

Narrator: DALIA MOHAMMAD

Interviewer: Isabel Nguyen

Date: May 27, 2021

Location: Zoom

Collection: Race and Oral History Course, Spring 2021

Length of interview: 00:35:46

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**Isabel Nguyen (IN):** All right, hello! So my name is Isabel Nguyen, and today is May 27, 2021. So I'm interviewing Dalia Bapeer Mohammad through Zoom for the UCSD Race and Oral History Project. So could you please state your full name, date of birth, and place of birth?

**Dalia Mohammad (DM):** My name is Dalia Mohammed, and I was born December 10, 1994 in Kurdistan, northern Iraq.

**IN:** Awesome, thank you. And then, can I please ask you for a verbal signature for the recording and archiving of this interview by reading the statement I included in the chat, or, if you have it on the paper?

**DM:** In consideration of the recording on preservation of this oral history by students of the University of California, San Diego, I, the interviewee, Dalia Mohammad, hereby grant the University permission to publish, duplicate, or otherwise use the recordings and trans--transcribed interviews, and any photographs or audio/video footage taken during the interview. This includes publication in print and electronic form such as--such as on the Internet, rebroadcast the interview or portions thereof, and transfer the interview to future media.  
[laughed]

**IN:** [laughed] Thank you, Dalia.

**DM:** Thank you.

**IN:** So, to start off, I wanted to have some introductory questions, so can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your family background?

**DM:** Absolutely! So, again, my name is Dalia Mohammed, I was born in northern Iraq--Kurdistan. I moved to San Diego in 2003, I was nine years old. Moving there, I didn't speak any English, so it was my mom, my brother, and my dad. My brother's also, he's three years older than me, so I only have one sibling. I went to Foothills Christian High School. I went to a private high school because my parents wanted me to get a better education and have the focus on... have more focus on language and understanding more and fitting into the community

because it was a smaller school. From there on, I went to San Diego State University, where I got my bachelor's degree in community--in Counseling and Women's Studies.

**IN:** Thank you.

**DM:** And... yeah.

**IN:** So, can you tell me who or what has shaped you into the person you are today?

**DM:** I would consider my mom shaped me into who I am today because who I am is, I am a domestic violence advocate, and that is what I went to school for; I went to school for Women's Studies, Counseling, knowing what... knowing everything about who I am, which is a female, which is a woman. And so, my mom started a nonprofit organization in Kurdistan, which is the first ever organization to have its own shelter as well, that women were able to go and get shelter from their abuse, their abuser. And so, growing up in that was incredible. Seeing the women and how they can overcome certain things and just by having my mom there to help and support them was huge, and that is what shaped me into the advocate that I am today, and that is the reason that the work that I do today.

**IN:** So it sounds like you had a really strong role model.

**DM:** Definitely, definitely.

**IN:** So, when you first meet people like, for example, me, [laughed] what are maybe like, one or two things you would want them to know about you up-front?

**DM:** When... I want people to know that I am a female who is Muslim and a person who came here, not knowing the language, not knowing anything, and I was able to do something for myself, become the person I am today, and I was able to... from surviving war--surviving a war, a war-torn country--I was able to come out of that and be the person that I am today. I really like when people hear that story, because I see myself as a success story. And I want people to know that, no matter what you go through, no matter what the obstacles you--are in your life, you can always come out of it and be stronger and better every day, and so I like to relay that message, no matter it's through friends or professionally. It's something that I want people to know about me whether it's directly or through my actions.

**IN:** So, coming from Kurdistan and not knowing the language and getting used to American life, what was your experience like, especially in the private school that you mentioned?

