

TAPE # DA 91
Debbie Almontaser
JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director
PROJECT REBIRTH

01.00.01 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Where do you want to start?

01.02.17 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Nowhere.

JW: Where are you right now?

01.02.31 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I'm here. (CLEARS THROAT) (LAUGHS) Physically I guess. Also I, I can't even find myself emotionally. I'm all over the place. I'm just really all over the place.

JW: What was your blackberry?

01.02.56 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I was reading an email from, from work, so yeah.

JW: What about it?

01.03.03 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, no, it's just yeah, irrelevant stuff at, at my new job, which is so (?) irrelevant to who I am. But you know, I'm in this, I'm in this department right now, temporarily, until I figure out what I'm gonna do with myself.

JW: What about February?

01.03.31 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: The school. (CLEARS THROAT) Yeah, and the school got approved. We got approved February 12th. Yeah, well, before February 12th, we're under the radar. Nobody (~JW~) knew about us (~JW~)

JW: What's the washing machine emotion that's happening now?

01.03.52 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Gosh, it's so, it's so huge, (?). Jim it's so huge. It's like you know, I don't even know. It's like depending on what day it is, you know, it's a different emotion, or what time it is, it's a different emotion. There are times that I'm happy that the school is open, which I'm very happy that it's happened. There are times that I'm very angry that I'm not a part of it. There are times that I feel a sense of betrayal.

01.04.26 There are times that I just feel like the whole world is just so unfair. And then there are times that I just feel like what did I get myself into, why am I in all of this? There are times that I just don't want to be around anybody. Just want to drop off the face of the earth. So (PAUSE). It's hard. It's hard trying to, you know, get myself back (CLEARS THROAT) into, into the groove, and into what I was doing.

01.05.01 I just, I can't even process everything that I've gone through. I just can't. (PAUSE) It's, it's just been such a long, a long journey. And one that's been very, very difficult, and one I felt, at that time felt that people were there supporting me, and watching my back and, and helping me.

01.05.31 But then, at the slightest (?) you know, at the drop of a hat, everything just changes. You know? I realize that I'm in all of this by myself. You know, (CLEARS THROAT) that I endured so much pain. (PAUSE) Just all of the, you know, the backlash and the discrimination that I was facing and just, I kept putting it off, and saying I have to keep focused, I have to stay driven.

- 01.06.05 And I was, but the people around me were not. And that's the sense of betrayal that I feel. (CLEARS THROAT) I'm really, really angry at them. Very angry, and I just (CLEARS THROAT) I don't even know how to (?) deal with it.
- 01.06.28 You know, I can't. it's just so huge, you know, and getting caught up in the politics and other people's politics and being the victim for everybody else's politics.
- JW: Who are the people?
- 01.06.53 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: People at the Department of Education. People at New Visions, the mayor himself. You know, I feel that I, I've been so much in this city and I've proven myself over and over. And I just went right out the window, and the New York Post word was taken over mine. You know, and not even getting the chance to explain what happened. And, and to defend myself.
- 01.07.28 But to be forced into handling the situation the way they felt was most appropriate, and in the long run it was not to the best of my interests. It worked against me. And the issue that the, the (?) difficult thing about it is that they kept telling me this is the only way to diffuse this situation. This is the only way to diffuse it is issuing an apology. And I'm like, but issuing an apology is stating that I am guilty of what the Post is saying about me.
- 01.08.03 I'm not, they did not use all of my words. They misquoted me, they misrepresented me. They left out a lot of important information that would have made my interview balanced. And they just didn't want to hear. They didn't want to hear the, the whole, you know, process of, of rebutting it, because they were terrified of the Post. So a lot of my anger has to do with how this administration bases their decisions on what the Post says and does.
- 01.08.40 It's the Post running the city, not this administration, because they use the Post as the barometer of how to go next in city politics, so I'm really angry at that.

01.08.58 Angry and just how everything just all happened, you know, and escalated and they really did nothing to de-escalate it. You know? It, they didn't allow other newspapers to cover this, all the coverage was happening on the New York Post, which every day was even more horrific and more horrific. And then Randi Weingarten jumping into the arena.

01.09.29 And just making matters even worse. And at that point, that's when I realized that the DOE was sort of against the wall. With their backs against the wall of like we don't know how we're gonna be able to go forward.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Last year during our interview, at the time you were upset because you had frustrations about moving forward? Do you remember back then?

01.10.20 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I know (LAUGHS) this is the system is, has just abused me so much, right? (LAUGHS) And I'm still in this stupid system. That's why I said to you, I have to find myself, 'cos I just can't, I can't deal anymore with this institutional racism. So last year, when we talked, I told you about the place I was. There was sabotage, the director that I was working with sabotaged my opportunity to get another job. And then rather than just dismissing it, I forwarded my termination letter to the head of the department, who actually is a Repson Fellow.

01.11.04 So I have that, that alum, alumni connection, and I faxed over the letter to her, and I said did you know about this? You're cc'd on it. I'm curious to know, you know, are you, is this something that you are in favor of? So Michelle Cahill called me back and she said absolutely not, I can't believe this has happened.

01.11.28 Sit tight, we're gonna make sure you have a job. (LAUGHS) So. IN the weeks later, she made sure that I got a job. And I had the choice of either going to the Bronx, or working for the same director (LAUGHS). And I chose the same director to avoid going to the Bronx

(LAUGHS). And but it was poetic justice, because I, I got a job and, whether she liked it or not, and I was a constant reminder for her every day (LAUGHS).

01.12.00 And so it was fine. I did my work. Left at the time that I needed to. And I was working on the school project. So from 8 to 4, I was doing my job at the DOE, and then from 4 to the wee hours of the night, working on the school project. And galvanizing a diverse team of people, educators, community members, parents, and high school students who became the design team for the school project.

01.12.33 And we worked really, really hard and diligently to write the executive summary which was submitted in October, and then the final proposal which was submitted in December, and then we went in for interview. And we went for the interviews, I think December 13th. It was quite a, an amazing experience, where the 11 of us went in front of a panel of people from the DOE and New Visions and a couple of other non-profit educational organizations.

01.13.09 And we, you know, we gave a solid argument as to why the school should be approved. And (~JW~)

JW: Was there resistance at that time?

01.13.23 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: There's been (LAUGHS) resistance all the way through. (CLEARS THROAT) On January 5th, New Visions called me in, with the Arab American Family Support Center, who's my lead partner, and at that point, they had some very important information to share with me. And the Support Center. So we went in, they gave us overall feedback about the (?) you know, interview (CLEARS THROAT). Said everything went well.

01.14.00 There was one issue and that was that there was not a strong answer in dealing with the English language learners. And that answer came from (CLEARS THROAT) one of my team members who I had identified for her a very important role, which was to be my second in

command, and eventually become the assistant principal had we continued. So they raised it in that way, and they said well right now, there is one stipulation.

- 01.14.34 You know, that is, is, you know, there, and the ball is in your court and you decide how you want to deal with it. You know, you have to think about it, and your options are two, that you do what is requested, or you simply walk away from this and give the whole entire school project up.
- 01.15.00 So of course, they played with me a guessing game to guess what I thought it was. I said I have no idea, and nor do I want to guess. Just tell me what it is. And it was basically if we wanted the school to be approved, we had to let go of Karen, who is a part of my team, who played a very, very vital and important role as a part of my team.
- 01.15.25 She was the second you know, the, the closest person to me who was able, you know, I would start a sentence, she would finish it, vice versa. And we were just really, really you know, we knew what we wanted to set out and do. And basically they did not feel that she was the appropriate match. Considered her to be a liability. And, and didn't feel that she would you know, help in you know, starting a small new school.
- 01.16.01 And basically the whole rap that they used was that you know, her interpersonal skills, you know, were not up to par. That for new teachers in a new small school setting, would not be beneficial, and that she has a hard time getting along with people. And what have you. So at that point, I felt like they dropped a bomb on me, because I was like I can't believe this is happening.
- 01.16.35 And basically New Visions said to me, well, we need an answer from you. We need to know what your thoughts are on this. And my lead partner, the Arab-American Family Support Center, like well, the school has to go on. And I said well, wait. We need to discuss this. I'm not just gonna eliminate somebody from my team because people have this misconception or this opinion of this person.

- 01.17.02 So people at New Visions then took out a stack of, of articles or documentation that the DOE had given them, that she did not get along with this person and that person. I was very appalled. Because the people that they named I knew were not friends of Karen. Who've always (?) been gunning for her and did not want to see her succeed, or be happy.
- 01.17.30 And her coming to work at the school would have meant a pay cut and also a demotion. In positions. She was gonna go to the school on a teacher's salary. And to just because she wanted to be a part of a, a school community where she could just create something from scratch and be a part of such a school. So at that point, you know, it was a very difficult decision for me, and I said, look.
- 01.18.04 This school is bigger than anybody here. The school has to happen, and if it meant that I step down, I'll step down to make sure that the school opens. Because this is we're talking about history. We're talking about an entire community looking forward to this. And therefore, if this is the only thing holding the approval of this school, then I will.
- 01.18.30 I'll speak to Karen, and I know that she wants the best for the school and I know how important it is for her to see it open. So we have to move forward. So I left that day New Visions. She knew, Karen knew that I was going to meet with them. Initially I wanted to take her with me, but they told me not to. And it was the most difficult weekend of my life. Just trying to think of a way to break the news to her.
- 01.19.03 And that day, I, I actually cried so much that I lost my voice. That day. And then I spent the whole weekend just sick from just, just trying to replay how I'm going to tell her. This. And at that point, she called on that Saturday, this was, it was a Friday that I met with them.
- 01.19.28 She called Saturday and she heard, she realized I couldn't speak to her. So I told her to meet me. Naige told her to meet me on, on Sunday, you know, for, for brunch, and for us to meet face to face. So I, I met with her. I didn't meet with her, she called me, I was actually up in the Pocono's. And she called me, and I was on the bus. My voice was somewhat back. And she said ok, well, you couldn't talk to me the other day.

- 01.20.03 You sound better today. Just tell me, I can't (?) really, it's best when I come and see you in person. And she said, well, what did they say about the interview? So I briefly gave her some of the information. And then I kept telling her, I'll tell you when I come, when I see you face to face. And she said, there is something far more bigger, Debbie that you're not, you're not sharing with me.
- 01.20.31 And I said to her, Karen, I really can't talk to you on the phone right now. And she said yes, there is something. And it's me, isn't it? And at that point, I couldn't talk to her any more. I was crying, and she said I knew it. I knew it, that they see me as a threat. They don't want me to be with you, you know, you know, this is Ok. You know, it's far more bigger, you know, the school has to happen. History has to be made.
- 01.21.00 I don't want you to cry, please don't cry any more. I'll see you when you get here and we'll talk. But it was hard. It was really, really hard. To, to just tell her that. And the hard thing about it was that I was starting to do, you know, what you see happening in institutions and corporations, of people cutting people out and do you know what I mean? Like just, just treating people like, like garbage.
- 01.21.36 And it hurt me to have to do that. Because I know her, I respect her, she is brilliant. But yet, people don't see in her what I saw in her. And won't give her the chance to see what I've seen in her, and how much she cares and how much she offers. But I could not advocate for her.
- 01.21.58 And I could not do anything to keep her. And (~JW~)
- JW: Would you do it differently now?
- 01.22.06 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Would I do it differently now? (LAUGHS) Had I, you know, had I said no, I'm not gonna take her off the team, they wouldn't have approved the school.

JW: Was it a quid pro quo?

01.22.20 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah, yeah. And I just love how they put things in the language, you know? A stipulation. You know, there is a stipulation, you know? So that was basically it and at that point, I basically said, well (~JW~)

JW: You were reflecting on corporate treatment of people?

01.23.02 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I just don't like, I don't like eliminating people. I don't like, you know, having to play these power trip games. You know? And, you know, all, the judgments that are being made about people. You know, this one shouldn't be here because they're just not, they don't fit the mold, or you know, this is just it, it's just, it was so hard to deal with it.

01.23.30 And then the way that people at New Visions dealt with it, you know, they didn't even treat her with, with any respect or decency upon this decision. (CLEARS THROAT) One of the coaches came and had dinner with the two of us, because Karen, wanted to hear from another perspective the feedback on the interview. And this person is very humane and very decent (CLEARS THROAT) and very caring.

01.24.02 She sees, she sees people as people. She doesn't see them as another number. But really cares and helps people who go through the process. And after my resignation, she called me. Right, the day she found out and she emailed me just with sincere (CLEARS THROAT) concern. And just wanting to be there for me if I needed it.

01.24.28 And, but everybody else at New Visions did not email me, did not call me. It's just really amazing to see the dynamics. (CLEARS THROAT) of how people are so institutionalized. That they really detach themselves from the people. And are just focused on that job and getting it done, no matter what they have to do to achieve whatever it is. And I just find it really, really disgusting.

JW: I do, too. I deal with it all the time, like right now. Dealing with contracts, creating agendas and then people's lives get torn apart?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

- 01.26.05 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I don't know. I hate it, I really hate it, Jim. I hate it because I just, I find people always get the raw end of the deal, you know? And, and it's just because of, you know, people don't see them for who they are, and, and I just, you know, as much as I tried to advocate to keep Karen, I was not able to.
- 01.26.30 The one thing that I put on the table was Ok, well, if she's not able to come join us this year, maybe down the line in two or three years? And the answer I got was absolutely not. (LAUGHS) so. At that point I said, ok, no problem. Had I continued at the school and the administration changed, I would have brought her back.
- 01.26.57 But I'm no longer there to bring her or bring me back (LAUGHS). So, so Karen was the first, actually Karen was the second loss. Earlier, when we were doing the proposal writing, I was basically informed by New Visions to, you know, check everybody that I was bringing on the team, you know, references and speak to them, find out more about them.
- 01.27.29 Majority of the people I knew very well. There was one person who was an assistant principal, and she was having problems at her school. And after asking people and finding out what these issues were, in her school, the issues there were that there were some Jewish teachers who were calling her anti-Semitic. She is African-American and Muslim.
- 01.27.57 And she was also being bashed by the UFT and what have you. And at that point I was like Ok. I really cannot take any chance. If she's already been in the papers, already has this reputation to have her on the team. And she was someone I had to let go. But I was able to find a way to do it that was dignified and respectful without making her feel like she was thrown off the team.

- 01.28.29 But basically just telling her she had a lot on her plate. And she was ill at that point, and I said to her, I don't want her to, you know, to have one more thing on her plate. In addition to being an assistant principal, to trying to get her national certification. And then you know, dealing with personal family problems. That the best thing would be for her to be as an advisor from afar.
- 01.28.56 And whatever information or resources that she may have, to call me or email me, and you know, if she is (CLEARS THROAT) willing and able to actually look at some of the writing and give us feedback, and she was absolutely grateful. You know, for that opportunity. She almost felt like I, you know, got her off the hook? But so it worked to both of our advantages. And so, in that sense, I felt good about that, but I still didn't feel good about it because she was not guilty of anything.
- 01.29.33 But it was just this reputation that she developed based on, you know, the media campaign smear that was on her, you know, in her school? And by the UFT. But I just could not afford, you know, any, any surprises as we were moving forward. And so that was the first person.
- 01.29.59 And then Karen, and then the third person who was on the team from the very beginning was this Caribbean American woman who was really awesome, smart, learned to speak Arabic, lived in the Middle East for a year. Was working for an organization translating, you know, documents from Arabic to English. Really, really, really smart. And we hired her to be the school coordinator, site coordinator.
- 01.30.33 And I worked really, really well with her. She knew my leadership style, knew it well. But she was seen as a threat by the Arab-American Family Support Center. And the relationship that we had. And they pretty much wanted her to be their employee and tell her what to do.
- 01.30.57 They didn't want to share the, you know, they didn't want to share the responsibility of her being there for the school. And us both, me and them, supervising her because the money's

coming from the Gates Foundation for her to do this job. So there were struggles back and forth. At that point, there was serious, this was sometime in May.

01.31.27 There was you know, things were getting really crazy. The New York Sun did a horrific you know, week of slamming the school as well as slamming me. They allowed Daniel Pipes to write a couple of op-ed pieces, columns, the first one was saying why the school was a bad idea. And what's gonna, what it's gonna develop. And then the second was basically you know, you know, just highlighting me as this radical Islamic fundamentalist (LAUGHS) who was going to be you know, training terrorists.

