

**TAPE # DA 108**  
**Debbie Almontaser**  
**JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director**  
**PROJECT REBIRTH**

01.00.31 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Last time we spoke was after the school had opened?

01.07.39 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah. Do you remember what day that was, actually?

JW: September the 10<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup>? You had a meeting with the head of New Visions who congratulated you?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

01.08.49 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh. (LAUGHS) The, where does one begin? It's so scary because it's already 2007, we are in 2009? Like I don't even know where to begin. And just like what you just talked about.

01.09.05 My having dinner that, that night with the head of New Visions. And then hearing that and reflecting back on that, and just the emotions that it raises for me. You know, it was, yes, it was celebratory and yes, the school wouldn't have opened without me, but it's just such a painful, painful thing, to think about that it opened without me (LAUGHS).

01.09.32 So you know, looking at things from a macro level, I feel that I've, that I did accomplish what I set out to do, and that was create an institution that was gonna become a part of this country's history. Then looking at it from a macro level and really, at me and the journey and

or you know, the, the course that I ended up following on was one that just really was very, very hard to, to deal with.

- 01.10.12 You know, in the weeks and, and days afterwards, you know, and looking just back and where I was then, and the months afterwards. I think the word that best describes what I experienced, you know, from August 9<sup>th</sup> up until probably mid-October is just this absolute numbness.
- 01.10.43 And the numbness was really more or less I think just, you know, a shock that I went into, where I was not able to feel what I was really feeling.
- 01.10.58 Think about what actually happened to me and how it happened to me. And you know, just really not being connected with me. You know? And, and what I was going through. And I think that somehow my mind, I don't know, my heart, knew that I needed to, to disconnect those feelings and, and what I was going through, what I was supposed to be going through.
- 01.11.33 In order for that objective of the school opening and, you know, stabilizing to happen. And yes, that day, that very morning, you know, of whatever - I can't remember what day of the school year, I think it was September 4<sup>th</sup> - seeing it open, seeing all the media that was around it.
- 01.12.01 People who mobilized to be at the school in support. It, it was just really amazing to see the footage that evening, and, and recognizing all of these faces of people that I had met after September 11 that I had worked with. Or have had the opportunity to meet them, you know, passing through at an event or what have you.
- 01.12.30 So the way that people just coalesced and came together was really powerful, very powerful. And it just, it said a lot about how people believed in what I believe in, and that was that this school had to become a reality and that people were gonna be out there to defend it, and to make sure that whatever they needed to do, to let the world know that this is a school that should exist was really.

01.13.06 It sent a powerful message to me. And just (~JW~)

JW: What's the message?

01.13.15 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: The message was that you know public education, you know, should be supported, and this school is among 70 other dual language schools in the city.

01.13.29 And you know, in the post-911 world, why not having an Arabic language dual language school, you know, become a reality in New York City? And I think a lot of people who supported the idea, you know, really knew the significance and understood the significance of the school based on what I had presented to them and what I've shared with them. And I think a lot of it had to do also with them knowing who I am and what I stood for.

01.14.00 And you know, believing in you know, the message and the intention that was set forth in creating this school was really powerful. And it's interesting. To thinking back before all of this happened, I think it was either in June or July, I had ran into a good friend who is a lawyer who worked at the ACLU, who is a big, you know, proponent of public education.

01.14.32 And over the course of the years had actually been against the whole theme-based schools around culture and language. And, and in the case of KGA, he really refrained from speaking. And it wasn't necessarily because he felt that, you know, what he believed in was compromised because he, he knew that there were 70 other dual language program schools, and that this was not gonna be any different.

01.15.04 And because he knew me, and knew the work that I have done over the course of the years, you know, refused to engage with the media. They called him numerous times, you know, to, to speak with Diane Ravage who is a huge, you know, (?) opponent to dual language theme-based schools.

01.15.30 So he basically refrained, and he, when we ran into each other, he said to me that there were so many times that he was reached out to and he refused to get into the battle because he knew who I was and, and respected the work that I do, and thought that such a school was really gonna be, you know, an asset to the city in terms of the great deal of backlash and discrimination.

01.15.56 And you know, educating the broader public, about this community, about this culture was something that was really, he thought would be a good idea - given that it was not just something based within the school but also on a community level, that it was gonna be engaging the broader community in the area: families, community organizations, you know, people living in the neighborhood.

01.16.25 So it was very heartwarming to hear that. And you know, again, it goes back to those relationships that you form and people knowing you and what you stand for. And so it was great to, to get that kind of feedback from him.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: What happened next?

01.17.14 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, I began to come out of the numbness, I think, my first. Well, I think that what happened was there were numerous people who were contacting me and asking me what happened, what happened, and everything didn't make sense, everything didn't make sense.

01.17.37 It just, that's, people are who knew me just knew that I don't throw in the towel and give up. And as much as I tried to refrain from speaking about what actually happened in August, to ensure that the school opened, it was quite difficult.

01.17.58 You know, to, to and I also was in the process of processing what happened. So. Just the way things went down. And, and the games that were being played, and. You know, the emotional

rollercoaster that I was put through. I was just feeling very, very, you know, I don't know I can't find a word, but basically (?) lost in all of this, in terms of trying to really understand what happened.

01.18.33 And I think that the first time that I actually that something sort of like you know, resonated for me in this numbness was actually the August 20<sup>th</sup> rally that took place in front of Tweet Courthouse. And just seeing all of these people coming out, you know, and demanding justice.

01.18.58 And actually seeing people holding signs saying, you know, I'm UFT'er and you know, in support of Debbie Almontaser was just really, it was just really surreal to see this. And, and you know, hearing people chant that day when (?) I was sitting in the cab, just you know, saying bring Debbie back was just really, it was, I just couldn't figure out like oh, my god, you know?

01.19.27 This, this is really huge.

JW: What did it mean for you?

01.19.42 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I think that it sort of gave me a sense of security in terms of like you know, if I chose to move forward and, and speak up about what really happened, there are people there to back me up.

01.20.00 'Cos there was a time in (?) the you know, days and weeks after, you know, my being forced to resigned, where I felt alone and I felt afraid and scared to speak up to, you know, discuss the issue. Because just the threats that not necessarily were made in a direct way, but in a very underhanded way, of people telling me you know, you still have a long way in your career in the system.

01.20.35 You know, you should do whatever they tell you because you just do not want to end up in a very bad place. You've invested a lot of years in the system, don't throw it all away. You

know, this administration can be very vindictive and make your life miserable (LAUGHS). So all of these things, you know, I had people within the system saying this to me.

01.21.00 And then I had people on the other end of all of this, out of the system who were like this was unjust. You know, what happened should have never happened. And you know, just hearing these two, two voices in my head, of going back and forth. And having then the opportunity to speak to several lawyers who actually reached out to me, wanting to represent me pro bono.

01.21.32 Hearing their take of all of this, and what, what their approach was gonna be, for some it was ok; for others, I felt that this was an opportunity for them to build, you know, a platform for themselves and make this a huge, overblown issue. And I just was not comfortable with you know, with the exaggerated approach.

01.22.01 But really wanted someone who was actually gonna be thoughtful of, of me the individual, my family, you know, the sensitivity of this whole situation in terms of how it was not just an attack on me, the individual, but you know, a part of a bigger, you know, assault on a community in the post-911 world.

01.22.30 And so the people, the lawyers that I spoke to didn't get that. And so when I finally met with Alan Levine, who, who I ended up, you know, saying yes, I want you to represent me, he got it, he got it really, really well. And he understood it. And so I just felt like it was such a perfect match in terms of him being the person that I wanted to represent me moving forward.

01.23.04 And I think, you know, and I think I've talked to you a lot about this. Throughout (LAUGHS) the course of our being together. My conviction and my passion of doing interfaith work and bridge building between the diverse communities of New York City was something that I held very, very high on my priority list of continuing and maintaining.

- 01.23.34 And, and just you know adamant about it and making the time to do it, whether it meant organizing in a grass root level event, speaking on a panel, traveling somewhere to speak about what we've been doing in New York City. In the days after, you know, it, it was interesting to see the different calls that I got, the emails that I got from, from all of those circles.
- 01.24.00 And it was just really amazing, just individuals – rabbis, ministers, reverends, you know, clergy from all over the country, just contacting me and saying what can we do, we're so sorry? This is terrible. You know. So I was like saying Ok, you know, these are the people that I've surrounded myself and that I've done so much with.
- 01.24.27 But then yet looking at the, the broader issue of how all of this happened, it was you know, an organized campaign by a set number of individuals who pretty much, you know, had their own political aspirations and who felt that what I was working to accomplish was going to endanger those political aspirations.
- 01.24.57 And I think I never in my wildest dreams thought that I would ever fall into (LAUGHS) the political arena around the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, never, ever. I have always maintained you know, a line of being inclusive of everybody. Not being judgmental. A firm believer and advocate of human rights. And standing up for social justice.
- 01.25.27 And have always been very careful in choosing the words that I use when talking about that issue. To make sure that I don't, you know, I don't offend anyone. But getting people to see the humanistic aspect of both people, and helping people become better educated about the issue that affects people on the grass root level.
- 01.25.59 In that part of the region. And getting people to connect in that way through the work that I did with the dialog project. You know, through the personal stories and experiences and you know, building those kind of relationships for people to see people. Not to see you know, the politics that are played by, you know, governments or leaders of these countries.

- 01.26.29 And so this organized group of people were just so adamant to create this propaganda, that my whole intention and perspective on the development of this school was to somehow erase you know, the history of Israel. To demonize this part, you know, to demonize this country, to really you know, create a group of young people who would continue that.
- 01.26.58 And it was just very, very hurtful, very hurtful to see this propaganda, you know, continually being formed by this group. Because everybody who, who's known me over the many years knows that that's not my agenda. My agenda is bringing people together, regardless of their ethnicity, their religion, their culture. Their nationality. It's about bringing people together. And so I was like caught in this place, you know, in the months afterwards, saying to myself, you know, I've engaged with people and the, across the spectrum - from the liberal to the moderate to the conservative, to the extra conservative (LAUGHS).
- 01.27.49 And to work really hard to work with the conservative and extra conservative groups. And, and building relationships and building trust and saying we can work together, you know, we can work together here at home.
- 01.28.04 With the you know, you know, desire that one day, after years of these strong relationships, that we could sit around a table and say you know what? We've worked for many years, and we've done so much here in New York City, and we have to sit down and talk about what's happening in Palestine and Israel.
- 01.28.26 And if we have any way of being able to address this situation as a concerted, on a concerted effort, and you know, based on our relationships and trust that we've built, if there are people that we are able to impact in that part of the world, to bring peace, it's our responsibility to do so.
- 01.28.55 And I knew all along you know, in my, you know, interactions with, with conservative Jewish community, that that wasn't something that was gonna be achieved in a year or two or three or four or five. But it required you know, a long time to do that. And so when all of this unfolded, about the tee shirts and the propaganda and the smear that I experienced in the

New York Post, it was just really amazing to see how basically people from the conservative Jewish community who've I've interacted with for years, who known my record, who maintained, who I maintained an open line of communication throughout the course of the development of this school.

01.29.53 Who in May, the ADL, the anti-defamation league wrote a letter supporting the school. Who you know, there was an open line of communication around using some of their curriculum, the World of Difference Tolerance Curriculum, and what have you. When what happened, happened, there was just this silence, dead silence.

01.30.19 And I, I was just totally, totally dumbfounded. I can't even find the words to describe it, but I was just totally stunned by that silence.

01.30.41 And only then to hear snippets in newspapers articles where there were people who, within the conservative Jewish community, had enough courage to defend me, in the Jewish Week, and its, the title of that article was just absolutely bizarre.

01.31.01 You know, The Shootout Over the Arabic School, the Jewish Shootout or something like that. Over the Arabic school. And it was basically people within the conservative community wrestling with one another around this issue. And there was a, a few individuals who were like, you know, this is not right, this is how it happened.

01.31.30 So it, it was heartwarming to see that, but you know, the heavyweights, the, the head, leaders of these organizations, who I've had relationships with, were silent through all of this. And I found myself at a point in questioning, you know, what was I thinking? You know, in terms of my you know, spending so much time and energy establishing these relationships and, and nurturing them and working closely.

01.32.05 That I then become a focus, you know, or at the center of this highly politicized agenda of others, not my own. And I am just left out there in the cold by people who I, if the shoe were on the other foot and this happened to them, I would not stand or sit in silence about it.

