

Interview with Qur'an Shakir

QUR'AN SHAKIR: It is a beautiful day!

MARISSA HOWARD: Thank you.

QS: My pleasure.

MH: I didn't realize you were Mariah's mother.

QS: Yes, and Alethia's sister.

MH: OK, yeah. There's a lot of—it's a lot of family—what I'm realizing is that there's a lot of community, there's a lot of family, whether blood-related or just by choice.

QS: Yes, yes, yes, we have a lot of that.

MH: Can I pour you some tea?

QS: No, I want *you* to get tea.

MH: OK, well, there's two glasses. Would you like—

QS: Yeah, OK. So it's very hot, because I just steeped the water.

MH: Do you take sugar?

QS: I don't have to. And this one is "Two Peaches." I don't know if you're a regular at the tea shop—

MH: It sounds like I'm going to be. I'm actually going there tomorrow as well again for--

QS: Oh, for Imam Plemon

MH: How did you know?

QS: You told me. You texted me.

MH, *laughing*: Oh, I did. OK.

QS: Yeah, you texted me, and I—

MH: I was going to say, everyone [inaudible] already.

QS: No, you told me, though. And I told Mariah, I said, "She said tomorrow, but I've got a lot going on, and it's so crowded." I don't know if they told you how crowded it is on Friday.

MH: That's what I'm wondering—

QS: So I kept saying to her, "Sound's going to be bad—"

MH: If maybe there's a better place or time to do—

QS: And he may decide to take you over to the Masjid.

MH: That's what I was a little bit hoping.

QS: OK, all right. Good, yeah. It's hot. So this one has the peaches in it. It's the black tea—I'm going to read the package again. But that—you know, they create their own tea. They blend their own teas, yes.

MH: So how has it been, seeing that this business and your family and your daughter—

QS: So, you know, we're a family of businesses, because my son said, "Why don't you just tell her to come here, and you just do it here?" And I said, "I didn't think about it. Because he has a studio right up in West End. And so Mariah and Alethia have this tea shop. And I have another daughter—and this morning I was doing covid testing—she has a clinic. So we do covid testing at the school, so everybody has a business somewhere in this family.

MH: It's actually worked out. They're filming a movie, actually, in my office, so I don't have a desk right now. There's a movie shoot there. And I live in Capitol View Manor, so it's right up—

QS: Yeah, that's right up the way.

MH: OK, so Mariah mentioned you worked at the school, the Mohammed School?

QS: And so my story that I always tell people when I talk about Mohammed School is that I have served every role there is to serve at the Mohammed School. So I was a student—that's my school I went to since third grade, and then a parent—because all of my children went through the school from three years old to eighteen, a grandparent now—because I have grandchildren at the school, but I also have been a teacher at the school, the leader of the high school, the principal and director of the school, and I served on the school board. So anything you want to know—[laughs]

MH: For many—for basically my whole education I went to private schools and smaller schools, too, so I understand that role of everyone is—a lot of teachers teaching multiple classes, and everyone knows everyone.

QS: Everybody, yes. And just from doing the covid—because I haven't been there, to Mohammed Schools, in two years in a capacity of leader or anything like that. And so from doing the covid tests from August until now, I know every student's name, because we test everybody. So when they step up, I'm like, "OK, you are—" and then one child said, "I'm going to sit here till remember my name" [laughs].

MH: How many students are currently there?

QS: I want to say, right now it's 140, 150, somewhere in there. I'm not sure.

MH: So I know this will probably be a short question. What's the history—can you tell me a little bit about the history of the school?

QS: You said, "a short question"?

MH: I know—[*Both laugh.*] or short answer.

QS: Yeah, the question will be short [*laughs*]. The answer may not be. So, you know, Mohammed Schools got their start really in the '30s with Sister Clara Muhammad. I don't know if you know if you know of Sister Clara Muhammad.

MH: I've heard her name.

QS: Yes, so Sister Clara Muhammad, in the '30s, in Detroit, decided she was going to teach her children at home. And teaching your children at home in the '30s was against the law. All children in America had to go to school. So she decided she was going to teach them at home, because what they were learning in the public school was that Black people were saved from Africa, you know, like they were-- somebody saved them from being monkeys in the tree and all that stuff. She didn't want her children to know that. She wanted them to know that they come from a rich history of scientists and theologians, and that's the reason that the people came to capture them. And so she said, "I'll do this at home myself. I don't have to send them there." And that's how the school got its start. And you know, she and many others served [prison] time because of that role that she played. And so it was in the '50s that homeschooling became legal. And we say it's because of that stance that she took for those twenty years.

