

TAPE # DA 38, 2006
Debbie Almontaser, September 16, 2006
JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director
PROJECT REBIRTH

01.01.00 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: What is going on in the here and now, today, for you?

01.05.26 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Where should I start? Well, I guess it's (?) maybe I could just try to do some chronological stuff (LAUGHS). Leading to that, 'cos I just don't want to start there. (~JW~) It's too uh, it's too, too uh, difficult then to get myself together again.

(CLEARS THROAT)

JW: What about the beginning of the year?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

01.05.56 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, you know, that I was, I'm still, I was still in the same position for the past couple of years at the Department of Education. Working as coordinator of external programs. In the midst of all that (CLEARS THROAT) I've continued doing you know, all my community work. Uh, so this past year, I would say the thing that I worked uh, a great deal uh, to build up you know, is a school project.

01.06.28 You know, this time last year I had gone to the Department of Education's open house for starting schools. I met some folks from my community who attended that meeting. And then a couple of them and then we were meeting again at New Visions, and it seemed like they were interested in the project, but then I saw that they had their own personal agendas of how they want to go about the school uh, and not necessarily work in concert with me to make it happen.

01.07.00 And uh, unfortunate uh, the, by the end of (?) September, they you know, withdrew wanting to work on the project because they didn't feel they had the capacity and wanted to wait 'til the following year. I tried to re-salvage things with New Visions, and New Visions felt like you know, it's just, you know, the proposal is due in 10 days. There's no way that you know, it would make sense.

01.07.30 And you need a team and you need committed people and organizations. And uh, you know, I said you're absolutely right. So if you want to do this, call me again in the spring and we'll get started earlier. And they did, they called me in the spring uh, and then we, I rummaged up a list of people for them to contact in the Arab-American community (CLEARS THROAT). And they held the meeting, finally uh, the beginning of (?) April to introduce the whole concept of developing an Arabic dual language high school.

01.08.03 And it was really, really wonderful to have about 12 or 15 people from the community come and hear about this exciting project. And the energy and the excitement. And I had mentioned to them about how this could have happened last year, and the school would have been opening this September; however, things didn't you know, work out the way (CLEARS THROAT) I had anticipated them working out with people at New Visions.

01.08.32 You know, the poor outreach that they did only drew up a couple of people, and those couple of people who did come forward were not interested in sharing the whole idea with the broader community and wanted to head-spear it themselves, but realized they couldn't. And last minute they withdrew. And here we are now, again, and we really need to make this happen, because if we don't it's going to be a lost opportunity.

JW: Was the false start with your first proposal a real thing or just something that happened?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

01.09.57 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, there was definitely something behind it, there were there were people, there were a couple of people that had personal agendas. They wanted to head-spear it. They wanted their name all over it. They wanted to say that their organization did it. And really didn't understand that you just can't do things that way. The model that New Visions, as well as the Department of Education with all these new high schools is community involvement. Is getting all stakeholders of a community involved in creating a school.

01.10.29 And so in their minds, and this was in one of the emails that I got sent to me from one of them, they wanted to put together a team, put together a formal proposal and then, you know, present it to the community. And I was like Ok, that's not the way (LAUGHS) you know, that this model should be. This should be involving everybody. You know, and anybody who wants to be a part of it should have that opportunity.

JW: You start with the outside and get support?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

01.11.10 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Right. And my emphasis uh, to these two people was that from my own experience with Arab Heritage Week, the Arab-American community does not respond (LAUGHS) very well to people just initiating things on their own and saying, you know, here is what we have.

01.11.30 You know, we just got Arab-American heritage inaugurated by the city, you know, now let's work together and organize these events. It just, there were individuals, particular people who are of the elder generation who felt that you know, this should have been discussed uh, and we should have all gone to ask for it. You know, no, you didn't have the authority to speak on our behalf, which you know, I still sometimes every now and then question like well, you know, how do you get the authority?

01.12.04 Who appoints you to have the authority? (LAUGHS) And uh, you know, it's, sometimes it's tiring to have to deal with all of that. And uh, from that experience uh, you know, even though I know that I try to be very inclusive in the beginning and people ask me (?) you know, ok, let us know if it, if it works out we'll be happy to come together and you know, and organize and plan for Arab Heritage Week, and then when it really became a reality, everybody was shocked.

01.12.35 You know, I almost felt like they were just yes-ing me to, you know, but the whole time not believing that this is actually gonna happen, or that I'm really advocating for it. But no one ever said, well, I want to go to meetings with you, or I want to be a part of doing it. But in all of my conversations I was like, you know, there's someone in the mayor's office that I've been working with and negotiating and eventually when I get the green light, you know, I'm gonna ask for a meeting where we all go and meet with them, as many people from the leadership to meet with them and finalize things.

01.13.10 So it's interesting that how some people understand that sometimes negotiations happen with one or two people, you know, and I think people who are politically savvy understand that and know that that's the best way to get results.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

01.13.50 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: So yeah, and uh, you know, it's interesting because now there are a lot of national Arab and Muslim organizations doing these kind of trainings to help people become more politically savvy in negotiating things, and they all uh, they've uh, both, couple of trainings I've gone to have overemphasized the fact that you need to have a small group of individuals. You know, no more than 4, you know, that's the maximum, two is minimum, you know, and, and proceed forward. Uh, and so you know, we uh, it took a couple of years.

01.14.27 You know, I persevered and I kept going back and going back, and eventually when there were like were interested in this, you know, get the community involved, write us a letter and

get as many organizations you know, requesting this, and that's when I rallied everybody and everybody was shocked that this was actually happening (LAUGHS). And they did sign their name. Uh, it came by surprise, but we did it, you know, and from that experience, I realize that anything that I need to work on with the Arab-American community, that I needed to you know, to try to include them in the process from the very beginning in order for it to be successful.

01.15.09 And so the whole thing with this school project was that uh, it was a build up. I gave a list of names, I said these are very important people to invite. When you invite them ask them to extend the invitation to others. Uh, so you can have as many people come and hear about this project.

JW: The heritage week process happened, and then people came on board?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: What about the lesson to be learned?

01.15.50 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, the lesson I learned was well after Arab Heritage Week, after the inauguration, there were a couple of people who questioned my authority as to, you know, who authorized me to go speak on behalf of the community for Arab Heritage Week. And it was a couple of people who were just, who felt that, you know, that that should have been something discussed prior. And I resented the fact that I had to explain myself and say, yes, I did speak to five or six individual leaders, and I explained to them that I was working on this, and eventually that I needed their support to come on board when things panned out.

01.16.30 And they gave me their support, and here we are today. You know, so if people feel that they weren't included in the preliminary stages of discussions, you know, this is just the way that, the mayor's office works, you know? And the couple of times I asked to bring other people, they were not interested in meeting with the other people in the community. They wanted to

just take you know, their time to gradually you know, figure out where and how they want to go about this.

JW: People also don't like to be a part of a failure?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

- 01.17.16 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: And so the last thing I learned was, ok, you know, this is something that people, a couple of people called me on the carpet to. So I'm going to make sure that they feel included in a part of the process in the beginning. And uh, it's interesting (LAUGHS) because as inclusive as you want to be, there are still naysayers.
- 01.17.39 You know, naysayers who will always find something, you know, to nitpick about, and uh, and try to derail things. So you know, the whole process of bringing the community together, you know, the excitement, the commitment uh.
- 01.17.57 And then when it came to making very concrete decisions of which of the organizations in the Arab-American community will become the lead organization to receive the seed grant uh, to develop the school, it became really hairy. There was one organization which fit, you know, exactly what New Visions and the Department of Education would be looking for. It's a non-(secretarian?) organization providing social services. And youth development. And then the other organization that was nominated by some of the community members was actually an organization that formed an Islamic school.
- 01.18.42 And they felt that they qualified and had a better understanding of how to develop a school than the other organization. And so the community had to go through this process of uh, you know, voting on which organization would be the best fit.
- 01.19.01 So the two organizations are requested to write proposals to this committee. Uh, and do presentations and then have a question and answer uh, after they got to do their presentations. And throughout the whole process, after going to the New Visions meetings, people felt that

I should be the one leading the meetings and, and guiding the process, being that I'm, knew about it from the very beginning.

01.19.30 Uh, and that I work for the Department of Education and have a clear understanding of what was required. And so that was really, you know it was really wonderful because uh, you know, at the second meeting, one of the people said, well, you know, if people don't mind, I think Debbie should continue leading this, and being in the chair of this process until we make all the important decisions, and I said, you know, I'll be happy to do it but if someone else wants to do it, please, by all means.

01.20.01 And uh, it was unanimously voted that I do it. And uh, it was difficult, because I, you know, needed to remain neutral (LAUGHS) and at the same time, you know, I had my own personal, I don't want to say interest, but my personal wants and needs for this project. And I had to always, you know, do some self-checking in the process to make sure that my personal agenda did not interfere with the process.

01.20.34 And it was so hard, because uh, you know, there were things being said, and people, you know, wanting to shift things. And I couldn't be the one to say no, but let's go this way or you know, I had to let the process between the entire group, you know, just the discussions to continue and hopefully somebody would say something that would, you know, shift things. Uh.

JW: What about the dichotomy of personal agenda?

01.21.42 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, my personal agenda I would say started uh, that fall after I had a conversation with the person at New Visions. And I actually met with the president. He, he met with me first and then he, they invited me for another meeting, and I met the president of New Visions.

01.22.03 And it was 'cos they wanted to meet me. He wanted to meet me. They were so excited to hear about me, about the work that I do, about my you know, education background. You know,

having my principal's license. And at that meeting they were very much trying to convince me to lead the school. And I was, at that point in my life, somewhat resistant.

01.22.30 But a part of me was very, very uh, excited about it, and wanted it. But then the other part of me was afraid to go there because of just the way the world still continued. You know, the backlash, the discrimination, the detentions, just, you know, the whole issue of, of my community being under siege and saying to myself, ok, if I do start a school, and I lead the school, that means I will be confined to a building.

01.23.02 And I'd be responsible for you know, 3 to 500 students. And if anything in the outside world happened, I wouldn't really be able to do anything because I'd, they're my priority. Am I ready to make that kind of decision?

JW: You had to make that decision with you kids after 9-11?

01.23.44 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: And they helped me find my way (LAUGHS) out of teaching and, and doing this kind of work. And uh.

JW: It's now like you're being pulled back to where you started?

01.24.03 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: And not only that but uh, had September 11th not have happened, I would probably be a principal somewhere. Because I was in the Aspiring Leadership Program, which was uh, intensive uh, supervision-administration leadership program that I was nominated for, selected, and then I was in my last semester, and the whole you know, notion with it was once you graduate, you know, you're gonna get three offerings.

01.24.35 And in the three offerings, the first two you could say you're not interested in that, that offer. Uh, but the third one you have to take, and that was the part of the contract. So uh, over the years, you know, September 11th happened. I was in the classroom, finished a program. I was given the first offer, you know, are you ready, we have a couple of placements, we think

you'd be great at So-and-So school, and my response to the (?) deputy superintendent was I'm not ready.

- 01.25.10 You know, the state of the world, the state of my community, I just can't make the commitment. I am committed to education, I am committed to doing anything uh, that will you know, make the world a better place for students. But I'm not yet ready to make the commitment to be a school leader.
- 01.25.31 So that was in uh, February, and then I got the second offer uh, in September of uh, 2002. And again, I said I'm not ready. And they were very supportive. The deputy superintendent and the superintendent at that time were very supportive and understood the importance of the work that I was doing for them. Uh, and not to pressure me into taking anything.
- 01.26.00 Uh, and then of course the third position, the third time came up and I explained the same thing, and they were very uh, you know, understanding. They're like, you know, the work that you're doing is powerful and important and we want it to continue, but we wanted to give you this, this fair option uh, as we you know, we all agreed upon. But uh, you know, September 11th happened, I put my dream you know, on the shelf.
- 01.26.34 That's what somebody said the other day when I was having this conversation. You shelved your dream, you know, to help others. And now you know, you're (?) reconsidering to move on with your life, to do this. And uh, it was that meeting at New Visions where, at the end of the meeting and just seeing the excitement and I was thinking to myself, I was like what is it that they see in me that I don't see in myself that is making them so excited? (LAUGHS)
- 01.27.02 And uh, I left that meeting, you know, I wouldn't give them a straight answer. I said, I told them (?) I needed to think about it, and that I would get back to them, and you know, we'll move forward from there. And the meeting ended, and I went with Adam, he waited with me for the elevator, and he was just giving me this last little, you know, you know, cheerleader moment of like you would be the best person for this.

01.27.34 And he, he left me with you know, one sentence, and that was you know, Debbie, this is an opportunity for you to bridge the gap between East and West. You know, this is what all of your work is about, you know, building bridges of understanding. You would actually be merging what you are doing on a global kind of way into a local kind of way in a school community.

01.28.06 You know, you can pull onto all the resources, all the networks that you have developed in the, you know, past few years, and really create a dynamite school that would really be you know, your, your field to build bridges of understanding between people.

JW: When was this conversation?

01.28.28 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: This took place last year, in the fall. And I had just, I was blown away when he said, you know, this would be your opportunity to bridge the East and West.

JW: Why were you blown away?

01.28.44 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: It meant a lot because that I think for me, for the past several years, that's all I've been trying to do is help people understand who Arabs are and who Muslims are, and our culture, you know, our rituals, our customs, you know, and then also how we're a part of this, you know, country and you know, the fabric of it, and you know.

01.29.06 And if you can understand the two, you know, then you can that gap is bridged. And that's, that for me just uh, you know, it, it resonated and I left, and I kept thinking about what he was saying, and I came to the realization that maybe this is where I needed to go with my life.

01.29.30 You know, that I'm all over the place (LAUGHS). I'm spread thin. Uh, I'm circling sometimes, trying to figure out where does this, where is this work taking me, where you know, is it, you know, as effective as I really think it is, and sometimes you know, I doubt

that, you know, 'cos there's always things that just come up and then you're like Ok, I thought because we've been doing X, Y and Z that you know, this has gotten better. And uh.

JW: What closes it down?

01.30.05 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Uh, just you know, things in the media. You know, even you know, and this is something that I've said to you many a times, you know, I'm one person here in New York, there are other people in New York who are doing just you know, as much, maybe even more, and across the country, you know, and sometimes these efforts just you know, mean nothing.

01.30.29 I mean, the most current you know, example is the Pope's statement, you know, about Islam and the violence and connecting it back to historical events, and you know, condemning you know, Islam in a way that was just so negative. That it's you know, we have, I felt we've come so far to help people understand that there is no (?) you know, significant correlation between, you know, what you know, the history books say and what actually happened.

01.31.06 Uh, so just saying to ourselves, you know, saying to myself you know, as much as we tried to explain what the word jihad means, people still don't get it (LAUGHS). You know, they still think it's holy war. Uh, and it was sad. It was sad to hear that, you know, from a religious leader who is, you know, revered by millions of people, you know?

01.31.31 And so now we have to undo what has been said, you know, to help people understand that this is one individual's perspective. You know?

JW: That's a good way to look at it; powerful.

01.32.22 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: And so yeah, yeah, I'm sure people would look at me and say she's so pompous (LAUGHS).

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: They really need to think about the world in a different way, and subvert common perceptions in a different way as a leader?

01.34.13 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well I have to tell you one thing. Uh, I'm actually doing several speaking engagements. Uh, and a couple of them are actually going to be with uh, with uh, Christian groups, Pax Christie, which is gonna be the first time that I'm doing something with uh.

01.34.32 And then the other one is actually in, in Massachusetts uh, in uh, Hingham, Massachusetts, at a uh, at an abbey. So it's gonna be really interesting (LAUGHS). And I've been contemplating about what am I going to present at this, you know, at these uh, lectures. And you know, when all this came out with the Pope, I was like, this is perfect (LAUGHS).

01.35.00 This is perfect, here is all of my material that I'm going to present, you know, and I'm taking his perspective and juxtaposing it to, you know, scriptures uh, from the Koran and uh, historical text, you know, that really gives, you know, a, a very accurate depiction of Islam, you know, in helping people understand that you know, we can't you know, find the negatives in each other, but find the positives and work from there.

