

**TAPE # DA 28      09.10.2005**  
**Debbie Almontaser**  
**JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director**  
**PROJECT REBIRTH**

01.01.00 PICTURE UP

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Can you talk about the funeral for Ossie Davis you went to?

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

01.03.02 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: So of course, I didn't get there in time. Uh, the, the cab ride was a bit long. He took the local streets, which was a big mistake. Got there. The crowds were all the way outside the church. People had already been allowed to go into the church. And when I got there, the only people that they were allowing was actually press. And there were people yelling and screaming at the guard. And I was like, what's happening, what's going on?

01.03.28 And one woman turns around and says to me uh, they're only letting press go in. And uh, so if you have a press pass, they'll let you go in. I said, I don't have a press pass. I need to get in. (LAUGHS) And she's like, you know what, somebody gave me a press pass. But I don't know if I have it in my wallet or not. (CLEARS THROAT) This older African-American woman. Uh, very, you know, intellectual. Very well dressed. Just (?) you know, the aura was amazing between the two of us.

01.03.58 And uh, (?) we walked over (?) to the side. She actually said to me, she goes, if I can find it, I will take you in with me. I was like, you'd do that for me? And she's like, absolutely. We're all here for Ossie. And I was like, this is amazing. I was like, I am gonna get in. So we walked over to the side to look for her press pass. She was looking through all the pockets of,

of her wallet. Couldn't find it. Then I said to her, I said, you know what, look in that other pocket right there. I don't think you looked in there. And she looked in there and there it was. (LAUGHS)

- 01.04.28 We found the press pass. So she walks over. We make our way through the crowd, because they were just yelling and screaming and carrying on. And she flashes it to the guard and she says, here's my press pass. And he's like, okay, ma'am, you could go in. And she held onto my hand really tight, and she was dragging me behind her. He's like, miss, where are you going? She's like, she's with me, she's with me. And we walked in. It was incredible. I can't even begin to tell how excited I was. And I was like it's just faith that I'm here today. We walked into. Absolutely, there was absolutely no place to sit downstairs (?) in the huge chapel.
- 01.05.05 We ended up going upstairs onto the balcony. And we found a really great spot to sit. And we sat there together. Uh, we talked, we exchanged each other's cards. Uh, and it was just so beautiful. We shared a program that's, you know, somebody else next to us was, (?) had owned, because they ran out of programs. They literally ran out of programs.
- 01.05.28 And everybody was like, fighting over them because, you know, it's like a collector's item now. Uh, so I said to her, I said, you know, I know the people at Riverside Church. If they have any left, I will ask them to save two for us. Uh, and I will certainly mail it to you. So when I met with the folks uh, the following week at Riverside, they told me that didn't have any more. That, you know, they just didn't print out as many, and it wasn't, didn't make sense to print out more after the event. But it was absolutely beautiful.
- 01.05.58 Just, you know, to see all of these people who came, you know, to, to bid Ossie Davis farewell was really, really beautiful. And uh, Malcolm X's daughter was there, you know, and she gave this beautiful, you know, touching speech that just like, I was crying the whole time she spoke. And I think she spoke the longest of everybody. Even longer than his, his daughters and his sons. And it was just very, very touching for me, being that she herself is Muslim.

- 01.06.30 But yet (?) had this special connection with Ossie and his wife uh, Ruby Dee. Because after their father had passed away uh, Ossie became like another father to Malcolm X's daughters. And so she reminisced on all the things that he did for the family, and the support, you know. And how he filled that gap for them uh, as a father, someone who was there to guide them and to take care of them and nurture, you know, their childhoods.
- 01.07.01 And it was just really, really beautiful to, to just make that connection. And uh, you know, the music was incredible. You know, there were a lot of dignitaries there. Uh, President Clinton was there and he spoke. And it was just really beautiful, so his comments were really down to earth and, and just from the heart, you know. And uh, other stars that were there, I can't even remember all who were there. But it, it was just really incredible, you know.
- 01.07.29 It, it didn't matter, you know, what your title was or where you came from. It was like we were all there for just one thing, and that was just to, to bid him farewell. So I stayed to the very, very end. Uh, and it was beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. And uh, then we walked out together, this woman and I. And we hugged each other and (?) we said to each other, this was amazing that we had this opportunity to share this time together. And we left.
- 01.07.59 So uh, so I, I left that day feeling like, wow, I was just a part of (?), of history. Literally a part of history. And when, you know, in my conversations with people, saying that, uh, telling them that I had gone to the funeral, they're like, wow, really? How did you do that? And did you know him? I said I knew him, and I knew his wife. But I didn't know him uh, in a personal way. It was more of a professional way, through my work with Women In Islam. Uh, being, you know, that he was uh, a big supporter of ours.
- 01.08.30 And actually, his last big gig uh, here in New York City was the Darfur fundraiser that we did, which was a collaboration between Women In Islam and (Benet Jesheran?) and uh, another charity that came together. And he exceeded the program. And so that was really like, our last, you know, really wonderful time with him. And it was really, for him, one of the very last things that he worked on in, in regards to charity work, etcetera.

01.09.03 And I, I remember that day when he came for us to uh, to emcee the program uh, there were a few people on the committee who decided that we needed a script because we were using the Columbia theater. And we had to be out by so and so time. So they created a script for Ossie. (LAUGHS) And he said to us when he came in, he says, I will tell you guys, nobody ever creates a script for Ossie.

01.09.31 He said, but because this is a really good cause, and I understand that if we go over time for this space, that you have to pay money for it, I'll do it. But I want you guys to know that this never happened, (?) this never happened, nor should it be shared with anybody publicly. (LAUGHS) But the funny this, when he got onstage, he would read the script and then look up. And then not remember what he had to say, so he finally told the whole entire audience that he had a script to follow.

01.10.00 And if he didn't sound himself, to forgive him. (LAUGHS) So it was really wonderful. So uh, one of the wonderful things that came out at the funeral was his family announced that, you know, any contributions or donations uh, were to be made to the Darfur genocide. Uh, and they gave a listing of a few charities that are doing work over there. And for me, as well as, you know, my other colleagues in Women In Islam, we were really touched by that.

01.10.31 Because you know, he did, he emceed this event for us. And he saw the great need. You know, and his family saw the great need. And it resonated for them uh, that they chose that cause. So we felt like we had somehow, you know, you know, compelled the family to, to really do something so beautiful.

JW: Can you talk about the woman you met?

01.10.55 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, yeah, incredible. I have her card. Uh, I have not yet really had a chance to email her or call her, you know, but there are so many amazing people that I meet and I get their cards. And we, we tell each other we're gonna write each other (LAUGHS), or we'll call each other. But I just, it's so incredibly hard to call people. And

then just emailing people, it's like, how do you remember to email just everybody you meet? So uh, but I do, most definitely do want one day to, to get her card out of my wallet (?) and just touch base with her and, and let her know that that was a really special time.

01.11.31 And maybe (?) I could do it probably towards the, the anniversary of his funeral.

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: How are other things for you?

01.11.56 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh god, how are other things? (LAUGHS) I don't even know where to begin, you know. I used downstairs the analogy of being on this roller coaster that doesn't stop, you know, and has a lot of bumps. Uh, is going fast. Sometimes so fast that I just can't even take like a deep breath and figure out, you know, where, what I need to do, how do I need to go about stuff. And it's, it's been tiring. It's been really tiring.

01.12.29 Uh, you know, and just, just trying to maintain, you know, (?) this, the spirit of, of really bringing, you know, people in my community together has been like, the most challenging thing for me. And when I mean my community, it's, you know, the Arab-American community. The Muslim community. And just, you know, creating some type of unity to, to develop a stronger voice you know, in order for us to be taken more seriously, you know, by city officials, government, community leaders, etcetera.

01.13.05 It's, it's been quite, quite difficult. And, you know, the thing that, right now, that I'm struggling with is, am I the only one out there who wants this? Are there others who want it as well, but are not, you know, are not working hard enough to make it happen? And I feel like, for me, I don't know why it's become such a burden that I feel like I have to, I have to keep aiming for that.

01.13.29 And uh, one project that I, I (~JW~)

JW: Is it a personal burden or pressure from outside forces?

01.13.44 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Uh, I think, the burden is personal. But then the outside forces that, that I've, you know, I've had to deal with have, have made me feel discouraged in regards to like, is it really worth, you know, me killing myself to do this?

01.14.02 Uh, you know, and, you know, one of, one of the saddest things that's happened is that, and I shared this with uh, with Danielle, is, you know, I became victim of, of being, you know, accused of, of wanting to run for, (?) you know, public official, you know, to be a politician. To, you know, get a job in city hall, you know.

01.14.29 To, (?) you know, achieve this political status. And I'm like, that's far from what I want to do (LAUGHS) with my life. Uh, and it's just really, you know, (?) it's made me stop to think like, what am I doing to make people, you know, perceive me in this way, you know? Or is, is it just, is it me or is it just them and it's their own personal baggage, you know, that they are just not, not understanding where I'm coming from and projecting, you know, to the things that they're talking about.

JW: The perception thing is harder to deal with, that you're just doing what you're doing and not easy to separate?

01.15.43 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: So (CLEARS THROAT) what's made this year difficult for me is, is just, you know, dealing with some of the inside politics within my community of, of figuring out why my people are (?), why people are thinking this way of me, that I'm trying to promote myself and I'm trying to, you know, achieve this political status.

01.16.02 And you know, and I, again, like you said, perception, that is not what I want people to perceive. Uh, it's not anything that I'm interested in, ever, to go into politics. Uh, and just the fact that, you know, my, you know, my intentions are being, you know, misunderstood has been really, really painful. Uh, and the project that I had speared, which then, you know, I almost said to myself, why did I even bother to do this, you know?

01.16.34 And regretted doing it. And it was, after talking to somebody uh, Reverend Alfonso Wyatt, who's an amazing Baptist preacher, just the most beautiful person you could possibly think of, you know. And loving and caring and just has so much to offer to the world. And I asked to meet with him. And I sat with him for three (LAUGHS) hours. And he just let me pour my heart to him.

01.17.02 And he, I walked out of there feeling good. I walked out of there feeling like, you know what, I need to continue doing what I do, you know.

JW: Where you at a point of saying stop?

01.17.13 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I was (?), I was at a point of saying that I was going to disengage with the things that I was planning for uh, within the Arab community. And I was just feeling like, you know what? Just to, to stop the rumors, to stop all of this negative, you know, things that people were saying about me.

01.17.38 Just to, you know, just to do my own thing, you know, and, and not try to engage in pulling people together and working with people and establishing this united community uh, because it was just, you know, it, it was really taking a toll on me. And not only on me, but it was also affecting my relationship with Naji, because he would see how upset I would get when I'd hear these rumors.

01.18.04 Or he would get upset when he hears the rumors himself. And uh, at one meeting (~JW~)

JW: How does the information come to you?

01.18.14 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (?) It's really interesting because, and, and this is such a dynamic that I've never in my life, living here, experienced. But it's something that (?) I've learned about Arabs, which is not in any way negative, but I think, you know, especially after I talked to Reverend uh, Alfonso Wyatt.

- 01.18.32 He said to me, he says, every community has these kinds of in-house politics and nonsense. So for example, one of (?) the young people who was working on, uh, I should give you a context of what this project was, which had just made my life miserable. Literally miserable. It was the Arab Heritage Week. And uh, it was something that had taken place that was in the works for three years.
- 01.19.01 It took a great deal of negotiation and talks uh, with people in the Mayor's office. And it was specifically with the Immigrant Affairs Office uh, where I approached Mayor Bloomberg at a South Asian Heritage event. Uh, I believe it was November, 2002, and said to him how important such an event would be for the Arab-American community. And his response to me was, you know, as a Jew, there's nothing more that I would love than having the Arab-American community in New York City feeling a part of the broader community.
- 01.19.37 Uh, and so most definitely I think it's a great idea. Speak to my Immigrant Affairs Commissioner and make this (?) happen. So since that point on, I talked to his commissioner of Immigrant Affairs (~JW~)
- JW: How did that conversation go?
- 01.19.54 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Right after I spoke to him, (~I~) I went right over to her and repeated everything. And, and it was funny because I planted myself, at Gracie Mansion in this, you know, beautiful hall. I realized that uh, he was gonna go up to the podium, and when he got off, he'd have to pass by the windows. So I planted myself right in front of one of the windows. And we were all lined up. And when he was walking away from the podium to go back to the room where he was taking photos, he had to pass by us. And of course, he was shaking everybody's hand who was there. (LAUGHS) So when he got to me, I shook his hand and I didn't let him go. (LAUGHS)
- 01.20.29 I had him for a good, you know, over 60 seconds. And uh, I told him all of this stuff. And I had a friend of mine who was from the Museum of the City of New York standing there, who

heard everything. And I said to her, I said, Kathy, you heard what the Mayor said. So I would like for you to help me approach the Commissioner of Immigrant Affairs on this. And so he walked away and then I made my way to find the commissioner and relay the message. And the person from the museum said, yeah, that's what he said. (LAUGHS)

01.20.58 And so I called her up and we set up a meeting. Uh, she asked me to write (~I~) a proposal.

JW: So you were thinking ahead?

01.21.07 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yes. Yes. I wrote a proposal. They requested a proposal. And I got the Museum of the City of New York, being that earlier uh, that year, they had the uh, Museum of the City of New York's uh, they had an exhibit which was called uh, Community of Many Worlds: Arab-Americans.

01.21.28 And so what we wanted to do was incorporate some of the exhibit pieces around this event. Uh, so we wrote the proposal together. They asked us that we have a fiscal agent, you know, who would be the umbrella. And that became the museum. The museum was very supportive and very interested in making this work. Uh, they, you know, finally gave us the green light. They said, okay, we could do it in July. And I turn around and I looked at them and I said, this is crazy. We can't do it in July, you know.

01.21.59 People are away on vacation. Schools are closed. Uh, it just would not make sense. And uh, so she said, okay, well, then we'll do it in the fall.

JW: Where do you get the stand-up part?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I don't know. (LAUGHS)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Has your ability increased over the past few years?

01.22.43 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (~JW~) I don't know, Jim. I don't know where that comes from. I think that it's there. (?) It's there, but I have no control over it. And, and I think that that's what has really made me fall victim to people really just like, finding things to say about me.

01.23.03 And I know that, you know, my husband always constantly says to me that I have a gift, you know. And uh, that it's my responsibility to use that gift. And if I didn't, then, you know, I would be held accountable by God for not using my gift. And I don't know, I don't know where and how that I can reach out to people.

01.23.31 I can get people to listen. I could get things done, you know. (LAUGHS) A friend of mine always used to say to me, and she still does, she says, you know, if you need money, go to Debbie. Debbie can, you know, can draw blood out of a stone. And I'm like, I don't know how and, you know, she's like, well, you do things that people just cannot do, you know. And last year (~JW~)

JW: This is a pretty heavy cornerstone for you and your husband?

01.24.13 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah. But I, I don't know where I get that drive. I really don't know. I don't know, I feel like it's like this, you know, part of me that comes out, that, that I don't even have the opportunity to think about, do you know what I mean? Uh, or take control of, or, you know, I'm not schizophrenic or anything like that. (LAUGHS)

01.24.36 But there is some innate, I don't know, for lack of a better words, power in me that's, you know, sees something and seizes the moment. So I don't know how I even, I don't even get a chance to think things thoroughly, you know, in order to make that, take that step. I just dive right into it.

01.25.01 And uh, so far so good. It's, it's worked. And it's always worked for the advantage of my community and, and the stuff that I do. Uh, it's never, you know, it's never been self-

promotional, you know, as people have, have been portraying it to be. Because I think whatever I've done, it's always, you know, to, to highlight the community, or to bring positive things to the community.

- 01.25.28 Uh, I've, the only thing I've gained is personal, you know, gratification that, that it was accomplished. You know, I'm not, you know, gaining money. Certainly not. You know, I'm, I'm pouring a lot of my time and my energy uh, to do it. And it's, and I think that's really what, what killed me uh, with the Arab Heritage project is that I put so much time and effort. And then there were people, a couple of people who literally just were antagonizing every word that I said in an email.
- 01.26.06 Or every idea I came up with, you know, in an email. And you know, when you read the email, there is, you know, you're like, how do they think this, you know? And again it goes back to that perception. And you know, the lens that they're using to read it. And it got to a point that I wasn't sleeping. It got to the point that I was second, you know, second-guessing everything and, and judging everything I say or do.
- 01.26.33 And it got to a point, like, when things got really, really serious with the project, that you know, I started feeling like, okay, well, you know what, I'll let you guys decide what you want to do, you know. I, you know, and in a way, that, that, there was good about that happening. That I let people figure out what we needed to (?) do together. And it's not that I'm controlling.
- 01.26.58 But uh, I just, I was angry that I had to, like, let go of a lot to do with this project, you know, when originally, it was my idea. Uh, and it wasn't all about me, you know, getting the credit or anything. But I was angry of the fact that there were people trying to push me out of it. You know, that they had no really, no respect for the fact that we wouldn't have been there that day if it wasn't, you know, for my pushing uh, people at city hall, for all of the conversations I've had with city hall.

01.27.34 Uh, and you know, the few people that I, I did speak to in regards to this who really know me and know my work and know how I work in a group dynamics, you know, basically said to me, Debbie, it's not you. It's not you. It's the people, you know, these people that you really haven't worked closely on a project with.

01.27.58 Uh, this is something new and foreign to them. They are threatened uh, by your capabilities. They are threatened by the fact that you, within the community, you know, are the only one who actually has access to people in city hall. And so because of this, you know, they are threatened by the fact that, you know how and why. Uh, and uh, you know, I was even getting emails of like, you know, from, from one particular young woman, who basically said to me, you know, (?) you know, we feel like you're selling out on the community.

01.28.36 Uh, we never thought that you would do something like this. Uh, and it was all in regards to the event at Gracie Mansion, which turned out, you know, it, there was so much drama, you know, for that event to finally happen, that it was beyond belief.

JW: How have you kept this type of thing from undermining your self-confidence?

01.29.31 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I've been dealing with it by surrounding myself with, with positive people who really believe in me and who, who believe in, in what they call this gift that I have. (LAUGHS)

JW: Do you think you have a gift?

01.29.45 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah, I, I believe that I have it. And sometimes I don't like it, you know. And, you know, I always say this, and I don't know if I've said it in the past, that sometimes it's a blessing, but sometimes it's like a curse.

01.30.03 Uh, and you know, those days when (?) I'm feeling like, you know, why do I have to do this? Why am I doing this, you know, is, those are the days that I feel it's a curse, you know. And

then there are days that, you know, I can convince people to do things uh, that are, you know, or I, I shed light on things to people that they never thought about.