So now, fast-forward to Atlanta, in 1965 is when we started our school. So when Sister Clara Muhammad did that in her home, people all over the country began to duplicate what she was doing. And the school—she called it a university--even though it was elementary, middle, and high school, she called it a university because it to be considered education on a higher level. And so the school was called The University of Islam, and it was all over the countries in many, many cities. And Masjid schools started in 1965, so that's how our school actually started here, in 1965. And then, I don't know if you know the story of the Nation of Islam, where the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, who was the leader of the Nation of Islam, he died in 1975. His son, Wallace, became the leader. And Wallace had already studied Islam—I call it "true Islam," because what his father was teaching was not, because it was "the white man is

the devil, and Black man is God,” and that kind of stuff, which is totally not Islamic. And so his son studied Quran, the scripture of Islam, and began to teach his followers that. When his died, he inherited the community, and he taught that and said, “We’re not going in this direction that my father was taking us in.” And he also said, “I want our schools to be named after my mother, Sister Clara Muhammad. So that’s how the schools became Sister Clara Muhammad Schools all over the country. OK, that’s our story [*laughs*].

MH: So the school, was it always in DeKalb or always at that location?

QS: No, when I was in school, it was on Bankhead Highway, which is now Hollowell Parkway.

MH: That’s where the original mosque—

QS: It was there, yes. And so a part of that building was the school, and the same thing when we bought this property here in Fayetteville [Road]. Part of that building was the Masjid. The Masjid was there, and the school was there. And then later, in 1990, we bought that property where the tea shop is and the Masjid is, we bought that property in the '90s. The one down the street—I don’t remember all those dates—but the one down the street, we bought that in 1972, I wanted to say; it was in the '70s when we bought that one. And so twenty years later we bought that plaza and put the Masjid at the plaza and the school only was at the other property.

MH: OK, and so did you—were you living—when your daughter was growing up and going to the school and when you were attending the school, were you in DeKalb or in that area?

QS: Right here in this house.

MH: OK, so you would go all the way over there for—

QS: We would make that drive, that trek, yes.

MH: Because there weren’t any other schools, correct, over here?

QS: Not Islamic schools. The next Islamic school—because now there are about ten or eleven Islamic schools in metropolitan Atlanta. So at that time we were probably the only Islamic school. And the next Islamic school was erected in the '70s, and that’s Al-Farooq on Fourteenth Street.

MH: Yes, because I met one of the teachers who was bringing—

QS: Who’d you meet? Because, you know, I know everybody! [*Laughs*]

MH: She was the Arabic teacher—[*Tries to remember name.*]

QS: I don't know who that is. I know a few of them.

MH: So how important is it for Muslim students to get an education in one of these schools?

QS: That's up to the parents. We think it's important because—well, Imam Muhammad, who, like I said, became the leader after his father—Imam Muhammad, his whole thing for us is that we have to have this sense of self. That's the whole thing his mother was trying to do, is have this sense of self. And when you have a sense of self, he said, it makes life better. So that sense of self is best achieved amongst your people. And when you are with your people, you learn your history, you learn to appreciate who you are and to know that there's something that needs to be celebrated. And you know the story of equity in America for Black people, because we have—in fact, I'll send it to you—an article that one of our students wrote just recently. He wasn't Muslim, he was Christian.

MH: I saw that.

QS: You saw that? So that student—that's Sammy, from the class of 2007. Because I remember when Sammy was at the school, and he wasn't the first. But that student was there, like many other African-American parents put their children in our school, even though they weren't Muslim, because they needed for them to have that sense of self and to feel protected, especially the males. It's very difficult for African-American males in our country, unfortunately.

MH: That reminds me, one of the things that I've learned about—and I've heard this from students that attend HBCUs, for example, is how on the surface, it may seem like it's not diverse education, but in reality, students who go there realize that it's actually—they realize the diversity of the students that go there, and so, could you say it's similar—a similar thing?

