be with your family. And uh, and so I ended up I don't remember if I did the workshop with her or not, but uh, the following day uh, you know, it, it was just very scary.

03.38.28 I, I started feeling like I was being watched. Uh, I was, I, I got to the point where I was feeling like I'm being watched everywhere. Uh.

JW: Did you see people?

03.38.42 DEBBIE : No. I didn't. but it was just, it was just really scary. Uh, and I, I guess what made me feel that way was that uh, this was a tip. This was somebody, it could have been anybody.

03.38.58 It could have been a neighbor, it could have been someone who saw me in public. It, it could have been anybody. It could have been somebody that knew me. Uh, who knows? Uh, and uh, you know, I remember the following day calling another one of my friends who organizes with me, and I told her what happened and she was just in shock. And she said, Debbie, you have to tell people that this happened to you.

03.39.28 You cannot keep shut about this. You have to protect yourself. And uh, I said to her, well, I, I don't know what you mean. She said, people need to know this, because if you are picked up and nobody knows that you know, this has already transpired, you don't know, you know. You could be a disappeared. And you know, her call then (STOPS)

JW: What do you mean disappeared?

03.39.54 DEBBIE : Just being picked up and not, not anybody knowing if I'm picked up or given information that I am. Because the Patriot Act has given people, has given the government that opportunity to do so. Many of the people who were picked up post-9/11 and detained, some of their families didn't even know they were detained, because they did not release the names of the people being held.

JW: And a family never knows where they are?

03.40.19 DEBBIE : Yeah. And some families uh, because of their illegal status in the country were afraid to go to the police department and report their loved one missing.

03.40.34 You know? Because they were afraid for their own you know, safety to remain in the country.

JW: How do they find out?

03.40.44 DEBBIE : The way that people have found out was some of the organizations uh, DRUM, which is Desi's Up in Rising, I forgot the title, it's DRUM, that's the acronym. Uh, IGNA, which is another organization that was going into the detention centers and visiting some of these people that were being held.

- 03.41.08 Uh, and they provide them with some food or some you know, things, and some support. And uh, were able to, to be able to share with others, you know, So-And-So's being held here. And you know, etc. And those that were actually taken out of their homes, picked up out of their homes, their families obviously know.
- 03.41.30 But those who were picked up uh, you know in the street or at their jobs or wherever they were, people didn't have any idea. So uh, I then uh, contacted uh, the ACLU, and I shared with the executive director uh, what's her name?
- 03.41.57 Uh, Donna Liberman, my experience. Uh, I called the Center for Constitutional Rights and I shared my experience with uh, Bill Goodman, who is uh, a lawyer there. They uh, documented everything that, that transpired, what was said and what was done. And uh, they uh, their, their advice to, to my husband and I was to make this public.
- 03.42.29 You know, that an American citizen was being targeted uh, based on this legislation of tips. And uh, you know, that this war on terrorism is really getting out of hand. Uh, and that people who were citizens of the US should not falling victim as well as the immigrant communities. And uh, CCR (?) Center for Constitutional Rights uh, recommended that we write a letter to the mayor and the police commissioner uh, bringing this to their attention and requesting to meet with them uh, on this matter.
- 03.43.15 And uh, you know, dealing with it, that this should not have happened to me per se. Uh, someone who's very well-known and recognized uh, to fall into this category.
- 03.43.30 And uh, I wanted to do it. Uh, it was something that I felt that I needed to do to bring closure to this whole situation, but my husband was not ready to do it. And uh, he couldn't, he couldn't deal with, with what would come next.
- 03.43.58 Uh, you know, would there be retaliation, would there be scrutiny by the broader community, you know, if this became public information. Uh, they also had recommended to do a press release uh, that this was (?) that this had transpired with me. And uh, my husband was just frightened of what would come next. Uh, he was very frightened that it would, you know, cause more harm than good.
- 03.44.30 Uh, that maybe then you know, they'll really harass me or do something. Uh, it pained me, it pained me that uh, I couldn't convince him to do it. Uh, and.