- 01.30.30 Uh, I mean, one example of it was the Muslim Day Parade, which will be coming up soon. Uh, they'd created a flyer for it, and they wanted it to be a way to celebrate uh, the Koran. Especially after the desecration of the Koran uh, in Guantanamo Bay and, you know, the government not taking quick action, etcetera. And the flyer that they were distributing said, you know, the Koran is the salvation of, of humankind.
- 01.31.09 And I looked at it and it just made me cringe. Uh, and uh, my husband had looked at it. He, he just, (?) it didn't, he didn't see what I was seeing. And I had a conversation with him. And I said, I really, I can't support this. And he's like, what are you talking about, you know? I said, I can't support this. What if you are a human being that does not believe in the Koran, you know?
- 01.31.36 That your book is the Torah, that your book is, you know, the New Testament, the Old Testament? Uh, I said I find this offensive. And he looked at it and he said, you know, I didn't, it didn't even dawn on me. I said, I can't, you know, support their efforts or, you know, or say to them that this is great, that this should be their theme, etcetera.
- 01.32.00 So the committee of the uh, of the Muslim Day Parade was actually traveling from community to community for feedback and support and to get people to come out of, for it. Because in the past couple of years, people have not been coming out as much to the parade, which takes place on Madison Avenue. And I said to my husband, I said, we, I have to go to this, (?) we have to go to this meeting. And I need to help them understand that we cannot use this title.
- 01.32.29 And prior to the meeting, I emailed my colleagues at Women In Islam and I shared with them my feelings and how I interpreted this. And they were like, you're absolutely right. We don't think they should use this. And I was like, we have to help them come up with another title. And so on email, we started throwing around, you know, different titles. And one of my

colleagues, you know, sent this, this amazing title, which was, the Koran, a universal message.

01.32.59 And I was like, wow, this is positive. This would be something that anybody, you know, reading this flyer would not find offensive. But would also in their mind say, well, I wonder what this message is, this universal message is. And may want to then pick it up and read it. So the meeting was like, the third meeting that week. And it was actually the day after I had this very serious meeting with the Arab Heritage uh, committee, which at that point, we were deciding as a community whether to continue uh, with working with the Mayor's office to get the inauguration or not.

01.33.40 And it's a very complicated story. I should probably finish the one with the flyer. (LAUGHS) So uh, that whole weekend before that meeting, there were people from the committee who, who knew, who were hearing a lot of stuff. Who were calling me and preparing me how to come to the meeting uh, who to bring with me to the meeting.

01.34.03 Uh, it was like, (LAUGHS) it's bizarre. And I was like, why are you (?), why are you giving me all of these tips or warnings? And they're like, we just don't want you to fall under attack. There are two people who are really out to ruin you. And I was like, okay, so this one particular person, I listened to her advice. I brought all the things (LAUGHS) that she asked me, the people to this meeting.

JW: Such as?

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

01.34.41 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, what I had to do, one of (?) the biggest rumors that they were passing, that was going around was that I uh, I represent no one. I'm an independent individual who have, who has self-nominated, or self-selected to become (?) a leader, a community leader.

01.34.59 Uh, and the only reason that the Mayor's office is even engaging in conversation or dialogue with me is because I work for the Department of Education. Uh, so therefore, they feel that I'm safe enough to talk to, which is weird. Uh, and that I represent no one. I represent no organization, nor do I have the authority to speak on behalf of the Arab or the Muslim community.

JW: So you were being perceived as potentially against your faith? Do you think you would have seen the flyer in the same light a few years ago?

01.36.36 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I think I would've. (~JW~) And I, I say that I would've because of my commitment to the interfaith work that I do. And to the building bridges between, you know, (?) especially Christians and Jews and Muslims.

01.36.57 That, that is something that is close to my heart. And I would not want to see people that I, I respect and I cherish to, you know, pick up this flyer and feel alienated or feel like, you know, our books mean nothing. What is this supposed to mean? Uh, and this is the struggle that I've had with the folks at the Muslim Day Parade of how they need to become uh, you know, more broadminded uh, of who their audience should be at this parade.

01.37.29 It shouldn't just be Muslims. You know, it should be an opportunity where non-Muslims can come out in solidarity to celebrate this day with them. And, and so when going to that meeting, (?) I wasn't planning to, (?) I wasn't planning to go to that meeting, but uh, and then I said, okay, maybe I should just email these folks. But then I said, if I email them, it's not gonna, they're not gonna understand what I'm saying. So I went to the meeting. And I brought Naji with me.

01.37.58 And I said to him, we have to make sure (LAUGHS) that we get them to understand what we're talking about. And uh, (COUGHS) one thing that Naji does all the time is that he just sits and he listens, and then when he sees there is like, nobody responding or there's opposition, then he'll, he'll gradually, like, you know, start engaging in the conversation to, to just provide support. But he is not like, one of those people who would be like, well, you

should listen to her, or you know, jump in right away and, and push the agenda, which uh, (?) which is wonderful about him.

01.38.30 And when I brought it up, there were actually other people sitting in this meeting. There were about 15 people who actually like, understood what I was saying. And they're like, you know, we never, (?) we never thought of it that way, but you're absolutely right. If I was a Christian or a Jew or, you know, or an atheist or whatever, I would probably get offended if I read it. That this is the salvation of humankind.

01.38.56 Uh, (CLEARS THROAT) so (?) the Muslim Day Parade uh, committee members said, okay, well, do you have, do you have uh, a title for us? They thought that I was just like, bringing it up just to be critical. Uh, I said, I'm not, you know. (?) I do have a title and I hope that you would be interested. Uh, and I told them. I said, I cannot take credit for it, you know. My colleagues at Women In Islam uh, you know, we talked about it and, and (?) one of them, you know, raised, one of them shared this title.

01.39.29 And I think that it would be so beautiful. And I shared it with them. They liked it. uh, but (?) they were hesitant in the beginning, and they're like, well, we have to go back and we have to get the entire committee to vote on it and what have you. And then everybody sitting at the table, they're like, well, if you want community input, this is community input. And if you want our support, then you really need to take this title into serious consideration. So they did. Uh, and then Naji felt like it was important to make sure to follow through, that the, that the flyers were changed.

01.40.04 And he volunteered to work with the person making the flyers to make the flyer, to go back and change it and, and just add different fonts and what have you. And you know, different pictures. 'Cos it, it was just, it was too jumbled and (?) it was too colorful. It wasn't appealing to the eye. So (?) I was so proud of him that he took on such uh, (LAUGHS) a job. It was like, are you sure you want to do this, in front of everybody? He's like, yes, I do. I absolutely want to.

- 01.40.30 And uh, I remember that night, you know, getting into the car. It was a late meeting. We were there 'til about 10:00. And uh, he was driving and I was just sitting next to him. And I started crying. And I said to him, I said, you know, uh, I would've never forgiven myself if I didn't come out to this meeting tonight. Uh, and I said to him, I said, I, I know that, (?) and I know that he was also burdened by the fact that I was attending a lot of meetings.
- 01.41.00 I was doing a lot of late night work for the Arab Heritage uh, and I, I was really, you know, I don't want to say neglecting him, but I, I was really just uh, in regards to like, being there for him, being there for my family. And I uh, you know, and with all of the turbulence that was taking place, and all the rumors and all the horrible things that people were saying, it bothered him. And at times, he would snap, you know, and he'd say to me, you know, well, maybe you just shouldn't bother with them and that's it, and don't work with the, you know, with these groups anymore.
- 01.41.34 And, you know, he just wanted to sever the ties with, you know, some of the organization heads uh, who were actually the ones, like, saying these things. And I said to him, I said, we, uh, you know, we just can't. I said, right now, we cannot, you know, have confrontations with people. We cannot, you know, make accusations, you know. (?) We're just hearing things, and if we do, we, we can literally destroy this project.
- 01.42.01 Uh, and this project will not be able to go forward. And we can't. You know, I said I will keep putting out fires, you know, until this whole, entire project is over. And then, you know, we'll deal with, with the nonsense. And, you know, there were times he just did not want to hear that. He's like, you know, the hell with them, you know, they don't know what they're talking about and, you know, you're probably better off not associating yourself because they're all incompetent and, you know, and just, and (?) you know, most of the stuff that he was saying was true, but I just, I couldn't, I couldn't, you know, I couldn't just write people off, you know.
- 01.42.38 It was important to have their input and their collaboration, even though that they were there, you know, against, you know, the good will of myself and other people working on the

project. But going back to riding home in the car that night, I just started crying. And I told him, I said, I, I would've never forgiven myself if I didn't come to this meeting. And, you know, the fact that, you know, we sat at this meeting and, you know, that the, this committee was able to listen, you know, even though that they had already printed out 5000 flyers, you know.

01.43.14 And they blasted this to people on email, that we were able to convince them to change the flyer uh, the title, the theme. And to be really more open-minded, you know, is a big deal, you know. And you know, (?) I just, I was crying in the car.

01.43.33 And he's like, well, why are you crying? I said, well, this is when I feel like what I do and what I strive to do, you know, really works. And these are the things that I love doing is, you know, fixing things or, you know, helping people see things differently from what they really are. And you know, I shared with him, I said, you know, it's, it's been a rough month. And this is like, the only, right now, the only small success for me, you know.

01.44.02 That (?) I've done something for the better good. And uh, and he, he was just, you know, he's very supportive. But uh, the Arab Heritage project just like, really pushed both of us over the edge.

JW: He also stood next to you in spite of his reservations?

01.44.48 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Exactly. And he's always been supportive. But the Arab Heritage project was just like, you know the saying, it was (?) the straw that broke the camel's back. (LAUGHS)

01.45.00 It, it was, for him uh, like all other projects that I've been involved in, he's always been very supportive and wonderful and, and just there. And you know, in every way. But what the Arab Heritage project uh, because of the hurtful things that he was hearing about me, (?) it just, it devastated him for me to continue, you know. It, it was just really hard for him to see me work with people who were hypocrites, you know.

- 01.45.30 Who I was wheeling and dealing with them, and pretending like I've heard nothing uh, (?) that was being said about me was just really hurtful for him. And I think for him, more uh, I would say this is more on a cultural and religious base, you know, as a Muslim man, you know. He has a responsibility to make sure that my well-being, you know, is always, you know, taken care of.
- 01.45.57 Uh, you know, that my honor and my dignity is, is always maintained uh, in the eyes of the public. Uh, and you know, that no one should ever in any shape, any, you know, shape or form, disrespect me, you know in my face or behind my back. Uh, so it hard for him to, to take uh, (?) you know, a back seat to all this. And he knew what was (?) being said and done.
- 01.46.29 Uh, and I think that was like, where it was, it was painful for him for me to continue doing the work. Uh, and for him to, you know, he was supportive. But (?) supportive with resent. (LAUGHS) Uh, you know, and uh, you know, it, one day he said to me, he said, you know, this, you know, this project, you know, has just literally absorbed you. And I, I don't know anymore whether it's, you know, because, you know, it's for the, the better good, or is it because this is something you want to personally achieve?
- 01.47.05 And I was just like, totally blown. (LAUGHS) I was shocked. I was like, now you're saying this about me? (LAUGHS) And it's like, I can't believe this. And I, I wasn't laughing about it. I was very upset. Uh, I said, you know, all this time, you've been supportive and, and now you're treating me like everybody else is. He says, well, I just don't understand how you could, you know, be functioning with all that's being said and done, and you are just blocking this and, and continuing to work.
- 01.47.33 I said, well, if I sit and think about what's being said and done, you know, about me, then (?) I will have a nervous breakdown. And (?) I will not be good for this project and I will not be good for you or for anybody. And right now, I just need, I need your support and I need your understanding uh, to finish this. Because I, I have started it and right now, my professional career is on the line, you know.

01.48.02 It's, you know, you don't engage with city officials and then you back out or you let things flounder, you know. Then what does that say about you as a professional? Uh, and I said, so right now, I feel like the integrity of my profession, you know, of my career, is on the line here, you know. And uh, he, he understood that, you know, and, and he apologized to me and he said to me, he said, you know, it's, you know, not that I don't support you.

01.48.33 But I just, I just hate to hear these things. And (?) I just feel like you're living in this glass bubble. Like, you know, you're untouchable and, you know, and, you know, maybe that you need to talk about this stuff, and you need to, you know, let go of some of these things.

JW: Such as?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (~JW~) Just like, all, the things that were being said about me, you know.

JW: What about talking to (?)

01.49.58 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Uh, well, talking to him about it made him more angry. (LAUGHS) So I couldn't talk to him about it. But he was (STOPS)

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

01.49.12 END OF TAPE

**TAPE # DA 29 09.10.2005**  
**Debbie Almontaser**  
**JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director**  
**PROJECT REBIRTH**

02.01.01 PICTURE UP

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Did you continue to get exasperated with the reaction as you moved forward?

02.02.00 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yes. It did. It did. And I told him, I, I basically said to him, well, there was one particular meeting where this one, (?) there were a couple individuals who really just, really literally (?) going out to, to make it seem like I was, you know, someone (?) who was trying to promote myself and become a star, whatever. Uh, at the second or third meeting of this Arab Heritage committee uh, in regards to, you know, doing the Gracie Mansion event and the week-long events, etcetera, (?) it was, I think, about the second meeting.

02.02.37 And it was, we were coming together to uh, discuss uh, what we needed to do and what some of the things from city hall were required. And one of the things that was required by city hall was to uh, provide them with a list of people that will be invited to this gala.

02.03.01 And we were informed (~JW~)

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

02.03.09 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: So we were informed by the city hall officials that all the names on the list were gonna be vetted. And that we should make sure that we don't have anybody's name on the list, you know, who's not documented. Who, you know, we just don't want to raise any red flags for anybody.

02.03.30 So this one individual, she was outraged uh, about the fact that city hall wanted to do that. Uh, and here she sent me an email prior to the meeting, just really, you know, questioning my loyalty to the community and how could I, you know, sell out on the community. And,

you know, (?) to give in to city hall to want to do this, and this is not right. And it's unconstitutional and a whole lot of other stuff.

02.04.01 And I responded to her in the email, and I said, you know, I understand where you're coming from and I agree with you. However, (?) this is just the way it works when you are going to go to any event at city hall or Gracie Mansion or the White House or, you know, (?) whatever. This is just the way that government officials function. Uh, and they're not just doing it to our community.

02.04.29 They do it to all communities. And so it was difficult for her, and then her being so uh, adamant about not (?), not allowing, not doing this list in order for them to, to do the vetting uh, ripple-affected to the, you know, rippled, (?) there was a ripple effect within the, the committee.

02.04.56 And so there were, the committee then was divided half and half. Uh, so those who were like, organization heads and lawyers knew that this is something that we had to do and, and we should just do it, and we have nothing to be afraid of and nothing to worry about. Uh, and so I basically said to the group, I said, you know what, I will leave you as a committee to decide, you know, what we want. Uh, if we want to go forward with this, and we supply them with the list of names with, you know, the understanding that this is going to happen, fine. If we don't want to, we don't have to do the event at Gracie Mansion.

02.05.33 We could do something within our community and invite the Mayor. So these were the two options. So the people who were feeling like we should provide the list and we shouldn't, you know, have to feel like they're discriminating against us, were basically adamant about going to Gracie Mansion. Uh, and were feeling like, look, the Mayor has never come to our events. And it's high time that we go to his house and, and you know, and, and build bridges and let him know that, you know, we really want to, to build this rapport and relationship.

02.06.03 Uh, so we went around and we took a vote. Uh, and of course, the majority in favor of the Gracie Mansion event uh, you know uh, won the vote. And she was very disappointed and

upset. And as we were moving onto the rest of the agenda items, she stopped us and she said, well, you know, I (?) there is something that I really have to say. And uh, (?) I cannot sit here and not say it.

02.06.33 So we, everybody looked at her. I was sitting directly across from her. And she says, well, I'm really disappointed in how Debbie handled this whole, entire situation. Uh, you know, Debbie, from the very start of this whole entire project, should have consulted the entire Arab-American leadership. Uh, and got them all, you know, on the same page and set up a meeting with people at city hall.

02.07.04 And as community leaders, should have requested this event. Uh, this inauguration of Arab Heritage Week. Uh, the way that it was done was just not uh, you know, (?) it was not considerate of the Arab leaders in the community. Uh, and so I really just don't understand, you know, how Debbie, you've just really decided to take this on upon yourself.

02.07.32 So Naji was sitting there. I saw, (?) I saw the pain in his face. He is sitting to my left, like two people away from me. And I, I saw him. He was ready to, you know, to say something. And I just quickly gave him a look of like, you know, don't say anything. And he didn't. And a couple of people on the committee were basically feeling like, well, you know, it's not a big deal.

02.07.59 Look, you know, (~I~) here we are.

JW: Did you respond?

02.08.05 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: A couple (?), I didn't want to respond right away because I didn't want to be perceived as defensive, that I was getting defensive. But a couple of people said, you know, it, it doesn't matter right now, because here we are, you know. And we have to take care of this, and we have to move forward with this. So calmly and collectively, I responded to her. I said, you know, Linda, you know, thank you for bringing this up. I'm glad that you were able to be open and honest about how you feel.

- 02.08.30 I'm sorry that you're disappointed, I said, but uh, you know, this is not news to many of the Arab-American leadership. And I said to her, I've said I've spoken to Dr. (Dabber?), you know, in the very beginning of this. And he said to me, he was one of the leadership heads of an organization. He said to me, well, that's great. If it happens, you know, we're here. Uh, because the plea that I made to all of them when speaking to them individually is if this happens, you know, we as a community have to come together and make this work.
- 02.09.02 So his response to me was, you know, if, if this happens, you know, (?) you know where to find us. I told at least six or seven of them. And it's funny, because now when I reminisce on the conversations that I have had, some of them were like, just saying, oh yeah, that's great. Well, if it happens, but almost with this disbelief that it was gonna happen. Like, I was sort of maybe making it up or, you know, this is just like, really weird.
- 02.09.28 Or you know, uh, but they were supportive. But I, now thinking back, I just really don't think they, they had a belief that it would happen. Uh, so I said to her, I said, you know, I spoke to this one, I spoke to that one and I spoke to that one. I said, you know, I'm sorry that your, the head of your organization didn't share this information with you uh, because he was very well aware of it and I got his support. And he said to me, when, you know, if the ball gets (?) you know, rolling, you just let us know.
- 02.10.01 And I said to her, I said, after all the conversations that I had with the person at city hall, there were a couple of times in the beginning, I kept requesting that I bring others from the community to meetings. And they insisted that they cannot have more people to dialogue with than me. And their reason for that was that they're extremely busy and don't have time to devote to a group uh, for a meeting.
- 02.10.31 And I said to her, when they gave the green light, and I told all of these community leaders that we needed to come together, they came together. And the final thing before we were able to go on forward with this was, the (?) city hall actually asked for a letter from organizations

sponsoring such uh, an event. So of course, I spent a night composing this letter of what it should say and how should it sound and, you know, how it should be compelling.

02.11.03 Uh, I called all of the organization heads, 15 organization heads, and I told them, look, here we are. (?) You know, they want a letter. I have to submit this letter to them by Friday. I need to know, are you on board so I can list your name on the letter? Uh, I said, ideally, it'd be great if all the organizations could sign this letter, but it would be impossible to get all of you to sign this letter. So of course, all of these organization heads couldn't literally say yes, put our organization on until they got approval from their boards. So by Friday, only 11 were able to get the final approvals to be listed on the letter.