QS: Yes, for us, that diversity comes in many ways. When we talk about that sense of self, I don't know if you're familiar with Dr. Gholdy Muhammad? Gholdy has this idea that in education—she studied our history and how we educate and inequity--and in teaching about us and who we are, it is important for us to know others as well. That's a big part of the equity. Sometimes we think it is about exclusion and isolating and just thinking only about you. But in order for you to truly be diverse, you have to know the true history of everybody. You have to be able to know their history and to be able to appreciate that to really celebrate how you move through the world. And so,

yes, there's a lot of diversity there. And I know, like, I just saw my friend, I said, "We've been friends for fifty years." He went to the school when I was in school. And he wasn't Muslim then—he's Muslim now. But his mother put him and his brother in the school fifty years ago for the same reason Samuel's mother put him in the school twenty years ago. So it's the same thing, where we're here to be protected, to celebrate us, understand us, you know, it's not uncommon to walk through our halls and see some great African-American pictures up and the history of that person on the wall or to hear a teacher talking about any time period and a great leader who was of color at that time. And that's not something you get in every school and in every environment, because it's something that's been hushed in our world.

MH: How is the Islamic religion taught in the school or like the curriculum change or—

QS: Yes, I love that. Yes.

MH: So, integrated into the curriculum.

QS: I love it, yes. So at Mohammed schools it's different than at any other Islamic school, and I've had the opportunity to see many Islamic schools, so I'm going to home in on just the idea of Islamic education. So in Islamic education, generally what you will get is the study of the Quran. You know, the Quran was revealed in Arabic, so you'll have a lot of study of it in Arabic, and some of them who study it in Arabic may get the English rendering of it—may get it. Otherwise, they just know how to recite it in Arabic. And they'll have a class called Islamic Studies class, where they learn the history of Muslims, and they learn that in that class in isolation. In Mohammed Schools, it's in every class. So when you study mathematics, you learn in mathematics, where does Allah in the Quran talk about math? And He talks about "He has created everything in pairs." And so you start to look at the nucleus and the neurons [sic] in the atoms—all of those are in pairs. And that's how it's taught in math, it's taught in science, it's taught in English, from the perspective of the Quran, what Allah has told us. So the Quran is infused in every class. We do have Islamic Studies classes, where you can concentrate on the history of who was the prophets—because we believe in all of the prophets of God, from Adam all the way up to Mohammed, so all of them—so that's where you get that concentrated study of the religion. And we also have in that the study of all of God's religions, because Islam is not His only religion. So we study all of God's religions in that Islamic Studies class,

and you may mention it in the other classes; but it's studied in concentration in the Islamic Studies class. We will have an Arabic class, where they learn to read Quran in Arabic, and they get the English rendering of that, so they understand what they're reading as well. So that's how Islamic Studies is taught in our school. Even in disciplining students, when students err--and we're all bound to err, everybody does—then it is all about how did God correct people. You know, we look at this study of how—there's a story of how Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, he shunned a blind man. A perfect opportunity to talk about why do you talk about somebody who's less than you or who you think is less than you. And God gave revelation that told him, "No, you don't do that." Everybody is equal in the sight of God. And so you have to learn that. And so that's a great lesson to each when you're disciplining, especially with somebody who's bullying or something like that. And so it's infused in everything we do. So from the way males and females interact with each other, it's based on what God tells us in the Quran. So there is no premarital sex in our religion, so we set up the environment to say, "OK, we're going to respect what God says to us, so there's no premarital sex. So you have to learn how to interact with one another without getting sensual or sexual about it." And that's a big thing to know, especially right now when you get in middle school. You know, when you realize, I got these hormones! [Laughter] So it's a good time to teach the lesson.

MH: Are there prayer times?

QS: Mm-hm. So the prayer is infused—usually at school there's only one prayer time, and that is the middle prayer, the Dhuhr prayer. And so we stop all classes for that prayer. Sometimes, the prayer that comes right after school is done, but usually people go home to do that; so there's only one prayer that's done. The other thing about prayer itself is that every class begins with a Dua, which is a supplication, just an appeal to God. When I'm in my class, when I was teaching, I would say, "Yeah, let's put God on the subject." And so we would begin class by just thanking Him or praising Him or just a reminder to Him, a thirty-second prayer. But in Islam, you know, for Muslims, we have a formal procedure for prayer, too. So that's very different from just appealing to God. And that formal procedure—I don't know if you've seen the prayer itself, where you stand upright, and there's a call to prayer, so everybody gathers for the prayer, and then there's a routine that we go through, where we're reciting Quran, and the transition from one position to the next position is "Allahu akbar," "God is