- 01.32.35 And so I felt a sense of, you know, abandonment. I felt a sense of betrayal. And.
- 01.32.59 There were times that I was like ok, well, let me think about this, let me try to better understand the situation. Let me look at it from another perspective. And no matter what way you looked at it, what happened, happened. And you know, I. It just happened, and it just happened in a way that was really, really hurtful.
- 01.33.26 And surprising in a way, but looking back at it now, I'm not, I'm no longer surprised. And the one thing that I've learned through this experience is that you know who your friends are, because those are the people who surround you and who comfort you and who say to you, we're gonna do something about this. We're not gonna let this go unanswered. And I didn't get that. I didn't get that from you know, these conservative Jewish leaders.
- 01.34.02 And so it's really put me in a place where I am now questioning all my relationships, and basically assessing, you know, who I can really work closely with and know that this is not gonna happen again.
- 01.34.27 And when I mean (?) you know, happening again is this whole, you know, being left out in the cold. You know, this sense of betrayal. You know, God willing, I never experience anything else (LAUGHS). As big as this, God willing, oh, god. I, I just probably die. I'd want to find the biggest rock and climb underneath it. Does that make sense, climb underneath? Whatever (LAUGHS). Burying myself underneath it.
- 01.35.01 So it's really, it's really, you know, left me to question relationships. And it's hard. It's hard, 'cos I don't want to question relationships of individuals that I've formed these relationships with, who are connected to these larger organizations who have these, you know, certain guidelines of where they stand on whatever issue.

- 01.35.30 And so I've sort of had to just toe the line in terms of my continued engagement with some of these organizations, because I just feel like right now I need to do that. And I need to, you know, actually focus my energy in a different track.
- 01.36.00 Now with that said (LAUGHS) what's amazing is that the relationships that formed after this experience was really powerful. And so those relationships really helped me through this whole, entire ordeal. People who I never knew prior to this experience just standing up and, and taking, you know, a stand on this was really very powerful for me.
- 01.36.37 And particularly what I found to be the most touching is people who have heard of me and of my work, taking a public stand at an event, and it just, there was one person who stood out to me, who stands out to me today. And it's interesting.
- 01.37.00 I had gone to a national conference on Muslim-Christian understanding at the Virginia Theological Seminary, it's a, an Episcopalian seminary. And I was sitting with a, a colleague, Christian colleague who works here in New York. And we, I don't know how we came up to the story, and somebody asked well, what were some of the lessons learned for people living in New York?
- 01.37.30 And this person shared being at an IFTAR interfaith dinner at Union Theological Seminary, and a respected rabbi and academic at the, I think it's the Jewish Theological Seminary, standing up in front of 300 people and admiring me, and shaming how things turned out in terms of the mayor and how the community left this whole situation.
- 01.38.09 Meaning the larger interfaith community unanswered, unaddressed. And it, it was, that was a very powerful moment. To sit there for the very first time, you know, and for this man who I was sitting next to him and I was on the very same panel he was.
- 01.38.29 And to have him say to me it is such an honor and privilege to make your acquaintance. I've read everything that's happened. And I just want to say to you that I apologize from the bottom of my heart for what some members of my community have done to you. And want

you to know that there are many people like me out there who support you. And are very moved by your struggle.

01.38.57 And if there's anything I could possibly do, I am at your service. And so it was great to get that, sitting down with him, and then as it was his turn to go up and, and speak. He began by opening and acknowledging my presence. And how humbled he was to have made my acquaintance. And the importance of people supporting the work that I, I've done thus far and will continue to do.

01.39.30 And that (?) as people of conscious really need to question, you know, the dynamics that happened, and to work closely on making sure that this is not repeated. And it was just really incredible. To, to have someone who really didn't know me, you know, to take such a courageous step.

JW: When you were in the middle of it all, what were you thinking then and how do you view it now?

01.40.28 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, all of those voices were happening, and I, you know, remained in that numbness. And I think that it was sometime in October, and I don't know if I. So it was probably late September, probably maybe early October, that so I had at that point spoken to several lawyers. Then I, I had met Alan.

01.40.57 And you know, there is this very special story about meeting Alan (LAUGHS). He, he had emailed me weeks in advance, and I did not realize who he was, and just simply said you know, I've been watching this from afar. And would be very happy to offer you a consultation on the situation, and you know, if you're interested, I'd be happy to sit with you, just to give you some advice.

01.41.35 And if you already you know, done so with others, I wish you the best of luck. And if you choose not to, then I wish you the best of luck. And so that email sat in my box for a very long time. And then (CLEARS THROAT) Adam Carroll, who's a dear friend of mine, and

Mona El D'hari, who is the organization head who created the, the tee shirts, they were all just organizing and mobilizing.

01.42.07 They're the ones that organized the August 20<sup>th</sup> rally. Then they did something in September, actually September 20<sup>th</sup>, where they brought politicians to stand up and question what happened. And so in the weeks, in those weeks, actually, after the school opened, I felt somewhat more comfortable to speaking to people you know, in, in a confidential way of what happened.

01.42.36 And I think it was at that time that I started to sort of like question things and, and listen more to the voices of like this was unjust. This should have never happened. You know, you were mistreated. You know, you were coerced, you know, threatened.

01.42.58 And so at that point, I (CLEARS THROAT) talking to Adam, he said to me, you know, I know that Alan had mentioned to me that he reached out to you weeks ago. And he hadn't heard back from you. And you know, I really think that if you are gonna pursue speaking to lawyers that you should certainly include him in, in the you know, list of lawyers to speak to, because he really gets the whole social injustice aspect of it.

01.43.32 And so I said ok. So I actually called him and he, it was interesting. He was on vacation. And I was like I'm sorry, you know, I'll call you back when you get back. He's like no, no, no. It's ok. I could talk to you for a few minutes. And I said to him, I said I'm simply calling to see if there is a chance that I can meet with you to discuss matters. And (CLEARS THROAT) he at that point said, you know, I'll be back in my office. I'll email you some available times.

01.44.01 And he came back, realized that his schedule is really booked. So he said to me, I am willing to meet with you Sunday afternoon. If you are up to it. Just let me know. And I felt awkward about meeting with him - Sunday afternoon it's his, you know, day off (LAUGHS) so I, I emailed him, he's like no, it's no problem at all. So we got in the car.

- 01.44.31 And Nadji and I went together. And we got there, we rang the bell in his building. We went up, and it was the very first time that I was meeting him. And he opened the door, and he's, you know, he I wasn't I, you know, you have this image of people (LAUGHS) Wasn't expecting to meet somebody who is older and (CLEARS THROAT) you know, and really out there, who's been doing so much amazing work on First Amendment.
- 01.45.03 So I had totally this different image of him. But that meeting him, I was like oh, my god, this is so amazing. So anyway, he opens the door, and as he opens it with his right hand, he said to, to me, Nadji was behind me. He said it is, you know, it is such an honor. I am so honored and humbled by your, you know, presence, and I am just really delighted that you know, I'm getting the chance to meet you.
- 01.45.32 And, and just want to start off by saying that I am really (?) really sorry about what's happened. And how it happened. And how members of my community were in some shape, way or form involved in this. And I am just humbled to, to make your acquaintance if anything from today's meeting.
- 01.45.59 And so it was very, very moving for Nadji and I. And I remember just looking over to Nadji and Nadji's eyes swelled with like tears. And you know, it, it was just very moving, very moving, to see that. And so we walked in his office. We sat there. He was not the kind of person who would, you know, the other lawyers I met with were beating me with question after question (LAUGHS) after question (LAUGHS).
- 01.46.31 That was not his style. He just simply let me talk. He simply let me talk. And I actually was in his office for 5 hours (LAUGHS). And he let me just say everything from, you know, A to Z about the whole situation. And I remember leaving that day feeling like I had unloaded this huge, you know, huge burden that I had been carrying.
- 01.47.04 And I remember through the conversation, I would say to him, I'm sorry, I know this is taking long, I'm sorry, you know, maybe we should reschedule. And he's like no, no, no,

take your time. I have nothing. I have nothing to rush out of here for. It's really important, and I just want you to, to just continue and, you know, as you are. And, and so.

01.47.30 At the end of the conversation, I said, so I have said a lot and I don't know how you've been able to process anything (LAUGHS). Do you have a diagnosis for me? (LAUGHS) So he just looked at me and he smiled and he says, Debbie, you were absolutely wronged. In this situation. And shame on the chancellor, shame on the mayor. And everybody at the Department of Education.

01.47.57 You know, in the way that they handled your situation. And so I think sitting there, hearing that from him just sort of like it hit me. You know, I had all of these voices, you know, end of August. September. And then, then hearing him just sort of really process it with me, and, and tell me exactly what his analysis was just really hit me.

01.48.34 And at that point I was just like oh, my god. You know, there, this, this is, this is a civil rights issue. It's, it, this is something that, you know, should have never happened to me, or happened to anybody. And he basically at that point just said to me, you know, I, the decision is yours on how you want to move forward with this.

01.49.10 You have claims, you know, on your First Amendment being infringed upon. And the coercion that took place was also unacceptable. And you simply did nothing wrong to get what, you know, to be in the situation that you are today.

01.49.36 So he (CLEARS THROAT) basically said to me, think about it. And let me know. You know, what you'd like to do. And you know, I am happy to take this case pro bono. Because I personally feel that I need to be a part of, you know, making this wrong a right, as a civil rights lawyer, as a person of conscious, and as someone who believes in social justice.

01.50.11 And so I, you know, I humbly, you know, offer my service to you. And so you could take as much time as you need to decide on this, and let me know where you stand, and if you

choose just to walk away from this, I will certainly just keep this confidential as it is supposed to be.

01.50.48 So we, we left his office. And I spent you know, I think about maybe a week or maybe two weeks, like every day crying about this.

01.50.57 Like I, like you know, it's like and even like when it happened, I would always wake up every morning, crying. 'Cos I was just like oh, god. Here's another day that I have to deal with this. And I remember like, you know, having to push myself to go to Tweed and not wanting to be at Tweed 'cos after they, they basically sent a report to Tweed and you know, if you know, you can figure out whatever you want to do.

01.51.26 Just dragging myself to that building was just really, really hard. And I remember that week that I had to report. I mean, the person that I had to report to just looked, he took me out to lunch. It was really interesting. It was like Day 1 or Day 2. He took me out to lunch and we sat there, and he's like talk to me, Debbie. And he was totally, somebody I don't even know. I was like ok. How am I gonna talk to him?

01.51.54 I don't even know like (STOPS)

01.51.54 END OF TAPE # DA 108

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**Debbie Almontaser**  
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02.00.05 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Tweed?

02.00.17 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: So it was very hard for me to drag myself there. You know, in August. And the person that I, the office that I reported to and the person that I was directed to, to speak to about moving forward with my new work, he took me out to lunch, and we sat there, and he's like what really happened?

02.00.40 And I didn't know like, I didn't know him enough to trust him. But I simply gave him as much information for him to sort of connect the dots. And he just looked at me, and he's like you know, this is huge. You know, and whatever way that you decide to, to move forward, and I'm sure that you have other people who are advising you and who are speaking to you.

02.01.06 But you have to basically do what's right for you and what feels right for you. And I just looked at him and my eyes swelled up with tears. And. You know, he, he was really very comforting and so we went back to work.

02.01.27 I came back the next day, and he's like Ok, I think what you need is just some more time off. You know, do you have vacation time? It's like yeah. He's like take as much days as you need, and then come back. And I was like so relieved to just hear that. And I took, I think I took about maybe 7, 8 working days. And I mean, that helped, because I ended up going you know, to our home, our summer home, and it was like this is where I need to be and just trying to reflect on this.

02.02.06 But I remember like every morning waking up and just like you know, crying, waking up with tears in my eyes. And, and not even understanding like everything. Still numb with this. And. So it, it was difficult, and I don't know what led me to tell you this part (LAUGHS). There is something else (~JW~)

JW: This is the vortex of voices?

- 02.02.42 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: So, so at that point I think that after I saw Alan and I had a, some time to, to really digest all of this, you know, again like the whole crying stuff came up, and just finding myself doing it more often.
- 02.03.04 Every time I thought about the conversation that I had with Alan. And you know, the expression on his face, you know, when there were thing that I told him that he was just outraged about. Just really hit home for me. And so one of the strategies that I think I, I really appreciated about Alan was, he's like you know, we will try to handle this, you know, two ways.
- 02.03.31 We'll give these people the option to have a discussion, behind-closed-door discussion. And help them save face about what happened. And smooth things out. And if that's not what they're interested in, or will not speak to us, then we will take the legal matter into court. And so I think that aspect - with all the other lawyers, nobody offered that as a, you know, as a route to, to try to deal with this situation.
- 02.04.07 And I think that when speaking to Alan and knowing who I am as an individual - I'm not one who's confrontational. I'm not one who likes to put people on the spot or make a big deal out of something in a way that just, you know, creates more tension and ugliness.
- 02.04.29 And so him offering that, it was like Ok, this is a good way to do it. I am, you know, this is my professional training of bringing people to the table, of discussing an issue, coming up to, with some you know, resolution, conclusion, etcetera. And so the person that I had been in conversation with was actually the head of the office of new schools, Garth Harries.
- 02.05.00 Who I remember the day that I had to submit my letter, he called me on the phone and all he did in the first few minutes was just apologize to me of how badly he felt that things turned out. And how he, you know, blames himself for not being there more for me, and not offering me the support that I should have been offered.