02.11.39 And then the letter was signed by me and one other organization head who, actually I forwarded her the letter and we revised it together and we put it on letterhead and we put it out. But all of these organizations had to be a part of it. And so I said to her, I said, you know, this didn't happen because of me alone. I said, all of these organizations, when they saw that we had the opportunity to do it, jumped on board. So they knew, majority of them knew that this was coming down the pike.

02.12.14 And, but I'm sorry that you, you know, you're disappointed that things happen the way they do. And I explained to her, I said, you know, also, you know, bear in mind that there are some of us who have opportunities to be able to meet with city officials and mingle in different circles with city officials.

02.12.31 And then there are most of us who don't have that opportunity. And I said, I've been fortunate to have that opportunity. And when I do, I am not one of those people who will go and mingle and bake bread uh, break bread uh, and get nothing done for my community. I'm assertive and I go after what I believe. And I follow through. And that's what I did. And it's three years in the making to get where we are today. Do I regret doing it? No, I don't.

02.13.01 Uh, and I'm sorry that you feel, you know, that you're disappointed or you feel left out in the process. And so we moved on. So somebody in the group just changed the entire subject and

we moved on. But uh, Naji was pretty upset when we left. He was like, how dare she question your authority, you know, and what was that supposed to mean you know?

02.13.31 That, you know, you can't talk on behalf of the community, that you can't advocate on behalf of the community, you know? That you have to have permission from people to do this? You know, you're a grown adult. You're a professional. You're qualified to make decisions. Uh, and you are respected. More, you know, respected in the broader community than you are within your own community, obviously, from her behavior. And so I said to him, I said (~JW~)

JW: Do you think that's true?

02.14.00 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Uh, do I think it's true? I definitely know that I am much more respected in the outside community. Uh, within my own community, I believe that I am, but there are a few people who just, who are relentless in, in accepting, accepting, you know, my leadership or my intuitiveness, you know. Who are, (?) who are just really threatened by, by this.

02.14.30 By, by my initiatives, by my will, you know, my leadership. Uh, and it's sad, because I was never aware of it before, until this project.

JW: Does some of it have to do with being a woman?

02.14.48 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Big time. (LAUGHS) Big time, because uh, I uh, after that particular incident, the, the head of the organization that this young woman uh, works for uh.

02.15.07 I had the opportunity to, to chat with him after the Children of Abraham Peace Walk, which he is the president of the mosque that we had actually walked from to the church, Trinity Church uh, in lower Manhattan. And uh, at the end of the walk and after the program at the church, we sat down and we talked. And, and I told him of, of the comments that she had made at this event.

- 02.15.31 And I mean, you know, Jim, what she said that day upset me, but when I tell people what upset me about it uh, they're, they're surprised, and you'll probably be surprised. What I was upset about was not her questioning my authority, but I was more upset with the fact that her as an Arab and as a Muslim woman, in a public forum of 15 or 20 people, basically was attacking me.
- 02.16.02 And I found, what I found disturbing about it is disturbing about it is that she and I are the only two within the whole community that both wear hijab. Uh, and I personally feel that it's important for the two of us to be allies uh, and work together and support each other, rather than to be uh, competing with one another.
- 02.16.29 And so most of the people at the, at the meeting were men. And I felt for two women to carry on like this uh, in front of these men really (?) dis-empowers us. Uh, that's what I was upset. And uh, you know, I never got the chance to be able to tell her that (?) I was upset about that. Uh, because you know, (?) the whole lot, I wanted to, and then a whole lot of other things were happening and I felt like if I did, it would just add more fuel to the fire, so I left it alone.
- 02.17.06 But I shared it with a couple of the women in the group, how this was not a way that we, in a public forum of men and women, should, you know, should treat each other. That we really need to be allies and support one another, because there are times within the Arab and Muslim community, you know, that there are males within, you know, the committees or whatever that we're working in, that will muzzle the voices of women.
- 02.17.34 Uh, and I've had to fight, you know, tooth and nail to make sure that that doesn't happen. And I've done it always in a very diplomatic and professional way, and respectful way. Uh, and just for the two of us to have to, you know, for her to tell me she's disappointed in me, and then for me to explain to her, like, I could have done that on the side, you know. She could've said this to me on the side without having to air this in front of the men sitting at the group.

- 02.18.03 Or she could've told me this, you know, with a few other women. It wouldn't have been so bad. But what upset me was the fact that it took place in this public forum. Uh, and it really shows, you know, it, it shows division among women who are activist and who are, you know, (?) working for the community. And so that's really what upset me. Uh, with that and, you know, I don't know where that's coming from.
- 02.18.32 But when I did speak, I didn't know where that was coming from. But when I spoke to the uh, president of, of the organization that she works for, he said to me, he said, you know, the comment that, you know, she made to you uh, was a comment that was made at this coalition which is uh, a coalition of men who are either uh, mosque leaders or community leaders or organization leaders.
- 02.19.03 Uh, there is about 15 or 20 organizations that are a part of this coalition. And uh, they were invited to be a part of the Arab heritage. The president of this coalition knew about this from the very beginning. Dr. (Jabra?) knew about it because he was also one of the people that I was informing, and I have a very good relationship with.
- 02.19.27 And he said, you know uh, the week before you guys had the Arab Heritage committee meeting, there was one of the coalition members who basically made that comment. And he said, what you heard from her was mouthed off by somebody else. And she's basically bringing back what she heard. And he said, (?) I'm really very concerned about uh, about her, because she is basically, you know, absorbing what she hears uh.
- 02.20.03 And then using it for her own, you know, to, allying with these men in order to be in their grace. Uh, and to be accepted and to be, you know, to be a part of this coalition. Uh, and he said, I will be honest with you, there are three people in this coalition who do nothing but bash you. (LAUGHS)
- 02.20.30 And so I said to him, I said, well, you know, you're a good friend and you're an ally, and I've known you for a long time. And I think that you owe it to me to, to help me understand what is being said about me so I can be better prepared in dealing with people, you know,

who feel this way. And I told him, you've known me for a very long, and you know of my work and you know how I work. Do you perceive me this way? He said, absolutely not.

02.20.59 He said, but you have to understand, there are two things that you have going against you. And I said, oh yeah, what are they? He said, you're a woman and you're a Muslim woman. An Arab-Muslim woman. And they are Muslim men, and there're Arab men. And feel (?) threatened by the fact that you have achieved what you've achieved. Uh, and so there is no other way to deal with it or to come to, you know, consensus with, with where you are, you know, on professionally as well uh, on a leadership role. Uh, and so (~JW~)

JW: Where are you as a leader right now?

02.21.40 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I don't know, Jim. I, I just even hate the title. Because of all of this that's happened. I just, I really, I don't even know how I, how I resume this title. (?) You know, if, if I were given a choice, I (?), I don't want it. 'Cos I don't even understand what it means, Jim.

02.22.02 You know, just because I'm outspoken, just because I advocate, just because I am there for people when they need something, just because I'm able to, you know, to, to get things done that necessarily others can't, I just, I don't know if that, you know, that would entail being called a leader. I don't know if I'm even making sense. (~I~)

02.22.30 But you know, it's just been really, really hard, you know. People in the media will call me and ask me for, for advice or ask me for someone to speak to or help connect them to a story, or this, and I'm like, why do you call me? And you know, their response to me is, well, we know that you're very well connected in the community, and you know what the community issues are. You know, I'm not a head of an organization, you know.

02.22.58 And this is the thing that many of these people, you know, in the Arab-Muslim community resent the fact that I'm not uh, an organizational head. And yet (~JW~)

JW: Could you be?

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

02.23.15 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (~JW~) Could I be? Uh, I probably say I could be. Uh, and, and there are, you know, since we last talked, there have been other projects that I've been working on. And I've felt like right now, to justify that I could be uh, and not that I, you know, should be or want to be, but somehow, I've been, I've been pushed, you know, to feel like I have to belong to an organization to, in order to have credibility in the community.

02.23.47 And I resent the fact that that has to happen. I really do. Uh, but uh, since last July uh, I may have told you in our interview about the Yemeni American Association?

INTERVIEWER: You had been invited to become a part of it, arriving late and all?

02.24.30 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Okay, well, I was invited to be on, on the organization uh, membership uh, or a board. And we had a couple meetings after that. And I told them that I would only do it if they did X, Y and Z. And, and that was to add more women to the board. And to change the entire mission of the organization. It was a membership for men uh, a social club type of thing. And I changed the whole thing.

02.24.59 I said I wanted to become a family-oriented social service for the Yemeni-American community. And they did it. (LAUGHS) So I don't know how I do it, Jim. I don't know. I don't know, Jim. Sometimes I scare myself. Does, have you heard that before?

JW: From you?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I don't know. From me, from anybody else. I scare myself.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Where does your courage come from?

02.26.53 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I don't know. (LAUGHS) I don't know. I don't know where that's, (?) where that comes from, but I was able to say to them, the, you know, if you want me to be involved and you want me to help in this project, in this organization, then these are the things that I require. These are things that we need to do. (?)

02.27.11 I think I mentioned to you previously, this organization has never had a women head. Or on the board. Or was open to women, period. It was uh, a social club for men to come together. I mean it's like The Honeymooners Club where, you know, where uh, Jackie Gleason and his friend used to go when they wore those buffalo heads or whatever. (LAUGHS)

02.27.35 It was that kind of type of thing. And they said at the meeting, and they said okay. I said uh, you know, (?) it needs to be family-oriented and needs to be open for, you know, anybody coming into, through the doorway for help. It needs to become a social service to deal with

the needs and concerns of our community in the post-911 era. And they agreed to all of the things that I requested.

02.28.02 Uh, we did the mission. We did the bylaw. We did the goals and objectives. And I was, in all the midst of all this, I was also doing the (Revson?) Fellowship. So I'm starting an organization (LAUGHS), and also going to Columbia University. And uh (~JW~)

JW: Does it scare you?

02.28.39 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: It scares me. It scares me. It scares me (?) to sit back and, and think about things I've, I've done or things I've, you know, made demands on. And, and the fact that they, they actually happen, you know. Like, who am I, who was I to stand in front of these men and, and make these demands?

02.29.02 And to actually get them. Do you know, (?) you know what I mean? (?) It was just, and, and the fact that I did it and, and I did it so confidently uh, and, you know, and, and just so, so straightforward, you know, and not really you know, allowing for much discussion. You know, these are what I, these are the things that I need and if you can (?) you know, accommodate them, then I'd be happy to work with you.

02.29.33 That was basically it.

JW: What scares you?

02.29.49 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: What scares me? Uh, I don't know where, what I do and uh, you know, what, (?) I don't (?), I hate calling it a gift, but I don't know what else to call it, you know, where it's gonna take me.

02.30.02 That scares me, where, where it will take me from here. Uh, it'll probably be something, you know, I don't know. It may be something bigger. I don't know. But, and only time can tell. Uh, but, you know, I had a conversation with a friend uh, back in June. And when I finished

the Revson Fellowship, and I said to her, I have completed it, you know, people in my program have gone to bigger and better things, different jobs, higher, you know, (?) you know, much more prestigious positions.

02.30.37 And uh, I don't know what I want to do with myself. So I started applying for a couple of jobs in the Department of Education to work in (Tweed?), which it's like the main leadership of the Department of Education. And I did it not out of, because uh, there was this, this uh, you know, need uh, (?) that I wanted it.

02.31.00 But it was more to sort of like, feel like, oh, okay, this is what everybody else in the program is doing. So maybe I need to do that too now that I have completed it. And when I told her the one position that I applied, she goes, are you sure you'd be interested in doing this? And I said, well, I, I guess I would be. But uh, she says, would it make you happy? I said, I don't know. She says, well, why did you apply for it? I said, I don't know. I just felt like I needed to apply for a bigger position, more prestigious position.

02.31.27 So she, you know, was giving me a couple of reasons not to push myself to work at Tweed because it's very stressful and, and very, they micromanage and I would not be happy as an individual. And uh, she said to me, she says, Debbie, uh, you know, what do you plan to do with yourself in five years? And I said to her, I said, I've never given that much thought. And she's like, are you serious? I said, yeah, I've (?) really never thought of like, what do I want to do with myself in five years?

02.32.01 And uh, I said, well, have you? She says, yeah, in five years, I want to be in a school. I want to be an assistant principal. And her uh, what she said to me that day (?) has resonated with me. And it's like, I have to start setting a goal for myself. I have to like, have you know, this, this goal that I work towards.

JW: Why?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I don't know. I don't know.

INTERVIEWER: If you had said three years ago your goal to be the only woman to be on an all-male organization, would you have believed you?

02.33.01 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I don't know. I don't know why I feel (?) like I need to pressure myself to, to have uh, a future goal. I don't know why. But I, you know, people that are around me do this. And I don't know. (?) You know, when I think about it, what do I want to do from now, five years, I can't even wrap my head around the concept. You know, I feel like, you know, everything that I've done, you know, from 9-11 up until now, somehow (?) I've either stumbled into it uh, or, (?) I've stumbled into it.

02.23.40 Or somehow (?) it was one thing and turned into another. Uh, and just (?) you know, as, as it unfolds, (?) you know, I go with it as it unfolds.

JW: Can you track any motivational force behind it that started with 9-11, such as anger, happiness, sadness?

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

02.34.56 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: There definitely is a motivation behind everything I do. And I mean, that motivation uh, you know, began, you know, that day of 9-11, that evening, you know, where (?) I'm sitting there and watching what I was watching and knowing that my son was not home anymore, you know, at Ground Zero. Uh, you know, and at 6:00, my phone ringing, and it was the, you know, community board president, the school board president asking me to come to a meeting the following day to help them strategize in regards of the Arab and Muslim community.

02.35.38 And I was, as I was just saying to him, well, I don't know how can I assist you. And the superintendent takes the phone from him and she demands that I go in the next day. And you know, just, after talking to her and saying, okay, I'll come, but I'm afraid to come. And can

you, you know, make sure that I have a parking spot and is it okay if my husband could come?

02.36.01 And all of that. And her just saying, absolutely, it's not a problem. Don't worry about it, you know. And hanging up the phone with her. And then turning around to my husband. I'm like, I have no idea what, how am I gonna help? What can I say or do that, you know, that no, that she or her staff or the entire, you know, school board can't figure out or do?

02.36.32 And my husband's like, you have to go, you know. You are the only one that knows the community. And understands what the needs of the community are. And you will listen and you will eventually (?) there'll be some way that you can contribute, you know. And I remember that (LAUGHS) night, uh, just like, saying, oh my god, I'm gonna look like a total idiot 'cos I can't even think straight, you know. I mean, I was upset about my son leaving.

02.37.00 And just everything that happened that day. Uh, I was literally, I felt, you know, dysfunctional. Uh, and I remember that night, picking up the phone and calling uh, my advisor for the Aspiring Leadership Program. And, and saying to her, Sandra, you know, I've just been summoned by the superintendent. I'm gonna look like a total idiot. I don't know what to say or do. I don't know how I could be of any help to her. Uh, and that's it.

02.37.30 After this, she's gonna see that I, I'm not fit to be a principal. (LAUGHS) And she said, stop, that's not true, Debbie. You have so much to offer. You will be fine. Just go in there confident. Believe in yourself. And listen. You know, hear what the issues are. You know, and bring up the issues that you so far know that are taking place in your community. It's, (?) right now, it's your responsibility to advocate for your community.

02.37.58 And uh, you know, I hung up the phone with her. And we went that next day. We went to that meeting. I don't know if I shared this. Have I ever shared this with you?

JW: No please tell more?

- 02.38.12 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: So uh, we went to that meeting. And uh, at that time, the superintendent and I were having somewhat, some friction, you know, based on uh, you know, just other people, you know, in her, in her cabinet who were somewhat, you know, envious of the fact that I was young and I had had, you know, achieved so much in my career.
- 02.38.38 You know, from a classroom teacher and then becoming uh, (?) you know, a teacher trainer, you know, at a young age. And everybody else who were teacher trainers were much older than me and what have you. And uh, you know, there were, before 9-11, you know, she had spoken to me about perhaps going back into the classroom and, you know, considering to do other things.
- 02.39.03 Uh, you know, until I finished the program to become a principal uh, etcetera. And I didn't understand where all that was coming from before 9-11. But she sent me a letter uh, think it was August 17<sup>th</sup>. And I had gotten the letter, she put it in uh, (?) she put it in the office mail, which takes weeks to deliver. She didn't put it in the mail mail. And the letter was actually very, very, very nice.
- 02.39.36 And I had chosen the school that I had gone back to teach. And uh, you know, she, she spoke to me and she said, you know, it'll be a good thing. You know, once you finish the program and once you really, you know, have a year or two in the classroom, you know, I think you'll be ready uh, to take on a school. Uh, I wasn't happy with it, because I didn't understand where it was coming from and why she thought it was important for me to go back.
- 02.40.04 Uh, because you know, the work that I did do, (?) you know, on a district level was exemplar, you know. I was always very highly talked about by schools, teachers, etcetera. So it came from a left curve. I just did not understand where that came from. But uh, I went back and (?) in August she wrote me a letter.
- 02.40.28 And I got it the day before 9-11. And I took it home. I, I read it in school. Uh, I read the letter. It, it was, (?) the tone was very nice. And she was very happy that I chose a school that

I could actually uh, give back to my community. Because the school had a large Arab and Muslim population. And she hoped uh, in the letter, she wrote, and you know, I hope that, you know, this decision that we have made uh, does not in any way deter you from continuing to do the amazing work that we know you are capable of.

02.41.10 Uh, we want, I want to personally extend my invitation to you to attend uh, our multicultural, our social studies multicultural education uh, committee. Because your input uh, is very much needed on the Arab and Muslim uh, experience.

02.41.31 Uh, and that you will take a leadership role in the school that you're working and to better serve your community. Uh, please find attached uh, this book uh, that I thought you'd appreciate to include in your classroom library. So uh, I took the book out of the, I, now I can sit here and laugh. Uh, it's amazing. I took the book out of the envelope and I started to cry when I looked at the title and the cover.

02.41.59 And uh, god, what is the title of the book? It's Sammy's Troubles. And it's about uh, a little boy in Lebanon during the war. And the cover was very dark and grim and, you know, he is in a basement huddled in the dark, you know, while the bombings were taking place during the day. And I started flipping through the book and I just started to cry, you know.

02.42.28 I, (?) you know, I had this eerie, negative feeling from the book. And I was also hurt, you know, by, by everything that had happened that summer, you know. Because uh, so much happened and I did not understand why it was happening. I wasn't told. I wasn't given much information. But like, the course of my career changed that summer. And it was totally not in my control. It was in her control. And so uh, there was a great deal of resentment, you know, for that.

02.43.03 And I was really trying very hard to distance myself from her. And then to get that call on September 11<sup>th</sup>, and be summoned to her office uh, was really hard. 'Cos I was like, okay, you know, one minute she's telling me that I need to be in a classroom, teaching. And then

the next minute she's telling me she needs me as a leader here, you know, and someone who can advise her, you know. I felt like I was getting a lot of mixed messages.

JW: What did you book mean to you?

