

TAPE # DA 18
Debbie Almontaser 02.12.05 New York
Jim Whittaker, Producer
PROJECT REBIRTH

01.01.01 PICTURE UP – WHITE CHART

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW : Has a lot happened in the last year since the interrogation?

01.04.18 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : (MID-STATEMENT) I actually in January, I started applying for the Revsen Fellowship. And uh, I had applied the year before, just on the persuasion of friends who were like you have to apply, you have to apply.

01.04.34 And then one of the Revsen fellows that year nominated me and they sent me a letter inviting me to apply because you know, someone in the group had recommended, and they thought I'd really be great and so I applied uh, the first time. And uh, I didn't really put all my effort into it.

01.04.58 I uh, like I wrote the two essays like a few days before they were due, and you know, it got a couple of reference letters that were just you know, weren't that uh, weighted in terms of talking about the work that I do. And it was all because of the fact that I did everything like within that week before the deadline, so. I didn't get it. I didn't get called for an interview. And uh, I was disappointed, but I was also very relieved that I didn't get it because I was nowhere, you know.

01.05.34 I was not ready for such a commitment, you know, having one year of study and you know, having to attend the weekly seminars and having to you know, be a part of a cohort that was really dynamic and you know, very special in terms of getting picked to do this. So I was relieved, but I was very disappointed in my performance of, of how I went about it. So.

JW : You were probably doing a few other things?

01.06.03 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Oh, I was doing so much. Uh, (?) just involved in, in a lot of the community work that I was doing uh, you know, events, uh, you know, the work that I've been doing through the, my consulting work as well as the education uh, work that I was doing with uh, the Department of Education.

01.06.25 And uh, the one of the nicest things that happened to me that year was actually I had the opportunity to co-run uh, the Mosaic Youth Project, which was actually bringing uh, 25 young people from across the city for a cultural diversity training. Uh, and preparing them to become trainers themselves, facilitators. And that was really quite awesome uh, to have that opportunity. Uh, and within the group, there was interestingly enough uh, five young women who were actually Muslim who were a part of it from the very beginning.

01.07.05 Where we had them during the summer. Where they had the intensive training. And most kids out of the 25, they were the ones that really stuck through with us, through the entire year, and they were coming back on weekends, they helped plan a, they actually planned and we just were there to support. They planned a uh, a conference on Martin Luther King Day.

01.07.33 Uh, and it was really, really wonderful. It was very well-attended. And we collaborated with (Soko Gaki?), which is a uh, a Buddhist temple uh, in lower, lower Manhattan, off of 15th street (?) 15th Street. And we had over 300 people who showed up. Young and old who were very interested.

01.07.56 Uh, to you know, celebrate that day in that way so the young people invited uh, guest speakers, presenters, workshop presenters, you know, did an amazing job. And it all we did was just basically help facilitate, you know, like some of the logistical things that adults needed to do. Uh, but it was really, really wonderful. And.

JW : What parts were the most wonderful?

- 01.08.29 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : The, the part of it that was most wonderful was my opportunity to connect with, with the (five young?) women. Uh, and it was in a way that was so organic. Uh, a few of them uh, two of them actually didn't really, they were, they were brought up Muslim, but didn't practice. Their parents really didn't practice. And so for them uh, it gave them an opportunity to self-reflect.
- 01.08.58 Uh, and also feel like you know, I can, I can tell people I'm Muslim. I should be proud that I'm Muslim. Uh, and it came up in conversation uh, with these two young women, just while we were painting a mural uh, as they were finishing up and I was helping. And they're like, you know, we're just so happy we, we met you and we're so happy we're working with you and you just, you make all those things about Islam you know, just, just dissipate, just disappear.
- 01.09.29 Uh, you know, you're doing everything that we possibly want to do, but you're wearing hijab and you know, you just make it seem like it's an ordinary part of your life. Uh, and we're just so happy that we know you and the work that you do. And uh, you're you know, you're such a great role model for us. And uh, you know, it's hard when you hear that kind of stuff, people telling you that stuff, 'cos you just don't know how to respond to it.
- 01.10.00 But uh, you know, I was really, really happy that just my being with them was somehow helping them come to different conclusions about their, their religion, their relationship to the religion uh, and I just feel like, you know, it has to be this way or no other way. But you know, having the religion to be a part of your daily life, and fitting into your lifestyle rather than you trying to you know, be run by it.
- 01.10.34 Uh, etc. so it was really (~I~) sweet.

JW : It was their way of processing the rigidity?

- 01.11.10 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : (MID-STATEMENT) And, and they saw that in the way that, that I practice. Uh, that I'm (?) that I just, it's a part of my life, but it doesn't you know, it's not as you said, the rigidness is not there.
- 01.11.24 Uh, and so for example, like one of them said, you know, typically, you know, when a woman gets married and she has children, that's like her obligation. She has to stay home and, and raise her children. Uh, but you, you know, you're, you had your kids and you were going to school, you were working, you were just your typical, you know American mom who had to work and had to do it. And my response to that was we all live in different days and times, you know, if I was able to stay home and, and do that, I may have just stayed home and, and done that.
- 01.11.59 But uh, you know, when you have a family, you have a mortgage, you have responsibilities, it, you just can't live on one, one income unless you know, it's your husband has this amazing job to just brings in (LAUGHS). You know, a lot of money for you to do that, so. Uh, they were very, it was interesting. They even adored my husband. Every time he would come around or you know, during the conference, he came and he volunteered, and a couple of times he would drive us home if he'd picked me up.
- 01.12.30 And they just, they just adored him. They're like, you know, when we grow up, we want to marry somebody just like you (LAUGHS). So that was pretty cute and uh. (~I~)
- JW : He felt good about that?
- 01.12.42 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Yeah, absolutely. And there were times you know, we're driving in the car and I'd start giving him orders, and they're like listen to her, she's giving him orders. Can you believe this? (LAUGHS). Uh, so that was really pretty funny, and he's like well, she just tells me to do, I just do it, you know?
- 01.13.00 Uh, so that was really, really sweet. Uh, so where are these girls today? They are very, very involved in their school. Uh, one of them started uh, an Arab American club, which is really

awesome. Uh, two of them are involved in their uh, their Islamic clubs, their MSAs. Uh, and they've actually moved on, they started doing this in their high schools, and now that they've moved on into college uh, they are involved in their MSAs.

01.13.30 In fact, one of them just emailed me last night. Uh, about a conflict that she was having and uh, just wanted to touch base with me and help her think about it. So and the way that I help her and, and all of them think about is I pose all these questions (LAUGHS) that I ask them to, to think about uh, to help them find their own answers, so. I can't wait to, to see her responses to the six questions that I asked.

JW : Is that how you do the Socratic method?

01.14.06 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Yes, yes, and you know, they're like you know, we can never just come to you and ask you for advice. You just don't give us advice (LAUGHS). I said, well, it, it wouldn't be the same, you know, I think that when you think about it and all the right questions are asked, you organically come to your answer. And that's really important, you know, and it's something that I firmly believe is a way to learn about yourself.

01.14.31 Is that you, you ask these questions of yourself and when you can find the answer to it, it leads you to what you need to do. So uh, so uh, you know, they were doing a lot of workshops. Some of the workshops were on uh, Islam and Arab culture. Uh, we actually got opportunities for them to uh, go to schools and their schools actually released them, their high schools released them to do workshops in elementary schools.

01.15.04 Uh, we got them to do stuff in the evenings, during the weekend, at a couple of community-based organizations uh, at a city-wide conference actually held by the city. Where they facilitated, so it was really such a great experience, and uh, you know, there was one in particular uh, who was very, very, very shy, didn't talk much at all.

01.15.30 And it was just amazing to see her blossom, just amazing to see her blossom and, and you know, start developing all these leadership skills and, you know, really talk her mind and uh,

it was just beautiful. And her challenges were not just her being shy, but she also had a disability, and so she was always feeling like, you know, nobody's gonna take me serious, you know.

- 01.15.58 And it was just really, really amazing to see her come out of that shell and uh, do amazing stuff. And, I mean, one of the, the moments that was just so gratifying to see her in was actually uh, when we had the peace boat from Japan visit. And it was in the summer, and it was actually a time that you guys were supposed to shoot, and then the uh, American Friends Service Committee, the last-minute they decided that they couldn't get the release.
- 01.16.28 And so we were at their space, and uh, it was actually her first official time that she was actually supposed to do anything. And it took her awhile, because we, we, we didn't want to push her, but we were trying to let her find the time that she felt most comfortable, and she finally said, you know what I have to do this, whether I like it or not, I have to do this (LAUGHS). So uh, she facilitated a activity with uh, was interesting, with over 40 people.
- 01.17.01 Half of the people were Japanese. (LAUGHS) And they needed translators. So can you imagine doing an activity where you have to stop for translation. Uh, and then, and it was interesting because it's translation two ways, translating to the Japanese folks in Japanese, and then translating back to the American folks in American. So and in the past when I have had to do that, I know that it just stressed me out because it takes up time and you know, you just have to wait 'til you see everybody is almost finished and then you pick up.
- 01.17.36 And she handled it so beautifully, and uh, she, she was handed the mike, because it was a pretty huge room, and she just started talking and you know, just amazing. She wasn't nervous, her voice wasn't cracking and she did a really great job.
- 01.17.57 And then when she was actually debriefing the uh, activity and just summarizing the experience that we had gone through, she just kept talking and talking and talking (LAUGHS). And one of her uh, co-facilitators said Ok, we have to move on to the next activity (LAUGHS). You have to stop talking (LAUGHS). So that was such a tender and

sweet moment uh, to see her do that. And the following day when we got together to, to just debrief the whole entire day and ask them what was it like for them and what was their experience.

- 01.18.33 And she just said, you know, I can't believe what I did yesterday (LAUGHS). I'm like what do you mean? She says, I just can't believe that I held the microphone and that I was just talking and talking and somebody had to tell me (LAUGHS) that I had to stop so we can move on. And it just felt so good, and if I did not now you guys, and the person I co-facilitated with was Jill Strauss, who I met shortly after September 11 who is an educator.
- 01.19.00 Uh, she said, if I did not have this opportunity to be with you guys and I didn't have your encouragement and your support uh, I don't think I would have ever, ever done this. Uh, and so you've really, the two of you have just you know, helped me come out of my shell and it was just so touching to hear her use those words you know, of coming out of (?) her shell. And when we, you know, we asked her to explain some more, she says well, you know, I was very self-conscious of standing in front of people.
- 01.19.33 And you know, with my limp and with my arm, left arm not being able to move it (CLEARS THROAT) so well, uh, and walking slowly and uh, I was very, you know, just conscious of how I looked and I just didn't want any attention to me, but you know you guys helped me not care about that kind of stuff.
- 01.19.57 But to really push myself through who I am inside and for how smart I am and uh, and that I just should set my mind to do whatever I want, and, and to do it. So you know, it was just so beautiful for her to, to share that. To share that. So it was really, really amazing to uh, you know, have, have that experience with her. And her family's from Bangladesh. Uh, both her parents are practicing, but they've allowed her and her sister uh, to really make their own life choices in terms of education, in terms of dress.
- 01.20.34 Uh, and it was interesting, you know, every now and then when we would meet, she'd start wearing some of her cultural outfits. Uh, and so that was really, really fascinating. You

know, she would come in wearing uh, the (sural, the sural chamis?) which is a long shirt and with the baggy pants, so you typically see in India and Pakistan, and with the shawl wrapped around her neck. So it was really, really sweet to, to see that.

JW : What do you think brings that out?

01.21.07 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : (MID-STATEMENT) extremely Western clothes, she was always in jeans and a tee-shirt. And uh, the days that she came in she just uh, my interpretation of hat was she was starting to feel comfortable about her identity, of the fact that she's Muslim and the fact that she is from a very rich uh, culture. From Bangladesh,

01.21.33 And uh, there were a lot of opportunities that we provided the kids to talk about their culture, their traditions, their rituals. And in the beginning, it was really hard to get them to go there. But eventually it started coming up, you know, when the holidays came. When Ramadan came, they were all fasting. And we use to have late meetings where we couldn't go home and have dinner with our families, so they were all bringing food. And it would all, we would all have dinner together. You know, the Muslim and the non-Muslim youth who were involved.

01.22.01 Uh, there was one particular uh, young woman who's uh, Latina. And uh, she was going to high school with uh, with this young woman. And she brought her, she said, you know, why don't you come, I think you'd really enjoy it. So she joined. And in the beginning she had a really difficult time because she had a lot of uh, negative misconceptions about Islam. And uh, you know, just about a lot of stuff. So there is one day (STOPS)

JW : Did someone tell you that before?

01.22.38 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Well, we didn't know this before, but it, it was coming up in a lot of the discussions. And she has a brother who's in the military, and one day we were talking about just you know, things the world, you know, the war coming. And uh, you know, one of the young people just said, you know, it's really disgusting that people will

actually listen to, you know, to the government when they tell them you have to report, you know, and you're going to Iraq.

- 01.23.09 And she, so she said, well, you know, it's not, because if you love your country, you'll do anything for it. And they're like, well, yeah, we love this country, too, and you know, we'll do anything for it. But to fight an unjust war, you know, we don't think that's right. And she said, well, you really don't know if this is a just or unjust war. Uh, and I think that we really just have to support you know, our leaders.
- 01.23.33 You know, they know best. Uh, for, for this country. So uh, she said, you know, there are a lot of terrorists out there, and we have to get them. (LAUGHS) And then the kids started asking her, well, what do you mean? And you know, and so a lot of those things, she says, well, you know, those fundamentalists and you know, Osama bin Laden, and you know, he has all these cells and they must be here, and you know, so we all have to keep an eye.
- 01.23.58 And it was (?) really, really fascinating for, for some of the uh, Muslim youth to just like say well, you know, do you think we are? You know, we live here. And it was just uh, it as a huge learning curve for her to just dialog, and try to, to hear about them, and when they started sharing with her about the religion of what it means, and you know, the rituals. And about the Koran which is the, the text.
- 01.24.31 You know, she started to listen, and she really started to question uh, herself as well as question the young people to help her come to a lot of you know, her own uh, revelations about what she's been taught. And one day uh, after one of our meetings, she uh, she didn't leave with everybody. She stayed and she said to Jill and I, she said, you know, uh, this was the best thing that ever happened to me.
- 01.25.00 And we're like what do you mean? She's like you guys have helped me open my eyes to a world that I never realized existed. And we're like well, what do you mean? Uh, just uh, explain to us, what do you mean by that? She says, well, you know, I have been throughout

middle school and high school believing everything I read in school, in high school, in history. And all this time I've been thinking that the whole world is against us.

01.25.29 Uh, and it's not. You know? And you know, for those people who do feel like they're against us, it's because of all the harsh things that our country has been doing over time. And this, being a part of this program has helped me learn you know, about alternative media, about alternative perspectives that I never realized existed. So I'm just so happy that you guys have helped me see the world for what it is.

01.26.00 And when she left, we were just like astonished. We were like oh, my god, this is unreal (LAUGHS). You know?

JW : She did a 180?

01.26.08 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : She did an extreme 180. So all of that resistance that she had about Muslims and what have you, just sort of like just disappeared.

JW : You can see the locks clicking into place and that's very gratifying?

01.27.05 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Oh, there is, there is. And once she was telling us, when she was actually supporting you know, the war in Iraq we were just like all in shock, you know? And she was really under this impression that you know, we have to protect ourselves, and if we don't take Saddam down, then you know, he's gonna attack us. And when she was you know, sharing you know, what the president is saying, that you know, he is linked to 9-11, that Saddam was linked to 9-11.

01.27.35 And then the, the young people were actually saying, well, where is the proof in that? You know, we, we also hear this, but we don't really believe that there is any connection. Uh, and so they asked her to actually go and do research. Uh, and the following, she came and she said, look, I didn't find anything uh, (LAUGHS).

JW : Did she call the president?

- 01.28.00 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Well, that's what she said. She goes, I didn't find anything in alternative media that says that, that Saddam is linked to 9-11. This is (?) the only evidence that we have here is what the president is saying (LAUGHS). And I don't have access to him and his staff to say show me the proof. (LAUGHS) So uh, but that moment for her was like, wow. You know, I really have to pay close attention to what I hear, and I have to question.
- 01.28.30 And that was a huge learning that she, she came to was that I just can't, you know, I can't accept everything that I hear. I have to really, really do my own research, my own investigation. Uh, and really figure out what is truth and what is false. And so it was really fascinating uh, that day, just for her to say you know, you guys are right. That I, I can't listen to everything I hear.
- 01.28.57 And that I need to question and that I need to look at other sources of media to, to help me come to my conclusion. So uh, (?) it was just amazing to see her become such a, an ally for the young women that were in the group, as well as the young men that were in the group. Uh, and the group that, that ended up sticking with us, which was really fascinating was uh, four young Sikh men, and they were high school students, and uh, two of them were actually college students.
- 01.29.32 And so what, them and the uh, five young Muslim women and uh, this Latina young woman, they really, they basically ran the show for that conference, the Martin Luther King conference. And their stories were so intriguing, the Sikh, Sikh boys, so intriguing because they, too, have been facing a lot of racism and discrimination and the backlash, and you know, being called Osama because they wear their turbans.
- 01.30.03 And uh, when we were planning the conference, uh, we told them that, you know, they need to think about addressing all the issues that are bothering them. In our society and (~JW~) no small task (LAUGHS). And so the one of the young Sikh boys said, well, I want to let everybody know who we are.

