

Race and Oral History Project, UC San Diego

Narrator: Naima Hagiismail

Interviewer: Abijith Augustine

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00:00:02

Abijith Augustine: Hello, Naima! My name is Abijith. I'm a senior from UCSD, Studying bioengineering:bioinformatics with a minor in physics and biology. This interview is actually part of a project called Race and Oral History in San Diego, where we interview individuals who are part of the San Diego community and get oral histories from them.

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Abijith Augustine: So can you tell me about yourself, where you're from and a little bit about your background?

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Naima Hagiismail: Yes. So my name is Naima Hagiismail. Oh, is that frozen? Okay, I'm good. Can you see me? Can you hear me? Okay, good. So okay, so my name, my name is Naima Hagiismail. I'm currently a high school specialist at a nonprofit organization called Barrio Logan College Institute. I'm specifically working on the El Cajon site. So our institution actually has 5 sites, and El Cajon is one of them. And that's what I currently do.

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Naima Hagiismail: A little bit about me. My parents. My mother is from Yemen, which is a country in the Middle East, and my dad is from Somalia, so I'm a little bit African and Middle Eastern. I didn't grow up Somalian, and I didn't grow up Yemeni. I was actually born in the United Arab Emirates in a specific city called Allian, not Dubai, the major city in the Emirates, but it's called Alain, which is a small, very conservative city. There in the United Arab Emirates, I moved to the State back in 1999 and then I was about 12 years old. I attended middle school, and then high school. Here in San Diego. I graduated and I went straight to Ucsd with a biochemistry major. So biology, biochemistry slash cellology, and then I also had a minor 2 minors in pre med and Middle Eastern history. After graduating, I decided not to go to medical school, and then I did my master in public health and specifically in a health promotion. I worked in various organizations. I worked in a hospital before I worked as a lab researcher and after I obtained my master degree, I worked as a community health specialist in different

organizations, starting with UCSD community health. And then I moved to the county where I was delivering health education to various community groups. And again I just landed to drop about 2 years ago and right now with BLCI. I am married, and I have 4 kids ages 14 to 6 years old.

00:02:56

Abijith Augustine: Okay, that's nice.

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Naima Hagiismail: Yes.

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Abijith Augustine: So you said you're from Yemen. Right?

00:03:02

Naima Hagiismail: My mother is correct. Yes.

00:03:04

Abijith Augustine: Have you tried any of the Yemeni food? There's like this food called Mandi. I don't know if you know it.

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Naima Hagiismail: Of course, of course I've just. I tried Mandi. I make Mandi myself.

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Abijith Augustine: Oh, that's nice!

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Naima Hagiismail: Yeah. So I don't know if you know. Mostly when you come from a both cultures, the mother usually nurtures her kids with her culture more than Dad. So anything. I am more skewed, more bias with the Yemeni. But when people ask me, depending on what they're from. if I could be relatable as African. I say, I'm Somalian. If I could be relatable as Middle Eastern. I say, Yemeni. : so I am very, like diverse.

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Abijith Augustine: Coming back to your background. So how was your experiences like an immigrant who came to the US when you were in middle school? How? How has it been shaped like your future?

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Naima Hagiismail: It plays a big part, actually, because growing up in a very conservative city, very conservative country, my mentality was very biased to different race. That's the truth in Middle East. And then when I came here I interacted with a lot of different races and not only different races, but also different cycle. Economically, majority of people who live in the United Arab Emirates are well off. So you're more interacting with more educated people middle to high class where it's here. I mean, first we moved. My dad brought us here when we came to San Diego. We moved in a city called Fairmont and that's where it's a lot of Somalian community are here. So it's fair amount. Slash El Cajon Boulevard, University Avenue. It's like right there. Big Somali community is living there, and for me, not speaking Somalian, not really knowing much about the Somalian culture, I felt that I was like a fish swimming in a you know, I technically was a little bit lost. I'll be honest with you. And not only that Abijith. I also had some identity crisis because I didn't know where to belong. Am I really Yemeni? Am I really Somalian? Am I from the United Emirates? Am I American because I became an American citizen. So it was hard. But it really gave me an outlook of how I shaped myself now, and I could just say I'm a multiple race in one, and at the end of the day I am human, and that's what I go with.

Yeah, yes.

00:05:52

Abijith Augustine: I also had a similar experience. When I first came to the Us. I came here 5 years ago to Modesto. It's like there's not many Indians there, so I didn't know how to adapt. And then I came to San Diego, where everything's like everything. Everyone's free, like everyone's free to talk to. And it's fun in San Diego.