01.32.08 So it, it was just really horrific. Absolutely horrific.

JW: How did you take the first wave of articles?

01.32.20 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, shortly after the school was approved, the blogs came up. And the blogs are owned by Daniel Pipes. So he has Pipeline news. They were digging up stuff about me. They were basically through the internet Googling me and finding out I was at this event, I was at that event, I did this, I'm (?) associated with this person, that organization, etcetera. And they also were taking quotes of, quotes that I was quoted in newspapers, and taking them out of context.

01.33.00 So there were, the, they basically portrayed me as a 9-11 denier. That I (?) denied that 9-11 happened. That I'm a, a terrorist sympathizer. I mean, a whole, whole lot of crazy stuff. So everything that was on the blogs started to appear in the New York Sun. And rather than rebutting it or getting people to write and, and sort of like counter it, the Department of Education or New Visions, they didn't do anything.

01.33.40 And at that point I was like Ok, if this is the strategy that they don't think we need to do anything. But yet, they were quick to say to me, you should, you know, if there are people in the Jewish and, and Christian community, clergy who could testify to your work and who you are, they should be, you know, encourage them to speak.

01.34.00 And at that point, we had done a media strategy where we talked about doing a national advisory council and a local advisory council. And I quickly formed the advisory, the local advisory council. And I invited local clergy and community members who I've worked with and who really could testify to my work and who I am as an individual.

01.34.30 And they were writing letters to, to the New York (?) Sun. in defense of the school and in defense of me.

JW: Were they published?

01.34.40 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah, they were published. Yeah. And not all. Some were. And but what they ended up doing was putting them up on you know, the comments on line. So people could pull those up.

JW: How were you feeling?

01.34.57 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: How was I feeling? I was absolutely appalled that Daniel Pipes and, and the likes of him can actually sit there and create, you know, this crazy stuff. I mean, for them to say that I'm in disbelief that 9-11 occurred, and that Arabs and Muslims were involved, and for them to take a quote which I was quoted in a newspaper (CLEAR'S THROAT) you know, and not completing the entire quote, just taking the first part, and just putting it out there, and portraying as if I didn't believe that it was Arabs and Muslims.

01.35.39 It was just really downright dirty and, and, and wrong. The whole issue of the work that I was doing after 9-11, they've never discussed that. They never, ever mentioned that I have a son who served at (LAUGHS) Ground Zero. None of that kind of stuff appeared. It, it was just really taking things and distorting it.

JW: Did you feel helpless?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I was very angry. I was very angry (~JW~)

JW: How can you describe what you had to do to survive as a person, building armor around your feelings?

01.36.56 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, I have to tell you, I was, I was angry. I was nervous. I mean, I knew that there was gonna be opposition to the concept of the school. But I was not prepared to see the entire campaign against me as an individual. Like I, I was just not prepared to see that people were gonna be so you know, so, so downright dirty in their politics to go after me.

01.37.27 That part really shocked me, and that part scared me, and that part, you know, made me really, really frightened, and, and nervous at times. Where you know, I, you know, had to be concerned about public events that I was going to, or you know what have you. And, I mean, one particular incident that happened, the wake that the New York Sun was slamming me, I had actually been invited by the Brooklyn DA's office to do a presentation for 30 judges on better understanding the Muslim community in New York City, to better serve their judicial needs.

01.38.14 And I did not want to do the event. But they begged me to do it because they felt that I really knew and understood the community and could shed a great deal of light to them. So in my conversations I said, well, is this a closed event? They said, yeah, it's just our judges. Well, we get to the event, 30 judges are there (LAUGHS).

01.38.39 Other folks from the Brooklyn DA's office are there. And we do our presentations, there are a couple of other people, and of course, before doing my presentation I made a disclaimer that I was not there as a DOE employee or as a principal of the school, but I am, you know, a community leader who's here to help and assist them, better understand the Muslim community, etcetera. I made my presentation. (~JW~)

- 01.39.05 Completed the presentation, we were taking questions and answers. And they all disassembled, and there was somebody who was sitting there but I had not paid close attention to her. She was taking notes on a small notepad. (LAUGHS) And then it dawned on me later that she was a reporter, because everybody left and she was still speaking to the other two speakers and the organizers. And I said who is this person?
- 01.39.35 And one of the people turned around, she's a reporter. I was like a reporter? (LAUGHS) I said which paper? And someone said the New York Sun. I flipped out. Flipped out. And I was like nobody informed me that there was gonna be media here. I feel that my rights as an you know, citizen have been infringed on here. I should have been informed, this should have been announced.
- 01.40.00 Had I known, I would not have done my presentation. I feel very disrespected. I flipped out, it was ugly. The organizers then calmed me down, and they're like ok, just don't make a scene right now because you don't want her to report this (LAUGHS). So I calmed down, and when I say I flipped out, I didn't like yeah. I was (?) it showed that I was upset. But I was not, you know, irate.
- 01.40.29 So basically I (?) you know, we talked to her, the judge, had a judge talk to her, and she said she apologized to me up and down. And she said, you know, I really did not know. She said usually these events are open to the media. But I was not informed that we were gonna have media here, and I know that you asked and we told you there weren't any. There was a miscommunication in my office. I was furious. So basically what I ended up telling the reporter was that she made sure that she included my disclaimer.
- 01.41.04 And that you know, she stick to what happened, nothing gets distorted. Of course, you know, she wasn't gonna guarantee me that because she still has an editor who is after me anyway. What ended up happening the next day, makes the headline, and of course, who do they highlight? Me (LAUGHS).

- 01.41.29 And they're like you know, Debbie Almontaser, Muslim-American leader who is also the principal of the Kahlil Gibran International Academy (LAUGHS). And I told her, I told the reporter, I said look, there were two other, you know, panelists you know, feel free to quote them, you don't need to quote me. And she says ok, well, I'll, I'll see. What do they quote me saying? That Muslims in New York City distrust the (?) judicial system.
- 01.42.03 But did not write everything that I said. And basically what I said was they (?) do not trust it because the countries that they come from have given them this impression. And therefore, they need to be educated about the US judicial system to know that the system is there to serve them. Of course, that wasn't all written there.
- 01.42.29 Again, the splicing. So that made headlines. I told the DOE that I was at this event, New Visions was sort of not happy, and basically you know, I was given this, you know, lecture of like, you know, you are living the life of a politician now, everything that you say and do, you know, you have to be mindful of where you go. Who you're with, and I was like this is absolutely crazy.
- 01.42.57 Why can't I be just like the 1400 other principals in the city? You know, this cannot be my, my life, 24-07, you know, I need that time to be an individual, to be a wife, to be a mother, to be a friend, to be you know, just an individual who has citizen you know, the rights of other citizens. So (CLEARS THROAT) anyway, at that point I was like I can't go anywhere without any media anywhere (LAUGHS).
- 01.43.30 So I was pretty much ultra sensitive to where I was going. I stopped going to community events. Just to avoid being seen by the media. And just really immersing myself in doing what I needed to do. So at that time, I was very, (?) I was really angry and upset. And Daniel Pipes then took it from the New York Sun to Fox news.
- 01.43.59 So there were a couple of times that he was on Fox. And what the DOE did at that time was they got equal air time, and rebutted things on TV. On Fox News. But in terms of the New York Sun, they did nothing. New Visions did nothing (LAUGHS). And then my lead partner,

the Arab-American Families Support Center did nothing. And it was really the rabbis and reverends of different, you know, churches who are writing in and, and basically defending me and defending the school.

01.44.35 You know, and this stuff continued. I mean, it continued for months. There were stuff in the daily news that were written horrifically about the school. And then I was interviewed by the Associated Press, the Daily News, a couple of others - not too many, because I really wanted to stay focused and I avoided speaking to the media as much as possible, to do the work that I needed to do in starting the school.

JW: How was the interview with the Associated Press?

01.45.03 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: It was great, it was, it was, and you know, it was, it was taped. So it went off really well. And it was carried all over the country, world. And then the Daily News invited me to do an op-ed piece, explaining what the school is about. And, and that went really well. That was in May. And then from that point, you know, June was pretty tough because the bloggers were blogging.

01.45.34 And you know, there were a couple of papers that were carrying it. But I would say that June and, and July were quiet. I got a lot of work done. A lot of work done. I was able to hire the teachers. You know, do a lot of the nuts and bolts in terms of hiring furniture, books, supplies, materials. Develop the curriculum.

01.45.59 Do everything you possibly could imagine that needed to get done for the school to open.

JW: Were there protests?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Protests, against the school?

JW: Yeah?

01.46.15 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: No, not physical as of then, no.

JW: There weren't?

01.46.25 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yes, protests (LAUGHS). Yes, protests about the site-ing, where we were gonna be sited, yes.

JW: What about that?

01.46.36 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: That was pretty scary. That was pretty scary. Our first site was supposed to be PS282, a school in Park Slope. And we met with the principal of the school and several individuals from her building before the, the it was made public, and the questions that I was asked, and the way that they were looking at me. And the way that they were talking to me was just really, really horrifying.

01.47.05 Questions that were hold to me were so, when are your holidays? And my question, my response was, the same time as all New York City public school holidays (LAUGHS). Will you need to, will you need to have the cafeteria modified for dietary, for kosher, hallal dietary needs?

01.47.32 And we're like no. You know, if we had kids who eat kosher or hallal, we will work with the families to prepare their food at home. You know, there are over 100,000 Muslim kids in the New York City public school system. I don't think anybody's changed their cafeterias, modified their cafeterias (LAUGHS). Will you be teaching religion? No. And I mean, and then the question was, the final one which I just felt really resentful about, so, how are you gonna (?) treat 9-11?

01.48.12 And I was like, what do you mean treat 9-11? Well, we have families who were lost during 9-11, and people are really sensitive, you know, what, what are you as a principal gonna be doing with your staff and your students?

01.48.27 I said, well, we'll be doing, observing, you know, a time of observance, like all other schools. And if there are kids and teachers who feel that they want to do some kind of project, they can. But we're, you know, depending on interest. You know, it's a time that, you know, a lot of people, innocent people were killed. And they should be you know, respected. And I was like, why would such a question be asked of me?

01.49.00 Totally appalled by it. And then, finally, you know, there just you know, they finally said, look, we're afraid. You know, this school may be a hotbed, this school may be dangerous. We don't know if you come to our building, how people will treat us. What if you're, if you become a threat to the whole entire school building? And no matter how much I reassured them and New Visions reassured them, they were already like set in their mind, skill that, you know, we're, we're this really foreign entity.

01.49.38 So they launched a huge campaign to make sure that we didn't get into the building. After the school was announced (~JW~)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

01.49.52 END OF TAPE # DA91

TAPE # DA 92
Debbie Almontaser
JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director
PROJECT REBIRTH

02.00.00 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: You were there at the protest?

02.00.38 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: No. What happened was the school was announced. And then we were invited to come to a community meeting, to meet the, the PTA and the families. And we were asked to come at 6:30. However, the principal made sure to assemble her school community, and we got there, and there were like over 500 people.

02.01.03 It was standing room. We walked into a very, very hostile environment. It was people from the Department of Education, myself, the partner, the Arab-American Family Support Center person that was hired, Candice, was there with me. And New Visions. And they were pretty hostile.

02.01.28 They did not want a school to come into the building. They did not want to share the space. And they were also greatly, greatly concerned about the school being a security issue. And of course, at this meeting, you know, people wanted to know what the school was. Gave them, you know, I met with the teachers, and the staff earlier that day. They were pretty hostile, too, and were asking me ridiculous questions. You know.

02.02.00 The same as the principal, do you have different holidays? Are you gonna be teaching religion, like the same old (LAUGHS) crazy questions, and answer all those questions and offered some of the resources that we were gonna be bringing to the building. And it made no difference. And then when we met with the families, it was still, it was, it was pretty, pretty heightened. People were (~JW~) really ugly.

JW: What was the worst in your mindset?

02.02.32 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: The, the worst moment was well, number one, they didn't have anywhere for us to sit. We were standing for two hours, against the, the stage. So it was pretty painful. It was hot. There was no water. I was nearly about ready to, to pass out from the, the heat and, and dehydration. And parents were coming up to the microphone and complaining.

02.03.00 And then one parent says, well, can we just hear about what this school is? So at that point the DOE and New Visions said, ok, Debbie, why don't you give the mission and vision of the school? Gave the mission and vision of the school, and I purposefully left out that we were gonna be teaching Arabic as the second language towards the end. And when I said we, we will be providing Arabic as the second language, there was like this uproar in the audience, like Arabic?

02.03.31 You know, or this huge like noise. And somebody yells from the back and says we don't need Arabic in this neighborhood. We don't need Arabic. If any language that we should be teaching our kids is Spanish. And then somebody yells from the other end, that's the language of the enemy. Why would we want to know what our enemy says? You know, their language or their culture. And I was like this is really crazy. So then (~JW~)

JW: What do you think that's about?

02.03.58 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Fear. And just you know, just mere, you know, racism. I mean, what's, what's wrong with speaking Arabic? What's wrong with learning about Arab culture? And it was just really, really astonishing to just hear people think out loud. People came up to the mike and said, well, you know, we don't really think that this is an appropriate school. You know, who's to say that the kids are not gonna be indoctrinated.

02.04.31 You know, and we don't want this to be a school where all students walking around are gonna be in burkas. (~JW~)

JW: Indoctrinated?

02.04.40 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Indoctrinated meaning that we're gonna, you know, we're gonna end up making every student believe in one ideology, and it might be you know, this radical Islamic ideology that's going to, you know, create hate mongers towards America.

02.05.01 So that was pretty wild, pretty wild. And the questions kept coming, and then finally the, the PTA president said, well, we no longer want to hear anything. I mean, they basically said we're not giving up the space, and we need to continue this conversation. And the DOE did not handle the meeting well.

JW: On the spot they said that?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yes.

JW: What did you say?

02.05.31 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, I couldn't say anything because I was with the DOE officials and New Visions, and at that point, they're like we've heard all we needed to hear. And you know, we just want you to know that we're organizing to make sure that this school does not come into our space. And you can now pick up your stuff and leave because we're gonna use the rest of the meeting time to strategize on how we're going to mobilize against the school coming here.

JW: The DOE was against you?

02.06.10 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: No, no, it wasn't the DOE who said this (~JW~) . This is the parents of the school, 282. (~JW~)

JW: And the DOE said what?

02.06.19 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Nothing. (~JW~) They said we, (~JW~) one of the things that, that was weak on, on the Department of Education was they were not able to give the amount of rooms that were gonna be allocated.

02.06.33 What that was gonna look like, for how long. So they were unclear with their answers. And basically what they said was, well, we're gonna have to reconvene this and when we

reconvene this, we will give you the specifics. So at that point, the parents said, well, then there's really no further, no further reason for us to have a conversation.

02.06.59 We'd like you to leave, and we're gonna use the rest of the time to strategize as to how we're going to mobilize against the school coming here. (~JW~) And we all left (LAUGHS). We all walked out.

JW: How was the conversation afterwards?

02.07.19 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, lord. It was interesting. Well, I mean, it could have went better. But it wasn't handled poorly on the Department of Education side. The person who went was not very well prepared in knowing all the answers.

02.07.33 There was somebody there who knew the answers, but that person was lower-rank. And this person didn't work (?) you know collectively with that person to say ok, what, what did you guys figure out? You know, what was the allocation of space? That wasn't done. And that person wasn't given the chance to talk.

JW: Did you know you were done at that point?

02.07.56 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: With this meeting? (~JW~) Oh, no, it, it dragged on, it dragged on for weeks. After that meeting, we walked out and there were parents who came over and some were supportive in saying I think your school idea is really great, but I just want you to know that we just don't want you here. Not because of your school theme or what your school's setting out to do. But we just don't want to lose our space. Which is respectable and you know, which I, I totally find as a valid issue and really respect it.

02.08.28 And then there are people who came up to me, there was one white couple who came up to me, asked me to give them my name and my contact information. I purposefully did not give out my cards. So I just wrote my name and I wrote my DOE email address. And the woman says thank you. And she said I just want you to know if your school comes, (CLEARS

THROAT) if your school is approved to come here, I'm gonna pull my child out in a second, because I refuse to have my child in the same building with a radical school.