- 02.05.30 And I shouldn't have been put in a situation to handle all of this by myself. That he should have been there. And so throughout the course of all of this, he continued to maintain phone conversations with me. Bob Hughes from New Visions continued to keep you know, conversations with me. And looking back at it now, where I am in this whole issue, it was really just to make sure that they kept me quiet.
- 02.06.07 And always just playing on my emotions of like we know you want to see this school open, we know you want to see the school open. And so every time that that was said, you know, like all of the anger in me just, would just be subdued or put on hold, or you know, muzzled.
- 02.06.35 And so after the school opened (CLEARS THROAT) there was this huge silence after I met with, you know, the head of New Visions for dinner. And there was a huge silence between Garth Harries and I. And it was weeks, and I think when that stopped, it was (?) a few weeks, I would say. Not hearing that voice of you know, we know you want the school to open.
- 02.07.01 We know that you want to have a prosperous career in the system. We you know, all those things, I was able to sort of like Ok, you know, be able to, to hear more of the other voices and start to really process what happened. And having that opportunity to, to talk to Alan (CLEARS THROAT) and figure out all of the alternate routes to take with this was, was you know, doable for me.
- 02.07.30 And so I contacted, I contacted Garth and I said to him, I want to talk to you. And we met, and I said to him, I said I want us to talk about what happened. And I also want you to know that I want to go back to the school and what happened to me should have never happened. And I'm giving you the opportunity to go back to the chancellor and let him know that I want to sit down and talk about this situation.
- 02.08.06 And at that point, he was totally shocked, stunned. And of course, started, you know, you don't want to do this. You know, you don't want to confront this, you know, institution. You know, the answer is clear and cut.

- 02.08.29 They do not want you back at the school. They do not want you to have anything to do with the school, and you're just gonna have to make your peace with that. And I personally recommend that you just find something else to do in the system where everybody would support you and offer you whatever it is that you need to do it. But this is really something that I don't think anybody's interested in having a conversation with, with you about.
- 02.08.58 And at that point, I said to him, well, you know, this has to, there has to be a conversation, 'cos if there is no conversation, then I will make this a public issue. And I will file a lawsuit. I have spoken to a lawyer and I know what my rights are. So he went back, spoke to the chancellor and whoever else.
- 02.09.28 They told him that it's absolutely out of the question and they are not interested in any conversations. And case closed. At the same time, Alan had also pursued the legal counsel at the Department of Education. He called up Michael Best who's the head of counsel there. He was very, I can't even find the word, but in terms of his response was not favorable in terms of how you handle a situation (?) such of this.
- 02.10.12 He refused to honor (?) Alan's request of a meeting. He was very arrogant in the way that he was talking to Alan, and the way that he carried on. And in addition, Alan then is like Ok, well, we're gonna try to bypass him.
- 02.10.32 And I'm gonna send a letter directly to the chancellor. A letter was sent directly to the chancellor. And the response through Michael Best was we're not interested in having any conversation around this situation. Nor are we interested in what you have to say and whatever you decide to do it's your right. So. Garth Harries (~JW~)
- JW: How were you feeling at this point?
- 02.11.02 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, I was absolutely outraged. I was outraged then, and I continue to be outraged about it. Because you know, the dismissal piece of it is just

absolutely unprofessional and arrogant. And you know, it's just distasteful. I can't find any (LAUGHS) other words to describe it.

- 02.11.30 So conversations continued between Garth Harries and I, and he's like you know, we will come up with other things. You can find other things to do. You know, give us some ideas. And I was like I really, there isn't really anything that I want to do other than be at the school that I created. That's what I want. And so there was conversation of you know, him trying to, he basically was the designated person that they said you deal with this situation.
- 02.12.04 You better fix it (LAUGHS). And he, I have to say in all of this, I really have a great deal of respect for, for Garth. And find him to be a person of integrity. And a person of genuine concern and interest in the human peace. 'Cos a lot of our conversations were not just about him offering directives.
- 02.12.33 You know, the directives of the chancellor and the mayor, but there, there was also this whole approach that he was always taking with me that was more on a humanistic level of you know, looking for the best for me. He could have been clear cut and dry and this is it, here it is, no way. But just really processing the whole, the whole situation with me and trying, you know, really hard to find a way to, you know, move forward and beyond this.
- 02.13.10 And at that point I was just not interested in, in hearing, and I always thanked him for his sincerity and his genuine, you know, interest in making, you know, finding the best thing for me. But you know, this was really what I want.
- 02.13.28 So in one of our very, I think last meetings, the posting for the school position, the principalship was posted. Even if I were to have continued, I would have had, you know, (?) if this didn't happen, I would have still had to go through the C-30 process, which other people could apply and then they interview people and then they choose a person. But 99% of the times, the person that starts the school leads the school.

02.13.59 And in fact, people in his office in June had said to me, we need to designate a time to just help you prepare the application process, so you don't have to worry about it when school opens. (~JW~) So anyway, he basically said to me, you know, the position is, is up. And you know, you probably have seen it. And I just want you to know that, you know, it's your right if you chose to apply.

02.14.29 But I just want you to know that the sentiment here is that if you do, you will only continue to, you know, harm the school. You will, again, put this back, you know, put the school back on the radar of the press. The press will continue to you know, to batter the school. And I know that the school means a lot to you. And I hope that you will you know, when making your decision that you will consider the fate of the school in all of this.

02.15.02 And how your decisions, you know, will impede and impact the school. So I then shared this conversation with Alan and Alan is like ok, this is interesting. Did you know that the position was up? I said, you know, somebody at one point or another had mentioned it, but I never looked at it on line, and with all that's going on.

02.15.28 And he says, well, I think you need to apply. You know, it's your due right. And I will let you know, Michael Best, general council know, that you are. And see, unless they are interested in having another, unless this will, you know, urge them to have a conversation about this. So he calls up Michael Best. He says to him, you know, even if she applies, she's not gonna be considered.

02.16.01 She's become a lightning rod, and we're not interested in having her in any leadership position with any small new school. And case is closed. She can work anywhere in the system, but she's not going to go back to KGA, or any other school for that matter. And so (~JW~)

(SIMULTANEOUS CONVERSATION)

JW: That's a big deal, too?

- 02.16.30 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, that was huge (LAUGHS). It's like Ok, so now I am literally being banned from ever leading a school. But then of course, they backtracked and said oh, no, no, no. You know, we just said KGA. But if she wants to lead a school, there, and there are any openings, she should apply and go through the process. But the process of ever applying for a position, it's literally a done deal.
- 02.16.59 The process is not very democratic. People on these committees usually lobby for who they want. And for the most part, it's the (?) person that's acting intern. Or someone that they are invested in bringing on board, who they've heard about or what have you. So at that point, this was a Friday.
- 02.17.29 Saturday came around, it was actually a holiday, (?) Muslim holiday that I was observing, and I had said to Alan, I'm not gonna be able to work on the application. This was like the weekend before October 16<sup>th</sup>. That was the (?) deadline for the, the application. I get online Saturday night, and the position was removed from the website.
- 02.17.58 The (TOUF site?). And it said we apologize, we have decided to remove this position. It's no longer being posted. Of course I immediately call Alan. Alan is like this is really interesting. He had somebody in his office take a picture of the message that was on the website. On Monday morning, he called Michael Best, and he said you know, this is really interesting that I talked to you Friday evening, and you put out the message to your website people to pull the posting so Debbie doesn't apply.
- 02.18.35 Well, he then immediately gets on the defensive. He's like oh, that's not true. That's not the case. I don't know who took it down. It wasn't, you know, this is unbelievable, but we will make sure to put it up, because it is her right, after all, if she wants to apply for it. So the position gets posted again mid-afternoon, Monday.
- 02.18.58 I then go home that evening, like around 9 o'clock. I had some event I had to go to. And I basically was up 'til 4 in the morning completing the application (LAUGHS). Sitting there,

completing it, it, there were two essays I had to write. I had to update my resume. And all that stuff, and upload it. So I gave it a couple of hours, 'cos I was like ok, I need to proofread this, I gave it a couple of hours.

- 02.19.31 Slept, woke up, went to work, and then at lunch time I submitted the application of that Tuesday afternoon. And at that point also, I had already basically decided to publically, inform the public of what happened. And the strategy in speaking with Alan is that the public needs to know that you applied, so that your application does not get somehow lost in the shuffle.
- 02.20.06 Since we already know they are not interested in having you in this position. So I think at that point, the coalition, Communities in Support of Kahlil Gibran formed, which is a, was about 6 or 7 organizations, civil rights, community, immigrant community groups, education groups, who came together and were basically organizing press conferences, letter campaign writing and what have you.
- 02.20.39 And so they organized this press conference, which was incredible in terms of the turnout of people who had come out (CLEARS THROAT). And my speech, Alan and I actually put together my speech, my, what I was going to say.
- 02.21.02 And I remember that day going to work, you know, and saying oh, my god, today everything will change (LAUGHS). And I have this feeling of like, you know, I, I was scared. I was anxious. But then at the same time, I was like the world will really know what happened. So I was also, I had this, this, I don't know if it's, I guess the word is thrill of like, you know, (?) I am no longer muzzled.
- 02.21.37 You know, I, people will know what actually happened, and understand how it happened. And, and that's, that for me at that point was like the most important thing, because people were continually puzzled by this, and people were always questioning what does she want, you know? You know, if, if people want to support her, we need to know.

- 02.21.59 We don't want to organize and mobilize and make noise if we find out later she is really not interested in going back to the school or has any desire to. So at that point, it was just my making this public statement was the most important thing. And I remember that day just saying Ok, this, you know, this is a turning point here, you know, of fact, you know, it, the facts, the truth will be set free today.
- 02.22.37 And so I finished work, the press conference was for 5:30. I finished working at Tweed. Then went around to city hall. That's where everybody assembled. And just walking into the city hall court, that, the courtyard there was just really amazing to see like all the press assembled out there.
- 02.23.06 And also to see the line of people that the coalition had organized in speaking. I had not realized that there was, that they brought clergy who've been in support of my situation and the school. They had people from city council who were out there, speaking up as well.
- 02.23.29 And then just community leaders who were absolutely outraged and felt that they needed to be there. And, and heads of organizations, particularly the organizations that were a part of this coalition. And so. I remember standing there, you know, at, at the podium with all of these microphones and all of these people from, you know, the media and supporters also who just came to be there, supporters.
- 02.24.00 And it was just really, really amazing. And it was to say the least, it was the most, I felt like I was being freed (LAUGHS). I don't know, I can't find another word. I felt like you know, you know, everything that I had bottled in for weeks, and that I have been struggling with was actually being freed.
- 02.24.35 And it took just so much time and energy for me as an individual to process this. And to, to come to this (?) you know, to this resolution of speaking up and you know, speaking up for myself and others who may fall victim to such attacks.

02.25.02 And I remember, you know, I think it was the weekend prior to, to this, or just sitting on, sitting on the deck and, and talking to a friend of mine and just letting her know that, that I'm just, I am, how outraged I was by all of this. But at the same time, how scared I was to make this a public thing. And (~JW~)

JW: What were you most scared of?

02.25.35 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I was scared of the whole thing of like challenging this institution and challenging the city of New York, and what is this gonna look like, you know, how am I gonna get through this? You know, what will they turn around and do to me? Like all of the scenarios. Like you know, those fears were coming based on all of the stuff, all, the voices that I was getting from within the system.

02.26.04 But you know, you're shooting yourself in the foot, you're blackballing yourself in the system. You will never be allowed to do the work that you want to do, you know, they'll find ways to make your life miserable. Like all of those, those voices (LAUGHS). And I was like, do I want to live my life, you know, in such oppressive, such an oppressive environment? And so I found myself (~JW~)

JW: Or?

02.26.35 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Or speaking up, speaking up you know, and, and putting this out there as a social justice – civil liberties issue that needs to be exposed, that needs to be put out there, you know, to teach, you know, institutions, government leaders, and individuals that you just can't do this to people.

02.27.05 And so I was you know, grappling with can I handle this? This is a huge thing, and then grappling with the other thing of you know as an individual who believes in social justice, who believes in you know, upholding our constitutional rights. You know, I have to do this, 'cos today it's me; tomorrow, it'll be someone else. And it'll be someone else, and it'll be someone else. And I can't let that happen. So (~JW~)

02.27.49 END OF TAPE # DA 109

**TAPE # DA 110**  
**Debbie Almontaser**  
**JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director**  
**PROJECT REBIRTH**

03.00.31 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: In exploring the feelings of loss and grief, what were you experiencing?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: What was I feeling?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

03.03.31 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, my god, I was feeling a great sense of loss. And the loss actually is that I had felt so invested in the development and the creation of the school. I spent hours and hours and hours of my breathing, waking hours working on it, and even spending hours that I was sleeping and dreaming about it and what it was gonna be.