01.35.36 You know, we can't let history dictate our future. Uh, and, and use that to help, you know, clarify you know, things that were said, as well as help people understand that you know, yeah, this was said, but we need to find ways to work together. Uh, and what's really great is national Muslim organizations have, you know, picked up on this issue and they want to meet with people from the Vatican, you know, the major organizations in Washington uh.

01.36.12 And really have a discussion about this, and they've also done a massive uh, press release to all Islamic centers across the country to engage in dialog with uh, the people who are Catholic, you know, contacting their, their local churches uh, and, and having a dialog and helping them understand that, you know, we need to, first and foremost know that we're all human beings.

01.36.39 And you know, whatever we adhere to you know, faith-wise, we shouldn't let it you know, dictate how we work and live together. Uh, so I found that to be just so pro-active, you know. Yeah, it, it came out of a reactive thing. But it's pro-active. It's, it's you know, making sure to take care of it before it gets out of hand or escalates.

01.37.07 So uh, so I feel that that's my calling when I do these two presentations. You know, to just have this dialog about this. You know, and, and take it further.

JW: You and the Catholics use the same word, calling?

01.37.35 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I think I do (LAUGHS). I keep asking myself, why am I doing this, who summoned me? (LAUGHS) You know, why can't I just be like the rest of the people who just hear things on TV or read something and just say oh, this is just so terrible, these people just don't understand the world, and then just go on with my own personal life.

01.37.58 But I just can't.

JW: Why do you think that is?

01.38.03 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, I wish I knew, Jim, I wish I knew. I, I feel that if I did, then I would be letting myself down, letting God down, letting, letting my community down. That I can articulate and I can shift perceptions. Uh, you know, and help people think differently.

01.38.27 Uh, so I know that I have the ability, I know that I have the talent to engage people in provocative discussions and, and you know, and, and move them in a way to think differently. So you know, I know that I can't, I can't ignore things. You know, ignoring things would just keep them stagnant. And so whether it's, you know, talking to, you know, a colleague of mine whoever it may be, you know, I'm making some different uh, with one person.

JW: What about being compelled by the notion of really changing the world, and is it more in our nature to have conflict and therefore it's impossible to change?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

01.42.35 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I don't think it's impossible. I am a firm believer that you know, change can happen, but you can't do it by yourself. You know, you, you need other people who believe in what you believe. You know, to make those changes. You know, and it can happen. How you know, it's, it's all a matter of fate, you know, and belief.

JW: In yourself?

01.43.03 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: In yourself, in the cause (LAUGHS). Uh, you know, and, and just you know, fate plays such a large role in things. You know, being at the right place at the right time, and being heard, and being you know, believed in, and, and, and invested in, you know, thought-wise, you know, even financial, I think, you know, can (?) make it happen.

01.43.32 Uh, and you know, I mean, my belief in, in making a difference, you know, is from the grass root level. If you can change a small community (LAUGHS) you know, you pray that it will ripple effect, you know, to the broader community. You know, and you know, it's, it's small baby steps, you know, that make sometimes the most difference.

01.43.57 I mean, one of the things that I've been engaging in for quite some time uh, is in conversations with some of the conservative Jewish groups in New York City, you know, organizations that are, you know, pro-Israel all the way, and will do anything to make sure that the security and viability of Israel integrity is always there.

01.44.27 Uh, but I felt that there needed to be a bridge created between the Muslim and the Jewish community, and through conversations with some people that I've developed a relationship you know, in the leadership of some of these organizations, you know, I have been able to,

you know, get them to see that, you know, in order to make a difference, first we have to establish a relationship.

01.44.57 And after that relationship established, develop trust. And beyond that, then there is opportunity to work and somehow make a difference. Uh, and just, you know, in order to do that, you have to put your personal beliefs aside and see the individual for who they are. And vice versa. To really you know, to, to connect as human beings. And so uh.

JW: What does that look like?

0.45.32 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, I don't (~JW~) mean religious beliefs. I mean personal beliefs on you know, talking about this particular community, the fact that you know, you know, Israel has to remain a state at all cost. You know, doesn't matter who gets hurt or what, you know, and for people who are Arab and Muslim to hear that is very hurtful.

01.45.58 You know, and what do they want? They want you know, they (?) want justice, they want equal treatment of the Palestinians, they want the Palestinians to have their land, etc. So you know, the, there are two opposing sides. You know, and there are people within the Jewish community who I've had conversations with who, who feel badly to see what is happening, you know, to the Palestinians but are loyal to their country, you know, and its viability.

01.46.33 And uh, I'm a firm believer that in order to make a difference over there, you have to build a solid foundation here. And that, that movement will not happen if you are thinking to do it alone. That the two communities need to come together and to work on the issue together to make a difference. You know, the Muslim community, the Arab community, you know, can work for years and years and as hard as possible.

01.47.05 And I don't feel it would move the progress of making a difference there as fast as the two Muslim and Jewish communities coming together here, establishing that relationship and trust. And then looking at the issue there to work on it from here. That's my personal belief (LAUGHS). So (~JW~)

JW: Are you doing that?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: In my conversations, yeah (~JW~)

JW: Are you taking it from local to the next step?

01.47.35 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah, that's, that is one of my aspirations (LAUGHS). One of the things that I, I would like to see happen. So uh, (~JW~)

JW: What does the heavy sigh mean?

01.47.56 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: It's uh, I, it's a tall order, I know I'm asking for a tall order. And will it happen, I don't know, but I'm trying. Uh, so.

JW: (?)

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: To follow, to make happen.

JW: Internally or externally?

01.48.16 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Uh, sometimes externally. It's externally. It's, it's externally, because if I could get everybody to do what I want them to do (LAUGHS). I think that you know, a lot of progress would have probably already happened.

01.48.30 It's, It's you know, it's galvanizing you know, the movement, the people. And it's so difficult because there is so many different agendas. So the prime example is I've had these conversations behind closed doors with people in the Jewish community. Informal conversations (STOPS)

01.48.57 END OF TAPE # DA 38

TAPE # DA39
Debbie Almontaser
JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director
PROJECT REBIRTH

02.00.1 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: You were giving an example of how it might play out with two groups from local to global?

02.02.28 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: And I was (?) I was giving the example of the Muslim and Jewish community in New York City. And uh, just some of my personal efforts behind the scenes of having conversations with people in the Jewish community of how important it is to you know, build bridges between Muslim organizations and individuals uh, to work together on local issues and perhaps one day if ever possible, you know, consider thinking about you know, the, the world.

02.03.04 Uh, and not framing it in a way, you know, we need to work together because we have to fix the Palestinian Israeli issue. But basically you know, framing it that you know, it's high time that the world sees that both of our communities can work together. They did for centuries you know, pre the Palestinian-Israeli issue. Uh, and we need to show the world that these two faiths are not at odds with each other, you know.

02.03.31 That it's, it's you know, a conflict, you know, over you know many things. So uh.

JW: Ego?

02.03.43 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Ego. Land (LAUGHS). You know, a lot of things that cause conflicts. And so you know, after having conversations, there was a receptive you know, receptivity of (?) considering it.

02.04.04 And there were people in the Muslim community who have been longing for this and feeling that it's important to do. And I was able to bring two, two really dynamic people together, and you know, it took some time to get them (LAUGHS) to the table. Over two months of trying to negotiate a meeting, and, and getting both to feel comfortable and understand that both wanted the same thing, but just couldn't figure out how to navigate getting to the table and, and discussing uh, you know, how can we work together, what can we do?

02.04.39 And the great thing that came out of that uh, negotiation is these two people decided to uh, bring other people from the Muslim community together for a dialog. And it wasn't just you know, let's get to know each other and feel good, but let's get to know each other and see what can we do to better support our communities in New York City.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

02.06.08 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Naji and I were driving a few weeks ago up to the Pocono's and we were driving by the World Trade Center area, and we saw a sign about the Freedom Tower, you know, stating it was gonna be completed in 2011, and I turn around to Naji, I was like oh, no (LAUGHS). This is gonna stretch to 2011.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: When you were presented with the East Meets West opportunity, you had a decision to make?

02.07.13 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well. What it means is that I've been you know, from

since 9-11 up until this point just you know, on, on like a treadmill, you know, just continuing to go, to roll with the punches of whatever crisis is coming up, whatever issue is coming up and trying to work with it and deal with it.

02.07.40 And uh, when he said that to me it (?) there was some kind of realization that I came to, and that was that yeah, these things are gonna continue, but maybe it might be an opportunity for me to understand that I could create my own small community.

02.08.01 Uh, that would be a model for world peace, you know, bridging the gap, you know, creating tolerance and understanding. You know, producing young people who you know, who can speak on behalf of the community, on behalf of you know, themselves as global citizens.

02.08.26 Uh, and that may be you know, something that is worth investing my time and energy at. You know, 'cos I certainly know I won't be here forever to do that. Uh, and you know it scares me that you know, myself as well as a lot of others who do this kind of work sometimes lose, you know, touch with reality that we're not gonna be here forever, and if we don't start galvanizing young people you know, to continue this kind of work, you know, then we've, we've let down you know, a lot of people.

02.09.07 You know, and, and you know, there won't be enough people working on such causes. And so that's when I, I, I said to myself that I really need to give this serious consideration. You know, it's an opportunity that I thought I would never, ever get to be a principal because of just the world state.

02.09.34 Uh, but this was an opportunity to have what I you know, worked in my career for, to lead a school. And at the same time, you know, teach and, and develop young people, you know, to the things that I aspire to, you know, and that's bridging the gap between East and West, and developing socially and you know, ethically conscious individuals.

02.10.04 You know, to question uh, and to be motivated to make a difference in the world. So that is, that was my realization that I you know, I can do this, I can go back to what I wanted to do

pre-911. Uh, but do it in a way that is unique and amazing and true to you know, what I've been doing, you know, and furthering you know, the cause of, of educating and, and building bridges between people.

JW: Is there a struggle in leaving the community and going into the smaller world of a single building?

02.11.08 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: There isn't. And uh, there was in the beginning, and that was the resistance that I was having when people at New Visions were trying to convince me that this is the most amazing thing I could do. And then (~JW~)

JW: Can you go back to that time, because it's like an amoeba process, and as you said, you're not getting any younger?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

02.13.30 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (MID-STATEMENT) I mean, some of it is is that I'm tired of the politics. You know, with community people who just uh, it's just so draining because I feel like it, it drags the work, you know, it drags the stuff that you want to do. And a part of me feels that you know, if I have my school, I could do whatever I want. I can galvanize. I can you know, nurture, I can develop these amazing individuals who will be socially you know, conscious and, and challenge you know, the (unjustice?) and, and, and really you know, become global leaders who want to make a difference.

02.14.15 You know, and you could do that with young people. You can, you can nurture them, you can educate them, you can provide them all of the different perspectives. Uh, you know, and it's not you know, to indoctrinate them with anything, but to just provide them all of the information and they can make their own informed decisions on what to do and how to go about it.

- 02.14.38 And it's not you know, that I want to create a school that will have a political slant. That's far from what we want to do. You know, we want to create a learning environment where kids could look at everything and read everything. Inform their own decisions and opinions on issues. And then decide to take whatever cause they want to take, you know.
- 02.15.01 Uh, and move on it. So a lot of it had to do with the politics that I, I deal with as a woman. Uh, you know, as an Arab and you know, a Muslim. Uh, the other part of it is that you know, one person I had a conversation with after speaking with people at New Visions you know, and I was grappling with this issue of you know, I don't know if I could do this, uh, I won't be accessible when people call me, I won't be able to do this.
- 02.15.33 And, and she said, you can, you know, you just have to be strategic in how you you know, you form the school. And I just sat there and I was like well, what do you mean exactly? She says, well, you need to surround yourself with people who believe in your vision, who believe in you and the work and how important it is to continue.
- 02.15.57 You know, and these people will then be there to hold things together if you do need to go to a meeting, if you do need to you know, travel on, you know, to some distant place to be at some conference because you know, the world needs your perspective on it. Uh, and she said what you need is to find yourself an assistant principal, you know, who will have your back 150%. You know, who understands the importance of, of your work as a leader.
- 02.16.32 Uh, and also understand the importance of you know, the work that needs to continue in the school. And it just, what she said resonated with me immensely. And even though that there is this you know, this uh, environment in the education world in New York City of you know, you know, the protocols and the regulations and what have you.
- 02.16.59 You know, these new schools that are being developed are so community-oriented. You know, they want everybody who is a part of a community to feel a part of the school. To be a part of the development, to be a resource to the school. And so in a sense, you know, my role as a school leader, you know, will not change greatly because, in order to have this school

that is very community-oriented, you need to engage with your community, with the broader community.

- 02.17.32 Uh, you know, with local officials politicians, you know. Uh, you know, community-based organizations. Families. Uh, so it, it's a very you know, it's a very interesting way of, of developing a school and leading a school, you know, and it's really you know, is a model of you know, it takes a village to raise a child. You know, that's what they're looking for.
- 02.18.02 You know, they're, they're seeing education now being a part of the bigger community than just in an isolated building where nobody in that community cares for what's happening in that building. Uh, so I don't, I no longer see a disconnect between the community and the school leadership opportunity. I see it being uh, you know, a part of a whole.
- 02.18.32 Uh, so I don't, and especially this person helped me put things into perspective and understand that you can have you know, both you know, both worlds. It's just how do you, how do you create the environment, to make sure that you are true to yourself. But most importantly, true to the kids. And their families, and providing them the utmost you know, great education that any education you know, system could provide.
- 02.19.05 So I, I truly have to say I have surrounded myself with you know, amazing, amazing people. You know, who are working with me on the school proposal, who believe uh, in the concept of the school, who believe in you know, what it's gonna stand for and the kind of individuals it's gonna develop. And I mean, it's just, the team is so beautiful. You should see how diverse it is. You know, it's so diverse. I have someone who's Chinese-American, I have someone who's uh, Puerto Rican uh.
- 02.19.44 I have two Jewish people who are like, one of them is a parent and she's like I want my child to go to this school when it opens. Uh, you know, two African-American women uh, it's just amazing. And of course, you know, Arab-American individuals are also interested in this and, and see this as a very important uh, you know, institution to develop. So that's where my realization came from. And so you ask about there, there are things in my life that uh,

that are getting me to that, you know, midlife, I don't know if it's crisis (LAUGHS) but midlife stage.

- 02.20.26 Uh, and uh, so what are they, some things that have occurred? You know, just, just feeling the tiredness, you know, feeling tired, you know, knowing that my body can't do what it used to do (LAUGHS). Uh, and uh, and just you know, you know, looking at myself and then looking at others and seeing that I'm, I'm starting to, to look and sound different, do you know what I mean?
- 02.20.57 And a prime example, when I went to this conference uh, in Denmark, there were a lot of young people there, a lot of young people. And like I could see the maturity level, you know, between me and them. Uh, where they are in their life, where I am in my life. Uh, and I was like wow, I can no longer associate myself with that younger crowd, do you know what I mean? It sounds so weird. Like I, I still feel as young as they do, I think (LAUGHS).
- 02.21.32 But then, mentally and emotionally I'm not there. I'm so far you know, far in my, my progress as a human (LAUGHS). And so that is uh, a reoccurring theme that I see. Uh, and then just you know, my interaction with younger individuals and, and how they look up to me uh, you know, for advice, for feedback, for whatever it may be.
- 02.22.05 You know, and, and, and knowing that that has a lot to do with age. Uh, and just you know, just, just the stuff that Naji and I are going through, you know, uh, physically. You know, him you know, being diagnosed with high blood pressure you know, and the things that we have to do to make sure that you know, his blood pressure is maintained.
- 02.22.30 You know, I'm changing our eating habits, you know, changing you know, just doing a lot of things that we did not do when we were younger. You know, and you know, little things you know, that sometimes you know, you just go through. And uh, in July, I think it was, I don't remember what day it was, but it was in July uh.