02.43.31 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Uh, well, the book, (?) the book was about an, an Arab child who was a Middle Eastern country. It, uh, I don't know. I just, I really, I cried. I cried looking at the book. I cried, you know, flipping through the pages. I cried from the letter. Uh, and actually uh, (?) every time that I picked up that book, it upset me. Upset me. And I don't know if, you know, I've written about this uh, you know, in, in a piece that I wrote, a personal piece that, you know, that book just really, (?) it gave me these negative vibes, you know.

02.44.11 And then the next day 9-11 happened. I don't know if it was some type of premonition. I don't know. I'm not one who believes in premonitions or superstition. But uh, it, it just upset me, you know. And then the following day, 9-11 happened. And then, and from that point on, every time I picked up that envelope, I didn't even put that book in my library.

02.44.35 I left in the yellow envelope with her letter. And it's still sitting on the shelf somewhere in my house, in my library actually. So uh, yeah, so going back to the day, I did go that day to the meeting. And (?) I remember sitting a circle, you know, all of us. And what the issues were. And the fact that I was able to function, Jim, that day is, is beyond belief, you know.

02.45.03 And I mean, this goes back to what you were saying, what is the motivation? I don't know if it's motivation or it's conviction. I don't know. I think it's more conviction than, you know, of (?) having, of making sure to do the right thing, or to do everything that you can possibly do that's in your power. And so sitting there and hearing about the initiatives, as well as her saying, okay, how can we make the Arab and Muslim children and families feel comfortable?

02.45.32 How can we make them feel that, you know, that they have nothing to do with what's happened? Uh, that they are part of this community, that they are part of uh, you know, this

country, and that we do not want anyone to feel, you know, like they're in danger, or to feel like they don't belong. And I said to her, I said, okay, well, the letter that you're going to, to put out to the entire school community (CLEARS THROAT) should be translated.

02.46.02 And she's like, okay, what languages should we do it? So I started naming to her all the languages that I knew, you know, were important, you know, based on the Arab and Muslim community, which comprised of Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, people from India, etcetera. And so we, I said, we need to translate the letter. So she said, okay, well, we don't even know who to contact or who to get it to, or, I said, (?) that's not a problem. I can get it, I know people who can translate it in these languages.

02.46.31 So we took on the, the role of making sure those letters got translated for the following day to go out on that Friday. Uh, and so she was like, well, what else can we do? I said, it'll probably be good to have, you know, a community member at each school uh, who is, who would be there on a voluntary basis, just to make, you know, the families and their kids comfortable when they walk through the door and know that someone can speak their language and someone that looks like them is there, you know, as, as a support to the school.

02.47.02 And she's like, okay, well how do we do this? I don't know anybody. And I was like, don't worry, I'll come up with a list of people. I'll make calls. And I'll get people and see how many people can at least commit for next week, you know, for Friday and next week. And she was totally amazed, you know, of all, with all these ideas. Uh, and uh, and then, you know, she's like, okay, what else can we do?

02.47.27 I said, well, maybe, you know, having just, you know, meetings at each of the school, asking to PTA and the principals to have, like, a forum, you know, or support group type of meetings where they can invite the whole entire school community uh, and just, you know, have people share what they're feeling and, you know, what they want to do. And (?) figure out, you know, what can they do for 9-11, you know, support, etcetera. And uh, and that's what we ended up doing.

02.47.57 And I don't know, Jim, how I came up with these ideas. I don't know. But she was pretty much impressed. Uh, (?) and I think like, that day, I started like, I was on a mission. I don't know for lack of a better words, but you know, we went home and I said to my husband, where am I gonna get at least 20 people to volunteer to go to these schools, to each of these schools that we targeted as having other, you know, Pakistanis or Pakistani and Arab children, etcetera.

02.48.27 And uh, it was amazing, because there were a lot of young professionals (CLEARS THROAT) who actually felt like they needed to do something like that. You know, they took their own personal time from work, or they worked so close to, you know, the (CLEARS THROAT) World Trade Center area that they weren't working, and felt like they needed to be doing something uh, that we were able to do it, you know.

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

02.48.55 END OF TAPE

**TAPE # DA 30 09.10.2005**  
**Debbie Almontaser**  
**JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director**  
**PROJECT REBIRTH**

03.01.01 PICTURE UP

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Are you struggling with accepting your role as a leader, and perhaps you're a reluctant leader?

03.03.53 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (?) That's a very, very uh, you know, you're really like, you put it together. Uh, because that's the one thing that I've been grappling with right now for the longest. Especially since, you know, with everything that's been (?), that's happened with the Arab Heritage uh, project, and you know, and in regards to talking to different people and I had mentioned earlier that I have been, you know, circling myself with people who really are supportive and who are positive and who really, who see what I have to offer.

03.04.33 And you know, in the midst of all that, and I had mentioned earlier that Naji was, you know, saying to me, you know, you're, you're living like, you know, you're in a glass bubble. Like, nothing can affect you. You know, we have to talk about this. And of course, I couldn't talk to him because it just, it made him more upset. He wasn't the outlet that I needed to, you know, let go of some of these, these trials and tribulations I was going through.

JW: Especially since you knew you would continue to do what you were doing?

03.05.17 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (MID-STATEMENT) You know, I, I find that to be (?) the greatest quality in him, that he, you know, actually has that much power to be able to let go of that manly expectation within our culture and our religion.

03.05.34 Do you know what I mean? I, I find that to be an enormous, you know, quality that (?) very little men within my culture, you would find very little men who would have that, you know. And, and it's really, it's, it's powerful.

JW: Self-confidence?

03.05.54 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah. It's a lot of confidence. And uh, so in regards to the way that I was dealing with all this, I was talking to people. Uh, I mentioned the Reverend uh, Alfonso Wyatt. Uh, I talked to another good friend of mine who uh, who is a convert to Islam, but he's uh, he's Irish-American, you know. Blonde hair, blue eyes. (LAUGHS) The, the greatest person you could be around. And uh, he, you know, they, and what's startling is that they both said the same thing to me.

- 03.06.30 And you know, this resonates at like, in every conversation that I have. And it's like, you know, this is something that you're going to have to deal with. You have to accept who you are. Uh, accept, you know, what you, the gifts that you have been given. Uh, accept uh, you know, what you are capable of doing. Uh, and know you have to develop a thick skin and know that there will (?) always be people who will be there to criticize, who will be there to judge, who will be there to, to try to bring you down.
- 03.07.09 And I guess (?) the thing that really was most touching to hear from both of these, these men uh, was, you know, Martin Luther King didn't do this, you know. He didn't do what he did uh, without going through what you're going through. Malcolm X didn't go through, you know, and I, you know, and then the prophet Mohammed himself, you know, bringing this message of Islam to people.
- 03.07.34 And so many people not believing in him or his message. Uh, you know, the, just, the hardship that he went through uh, in being accepted as a leader, etcetera. And you know, for these people to actually put me on that kind of level was quite frightening. And I said to them, I said, please don't compare me to these people. I'm, I'm nowhere near, you know, what these people have accomplished in their lifetimes.
- 03.08.02 Uh, and you know, (?) the two of them, you know, in their own ways uh, said to me, you know, you may not, you may not think of yourself this way, but this is, this is your destiny and you have to accept it. And there are days where I want to accept it, Jim. Uh, and I want to embrace it and I want to continue what I'm doing. But then there are days that I say to myself, you know, I just don't have the capacity, the, the mental and the physical capacity to do it.
- 03.08.35 Because it is, takes a lot of energy. Mental energy. Uh, you know, and then just after all the hurtful things that have been said about me, it's just been really, really hard, you know. Uh, really hard to, to just, you know, pick up yourself and start over again.

03.08.57 Uh, and I had talked about earlier, about like, how this part of me comes out and I have no control of it. (?) I end up doing things, you know, without being aware that I'm doing them. And some examples. Uh, you know, the blood drive, you know. It's been something that I've been doing with the New York blood center since you know, 2002.

03.09.28 And every year, we've been doing it. You know, so it's like, okay, this has to happen. And we organized it. Uh, the Iftar dinner, which last year, was the very first time that the Brooklyn borough president, I don't know if I mentioned it in my interview, the first time ever that he ever, ever considered holding uh, a religious dinner for the Muslim community at, at Borough Hall. Uh, and (?) inaugurating that this is something that will happen every year.

03.10.00 So, you know, in August, I was already making phone calls to make sure we had the date. So do you know, (?) do you know what I'm saying? It's like, (?) I'm just, (?) these things continue to happen, you know. I, and I do have those days where I just want to be left alone. I just don't want to, you know, I don't want to be known for who I am or, do you know what I mean? I, it's so hard to explain. But then there are days that I say to myself, okay, this has to happen, you know. This has got to happen.

03.10.29 We have to do this. And it's hard. Uh, and it's (~JW~)

JW: What do you think about authenticity, and finding out who we are in our most authentic place, overcoming fear and doubt along the way?

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

03.12.04 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: The opposition that I face, Jim, (?) is really breaking away at me. You know, (?) within uh, my community. And it's (?) maybe two or three people. But you know, their force has just, it's so powerful. And it's like, (LAUGHS) my son said to me, he says, Mom, you live a life of Star Wars. (LAUGHS) And I looked at him and he's like, you know, you have the Darth Vader, you have (LAUGHS) the evil forces against you.

- 03.12.39 And I mean, I looked at him, and I was like, gee, thanks so much, you know. And the latest, the latest Star Wars is now, you know, the Bush Administration analogy, and now you're comparing me (LAUGHS) to this. Gee, thanks so much. But uh, there are. (?) There are forces that are really, I don't, I don't want to say intimidating me.
- 03.13.06 They are sort of like almost making me want to crawl into a shell. But I'm not letting myself do that. I'm not. And (~JW~)
- JW: Are they creating doubt?
- 03.13.22 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, that, doubt, yeah, they've created that doubt. But I, you know, I mentioned the doubt. And I, I also, you know, just crawling into a shell. And I just can't let myself do that. I can't, you know. I know that, you know, I know that I have a lot to offer. And not because I know it because I know myself. But I'm confident that that's true because I hear it from people, you know. There are people who are reinforcing this.
- 03.13.58 And who are encouraging me, you know, to continue with this. And it's both people within my community and outside my community who recognize this. Uh, and so, you know, I feel that obligation that I have to, I have to, you know, I have to withstand and, and persevere uh, and understand, you know. And I think the, the one thing that really keeps me going is knowing that all people, you know, who, who play such a role as myself, you know, past and present, face what I'm facing.
- 03.14.34 But I've learned to deal with it. Uh, and I've really been doing a lot of self-talk uh, as well as talk with people that I know who care about me and who are, you know, that positive force and energy in my life of staying focused. Uh, and you know, keeping my course of what I feel that I need to do.
- 03.14.58 Uh, and not letting what's being said uh, affect me. Uh, and not focusing my energy on, on the negative things that are being said, but focusing it on the work that needs to get done.

JW: What's the self-talk?

03.15.14 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: It's just that. Stay focused, you know. This is natural. This has happened. And I (LAUGHS), every now and then I say to myself, okay, look, Martin Luther King had absolutely no idea he was gonna take on the role that he did, you know.

03.15.29 Uh, what's her name uh, Rosa Parks did what she did and, you know, and then people in his town went over to his church and started talking to him, and like, we can't let this, you know, we just can't let this, you know, go unspoken of, or we have to, you know, fight for this. And he was swept into the, you know, into the whole thing and boom, you know. The course of time and history took its place.

03.15.58 And I keep saying to myself that, you know, I, I certainly did not self-select. Uh, it, things have happened the way they've happened because it just, it's destiny, you know. You know, I was there and I couldn't sit back and watch what was happening after 9-11. I felt that I needed to advocate. I felt that I needed to be a voice. And, and I did what I did out of conviction.

03.16.28 Uh, and, you know, there are, you know, that was available to everybody and anybody who wanted to take that role, you know. And I should not beat myself for taking that role because others didn't. Uh, and that's just really been something that I've been saying to myself, is that people have the opportunity to do what I do. It's just a matter of, of committing to the work, making the time to do the work, and following up.

03.17.04 And uh, (?) and that's just really, you know, the stuff that I say to myself. And, and most importantly, that everything that I do is all, you know, in service to God and humanity you know. And uh, after the tsunami, the tsunami uh, tragedy, I had gone to a Friday prayer in mid-Manhattan.

- 03.17.33 And uh, (?) you know, it was a day that I was totally uh, I, I was just feeling very hopeless. Uh, and the reason that I was feeling hopeless was because I, there was no outlet for me to do anything. Like, I was feeling like, oh my god, this horrible thing has happened, and I can't do anything about it.
- 03.17.58 Absolutely anything about it. And I was just like, you know, saying what can I do, what can I do? And I couldn't find what to do. And that morning, uh, that afternoon, I actually went to the mosque in mid-Manhattan, and you know, he was talking about (?) the sermon, the imam was talking about uh, that uh, the tragedy itself, you know, is something that was meant to happen because it's God's will.
- 03.18.32 And that we can't change, you know, God's will. And that we have to accept it. And we have to know and understand that what has happened is not a punishment. Uh, and all of those people who've lost their lives are all, you know, are all witnesses to, you know, God's, you know, greatness and will all be granted heaven.
- 03.18.59 Uh, and as he continued uh, in his sermon, he talked about how these people who died there uh, you know, will, will be resurrected. Every time, you know, from now 'til then, will be resurrecting, you know, in their graves uh, to witness this. And you know, he was telling us that we may think it was a violent and tragic death for them.
- 03.19.32 But it may have not been, because you know, the God that we know, you know, took their lives in a way that was very serene and tranquil and welcoming. Uh, and that, you know, he, this was his, his might uh, and his, his doing. And that no one should feel, you know, devastated, you know, for those people, because they are truly, you know, in God's mercy.
- 03.20.01 And as he continued in the sermon, he said, there is, you know, each and every one of us, you know, uh, must know and understand that when we are resurrected, we will be resurrected in that very last moment of whatever we were doing. And he said there is nothing more uh, gratifying uh, than dying while you're doing a good deed, you know.

- 03.20.28 Whether it's for your, your husband, your wife, your child, your neighbor, you know, your community. Whatever it is. And so I thought about it really long and hard. And I'm like, oh my god, you know, it just gave me chills. Just to think about it, you know. And how, you know, my faith has really been a big uh, a big push in the work that I do and my convictions. Uh, and just knowing that, you know, uh, a lot of what I do, like, if, if my time came, I would hope to God that it would be, you know, in one of those meetings that I'm advocating for something. (LAUGHS)
- 03.21.09 Although I don't want to frighten the people in the meeting. (LAUGHS) But that, it will be, or maybe it'll be at my computer writing a letter, do you know what I mean? But just always that, that it happened in my service. In my service to my community.
- 03.21.28 And so you know, I, I know that (?) I've, I can't help not doing that stuff. I mean, like last night uh, Naji was working and this Yemeni American organization that I talked to you about, we're having our official public grand opening October 2<sup>nd</sup>, so last night, I wrote five letters to uh, some officials and community leaders.
- 03.21.59 And I revised the flyer. And uh, I uh, I also sent an email to somebody about uh, actually through ADC. He was posting some of their information. He's also a volunteer and he's a workaholic like me. So he, he emailed and then I responded. I was like, tell them, you know, if they're really interested, that I do this kind of work. They were actually going to provide uh, training, cultural and ethnic training for uh, first responders uh, in Louisiana.
- 03.22.32 Uh, you know, in regards to the Arab and Muslim community. So I responded. I said, you know this is the work that I do professionally. If they do need people, there, there's a storage or you can't find people, I'd be happy to, to commit (CLEARS THROAT). Just let me know. So he emailed me back. He said, (?) he said, I've just sent it, but I don't know if anybody's in the office. Uh, and then (?) I emailed him back and then I emailed him something else in regards to the October 2<sup>nd</sup>.

03.22.59 We were emailing each other back for about an hour. And he says, you know, Debbie, the last, final email, we says, you know what, it's Friday night. What is wrong with the two of us? (LAUGHS) And I said to him, I said, you know what? You're absolutely right. This is pathetic. This is how the two of us are spending our Friday night. You know, worrying and, and just like, continuing to do the work. So uh, I love it. I know that I could probably be sitting watching TV. I could have dinner you know, with friends or whatever.

03.23.30 But it's like, the stuff that makes me the most happiest. That makes me feel like, wow, you know, I'm making a difference. Or wow, I'm accomplishing something, you know. And uh, yeah. So (?) I very much feel like I've even prepared myself for death, Jim. (LAUGHS)

JW: (?)

03.23.55 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah, but (?) I want to be uh, I want my time to come where I'm doing something, you know, meaningful and something for others.

JW: Aristotle's observations about kids are interesting and somewhat in line with what you are saying, and that you are constantly engaged in something fulfilling?

03.25.32 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I, I truly am. Uh, I am engaged in things that are very extremely fulfilling and uh, you know, despite that everything that happened to me this summer uh, let's say, through, from April through July, July 16<sup>th</sup>, or July, I would say July 19<sup>th</sup> uh, which were like, the most turbulent (?) times of my life. (?) That project was the most challenging because of the dynamics of the, the committee that I was working with, you know.

03.26.02 The personalities that I was working with. But after all, after it was done, the, the last and final event was actually a festival in the park. In Prospect Park, where we had over 1000 people who attended where there was food, Middle Eastern food, Middle Eastern music, dance, everything. Uh, it, it was just really, it was the most beautiful event.

03.26.29 And, and then there were things that were being said and done at the event, but I was like, I am just going to just relish in, in this moment. Because it, it was amazing.

JW: Do you get to do that?

03.26.41 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Do I get to do that? Uh, not often enough. But I did that day, because the young people that worked on that project, on organizing that festival, I was so confident in them doing, pulling it off the way they did, with very little of my input, that it was incredible.

03.27.02 And they did an amazing job. And I think the, the most, (?) gratifying thing for me out of that was the fact that I believed in them were others in their own organizations that they were working in did not believe that as young as they were, could do what they did. Uh, and so that was incredible. Just them, the day of the event uh, when I got there, at 9:00 AM to set up, they're like, Debbie, we can't believe that this is here. That this is happening.

03.27.31 You know, this is all because of you. And I'm like, no, it's all because of you. And they're like, no, it's because, it's all because of you. You believed in us and you supported us and, and you guided us and you led us. And here we are today. Uh, and just, because enjoying the, the song and the dance and the food. And just letting these young women, like, you know, take the show, emcee it, you know, do what they were doing, was incredible for me.

03.28.01 And I, I really relished in that, in that moment. Uh, just sitting back and, and absorbing. Like, wow, there are people in my community that, you know, I (?) celebrate. And when it was time, when the Commissioner of Immigrant Affairs came from the Mayor's Office to, you know, to speak and to inaugurate, officially inaugurate Arab Heritage uh, before I, they asked me to uh, introduce him.

03.28.30 And I said, (?) you know, it's not a big deal. They're like, no, you should. You know, you're the one that's been interfacing with his office and it makes the most sense. So I took that moment to recognize each and every one of these young women who did this incredible job.

And their work, their effort. Uh, just literally spending a few minutes just on them, just really, just, uh, just remembering the smiles on their (?) faces and, you know, their eyes gleaming with joy that somebody was really recognizing them was really, was beautiful.