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Naima Hagiismail: Yeah, yeah, yeah, for me. Also, September 11 happened when I was in high school and that was a big culture shock for me, because I didn't expect that people would be mean, you know. Just have been just mean with something that you had nothing to do with. And then the assumption and how people just view you and I was a child in high school. But I covered, and that's just identifying who I am because I was covering. So it did play a big part of who again, who I am today, just going through these rough experiences, really plays a big part of who I am today.

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Abijith Augustine: Yeah, it must be tough.

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Abijith Augustine: So about BLCI. So what is BLCI for you? And can you tell me a little bit about what your role is in BLCI?

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Naima Hagiismail: Yes, so do you know what BLCI in general is?

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Abijith Augustine: I do know what it stands for. It's Barrier Logan College Institute.

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Naima Hagiismail: Hey? Well, we start somewhere not knowing the abbreviation of BLCI as a whole. That's perfect. So BLCI is a nonprofit organization. Technically, they get their money heavily from donors. So we try our best to raise money to advocate, to partner with other communities, just to get funding from. Who do we serve? We serve the first generation. So all our students have to be first generation. What this first generation means. They have to be the first in their family to graduate college in the United States. So if their parents graduated from Iraq, from Mexico, from Pakistan, from anywhere in the world, with a degree, it doesn't matter. They have to graduate from here in the United States. So first generation, we also try to target low income. But in El Cajon most families are very stable. So it's not really a criteria for them to come into our program. BLCI originally originated from Barrio Logan. That's why Barrio Logan holds the big name. But we serve 5 different sites. We have the actual barrio, Logan. We have Chula Vista, El Cajon, and then other 2 are specifically inside high schools. One of them is inside San Diego High School, and the other one is inside a charter school called King Travis High school. My role is a high school specialist which I run the high school program. I serve students from 9 to 12. What do I do with them? I prepare them to go to college. From college application, from applying to financial aid to exposing them to universities. We take full trips. We expose them to local universities. They take a journey all the way to North California, where we visit various universities, such as UC Berkeley. We even go to Merced. We have a great partnership with Stanford, so we expose them. So when they're 12 great, they could make an educated decision of what school they want to apply to. So technically, that's my role. How do I do it? I deliver a weekly workshop depending on the grade level. So my integrator meet with me every Monday. They meet with me every Tuesday, eleventh to greater every Wednesday, and then, seniors, they meet with me every Thursday.

Currently our seniors have already finished everything. All of them got into their schools already. They committed to the school. They all apply to financial aid, same thing with scholarships. A lot of them applied for scholarships. So I don't really meet with them on Thursdays. Now that's technically my role and the organization I work at. Hopefully, I answered your question thoroughly.

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Abijith Augustine: Yep, you did. You did.

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Naima Hagiismail: Okay, perfect.

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Abijith Augustine: Yeah, that's that's great. I never had this opportunity. So it's.

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Naima Hagiismail: 100%. Well, I was a product of something like that. When I went to high school there was a program called the Opera count program, and I was part of it and a lot of my experience right now with my students, just because I went through that program. So coming here I was considered first generation, even though my parents graduated college back home. They didn't graduate here, so they did not know the system. So that's why we say first generation because they're not exposed to the educational system in the United States. They don't understand where the funding comes from. They don't understand the difference between community, college and university and a lot of cultures have a taboo about community colleges. Oh, no, this is not the smart students who go to community college where there is a different pathway depending on the student's interest and the money. And also sometimes it saves you a lot of time. So again, part of our program is the parents component where we invite parents, and we ask them to commit to 30 h per school year to understand the school system right? So we're not only working with students, we work with their parents as well.

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Naima Hagiismail: Yeah.

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Abijith Augustine: Is that the reason for your interest in BLCI? Was that the reason?

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Naima Hagiismail: You know, I grew up now, understanding my personality a little bit, and that's why I wanted to really be a doctor. I think I like to help people right. And then there are different ways of helping people, and I wanted to also see a fast result. So when I was working on research. I worked for a whole year, and then the experiment we were working on failed and that one of like took me a setback. That's how research is. There is sometimes you work on a project for 2 to 3, even years, and then one error will set you back, and then you have just to

pick up and and happen. So I think I wanted that fast through work in the same time I wanted to give. So when BLCI came along. I mean, they vented me. They saw me. I was working part-time during that time, but when they called me, they told me about the organization. I was like, now it's time back to give to a program that gave an opportunity for me. And that's how I joined BLCI.

00:13:01

Abijith Augustine: Yeah, it's nice. You mentioned that. I'm also in research. That also help me understand myself as well. So it's not. It's not that. So it has nothing to do with research. But it helped me to gain new insights about what I want to do in the future. So it's funny. You mentioned that.