03.04.03 I mean, I remember, you know, that spring just dreaming actually our doors opening and the kids walking through and, you know, everybody just, it was such a great, great vision that I was always dreaming of. And so with all of this happening, I literally felt like I had lost something very near and dear to me.

03.04.37 I, I, you know, it sounds pretty corny to say, but I felt like I lost, like a mother losing a child? You know, it's, now I look back at it, now, today, I say it's (?) kind of corny but it's (?) it wasn't then.

03.04.57 You know, this was something that I, you know, invested so much time and made so much sacrifice to see going forward. And then just being taken out of the picture and, you know, it taken away from me and given to someone else to manage, to run. Who really did not understand it or know how to proceed with it. Just hurt deeply, you know, and I think that as time goes by and I hear things about how things are going at the school, it pains me to hear that the school's not doing well.

03.05.42 That the entire teaching staff I hired is no longer there. That they have all been railroaded out, pushed out. It pains me to know that the Arabic language has been compromised by 50%.

03.06.02 The cultural studies piece untouched. And the fear you know, that was instilled in the staff, the staff that I had hired, of what they can't teach and what they can't teach, what they could teach, just was very painful, because I felt that you know, the Department of Education and New Visions were no longer invested in what I had been invested in.

03.06.34 And that is to create a quality school you know, that was gonna be welcoming students of all different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds, you know, to learn this very important language in the post-911 world. It was more of let's make it as normal as other schools as possible.

03.06.59 And let's just you know, include the Arabic instruction, language instruction in there. So, you know, it pains me to, to just see that it's, it's not meeting its full potential, the potential that I had envisioned for it.

JW: How do you reflect on that in a post-911 world?

- 03.07.27 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: You know, the school was, was developed to teach Arabic language and cultural studies. It was to allow young people to learn this language, being that it's one of the most, you know, critical languages in our country. English, sorry. Arabic and Chinese are the two critical languages that have been identified by the US Government as the critical languages.
- 03.07.58 There's federal funding for it. There is a great deal of need for it. And universities are you know, as much, as many as possible, are trying to teach it. However, there's a huge shortage of instructors to teach it. And also there is this movement of introducing Arabic into K to 12 through federal funding. And so that aspect of it is not being met.
- 03.08.31 No one is aggressively pursuing federal funding to, you know, bring it in. And so the Arabic language component is very important, and in order to be affective in speaking that language, you also have to understand the people of this part of the world – their culture, their history. You know, to really be effective in speaking it.
- 03.09.02 And so you can't have one without the other. And I think that, as I had mentioned, the significance, number one, is that it's a government, you know, push. And then the second part of it is that the school was supposed to become a community-based school where people in the community, the broader community, found it as a place to learn about this culture, to learn about the, these people.
- 03.09.35 This part of the world. You know, to help them better understand, you know, this community based on the negative perceptions and misconceptions that have been generated by the media.
- 03.09.53 And so not only was this gonna be something that students were gonna study, but also creating it as a community school where there were gonna be cultural events, held at the school, you know, offering people within the community to come in and learn Arabic in the evenings. Just a whole set of, of ways of really making people within the community see it as an educational hub. Not only for students, grades 6 through 12, but also, you know, adults, families, etcetera, seeing it as a place of learning.

03.10.35 And to just really help them better understand who their neighbors are, you know, and you know, the rich history of, of the Arab world and what it has offered throughout civilization, etcetera.

JW: In the midst of it, you said you were muzzled or silenced – did you have emotions that connected back to 9-11?

03.11.39 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I did. I definitely did. And when reflecting on those times, I think a lot as we all know, a lot of it had to do with my being very out there and challenging government legislation and, you know, around the detentions and deportations, around the PATRIOT Act, and what have you.

03.12.10 And it was quite scary. You know? It was scary then and, and not just, it wasn't scary for me the individual. Yeah, I did, I was afraid. I was sort of like stunned. I was, you know, there were some fear, there was some fear generated within me, but you know, I was able to say Ok.

03.12.40 I can't imagine that I would become a (?) someone who would be detained and what have you or. But what frightened me more the fact that how it frightened my family. You know, my kids, you know, having them come to my house, asking questions.

03.13.03 Then my husband calling them and them saying to him we're not interested in talking to you. Please have your wife call us (LAUGHS). It just really, it really, it, it just, it really scared my kids, you know, and making them feel like, you know, will Mom ever come home? And so it, it was quite a, reflecting on that whole time, I had said I finally came to the conclusion that I needed to, you know.

03.13.36 I needed to really understand that, you know, I have to be mindful of my family and how much my family could take in all of this. You know, the strain. You know, and that has been

like the one thing that I've continually over and over grapple with in terms of like wanting to fulfill my own personal aspirations.

03.14.05 And then how would that roll over, you know, onto my family in terms of the fact that people know that they're connected to me (LAUGHS). Was quite a, you know, I, it's always having to be thoughtful and mindful of making sure that I don't sort of put them in a place where they don't feel safe.

03.14.31 Or uncomfortable, to some extent. So. (STOPS)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: So you moved towards educational aspects and you were silenced again?

03.15.15 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: So then I had to change gears (LAUGHS). And at the, this time it was actually become political (LAUGHS). Oh, my god. Jim.

03.15.29 I never, if somebody had come to me in 2005, prior to my getting into the whole thing with the development of this school -I mean, when it became an idea, and said to me, you know, when the school opens, you're gonna be caught in the crossfire where you are going to become targeted and then you are gonna have to challenge, you know, the powers that be, I would probably be shocked.

03.15.58 I would probable have been shocked and said I can't imagine what would possibly happen that would make me want to do that. And so again, I think what has made me do it is really you know, self-reflection and questioning of can I live with myself if I didn't stand up for myself and others?

03.16.28 And you know, I, I had started talking about that conversation as having with a close friend of mine, and just sharing with her my fears, and also sharing with her this heavy weight of, of

not challenging this, you know, and how would I be able to live with myself, you know, over the course of the years.

03.17.00 Knowing what happened, happened and I pretended and went along with all the people that did this to me, that nothing happened. And I just, you know, it was a huge, you know, huge weight to carry on my shoulders, knowing that I was wronged. And knowing that I had the, I had the support and the legal representation to, to challenge it.

03.17.33 And you know, in the course of those days that prior to my speaking, you know, and every day that I reported to Tweed and tried to be functional in the sense of being able to work and, and do things, there was just something unsettling in me about that whole set up. And always felt like I was being bought off, you know?

03.18.00 I was sent there, and then I was told, oh, we're gonna keep you on a principal position salary. And your line will be, you'll continue to be a principal. And I was totally stunned to hear this. And this was something that Garth shared with me, and his, his, you know, he said to me, he says, you know, it's, you know, it's, it's the best we, you know, we could do for you.

03.18.29 And sort of like saying Ok, this is the best you could do for me (LAUGHS)? You know, you know, and then speaking to other people and people saying to me, this is great. You know, this is really great. You're on a principal line and you'll be getting the salary of a principal, you'll be one of the people working here who's, you know, making a high salary.

03.18.57 Everybody here is, you know, in the 80-90 range. And you know, you should be happy with this. And you'll have, you know, you'll be a part of a union. This is really a great, you know, a great deal to settle with.

JW: What does Tweed stand for?

03.19.16 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Department of Education. Tweed, Department of education employees who are saying this to me. There, there was just something unsettling about it,

and, and just did not sit right for me. You know, where again hearing these voices of they're taking care of you.

03.19.38 You know, they will take care of you. You, you know, they're beholding to you. For you know, for what you know, you, for listening to them and, you know, doing as they (COUGHS) have requested of you.

03.19.57 And it just, it was very, very unsettling for me to know that I was getting this salary, you know, when I should be in a school collecting this kind of salary, and you know, the whole idea of, of you know, being bought just was very unsettling for me and, and totally not principled. And it went against my principles as an individual. And so (~JW~)

JW: Where was your family's point of view in all of this?

03.20.36 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, in the weeks and the days after, I did not let my children know what actually happened. I simply, you know, said, you know, this, this is what I've decided to do. And they were pretty stunned. My kids were pretty stunned, because they know that I am a fighter, they know I don't give up easily.

03.21.02 And I remember, you know, two of them, Shiffa and, and Hammed basically saying to me, you know, this is not like you, Mom, you're a fighter. You've always taught us to fight and never give in, and this is just not you. And you know, I simply said, you know, the school has to open and I want, did want I did to make sure that the school opens.

03.21.31 And so nobody's won anything. You know? And but just you know, saying that to them and not really, really indulging what actually happened was quite painful. And also, you know, put me in a place of questioning what would I want my kids to have done if they were in this situation?

03.21.58 You know, all along I've been teaching them to be just to be fair, to stand up for what they believe. And in this (?) you know, in this situation I have not done that. And that was another

you know, another issue that I felt that, you know, not challenging this and, and going along with what the Department of Education wanted, just also compromised, you know, what I've been teaching my kids and what I believed in.

03.22.32 And so when the week of that I decided that I was gonna apply for the position, and that I had gone and spoken to a lawyer and that I decided to pursue, you know, legal course on this issue, my kids were absolutely I don't want to say shocked or surprised.

03.23.02 They, they were like we knew there was something wrong (LAUGHS). And so they were absolutely supportive. And I explained to them that, again, this is going to raise some more publicity around the issue. And that I was gonna be in the press again, and if this is something that they felt was too much of a burden on them, then they needed to let me know.

03.23.31 And at that point, they, the three of them said, Mom, you know, there's no way that you can, you can engage in legal actions without this becoming a public issue and the press following it, you know? And so it, it comes with the territory. And you know, we'd rather have the world know what actually happened than it not being publicized and talked about.

03.24.04 So. And, and you know, this came up because I saw that over the course of the months when this, when I was still within the position, you know, the issues that were raising for my kids, you know, Yusuf and his line of work, working with the building department and architects - you know, people would recognize his name and say to him, is she related to you. And he's like yeah, that's my mom.

03.24.30 And for the most part, there were people who were supportive. And then there were one or two people who were not supportive and thought that it was a crazy idea to create such a school (LAUGHS). But you know, since I'm his mom, and, you know, I might be a good person (LAUGHS). So of course, coming, having him come home and share this with me, and saying to me that the level of ignorance that's out there is amazing.

03.24.58 And then of course, Mohammed, having to deal with that, too, in his workplace, you know, and seeing some of the stuff in the Post or the New York Sun and people reacting to it. And asking ignorant questions was, for him, at times frustrating.

JW: How did Yusuf react to your wanting to challenge it?

03.25.22 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: He was very supportive. He's like, Mom, you go after them. 'Cos what happened to you should have never happened. (?) They know who you are. They know your, your record. And they you know, were supportive all along and they should have never backed down from supporting you. So it was really amazing to see my kids, you know, be very understanding and supportive, and, and wanting me to, to you know, go forward with this.

03.25.56 And I think for the most part, they also understood when I explained to them that it's not about me, you know, solely about me and bringing, making this a public issue. But that this was something that I feel as a human being a sense of responsibility, to make sure that other people don't you know, have to go through what I've gone through.

03.26.23 And so they, you know, they, they got it, they understood, that my actions were not just for my individual interests, but also to make sure that this cycle of injustice doesn't happen to others, and that city governments, politicians, institutions think twice, when just that situation occurs.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

Q: Naji?

03.26.53 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Naji (LAUGHS) Oh, Jim, what could I say about Naji? This situation that I have been in, has been the testing, the most testing, testing situation I have, or both of us have experienced in the 28 years that we've been together. I think that the one

thing that I have walked away from this situation, Jim, is that Naji will always be there for me, through thick and thin.

03.27.27 And he has always been. But this was really the breaking point - I thought this was gonna be the breaking point of our relationship. There were days that I was terrified that that would be the case.

JW: Those are strong words?

03.27.45 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yes, that real. He, you know, was dealing with his own stuff. He was not feeling well. The whole, you know, after, when all of this happened, my picture being on the front page of the New York Post, the media harassment that I was experiencing.

03.28.14 You know, and then just all of this once we did file and we went forward, and you know, being in the courtroom and the continued, you know, media attention. There was some write-ups that were good, and of course, the New York Post always slammed me (LAUGHS).

03.28.34 And the New York Sun as well. So you know, he, at one point was just, it was getting to him.

JW: In what way?

03.28.44 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Getting to him at work. You know, there were people, his colleagues were following it and always you know, saying oh, your wife was in the paper again. And then just having to hear about it and say oh, my god, what is it how, what could it be, what are they writing now?