- 03.29.04 And we called him up. I introduced him. He gave, I made sure that all of the sponsoring organizations came up and received a proclamation. We all took pictures with him. Like, it was so important for me to, to make sure that everybody was included in that moment, that they felt a part of that moment. Uh, and even for the uh, the Gracie Mansion event, you know, which was supposed to be a 450 uh, people gala that turned out to be a 50 Arab-American leadership breakfast with the Mayor and his commissioners.
- 03.29.39 And you know, all of the nonsense and, (?) the thing that made it the most challenging was the juggling between uh, was actually the balancing acts that I had to play in both my community, and then also with the city officials. Uh, you know, really keeping things calm and cool and, you know, even though that I knew that my community was upset and outraged.
- 03.30.04 We sort of had, I, I had to like, calm them down and say, okay, let's think about this rationally. How do we want to deal with this? And I know that I had mentioned earlier about the, the names of the people being vetted. I was able to, to make a huge argument to the Commissioner of Immigrant Affairs uh, about the names not being vetted. And what he did, and his deputy did was they went back to the Mayor's staff.
- 03.30.32 And they said, look, we have these 11 sponsoring organizations. Can we vet the organizations and hold the organizations accountable for the people they invite to this event? And not check the 450 names that we're inviting? And lo and behold, they agreed. I was totally shocked when she came back and she said okay.
- 03.31.00 But I built such a compelling case to them that the community, since 911, has been feeling targeted and under attack and mistrusted and misunderstood. And this really is another way of saying we don't trust you, so that's why we're doing a background check on you. Uh, and

therefore, you know, people are gonna be very, you know, much more reluctant to wanting to participate with city government officials. And the fact, and then when she came and shared this information at the committee meeting, they were all shocked that, that they actually went as far as negotiating with people on the Mayor's staff.

03.31.41 So it, it was a big accomplishment. Uh, you know, but things in, you know, we didn't end up having the 450 uh, people event. They, they shrunk it down to 50. Uh, and then having to choose the 50 people was the most arduous thing. And I let the committee, I said, you invite people from your organizations and whoever you deem fit.

03.32.04 And I will give you a few people from my organization and, and that's it. And then just like, the juggling of making sure then, when we went up to get, to receive the proclamation from the Mayor, you know, figuring out who should be the people to go up there for the photo op, you know. And pressing the organizations to give me names, which they did it. And then I had to, you know, pick up, pick out names from their, from the list.

03.32.32 And then making sure that there was enough representation of the Arab Muslim clergy, and then the Arab Christian clergy. But it was, it was, afterwards, when I was explaining to somebody that I, I had to do that, they're like, Debbie, how did you think to do all that? I was like, (?) I don't know, but it was important that I do that. I mean it, I just did it. I was like, you know, people are gonna be standing up there.

03.32.59 I want people to feel represented and equal. Uh, and that's, you know, even in regards to, you know, gender and, and what have you. And uh, it, the most uh, beautiful thing, Jim, that day, was actually, I was sitting at a table. And we had prepared for this. (LAUGHS) Prior, there were people who wanted to raise some of the issues that they were resentful of the Mayor and his commissioners.

03.33.30 And at the meeting, the meeting that took place two days before the event, the (?), I asked the committee, I said, you guys have to decide what, what do we want this event? I said, number one, you have to remember, the Mayor's gonna inaugurate Arab Heritage. Uh, so it, (?) to

me, and this is my opinion, it doesn't make sense that we're going to celebrate our inauguration, and then our way of saying thank you is say, well, how come you discriminated against this one and why are you doing this to us and why are you doing that to us?

- 03.34.00 I said, I personally see this as a celebration day, you know. (?) Getting the, the week inaugurated, which means this'll happen every year. And an opportunity for us to build bridges and establish relationships with him and his commissioners. And I think we should use it as a time to get to know each other rather than severing the relationship the first time that we come together.
- 03.34.27 And uh, we went around. Everybody shared their views. And the majority agreed with me. I said, this is my opinion and I don't, I will go with you guys, whatever decision you, you choose to make. And thank god that there were older, more diplomatic, more political savvy people who saw that this was the way that we should go. And so we made talking points for the people. Uh, one of the young women who's like, 21 took notes, and I took notes.
- 03.34.58 And I was like, great, this is one more thing I have to do before tomorrow morning, which, the breakfast was actually gonna be happening. And uh, she said, you know, Debbie, I'll be happy to, to type it and print it and bring it in the morning. And I saw like, the adults sitting at the table like, you're not gonna give it to this kid to do (LAUGHS) kind of look. And I, I pretended I didn't see them, and I said to her, I said, okay. Go home, type it up, email it to me. I will proofread it, do like, the final read.
- 03.35.29 And then I'll be happy to email back to you and then you print it. She had a printer at her (?), actually a copy machine at her house to make uh, 60 copies. And she did. And they, a couple of people after the meeting came up to me after she had left. They're like, how could you trust her to do that? That's, it's a very sensitive document. I'm like, she's gonna email it to me. And you know, when we have people, young people who want to do things, we shouldn't discourage them. We should encourage them and, and support them.

- 03.36.00 So I was nervous. I was like, god forbid she gets there late. God forbid she forgets it at home. But she didn't. She, she came through. She brought it. She passed it out to everybody. All the people that attended to the meeting, I, I basically recommended that, being that all the other heads couldn't make the meeting, that each person plot themselves at a table and try to facilitate the conversation with each of the commissioners sitting at their table.
- 03.36.28 So it went extremely well. And the moment that I started to tell you about, but I forgot. The gratifying thing about it, Jim, was when I was sitting at my table, listening to the Commissioner of Immigrant Affairs, who is from the Dominican Republic uh, talk about the Arab-American community and their contributions since the (?) late 1800s. Uh, their contribution to city, to New York City.
- 03.36.57 Uh, both the Arab Muslim and the Arab Christian uh, (?) it was just so beautiful to hear somebody else acknowledge my, my cultural heritage. Really, really beautiful. So I'm sitting there, Naji's on my right and Dr. Henry Habib is on my left. And he just, you know, coincidentally looked and he saw like, tears coming down my eyes. (LAUGHS) And he was, he was touched by my crying. And, but it was the most gratifying thing to actually hear.
- 03.37.29 And, and at that moment, I was like, everything that I had gone through, all the drama and all the commotion, was worth it, just to sit there in a room of 50 Arab-American leaders and 15 commissioners to hear this acknowledgement. It was really beautiful. And you know, then being, you know, the mayor reading the proclamation and acknowledging the community and calling us up to receive it and, it was really wonderful.
- 03.38.02 Just really wonderful to, to participate in that. I must tell you, I lost 15 pounds (LAUGHS) through that project.

JW: You lost weight?

- 03.38.12 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah. I, I literally did not eat, 'cos I, I was like, a basket case, you know. And, and just like, you know, making sure that, you know, the relationship with

people at city hall was, was calm and you know, successful. It was a tough act to pull.

(LAUGHS)

03.38.33 And the funny thing is, is that people who were (?) on the outside, you know, periphery of, of the project, both who are Arab and who had no involvement in the, (?) you know, the planning and what have you, were just totally at awe, you know, of how (?) it happened. The inception, how it happened, everything. And then even people who are non-Arab, who just like, saw, you know, this driving force taking place.

03.39.02 And, you know, my leadership, you know, role in it were just totally at awe it, it finally happened. And so that was really beautiful. And I have to also mention that it's the first time that actually the Arab Christians and Arab Muslims worked together on a project. So that was truly gratifying for me. That I was able to bring both communities together to work for a common goal.

03.39.28 And that each and every one of them that day at Gracie Mansion actually walked into that hall or that room, (?) whatever they call it uh, leaving their religious identity out the door and going in there as an Arab, and as a united Arab community. It was really beautiful. So I don't even know what I was about to tell you that I, oh, I know what I was gonna tell you.

(LAUGHS)

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

03.40.06 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (MID-STATEMENT) When you look at the end of your life and you decide to, if you have, have lived a really good life, happy life. Fulfilling life. Uh, I actually was invited onto the Peace Boat. And I don't, I, I told Danielle, so I don't know if she told you, but I called her on the boat to tell her that I'm leaving New York on a Peace Boat. (LAUGHS)

03.40.28 The Peace Boat is an NGO, a Japanese NGO, a non-governmental uh, organization? Yeah. That actually travels around the world three times a year and stops off at about 20 to 25 ports

all over the world. And their mission is to really do peace education and helping Japanese citizens better understand the world around them.

03.41.00 And developing a sense of uh, appreciation uh, for the diversity and the existence of people in the world. And so I've actually been working with them for the past three years. They've come here every year. Uh, they came here last year for the 9-11 celebration at Riverside Church, which I participated with them. Uh, and every year they've come, I've given them a tour of the Arab-American and Muslim community.

03.41.30 And taken them to meet people in the grassroots community. And I have also taken them on a tour at Ground Zero. So I, it's interesting now that they're looking for volunteers. I almost want to say I'd like to do it, but I don't think I would probably be invited. (LAUGHS) Uh, you heard about that?

JW: Invited to do what?

03.41.51 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, (?) today on the New York one, they actually were putting out a plea if people were interested in volunteering to do uh, (?) tours of Ground Zero. Did you hear about it?

JW: Walking tours?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah, walking tours.

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Are you really afraid of rejection?

03.43.09 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (MID-STATEMENT) But I do hate rejection. I, I have to, (?) I really have to think how am I gonna propose this? Like, I know that they're looking uh,

based on what I heard today, but I, I could be wrong, it's really family members. So there's nothing that makes me a family member of a lost one.

03.43.26 But I am a family member of somebody who was down there for six months. But (?) I don't, you know, I don't think that would be, you know, the reason. I just, I don't know. Because I'm Arab and Muslim, I don't know how that will fly. You know? I really don't know how that will fly. But I have to give it some thought. I really do.

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Have you been invited onto the Peace Boat to go to the different ports?

03.44.07 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I was invited to uh, to teach on the boat. They have a global university where students uh, are engaged in three months of learning. And the class that uh, I had worked with was, you know, people of all ages. It's uh, it's a graduate-level type of uh, setting. And uh, what they were learning about was the, (?) the state of the Muslim world uh, you know, since 9-11 and on.

03.44.36 And what the ramifications have been. And so their visit here to New York City uh, was huge in regards to, you know, the image that Muslims since 9-11 up until now, how it's become much more negative uh, than it was pre-9-11. And the ramifications that are taking place in the different countries, et cetera.

03.45.00 Like, you know, with the London bombings, that now they've just passed something like the Patriot Act over there. And you know, the fact now that they want to deport people, et cetera. Uh, so (~JW~)

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

03.45.34 END OF TAPE

**TAPE # DA 31 09.10.2005**  
**Debbie Almontaser**  
**JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director**  
**PROJECT REBIRTH**

04.01.00 PICTURE UP

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

04.01.31 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: So uh, I was invited to, to come on board and teach. And I gave them a tour of the Arab and Muslim community prior. And the same people that I gave the tour were actually the students that I taught on the boat. And I was invited for ten days to teach on the boat. Which only required an hour and a half of my time, which is only like, 40 minutes, 45 minutes in addition to the translation. So I, the rest of it was translation time.

04.02.00 Uh, it was this beautiful luxury line. The Topaz. Uh, very, very, very beautiful boat. And uh, I was on there, Jim, for ten days. Can you imagine? And I remember standing there, you know, and I, I saw the movie Titanic. Now it, it scares me to watch it and then get, you know, or think about it and be on, on a boat. But uh, I just, (?) while one day, one evening, just being in there after actually I left, and Naji didn't go with me the first five days.

04.02.34 I went ahead and he followed me and he met me in uh, in Montego Bay. And uh, it was actually that very evening that I had left, and we were sailing out of the uh, (?) I forget, is it the Hudson River? You know, where you, you go (?) between New Jersey and, and Manhattan. And uh, just sailing through and we sailed under the Verrazano Bridge and it was just really, really amazing.

- 04.03.03 And, and I, at that time, was just actually reminiscing on my whole entire life of like, oh my god, I'm actually on this boat. This boat is gonna sail into the middle of the ocean. Who in their wildest dreams would've ever thought that I'd be on a boat? You know, that I, I would actually be doing this. And that I was actually alone. (LAUGHS)
- 04.03.27 The thought of being there alone (?) really scared me. But I was like, I have to do this because you know, this is my calling. This is the work that I've been destined to do. And uh, before we, we left the dock, Naji uh, you know, he stayed on the boat with me until it was time for him to, to get off. And he uh, we were actually on 55<sup>th</sup> Street. I think that's where we were docked. And he got off the boat, went under, you know, across, and there's actually there, there's uh, an underpass where actually cars can pass, an overpass.
- 04.04.07 And he sat below it in this area. It was dark already. It was (?) 9:30, and there was like, this gleaming white light. (LAUGHS) And he sat like, right under it with his legs crossed. And we were sitting there talking to each other until I lost reception. It was just so, it was such a beautiful moment, Jim. Just such a beautiful moment. He's like, I can't believe I'm letting you do this. (LAUGHS)
- 04.04.31 I can't believe that you're on this boat and I'm sitting here watching you. He's like, I wish that our kids were here to see this glorious moment. And I'm like, what's so glorious about it? He's like, you know, you, you are doing amazing work. You know, you are, you are, you are so committed to, to doing, you know, what you do. And, and it's just such a beautiful moment to share with you. And, you know, so it was just so beautiful.
- 04.04.58 And him sitting there until, you know, the boat just like, sailed all the way and I couldn't see him. I was looking, I was talking to him and looking through binoculars. (LAUGHS) And I took a picture of him, but you could barely see. He looks like a little dot, even though you zoom it in. Uh, it was just so beautiful. And he jumped in the car. He started driving on the Westside Highway as the boat was going. (LAUGHS) He drove all the way to the Verrazano Bridge.

- 04.05.28 And then there there's like, this uh, what do they call it? Uh, like a boardwalk. Not a boardwalk. It's just an area you can walk along the water. Parked the car, and he waited for the boat to pass through. (LAUGHS) Of course, I couldn't see him, but he was on the phone. He's like, I'm now watching the boat you know, go under the bridge. (COUGHS) And I'm telling you, I was like, I don't see you. He's like, of course you can't see me. I'm very far away and it was very dark. And it, it was just so beautiful.
- 04.05.57 But when we got out to the middle of nowhere, where you could see absolutely no lights at night, I was like, it was so serene. So serene, Jim, and so tranquil. And I was like, I can't believe that I am (?) sitting, or standing on a boat, literally watching all this happening, you know. Knowing that I, I had such a hectic and, and difficult three months. And then to be on that boat and say, oh my god, this is just like, a refuge.
- 04.06.30 A true refuge. Just for me to, to reflect, take stock. Uh, think about what, what had transpired. And just to really self-heal. Really, truly self-heal, you know. Just being, you know, just being in the middle of nowhere and all you smell is sea water. It was really, really beautiful, you know. And the treatment that I received on the boat from the students, from the Peace Boat, you know, executives and officials, was, was just wonderful, you know.
- 04.07.04 I, I stayed in this beautiful, luxurious suite, you know, with this beautiful, you know, bedroom and a huge living room space. And a huge bathroom. And when I took some of my students for, you know, if they wanted more information about something and they'd see the room, they were like, in total shock. They're like, we can't believe you have this big room, you know. And then when they saw the bedroom, they're like, and I'm like, well, well, how is your room?
- 04.07.30 They're like, we share one room smaller than this. And it's like, bunks, three bunks on top of each other. Uh, and I was like, okay, this is really interesting. (LAUGHS) So I, I was so grateful to the uh, the Peace Boat executives for just treating me like royalty uh, on this trip. Uh, they paid for everything. My travel. Uh, coming back. Everything. And when I found out what it cost to be on the boat, I was like, okay. (LAUGHS)

04.08.01 Quite expensive. So uh, Naji met me in Montego Bay. And he got on board. And we were on the boat for another six days. And then we crossed uh, the Panama Canal, which was an amazing experience, Jim. Amazing experience. Incredible. Uh, we stopped off in Panama for a day. Uh, and then (~JW~)

JW: You guys made some distance?

04.08.26 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah. And then our final destination was Costa Rica. And that was absolutely beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. It was actually our very first time to take uh, actually no, our second (?) time to actually take uh, an international trip together since we've been married. We, you know, we've done national stuff, but for Naji like, to, to be able to get away from his work, it was like, really the first time in many years. Since 1986, the last time we went out, the country was to Morocco. Uh, and it was just really, really wonderful. He had such a great time.

04.09.03 And he relaxed and he enjoyed himself. And the most wonderful thing about it, Jim, was that we were able to just like, be ourselves.

JW: What did that mean?

04.09.12 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I don't know what that means. It means like, we were on our own time. We weren't pressed to do anything. It wasn't like we had to, you know, you know, what's the next cause that we have to get involved in? (LAUGHS) We were literally in the water, so there was not much you could do. Uh, although while I was on the boat, I found out a lot of information that the Peace Boat executives had absolutely no idea. (LAUGHS)

04.09.37 And I brought it to their attention, so they're like, oh, thank you. We did not know this. (LAUGHS) Uh, and the students were really wonderful. You know, there were times that uh, you know, they organized like, coffee uh, tea sessions or, you know, just like, a after hours uh, you know, little party for me. It was really, really nice.

04.09.59 And it was very casual. You know, I, I got a chance to swim on, in the swimming pool. I got a chance to exercise. I got a chance just like, to do whatever I wanted to do, which is so rare for me. So this trip was really, really incredible. Uh, and it really just helped me relax. It helped me to unwind and uh, and just like, really appreciate my relationship with Naji. Not that I don't, but it just really rekindled uh, our, you know, our love for each other and, and our commitment for each other.

04.10.34 And he had such an amazing time. I just, I loved seeing him have a great time. (LAUGHS) It was really gratifying, you know. And just like, you know, him just (?) getting burned in the sun and the, you know, (LAUGHS) the phases that he had to go through, you know. The ashing and everything. It was just really cute and funny. So uh, and then just like, all the lost in translations that we had to deal with on the boat with the Japanese people.

04.11.01 And then when we were in Costa Rica, you know, all of the little funny things that were happening to us. It, it was just really cute and funny.

JW: How's Naji's health?

04.11.16 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, he is so much better these days, thank god. Thank god. I'm just so happy and relieved that like, the medication that he's taking now is really working well. Uh, (CLEARS THROAT) he's feeling good and energetic. And he's, he's his normal self again. But it was really, really scary the last time we talked, and the way that he was feeling.

JW: His blood pressure, right?

04.11.39 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah, he had high blood pressure. Hypertension. And uh, you know, he's watching his diet, you know. And he's taking a lot of uh, natural herbs, you know. Uh, (CLEARS THROAT) and really, you know, he has the medication, but he doesn't take it frequently. He's, you know, (?) he's doing the natural herbs.

04.11.59 And then there are days where he feels the tension and he'll take, he'll take a pill. But the doctor that he uh, transferred to is someone who believes in, you know, natural herbs and, and stuff. But also understands the importance of having medication in your life, too. So uh, so yeah. So he's doing really good. And I was nervous about him going on the trip. It was like, make sure you don't forget all your medication, you know. Don't forget your pills and just like, really fussing over him.