00:13:21

Naima Hagiismail: No, no, no! Are you working in medical research, or you're a bio engineer, so probably it has something to do with Bio.

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Abijith Augustine: I'm actually working on a lab in the Leichtag library legend. So it's a neuro developmental or lab. So I'm basically a computational biologist as well. So I work on computers. So I don't ever have to take the piper tips or anything. So.

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Naima Hagiismail: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay, got it. Yeah. I worked at the Scripps research Institute around the corner. And then in a specific and molecular biology lab. So it's a role that I took as an intern from high school. And then I just shadowed one of the Ph. D. Students in his project. And then, later on, when I came to Ucsd, I went back to them and they gave me a part time. Job and I kept working with them. And then when I graduated, I continued. But I am always with you. This is not something that I like sitting in the lab quietly. I'm a very giggly person. I'm an extrovert. I'm not an introvert. I'm an extrovert. I like out. I like to speak with the people, and being quiet, the lap and wiping and doing notes and running a jail, and you went through it so we can. When I explain it, you definitely have a smile. So you understand? So yeah, I couldn't see myself working in a research lab. Yeah.

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Abijith Augustine: Yeah, that's true.

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Abijith Augustine: I've been working on this lab for 3 years, and we still haven't been able to submit one paper. So we're still working on it.

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Naima Hagiismail: I'm telling you, and with Barrio Logan, I mean, we work in college applications, starting from August. Some students submit by October, and then they hear from universities as early as November. like Cal State San Marcos sent our local students decision right away. So, seeing that fast result, hey, my students, that I helped getting to a school? It's like, Yeah, that's what hypes me up. That's what keeps me in the role. Unable to deliver to these students to let them achieve their dream, to get a higher education. So it's like, yes. So we're hitting acceptance. And now a lot of my students are also getting scholarships. One of my students. Just yesterday they heard of a \$10,000 scholarship that she just received. And I was like, Yeah, I'm glad that I pushed you. so that fast result and contracts with the research years of a result is where I changed my platform from health to education.

[Connection Problem]

00:16:06

Abijith Augustine: Hello!

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Abijith Augustine: Was that one of your favorite things, working with the kids like getting the result.

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Naima Hagiismail: Yeah, actually getting the result and seeing the result. And I know it's part of the other question. But a big part of me being in BLCI is, I am able to celebrate the student's success. I'm actually able to see students going into higher education or going into their dream school. You know. Just being part of that makes me very proud. So it's a very quick result for me that I'm able to celebrate, and, you know, be proud of.

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Abijith Augustine: And you also mentioned about students getting into high school. So why is there a need for a BLCI site at El Cajon ?

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Naima Hagiismail: A lot of our parents in EL Cajon, specifically, are immigrants specifically from the Middle East. So, coming from a lot of countries that have war fleeing countries that they don't want to flee to once they come here, they expect their kids a lot. You're from India, so your

kit, your parents always have holding you to a very high expectation. You don't have any choice but to go to school. I don't want you just to work. No, I could take you back home, and you could just work on the street right? So everyone is really pushing hard for the idea. Education is very important. All of these kids have a great GPA. All of them are great students, but they do not know their pathway of going to college right? Some of them could get a full scholarship to go to UC Berkeley, to Stanford, even to Harvard without them coming to our program and helping them. They were just settled by going to 2 years of community college and then just going to San Diego state, where some of them have a potential to go to one of the Ivy League. They have the potential. So a lot of our students are very smart. And that's why we see they need it. Hey, we need to help these students. We need to make leaders in this country. We make, we need to make doctors, not any doctor, high quality doctors. And these students do have the potential. So we need to take them. We need to let them integrate into the community. To the American culture of yes, education is very important.

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Abijith Augustine: Yeah, that is so true. There is so much potential that goes unnoticed in the Us. I've seen that myself as well.

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Naima Hagiismail: Yes, yes. and There are some parents who just settle with their kids finishing high school. And then. just, you know, working. And we actually have a big community here in El Cajon where parents are business owners. I'll say 70 percent of El Cajon liquor stores are owned by Iraqis. So they're not really pushing their kids. Hey, go complete education. You have a business that you're going to take after you're done. So also, we are going to do outreach. We are talking to families because some of these kids hit. Yes. they will take your business. But hey, they have a great Gpa, they have 4.0. So they have a potential to go to school, study business and turn your business to something else. So also we are a big part of outreach. We go, we, we speak, and we try to change some of the groups or race, and of the pockets of El Cajon about the importance of education.

