

MARISSA HOWARD: Hi, good morning.

ADILAH MUHAMMAD: Good morning. How are you?

MH: Good. I'm sorry if you're having any issues logging in. Maybe I sent it to the wrong email. I'm sorry.

AM: I don't know what happened, but I'm happy we are connected.

MH: [Inaudible] you, too. And just a heads-up: This is all being recorded so that we can save it. Melissa, who I believe you spoke to over the phone, she's just logged into the Zoom just to get this meeting going, but I believe—for volume and everything—so she's not really actively participating and listening in.

AM: All right.

MH: So kind of what I've been saying to several folks as what we've been doing, we're kind of collecting just stories for our oral history stories. And I've spoken to several people already, and it's just been a wonderful experience, because for so long, we haven't collected all the stories of DeKalb County, and we're excited to do that with you and get your story and be part of our permanent collection. So what this will do is that we'll put this on our website, with your permission, and they'll be able to research, and other people will be able to see it; but other than that, it will actually be part of our collection, in our Oral History collection for generations.

AM: OK

MH: So that's a little bit about what this is, and other than that, I will—I don't know, I just want to get a little bit about just—hear your story. All that was sort of mentioned—I spoke to Quran [Shakir], and so what she was mentioning is that you have knowledge about breastfeeding history and the Muslim response, and so that's sort of all I was—all I've heard so far. But I'd love to hear a little bit more and kind of turn the digital microphone over to you to get a little bit about your background and your story.

AM: OK, well, the easy task is to jump right in and to start somewhere. I don't really know where to begin. But I am an advocate, really, for breastfeeding, for midwifery, and for women just reclaiming their majesty. So those are the things that are really dear to my heart. I always say I have lots of passions. You know, I love crafting, sewing, embroidery, gardening—there are a lot of things that I just truly enjoy. Many of them just stem back to my childhood, primarily living with my grandparents and, you know, my grandmother teaching me a lot of these things. And my grandfather was a prolific gardener and grew all kinds of foods—nuts, and we had grapevines and peach trees. And so I grew up with a lot of canning, and I do a little bit of that now.

But the breastfeeding really is grounded in my Islamic influence. I always said if I had never become Muslim, I probably would not have breastfed my children, because that's not something I grew up with. And then, you know, when I really got into it, and I discovered that I have a passion for breastfeeding, I went back and talked to my mother, my grandmother, and some of the older women that I grew up with. And pretty much it seems like the breastfeeding stopped with my mother. So I was the only child—I'm the firstborn—and so I was the only one of her four children that was breastfed. And so I think she probably bought into the propaganda of formula being as good, you know--with the freedom that comes with that, anyone can feed the baby. I'm just thinking that that was the climate that she made the decision that after me, she bottle-fed her next three children.

But because, as I said, of my Islamic influence and the Quran actually speaking to breastfeeding the newborns, it became very natural for me to do that. And I enjoyed it, and you know—I have three children. I breastfed each of them for two years, and it was such a wonderful experience, I just felt like every baby should have that advantage. And so since that time, that's been a passion and something I often speak to. And looking back through my generations, I've found that we are six generations strong breastfeeding mothers on my maternal side. I don't have that evidence from my paternal side, but definitely. And I'm so glad that my mom got me in, because that would have broken our line of breastfeeding. But because she had one breastfed baby, that allowed us to be able to track that sixth generation of breastfeeding.

And then I have a sister who is not Muslim; she has two sons. The first son, I guess I didn't get to her in time, so she didn't breastfeed him; but the second son she did. And so them not being Muslim, I was so surprised when my nephew called and said, "Auntie, can you help? I have a new baby. We're trying to breastfeed." And then, you know, talking to him more—I think he has six children—and they're all breastfed babies. And so he said he had never seen anyone breastfeeding until he saw me breastfeeding my babies, and that influenced him to breastfeed his. So the influence is just really great. And so I have two grandchildren; they were both breastfed, and I just think it's in alignment with the natural order. And, you know, we often get away from that natural order of things; but thankfully that's pulled back in in order.

