

Race and Oral History Project, UC San Diego

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18:37:21(M) Yeah. So could you please give me a brief introduction about yourself?

18:37:29(Y) Yeah, of course. So my name is Yazan and I am the director of community, a grassroots organization based in Los Angeles called Vigilant Love. We do work on Islamophobia through arts, healing work, and then organizing community activism. And yeah, I also do research. I have my undergraduate and master's degree in gender studies, and a lot of my research is actually looking at the relationship between gender refugee hood and surveillance and that's actually what brought me to a lot of my work with the Madjal community center and alcohol. Other than that I'm based out of Long Beach California right now. I lived in San Diego when I went to school there, and when I was working on the founding of the Majdal center. I was a graduate student at San Diego State University for 2 years. And then I moved back to Los Angeles after that. And I'm Arab, Muslim. Both my parents are immigrants. Lebanese Palestinian.

18:38:46(M) So would you like to talk about some memories or like experiences from your early life that helped you to become who you are today?

18:39:12(Y) So both of my parents. are both half Lebanese, half Palestinian and they, as well as a lot of our family, have both been impacted by war, by colonization. A lot of our family had to split up and move to different countries. And so we are actually the only people like my parents, myself, and a couple of other family members are the only people who live in the Us. Majority of our family actually lives back home. So either in different countries in the Arab world. So I think, growing up, watching the news, and also visiting family and learning more about different experiences with state violence, with Us wars, with Zionism and colonization like these things. Those are definitely experiences that really impacted me and made me want to learn more about how to like, organize around issues relating to what or relating to refugee hood and relating to social justice.

18:41:15(M) So as you mentioned that, you have some research on gender studies. So would you like to talk about your experience, or like some stories or thoughts on this topic?

18:41:37(Y) Yeah, do you mean like gender studies in general? yeah, yeah, just like you?

18:41:45(M) Is there any thoughts, or like some stories that you would like to share with me?

18:41:52(Y) Yeah, I guess some things that come to mind are just thinking about and a lot of how it's really hard to have or center third world experiences. And third World feminism in these conversations I think that's, probably like something that came up a lot. I think, and undergraduate experiences in graduate school and in community organizing spaces is just, I think, looking and seeing how I again you had shared in your own personal experience, that like in your own upbringing, your experiences with your gender. Maybe you were different from what people expect. of your experience and I think that that's something that happens a lot with like in the Arab or Muslim context, too, is that there's there's kind of a stereotypical way that people expect feminism or gender to to happen, or to like the experience by women are people who identify as Lesbian or gay or queer or trans. and I think something that i've really like I was experiencing myself in undergraduate, and then saw a lot with the refugee community like in organizing and alcohol. I don't know if there's expectations of sexism or social conservatism that limits women to like roles. And that's just not really the experience and then also looking at how harmful those stereotypes actually are. For communities and like how it makes it. Okay, then, to think that, like war, for example, is okay, because, like thinking of Afghanistan, for example, I remember when I was younger, like the the way that the United States said they wanted to go to war with Afghanistan was because like to save women or these kinds of things, and so thinking about how then gender and feminism gets used in bad ways.

18:44:15(M) I see. So you talk about refugees. Would you like to share something that makes you really feel touched about some experience, or like some stories about the refugees? Or if you would like to share about the refugees who live in different countries like in the US. And how they can accept the culture in the US.

18:45:58(Y) Yeah. Okay, I understand. I think some things that we noticed, taking place in the Syrian refugee community. San Diego in general is historically like a major refugee city. Because of the Vietnam war and so many refugees like it really started with Vietnam in general like That's when refugees became a big population in the United States. And so San Diego has always been a city for that, and I think before Syrian refugees were coming. There were actually a lot of iodaki refugees. And like some of my peers. So I was working with the Majdal Community center. They like, we would have conversations about the difference in adjustment. So, for example, iodaki refugees who fled iodak after the US bombed and invaded in the early 2000. By the time Syrian refugees are coming. It was about 10 years later, and there was a bit difference in like the needs and the experiences of these Arab Muslim refugees. So there was a lot more establishment that these refugees from iodak had had versus the same refugees as peers of mine who were working with the refugees before I moved to San diego. We're literally helping with securing clothing securing short-term housing, trying to figure out food, and so something that we started noticing is like when we were wanting to work with at the very beginning, as Arab Muslim refugees. I think our goal was like. We want to really help center social justice issues and really support communities and set their own goals and their own political work. And what we realized early on is like Oh, like that's really idealistic in some ways are naive because like yes, You know, like community might be interested in talking about social justice things or about community advocacy, but also, like people, are very traumatized. They're still figuring out where they're gonna live, they're still figuring out where they're gonna get food