greater.” And it moves you from one position to the next. So you stand upright, you bend and you touch your knees, you go down to the floor, and you come back up. And in each position there are things you are saying. So it’s a formal ritual prayer. And that is done five times a day. And for each of those times of the prayer, it’s done differently. So like, the early morning prayer before the sun rises, you do two steps or two Rakahs, where you do that up and down, and at Dua, the one we do at school, is four, but it’s done silently, so you do it to yourself. So it’s different steps that you do for that. And it is done at school.

MH: How’s the school preparing these young students to eventually go out into the world?

QS: You’ve got some great questions!

MH, *laughing*: As representatives of the Mohammed Schools and larger, as young Muslims.

QS: Yes, those are great questions, and a challenge, too, for many. And so I want to talk about me, growing up. And when I was growing up, that was a whole community vision and mission, and everybody constantly would tell us as young people, “You know, we’re preparing you to take over and to be in charge,” and all this stuff. So we knew, when we were growing up, what our mission was. And we were all on this “Do for Self” mission in the Nation of Islam. And during that time, the ’60s, ’70s, when Elijah Muhammad was the leader, it was a whole “Do for Self” campaign—there’s another word for that. But Imam Muhammad became the leader, the mission became whatever God wants us to do, whatever God has planned for you to do. So the way it was communicated was done differently. It wasn’t from the community, per se, as much as it was from each family. So each family has something they want their children to do, which is what everybody does, right? And so they—that’s why they choose the schools, they choose us, why they choose the things they do, they expose them to, and all that. So now when we get to our school, our school has a mission to prepare our children to be effective global citizens. That’s what the mission statement says, “to be effective global citizens.” In that idea of being effective global citizens, then we have exposure to basketball, soccer, Model UN, Mock Trial, drama—all these things, right, that help the individual to work in a group and to learn the dynamics of how to give and take, and how to exert your leadership when you need to, and all that.

The other thing that we do at the school, which is one of my favorite things to



have done with our students, is “Powerful Youth in Charge,” which is what we call the organization that we formed. And starting in middle school we would teach them about the laws and how government works. We learn that anyway in classes, right, but in our little organization, they learn these ideas of how government works, and they also begin to go out in the community and take on causes. So I call it preparing them to be advocates and activists. And I like to tell the story how they had a law changed in Georgia through this work that we were doing, where they look at what are the concerns in the community. So I know when my children, who are now twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five, and now about to be forty—she doesn’t like for me to stay that—when they were in school, then we used to have them going out, doing surveys to see what’s killing our young people. And they did surveys about alcohol use, smoking too soon, and all of that. They did these surveys, and they went out and helped get petitions signed, and that’s the activists’ role. And so later on, about ten years ago—has it been ten years? Maybe seven or eight years ago, I had a group of students that I took out, and they looked at—there was a law in Georgia on prostitution, and anybody arrested for prostitution, they were imprisoned for it—they went through the process. So they had the law changed where, if you were under eighteen, you can’t be arrested for prostitution, because that is really exploiting them, right? And so the whole law changed. It took us about four years, but it happened. And I remembered the day when the lawmakers finally voted on it, they were sitting there in that gallery up there when they voted. They said, “They did it?” I said, “Yeah, y’all changed the law.” So now, in Georgia, if you’re under eighteen, you don’t go to jail if you’re a prostitute. You go to therapy and you go and get help and all of that. So that’s some of the examples of how we prepare them to go out into the world to be a part of what’s going on in the world, to really be effective global citizens.

MH: One of the things I also want to ask you about in that is either fighting against stereotypes or how do you prepare them for that?

QS: When you say “stereotypes”--

MH: As both—as Muslim, which in America, we haven’t had a great track record of that. And maybe you can speak to if, in your mind, it’s get a little bit better or maybe not, or how you’re preparing them for that?