01.30.32 And I said, well, how would you go about it? And he said, well, I want to do a presentation that tells who we are, how Sikhism originated, what our beliefs are, and what good, loving, peaceful people we are. And uh, I have just like wow. That would be awesome if you could do that. And he and two of the other young men over the week, put together this amazing, amazing slide show, that it was like a power point presentation, but was amazing.

01.31.09 And they did, they did a quick dry run for us, for the group. They showed us the sides. And they talked about each one and it was just so wonderful to see them articulate their ideas. Uh, and solidify what things meant. Uh, and they were just so passionate to do it.

01.31.31 And the day of the conference, there was, we were all conflicted of whether this should be a small workshop uh, you know, and people who are interested could attend it or whether it should be a part of the bigger whole where we have the 200 people in the room. So we gave them uh, the opportunity (~JW~) to make that decision.

JW : What was the conflict was?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

01.32.02 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Well, because there were so many workshops, and the conflict was we didn't want to just, you know, ten or fifteen people to see this, we really wanted everybody to see this, because it was just such an awesome presentation. And the adults, Jill and I couldn't say well, we think you should have this you know, as one of the main parts where everybody is still in, in the main hall.

01.32.27 But we wanted them to come to that conclusion themselves. And uh, you know, through discussion, you know, we posed it, we're like, well, so what do you think about this? Should this be a workshop or should this be a part of the main session. Where, where are you guys heading with this, how are you feeling it? So actually one of the young Muslim women said I think it should be uh, during the whole, where we're still in the main hall with everybody

because it's so important for everybody to understand that people wearing turbans are not Arabs, are not Muslims.

- 01.33.02 Uh, and it, it's really an opportunity to educate people. Uh, and help them understand this. So you know, the, the rest of them were like, you know, it's, it's true, and you know, the Latina young woman basically said uh, I never knew this stuff. And I'm sure that there'll be a lot of other people who you know, don't know this information and it is valuable information.
- 01.33.30 Uh, and she shared some of her preconceived notions. Uh, she says, you know, when you see a picture of Osama bin Laden and you see a picture of a Sikh or you see a Sikh person, you think that they're a part of the same, you know, cult. And you know, and they're evil and. So it was really fascinating. Uh, so they did the presentation for the whole, entire 200 people. Uh, and they were not nervous, they were very confident.
- 01.34.00 They spoke really well. They were able after their presentation to answer questions and people were so just so intrigued. Intrigued to hear their story uh, and for them to just tell some of the, you know, the struggles that they've had. Uh, one in, in particular is uh, for Sikh men, they have to carry a pocket knife as a part of their uh, religious tradition.
- 01.34.30 Uh, and they wear these bracelets, it's a bangle. And that you know, that symbolizes one thing. And carrying a pocketknife symbolizes another. So after September 11th, you know, many of them were not able to do that. They were afraid to do so, just in case they were stopped or questioned, uh, etc. And for them, it was a huge struggle, because this was a violation of their religious belief.
- 01.34.59 And helping people understand that was a huge, huge task. And them sharing this kind of information of it being confiscated, you know, by the police, confiscated in the airport uh, and you know, there were just really some sad stories of how some of these pocket knives have been passed down for generations. And when a man would get to the airport, they would take it and not give it back.

01.35.28 And you know, they've struggled uh, greatly to try to get the airport to at least have people in the airplane hold it in a safe or whatever, and when they landed to give it back. Uh, so back, at that time when they were sharing this information with us, uh, it, they were still and people in their community, community leaders were still in the process of trying to negotiate this as a religious uh, belief that they needed to have respected.

01.36.01 Uh, and so I'm curious to know today and now that I think of it, I will email uh, (Singtu?) and, and ask him whatever happened with that. But uh, it was just pretty, pretty sad to hear that. And it's almost, it put me in their place of like if I had to not wear my hijab you know, which is something that means a lot to me, how I would feel about it. And uh, it was just wonderful. We had so many opportunities to, to put ourselves in the shoes of the other.

01.36.33 You know?

JW : How would you feel?

01.36.38 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : how would I feel? Oh, I'd be absolutely devastated. If, if that was the case. Uh, you know, that I was to go somewhere and you can't enter unless you take it off. Uh, I probably not enter. Uh, you know, and uh, thank god that that has not become an issue here, as it has become in France. Uh, which is quite interesting uh, to, just see how that is, how that's evolved.

01.37.05 Oh, yeah, yeah. (~JW~) There is a ban. They, in France they have banned uh, people from wearing any religious garb or symbols, and uh, for Christians you are not to wear a cross bigger than an inch or so. Yeah, and so for, for Sikhs they're not allowed to wear their turbans.

01.37.31 For Muslims, they're not allowed to wear their hijabs. For Jews, they're not allowed to wear yarmulkes. And uh, this legislation actually was passed uh, last year in April.

JW : Is it a de-religious-ization?

- 01.37.51 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Yes. Yes. To, to continue being a secular province or state. Uh, which really infringes on the rights of so many people who you know, want to autonomously you know, follow their beliefs. And uh, it's caused a lot of uh, hardship, a lot of hardship for people who, who do wear their turbans and who do wear hijabs, you know? Many young women now are not continuing their education. Uh, some who work in government, you know, positions also are not allowed uh, you know, have stopped working because of that.
- 01.38.30 And it's just a really uh, it's pretty, quite honestly pretty pitiful that it went that far. You know, even though that many people across the world mobilized through demonstrations and, and what have you and letter campaign writing, it just, it didn't penetrate. You know, and the government actually uh, went through with it, and it was interesting because I just read about two months ago in the New Yorker, they did a story of a young uh, Arab Muslim woman uh, who they interviewed uh, who wears hijab.
- 01.39.09 And she uh, has been going to college and was told that she couldn't wear it. No, actually in France. And uh, so she dropped out for that semester and was grappling with it, and became even more uh, you know, more devoted to the religion.
- 01.39.33 And uh, in her interview she just said uh, she wishes that she could move to Brooklyn. Uh, it's really funny, because the person who actually gave me the article said she must have seen you on TV or read about you (LAUGHS). And so she writes, you know, when they interviewed her, they wrote that she, she wished that she could live in Brooklyn, New York, and go to Brooklyn College, where she hears that people in Brooklyn can walk freely wearing their hijabs without having to worry about anyone discriminating against them.
- 01.40.03 Or government officials, or the police stopping them to say take it off before you enter government space. Uh, and it was really a beautiful, well-written piece uh, of her reflections of this and reflections of her friends who are also being tormented by this legislation. Uh, so

that's her ultimate wish, is to come to Brooklyn and when I read it, I said if only you knew (LAUGHS).

01.40.31 It's not as you know, as sweet as you think. But I, I wish for her, I wish that she would come. You know? Just for the fact that she wants to have religious freedom. Uh.

JW : Are you weary of trying to explain something that maybe shouldn't have to be explained?

01.41.06 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Oh, yeah. It makes a lot of sense. Uh, do I get tired? I absolutely get tired, Jim, I absolutely get tired. Of explaining. Uh, gosh I uh, you know, it's interesting how many presentations I do within a year. I, I can't even keep up anymore. You know?

01.41.29 Uh, at one point, for the past two years, I have not even updated my resume (LAUGHS). It's been that bad. Uh, and people are constantly telling me, keep a record of all the presentations and workshops that you are doing. And uh, it's really important for you to just keep that uh, information logged at, you know, come in handy, etc. And the majority of my presentations are about Islam are about Arab people and uh, it gets really tiring.

01.42.02 Uh, very tiring. And I was invited uh, early (CLEARS THROAT) it was actually in November of this year, to St. Joseph's college in Brooklyn. And uh, they had religious leaders from different faiths and they asked for someone who is Muslim to, to come talk. And they sent me a list of 12 questions to answer (LAUGHS).

01.42.30 And all of them were you know, what is your faith say about peace, what does your faith say about terrorism? What does your faith say about you know, living in harmony, what does your faith say about uh, you know, living with other people of religious backgrounds? And the questions were just so you know loaded for me. Like, you know, why are you asking me all these questions? You know, it's already 2004.

- 01.42.59 Uh, there has been so much said and done about Islam. And uh, I had to, that day, you know, the, the days before that as well, just prepare myself mentally to be able to articulate, you know, these ideas that my answers to these questions in a way that as not gonna come off defensive. Uh, in a way that was not gonna be interpreted that I was proselytizing. Uh, in a way that people can really hear and understand, you know, what I'm talking about.
- 01.43.37 And uh, getting there that day was really amazing. It was like a room filled with 200 students. You know? Majority you know, white. There were a few minorities. Uh, and later that day I found out, which was really interesting, is that many of the students that come to this college are actually from uh, from out of state.
- 01.44.01 So it's really fascinating. There was some kids from the Midwest, etc. So it's like OK, this is really interesting (CLEARS THROAT). And uh, the, the strategy that I chose that day to answer some of these questions was rather than talking from a text or bringing you know, you know, resources to, to discuss some of these questions or respond to these questions, I chose to use personal stories of my own, my family.
- 01.44.32 My children. Uh, friends. And uh, and, and try to deal with them. Uh, and you know, we weren't just talking about terrorism. It was just really that was the most difficult to help people try and understand that you know, Islam does not in anyway condone terrorism. Oh, you know, there is nothing in the text that says, you know, to go do it.
- 01.44.59 And just providing them, you know, with just short, you know, personal stories of, of you know, how I came to, to you know, to adopt the faith. And it was because of, of the teachings that you know, it provides to, to live peacefully, and you know, to constantly question yourself of doing what's right for yourself, your family, and your community.
- 01.45.26 And you know, what that constant questioning you know, you, you would never stray to doing you know, evil. You would never stray to wanting to, to hurt people. You know, that God hasn't instructed you to serve uh, and so that (?) for some people there, it was really, really difficult to hear. But them (?) you know, I saw some people just making that

connection with me of like wow. You know, that's, that's deep. You know, we haven't heard about this. We didn't, we never read about this.

- 01.46.00 And then we gave the audience an opportunity to ask questions, and uh, one of the young women, you know, raised her hand, and she said, you know, I had this whole, entire notion that you know, that Islam one of its tenets is to fight infidels. And uh, you know, and just make, and turn, have everybody convert to Islam or to you know, to terminate them. And I was like you know, that's absolutely.
- 01.46.30 Something that you may have heard, you know, or read. But it's quite frankly not that. You know? And I explained to her of the importance of tolerance within Islam for people of other faiths. Uh, and at that time, the two other faiths that existed were Christianity and Judaism. And both people are considered people of the book, because they, too, had prophets that people uh, who are Muslim believe in.
- 01.47.01 And that (STUMBLE) was even a huge connection for people to, to understand that we respect and admire Jesus, and we see him as a prophet, not as the son of god or god himself. Uh, and how his mother is someone who's very sacred in Islam, because of her virgin birth and her virtue and the way that she led her life. So it was, that was also a very huge learning curve for people to, to understand that we also uh, you know, we had that understanding about him.
- 01.47.35 Uh, so it, it was really interesting to, to have that experience and you know, it was upsetting because it was 2004 already and I'm feeling like you know, there is so much out there, and in my closing thoughts, uh, when we all got a chance to give a minute of reflection and closing, you know, I eluded to all of these websites and books to read.
- 01.48.00 And you know, just telling people that we live in a time that information is very easily accessible, and it's our obligation to learn. And not to read once source, but to read many sources to come to our own conclusions. Uh, and that was one thing that I wanted to leave

them with, as well as ask each and every one of them to find someone uh, someone in their community that was Muslim. And just talk to them.

01.48.29 And you know, I said to them, I promise you, they won't bite. Uh, they won't do anything to you. In fact, they would be so honored, so honored that you are talking to them, and that you want to learn about their faith. And you know, I said to them, you will not get anyone who will be negative. Uh, I said 99% you will not find anyone who, who will say you know, why are you asking me this. But you know, it all depends on your approach. But uh, as a part of their duty and responsibility, uh, they are to talk about their faith.

01.49.04 And it's not to convert people, but just to, to share why they are at peace with who they are. Uh, if it comes up. So. Uh, it was an interesting afternoon. Very interesting afternoon, and uh, you know, when the moderator who sent us the questions uh, I asked him uh, well, what were the questions like for everybody else?

01.49.28 He said, well, you know, we, we also had similar questions. Uh, I said, so did you ask everybody about, about terrorism? (LAUGHS) He said, well, no, not necessarily, but we thought it was important to ask you because you know, we really we needed you to help people (?) you know, understand. That you know, Islam doesn't condone, condone terrorism. I said Ok. Uh, so I, you know, there are times that I feel like, you know, these things are planted there.

01.49.59 Uh, but then there are times that I feel like well, this is important to discuss. But it is very tiring to discuss. You know, the same, same things over and over. Uh, but you know, that's become the story of our lives, you know, post-911 is to constantly explain these uh, unfortunate things, and uh, the most recent one was actually somebody from within the Arab community. I was going to speak at a synagogue about building bridges between Arabs and Jews. And (STOPS)

01.50.39 END OF TAPE # DA 18

TAPE # DA 19
Debbie Almontaser 02.12.05 New York
Jim Whittaker, Producer
PROJECT REBIRTH

02.01.00 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW : What about the breath when you're talking to me?

02.01.59 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : The thought behind the breath is you know, (?) you, you raised the issue of the, you know, about this, and the, the breath is like, it's really tiring to, to be doing this. And I'm, I'm talking, I am actually venting to you (LAUGHS) about it. Uh, so it's, you know, my venting and, and taking, making those sighs are just you know, I feel like I'm unloading, unloading a lot of this stuff.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

02.02.34 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : I'm unloading, and it's not that I'm tired of sharing uh, with you. I'm, I'm tired in general of the world making those kind of demands. And maybe that's just too big, saying the world, but uh, although maybe no, it could be the world because one of the things that uh, that happened uh, November I was asked by Spirit magazine to do a 30 second commercial for them (LAUGHS). And this is really funny, but it's also uh, it was aggravating.

02.03.10 Uh, Spirit magazine is a woman's magazine that celebrates diversity, and they were looking for a Muslim woman, and they were looking for actually for a few months. And it's so funny because it's, it's so parallel to (LAUGHS) Project Rebirth (LAUGHS) of the looking and looking and not finding anyone and then you know, all the sudden, I became it (LAUGHS).

- 02.03.34 Which is not a bad thing. Uh, so uh, finally Laura uh, got a hold of one of my friends, who was actually the executive director of Women In Islam, which is an organization that's been around for 13 years, and I joined uh, after her begging me to, to basically uh, join and be a part of it.
- 02.03.58 And it was after a lot of you know, reflection and, and in terms of making the commitment. Uh, I'm always feeling overcommitted and over extended, and it was like this is gonna be one more thing that I have to work with. But I did uh, I did decide to join. I've been with them for the past uh, I would say since actually since the, the summer of 2003, so it's almost 2 years. And uh, she's, Laura spoke to her and she said, you know, we're looking for this dynamic woman who does all of this amazing work.
- 02.04.34 Who works in the interfaith world, who works, has a you know, who's a professional, who's (CLEARS THROAT) making a difference in the lives of children or people or whatever, but we just, we need a Muslim woman. And particularly we're looking for a Muslim who wears hijab. And she said, and that's been really difficult to find. Uh, and we can't ask a Muslim woman who is out there to wear hijab for this commercial.
- 02.05.02 And so uh, my friend referred her to me. And she called me uh, and she left me a couple of messages and I was like oh, this is ridiculous. You know, they want a Muslim woman for a commercial. Uh, finally she called me back and this time she got me and she started telling me about the project, and uh, (CLEARS THROAT) the magazine being fairly new uh, and they want to project you know, the, the diversity.
- 01.02.34 Uh, and, you know, how people understand a lot of the misconceptions about different women, etc. And she sent me actually a couple of uh, of issues of the magazine and I was really, really impressed. With the stories that they were uh, writing about and, you know, just the also the highlighting of, of different women for the work that they'd been doing.