like they're still really reliant on welfare to figure out their day to day and so we started learning about the differences in stability and when it's realistic to build a community. Like, when is it realistic to build in terms of just relationships and helping people get resources? When then, like, after a certain time, can that become more of like: Okay, now we work together, we create things together. We have community events and stuff. And I think that was a big learning curve that came from looking at the differences in Arab Muslim refugee experiences based on what years they were coming, and why. And in terms of I think that the thing that you'd asked about like fitting into US culture or their experiences with it. There were definitely generational gaps. where you know like parents and grandparents like weren't learning English didn't know English, or an interest in learning it. Didn't know how to talk to the schools about their kids, needed help calling welfare like where we or other nonprofits in the area would call welfare for family members. Because there weren't translation services available and they wanted to figure out what was going on. You know, versus these kids who are growing up and learning English, learning it much more quickly, having to become more than the people that represent their parents in public and kind of help their parents navigate public settings like a trend. And then just tensions, you know, like but I think that they are really normal with feeling alienated or isolated in schools because, like some of our youth were still learning English, didn't know it very well, and being bullied or made fun of. You know stuff like that.

18:50:58(M) So as I as I saw in the pre-conversation you are a an organizer of the Arab Muslim community, so can you tell me, like, what's lead you to create the community?

18:51:29(Y) Yeah. Okay. You repeat the second part of your question.

18:51:33(M) Sorry. Oh, okay, So it's like you can share some memories and experience in the journey of founding or or creating the community.

18:51:56(Y) So I moved to San Diego in 2018. And by the time I moved I was already coming to San Diego in 2017. But I'm sharing this because a lot of the relationship building with the Syrian refugee community has been done by my peers. So when I was coming is when we were trying to shift from the weekly programming with the community into "let's open a physical space". And so I had moved at the time that we were trying to figure out: What would we do with the physical space? How can we better support the community if we have a physical space? And so before the Majdal center was opened. People that I work with who are also in Majdal and other organizations, they've been working with Syrian refugees for years. (Those people) really helping them(refugees), really getting to know them, building deeply personal relationships with families, you know, like if a family member would reach out to them and be like: Hey, I need help with this. Like they would call the people that I was working with. And so we had those deep relationships, And it was like, Okay, if we have, like a physical space, then we can offer workshops for community members like Maybe, for example, we could teach English to community members, or maybe we can offer some social services that are more resource and can do more for community. Because something else that was happening which is a huge reason why Majdal was a big goal of ours was, there is a lot of surveillance in the refugee community. Especially of Muslim refugees in the United States. It's really easy for the social services that refugees seek to become places where actually the United States Government is surveilling their action, surveillance, their behaviors, and things like that and we had seen examples of that taking place in San diego before and so we're really worried for the community,

and so the original or one of the original goals in opening the physical space was providing a space for community that's safe for them where their needs can be met without their rights being violated. And so that was a huge thing. and so when we first opened the physical space. You know, we had a giant opening celebration, and we're really excited and the Syrian community was really excited. We had our artistic performances and musical performances. We had a big food party with music. And it was in time where I think community was really excited to see that there was a physical space that represented them fully instead of what they were used to, which is organizations, or nonprofits that go to for hell where they couldn't fully be themselves they wouldn't be able to talk about, for example, their experiences back home where they couldn't only talk about politics. They couldn't share their opinions in the same way. And I think that Majdal is the space where the community is not like what we are servicing, but instead working with. And I think that's really rare in NGOs in the United States oftentimes. Especially refugees especially immigrants are usually seen as people who because they don't speak the language or know the culture they're seen as people who don't understand as much and so then they're treated like objects sometimes instead of like people and I think that for us that much to like that's something that we really really wanted to push against or fight back for.

18:55:55(M) I think it's like it's a second home for those people. I think it's very comfortable and very warm for them. Yeah, I think it's like a group of people who have the same belief and something like opinions on politics or something. and they feel safe to talk about this physical area. I think that that is totally good for them. Yeah. And as for the Majdal Center, can you tell me about your current role and or your work in the Majdal Center?

18:56:41(Y) Yes. So my work in Majdal center is now with things really into research, but I don't work as much with Majdal Center as I used to. So I was really active. from 2018 until about 2020. And I was primarily helping with researching and looking at policies in San Diego that were impacting refugee safety, which is around the surveillance stuff that I'm talking about. We were really looking and keeping an eye on refugee safety, making sure that you know people weren't being spied on, or these different things. And that's kind of what our focus was and a lot of the work that I did was research and working on creating a report that helped break down the types of research surveillance that were happening.

18:57:50(M) I remember that you also mentioned something about the mental health spaces in the communities. So can you tell me something more specific about that?