**DM:** I can say that it was, it was very difficult because I was the only girl in my school with brunette hair. Everyone was blonde hair, blue, green eyes, and it was difficult. Some people had never met a Muslim girl before. Some people had never met anybody from Iraq, and I went to elementary school--in a private school as well--so the elementary school was super difficult because I didn't speak any English and it was hard to, to make friends, and I'm very social and very vocal and I have all this energy. So I did eat lunch by myself, for the first three years of being in the United States, I did get bullied. I mean, and I didn't even understand what I was getting bullied for, which is a good thing that I didn't speak English at the time. [laughed] But when I started high school, I played--I was tall, so I played basketball and that's how I got, I became friends with people. That's how I started to make friends and I had a huge group of friends that loved me and were there for me, and it was a really good experience. Towards *high school*, it became a good experience, but before that it was, it was a hard time.

**IN:** So outside of private school, then, what--because you mentioned your friends--so what did your support systems look like, whether it be like your family members or other people you may have known from Kurdistan, or like in the area?

**DM:** Yeah, so the community is really close in San Diego. Everybody knows each other, so if you're Kurdish, and you see another Kurdish person on the street, you just know each other, because they're, it's a very small community, and we had a lot of--we *have* a lot of Kurdish friends, and those are people that I've just grown up with knowing, and also, I... My best friend is not Kurdish, she's from Afghanistan, but we also share a lot of the same life stories, and we have a lot of similarities, so that was my--that *is* my support system until today. It's the Kurdish community and also my Afghan best friend.

**IN:** Okay, so going off of that, what is community--like the word "community"--kind of mean to you?

**DM:** "Community" means support. It means being there for each other, it means that when you have something that you are dealing with that is, God forbid, whether it's a funeral or it's you're in the hospital, it's being able to call on your community, or whether having something unjust happen to you, having your community stand there and support you, and whether it's you're having a wedding, having your community show up for you.

**IN:** That's a really nice definition, thank you.

**DM:** Thank you.

**IN:** So as a community health worker and, like, women's advocate, how do you uphold those, like, values and goals within License to Freedom?

**DM:** So, License to Freedom, within itself, it's--we--it's a huge family, so even the staff there, the therapists... We have therapists, we have advocates, we have attorneys, so every--law enforcement as well, constantly walks through, and we're all a big family, because if it's not for law enforcement, we can't have advocates, we can't have... And if it's not for the advocates, we can't have comfortable clients that come in, so we are a community in and of itself at License to Freedom, and we are able to share our community and give people the opportunity to become a part of our community. So with, with License to Freedom right now, I'm their community health worker, as well as we're doing a contract which is called crisis counseling. So with a community health worker, what we do is, in the beginning of COVID-19, we started just giving people information about what is COVID-19. And I was a part of the group that did it in the Kurdish language, and I'm the only person that did it in the Kurdish language, and then we have somebody else that does it in Arabic and Farsi and the languages for the population that we serve, and then from there, we shared places where you can get the COVID-19 tests to see if you're positive, what to do if you're COVID-19 positive. And so, now we are, with the community health worker, what we're doing is getting people appointments for vaccination, and that is my main role: is getting people their appointments, making sure they show up, confirming their appointments, reminding them, telling them what the COVID-19 vaccine is, when they have a question about what vaccine they're getting, they come to me, and I'm able to also translate all the county forms that they have available on the county website and translate those into Kurdish or the other languages that are needed for our community to be able to understand because the Kurdish, the Kurdish language is not on the county website, and so which is difficult for the Kurdish community, because then they don't have that resource and some of them don't speak English, so that can become difficult.

**IN:** Mm, okay... So, looking at License to Freedom and the communities you serve, like, what is the demographic, like, what are the demographics of the community or communities you serve within License to Freedom?

**DM:** We serve refugees and immigrants who, who are... There's people from... We have, we serve a lot of people from Iraq, from, I mean, Kurdish people, a lot of the Chaldean community, which is, which are also from Iraq, we serve people from Iran, Afghanistan, we have a huge Afghan community we serve, all over the Middle East, Southeast Asia...

**IN:** And then, License to Freedom, I know, is a member organization of the San Diego Refugee Communities Coalition, so could you tell me a little bit about the importance of that partnership and, kind of, how your group functions within the coalition, or like how you interact with other groups?