- 02.06.02 So uh, I called her back, is aid Ok, what is it that you need from me? She said, well, what we're, what we need is a commercial. And uh, this commerical's actually going to air internationally. And uh, it will help you know, number one, publicize the magazine, but number two, you know, get people to really see that there is a, you know, a magazine that's specializes in celebrating diversity of women in such prestigious positions or, you know, in whatever works that they are doing.
- 02.06.36 So we would love to have you because we've heard that you're very charismatic, that uh, you know, you touch people in a way that many people can't touch people. Uh, and you know, you were highly recommended that you'd be the perfect person for us. And uh, and I saw your picture on line (LAUGHS)
- 02.07.02 And I just fell in love with you. And it's like what do you mean you saw my picture online. She goes, she says, well, I did a Google search on you, and there are a couple of pictures of you on line already. So I said, Ok. This is (?) really interesting. I didn't realize they were, there were any. Uh, so uh, I went to their studio. And you know, a thirty second, maybe even less, commercial ended up stretching to two hours. I was so aggravated.
- 02.07.35 And the things that they were asking me to do uh, they had me sitting at a computer you know, trying to, it was actually a studio for, it was uh, the technical design institute or something like that in the city. And they asked me to work the computers for you know, taking pictures of mannequins with clothing, and I'm like, I don't do this in real life.
- 02.07.59 And I don't like doing this because I don't want people to think this is what I do. (~JW~) And I told, yeah, I said that to them. I said now, I, I agreed to do this commercial. Uh, but there are just some things I'm not happy with. I, so if you want to take a picture of me at the computer, looking like I'm working on a computer, that's OK. But don't ask me to you know, do other stuff. So they were respectful. I know they were annoyed, but they were respectful. And then I had this uh, I had this like blurb that I had to say about the magazine, and they made me say that like 20 times (LAUGHS).

- 02.07.37 Until I got it right and it sounded perfect, and you know, they had a few that, that sounded really good, so they were gonna use those clips. So anyway uh, we did that. And uh, I sort of felt really icky about it. I didn't like the idea.
- 02.08.56 But then of course I felt the commitment to uh, providing a positive role model and image of (?) a Muslim woman. So uh, I didn't hear back from them. They were supposed to send me a clip of what the final piece looked like. Uh, I didn't hear back from them, and I just recently emailed the person, Laura, uh, and said to her, you know, I haven't heard from you guys, but I just want to tell you that I've already gotten you know, three or four calls saying that you know, they, people have seen the commercial.
- 02.09.30 And I don't have British TV in the US to actually uh, see it. But uh, I would really like a copy. So uh, my sister uh, actually has this dish that provides her all these different channels, and she said that it was after dinner and her son was watching TV, my nephew, and he was talking on the phone with his friend. All the sudden he sees the commercial (LAUGHS). And she said he jumped out of the, off the couch.
- 02.09.59 And she heard him jump off the couch. He's like Mom, get in here. And she's like what's the matter? He's like Aunt Debbie's on TV. (LAUGHS) She's like are you serious. And by the time that she walked over, she just saw like the end of the clip. And she said, what was it? He's like it's a commercial. She was on a commercial, talking about a magazine (LAUGHS). So, so funny. So she said they sat there for the next hour (LAUGHS) monitoring this channel. Uh, you know, for this commercial.
- 02.10.29 So she said to me uh, uh, my sister said, she goes, Debbie it is awesome. You sound great, you look great. It is such a beautiful commercial. And uh, and you know, then a few other people had emailed me. But when my sister was telling me about it, I said to her, I said you know, I really don't like this stuff, and I just don't know why I keep saying yes.

JW : Why?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER : (LAUGHS) Uh, why don't I like it? (~I~)

JW : Why do you keep saying yes?

02.10.59 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Oh, why do I keep saying yes? Uh, I, I most of the times I get cornered in to say yes. So I have no choice but to say yes. And a lot it has to do with the fact that there are people who are up to just you know, standing up and, and doing it, you know, this woman in particular said to me. We'd been looking for three months, and we haven't found anybody who, who would do it.

02.11.27 Uh, and we really would love somebody to do it. And we've heard that you know, you've done stuff like this before, and we didn't think you know, you'd say no to us. And you know, and I did give her a very hard time in the beginning. But when she started telling me you know, how compelling it is that for her, for their executive director of this magazine to say you know what? We want a Muslim woman to do this. She said this is a huge milestone, especially with the negativity around Muslims.

02.12.00 Uh, and people fearing that they may lose ratings or you know, people ordering subscriptions or buying the magazine off stand, etc. Uh, is pretty you know, it, it's a pretty special thing to actually have this director, executive director to say let's do it on a Muslim woman, why not? Uh, and she said to me, and you know, if you don't say yes to us and we don't think we're gonna find anybody.

02.12.32 And so uh, I'm not pressuring you, you know, I want you to think about it, and I'll call you tomorrow. But you know, you doing this would be a service to your entire community. And you'd be touching the lives of people all over the world, because this is gonna be airing worldwide. So uh, I went home and I actually told my husband, and he's like oh, great. Another project (LAUGHS).

02.12.58 And he said, well, how much are they paying you. I said, well, I don't think they're paying me anything (LAUGHS). He said, well, you know, you have to ask these kind of questions.

You know, you're always doing things for free, and you know, you should you know, be compensated for the stuff that you're doing. Uh, so I told him I said I don't know. And I, I shared with him what she was talking about. So he said to me, he said, you know, the decision is yours, you know, you choose whatever you want to do. Uh, it'd be nice if you could get paid. Uh, but you know, if you don't, that's OK, too.

02.13.33 But you know, you really have to think about this is something you want to do. And so I started explaining to him of how she made it so compelling. That you know, they'd been looking and they haven't found anybody and it's really important to have the Muslim perspective, and also to provide a positive image of Muslims, particularly women, since women are always considered oppressed by many.

02.13.57 Uh, and so she called me up the next day and I said to her, Ok, I'll, I'll be happy to do it, but what does it require? So she said, you have to go into our studio, it may be just an hour or maybe less. Uh, you know, but the, the person there who's gonna do everything will be great, and supportive, and will workaround your schedule. Uh, so that was really nice. That, that it was gonna happen on my time so, and it was still so difficult to try to get them to be at the studio when I was available. But eventually we were able to do it. Uh, so (STOPS)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW : (?)

02.15.11 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : I feel too obligated to say no. And believe me, there are so many times that I say, ok, I'm gonna try to get this person to do that, and this person to do that. And I have been really fortunate in terms of building a network of other women who sort of uh, are sort of like, you know, ready for this kind of, of stuff, and, and trying to uh, delegate some of these responsibilities. Uh, there was a (~JW~)

JW : You are aware of others (?)

02.15.55 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Or the opportunities to, to be called on. Uh, or just the self-confidence that I could do this. And so for example, a couple of these young women that I told you about through the Mosaic Youth project uh, you know, I've called on them a couple of times to, to go to a school and do a workshop. Uh, where I, you know, developed a relationship with their school to say you know, they, they were trained to do this, they're really great and it would make your school look good. That you're sending, you know, one of your high school students, you know, to a school, an elementary school, a (?) middle school, you know, an organization to do this uh, that's a really special thing.

02.16.37 So there has been that support to get people who are under (?) 18 to actually have those opportunities. Uh, (COUGHS) and just through my travels of meeting other young women, professional women who just you know, have not had the chance or the opportunity to have such opportunities and there was one in particular event this past January, on Martin Luther King day, they were having this interfaith service at a church and they were looking for someone Muslim and they called me, and I said you know I, I can't do it. I have a commitment already that's uh, you know, that I can't get out of, but I'll be happy to find you someone else, and I was able to call (?) this young woman uh, and set her up and she went, and the pastor of the church the next day emailed me, said she was wonderful.

01.17.31 And it was great, and we're so just so delighted and so honored to have you know, heard it, about you to help us find somebody else. And uh, so that was really, really sweet.

JW : When you go to bed at night, do you feel there's a pact forming towards a goal?

02.18.09 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : You know, I, I think about a lot of things when I go to bed. I don't, I don't think (?) too much future-wise, but I mean, one of the things that I question myself at night is, you know, what is, what did I do today that you know, touched somebody in a way that, that was great?

02.18.29 Uh, that just made that person or those people feel good about themselves, about the world? You know provide them hope, whatever it is. So that's usually the question I ask myself at

night. I'm like, you know, and I also do ask myself, you know, what are, what can I do better? Uh, you know, what will make things better? Uh, but in terms, and I guess when I do ask that, maybe, maybe it is more future-scopish, like you were saying?

02.19.03 But I don't like foresee in three years that you know, I will have achieved X,Y and Z. I just, I don't feel like uh, who knows, maybe. I haven't thought of it that way. Uh, gosh. You know, it's just, thinking back about everything,

02.19.31 and you know, this event taking place tomorrow uh, you know, it was a huge responsibility that was bestowed on me for lack of a better word, it was bestowed (LAUGHS) on me by the community. Uh, we had gone to one of the Imams, religious leaders from the 96th street mosque, called an emergency meeting, and he, his, his background is he's Indonesian.

02.19.59 And I had called him about 4 or 5 days before him calling the meeting, just saying, you know, I, I'm really devastated about what's happened, and I feel like I need, you know, need something to do. And you know, I want to do something, but I just don't know what it is, and if you can call me back and let me know if there is anything that I could assist you with, you know, the community with, you know, organize something, do something. You know, raise money for you know, people in Indonesia, you know, whatever it maybe just, you know, feel free to call me.

02.20.35 So uh, he called me back and said well, you know, I'm thinking about organizing a meeting, and uh, (CLEARS THROAT) just to call everybody, as many people as possible, and you know, have people share some of the efforts that they've been involved in, and uh, and then just like see what the community wants to do in response.

02.20.57 So he, he called people and I called people and we got over 30 people who came to this meeting. It was really awesome. (CLEARS THROAT) so in the conversation of, you know, what people were doing (CLEARS THROAT) I had shared uh, with everybody what we were doing in Brooklyn about the six drop-off sites for clothing and medicine. And you know, organizing pickups, from the different sites and shipping it to uh, new jersey uh, for

the Islamic Circle of North America, to ship it to Indonesia and Sri Lanka, and India, etc. and how we had been doing that,

02.21.38 And people really amazed to hear of such an initiative was actually taking place, even though that people think New York City is small, it's not. And uh, other people were sharing some of the things that they were doing, and the question uh, since he facilitated the meeting, he said, you know, uh, you know, how do people feel about what do people want to do in response, you know? We've been getting, I've been getting calls, Debbie's been getting calls. And I was truly bombarded by media, but you know, officials of like, you know, what can we do, is there anything we could do.

02.22.11 Uh, who should we contact, etc? And uh, in the conversation uh, it was raised that perhaps having a memorial service, and then also someone said well, we should also do a fundraiser. And being that everybody was doing this on a voluntary basis, we just did not have the capacity to do two, two different events. (CLEARS THROAT).

02.22.36 And so we decided to make it (CLEARS THROAT) one event culminating uh, both things. And uh, when we started uh, breaking up into groups of who was gonna do what. Someone in the group uh, a good friend (~JW~)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

02.22.59 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : One, one person in the group said uh, I nominate Debbie to be the public relations committee head. And I turned around and I looked at her. It's like are you for real? (LAUGHS) And she's like yes, I think you should be it. And it's like, please don't do this. Please don't do this. And she said, you really have to do it. (CLEARS THROAT) so you know, I'm in the Revson program, I'm taking classes, I'm also working full time. I was like when the hell am I gonna have time to do this?

02.23.29 So uh, I asked that all the committee, the committees be solidified, what are the responsibilities? And when we started talking about the public relations part of it, it was

contacting local politicians. It was uh, sending out letters to politicians, to the speakers, to, you name it, whoever we were gonna invite, and whatever (CLEARS THROAT) advertisement we were gonna do. They needed to have a name.

02.24.00 And uh, that was very and what was important was to have a name that people you know, when seeing the flyer or the letter could say oh, I know her. Or I've heard of her, or him. And so uh, the person who nominated me said if there's anybody sitting in this room who everybody knows in New York City, it's Debbie. And so you know, with all due respect, I really think that she should take it. I know that we're asking a lot of her, and of course she has you know, the final say in saying whether she wants to do it or not.

02.24.33 But you know, the success of this event uh, lays in Debbie's hands. And I was like oh, this is just great (LAUGHS). You know, keep twisting my arm. You know, and I wasn't saying this to her, but I was thinking this, and uh, my husband was sitting at the meeting. And he just listened, he was listening. And uh, he would look down at me when this nomination came up, and then this appeal that it should be me.

02.25.01 And uh, you know, he, he's been so wonderful and so supportive uh, it's just amazing, you know, that he even puts up with me sometimes. (LAUGHS) So uh, you know, I thought about it, and it was like oh, my god, if I say no, and somebody else does this and this event is not as successful, how am I gonna feel? I'm gonna feel so terrible. You know? And uh, people are like, Debbie, please you've got to do this.

02.25.32 You got to do this around the table. Even people who didn't even know me, but have heard of me are sitting around this table, and I just said to the one woman who was sitting next to me, it was like you don't even know me. How, how could you have such confidence in me? And she says, but I heard about you. And I'd been reading stuff about you. And I was like OK. So uh, I said to them, that I would accept it under the condition that I had a solid committee that was going to work with me, and that would be very flexible in taking delegated items and doing things and really supporting me, because I cannot do it alone.

- 02.26.10 And uh, I said so, when I had at least 8 names on a list of people who are gonna be committed uh, to work as a team with me, I will, I'll, I'll do it. And so they passed around a paper, and 8 people signed up.
- 02.26.27 And unfortunately, out of the 8 people there were only about 6 who were very active. And the other two have just been like you know, there, but not really doing major stuff. But, uh, these two people just haven't had the experience of doing a lot of this kind of stuff, so I'm hoping that at least going through the process and seeing the stages that we went through and the procedures that'll be, that it has been a uh, a good learning experience.
- 02.27.02 Uh, and, you know, I haven't written them off. A couple of people in the committee are like why are you, bother including them in the emails, and it's like no, it's important, you know, everybody has their limitations. Everybody you know, has their learning curves, their learning styles, and it's ok. I think that it's important just for them to every now and then check in, every now and then say you know, I'll take the flyer to so and so.
- 02.27.27 Or I'll contact this person uh, and maybe the next event that we ever plan, they'll be ready to take on more responsibilities. So uh, so I took on the responsibility uh, of being the community relations person, the public relations person for this event. Uh, and we had to find a space (LAUGHS). So they're like we need a space that does not cost a lot of money uh, and it has to be big because we really want to have a large turnout, you know, (?) both Muslim and non-Muslim.
- 02.28.04 So the wheels started turning in my head. And I said, well, I do have a very special place in mind that I could certainly pick up the phone and call them. Bu it need to know if people are supportive of the idea of having the event at a church. And so they said to me, we'll talk to us. You know, we trust you, we trust your judgment, talk to us. Tell us why you think we should do it at a church.
- 02.28.31 I said, well number one, we're you know, we may not have to pay for it. Number two, I think any church or you know, any religious affiliation would be you know, extremely

delighted to co-sponsor and to support us in such an important initiative. Number three, nobody has really done anything citywide. And I think people would be very supportive, and very uh, committed to wanting to be a part of something like this.

02.29.02 And my, my last point was, and for us as a Muslim community, this would be a really good thing to continue establishing the relationships and building bridges between our community and the broader community. And uh, and I think this for me has been really one of my biggest goals. Uh, is to really continue those efforts of building those bridges and a couple of people were skeptical about the church saying yes.

02.29.32 And I said, well, you know, it's worth a try. The worst thing they could say is no, sorry, we can't do it.

JW : Why the skepticism?

02.29.42 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Well, the church is the Riverside Church, which is nationally or internationally renown uh, for its social justice, or all of the different people who've spoken there, Martin Luther King spoke there, he gave a speech on the Vietnam war. Desmond Tutu has spoken there, Nelson Mandela has spoken there.

02.30.04 Uh, it has a very rich history in social justice, and you know, in living harmoniously with all people. And the person who is really the most skeptical was saying, well, you know, you know, it's a Muslim community event. Yeah, it's interfaith but you know, really, I don't think that the church will go for it.

02.30.30 And uh, you know, so you know, this is a very famous church, and you know, they might not want to have anything to do with us, and uh, so I was basically just really it's like OK, this is really interesting, you know, that even there are people who have such low self-esteem of the community and that really bothered me. So uh, you know, after presenting to them my thinking behind it, they're like, you know, this is a really great idea (~JW~)

JW : When this bothered you, how does that manifest itself uh, in your home with your family?

02.31.40 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Well, at that moment, you know, I said to, to the person I said, I said, do you know what? It's worth a shot. And if we, if they say no, that's Ok, you know, we'll pick up and we'll just keep looking. Uh, but I really, I'm not gonna give up. I, I'm not gonna say, I'm not gonna just check it off and say they won't bother with us. And uh, I know uh, it was interesting because that night I had gone home and I was sharing the conversation.

