

MARISSA HOWARD: So, do you mind just stating your name?

IMAM PLEMON EL-AMIN: OK, I'm Plemon El-Amin. I'm the Imam Emeritus of the Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam.

MH: And how long were you the imam here?

IMAM PE-A: I was the resident, the primary imam for twenty-five years. I was the assistant imam eight years before that. So, thirty-three years I've been imam here for this particular community. And I've been retired now for twelve years.

MH: What is a retired imam, what is his position or role?

IMAM PE-A: Basically I retired so that I could let the younger imams step up and be on salary, technically. We can't afford to pay for so many people. And so, me being there, it was a move to bring in younger leadership. We have sent young people overseas to study in Syria and Malaysia. And when they came back, there was no way to employ them. So that was part of my strategy, is to—twenty-five years is enough time—to step aside and let younger leadership step in. So I still serve on the board here, and I'm—other than that, I'm just a regular, active believer and supporter here.

MH: Could you tell me about this community in particular, the Decatur Muslim community?

IMAM PE-A: Yes, we originally were connected to the Nation of Islam and have a history that goes back in Atlanta to 1958. In 1975 Elijah Muhammad, who was the founder of the Nation of Islam, passed away, and his son, Wallace Muhammad became the leader; and he transformed the Nation of Islam from a pseudo-Islamic community into a legitimate Islamic community. So a lot of the beliefs and teachings that the Nation of Islam had were not legitimately Islamic teachings. A lot of good things, too, that they had have continued. That year we moved out here—actually a few months before that, in 1974, we moved out here to—down the street on Fayetteville Road to Decatur. We continued to operate a mosque in Atlanta and this one in Decatur. When we made this transformation from the Nation of Islam to a global Islamic perspective, we began to be primarily active in this particular neighborhood. So we bought the—which was the Church of Nazarene down the street on Fayetteville Road. We bought it in 1974, we made the transition in 1975, and we turned it into a regular mosque. Ten years later we wanted to move the school from the West Side here, so we renovated that facility where it could facilitate and hold both the school and the mosque. And then so we kept that going for—until 1990, and this property came available; so we

purchased this property and kept the school down the street and renovated this property for the mosque. So we've been located here since we did a grand opening in 1991 right here. So we bought everything that's connected with the parking lot and have encouraged members to open up businesses but also have supported people who are not members in their businesses here as well.

MH: Could you tell me a little bit about the fact that you did purchase a Christian church in 1975 here? Could you tell me a little bit about that transition?

IMAM PE-A: Yeah, I think the church—I'm almost certain this is the Nazarene Church was the same one that now is located at [Interstate] 285 somewhere in between—you can see it from 285, somewhere between Covington and Memorial Drive. I believe—I can't tell you for certain—but I believe that when the neighborhood was transitioning in '75-- we actually closed on it in the latter part of '74, September '74—but when the community was transitioning, I believe that the congregation had moved out of this area, and so they relocated. From an Islamic standpoint, there's nothing wrong with a mosque being located where a church was. In fact, the idea of—if something has been consecrated for the worship of God, then we want it to stay that way, whether it becomes a mosque or synagogue or church, we want it to stay that way. So once we moved there, many of our members began to move in the area as well.

Three years later, when we made—when we completed this transition, where really, 1977, when we completed that transition, we began the call to prayer five times a day. So in 19—really in 1976, you could hear the call to prayer in the morning before sunrise, at noontime, in the afternoon, at sunset, and then at night. And so that was problematic for the neighbors at first, but the next five or ten years, the community had transitioned, and we were the elders in the community. And so everybody made an adjustment to it then. And I always tell the story of one day one of the neighbors came in, and our speaker system had blown a fuse, so we had—for a few days, we hadn't called to prayer. And he came in and said, "Reverend, you made me late for work today because I didn't hear that song this morning." [*Both laugh.*] You know, so the neighborhood has adjusted to it, they hear—because it's amplified—and they hear the call to prayer, and they have really adapted to it. And, you know, if you travel to Muslim countries, that's what you hear. So we have established that. So we've been doing it every day, five times a day, since 1977. And when we moved up here, by the

time we moved up here, we had twenty families who lived within the hearing range of that. So twenty Muslim families live in this—around the area. So they hear the call to prayer, and they come up to the mosque.