**DM:** Absolutely! The coalition is very important to License to Freedom because that is how we got the community health worker grant, that's how we're getting the crisis counselors. We, at License to Freedom, we were able to--through the coalition--we were able to bring on three people to do COVID-19 assistance, so that was one person speaking Kurdish, which was myself, another speaking Arabic, and another speaking Farsi. So through this coalition it's--I was actually just at the meeting that I was in was with them, and it was everybody! All the community health workers come together on Thursday, and we're there to talk about what we did with our community that week and how we're able to support them; what we can do, what are some ways I succeeded this week with my clients or people in the community that I helped that you can benefit from, and so on, so we have an amazing partnership and I absolutely love it.

**IN:** Yeah, it seems like a lot of learning from each other, and, you know, constantly improving.

**DM:** Definitely. And we all have the same goals and we all love helping our community, so it's good to be able to share that, the same ideas with an organization.

**IN:** Mm... Let's see. So... In working with other organizations, does your--does License to Freedom do a lot of collaborative efforts, or, like, events with other organizations, whether they're within the coalition or outside?

**DM:** Absolutely! So what--when you're a nonprofit organization, you cannot just survive just working for--by yourself; you need other people, you need other support, and we're all about sending out that resource, so if we're not able to do something for a client, we're making sure to give the client another resource. We never leave them hanging, just, "Oh, sorry! We don't provide that, we don't have your language..." So we are connected with everyone in San Diego, we are connected with the city of San Diego, we're connected with all the other organizations, and we work very closely with other nonprofit organizations.

**IN:** So, with regards to your work in License to Freedom, what's one experience that you really hold close to your heart? It could be something you learned from or something that you keep with you like what's a mem--one of the memorable experiences you've had?

**DM:** It was in, I'm not--I can't remember the exact date, but the war in Syria happened, and I remember, we had about 300 Syrian refugee families come to El Cajón, and they were put in a motel and the motel was dirty and they weren't able to provide them with their apartments just yet. And they didn't have their food stamps yet, they didn't have food, they didn't have a good place to stay, they didn't know the language, and they had just suffered all this trauma and they were put into this country that they don't know what to do. And so I remember getting the call of "We all need to go to this motel and help these people," and we just showed up and we brought them food. We actually--it was November and we even took our Thanksgiving meal there.

Everyone from the community took their Thanksgiving meal and we shared it with the refugee--with the Syrian community, and that was an incredible thing to be a part of. And now, seeing the same people that were in that, that motel that day, now seeing their children are getting accepted to SDSU, they're working at the places I'm going to, it's amazing to see.

**IN:** So when working with these communities, have you always been, like, this outgoing, like this “going to, like, jump in,” or has there been like a sort of transition from when you first started to where you are now?

**DM:** I was definitely a crybaby when I first started. I had very thin skin, I would hear any stories and start crying right away, and that is when I had to learn that, in order for me to help clients, I need to be more... I need to have more thick skin and I'm there to help them, and it's not--I shouldn't take things so personally, and that was a lot to, to adjust to, and then later I was able to, like, bring on my full confidence and my personality and work that in with the work that I do, so now I see a lot of people who are coming in to do advocacy. And they hear a story, and it makes them really sad, and they think about it for a long time. And I really like being that peer for them, to be like, “You're going to get through this; you'll hear more stories and you'll be able to be that voice for your client, and it'll make you stronger. And you'll be confident and super excited and make your client smile while they're crying.”

**IN:** So you refer to people in the community as “clients.” Is there something that you do when you're talking to them that kind of helps you express care for them, but not, like, get too caught up in their experience and in a way that, you know, leaves you maybe be emotionally exhausted at times? Like how do you balance caring for them, but also being professional, for example?

**DM:** That comes with a lot of experience, and the thing about working in a place like License to Freedom, which we are a community, and we are all very close, I'm able to help my client and later take a break. Say you were going through--you just hear a client's story and they're talking about their experiences dealing with domestic violence or sexual assault. Those are all very heavy topics, so it's all about knowing that, if my mental health is not good, I'm not able to help this client, so taking breaks, making sure that I'm good, and then being able to help that client, to the best of my ability.