02.32.05 And this is like one of my cathartic you know, things that I do is, is share everything with my husband. And I,I started telling him about how this person was so skeptical and sharing you know, these thoughts, and he's like, well, you know, there I'm sure he's not alone, you know, that there are others who feel this way and you know, my biggest frustration when, when sharing this kind of stuff is like I get frustrated with the fact that people aren't at my (?) level of thinking.

02.32.41 And even in organizing this event, even in organizing other things within the Muslim community, I find that, you know, and this is, sounds so weird and I just, I,I don't want it to come off like I know everything or, but I find that, you know, that I'm just in my level of thinking, I am, it's so sophisticated and so advanced that people within my community are just not there yet.

02.33.08 Or don't understand the concept or you know, just or even how to deal with it, you know. When, when sharing this information about the church, you know, and I said uh, you know, it's a matter of approaching and seeing what their answer is. And somebody said, well, how are you gonna approach that? And I said, well, I'm gonna call somebody that I know.

02.33.32 So even that concept of like, you're not just gonna pick up the phone and, and speak to the information desk. You're gonna, you know, ask for someone that you know, you know, or someone who does this kind of, of work in the church. Uh.

JW : Before 9-11, did you know any of this?

- 02.34.00 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : I would say what I knew pre-911 was all education related. Uh, where I was organizing a lot of conferences uh, you know, for teachers uh, you know, stuff really orienting around, around education. And one of the projects that I really did which I'm really proud of, and I think that really like builds my uh, I don't know, my repertoire of organizing was actually the uh, the exhibit.
- 02.34.37 The uh, community of worlds uh, community of many worlds, Arab Americans in New York City, which was featured uh, at the Museum of the City of New York. And that was a four-year process, that uh, I got into the process after the first year. And the way that I got into it was uh, the curator of the museum needed someone with an education background to do presentations for teachers.
- 02.35.07 Uh, on Arab culture. And somebody said I know Debbie Almontaser, and, and (?) I know she does this at libraries and you know, and at certain events. So she called me up, she said you know, we have this workshop and it has to be an educator who does it, because these teachers are coming and they need new teacher credits, and you know, it has to be by someone certified in education.
- 02.35.30 So I you know, prepared and I went to do it, and then when I started asking her, well, why is the museum taking such an interest, she said, well, you know, we got a generous donation from a private foundation to, to develop uh, this exhibit, and we are looking for more people to recruit, you know, to be a part of it, and we really think that you know, your expertise and your, you know, coming on board as an Arab American and as an educator would really help us with this project.
- 02.36.08 So I attended all of the, the planning stages and I was one of the, the planners of making it come to life, and what was interesting was it was supposed to open and uh, in November of 2001. And September 11th happened, and the president of the museum decided to delay the opening, and we were so crushed, because we were like why, you know, are you afraid?

Is something gonna happen to the museum, you know, are you afraid people are not going to come. What have you?

02.36.43 And the president met with us and he said it's not about that. I think that we need to provide the Arab American community 6 months to see what unfolds, so we can include, you know, this important time within the exhibit.

02.37.03 To help people understand what the strife and struggles have become post-911 for such a thriving and rich cultured community. And so we were, you know, ecstatic to hear that that was the case. And he promised us to provide us a bigger uh, space. Also. So it, actually expanded double the space, just to put more stuff in there.

02.37.33 And uh, it opened in March of 2002, and it was incredible. And it was open up until I think November of 2002. And uh, all of us who were on the committee were giving tours uh, so did maybe about 7 or 8 tours for different communities, you know, school groups uh, senior citizen groups. It was really wonderful, a wonderful experience.

02.38.01 So that's where I got a lot of my organizing and facilitating around this kind of stuff. Uh, and then we also did like cultural events on the weekends where we did something with food, something with art, etc. and people would come in for those kind of things. So that in a sense helped me like for the nuts and bolts of, of organizing.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

02.40.25 END OF TAPE # DA19

TAPE # DA 20
Debbie Almontaser 02.12.05 New York
Jim Whittaker, Producer
PROJECT REBIRTH

03.01.00 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

03.01.12 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : So there is, there has been so much you know, along with my uh, the Revson fellowship, you know, and, and working. I have been invited uh, to speak nationally as well as internationally.

03.01.31 Uh, I don't know if I told you guys I went to Russia, did I tell you I went to Russia? I went to Russia last year this time. And uh, I was invited by a uh, multi-faith, an interethnic multi-faith uh, coalition of uh, organizations in Russia. That are in the process of rebuilding their country and developing you know, ethnic diversity and harmony, etc.

03.02.05 And they came in uh, 2003, and I was invited to this organization to meet them. They wanted to hear, they wanted to hear and learn about the Arab and Muslim perspective, post 911. So I had to give them a presentation of what the issues are and what the community is doing. And the gentleman gave me his card and he took my card and he said, you know, we'll be in touch, and it was like, Ok, yeah, right, you know.

03.02.32 And he was saying to me, well, we'll do something together, you know, maybe in Russia. And it was like OK. So they wrote a grant (CLEARS THROAT) and they got the grant, a USA ID grant. They put me in the grant. And uh, they uh, they invited me and they paid for me to go there. It was really, really pretty awesome. And uh, got there, uh, and the whole focus was for me to share my experience post-911 and what I and other community leaders did in response.

03.03.11 And that was going to be the learning stage for the forty organization heads that they brought together. And uh, you know, it, it was really one of the most scariest trips to make, first of all, going halfway across the (?) uh, world. Uh, secondly, to a country that I didn't speak its

language. And third, the fact that it was not a Muslim-friendly country and this was the trip was actually 3 weeks after the, the bombing.

03.03.45 The uh, the train bombing in Moscow. And so my husband was like I don't want you to go. It's dangerous. You know, I don't think you should go, you know? Not that you know, I'm worried about you (?) getting hurt, but I'm just also, I'm just worried about you being you know, targeted.

03.04.05 Uh, or discriminated against. And during my whole trip, I wore a hat. I didn't wear my hijab. Uh, I wore a hat, and when we were in the conference area, I wore my hijab, and even there are people there who were, you know, at the hotel staying that just looked at me like where is she from and why is she here? So it was really intense. The stares were far more extreme than what they were here in the United States.

03.04.32 And uh, it was really wonderful to give them, to provide them that scope of the post-911 history, and for them to see what Muslims, Arabs and South Asians went through post-911. And then what we as a community did in response. So I took a lot of the educational materials that I had developed with Columbia University, with educators for social responsibility.

03.05.01 I took a lot of the documentaries that I've been involved in uh, and we let them watch them in the evenings. And what have you. Uh, and uh, and I just connected with a lot of people, and what was really fascinating was within that 40 group of people there were 5 Russians who were Muslim. And uh, it was one woman who actually wore, she covered her hair, but she wore a hat that you couldn't tell if it was hijab or a hat or whatever it was.

03.05.36 Uh, because she, too, wasn't feeling comfortable and safe to wear hijab, as I am. And uh, (CLEARS THROAT) and the other, there was another woman uh, who didn't really wear it, who didn't really in the beginning tell people that she was, but after a few days she shared she was. And then there were uh, three gentlemen, and that was interesting. Two of them were actually Chechnyan.

- 03.06.05 So these two Chechnyan Muslims just so deeply connected with me, in terms of what they have to deal with, living in Russia when they are in Moscow or when, wherever they are in whatever city, because of their tan complexion. They are constantly being stopped and harassed, and you know, even (CLEARS THROAT) detained until somebody comes to bail them out. Or they get (?) you know, a wire transfer to bail them out.
- 03.06.31 And uh, and just them sharing that story with me was really, really sad. So they, and you know, sympathize and empathized with Muslims in, in the United States who after 911 had to go through this. So that was an incredible experience, to just you know, see how uh, I touch the lives of all of these people.
- 03.06.56 And you know, not just the Muslim folks that I met there, but the whole group entirely, you know. I was such an oddity to this group (LAUGHS). Uh, that I was Muslim, that I traveled halfway across the world to do this kind of work, because they had this image of women being, Muslim women being home, and not being a part of the mainstream doing such good works, etc. So my presence there and my participation just like broke all of those stereotypes, just totally diminished them for them.
- 03.07.33 And uh, the, they were just so delighted to meet me and there is also this, this older uh, Jewish gentleman who was actually a head of a Jewish uh, non-governmental organization. And he was just so inspired by the interfaith work that I was doing. And you know, he sat with me for like two hours, just picking my brain to give him ideas of what did I do, how did I do it? Uh, how should he approach the Muslim community.
- 03.08.05 How should he you know, plan interfaith events. What were some of the themes of these events, and you know, how did I get people to talk to each other, and it was really, really sweet. And I mean, that trip was such a huge learning for me as well. Uh, about the people of Russia, about their struggles.

03.08.28 Uh, you know, and then also the, just the preconceived notions that we have of Russians and Russia and all that, that just has developed over the many years. And just to meet people and see how humble they were, and how eager they were to learn from us was really, really special. Really special. And uh, you know, and just for them to know that I was married and that I had a family (LAUGHS) was also something that was so out of the ordinary for them, and they're like, you know, how come your husband didn't come with you?

03.09.04 You know, I said, well, you know, originally I wanted him to but he couldn't because he had to work, and, and they're like wow, he let you go. And (LAUGHS) I'm like well, what do you mean by that? And this is actually Russian women. They're like well, you know, our, if, if I had that opportunity my, I'm sure my husband would have to agree for me to go. That it, I just wouldn't be able to say I'm going because I got this opportunity.

03.09.29 So it was really interesting to even see the dynamics for women in Russia you know, and just sitting there, one day they towards the end of the event uh, they had a huge banquet for us and they uh, they had elected one of the gentlemen to be the master of uh, of the uh, (STOPS)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

03.10.10 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : So you know, it's not a part of my daily language or you know, 'cos we don't make toasts, because we don't drink alcohol. And so of course being that I was a part of this group, this delegation from the United States it was only appropriate for me to be at this beautiful banquet of, you know, caviar and all of this lavish food, you know, which the main course came out at 11 PM (LAUGHS).

03.10.34 And food just kept rolling out and rolling out, and I was observing the, the toastmaster, you know, choosing people to, to toast, and it's like about 10:30. We started at 8. And it was like there hasn't been not one woman who has gotten up yet. And so I was like, do women toast, or they don't toast, or what's the deal here? (LAUGHS)

- 03.11.00 So I got the attention of the, the toastmaster, and I said I'd like to make a toast. And he looked at me like I had two heads (LAUGHS). And he said, well, uh, uh, you know, he just kept saying that, and I said is there a problem? And he goes, well, you're from the American delegation. You should make a toast (LAUGHS). So I stood up, and (?) people didn't even realize I was gonna do that. So he then, he said, he goes, Debbie is going to make a toast.
- 03.11.33 And everybody just, all eyes were on me. And everybody was so surprised. It's like why, why is everybody so surprised? So uh, my toast was actually to all the women, because the women who were at this, this training, I didn't feel that they were very active in the participation. I you know, I sensed this male domination.
- 03.11.59 I sensed that the men just had more opportunity. Uh, even though that some of these women were actually heads of organizations, but there was just this social protocol you know, with men and women. So my toast was actually to uh, all of the women for being who they are and providing me, you know, a window of opportunity to learn about them, their country, their lifestyles, their struggles. Their issues.
- 03.12.30 And just for, for the strength you know, that they have to do what they do, whether they're homemakers, whether they are heads of organizations, but just you know, being the backbone of the country. And I made the toast, and everybody toasted and they clapped and, and what have you. And then uh, one of the translators said, you know, Debbie, this is unheard of (LAUGHS).
- 03.13.00 In, in the Russian culture. It's like, what are you talking about? He goes, women don't usually toast, but it is so amazing that they just adored you and they loved what you said and it was beautiful and they just clapped for you. And I said, oh, my god, are you telling me I just, I, I broke a cultural (LAUGHS) code here? I wish you'd mentioned something. Maybe I wouldn't have done it. I hope people are not offended. He said no, they're not offended. It was really a great thing you did.

- 03.13.29 So about half hour later, the one of the women, one of the Muslim women who actually wore hijab, and she was actually quite vocal of all of the women uh, throughout the conference. And people were you know, there was one point that the person who brought us together said oh, you know, Fordosa troublemaker. (LAUGHS) Teasing her, but he knew her for a long time, but he just threw that out. And it's like she's always a trouble maker she always has something to say. Uh, which was really sweet. And about a half hour later, she worked up enough courage to get up.
- 03.14.02 And she made a toast, and she toasted the American delegation and she dedicated it to me, and she said, you know, which was really, really beautiful. She says, you know, uh, I finally found somebody who's exactly like me, you know, struggling to help people understand Islam, struggling to help build you know, community and harmony and ways to help people just live together.
- 03.14.32 Uh, and this person is in the United States and I am here, you know, and we're living in parallel worlds. Doing the same kind of work. And we're both even Virgos (LAUGHS). And uh, she you know, it's so beautiful. She, you know, she said that you know, when I hear her, I hear my voice. And uh, when I see her actions, I see my actions.
- 03.14.59 It was really very touching, and so she, you know, she closed with saying, you know, I am so happy to have been brought here for this training and to have had this opportunity uh, to be inspired, you know, by this special woman. And then everybody started clapping for her, and I was actually crying because I was like oh, my god, this is not what I was expecting. We waited a little while longer, and then another woman (LAUGHS) got up and toasted from the Russian delegation.
- 03.15.31 And so the, the translator was like oh, Debbie, you've started something here (LAUGHS). I said well, you know, what's, I hope it's not bad. He said no, but this is good because this is something that we have been struggling with. Is to you know, make women feel encouraged to do stuff like this. To stop you know, you know, remaining in those social roles that have

developed for them you know? Yeah, they can drink and they can hang out and you know, but they have those roles.

- 03.16.03 But you know, they also need to feel like equals to the men. And so I felt so, I felt really wonderful that I somehow set a precedence for them, you know, especially being that I'm Muslim and this is so atypical for a Muslim to be involved in, and especially at a, a banquet you know, where everybody was getting up toasting. Uh, but the fact that I was able to just encourage these women you know, by me taking that step was really beautiful.
- 03.16.35 So the last day of our trip uh, it was really interesting because I traveled there with CAMBO, which is a community-based organization which I've done consulting work for, and I actually ran the mosaic youth project for them. And the entire delegation had gifts for the executive director, and the president of this organization.
- 03.16.59 And there were 8 of us who traveled. And then they also had gifts for me. So it was so awkward to accept these gifts (LAUGHS) for me, where everybody else, all the other 8 people were not getting any gifts, except the executive. And when doing so, I had to uh, I had mentioned to them that you know, if you should just give somebody had said to me, you know, tomorrow you're gonna be presented with gifts, so we hope you're gonna like them, and I said well, I don't think you should present them to me. I think you should present them to the executive director of this organization. It's only appropriate and professional. And, and what have you.
- 03.17.36 So I guess this person went back and in their presentation of presenting this stuff, you know, they in their presenting they basically said you know, we, we're so inspired and touched by you and we just wanted to give you something to take back to remember all of us. Uh, you know, we never in our wildest dreams ever, ever thought that a Muslim woman (LAUGHS) from the United States was gonna come and be a part of you know, this training.
- 03.18.04 And uh, you have touched us in a way that is just you know, so deep and so wonderful. And we want to you know, let you know how much we appreciate you leaving your family, your

children and being here with us. And it was just so beautiful. And the funny thing was, during our, the trainings, my husband would call at the most bizarre times (LAUGHS).

03.18.29 A couple of times he would call and I was in the middle of a presentation, and so one of my colleagues, American colleagues, would say Debbie has to call you back. And so one of the men was like boy, he's very, you know, he's just you know, he's always calling you (LAUGHS). So my colleague, Ilene, says, she says, well, you just don't understand the relationship between these two people. And so he, you know, he was listening and she said, you know, they're, they've been married for over you know, 23 years.

03.19.00 And they seem like they're only newlyweds. They're inseparable. They're so committed to each other. And Naji is you know, Debbie's biggest, biggest fan. And so he's very worried about her. This is the first time that she's this far away from him. Uh, and you know, it's a ritual for him. So you know, it was really special for this (?) particular man, and it was actually one of the Muslim men.

03.19.28 To hear this, you know, that there is such a gentleman who is so committed and so supportive of this kind of work. And uh, in one of the very last days that we were there, he actually he said, he said to me, Debbie, I want you to find me a wife (LAUGHS). And I said to him, I said, really? From the United States? He said, yes. You know, she could, she has to be Muslim because that's what my mother would want. Uh, I said Ok, and what, what's your preference?