04.12.28 Uh, and then uh, you know, the weather in Costa Rica, it, it differed from day to day. There were days that it was humid at night and, you know, he couldn't tolerate being, you know, in a place that didn't have air conditioning. So, you know, we had, we had some really funny, funny things that happened to us. (LAUGHS) But uh, but I, I won't get into detail, (LAUGHS) there are probably other things you need to ask me.

JW: I'll take any stories if you have one?

04.12.56 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Okay. I'll tell you, I'll tell you the story of the almond uh, Almond and Corals retreat. Resort, actually. Uh, it's this very popular place on the Caribbean side of Costa Rica that a lot of people from the United States and Europe go to. And uh, a couple people that we ran into in San Jose were like, oh, it's a beautiful place. You'd enjoy it. It's right off the beach. You'd love it, et cetera, et cetera. So uh, Naji's like, well, we have to go, you know. We have to go to the Caribbean side.

04.13.30 And I was like, okay, where are we gonna stay? He's like, well, we'll try this place, Almonds and Coral. We look it up online, but you really can't see much from the pictures. But it sounded really interesting. Uh, and it's \$150 a night. So he, he booked for two nights. Uh, we traveled from San Jose to the Caribbean side uh, on a bus. It was like, ten bucks for each of us. It was like, a four-hour trip.

04.13.59 We get there. And we got there, uh, we left in the morning. We got there about 4:00 in the afternoon. And then we got off the bus. And then we had to take a cab to the hotel. And it

was the most funkiest ride you've ever imagined being on. The roads were horrible and it had rained that day, so it was also misty in the air. And it was cloudy and it was humid. We finally get to the hotel like, a half hour later. And you know, you go through these gates.

04.14.30 And then when you go through these gates, you're like, in the rain forest. So like, okay, this is really interesting. We finally get to (CLEARS THROAT) the reception area. We go in. We put, we process our paperwork. We pay with our credit card. And then they ask us to wait until we get escorted for our room. So finally that happens. We get there, and what we find is uh, this bungalow that's actually on like, a deck platform.

04.15.04 And it, the whole bungalow is made of, of like, uh, it's made of uh, netting. And then it has like, a tarp, green tarp on the top of the roof. And you could see everything that's in the living room. And then, but you can't see anything that's supposedly in the bedroom because within this netted bungalow, there is also a green tent that has a bed in it.

04.15.31 And we were like, okay. We went in there. Uh, we checked out the bathroom. It was also in another tent. They had a stand-up shower, a small sink and a toilet. And we're like, okay, this is really interesting. So Naji's looking at me and I'm looking at him, but neither one of us did not want to say anything to each other because we didn't want to disappoint each other. (LAUGHS) So he's like, okay, this is really, really interesting. He was like, okay uh, okay, so I guess we could live with this for two nights. I didn't say a thing. He said, all right, I'm gonna go ask somewhere the, the beaches.

04.16.08 How far is it from, from our bungalow. So of course he goes. And uh, he asks them. They're like, oh, it's 500 feet from here. So of course he had to walk. And then what you're walking on was not the ground, but it was like, this platform that was about six inches high that you had to walk on. So it was like, this maze through the rain forest.

04.16.29 He left me in the room. And they gave us a sheet when (?) we had checked in, and I started reading it. And it was the things that you need to do. So it was before going to bed, check your bed for bugs. (LAUGHS) And make sure your bags don't have any bugs. Uh, and then

it, uh, it also said uh, please be respectful of your neighbors, because everybody can hear you. I was like, okay, this is really wonderful. Uh, it said please do not, you know, leave your door open because monkeys could come in. (LAUGHS)

04.17.01 So I was like, oh my god, this is so crazy. What are we doing here? And then the whole time that I was in there while he was out, I kept feeling like I had ants going up my legs or something. So I was itchy and really paranoid. So he comes back and he says, okay, the beach is really far away. But I guess we can deal with it. So right before he came, I started hearing this really (?) scary howling noise.

04.17.29 And I was like, what the hell is this? And it just kept happening over and over. And it was, there was this echo with it. And it reminded me of this movie that I saw a few years ago called The Congo, which is (?), it took place in South America and there was this chemical there that was dumping this waste that the monkeys were drinking, you know, in the drinking water that they were drinking from. And they, the monkeys went wild and they started killing people. (LAUGHS)

04.18.00 And like, okay, so we're gonna be eaten by monkeys tonight. (LAUGHS) So Naji comes back and he hears it and he's like, what is that? I was like, uh, I don't know. I was like, really calm, but I was like, flipping out inside, but I was really calm 'cos I didn't want to disappoint him. So he says, okay, I guess it'll stop soon. He says, all right uh, I guess there's an air conditioner (?) in that tent, in the room, so we opened the tent and we're looking. And we didn't see anything.

04.18.30 And then right behind the tent on the side, (?) he felt something hard. So he's like, okay, this must be it. Let me just, you know, see what it is. So what do we find? We find this huge fan that's like, this big that you, that's placed on the floor. And you could plug it in. But Naji's like, great, we put this on, it's gonna blow the tent. (LAUGHS) And he's like, I can't stay here. I cannot have this, (?) this fan. This fan is not gonna cut it for me.

04.19.02 And I said, you're absolutely right. We can't stay here. So we both packed up our stuff. I was like, okay, what are we gonna tell them? He's like, I'm gonna tell them that I need air conditioning. If he has another bungalow that has air-conditioning and it's indoors, we'll stay. If they don't, then we're leaving. So we went, we spoke to the owner. And he said, no, these are all this way and I'm really sorry. And I understand that you're asthmatic and what have you, and I'll be happy to help you find another hotel that could accommodate you.

04.19.29 So uh, he told us, why don't you go have lunch and we'll be, you know, we'll, we'll look into all that. And we'll get you a ride to the other hotel. And it's not a problem. So we went and we were eating lunch. And then there were all these American tourists who were there having a great time, having lunch has well. And I'm looking at them and I'm looking at us and I said to Naji, I was like, what is wrong with us? And what is right with them, that they're all happy that they're staying here? (LAUGHS)

04.19.58 And Naji's like, I don't know, but I can't stay here anymore. This is just not working for me. And I said to him, I said, you know what? I thought I, we'd enjoy this and I thought I'd have a great time, but this is just not for me. (?) I don't like the bug feeling up my legs. (LAUGHS) And the noises and that's it, you know. You know, different strokes for different folks. And this is just not our stroke here. (LAUGHS) So we packed up and we went to the next hotel, which had actually really nice cemented bungalows with an air conditioner uh, which we stayed in and it was really nice.

04.20.35 And it was right off the, the beach. You know, we got a chance to, to swim that following uh, that night. And then the following morning. And one of the most wonderful experiences that I had, Jim uh, was we actually got an opportunity to go snorkeling. So it as absolutely beautiful. We, we paid \$100 each to the, this resort, and they took us out. It was really, really beautiful.

JW: Is that where you're underwater with the apparatus?

04.21.02 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: No. It was snorkeling. Yeah, the water wasn't uh, that deep. Uh, there were parts that were deep (~JW~) uh, but the fish, the water was so clear that you could see. (~JW~) It was so beautiful.

JW: Some of the best diving in the world is there?

04.21.17 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah, it was so beautiful. And it was a four-hour trip. Uh, Naji, I mean, both of us are not great swimmers. We're not. And, and he was like, he told the instructor, he's like, look, you need to be very close to us (LAUGHS) at all times, and make sure that my wife is okay.

04.21.33 And I'm like, please don't worry. (?) And so the guy got nervous. He's like, you know what, I'm gonna give you uh, this thing that we usually just give people who are a little nervous, you know, to keep under your arms. But you'll be fine. You could swim, you could do everything. Uh, (?) it was like, uh, just like a float, but it was like, uh, like a hot dog thing. I'm like, all right. And I did it because Naji was so petrified that I was gonna drown or something. (LAUGHS) And we did it.

04.21.58 And uh, Naji was only in the water for 40 minutes. He got tired, 'cos he, you know, he had to wear these huge fins. And mine were small and it wasn't so bad. So we went with a group from Spain and, of women, actually, older women. So they were teasing Naji. A couple of them went back in the boat 'cos they got tired. And they're like, we think your wife is gonna leave you. She's gonna stay here in the water. (LAUGHS) But it was just so beautiful and serene. And I've never had that experience before. And it's funny when we were uh, getting picked up by the, the person taking us, he's like, ma'am, where is your bathing suit?

04.22.32 I was like, I have it on. Uh, I, you know, I got this uh, specially made uh, suit from Egypt, which you can wear. It's made for Muslim women. Uh, that's, you know, it's like, leotards. But it's made from you know, swimwear uh, fabric. And like, this just long over shirt over it that's also just, you know, camouflages your body shape and everything. And I'm like, I

have it on. He's like, you're gonna swim like that? And I'm like, yeah. He's like, but your clothes are gonna get wet (?) you know, heavy.

04.23.02 And I was like, no, this is specially-made swimwear. He's like, okay, ma'am. So (LAUGHS) we went out. It was incredible. It was, it was really incredible. And I, I remember just sitting in the water and saying, wow, I can't believe I'm doing this, you know. So this just goes back to that point of, you know, looking back at your life and, and where you are. And so I am fortunate. I, I am totally fortunate that I've gotten so many opportunities to do things that I never, like, really, you know, planned to do.

04.23.34 But have just happened because of like, this course that I'm on. Like, the, the whole thing with, with, you know, being on the Peace Boat. I would've probably never said to myself, let's, or to Naji, let's go on a cruise. 'Cos that was not something I really desired or do you know uh, but it just happened because I had to go teach on this boat. You know, because I felt like it was important to provide this group of students with this education.

04.24.01 And then all of the rest of the things just happened because I was on the boat. (LAUGHS) So, yeah.

JW: How are your sons doing? One is engaged, yes?

04.24.18 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: He is engaged. (~JW~) Mohammed is engaged. Uh, and he is right now literally flipping out to have the wedding in January.

04.24.30 And uh, his father-in-law and mother-in-law are feeling like it's just too soon to have a wedding. Uh, they want her to finish school and they're trying to stall them up until July. So I don't know. So right now, they are in flux right now. Her parents are not happy. And Mohammed and his fiancée are like, well, we want it, but we want, well, she's saying, I want to have it in January, but I want everybody to be happy. And her parents are like, well, we're not gonna be happy. That's why we want you to do it in July.

04.25.05 So, you know, the decision is like, really in her hands, but she just doesn't want to, she doesn't want to disappoint her parents. And I feel bad for her because it's, you know, it's, it's a lot of pressure on her, and stress. And so I was actually talking to Mohammed last night and saying to him, you know, you have to cut her some slack and, you know, there's only so much she could say and do.

04.25.29 And you know, you have to have a balance between your family and, you know, your partner. And it's very hard for her to pick you over them. Uh, you know, and just, you know, so if you have to wait 'til June. He's like, but you don't understand. You know how many more months that is? (LAUGHS) I'm like, look, you see each other, you talk to each other. They're literally on the phone every hour on the hour, you know, if they're not (?), if he's not working and she's not in school.

04.25.59 Uh, and so we'll see. So I, you will be the first to know if there's a wedding in January. (LAUGHS) Although I have to warn you, he might not let you come shoot.

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

04.26.15 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (MID-STATEMENT) 'Cos he's like, he wants to have a very traditional wedding. Very traditional. Uh, segregated and the women on their own and the men on their own. Uh, he doesn't want to have cameras. He's like, you know, everybody who comes is not allowed to bring a camera.

04.26.31 Uh, they can uh, the only camera that'll be there is the (video-tographer? and the professional uh, photographers. That's it. He said, I do not want anybody snapping pictures of my wife. And I'm like, oh great. This is just really wonderful. (LAUGHS) So my sister, who's like, uh, you know, camera fiend, I don't know how we're gonna get her to keep her camera at home. And I was like, what about family? Just immediately family? He's like, absolutely no way. If they want, then we could give them pictures from the, the professional photographer.

04.27.02 You know, he's like, I don't want anybody to take a bad picture, you know. I'm like, okay, whatever. So uh, so yeah, so it, time will tell what's gonna happen. They're still working on her parents.

JW: For the date?

04.27.18 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: For the date. And, and the date that he wants, Jim, is January 1<sup>st</sup>. And I'm like, okay. January 1<sup>st</sup> is a holiday. (LAUGHS) So I don't know if any catering hall will be open. He's like, Ma, that's the only day in the year that they don't have any business. Of course they're gonna want to have uh, a party, you know.

04.27.37 We may even get uh, a discount. I'm like, okay. If you say so. (LAUGHS) So uh, so we, (?) you know, basically Naji's like, I'm confident that we could do this. 'Cos I even panicked and freaked out when he told me January. I was like, that's only less uh, you know, four months away. How are we gonna get the invitations out? How are we gonna, you know, how, she needs time for her dress.

04.27.59 And he's like, Mom, don't worry. We could do it. and Naji's like, don't worry, I will organize this. And it was like, okay, because you know, and my, my, of course, Mohammed says to me, he says, Mom, you are an expert in organizing. What would be so difficult with the wedding? I was like, I've never organized a wedding. And I don't want to uh, you know, to experiment here. You know, this is not, you know, a social justice gathering or (LAUGHS), this is uh, you know, it's much more formal than that.

04.28.28 And uh, I said, you know, if worst comes to worst, I'll have to find a wedding planner. (LAUGHS) So uh, so we will see. But I, I don't know, you know. It depends what, you know, what she really, if she really sets her mind and says to her parents, you know what, guys, I love you and I will always love you, but I really want to get married in January. So we'll see. So he's doing good. Uh, (Yousef?) is doing well. He's in school at Brooklyn College, still there.

- 04.28.59 And he is working part-time for an expediting uh, company, you know, that uh, expedites paperwork for uh, construction companies and architects and what have you. So he's doing that on a part-time basis. And he, he likes it, which requires him to travel all over the city. Uh, and, and you know, meet city officials, well, not officials, but I guess people in, you know, the building department and what have you to get paperwork approved.
- 04.29.28 So he came home last week and he's like, you know, this is not a bad job. I'm, I'm really, I'm getting very friendly with, with these people who do the work. And maybe I could do this on my own and open my own company. I'm looking at him like, okay. (LAUGHS) I don't know if you, you know, want this to be your career for the rest of your life. But uh, you know, that's, he's happy with that for now. And uh, my daughter is in her last year of uh, of high school. Do you believe it?
- JW: How does that feel for you?
- 04.30.00 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Scary. It's scary, because uh, she's, she's growing so quickly. She's grown so quickly. Uh, I'm still thinking like, she's going into the tenth grade, and when she's like, Mom, this is my last year, you know. And I mean, (?) I don't know if I shared this with you, but one uh, in the past uh, it was, I think sometime last year or the year before, and uh, I had, we were just in conversation, her, her dad and me, just about her and what grade she's in and her age.
- 04.30.36 And I accidentally did not remember that she was actually 16. I thought she was still 14. (LAUGHS) Well, she just couldn't forgive me about that. And I was like, you're 14, right, and she's like, Mom, I can't believe you don't remember how old I am. I really, I am shocked that you can't, I'm not telling you. And I'm looking at her dad. She's like, Dad, don't tell her. And I couldn't remember like, what year she was born and like, it was just all jumbled in my mind.
- 04.31.02 And then I was like, okay, you are now, you're in the ninth grade, right? And she's like, Mom, I am your child, how could you do this? (LAUGHS) And I said to her, I said, look, I

am in a state of denial that you're growing. That you're, you know, you're becoming uh, this young woman. And uh, I went home and (?) I kept asking my husband. He's like, I'm not telling you. I'm not telling you. (LAUGHS) So I went home and of course, then I, I just started looking at some papers.

04.31.29 And I was like, oh my god, I was two years off. This is really embarrassing. And she's like, don't talk to me, Mom. I don't want to talk about this subject. (LAUGHS) She grilled me for like, a month over that. For a month. And I said to her, I said, you know what, it's because you're a really good student. I don't get calls from your schools. Of course when I go for parent-teacher conference, all I hear is your praises. So you know, like, this stuff just (CLEARS THROAT), you know, doesn't stick in my head.

04.31.58 And so she was like, Mom, I can't believe you couldn't remember how old I was. I said, you should be happy. All women always wanted to be considered they're younger.

JW: What about the issue of Yousef and the Army?

04.32.21 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: The way that it resolved itself was he decided to resend his letter. And uh, they gave him back the letter. But they gave him a hard time.

JW: Tell me about the letter?

04.32.33 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, he, (~JW~) he decided to (?) resign. And he wrote a letter of resignation and he submitted it. And uh, they called him in and they're like, why do you want to do it? And he, he basically was very open and honest with them. He said, you know what, I, you know, I love this country and I love what it stands for. But right now, I'm very, very disappointed with just the climate and the state that we're in. You know, our country's at war with a country that had nothing to do with 9-11.

04.33.01 Uh, you know, we have a president who's just totally off the mark uh, does not understand that we're a part of a bigger world. Uh, and I just don't want to be a part of, you know, a part

of a government that (CLEARS THROAT), you know, is not fair and just in the world. Uh, so they took his letter. They uh, assigned him a JAG officer, and so the JAG officer was, you know, pretty much working with him.

04.33.29 And he, you know, he told him, he said, you know, you resigning is going to, you know, cause you a lot of ramifications in your future. You're going to be discharged with a (?), you know, (dishonorary?) discharge. Uh, (CLEARS THROAT) you know, it'll be marked on your records. It just would not be (?) good for you professionally to, to have this. You know, you'll be red flagged for the rest of your life. And uh, you know, if I were you, I would just complete the year and the few months that you have to go.

04.34.01 And be over with it rather, and you know, get discharged with an honorary discharge. Uh, and uh, and keep yourself out of, you know, just this stuff of uh, you know, and he told him, he said, you know, you're Arab, you're a Muslim. And it's just not good. It may cause or it may, you know, give the wrong perception. And so he came home and he shared, you know, all of this with us.

04.34.29 And at that point, we were like, you know, you do what you feel you need to do, you know. The decision is yours. So uh, he decided he didn't want to be discharged with a (dishonorary?) discharge. He went back and he asked the JAG officer to actually uh, resend the, the letter of resignation. And when, when they did, then they gave him another hard time of like, why now has he decided to change his mind.

04.34.58 Uh, and uh, (?) they put him on probation for three months. And uh, you know, he has, he was supposed to be doing his monthly drills. There, he went to a few and sometimes he missed some in the winter. And I believe that it, he was supposed to be done as of August 15<sup>th</sup>. I, I totally forgot to even ask him. But uh, he was never called, you know, to, to report to Iraq or anything like that, thank god.

04.35.29 Uh, and uh, there were just, you know, he, I'm sure, (?) I remember a couple of times him getting calls for his, his monthly drills, but I don't know if he attended all of them. So I have to ask him actually, what does it mean now that August 15<sup>th</sup> has passed?

JW: Do you have relatives in Iraq?