JW: (Did you have any doubts about doing it?)

- 03.44.47 DEBBIE : Any (~I~) I did and I didn't. Uh, I was more for doing it because it would become general public knowledge, and I know that the public would not sit back and take this easily.
- 03.45.08 Uh, that I would have support uh, and that I had absolutely nothing to hide or fear. You know? Uh, you know, that that, I was harassed for no reason. You know, and uh, but it was hard, because while I was trying to push this to take place, I was also frightened of what if something could really happen, you know?
- 03.45.37 And I thought of other political prisoners, you know, and how they've served years and years, and everybody's out there protesting for them, but it, it got uh, it, they're still there. Uh, so there was that fear and doubt, you know, but then I kept thinking, well, I'm a woman. It may not happen that way .
- 03.45.59 Uh, but uh, after a great deal of conversation and seeing how this truly shook up my family, uh, I had to respect and honor my husband's wishes of not going through with it. And uh, you know, this is the way that he found closure in dealing with it, was just letting it go, pretending it didn't happen or it did happen but we're, we're moving on beyond that.
- 03.46.31 Uh, but at the same time, he was also very, very concerned about my political involvement. Uh, he was always, always urging me not to speak publicly at demonstrations and at rallies. Uh, he was always uh, asking me to just be careful about the conversations I had in public, you know, you don't know who's listening.
- 03.47.00 You don't know who could take things and turn them around and use them against you. Uh, etc. And uh, you know, he was very, very, very traumatized by this, as well as my kids. And my kids after that happened, they spent like two weeks calling me, different times of the day and just saying, hey, mom, so where are you?
- 03.47.30 Like all three of them. That was like the famous line, so where are you? Uh, I'm like I'm at work. You know? I'm at the store or you know, I'm still at work. You know, but it was almost like they had to check to make sure I was somewhere. And that I was safe and that they can reach me. And it was very, very terrifying to see what they were going through. Uh, this feeling of insecure-ness and, and sense of you know, loss. That (?) they're gonna lose their mother.

- 03.48.04 Uh, was very, very frightening. Uh, truly frightening. Uh, and I hated to see my family feeling this way. I hated to see them feeling so insecure. Uh, and questioning like everything that we did as a family. Uh, you know, just well, (?)
- 03.48.34 I didn't know what the hell I just meant by that questioning what we did as a family. I guess, you know, going to demonstrations uh, I, my kids stopped going with me. They didn't go, uh, they didn't want to be involved at demonstrations. Uh, I mean, my daughter was always at most of them with me, and she's in pictures, you know, local newspaper pictures. But beyond that, that was it, you know, there was just, they didn't want to go there, and uh, it was quite painful.
- 03.49.06 It was quite painful to be able to, not to be able to continue doing uh, what I really felt like I needed to do. Uh, and I know that uh, it was hard then to constantly receive calls from people who were organizing and going to demonstrations and rallies and asking me to go with them.
- 03.49.29 And then I have to say well, you know, I'm not going. I have this, I have that. And uh, I basically started to book my days with other things to do, other than going. Uh, I remember the February 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> demonstration that took place here in New York. (STOPS)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

03.49.54 END OF TAPE # DA1103.0300.3

**TAPE # DA.1103.**  
**Debbie Almontaser**  
**JIM WHITAKER, Producer/Director**  
**PROJECT REBIRTH**

04.00.16 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: You weren't actually able to tell people what happened and why you couldn't come to the demonstrations?

04.00.40 DEBBIE : Uh, I did (~I~) I did share it with a lot of my friends, my close friends. Uh, but uh, it was just very painful to try to share with large (?) you know, large groups of people, 'cos I just uh, it was just too painful and I didn't want people to feel sorry for me.