02.22.57 And I can't remember it was beginning of July, middle of July, I don't remember, but we were up in the Poconos and uh, it was a weekend. And the uh, we have a friend who lives there who goes and sells stuff at a flea market not far from our house. And so we decided that morning that we were gonna go to the flea market, go say hello to her. Uh, and then like after she's done you know, go out and have lunch.

02.23.28 So we drove to the flea market, and you know, in the Delaware Water Gap there are all these different beautiful roads that you could drive through to get there. So uh, when we went, we took the, the uh, the scenic route, which is just you drive through farms and it's really beautiful. And uh, the road is very, very narrow so, and it's only two lanes, cars going opposite directions.

02.23.56 And uh, really beautiful. Uh, very enjoyable to, to ride through. So we went to the uh, to the flea market, we did some shopping, and uh, uh, my friend, Kathy, was you know, packing up her stuff, we helped her pack up. So we told her we were gonna go ahead and she's like I'll, I'll follow you guys in five minutes. So we got into the car, and uh, we started driving. We took the same route back..

02.24.32 And uh, five minutes into driving, this is weird, I, I started, I got really scared. Really, really, really scared, that we were gonna get into a car accident. And it's just like a million and one things were like rushing in my head. And I was like you know, there's a car that's gonna be coming down the road and it's gonna hit us and we're both gonna die.

02.24.57 And, and I just had this scary feeling, my heart was beating a million miles a minute. And I was just like ready to jump out of my skin, but I didn't.

JW: Did you (?)

02.25.11 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: No (LAUGHS). I didn't. Naji was driving. And I kept looking ahead and then I would stop looking, and I would look over my right, and then because it was a very hilly area, and I realized that if we did get hit by a car, that we'd roll down this hill.

- 02.25.29 It was just so traumatizing to just be in the car for a 20-minute ride that felt like eternity. And all I could think about was us getting killed in this car. And I thought about my kids, you know, being orphaned. I thought about my mom, who's gonna break the news to her, this will kill her to find out that I died this way.
- 02.25.55 Uh, and then, you know, in all this, I was also praying. I was praying profusely, you know, and then just having my hand at my heart, and Naji not knowing what was going on. He was just driving. It was absolutely silent in the car (LAUGHS). He didn't say anything, I didn't say anything. The radio wasn't on. And he just kept driving. He, and then later he told me, he was surprised by the quietness, because I'm always the initiator of conversations (LAUGHS).
- 02.26.26 So anyway, I had my hand, and I was praying, then at one point, I started just praying so deeply and saying God, please spare him, you know, take me, you could take me (LAUGHS). You could take me but please spare him, because he could take care of everybody, you know, 'cos I can't live, I can't live without him. So uh, spare him and you could take me if you want. And I continued praying. It was so scary when I think about this, 'cos my heart was about ready to jump out of my chest.
- 02.27.04 So finally we get to the house, you know, we pull into the driveway, and I'm like oh, thank God. But I still had that feeling. I had that feeling, Jim, for probably 6 hours. From probably like it was about 1:30 and I continued to feel that way 'til about 6 o'clock. And I was just, I was like ok, I'm probably gonna die today.
- 02.27.32 And maybe God is just preparing me and he's giving me all this opportunity to repent and to (LAUGHS) you know, make my peace with the world. And, and all of this stuff. But uh, we got to the house, we got out of the car. I went and I washed up and I prayed, 'cos I felt I just needed that to help relax me, and but I was still, I was still feeling like that was gonna be my last day.

- 02.27.58 Uh, and then we were like where's Kathy? How come Kathy hasn't gotten here? And it was like 45 minutes already, an hour passed. And then finally she pulled up and we're like Kathy, what happened? You told us you were right behind us. She says I was. Uh, and she said, and then this horrible accident happened. And uh, and we couldn't move. They you know, they closed the street and we had to wait 'til they moved the cars, and you know, and then I was able to continue.
- 02.28.30 And I was just blown away by that. I was so, you know, it, it was, it was chilly, chilling. Just, it was scary. And uh, I think what I experienced was you know, the chill of death. You know, it wasn't meant to happen to me. Or maybe it was, but then God just decided, Ok, I'll give her another chance (LAUGHS).
- 02.28.57 I don't know, I don't know. But it was so scary, Jim, when she told us that. And uh, right before she came, I, I told Naji, but I didn't tell him what I was feeling. I told him, you know, I said, when I, I've, I had this really bad feeling, like something is gonna happen, something, you know, terrible or just you know, bad. And I started feeling this way while we were in the car. He was like, I was wondering why there was such a silence in the car (LAUGHS).
- 02.29.29 I said, well, I don't know, I, I was just thinking about it. And he says, well, you know, uh, you know, you're everything is fine. And I called my kids. I called all of them. I was like so what are you doing, where are you? What's going on? And then I was like Ok, everybody's fine. Then I called my sister, I said let me double check. Maybe my mom or you know, something with my sister. Or, and everybody was fine. And uh, except I didn't get a hold of my oldest son. So then I was worried about him, and I was like Ok.
- 02.30.00 I left him a message, and then I called my daughter back and I was like when was the last time you saw him? And she's like I just saw him last night uh, you know I'm sure he's fine. And what have you. And then Kathy came and she shared this news with us, and then Naji says, oh, you see, so. You know, whatever your worried feeling was, it must have been that, you know, related to that. But it, it was extremely uh, or I've never, ever, ever experience that, Jim. Never in my life have I ever felt so scared of dying.

- 02.30.36 And it's not, not the, you know, like if it happens, it happens. I'm not afraid of it happening. But I'm afraid of what'll happen to my family. Do you know what I mean? It's so hard to explain, you know? I, you know, just like I know that each and every one of us is going to die, and that is just a part of life.
- 02.30.59 But the thing that terrifies me is just who you leave behind, you know? Like I know I cannot live without Naji. I just know like if, and I always say that, you know, if he dies, that I want to die with him. But then I think about our kids, and I'm like no, you know, if one of us has to go, it should be me first (LAUGHS). And then him uh, afterwards. And then I think about oh, my god, what would he do without me? You know? And then my parents, you know, my mom, you know, it's.
- 02.31.32 My mom had always favored me over all my brothers and sisters. And everybody, all my brothers and sisters know this, and they've learned to accept it (LAUGHS). They just totally learned to accept it. And uh, my mother for the longest has gotten away with it because she says, well, that's just natural because she's the oldest and the first child, it's, it's a natural thing. You know, don't take it personal (LAUGHS).
- 02.31.57 And so everybody has accepted it. So know that it would devastate her. Uh, and then just like my children, like my daughter. I don't want to, I don't want to leave her yet, you know, she's too young to be left alone. Uh, and so that, that, that in itself is so scary, you know, just your kids, your immediate family. And you know, and then how that would feel. So that evening, you know, I sort of things uh, settled and but I was still distracted by it.
- 02.32.34 Uh, we made dinner, and we sat down and had dinner, and then I had those heart palpitations again and I thought that oh, and I was like ok, this is it, this is my last supper (LAUGHS). This is it for me, I know I'm having this dinner and that's it. You know, and I was like God, please don't let me die (LAUGHS). Not yet, you know, just you know, you know, let Naji enjoy some more time with me (LAUGHS).

- 02.33.03 And uh, I got up from the dinner table and he was like watching me and he was like this is so weird, what is going on with her? You know, and then he followed me to the kitchen. He's like, well, you know, are you Ok? I'm like yeah, I just needed something to drink. I, there was stuff on the table to drink, but I just, I needed to step away because I didn't want to alarm him and Kathy. And uh, we came back..
- 02.33.26 I came back and sat down and tried to finish eating. And then that day we were driving back to New York. And then I just kept thinking about oh, my god, is this gonna happen to me the whole drive through? (LAUGHS). And uh, I, you know, we packed up and I, I prayed again before leaving the house. And then Kathy was with us, we were taking her back to New York. And we just, I felt better. We got entrenched in conversation about some of her friends.
- 02.33.59 And you know, past things that have happened to her. And just like connecting to things that have happened to us. Her husband, you know, used to own a pizzeria, so she was telling us all the horror stories (LAUGHS) of customers. And then Naji was sharing some of his horror story, stories of customers, and then my restaurant experiences and things that have happened when I've gone to restaurants. And uh, and I was distracted. And then when we got home, I was so happy to be home, inside.
- 02.34.30 Like a block away from the house, Naji was like, you know, I'm glad that you, you know, you're back to yourself again. And he's like what was all that about? I said, so I shared with him that I didn't want to tell him exactly what had gone on. And when I told him about what I experienced you know, on, on that hill driving back from the flea market, and how I felt and uh, I was just like so sure we were gonna die. And everything.
- 02.34.59 And he was like, boy, this is weird (LAUGHS). You know, he's like why didn't you tell me? I said because I didn't want to scare you, you know, I wanted you to focus on driving (LAUGHS). I didn't want to distract you from anything. Uh, and I said, I don't know why I felt the way I did. I've never, ever felt this way. Uh, and it scared me, but it was a reality check. You know, and I said to him, I said, you know, I, I cherish every moment with you.

02.35.29 Uh, I don't want, you know, anything to happen to you, you know, and I, I said I prayed so hard that if anything was to happen, that I should go first (LAUGHS). And he was like I can't believe that you're talking this way. I don't know what's gotten into you and I said I don't know either. I can't explain the phenomena that I, I experienced. I said, but when Kathy told us that there was this horrible accident after we left her, I said I don't know, maybe God just decided to spare us.

02.35.59 You know, and, and let it happen to someone else. And, which is not a nice thing, either. But you know, it's, it was a touch of death.

JW: Why would God do that?

02.36.12 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I don't know (LAUGHS). I don't know, I don't think I'm anyone special. But I don't know, maybe because I prayed so hard, I don't know. That I prayed so hard, you know, and it wasn't that I prayed for me, but you know, it was more for Naji, for my kids, for my family.

02.36.33 So I don't know. It was so scary, Jim, so scary to have that, I never, ever experienced that. And then I spent that night and the, the next few days just praying that I never experience that experience again (LAUGHS). You know?

JW: Do you pray a lot?

02.36.50 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I do, I pray five times a day. Yeah. it's uh, it really keeps me grounded. You know, in touch with God, in touch with reality. Sustaining. So yeah. so that was quite an experience, and I shared that with a friend of mine who is uh, Baptist uh, and uh, she, she was like you know, you, you had a chill of Death. You know, death was coming, but it wasn't coming for you, it, it had come for someone else. This is her interpretation, and she said, and you were driving down that road, and as it was coming, you know, it, it touched you.

02.37.35 You know, it wasn't your time, your time wasn't set yet, but it touched you, and it touched you because you are a, you know, someone who is faithful and a believer and it touched you. And I was like ok, is that a good thing or a bad thing, how do you interpret that? She says, well, it's a, it's a good thing because you know, it shows how close you are to God, and was really interesting to get her perspective.

02.38.01 And I said, well, do you think there's a lesson in this? She says, well, there's always a lesson in everything. And I was like well, what do you think my lesson out of it, or if you had experienced it? And her response to me was, just keep doing what you're doing, you know, keep believing, keep praying and center, you know, center yourself, and always keep God in, in that center with you. So it was powerful.

02.38.29 It was absolutely powerful. But you know, you know, a lot of that thinking about me not being here forever you know, really thinking about the future, thinking about my kids, thinking about uh, you know, the world. You know, who's there to carry on. A lot of that right now for me has resonated a great deal. And, and just in, in the writing and the development of this school proposal and just you know, really developing young individuals who will be leaders among leaders.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

02.39.11 END OF TAPE # DA 39

TAPE # DA 40
Debbie Almontaser
JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director
PROJECT REBIRTH

03.01.00 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Considering aspects of death can be a driving force in Life?

- 03.02.37 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I do, I do, and I know that there are like times, you know, like when are like times (?) the world, when there are things that happen in my life, you know, things that are painful. I always you know, I look for refuge in God. And it's like you know, it's you know, just saying you know, you know, that (?) just looking, looking towards god for, for resolve, for you know, just a sense of uh, you know, of, of overcoming whatever the issue is.
- 03.03.14 Uh, and I always connect it back to you know, that I know that he's there for me when the chips are down or whatever is happening in my life. And if that's the case, you know, this is (?) what will be there for me when my time ends.
- 03.03.32 When my time to leave this world you know, will come. That that will be a place that I'll be. And it just won't be on a superficial you know, level of you know, talking to a god that you don't see, but I know that I feel, I feel his mercy on me when I do need him.
- 03.03.57 Uh, but at that point, I'm sure that I, I will get the opportunity you know, to see you know, whether it's a (lamination?), a light, you know? But I will, I will get to see and I will get to connect, you know, so I, I look forward to that, I always look forward to that. And uh, I mean, one of the things that's beautiful about you know, prayer in the Islamic tradition is that the most closest place you are to god is when you are kneeling and your head is on the floor and you are praying.
- 03.04.33 And you know, speaking to him as if you know you are whispering in his ear, if he had an ear. You know, and so that, that's like one of the, the best time in my prayer is just being able to, to just you know, be down on my head for as long as possible and you know, with your eyes closed and just you know, you know, just praying.

- 03.04.59 Praying for whatever it may be, whatever issue I'm dealing with, whatever uh, you know, whatever uh, you know, whatever it is. I mean, like there was a time uh, in the spring that I was just going through a lot, you know, just with the community issues. Uh, you know, trying to move forward with a lot of stuff.
- 03.05.30 And just you know, the emotional you know, trauma that you have to deal with when people see you doing things and moving forward and doing things that are not comprehensible or believable do, like I can't try to, I can't (?) find a way to explain it. Just like getting things done that people would necessarily say oh, such a thing couldn't happen.
- 03.05.56 You know, like the Arab Heritage inauguration stuff. People never dreamt that something like that would ever be passed by you know, the city of New York's government officials, but it happened. Uh, and so you know how you always have naysayers who will say and do things to try to, to bring you down. And I, I've learned and I've come to the realization that this comes with leadership, you know, and a very good friend of mine who is Irish and uh, who converted to Islam, you know.
- 03.06.32 Who, he's so wonderful 'cos he, he is so spiritually connected and you know, I, I just love talking to him. And I started just confiding in him about what I was feeling and, and how I'm just so tired of having to always you know, have to deal with this. And you know, I just don't want to do what I can do or what I know I'm capable of doing because it's, it's just, there's so much drama, you know, and you can only take so much.
- 03.07.06 So in the conversation he says to me, well, you know, people who do have a calling have to deal with that. He said, you know, the prophet Mohammed had to deal with that, you know, in his time. Martin Luther King dealt with that (LAUGHS) in his community. Gandhi dealt with that in his community, and as he started going down the list of people, I was like ok, stop.

- 03.07.32 Now you know, just stop. You are putting me in, in the class of these individuals? I was like that's, that's just a little too extreme for me. I don't seem myself in that category. Uh, and he's like why not? And I said I just don't. I don't think that I'm making you know, especially the prophet, you know, he has, you know, one point three billion followers today (LAUGHS).
- 03.08.00 You know, I, I would never see myself you know, you know, reaching masses like that, nor do I have the desire, you know, to you know, to be a religious you know, leader or you know, uh, so his, his response to me was no, not necessarily. But you know, when there are people who are doing things that (?) are out of the ordinary, there are people who don't know how to deal with it, and therefore find things to negate uh, or, or make that person you know, get off track.
- 03.08.36 And he said what you need to do is what they all did, was stay focused (LAUGHS). Continue in the cause, believe in yourself, surround yourself with people that believe in you. And uh, and don't let this stuff bother you. You know, you just have to really be strong and develop a thick skin. And you know, he, he put it so eloquently, and I always have to keep reminding myself that.
- 03.09.02 But it hurts, you know, it hurts when you hear things, you know, small, small things that are said and rumors, whatever the case may be. And uh, it's just painful. And then one of the things that I do to myself is I say, ok, well, maybe I am not, I'm not connecting more with God. You know, maybe I need to pray more. Maybe I need to you know, just you know, try to do more charity work, and you know.
- 03.09.29 I was thinking for some time I was like I need to find things to do that nobody knows me. That's what I need to do. And so I thought about you know what would be really cool? I should actually go to hospital and visit kids, you know, take little gifts and toys and just go visit them, or go visit the elderly, take them flowers. You know, I'm sure there are a lot of people in the hospital who don't have family members that I could just go and cheer them up.