- 02.09.00 And I looked at her with a smile and said, ma'am that's your provocative, you know, you, if that's what you want to do, you are more than welcome to it, you know? And. It was pretty scary (LAUGHS) to hear somebody who looked so sweet say that to me. And yeah, and then there were other people who were like, you know, school's a great idea. We'll be happy to help you find another space, but we don't want you in our backyard.
- 02.09.34 So we left that meeting, and the people who took my name down, oh, there was actually one guy in the audience who was really, really scary. He was like this (?) you know, over my dead body. If it means I have to start cutting heads off, it was really scary. And he wanted my contact information. I told him I did not have a card, nor did I want to give him anything (LAUGHS) at that point.
- 02.10.01 He just sounded too violent for me. And we ended up leaving. The next day, the chancellor's office was bombarded by emails from some of these parents, and what did they send? They sent all the blogs to the chancellor, about me. And about the school.
- 02.10.29 And then the press office was notified and then the press office notified me and at that point I was like ok. So. Why are we concerned about the blogs? You know, are you guys sort of like believing them or, and they're like no, no, no. But this is now the level it's going. It's like well, this is nothing new, you know, that everything on the blogs are not true. Everything that you know, Daniel Pipes is spewing about me and the school are not true.
- 02.10.58 But it was pretty, it was really, really disappointing to see the level that people were going to, to try to you know, incriminate the school, as well as me. And to prove a point to the, you know, the chancellor that the school has no business being a school, period. And that they were to gullible, you know, to believe what they were reading on these blogs. Really gullible. So, so you know, as the months progressed, another site was, was found.

- 02.11.34 But in between that time, the blogs kept getting worse. Daniel Pipes and his thugs found out about the Council on American–Islamic Relations, giving me a, an award for my outstanding community outreach and activism. And so they had a major issue with that (CLEARS THROAT) because they are portraying the council on American-Islamic relations as a, you know, terrorist front in support of Hamas and Hezbollah.
- 02.12.09 And what have you. So at that point, that was news-generating, and everybody wanted to learn more about it. So the New York Sun insisted that they do an interview with me, and that they wanted to do a profile on me. And had we not agreed to do it, they were gonna use some of the things that Daniel Pipes was putting up on his blog.
- 02.12.34 So the DOE basically just like they did with the Post said to me, it'd be to your best interest, it's better that you represent yourself, rather than having others represent you in telling their side of the story. Yada-yada. Did a 45 minute interview with the New York Post. I mean, sorry, with the New York Sun. And asked me a lot of questions about the school.
- 02.12.59 About my professional background, my community organizing interfaith work, etcetera. And got a really good understanding of what the school is about (CLEARS THROAT). They spent a week doing this piece. And they asked to speak to other people, they spoke to people in the Jewish community and the Christian community and the Muslim community and just trying really, really hard to dig for something, and they found nothing.
- 02.13.29 Eventually the editor of the New York Sun said to the reporter doing the piece, go back and ask these three questions. She has to answer these three questions. And so they were you know, pursuing me for 24 hours, begging me to answer the following questions, and I called up the DOE and I said do you know what these questions are? They're like we have no idea. Absolutely no idea. And we talked about, you know, in the interview about this organization, Council on American-Islamic Relations.
- 02.14.07 The president of the organization sits on the commission for Human Rights. He was appointed by the mayor himself - prominent lawyer, legitimate organization, you know,

providing people with civil rights, you know, services. It's one of 30 chapters across the country who are basically defending the rights of Muslims all over the country.

02.14.29 But continues to be vilified because of the fact that it's fighting for the civil rights of others, of this community. So the DOE says we have no idea. Do you have any ideas? It's like no, I have no idea. What can they possibly want to ask? They're like well, we'll do a group interview. You know, if you want to come by, we'll do it on the phone and we'll see what they have to ask. So we get the reporter (~JW~)

INTERVIEWER : What were you feeling at that point in time?

02.15.03 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: At that point in time, I was just like going crazy, like what can they (?) what now can they possibly ask? And I'm racking my brains, did I do something, did I go somewhere, was I, you know, anything. And the only thing that I thought of was maybe they found out that I was, I volunteered on, on what's her name (STOPS) McKinney. (STOPS) the congresswoman in Georgia.

02.15.36 Oh, my gosh, I'm blanking on her name. Cynthia McKinney. I volunteered in her campaign to get her back in Congress (LAUGHS). In 2004. The summer of 2004, and I'm like oh, maybe they found out about that. And I told the DOE and they're like Ok, but what's so big about that?

02.16.00 I was like well, not too many people like her because she sits on the International Human Rights Commission in congress. She's the, the head of it. And people feel that she's very outspoken about certain countries' abuse of power and abuse of civil, you know, and human rights.

JW: You mean the US?

02.16.23 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: No. (~JW~) out, you know, foreign (~JW~) she was on the foreign, foreign human rights council. (~JW~) So people within the (?) you know, in the

conservative right wing Jewish community see her as a threat to Israel. Because she speaks about these kind of abuses. And I was like maybe they found that out. And now they're linking me to Cynthia McKinney (LAUGHS). So the DOE, the press office at that point, they're like yeah, but that's not a newsmaker. People always volunteer on campaigns and you know, we don't, we don't think that's an issue.

- 02.17.02 And I was like ok, well, I don't know what else, then. You know, I can't imagine what they want to ask. So anyway, we get them on the phone, but I, it was nerve-wracking. I was like why are they doing this to me? Why don't they just give this up and just leave me the hell alone? Why is this happening to me, why not happening to everybody else? Why can't I just be normal like everybody else who's opening a school?
- 02.17.29 We get on the phone with the reporter, and first thing she does is she apologizes for all the calls and in insisting to talk to us and she also made it very clear that the questions were not hers and that they were given by the editor. And she really, really apologizes in advance. And the DOE tried to get the questions from her, but she wouldn't give it to them. So we sit there and the first question that I was asked was who do you think was responsible for 9-11?
- 02.18.04 I was totally blown away. And at that point I said to her, is this a question that you would ask of the 1400 other principals across the city? And she said no. I said, well, do you think this is, is it fair for you to ask me this question as a principal of a New York City public school?
- 02.18.28 Her response was no. The second question was what are your thoughts and feelings about (?) Hezbollah and Hamas? They are identified as terrorist organizations in the Middle East by the US Government and the world. What are your thoughts about them? And I gave her the same response, would you ask these questions of the 1400 other principals? Her response was no.
- 02.19.00 And my response was, well, then do you think it's fair for me to answer them? Of course, she said no. And then the last and final question was about this organization, CAIR, the Council on American-Islamic relations. She said, well, you know, from when we last talked to you,

we found out that these, that this organization supposedly after 9-11, there were documents that were found that this organization wrote letters of support of Hezbollah and Hamas.

- 02.19.31 How do you feel now about receiving an award from this organization? And at that point, I said to her, you know, we discussed this yesterday, you know, as the Department of Education has said to you, as well as I've said to you, this is a legitimate organization, it's a chapter here in New York. That is well-respected and recognized. And you know, I'm not a member. I'm not associated
- 02.19.59 I was given an award, and that's it. You know, and you know, this organization is legitimate and, and well-respected. And I don't feel like I need to, you know, engage in this conversation (?) you know, these political ideological conversations. And at that point she thanked me, we hung up the phone with her. The article was supposed to come out on Monday. This was Friday. The article was supposed to come out on Monday.
- 02.20.29 Paid fifty cents for the New York Sun, found out it wasn't in there. Called the DOE. They emailed the, the, the reporter. She emails back and says the, the editor decided to scrap the piece. (LAUGHS) So after 45 minute interview, after giving them a slew of people to talk to, and, and then doing their own personal you know, research trying to figure out, or find something crazy about me, they found nothing, and that's what they ended up doing.
- 02.21.05 So Alisha Cologne., who's one of their commentators continued to write. They continued to let Daniel Pipes write. And it was just pretty ugly, pretty ugly. You know, very despicable. And they had my picture posted on their website, from the moment the school was announced. All the way to the day of my resignation.
- 02.21.30 Like a couple of days after my resignation, I looked to see if it was there anymore, and they took it down. So it was pretty disgusting to, if you go on their main webpage, that you find my picture there.

JW: Was there another protest that happened?

- 02.21.49 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yes. The second protest was with the second school. And the (?) second school that was identified, the chancellor's office, the chancellor and the deputy mayor got involved.
- 02.22.04 They met with the school principals and they asked them to kindly work, you know, collectively to ensure that the school is welcomed. And recognized by the families, and that you know, we get what we need to do to make sure that we open. And at that time, there was discussion about the school not opening, before that, the school not opening in 2007, but opening in 2008.
- 02.22.35 And there was a back and forth in the paper. And then the chancellor and I had a conversation, and he told me that his gut feeling was to open in 2007. Because if we dragged it to 2008 that this controversy will continue and that it will just be really water torture. And I agreed with him. And assured him that I can hire the teachers, do the student recruitment, even though that we were late in the game.
- 02.23.03 And we did. I, I did everything that I needed to. So we met with the, the principals and their PTA presidents. They were receptive. But then when we went to meet with the school community, both communities, the Brooklyn High School and the middle school parents, it was quite interesting. It was packed auditorium.
- 02.23.30 There were people from all over, even community members who attended. And they were somewhat receptive, but then there was some opposition. And so the conversation was very well-framed. The PTA president from the middle school handled the meeting really well. The deputy mayor, Dennis Walcott, was there to answer any questions and offer support to the school.
- 02.24.00 So it's pretty, it was pretty well, you know, well-run. There were some crazies in the auditorium, who there was one woman who basically got up when it was time for the question and answer who asked, she said, I want to talk to that woman, that girl over there,

that woman with that thing on her head. And I was like ok, I guess I'm the only one here with something on my head (LAUGHS).

- 02.24.28 Turn around and I looked at her, she's like, you know, the woman that's wearing the burka. And so I got up and I was like it's not a burka, it's a hijab. And I said how, what, how can I, what questions do you have? So her question was, I want to know if you're gonna be teaching Sheri Allah, this is the United States. And you know, we cherish and value our constitution dada dada. And I want to know if you're gonna be teaching Sheri Allah. So I responded to her, and I said we are like any New York City public school. We will be teaching reading, writing, math and social studies, and Arabic as a second language as it is one of the most sought-after languages in the country.
- 02.25.12 That will be preparing students for international careers in diplomacy. What have you. So at that point, she's like yeah, but I want to know. I said no, we are not teaching it. This is a public school.
- 02.25.27 Then somebody gets up and starts yelling, this is America, we don't need to learn Arabic. Our kids need to be learning English before they learn anything else, they can't even read and write in English. So at that point, the attacks started on the school. And we don't need the school, this and that. The deputy mayor jumped in, and he basically said this is absolutely unacceptable of people to stand here and, you know, you know, to just continue you know, with this disrespect and this intolerance.
- 02.26.03 We are not here to discuss the approval of the school. The school has been approved, the school is going forward, and what we're here to discuss is site-ing and space. We are committed to the school, like all the other schools. This is no different than any other dual language school, and we're doing to do right by it, just like we have for other schools. And that was it. Went back and sat down.
- 02.26.29 There were some other questions that were answered. I was asked to give a presentation about the school. I explained in the beginning the mission and vision of the school, and then I

also read a, an email that I got from a soldier who served in Iraq, who was absolutely thrilled to hear about the school and the importance of the school. And the relevance of it in this day and age. And where our country is you know, concerning the war and preparation of our soldiers, etcetera.

02.27.07 And the email he shared with me, that only two percent of soldiers that are sent to Iraq speak Arabic, and he said it's quite frightening for people to go there, even though that he was fluent in Arabic, he was still, he still went through a great deal of culture shock, because the program that he went through to learn Arabic did not prepare him culturally to understand the people and the issues of that part of the world.

02.27.38 And that this school would be doing such a great service for our country. So I read his email and people were very, very moved by the email. And at that point, I said this is why the school is important. It's twofold, it's building bridges of understanding, and it's also preparing our students and our workforce for the 21st century.

02.28.03 People applauded and then I sat down. The questions and answers, and then the crazy stuff began. Which this crazy woman. (CLEARS THROAT) so (~JW~)

JW: Which one?

02.28.16 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: The one who said, yeah, are you gonna teach (?) which (~JW~)

JW: What is that?

02.28.22 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: It's, it's Islamic law. Islamic law that was used 1400 years ago, which really does not much apply to this day and age (LAUGHS). Is you know, in some places being used, but it's just so versatile it doesn't make sense. So.

JW: That was when?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: That was in May.

JW: What about June and July?

02.28.51 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Relatively quiet (~JW~) we finally got into, well (~JW~) we got into the space (~JW~)

JW: Did the mayor and his staff vow support for you?

02.29.18 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yes, they did, for the site and they, they committed a great deal of resources and manpower to make sure that the site was available. So after we went to the second building, we were supposed to be on the fourth floor.

02.29.33 Which all it required was painting and installing air conditioners, that's all. The parents of the middle school protested us being on the fourth floor and insisted that we be moved somewhere else. So what ended up happening was they kept negotiating back and forth, the DOE gave in, said ok, we'll let you have the fourth floor. We'll put the school on the first floor, we'll convert a cafeteria into a classroom, we'll convert the library space into a classroom.

02.30.04 And we will have the school at that part of the building. Everybody was happy. So when I went to look at the space, it's this huge cafeteria that was supposed to be turned into classrooms, one classroom, or two at that point, but that I said it would be too small for classrooms. Small office space. You know, what have you.

02.30.28 So at that point, they needed to get partitions, furniture. They took care of all of that. They said to me, do not worry about that, because of the fact that every, you've gone through all of this trouble, we will accommodate you by getting everything. You just tell us what you want and we'll get it for you. So at that point, when I was in this cafeteria, I was like there isn't even a place to hang a chalkboard. What are we gonna do here? And they're like don't worry,

we'll get you smart boards. I was like there's not even a place to hang, you know, bulletin boards for students' work.

02.31.00 Don't worry, we'll get you bulletin boards. So basically I made a wish list for them of all the things that we needed to make it conducive, where parents could feel like wow, this is a really great school that I've, you know, sent my child to. So that was being taken care of by them. I gave them what I wanted, how many things I wanted, and they were paying for it. So they were invested in that aspect of, like, we know that this is going to be a school in the media and the public eye, and in the media.

02.31.34 So we want to show that we are sticking behind this decision, and that we're gonna support the school 100%. So in that sense, that support was there, and I felt it. The only support that I was missing, and which I kept saying over and over, both to the DOE and to the New Visions, was public relations support.

JW: Why didn't they give you a media support person?

02.32.02 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: They didn't. (~JW~) It was, from the moment the school was announced, I said to them, we need to have somebody who will promote the school in a positive light. We need somebody who will counter anything that is developed or put out there. We can't count on the press office for the Department of Education to worry about KaGI and, and worry about the 1400 other schools that they're dealing with. And I was always, I was getting yes'ed to death about this. And also just saying to them, I can't, you know, I don't want to have to deal with media issues.

02.32.40 And that was something that I was constantly being bombarded with was every time the Department of Education press office could not answer a question, they'd pick up the, the phone and call me. We have this reporter who's asking XY and Z, not sure of the answer, how would you answer it?

02.33.01 So. Had to deal with all that. And that was like continuous. It, it was exhausting, even though that there was so much that we put together, and I put together for them fact sheets and, and what have you, to try to help them, there were times that (?) they were being asked things that just, we never thought about. So that in itself was draining to have to do that. In addition to all of that, I was also issued some FOILs, the Freedom of Information Law acts, which were also pretty frustrating.

02.33.38 I had received the first one in May, where the Brooklyn paper requested all of my email correspondences with the Department of Education regarding sie-ting. They wanted us to give them all of the emails between me and the Department of Education.

02.33.59 And they also wanted the school curriculum. And when I got this from the legal office, I mean, that was like the first time that I broke down and started crying. Like I was like are they out of their minds, that they want this information? What, you know, what constitutes that they can have this information? How dare they ask for this kind of information? And (?) you know, the thing that, that terrified me about this question was sitting in front of a computer (LAUGHS) and digging up all these emails about site-ing which, you know, is very daunting and time-consuming.