QS: That’s multi-tiered, and I don’t want to be too idealistic, I want to be more realistic, and I want to say that they live in this world, where they can see what’s going

on. So when they say Ahmaud Arbery, and they see Breonna Taylor, and they see their own lives—because I've had students to talk about how they were picked on, you know, by the law, just because of their color, the color of their skins. And as Muslims also, there's Islamophobia, because people don't understand who Muslims are. So our children, our—the high school students, you know, I guess we've done some things with middle school, we talk openly about it. That's Number One, I think to be honest and to really talk about what makes someone feel superior, what makes someone feel like they can, you know, exert this kind of prejudice on people. We talk about that. Because, in the Quran, there's an Ayat, where God says that he has made us different. He made us different that we could get to know each other. And I love to talk about the fact that God is just [inaudible]. He loves diversity. And I always say, "You look at a garden, a garden of flowers. Does He ever put just one flower there? One color flower, one type of flower? And if it is, they're all different, too." And if it is a whole bunch of purple flowers, you're going to find a little yellow flower coming through there. He loves diversity, no matter what. And so that conversation has had a lot about how God loves diversity. Where do you see His diversity? And you begin to have a thinking to understand and appreciate that this is a Creator that loves a creation that is full of variations, even in a group of people who may be all the same people—their hair is not going to be the same, their eyes are not going to be the same. They're going to be different, right? He loves diversity. So we have to learn to appreciate diversity. That's the big thing that we have to teach them, so you're not one inflicting it. And then to also understand that everybody isn't going to think like you. That is so real. So in high school our students participate in this program called Peace—P-E-A-C-E—by Piece—P-I-E-C-E. And it is a group of Christians, Jews, and Muslims, and they get together once a month and talk about, let's say, grandparents. When they talk about grandparents, they talk about—

MH: I'm sure that conversation could go on forever. *[Both laugh.]*

QS: Yes! So they just [inaudible] subject!

MH: It's the same—

QS: Or a prayer, and they just all talk about, "How do we do it the same? How do we do it differently?" just to get to know each other, back to that Ayat that says that you may get to know each other. So that's one of the things that they do. I'm trying to see some of these—because some things, you just do naturally now, and you don't

even think about that you're doing it. It's not—it's attentional but not intentional. You know, like, you know you need to know these things, and our children need to know it. And they need to be prepared to function in the world, a world that doesn't like them. So we let them know, the world doesn't always like you. Because you are a person with melanin in your skin, they may not like you, and you may know it or you may not know it, and here's some ways you can see it. But this also is a way that you can work for against it, whatever you need to do. And that "Do for Self" has helped a lot for me, and that's why I think a lot of my children have businesses of their own, because of that "Do for Self." You don't have to work for somebody and be abused. You can own your own business and hire other people and show how it should be done and still find your elevation and find your place where you need to be and keep your sense of self, go back to that sense of self. That's very important. So I think that's the kind of stuff that we are teaching—naturally, though. If that makes sense.

MH: And the younger generation sees that and sees their own community making businesses and—

QS: They see that, and we talk about that.

MH: And fostering a place where you can thrive.

QS: Yes

MH: One of the—I first actually heard of the Mohammed Schools—I went to Our Lady of Mercy.

QS: Yes! There's one right here in Fayetteville.

MH: Mm-hm, and I remember we played you guys in basketball. And one thing—it's now sort of clicking, and I forgot who I was speaking to about this, with Ramadan coming up—that—how do students—and not realizing it, probably during, you know, during basketball season or—that these students are participating in Ramadan while—

QS: Yes, they're fasting.

MH: --fasting while playing. I feel like, at our school, we weren't prepared, or we didn't know much about your school. But I'm learning so much more within this last week about this entire community that's just around the corner. It's been a real beautiful experience, learning so much in your community and how welcoming your community is. But I wish, for my school, that we did learn a little bit more about the fact that, you know, these students are fasting and—

QS: Yes, for twelve hours in a day and still playing basketball and all that. The whole idea of fasting and continuing with your life is to say that God is not going to put a burden on us that we can't bear, and so we train our bodies and ourselves to respond to whatever we tell it to do. You know, that's my big conversation with students, especially those that are like, "Oh, my God, I'm going to die!" when they first start out. And then eventually it just becomes easier and easier. Because it really isn't hard. I always tell people the hardest part about Ramadan for me is keeping good thoughts. Your thoughts can drift, and so keeping good thoughts and because you cannot gossip, you cannot spend your time idly talking about things that are of no benefit. That's harder than not eating and not drinking, I promise you. It's much harder to do those civil kinds of things than the physical stuff.