**IN:** Mm, I see. So outside--

**DM:** And we go through a lot of training, while--sorry--a lot of our trainings are, are to help us with those things and the director is really able to send us to as many trainings as she can so that we can do our jobs to the best of our ability and even... She goes out of her way to send us to trainings, even if they cost something, she's able to make that happen for us so that we're, we have that built.

**IN:** Ah, I see. So outside of License to Freedom, you had mentioned, kind of, having self-care practices. So outside of License to Freedom, what are some things you like to do, whether it's just, like, recreational things or, like, to relax, that kind of stuff?

**DM:** I like to... I go on hikes at Lake Mary, I like to hang out with my friends, talk to my friends, call--be on the phone, talk to my husband and like, just normal things that you wouldn't think are therapy, which are considered therapy for me. I think just being able to, like, unwind and talk to your best friend just makes everything better.

**IN:** That's definitely really important. Let's see... So, with regards to the pandemic--obviously a big thing--so how has your everyday life been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?

**DM:** Personally, it's... it's been really difficult. I mean, just, the pandemic is... I can't, I can't say that I complain, because a lot of people have lost their lives and they've lost a lot of things, and that's what keeps me, like, very grounded, to not complain and say, "Why is this happening, why is the pandemic going on at this time in life?" And it's--the pandemic definitely affected my life plans tremendously. It has--it kept me from seeing my husband for a year. It was really hard, but things are looking good; things are getting better now, so I just want to focus on the positive and... Hopefully, we can all put this really hard time behind us, but we're all working on it.

**IN:** Definitely. So, what does your everyday life look like, like, you know, during the pandemic, and how has that changed from what it looked like before? Before the pandemic?

**DM:** Everyday life, I would wake up in the morning--before the pandemic--at 8AM and go into work until five o'clock, had to wear professional clothing and go to meetings and have the anxiety of driving from and to meetings and traffic, and now it's, "Let me put on a clean shirt and put some makeup on to get on Zoom." [laughs] And I like being on Zoom! I didn't realize that it would be, that I would like it so much, but I do, and it's changed from having a really hectic schedule to still having a hectic schedule, but still staying in the same chair, so I think that's the nice part about it.

**IN:** So what are some things--it sounds like maybe you'd be down to keep some things during the pandemic, you know, past pandemic time, so, like, what are some of those things that you've picked up, or some things you've had to do in quarantine that you would be okay with doing, you know, once the pandemic is behind us?

**DM:** I would be okay with social distancing. [laughs] I would be okay with wearing a mask in certain places now, for sure. Always sanitizing our hands and washing our hands, regardless of a pandemic going on. And I would definitely be okay with doing meetings over Zoom, because I

feel like we get so much--we're very productive on Zoom than when we're actually in a meeting... in person! [laughs]

**IN:** Oh, I see! So then, with regards to your work at License to Freedom, how has the pandemic affected... I guess you talked a little bit about your work, but I guess, the overall organization, like how it's being run or like how it functions? How has the pandemic affected that portion?

**DM:** So what's incredible about License to Freedom is most of the organizations in San Diego actually closed during COVID, and License to Freedom was the only one in El Cajón that stayed open, and we were physically there. We had physical therapists there, we had attorneys coming in, the director would go in all the time. I was available on call--I *am* available on call. We were there; we never stopped working. And we never stop working, so we're always there for the community and we know that the work we do and the population we serve, they're very vulnerable and you never want to close that door, no matter what. So it's--it hasn't changed, we're still there.

**IN:** Mmhm, so it's pretty consistent. So, in that case, during this time, have you seen, like, an--like, how has, like, the workflow changed or has it been pretty consistent?