03.20.00 He said well, you know, somebody who, who likes family life, somebody who you know, will you know, provide everything I need, and my children will need. And who will be supportive. And, and I said well, what about somebody like me who works (LAUGHS)? And he just like, he paused for a second and he said, well, I guess that's OK, too, but I don't know then if we have kids if I want her to work (LAUGHS). I said, well, if you're asking me to help find you a wife, then it has to be somebody that, that really uh, would be dynamic and uh, otherwise, I can't help you on that.

03.20.39 I don't know if I could find you a wife, who will stay home, who will be a stay at home mom. So uh, he said, well, you know, if, if it's somebody like you uh, I can't go wrong (LAUGHS). And that was really a tender moment for him to, to actually say that, (?) like look for a wife for you? This is really interesting.

JW : What about your husband and how are you doing?

03.21.09 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Oh, my gosh, how are we doing? You know, he is so wonderful. I, words can't even capture sometimes how I feel. You know? And there are just so many demands on me that he, he knows of and understand, you know, and I know that there are sometimes that he just like he reaches the edge, you know, but he just doesn't like explode.

03.21.38 And, and you know, and throw his hands up in the air and say I can't take it anymore, you're never home (LAUGHS). He hasn't reached that yet. However, I know that there are time where I can hear it in his voice, you know, on the phone, or I could just see it in his face, you know, when we're talking. Uh, and one example is this, this event tomorrow's event, and when I was nominated and I just looked over to see if he was looking, and he just, you know, he gave me a look like, you know, it's up to you.

03.22.07 That kind of look. Uh, you know, it's, it's so hard sometimes to, to be able to uh, to decipher between like my responsibilities to my family and my responsibilities to the community.

03.22.28 And I know that all the responsibilities that I have uh, for the community, the Muslim, Arab, South Asian community, anybody who's been under siege post-911 uh, is a responsibility that I took upon my own self. I've, I basically have let myself uh, I don't know for lack of better words, fall into the trap of, of being there for people uh, in general, politicians, anybody who calls and, and asks or requests or wants an interview or whatever.

03.23.05 And but I always like question you know, am I, how much am I also providing my family? And uh, you know, my kids, thank god are older and more understanding and appreciate the

work that I do, even though that they don't always say it, but there are tender moments where they do say it.

03.23.29 But uh, Naji has just been incredible. And uh, you know, he, he's been having some medical problems for the past, I would say year and a half, and so that's been really, really scary for both him and for both me, for me as well. Uh, he uh, you know, he had his case against the hotel for racial discrimination. They settled before going to court.

03.23.59 He got the promotion that he kept getting dodged, and uh, he started his new position. He, he loved it. It is a very intensive uh, you know, position to uh, and responsibility. And he started actually having dizzy spells, shortness of breath. Uh, he went to the doctor and he was diagnosed with uh, high blood pressure. So he's put on medication, we had to watch his diet.

03.24.30 But every now and then, when he would have those dizzy spells, it just terrified me. You know? Or just you know, him saying I can't breathe, and you know, we'd end up getting in the car and driving to the hospital. So we had a few of those incidents, and it's really, really scary. And I keep saying to myself I need to be more there with him, for him. Uh, you know, and when you know, when he does feel ill or whatever the case may be, I do drop everything and, and make sure that I'm there for him.

03.25.02 Uh, but then when he's well you know, I'm back to you know, to the, in the trenches doing what we need to do. Uh, having him be as supportive as possible, you know, driving me wherever I need to go or setting up whatever, you know, being at a workshop and being my assistant (LAUGHS). And making sure not to tell people that he's my husband. It's really funny, but I always end up telling them, by the way, this is my husband at the end (LAUGHS).

03.25.31 Let's thank him for being here and helping us and he just like, I know he just gets so annoyed. (LAUGHS) it's like why must you tell everybody? It's not important that you tell everybody. And you know, one day I questioned him, I said, you know, what's the deal? Are you not proud to be my husband? He's like no, of course I am. But I just, I feel like, you

know, you should have this professional assistant (LAUGHS). I said, ok, very well. But uh, he's just wonderful. (~JW~)

JW : That's quite a reversal?

03.26.04 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Oh, very, very big reversal. And uh, this past November, I was honored by the borough president of Brooklyn at the very first uh, IFTAR, Islamic Ramadan dinner. Which I had pushed for a very, very long time, since the borough president became borough president, to happen.

03.26.30 And year after year, I kept nagging and bugging, and you know, his staff and saying how important it is and you know, if, if I am to continue, you know, being a liaison, you know, informally a liaison, that I needed some things that needed to be addressed and taken care of, and this would be one that would be very affirming and special for the community to happen. And so finally, they said OK. We want to do, you know, an uh, IFTAR dinner for the Muslim community.

03.27.00 Help us, show us, who should we call, how do we do it? How do we go about it? So I formed a committee uh, and they called a couple of other people uh, and we organized this dinner and one of the procedures or one of the things the borough president does is actually uh, they honor two people, a male and a female, and a organization within that community that is, that are doing outstanding work for the community.

03.27.31 And uh, when we sat there, and we were discussing the names, when it was proposed, I said well, I certainly know of a few sisters that I can recommend and you know, I'm sure you guys know also some brothers, and I have some names. So the whole committee turned around and said, well, we know who we're nominating. The female we're nominating (LAUGHS). And I said, really who is it? And they're like, you. I'm like well, you can't nominate me, because I'm a part of the planning committee, just is not right. It's weird, it's strange.

- 03.28.05 And I'd rather be a part of the event rather than being honored. And I'm like no, it's so important, you're doing this, you're doing that, just listing everything that they've known about me to do. And uh, I said to them, all right, very well. But I did 80% of the work for the event, again just of knowing what needs to get done, etc.
- 03.28.28 And they were just, they were also very supportive, I can't say they weren't. So the night of the dinner, the media was bombarding me to, you know, to give to come, give a comment of the organizing of the event, and I'm like well, you know, I think you should go speak to so and so because uh, they're a part of the organizing committee (LAUGHS). Like I had to play it off that I wasn't a part of the committee so that I could be honored. Which was, was just horrendous for me, personally.
- 03.28.56 So uh, they're like, well, we already spoke to that person and they told us to talk to you. (LAUGHS) And I was like, ok, great. So I gave them a blurb, it showed up in a couple of the ethnic papers, and in the local mainstream papers. It was a really wonderful event. And when the borough president honored me, he had a (?) wonderful things to say. You know, being that he and I had formed a relationship, you know, where he'll call me at 10 o'clock at night and say to me, you know, one night he called, he said, you know, I have this uh, event I have to do at a synagogue, and uh, the synagogue is located in a heavily populated Muslim community.
- 03.29.34 And I just want them to befriend their Muslim friends. And community members. And I want to find something that really connects them and it's uh, I'm going this Friday and I know that the Muslim community has some kind of service on Friday. What is it called? (LAUGHS). So I gave him the name and I explained what it was, and he's like this is perfect. So on Friday, they go make (Jamah?), and the, they leave and the Jews are just coming into their, their synagogues to, for Chabat.
- 03.30.06 And it was really, really sweet, and so he was like thank you, Debbie. I'm so glad that you were still up. You know, so. All those little favors paid off to get the event. So uh, you know, he shared some really beautiful, tender moments of personal conversations we've had,

of my persistence, of my dedication to the community. And to the broader Brooklyn community.

- 03.30.30 And he presented me with the uh, this beautiful proclamation. And uh, in my you know, acceptance speech. I didn't prepare anything because I was like you know what? I want to talk from the heart. And so in my acceptance speech, I thanked him, I thanked the community, and I said but there is very, one very, very, very special person that I want to thank from the bottom of my heart who is you know, my mountain of strength.
- 03.31.00 My biggest cheerleader, you know, my confidante, my you know, my world, who, you know, who is there when the chips fall, who is there when things are going the best they can possibly be going. And this special person is my husband, uh, who I adore and appreciate of having for 24 years, and without him I wouldn't be here today in front of you all. And, and I said I know he's here, he's supposed to be sitting at our table (LAUGHS). But I know that his heart doesn't permit him just to sit while everybody else works.
- 03.31.38 I know he's somewhere here, and I want him to wave and I want everybody to see this special man who has captured my heart, and who you know, is just the most wonderful person in the world to me. And so he, he stopped in the middle of this room, this ball room and he, he was so surprised to hear all of this, he wasn't expecting it at all. (LAUGHS)
- 03.32.04 And uh, he, he stopped dead in his tracks, and, you know, people are like, wave, come on, wave (LAUGHS). So he waved and everybody just started clapping hysterically for him. And uh, it was really beautiful. And one of the uh, ethnic papers, the Muslim paper, they, they said, you know, the quote was, you know, it was, it was a wonderful, you know, moment for Debbie, but it was a glorious tribute to her husband.
- 03.32.33 Uh, to be recognized for his support and commitment to the great works that she's involved in, so it was really, really a beautiful quote to have. And he's like you know, why do you do this? I know I do all these things for you, but you don't have to tell everybody and you don't

have to stop me in the middle of doing something, and I really don't like the, you know, the attention. I said, no uh, you deserve it. You really, really deserve it.

- 03.33.00 So you know, his health has really been, been really scaring me, you know, just this past weekend. (?) It was just this past weekend. He had his dizzy spells and it was just really, really scary because we would. He was standing and I was speaking to him. Oh, yeah. It, it was Saturday was the grand opening of the Yemeni American Association.
- 03.33.31 Which uh, I was invited to become a part of the board last July after doing a presentation at a forum of, for professionals. Yemeni professionals in the United States, and they brought people from all different parts of the country. To be in a forum for young people, and their families to show that you know, the Yemeni community is really thriving. Uh, and doing great things.
- 03.34.00 And these are people to celebrate for what they've accomplished. And the day I got there, I ended up realizing that I was the only Yemeni woman (LAUGHS) and there were 7 men, so it was pretty intense, and the majority of the audience was actually men. And so to present to these men who basically throughout you know, my career, I've really haven't done much work within the Yemeni community because of the fact that uh, they've isolated themselves in terms of keeping cultural traditions.
- 03.34.37 Not moving or changing with the times and the dynamics of the world and the community they live in. And so there aren't that many women who are out there and who are educated and who are professionals. There are, but there aren't many. Many of them are home makers and, and what have you. So it was interesting to have to present what I've accomplished thus far that day to this group who I felt so nervous about in terms of them not being so very supportive of women's roles.
- 03.35.14 Uh, it was so intense, and it was so nerve racking, but I made it. And they introduced the concept of starting an association, an (?) organization to meet the, the social services uh, needed by the community post 9-11.

- 03.35.30 And they were, just having a dialog and a discussion of how to go about it. And finally I just couldn't take it anymore when they were talking about buying a building where people could go and you know, have meetings and what have you. Uh, there was no talk about you know, legal services, you know, health services, mental services. Any kind of service that would really help the community meet its challenges. So I finally raised my hand, and I said to them, I said, you know, if, if there is one thing that such an organization could do, it could meet you know, the needs of the community, you know, on terms of legal issues.
- 03.36.11 There are so many people with immigration problems, the tension problems, etc. There are many people who don't have health benefits and they don't know how to get health benefits (COUGHS) for their children. There are many women who are not even seeing a gynecologist on a monthly basis. And I brought up like all of the serious issues.
- 03.36.34 And the president uh, who came up with the idea, said you know, I really appreciate you chiming in, and I want to tell you how much respect and admiration I have for you. Especially when I see your picture on TV or when I see you interviewed in a newspaper or a magazine. Uh, it gives me such pride, you know, to, to know you are a part of this community.
- 03.37.00 And I would like to invite you, if you'll accept, to sit on the board of this organization and help us develop it from scratch. So that was the last thing I was expecting. I was like oh, my god, what am I gonna do with this? So uh, I said, well, are there other people who are gonna be a part of this? He said, well, I make, I, I am making an appeal to the group, people who are sitting here who are interested and motivated, I would like for them to you know, raise their hand and, and join us and meet and, and make this into an organization. So people were very nervous.
- 03.37.39 And I finally said to them, I said I will accept under the fact that I challenge all of you sitting here to at least, before walking out, to have five people who will make the commitment to be on this board and make this organization become a reality for our community.

03.38.02 I am very overextended, I am doing far more than what I could possibly do within the Muslim community and the broader community. But I feel committed and compelled to establishing something for the Yemeni community. So I will only do it if I five other people here today will join us. And so five other hands shot up and they were all men.

03.38.29 And I said, you know, I also made the appeal to the women who were there, and nobody, nobody just dared to do it, 'cos they were just really nervous and in terms of figuring out how this would go and what this will be, and I tried to bring a couple in, you know, during the process of establishing the organization, and everybody was really weary of jumping on board. You know, just with all the cultural (~JW~)

JW : You meet that opposition a lot?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW : How does the phrase, no good deed goes unpunished apply in your life?

03.39.51 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : (MID-STATEMENT) that was a realization for me this weekend. Uh, in, in the process of trying to get this organization going, I couldn't get any women (?) representation. Uh, right before the opening, one of the young women, I ran into her, who was at this conference that I spoke at. Uh, basically wanted to have, wanted to talk to me personally about something that I had said at the conference. That has still affected her since that day.

03.40.28 And I was just like really nervous of like oh, my god, what could it possibly be that this is way back in July and she's still holding to this. And so I said to her, I said, you know, please feel, feel you know, free to tell me what it is because I need to know. If I have in any hurt your feelings or offended you. I need to know. She said, well, you know, in your presentation you had talked about the community, and I raised up a lot of stuff at that, in that conference,

from my own personal experiences about, you know, women having education, women being supported to work, women driving.

03.40.10 And I shared how, within the community, when I was developing as a professional, the entire community was not supportive. Uh, in my face and in my husband's face, they would be very kind to us. But behind our backs they, they just totally you know, called us uh, American wannabe's.

03.41.33 Uh, they uh, you know, thought that I was the man and my husband was the woman, you know, I wore the pants in the family. Uh, that I was running the show, and uh, that you know, he was allowing me to do things that were not ordinary for the community, and that you know, I perhaps maybe setting a bad example for other women, you know, for in terms of them wanting to become professionals and independent.

03.42.10 And what have you. And in my presentation I raised these issues. I (?) gave personal stories of how one day, in the heart of the Yemeni community, I was driving down the street, and I stopped for a light. And (?) there was a couple of Yemeni men standing there, and when they saw that I was behind the wheel, they just were flabbergasted.

03.42.35 I, they were shocked. You could tell with the shock in their faces. And one of the gentlemen (CLEARS THROAT) who was walking, crossing the street in front of my car was just you know, piercing into the car. And not realizing (CLEARS THROAT) where he was walking, he wasn't looking at where he was walking, and he nearly tripped in the middle of the street. (LAUGHS)

03.43.01 And I said what's wrong with that picture? You know, why are people so fixated about driving? Where does it in Islam say that a woman can't drive a car, you know? Why are we you know, thinking in, in these terms that women shouldn't these opportunities, that they shouldn't function in society. Uh, I raised the issue about education, how women have equal rights to education in Islam and why are letting cultural traditions supersede what, what God says, for us to be a part of.

- 03.43.35 Uh, and I talked about you know, the man times that you know, my husband's close friends would tell him, you know, you know, today you know, when we were leaving the mosque, you know, somebody saw your wife with you know, with a bag and a bunch of people walking to the library, and they're just like you know, thinking it's crazy and it's weird and you know why are you letting her doing this? And you know, what is she gonna accomplish, and (CLEARS THROAT) and what have you.
- 03.44.01 And I said, and my husband always came home and he never shared these stories with me until I finished school, because he wanted me to do this. He knew that this is what I wanted to do. And I then raised one issue, which was something that upset her was that if a woman is leaving her home with integrity and commitment and devotion to her religion, to her family, to her spouse, you know, she should be able to do whatever she wants to do.
- 03.44.35 As long as she knows who she is, where she comes from, and that she walks with pride, and knowing that she will not shame her family, her husband, or her people. And when a woman could do that and know and be strong in her, in her faith and herself and her family and her traditions uh, then there should be absolutely no father, brother, son, family member who should discourage their female relative from having an education.
- 03.45.09 They should be proud to have someone represent, and proud to have somebody you know, who can contribute to society. And so she was upset with me going in depth of, of talking about you know, being chaste uh, you know, I mean, these were like the things that she interpreted, and I'm sure they all did.
- 03.45.34 And that was what I was talking about, but I didn't want to use the word, being chaste and faithful, you know, not being out there and you know, flaunting herself and looking for other things other than what she should be striving for. So she, she said to me, she said, you know, it just really, really bothered me that you went there. You know, and I, I just, you know, it, it made me feel like you were affirming why they, you know, should not let us be doing these things.

03.46.03 And I said, really you know, you felt that way? I said, I, I really faced this head-on. I wanted them to know that you know, they have to respect the fact that if a woman wants to do these things, they have to respect, and understand that, you know, we are all accountable, you know, to ourselves, to our families, and to God most importantly, of doing the right thing. And they have to trust.