And it's sort of the same process with midwifery. So, you know, originally in this country, the enslaved women were the midwives for the community and pretty much helped with all the birthing. And then I think in Georgia in the 1920s there were thousands of midwives. But then legislation and the medical community kind of converged on that practice and no longer licensed midwives. And so there are many midwives still working, but they're sort of working under the

radar, because legally they've been banned from doing, you know, what their ancestors have always done. And so that's another passion. I work with a group of midwives, and we're working, you know, to get legislation passed so that these women can continue to do the great work that they do without that cloud of "I have to operate underground or under the radar." And so that's one more thing that I'm involved with, is really trying to legalize that very important aspect of our culture.

So actually I was at a meeting yesterday, and we were talking about maternal health and trying to strategize and how we can get these laws pushed through so that families have more options. Since covid I think home-birthing has had a resurgence, and so there's much more interest, and we really need to get that support so that women have the choice of how they want to birth their babies safely and, you know, in good order. So as it stands, America is pretty low, comparatively speaking, for maternal health best outcomes, compared to many less-developed countries, countries that have less technology and more of these advanced systems in place. But they have much better outcomes, and usually it's the countries who appreciate and engage their midwives for low-risk pregnancies.

So that's pretty much my story as far as breastfeeding, midwifery. Is there anything else that I should speak to?

MH: Well, it sounds like what you're doing is really trying to bring—kind of bring it all back before—you know, before formula, before processed foods, because it sounds like you, you know—with your garden, and you grew up with gardening and canning, and sort of bringing it all kind of back before all that. Can you talk to me a little bit about where you grew up or how maybe where you grew up influenced how you're thinking today?

AM: Yes. So I'm a native Charlottean. I was born in Charlotte, North Carolina. I happened to come to Georgia when I got married. My husband is from Georgia, so that's how I got here. But I grew up in Charlotte. I went, you know, through the Charlotte-Mecklenburg education system. I graduated from Queens University in Charlotte. I have a BSN, so, you know, I have the nursing experience as well. And nurses are pretty heavy in my family, too. My mother was a nurse, my daughter is a nurse, and I have other nurse family members. So that's, you know, kind of what influenced [five-second skip in recording].

I grew up more in the county area outside the city limits, and so we had room for gardening. And all of my family were kind of together. My grandfather, his sister lived next door to us, the brother next door to her, and the youngest sister next to him. So we all grew up with family pretty much having that close-knit family. And then the families on the other side of the house were pretty much the same. It was grandfather, son—you know, grandchildren—those

four houses on the other side of us, so they were remotely related to us. But we just grew up kind of free to play and run and enjoy and walk the woods and just a wonderful childhood. But that was kind of my childhood experience.

MH: So can you tell me about when you came to the Atlanta area? You mention that you came here when you got married or when you were married. Were you in the Muslim community then?

AM: Yes. So I converted to Islam probably when I was maybe twenty, twenty-one years old. And I got married much later. So I converted in Charlotte, and I was a part of a very strong Muslim community there. I still have very close connections with that community now. And then I moved here in '86. And then I've moved around some, but primarily that's how that transition happened.

MH: Were you practicing the breastfeeding advocacy then, or did that sort of kind of come naturally a little bit later?

AM: Well, you know, I always had the interest, because when I originally went to nursing school, I was an older student. And I went because I wanted to be a midwife; I wanted to be a nurse-midwife. When I finished nursing school, [inaudible] a grueling experience. When I finished, it was like, OK, I'm done. I'm just going to hold on and see. And so--but I was very much interested in natural childbirth, and I guess that was just kind of a natural progression to when I became a mother. That's really when I became the breastfeeding advocate, is when I had the personal experience.