- 03.09.58 And I was like nobody knows me (LAUGHS). You know, and it would be just my you know, act of kindness and you know, and good deeds, just to make somebody feel good for a little while. And uh, and so that was like one thing that I was, I was thinking a lot about, and just trying to find ways to bring myself closer to God that didn't associate with people that knew me or know of me.
- 03.10.27 Uh, or that I know. Uh, and then there is this one individual person who he is incredible, absolutely incredible. He grew up here in the States, went to school. He actually grew up in uh, Washington State I think, went to school, became an architect, and then just one day decided that that wasn't his calling, and that his calling was to learn more about Islam.
- 03.10.56 And so he went (CLEARS THROAT) uh, on this spiritual journey of just learning, you know, reading. And his dad was actually a scholar, and his grandfather was a scholar. Uh, and it was just such a natural thing. But you know, in, in, in the, his home, it wasn't something that was an expectation. You know, it was something that if you felt you wanted to do it, you could do it. And his parents were supportive of whatever he wanted to do with his life.
- 03.11.28 And you know, he had a knack for math, and architecture was really great. And he did it, he worked in the corporate world, wasn't happy, spiritually he wasn't connected, and he made that choice. So for some time he's been living in Syria and doing all his studies there. And uh, what is the most breathtaking thing about this man is that he has delved into scripture and literature uh, on Islam that you know, is incredible, particularly on the issue of women and the role of women.
- 03.12.07 And you know, this psychological and social. It's really incredible. And, and the reason that this guy, well, you know, is encompassing all this is because of the fact that he grew up here, and had this really you know, huge educational background where, in his studies he was studying psychology and sociology and you know, all of the different, you know, philosophy and what have you and was able to pull all that together.

- 03.12.39 And then when going and looking at the, you know, these texts was able to, to take all of this stuff, you know, all of this background with him to interpret what he was interpreting. And what I find to be the most incredible thing with him is that when he talks about the state of women uh, he talks as if he was another woman (LAUGHS).
- 03.13.06 And so he would refer back to historical events uh, you know, specific texts from the Koran and you know, in (?) just in his (?) you know, in his presentation or in the conversation you would have with him at a table, he (?) would say, you know, we women have a lot to deal with (LAUGHS).
- 03.13.28 And the first time I heard him say that I corrected him, and I was like you mean us. You're talking about women, not us, you know, the community. He's like no, I'm talking about us women (LAUGHS). And I was just, I was totally at awe of how comfortable he feels in his skin uh, and confident in himself and his education. And that he can actually see himself a part of you know, everything and everyone, do you know what I mean?
- 03.14.02 It's so incredible, so absolutely incredible. So the reason I'm telling you about him, is that he has played a huge role in my spiritual life. Uh, I have conversations with him, I call him and I'll just share everything with him, what's going on, and he just helps me put things into perspective. In the spring I had a 4-hour conversation with him, I had to change my phone battery twice (LAUGHS).
- 03.14.33 Uh, but what was really wonderful was I was beating myself and saying maybe I'm not, I'm not close enough with God and maybe this is a sign that I need to be more humble and more pious and, and he's like no. He's like, everything that you do is worship. And I was like what do you mean? He says, everything that you do, you know, the moment you wake up and the intention that you make to go out and go to a meeting and make a difference uh, you know, the (?) every moment that you are advocating for your community is a worship.
- 03.15.06 Every moment that you are bridging the gap between individuals, whether they're Christian and Jewish or you know, Muslim and Jewish or whoever it may be, that is worship. He says,

everything that you do is worship. You know, and you know, being hung up on the fact that you have to you know, pray you know, extra or you know, read you know, the Koran every day, he said, you know, those are all good things to do.

- 03.15.35 But you can't, if you, if it means that you would have to give up you know, going to a meeting to do that, he says, what you're doing is you're serving yourself by doing those things. And when you're a meeting, and you are uh, you know, helping people understand something, you know, or making a difference in one person's life, that is more significant, because you are making a difference for others and with others.
- 03.16.06 And so I was like wow, that is so incredible (LAUGHS). So incredible. And I know like in the past, you know, people, other religious leaders who you've spoken to, and, and this is like I think you know, a resonating thing among all faith traditions, you know, whether you're Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, whatever. You know, the whole spiel that nay religious leader will tell you is that you have to pray and you have to do righteous things and you have to be closer to God and you know, prayer is important.
- 03.16.38 Uh, and you know, and if something goes wrong, that's you know, what you need to do. And so like we've all become conditioned like that's what needs to happen, but then sometimes you know, they don't realize that everything that you do leads to that. And so he made that connection for me, and I, I was like, it was.
- 03.16.59 I felt such a sigh of relief and comfort in knowing that ok, I'm thinking that I'm lacking in this, but in actuality everything I'm doing is making up for it. And, and it's so much more you know, uh, it has more weight. You know, so uh, he has been really, really wonderful. Really wonderful. And just, as I said earlier, you know, looking at things from many different you know, methodologies, philosophies, sociologies, psychology, he just, it's incredible, absolutely incredible.

JW: This philosophy has a theme that's connected with him?

- 03.17.57 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: He's not (LAUGHS). He's not, he's married. He has a family. But uh, I just find it to be incredible that he can, he can see himself in everybody, do you know what I mean? And that is something that I would aspire to, to wanting to do. And it's interesting because this theme, now that you're pointing it out, it's really interesting (LAUGHS). It's resonating in our development of the school.
- 03.18.31 You know, getting the kids to see themselves in others. So it, it's amazing. You know?
- JW: (?)
- 03.18.43 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, I just, right now I just had the, it just, it hit me, because of our, our conversation right now. He you know, in the way that he talks about himself being, the way that he, he makes himself as a part (STOPS)
- 03.19.05 He sees himself in everybody, so he'll say, he'll, he will identify with the female species (LAUGHS). He'll identify with someone who's Christian or who's Jewish or who, anybody, you know, and I thought that was incredible that he, he's so self-secure. You know, and also so humanistic to see himself in everybody.
- 03.19.30 And that's something that you know, it's something that I (?) share with people but now it's something that through I guess, through some of the reading that I've been doing I've been seeing it resonate. I mean, there is this great, you know, educator, Tom Rawlins, you know, who has this incredible quote that we used. Uh, in the writing for the uh, the proposal.
- 03.19.57 And basically you know, the quote uh, talks about you know, the impossible can be possible if you believe in yourself and others. Uh, and the only way it could become possible is if you and others work together, collaboratively uh, you know, and then the question that we develop for kids in this on particular part of the proposal is that getting them to ask themselves how can I see myself in others? In order to do that, you need to step into the shoes of the other.

03.20.38 You know, and, and look at things from their lens, to develop an understanding of, of them and yourself, and to see there's not much difference, you know, between us as (?) human beings. So uh, you know, it just right now resonated for me that what, the things that he's been saying and, and talking to me about and the things that I see in him, are resonating in my work. That's, that's the epiphany I just had right now (LAUGHS). So.

JW: How important is that idea to you?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, incredibly important.

JW: Why?

03.21.23 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Uh, I (?) the reason it's important for me is because if we can get each other to that point, to see ourselves in each other, I think that all of the social divides will disappear. And I think I, I firmly believe that it's possible, you know, and if you start with a small group, like Margaret Meade says, a small group of people will make a difference uh, that it can happen, it could certainly happen.

03.21.59 And it's such an easy concept to get kids to think about, you know, 'cos sometimes kids you know, in their most innocent way you know, can teach you lessons that you never, ever thought possible, do you know what I mean? It's really incredible. And I think that this is something that because of the fact that they're coming to this, you know, they're young, they're, they haven't been conditioned, you know, or there is some condition, but there is still you know, an opportunity for them to learn through experience, to develop their own perspectives.

03.22.39 And you know, develop into individuals other than you know, the normal individuals, I think it's possible.

JW: Do you recall the conversations with kids after 9-11 and that it was the parents who were ready to pounce?

- 03.23.31 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, absolutely. It's because their lenses have not been fully tainted (LAUGHS). You know, they haven't developed this prior knowledge or understanding, you know, of things you know, to help them, you know, that they are permitted to see things differently. You know, just the fact that my kids, when they went to lunch and they came back and they were telling me it's those dumb Arabs. And then when we sat down and we were talking about who Arabs are, and I self-identified as an Arab.
- 03.24.02 And I asked them, do you think I would do something like this? And they're, they said to me, no, you wouldn't do something like that, Debbie. You know, we know you. So that in itself, you know, is because of the experiences, the personal experiences they had with me uh, that helped them overcome you know, making those judgments, you know, about everybody. You know, (?) help them understand that there is good and bad in every faith, in every ethnic group.
- 03.24.37 Uh, and it's because they're young, and they can actually you know, they don't have that baggage that we as adults carry. You know, and there are people who try very, very hard to say they're understanding, they're, you know, they've changed their perception, and you could still see the racism or discrimination creep out sometimes in things that they say. Or just body gestures that they make, and you say are they really, you know? Are they really you know, acting to what they are preaching.
- 03.25.13 So. But kids are there. They, they still don't have that baggage, you know, to weigh them down and, and make them think differently, you know, or they will be politically correct in front of you, but then think differently.
- JW: Maybe your spiritual adviser is on to something, on the highest plane, the process of turning the me in to we?
- 03.26.28 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: He is. He is absolutely incredible. And uh, he was actually uh, here uh, I think in March, I can't remember. And uh, it was funny, because we were both

invited to speak on the same panel and had absolutely no idea (LAUGHS). Absolutely no idea. And uh, what he was invited to do was to set the stage for uh, for uh, social service.

- 03.26.59 The importance of providing social services in the Muslim community. And he was invited as a spiritual scholar to you know, to help us understand that that is a part of our tradition, social services are a part of our tradition. And uh, so he eloquently, beautifully put it out there, you know, the presentation. And uh, he talked about how social services have been a part of the Muslim tradition as far back as the time of the Prophet Mohammed, you know.
- 03.27.38 And him living where he lived and how that was, it played an intricate role in social life. And he identified five groups that are the most neediest for services. And they remain to be from the time of the Prophet 'til this day. And it was just so incredible, because just seeing that as a continuum throughout history you know, and those five, the five categories were women, children, elderly uh, the poor, impoverished, and uh, people who, the term that he used in order to not to cause controversy, was sexually deviant, and what he was referring to was homosexuals.
- 03.28.35 Uh, and these are the five categories in society, dating back to the time of the prophet, that have always been affected. By society, by you know, socio-economics. Politics. What have you.
- 03.28.56 And that they are the five you know, groups that needed the most attention and services to be uh, you know, created, and tended to. Uh, so it was really powerful and he talked about you know, he, for each category he did a lengthy uh, presentation about what were the social ills then. Uh, and what did people do for them at that time, and what should continue.
- 03.29.27 And how there has also been a breakdown between what was happening then and what is happening now. Uh, that back then, the Muslim community was far more advanced in social service development uh, than they are today. And he pointed out how uh, social services right now are, are not meeting the needs of the sexually deviant community.

- 03.29.57 And uh, and the issue with women. That women are, continue to be disparaged in Muslim countries. Uh, their roles are diminished. Uh, and you know, they're not looked at as a part of a viable part of the community, you know, nor is anybody doing anything about it. And I thought that was so powerful. And so then people pressed him about the sexually deviant, and he says, well, you know, it's people who self-identify uh, with that sexual orientation and rather than the community understanding that this is a choice they have made, they shun them and isolate them, when in reality that does not help an individual.
- 03.30.42 You know, you have to see that person as a person, as a human being, and, and help them and, and understand them as a human being, and whatever, you know, they need, you know, you are obligated to treat them as another human being.
- 03.31.01 And I thought that was so powerful. You know, it was the first time that I ever heard anybody talk about you know, that aspect uh, in a way that was very humanistic. You know, so uh, it was just really a very uh, it was an interesting learning experience, because everybody you know, never talks about that, do you know what I mean, in any of the faith traditions, particularly uh, you know, who are I don't want to say conservative, but who are far more you know, uh, following to the scriptures.
- 03.31.44 Do you know what I mean? That they just don't see or recognize you know, people who self-identify that way as human beings, and what typically happens is that they're shunned and isolate.
- 03.31.59 Uh, so it was really, really fascinating to learn this. You know, and him helping us understand that you know, during the (?) time of the Prophet that wasn't you know, what he wanted people to do. He helped everybody see the good in all. You know, and helped everyone, you know, and that everybody should be looked upon as a human being rather than what they you know, self-proclaim to you know, or their politics or whatever the case may be.

03.32.29 So it was really, really wonderful. And uh, so he presented on that, and then I talked about the organization uh, which I, I think I had mentioned to you, the Yemeni-American association on the development of that. And uh, I got good news on September 11th, which I don't know if uh, if uh, Danielle told you. We got the Union Square Award. Which is \$50,000 grant.

03.33.00 So that was huge, a huge thing. Uh, just to help you know, continue building capacity for the organization and, and building it up. And uh, I was actually invited to that panel to talk about the uniqueness of this organization, focusing on the Yemeni community, but at (?) the same time, you know, (?) broadening its scope to work with all other people who came for social service help. Uh, and so after that uh.

JW: Which award was it?

03.33.33 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: The Union Square Award uh, it's a New York-based organization, and uh, the way that it works is somebody nominates your organization. Uh, for its unique service or whatever the case may be. And they invite you then to uh, fill out an application. And the application then is submitted to the Union Square people. They review it, and then they invite you for an interview.

03.34.02 You go in for the interview, and they ask more questions. And then the person who does the interview uh, takes it back to a group of funders. And then she pitches the is organization to the funders. And then they make the decision whether they should be given the Union Square Award or not. So there are 13 this year that are getting it and we're one of the 13 organizations.

JW: What organization is getting it?

03.34.31 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: The Yemeni American Association.

JW: It's the organization you were challenged by years ago?

03.34.41 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (LAUGHS) Absolutely challenged, absolutely challenged. But uh, we've been able to turn it around and I know that I, I mentioned to you the last time that I'm the first woman to sit on the board of this organization (LAUGHS). Well, now there are three of us. I've made sure to you know, to rummage a couple of others and get them on board.

03.35.00 And uh, we're kicking butt, you know, and we're running the show (LAUGHS). You know, so we have our male props. I shouldn't say this. This cannot go on camera (LAUGHS). 'Cos they'll kill me. Uh, but uh, yeah, so it's, it's just really delightful. You know, I uh, worked very hard to get, to get us recognized, you know, and it's all just about talking about the organization in every circle I found myself in, and then somebody was so compelled by the whole concept of what we were doing, and they nominated us. And we got a letter of nomination that we were nominated.

03.35.41 They never tell you who nominated you, though. Uh, although now that we got it, I should ask, who knows. Uh, so yeah, so you know, the application process was a bit you know, tedious, but I was very strategic in pulling it together. We created this whole portfolio of the things that the organization has done, with graphics and pictures and what have you, and we took it to the interview.

03.36.05 And you know, she started asking us questions. I said, wow, I think this will answer your questions. And I pushed over the portfolio and she opened, it, and she said this is quite impressive. I don't think any group has done something like this (LAUGHS). And I was like Ok, great. So uh, she flipped through some of it, and she asked questions, and I was like it's in there, page XY and Z. so it was really wonderful.

JW: How did the group feel?

03.36.31 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, uh. When we were putting the stuff together, and I know that this is something that (?) I have to deal with, too, is that I feel that and Najji says this (?)

all the time to me. He says you have to slow down. You have to slow down. You have to let people catch up with you mentally (LAUGHS). You know, you talk too fast, you think too fast, and then people get lost and frustrated with you.

03.37.00 So you have to you know, you have to slow down, and I'm like Ok. what is difficult with XY and Z. and he's like, he says, you know, I even sometimes have to struggle with trying to catch up with you, but I do catch up eventually (LAUGHS). But you have to slow down. Otherwise, you're gonna lose everybody and people are gonna feel like you're, you know, you're, you're just taking over. And I'm like but I don't intend to do that. And that's not my intention. He says, I know it's not.