03.46.33 And so I said, I don't know if everybody felt this way, but if you did uh, I'm really sorry, but I think that our community needs to hear this kind of stuff. They need to hear that each and every woman in any family thinks about these things very seriously, thinks about making sure not to tarnish her family name.

JW : What did she say? Did she get angry?

03.46.57 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Uh, you know, in, in our conversation she sort of started understanding why I had to raise it. I said, if I didn't raise it, everything that I could have said then, said to them that day would have meant nothing. Because this is what they want to hear, this is the assurance they want to hear. They want to hear that each and every one of us thinks about this stuff, seriously. And so she really, she understood, eventually she understood.

JW : Who wanted to hear this?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER : The men.

JW : What to hear that you think about it in what way?

03.47.33 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : That we think about it being important in our lives to be uh, living you know, chaste life uh, living a life where you know, we will never you know, disgrace them or shame the family, you know, because there is this huge honor system. Anything, you know, happening to a female within an Arab family, you know, whether it be

rape, whether it be you know, an accidental death, you know, etc., is something that basically the men in the family are looked down upon.

03.48.09 And, and said, well, you know, if your daughter was at home, if your daughter was, you know, doing this, this wouldn't be, this wouldn't have happened. Type of thing. And so my position on this was to help them see that you know, you shouldn't be the caretaker of this person who is an adult.

03.48.31 This person needs to carry that within himself. This woman needs to carry that within herself, you know, and be accountable for herself, and know of her actions, etc. And so for, just to address that you know, solidified for them that that was something important that they needed to know. (STOPS)

JW : Does this make you appreciate your husband's nobility and tolerance in your actions?

03.49.25 END OF TAPE # DA20

TAPE # DA 21
Debbie Almontaser 02.12.05, New York
Jim Whittaker, Producer
PROJECT REBIRTH

04.00.09 PICTURE UP

04.00.09 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : (MID-STATEMENT) extremely difficult position for both my husband and I, him more, because he has to deal with this nonsense, where he hears it. Uh, and he used to hear it, he doesn't hear it anymore.

JW : Why?

04.00.22 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : He doesn't hear it anymore because (STOPS)

JW : Deal with what?

04.00.29 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Oh, with this, you know, with these notions that the community have had about me driving, about me working, about me going to school, about me being you know, working in the, in the mainstream world, etc. Uh, and he always just you know, he ignored it, he put it aside, and he just encouraged me and supported me to do what I wanted to do. And I think for him, uh, you know, it's been a huge, a huge burden to have to deal with it.

04.01.00 Uh, to be you know, judged or to be you know, looked at or in, in that way of like, you know, that Debbie runs the show at home and, and their life, etc. Uh, and.

JW : He doesn't deal with it as much now?

04.01.18 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Uh, he doesn't have to deal with it anymore, because people within my community have seen me amount into something (LAUGHS). For a lack of a better word.

04.01.30 Uh, they have, you know, they saw me becoming a teacher, and helping many kids within our community who needed assistance. Uh, they saw me becoming a part of the education system for (?) where I was advocating for their children, young children, to get the proper education that they needed, etc. Uh, and they also were very, very intrigued, particularly the elders, with how I carried myself.

04.02.00 You know, that I, I was very devoted and committed to my faith, but also very devoted and committed to community service and, and doing (CLEARS THROAT) what I've continued to do. And uh, you know, they also have learned to accept that I, that I am a positive representative of the community, for them to really look to and aspire to.

04.02.28 And you know, in the years after my becoming a teacher, many young women started completing high school, who, who actually were not, which was really startling uh, within the New York City community, Yemeni community. Uh, many of them started to go to college, many of them started to work. Uh, many of them started to drive. Uh, so you know, you just need one person to pave the way and then people start to follow.

04.02.58 And you know, people within my community, within the Yemeni community really recognized me as one of those pioneers. And so it's amazing right now of how much respect and admiration that you know, the elders as well as, you know, your typical Yemeni family has for me. Uh, and (?) again, it's like a huge responsibility to, to maintain that. Like you know, God forbid (LAUGHS) something happens and I fall from their grace. But uh, (~JW~)

JW : Do you reach a point of overdoing it to the point of questioning what you get out of what you are doing, and how do you take a break from it?

04.05.33 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Well, the two definitely clash. You know, the one wanting to keep going forward with some of these important initiatives, and uh, and then just you know, pulling back and, and taking stock and you know, assessing where I am in my life with my family, with my broad, my bigger family, my parents, my siblings, etc. And uh, it's scary (~JW~)

JW : Where are you with that?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

04.06.23 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : It was actually uh, it was a call between my sister and I over my mother. And uh, when I was going to Russia, my mom had come from the Middle East uh, to visit, and she also needed to get some medical work done, etc. And I kept pushing my brothers and sisters to all make sure she gets her in January and that she heads to Buffalo

where she was gonna have all this medical stuff done (CLEARS THROAT) before I go to Russia.

04.06.59 Uh, so unfortunately her flight came in February, she was there end of February and then she stayed a few weeks here. And I was working, I was going to school, and I was preparing for this trip. And at one point uh, my mom, the day my mother was getting here was actually a day that I was doing this huge presentation. Uh, for a, it was a women's gathering, and it was called you know Charting Our Course, you know, Women you know, And Their Initiatives.

04.07.36 So I was one of the featured speakers, and it happened to happen on the day that my mother was arriving. So I had to move heaven and earth to make sure somebody was picking her up. (CLEARS THROAT) and what ended up happening was I begged my sister to have her husband take the day off to do it (LAUGHS). Uh, and she was not happy. And you know, and I kept telling her look uh, you know, this is coming up and I need somebody, I can't find anybody, you have to take the responsibility.

04.08.08 Uh, she was not happy at all, and she says, you know, it's just there are so many things that are going on with you that sometimes I question uh, you know, you know, are you setting your priorities appropriately? And I just, I said, what do you mean?

04.08.29 She goes, you know, we know that Mom was coming, and you know, she was looking forward to you picking her up. And spending the day of her coming with you and now I have to do it, you know, get my husband to do it. And you know, have to spend the afternoon with her, and you're at this conference speaking, you know? I'm not, I don't have an issue about us picking her up. Uh, but I just have an issue that you're not gonna come 'til like 3 hours after her coming, you know, and everybody's there greeting her and welcoming her and then you show up last.

04.09.05 Uh, so I was feeling like crap and I said to her, I said, you know, this was out of my control. I kept telling you guys that she needed to come early you know, that I have this commitment,

and you know, I, I've already made this commitment months in advance, and I just have to, I have to keep it. Uh, she was not happy, I know she was angry with me. Uh, my mom, they picked her up, I did get there about 3 hours later.

04.09.33 I sort of felt really awkward, you know? And it wasn't that my mother made me feel awkward. My mother was extremely delighted and happy to see me, but I felt awkward because of everybody else that was there, you know, and them staring at me. My cousins, and you know, friends and distant relatives were just like, you know, you're showing up 3 hours later you know, type of thing. So I felt very uneasy that night. But uh, uh, I tried to have a conversation with my sister about it.

01.40.04 And she's like, you know, doing worry about it, it was taken care of and what have you. And you got to see Mom. And that was that. And uh, I know that there are times, you know, I had to cancel with her, she was coming over my house and we were gonna, you know, do something really special, and then I had to call her and say you know, something came up, we can't do it this weekend, can we do it next weekend?

04.10.29 And so it's, it's like always my schedule is affecting some of the plans with her. And I know that sometimes she gets irritated. Uh, but at the same time, I know that she knows and understands that this is important stuff. Like the commercial, she picked up the phone and she called me and she said, guess what, we saw you on a commercial. And you know, it was happy and you know, she said it was great, and I looked really wonderful and I sounded great, and.

04.10.58 Uh, but I know that sometimes you know, it, it can be uh, you know, it, it takes its toll on my family. My younger sister who lives in upstate Buffalo uh, they were having a shower for one of my nieces, and they kept telling me, give us a time, we'll, we'll plan it around your schedule (LAUGHS) you know, and you could come up. It should be a 3-day weekend, so that way you know, you'll have time to spend with us and what have you.

04.11.32 And so they, I gave them a weekend, and everything had already started evolving in terms of the planning for it, and then something came up and I just called her and I said, how far are you guys in the planning stages? And she said, well, we've already sent all the invitations, and people have already know to, to mark that date.

01.11.59 And she said why are you asking? I said, well, you know, something did come up but uh, you know, and she said, you know, before I could even finish my sentence, she's like, you've got to be kidding me? You're calling to tell us that you have to reschedule? You're not gonna say that, right? (LAUGHS) It's like, (?) in the back of my mind, it was like well, no, not anymore. (LAUGHS) but I knew that she was like fuming, fuming.

04.12.29 And she says, you know, I know that you know you have a lot of demands on you, that people call you and you know, expect you, but you know, you also have to just set time for your family you know, 'cos yeah, we'll always be there for you, but there's only so much we can take. And so I was like ok. So uh, I just ended up calling you know, and saying look, I can't do it. You know, if you want to reschedule with me, that's fine. If not then we just, can't do it that weekend.

04.12.58 And uh, so yeah, so there have been those times uh, that you know, my, my sisters have you know, felt like you know, we can't do it.

JW : Do you ever think of stopping?

04.13.13 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : Do I ever think of stopping? I do. I think about it all the time, Jim. But I don't, I don't even know how to begin. I don't know what people will think. I, you know have I let them down?

04.13.31 Have I now become self-oriented? You know, just wanting to be me and just me alone, and you know, and, and there was you know, after I got the Revson Fellowship, I did cut down on a lot of you know, my work within the interfaith community, within the Muslim community. And uh, you know, somebody just made a snide remark, you know, to me uh, at

a gathering, when they were just telling me about updating about me about certain activities that I was involved in and that have just continued.

- 04.14.08 And they're like well, you know, Debbie now has become a Revsen, God forbid that she continues working with us. And I turned around, and I just looked at him and I said, you know, what is that supposed to mean? He's like well, you know, we know the reputation that people who get the Revsen, (?) you know, Revsen, the reputation that they develop.
- 04.14.28 And you know, this persona or image that they start to take on and you know, like they're above everybody. And I said are you serious? You're saying this or are you just pulling my leg? He's like, well, I'm not pulling your leg and I'm not saying that you know, that you have become this way. But you just really you know, you're not interested in a lot of, you know, important stuff that you used to be. And so I, I, I got really defensive and I said, you know, this was a prime opportunity uh, that I've gotten and for me not to accept you know, this wonderful privilege and honor to have this kind of opportunity, and not make the best of it wouldn't be fair to me or the program.
- 04.15.16 If I just you know, was half engaged, and not committed. And I, I'm really disappointed that you feel this way. You know? So uh, that's been kind of interesting, also, you know, just some people feeling like I've let them down.
- 04.15.35 And a part of me saying yes to do this (?) tsunami event has also just been to help people within the community who I've been organizing and doing a lot of stuff with, just to help them realize that I haven't abandoned or you know, jumped off ship. Uh, but I'm there, but I'm just not 100% there.
- 04.15.58 When they do need my support, when they do need you know, me to take charge of a lot of stuff. Uh, and you know, one prime example is this event on Saturday, the grand opening of this Yemeni organization. Which I you know, have been asked to be on the board, the first woman in its history you know, in Yemeni history to actually sit on a board in the United States on a Yemeni organization. Uh, which is a big thing.

04.16.29 And the uh, the gentlemen who are on the board I know have, have had moments where they've probably cursed me out in terms of them working around my schedule (LAUGHS). And, but they know and understand that uh, my participation is key and important. But the fact that they have to plan meetings around me uh, I know has, has been a burden on them. Uh, we were supposed to have a meeting this morning, to debrief the uh, grand opening and I told them that I couldn't make it.

04.17.05 If they would have the meeting later tonight, and they didn't respond to my email. They had the secretary call me and say you know, the world doesn't revolve around you, you know? Uh, this was a very important meeting, you shouldn't have scheduled whatever you scheduled for this morning. You know that we had the grand opening and we were planning to do it the next weekend, and discuss it and blahblahblah.

04.17.31 And they can't meet uh, and we, I don't know when we're gonna meet. They're like, you know, give us a date. And we'll, we'll try to figure something out. So I, I basically told the secretary, look, I don't necessarily need to be at the meeting. I will give you guys all my feedback, but you guys if you want to meet today you can meet you know, on Saturday. I'll give you my feedback and some things that are concerns and things I feel that we should do.

04.18.00 And, and so he, he just said to me don't bother, Debbie. Just don't send us anything. You know, we, we're not meeting and we'll figure it out when we meet the next time. (~JW~)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

04.18.13 DEBBIE ALMONTASER : So uh, so that was like a, a bit of a, a crusher. Uh, the grand opening was very intense. Uh, that day Naji had to work, and he has actually been attending all of these board meetings, because of the fact that I know people within the Yemeni community are not ready to have a woman wheeling and dealing with a group of men (LAUGHS).

- 04.18.39 Even though they are professionals and they are people who have grown up here and what have you. The community just is not there yet. So I felt that it was important to have Naji's participation there as my husband. Uh, and so he couldn't be at the grand opening, and he said to me, he said, you know, I can't be there, I feel really badly, I have to work.
- 04.19.02 But I don't think you, I hope you're not thinking of not going. I said, well, I don't feel comfortable. I don't know who's gonna be there. And he said you, you have to go. You have to go and you have to do what you have to do. You made this commitment and our community needs to see change. And the only way change will happen is if you go and you make that change. And I was just like (LAUGHS) astonished at his uh, his support, you know.
- 04.19.32 And, and just like saying you have to do it, you know, I know that the community just you know, makes your knees shake, which they do. (?) they do (LAUGHS). You know, and I, it's funny, at the end of the, the grand opening when the board was just reflecting. There are a couple that I have a really good relationship with of the gentlemen and they're like you were great, you know, you did a great job. And I was like yeah, right. And they're like, yeah, you did.
- 04.20.00 You, you handled it so well, you know, even though that you were annoyed and upset with some of the stuff, you were so eloquent, you know, the way you presented and what have you. And I turned around and I said to him, I said, you know what? This is the toughest audience that I've ever had in my life. Will always remain to be so. Because it is my community. I said, you know, I have presented at a synagogue, on a high holy day, Rosh Hashanah.
- 04.20.30 As an Arab, talking about (?) bridging the gap between the two communities. I spoke in front of five hundred Jews, and that was pretty nerving-racking. And, and scary to go into a sacred space on a sacred holiday and to talk about the Arab-Israeli issue. And not knowing how people will perceive me. How receptive they will be to what I have to say.

- 04.020.58 I said, but at the end, they all stood up and gave me a standing ovation. For my coming, for my taking the challenge, for my eagerness to work with them. And I said, that was the most nerve racking presenting I ever did. But presenting in front of the Yemeni community is tops. This is the most nerve-racking that just rattles all my bones. (LAUGHS). And he looked at me in astonishment.
- 04.21.27 He said, you know, you were amazing under all that pressure, you did a great job. Walked into the room uh, my god. I walked into this office space. There were 70, at least between 50 and 70 men sitting. The board, they started at 12, and I ended up coming at 1 because I had a previous engagement I couldn't get out of, which was also something they were annoyed with, but they were like Ok, when you get there, you get there (LAUGHS).
- 04.21.59 Uh, and they desperately need me on there, but I know that eventually they're just gonna get fed up with me. So I walk in, there are 70 men, Jim. Seventy, maybe less, I don't know. I walk in. I did not see one woman there, and I actually called up all of the women that were at the prior conference and others, and I'm like you got to come, you got to come, you got to be there, you've got to support me. I'll be there at 1 o'clock. I'll meet you guys there at 1 o'clock on the dot. They didn't show up. (LAUGHS)
- 04.22.28 And there were people standing outside, and I a car, I took a car and it pulled up in front of there, and I was like I can't walk away. These people know that I'm here. I can't walk away. You know, and then I just remembered what Naji said to me, you got to do this. You know, our community needs to change. And you're the only change right now. I open the door, I walked in, the board members are happy to see me. I uh, they were sitting way in the back of the organization, and because everybody was hovered all over, I felt awkward to pass through.
- 04.23.04 And so I decided I was gonna sit in the back with all the other people and just be like an observer or something. And the board members are like no, come over here. You know, they're waving at me, and they're like over here, and you know, we saved you a seat. And I had to march through these men, you know, passing by them. I was so nervous, Jim, that I

couldn't, like I felt my knees like wobbling (LAUGHS). Like I was gonna fall on the floor and just like you know, collapse.

04.23.34 So I finally got to, to the seat. Uh, one of my colleagues saved me a seat. And they continued their presentation. They had the Yemeni consulate from Washington DC there. I don't know who and why he came. But uh, he heard about the grand opening, and he came with a proposal for the community. In (?) you know, for the establishment of this new organization. And he spent about an hour before I got there, presenting this proposal.