**DM:** So I'm... License to Freedom, we work with victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, we also have a 50-week offenders program, which is when an offender--when you go to jail for domestic violence and you're convicted of a crime for domestic violence, the court mandates you to go to a 50-hour community--which is a 50-hour course on how to not go back to jail and how to not beat your partner or abuse, and you'll learn a lot of things there, and so License to Freedom has that class there. We also have youth groups, we have immigration attorneys, we have DV [domestic violence] attorneys, so... Where... Oh, my goodness, I lost your question. How has...?

**IN:** Yeah, I had asked, "How has the workflow changed during quarantine?"

**DM:** How has the workflow changed? So, with our DV... With our DV clients--so that's where I wanted to go with this--we provide all of those, but with DV--"domestic violence"--it has, it has gone up. People are at home and people are frustrated. This is a really hard time, and people don't have their work to get away from their partner. They don't have that break, and also, the people that got an opportunity to be safe while their partners at work, from the abuse, were getting abused over and over, throughout the day, and that's where we were able to--they were able, they came to us and we found those stories, so I do believe that DV has definitely gone up during the pandemic.



**IN:** And then, for individuals who do experience domestic violence, what are some ways, like, maybe you as a community health worker or others have, like, from License to Freedom, you have suggested as ways for them to stay safe or... yeah, stay safe at this time?

**DM:** Yeah, so we have safety plans. So there's a safety plan that you can give, whether you're a client or whether you're just anyone that wants a safety plan, you can look it up online and it's super easy, and you just do those certain things on what happens if you feel unsafe. You have your passport, you have money, you have... What are you going to do in case of an emergency? Who are you going to call? What are some friends' numbers that you're going to have there--then and there--and ready to call them? Or, calling 911, which is, like, simple, but a lot of people don't want to do, because they don't want to get their partner in trouble. Which is a hu--huge thing; we tell them to make sure, if you're feeling unsafe or if you are in a situation like that, to make sure you call 911 before you call us. And we're usually able to really make sure that each client is equipped with the resources that they need in case that they go through that, and we give this information to everyone, whether you're a domestic violence client, you're coming for youth group, or... We're just able to--we want everyone that walks into License to Freedom, know that they can trust us. We're there for them, and we can give them the resources that they need at any time that they need it.

**IN:** So, as you are now, could you imagine your life without License to Freedom, or, like, your involvement in this community? Could you imagine it and, like, what would it look like?

**DM:** Absolutely not! It would be so boring, and I wouldn't have the experiences that I have right now if it wasn't for License to Freedom. I have been able to grow so much professionally and personally with License to Freedom. It's the--it's the relationships you create between the--the relationships you are able to create with the clients, and as well as with the employees there. It's--it's an amazing place and I can't imagine my life; it would be dull and boring, and I would probably have an eight-to-five job doing not-so-much-productive things that I'm doing right now.

**IN:** So, where do you see yourself, I suppose, in--in the future, like, five years, for example? Like, where do you see yourself?

**DM:** So, before License to Freedom--well, I've been with License to Freedom for years, but--I also worked for the City of San Diego and I was their domestic violence and sexual assault victim services coordinator, and doing that was really cool to me: working on the government side of things, and not so much the grassroot. And that gave me--and while I was there I really saw how being involved in law, being involved in those things really are able to get--really are able to get people, like, the help that they need, so I see--I definitely see myself grow professionally into doing something more of... Maybe not go to law school but get my master's in, like, therapy, or get my master's in something that's going to help me grow more

professionally and do something different, but definitely stay in domestic violence and sexual assault area.

**IN:** Gotcha. In the same vein, where do you see License to Freedom in five years, the organization?

**DM:** I see License to Freedom continue to do its amazing work, and I see License to Freedom go viral on the Instagram that I just created. [laughs] And, and I see us growing and having more... more programs, and maybe creating another office location, which would be very cool! So I can see License to Freedom growing and growing--which we already are, but I see it being different in five years in a good way.

**IN:** And then, this question might be a little more nebulous, but what does your, like, ideal world look like [pause] for you, like, what does that look like?