MH: How do you choose who actually does the call to prayer?

IMAM PE-A: We try to pick whoever is—who has the best call, the best voice. But what's actually more important is that they are consistent and on time, because it's not easy making—coming to the Masjid five times a day. The muezzin that we have now has sort of moved a little further out, so it makes it a little more difficult. So we have a couple of people that live in the neighborhood, if he's not here, they go in and call to prayer. But that's a position of honor, to be the muezzin, or the caller of prayer. So people look forward to being able to have that position.

MH: Do they each have their own melody?

IMAM PE-A: Oh, yeah. It's a standard call, but everybody sounds different, though. And it has a lot of inflections and elongations that different people do it with a different style.

MH: I remember I went to Istanbul, and that was the first time I'd heard it, and from all around. And everyone—I didn't realize it was all different in the way it sounded.

IMAM PE-A: Yeah, the main mosque in Istanbul starts it off, and then about five seconds later the different mosques—so they sort of, they have a system where everybody starts a little bit behind each other, so it's like ribbons in the sky, you know, just rolling through and everything. But it's very moving in Istanbul, I think, yeah.

MH: So a little bit back to the church—and actually it's partly a question with this, too, do you have to orient the—is there an orientation with the way that you're praying?

IMAM PE-A: Yeah, in general, most churches are turned east and west, which makes it easy for us—we're slightly north of east in our direction. And so the church normally has its front door facing the east, and so the preacher normally—or the pulpit—is normally facing east, and the congregants are facing west. So when we come into a church and make it a mosque, we sort of turn it the opposite way. So the way that they would normally walk in, that's really—the back is normally our front. So down there that's basically what we did, is we reoriented and then have a slight turn. So we're praying in the direction of Mecca. And technically every direction is a little

different, because you're forming a huge circle around Mecca. So the direction we're praying in, then if I went down to Miami—we're praying this way. If I went down to Miami, they're praying slightly more north. If I went up to Canada, we're praying in a slightly more south—southern. So, yeah, so we are conscious of that. And I—you know, not all churches are oriented toward east, but this particular one was.

MH: Now you were just mentioning pulpit, preacher, reverend—

IMAM PE-A: So our preacher, our reverend, is called the imam. Technically we don't say we give sermons, we give what we would call a Khutbah, which is a teaching. So more so than preaching, we're teaching. We don't have a pulpit; everybody's on the same level. But we do have a minbar, or a place where you preach from. And the imam is—the congregation is turned eastwardly toward Mecca, and the imam is facing them. But when it's time to pray, then he turns that way as well; and everybody's turned that way.

So there is a front and a back. In our mosque we have strong—and in Islam in general, there's a strong code of modesty. So that modesty turns into a lot of separation between men and women. Some mosques, the women come in a different door, or they're upstairs or in the basement or separated. Here we're all in the same space, and that's the way we prefer it. But we don't have any curtains or any partitions. But the men are closer to the front, and the women, they are located in the back. Because we have this bending down in prayer, we try to avoid being behind a woman when she's bending down and praying, so that's the way we deal with it. I've been in mosques that put up curtains or have a different room, but we love having everybody in the same space, same room. When we get through, everybody comes out into the lobby. And so we have a little stronger interchange between men and women than most mosques, but it's all done in very modest and good taste.

MH: Could you tell me a little bit about your story?

IMAM PE-A: So I'm a native Atlantan, born and raised here. I went to Booker T. Washington High School. And in my high school year—see, I was born in 1950, which put me in high school from '63 through '68—and these were the years of assassinations, with the Birmingham bomb—the girls at the Sixteenth Street Church, Medgar Evers in '63, John Kennedy; in '65 Malcolm X was assassinated; '68, my senior year, Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy. And so it politicized me somewhat, and my family all went to Morehouse and Spelman, and I was trying to get away. So I applied to the

Ivy League schools and to technical schools away, and I was accepted at Harvard, so I went to Harvard in 1968 and became very much politicized. This was the heart of the student movement in colleges, very much in the middle of it in the Northeast, and also West Coast was very much in it. Atlanta was a little bit behind, the South was a little bit behind in that movement. So I graduated from Harvard in 1972, this is my fiftieth year—fifty-year celebrations now for it. But I became very much politicized, and when I came back to Atlanta—I should tell you, I was born and raised as a Baptist, so I was a Baptist Christian, and my family was all Baptist.