03.37.29 He says, but you have a lot of experience. You have done this before, you have worked with other organizations, and the people that we have on the board are not familiar with this stuff. So you have to take baby steps. So it frustrates me, but I have to do that. So when we had to pull the application together, we sat down for a meeting, and I explained to them that we needed to create a portfolio, and so let's brainstorm what we're gonna put in the portfolio.

03.37.58 And so then people were totally at a loss of like what should go in there. And I got frustrated (LAUGHS). I was like, well, pictures, you know, pictures of the stuff that we're doing with the kids, pictures of the ESL classes. They're like, oh, that's a good idea. And I was like ok, what else you guys think we should put in there? So I kept getting like blank stares. Uh, so then I said, well, think about some of the events that we did.

03.38.27 How can we capture some of the events, other than pictures? And then so eventually like, you know, I have to ask questions to get people to give me the answer (LAUGHS). And thank god that it comes with teaching. So we put fliers in there, we put you know, letters that we got from the governors' office for an event that we invited his office to, the Mayor's office. Uh, fliers of events that we did. Uh, you know, blood drive flyer uh, turkey drive, Thanksgiving turkey drive flyer.

03.39.02 Like all of that stuff. Just to show that we've have developed some track record. And uh, and so you know, the person that we had working in the office who is incredible, you know, you just give her an idea, and then she'll roll with it, and, and, and carry it 100% through. And so we, she put together this incredible portfolio that was quite impressive. So uh, they were, when we went to the interview uh, I had prepared them to understand that you know, the whole board wasn't invited.

03.39.38 It was only four of us and that was because we were the so-called founders of the organization. And that's what they were looking for.

JW: You're now a founder?

03.39.46 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I am a founder. But the fact that you know, there's 9 of us and only 4 of us were able to go caused some conflict. People were like well we all came together and we did this. I said I know, but the grant is called the Founders Award. The Union Square Founders Award. And if you look at all (?) if you look at all of us, who were there when the idea, the seed was, was planted?

03.40.10 And then (?) they all realized that it was you know, three people and myself. And it was like Ok, it happened at that meeting and that's how it grew and then we had a second meeting, and that's when we did a call to invite other people on the board, and that's where the rest of you came on board.

03.40.29 And they're like Ok, but it would have just been nice if we were all, you know, included. So trying to get them to understand that we can't include the whole board, there's just only 4 people and that was the you know, the requirement. And then when we went to the meeting, one person came who wasn't supposed to be there, but thought that she had to be there, so she came, it was so awkward, and it was like oh, my god, we are making a big mistake. Why is she here? And it was like too late to say to her, leave. Do you know what I mean? So she was there, and thank goodness, the person who interviewed us made it clear that it was just a founder's award, and it had to be the four people that we identified in the application.

03.41.09 That we couldn't include everybody. And now when we get the award, it's the picture of the four people only. And that I know I'm sure is gonna cause some you know, conflict uh, how come the whole board can't be in the picture? So uh, so at the interview, she, what they focused on was our unique experiences as immigrants and you know, how we overcame the barriers and how we became successful individuals.

03.41.37 And now giving back to our community. And that's what's so unique about this award. So yeah, so sometimes just I get frustrated with carrying everybody. Uh, not that I hate doing it, I love it. But I just feel like everybody should already now be up to speed with me. But you know, everybody has different experiences.

03.42.04 This is, uh, this is my passion you know, and others it's not. You know? It's their, they, their passions are totally different and they have expertise in something that I don't, but I can appreciate, you know, that they have that experience.

JW: How's Naji?

03.42.25 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, gosh, Naji is doing great. You know, he, you know, there uh, you know, (?) I mean, his health is, we are coming to the (?) realization that we're not getting any younger and that we're getting older, and that we are starting to develop symptoms that older people get (LAUGHS). So uh, it's pretty uh, you know, it's pretty concerning, pretty concerning. I mean, you know, uh, when was it? Sometime in the spring, late spring, in June, actually.

03.43.00 He wasn't feeling well. Uh, and he didn't tell me, didn't tell me at all. And I was like wondering. Uh, and actually a good friend of mine was getting married and we were invited to the wedding and he opted out from going to the wedding. And he was like very just tired and withdrawn and just like always just tired. And I was like ok, this is interesting. So now we're missing my friend's wedding. And his response to me was I'm really tired. I just prefer just us being together.

- 03.43.31 You know, we can go up to the Pocanos or we could just stay home. And I was like Ok. you know, I, I felt like I needed to respect his space, as long as we were doing something together. And uh, he stepped out actually, I don't remember what he needed to go do, and then I was just cleaning up on his desk, and I found medicine. I was like ok, this is really interesting. And I picked it up and I read it and I saw that it was the prescription was just filled recently.
- 03.43.58 And everything, so when he got home, I was like what's going on, how come you're talking medicine? (LAUGHS) Why (?) don't I know about this? And, and what have you, and you know, is there something wrong with you? So he's like well, you know, I didn't want to worry you. I didn't want to alarm you. You already have a lot in your head, you know, and on your mind, and I just didn't want you to have one more thing to worry about. I was like what do you mean, you didn't want me to worry? It's like you're, you know, you're number one. You're the priority here. You know, I need to worry about you, (?) everything else comes second to you, so that you need to understand that. So I was like what's going on.
- 03.44.35 So uh, he explained to me that he had not been feeling well for like over a week, and he went to the doctor, and they did some exams, and they told him that his prostate was swollen. Uh, and he was having some kind of inflammation so he had to take medication, so the medication was making him tired.
- 03.44.58 Uh, you know, no appetite uh, and just like you know, and sleepy, sluggish. Uh, and that was just the way the, the medication, that that was a side effect of the medication. I was like well, how long do you have to take this? He says, well, I have to take it for two weeks, and then go back and then they're gonna check me again. And so I got really, really concerned. I was like you know, you have to tell me stuff like this. (LAUGHS) I can't you know, don't surprise me, don't let me find out like this.
- 03.45.28 You know, I'm sorry that I was pressuring you to go to this wedding. Had I known that you weren't feeling well, I couldn't care, you know?

JW: Did you get in a fight about this?

03.45.41 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah, yeah, we got (LAUGHS) And his response (?) was like you know, but I didn't want to worry you, you already have a lot on your mind. And I was like, and that's sometimes what drives me crazy is that he keeps things from me because he doesn't want to worry me because I already have other stuff to worry about. And uh, getting him to understand that everything else is secondary and he's primary sometimes is difficult.

JW: Is it true that he believes in your mission?'

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, absolutely.

JW: What about that?

03.46.15 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: He has a stronger (LAUGHS) belief in it than I do myself. (LAUGHS) He does, Jim, and it scares me. He sees, he sees in me what I, I don't see always clearly, do you know what I mean? Like I can't explain it. Like I, sometimes I (?) I see it and I feel it and I understand it, but he sees it vividly.

JW: What?

03.46.50 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: He, he sees what I'm capable of. He sees that whatever I do gets followed through. Like this whole thing as a prime example, this whole thing with the uh, the Union Square Award. I (?) kept saying to him, I don't know if we're gonna get it. Uh, you know, we did the application. The application seems good, but maybe there is stuff that we left out that we could have done that I, we could have put this, we could have put that. Uh, I don't know, I don't think we're gonna get it. We're too young, we're too small, we're not doing you know, amazing dynamic work. And he would say to me, we're gonna get it, you'll see. I really have a good feeling. What you put together is really incredible.

- 03.47.29 We're gonna get it. And it's interesting because we had a meeting that Sunday, the 10th, was it the 10th? Yeah, at the Yemeni American Association, and uh, we were just like strategizing of what we needed to do to be prepared. And I said, you know, we don't know, maybe there might be a surprise visit by the people from Union Square Award and you just, we have to be prepared. You know? Making sure that you know, everything is in order, the programs are running.
- 03.48.06 That you know, we can't have some of the volunteers slack off and say they're not, they decide the last minute not to come and then the program gets cancelled, whatever it may be. So he's like, you know, we uh, they're like you're right, you're right. And Naji, and I said, you know, and who knows, maybe we're (?) who knows if we're gonna get it or not. So Naji's sitting there. Proclaiming that he has a gut feeling we're gonna get it. He says, you see, I have a really strong feeling we're gonna get it. You'll see, you guys.
- 03.48.30 We're gonna get it. And I'm looking at him and just smiling. He's like the work that we put into it, he didn't want to say the work Debbie put into it, but the work we put into it (LAUGHS). You know. Uh, we'll produce results. So we get the call, 3 o'clock. they call the president, the president called Naji, and he was trying to call me ,and he couldn't ge a hold of me, and then finally he called me and he was like we got it, can you believe this? I was totally in silence.
- 03.48.59 I couldn't talk, and I started crying, I was so happy. I was like I'm in total shock, this is incredible. This is wonderful and you know, and I was like this is such great news, you know, to get, especially today 'cos today's such a heavy day for me. And what have you, and then Naji called me uh, right before we started shooting for the Union Square, I mean, for the, the book reading. And he's like I have great news for you, and I was like really? What? He's like are you, are you ready for it?
- 03.49.30 And I didn't want to tell him that you know, the president already called me and told me. So I was like what is it? He's like you're going to be shocked. I was like ok, what is it? So then he told me. I was like wow, you know, I acted surprised, and I pretended just to like give him

the, the satisfaction. And, and he said didn't I tell you, haven't I been telling you that it was gonna happen, that you were gonna get it? That, you know, you put in so much time and energy and whatever you set out to do it, it just happens.

03.50.00 Wasn't I just saying that yesterday? And I was like yes, yes, yes. He's like so why is it that you have a hard time believing that what you touch or what you do is not gonna happen? It's like I don't know, I was like I don't want to be too self-sure (LAUGHS). But uh, he was really happy.

JW: Why is that?

03.50.19 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I don't know. (~JW~) It's scary, and it's scary to be so, so self-sure, you know? Well it's scary and uh, to think you know, to be inevitable, to be you know, I don't know. It's scary. Uh, so I, I always feel like it's important to humble. Humble myself.

JW: (?)

03.50.48 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: You know, to just be so sure that whatever you do is gonna happen 100%, you know, like you're gonna live forever, do you know what I mean? That that's, that's just (?) impossible.

JW: You come to accept it?

03.51.04 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: The realization that sometimes you get things and sometimes you don't, and sometimes and, and you have to accept sometimes why you don't and not resent. Uh, and it's I just find that it's important to be humbled, to be humbled with whatever decision and you know, so if you, you know, you do achieve something, that's wonderful.

03.51.33 But you could, you should always be humble about whatever it is that you achieve, and whatever that you get. You know, that there is a higher power, you know, that you, you

know, that you're not perfect. That you, you know, that there is a higher power that be that makes that happen, that it's not you, do you know what I mean? Like I know that (STOPS)

03.51.55 END OF TAPE # DA 40

TAPE # DA 41
Debbie Almontaser
JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director
PROJECT REBIRTH

04.01.01 PICTURE UP

JW: You have a strong belief in the will of God?

04.01.10 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: In the will of God, that God is a driving force to make everything happen. That he you know, he has you know, he has sent us all out with a mission, you know, that whatever he will trust will happen through us, through what we do.

04.01.28 Uh, and that there are going to be times where there'll be bumpy roads, and that you'll just have to be prepared for them. And accept them. So uh, so that's where I always continually, whenever anything positive or wonderful happens, I, I, I reconnect and understand that it's happened because God wanted it to happen. You know, and I was just there to facilitate it.

04.01.56 You know, and uh, it's uh, it's important for me to, to think that way, and it's because of my beliefs and my understanding of what it means to be you know, uh, someone who practices Islam that, you know, God wills everything and he writes out our destiny and what we are set out to do in the world. So know that you know, he put me in this place (LAUGHS) you know, uh, and he gave me the ability, the, the talent to make this happen.

04.02.35 And it's happened. So yeah.

JW: How do you reconcile some of the destiny choices that have been the roots of bad things, do you wrestle with them?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

04.04.18 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I, I wrestle with, I wrestle with the idea that there are people who have different agendas. Uh, and how those agendas are played out scare me.

04.04.33 Uh, they do scare me. So do I believe that God willed you know, for what happened to happen? I don't know. You know? Uh, you know, the agenda of those individuals, what drove them, what brought them to it, what motivated them, you know, still to this day haunts us all.

04.04.58 You know? And I know that the god that I submit to every day, five times a day uh, does not teach us to do that, does not believe in that, does not proclaim that, does not you know, uh, it, it's scary, it's just scary, you know, that what is happening, you know, and, and the agendas that people, have how they've affected all of us.

04.05.30 You know, and uh, you know, I, I don't know I don't know what to say and that's, that's a really, it's a provocative question (LAUGHS) that uh, that uh, is, is something that needs to be explored. And you know, although you know, what I, I can say is that I know that there are people who are like me, and, and it's not to say that I'm (CLEARS THROAT) any different from the ordinary, but there are people like me.

04.06.05 Uh, who are somewhat different, you know, in what we do and how we uh, function in the world. Uh, and how our destiny plays a large part of our lives you know (CLEARS THROAT) and I think that that is all connected, again, for me it's spiritual.

04.06.27 And for others, it may not be, but yet they are in those kind of places, do you know what I mean? That they are making a difference, you know, that they are a part of uh, you know, and they're all people of different faiths, you know, I mean,?

JW: Fates or faith?

04.06.44 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Faith. Yeah. Faiths, traditions, you know, religious backgrounds, who are making a difference, you know, and so you know, that's their destiny. Is it faith-driven, I don't know, but that's their destiny. Uh, is what you know, you know, what has happened on 9-11 and what continues to plague our world today uh, faith-driven for the people who are, who have or are committing those you know, heinous acts, you know, it could be.

04.07.19 But you know, I know that it's not the faith that I ascribe to, do you know what I mean? 'Cos I know what my faith teaches. You know, and I know that it's certainly not you know, to commit such heinous crimes against humanity.

04.07.34 Uh, and whatever it is that they are reading and whatever way that they are interpreting you know, what they are reading, it scares me. It scares me, it scares all of us.

JW: Do you think about that or struggle with?

04.07.53 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I know, I struggle with it all the time, and I struggled with it on Colorado radio two weeks ago (LAUGHS). I was interviewed for the book, and of course, everybody who wanted to interview me was basically asking uh, all the great questions about the book, and they're like so, what are your thoughts about what's happening currently in Lebanon and, and Israel, with Lebanon and Israel? You know, and uh, and then also the questions about Islam and you know, the fundamentalists and the whole, you know, the whole kit and caboodle about that.

04.08.30 And you know, just having to constantly reiterate to people you know, what's happening is, you know, it's happening with a minority group who are adhering to their own personal beliefs of how they perceive Islam to be and what it should be, and they're in the minority, and the majority are thousands and thousands of people who think like me and who understand Islam in the way that I do and that Islam does not condone you know, such behavior.

04.09.05 Uh, it's un-Islamic to kill people, innocent people, people in general. That that's not what the faith tradition is. And one statement that I uh, I made was that you know, people you know, think that it's the world against you know, these Muslims, but you know, they don't understand that within the Muslim world there is a war within Islam.

04.09.31 And that war is people like me trying to take back the faith from people you know, who are dragging it down and making it seem like this evil religion uh, when it's not. You know, and so trying to you know, vindicate you know, the faith and, and the people that adhere to it is, it's a struggle. You know, it's an absolute struggle trying to you know, help people understand that what you see and what you hear is not, you know, what it's about.

JW: It's a big hill to climb?

04.10.19 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: It is, it's a huge hill, now that we have to climb and figure out how to deal with.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: What about Naji and his point of view, his motivation?

04.11.38 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I know, he's a very, very, very special man. Absolutely special man. What I love about him so much is how secure he is in himself. He's so secure, it's incredible. You know, he is not, like I see other couples who, who struggle with this, and not just Muslim but of all faith traditions.