MH: Are you hoping that this year's Ramadan is a little bit different? I mean, we're still in the pandemic, but getting together, is it—

QS: Yeah, I'm nervous about it. The imam—that's the leader of the community—the imam posted on Facebook, "Y'all ready for face-to-face Ramadan?" Like, no, I'm not. I'm really scared. So I don't know what to expect this year. We did what, two years, where we did it from our own homes. And the beautiful part about Ramadan is the people and being able to break your fast—

MH: Eid

QS: Yes, that's when you break your fast. At the end of the day, hundreds of Muslims come together to eat together. Or like, I grew up in this house right here, right? And so my mother used to have an acre of land in the back. My mother used to have fifty to a hundred people in the backyard at least two or three times a week during Ramadan. I can't do that right now during a pandemic. I had a family dinner over here this past Sunday, and we were all spread out, all over the yard, because—and talking to each other [*laughs*] from a distance, because there's a pandemic still. And in Islam, the Prophet, peace be upon him, said that those who protect themselves during a pandemic get a blessing. And so we work for the blessings.

That's a big part about being Muslim is that we're constantly on this quest to please God and constantly on this quest such that when the time comes, we get to go in the next life to the Paradise, you know, you have a choice of Heaven or Hell, as they say. And so we're always working to see—you don't know where you're going to go, and so you're always working to be one eligible for Paradise. And that's based on what

you've done on this level of your life, because that's the next life. And so we believe that God creates everything in stages, you know, from in the womb, on the Earth, and then the next life. These are all stages, right? And so we're constantly working toward that, and so we see these things that come to us as an opportunity for us to give testament to our love for God, because Shaitan, or Satan, promised God, "They don't love you, and I'm going to prove to you that they don't." And so he goes through the Earth, you know, causing havoc and causing us to either respond or not, as his way of proving that we don't. And so we have to be those going through the Earth saying, "Mm-mm, I ain't falling for it. Nope, nope, nope," and constantly working to prove our love for our Creator and our love for this all-powerful Being, whatever we choose to call Him. That's our thing. And so Ramadan is a wonderful time to do that. And so in our fasting and abstaining from these things that are [inaudible—"legal"?], things that, you know, it's a blessing it have it, we abstain from that to show we have the ability and the discipline to honor what He has said. The other thing is that there are some people who can be so righteous and holy that they may think, "Oh, I can just fast on beyond the twelve hours." That is called disobedience, too. You can't just fast as long as you want to. You have to follow the guidelines, and the guideline is you break your fast at sunset. You're not more righteous because you can fast longer or pray more, because there's another Hadith—Hadith is the life example. So there's a Hadith where somebody was praying. They said, "Oh, he's so righteous, look at him praying. He just prays all the time. Oh, my God, he's so righteous."

And the Prophet said, "Who feeds him?"

And they said, "Well, we do."

He said, "You're the righteous ones." Because he's over there mooching! That wasn't his word—that's me [*laughs*].

But so—yeah, Ramadan is an anticipated joy, even in its struggle. I don't know that I'm ready for the big groups. I haven't even gotten myself to the place where I go to Jum'ah. I always listen online, and [inaudible], "I don't think I'm ready yet." And so covid has done a job on me mentally, where I don't feel—like today, when we did Grandparents' Day, I said, "OK, I can handle this."

And my daughter said, "You're going to do it?"

I said, "Yeah, I'm going to do this for Marcus"—that's the eight-year-old. Because you've got to take your mask off and eat, and there was a lot of people there. So, yeah.

MH: So you'd mentioned that your mother lived in this house, farmed in the backyard, or had an acre, was she Muslim growing up?

QS: Mm-hm—no, she wasn't. She wasn't. My mother and my father were the first in our family to choose Islam as a way of life, and they did that in the '50s, and it was a conscious choice to put the family on a different trajectory, is what I keep telling our children. We come from a family of pimps and drug dealers in our family. And they were like, "No, we're going to change this. We don't want this to be our way." And so they chose Islam as the way of life. And when I tell people my mother used to wear miniskirts, people who knew her—because she's not here now—people who knew her were like, "What? That's so hard to believe," because she was considered like the mother of the community, because in the '50s, when Islam was making its way to Atlanta, they were of the first ten to twenty Muslims in the area. And so for what, fifty to sixty years of her life, that's what she did, was help establish Islam in the Atlanta area. So yeah, she didn't grow up Muslim. She grew up Baptist and chose Islam. And I think she was in her thirties when she chose Islam.