03.28.58 Just the, the fear of the unknown, in terms of, of what some of the things were gonna be written. And so, you know, just, just not, not having any control over the situation. Also worrying about my safety over the course of the months. You know, being extra cautious about places that I went, you know things that I said publically.

- 03.29.32 Etcetera. And it was just a lot of it (?) raised a lot of emotional stuff for him, the worrying about my safety and worrying about what else is being generated out there about me. And worrying really more or less from these people that actually targeted me, the Stop the Madrassa Coalition, and what you know, what they were thinking of doing and, and carrying on, so.
- 03.30.05 And then just also you know, whenever I was approached to do additional interviews, just being very, very cautious and afraid of them turning around and writing something else, or you know? Manipulating my interviews and making it seem otherwise. Whether it was TV. So it raised a lot of, a lot of concern for him.
- 03.30.35 And so it required my reassuring him, you know, and, and just saying to him, I need to do this. This comes with the territory, you know, we talked about this when, you know, we discussed my moving forward and filing a lawsuit. You just, I cannot, you know, the public needs to be kept abreast in order for public opinion to continue, you know, public interest and opinion to continue in our favor.
- 03.31.04 And so it, I just need you to be you know, reassured. And so then also having Alan sitting in on interviews with me, and you know, making sure that the reporter shared with us, you know, my quotes and all of that reassured him. But it was just really difficult for him to sort of feel comfortable with all of this.
- 03.31.30 And so when I say, when I said earlier that this was the big test for our relationship, I think that if Naji were some other man, he would have probably left me already (LAUGHS). Really, Jim, really. So he's really stuck through it, and he's never, ever said to me, you know, you got us into this. Or said, you know, you know, why, you know, why are you, why is it always about you, do you know what I mean?
- 03.32.04 Never. He was always very supportive. And continues to be supportive. But it was just the time for him that he was just feeling like everybody is out to get me, and he has to somehow protect me and (LAUGHS) do you know what I mean? It's hard to explain.

JW: We've also talked about his understanding in light of the cultural norm?

03.32.37 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah. That was a big test there, too, there, too (LAUGHS). Big test. You know, and he, he really, he did, he's done a magnificent job and continued to support me. And I think that when I say he would have left me? Culturally probably, if he was more traditional, he would have probably left me (LAUGHS).

03.33.00 But I think emotionally also, this has been a, a huge emotional rollercoaster that we both have been through. And he's really, he's really weathered it with me. And you know, he just having to deal with his own stuff, family stuff, his dad being ill, coming here, you know, back and forth. You know, just (~JW~)

JW: How is his health?

03.33.31 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, he, he was not feeling well for some time, and actually he began not feeling well I want to say, so December? He was not feeling well in December of 2007. He started not feeling well. And then, I would say through, through actually the summer (?) up until the summer it was a (?) big rollercoaster.

03.34.01 And I was really like really, really nervous. With the way that he was feeling, and I was just always questioning you know, is it all of this, you know, this whole entire thing that we're enmeshed in, or is it, you know, what is causing it? You know, why is he not well? Why is this? And you know, it, last year, I would say December, January, this is 2009?

03.34.33 Yeah, 2008, yeah. God it's all one big ball (LAUGHS). And I think when he got really ill, there was this part of him of like saying oh, my god, if something happens to me, who's gonna take care of everybody and everything? And just like and then just him wanting to sort of like say to himself, I really need to cut down on what I'm doing, I need to take better care of myself.

03.35.02 I don't need to be working as hard. I don't need to stress myself out. So like, you know, it got to a point where he was last year in the fall just really feeling like, you know, just like, you know, in a really depressed about it. And you know life choices that he's made in terms of you know, how he's handled you know, stuff with his property.

03.35.35 And just how he isn't so (?) enmeshed in you know, continually wanting to make money and support the family. And that he's compromised his health. And so seeing about himself, you know, what if something happens to me, who will be able to carry all of this responsibility?

03.35.58 And as much as I have said to him, don't talk this way, I don't want to hear you talk this way (LAUGHS). You're not going anywhere, you know, and things will work out and whatever, you know, if this will make you feel better, I will take care of whatever has to get taken care of. But it, it was just really hard (?) for him to sort of, to, to manage. In terms of just all of this, and, and my stuff. So.

JW: How much do you feel your calling to do this work has affected him?

03.36.43 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: You know, throughout the course of the years, he, he's had his up, ups and downs health-wise. But it was never connected to me, but this time I felt like it was connected to me. (LAUGHS) But he's never said it was connected to me.

03.37.00 So but I internalized it as that, and so really felt really badly about it. And trying to just figure out a way, you know, to, to help him through it was just really, really difficult. I mean, it, you know, he, I had to say to him, you have to go for counseling. You need, you need to feel good about yourself. You need to understand that you're doing the best for everyone, you know, and that you do need to put yourself at the center of, you know, of your universe in terms of taking care of yourself.

03.37.35 And so you know, there were days that I was feeling that he's so centered and focused on me, and all my issues that it just was draining for him. But it was something that he has never said, and I think also the other aspect that really (~JW~)

JW: You have sometimes felt it, even if he didn't say it?

03.38.00 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I felt it (~JW~) Yeah. And the times that I did, the one issue that I think Naji has had is the response from within the community. The Arab and Muslim community. And just feeling like, you know, he wanted more done. You know, he wanted them to take (?) a more active role, he wanted them to be there.

03.38.28 He didn't feel that they were there for us as much as other people in the interfaith community and social justice community. And that for him was really very sad and depressing and, and at times, he felt just really outraged. And I think a lot of it had to do with the fact that when anything happened to anybody within the Arab or Muslim community, the two of us were immediately troubleshooting and helping and figuring out and, you know, (CLEAR S THROAT) doing something to fix whatever the situation was.

03.39.06 And so he felt this sense of being let down. A sense of also coming to the realization of who his real friends were, and who weren't his real friends. So that you know, was something also that he really struggled with.

03.39.31 And he had a lot of, you know, deep-rooted anger and frustration. And, you know, and just, and I have, you know, I, throughout the course of this, I in some way shared his sentiments. But I have also come to the conclusion that for the most part, it's probably people feeling afraid that they would get targeted.

03.40.03 You know, if it happened to me, it could happen simply to them by associating (LAUGHS) themselves with me. And the situation. And it's, again, it's not to say that the whole entire community was silenced. Or took no interest in, in wanting to do something. People were absolutely puzzled and baffled by how this whole situation happened.

- 03.40.33 And also the politics that, that took place in, in, around the whole entire situation. In the development of the school, I pretty much rallied the community to come together and support the idea and to be there for the school.
- 03.40.56 And then when this happened, the mayor's office and the Arab American family support center on August 13<sup>th</sup>, met with the community basically saying to them, we need your support. We need you to help us open this school. If we lose your support, if you don't stand with us, we're gonna have a difficult time opening the school. At this meeting, of course, there were leaders from the Arab American community saying we want answers as to what happened with Debbie.
- 03.41.27 And where, (?) you know, what is going on? And they simply said to them that this was Debbie's wish. You know, she chose to, to you know, to move, remove herself from the position to spare the school. And we're all respecting her wish, and we expect the same of you. And of course, people asked, well how is she? We, you know, what is she doing? And their response was, she's fine, she's taking some time off to regroup, you know, and be with her family.
- 03.42.04 And we really (?) need to respect her time off, and we need your support to (?) move forward to open the school. And so the community in a sense was held hostage (LAUGHS). (CLEARS THROAT). In terms of, you know, advocating for me, but not really understanding what's going on.
- 03.42.31 And then wanting to see the school open. And so there was this you know, this huge, you know, decision that needed to be made. Do we support the institution, do we support the individual? And if we support the individual, does it compromise the development or opening of the institution? And so.
- 03.42.57 I, you know, again, my goal and objective was to see the school open. And I made sure that everything I said or did, did not impede on that. And that's why I was very careful as to who

and what I said in those days, in order to make sure that, you know, nothing sabotaged or affected the school from opening.

03.43.26 And so I think that, you know, that just, you know, the, the choices and decisions that people within the community have made, have really, really you know, made Naji question, question, you know, where the community stands and lies. And you know, him feeling that this you know, is a social justice issue.

03.43.57 You know, a civil rights issue that everybody should be outraged and should be out there speaking against. And the voices that he wants to hear are basically voices of heads of organizations who, number one, receive city funding to run their programs (LAUGHS). So of course, everybody's thinking twice about their funding versus, you know, this civil rights issue. And also, you know, not making enemies within the city government agencies.

03.44.30 You know, if they choose to, to support me and, and speak out publically then it puts them in opposition with the mayor and other city agencies that they basically interface with. So it's, it's quite a, a challenging situation. And so you know, for the most part, Naji feels it's not principled.

03.44.58 It's more driven by you know, political agendas. And that's where he is frustrated, and, and feels that people have really compromised, you know, their word and compromised social justice. And so I constantly have to help him like process these conversations that we have and say to them, look, you know, the organizations are providing services for needy people in our community, and I don't know.

03.45.33 If I was in the same situation, I might be having to make those decisions, too. You know, just trying to help him move beyond - like being stuck around this situation, do you know what I mean? And what I mean situation, just like where the, the stalemate of the community. I think that's (LAUGHS) probably the best way to, to describe the situation.

- 03.46.02 He has been grateful and to see the outpouring support that I have received from the interfaith community. From you know, people all over the city, individuals and what have you. You know, being honored by J-FREJ, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, October 18<sup>th</sup>, two days after I publically spoke out about what happened. Which for them was a huge shocker, you know?
- 03.46.37 They were honoring me for the establishment and the development of, of a unique and amazing school. To be established in the United States. And then, two days later, the day, after my speaking out publically, them (?) then seeing that this is just not for that, but also standing up, you know, being a risk taker to challenge, you know, challenge this unjust position that I was put in.
- 03.17.12 And then being honored by Pax Christi, following six months later. So it's just been really very heartwarming and, and comforting for him to, to see the outpouring support of people you know, locally and nationally. (CLEARS THROAT)
- 03.47.31 Having academics from all over the country sign a letter that was sent to the mayor and the chancellor. Of, on what a grave injustice this is, not only to (K-12?) but to the academic field - having people from ACLU, Harvard and Yale and, you know, over 40 signatures of academics who were in support of my going back and demanding that justice be served was just really incredible.

JW: After the press conference, you felt everything would change - what happened?

- 03.48.22 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, (CLEARS THROAT) the change was, you know, the story that had been etched in stone by the Department of Education changed. You know, I (CLEARS THROAT) they basically made me the fall guy for the incompetence of the press office. And figured that the best way to deal with the situation was to remove me. And so the way that all of that was done to make me seem like the one that was the problem changed.

03.49.01 Because I wasn't the problem. The problem was their lack of support and, you know, in those days. And their way of managing the situation. You know, the mayor and the chancellor could have made history by, by supporting me. When, when all of that, you know, media frenzy that was created by the New York Post and the Stop the Madrassa coalition, it would have been the most opportune time for the mayor and the chancellor to stand up to the racism and bigotry that Arabs and Muslims are confronted with every day of their lives in post-911.

03.49.48 They could have taken the courageous opportunity to stand up and speak for my record and dismiss what happened. And unfortunately, they took the easier route, which was they caved and pandered.

03.50.04 To these right-wing conservative efforts. And so they really missed, you know, they missed the opportunity to set precedence - locally and nationally - for other government agencies to stand up to this, you know, racism and bigotry that exists.

03.50.28 And so my speaking up really changed the whole landscape of what happened.

JW: In what ways?

03.30.40 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: It, certainly putting out what really happened, that you know, I was forced to speak to the New York Post. There was a press person on the phone who heard the entire interview. And at the end of the interview, upon hanging up, she called me and said good job, Debbie. I think (?) it went really well.

03.51.01 We'll see tomorrow. Tomorrow came, and I was portrayed as defending the tee shirt, which I never did. I was portrayed as minimizing the historical context of the word intifada. Based on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. And then that, as of that afternoon, (?) serious conversations were had within the press office and with the chancellor, that I basically was not privy to.

03.51.36 But at the end of the day was told we're putting together a, a statement and we want you to approve it, that will go out. And I asked what the statement was, 'cos I was not at a computer (STOPS)

03.51.50 END OF TAPE # DA 110

**TAPE # DA 111**  
**Debbie Almontaser**  
**JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director**  
**PROJECT REBIRTH**

04.00.11 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: You were talking about how things played out, but getting to a place beyond it.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: What's happened to you personally?

04.01.21 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: What's happened to me personally? Well, I would say that I've grown - grown older (LAUGHS). I (?) say very cautiously, grown wiser. 'Cos I don't know how wise I am (LAUGHS) (?) this experience. But I (?) I'm much more cautious now in terms of establishing relationships, and, and sort of always, you know, thinking twice about the genuineness of individuals.