04.01.03 Uh, and I didn't also want people to say, well, you know, why are you being a wimp about it? You should challenge them. Uh, because I felt like they, they couldn't understand what my convictions for, for changing my way of life were. And my convictions uh, at that point were you know, holding my family sacred, you know.

04.01.29 The you know, security and the safety of my family was the most important thing in my life. Uh, you know, and I learned this you know, through this experience that you know, I (?) wouldn't be able to function if anything ever happened to my kids or my husband. Uh, and I know that it would devastate them if something happened to me.

04.01.59 Uh, and I, I couldn't live with myself or even you know, even if I had died or whatever, I couldn't live with the fact that I traumatized my family uh, and that's when I really had to start adjusting you know, my views on issues. Uh, and I'm not saying that you know, I'm adjusting them by going with what the majority or what you know, what is politically correct.

04.02.32 But uh, adjusting how I you know, take on issues. Like I no longer speak at rallies and demonstrations, because that is you know, I'm putting myself on, on a platform where everyone and anyone can hear me and video tape me and see me.

- 04.02.54 Uh, and uh, but it does not mean that you know, I don't believe in what people are saying and talking against, you know, that, you know, has been you know, atrociously hurting many communities in our country. Uh, but I still you know, I still am involved in organizing around educating people on their civil rights and liberties. Uh, and educating people about how this is affecting immigrant communities.
- 04.03.33 Uh, but on a, you know, on a small scale as an educator, not as someone challenging uh, the powers that be. And uh, I decided to do it this way because you know, again, my, my family comes first in my life. And uh, the retaliation you know, aspect scares me to death, you know.
- 04.03.59 And I just keep remembering you know, the phone conversation with this agent who kept talking about my two sons and what great young men and how I should be proud of them. It was very eerie to hear him continually talk about that, and I almost felt like there was a message you know? And that message was you know, if you don't stop you know, your engagement at demonstrations and, and rallies and getting people to you know, you know, to be against these policies and legislations, something can happen to one of your sons. (~I~)
- 04.04.41 I don't know. There is in my heart a fear that my sons you know, can you know, can fall victim. Uh, and I, you know, as mother, you know, you have this intuition, you know, and remembering this call, you know.
- 04.05.03 And just, you know, sitting on, hearing this man constantly talk about my sons, like I almost wanted to say to him, why do you keep dwelling on my sons and how wonderful they are? I almost wanted to say that to him. But I didn't go there because I didn't want it to be perceived like I'm crazy or paranoid or I'm trying to insinuate something. But uh, it scares me. It scares me to get to me that they would you know, do so.
- 04.05.31 And during uh, the time that I shared the information with the ACLU and CCR, they basically uh, saw this as an intimidation factor. They're using it to intimidate me to silence me. Uh, and I truly believe that that's what they wanted. Uh, you know, and they basically got it.
- 04.06.01 And uh, they didn't get it because they frightened me. You know, but uh, they got it because you know, my family comes first in my life and I, I, I would you know, devastate me if anything ever happened to my kids. And uh, you know, but this is the climate that we live in, you know, and I'm not the only one that this has happened to.

- 04.06.29 There have been 3 or 4 other people here in New York City uh, who've been investigated. Uh, one man in particular because he changed his hair. He, he got a different haircut. And they called this 1-800 TIPS, and this man was gone and, and investigated and asked, you know, we got a report that you changed your haircut, you know, you used to wear it long and now it's very short and uh, you know, you're of Arab and Muslim decent, and you know, it's just terrifying.
- 04.07.09 And uh, I remember the Arab-American anti-discrimination committee after getting these 3 other people who reported what had happened to them, trying to get all of us to come together and do a press release and show this is unjust and why are people targeting us?
- 04.07.28 Uh, another gentleman uh, worked in a restaurant here in mid-Manhattan and uh, he used to have a lot of Middle Eastern customers come you know, at a particular time in the day. And somebody called and reported that. That you know, there are people of Middle Eastern background congregating you know, at this restaurant. You know, and this man is there and they must be plotting something.
- 04.07.58 And uh, it was just friends who worked in the neighborhood who were coming to eat and going together to eat. Uh, so it's, it's terrifying, it's scary to see the hysteria and fear that our government has created. You know, to really make people you know, see things that are not there. I don't know what to say.