04.35.52 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I, we did, yeah. (~JW~) We did. They're all home now, except for one who's actually in the Navy, who serves on one of those, those ships that are in the area. Uh, but we uh, we had three Marines. Two of them were actually brothers. Uh, and the other one is just a nephew. And they all were there uh, over a year. And then they came back. Uh, and so the only one that's still up there is, is the one that's a part of the Navy.

JW: How are they doing?

04.36.23 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, they've all come back changed, Jim. Uh, the one that we're the closest to who's actually Naji's sister's son uh, you know, smokes, had a hard time really starting over. You know, going back to school, working. It's just extremely hard for him to just like, pick up and, you know, go back to normalcy. Uh, and the other two uh, they, they are actually related. Uh, it's funny because their parents are related to family members of mine as well as Naji's from his side.

04.37.00 One of their parents and then the other parent is related to me. Uh, so they're like, I would say two or three family generations, or whatever, how they say that. Third cousin or whatever on my side. And uh, we were very alarmed that they sent the both, the brothers out there, really alarmed. And I tried very much to, to, you know, get the family to oppose, you know, to really say, no, you can't send both of our kids.

04.37.28 You could send one or, or not even send either one, but people, particularly uh, many of our family members, are just not, not (?) you know, not apt to wanting to be defiant, do you know what I mean? And so it was difficult. And, I mean, for my sister in law when her son was there, you know, just watching the news, just always being nervous, you know. Thinking

about her son at all time. And, and then also just having a hard sharing with people in the Arab and Muslim community that her son was in Iraq.

04.38.04 It was also difficult, you know, 'cos there are people who are like, oh, you know, I hope he's okay, and then there are people like, what the hell is he doing there, you know. He shouldn't be there killing his own people. Do you know what I mean? So it was, it was pretty, it took a toll on them. And it took a toll on him, too. When he had come back uh, just uh, you know, in conversation, you know, he told me that it was very difficult for him to do, to do his work. It was hard at times when he used to see abusive behaviors against people, Iraqis.

04.38.35 Uh, and then it was also difficult for him, with his own colleagues, when he would speak to the Iraqis in (?) Arabic uh, and get them to cooperate and, you know, some of the people that he, (?) that were in his unit were sort of like, feeling like, what are you saying to them? What are you telling them? Almost, you know, like they didn't trust his judgment or, you know, were feeling like he's, you know, saying something that might not be legit to the mission or whatever the case.

04.39.07 So it was uh, it was a hard, it was a hard uh, act to juggle for him, you know.

JW: What was your reaction to Katrina?

04.39.26 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh god, I was devastated. Where was I when it hit? I don't even remember where I was. What day was that?

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

04.40.01 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah, I don't remember where I was, but I know I was, I guess I was in town. 'Cos I had been going back and forth. We uh, (?) we actually bought a house in Pennsylvania, in the Delaware Water Gap.

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

01.40.20 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: It is absolutely incredible. We just uh, signed a contract uh, about a month ago. Uh, before Katrina happened. So we were going back and forth over the weekends. Uh, and just immersed in that. And it's just, you know, we were originally looking for like uh, a family, you know, summer home or whatever. We ended up stumbling on this beautiful property that's on three acres of land. Has a small pond. And has uh, a horseshoe creek uh, flowing through one side and then dumping on the other end of the property into the Delaware Water Gap.

04.40.59 Which (?) it's really beautiful and serene. And so I think that we were in Pennsylvania when that may have happened. But (?) it was scary, Jim. It was really, really scary, you know. And when we were actually going, when I was going on the boat, there were two major hurricanes that happened. And Naji was like, flipping out about me being on the boat. And then while I was on the boat and he was still here in New York, there was another one that hit (?) New Mexico, was it?

04.41.28 And he was like, petrified that (?) you know, that was, we were gonna go into it or something. And we didn't. We, we had an amazing trip. It was a smooth ride. But uh, I, I was totally shocked. And, and really, really scared to hear of like, what the devastation was. Uh, and my immediate response, you know, my immediate response was like, you know, how, how could this happen, you know. It's just so scary, you know.

04.41.59 The fact that, I mean, they, they reported it, but not knowing how, how strong it was, and really like, doing a massive evacuation of people was just really scary that that like, didn't happen, you know. And those who were smart enough and had money, I shouldn't even say smart enough. Those who had money picked up and left, but those who didn't have money had no, no choice but to stay.

JW: Were there echoes of 9-11 for you?

- 04.42.29 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. It's, you know, again, you know, this is another thing that's hit close to home. Uh, you know, and just the devastation that was caused and, you know, the lives of so many people being lost uh, was really, really scary. Uh, uh, you know, and, and the fact that it's just here, you know, in our country was really, it was really scary. And you know, the, the same thought that I had about 9-11, like, how could this happen, you know?
- 04.43.00 In this day and age, with all this technology that we have, like, how could these people infiltrate and do what they did, you know. And then, I had the same thought with Katrina is, you know, we are so technologically advanced. Like, how, how could we have not been forewarned much sooner? And you know, that we, as this, you know, strong nation could not (?) have evacuated all these people out of there.
- 04.43.30 Uh, and, and just, you know, shortly afterwards, there was an article, an (opt-ed?) article in the New York Times in September, on September 2<sup>nd</sup>. And it was uh, an opt-ed about uh, a research report that was done in December of 2001, about uh, that was, it was a research study done on all of the United States, of what would be the most devastating, catastrophic uh, you know, incidents to the, to the country.
- 04.44.05 And there were three things that they identified. And that was, and I don't remember the exact order, but of course, terrorism. Uh, (?) a hurricane in New Orleans and uh, a uh, earthquake in San Francisco. And so this research was submitted to the US government uh, in regards to being proactive, to make sure uh, that these things are covered.
- 04.44.33 And the New Orleans issue has been on the table of, you know, of really strengthening those levees or figuring out another way to make sure that that, that part of the country did not, does not get flooded if there was a hurricane, you know. And the fact that the US government chose not to do anything was really appalling, you know, and that's what this uh, opt-ed outlined was that this is not news to the United States. They knew about this. (?) You know, the government knew about this, but chose to do nothing.

JW: Will you go down there?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I want to go so desperately.

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

04.45.21 END OF TAPE

**TAPE # DA 32 09.10.2005**  
**Debbie Almontaser**  
**JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director**  
**PROJECT REBIRTH**

05.01.00 PICTURE UP

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Will you go down to help out with Katrina relief?

05.01.39 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I most definitely would love to. And one of the things that, I mean, again, I was feeling that despair that I did when uh, when the tsunami hit, you know. And I was able to shortly after going to that sermon that I talked about at the mosque, and, and hearing it, I left there saying, oh my god, we have to, you know, we have to mobilize and, and start doing collections.

05.02.04 And I was able to get uh, six uh, organizations and mosques to actually collect food uh, and medicine and clothing, which then we had to rent a truck. I don't know if I told you about this. We rented a truck to New Jersey to drop off this stuff once a week from all six

organizations. And that was such a huge responsibility. Uh, and I remember like, Naji, you know, getting him involved. And one day, he was supposed to drive the truck and he got sick. And I was like, okay, you can't drive the truck. And then just going crazy to find somebody to drive it.

05.02.37 And that mobilization worried me because I was like, okay, we could do that again. But it's just such a hardship, you know, of, of making the collections and then picking up and then delivering. (?) It sounds easy, but it's a really difficult task. And we thought about that this year uh, in regards to doing that with the, with Katrina.

05.03.01 But everybody's already doing that. And I was like, you know what, the most important role that I could play right now is just distributing information to people. So some of the major uh, Muslim organizations are, are (?) giving relief work. And I felt like, okay, this is what I need to do is just educate the grass root people, this is the way they can participate. And just have really been massively emailing people, you know, about places they could drop off canned goods, medicine uh.

05.03.33 Places that they can, you know, make checks out to, donations, etcetera. And what's sad to say is that yesterday I just got an email about a family that relocated. That's a family of 14 people. It's uh, (CLEARS THROAT) one family and then the sister and her kids uh, who were like, (?) relocated here to Brooklyn and they have absolutely nothing.

05.03.56 And one of my friends from the uh, from uh, (?) Synagogue is actually a friend of the family member that lives here in Brooklyn who baby-sits for her. Uh, and she told her that this family was staying with them and they're in desperate need of help and assistance. So they emailed me asking, do you know anybody, can you help us? And so I connected them with this relief organization that's here, that's doing collections and what have you, and hopefully on Monday uh, I'll be meeting with the family and the people from this relief center to, to see how we can accommodate them.

05.04.35 Uh, so I think I briefly talked to you earlier about, you know, just seeing this posting that they wanted to do. Uh, (?) some training, cultural and ethnic training for first responders. Uh, it's, the organization is called the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee. And it's, it's a national organization. So I emailed them and let them know that I'd be happy if, to serve if, you know, they had a shortage of people to provide the training.

05.05.03 And uh, I will try to work it out with my job, which is not very supportive, Jim.

JW: What's your job?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I hate my job at the Department of Education.

JW: (REPEATS PREVIOUS QUESTION)

05.05.17 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, now I'm coordinator of external program. I work with community-based organizations and after school programs in terms of establishing relationships between schools and community-based organizations to provide services. Uh, I advocate for both. Both entities, you know, for schools to get programs.

05.05.38 For, you know, CBOs to find a school to work in. Uh, monitor and supervise some of these CBOs in our schools. Uh, (?) you know, I'm a liaison to them, as well, if there is an issue with the principal or with the school personnel or what have you. And it's, it's had some, (?) it's, you know, it's goods and bads.

05.06.01 I like the job. I'm really good at it in terms of networking and building bridges and, you know, getting resources where they belong uh, et cetera. The only thing I hate about it is that it doesn't permit me to, to have flexible timing in regards to, you know, doing such important work such as this. Uh, I had the, the rare and wonderful opportunity to actually go to uh, Indonesia after the tsunami hit in March to uh, do actually uh, conflict resolution training and anger management training through the Ohio State University (~JW~)

- 05.06.42 No (?) Department of Education wouldn't release me. They're like, you know, your responsibility is (?) to this department, you know. We understand that it's uh, you know, (?) it was a tragedy, but you know, we also have to (?) you know, look for the benefit of this department.
- 05.07.02 And right now, you need to be here. And if you choose, if you choose otherwise, then you know, it's up to you. But basically if I would have said, well, I'm going anyway, then I would have gotten fired. (LAUGHS) So uh, that's what I hate about it. I hate that there is no, there is no flexibility. There's no uh, human understanding. Do you know what I mean? Like, I would've taken my personal time to go there, and I wouldn't have expected to get paid, you know.
- 05.07.32 But just the fact that I needed to be released was the important thing. And so I don't know now. With Katrina, it'll probably be the same thing. But I have to just find a way to, you know, to directly communicate with the chancellor and say, look, this is really important. Uh, I need your support. Even though that that's gonna mean that I override the heads of so many people.
- 05.07.58 But I find like, that's the only way. If that's the only way, then I have to take that risk. And I regret not going to Indonesia. I really do. Every time I think about it, my heart hurts. 'Cos you know, the (?) whole, there are plenty of people who do, who do this kind of work, conflict resolution, anger management. But the whole reason that Ohio State University invited me was because of the fact that I was Muslim. And I wore hijab. And you know the country Indonesia is Muslim.
- 05.08.29 So for them to have somebody of their own faith, someone they can relate to, was very important, especially since right after the tsunami tragedy, you know, there was this whole tension between the US and Indonesia, you know. And Indonesians feeling like the US is trying to take over. And my presence there would have alleviated, you know, that whole entire persona or, you know, perception of the fact that I am, you know, from with your, from within your faith.

05.09.01 But I'm also here to help you and I'm not, you know, we're not a part of, you know, this bigger force that's trying to take over your country or whatever. So I regret not advocating for that, you know. Like it was uh, a moment that I did not seize. So uh, so yeah, so if they do get back to me and say, yes, we definitely need your help, I think that I'm gonna just take that leap and do what I should have done with uh, the Indonesia opportunity.

05.09.35 And, and contact the chancellor directly and say this is really important. I cannot see them saying no because this is a national event, you know. It's like, your country, right? I don't know.

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Can you comment on the London bombings?

05.10.21 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh god, Jim, it was, it was devastating. It was devastating to hear what had happened. And it happened July 7<sup>th</sup>, right? Yeah. It was July 7<sup>th</sup>. That week was a quite a stressful week for me because that was like, the week before the Gracie Mansion event. And there was just (?) a lot happening. I was involved in putting up a website. And that was even before that. I was involved in putting up a website literally from scratch. Not that I'm a website designer, but providing them the content. Uh, getting the, the list, just a lot of coordinating for this Arab Heritage Week.

05.11.06 So I was actually uh, at work and uh, I don't remember how I heard about it. It was that morning that I heard about it, 'cos they're, they're ahead of us. So I went to work that morning with like, this sick, you know, sense in my stomach. Like, oh my god, what does this mean now for us, you know. This is just like, here we go again, you know.

05.11.31 Just another thing we have to deal with. Uh, and I remember running into somebody (?) in the street uh, at one o'clock, a friend of mine. A very good old friend of mine. Uh, and she's like, how are you, and she's like, how are you. And she's like, what are you up to these days?

And I told her. And she's like, wow, that's a huge undertaking. And I said, right now, and I just like, (?) I vetted to her. I said, right now I don't know if this gonna go forward or not. She's like, what do you mean? I said, I am so scared.

- 05.12.01 I have sick sense that city hall is gonna try to call this event off. 3 o'clock that afternoon, I get a call from the person I was working with in the Mayor's office. And she says, Debbie, I need you to call me tomorrow at 11 AM. And I just want you, I want you to keep me in your thoughts. And I was like, okay, what does that mean? She says, I have a very important meeting tomorrow, but just keep me in your thoughts.
- 05.12.31 She didn't say pray for me. (LAUGHS) But just keep me in your thoughts. And I said to her, I said, you don't mean to tell me that they're trying to cancel? She says, I can't tell you anything. I'm gonna go to this meeting tomorrow, but I don't know what to expect. But just keep me in your thoughts, that I will be prepared enough to make sure that we continue with the course. And I was like, oh my god. I can't believe this.
- 05.13.00 So that whole night, Jim, I was like, on pins and needles, thinking about, okay, they're gonna do this to us. They're gonna cancel the event because of, of the London bombing. So I called her the following morning. She said, you owe me your firstborn. (LAUGHS) I was like, why? What did you do that I owe you my firstborn? She said, they were literally considering to cancel the entire event. And I put up a huge fight. And I was the only one, the only reason of voice in there, but I was able to get them to see that we can't.
- 05.13.34 That now more than ever, this event needed to happen because if we didn't, then we are literally saying, we believe in guilt by association. We don't trust you and we don't acknowledge you in our community. And she said, they, it took a lot of convincing, but the event is gonna happen. And I was so relieved, but it just, it, it killed me, Jim, that, you know, (?) anything that happens anywhere somehow always has a ramification on the entire community.

05.14.10 And it's just so tiring to have to deal with that, you know. It's just so tiring that, you know, that people look at you with suspicion. That people treat you, you know, indifferently when they hear things that have happened, even though it happened across the world. It's still, you know.

05.14.29 And also, it, it hurts that people cannot differentiate between the general, major Muslim population and then this small segment of fanatics who are acting not based on religion, but on political agendas uh, to achieve god knows what, but it's certainly not anything that the religion teaches or believes in. And so it's really, it's hard.

05.14.29 It's hard to have to constantly go back to that, and you know, reeducate people, you know. And just, you know, do that kind of work over and over again. It's just so draining. It's like, you know, (?) just like this constant, you know, defense mechanism that, that we all have to, you know, put on to say, okay, you know, our religion doesn't say this. Our religion doesn't condone this. Do you know what I mean?

05.15.29 And it's just tiring. Like, absolutely tiring. And uh, I had then left. I left the city July 20<sup>th</sup> and then the second bombing happened, I think. It was July 21<sup>st</sup>. So I was on the boat when that happened. And I was like, so nervous and sick to my stomach as well. And I (?) was checking email. And then I saw about the bag searches in New York City. Oh yeah, they were doing bag, (?) they're still doing it on subways and platforms.

JW: It's not specifically targeted towards Arab-Americans?

05.16.06 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: It's not. (~JW~) They say, but they randomly select people. (~I~) And of course, the ACLU and (?) other civil rights organizations are saying that, you know, once you, you, excuse me, instate such a procedure, that how could you not fall into the trap of, of racially, (?) you know, racially profiling people?

05.16.30 Uh, and so (?) it was really, it was sad that we had to take a step back, do you know what I mean? And uh, I mean, I have been fortunate they, nobody's stopped me, but I haven't been

carrying big bags. And I've been carrying a bag that's open. (LAUGHS) Don't even zip up my bag, just so that way (?) I don't fall victim. Uh, there have been about four or five people in the community who have been stopped.

05.17.00 Uh, but, you know, (?) it's just so difficult to say, oh, well they stopped me because I'm Arab or because I'm Muslim, you know. So quite frankly, I feel like it's a waste of, of the city's money, you know. We need better security measures than having police underground or in subways doing this. And quite frankly, I think the, the uh, crime rate in New York City has gone up because of, of the police (?) doing this.

05.17.30 They're not being out on the streets or available to, to attend to calls or emergencies. So (~JW~)

JW: What does the future hold with regard to this?

05.17.42 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, the future right now is very pessimistic, because shortly afterwards, you know, Tony Blair passed uh, legislation similar to the Patriot Act. And then I just heard uh, fairly recent uh, I think a couple of days ago, that he is trying to pass this uh, legislation to deport people who are reported to be inciting hate, you know, in mosques or community centers or whatever.

05.18.12 And my thoughts on that, you know, it's two way. It's, okay, yes, I agree. If they are inciting (?) hate and are negative influences in the communities, they don't belong there.

05.18.28 But then how do you, how do you judge that, you know? I would hate for people within a community to call because they don't like that person and say, oh, you know what, let's, let's just get rid of him. He's so annoying. I can't stand him. I'm gonna call and say he's (?) inciting hate.

JW: Could that happen to you?

05.18.51 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Uh, it could happen to anybody.

JW: But in light of what we've been talking about?

05.19.01 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Probably so. (?) You mean from within my own community?  
(LAUGHS) Anything is possible. Anything is possible.

JW: Do you want to talk about it in terms of your personal experience?

05.19.23 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, it scares me, Jim. I mean, that whole thing scares me. And I know, the, the toll that it's taken on my family is terrifying. And I never want my kids or my husband to go through that experience. But anything is possible, especially now with the secret charges that the US government is, is able to hold on people, you know. Basically imprison people with secret evidence that no court of law can see, et cetera.

05.19.50 You know, and this has happened to actually a few Muslim Americans. I mean, one of them is Jose Padilla, you know, who is a Latino convert, who they claim, you know, was planning to, planning an attack or something. Uh, but, you know, he's being held on, on secret evidence that cannot be shared with the public. Uh, and then there are a couple of others. So it's scary, but anything is possible, you know. And uh, you know, there are people, for example, within the Yemeni community who are picked up for money transferring.

05.20.32 And who are actually uh, what's the word I'm looking for, framed or, you know, targeted by one particular person. You may remember this incident. Uh, I think it was about six months ago. Do you remember a gentleman who set himself on fire in front of the White House?  
(~JW~) Yeah, he was a Yemeni American who was actually uh, playing the role of being a spy within the community.