18:58:09(Y) Yeah, So the mental health is actually my current work. But it does tie back to San Diego. So The work that I do. That part of it was in San Diego looking at how mental health resources are offered to refugees in the United States. There are currently policies, in effect, by the United States Government and laws relating to national security that make it complicated. Basically the privacy of refugees in therapy or in different social settings, where normally it would be legally required that they have privacy. These policies actually don't guarantee that and there have been examples in the United States of people who are vulnerable because of their race, their religion, their ethnicity, having their rights in the therapy room taken away with our medical privacy taken away with claiming that it's for national security, but not necessarily having any indicator except the person's race or religion, or both. And so what we do at the organization I work with now, and part of the Majdal that is part of that in terms we try to look at who are the people that are doing that? How does it work, and what ways can we keep

community members safe? How do community members like: Hey? Sometimes you actually shouldn't share everything that you are thinking and therapy because sometimes therapists or psychologists have to report things if they think it's a violation of national security. But what is defined as a violation of national security is actually very, very simple things that are not related to violence and we've had people in the US who've been arrested or to be deported based on things that are basically their political beliefs that came out in therapy. You know things that are very, very very basic and very simple. And I think that's a lot of where my energy goes now, and Majdal is definitely a huge site in mind for you personally, when I'm doing that work.

19:01:12(M) Okay, Yeah, I didn't expect that the therapists can also report something about the different opinions in politics. I think it's like for those people who go into therapy, and who are arrested for some simple reasons, it's really unfair for them and I think the mental health that you are going to have in your work is very necessary for them.

19:01:45(M) I also remember that you also talk about keywords like community autonomy and some social justice struggle. Can you tell me more about community autonomy and the social justice struggle in your work?

19:02:25(Y) Yeah, So the work I think is kind of a little bit of what I was talking about before. But basically the community autonomy is with the nonprofits and the refugees in San Diego. We were noticing that nonprofits or other NGOs, they sometimes would make decisions for the refugees, or they would use the refugee stories to make themselves look good or they would misrepresent the refugee experience in a way that was actually unsafe for refugees themselves. And so that is something that we noticed happening a lot, and that is a huge part of why we wanted to try to create a space like the Majdal Center. Because we saw that the refugee community was often being spoken for like, and they did not have the autonomy or the freedom to make their own decisions in the ways that they should, that was kind of a big focus. So for us that Majdal Center, even something as simple as we're working with community and instead of we are like helping or teaching community like ways of seeing the community where they are equals and part of the process instead of people who need to be told what to do people who need to learn And I think that sometimes it's hard to see that because it's more of like "How does your organization think about these things?" It might not show like you could have 2 NGOs that offer similar programs. Maybe that is like 2 nonprofits offer a program, let's say, helping kids with their homework. But that what matters is the reason for why they're doing that program? Are they doing it to look good? Are they doing it Because they see the youth or the kids in these programs as people who should become community leaders? You know, and one nonprofit can be doing it because you know, maybe they care, and they want to help. But they see refugees as people who are victims that can only be helped, and not people who can help others, or people who can be community leaders. Or maybe another nonprofit is doing it like, our Majdal is like, we want to build the capacity of community. So they can control their own lives, and make their own decisions and run their own communities the way that they want to, instead of having to be told. So, anyway, that's kind of a little bit more about community autonomy.

19:05:37(M) Okay, I totally understand that and would you like to talk about some current difficulties that you face in a work or like your expectations to overcome them?

19:06:12(Y) I don't really work a lot with Majdal right now, so I don't really know the difficulties that are happening in depth.

19:06:20(M) So if there's anything that you feel like you want to do better in your current work is not like in the Majdal center, but your current work in the grassroots organization.

19:06:47(Y) Oh, I mean, I think something that we are struggling with in general is just trying to figure out how to do different work without resources for it. I think that's something that we struggle with a lot but I'm kind of trying to figure out if we have to do, for example, 3 different things relating to community education and also, like working with mental health therapies at the same time, how do we figure out which is the priority if we don't have the resources to do both? Those are some common issues that we have.

19:07:45(M) Do you have, like some envisions, or like hope for the types of community work that the marginal center will engage with in the future years?

19:08:05(Y) Yeah, I mean, I think that a long, long term goal that we have for the Majdal center is like that we used to have any way, and one that I think is kind of still there is really thinking about the relationship between the community center and the community growth in general. So like from even what's been happening in the last couple of years, like there's been a lot of work that people at Majdal have been putting in with growing community leadership engaging in advocacy locally and getting community members excited about, you know, getting involved in issues relating to their city and relating to their status as refugees. And I think something that would be really cool to see as a continuation of that is the community leaders who come to mestad to see them leading different kinds of social justice or wellness campaigns for the community. I think that that would be really powerful.

19:09:28(M) I think that's very good to see in the future that Majdal center will have. And, is there anything that you would like to share with me? Or like some specific stories in your work that you feel are very important that you would like to share with me?

19:09:59(Y) Not that I can think of.

19:10:07(M) Okay, it's okay. I don't think I have any more questions for today's interview.