JW: Looking at your ambition and standing up and the calling and family, it seems like it could just be bundling up. How are you?

- 04.08.58 DEBBIE : How am I dealing with it? (~I~) Uh, god, it's, it's the, it's a very hard thing to juggle, a very hard thing to juggle. Uh, it's very hard because uh, you know, my kids know that I'm there for them, but I also know that there are time that they don't feel like I am there for them. And it pains me. It truly pains me.
- 04.09.25 Uh, you know, and it's not that they would come out and say it to me directly or confrontationally or uh, but there are certain days at least you know, maybe 3 or 4 times in the month, that I really take the time or maybe even the last two or three times, I take the time to uh, to cook and elaborately cook. And uh, you know, the boys would jokingly, would jokingly say, wow, Mom's cooking?

- 04.09.58 And uh, you know, (?) I feel guilt when I hear that, but they pass it off as uh, you know, a funny thing, they're teasing me. But uh, I always question am I doing enough for them? You know, am I home enough? Uh, uh, so it, it's hard. But they know uh, you know, in the same token, they know of how much the community relies on me.
- 04.10.30 They know how much I do for the community. And they know that you know, I've taken on this role as, as almost being a spokesperson for the community. And they, I've never heard them speak you know, against you know, uh, doing it because they need me, do you know what I mean? Uh, they've all been very supportive.
- 04.10.55 I know that they were uh, puzzled by this you know, incident that happened and were also very you know, frightened of you know, what I was involving myself in. Uh, and so you know, I sensed from them this nervousness, and that's why I decided to stop uh, you know, organizing uh, politically and just doing more of you know, the interfaith uh, and the education about Islam and Muslims and Arabs and South Asians.
- 04.11.38 Uh, you know, finding that you know, talking and dealing and working with civilians, you know, with the broader public, rather than challenging legislations uh, you know, that that was what I needed to do.
- 04.11.58 And so do I find what I'm doing now uh, important? Yes, it's very important. Uh, do I find it uh, self-fulfilling, I do. But I also miss the fact that I, I can't (CLEARS THROAT) stand up to issues that affect my community and in a more public way like I used to. I miss that.
- 04.12.27 I miss that, and uh, you know, I hate the fact that I've been silenced. You know, and uh, and that my silencer was you know, my government who I never, ever thought would ever turn on me, you know? Never in a million years, because of who, who I am as an individual, not because of my religion, not because of my cultural background.
- 04.13.00 But as an individual, you know, who is a contributor to society. I never thought that that would happen to me, you know, and for it to happen you know, in January 21<sup>st</sup> the day after Martin Luther King's birthday you know, who said, you know, judge not a person by the skin of their color, but by the character.
- 04.13.27 And so I feel you know, that I wasn't being judged for my character, you know? But it was because of the fact that I wear my religion. Uh, and so I resent, I resent the fact that I, I've been silenced. You know, and you know, I, my only way to deal with this is just continue the education work and the interfaith work that I'm doing and.

04.14.00 And just helping people understand uh, and informing them and just proving them with education about Islam and Arabs and South Asians. Uh, that would help them understand that you know these are people just like everybody else, and hoping that what you know, I share with them transcends into them taking some action. Uh, political action at some other time. You know, to help advocate for people who are being targeted. (STOPS)

JW: It's been a tough year for you?