**DM:** An ideal world for me is having a world where people don't hurt one another, where... where domestic violence doesn't exist, child and elder abuse doesn't exist, where racism doesn't exist. Discrimination isn't... it's *extinct*. I just want--and that's the world that I feel like we *can* accomplish and that I *can* see, hopefully in my lifetime, but I definitely--my ideal world is people living in harmony and being happy and loving each other and accepting each other for who they are.

**IN:** So it's really a good, honest, ideal future, yeah. So in... Does License to Freedom exist in that future, where if there's, you know, like, no domestic violence, for example, or like, I know we've talked about License to Freedom as more of, like, not just like a center, but like a community as well, so where does License to Freedom, like, figure in that ideal future?

**DM:** I think License to Freedom *will* fit in that because... License to Freedom does a lot of other things. We do--we have therapy services, we do a lot, we deal with a lot of VAWA [Violence Against Women Act] cases. License to Freedom does a lot of community groups which are on healthy relationships, and I think that we will still exist, but with less people hurting.

**IN:** So what are some things that you would want outsiders, like who aren't already in the communities you serve, like the refugee and immigrant communities, that you would want them to know about your work in License to Freedom, they might not know from the outset?

**DM:** I want them to know that you--when you come into our office or when you call us, we will be there for you. We will not just--we're not just another place where you call, and we give you to another organization or we give you a number to call and you end up nowhere. When you're calling License to Freedom, you have called your destination, and whether that be, you need

somebody to speak your language, we will make that happen. When you need somebody to go to court with you for something, we'll make that happen. And, so I want people to know that License to Freedom is the hub of anything that you need, we're there for you, whether it's in our job description or not, we're going to make sure that we are there for you.

**IN:** So, as we transition to, I guess, the end of the interview, is there something that I didn't ask about, or that we didn't really touch upon that you'd want to bring to light during this interview, whether it's about yourself, or about License to Freedom and your work?

**DM:** About myself is... I... hm. No, I think, I'll just speak more on License to Freedom. License to Freedom... we were just actually in the Union Tribune, and on channel--what was it--channel 10 news? for having our first vaccination mobile site, and we had about fifty-five people from the refugee and immigrant community come and get their vaccines, which was a very big success for us, as well as we have been getting people their vaccine appointments ever since vaccines have been available, so I just really want to highlight that we have been really like the leader and force in getting people vaccinated in the community.

**IN:** So for people who... want to support your--their fellow refugee communities or people who identify as immigrants, what are some things you'd want them to keep in mind when, you know, trying to be there to support them and, like, trying to be understanding and, you know, like, culturally competent? What are some things you would want people who aren't already in the community to know when dealing with these populations?

**DM:** Yeah, so... I mean, when you first start working for License to Freedom, you have to go through the cultural competency training, but I mean, not just that! We're really able to help people understand, and so, if somebody were from outside of the community wanted to help or assist License to Freedom, I would say, definitely know the right things to say or to do, and to not offend someone's culture or religion. Try not to shake hands with a lady who has a hijab on, or try to wait for her signal first, if she's going to signal before you. Just making sure, like during Ramadan we were able to keep our office very nice, we were able to not eat in front of people who were fasting. And just do certain things that respect the other person's culture, and I think that we're--we do a really good job of making sure that everybody's equipped before they start working with our clients.

**IN:** Mm, I see... Thank you! I guess, one last question: I think you may have touched upon it a little bit, but what would you like viewers or listeners or readers, however they're engaging with this interview, how... What would you like them to take away from this interview?

**DM:** I think anytime that I'm speaking somewhere, I want you to take this as a resource, whether I'm a resource to your friend, a family member, yourself. Know that you are not alone and that

there's always help, whether it be you're going through a bad relationship or an abusive relationship, or you've had some kind of trauma go on in your life. You're definitely not alone and License to Freedom is here for you, and we are able to be that resource to you. So, keep us as a resource; don't forget our name, like us on Facebook and on Instagram and share--share with your friends who we are, because you never know who might actually need this resource.

**IN:** Well, thank you so much, Dalia! That concludes our interview.

**DM:** No, thank you so much!