- 04.12.02 And, and what have you, and when there is a woman who is so out there, do you know what I mean? Professionally, academically, there seems to be tensions of, of you know, of uh, insecurity, of you know, she's more smarter and makes more money, do you know what I mean? I've seen that like ruin relationships because of, of the fact that one individual feels insecure about the other, and particularly with males.
- 04.12.33 Naji is not that way at all. He is incredible, and I, there are times that people will try to instigate (LAUGHS). Will say something and you know, will you know, try to you know, subtly put something out there to just like make him feel uncomfortable or anything. And he does not even let anybody go there, you know, 'cos he is so secure in, in himself and his role as my husband, and uh, you know, the supportive role that he plays, it's incredible.
- 04.13.11 I mean, he one thing that he does consistently uh, and for as long as I've known him is that I'm like, when I'm not there, I am like one of the, the primary conversations that he has with people (LAUGHS). You know, what I've done, you know, where I've gone to school, what I'm working on, and what have you.
- 04.13.32 And it's funny because there are times that I'll meet people that he's known at work or people that he's met through different things, and then I'll meet them and they're like wow, I've heard so much about you, your husband was telling me about XY and Z, and that's really great. And it's funny because one (?) person was actually the uh, an architect that he uh, had brought to see the mosque because they wanted to expand it, and he's known him for a few years.
- 04.14.01 And he actually then brought him to the house while we were up in the Poconos, to meet me. And he's like you know, I'm here with my wife, and he's like you know, I've heard so much about your wife, can I meet your wife (LAUGHS)? So he brought him over. So this guy was like stuttering you know, as he was talking to me. He's like I've heard so much about you over the past couple of years, and I'm just so inspired and I'm just honored to meet you and

you know, just the work that you're doing in the community and that you're an educator and now you're gonna be developing this school, this is so incredible.

04.14.33 And you know, Naji, you know, every time that I see him he's you know, always talking about you. And I was like I don't understand why Naji has nothing else to talk about but me (LAUGHS). And he's like oh, I look forward to his stories about you.

JW: He loves you?

04.14.50 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah, yeah, yeah, he absolutely adores me. And the day of the book premiere, he uh, he came to it. And he made sure that he didn't miss it. He was really excited to come. And uh, he knew that it was gonna be emotional for me, too, because you know, the chapter is about my experience and about my work. Uh, and he's so proud of it, absolutely proud of it. And he uh, was there with me, but he didn't like stick around with me. He was just, he was there, he was talking to people, but he was talking to everybody about me (LAUGHS).

04.15.30 And then I was you know, my typical you know busy bee, going fro person to person and talking and connecting with people. And also talking about my school project and trying to recruit more people to come on board and support the idea. And, and what have you. And one person who came is actually a volunteer at the Yemeni-American association who's a student and who is just you know, just like wants to be everywhere I go. You know? Remember I was saying earlier about how younger people look up to you and, and just you know, so she is one of those people and I just love her to death. And, and I'm trying to help nurture her to you know.

04.16.09 Like one of the things I just you know, recently did was encourage her to fill, you know, to apply for a Fulbright. And I you know, she asked me, well, if I do, would you write me a, you know, a letter, and I was like absolutely. You know, so. Uh, so she came to the event, 'cos she uh, I, I met with her and she's like Debbie, you look exhausted. I said, yeah, because I've had like five interviews in two days. And she, so she asked me and then I told her it was

about the book and she's like oh, my god, that's amazing, can I you know, it's like I'm having the premiere and I didn't tell a lot of people but if you want to come, you're welcome to come.

04.16.43 So she came. So as I was doing my mingling, her and Naji uh, were chatting. And she uh, she wrote me an email and she's actually in a relationship uh, you know, with this really wonderful young man, who's actually right now teaching in Yemen.

04.17.02 We got them both to love the Yemeni culture, that they went to Yemen. And he landed a job there, so he's there working. And she came back to finish school. And she's volunteering at the Yemeni-American association. So she emailed him about the book premiere and in the email she wrote to him uh, the thing that she loved the most about it was this candid moment that she had with Naji.

04.17.28 And uh, so he responded back to here, and then in the body of the email of course, this is there. So it's like you know, how when you scroll in an email and then you read what was said before, just to try to figure out the context of the email? So uh, she describes this candid moment you know, she says you know, there is a really beautiful candid moment that I will never forget as long as I live, and I wanted to share it with you uh, because it's, it just, you know, it, it gives me hope that our relationship will you know, continue to build and uh, to last as long as Naji and Debbie's.

04.18.07 And she said you know, this candid moment that I had with Naji which I will never forget is that I'm standing there talking with him, and out of the blue he says, you see that woman standing over there? (LAUGHS) and uh, he points at Debbie and uh, he says I love that woman more than life. I am so proud of her and I'm so proud to be her husband.

04.18.29 And she is just incredible and I can't imagine you know, the world without her. And so she writes in an email and she says and, and while Naji is saying this to me, his eyes are just you know, filled with tears, you know, water. His eyes are watery and he's just you know, and

he's talking and he's nodding his head and he's saying she's just so incredible and she's such a gift to me and to the world.

04.18.58 And, you know, so she is just you know, I can't imagine life without her. And so she just looked at Naji and then she said that her eyes also got watery. And you know, and then she started talking about me, and then they started talking about something else (LAUGHS). Which she uh, she shared that so she's like you know, it was just so beautiful, out of the blue, that you know, he just pointed that out. So it's like wow. I didn't tell Naji that she told me this (LAUGHS).

JW: You have secrets?

04.19.34 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: No, but it was so beautiful to read and I was like oh, my god, it's incredible. I never, I never, ever imagine that I would be loved so much by one person, do (?) you know what I mean? And uh, and he's actually said that to me. Uh, just one night out of the blue, you know, we're laying in bed and just right before we're you know, ready to fall to sleep.

04.20.01 And he just says he, you know, you know I love you, and it was like yeah, I think I do uh, 26 years later, I think I do (LAUGHS). He's like I never, ever in my wildest dreams thought I'd love somebody so much. I was like I love you too, uh, I was, I couldn't even say anything else more than that. You know? But uh, it's huge. It's huge, and that's why I cannot see myself without him, and it scares me to think f ever losing him.

JW: How was the book?

04.20.34 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, gosh, the book reading was beautiful. Was absolutely beautiful. I was crying uh, my nose was running, it was a little chilly at the (LAUGHS) at the book reading on September 11th. It was emotional. Uh, when I first got the book, it was incredible just to look at the, the cover and then open up the book to my chapter. And, and read it.

04.20.57 It was painful, but it, it was therapeutic. Writing it was very painful, but therapeutic, and now reading it and even, every time I go back and read certain parts, I still get emotional. Absolutely emotional. And it came out at a really good time in my life. Because uh, I've been having a lot of uh, upheaval at work. A lot of upheaval, and I don't know where it's coming from, I don't know what the driving force is.

04.21.28 Uh, so there is been a lot of ambiguity uh, interest. It's been feeling really yucky, absolutely yucky to deal with it.

JW: What specifically?

04.21.42 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Uh, the department that I was working in at the Department of Education uh, was revamped. And we were informed that that was gonna happen sometime in February, that they were gonna do a lot of restructuring but we didn't know what, you know, what department, but then we were all saying ok, it's probably gonna be our department because we provide youth development and family support services.

04.22.11 And our you know, our intuition was right. It was the department that they decided to restructure. And so the way they did it was there were a ton of regional offices across the city, and they dismantled five and kept five.

04.22.28 And now there are one in each borough. Uh, and then what they did was they eliminated a lot of positions, and one of those positions was mine. And they made it clear that they were gonna eliminate positions, but they also uh, encouraged people to apply for other positions that were gonna be coming out, and basically you know, oh, you don't have to worry, you'll apply, you'll be interviewed for other positions and you'll remain.

04.23.00 Uh, so it was like Ok, this, you know, this is another change, you know, I will weather this like I weathered the last restructuring and you know, things will be fine. And uh, you know, I applied for all the positions that came out. You know, they also develop these empowerment

schools, I applied for that. And the thing that, that has been really disheartening, is that everything I applied for I did not get called for any interviews. And I have just have found that to be the most mind-boggling thing.

04.23.33 Uh, for it not to be called for interviews. And everything that you apply for is through email. So you don't even get a message saying thank you for applying, you know, you'll be hearing from us shortly. However, I found out that some people were getting those messages, but I wasn't one of the people getting the messages. (LAUGHS) And I kept saying, ok, this you know, I'll you know, something will come out, something will happen, something, I'll get a call. I didn't get any calls.

04.24.04 So the restructuring happened, they interviewed people, they placed people. And uh, I continued to go to work, you know, and continue to be in limbo. My position was eliminated, and they uh, talked about it being a part of the new restructuring. They called the positions Youth Specialists. And uh, I was, I applied for it, even though that it was gonna be a 40, \$20,000 pay cut.

04.24.35 And I thought long and hard about it, had I, if I'd gotten the opportunity, should I take it or not? Uh, and I came to the Naji and I discussed it and he's like if you want to work, that's fine. You know, but then when the job description came out and I looked at it, I did apply for it, just 'cos I was need to keep myself in the loop.

04.24.58 Basically what it required was to be out in the field 90% of the time, going to schools, and that may require me going to Staten Island, at least going to 2, 3 schools a day. Uh, and then coming in for a half a day one day a week. But basically (CLEARS THROAT) being out in the field. Uh, so I was like Ok, I'll just apply for it and maybe things will change if I get it and I accept it. But then when I saw the you know, the, the salary, I was like this is crazy.

04.25.29 And they expect you to be out, and then one of the criteria's was to have a car, to expect you to drive with the price of gas (LAUGHS) being the way it is. And what have you, I was like Ok, I, let's, I'll make that decision when I get interviewed. Well, I never got interviewed.

And uh, I became overly uh, sensitive of the fact that why is my colleagues getting interviews, why are my counterparts in other regions getting interviews, and I haven't even been called, what's going on here?

04.26.05 So uh, I didn't get any information. I spoke to my director. Who uh, was new to the office. She was, this was her first year that she came on board. I've known her from the past uh, and she came on board. And has an extremely different working style from other supervisors I've had, directors I've ever had.

04.26.31 Uh, you know, she set a precedence and you know, tone in the office that was not really healthy or conducive. Where there was a sense of team uh, commitment and collaboration. That went out the door. Everybody was expected to work in isolation and produce and what have you. And you know, I did my job. I did everything I was asked above and beyond what I needed to.

04.27.00 Did things that weren't even a part of my job description. Uh, had a good relationship with her. Uh, and minded my business, did my job, minded my business, and then 4 o'clock left and did what I had to do, you know, my community work, etc. And so uh, in conversations with her, when people were getting called, I was like you know, Diane I haven't been called. I, I don't even know if my resume ever got there, do you know what's going on?

04.27.29 And her response to me was I don't know. You know, over a thousand people applied. You know, they have a screening committee. The screening committee reviews the resumes, and then they put the names on a list, and then they call people up for interviews. You know, I have no say in this, etc., etc. But in the meantime there were a couple of people in the office that she told them to apply for XY and Z position, even though they didn't qualify, and they called for interviews.

04.27.59 Uh, but declined the uh, taking the job. So you know, she advocated for those who she wanted, and I wasn't one of those people she advocated for. I don't know why. I know that I never crossed her, I know that I was always a team player. And the other thing that's mind-

boggling is that you know, my, my review, my annual year review, I got satisfactory rating. You know, I did stuff, you know, that she as well as you know.

04.28.41 The supervisors under her realized that I would be the (?) best person. And that was the department was subpoenaed, for uh, the case of a child that was killed uh, by her stepfather, and it was in one of our schools. And we were subpoenaed for all of the records at the school and at the region. And I was assigned to deal with the subpoena. And it was a 48-hour turnaround.

04.29.03 And you know, it's something that a guidance councilor should be doing because it requires you know, that kind of background. Uh, but I was assigned and I said ok, I'll take care of it. And being that I knew who to go to ask for XY and Z, I was able to do it. So they were very impressed and very happy that I was able to do it.

04.29.28 But uh, it obviously means nothing because you know, it, I didn't get interviewed for anything. And every time I would talk to her, she's like I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. I don't know what's going on at the Department of Education at Tweed. Uh.

JW: Are you still working there?

04.29.51 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I am still working there and uh, yesterday I got my termination letter. So I am going to be as of (?) September 28th terminated. So it's, it's been really, really uh, difficult to deal with because I feel like you know, I've been tried without even a, you know, due process or do you know what I mean? Like I don't even know why, why am I being terminated? You know I hadn't even gotten the chance to interview for anything you know, to show that I qualify for any of the jobs.

04.30.32 You know, to add insult to injury I saw the new office brochure. And 80% of the things in that brochure were things that I specialized in. You know? And they got all new people. Sixty percent of the people that they hired are from the outside, and then forty percent are

people who've been in the system uh, but just reshuffled and brought them into different places.

04.30.58 Uh, you know, at one point, she had a conversation with me where she was like, you know, I, uh, I have a youth specialist position available, you know, if you want it I could give it to you. And I turned around and I looked at her and I said, you know, Diane, with all due respect, uh, I appreciate that you, you know, want to help me. But you know, I don't see myself accepting a position that I didn't even get interviewed for to have my credentials speak for themselves, for themselves.

04.31.32 Uh, and therefore, I'm not gonna you know, accept this offer. You know, I feel that as a professional holding two masters degrees uh, that I should have had the opportunity to go in for an interview. And uh, I said, you know, and other, the other thing is I'm not interested in taking a \$20,000 cut.

04.32.00 And so she was like, well, what are you gonna do? I said, I'll wait, you know, if I find something that's fine. If I don't, I'll collect unemployment. I wasn't about to let her get the satisfaction. Uh, but I am just so, I, I am just so totally shocked that this is happening to me 15 years later. That's how many years I put in the system. Uh, all of this is also happening while I'm you know, writing this proposal to open a school.

04.32.33 Uh, and you know, it's only something that I have shared with Naji and two other close friends. Like I can't even share this with the people that I'm developing the proposal with. You know? I don't want them to say why is the Department of Education terminating her, why are they rejecting her? You know, and put any suspicion in their mind to think oh, my god, this you know, we're wasting our time.

04.32.58 You know, writing this proposal, because you know, she doesn't have any standing anymore at the DOE, do you know what I mean? Like all of this is just killing me. So I got my termination letter yesterday, so it was really painful. Uh, just you know, like I (?) it was, I was preparing for it, because you know, they sent us out a memo and they said that

August 31st the office was gonna close. And the new office was gonna open.

- 04.33.29 And you know, just preparing myself for it. And then everybody's like well, it seems that you're gonna stay you know, because this restructuring, they're (?) realizing, and a lot of people that applied and got the jobs backed out. Because they were all managerial. And the expectation far exceeded what the pay was gonna be and, and just the capability, individual capability.
- 04.33.56 So now they're like scrambling to try to, to get people to fill the positions. Uh, and that's why she (?) offered it to me because she was left with basically you know, all of these open positions. And school's gonna open and nobody's going to you know, be there. And uh, you know, and that conversation she says, you know, I have all of these new people and I don't even know how I'm gonna get them up to speed. And they didn't even prepare, they didn't even offer to train them.
- 04.34.28 I have to find people to train them, and I'm looking at her I was like oh, well. You know, this is what happens when senior people you know, are just moved to the side. I said, good luck, and I, and I walked out. You know, it's not my problem (LAUGHS) that she's stuck with new people who needed to be hired uh, need to be trained. But uh, in, just, you know, Naji's been so supportive, you know, and, and just helping me deal with all this.
- 04.35.03 He's like you know, you don't need the money. We're financially well off. You know, maybe it's a good thing. It'll give you the opportunity to work on the proposal (~JW~)

JW: Do you see it as a good thing?

- 04.35.18 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I do see it as a good thing, but I don't like the way that it's ended. The ending that I would have preferred is to have had the opportunity to go in for interviews.

04.35.33 And whether I was offered something or not, at least I know that I had been given the opportunity, the courtesy as someone who's been in the system for 15 years. To go in and have an interview. And if I was offered something, what I was planning to do was say you know what? I really thank you for offering me the position. However, I have other plans.