04.02.04 And how much I want to invest my time and energy, if I don't get back what I certainly would expect. What I would give. I've also, would say that I've you know, over the course of, of this time have been able to, to maintain my strength.

- 04.02.32 And ability to move forward with this by continually reminding myself that this is not, you know, this is not an attack on me, the individual, but that this is a part of a political, geopolitical agenda. That, you know, right now is being played out in the post-911 world. And I just happen to be a very good target.
- 04.03.02 You know, in 2007, for being a visionary, for I would say challenging the status quo with some folks. For being able to spearhead and, you know, bring in so many people into, you know, this project. And getting, you know, educated, the education system to, to approve the school.
- 04.03.38 You know, to get the buy-in and support of the mayor's office for the establishment of this school. I think for some conservative, right-wing conservative groups, this is a scary thing. To see a Muslim woman in the post-911 world, you know, on this kind of track in developing an institution that would be educating young people Arabic and (?) you know, Arabic cultural studies.
- 04.04.13 And, you know, seeing this school as becoming one here, and perhaps being replicated in other parts of the country, I think, for some people is, was just something that they could not handle.
- 04.04.32 And you know, there are agendas out there that this certainly does infringe upon. And that is, you know, there are institutions and people out there who want to keep the, you know, the drums beating for war. There are people who want to continue to marginalize and disenfranchise Arabs and Muslims in this country because they don't want to see them succeed.
- 04.05.06 Or climbing up the ranks in fear that they will infiltrate the education system. Today I'm a principal, you know, years later, I may become a superintendent and chancellor and, you know, Secretary of Education for the US (LAUGHS). And then basically, you know, imposing Sheri Allah, you know, or Islamic education in the entire school system.

- 04.05.38 I know this sounds absolutely absurd, but this is a reality for some people. And some conservative right-wing organizations fear this, and have really, you know, (CLEARS THROAT) continued to be the protectors of, of this country with it, you know, making sure that this doesn't happen.
- 04.06.06 And you know, I've been referred to as the soft jihad. I've been referred to as the moderate who has a political agenda to infiltrate. And, you know, it's scary. It's scary that there is such mistrust and such fear of people who are Arab and who are Muslim.
- 04.06.30 And that there are organizations and individuals who basically will do whatever it takes to make sure that people you know, of my background do not succeed and, and move forward. And you know, it's something that if you would have said to me that there will be people thinking this way, several years back, I would say this is crazy.
- 04.07.01 You know, we have a government that should be protecting our borders and our country and what have you. Why do people, why should individuals or organizations take this upon themselves? And so it's sad. It's, it's a very sad state.
- JW: How did September 11<sup>th</sup> affect this?
- 04.07.27 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, it's interesting because after September 11<sup>th</sup>, there was a great deal of, of support and understanding from people your average citizen. People in the interfaith community, your neighbors who were like no, we're not gonna let this happen to our neighbors, and really came together and coalesced and worked together.
- 04.07.56 And then there were people who felt like, you know, these are, people are our enemies. And I think that after September 11<sup>th</sup>, they were not as loud as they were today, and they were not as prominently known as they are today. And a part of me believes that this was an outgrowth of the Bush administration and the fear tactics that were always put out.

04.08.30 That basically people felt that they needed to take this kind of role. And so I feel that that administration really nurtured the schism within our, you know, society. Of basically recruiting everybody and anybody to if they see something, say something. And you know, and help us you know, eradicate this enemy within kind of mentality.

04.09.00 And so I think that it became quite prominent in the academic field, with academics who were scholars in Middle Eastern studies, Arabic language. Or, you know, with academics who basically wrote or discussed matters on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

04.09.24 That they became the enemy within. And so you know, there are numerous cases across the country of people's work as well as tenure in some of these universities that were put to question.

JW: Do you consider yourself the enemy within?

04.09.46 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Do I consider myself? No. I don't consider (~JW~)

JW: So you think people (~JW~)

04.09.50 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I believe so. I, there are and I mean, it's on blogs, it's on (LAUGHS) you know, it's on video. I've been, you know, the, being called the (?) soft jihad simply you know, means enemy within. So having somebody who can sit there on camera and say this about me, it's quite astonishing. You know, and this individual, of course, has never interacted with me, never spoke to me (CLEARS THROAT). It's quite amazing.

04.10.28 Quite amazing that people can actually generate this kind of stuff and, and really get themselves to believe this.

JW: How have you changed since September 11<sup>th</sup>?

- 04.10.43 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: How have I changed? Well, I (?) well, how have I changed? I think that my (CLEARS THROAT) my (?) principles remain the same. I'm very dedicated and committed to social justice, to building bridges of understanding among people.
- 04.11.10 To educating people, to you know, provide understanding on issues and matters. And I think the, the part of me after September 11<sup>th</sup> was very, was, I was very active in terms of social justice, you know, very, you know, an activist.
- 04.11.40 I can't find any other word – an activist (LAUGHS). And you know, during that time it was very much needed, it was required. As the years progressed and (CLEARS THROAT) and you know, there was this, this time where there was this, you know, opportunity to sort of like change gears and do more education and building bridges through education.
- 04.12.11 And you know, the whole thing with Arab Heritage week, you know, working in schools and in community-based organizations and cultural sensitivity work, and, and all that stuff. And sharing best practices, you know, nationally internationally.
- 04.12.29 And then of course, you know, continuing this work through establishing the Kahlil Gibran International Academy was just a natural progression of this work. And so we got there. And all of this happened, and I think that it's brought me back to that point of, you know, it's time again to fight for social justice.
- 04.12.57 And I think that where I am today is really, you know, fighting for my own personal rights as well as the rights of others. And so it's been, you know, a journey that's been hard. It's been a journey that's been painful. It's been a journey that I continue to grapple with, working in the system that I'm fighting. There are days that you know, I feel like I'm carrying a mountain on my back from 9 to 5 (LAUGHS).
- 04.13.36 And there are days that, you know, and those are the days where I have to deal with bureaucracy. You know, bureaucracy that, that impacts my work, and the work that I'm

doing right now. And also the mistreatment of other people in the system who basically just, you know, drift off into the sunset and let what happened to them happen to them.

- 04.14.06 And so I've seen a lot of people you know, be put in those kinds of situations and feel very powerless. And it, it hurts me to see that. I would say that at least I see this happening 2, 3 times a month.
- 04.14.31 And (CLEARS THROAT) hoping that my standing up to the system somehow would encourage others to do so. But it seems to (CLEARS THROAT) it hasn't. You know? It hasn't. And so it, you know, when I've seen that, I've simply said to myself I'm so fortunate because I think I would have probably (CLEARS THROAT) done the same thing if I didn't (?) if I did not feel safe enough to do so and have public backing and support.
- 04.15.08 I think that that, the one thing that I've learned is that that is a very important thing, you know, is to, and so all of my work after 9-11 - of bringing people together, all the interfaith work, the organizing, the mobilizing (CLEARS THROAT) paid off.
- 04.15.29 You know, I, through this experience, have been able to reap the, the fruits of my labor. You know, people who, you know, I work closely with have come to my aid and are supporting me and are there for me. And you know, as I mentioned earlier, there are people who simply have drifted away or never bothered.
- 04.15.56 And that's how you learn how your real friends and who (?) are not your friends. (CLEARS THROAT)
- (OFF CAMERA REMARKS)
- JW: How has it tested your faith?
- 04.16.33 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Wow (LAUGHS). Well, I have to say that it has not tested my faith. I think that this experience actually brought me much more, I don't want to say closer,

'cos I think I've always been close. And I think I, I've really been more spiritually connected than I have in the past.

04.16.57 It's really, it, it's offered me a great deal of strength. And I think that my making my peace with this as, you know, this is the course of my destiny and, you know, this is something that was probably meant and written for me, and I just have to take it and know that there'll be something else coming up, you know? And to be patient, and to let this take its course and perhaps there will be something, you know, you know, along the line, down the line that, you know, will be my next calling whether it's a big calling or a small (LAUGHS) calling.

04.17.40 But just, you know, as they say, rolling with the punches. And getting through this. So I have really, you know, spent a lot of time contemplating and reflecting and, and just connecting and you know, with God and just asking for strength, you know, to continue through, through this journey, with, you know, with gracefulness and eloquence and clarity.

04.18.17 And just the strength, then, to just protect me and protect my family and to protect Naji, you know, health-wise, as we get through this. So.

04.18.29 It's you know, it's my (?) spirituality has played a really big role in all of this. Just really, (CLEARS THROAT) spending a lot of time you know, individually connecting and just praying and absorbing, absorbing everything, and, and just letting time take its course to offer me the clarity. And I feel that I've, you know, I have, I've gotten some of that clarity.

04.18.59 And I mean, when people see me and (CLEARS THROAT) and say to me, I, you know, I just really admire your strength, you know, and, and perseverance in this whole situation and how you've handled it so eloquently and gracefully. It's, it's just amazing. If it were me, I would have probably had a nervous breakdown, I would have this, I would have that. And it's the times that I, I just say I'm so grateful that God has really helped me through this.

JW: How would you describe the writing for you?

- 04.19.45 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (LAUGHS) Well. In 2007, you're gonna open (LAUGHS) the first you know, public Arabic dual language school in the country. And then there'll be a very bumpy, bumpy ride. (LAUGHS)
- 04.20.02 And you'll be thrown off the train (LAUGHS). I don't know. And yeah, it's, (?) a metaphor, but it's just, you know. It's the course of my journey and I'm you know, I believe that we all have journeys in our lives that we're meant to take. And so, you know, I could have simply gone the total opposite and said what the hell? (LAUGHS)
- 04.20.30 This is not what I wanted (LAUGHS). You know? But I don't think that would have helped. And probably would have, you know, made me very bitter and angry. And perhaps would have driven me to disengage, and I wasn't about to let that happen, you know? It's, it's not who I am, it's not what I stand for. And it's not the way that I've chosen to live my life, you know?
- 04.21.00 There, people (CLEARS THROAT) you know, and a specific community who've targeted me. And I have not allowed that to in any way, shape, way or form, taint my deep convictions of the work that I've done and that I will continue to (?) dedicate my life to. And so it, what it does show me is that there is, continues to be a great deal of ignorance.
- 04.21.32 And fear within our country, that needs to be addressed. And the way to address it is through education. And so my taking, you know, this road or journey forward is, you know, (CLEARS THROAT) to continue what I've set out in doing with my life and that is to educate people.
- 04.22.01 And if it means to educate them about what happened to me and the far bigger assault that it is on Arabs and Muslims in the post-911 world, so be it. Somebody has to do it. And I, you know, (CLEARS THROAT) take what has happened to me and have decided to take it in a positive way.

- 04.22.27 And that is, here's what happened, and here's what we can learn from it. And so you know, people when first meeting me are just so at awe about how I've handled the situation. And for example, just the other night we were at the Interfaith center of New York for a fundraising dinner. And this woman who's never met me but read about this whole situation from afar, simply was some humbled to meet me, and then as we were eating dinner, she said you know.
- 04.23.04 I just, I, I wish there is a way to better understand the whole situation. 'Cos I just feel like people have gotten bits and pieces through the paper, through, you know, reading about it, and I don't know if you are open to my asking a couple of clarification questions? 'Cos I'm sure you're probably sick of this and don't want to talk about this any more (LAUGHS). And I said to her, on the contrary, I love when people engage me in a conversation about what happened.
- 04.23.33 And she looked at me with this bizarre stare (LAUGHS). She's like (?) so I said to her, I said I know it sounds really crazy, but I want to continue talking about something that's painful. People think is painful and, and that is painful. But the only way that I will help you understand the situation is by engaging you in a dialog about it.
- 04.23.56 And so I am very happy, and I have actually welcome the opportunity to be invited to your community to talk about this and lessons learned from this. And so she's like really? And I was like, yes. So anyway, she asked me the couple of questions, and she's like I'm so glad I asked you because I was just trying to figure out, you know, you know, you know, why were you wearing that tee shirt? (LAUGHS) And when I told her that I never wore the tee shirt, that I had nothing to do with the tee shirt, she's like oh, ok.
- 04.24.29 So. You know, it's, it's important. You know, because there is a lot of unanswered questions, there are a lot of people who have different understandings, and for me, it's not just about that, but it's really about here we are, 2007, now 2009, what is the reoccurring thing that continues to plague our country?