04.24.10 And before I got there, also the president gave a welcome and a brief summary of what we were planning to do. Finally about 15 minutes later, I sort of got the gist of what he was trying to do. And when there was finally a moment of silence, I said, you know, if I may, I'd like to interject. (CLEARS THROAT)

04.24.31 I thanked him for coming. I said, thank you for coming, it was really a pleasure to have you. Uh, come to our grand opening uh, we are so honored that you made the time. And you made the commitment to come. Uh, I want to thank you for the proposal that you have brought, you know, for the community and the board to review. Uh, and get back to you about. Uh, which is something that the board, this established board will be doing for anything that (CLEARS THROAT) relates uh, or connects to the community.

04.25.07 Uh, however, right now, I think what's really important uh, is for the board of this organization to present uh, what it sets out to do for the community. And I said, I'm sure that the president may have done that, but if he hasn't, then I think that's what we really need to do.

04.25.27 Uh, and you have raised many issues that are affecting the community, and we're very much aware of them. And much more aware of what's affecting the, the community in New York City. And I think us presenting uh, what we planned to do would really solidify a lot for you and the entire community. So uh, two of the board members, both together, said, well, we

think you should do the presentation, Debbie (LAUGHS). And I was like I think the president, with all due respect, I think it's the president who should, who should do that.

- 04.26.01 So the president gave about a two minute summary and then he stopped and he said, quite honestly, if there's any capable in providing you with a presentation of what this organization is setting out to do, it would be Debbie. It is such an honor and a privilege to have her and her expertise and her wisdom of working within and out of the community.
- 04.26.31 Uh, to help us get where we are today, and so if there's anyone here who can do (CLEARS THROAT) you know, an in-depth presentation, it would be Debbie. So Debbie, I would really appreciate if you would present for us what we are planning to do. So of course I was put on the spot, and I (CLEARS THROAT) made it clear to him, I said, you know, I want to start off by saying that the entire board of this organization is very capable, and if you all agree that you want me to do the presentation uh, I would be happy to.
- 04.27.05 So they're like yes, please do it (LAUGHS). So I took about 15 minutes, Jim, solidifying exactly what this organization is setting out to do. Uh, the afterwards, the Yemeni consulate turned around and said, well, now that I understand what you are planning to do, I want to (?) congratulate you all on the thoughtful thinking and the process and the development that you have developed for this organization.
- 04.27.40 I want to wish you all the best of luck, and I want to extend my support if there is ever a need for anything from the consulate, we would be very happy. And so now that I have a clean understanding uh, based on what this sister has presented, which I am very impressed and I am very honored and humbled to have made her acquaintance.
- 04.28.06 And to congratulate all of you, the board, for recruiting her to be at the helm of this organization with you. And for the community to provide her the support and the utmost uh, respectful way as possible. Uh, it's someone such as her that needs to be in every organization or any affiliated uh, type of group to, to really help guide uh, and, and pave the way for the community.

- 04.28.45 So he turned around and he thanked me. Uh, then the couple of other men who is like the New York City council for Yemen who's actually at the UN here. And what have you, they also did the same thing. They thanked us and they congratulated us and then they all got up and left (LAUGHS).
- 04.29.03 So then it was the conversation was between us and the community, and they had a lot of really good questions and, and what have you. And it was, Jim it was the most gratifying thing to have experienced that day, you know, to get you know, the consulate of Yemen to, to give me such an honor and encouraging the community to uh, to stand behind me and support me was really a huge, huge thing to have happened.
- 04.29.34 Uh, so uh, you know, I went home that day and I was telling Naji, I was like, I can't believe you weren't there, it was awful it was horrible (LAUGHS). And I had to stop this consulate from telling us what to do, and I had to find a way to do it that was so very diplomatic and professional and, and thank god afterwards I was able to win him over, and he gave me this beautiful tribute and encouraging the community to support me.
- 04.30.00 And uh, you know, he, we just, he was listening, he was like, I told you you'd be fine, and you'd be great and you know, you were gonna do it and I know that, you know, you're terrified and you're scared of speaking, he says, but you know, if there's any meaningful work that needs to get done is within our specific community. You know, you have done everything you could possibly do with the broader Muslim community etc. but our community right now, you know, really needs us to start making these strides.
- 04.30.32 So uh, I turned around to him, you know, because I, I was really emotionally drained that afternoon, emotionally drained. I didn't eat that day. It, it really drained me, and I just turned around to him and I was saying, you know, we always (?) and I was saying to him, we always talk about the gifts that God gives us. And sometimes I always uh, uh,, I always ask and I wonder is the gift that he gave me, you know, a blessing or a curse?

- 04.31.05 And uh, you know, he, he was just listening. And I said, you know, sometimes I even surprise myself. You know, with what I do and with what I say and, and how I go about it, and you know, this gift of intuitiveness, you know, knowing you know, when is the right moment to capture, and, and to take it is, is just uh, it is a true gift.
- 04.31.31 And I was telling him that as I was sitting there, one of the board members sitting directly across from me, you know, saw me turning shades and he knows when I'm folding my hand and, and grinding my thumb in my (LAUGHS) in my palm that there's something going on. And he's known me since he was a kid. I'm older than him. And I, I sued to know him as a student. Uh, he just whispered to me, and he, he (?) in a way and nobody was watching.
- 04.32.02 I don't think anybody was paying attention to the two of us, and he just said to me, be patient, sister, be patient. You know, like just telling me don't you know, don't say anything yet, just keep listening (LAUGHS). And I listened and I listened, and then I just knew when the right moment was to interject, and when I was telling Naji of what the, the Yemeni consulate had brought, this proposal for us of what we could do (LAUGHS) he was like and what was the board doing?
- 04.32.30 And I said they just sat there and they were all listening. And he said and none of them said anything? I said no, and he said, and then what? And it was like, and then I had to do it. I (LAUGHS). I said, can you fathom this, can you imagine you know, in a room of 70 men, you know, a woman had to do this? And I told him, I said I was so terrified because I didn't know what the audience was gonna think of me. What the board was gonna think of me, what the, you know, Yemeni consulate was gonna think of me.
- 04.33.0 But it, it worked out really well. So as we were talking as I was talking to him about this gift, you know, whether it's a blessing or a curse uh, he started having, he started getting dizzy. And then all of the sudden he was flipping actually through the mail and he was on the bed. And he was just listening to me and I was going on and on and on, rambling. And all the sudden he just says to me, I can't breathe. And I'm like, I looked at him I'm like what are you talking about?

- 04.33.31 He's like I can't breathe. I'm feeling dizzy I need, I need to go to the doctor. Uh, I'm not feeling well. And I was like oh, my god, you're, you were just Ok a minute ago. I don't understand what's going on? And he's like you know, get the keys, let's go. And you know, he's like you know, call Yusef, tell him I'm not feeling well. And I was just like, I didn't even know like what to do. I was just paralyzed in the moment.
- 04.33.58 So I uh, started screaming out for my son to come. He was actually in the bathroom uh, getting fresh water for his fish tank. And he's like what's the matter, what's the matter? It's like Daddy's not feeling well, we have to go. You know, get your stuff, let's go, we're gonna jump in the car, and take him to the hospital. So uh, we jump into the car and he's sitting you know, he's sitting in the car and we're like are you Ok, are you OK? He's like I'm Ok, but we, you know, just hurry up. And I couldn't even drive at that moment. Thank God that my son is older to, to do that.
- 04.34.30 So he, you know, and he's a really good driver. He started driving us. Uh, we get to the hospital uh, you know, they check his blood pressure, they start you know, checking his heart and what have you, and they're like your blood pressure is high. You know? And uh, you know, did you take your medicine, did you eat? So he says to us, he says, well, I ran out of my prescription uh, and I was supposed to go pick it up this afternoon and I just totally forgot and I didn't have my medication so it was just so nerve-racking, you know?
- 04.35.06 Extremely nerve wracking to, to have to go through that. So uh, and you know, we were gonna go to dinner. We had made plans 'cos he was saying to me, while we were talking, he said, you know, uh, did you think about dinner? I said no, I'm uh, what do you guys feel like eating? And he's like you know what, you've just had too much of a crazy day. We're just gonna go out. And so we ended up you know, being in the hospital for a couple of hours uh, and then we left.
- 04.35.37 And he's like you know, I'm sorry that I, I ruined you know, our diner plans. I was like dinner plans, I'm not even hungry anymore (LAUGHS). I'm just so relieved that you're OK.

Uh, so he you know, we ended up just picking up something up on our way home from the hospital. And we got his medication and you know, and it's just been really, really scary to have to deal with this, you know, so scary.

04.36.02 Because you know, and I, I was telling him the other day that I still, I just don't see him and myself growing old (LAUGHS). I don't know, it's weird. But I don't. I still see him as that young, energetic, vibrant man that I married. Twenty-four years ago. Uh, you know, doing all that he does, with all of his might, and you know, his passion.

04.36.31 And, you know, I don't see myself you know, getting that way, either. You know, thank God that you know, I'm healthy. That I'm not, I don't have any you know, any symptoms of you know reaching old age. I'm almost 40 but I know that's not old, but uh, but I just don't see it. And him now approaching those stages is really, really scaring me to death.

04.37.01 Uh, you know, and one other time that he had gotten sick uh, with the same stuff, same symptoms and as we were you know, getting ready to you know, well, we were waiting in the waiting room after they'd checked him and that they didn't really know was going on. You know, he's talking to me about the bank accounts, the mortgage, the savings (LAUGHS) And all this stuff, and I was like, I don't want to hear this stuff right now. You're upsetting me, and I have to tell you all this stuff.

04.37.32 You have to know this stuff, and you have to like take care of the stuff with my dad if something happens to me, and you have to make sure you know, that his assets are Ok, and that he gets his share and, and all this stuff, and I was like don't do this to me. I do not want to hear this. I am not gonna deal with this stuff because you're gonna be here. You can't go anywhere. You know, you just can't. Uh, and he's like look, you know, this is stuff that's not in my hands or your hands.

04.38.02 You know, and we have to face it. These are things that we're gonna have to go through and who knows? You know, who's gonna go first or who, how we're gonna go or whatever. And it just terrifies me to think about this. You know? About him ever, anything ever happening

to him. I would just totally you know, I can't even see myself functioning. You know, it, it's just really, really scary.

- 04.38.30 Uh, so a lot of you know, what I do now, I take that into consideration in terms of like making sure to, to be home more often, making sure to like ask him did you take your medicine? Making sure that he eats well. Uh, you know, even though that sometimes it's a hardship, but it's such a, it's such a good hardship.
- 04.38.56 You know, I feel such gratification just to, to know that I am, I am somehow sustaining him, you know, 'cos I you know, he's my sustainer (LAUGHS) in terms of giving me the strength to do what I do. And uh, yesterday I shared with uh, with Danielle, when she, when she called me she said, you know, how are you doing, Debbie? Let's talk. How are you doing? I said, well, if you would have asked me yesterday how I was doing (LAUGHS). I would have just like broke like a dish. And fallen into a hundred pieces.
- 04.39.30 And she's like well, what happened? Uh, you know, so I started talking to her about you know, how this event has truly immersed me. Uh, has just swallowed me, you know, in terms of what I have to do, the meetings. Uh, you know, the fact that I was able to forge this relationship with Riverside and get them to support such an event and co-sponsor it and have the Muslim community actually holding a prayer service there.
- 04.40.04 Uh, is just beyond belief. And the church is just so happy to have had the opportunity. It's the first of its kind to happen between Muslims and Christians. And every time that I speak to them, they're like you know, we are so indebted to you for making this happen between our communities. And so this uh, this week alone I had two meetings uh, there, and they were in the evening
- 04.40.32 and it was just so hard, and Naji had worked (?) two days uh, and then the other days he was home. So I was out on Monday night and he was home uh, he was home on the weekend, which I was also home. He worked, I think one or two days, I can't remember. But I was

out Monday night, Tuesday for the Revson, Wednesday for my class, and Thursday I had to attend the volunteer training.

- 04.41.07 And I tried very, very to get people from the planning committee who are, who've been going to the meetings with the church to go. And nobody was available. And uh, it was you know, was standing at 12:30 outside of the school that I was going to visit. Uh, to help them get a CBO, a community-based organization. And uh, I got there a little early and I'm making all these calls, please you got to go, I need you to go. I can't go.
- 04.41.34 And I couldn't get anybody. And I was just feeling like so abandoned. I was feeling so, you know, pressured and, and it was all because, I was feeling this way because I wanted to be home. That's what I wanted. And I just felt that nobody was there. Just to help me make that happen. And it just killed me, where I was like, you know, why the hell am I doing all this, you know? Is this all worth it, you know?
- 04.42.03 I want to be home, Naji's home, I want to go home, I want to make dinner. Just want to be with the family. Uh, you know, and just like, you know, just have that quality time 'cos I love that quality time. Which I don't feel like I have a lot of because of all of this craziness in my life. So uh, I called one person, and she, she said to me, you know, I could go but I'll only stay for half hour, 'cos I have a, you know, a grant that's due, and what have you.
- 04.42.35 And I'm like, you're already in the neighborhood, it's probably gonna be an hour and a half max. If you could just do that, that would be so awesome. And it was so easy for her to say no to me. You know, and I'm like, you know, and this was somebody that has asked me for a lot of favors and stuff. And I go out of my way. And I was just feeling like you know, damn. You know? I'm not asking for a lot. It's not like she has to travel. She's already right across the street. All she has to do is stay there.
- 04.43.06 And I couldn't get her to, to do it. And uh, you know, Naji called me, like when all this is happening. And he doesn't know what's going on and he's like you know, how are you, what's going on? And I started explaining to him, I'm good. You know, I, the training

tonight is happening for the volunteers, and you know, I trying to get somebody to, to go with them and what have you.

- 04.43.34 And he's like so what does that mean? You know, I didn't say anything. And he said, well, you said you were gonna be home tonight, and you know, we, everybody's home and we're looking forward to it. And I said to him, I said, I can't get anybody to go. And I cannot sent these volunteers to this training without somebody who's been at the planning committee meetings.
- 04.43.58 If a question arises, if something with the program arises, they're not gonna know anything. So he started naming the people on the committee, it's like did you call this one, did you call that one? I was like, yeah, I called all of them and everybody is not available. So he just like he was silent on the other end, and uh, said are you there, he's like yeah, I'm here. Uh, I said, so it, you know, I, I'm gonna have to go to this meeting. So there was just a long, a long pause. He didn't say anything to me.
- 04.44.33 And, and uh, I said I know you were looking forward to me coming home and so was I. But I just can't afford for anything to happen, you know, any misinformation, any misunderstanding and you know, the volunteers are from the Muslim community. They need guidance, they need to understand what the event is all about and etc., as well as the people from the church. They need to know what our rituals are and what have you.
- 04.45.03 And so I'm explaining, so he says to me he said, you don't have to explain all that. I know all that stuff. Uh, you know, go take care of what you have to do. Don't worry about us, and you know, when you get home, you'll get home. So uh, we hung up the phone, and I knew like if I, if he was just like right in front of me, I knew that that was like one of his you know, he was at his peak with all of this.
- 04.45.31 Like just, I know he was not happy but you know, he didn't, he didn't lash out, he didn't say you know, he tried to provide me with strategies of other people doing it, and uh, you know, and I just felt so badly. And as I started walking to the train, you know, after hanging up with

him, I was like I can't believe that this is happening to me. It's like that I have to keep making decisions between my family and my community work.

04.46.01 You know, when can I actually do both together? Uh, without having to compromise one or the other. And uh, as I was walking to the train I was just crying. I was just sobbing and it was a very quiet two blocks to the train, there was nobody around (LAUGHS). And it just felt so good to let it go. And uh, you know, but it was a heavy, extremely heavy day for me, Thursday. And it was really you know, it got to my breaking point.

04.46.32 And uh, I went to the training. Uh, we worked things out, things went really well. The uh, the reverend of the church that we'd been planning with was just so supportive and so you know, eager to make this work, and, and what have you. And you know, he started sharing other information with me, that we needed to take care of, and I just said to him, I said Jim. I can't, I can't function any more right now.

04.46.59 And uh, he said well, are you OK? And I said, you know, I am in such overload right now. I really cannot, you know, talk about this stuff. I need to call you tomorrow. So he just like saw it you know, in my face, and he heard it in my voice, and he's like you know, Debbie, you have to take care of yourself, you know? You have to really you know, not take on so much. He says, I know that, you know, you're an oddity uh, for the outside world.

04.47.30 You know, outside of your community, and people reach out to you. They call you, they want to work with you. They you know, are overextending you. But you also have to take care of yourself. You know? And, in order for this work to continue you have to take care of yourself. And uh, you know, he said, you know, we definitely could talk tomorrow, even though it's my day off, here is my cell phone, call me and we'll take care of this tomorrow. So uh, it was just so reassuring.