04.14.50 DEBBIE : It's been real tough. It's been real tough.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

04.15.29 DEBBIE : I, I just hope that you know, you and then the viewers who see this ten years from now, you know, see that it's not just me, one individual, that this has affected within the Arab and Muslim community, but there are so many people who can you know, who can identify with my story of Arab and Muslim and (?) you know, South Asian decent who have had, if not similar, you know, something close to, to what I'm going through. (~I~) Do you know what I mean? And I hope, so that I hope that (?) in the piece. (STOPS)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

04.16.21 DEBBIE : And, uh, she was just so impressed with this project. So impressed and so you know, just at awe that somebody came up with such an idea. (STOPS)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

04.17.06 DEBBIE : (MID-STATEMENT) Sometimes I don't, like I missed the picture or I missed the point? You know, sometimes, and it's because I guess everything that I'm engaged in and everything is happening and like I'm in the moment, always be like in the moment? And she said to me, she said, you know, Debbie uh, this is an amazing project for you to be a part

of because you know, you are the voice of so many people in the Muslim and Arab and South Asian community.

04.17.34 You are, you have been and I know it was so funny the way she said it, you have been the chosen one (LAUGHS). The Chosen One, to represent and I was like, Aileen, I don't want to hear this. Like you know, I don't want to be the one to represent millions of people. You know, because I'm not, I don't want that responsibility, 'cos you know, I'm just, I'm, I'm a person (LAUGHS).

04.18.01 I'm not perfect. Uh, and she said to me, she said, this is so amazing. You know, that you're getting this opportunity and, had how powerful this is. Uh, you know, and, and what an amazing way to capture history you know, to, to be able to see the evolution of one's life and it was really interesting. And uh, you know, I'm not even telling it to you as eloquently as she did, but after talking to her, I was like, wow. She's absolutely right. You know.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

04.18.49 DEBBIE : You know what's the most painful of this? (~I~) Is this interview. Do you want to know why? (~I~) Not because I don't like being with you and you guys.

04.18.59 Uh, because I have to face myself. Because I have to face what's inside of me. What's uh, my struggles, my anguish uh, the challenges that I, I am dealing with uh, as an individual. Not as a mother, not as a wife, not you know, as someone in the world a professional. But just my own struggles of you know, how do I navigate myself.

04.19.33 Yeah, so you, when I (?) meet with you, I face those challenges. And it's sometimes it hurts, you know? To have all that come out. I'm also involved in this uh, writing project, through Teachers' College Press. They've been after me since the January of 2002 to, to write for them an article and with a group of other educators and people in New York City about the experience.

04.20.07 And uh, I went to a meeting, they brought people together because a lot of people have been having a hard time putting their thoughts together to create an article. And uh, when I went to this meeting and we sat there as we were talking, I realized why I haven't been able to get it together to do it. It's because of my fear of you know, dealing with all this stuff.

04.20.33 You know, the, the things that I've gone through. Uh, the experiences uh, you know, it's like just rehashing all of this. Uh, and I just didn't want to rehash, I just wanted to continue like you know, suppressing pushing down and just worrying about what I had to do you know, tomorrow or next week. (~I~)

04.20.58 So it's a, it's uh, an interesting way to reflect and help you know, I'm, I'm seeing this as an opportunity to help me reflect on my past. And to use what has happened to me and help me mould my future.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

04.23.06 DEBBIE : You know, I also see this, you know, actually in, in my son, Mohammed. Uh, who's, you know, who's had a hell of a time since September 11<sup>th</sup>. And I think I shared with you that he dropped out of high school, and I may have shared that earlier. But after uh, after this experience uh, he uh, you know, he went through so many changes himself.

04.23.33 Uh, at one point in, in time he wanted to change his name. He didn't want to have Mohammed as his name. He wanted to change it to Adam, which is his middle name, but he just wanted to totally you know, remove Mohammed 'cos of the fact that it's recognized as a Muslim name. And uh, you know, he's changed in his, the way he dresses, the way he wears his hair uh, the music that he listens to.

04.24.06 Uh, and it, (STUTTER) it was quite, it was (?) scary, you know, to see like this fast transformation and, and just trying to (?) identify with some, something other than his own cultural or religious heritage.