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Abijith Augustine: It's also true that culture also plays a part. Like, as you said, I'm I mean they. My parents always had this higher expectation. They used to think like, I'm some kind of genius or even my sister was some kind of genius. That's part of the reason I chose, like UCSD, and chose this major.

00:20:06

Naima Hagiismail: It's the pressure sometimes from our own culture, and it's the same thing with my culture. They wanted me to be a doctor, because they say you're smart, you get an bio chemistry. You gotta "A" in chemistry. You did the college fair, or you did a science fair, you did

this science fair. You've got a lot of scholarships. You gotta be a doctor. My father is a doctor. He was a doctor. So they wanted somebody to inherit my dad's degree, and I was in that regard. I didn't, I didn't tell you a little bit. I also come from a big family. We are nice siblings. So I come from a big family where 7 sisters and 2 brothers, and I am kind of the middle child. So my parents really depend on me to teach my siblings. Hey? You're good at math. Teach them math. You're good at science. Teach them. So the responsibility came as a sibling to take care of me. My siblings also play a big part of me right now, taking care of my students, because I grew up taking care of my siblings.

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Abijith Augustine: Yeah, I get a little bit of nostalgia. After hearing that I had some experience with that as well.

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Naima Hagiismail: You have younger siblings.

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Abijith Augustine: No, I have an older sister, but I do have a lot of cousins who are younger than me, so.

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Naima Hagiismail: Yeah. Yeah. So you always look up to them, and the comparison is right Abijith. Your cousin is already a doctor. He's a lawyer. You better be like.

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Abijith Augustine: True.

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Naima Hagiismail: Yeah, yeah, yeah, so we are very relatable and cultures as well, no matter how long you have been living here for the past 25 years. But hey, culture is culture, no matter where they place you at. It's with us.

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Abijith Augustine: That's so, that's so true. So it talked a little bit about your family as well. So a little bit about your current standing. So how was your personal experience or working with the high schoolers? Shape your understanding about race as well as oral history. If you have any.

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Naima Hagiismail: Yes, yes, if you don't mind, give me a minute.

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Abijith Augustine: Sure. Sure.

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Abijith Augustine: Yep.

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Naima Hagiismail: So your question was, how does my role in BLCI right now shape who I am today.

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Abijith Augustine: Your understanding about race as well as maybe, if you have any as well as oral history.

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Naima Hagiismail: Yes, yes,

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Naima Hagiismail: Our population in El Cajon again, is heavily immigrants, right? and not only that 75% are Middle Eastern, Iraq, Afghanistan and Syrian. We have Mexicans right? So Hispanic Latinos slash Latinax. We don't have African Americans, whatsoever and that's a concern for me, cause reading a lot of research. African Americans have the least. They don't have the support, even though there is support there. But there are a lot of factors. Why, a lot of Africans, American don't go to or pursue higher education. So that's a different story. But that's what I noticed in my site Abijith.

[Froze]

You froze. I don't know. Do you hear me?

00:23:54

Naima Hagiismail: Abijith? Can you hear me?

[Froze ends]

00:24:16

Abijith Augustine: Hello! Can you hear me?

00:24:18

Naima Hagiismail: Yes, I can.

00:24:22

Naima Hagiismail: Yeah, your recording stayed. It didn't stop.

00:24:28

Naima Hagiismail: So on one part, maybe you should. Yeah. But yeah. So yeah. So I know, I noticed that in El Cajon, specifically, we have a heavy population of Middle Eastern immigrants, where, when we go to Barrio Logan site. it's heavily Latinos, Hispanics, right? So we tend to do a lot of translation focusing on Hispanics, middle Eastern part. Right now, we're also having the Afghan community, which also needs a different translation. So it is very interesting to see different races in different pockets in San Diego. and why they gravitate toward one location, I think, because of you here. Oh, now, come on a lot of Middle Eastern story stores, a lot of the stores that have Arabic writing and a lot of mosques there. So that's where they go.

Same thing with Barrio Logan, Barrio Logan has always been at Chicano, right at Chicano Place, where they have a Chicano park over there. So a lot of Hispanic feel relatable. This is what I see at home. This is what I am related to.

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Naima Hagiismail: So yeah, it's, it's very interesting to see race playing a part in our community and the history of it. So again, the history of Barrio Logan, the Chicano Park, the history of the Chicano Park. If you don't know about the history of Chicano Park. They were promised to have a place they destroyed, or they yeah, they built, the freeway people, Hispanic people protested. So that's technically the history of barrio logging. That's why people really hold that place to be an identity for that. And the same thing, right now, when you go to different pockets of San Diego, you have Euclid Avenue, It's heavily African American, right? So if you want to really see a lot of high schools or students from the African American background. You're gonna go to the pocket there and then. El Cajon is very famous for anyone who comes from different parts of California. They know El Cajon is the place to go. If you want to have Middle Eastern food, you wanna have. You want to experience the Middle Easter culture. So the history of it technically is a continuation of what had happened. Immigrants came to a city established, and then you hear and then depend on where they come from. Different races or different ethnicity will gravitate toward where they feel comfortable or relatable at.