And so when I came back to Atlanta, I had been exposed to various religions, but my main focus was on social justice and trying to bring about some change. So when I came back to Atlanta, most of my friends that I went to high school with, who did not go to college, they were coming back from Vietnam. And many did not get back from Vietnam, and some with loss of arms or legs, but most really had a very strong addiction. So they were bringing back, coming back addicted to heroin during that time. And so I wanted to sort of see how I could bring about a change. I spent four years in college during the social justice movements and studied everything, and I came back and people were having these difficulties. And I met a lot of activists during my school years, and nobody had the solution to my folk coming back with these addictions and challenges and syndromes and everything. The only organization that I saw that was making a difference was the Nation of Islam. After two years of searching and looking and everything, I joined the Nation of Islam, and also I had gotten some different habits as well that I needed to clean up. So I joined the Nation of Islam and really saw the power of that organization to change people's lives, especially African-Americans' lives.

But then Elijah Muhammad died four months after I joined, and his son, Wallace Muhammad [Warith Mohammed], became the leader. And he was speaking exactly to what I really was hoping for, and so I say I joined the organization in 1974, but I converted to the religion in Islam in 1975 under his leadership. We had a great imam here that studied under, Imam Ibrahim Bachar [spelling?]. He's passed away now. I became his assistant for eight years, and then, when I became imam here, I became also an assistant to the national leader, Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, and traveled with him for the next thirty years basically. And so I've been very active in the Muslim community, not only here in Atlanta but throughout the country. And we have great

relationships with Muslims throughout the world. And so I've had a cousin in my family that became Muslim, and basically everybody else is Christian. We have good associations, and it never brought any real problems in my family relationships.

MH: Do you find—I've noticed a lot of other people that I've interviewed, they were also Baptist, and so do you bring some of that culture of Baptists or some of the same traditions? Do you find that it kind of a little bit, like a—makes for some of the old—some of the same—like you were mentioning pulpit and sermon, that's what I was thinking of.

IMAM PE-A: I mean, the difference between us is we are familiar with—when you converted from Christianity to Islam, then you're familiar with Christianity. From a Quranic-Islamic perspective, we should be familiar with Christians, we should—God speaks in the Quran very highly of Christians and people of other faiths. Most Muslims do not have that insight, most international Muslims don't have that insight or that experience. So it is special to us, but I think more so than the Baptists or the Christian part, is really the African-American culture, which that African-American culture is heavily influenced by Christianity and Baptists that are—well, Christianity in general, but most African Americans would probably be Baptists or—most would definitely be Protestant Christians versus Catholic Christians. But we do have a couple of pretty strong Catholic churches here in Atlanta that are Black. But I'm saying that is to say that it's not so much directly the religion that's coming through as the culture. And the religion has definitely influenced the African-American culture.

So if you were to hear an African-American imam speaking, you could hear certain portions that sound like it's a Baptist preacher. Whereas, if you went to an immigrant or non-African-American mosque, you wouldn't hear that at all. You wouldn't get that sense at all. But that imam is not--like the imam that just spoke today, he was born a Muslim. He's never gone to any church, he didn't convert, or anything else. But you can still hear this same preaching type of thing, because it's a cultural—it's more of a cultural aspect to it, you know. So yeah, but we're always—as Muslims we're obligated to show great respect for Christians and particular for people of other religions as well. The Quran says that any who believe in God in the Last Day, who believe in the Gospels of Christ, who believe in the Torah, who believe in any of the books of any of the prophets, they are promised, if they believe and do good, they are promised the Paradise. So we always see them as our brothers and sisters in faith.