JW: When did that happen?

04.25.28 DEBBIE : Uh, this happened after the visit. Uh, he was the one that I was telling you that was pacing back and forth. Uh, so he used to listen to R & B and rap music. Now he listens to rock and roll. Uh, uh, his clothing, he used to wear very baggy jeans hanging like from his (?) from his hips uh, big oversized shirts. Now he's wearing fitted clothes. Uh, he shops at the Gap, Banana Republic.

04.25.02 Uh, what's that place that he goes, DNM, is there such a thing? I always get it wrong (~I~) but uh, basically uh, college students go there and teens go there.

JW: What was the pattern?

04.25.19 DEBBIE : Well, the pattern here is that he doesn't want to identify. He, he's, (STUTTER) he feels that he needs to identify with being more of an American uh, and being a part of the mainstream than being a part of a minority.

04.25.38 So this mainstream to him right now is being you know, and he's very light skinned. He, he can easily be identified as a white man. Uh, and so in his clothing, you know, he's very, very you know, prim and proper.

04.25.58 Uh, not that he's wearing a tie, you know, or slacks, but very, his clothes are fitted, you know, he looks like he's in a Vogue magazine. He came out of a Vogue magazine. Uh, and uh, you know, his style in music uh, you know, even (?) the way he talks and carries on, carries himself (CLEARS THROAT) is very much more professional and uh, and you know, it's great.

04.26.28 I've, I love seeing him feel comfortable you know, with his new image. Uh, because (?) he's also going to college, which was something that we were struggling with, you know? He uh, had to (?) get his GED after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 'cos he you know, couldn't go back into the city for school there. Uh, and he's in college now, you know, and (?) it was just amazing that he made this decision.

04.27.02 And he enrolled in August and he's going to school. and you know, he just, he feels like you know, he has a new, a new you know, leaf on life, a new, a new start. You know, but uh, you know, this you know, looking at him and thinking about him, this all, you know, evolved from that, from that visit, you know?

04.27.29 Of, of what would make me fit in, what would make me be more a part of everybody else? You know? And so you know, I don't know if it, you know, for a better or for worse. But you know, I'm looking at it as something that's, has been wonderful for him. You know, it's helping him live with his life. Uh, but I'm very sadden of the fact that he wanted to change his name, officially change his name. And not really uh, (?) be identified as an Arab-Muslim.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

- 04.28.17 DEBBIE : Did he change his name? Uh, his dad, you know, we were like at this, this (?) you know, where he was like really depressed and he really wanted it, so his dad and him went.
- 04.28.31 And if he uh, it would have cost \$250 to do it. So then they didn't do it that day when they went. My husband said to him, why don't you think about it you know, this is a lot of money. But if this is something that you truly, truly want to do, then we'll come back. But (?) you know, let's not make a hasty decision. Uh, and so they came home and they told me about it. And uh, my husband said to him, you know, the decision is yours, you let me know.
- 04.29.01 But you know, it, it'll mean that you, that's it. That, that name you'll never have again. And you have to pay all of that money. And so there were times he didn't, they didn't go back, they haven't gone back yet, but there are times where he says, well I'm gonna go and I'm gonna do it. And I'm tired and I want to change it. And then he'll forget about it. And then something else will happen or something will make him think about it, and he'll do it.
- 04.29.29 Uh, he has a Muslim student association at his college. And I said, why don't you go visit it/ I'm sure they're really involved and it would be great to meet other people of your faith and, you know, they have all these different clubs for different folks, you know, different religions. And he's like ma, I'm not interested. That's not what I want to do. And you know, it is what it is.
- 04.29.55 But uh, you know, it just saddens me that, you know, you know, he feels or you know, that he's giving up a part of him that, that's very you know, for me that's so important to have. You know? Just to fit in. (STOPS)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

04.32.09 END OF TAPE # DA.1103.0400.4