MH: And so have you seen a lot of changes, then, in your life, with either more acceptance or just being able to go to a market or like, different stores and get halal foods. I mean, it must be—

QS: That's different.

MH: --different and a change.

QS: It is, from the time that I grew up until now. So I grew up as a Muslim in the '60s and the '70s, and by the '80s I'm a young adult. And yeah, so what I've seen is definitely being different, because people didn't even know what a Muslim was back then. And now it's a common word, whether they understand what it is now, it's still a word people know. Then they didn't know the word. It was something you may have read about in a book or not. And so yeah, I've seen some different things, like when we were younger, my sisters and I were laughing about how we used to ride the bus sometimes. And we wore our uniforms, is what we called it. And people were like, "Why are you dressed like that?" It's not uncommon now to see a Muslim and to see how they dress and dress differently. And I don't think people will ask about it,

because you've seen it on *Grey's Anatomy* [*laughs*—there's always a Muslim intern now! And so it's really common. And so when we go places now, no, people don't ask like they used to. I'm trying to think where I might find difference. I know, I work with an Interfaith group. And in working with them, I think they may feel comfortable to ask you about your beliefs and to ask you, you know, "What do you think?" and "Is this OK?" and those kinds of things. And people are more polite about it than they were before, because before, I felt like people felt like it's an assault on Christianity, an assault on America, if you didn't do things "this way." And now because people have been exposed and because people have their own differences, too, then it is more accepted.

I'm trying to think—as much progress as we have made as a country, I—as a woman, I still think we have a lot of progress to make. We have a long way to go to get to, I think, where the Creator intended for us to be. When I'm—I just had a flash. When I was in school in the '60s, we had this new uniform that we had in the Nation of Islam, and it was this little top that came here with some pants, and the pants were wide-leg pants. I went to school in that; I got sent home, because girls didn't wear pants in the '60s. Did you know that?

MH: I mean, yeah, I—[*QS laughs*.] It wouldn't surprise me.

QS: Yeah, they couldn't wear pants! I'm like, "What? I can't wear my new uniform?" But that was funny to me when I think about it now, like, yeah, they sent me home. I went to public school in Alabama for first and second grade, and then we moved here to Atlanta, and I went to Mohammed Schools. And so that was really hard. That was hard, too, going to public school, because my teachers, they didn't understand my religious preference. And I remember one time a dog had chased me and got my lunch, and so when I got to school, the teacher was being nice to me. She said, "Oh, share your lunch with Qur'an."

And somebody gave me a ham sandwich on white bread. We didn't eat white bread during that time, and we surely didn't eat ham, because it's pork. And I said, "Oh, I don't want this." I'm six or seven years old, and I'm saying, "I don't want this right here. I'll just eat all the other stuff."

My teacher lashed me, "You ungrateful—" she just went on and on because I wouldn't eat the ham sandwich. "Eat the ham sandwich!" [*Laughs*]

But my dad had to go up there to say, “No, she did the right thing because we don’t eat pork.”

But they didn’t understand that. “You don’t eat pork? In the South? You don’t eat pork?” And they didn’t understand that the ham was pork, you know, like—

MH: It’s a vegetable.

QS, *laughing*: That’s a whole ‘nother lesson!

MH: Now, there’s vegan, gluten-free, halal, so it’s—halal is nothing anymore.

QS: That’s right, kosher, all of that. Another type.

MH: What brought your family here to Atlanta?

QS: We were actually from Atlanta, and so it’s really what sent us to Birmingham. And so like I said, my parents were the first Muslims in this area. And that was in the ‘50s. And so—I think it was 1960, I want to say, that my parents were sent to Birmingham to establish Islam there in Birmingham. And let me tell you a bit of history: the temple that we established was across the street from that church that was bombed. So that was like, on that Sunday that that happened, my mother told us about how—our temple was across the street—all the windows in the temple were blown out, and it was really messed up, and the police had blocked off the street and wouldn’t let anybody come down the street. But they let us come down the street, because we had to go to our service.

MH: I remember reading about that.