- 04.24.58 You know, this is the question that I always like to frame it. You know? What's happened to me has happened to others, you know? The, the fear mongering, the, the racist comments and attitudes that continue to play out themselves, and continue to be excused or let, you know, just take their course and not be questioned, and not be challenged.
- 04.25.27 So it's something that's happened throughout the course of our history, you know? People were not outraged by the racism and bigotry that impacted African Americans for hundreds of years. In this country. Until finally, through the civil rights movement, that people became you know, utterly, you know, outraged by it, and decided to challenge it and mobilize around it. So.
- 04.25.57 You know, making those connections for people and helping them understand. And I think now the biggest challenge is that we have our first African American president, which I was totally (LAUGHS) shocked that it happened in my lifetime. But I'm so, I'm so glad to be living just for that. To see that happen. I just feel like it was the most incredible, incredible thing to happen to our country.
- 04.26.27 And, you know, so there is this notion of you know, racism no longer exists. And I think that this is now the new, you know, the new issue that we have to deal with and say no, it, it continues to exist and it has, you know, it rases many ugly heads. That we have to continue working and helping people understand that, you know, we have to continue fighting on issues that infringe on the rights of people.
- 04.27.00 Whether they are African American, Latina, Arab, Muslim, you know, any, any person who you know, is put in that kind of situation. So. So yeah, so that's where I am. I'm taking my story (LAUGHS) you know, and putting it on the road to help people understand that, you know, there are needs to be some serious questions asked.
- 04.27.27 You know, about where we are today and what we need to do.

JW: When you started this journey it started with a teachable moment?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: It's continuing to happen.

JW: A teachable moment brought you down?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, absolutely. (~JW~)

JW: Can you take me through that?

04.27.53 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: So what was my teachable moment with? Well, my teachable moment is, it's funny (LAUGHS). My teachable moment was trying to teach the stupid New York Post (LAUGHS) reporter on the root word of an Arabic word which she did not know. And rightfully, as he explained in the interview, there were multiple definitions and he was just curious to know what the root word is. And of course, I did ridicule him and say well, you are a reporter, you should have done your homework prior to speaking to me.

04.28.31 Said I did, but this is you know, I've, what I've found, I'm just curious. Little did I know that he was gonna turn around and hang me using my teachable moment. So.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: It's a theme?

DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, yeah, it's definitely a theme. You know.

JW: What were you gonna say?

04.29.01 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I think that if I were to be able to do anything differently about what happened then, I would probably say that I would not have changed my giving him the root word and giving my explanation. Because that is who I am, and that's what I do, and what I do best is to help people better understand issues, situations.

- 04.29.30 I wouldn't do that differently. What I would have probably done differently is. Is probably immediately fight the DOE back. Like the day that they put out the, the press, the statement that they said to me that they wanted me to approve, which I revised and then I sent back and they only used what they originally wrote.
- 04.30.02 Is that I should have at that point fought back and publically called up the newspaper and said you know, the, those were not my words. The DOE, you know, put them out. So that's probably what I probably would have done differently. But anyway, it's, it's a moot point now. But. So it was a teachable moment, then.
- 04.30.31 I think you know the, the days after and the school opening and my being able to, you know, assess where I was emotionally, politically, was certainly a teachable moment for a lot of people. And in the days after, publically speaking about what happened, people were absolutely shocked to learn what they learned.
- 04.31.01 And basically said to me, many, many called and emailed, and said you know, you, you know, that was such a courageous thing for you to do. And you know, I, if I were in your position, I probably wouldn't have as much courage or would not be able to do it, it's such a huge thing to challenge an institution. And so for me at that point, it was like oh, my god this is big. You know, it, I knew it was big, but to hear other people say that this is a big thing you've taken on was quite overwhelming.
- 04.31.38 But at the same time, very gratifying. Because I knew what I was doing was setting precedence. You know? That this can happen to people. And so that, for me, was, you know, an eye-opener in terms of where I was. And, and continues to be.
- 04.32.00 And I think that in the weeks after, you know publically speaking about it and then filing the lawsuit and announcing that we filed the lawsuit and then going to the court, you know, to the lower court, and then appealing and then going back and forth and where we are today.

And, and then also just the whole situation with how these people continue to antagonize me, the Stop the Madrassa Coalition.

- 04.32.34 Where they thought that they completed their job by forcing me out and not being entirely successful - their whole objective was to make sure the school never opened. The school did open, but they were continue to, to try to close it even after I was removed.
- 04.32.56 But I think what was a huge eye-opener was to see how threatened they were by me. By my speaking out publically, exposing their tactics, you know, sharing my story and how everything unfolded in the role that they played in all of this was really something that was very threatening for them. And I (?) this came to my attention actually early of (?) early of (?) January, 2008.
- 04.33.37 Where they were contacting my lawyers and saying, you know if she doesn't retract her story, you know, we're gonna file a lawsuit, defamation lawsuit, blahblahblah. So. At that time I simply said to them just you know, let's ignore it. We ignored it for a couple of months.
- 04.33.58 Then the New York Times (?) exposé came out or exclusive interview that I did with the New York Times, where I was on the front page of the paper on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008. And it you know, gave the entire situation from A to Z of what happened, which I have to say was very gratifying. And I felt vindicated, you know?
- 04.34.30 For the time and the commitment that was made by the reporter to spend, and the amount of coverage, you know, that they gave it was quite incredible. And so in the days afterward, they again contacted us and they're like we're gonna file a lawsuit unless she comes out and publically retracts everything she said about us. And you know, gets a retraction in the New York Times and publically apologizes to our, our clients.
- 04.35.07 And then Alan called me and he asked me what did I think? And I said to him, I will not apologize. The day I will is when donkeys fly. You can tell them that. And so (LAUGHS).

He got back to them and said my client is not interested in doing anything that you're asking. And then they file a lawsuit.

- 04.35.29 And they filed the lawsuit and put out a press release (LAUGHS). And I was just shocked, not shocked that they filed the lawsuit, but I was shocked the New York Times actually covered it. You know, that the reporter decided to write about it, and she called me up. And wanted to get a comment from me, and I told her, no comment. I had no comments. I really didn't want to spend any time or energy around this issue.
- 04.36.00 My lawyer was away. Long story short, what came out of it is that, again, people came to my aid. And I have been fortunate to receive another wonderful lawyer who is very well-known and respected in the field of defamation, take on my case pro bono. And so it was all thanks to them putting it, you know putting out a press release in the New York Times covering it that this man was absolutely outraged that these people were, were you know, harassing me again, you know, in the court system.
- 04.36.39 So you know, it's been a wonderful experience to, to go and meet him and simply be told it's an honor and privilege to meet you and to, you know, take you on as a client pro bono, so. You know, life has been good, considering (LAUGHS).
- 04.37.00 You know? It's, I've been blessed with a lot of guardian angels. You know, it can't get any better than this. The people just want to, you know, to help me through this whole ordeal. Without me having to worry about financial, you know, representation and what have you. 'Cos I think that if I had to deal with that, I probably would have gone out of my mind (LAUGHS).
- 04.37.31 So. So again, my, the teachable moments for me are, is that you know, good always prevail over evil. You know? And so the good in, in complete strangers, you know, who believe in me and what I stand for has just been really tremendously gratifying for me to, you know, to see that there are people out there who have the same principles and understandings of life in the world as me and who are so giving of themselves and of their time, and.

04.38.15 And it's, it's just really amazing. Amazing, to, to you know, to meet so many wonderful people who are so giving and so kind.

JW: How do you feel about this country as an immigrant?

04.38.49 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Well, if you would have asked me this question in let's see, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2008? Right? Yeah. (~JW~). Yeah, before the election (LAUGHS) the day before the election to be more specific.

04.39.09 I would have had very mixed feelings. Very mixed feelings about it, because I just, the Bush administration has made such a mess of our country. It's, it was 8 years of hell. And so I would say that (~JW~)

JW: For you personally?

04.39.32 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, oh, for me personally on my journey? (~JW~) I was like you know, as I said publically, you know what my American dream, what I thought my American dream was turned, you know, basically turned into an American nightmare (LAUGHS). At the hands of you know, a concerted you know, effort by a group of people and by government officials who really did not have the courage to stand up.

04.40.08 But I would say that you know, I've never in any way, shape or form, felt differently about being an American. I have always loved this country, even when it has, you know, had ugly moments.

04.40.28 But I think that now, with this administration, and just the course that we've, you know, the journey and course that's, that has so far been taken has been one that's really very pleasing to see and has really, how would I say? It's a defining moment for us? You know, and it's really, I want to say that it's reclaimed my, my love, my love and dedication to this country.

- 04.41.06 Not that you know, I didn't love it or claim it as my home, but there were times that I just felt like I was an alien here. You know, and it was due to the government, you know, propaganda that unfortunately continued to play over and over.
- 04.41.27 That just ripple effect and you know, played out to make people who are of my community feel differently. And so to see that change has just been very, very heartwarming and comforting. I mean, I was anticipating, you know, had so much anticipation about the president's speech in Cairo.
- 04.41.57 And it was like oh, my god, you know, and I was reading all these articles about people speculating about what he's gonna say and what he's not gonna say and what it might be (LAUGHS). And gosh, the anticipation that it built. And I was just like I have to hear this and I have to hear it live, not that I got to go. But. I listened to it. I watched it, actually, live on, online, and it was just really, it was incredible. I found myself like crying throughout, just you know, to hear him, you know, his affirmation of the community within the United States, the long-standing history that Muslims have had in this country.
- 04.42.42 The contributions to civilization. You know, the, the role that Muslim Americans play and their, you know, place in society. It was just really, really wonderful to hear. And for him to you know, cite so many verses from the Koran and from actually Islamic history was just really incredible.
- 04.43.09 So you know, there is certainly good will and good intention on his part, to really carry us forward, you know, into the next several years. And I was just astonished that I did not hear the word terrorism or war on terror (LAUGHS).
- 04.43.29 At all. I was absolutely astonished. And just so. It was just very, very moving. And to see the people who were sitting there in that auditorium or listening to him was incredible. Absolutely incredible. And you know, all that's left now is, you know, for him to walk to the talk (LAUGHS).

04.43.57 And you know, I have, I have confidence that he will do his best, moving forward.

JW: How did it make you feel as an American?

04.44.05 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, my gosh. It made me feel like such a proud American. Like now I could go overseas (LAUGHS) and not have to feel like, you know, awkward about being an American. But now that we're, I feel like now we're much more connected to other nations and, you know, are on same level playing field.

04.44.30 That we're, don't you know, we're not this personified supreme, you know, arrogant country. So. it's, it's really gratifying, absolutely gratifying. And again, I feel like we're in a defining moment and, you know, changing the course of where we are, and you know, our level of respect in the world.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

04.45.03 END OF TAPE # DA 111

**TAPE # DA 112**  
**Debbie Almontaser**  
**JIM WHITAKER, Producer/director**  
**PROJECT REBIRTH**

05.00.43 PICTURE UP

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: What are the lessons or the big picture of the journey for you?

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

- 05.02.56 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Big picture. Well. I think that I've said for the most part that there still remains a great deal of (?) fear and misconception and ignorance about Arabs and Muslims in the United States and in general. So I think that, that, you know, that there needs to be more work in that area. Of helping educate the broader public about who Arabs and Muslims are.
- 05.03.29 And so my choosing to you know, speak out (?) to speak publically about what's happened to me and asking the questions where are we today as a nation, I think is really important, because it's two-fold. It's one, you know, sharing what happened and why it happened. And two, why is it happening and what can we do to ensure that this doesn't happen to others.
- 05.04.01 Whether it's Muslims, Jews, Christians, you know, any ethnic background. It just should not be happening, you know, and why is it that this continues to happen? I think that there needs to be a continued concerted effort around building bridges between diverse communities on a local – national - international (LAUGHS) level.
- 05.04.38 And so for me, I've continued to make myself available speaking at conferences, whether they're national or international. In a few weeks, I'm actually gonna be going to (?) Kazakhstan as a, a member of a five-member delegation from the United States.
- 05.04.59 I'm the Muslim representative who'll be talking or representing as a practitioner who's been doing dialog in interfaith coalition building among communities. So it's pretty exciting. Not anything that I lobbied or advocated for, you know, pursued. It just, I get a call from (?) Intersection International asking if I'd be interested and how great it would be to have me.
- 05.05.30 And hearing that this is going to be an international (?) conference that's being held where other nations will be sending individuals just made it sound very, very interesting. And humbling to actually see that there are other people that value the work that I continue to do, and who continue to see me as a, an asset and an important resource in this kind of work.