04.47.58 And I was like oh, my god. I don't want him to think I'm just like this incompetent person (LAUGHS). Who just like started, you know, just falling apart in front of him. And, you know, but he was so understanding. And when I called them yesterday you know, he was

very cheerful and he's like it's great to hear from you, I hope you, you rested. I hope you had a good night's sleep. And I hope your family's OK. And he sort of like sensed all of this stuff that I was going through that day (LAUGHS). He really did. And uh, you know, when he said how, how's your family, I hope everything went well yesterday.

04.48.34 And it's like yeah, you know, I got home (CLEARS THROAT) you know, at 9 o'clock, and you know, my husband and I just hung out, and I shared with him the meeting and, and what have you, and he's really supportive. And I said, you know, I'd been feeling really guilty about him not feeling well and not me being home more often. And, you know, so he was just like doing his pastoral stuff, you know, saying well, you know, this happens to all of us and you know, but you need to take care of yourself and your family first.

04.49.02 And you know, set time and try to structure your life in a better way that will not overextend you because if you fall ill or something happens to you, then you're no good to anybody. So uh, so it was a good conversation.

04.49.23 END OF TAPE # DA 21

TAPE # DA 22
Debbie Almontaser 02.12.05 New York
Jim Whittaker, Producer
PROJECT REBIRTH

05.00.03 PICTURE UP

05.00.15 JW : I have one question. Do you feel a certain over compensation in connection to 9/11 that comes into the process. Do you think there's a connection between (?) and in that time and in what way?

05.01.14 DEBBIE : If there's a connection between September 11th ?

JW : And the place you're at now in the sense that ..how things have blossomed, but also the pressure that's come with that. Are there connections to be discussed?

05.01.44 DEBBIE : Yeah, boy are there connections Jim. There are huge connections. Um, you know if somebody would've come to me three years before 9-11 and said you know something devastating is gonna happen and the Muslim community is going to fall under siege and you, kid, are gonna have to step up to bat and take on the challenges that come up, I would be like are you for real? Are you crazy? Get out of here. Me? Who am I to be, you know, I'm no, you know trained community leader. I'm not a spokes person. I'm not a representative.

05.02.29 Um, that would've probably been my answer to that person. Uh, but you know everything that's, that I am involved in since (?) since September 11th up until the present is, is very much connected. It, it's very much connected because, you know, I wouldn't be doing what I was doing, you know, if September 11th didn't happen.

05.02.57 I really firmly wouldn't be involved in what I'm doing. I wouldn't be in the career that I am right now professionally. I would've been in a school as a principle. That was supposed to be my story. You know, that was like my goal and my aspiration was to become a principle. That was it. I didn't want anything else. I, you know, got my second masters and it was in administrations, school leadership.

05.03.33 And I was just dreaming of the kids and their families, of the PTA meetings, of you know the after school programs, of just dealing with the issues the families have with their kids you know, just all of that stuff. That was supposed to be my world. And September 11th happened, and my whole world was jolted.

05.03.59 It, you know, my last year within the leadership program, I couldn't even focus, I couldn't complete my coursework, you know, I was so entirely dysfunctional in terms of being in a

academic setting to complete the degree. And the people in program, the leaders of this leadership program held it together for me.

- 05.04.26 Really held it together, like Debbie, we need you to finish this, you know, you can't throw this away. We need you to finish this. We know now that your priorities have changed. And you know, at that time it was like November, December, I'm like no, my priorities haven't changed. I'm gonna finish this, I'm gonna, you know, I look forward to being assigned a school and gonna go on with my life. And as things just kept getting worse and worse in regard to the Muslim community, it started becoming clear and evident for me that I can't be a principle, you know.
- 05.05.05 I can't be in a school building, uh, (CLEARS THROAT) dealing with just that community alone and shutting out the world. I just couldn't do it, you know. And my opportunity came where I was offered a school and I had to decline, and um, you know. I know they were not happy with my answer, but they respected it, um when I said to them I needed the next 3 to 5 years to have the autonomy to be able to respond to things, uh, affecting my community if they do arise.
- 05.05.47 And I need to have that and if I was in a school setting as the leader, I would not be able to devote myself a hundred percent. And I've been fortunate within my career to have the flexibility of having such positions that have allowed me to complement my work within my community to the broader community through the conflict resolution and the cultural diversity work.
- 05.06.17 Um and now just broadening that work with you know, CBO's and after school programs, of being there as an advisor as a liason, as someone who can support what they're doing and enhance it and connect them to others to help them meet the needs of our students whether it be academic, whether it be social or cultural.
- 05.06.42 And uh, I'm fortunate, you know, to have had these opportunities, but if I, if you know, if there was such a thing of changing things Jim, I wish that I could go back and make

September 11th never happen. If I could do that. If I could just go back in time and reverse everything that would be something that I would've never let happen.

05.07.10 'Cos it just, I, I you know, it just has, there is not a day I don't think. There is not a day that I live and breathe that I don't think about that day and how that day has, I don't know how to say it, but it has just become a curse for me. Especially when (SIGHS) I'm faced with having to speak up for my community, having to defend my community, um, having to be the mediator between my community and others who misunderstand them. Um, you know, it's just really tiring, it's extremely extremely tiring.

05.07.58 A couple of weeks ago, and you may have heard about the Coptic family that was killed in New Jersey. Uh, they were killed execution style and uh, the Coptic-Arab community is from Egypt and for centuries they've had bad, they've had bad, um, bad blood between the Arab Muslims and the Coptic Arabs in Egypt. And so the Coptic community was blaming Muslims for this horrible murder.

05.08.32 And um, when the accusations started flying, the media started calling me. I don't even know how they get my number. I just, it's mind boggling. And I'm like, well, call this organization, call that organization. It was a weekend. And they're like, well nobody's at these organizations and there is no further number, and somebody gave us your cell phone number and somebody gave us your home number and. And I was like, this is unreal.

05.09.04 So I had to basically spend my weekend figuring out to get people to go to the funeral, strategizing how to respond to the media, being very cautious and worried that I don't say anything that could be misinterpreted, um that will, you know, shed bad light on the community etcetera. And it just, it's so tiring to, to have to do all that. Like, you know, why did I, why was it me? Why couldn't it be anybody else, you know.

05.09.37 There's so many dynamic people in my community, particularly women, who are just, you know, amazing. Why just, why couldn't it be one of them and not me? You know, and when I mentioned earlier how I hated being honored, I just it's not for me. I just wanna be in the

background, I wanna do whatever it has to get done, and I just don't wanna be in the limelight and, you know, getting all the attention and the spotlight, it's just not for me.

- 05.10.06 I was honored by the Arab Association of New York in December, and they begged me accept and to go to their dinner. And, you know, in my speech to them I said, I said you know, I spent the past few days with butterflies in my stomach, and it's not that I'm afraid to speak, or you all know that I'm not afraid to speak. Um, but this kind of thing for me is just so uneasy, you know, to be rewarded for work that I'm doing, work that I am doing because I feel that I need to, not to earn, you know, the attention or to earn awards or, you know, to get credit for.
- 05.10.51 It's just a part of my nature to do. Um, and, they were really very receptive and and warm and. (SIGHS) But um, it's, it's just hard, you know, it's hard to become. It's become difficult for me to be, you know, expected to take on these challenges, um, to be a spokes person for the community and .
- 05.11.22 I mean when they were calling me, I was like well I'm gonna give you the number of somebody else. They called a couple of people and they were like, we don't wanna comment. And I was just totally appalled that, you know, they didn't want to comment, you know, they consider themselves, you know, community leaders, but they didn't want to comment on this. And um, you know, it just, it's, it's devastating that people can't really, I feel like sometimes people cannot think on their feet, you know.
- 05.11.53 And I know that these people couldn't comment because they just were not confident enough that they know the story, the issue and how to go about it. And, I know sometimes that I take risks, and these risks scare me because, you know, these risks could me detrimental to my reputation as well as the reputation of the community. And, you know, it's just, it's interesting how things are evolving and and continuing, and I don't know how long I can go with this, but um. I certainly know if anything, you know, happened to Naji that I, I will probably just like shut down. Um, because, um, I cannot, you know, god forbid, I cannot live with the weight of feeling guilty because I wasn't there for him.

05.12.51 You know, so um, it's, it's pretty scary, it's a scary thing to to think about um, and it's also a scary thing not to do anything at all, you know, to continue the efforts, to continue promoting a positive image of Muslims in the United States. Um, you know, again there are so many people who are doing it out there on a national level and a local level, but you know, the voices are few. You know and, the voices that are, you know, being sought out have unfortunately been, mine has been one of them. And again it goes back to what I was telling Naji that day of the gifts, you know, that we get sometimes, you know, I wonder if it's a curse or is it a blessing?

05.13.51 So, it and it's open to interpretation. There are times that (?) that I feel wonderful and good about, and you know things are going really well and I know and understand it's a blessing. But when things like this past Thursday were, I just totally reached my limits mentally and emotionally. I just felt like that, it's a curse that, you know, that I have to live with.

05.14.30 My back isn't hurting me anymore. (LAUGHS) It's like it all just went off my shoulders. I don't know Jim. Did I do it? Did I cover what you wanted?

JW : I understand your oldest son is not happy with the military

05.15.08 Yeah. You know who I have to thank for it (LAUGHS) Michael Moore. He um, he was Yousef was very gung ho for the war in Iraq. And, you know, he did his six months at ground zero, he came home and. You know he went back into his routine and started doing what he needed to do.

05.15.36 And um, we couldn't have even conversations over dinner about the war, about our country going to war. 'Cos he knew how adamant we felt about it not happening, and he was in support and he was firmly firmly believing that the US Army was going to, or the Marines or whoever were going to surgically remove Saddam Hussain.

- 05.16.03 And, the day after we went to war and the reports were that they had bombed such and such place, he was totally devastated. He couldn't believe his eyes when he saw it on TV, uh, he was truly shocked, but he did not say to us, you know, I can't believe what they did. He was still very much in support. So uh, in April I think it was April or May maybe later, I, we rented Bowling for Columbine.
- 05.16.37 And uh, we watched it and it was, I think it was that break, you know the Easter break, it was in April, and we were just watching it, and he watched it with us. And he (?) said nothing, he had nothing to say. He was supposed to return the movie. I got a call from the, um, video store saying that it was a week overdue. Uh, when I asked him about it, he said, oh yeah, I still have it, I'll take it back. I was like well what were you doing with it? And he said I watched it again.
- 05.17.09 And I found out weeks later that he kept watching it over and over and over and over. And he started to read, um, some history books, and he started reading The Nation and looking at alternative media, stuff that I've always like had mentioned in conversation, but he was totally did not want to hear about it. Um, he was a big FOX fan, FOX 5 fan, uh, which I, that channel appalls me.
- 05.17.40 So um, during the summer he started having conversations with us, and he you know, was willing to listen to what we were talking about. He started attending some know your rights events, some things about the war and what have you. And um, really getting better informed about everything. In March, um, or was it February? I can't remember. The huge demonstration against the war that took place.
- 05.18.20 He was um, at his college campus and he joined this group that was, you know, promoting the demonstration. He brought home a stack of fliers that he was giving out to friends and neighbors, and he went to the demonstration. It was so awesome to hear him say I'm going. I think it was when I was in Russia. 'Cos I, I wasn't there, and I was really disappointed that I couldn't go. But it was just so wonderful to hear him say, I'm going, I have to be there, I

have to support people, you know, this is wrong, and what we're doing is wrong. And it's just amazing to see the three hundred and sixty degree turn around that he's made.

05.19.06 Just incredibly amazing. So um, in his reading and questioning and then also going to see the second Michael Moore movie which I forget the title now (~I~) Farenheight yeah 911. Um, he went the first day and he stood on line for 3 hours for his tickets to go into the theater. Uh, and he was just so happy.

05.19.37 And he came home and he was telling us about it, and you gotta go see it and it's a great movie and it's amazing, and he comes up with so much information and. It was like, you know, it, it was just, you know, preaching to the converted, you know, he really, it was really wonderful. So um, last summer he decided without actually speaking to us about what he was planning to do. He decided that he wanted to resign from the Army.

05.20.06 And he submitted his resignation letter not to complete the rest of his duty. He um, was not going for his monthly drills. And uh, I found out that he submitted his resignation letter when he had gotten a call from his JAG officer. Is it JAG officer? Yeah. And he left a message, and he was like this is the JAG officer, and I immediately knew like JAG officer is like some kind of military law something, you know rules something.

05.20.44 So when he got home, I told him, and I said can you tell, what's going on? You know I know that show, you know about JAG and stuff like that, and it's people usually in trouble in the military. And he's like well, you know now that you ask I might as well tell you. I uh, I submitted my resignation. And I was like what do you mean? He's like I don't wanna complete my next 2 years. I, I, I'm disappointed, I'm upset, I don't wanna be a part of a military that is killing innocent people, that is doing unjust things. That is not, you know, in any way representing what this country stands for.

05.21.23 And um, I chose to do that. And I said well now what's going on? He said well now they're giving me a hard time. And uh, I'm, they told me the last time that I met with them that if I continue, if I wanna complete the this process that I will be discharged with a dishonorary

discharge, and it will not look good in my records, and it will red flag me and it's just not a good thing for my future.

- 05.21.58 And they've given me time to think about it and to get back to them if I reconsider not, not um discharging. So um, in meeting with the JAG officer they basically told him, you know, like what are the repercussions and it's just not a good thing, and that he should try to complete his term, he's better off this way, and it just, you know, it would in the long run serve him better.
- 05.22.27 Um, so he came home and he said that he was planning to, um, uh take back the resignation, and uh, when he did they were also giving him a hard time of now why did he change his mind. (LAUGHS) And they were gonna put him on probation and uh, you know, they're gonna monitor him and all of this nonsense. And him being open and honest of why he wanted to leave was something that really was upsetting to them.
- 05.23.02 You know, he basically said to them that he felt lied to, betrayed, uh, they promised him, you know, a college education that never, you know, followed through. His health (?) benefits suck. (LAUGHS) He's like why are you lying to people and getting people to join you. And the thing that appalled him the most was knowing that soldiers who died in Iraq are getting the same compensation that people in Vietnam, that people that were getting killed in Vietnam were getting today.
- 05.23.36 And he was like this is ridiculous, you do not care for our lives, for our families, we are worth nothing to you. So uh, he chose to you know, take back the the resignation. He did his 3 months probation. Um, he goes every now and then for his drills. Um, and hopefully, his, his term ends actually August of 2005.
- 05.24.07 So we have just been so nervous. Like if his dad and I knew that he was planning to do this, we would've discouraged him, because one of our biggest fears is that they might wanna punish him, uh, for for doing this by saying, you're going to Iraq. We're enlisting you, you're gonna be deployed to Iraq. So. And I shared this with him and he's like, you know, even if

they do I'm not gonna go. I'm like well what are you gonna do? He's like well I certainly can't be AWOL because they'll find me (LAUGHS).

05.24.38 But um, I will, I will look into being a conscientious objector, you know, and I'll, I will have to find, you know other people who are doing it and figure out how to do it. But I'm not gonna go and fight an unjust war. I would be happy to protect this country, you know, under any other circumstance of us being attacked, um, or violated. But for us, for me to go and fight a war that has nothing to do with our country, I will not do.

05.25.12 So we are, you know, day by day praying that he never gets that call. Um, that they will just leave him alone, they will let him continue, you know finish off his term. Um, and I have to tell you, this all happened in the summer and it's been quite excruciating to count the months left, uh, for this just to, to pass. Um, so it's it's a little, it's scary every now and then when we think about it.

05.25.44 But uh, it's just really wonderful to see him, you know open his eyes on his own. You know as much as I used to talk to him and friends of mine would talk to him, he would totally shut down. And for this just to happen based on a movie (LAUGHS). When I was telling this with to a friend of mine, she said you should let Michael Moore know, maybe he'll do a story on him. (LAUGHS) Of how he, you know, opened his eyes. I was like yeah Ok. (LAUGHS)

05.26.12 Um, so it's really wonderful to see him, you know with broader perspectives of the world and seeing himself as a part of it rather than, you know, isolated, you know the way that the military has made many of it's people feel. Yeah. So that's it

JW : The apple doesn't fall far from the tree

DEBBIE: Yes, yes, thank God. Thank God.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

05.27.07 I know that, I know that I'm the only voice, the only Muslim voice. So I, again it's, it's not just for me or the project, but it's for my community, you know their story being told, their anguish being told, you know. And it's not that I'm portraying each and every one of them out there, but I, I hope that I am, I am an agent that is telling their story, you know through my own personal stories.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

05.28.30 END OF TAPE DA 22