QS: Yeah, and so that was in the ‘70s, is when we came back. And so my dad was a minister in Birmingham. So in the ‘70s he wasn’t a minister in Birmingham anymore, so we came back here, because my mother wanted us to go to the Mohammed Schools, that’s the reason. She said, “We’re going to go back to Atlanta so y’all can go. They have a Muslim school in Atlanta, and you can go to this Muslim school.” A Muslim school, OK, let’s see what that’s like. Yeah.

MH: And you felt that it was much more comfortable—or you sort of felt like it was your home?

QS: Yeah, I didn’t have to fight! I didn’t have to fight about—and “fight,” meaning have this debate about what I ate—I could be comfortable with, you know, what I ate, how I dressed, who I was with, and everything was so normal for me, because I didn’t have to explain myself or to question, you know, what’s in everything. Because we didn’t eat pork to the point of, you know, we would read the labels on



everything. Now, this is normal now. Back then, it wasn't, to read every label. I didn't have to do that once I got to Mohammed Schools. And my teachers and, you know, everything, it was like people I knew—all my friends—it was everybody I knew. And it just made it so easy. And as I became a teenager, it was like a natural progression, because as teens, when we talk about being prepared for the world and what you have to do, we just knew it was going to be our obligation to go over--because we have businesses in our community—to go work for one of the businesses, because it's your role to help your community and be a part of that. So it's just a natural progression of that that we would do as a result of that. Even when I went off to college at sixteen, I'm going off to college, and I have a choice of what I'm going to major in, so it wasn't just about my talents—because I have a lot of great talents, I'm—[laughs]. That's a joke. [Inaudible]

MH: I'm not judging here.

QS, *laughing*: But when I went off to college, I told my daughter, who is now a doctor, I said, "You just brought it full circle for me. Because when I went off to school, my choice was to go into journalism or to become a doctor." And I said, "I chose journalism because I felt like not enough people knew Muslims. And I needed to use my ability to write to tell our story." And so once I started studying journalism and all that, I got my degree in journalism, and I worked for newspapers and television and all that stuff, many of my stories were about Muslims, to get that story out there and to begin to make it a normal thing to hear the word "Muslim" and the things Muslims talk about there until now. She's a doctor, and I said, "I could have done that, too, but I chose this for my community, and now you're choosing this." And even when her choice of being a doctor—she's a doctor of nursing practice—it's for the community, again. She works—her clinic—she owns a clinic—her clinic is in Riverdale--which is called Lotus. You know, the lotus is a flower that rises out of the mud. And so it rises, and we talk about this clinic, it's in this area that's considered one of the worst areas of Georgia for education and for health and all of that. So we placed this clinic in this area to be the lotus and to be a part of that community and to give back to the community. So it just comes to me full circle. And even when Mariah and Alethia did the tea shop, they said they put it in our community where people have places where they get more sodas and things like that, and not necessarily a beverage designed to be of benefit to your body.

MH: And as I'm discovering, too, it's not just health but it's just the process of slowing down a little bit--

QS: Yes! And taking time—

MH: And taking time, having a--

QS: --spend time with people, yes.

MH: I mean, this isn't a bad afternoon in here. [*Both laugh.*]

QS: Sometimes my sister would say, "What you doing? I'm coming over for tea." And we sit out here, and we have tea on the porch. Yeah. And that's why I said, "What's your flavor profile?"

MH: No one has ever asked me that before, and I had to think. You know, I was like, hm, maybe I should—I was struck, maybe I should test and be like, it's a sunny day with, you know, green— [*Inaudible exchange.*]

QS: Because you know, they have over, what, thirty blends. And that's the joy of it, because it's like, "What you blending?" And I know I had a friend who, she's been a friend for maybe forty years, but she passed. And I said, "I need a pick-me-up. I need something that's going to work my emotions, because this is really hard." And they have a tea over there called Hakuna Matata, and that's what it's designed to do. So it has in it the St. John's wort and that kind of stuff that works your emotions. So it's like, OK, yeah.

MH: Well, I don't want to take any more of your time, but I have—I'll pause the recording.

QS: OK. Yes, ma'am.

MH: Oh, do you mind just saying your name?

QS: My name is Qur'an Shakir. What else you need? [*Laughs*] Qur'an Shakir.

END OF RECORDING

Transcribed by CS