00:27:09

Abijith Augustine: Yeah, actually visiting Chicano Park was like one of the classes for this course. It was my first time visiting Chicano Park. I was like, Oh, my God!

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Naima Hagiismail: The art. Yeah.

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Naima Hagiismail: Yeah, yeah, yeah, the art is very beautiful. And it's not only art, but also the history there and the pollution there.

And what's happening there.

And I actually, when I studied my master's, I also saw how race plays a big part in certain communities. So, for example, if you go to El Cajon Boulevard, if you go to Chica Barrio Logan, you really don't find a lot of farmers markets. You don't really find Parks. You don't really find trails where people run right. But when you go to La Jolla you go to Del Mar. Even here in my neighborhood I live in East Lake to La Vista. Literally every corner has a trail. They have a park, and every morning you see people running

So because I studied public health. We saw race and obesity right accessible to food accessible to exercise. That all plays a big part.

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Naima Hagiismail: So our neighborhood, your Zip code determines. I don't know if you learned that your Zip code determines how long you will live. Your zip code determines what your future is gonna look like right? If my zip code says I am from Barrio Logan.

hey? Pollution.

asthma!

The food there right does play big part, whereas students who live in La Jolla, barely. You see any fast food I mean. You live in Ucsd right? When you drive around La Jolla. How far you see one fast food from the other?

It's rare that you see them closer to each other. Go to El Cajon Boulevard, go to University Avenue literally. Literally. Every corner that you go to has one or multiple fast food Carl's junior here and then Mcdonald's is there Chipotle is behind it so?

And then you look at the population and healthy, unhappy a lot of kids and educational. So it's very, very eye-opening.

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Abijith Augustine: That that is so true. I never thought about it actually. But that is so true about San Diego, like in La Jolla. It's like you cannot find any fast food here and thank you for sharing that actually.

00:29:52

Naima Hagiismail: Yeah, you're welcome. That was one of our projects in my master degree. Again, is it public health?

So we also. So you saw the, the history, the or I mean, I think I don't know if race and history, but for us also it was like race and health.

How your race, determine your health and your Zip code, and then how your life expectancy.

See if you live in a certain area, what's accessible for you? Right? So all of this plays a big part of how we should, and that's why education is very important. The more educated you are, the more aware of yourself, and the more you're aware of your surroundings. And that's how we start to change. And I think that's what Chicano park is. They wanted to make a change.

They're tired of being that population that looks down on.

hey? We exist. We need equality. We need better air. We need a better life for everyone. They don't have parks until now. They're protesting that they don't have parks in Barrio Logan. Then. yeah, yeah.

00:31:00

Abijith Augustine: It was so good.

00:31:01

Naima Hagiismail: And I've just been able to speak.

00:31:03

Abijith Augustine: Yeah, yeah, go ahead. Go ahead. I have all the time.

00:31:06

Naima Hagiismail: Yeah, well, you have to stop because we have to finish the questions. I don't know. Sometimes I overlap the answering because I read the questions ahead of time. So sometimes when I answer I think of that question after that already. So that's why you mentioned, because I kind of overlap the answers.

00:31:26

Abijith Augustine: Yeah, that's fine. That's what that's actually, we needed as well. So not to follow like some steps.

00:31:34

Abijith Augustine: I'll finish in with my last question. So do you have any message to the world who are interested in either BLCI or race and oral history?

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Naima Hagiismail: I mean, BLCI, continue what they're doing. I mean, everything starts with education. Once we change minds, we can change life.

For your class history is proof of what we need to keep and change, but the biggest lesson in history teaches us not to repeat the same mistake. When the kids keep hurting himself. I was like, how many times we told you not to do it. History is happening over and over. Certain rates are kept down with no support. I don't know what's the agenda on that, but the more we educate them, the more we do outreach, the more we give them a voice.

It's very important. Whether it is an art? Whether it is in photo coz, I did a project with my students called Photo voice. You don't have to speak. You don't have to say anything. Take a picture, because sometimes a picture speaks value.

So by taking a picture right? So that by itself a change will happen, but we need more generation to be more educated.

00:33:04

Abijith Augustine: Thank you for doing this interview. This will be part of our library collective. So thank you so much. Let me stop the recording.