02.34.35 And at that point saying to myself, I can't spend my time doing this. I need to focus on opening my school. And so at that point, I was actually at a, a DOE meeting for the school. And what I did was when I was crying, one of the coaches saw me and she felt bad and she was like what is it, can I help?

02.34.57 And I told her, and she's like this is absolutely crazy. So at that point, the office of new schools (~JW~)

JW: What's at the root of that?

02.35.08 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: What was I crying about? I, I was feeling harassed. Like why must you have every email that I've been corresponding with the Department of Education? What is all of this about? So I felt harassed. I felt like I was being given a hard time.

02.35.28 And I felt like this, this paper in particular was not in favor of the school and was also trying to, to find ways to sabotage. And, and I just at that point also felt very overwhelmed. Like I can't sit in front of a computer and get you all of these emails and then also worry about opening my school. So that was, that was a frustration. So at that point, the Department of Education, the office of New Schools basically said ok, don't worry. We'll take care of this.

02.35.59 So they took the load off of me in terms of the FOIL. So there are about 5 or 6 FOILS that were issued for curriculum, for the student roster, who are the students coming to this school (~JW~)

JW: This is the government of the US asking?

02.36.16 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: No, this is (~JW~) residents of the United States requesting of a government agency information.

02.36.27 So the Brooklyn paper was one that requested the school's curriculum and requested all of my email correspondence with the DOE regarding sitie-ng. Then there was one issued by a professor who works with Daniel Pipes who wanted the curriculum. Then another one was issued, which he wanted, the same person, the roster of the students, and the list of personnel being hired, the teachers.

02.37.00 And so it just continued. And that's when the Stop the Madrassa coalition formed. Which is a group of people who are a part of all of these different (?) neoconservative right-wing organizations that are anti-immigrant, anti-Arab, anti-Muslim. And they continued to issue more of those. And the DOE kept, you know, basically saying, the curriculum is not done. The curriculum was done in July.

02.37.31 And it wasn't finalized until you know, right before I left. And they didn't feel the legal office didn't feel like we had to, you know, give them every piece of information. So we gave them a curriculum map, they weren't happy with it, which outlined what we were gonna do throughout the course of the year. Couldn't release the student information because that's confidential.

02.38.00 And we couldn't release the, the staffing, because at that time, people were not officially on payroll. They were gonna get on payroll as of September 1st. So all of this harassment was just really, really exhausting. Like every time that there was a FOIL, I was copied on it, so that way I knew about it. But from the FOIL that I got back in May, which basically alerted me to you know, them asking for my emails, at that point I was very cautious to put anything in an email.

02.38.34 So whatever communications that I needed to do, I pretty much did a lot of it on the phone. Because I was like I just, it's just too much, you know? Having to deal with all of this, you know, freedom of information stuff. So all of that was taking a toll on me, it was exhausting.

02.39.01 But I was driven, you know, driven to really stay focused. And to complete the curriculum, the scheduling and everything that I needed to for the opening of the school. And (~JW~)

JW: How is your family doing?

02.39.19 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Naige, I, I've made him go through so much. I feel so bad for this man. I always get involved in something (LAUGHS). This for him has been very, very trying.

02.39.33 Absolutely trying for him, first to see all the negative stuff being written about me. And just being very angry and upset about it. But really, at that time, you know, with the New York Sun, with the Daniel Pipes blogs, it didn't bother him as much. Or when you know, Fox news was doing their stuff; the stuff that (?) bothered him the most was actually the New York Post, you know? Slander and, and stuff that took place, that led to my resignation.

02.40.07 You know, where he was confronted about it. By it, actually, at work. You know, people knowing him and knowing me, and you know, and even my children also being like you know, swept into it. And so it was hard. It was really, really hard, you know? And then for him to know what really happened but not being able to say well, this is what happened, because of the fact that the DOE is like you can't talk about it right now, you can't talk about it right now.

02.40.39 So it's been hard, it's been really, really hard. And I think him seeing me not doing ok with it has taken a toll on him, you know? Physically. Emotionally. And he's just, he's really very disappointed in the system.

02.40.58 Disappointed in the coward, you know, in, in the, the way that the administration, this administration handled it- rather than standing up, you know, to this racism and bigotry, how they just basically you know, were cowardice in the way they handled situation. (STOPS)

JW: What happened in August?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

02.41.38 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: So everything was doing great. This group, Stop the Coalition, Stop the Madrassa Coalition was refurbishing everything that Daniel Pipes put together on his blogs. And what's scary, Jim, is that there were people, they were actually mobilizing people.

02.42.03 They were, they actually had people (LAUGHS) attending community events, come, coming to events that they knew I was going to be at. So there was the Children of Abraham Peace Walk, which I was one of the co-founders, and this year it was the, the 4th annual. And I did not have the capacity to organize it as well as work on the school project.

- 02.42.30 But people from the community who were a part of it last year were like Ok, we're gonna do it but we want you to make sure that you come to it, 'cos you have to be there. Said of course, get to the event, and people who were part of the organizing, they're like oh, this person's here. They want to talk to you, that person wants to talk to you. They're really, really eager to talk to you about the school. So when these people found out that I was there, they were asking me the stuff that they had, that that was posted upon the websites.
- 02.43.04 You know, is it true that you don't believe that Arabs and Muslims are responsible for 9-11? Are you going to be teaching Sheri Allah? You know, all of the crazy stuff. And these people were so abnormal, do you know what I mean? Like really weird. Weird. And I engaged them in conversation, allayed their fears. You know, that whole thing about is it true that you don't believe that it was Arabs and Muslims.
- 02.43.03 I had to explain to them where that came from, and how whoever posted it up on these blogs failed to complete my statement. And even though that I was having these conversations with these people, I thought they were listening, but they weren't really listening. They already had their minds set as to what they wanted to believe. So they're about 4, 4 people at this event.
- 02.43.59 And one of the women gave me her card, and she's a chaplain for one of the precincts, police precincts in New York, in Brooklyn. And she basically speaks to cadets, and you know, officers before they go on roll call. And was, you know, proclaiming to me how it's her duty to secure this country, and to you know, inform and educate the officers of what's lurking out there.
- 02.44.32 And to make sure that there's, you know, that they address every suspicious behavior. And in our conversation about the school, she wanted to know what were we gonna be teaching, is the US constitution gonna be taught? Yes, it is. Why do you ask? They're like, because we're afraid that there are people amongst us who are trying to abolish it and teach their own culture, and their own religion.

- 02.44.57 And this really crazy stuff. And I kept reassuring her, you know and she would say to me, well, in San Diego this is what's happening. We're afraid this is gonna happen at your school. And I'm like no, it's not gonna happen at our school. This is a public school. This is not a charter school or a parochial school. This is a public school that's governed by the department of Education. So you know, as much as I was able to share with these people, these people were still driven.
- 02.45.30 They in their research about me, found out about the Arab Heritage inauguration and the July you know, weeklong events celebrating Arab heritage. They literally attended every event that was posted on the website. Number one, looking for me, because people told me that there were people that attended asking if I was attending (LAUGHS).
- 02.45.57 And number two, because they were hoping to find something or crazy or what have you. And the day that they went to the park festival (?) Prospect Park, they went around with cameras and they were taking pictures. And they found the booth that was selling these stupid tee shirts (LAUGHS). They took a picture of the tee shirt, which says intifada NYC on it.
- 02.46.29 And a, at the bottom of it it says OWAM dot org, which is the organization that produced the tee shirt. Went home, did their research, found out that OWAM shares the same space as the organization which I sit on the board in Park Slope, SABA, the Association of Yemeni Americans. And they put together a press release that they put out to every single news station in New York City and nationally.
- 02.47.01 For coverage. And all of the media outlets called the Department of Education inquiring about it, and the DOE said, look, you know, we have principals who sit on the boards of many organizations. And it means nothing. You know, this is a tenuous connection. You know, she sits on the board, this organization uses the, the space for a youth program.
- 02.47.28 It has nothing to do with the school, it has nothing to do with her. They all dropped it, except the New York Post. They insisted that they wanted to do a story on it. And they spent Friday

calling, they spent Saturday calling, and Sunday, calling all my home numbers, calling my cell phone. Bombarding the DOE with calls, insisting that they you know, talk to me.

02.47.59 And in all of this, I kept saying to the DOE, I'm not interested. You know that we've all agreed that we weren't gonna speak to the media. And the same argument that I got before was, well, they're going to go by this press release and what's stated, and it's probably best for you to talk for yourself. Than to have, you know, this group you know, make the headlines. (~JW~)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

02.48.29 END OF TAPE # DA92

TAPE # DA 93
Debbie Almontaser
JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director
PROJECT REBIRTH

03.00.00 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: We left off with the tee shirts?

03.00.29 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: So the New York Post insisted because they had been after me for months for an interview, and I refused to do it. When the, when I shared the email about the US soldier, they basically said to me, well we don't believe it's true. How do we know that that email was true that you shared at this public event?

- 03.00.57 For all we know, you could have been making it up. They wanted to talk to me whether to find out if it was true or not, and I told the DOE, I'm not talking to them. And if they want to see the email, then we can certainly get the, the soldier to, you know, allow them to see it. So I emailed the soldier and I asked him. He said sure, you could share it. But just don't reveal the information about my family so you know, you could share the email.
- 03.01.32 My introductory email to you. We forwarded it to the Post, and they let it go. There, then they wanted to do a story about me and the soldier. And at that point, I basically said there's really no story about me and this soldier. We haven't met. We haven't talked. He just emailed me, you know, just basically extending his support of the school and saying how wonderful it is, and if they want to do a story, they could speak to the soldier.
- 03.02.00 So let the soldier know, he said sure, let me get clearance, and then we can certainly, if I get clearance from the military, I'll do it. He got clearance, they interviewed him, then they wanted me to comment, and I refused. So they did the piece solely on him, but then in the paper, what they wrote was you know, Almontaser chose to use this email as a PR tool. It was, I didn't you know, that was not my intent.
- 03.02.33 But you know. It's the Post. So because of the fact that I kept saying no, I'm not speaking to them, no I'm not speaking to them, they were really gutting out for me. And at that point, the DOE press office was like, look, it's (?) to your best interests, but the decision is yours. You know, they want to ask you questions about the school, they're gonna ask you about this organization.
- 03.03.08 And basically you could just tell them that, you know, there's no, no relationship to the school or you. It's an organization using the space. And that's it. And you know, this tee shirt has nothing to do with you or with the school. This is you know, and you don't dictate what this organization should or should not do.
- 03.03.33 Etcetera. And that was to the extent of preparation and discussion that I had with the DOE regarding the tee shirts. There was never any discussion of if they ask you about the tee shirt,

you have to condemn it. Or, if they ask you about the word, you have to condemn it, because it wasn't about the tee shirt. It was all about this organization and this tenuous connection. That's what they led us to believe.

03.04.04 So at that point, I said to the DOE, even before the Sunday that we talked to them I said look, if they don't let up and you feel that this is something that is really important for us to do, then I don't have a problem issuing a statement. We can formulate a statement and forward it to them. I get an email from the DOE, saying ok, we think we're gonna go with the statement idea.

03.04.32 You know, but here are the questions that were sent in advance to us from the reporter. I review all six questions, and not one of them had anything (LAUGHS) to do with the tee shirt. The first question was about the organization affiliation. That's all it was. And then all the rest were about the school. Curriculum. Some of the projects that we are gonna initiate at the school.

03.05.04 And that was it. So I spoke to one of the people at the press office, and she said, you know, it's down to the line. He has to submit a story at 5 in order for it to be run. It's already now 4 o'clock. We're trying to see how we're gonna you know, figure this out. If you can answer the questions and get them back to us right away.

03.05.31 The other press person was speaking to the reporter and he's like no, I have my deadline I need to do it right now, blahblahblah. Carrying on. That person calls me and he says to me, look. You know, it's down to the line. We really don't have time to do the press statement. The, the statement, but what I do want to tell you is that he's not the sharpest knife in the shed (LAUGHS). He basically is going to ask you about your affiliation with this organization.

03.06.02 You have no affiliation, yes you sit on the board like other principals do. You are not dictating to this organization and you know, in good faith effort, the organization you sit on allowed this organization to use the (?) you know the space for their youth program. And if

he says what are you gonna do with this organization or you know, what if they do something like this again, he said, don't go into any hypothetical's with him, just steer away from that, and keep you know, keep yourself, continue to emphasize over and over your personal beliefs of non-violence.

03.06.41 And you know, social justice, and you know, promoting building bridges of understanding, etcetera. So at that point, basically the whole notion of doing the statement was no longer on the table. And he said don't worry, you'll have this person on the phone with you from our office. (~JW~)

JW: Was it ever possible the story would be negative without any comment?

03.07.14 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yes. Yes. They were concerned that the press release that was put out by the people from Stop the Madrassa coalition was going to be what was put up. And it was pretty ugly, pretty, pretty ugly.

03.07.30 So they felt that it was better for me to share my personal views on violence. And rather than for the Post to use what was put in this press release. So that was the whole reasoning behind it. And I just love how they say, you know, we really think you should do it, but the decision is yours. Always you know, to get themselves out of it. So at that point, I hung up with the gentleman.

03.08.03 We got on the phone, all three of us were on cell phones. I believe the reporter was on a cell phone. It probably was like 4:30, 4:45 I can't remember the time. And I started off by saying to the reporter, you know, I've really refrained from speaking to the media. I have a lot of important work to do. You know, starting up a school, etcetera.

03.08.28 However, you know, we're here on the phone with you and I just want you to know that our time is limited because I really have a lot of stuff that I need to get done, and my only time, personal time, is the weekend for me to rest. He says ok, no problem. I won't, I won't take long with you. He says, well, you know what we're calling about. And you know, we sent

you questions in advance, but you know, we really just want to you know, basically get to know the school better, and then also, you know, know more about your affiliation with this organization.

03.09.06 So at that point, you know, we delved into the questions about the school. They were quick and easy answers. I had answered them prior. And then he basically says, well, you know, that's all good and what have you, but you know, now we, you know, the really the crust (?) your relationship with this organization.

03.09.32 You know, this organization that's actually producing these tee shirts. That are basically you know, not too, you know, not too well favored or you know for a tee shirt, etcetera. I said ok. I like many other principals in New York City, sit on the boards of organizations.

03.09.59 This organization is separate entity in itself. It's you know, an organization that receives foundation funding to provide youth programming. And I would never, nor would the organization ever affiliate itself with an individual or an organization that would condone, you know, any violence in any shape, way or form. So that is something that you need to know. My life's work has been X Y and Z.

03.10.28 I've been doing this for over 2 decades, helping building bridges of understanding. All of my training at Columbia here and there, you know, this is foreign to who I am. I would never affiliate myself with any organization or individual that would condone any violence. He says well, you know, our issue right now is, is these tee shirts. You know? I said, well, you should have spoken to the, this organization.

03.10.59 He says well, we've been calling and they haven't been returning our calls, and therefore, we feel that, you know you should be responding, since you're responsible for this organization being in your space. I said I'm not responsible for anybody. These tee shirts, this organization has nothing to do with the school. These tee shirts have nothing to do with the school. Or me. And therefore, I really don't see you know, any, you know, any reason for us to have this conversation.

- 03.11.30 And he says, well, you know, it is important for you to, to speak on this issue because you know, you're allowing this organization you know, to be at your space. I said look. This is a youth organization providing youth empowerment for students. Young women, to deal with female oppression and, you know, female minority issues, nothing less, nothing more. I don't believe that they are in any shape, way or form wanting to incite any type of violence in New York City.
- 03.12.03 So then he asks me the question of well, what does the word, you know, being that you're a school of language, what does the word intifada mean in Arabic? And I gave him the definition. And I said to him, if you look up the word in the dictionary, it means shake off. I said however, this word you know, means different things for different people.
- 03.12.27 And due to the violence in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, where thousands of people you know, have been killed, this is not an appropriate word to have, because it has this you know, connotation. He left all of that out. He took (LAUGHS) the word how I defined it in Arabic, and that's all he put there, and then the first line that he put in was Principal downplays the definition of intifada.
- 03.12.58 But doesn't include, and then he writes that I said I understand and probably I may have said it when he was arguing, and I said yes, I understand that, but I also told him prior to that that you know, this word has different meanings for different people. And what it meant for different people. So anyway, at that point, he kept asking me the same stupid questions over and over, and at that point I said to him, I said look.
- 03.13.30 I've already answered this question. There's really no reason for you and I to talk. This shirt has, this tee shirt organization has nothing to do with the school. And therefore, I really don't think there's anything else to talk about. If you have any other questions about the school, I'll be happy to answer them. Otherwise, I think this interview is over. So he asked me one more question about the school. We hung up. The person from the press office calls me back right after we hung up and says to me, good job, Debbie.