You know, sometimes other Muslims might miss that, but we are very conscious of that.

Because—and then, you know, and having family that is Christian, then we are still going to weddings, we're going to Christian weddings, we're going to Christian funerals, you know, celebrations and everything, so we are connected to people of other faiths more strongly.

MH: That also reminds me, how I found out about it is the café next door, and they serve soul food, but in a little different way—you know, halal, kosher, healthier. And so that reminds me of what you were mentioning, too, that it's a little different spin.

IMAM PE-A: Yeah, it's the culture part. You know, because we don't eat pork, but we will use turkey. We'll cook with turkey bacon, or we'll cook with turkey meat in the vegetables and everything else. And so we'll still have greens, but rather than having ham hocks in the greens, you'll have turkey in it. So we do make those kinds of adjustments, you know, because in the family, we have had to have conversations with our family members, who say, no, I can't be no Muslim, because y'all don't eat pork. And so that goes into the area, well, let me fix you something and fix you some greens, and don't tell them that that's just turkey meat in there. And they're loving the greens, and you tell them that's not ham in there.

MH, *laughing*: Oh, every family's doing that now, I think.

IMAM PE-A, *laughing*: Right, right

MH: Vegetarianism and vegan and—

IMAM PE-A: So all of that. You know, I think the more you interact with people who are diverse and different than—you know, the more open you become, to find a path of agreement and coexistence.

MH: So how do you feel, looking around at this shopping center, which, when you were originally at the church, was not this? Wasn't this a grocery store, and—

IMAM PE-A: Yeah, originally it was a grocery store, but now this part was—all this was deserted. Before I became Muslim, where the restaurant is, this was a club, and I knew the person who owned that club. And it wasn't a great—it was called The Spot. And it wasn't a great spot. But this was originally a grocery store, but after they closed up and it had become deserted, Hosea Williams rented it for bingo, a Wednesday bingo parlor. And the reason the owner allowed Hosea to do that is it

allowed him to keep insurance on the property. Because, you know, vacant property, it's very hard to get insurance, or insurance is real costly. So Hosea would have bingo here every Wednesday night, and so when he stopped having it, that's when it really caught our eye. And so we purchased it and all these buildings. So now, though, everything else is coming up.

We had a lot of conversations with Tom Cousins, who's responsible for most of this development in the neighborhood, and he wanted to have this particular property, and we went back and forth with him on several occasions about it. Because he had bought the [inaudible—could be Goodwill or good will?], and we had talked about, well, maybe we would go with the [Goodwill? good will?] then. Because this was actually the center of everything, and so we went back and forth for a long time, but it didn't work out. So our property has really expanded in value, and so now we're talking with some of our own members who are developers about trying to build a mosque that would accentuate all the developing that's going on here but also have some business built, some facilities that would accommodate some first-class businesses, now that we have all these people who live in the area and everything. So we want to catch up with the development in the neighborhood, so we're talking on a regular basis about that.

MH: How do you feel about the next generation that's in this community now having businesses here and running popular shops and hair salons and seeing the next generation take over a lot of businesses?

IMAM PE-A: Oh, yeah. So that's basically what has happened. That's our movement. We are involved in the youth movement. There are many things that I could continue to do that I just don't do because I want the next generation to have an opportunity to do those things. So it's not only about the mosque, but it's also about the businesses. All these are young people operating these businesses, and we feel good about it. We want to improve the facilities so that they will be able to even upgrade what they are doing as well. So our plans are to really continue to have the mosque here but also develop the rental space in such a way where it would be very attractive to all the new people that are moving here.

An affiliate of Tom Cousins, they are planning to do something similar to what they have by the Publix behind us here. And so that's going to be, you know, the market value is very strong in terms of apartments and rentals and everything. So that's what everybody's looking at. But you also have to have some facilities that



people will be able to utilize as well, you know. The Publix is wonderful, but we need to do a little more. Let me see to this. [*A younger imam brings in a paper for IMAM PE-A to review. IMAM PE-A addresses him.*] So is this something I need to look at?

IMAM: Yes, please. It looks like something for the development situation.