05.21.00 And who was actually being paid off by, by government officials for information. And somehow they withheld some money from him or whatever, and he got really upset and he went and he set himself on fire in front of the White House.

JW: Died?

- 05.21.20 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: No, he didn't die. But he's in jail. And I think they're holding him also on psychological, you know, that he is not fit, psychologically fit. Uh, but he, he got a lot of people in trouble, you know, and one (?), you know, it's, it's just so scary, you know, what, like we said, anybody could turn around and report and say this person is, said this or did this. And, and I, you know, we are now in a time where, you know, any little thing, you know, can be believed by government officials.
- 05.22.01 And, and you know, and taken as, as a word of gold or, so it's scary, you know. And I think about that a lot, you know. I, I think about it a lot. Especially since, you know, that incident that happened to me a few years ago. Uh, and uh, you know, but what do you do? You can't live in uh, a cage. You can't, you know, isolate yourself. And you, you can't stop the work that you're doing, you know.
- 05.22.31 You just have to keep forward. So I'm not happy with, you know, what's happening in London. There is a great deal of backlash and discrimination. Uh, when I was on the boat, I had shared about, I actually educated uh, the students as well as the staff, who were some American and some European and some from Australia, etcetera, about the Patriot Act. And then I also shared that, you know, Britain is considering to do this uh, as well.
- 05.22.59 And, and you know, few people who lived in Britain said, you know, well, when we go home, what would you recommend that we do, you know, based on your experience in New York, being that this was such a devastating thing to happen in New York? And I said to them, I said, you know, befriend your Muslim and Arab neighbors. Get to know them. You know, be an ally and a support. You know, help them speak up for their rights. Help them, you know, develop a voice to speak about their faith and their traditions. And, you know, not to be scapegoated.

- 05.23.30 And they were like, wow, you know, that's very easy to do. I said, it's just a matter of establishing those relationships, and helping your families and your friends understand that, you know, we can't, you know, generalize about all Muslims or all Arabs, that they are terrorists, et cetera. And so that's, you know, that's still, that's still on my priority list, Jim, of, of just dealing with those issues. You know, tomorrow, you know, I thought it was gonna be the first September 11<sup>th</sup> that I would actually be able to just like, to (?) have my own personal time and, and really, and not do anything, and just like, be home and just, you know, in my own way, you know, just remember that day. And uh, a month ago, I, I got a call from uh, from a minister in a church in (Parkslope?) and uh, who we've, we've gotten to know each other really well and work together really well.
- 05.24.30 And he's like, Debbie, you know, I, I wanted to do an interfaith event (CLEARS THROAT) having, you know, people of different faiths come and, and do a prayer and, you know, get different organizations to sponsor it and, you know, but because of, of the time constraints and people going away, I wasn't able to get people to come (CLEARS THROAT) and, or make the commitment and they're out of town. And he said, right now, I really don't have anything substantial to bring to my congregation.
- 05.25.03 I, I want something that is moving and that is inspirational uh, and that, that will, you know, help them walk out of church reflecting about themselves and the world. And I want you come and, and share the podium with me. And (?) share giving the sermon for that day. And I was like, oh god. (LAUGHS) I really, I, I made myself totally un-accessible uh, you know, with other offers, other invitations that I had gotten, just saying I'm gonna be out of town that weekend. I'm gonna be out of town that weekend.
- 05.25.43 And when he spoke to me uh, almost a month ago, I couldn't say no to him like, after he made this plea. And I was like, okay, well, I'll be happy to do it. So I'm gonna be tomorrow at the Old First Church in Parkslope at 10 AM.

JW: Have you been offered a job as a principal?

- 05.26.13 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (LAUGHS) Oh god. It's another story in itself. I uh, I spoke to Danielle about New Visions uh, actually looking to develop a dual Arabic language school. And the, the first uh, the first, (?) you know, idea that came to them was actually to create an Arabic and Hebrew school, which would bring Arabs and Jews together to develop a sense of understanding uh, and coexistence.
- 05.26.47 And people at New Visions talked about it and felt like maybe it's too big of a challenge to take on two languages. And maybe just to focus it to one. So the person at New Visions just happened to be in Parkslope waiting on a falafel line to buy a falafel. (LAUGHS)
- 05.27.07 And right before him was a friend of mine who's Arab-American and one of her friends. And they were both talking in Arabic. So he stopped them and asked them if they were talking Arabic, and he introduced himself. And he talked briefly about the project. And he's like, I'm trying to connect with, you know, Arab-American leaders, you know. We're thinking of developing an Arabic school. So my friend says to him, she goes, well, the person you should be speaking to is Debbie Almontaser.
- 05.27.34 And he's like, you know, I heard that name, but the people who've mentioned it (?), mentioned her name (?) didn't have her contact information. If you could connect me with her, I would greatly appreciate it. So within three days, I'm sitting in this man's office talking about this idea. And just (?), you know, like, I connected the whole dots of who he should speak to and I was more fascinated by having the dual Arabic and Hebrew language and I told him how very much need it is in today's world.
- 05.28.01 And with the conflict there and what have you. So he's like, well, right now, we need the commitment of the communities to come together and help us find, you know, an academic uh, partner, as well as a community-based organization to partner, to develop such a school. And that's like, the whole model. And from that conversation, he's like, you know, Debbie, it's amazing that we've stumbled upon you, because you are the ideal person for this school.

- 05.28.30 And I really hope that you will take this into consideration uh, in being the school leader of such a school. And so I told him, I said, you know, ideally, it sounds really wonderful and great, but my commitment is to my community. And I don't know if I can make a commitment so soon, in the next year or two, to take on such a huge responsibility. Uh, I said, however, you know, my fate pre-911 was to become a principal.
- 05.28.58 And now in the post-9-11 era, I realized shortly after that that's not what I should be doing. Uh, I said, however, I do owe it to myself as well as to the Department of Education, since they paid for my masters to become a school leader, to eventually have that happen one day. So maybe in the next four or five years, you know, and I basically said to him, I said when the world calms down, I think I may be able (LAUGHS) to do that. So he's like, oh, the, the world is not in your control.
- 05.29.28 He was like, really trying to convince me that, you know, I should be doing this. So uh, a week afterwards, he called me back and he uh, they wanted to set an appointment for me to meet the president and the executive director of New Visions. And I went. I met them. They were extremely impressed, took all of my recommendations into consideration and told me, well, we'll get back to you in a few weeks. But we really think you'd be great, you know, and we'd love to work with you.
- 05.29.57 And you know, you have all your, the credentials required and what have you. So they left the room and this person who I initially met was walking me to the elevator. (LAUGHS) And he said, I knew, Debbie, they were gonna love you. And you know, before, you know, we set the meeting uh, we were asking around about you. They called, you know, this person at the DOE and that person at the DOE, and then he says to me, Jim.
- 05.30.29 He says, and the other day, we were meeting with the NYPD (?) and they had great things to say about you. (LAUGHS) And I looked at him. I said, the NYPD? I said to him, I said, Adam, I could understand if I was applying for a law enforcement position that you had asked the NYPD about me. But for a leadership position in a school?

05.31.01 That does not make sense. Or I said, I could understand if maybe the partnering organization is the NYPD, that we want to create some kind of high school police academy or something, that you would ask them. And he looked at me like, with this really nervous look on his face. And I, I looked him straight in the eye, Jim, and I said to him, I said, you mean to tell me that you did a background check on me?

05.31.28 And he was, he was mortified. He turned red, Jim. And immediately he says to me, no, of course not, why would you think such a thing? I was like, I just can't understand why you would be asking the police department about me. And why they would be telling you good things about me. No one at the police department knows me, you know. I mean, I've met Commissioner Kelly a couple of times, but he's met thousands of people.

05.32.01 Like he's gonna remember me out of everybody? I don't think so.

JW: How does that make you feel?

05.32.09 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I was crushed, Jim. I went home. I cried so much that night. And Naji was home. And he was like, you're taking this too seriously. Like, he was trying to find every possible way to make light of it. And I was like, absolutely not. I am crushed. I said, our people are gonna constantly be second-guessed, double-checked. You name it, it's always gonna be that.

05.32.36 And he's like, well, what are you considering? I was like, you know what, I don't know if I want to work with these people. I don't know if I want to do this project. That they had to go through that measure. I was like, they should've taken word of people at the Department of Education as enough. I would not be working in the Department of Education if I had a criminal record or if I have any, you know, any negative thing.

05.33.03 And every employee at the Department of Education has to be fingerprinted, you know. I have to have uh, you know, a clean slate in order to work there. And that should have been enough. And my credentials should have been enough. So Naji's like, well, look, you know,

unfortunately, this is the stuff that our community's gonna have to deal with. I was like, no, this is not fair, this is not right.

- 05.33.33 And you know, he was like, look, you know, you have two options. One is to call him back and, and yell and carry on and tell him that he's a jerk and that you're not gonna work with him. Or you can continue with this project, develop it, open the school, do something meaningful for your community. Something meaningful for the broader community, because you're not just educating Arab-American students, but you'll be educating New Yorkers, you know.
- 05.34.04 And this place will set an example for the entire country. It could be a model, you know, a coexistence school, et cetera. He said, but you have to put all of your feelings aside to accomplish that. So I said, okay. I said, well, then maybe if I do this, after the school's open and it's successful, I'm gonna call all those people at New Visions and tell them how dare they do what they did to me. (LAUGHS)
- 05.34.34 And Naji's like, okay, you could do that, you know. You're, you're already set in, and you know, established. Uh, I haven't, I did not contact them back. I left things where they were. He did call me back, 'cos they wanted to get back to me. And he said to me uh, right now, what we need is your help to identify an academic institution and a community-based organization that would be willing to partner to create this school.
- 05.35.06 And it's been really hard, you know. The academic institution that I would like for them to partner with right now is being banned by the Department of Education. And that's Columbia University. Yeah. Columbia University's Middle East Institute is banned from doing any work with the Department of Education because one of their professors, who is Rasheed (Hadidi?), who took over for Edward (Sahid?) who was this big scholar and advocate for the Palestinian cause uh, taught a course.

- 05.35.44 And the New York Sun found out that he taught this course to New York City Department of Education teachers. And they created this whole big commotion that he should not be teaching them because he is uh, he's racist, you know.
- 05.36.00 He, you know, says horrible things about Jews, about, (?) about Israel, et cetera, and should not be someone that should be allowed to teach. So Columbia and the Department of Ed battled this for like two months. And uh, Chancellor Cline and the Mayor basically said, you know, we will not continue the relationship unless you make sure that this professor does not step foot in any of our schools or provides workshops or courses to our teachers.
- 05.36.34 So uh, there is no other academic institution in New York City has the strength to do, to be a partner. Uh, so it hurts, you know, it hurts to have to deal with that, do you know what I mean? Like, this man is not what, what the New York Sun painted him to be. And for the Mayor and the Chancellor to take their word and appease the New York Sun and others who read the New York Sun was really sad, you know.
- 05.37.07 And (?) this man is highly recognized, renowned all over the world, you know, as a scholar, as someone, you know, who advocates for human rights, but yet who has become this, you know, negative person.
- 05.37.26 So yeah, so uh, I don't know. (?) I'm still bruised by, by what happened. And I just have to think long and hard about what I want to (?) do. Can I put my feelings aside to do this? And (?) the ironic and funny thing is, Jim, and I'll make this really quick, 'cos I can see you're tired.
- 05.37.51 Uh, I met with the chancellor deputy, the Deputy Chancellor of Learning, Teaching and Learning, who was my superintendent, who I told you was the one that told me to go back and teach. And who gave me the book. Well, after 9-11, we became like, these, these insufferable, she, she gained a great deal of respect for me. And understood the role that I play. And how important it is to, to have me there. And I asked her, I, I actually made, I set

meetings uh, for June and July with people that I really know and respect, who are really, you know, at the top of the line in their work as leaders as well as professionals.

- 05.38.37 And I asked her if she would just meet and give me professional advice of career, next step career advice. Uh, so when I went to the meeting with her, we just (?) shot the breeze for a couple minutes. And then she, as she always does, she doesn't give you a chance to talk. She does all the talking. She's just, that's her.
- 05.39.01 And she says, I think you should open a school. And I think you should open a school that teaches Arabic and teaches Arabic culture. And I'm sitting there. I was like, this is so freaky. (LAUGHS) So freaky. So she's like, you know, there is a school. It's, it's on Greek uh, mythology and Greek culture. And the language is Greek and it's amazing. And the kids love it. It's a middle school.
- 05.39.28 And I think right now, that the best thing that can possibly happen is you do the same and, for your community, for the broader community, it would be a place to develop understanding and cultural diversity. And giving me all the reasons. So I said to her, I said, Carmen, has anybody talked to you from New Visions? And she says, no, why? Why would they talk to me? I said, well, because New Visions approached me about the same idea. Excuse me. She was very surprised. She's like, really?
- 05.39.59 And I said, yeah. Uh, she said, well, we instructed them to work on English language learning programs. Not cultural understanding programs or schools or what have you, so I don't understand why they're talking to you. And she said, I want you to call this woman. I forgot her name. Uh, who is actually in charge of the new charter schools developing in New York. And she said, I think you should meet with her and work with her, and get some advice with her, from her.
- 05.40.30 I think you should also speak to the borough president. This might be something he'd be interested uh, in supporting. Uh, perhaps, you know, finding you the space, and she was really convincing me, like that's what I needed to do. So I went home and I, I told Naji. He's

like, this is interesting. You know, he said, the thing that you have been putting off the longest is really now, uh, you know, it's being pushed in your face, you know. And he said, look, you know, this may be a sign that you have to, to give serious consideration.

JW: To becoming a principal?

05.41.08 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah. And to opening this school. And then a couple of my other friends are like, look, Carmen is not gonna be there forever, you know. You should do it before she leaves. Otherwise, if she leaves and the new people come on board, they might have a different vision and different concept. And you could kiss that idea goodbye.

JW: The future?

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

05.41.35 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I'm getting closer and closer to believing that that's what I need to do. Because if I don't, Jim, I will never forgive myself that that was an opportunity that I didn't (~JW~)

JW: Becoming a principal?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: No, not becoming a principal. Opening this school.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

05.41.53 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (MID-STATEMENT) So I would not forgive myself that this was an opportunity that people on the top level in the DOE are, you know, thought of this, considered this, and I didn't take that, that step. So I have to hunker down and I have to make the phone calls. (LAUGHS) And I have to become proactive on it. And I got to do it.

JW: So what would that mean?

05.42.27 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I would transition, transition from my job into becoming a school leader. I wouldn't necessarily quit. I need a job while I'm, I'm developing it. 'Cos when, when you're developing it from scratch, you need some type of income. 'Cos they, they don't pay you to do it. So uh, the way that New Visions and the new charter schools work is that it's all volunteer-based work, and it's all, again, a community-based organization, and academic institute partnering.

05.43.01 And you have to develop an advisory committee comprised of the community, et cetera. And so in order to do this, I'm gonna have to identify people in the Arab community who I can work with, who will be supportive to make this a reality.

JW: And what about your other work?

05.43.21 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I don't know. I don't know, Jim. I don't know. That's what scares me. That is why I haven't taken the leap to really pursue and call people and make appointments is that I keep saying, okay, if I hunker down and I do this school, who's gonna do all the other stuff? Or how could I help myself from not wanting to be involved in all that other stuff? 'Cos (?) I won't. It, it will be impossible to run a school and do community work. Literally impossible. And there is one person who works for the DOE in the leadership, the principal's leadership uh, department, where she said, well, you know, it could be a part of the focus of your school, you know.

05.44.06 And she just said, you'd just have to find a way that you would interweave it. And uh, and justify it as a part of the growth and development and the nurturing of the school. That, you know, what happens in the community has to be, you know, nurtured in order for the success of the school. And if that means that you have to be a participant in that community work uh, to make that happen, I don't see it as a conflict of interest.

05.44.34 So I was like, okay. She's got a good point. So I, I need to, I need to, you know, some advice from people who've done this. And also principals who've, who've worked on creating

schools uh, in terms of helping me develop a timeline. In terms of being realistic. In terms of like, you know, just helping me through it. 'Cos I, I really don't even know where to start or how to start.

05.45.03 It's a daunting thing. You know, it's, it's easy to become a principal of a school that's already been established and has kids and has desks and has chairs. But it's daunting to become a principal of a school that doesn't even have a space. You know, that you have to find the space. That you have to buy the furniture. Do you know what I mean? It's scary. It's like starting from, (?) it's, yeah, it's starting something from scratch.

05.45.29 So uh, so yeah, so I need to push myself to do that. Uh, and I really need to start, I need to start setting priorities for me. And I think my biggest challenge has been that I, I focus too much on the needs of everybody else, but I don't focus on what my needs are, you know. And for, being a principal has always been a personal desire. And now I have that opportunity and to create something that is so unique and so fitting to the work that I do, you know, as an activist, as, you know, someone who is committed to (?) building bridges.

05.46.10 That this would be a great opportunity. But it would mean that I'd have to focus and I just can't get involved in every, in every cause. (LAUGHS)

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: You could do it?

05.47.03 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I could and you know, I also have to just, I have to accept what is gonna come with it. Ad what's gonna come with it is that the school is gonna be a very high profile school. I'm sure there will be those who are out there who are gonna, you know, antagonize, you know, in regards to it being an Arab school. Teaching Arabic, about Arabic culture, you know. In regards to saying, oh, you know, they might be teaching hate or inciting hate.

05.47.30 Do you know what I mean? Like, I have to become really physically and mentally prepared to deal with, with negative, you know, that it may very well be something that may come up. Uh, and that I have to, to ward off. Uh, I'm also very concerned about the US government taking uh, a big interest in this school. (LAUGHS)

05.47.59 In regards to wanting to provide more programming or money or what have to, to like, develop home-grown Arab, Arabic-speaking students who can then join, you know, the FBI and the CIA and the Army. Do you know what I mean? (LAUGHS) And so how do I ward off those forces without uh, basically like, turning them all away? That would then put me in uh, an awkward situation.

05.48.28 Or again, what we talked about earlier, in a position that could make me vulnerable. So, yeah, so it's, it's gonna, it requires a lot. It requires a lot, so I have to prepare (~JW~) myself.

JW: And you're still in formation in terms of dealing with that negativity?

05.48.49 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yes. (~JW~) I mean, on a world, yeah, on a worldwide level uh, and you know, I may have talked today a lot about, you know, some of the opposition that I face within my community.

05.49.05 But it's a very small, you know, number of people who are doing this. And it's out of their own personal insecurity. Uh, you know, and I, I hope that, you know, that would not be something that they would ever turn around and want to say or (?) do. Do you know what I mean? To sabotage good work, you know.

05.49.28 And uh, you know, but I am a firm believer in fate, and I know that, you know, that doing the right thing, that God will watch over me and support me. For whatever that's worth. (LAUGHS) To those who don't believe in, in higher, you know, the Divine Entity.

(OFF-CAMERA REMARKS)

05.50.04 END OF TAPE