- 03.14.00 I think it went well. The next day, the article comes out, it was absolutely horrific. Absolutely horrific. The caption, the, the tile was Principal Revolting. So I was like oh, my god. Read through it. And the part that just really blew me away was how he basically painted me downplaying the historical you know, meaning of this word.
- 03.14.40 By just including, or by just printing the definition of the word and not including everything else I said. And portraying it as if I was defending the tee shirt and defending this organization.
- 03.14.5 When I did not defend the tee shirt (LAUGHS) I did not defend the organization. What I did defend was the young women that are attending this (?) organization, who are New York City youth from all over the city, who are underserved, you know, exploited young women who are looking for ways to express themselves through media and arts.
- 03.15.30 That's what I defended. Because what he was implicating was vilifying them as you know, potential terrorists in New York City. So just seeing that headline and then reading what he wrote, I was absolutely flabbergasted by it. I get a call from New Visions, and I, they left me a message saying the president, you know, I'm really disappointed in your comments.
- 03.16.02 Meanwhile, that Friday evening, I forwarded him the email, saying I need your help. Please see this and please get the Post to get off my back. He didn't respond to me, he didn't call me over the weekend. He emails me at 11:15 Sunday night after the interview had already been done. At that point, the press office calls me and says (~JW~)

JW: What was that?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

- 03.16.43 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: They, I get a call from the press office and at that point (~JW~)

JW: What was the emotion that came up about the president?

- 03.16.55 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, yeah, I was very disappointed. I was like ok, what is this judgment, you're disappointed when you haven't even heard (LAUGHS) heard what exactly happened, and where the hell were you when I needed you? So at that point, the, the press office calls me and basically says to me, what the hell's going on? You know, we told you not to talk about the tee shirt. I said, we didn't talk about, you didn't say let's not (?) we did not talk about not talking about the tee shirt. We talked about the organization and making sure that this organization continually emphasizing that there is no connection here.
- 03.17.35 And I, you know, have no ties to it and has nothing to do with the school and to stay away from hypothetical's. He's like yeah, but you defended the tee shirt. I said no, I did not defend the tee shirt. You need to know that I was misrepresented and misquoted. There was a lot of stuff that was left out and at that point, we were arguing back and forth.
- 03.17.57 And he says, well, I'm gonna get the person that was sitting in on the call. I was like get that person. But here's what I'm telling you. A lot of things that it said were not included. At that point, he says to me ok, well, right now we can't discuss it, we have to figure out how we're gonna fix this. I'm gonna call you back in a couple of hours after I talk to people here. And figure out how we're gonna politically handle this situation. At that point, I get a call from the ADL, New York chapter.
- 03.18.33 I get a call from the Jewish community relations council. These are all organizations that I've worked with. And who I have relationships with individuals who work in these organizations. So they're all calling to say what the hell's going on. The president of New Visions calls again, we get on the phone. I told him how I can't believe his message. And you know, I called him, I emailed him, I didn't hear back from him.
- 03.19.04 And I explained to him exactly what happened, and he apologized. He's like I just don't understand, why did you speak to the Post? And we all agreed. I said yes, we did, but this is what happened. And I did not want to, but the DOE insisted. So it was back and forth, back

and forth. He's like Ok, well, just call the press person at New Visions and work closely with them and we'll figure this out.

- 03.19.36 At that point, time, time lapsed that day, I was still in, in a state of shock as to how this article just came about. And at that point, I get a call, well, I had to leave the building, 'cos I was just totally like in you know, in, in a daze, I couldn't (?) focus, I couldn't do any work.
- 03.20.02 Totally, just totally distracted. And I told Maria who, who's the person that was working with me that day. I was like I need to just go out you know get something, get a bite and then I'll be back, and I went with Denise, who is an intern, interning with me, and we were just basically trying to strategize how to deal with this, how to, you know figure a way to work this situation out.
- 03.20.28 And you know, and be able to move forward with it. At 3 o'clock I get a call from the press office, and they're like ok. Well, here is, here is what we've come up with. We've developed a, a statement, we're sending it to you. We really need you to review it, to think about it. And just know right now that the most important thing is, is that the school move forward.
- 03.21.01 And you know, in order for us to continue supporting you, you need to (?) we need to seriously consider this. The people that have been supporting you all along and the school are right now sitting on the fence. You need to put your pride aside. And approve this so we can move forward. You're not gonna like what you're gonna read, but just know and understand that right now, this is the best way to diffuse the situation.
- 03.21.31 You know, and I said, well, give me a, you know, an understanding of what you're talking about. He said, well, I know that you want to rebut this, but we're not gonna rebut this. If we rebut this, we're only asking for more, you know, trouble and, and more you know, ammunition for the Post. They're not gonna let this go. So the best way to deal with this is an apology.

- 03.21.59 At that point, I basically said what am I apologizing for? I did not do anything wrong. I was misrepresented and misquoted. Things were taken out of context. And I was not supposed to be asked about this tee shirt. I was under the impression I was being asked about this organization. Nothing else, nothing more. At that point he says to me, Debbie, just put your pride aside and understand that this is the only way to diffuse this situation.
- 03.22.32 So I get to the office, get on the computer, read this stupid forsaken statement, and it just made me sound like I condoned what this word meant. That I simplified the meaning, that I am condoning violence. That I was insensitive to the historical context of the (?) Israelis. Etcetera.
- 03.23.05 I played a little bit with the language, and I basically there was one part, a sentence that said I regret, I regret something, I can't even remember. So I changed it, basically said I regret implying or no, I regret that I gave the impression.
- 03.23.32 I can't remember, but basically it was I regret that I gave you know, that you know, that I gave the impression that I condoned violence, and I put in there, I regret that it was interpreted as though I condoned violence otherwise. They took, they were like no, it can't, it's got to be straight, it's got to be this. We were on the phone, back and forth and he's like no, you can't, you just got to, it's got to be a straight apology.
- 03.24.08 My revisions were not respected (LAUGHS). They're like this is, the, this is what the statement needs to say, Debbie, and you just have to approve it. You want the school to move forward, right? You want the school to happen. You want, you know, you've reached this far, you've done this much. And this is the only way to deal with this situation.
- 03.24.30 I had absolutely no choice but to say ok, fine, if this is what you think is gonna work best, fine. At that point, I said at least consider some of the revisions and get back to me with the final. Waited an hour, waited two hours, kept calling to ask for the final. You know, what was gonna go out finally. I get it 2 ½ hours later, and it was the original statement that they sent me.

- 03.25.03 They took absolutely none of my recommendations. And basically since I said to them, fine, you know, that's what they went with. You know, not really taking my, you know, my thinking or my recommendations into consideration.
- 03.25.28 At that point, the next morning, all of these people I had mentioned from the Jewish organizations called. I called some of them back who I was able to. They were then being bombarded by calls from the New York Sun, from the New York Post, for comments. ADL commented saying they were surprised by the remarks. The next day I spoke to the, the head of the New York chapter, and he basically said, you know, I was really surprised what happened.
- 03.25.59 Told him everything that happened. He's like, you know, the New York Post is known for this blahblahblah. They were quiet about things, you know, what he said was not as inflammatory. The New York Sun interviewed the national head of, of, of the ADL and he says I was a fool to ever think she was any different (LAUGHS). So I was like this is just lovely. You know, you didn't even talk to me to, to make this, you know, to believe that of all papers, the, the New York Post.
- 03.26.37 At that point, the next day, the apology comes out and they rip through me again. They wrote this horrific article about me, saying that, you know, I was insensitive and I'm not, you know qualified to be a principal because I'm incompetent. It was really ugly. Really ugly stuff.
- 03.26.57 And they were just like after me, and then the next day another article came out in an op-ed piece. I mean, they were on a mission. I was on, in, I think the New York Post for 7 days in a row (LAUGHS). Really on a mission. So with all of this, New Visions calls me Tuesday and says we need to meet with you Friday. I said ok. They're like come in with your partner. It's a real important, serious meeting, we need to figure out how we're gonna move forward from this point on.

- 03.27.33 I'm like sure, no problem, I'll come to this meeting. Wednesday I find out that the New York Post contacted Randi Weingarten, the UFT president for an interview. (~JW~) United Federation of Teachers. Union.
- 03.27.55 They call her up, they call up the principal's union president, and they wanted statements from them. I found out about this from the principals' union who called me up and said, you know, we're really greatly concerned. We can't believe that this is getting, going this far. You know, we're here. If there's anyway we could support you, and at that point I was like well, where the hell have you been all these months? I didn't even know that you're there to protect me or support me. They're like well, we can give you support, technical support.
- 03.28.27 You know, here's what we're gonna say, we're basically supporting you and saying that you know, we're gonna move beyond this. They're like you shouldn't have never apologized. And I was like well, gee, thanks. I wish I knew that you thought this way before I signed my life away to the DOE. Who thought that this was the best strategy. And New Visions thought it was the best strategy as well. So. Don't get me started, 'cos I think the two are in bed anyway. So at that point, the DOE calls me but left a message.
- 03.29.03 And they're like we just wanted to let you know that Randi Weingarten has been approached, and she basically is taking a cheap shot at the DOE, but she's doing it through you. So there's gonna be a piece tomorrow if you want to call us and talk about it. Feel free, it's late in the day right now, but if you want to call, you could call on our cell phone blahblahblah. I didn't call at that point because I was just feeling like they literally me to the wolves. You know?
- 03.29.33 By letting me speak to, by making me speak to the Post. (CLEARS THROAT) And then with their cockamamie idea of apologizing. So at that point, the article comes out the next day, and they have Randi on one side of the page, and I'm on the other side o the page, and we both look like we're in a yelling match at each other (LAUGHS).
- 03.30.01 It's so ridiculous. They're so good for graphics. And I don't even know where they were getting all these pictures of me. That they were using with different angles. It was just

horrific. And she basically condemns me for not condemning the tee shirt, for defending the, the word and I should have never explained what the word meant. And it was just really horrific, really horrific.

03.30.30 And at that point, I was like oh this is just wonderful now. We have Randi, who literally stopped short from saying she should be fired. But basically says the school should be under extra ordinary watch. To make sure that nothing, you know, crazy happens. So (~JW~)

JW: What did you think was going to happen?

03.30.58 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: At that point? Well, after on Wednesday I started getting calls from parents who enrolled their children in the school. Actually, as of Tuesday. On Monday came out, then Tuesday, then Wednesday, I started getting calls from parents who were greatly concerned. And a few of the parents that called said look, we're not in anyway you know, second judging or second doubting you and your leadership. We know what the Post is about, but we're really concerned about safety and security.

03.31.35 You know, this all of this you know, heightened media, you know, and the way that they're portraying you and the school is making us concerned that the school might not be safe for our kids. And so of course, I kept reassuring them that this is the media, that the school is gonna be safe, it's gonna be secure, and that the DOE's doing everything in its power, and you know, I have good relations with the NYPD.

03.32.03 And just basically comforting them and getting them to say ok, you're right, we're overreacting. Yes, all of these measures are, are being taken care of. I got about 8 or 10 calls from families that I was able to calm down and get them to just see this for the face value of what was going on and this while political agenda.

03.32.28 And then on Thursday, one of the parent who I was literally speaking to every day, who kept calling me, rather than calling me, she emailed me and she said to me, you know, with all due respect to you, Debbie, you're a visionary, you're a wonderful person. And I think you're

gonna be a great principal and the school is gonna be really wonderful. But I just cannot, I cannot send my child to the school because I'm really, really afraid, security-wise.

03.32.59 And I could not pick up the phone and tell you this. So I'm emailing you to let you know I'm really sorry that I let my personal fears of danger make me make the decision not to send my child to your school. And I hope you understand. You would not want to put your child in any harm's way. And I hope that you respect my decision and not see it as a disrespect to you and the work that you're setting out to do.

03.33.29 So at that point, that email for me was like the, the email, the, the straw that broke the camels' back. And I was like oh, my god. If the other 8 or 10 parents start doing the same thing, you know, there will be no school. And if other parents find out that parents dropped out, people are gonna be basically abandoning the school, and then there'd be no reason for us to have the school. If you have no students, you have no school.

03.34.01 At that point, I was greatly concerned, but that Thursday morning, I get a call from New Visions at 10 o'clock. And they wanted me to go in and speak with the president, and I said, well, I'm in a meeting right now. But I will certainly, I'll come when I'm done, I should be there at 1 o'clock. But as the days were moving forward, I sort of felt like this.

03.34.30 I want to say like a drift or a silence between me and the DOE and, and New Visions, like we were communicating, but it wasn't like communicating to try to move forward on all of this stuff. It was just like every time that I did speak to them, when they finally called me back, was this sense of loss of control. And it just did not sit well with me. And I sort of started to feel the, the sense of support you know, gradually you know, going down.

03.35.05 And when I went in on Thursday at 1 o'clock to speak to the president of New Visions, and I was just sitting across the table from him, and there was someone else from the new school development team from his (?) organization. And just looking at his face, and looking in his eyes, he looked like he hasn't slept. He looked in really, really bad shape.

- 03.35.31 And just basically I could see the fear and worry in his eyes. Of how to move forward with the school. So at that point, he said to me, we (?) I needed to speak to you. I'm sure that you saw today's headlines. I know that you've been getting calls from parents. You know, thank you for sharing that information. Thank you for working closely with the parents to get them you know, to see that the school is important.
- 03.36.05 And I said to him, all right, Bob. Where are we? Where, where are you as an organization. Where is the DOE in this situation, because I feel like you know, I'm not, I, I feel like I'm not getting all the answers that I need. You don't look yourself. I haven't heard anything substantial from the DOE about this issue.
- 03.36.33 The articles keep getting worse. What's going on? So he says to me, Debbie, my organization has never been put in such a situation before. I am at a total loss right now as to how to move, how to move forward, with everything and what is going on. This has gotten so out of control. My board is on my back. I haven't slept in two days.
- 03.37.01 This is becoming, this has gotten so out of control that I don't even know what to do. Our phones are ringing off the hook, our emails are being blasted. Letters are coming in, board members are yelling and screaming. He said, I've never dealt with such a situation before. I don't know where we stand on moving with the school.
- 03.37.27 And at that point I said to him, ok. Well, what about the DOE? He said, well, the DOE hasn't said anything to us, but you know, if we, if we can't figure out where we're going, I don't know what the DOE will do without us. So at that point, I said to him, I said, you know, this whole situation started with the DOE insisting that I speak to the, to the (?) Post. Had they respected my wishes and allowed me to issue a statement, we wouldn't be in this situation.
- 03.38.05 However, they didn't respect my wishes. They insisted that it was important. I went along, you know, the interview was not even 5 minutes. Went, zipped through the questions. Was asked a stupid question, which I was misquoted, taken out of context. And then this is what happens.

- 03.38.30 And basically right now we're at this standstill where you are telling me, where I'm reading from you right now that the school probably won't even be able to go forward, based on you know, the current events that just occurred. And he, he just sat there quietly. I said, so, I said to him, I said you know, when I took this on, I took it on to be an instructional leader.
- 03.38.58 I told you guys many times over we needed a PR firm, we needed someone PR to deal with this. That I can't do everything, I can't be the spokesperson. I can't be the instructional leader that I needed that support. So he had that point, says, I disagree with you. You are supposed to be the, the spokesperson. I said yeah, I am, but I'm supposed to also be providing, getting the support that is adequate for me to handle situations, not on a Sunday afternoon, you know, a five minute conversation and being told he's not the sharpest knife in the shed, and then being fed to the wolves, and then having the person on the press office that's on the phone with me hang up and say you did a good job.
- 03.39.41 And then two days later we're issuing an apology. Where had people supported me about what I said originally, we wouldn't be in the situation. So he's like well, we can't go back, we can't undo this, we can't undo that. The damage has been done. I don't know what we're doing.
- 03.40.00 I'm at a total loss right now. I've been in conversation with the chancellor. He doesn't know what he wants to do. But we're all right now in a standstill. And I said, well, what, what do you, do you have any resolutions? Do you have any alternatives for us to move forward? (CLEARS THROAT) so he basically says to me, Debbie, you have right now become a lightning rod for the school.
- 03.40.32 People and the media right now are not seeing or distinguishing between you and the school. This is all now all about you and the school has now been absorbed by the comments that were made, and the way that this has gone right now. And so people are not seeing the distinction between you and the school.