IMAM PE-A: Introduce yourself.

IMAM: Who is this young lady?

MH: Hi, I'm Marissa Howard.

IMAM: How are you?

MH: I'm from the DeKalb History Center.

IMAM: OK

MH: And I've just been collecting oral histories from several people in this community so far, so I'm interviewing the Imam here, and—it's just for our collection for our Archives.

IMAM: You're welcome. Thank you for being here. If anybody has the history [*laughs*], it's him. So welcome. Where are you all located?

MH: We're in downtown Decatur in the Historic Courthouse.

IMAM: OK, good stuff.

IMAM PE-A, *to IMAM, referring to the paper he was asked to read*: Do you think was the meeting here?

IMAM: I don't know. Sister Jeanette [*spelling?*] sent it—

IMAM PE-A: Oh, Jeanette [*spelling?*] sent this?

IMAM: --and Anita's looking into it. She said it looks legit.

IMAM PE-A: Yeah

IMAM: But it's if you have your own land.

IMAM PE-A: Yeah

IMAM: That's the—so look at it, and see—

IMAM PE-A: OK, so [*laughs*] you remember that Wells Fargo, when they had that—where they were opening up all these false accounts and everything, this is probably part of that, paying--

IMAM: To make up—Hm!

IMAM PE-A: --yeah, uh-huh. But that's good. Yeah, OK.

IMAM, *laughing*: Yeah, it's something, you know. [*To MH*] Nice meeting you.

MH: You, too.

*[Imams exchange brief parting comments.]*

IMAM PE-A: Yeah, so he's imam now. He's forty-six, so he's been imam since he was thirty-nine, so the last, six, seven years. And then before, when I retired, another young imam just like him took my place, and then he went over to Senegal to study. He's back now, but—so we've had two imams since I retired.

MH: So one of the big conversations with any religion is how the next generation, they're either, they're becoming more religious or they're not, or numbers are, you know, declining. Do you see that here, or do you see—

IMAM PE-A: Well, two things that work to our advantage is that we've operated a school where now this class that we have, this graduating class we have will be our thirty-first high school graduating class. And then the elementary school, we're probably on our thirty-eighth elementary—so for almost forty years we've operated a school. And we make an impact on those students who go through our schools, so they're all tied to our community in one way or another. But they go off in different directions and everything, but they still feel a connection and an allegiance to the community here but also to each other. So I always feel good about—I think our next generation, like both of these young men, both of them went to the school. And then we sent them overseas and everything, but I always feel good, because people feel connected to the community because of the school more so than just coming here for a Friday service and everything. And many of us taught down at the school, so they—I know them personally. Every one of those thirty-one graduating classes, I've taught a course each—to each senior class, so I know all of them, and they are engaged. You know, they'll dress different from me, they'll have hairstyles different from me, and everything else. But ordinarily they—when it's time to get married, they want me or want Imam to marry them, when they have their babies, they want us to have the service, you know. They are connected, and we just sort to have to encourage and maybe sometimes put some boundaries out there to see if we can keep them focused on a path. But we have a young community, and they are very much involved. So I feel good about it. You know, it's—they do things, ways different from what I'm comfortable with a lot of times, but, hey, that's part of it *[laughs]*.

MH, *laughing*: I think any parent or anyone could say the same thing about, you know, we did it to our parents, and—

IMAM PE-A: That's right.

MH: --generations.

IMAM PE-A: That's right. Jose Feliciano used to have a line in his song about—how did it go? The essence of it is, after you give all you can to—and all the warnings you give to your child, still he'll stick his finger in the fan. [*Both laugh.*] Still, I'll stick my finger in the fan. So we try to give as much help as we can, and I think the other part is, it's God plan, so, you know, it's—God is greater. This is what we always say, "Allahu Akbar," means "God is greater." So I can't see everything, you know, but God can. And so I have to leave enough room to say, "Hey, God's in charge of this. I'm just doing whatever I can do to contribute towards it." But I don't see the fuller picture. And we're living in a world now that it should be obvious to all of us [*laughs*] that we don't see the full picture, but as long as we have an idea of what's right and wrong, and we try to present our idea of what's right and wrong, and then we—because we have to be open to know that our ideas are limited.