04.36.00 I'm going to decline the position and then just take the 6 months off, work on the proposal, because the school, if the school gets approved, it will be announced in January, and then in February I have to start recruitment of students and setting up the school space.

JW: Is some of this ego?

04.36.26 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I don't know (LAUGHS). I feel hurt, Jim, of course I feel hurt. I you know, I, I've, a person holding two masters degrees, I have three different certifications. You know, you know, satisfactory ratings every year, like what's, what's the deal with that? What is going on that I am being blackballed? And a lot of it has to do, I mean, I, I was questioning, ok, is it because I am so active in my community?

04.36.59 Is it because I've become such a high profile that maybe people at the Department of Education don't want me to be there because maybe something may happen. You know, and they're afraid, you know, that I may take down the Department of Education with me, like all of these crazy scenarios that I was thinking about. Then the other thing was there was an event that we organized at the borough president's office, and it was Bridge to Brotherhood Breakfast, it was for fathers and guardians, male guardians and their sons.

04.37.35 We invited, I, I organized it in the space and I invited the borough president to speak at the event. And it was 90% men. The only women there were from my office and other people who volunteered to assist. And the borough president uh, did his speech, and at the end, started thanking you know, the families for coming. And then said, and most importantly, I want to thank Debbie Almontaser for her dedication and commitment to the public school system.

04.38.06 You know, and he stops midway and he's like where is Debbie? (LAUGHS) And he's looking for me in the room and I'm like why is he asking where is Debbie. So he finally found me and he's like Debbie, can you please stand? And I stood and he started singing my praises about the work that I'm doing not only in the school system but in the community and my activism and the bridge builder that I am.

04.38.31 And, and what have you, and, and you know, he you know, he asked everybody to, to, to join him in applauding me. And they all applauded for me, and my supervisor was sitting there watching all this, my director. And I was like oh, this is so embarrassing. It was 90% men, of course, this had to happen with all (LAUGHS) men. And then (~JW~) her.

JW: The woman who could have been responsible for letting you go?

04.39.04 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Everybody seems to think that it's her. That she didn't advocate for me. Uh, she could have found out about my (?) resume, if it got there or not. She could have advocated for me like the other people that she did in my department, and she didn't. And every time I spoke to her she was like I don't know, I don't know what to say. You know?

04.39.27 And but that after that event, she spent the whole week saying I didn't know that you and Marty were so close. I didn't know that you had such a great relationship. And she's like oh, boy. And you're more popular than Marty because everybody you know, who I spoke to knew you. And I was like oh, gee, this is so wonderful. I just like being my private little self at the DOE (LAUGHS). And then all of the sudden this was exposed with her. So I don't know if any of that has anything to play with it. I don't know.

04.39.58 I don't know. And what's killing me is all of this ambiguity.

JW: The ego question is more about being offered the job?

04.40.19 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: No, the river hasn't changed course (LAUGHS). Yeah, I wanted things to go my way (LAUGHS). Alright, so if it's ego, I'm, I am guilty (LAUGHS).

JW: It's a human quality.

04.40.37 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I know, Jim. It's just you know, god. This it's so (?) unreal. I mean, I was crying all day yesterday. That's why I have this headache (LAUGHS). And even though I took Tylenol, I still have it. Uh.

04.41.01 You know, there is a principal that I have known, that I worked with about 7 or 8 years ago. And he always kept it real. And he's like, you know, you have to remember one thing in the system-you're as good as the last deed you do. And that just resonated, you know, and, and it's like no matter what you do and how long you do it, you are only gonna be remembered for whatever it is that last one thing that you did.

04.41.30 Do you know what I mean? It's scary.

JW: It's very scary?

04.41.40 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: 'Cos no matter what you do in your whole career, nobody will remember that. Especially (~JW~) in this field (LAUGHS).

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: It's in every field, and it's the same with me; you have made authentic choices that were very brave and things worked out for you.

04.43.29 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Somebody said to me yesterday that it's probably divine intervention, that maybe God is just making it happen this way. And that I have to, I have to accept uh, what I've been dealt with (LAUGHS). Uh, and just move on. But it just hurts, because it, you know, you know, self-doubt comes into play.

04.43.59 Like you know, I'm not good enough, you know, is there something that I needed improvement in my work. You know, was I not, you know, extending myself more than I should have. Like all of these things, you know, are repeating in my mind and I'm like but wait a minute. Everything that I've done, I've done with you know, 100% or more of my dedication. You know, so I, I don't know. It's just, It's painful to be rejected.

04.44.30 You know, or just to be treated as a part of a group of the work force that you know, just does not, is not as dynamic as the new people that they sought out.

JW: Did you like the job and were you being your full self in the job?

04.44.53 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I like the job. There are days that I was not crazy about the job. And uh, that had to do with the bureaucracy. Sometimes whatever project you needed to do had to be approved. And then approval took forever, and then when it finally was approved, then you got to do it. I hated having the wait and to deal with that. And I feel like ok uh, you know, there are times, especially this past year I felt that my creativity was stifled because she was very uh, what's the word I'm looking for?

04.45.29 She was very uh, controlling. And uh, you know, just you know, she, I can't think of the word, but, but very just uh, micromanaged. And micromanaging sometimes just you know, just makes you crazy. Uh. So I did like the job. I didn't like the bureaucracy.

04.45.57 Uh, you know, sometimes there were things that I wanted to be at or do for my community that I couldn't because I had to be at work, you know? Uh, and so I had to look at this event or that meeting or whatever, and really sit there and weigh you know, and make the decision, should I take a vacation day or a sick day to do this, you know? And I did, I mean, I made those sacrifices. I don't regret making those sacrifices.

04.46.28 Uh, so in a way, I mean, what I'm gonna be doing now with the school, I might not have to make those kinds of decisions, do you know what I mean?

JW: You won't, perhaps?

04.46.46 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: And there are going to be meetings and events and things that will relate to the community that I'll be serving at the school, to keep me informed uh, on how to better serve and bridge the gap between all communities where the school will be located.

04.47.04 So.

JW: Is it scary?

04.47.07 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: It's scary. It's scary. And it's disappointing. And everybody is just totally shocked, who know me and know my work. They're like uh, they, they are just out of their minds that somebody with your qualifications and your experience and the fact that you can work in any department in this place and you know, they're just accessing you.

04.47.37 Yeah. so I'm not crying right now, that's really good (LAUGHS). I guess I cried enough yesterday. Uh, top it off uh, I spoke to a friend of mine who I've been working with. I think I mentioned to you at some point or another that we were trying to advocate for Muslim holidays in the public school system. And so we met with people from City Hall.

04.48.00 And the Department of Education, the chancellor's office, about this a couple of times to negotiate getting two days in the school calendar observed by having school closed. And uh, the talks you know, happened, but they weren't receptive. And I was actually a part of the committee that was a part of the discussions, the negotiations.

04.48.29 And it was a very uh, fine line that I had to walk on, because of the fact that I am a Department of Education employee, and I'm also a member of the community and an advocate. So I had to really you know, when we formed this committee, I had to ask myself

serious questions. How could I play this role without affecting my job, and then how can I play it and not let my community down.

04.48.57 And I think that I did a good job in, in being there as someone from the system, but not antagonizing the system, but being a bridge. You know, in helping both my community as well as the Department of Education officials see how there are kids as well as educators who would, who are affected by this, you know, and how can we meet their needs, etc. So there was at one point in time where I was thinking maybe they're getting back at me.

04.49.31 You know, for doing that. You know, but I all the meetings that I attended were on my personal time. And I was like maybe they're getting back at me for taking the stance. And then I would think about it and I was like but I didn't say anything disrespectful. I didn't antagonize. I was very professional. Uh, and I was there uh, to really (~JW~) help everybody. So I, and then I spoke to people who know the people that we met with from City Hall, and they're like they don't operate that way. They would not do it.

04.50.03 And then the lawyer that I was working with who is actually the person that uh, worked on the Amado Dialo case, and won it against the NYPD uh, he said to me, he says they wouldn't even dare do that. Because it would be so obvious.

JW: Discrimination?

04.50.24 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, he, he seems to think it is. And he's pushing me to file. And that was one of the things that upset me yesterday was like he was pointing at all of the things that he thinks are making it a discrimination issue. And I just don't want to go there, and I keep telling him, I don't want to go there. Because if I do, I will be red flagged. And then if I want to pursue the school, it may jeopardize the school.

04.50.57 And he, he's saying to me, well, if they even think about it, then we will strike back as it's a retaliation. And he does not seem to understand that yeah, I can win both battles. But then I will always live my life being treated like a leper, do you know what I mean? Everybody at

the DOE will treat me like she is a, you know, a betrayer. You know, treat me differently. And I don't want to work under those kinds of conditions.

04.51.28 So uh, his recommendation was to write a letter to Human Resource questioning, uh, letting informing them that I applied for the six positions I did, and that not one was you know, not one of those departments called me for an interview. And that I am requesting their assistance in inquiring why I haven't. And also detailing my experience, my education, my background uh, (STOPS)

04.51.58 END OF TAPE # DA 41

TAPE # DA 42
Debbie Almontaser
JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director
PROJECT REBIRTH

05.01.30 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: What is the motivation to cry?

05.01.12 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I think, well, for me, crying actually. Can happen with a lot of emotions. Uh, I do, I cry a lot with happy things. Just out of joy and, and just appreciation.

05.01.32 Uh. Uh, I always cry at movies, you know, when I see, uh, especially love stories. That's like my favorite (LAUGHS). Uh, you know, sad things that just happen to people. Uh, I don't rarely cry when I'm angry at things. I don't but uh, like yesterday, when I was peaking to the lawyer, and he was like pointing out all of the things of uh, that just make this blatant discrimination.

- 05.02.04 He's like you know, you have to set precedents, you, you know, you have to take a stand, you can't let this happen. You know, your community is already under attack and this just is just you know, giving carte blanche for it to continue happening. And if you don't stand up it's gonna continue. And so that just like really made me you know, it angered me,
- 05.02.30 'cos I was like now it's not just me, it's my people (LAUGHS), too type of thing. So uh, you know, he. I, I don't know what to do, Jim. I really don't know what to do. I'm afraid of challenging because I don't know what the consequences will be. Uh, I just want to, I just want to forget about all of this, and I want the proposal to be submitted. I want the school to be approved, and I want to open the school and I want to be in my school, and that's all I want (LAUGHS).
- 05.03.06 You know? And that's it. And, and not to be bothered with the politics, the bureaucracy of the DOE, but just to be left alone. And then, you know, just, you know, the fact and the matter of the principle that this is happening, and everything about this whole restructuring from the conversations I've had with people is that it's totally illegal.
- 05.03.35 I'm not like the only one that this is you know, that has been rejected, who's been in the system. You know, they had basically, they know who they wanted and they put them in these positions, and they only posted the positions online, because they wanted to follow you know, hiring protocol. So I, I'm totally confused, I'm totally confused.
- 05.03.58 And I've been avoiding speaking to the lawyer, because I just, every time that he talks to me, he gets me more upset. You know, with the pressure. Uh, I haven't talked to Naji about it because I don't want to upset him. Uh, you know, and he's been working, he's actually been working all day today, yesterday, the day before he worked uh, and he didn't come home, and he just came home late last night. And I was in bed and I was just tossing and turning. And but I didn't let him know I was awake.
- 05.04.29 But the sweetest thing, I work up this morning and he had a white rose on the coffee table in our bedroom, so it was really nice (LAUGHS) to wake up to a white rose. I was gonna carry

it with me, I was gonna bring it, but then I was like Ok, it's just gonna fall apart by the time I get home at the end of the day (LAUGHS). So I left it there. So, and I love white roses. They symbolize just peace and tranquility, and, and they're just so beautiful and so pure.

JW: Do you tend to see the purity in things?

05.06.12 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I do, I do. And I'm (?) I last night I was laying there and saying, ok, this must be happening for a reason, this has to be a blessing in disguise (LAUGHS). Maybe this is just happening to give me the opportunity to focus on this proposal.

05.06.32 Do what I need to do, get it approved, visit schools, just really you know, just ground myself before the school becomes a reality. Uh, you know, terminate, being terminated might not be a bad thing because now I could apply for (LAUGHS) unemployment. Which will carry me for six months. Uh, prior to all of this, when I was thinking about you know, rejecting the position that I would have been offered had I ever been interviewed uh.

05.06.06 I had thought about the notion of taking a leave of absence. And then just focusing in the proposal up until the school came, and in my conversations with people at New Visions, the person we're working with, the director of the school development. Her eyes just you know, widened when I said that, and she's like you're really considering doing that?

05.06.29 And I said, yeah, I just feel that I need to be focused and commit all my time. She says that's really admirable. She said, you know, this right now what you, the proposal process you know, is you know, extensive, but she said, when the school gets approved, the, the most extensive time of, will be the recruitment and the setting up of the school itself. That's when you should really think about not working.

05.07.01 And uh, I said, well, you know, if I don't work now and then I'll be ready then, too. So she said to me, she says, you know, think about perhaps continuing to work and then you can transition in February uh, or if you, you know, if you financially can take it, then you know,

then not working, and if the school gets approved, there's a possibility we could put you on salary as principal in February.

05.07.29 We've done that before. So I was like Ok, this is not such a bad thing, unemployment for six months. It, it'll carry me to February (LAUGHS). So uh, I looked at it from all those, I, I'm trying to make the best out of the situation. So I think yesterday I did all the crying and I finally said last night, ok. here's uh, this is it. So what are you gonna do about it? Are you gonna continue crying?

05.08.00 And feeling bad and depressed and horrible and like you're nothing and you're not worth it, and you know, you can't do anything. Or are you gonna say ok, this is what's happened, and this is what I need to do. So uh, I'm taking the later. You know, if it means that I will collect unemployment for the next six months and then just focus on the school, so be it. I was planning to do that, but I wasn't.

05.08.29 I wasn't expecting it to happen in this way. You know, and now there's a little payoff, there's money (LAUGHS). The unemployment. Uh, does it fix how I feel? No. I still feel hurt. Uh, but I, you know, I'm gonna make the best of it, you know, and I'm not gonna share this with my, my team, my colleagues or people even in my community, because you know, they'll panic. They'll probably say oh, my god.

05.09.00 You know, something must have happened at the DOE and now they don't want her, and if, you know, we go through with this proposal you know, they may, she, her name may be on you know, the, the, the shit list and (LAUGHS) And you know, the proposal will be rejected and she'll jeopardize this ever happening for the community. I know that's not the case. You know? I don't think I'm blackballed. And if I was, it's probably in this department in the Youth Development Department.

05.08.29 And uh, we'll see. I didn't leave yesterday my office 'til 6 o'clock. and I sat there, thinking about ok. I don't want to go home and be miserable all weekend. I have to do something to find out what's going on. So uh, I called a friend of mine who works at City Hall, and she's

so amazing. She's a Rebsen, a former Rebsen as well. And she's like Ok. you know, do you know anybody there? I was like, well, yeah, I know Michele Cahill who's cc'd on the letter.

05.10.01 My termination letter. And she's like, Debbie, do you think she's gonna read it? I was like no, it's gonna be like one of hundreds of letters that will go to her file. She'll never see the letter. She says, ok, do you have a relationship with her? I said, well, I called her in August to speak to her, and she did call me back. And I missed her call and then I called her and we never connected. So she said to me, ok, well, what do you want to do now? I said, well, I think I should contact her again, but I just don't know how to get a hold of her.

05.10.30 (CLEARS THROAT) she said, ok, you tried email, you tried the phone. Fax her the letter. And on the, just handwrite in the letter, you know, Dear Michele, you know, thank you for calling me back. I'm sorry I missed your call, you know, please let me know when you're available to discuss the attached letter. I can be reached at blahblahblah. And just sign it, Debbie. Don't sign Debbie Almontaser. And that's what I did, and I faxed it yesterday.

05.11.00 So let's see what happens Monday. Uh, and I'm sure she does not know that this is happening. You know, 'cos it's people under her who are doing the interviews and what have you. And it's got to be my director who just probably said that you know, don't put her in the mix.