03.40.58 And this is a big problem right now. And so we are right now just at a total standstill in terms of figuring out how to move forward. So in the very little words that I was getting from him, I mean, I, you know, you'd have to be stupid not to get the message. I said, well, if you are right now, if you think that my resigning is going to be able to move the school forward, and me stepping down is going to make that happen, I will do it.

03.41.41 But there is one thing that I need you to know is that this is not about me. This is about the school, the concept of the school, and how these groups and these people all over the country are threatened by such a school existing.

03.41.58 And I guarantee you, three weeks from now, the next person who would come in and replace me would fall under the same attacks. It would be no different. Because right now, the primary objective is to close the school down, not to get its leader down. But if this is what I'm hearing from you, that right now this is probably the only way to move forward, my stepping down and moving myself out of the picture to give the school a chance to open and to thrive, I have no problem in doing it.

03.42.36 But I am disappointed in you, and I'm disappointed in everybody who to this point right now, is basically caving in to the bigotry and racism that has been basically after me and after the school. So (~JW~)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

03.43.03 END OF TAPE # DA93

TAPE # DA 94
Debbie Almontaser
JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director
PROJECT REBIRTH

04.00.00 PICTURE UP

04.00.04 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: So at that point, he says to me, all right, well, ok. So this may work. It would certainly give the school a better chance. I never, ever thought that I'd be sitting here and saying to you that the (?) in order for the school to move forward, that you may have to make the sacrifice. I want you to know that it's very admirable.

04.00.31 And very telling about who you are as an individual and the sacrifices that you've made, you know, on the behalf of people, the movement, etcetera. And now you're making another sacrifice by providing the school the chance to move forward. He said, so I think you should think about it (~JW~)

JW: The mayor hadn't officially gotten involved at this point?

04.01.00 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yes, at that point, he said to me, I want you to think about it. You know, I'm going to speak to Joel, which is the chancellor. I'm gonna let him know that this is something that you've come up with as an alternative, and to see what his thinking is about it. And if you (~JW~)

JW: Did you talk to Naigi?

04.01.23 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I did not talk to Naigi (LAUGHS). I did not. Naigi called me around 4 o'clock. And I did not talk to him. At that point, he was like how are you? It's going on, like I'm fine, everything is good. I'm just really busy, I'm going in to another meeting. I just could not tell him over the phone, he was not in town, he was in the Pocono's. And I just didn't want him to start like flipping out, and, and whatever. And I knew that he was gonna trust me in whatever I did. However, I said to New Visions, I said, well, fine, you can talk to the chancellor. I am gonna think about this further.

04.02.00 But at that point I said to him, I said listen. If, if it's New Visions that's right now at a standstill and wanting to go further, you can feel free to pull out, you know, as my supporting organization, and the DOE can handle it. And he said to me, he says, if we pull out, the DOE will not have the capacity to move with the school forward on their own.

04.02.27 I said, ok, thank you for you know, your honest analysis of the situation. I do want to think this through. I do want you to share with the chancellor that this is you know, alternative that I'm seriously considering. But I need to know, you know, from him, if this is something that he feels strongly about. Or is it something that he's going to discourage me from doing.

04.02.56 So I want to talk to him. So he's (~JW~)

JW: Had you been actively considering it or was it a spur of the moment idea?

04.03.06 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: The pressure was immense. And I basically saw the writing on the wall. The, the lack of, of conversations. The lack of getting answers to things. Like I just you know, there was such silence, do you know what I mean?

04.03.28 Even though that there was talk, it was still silence, like just helpless silence. And then the parents that I kept talking to were just really, really alarming me and the, the biggest thing I was afraid of was the parents. Withdrawing and basically if they withdrew, then there was really no sense of having the school, because it was all about the numbers, making sure that you had kids.

04.03.59 So I seriously started thinking about it because I was like nobody's really coming up with any brilliant ideas. Nobody's, you know, where this is still happening. Like every day the Post was coming out with something else. And then with Randi's piece, I was like Ok, we are totally finished here. (~JW~)

JW: Randy's position is above?

04.04.25 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Randi is Randi Weingarten is the president of the United Federation of Teachers union. Which is one of the strongest unions in the country. Teachers union.

JW: Above the DOE?

04.04.39 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: They would never want to tangle with her (LAUGHS). Yeah. Yeah, she is a huge thorn in their side. Huge thorn in their side.

JW: When you saw that, that's when you felt like the writing was on the wall?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah, yeah, that's when I saw it. And then getting the email (~JW~)

JW: Is that the equivalent of seeing my face up against President Bush or something?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

04.05.05 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yep, you should have seen the headlines. Yeah.

JW: What did you think?

04.05.13 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I, well, I was just, I was petrified by the graphics. The two faces, facing each other with both of us having our mouths open at each other (LAUGHS). And then it says, UFT president Randi Weingarten rips principal. Yeah.

04.05.31 And she wrote a letter. And they took a lot of her letter out of context. (LAUGHS) So it was not nice, it was not nice. And at that point, I was like oh, my god, this is not good. 'Cos now Randi is in the picture. And she's a force to be reckoned with. So that was like that confirmed like the writing on the wall. Like there's no way I'm getting out of this whole situation right now.

- 04.06.00 Unless the DOE, New Visions, and the mayor's office was gonna brush it off and say screw this, we're sticking, we're digging our heels deep into this and we're gonna open this school, and we're gonna support Debbie. And I just did not, that wasn't happening any more. The support for the school was happening, but the support for Debbie, once Randi's letter was post, you know, published, I just saw that.
- 04.06.29 That they were not willing to support the two. Two aspects, the (?) you know, Debbie and the school. So I wanted to speak to the chancellor that day. Bob said I'm gonna try to get a hold of him, he's on vacation in Colorado. If I can't get a hold of him, I'll see if he has anybody in his place. So we, we talk at 4 o'clock, and that was like the time that I told him I would somehow you know, I'll, I was gonna think for a few hours and speak to Naigi and speak to some of my colleagues.
- 04.07.09 You know, to help me assess the situation. I couldn't even pick up the phone to call Naigi and try to share this with him (LAUGHS) 'cos I was like this is too huge for him to have to deal with right now. And not being home, and far away, I know this is just gonna just drive him up the walls. I called up two very, well, I called one person who I have a lot of respect and admiration for.
- 04.07.33 And I shared with her the whole analysis of the situation. And told her where New Visions was in the process. And how they couldn't see themselves going forward, and I basically said well, obviously it sounds to me like, you know, the only way to move forward is for me to step down. And I said, what's your analysis or, you know, of the situation?
- 04.08.00 Do you think that if I don't step down, what would happen? And this person basically said, look. I know the system and I know the people that work in it really well. You will go forward with it, but the support that you've been getting (?) all along will not be as strong. And you may be able to fight this battle for a few months. But if you don't have the support that you need, you are end up, you're gonna end up failing as well as the school failing.

- 04.08.34 And I don't think that that's something that you want to happen. You know, because this is far bigger than just you as an individual. It's you know, it's the school that you've worked so hard for, to create. And then the other person I spoke to, I said, well, what do you think? Do you think New Visions would pull out, and if they pulled out, the DOE would pull out? And it, the same exact analysis.
- 04.09.00 They're like they're not gonna do it right there at the drop of a hat and say we're not supporting you, we're not supporting the school. But you will not get the support that you need. And at that point, I was like I can't commit, you know, suicide here by you know, killing myself and killing the school. So at that point, I heard back from the president of New Visions. He said I can't get a hold of the chancellor.
- 04.09.29 But the deputy mayor of education is available and he'll be happy to speak to you. And you're more than welcome to call him and he is really, you know, he's very touched by your (?) you know, by your you know, offering to step down for (?) you know, for the well-being of the school, and he thinks it's very commendable and blahblahblah. And I said, well, I haven't made my decision yet. But I'm still exploring all the options and I want to hear from him if he has any (LAUGHS) other alternatives before I make my final decision.
- 04.10.05 So I met with him, and at that point, he was basically reiterating how (?) commendable this is and admirable and blahblahblah. And he's sorry that it had to get to this, and he's sorry that the press office you know, pressured me to speak and did not provide me the support that they should have and what have you.
- 04.10.32 And how important the school is for the mayor and for the city and how committed they are and how much capital that they've spent. And you know, he basically said to me, but you know, Debbie, we've reached a point that we are right now just totally exhausted. So your decision to give the school a chance to survive without any more controversy is really commendable.

- 04.11.00 And you know, I know that you're still thinking about this. The decision is yours. You know, we all know that you have the best interests for the school and the kids of New York City. And you know, we just want you to know that you're a valued employee, not only at the Department of Education, but you're also a valued community member who's done so much for us and the mayor's office, and you've built so many bridges.
- 04.11.30 You've brought so much to the city and you know, all the mushy stuff to make me feel good (LAUGHS). Which I did not want to hear at that point. I was like you bastard, you know? I can't believe that you're sitting here trying to make me look like a hero, but in the meantime, you guys are just, you realize that I'm a liability right now. That's what you, you're treating me like a liability right now, because you just are a coward.
- 04.12.01 People at New Visions are cowards, the mayor is a coward, the chancellor is a coward. That you can't stand up to the racism and bigotry that's out there against me, against the school. And that you are allowing the New York Post to be the barometer for this city for you to make policy decisions. Of course, I was thinking all that, but I didn't say that all to him (LAUGHS).
- 04.12.28 So at that point, I basically said to him, well, I have to think about this because we're talking about my livelihood. I spent two years of my life developing this school from scratch. I don't know what I'm gonna do after I resign. I don't know where I stand. And I just need to think about this some more. And he says, well, can you let me know in the morning, because tomorrow is the mayor's radio show.
- 04.12.59 And we know he's gonna be bombarded by calls. About all of this and the whole situation. So can you please let us know by 8 o'clock in the morning your decision? And so that way he, if he does get, when he gets calls, he is prepared to answer them. So I was like Ok, this is really (~JW~)

JW: He strongly suggested you just take the course of action?

04.13.33 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yes. So at that point, I said to him, well, I need to think more about this because we're talking about my livelihood. We're talking about a lot here. He says, well, as I said to you, you're a valued employee. You are an asset to the city. We will you know, do whatever it is that we need to do, to make sure that you are comfortable in a position of your choice.

04.13.59 I said, well, you know, I, how do I know that you have my interests right now, because obviously I don't feel like you have my interests right now. Your interest right now is making the mayor look good. You know, on my behalf. You know, on my account. And he says, Debbie, you know, we never thought it would get to this. You know, it's not about you. It's, it's just about maintaining the course, and making sure that the school opens.

04.14.31 And we know that that is the most important thing to you. It's nothing personal against you. It's just we really believe that your decision to do this right now is gonna be probably the best way to be able to (?) make, to help the school survive. To open, to be viable. So (~JW~)

JW: What happened that night?

04.14.57 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I went home (LAUGHS). No, I did not go home. Oh, god, it was a crazy day. So the superintendent of the school, how the hell did this happen? Oh. Before I went to the meeting with New Visions, I called up four people. Four people I know and trust. And I was like New Visions wants to meet with me and I have no idea why they want to meet with me. This is really bizarre. And they're like, well they can't ask you to resign. They can't ask you to, you know, they're not your superintendent, they're not your boss.

04.15.31 And one of the people was a superintendent. She's like look. The chancellor has not called me or spoken to me. Therefore, I don't think you should even be thinking this. She calls me up and she says, Debbie. I've been calling and I haven't been getting through to the chancellor. Don't make any move until you further hear from him. Don't listen to anybody. Until you further hear from him.

- 04.15.58 And then I told her he was in Colorado. And that the deputy mayor was the person that was the go-between. So she called him up. But he didn't answer his phone. And she's like, well, I'm gonna intervene, because you've been doing everything you need to. You've done your job. You've done far above and beyond, and I don't think you should make this hasty decision. And she was really like advocating and saying no, this is not what you should be doing. So she comes and meets me after, so after I met with the deputy mayor the first time, I said well, I don't think I want to do this until I have some kind of security.
- 04.16.34 He says, well, what are your thoughts? I said, well, if I'm gonna resign, I'd like to mention in my resignation letter what I'm doing next (LAUGHS). So at that point I was like I'm not doing this without giving them a hard time. So he's like Ok, well, let me go to the DOE and let me see what I can figure out. He goes to the DOE, comes back 45 minutes later. And he says, there is absolutely nothing I can offer you a position or whatever.
- 04.17.01 Joel is not here. He's on vacation. But I give you my word, you will be well taken care of. So I said, I'm supposed to function on your word? That I'll be well taken care of? He's like you have my word. So at that point, he says to me, so you know, you know, can you make your final decision tonight and let me know? I said, well, I still have to think about it. And I will call you in the morning. He says, ok, well, can you call me by 8 o'clock? (LAUGHS)
- 04.17.34 But here's my cell phone, you could call me any time of the night if you want to further discuss this. So he gave me his cell phone. He's like any time of the night. I was like I'm not gonna call you. So I didn't call him at 8 o'clock either. I called him like at 8:25. I was like let them sit a little bit. Roast on this. At that point, they're like well, you know, you're, (?) in your resignation letter you could talk about how admirable.
- 04.18.03 The reasons were your students and the safety and security and you know, that you did not want to stand in the way of the school. I was like I can figure out how to write my own resignation letter. The president of New Visions had the audacity to say to me can I see your draft before you send the final letter? And I was like, no. And then he called me up, and I

said to him I said I haven't even sat down yet to do it. And I don't know when I'm gonna sit to do it.

- 04.18.37 I need to think, I need to wrap my head around this. He's like well, you know, you can send it to me as early as 5 AM in the morning, I'll be happy to give you feedback. I was like I may write it at 5 o'clock in the morning. (LAUGHS) So I, at that point the, the superintendent came and picked me up.
- 04.18.58 She (?) was just absolutely in total shock. Could not believe what was happening. She took me out to dinner. We talked. She's like I just can't believe that this is happening. This is so surreal. This is so crazy. This is so out of hand. She just felt horrible, absolutely horrible for me, that basically I had to put myself in this situation to, to get the commitment of everybody to move forward with the school.
- 04.19.29 She drops me off at another friend's house who this person is someone very near and dear to me and who just like I will go to her if I had a problem, she would come to me (LAUGHS) if she had a problem. And she has therapy counseling to deal with anger and aggression and all that kind of stuff, so spent the first hour crying (LAUGHS). And she's like just let it out, let it out. And so I spent that first hour crying as to how angry that I was that all of this happened.
- 04.20.00 And how much I sacrificed, and what have you. And then after all that was done, then I said to her, I said I need to write this letter, but I don't even know where to begin. And every time that I would start just typing something I'd start to cry again. And so she helped me through with that, she helped me through with the letter. At that point she's like does Naigi know about this? I was like no, he does not. She's like ok, you need to call and this was like 8 o'clock, we called him.
- 04.20.34 And he's like so, what, what are you doing? I was like I'm at you know, my friend's house, and he's like he knew right away when I told him that I was there, that there was something (LAUGHS) going on. 'Cos that's a, that's basically when he, he sort of like Ok. She would

not be with Ozzie unless something was going on. Ozzie gets on the phone with him, she's like why don't you come over, Debbie's here.

04.20.59 You know, you guys are welcome to spend the night here. But we're here, so you know, just come on over as soon as you can and just drive safely. She's in good hands. Everything is ok, you don't have to worry. She's really doing good, she's handling all of this really well. I'm really surprised at her (LAUGHS). Anyway he gets there. We about finish the letter. Right before he comes, the president of New Visions calls to try again to see if I would send him my draft.

04.21.32 And I was like absolutely not. I was like, I've entrusted my whole career in, in, in your hands and the DOE's. And now I'm taking control. So at that point, he just let it go. Naigi came. He you know, he was just totally shocked by all of this. You know, we, we hung out for a little bit.