MH: I wanted to bring [inaudible] back again: Were there many other African-American students at Harvard when you were there?

IMAM PE-A: Yeah, my year we had forty-five men and—that came in my class, my freshman class—we had forty-five men [at Harvard] and fifteen ladies at Radcliffe. And then the next year, it doubled; ninety men came in, and actually forty women came in. So the numbers began to grow. There were a few before us, but that's when the numbers began to grow. And we were very, very close-knit. The difference was that Harvard began to let in people who—African Americans who came from public school. You always had African Americans, but they basically were private school students that had gone to Exeter and those kinds of places. But '68, King's assassination's influence and things, and just the whole national dilemmas of war and everything else, they began to find students who were from inner cities and were going to public school. So we had a good number of those that year and the next year and probably the third year, and then they started going back to the traditional ways after that. Because there were big changes, and the changes were things that Harvard wasn't ready for, and MIT wasn't ready for. So after three years, they tried to get it back under control. And it's tied to the whole student movement.

But they must have also done that with the white students as well, because it was just a different type of student then, you know, with the—what was it, Student [Students for a] Democratic Society—SDS. It was four or five years of serious change

and protest. But yeah, the students—because this fiftieth year we’ve done something with the Black students, and we’ve got to do something with all of the students, and reflecting on it, you can see that we are connected pretty much so because of those social circumstances more so than anything else I think.

MH: And Dr. King graduated from Morehouse—

IMAM PE-A: From Morehouse, yeah.

MH: And when was that?

IMAM PE-A: He graduated at the age of fifteen. He was born in 1929—is that correct? No, that’s not correct.

MH: I remember he was young--

IMAM PE-A: That is correct.

MH: --like, thirty-nine—

IMAM PE-A: Yeah, when he was assassinated, he was thirty-nine. So, yeah, he was—

MH: Young boy, yeah.

IMAM PE-A: He was born in ’29, yeah, and assassinated in ’68. But he went to Morehouse, he was fifteen—he graduated—when he came out of Morehouse, he was fifteen years old. Let me make sure that’s correct. [*Looks up information.*] That sounds young—no, he went to Morehouse at fifteen, and so that would’ve been ’44, and he came out in 1948. He graduated from Morehouse in 1948. But he also went to the same high school I went to. And I had a girlfriend in high school whose house—her backyard backed up to Dr. King’s backyard. So I was sort of familiar with his children. His children were younger than me, but I was sort of familiar with them.

MH: But it must have been exciting going to Morehouse in the late ’60s and—

IMAM PE-A: You know, I didn’t go to Morehouse, so I can’t say. But my father and all my relatives and everything, and I knew plenty of people at Morehouse.

MH: Oh, I’m sorry. I thought you said you went there, went to Morehouse and then you went to Harvard after that.

IMAM PE-A: No, I went to undergraduate at Harvard. OK, but I lived right near Morehouse, and all my folk went there. But—so to mention to that, the African-American schools, the Southern schools, were politically behind in the student movement. So when I came back from Harvard after my freshman year, Morehouse

folk weren't into the social movement that we were in. So it was about the second year you could start seeing it.

MH: That's interesting.

IMAM PE-A: Yeah, even—so I went one way, and I came back with my Afro hairdo and everything else. They didn't have that in '68. But by the end of '69, it had caught up. And it's just the conservative traditions of the South more so than anything else. Because many schools, like Temple University up in Philadelphia, they were very much engaged in the movements and everything. But Morehouse caught up, but it was not, you know, it was not where we were up in the Northeast. You know, Boston has ninety different universities, so it was a whole different thing there. So how we doing?

MH: We're good.

IMAM PE-A: OK

MH: I don't want to keep any of your time, if you're—

IMAM PE-A: And I'm going to show you something we have on the wall that has a lot of our history right out here.

MH: Sure

IMAM PE-A: And you want to take any pictures of it and look at all of that information.

MH: Yeah, great.

END OF RECORDING

Transcribed by Claudia Stucke