JW: Is that an attempt to get the job back?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: No. (LAUGHS).

JW: What is it, then?

05.11.22 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: To find out if I was blacklisted or not. That's all. I just want to make sure that I don't, that nobody's out there trying to, to mess around with my reputation.

JW: How has your marriage changed since 9-11?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, my gosh, it's gotten stronger. Absolutely stronger. Absolutely stronger. You know, we have a much, much more closer relationship. Uh, Naji's so supportive, you know, so supportive.

05.12.00 And I now that there are times I could do a whole lot more for him, you know, and it's just because of my inability to be able to do more uh, because of my work, because of, you know, what I do. It's, it's hard. But he's so great, he's so great. Words can't even describe how, he's so understanding. You know, so caring. So supportive.

05.12.09 It's like, you know, if, you know, if my life became a movie, he would get the, the best supporting actor (LAUGHS). Uh, you know, award.

JW: How did the most recent announcement London affect you?

05.13.02 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, gosh. It's like every time I hear stuff about this, it just, it devastates me even more and more, and it's like I feel like everything that we do somehow gets undone, do you know what I mean? It's like we take 3 steps forward and then we take 4 steps back. And then we have to start all over again. Uh, and it's scary. It's scary what's happening in London, it's scary just all of this you know, radicalization that's happening.

05.13.33 That's so scary. You know, and what is feeding it, why is it continuing. It's, it's scary. And I don't even know like where do we as global citizens start to question and even to try to resolve it. I mean, my trip to Denmark was really wonderful because we had the opportunity to hear all of the different perspectives of people living in different parts of Europe.

05.14.03 And uh, one of the things that we learned about the Muslim communities in London is that they're not, you know, given an opportunity to (?) integrate into British society the way that people get the opportunity to be integrated into American society. And uh, when we were talking about like why, why do people still feel like we are from another part of the world.

05.14.32 And why don't they feel like they are becoming British. And it's just you know, from what people are explaining was that the system doesn't make you feel like you are a part of it. It always makes you feel like you are a foreigner. And even if you are a second generation person, somehow because you're born there and you're going to school there, you do feel like (?) you know, somewhat a part of it, but there are things that remind you that (?) you're not a part of it.

05.15.02 And so what are those, you know, that was a question that we were asking. So what is it that you know, you guys could do there. And uh, the, the big question of that topic was integration into Western society. You know, is it a problem for all Western, for the whole, entire Western world. And the different countries, everybody responded to it, but the country that had the most difficulty with it was (?) was uh, England.

05.15.34 Uh. And then the US had absolutely no problem with it. And so you know, they wanted (?)

JW: That's true?

05.15.43 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, I think that it's true because I want to say that we are fortunate in the United States that we have social service organizations. That deal with this integration issue, that help people who do come from different parts of the world, you know, become educated.

05.16.01 You know, get career uh, training uh, you know, get them into the work force. Uh, you know, help them with their children getting into school, and really helping them integrate into the society. Where there, they don't have that. They don't have social services or NGO's that do that. You know, the government is trying to do it, and then when you have people who are coming from countries that don't see the government as a viable you know, friendly you know.

05.16.31 Uh, component of society, people you know, shelter or fear uh, being engaged or involved in something like that. So that's the issue. And one of the things that happened which was really

interesting uh, about a month uh, a month ago, they had the prime minister of uh, of Britain come to meet with the New York uh, immigration coalition. And it was about integration.

05.16.59 You know, how do New York immigrant communities integrate into the society, so the New York immigration coalition invited all of these community-based organizations working with different ethnic groups to do like a best practices for the Prime Minister. I thought that was interesting. And we shared when we were in Denmark, we shared what we're doing here. And uh, you know, how it is helping people transition easily.

JW: How is your son?

05.17.32 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, I knew you were going to ask. I don't know. You know, five years later, he is working. for an expediting (?) company with the building department. Uh, he's still home. He's not going to school. You know, he keeps saying I'm gonna go back, I'm gonna register, I'm gonna register. The semester comes in, he didn't register.

05.18.00 Uh, and you know, he's just, I mean, like you know, we, uh, it's just hard to gauge where he is in his life and what is he doing with himself. You know, my younger one got married, and he's deliriously happy and you know, going about his own business and you know, and then of course, Yousef will see the two of them together and you know, he'll just.

05.18.28 He, he made a remark like one day it was like, you know, it would be so great if I could find somebody, and you know, settle down. But I'll probably never find anybody. And uh, and I was like, well, you know, there's opportunities, you're just not, you know, you're not, you're not opening yourself. You know, so he, he liked the fact that you know, my son found somebody from our community and he's like well, I'll never find anybody from our community because you know, it's just the way that I want to be able to know who I'm gonna marry you know, really well before I marry her.

05.19.04 I just don't want, you know, to have casual conversations and you know, have visitation rights (LAUGHS). Before I marry her and blahblahblah. So I was, I said to him, I said look,

you know, this is culturally the way that things are done. You know, we, your dad and I are flexible and open to other things, but there are a lot of people in our community that are not flexible and open. And we can't push or expect people to do that for us.

- 05.19.33 And at this time, you know, you have to decide what you want to do with yourself, if you want to marry somebody who is not a part of our community, that's a question you have to ask yourself. You know, are you willing to do that, you know, and you know, have children and be able to raise them in an interfaith marriage. So you know, he's uh, you know, exploring a lot of stuff, you know, and I haven't seen him in the past week.
- 05.20.03 Uh, you know, he is just throwing himself in his work. Uh, I spoke to him last week after the uh, Mount Sinai report came out and I told him that he needed to learn about this report and also go (?) done that it's serious. I shared with him some of their findings, and he's like well I don't have asthma, I don't have respiratory issues and, and I was like well, it's not necessarily that you had to have developed them already, but you never know.
- 05.20.36 You were there for a long time. And you should just go and get tested. And you should be counted among all the people who served uh, at Ground Zero. So he is like well, I'll think about it. And like I'm going to send you the link for the report, read it and please consider doing something about it. He's like ok, ok. he, like I'm nagging him about it.
- 05.21.01 So uh, so I don't know, you know, what he's thinking. (~JW~) It's been hard to you know, to, to get him to come out, you know, go out with me or with this dad. You know, he's, he's lately distant himself from us. And I don't know what it's about. You know, I think I mentioned in the last time that he lost, he was losing hair. Well, his hair is fine now, and now he's losing skin pigmentation on his lips, on, on the sides. But now it's gotten better. So.
- JW: Why is that?
- 05.21.38 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, I'm attributing it to just being at Ground Zero. And when he had gone to some doctors, they told him that his immune uh, (?) immune system is uh, is

low. And that's why he's losing pigmentation. So they gave him some cream, it made it worse, so he stopped using the cream. Now it's a little better. It's, his lips have gotten a little darker.

05.22.03 But it, it's bizarre. You know, and not even his caused him to be very uh, self-conscious about you know, considering being in a relationship or anything like that, because it's his lips.

JW: Do you think this is a result of him being down there?

05.22.31 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, absolutely. It's absolutely. And I, you know, he never as much as I've bugged him to go for counseling, he never did. He would yes me to death and yes, I'm going, and there's no way I can track that he's going. Unless I followed him (LAUGHS). For a day. And it's because you know, he's an adult. He's a young adult and there is only so much I can say or do. You know, and his, one after he came home from serving, his thing was like you know, I'm an adult.

05.23.02 I know I don't need it, I'm fine, I'm this, I'm that. You know? And uh, it, it's just, so I figured Ok, I guess he would know when he needs to go. But uh, like I know like you know, any time near the anniversary he (?) we don't see him, he doesn't get involved. He doesn't you know, he's doing his own thing.

05.23.30 You know, and that's pretty much, most of his time he's not home. You know, he has friends that he hangs out with and what have you. But uh, it's just, it's hard. It's hard you know, like I, I've had conversations with him of like you know, you really need to think about your future, what are you doing with your future? You know, you can work, you could continue to work, but then where, where is tht leading, what's that leading to, you know, what, what are you aspiring to do with your future? You know, do you want to buy a house, do you want you know.

05.24.33 You know, settle down one day. What do you want to do with yourself? You know, and he's like yeah, of course, of course, of course. But I don't know if he's giving that thought, do you know what I mean? Like with my other two kids, I know like what they want to do. You know, Mohammed is already married. He's gonna be finishing engineering school. His wife is gonna be finishing next year. Uh, you know, they're saving up to buy a house. You know, they're not planning to have kids any time soon.

05.24.01 She wants to teach before she, you know, uh, has children. So it's you know, they already have like their life set up. You know, my daughter, you know, wants to finish school, maybe get married, you know, she doesn't know. So but him. It's all, it's, it's a big fog. A big cloud.

JW: Do you talk about September 11th?

05.24.57 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Uh, he doesn't. he doesn't like talking about it. Like there (?) was one time about a year and a half ago that uh, he had gone with me somewhere, and we were actually walking in downtown Manhattan, not too far from Ground Zero, in Battery Park area. Where we actually walked past, you know where Simms is, the clothing place? And uh, he was just recounting for me what it looked like after 9-11.

05.25.32 With the dust uh, and just how bad it was. And you know, the Burger King. Like he will never eat at Burger King now for as long as he will live. Uh, because the Burger King that was near Ground Zero was used as a morgue. And just the way that it smelled and, and everything, he just couldn't, he doesn't. it just uh, you know, reminds him of that.

05.26.00 So he (?) won't eat at Burger King like for you know, if we were out or whatever, he will not, he'll like no, I don't want Burger King. So I found out that day walking with him. Uh, and you know, I, I have asked him, I said, you know, you should tell your story. Maybe you should write about it. Maybe you know, you know, just writing a book about it and getting it out, or just keeping a journal and writing about it. And you know, he, he listens, but he doesn't respond.

05.26.31 You know, he'll just listen and listen and listen, and you know, and that's it. So you know, it's, it's hard. You know, I mean, it's so hard.

JW: How are you dealing with it as parents?

05.25.44 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, Naji and I get really frustrated. You know, he uh, had a car. And uh, he bought it for \$200. he put a lot of money into it, it was working. and then it started falling apart again.

05.26.59 So he didn't know whether he wanted to invest or not. And then he sold it to somebody and he wants to buy another car. So before buying a car, he was saying, well, maybe I'll buy a motorcycle. So Naji and I panicked. We didn't want him to own a motorcycle. It's just too dangerous. So we had bought a new car and we had the old little red car, and we were like, you know, if you want it, you can buy it. You know, Naji was thinking of selling it for like \$3500. He's like just give me whatever you have and, and take the car.

05.27.33 So uh, Yousif was like well, you know, he didn't tell me or his dad, but he told his brother, he's like I'm their child, why do I have to buy it? And it should just be given to me.
(LAUGHS) And then my younger son shared this with me, and I said, well, what do you think? He says, well, he does have a point. He says, but I don't know. I said, well, he is 24 years old. He is working.

05.28.01 And he, you know, I think it's good to have responsibility. You know, it's not that we need the money, but I think it's good responsibility and you know, Dad didn't say I want \$3500 from you. He said, give me whatever you can. You know, and I said he's home. He's not paying rent, he's not paying bills. You know, it's, he's making money and he's doing whatever he wants with his money. Uh, do you think it's too much to ask?

05.28.30 So he's like no, you're right. I guess it's not a bad thing, and Daddy's not asking him for \$3500. So it's uh, I don't know, there is sometimes that he, you know, he, he tries to make his dad and I feel guilty for things, and we don't know what. You know? You know, when he

was growing up he uh, went to public school and then we uh, sent him to a boarding school, and he was there for a year.

05.29.00 And then he, you know, came back. And uh, you know, he was always in school he, he had trouble. He had problems and it wasn't behavior or anything, but it was just not focusing. Uh, on his work. You know, doing homework or being interested. So we figured, Ok. maybe a change of, of pace would be different, you know, and uh, that didn't help either. And then he came back and then he finished high school. Uh, and then he joined the Army.

05.29.32 Uh, so the boarding school factor, like every now and then he's like well, you guys sent me to boarding school, I can't believe that you sent me to boarding school. You know, for, for middle school, and I was so young. And I was like, but there is so many kids who go to boarding school, and it wasn't a bad boarding school. You know, it was a boys' (?) boarding school. And there were other great kids that were there and that didn't have any problem with it. You know, and ok. So we made a mistake. You there for a year, now, you know, you came back. So it's hard, it's hard to figure out what the deal is with him.

JW: Tough as a parent?

05.30.14 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah, yeah. and you know, I've, I keep telling him over and over that you can't live in the past, you have to put what happened in the past (?) and move forward. Yeah, and if I, we could do things differently, we wouldn't have sent him to the boarding school had we known that he didn't like it.

JW: What about the chapter that you wrote?

05.30.44 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, it was my experience on the day of 9-11. Uh, and then the work that I started doing uh, as an educator and community organizer. It was really, I really, I'm very pleased with the turnout of the book, the chapter I'm very pleased with, and it took a lot of energy.

05.31.04 Uh, it took a lot of uh, you know, difficult thinking. Uh, and visiting things that I, it was hard for me to visit, you know? Uh, but I was able to get it down on paper and there was a whole lot that I wrote more than what was on the, that ended up getting published.

05.31.26 Uh, but because you know, they had to edit and they wanted to keep it you know, in the uh, theme of what everything else that people were writing about, the healing process. Uh, so you know, it, it raised a lot of questions for me about you know, what the world is like and what has been going on and what have I been doing to deal with it. And, and to move forward with it. Uh, so I'm very pleased with, with what it ended up being.

05.32.00 I am, I wish that there could have been more you know, Arab and Muslim individuals who (?) would have uh, contributed. I'm the only one in the book. Uh, and it makes me feel sort of like an oddity (LAUGHS). Uh, especially when you know, media would look at the press release and then see my chapter in there, and then rather than most of the people who you know, are in there prefer to speak to me or interview me.

05.32.31 Uh, so in a way it's been a good thing, you know, because it is, it's furthering my mission to help you know, educate and promote you know, a better understanding of you know, Arabs and Muslims. So it hasn't been too bad.

JW: Where do you think you'll be in 2 years?

05.33.00 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, in two years oh, my goodness. I hope in my school (LAUGHS). I hope in my school. Uh, school's supposed to open in 2007, September of 2007. So in two years, around this time, starting the second year of school, and then just coming back from a cultural exchange program from somewhere in the Middle East with a group of kids. From the school. That's what I'd love.

JW: Five years later?

05.33.35 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: In five years, possibly uh, helping other people replicate the school somewhere else in this country. If we do really well and we succeed and the school is successful. That's really my (?) ultimate goal, is to develop, replicate the school.

05.34.03 And it's public. And I keep telling everybody it's the first public high school 6-12, 'cos there are Arabic and there are Islamic schools, but they're charter or private. But this is public. So we want to do public schools, and that's what makes it unique, that it's a public school.

JW: Anything else?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

05.35.37 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: One of the people that's on my team, on my design team is actually uh, a family member of someone who is, was lost in 9-11. She is the sister of a woman that was in I think in uh, Tower 2.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

05.36.00 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: She's a Latina woman from Puerto Rico. (~JW~) and she actually uh, was a former principal at uh, not too far. She was 14 blocks away from Ground Zero. And uh, was a principal then. She continued to be a principal and two years ago, she took a leave and went to Afghanistan and started a school there. (~JW~) She's also one of the contributors in the book.

05.36.31 So I told her what I was doing, and I was like I want you to be on my team (LAUGHS). You have to be on my team. So she was like I'd love to be on your team. This is such an amazing concept. So yeah, so it's pretty compelling to sit there and listen to her. You know, and her belief in such a school becoming a reality and how greatly needed it is. You know, and her family stands divided with what the actions on the decisions that she has taken.

05.37.01 Like they (?) were totally against her going to Afghanistan and even thinking of developing a school for Afghanis after what had happened to you know, her sister. You know, but she uh, was committed in not letting what happened you know, jade her or make her feel that, you know, there are people in the world that should be hated. So it's pretty incredible. Such a huge asset to our team.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

03.31.45 ROOM TONE

03.32.35 END OF TAPE # DA42