04.21.59 You know, they talked to him, my friend and her husband. And just helped process the whole situation. And you know, we hung out some, for some time, and then we left their house like at midnight, and we went home.

JW: What did processing the situation involve?

04.22.19 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Just talking about it. You know, you know, like Naigi was like, why, why did you make such a you know, irrational decision? You know, you should have waited it out. And, and then I basically was like I don't think I would have gotten the support that I needed.

04.22.34 I cannot set myself up or the school for failure. And then my friend, who's also pretty keen on city government and stuff like that, was like that would eventually would be what would happen. And it's, this is probably right now the best time to pull out, rather than to you know, lose, you know, lose as an individual and then lose the school, you know, as an institution which a lot of people are looking forward to.

- 04.23.06 And then just, you know, just you know assessing and analyzing the whole situation as to how the world of politics and everybody, you know looking out for themselves and their agenda, and you know, this, they realize the DOE, the mayor's office, that they took this on and that they have to see it through.
- 04.23.28 And sometimes you know, you have to do what you have to do to accomplish your mission. And it was pretty evident that, you know, yeah, it was important to have me there, and yeah, you know, I did everything that I needed to do to make it happen. But you know, once you know, there was an issue that couldn't be salvaged, that was it. You know, the show must go with or without me.
- 04.23.58 So at that point, we went home. Got up 5 in the morning, read the New York Post, and there was two pieces. There was an article, follow-up on the article that was done on Monday. And then the editorial board wrote a piece. The editorial board's piece was basically how do you say shut down? What's a, what's the Arabic word for shut down? (LAUGHS) And it was giving multiple reasons why the school should not exist.
- 04.24.33 And I was like oh, my god, this is absolutely crazy but the most scary part of all of this is that these people use the New York Post as their you know, barometer to decision-making. They're always worried about the Post, and what the Post is writing and what the Post is saying and who's you know, it's just despicable.
- 04.24.57 I have lost so much respect for these people. So much respect for these people that, that's all they base everything on is the New York Post. You know, that they give it the credence that they are giving it. That the New York Times and the Daily News didn't even get a chance to cover this. On (?) Monday, and Tuesday and Wednesday, the New York Times and Daily News were calling the DOE as well as me, and everybody was like, the you know, right now the strategy is not to talk to any media.

04.25.34 And had they spoken to the New York Times, the New York Daily News, they may have been able to balance the playing field. Of what was actually happening. But the strategy was, no, we're not gonna talk to any media. But we're just gonna let the Post, you know run the show here.

JW: What about your goal to become a principal?

04.26.10 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I'm certainly not a principal, Jim. I don't even know if I will. I think that right now, my career as a principal has been shot because of the New York Post. Totally shot out of the water.

04.26.29 And if I were to want to lead a school, I don't think I'd want to lead any school but my school, the school that I created. So that, you know, that opportunity right now has been taken away from me. You know, because of the fact that the people that I circled myself with, I, who I thought had my best interests did not have my best interests.

04.27.00 It was all about putting (?) you know, this institution on the map, this administration on the map no matter who had to fall, you know, in, in, in the process. So. I can't see myself leading any other school right now, and even if I wanted to, the New York post will not let me do so because of the smear that they've cast against me.

04.27.32 And I say this from the experience that I've seen with other principals. The high school principal of Lafayette, (CLEARS THROAT) who was bombarded by negative press, particularly the Post, you know, week after week. (CLEARS THROAT) Where at the end of the year, she left Lafayette. And she was supported by the Department of Education.

04.28.01 But her, the school is nowhere compared to what the theme is of this school. The school was, you know, had a lot of violence and what have you, and she did things to turn it around, but then there were things that were done that were just weird, and what have you and the press gave her a hard time, the New York Post. She left at the end of the year. She was at Tweed.

04.28.27 Another opportunity for her came to lead a school. She went through the whole entire process of being accepted to lead the school. And the New York Post found out about her going to another school, and they started the whole campaign again. And they ended up making the school community that she was gonna go lead protest her coming on board. So this woman right now, there's no way that she's gonna be able to go back to a school. This campaign was launched against her then.

04.29.00 And then again, and who's to say they're not gonna try to launch it again. And I think in my situation, I will probably face the same thing, especially because of the way that they have characterized me as the intifada principal. You know, that I am this, you know, war mongering (LAUGHS) leader (CLEARS THROAT) who should not be around the minds of children. So (~JW~)

JW: Could you teach?

04.29.32 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Could I teach? I could certainly teach. But I, if you're talking, if you're asking about being in a teacher capacity, I wouldn't go back. I would not go back. And if I were to teach, it would probably be on a university level. I would not go back into the New York City public school system to teach.

04.30.00 So the irony of all of this is academic freedom (LAUGHS). You know, this has been an issue on university campuses all over the country. And my school and my situation has brought academic freedom issues into the public school system, you know, for middle school and high schools, you know?

04.30.27 And it's quite scary and alarming that I'm on Campus Watch. You know, which basically has a list of all of the university professors who have to be watched because of their controversial you know, seminars or topics of discussion that they discuss. And so I've made that list, you know?

JW: Will you be able to teach at a university?

- 04.30.52 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I probably would, if I pursued it. I think that there would be universities who would probably be interested. The issue is what would I teach there (LAUGHS). And this goes back to the question of what am I gonna do with my life, where, where do I need to move. How do I take this negative experience and turn it into a positive? How do I take it to, to you know, to create a sense of healing? And to you know, to bridge the gaps, I think, that this, this whole, the, the project, the school project has created a schism in New York City.
- 04.31.37 And I, I can't figure out how to describe it. But it's really brought people who are you know, racist and who fear the unknown out in terms of being vocal about the school not existing, you know, being out there against it.
- 04.31.58 And (?) September 4th, there were people protesting in support of it, all of the people who were supportive of me and supportive of the school. And then on the steps of city hall, all of these, you know, hate mongers were out there condemning the mayor and the chancellor for opening the school and demanding that it be shut down. You know? And it's, it's scary. Most of them live here in New York City.
- 04.32.27 Some of them live other parts of the country. But the way that they've been able to mobilize and to the, the resources that they're putting into this campaign against me and the school is quite frightening. Quite frightening. So you know, that to me has been very disappointing, and the other thing is that that's disappointed me greatly is the people that I thought had enough courage to stand by me did not stand by me when I needed them.
- 04.33.05 And I feel that, you know, had the shoe been on the other foot, I would have, I would have jumped to their defense. And I would have spoken out and I would have supported them and I feel like those voices, because of how this became so politicized could not do that.
- 04.33.32 And the other disappointing thing about all of this is that you know, when you look at the whole political ramifications of this whole situation, it's so blatantly, you know, Jewish

organized, do you know what I mean? Most of the people on the Stop the coalition, Stop the Madrassa coalition are from Jewish organizations or Jewish members, and constantly portraying this as a school and portraying me as an individual that has an agenda against Israel.

- 04.34.13 And the US (LAUGHS). When if anybody knows what I stand for and the work that I've been doing has totally been the opposite. It's, you know, building bridges of understanding between the Muslim and Jewish community. Between you know, immigrant communities and this country.
- 04.34.34 And so all of this stuff right now has just been, you know, just turned inside out. And so you know, the people that right now I feel a sense of betrayal by is, you know, some of these groups, Jewish groups that I've worked so closely with, who just stood on the sidelines and didn't say anything.
- 04.35.00 So I'm feeling a sense of betrayal there in terms of like if something would have happened to you, I would have been there. Also, just you know, not being given the benefit of the doubt by people at the DOE, the mayor's office, and then just this whole thing of like everybody taking this stupid tee shirt out of context, you know? I did what any educator would have done is use this as a teachable moment.
- 04.35.33 And I you know, and I think long and hard about this. The mission of my school is what hung me. You know? Looking at things from multiple perspectives, building, developing your own formed judgment based on the information that you receive on whatever the topic or issue is. And what I did was I provided (LAUGHS) this reporter the definition of the word.
- 04.36.03 And also giving him the multiple perspectives of what this word mean for different people. You know, what any educator would do. And then for people you know, like Randi Weingarten or others across the city who say you know, (?) you know, condemn, you know,

condemned the word, I condemned the violence, but I don't condemn the language, do you know what I mean?

04.36.33 What, what I mean? I condemn the violence that has been perpetrated by this word, the way that this word has been used, but when someone says to you who's totally out of your culture, out of your language, to condemn something, it's like you're condemning a people or a language. You know, this word before the Palestinian-Israeli conflict meant shake off (LAUGHS).

04.36.58 And because of the conflict, it's developed this word, this you know, this negative connotation. This definition. Which I explained all of this, you know, to this reporter. But what was used was basically just the perfect words to hang me. You know? And he, from the, just the, the amount of time that was spent in the interview, he already had his story written. All he was looking for was sound bytes to plug them in at different parts.

04.37.33 So the irony of all of this is, you know, the school being you know, an institution that helps people understand things from multiple perspectives, you know, and that's, that's what, how I would expect my children to be educated. I don't want my children to get one point of view. You know, I want them to be presented with a multiple perspectives, and then make their own informed decision as to what is truth for them.

04.38.09 And so my definition of the word gave everybody's truth (LAUGHS) but yet that wasn't presented. So.

JW: You talked about fate over the years, the path and God's plan?

04.38.36 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I don't know what the plan is. And I don't know what my fate is. I mean, it's, I never in my wildest dreams thought I would land in something like this. So scandalous. I don't, I can't even find it, I guess the word scandalous (LAUGHS) is the best way to, to just, to describe this.

04.38.58 'Cos and the irony of all of this right now, is that I have not been able to tell my side of the story of what happened, as to how the New York Post framed me. And vilified me in this way. You know, people, if you look at all of the reporting right now, every newspaper article that discusses this whole thing with the (?) tee shirts, sorry, either says I defended or I approved the tee shirts.

04.39.30 I failed to condemn the, you know, the tee shirts. And I did, (?) in the interview say it's not an appropriate tee shirt in New York (LAUGHS). What else? Oh, and then there was one article that basically said I was caught wearing the tee shirt by a reporter. So all of these stories are out there. That have been you know, concocted by people, by reporters, but nobody has Debbie's side of the story. And it's because the DOE has asked me not to speak about this right now.

04.40.06 And to wait off until the school's settles and be able to tell my side of the story. But I am right now fearing that if I don't, I don't know who in the media's gonna want to give me that air time to share my side of the story.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

04.40.26 END OF TAPE # DA94

TAPE # DA95
Debbie Almontaser
JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director
PROJECT REBIRTH

05.00.01 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

INTERVIEWER : We've talked about the facts, but not what's underneath all of it? Is your faith being tested?

05.00.46 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Big time. I think that what, what's happened has absolutely been a huge, huge alarming surprise for me. Like I never in my wildest dreams thought I would get caught up in something like this.

05.01.04 You know, this whole thing with the media. Being silenced, you know, for the betterment of the school. You know, just not exposing (LAUGHS) everything that's happened. 'Cos if I expose everything that's happened, it's, it will not be good for a lot of people.

05.01.29 And I mean, even before coming here and thinking about this, an I was like you know what? This is not coming out for five years, this administration (LAUGHS) will be long gone by then.

INTERVIEWER : I'm interested in your path of faith, the idea that this is part of a plan?

05.02.05 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I don't know what the plan is right now, Jim. I really don't know. I. it's like I feel that the past two years have, I've just been on this, you know, really, really fast, fast roller coaster. And not stopping to, to think, not stopping to process. To analyze where I am.

05.02.36 You know, and I know that I've gotten where I've gotten you know, because as I've always said, fate brings me here, and this is the path that I've been given to not necessarily lead, but follow because it's the path that's been given to me. I have taken this, you know I, I've accepted what's happened to me.

05.03.02 Whether I like it or not, and I think I mentioned earlier that (CLEARS THROAT) there are times that I'm very, very angry at all of these cast of carriers, characters. And then I come to

the final conclusion, this was meant to happen this way. You know, this was written to happen this way in my life. And so right now, the test is how do I handle this situation?

- 05.03.32 And there are two (CLEARS THROAT) two ways of handling the situation. And that is one, to go public with all of this crazy stuff that's happened and expose the wheelings and dealings of the department of Education and New Visions. And put it out there. And just make them really look bad in terms of how they handled the situation and how they buckled to the racism and discrimination.
- 05.04.02 And at that point, basically if I'd went that route, of course, the media, you know, and all of this is not gonna go away. And when you know, and, you know, it's not just exposing it, but it's also pursuing a lawsuit. You know, because there could have been so many things that could have been done differently. And for people to sort of like (?) put the writing on the wall for me and to figure it out, you know?
- 05.04.31 It just should not have happened. It should not have happened. They should have not buckled to the racism and discrimination that's out there. And this became evident for me because when I sent them my letter, they all cringed from my letter of resignation because I basically said that my falling under attack is based on my religion. And the fact that I wear hijab and America's not ready for you know, an observant woman to be a principal of a public school.
- 05.05.04 This is what it's all about. And so they cringed when reading it, did not want to release it to the media because they felt that it was gonna open up another can of worms. And at that point I really didn't give a care. Because this is what it was all about, from Day One. That's what it was all about. And so that (CLEARS THROAT) that in itself is one way, but I just cannot, I can't put my family through any more hardship.
- 05.05.36 You know, Naigi has taken so much dealing with all of this drama. My children, you know, just being exposed to it, and hearing about it everywhere they go and it's just, it became so overwhelming. And for me, to take that route and just continue with this whole thing, it will not in any way help them.

- 05.06.02 But it will just exacerbate the situation and be a continued reminder of this whole situation. So. The other route, you know, that I've basically been thinking about and probably would be the most conducive to all, is not exposing all of this stuff, but using this as an opportunity to educate.
- 05.06.31 And to really you know, use this as a platform to turn this negative into a positive and ask a lot of really important questions, you know, of, of our country. Where (?) are we as a nation. In 2007? In terms of being the most tolerant country in the world. Are we? You know, what exemplifies tolerance? You know?
- 05.07.00 How have we exemplified that? You know, and just talking about what I've endured, what this school has endured, and how this school is far more needed now than any time you know, in the world. And anywhere in the world. And then where do we go from here? How do we deal with this? You know, if, you know, with the racism and, and bigotry that exists in our country?
- 05.07.31 You know, how do we exemplify, you know, having the so-called, you know, supremacy and, and tolerance if we are not truly exemplifying it. So I don't know how I would do that, but (LAUGHS). So I've given thought to writing a book about this. I don't know if you saw the piece that was in the, in the New York Times, the Record of Muslim, Muslim Principal Ignored.
- 05.08.01 There was a publisher who reached out and, and asked if I would be interested in writing a book. That's one, one venue. And also just really speaking about this issue on a public level. You know, making myself available to speak at universities, at organizations, wherever the opportunity lends itself.

INTERVIEWER : How do you think that would affect your family?

05.08.34 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: It may, but I, that's the thing that I have to, I have to figure out how do I do it without making it more controversial, without making it confrontational. But you know, finding a way for it to be healing and educational. And I just don't know, I have to figure that out. But as the days have, have passed since my resignation and, and just reconciling with all of this, these are the things that now you know, that has now been really what I've been thinking about, in terms of you know, my path or where I feel like I need to go.

INTERVIEWER : Any relief?

05.09.21 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (LAUGHS) Any relief from (?) resigning from my post? (~JW~) I have to say yes. The relief. My stress level has gone down extremely, because I swear to you, Jim, there used to be nights I'd wake up in the middle of the night saying oh, my god, I forgot to do this. Oh, my god, I got to remember to do this. Literally, every night I was replay, I was actually not replaying, but predicting in my sleep what was gonna happen the next day (LAUGHS).

05.09.55 Like if I knew I had a meeting with X Y and Z person I would dream about that person and our meeting. So there was, I was so absorbed in (?) this school, and my role, that it was beyond, beyond belief. I lived it, I breathed it. You know, when issues arose, I felt my stress level go up. My heart palpitate. You know, feeling a sense of overwhelm-ness.

05.10.28 And then there were times I felt a balance when things were going ok, and things were moving forward. But you know, it pulled me away. It's 7 days a week, you know, 15 hours, (LAUGHS) 24 hours. And I also saw a sense of relief with Naigi, 'cos I know that there were days that he could not bear to see my anguish. And, and just the stuff that was going on, or how absorbed I was with this.