- 05.06.00 And that they understand the geopolitical landscape of what happened and why it happened. And how they've been able to say well, we're not gonna let what happened interfere with our decision to support and advocate and promote, you know, this woman's work. So it's quite gratifying, you know, to have these kind of opportunities present themselves.
- 05.06.31 And you know, I continue to welcome them because it really, it's all about educating people and if I reach one out of ten people some way, that I'm able to connect with them, it's, it's good enough for me. 'Cos that's what it's all about.
- 05.06.51 And, you know, there, I think there needs to be a much more organized way of helping the academic world, you know, provide (COUGHS) people, particularly educators in the K to 12 world, with, with opportunities to teach Arabic as well as cultural studies.
- 05.07.24 And so one of my long-term goals is to actually develop a center at a university that would actually certify teachers to teach Arabic and cultural studies. Up until this point I have not found any university across the country that actually has a certification program for educators. They basically have every language you could think of except for certification in Arabic.
- 05.07.56 And so I have given this thought. I've gotten (?) not political, but public support in terms of speaking to key individuals and academia and, and you know, leadership positions across the city who are in support and think it's a great idea. And I'm in the process right now of doing two things that are really important for me to achieve this goal. And the first is actually to, to get my Ph.D.
- 05.08.32 In order for me to work on a academic level I do need to have a Ph.D. in order to eventually get tenure. So that is one of my primary goals. I think that, you know, in this journey that I do see myself working in the academic field. Sooner than later. I feel that I've exhausted my energies for a lack of better word in the K to 12 world.

05.09.06 Because of where, how things actually played out, you know? And I think that in an academic setting that people would be much more receptive to this kind of work. And so I think that, long term, that's where I'd like to see myself. And so number one is get my Ph.D. you know, to get the accreditation and the recognition that comes with such work.

05.09.40 And then continue to find an explore ways to raise funding for it.

JW: Are you enrolled?

05.09.49 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah. I'm actually going to Fordham University. And I will be focusing on urban, urban education leadership, and so my focus will actually be looking at bilingual and dual language programs in the United States. Their history. The inception of these programs, their history, the challenges that they faced.

05.10.18 And basically ending with what made you know, the Kahlil Gibran International Academy any different from those schools, from those programs. And basically really exploring what, what were the issues or things at play at this school, and what were the things at play with all the other programs that were established.

05.10.48 Yeah. I don't think I articulated it as the way I wrote it in my application. But.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: It will be education?

05.10.58 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yes, it will continue to be education. Yeah. (~JW~) I think it's very, very important that, that I focus on this area. Because bilingual and dual education continues to be marginalized. And basically (CLEARS THROAT) over the course of the past ten years, the program, these programs or this approach has really been undermined by the Bush administration's push of you know, the No Child Left Behind, and No Child Left Behind Act has really compromised these programs.

05.11.44 So looking at that and why is it that we, in the United States, are not encouraging schools to teach multiple languages and having young people actually graduating high school with multiple languages other than one, if they're lucky.

05.12.03 If they're lucky, two, English and whatever foreign language that they take. So why is it that we are in the bottom of the totem pole, you know, worldwide when you have schools that are actually encouraging young people to have three to four foreign languages under their belt.

JW: Will you continue to speak out?

05.12.23 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yeah. Yeah. I just have to figure out how I'm gonna schedule all this (LAUGHS). Yes. Absolutely. I welcome the opportunity to be invited to any university community organization, house of worship, to talk about the making of KGIA and where it is today. And, and how important it is to support such schools as well as where we are today as a nation.

JW: What thoughts do you have about the site of 9-11?

05.13.10 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I've been following it as best as I can every time that it makes the paper (~JW~). And of course, every time that we drive by it on the Westside highway, of course, it's something that stands out. You know, stands out physically as well as emotionally.

05.13.32 And I'm, I have to say I'm very surprised that you know, the, the course of action to get things done in that part of the city, it's just been really shocking to see how slow things are. And also how political things are (LAUGHS).

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

05.13.56 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: No, I'm not shocked by that. But just how political things are, and that it's individuals' political agenda that continue to undermine, you know, things getting done, unfortunately. (~JW~) I have, I have to say that I do have somebody who works at the, at the September 11<sup>th</sup> memorial museum. (~JW~)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

05.14.26 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: So every now and then we get together and she just shares with me all of this crazy stuff that's happening there (LAUGHS). I'm like how is it that you're still working there? I'm shocked. (~JW~) Yeah. So. Yeah, so I don't know. I don't know like and it's amazing. Because you know, the work that she's doing now and trying to get curricula out and educating people about it and involving schools and it's just really great, you know, and I can't think of a better person who's who would be good for the job.

JW: How do you think of the day of September 11<sup>th</sup> now?

05.15.14 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: How do I think of it? It's still you know, it's still a raw wound. I don't think that we or I will ever forget, you know, that day and what that day holds.

05.15.30 And you know, it's, it's one of those days for me as well as many others that was a defining day, you know? And that really put people to the test of, you know, what are you gonna do, what are you gonna do about this? So it was really my first official call to service in terms of I could you know, do something about this and help others, or I could just do as many chose to do, not do anything and try to move on with my life.

05.16.08 And so you know, it, it connects, always connects back to me for me, you know, my call to service. That it took, you know, a tragedy such as that to really make me stand up and say I want to do something about this.

05.16.29 I want to help people and I want to educate people and I want to bring people together. So you know, it certainly has a significant place in my memory, in my data base, in my (LAUGHS) history. That, you know, you know, it's, yeah.

05.16.58 It's a, it's a hard thing. It's a hard thing and every years as we you know, we close it, it's very interesting. You know, as to where people are and how people are handling it. And, and just you know, where we are as a nation. So it'll be interesting to see how things happen this year under Obama.

05.17.28 What will his speech be? Will he come to New York? Yeah.

JW: Any closing thoughts?

05.17.43 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: (MID-STATEMENT) Naji, it's so funny (LAUGHS). He had like a laundry list of things for me to talk about. (LAUGHS)

JW: Did you talk about them?

05.17.50 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I think I did. He's like make sure you mention the academic, academic educators' letter and all the awards that you got. And (LAUGHS). He's so funny. He's so funny. What else did he say? Let's see, the academic letters, yeah. All the awards that you got. Yeah, I can't remember what the rest are, but it was pretty funny. So I did get them in, though, so you can vouch for me (LAUGHS).

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Your path was so dictated to by the day – and you combined your original goal with your call. What was your dragon slayer moment?

05.21.49 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I still don't have, I don't know what it (?) all of this, I don't. I still, Jim, I'm still processing all of this. I think probably like you said, if you ask me in two years (LAUGHS) we may have an idea.

05.22.02 In terms of, is there a, a dragon, right? A dragon that I feel that I've slained (STOPS)

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

JW: Did you break through in any way in the past year?

05.22.28 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Yes. I, I think the one thing that I broke through is my own personal fear of challenging an institution and a city. It was as I mentioned earlier, a very daunting and huge responsibility. To wrap my head around. But I knew deep down in my heart that if I didn't, and I let this go unchallenged and unspoken of, that I would have let down the cause.

05.23.07 The, the social justice cause. And I could have simply continued doing what I was doing and pretended like nothing happened. And allow the public to think otherwise. But I just would not have been able to live with myself.

05.23.25 And so I think the one thing that I have, that, that I think that I have been able to come to terms with and say I'm gonna take this on, is taking on the Department of Education and the city. It's huge (LAUGHS). It's a huge thing. And it takes, as I've been told by a lot of people, a lot of courage and stamina to do it.

JW: What fear did you as a person slay?

05.24.25 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I was confronting my own fear of, of being able to do this. My (CLEARS THROAT) my courage, my, you know, did I, do I really have what it takes to do this? You know, and, and I think that we all as individuals have, you know, this, this place that we take ourselves, of feeling in-confident, and feeling unworthy of ourselves.

05.25.00 And, and really putting ourselves down. And I know that those were, that was like I won't be able to do this, you know? (CLEARS THROAT) You know, they'll crush me. You know, they, they'll really, they'll, you know, I by the time that this is (?) you know, if this ever ends, I will practically have nothing and nobody. I'll lose everything. Those were the things that I worried about.

05.25.31 And that I had to confront and say I am worthy of this cause. I can, you know, I have to do this. I could do this. Really believing in myself and saying that I have to do this. And that I have to do it for others.

05.25.53 And so really (CLEARS THROAT) battling with you know those voices in my head that were saying you don't have to do this. Just move along with your life, and you know, pretend like nothing happened. And accept that you and people at the department and the mayor's office will know what really happened. And I just couldn't do that. I couldn't do that.

JW: Whose voices were telling you not to do it?

05.26.37 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: I think that some of them, I overtly, I, I don't know if any of them thought that way over (?). But I'm sure that there are hidden, hidden, you know, what's the word I'm looking for?

05.27.00 Feelings or thoughts you know, that Michael that day (LAUGHS) had. I think that it's certainly something that I would say that the mayor has. You know? The mayor has been blatantly - what's the word I'm looking for? I don't want to, has been blatantly unsupportive, in terms of the Arab and Muslim communities in New York.

05.27.35 He's, he's only given of himself very little. It has never been on equal stance as other communities. And a prime example of that is that 2005 Arab Heritage was inaugurated. There was a breakfast in July. These breakfasts continue.

- 05.27.59 The media does not know about them. People are not allowed to take pictures at these breakfasts. It's simply a breakfast with the mayor behind closed doors. And it's, the message that I as well as many others in the Arab America community feel is that he's too either too ashamed or too embarrassed to be seen (LAUGHS). With the Arab American community. And I think the way that he handled my situation and taking the expedient way out and dealing with it was quite shameful.
- 05.28.36 Because he is a person who has his own personal power and means to simply have, you know, say I know her. And this is not what happened, and she will move forward with the school. And case closed. And I think that his own personal political agenda, as well as his own personal aspirations and convictions to Israel, got in the way.
- 05.29.13 He is a huge, you know, supporter of Israel. He's public about it. He's spoken about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over, over supporting Israel's right to defend itself and minimizing the Palestinian struggle.
- 05.29.34 And simply because this word intifada had to do with that part of the world. As he said in his own speech on the radio that day. When announcing my resignation. You know, he said oh, she spoke about a word. She's not all that political savvy. She should have condemned the word, you know?
- 05.29.59 I as well as others across this land disagree with that. You know? That totally impedes on freedom of speech. You know, where are we as a nation when we have leaders telling us that you condemn a word, you don't discuss it. You don't explain it, you don't define it. You don't - it's unheard of. It's absolutely unheard of. And so it is directly connected to his, you know, his support of Israel.
- 05.30.33 And it just touched a nerve for him. That had I condemned it and condemned the Arab organization that created these tee shirts, I would have remained highly regarded in his eyes and the eyes of others who, you know, who have those, who share his sentiment.

- 05.30.56 And so you know, I chose not to do that. You know, and whether I was an educator or a politician you can't condemn a people and their language. You just can't. You know? And it's, it's deeply troubling. Deeply troubling that, and actually sad for me and also very - I don't know if the word, I guess emotional, to know that it had to get to that point.
- 05.31.38 You know, that I as an individual with the, the accreditation and the reputation that I have was literally minimized to a word. And I think this is the absurdity of this whole, entire situation.
- 05.31.58 Is that rational well-meaning people became irrational (LAUGHS). And were so hung up on a word that they let it supersede their judgment of what should happen. And so I think that this is, this is a huge issue. That I have as well as others with where the mayor stands on all of this.
- 05.32.32 So I don't know, I don't know, how in the heck did we even get to talking about him?  
(LAUGHS) (STOPS)
- (OFF CAMERA REMARKS)
- JW: Who's the fight for?
- 05.32.58 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Who's the fight for? I, I didn't actually get a chance to say this to you before. So every day, I continue to work at the DOE, right? And it's amazing that I worked for almost two years at TWEED, and the one thing that I have done that I did then and I continue to do today is that I, every morning I have to center myself, Jim. I have to center myself by saying ok.
- 05.33.28 I'm grateful that I'm getting another day to live and continue to do the work that, I, I'm enjoying doing. And saying to myself who am I really doing this for, and why am I still reporting to the Department of Education to work? And at the center of that is actually the

New York City public school kids. I'm there, and I do what I do because I am a firm believer and an advocate for public education.

05.34.02 And everything that I do and every intention that I have in continuing to serve this, in this system, is for them. And so it's always been, you know, what I've enjoyed doing and found gratifying. And I always, every day, bring it back to that. You know?

05.34.28 And simply reminding myself I'm not there for Chancellor Klein, I'm not there for Children First Initiative that the mayor has you know, put together because this is his baby. I'm not there for the two of them. I'm there for the kids. And whatever it is that I do, whatever decisions that I make, it's always on behalf of the kids. And what will make, you know, things better for them.

05.34.56 And so the work I'm currently doing now is all after-school work, after-school programs supporting them and assisting them technically. And offering them program enhancements. So it's all in the name of making sure we have better after-school programs for the kids.

JW: Investing in future generations?

05.35.19 DEBBIE ALMONTASER: Oh, absolutely. If we don't invest in them (LAUGHS) we're in trouble. We're in trouble. So that's it.

JW: Thank you.

(OFF CAMERA REMARKS)

05.45.04 B ROLL - STILLS

05.49.04 ROOM TONE

05.49.44 END OF TAPE # DA 112