05.11.00 As you know he's always been so supportive in anything I do. But I think these two years, he has been above and beyond in terms of support, because knowing that this was really my dream. And so when all of this happened, I saw a sense of, of relief, because he realized that

as time progressed with my leading the school that you know, as, as the high profile-ness elevated, he became far more concerned.

05.11.38 About my safety. And so I know now that he's sensing a sense of relief, that that's something right now that you know, that it wouldn't have to worry about that. And he still worries about my safety right now, anyway (LAUGHS).

INTERVIEWER : You can spend more time with your family?

05.11.58 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Definitely more time with my family.

INTERVIEWER : How is that?

05.12.03 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: It's great. It feels really, really great. And it also, you know it's, it's helped me reconnect with my kids, 'cos when this happened, they were very upset. They all cried, and they're like we can't believe you threw the towel. How could you give up, why did you let them win? (LAUGHS) The typical stuff. And I was like I didn't let anybody win. You know, they may have won this battle, but we're gonna win the war because the school is gonna be open on September 4th, and September 4th is a day of victory for us.

05.12.34 So I'm gonna sit tight, and I'm gonna do my countdown, and when September 4th, you know, happens, we've won because they did not succeed in shutting the school down. And so September 4th was a true, true victory. And my family was happy, (CLEARS THROAT) my kids called to congratulate me, friends called to congratulate me.

05.12.59 So it's, it's totally different, you know? And I'm just right now not, I have not, you know, immersed myself in doing other things. I'm really trying to take it easy and, and just taking one day at a time. And as I mentioned earlier, you know, I go through all of these different feelings of like ok, I want to be around people. And then there are days I don't want to be around people. It just around my family and then there are days that I just don't, I'm just so unhappy with how everything happened.

05.13.35 Yeah, so.

INTERVIEWER : Did you talk to Youssif?

05.13.41 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I did. I did. And he's been really, really supportive. And he from all of my kids has been the one that's been living this whole saga (LAUGHS). With me because (?) the line of work that he's been doing.. He's been working as an expeditor.

05.14.01 So a lot of architects and people at the building department have been keeping close watch of this. And when he first met some of these people, they're like you name sounds really familiar. Are you related to Debbie Almontaser? And he's like and they're like oh, we heard about that school. So he's shared with me that there have been a couple of people who are not in favor of the school. But sort of started feeling like Ok, well, that's your mom, ok. And (~JW~)

INTERVIEWER : What's an expeditor?

05.14.30 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, he, he helps process paper work for architects, with the building department. So he basically, an architect would say I need to get this processed and finalized, and approved by the department of buildings, can you do this? And then he would do all the paperwork, and take it to the building department (CLEARS THROAT). And then the building department would assess the paperwork and approve it. So.

05.15.01 So yeah. So he, you know, his been keeping, people that he's working with have been keeping him, you know, have always been talking about it. So for the most part, everybody was really disappointed and disgusted as to how things had rolled out. But you know, he was, he was, as I mentioned, he was angry and upset about my resignation. But at the end of the day he realized that it was for the better good of the school and that it was admirable of me to do what I did.

05.15.36 But he also felt a sense of disappointment in terms of how this administration handled it in the media. Of quickly accepting my resignation. Of using it as an opportunity to blast out pres release. And so he feels like that part was poorly, done in poor taste.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

INTERVIEWER : Did you happen to feel any humiliation?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: A lot. A lot.

INTERVIEWER : What about that?

05.16.24 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Gosh. It's so hard to talk about it, Jim. (PAUSE) It, it was. It, it's just. In all of this, like there was the, the part that kills me the most about all of this, there was, I did everything by the books. I did everything in my power to make the school be where it is today.

05.16.59 In terms of the hiring some of the best teachers that you can find. Doing my homework on each and every one of the teachers. You know, meeting with them, hearing them. Understanding how they function, how they work, what their style is. What their philosophy is. Far beyond what other principals who are opening schools right now did. I was so driven to make sure I had everything in place.

05.17.34 I went to a meeting at the end of July. To where I met with first year, second year, and third year principals, and they broke us up into our groups. And I was with the first year principals. And there were 7 of my colleagues, and the question for us was what are the things that are keeping you up at night that you still need to do before school opens?

05.17.59 So my colleagues are sitting there listing all of these things. And the facilitator turns around to me and says Debbie, do you have anything to contribute? Or are any of those things up there stuff that relate to you? And I turn around and I said to her, I don't have anything to

contribute. And all of the things that are up there, I've already done. (LAUGHS) And everybody at the table turns around and looks at me in total shock.

05.18.29 How did you do it, when did you do it? What do you mean you already did it? And I basically said to them, I, I did. I've done it all. Because you know, this is how I've spent my time. I know that my school's under scrutiny, and I just want to be prepared for whatever is gonna come, you know, before school starts. I wanted to make sure everything is done when school starts. I don't have to worry about these things. And (LAUGHS) ironically, too, my colleagues there are like can we come, can you show us your curriculum?

05.19.03 Can you show us the orders that you put in for materials and supplies? And I was like sure, come. And they came and they were just totally in shock to see everything put into place. So, you know, just the fact that I you know, busted my back to get all of this done, you know, and none of that counted for anything, you know?

05.19.27 And for New Visions then to bring somebody you know, who I really like, I respect, but now everything that's being played to the media is that she developed the curriculum. That she was on my design team, that she worked very closely, that she was the person who we consulted with to develop the curriculum. She did none of those things (LAUGHS). And just the way now that they're trying to spin this to make it seem that it's this person who's done all of this, to avoid any more connection to me.

05.20.03 Do you know, or affiliation to me, or that I was, that I touched those things or did those things. You know? As if though there was something wrong with me? So that part is very humiliating, to see the people that I really trusted and respected to sort of like now back away. You know, and feel as if there is something wrong with me.

05.20.30 It hurts, it really hurts. And then, you know, the people that I thought were my friends, you know, when I really need them the most were not there for me. You know, and that is pretty humiliating because they were called, you know, by the media to speak and a couple of people, or a couple of organizations responded by saying that they couldn't comment.

05.20.57 So that was in a sense, a sense of feeling, you know, betrayed as well as like what's wrong with me, for you not to speak on my behalf?

INTERVIEWER : Is that back when you were young?

05.21.16 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: It does, it does. It does. And it, and it all just brings it back to no matter what, no matter what it is that I, I've done to sort of like claim my space as an American citizen it's, it'll always be questioned. And that's the part that hurts. It's like you know, I and I know people in my community work double time to prove who we are and how much we love this country and how much we're a part of this country. But it just, you know, when something happens, that all just goes right out the door, or right out the window.

05.22.00 You know? And just this whole thing with how the media was portraying me, Yemeni-born, you know, it's like nobody knew that I was from Yemen. It was not an issue whether I was from Yemen or not, and just the way that that became a significant, you know, part of my identity, when it's the least significant to me. You know? What makes me who I am is the place that I've been raised in.

05.22.27 And yet, that was not included, not even saying Yemeni-American or it's just, it's, it's just horrendous. Horrendous. (PAUSE) So we have a lot of work ahead of us, Jim. (LAUGHS). A lot of work. Just you know, when I think that things are getting better, I don't. Like this whole experience has just showed me that things are not getting better.

05.23.02 That things are really gotten heightened, in terms of the backlash and the discrimination and the bigotry that exists out there. You know, and how like right here in New York City, it wasn't as blatant after September 11th as it is today, right now, with all of these campaigns that have been launched against me. Against you know, the Muslim Day parade, by the same people.

05.23.32 And they're just gonna continue. (PAUSE) And there just has to be a counter to all of this, to get the people who are the voices of reason to speak up against this stuff.

INTERVIEWER : Do you feel the American dream exists?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (LAUGHS) Not after what happened to me.

INTERVIEWER : Did you feel like it had existed?

05.24.03 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I did. I did, and I really, had I been able to continue and accomplish what I was setting out to do as a principal, I would certainly feel that I had fulfilled my American dream. But I don't feel like I did, and even right now, no matter what I set out to do at the Department of Education or anywhere, at the Department of Education, it will not fulfill me.

05.24.34 And I don't even know what will be the most fulfilling thing for me to do right now. I know that my social responsibility, you know, and this goes back to my faith, you know, of you know, looking at what the, the issues are, and, and taking social responsibility to, to work on them, to you know, better the world, is to speak up against what's happened, you know, the racism and the bigotry, and, and expose it and educate people, and.

05.25.17 You know, find a way to bridge the divides. But you know, that, I know that, that that right now is probably gonna be the most fulfilling thing for me to do. How am I gonna do it, I don't know how I'm going to do it.

05.25.31 How I'm going to tackle it. 'Cos a lot of this you know, and going back to the question that you were saying about has this been humiliating, it has been, and it's caused me to second doubt myself. It's caused me to feel inadequate at times. And I just don't like, I don't like that feeling at all. And so I constantly have to do like this pep talk to myself.

05.26.01 And you know, close friends, continually call me and try to cheer me up, and say this is not you, this is not about you. This is a bigger issue and you can't carry this load. And make it seem to be you. Yeah. (PAUSE)

05.26.29 So I don't know where I'm going, Jim. I know I'm going somewhere (LAUGHS). But I just haven't found that route yet. I need to go somewhere; otherwise, I can't, I don't think I can live with myself in terms of not doing something to, you know, to, to further you know, further the, the cause of understanding. 'Cos this is just, it's not who I am to just not you know, to, to just disappear.

05.27.06 I, that part of me was the part right now that's hurting the most. You know? And I think that you've known me long enough to know that I'm not an introvert, I'm an extrovert (LAUGHS). And I just have to find a way to come back out.

05.27.26 Find a way to come back out and, and really, really do something I don't know, spectacular, or something profound.

INTERVIEWER : You started by educating through tolerance and that's what it seems to be applauded?

05.27.56 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: We've only come so far, and we're still so far away. We're still so far away. So yeah, so that's what I need to do. I need to find a way to do that. To do it in a much more deeper profound way. And to reach masses, 'cos this is not just a New York City issue. This is become a national issue. Even international. I've received emails from all over the world.

05.28.26 About this issue and how people are appalled as to how everything unfolded. So that's what I need to do. I need to find a way to reach the masses.

INTERVIEWER : Will you be there in five years?

05.28.46 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Why do you have to ask me about five years (LAUGHS). I don't know, Jim, look where I am in five years (LAUGHS). A total flop.

05.28.58 Five years ago, you asked me that question. I feel like right now I'm back at Square One.

INTERVIEWER : I disagree – I try to look at defeat as a calcification process that strengthens and or just diverts you into a different place that's your path?

05.29.39 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: My problem is that I have not been given the opportunity to step out of my self, and look at everything objectively and process everything. I'm constantly being reminded of what's happened. Through email, through phone calls, through the media.

05.30.02 So it's been really, really hard. And the times that I have been able to do that I've been able to process and come to some of these conclusions. And the thing that I constantly remind myself is that I cannot let this divert me from the bigger picture (LAUGHS). And it's so easy, though, to be swiped right back into that diversion, and that's a scary thing.

05.30.30 And that's the, you know, inadequacy and interests and the insecurity that I feel sometimes.

INTERVIEWER : Anything else?

05.30.47 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I can't think of anything else. I have a headache (LAUGHS).

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

05.31.08 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (MID-STATEMENT) This is the one that I did not look forward to. 'Cos it's rehashing all of this. I even avoid talking to people who call me for the first time and I pick up my phone, because I just don't want to relive all of this, do you know what I mean? And rehash what happened. And I just want to just like move on.

- 05.31.27 You know, and some people have been really great and respected my space and don't feel like I need to give them you know, a, an explanation. And then there have been some people who have been really mean to me. I, I last two weeks ago. I was walking down the street. Going to have lunch not too far from Tweed on Broadway and Reid. And this passer-byer just recognized me and he's like Miss Almontaser, Miss Almontaser.
- 05.32.00 Can I talk to you? And I turned around and I looked, and I was like, ok. He knows my name,. I guess somebody I may have met somewhere. So I was with one of my colleagues, we stopped. And he says oh, you know, I've been following all the headlines, this is so out of hand, it's gotten so crazy. I can't believe it. You know, such a school, you know getting such flack and you getting such flack. And he sounded very, very supportive and then he said, you know, it's just, it's really a damned shame that you had to apologize.
- 05.32.35 You know, for the remarks, and I just have to tell you that I and many Americans across the country are really disappointed that you didn't stick it through. You, you know, you went as low as apologizing, even though you probably did not say what was said. And then you know, you back out and you resign. It's pretty disappointing that you didn't stick through this.
- 05.32.59 I was like, well, gee, thank you so much (LAUGHS). And I basically at that point said to him, I said, well, you know, it's disappointing to hear people making such judgments without having the whole entire story. You've, what you have only heard is from the media. You haven't heard my side of the story. Or my opinion or views on the whole entire situation. Therefore, I think it's unfair. And you know, it, did you ever stop to think why I may have done what I did?
- 05.33.34 Other than it being because you think I gave up, because of the, the pressure of this, you know these groups or, or the media pressure? I said, it's far more bigger than that. It was for the safety and security of the students whose families were calling me, and who were feeling you know, a sense of insecurity about their kids coming to the school. And so I made the sacrifice to make sure the school existed.

05.34.03 And so, you know, I'm thinking about the lives of 60 students, and the lives of 1500 others that are sharing the building. Not of my own personal interests. And at that point, he stopped to listen. He said yeah, but I think you just overreacted. Who's gonna really do anything to harm the school or harm you or? At that point I was like, you don't know anything (LAUGHS).

05.34.31 Who are you, why am I even explaining myself to you? So at that point, my friend was like Ok, we have to go. And we continued and she said don't ever stop and talk to strangers. Don't ever engage them. You gave him too much information. You don't, do, do you know him? I was like no, I don't know him. She's like ok, you owe nobody no, no explanation. So that was pretty crappy, to hear that, hear that point of view, and what people are thinking.

INTERVIEWER : Thanks for your time.

05.35.20 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (MID-STATEMENT) it's like nothing, Jim. It didn't even pan out to be anything historical for me. (~JW~) School is historical, yeah.

INTERVIEWER : My brother has cerebral palsy, said to me, when I got dumped by my girlfriend, says when bad things arise, good things always happen, and the life that he's led, I always remember that. So anything that seems bad, I turn it around. There is a gift in there?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Everything happens for a reason. So. Definitely.

INTERVIEWER : It's true also that any great leader has been challenged?

05.37.58 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I guess the part that I have to reconcile with myself is that (CLEARS THROAT) I did not fail. That I really achieved something monumental here, and that is the development, the creation, the establishment of the school. I mean, it wouldn't be

where it is today had I not put all the love and care and dedication to putting everything together for it to become a reality. So that's the one thing that I have to constantly remind myself.

- 05.38.30 And I think what has been paramount in this experience (LAUGHS) is I had dinner with the president of New Visions on Tuesday, September 4th. And the first thing that he greeted me with was congratulations, you know, the school has opened, and it's open because of you. You may have not been there, you, you know, are, you're not there, but Debbie, you know, who are we kidding?
- 05.38.58 You know, you did everything from A to Z for that school. You know, and you've allowed us to, to carry your dream forward. And that is huge. So when he first said that to me, I was like yeah, you jerk (LAUGHS). But then when I thought about what he said, I was like that is true. That is exactly what happened. You know, my resigning, the time that I did, everything was completely done, everything.
- 05.39.28 The only thing left was to continue recruiting more students, and I left with 50 students that had already committed, and five did not complete their paperwork. But that was good. And that was more students than the other 7 middle schools that were opening up. They only had 15, 20, 12. And I had the higher numbers. So.
- 05.39.57 That in itself I think is, is a huge accomplishment, and maybe you know, maybe it was meant to happen that way. Maybe it was meant for me to you know, lay that foundation and move on to bigger and better things. So. On to the next thing, whatever that is (LAUGHS).

INTERVIEWER : The other challenge has been the giving of yourself?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER : You're working for a bigger cause?

05.40.43 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Cause, yeah. And that was hard, that was really hard about what I want, what Debbie wanted (LAUGHS). And having to pull back from that. That certainly was. And it's taught me a lot about myself. Yeah.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

05.41.47 END OF TAPE # DA95