MH: How have you seen from your—from the start of it to today? How have you seen either the conversation change or the—today, how have you seen it grow or change?

AM: For breastfeeding specifically, midwifery—

MH: Yeah, or kind of going back to more—as I mentioned a minute ago, kind of bringing it back to before processed and before, you know, kind of getting it back to more home and natural and breastfeeding--before formula.

AM: OK, so I guess the greatest experience for me with that, again, would be my grandparents, because they grew up, you know, pretty poor, sharecroppers at one point. And then they moved closer to the city, where my grandfather went to work at a local bakery and still kept his roots intact by, of course, living in close community, gardening. Those practices, of course, you know, were passed down from his ancestors, and that's kind of how I got that influence. You know, like my grandmother taught me to sew when I was a young girl. She had one of those old Singer sewing machines that had originally had the pedal to make stitches, but then she had it converted to electrical. And I've just recently had it refurbished so that it

becomes my daughter's sewing machine. But, you know, she taught me actually how to cut out patterns, how to make my own garments; so a lot of times in high school I would make my clothing. And she also did quilting, so I have that influence. When my daughters graduated from college, I made each of them a commemorative quilt for their graduation.

So the sewing, the canning, all of those kind of homemaking skills that women don't so much pass on to their daughters now, I value and treasure. And I really try to work with my grandchildren and other youngsters to try to share that with them. For example, last summer we went to pick strawberries with the children, so everybody had their bucket of strawberries. And then we came back, and they made strawberry jam, which we're still eating. So, you know, just trying to keep those traditions passed down to have more self-sufficiency, to be able to, you know, grow your food, so you know exactly what it is you're eating. You have some better health outcomes. So that's kind of the full circle of it all from my ancestors on down to my grandchildren and other community children, trying to pass on some of those skills that can prove quite valuable.

MH: And there's nothing more self-sufficient than a woman breastfeeding her own child. I mean, that's [inaudible].

AM: Absolutely. I feel like birthing [inaudible] with understanding and again and that natural order of things and breastfeeding, I feel like those are the seat of a woman's autonomy. And so to have to really have it legislated is, to me, a little outside of that natural order, because I really don't need legislation telling me who can help me to breastfeed for money, because recently, you know, there was Georgia legislation that really wanted one set of practitioners to be able to get reimbursement for teaching breastfeeding. And there are many women that could really teach breastfeeding and do a really great job, but again, when the law steps in, it doesn't give the full breadth, and it diminishes that autonomy of the mother. And so that's kind of what fires my advocacy [*laughs*].

MH: And how important is it to be an advocate for your own community versus, say, maybe the larger community, but you being a Muslim woman in the Muslim community, how important is that as an advocate to be working with people in your own—

AM: No one can tell your own story like you can. So if we're not telling our own stories, they're not going to reflect the true description of us. So I think it's very important to be self-advocates, to tell your own story, to gather the stories of others, because that's the real preservation. And then you know, for African Americans—because we have history—an oral history tradition. And so verbally telling our stories and also beginning to record them I think is very important. So I think the work that you guys are doing, you know, is quite valuable, just to

hear some of the stories. And I went on your website, and I listened to a couple of the other ones, and I just found that very interesting and happy that there's a place to gather and hold the stories.

MH: Yeah, and we are, too. And we have more as we're uploading and transcribing all of them. Could you tell me a little bit about where, I guess the future of what you're doing, and do you see improvements? Do you see the conversation getting more normalized, I guess, of talking about these things, and do you think it's getting better? Do you think you're still up against a lot of—

AM: Well, it's an uphill battle, but it's a worthy battle. And so I think, yes, having more conversations. I have a business with Quran [Shakir], and we are celebrating Sacred Connections. And our whole idea behind that is teaching our young girls the value of their wombs and how you're empowered through your Creator, really, and so to hold onto that and not relinquish or surrender that so that you can have the full expression of who you were created to be. So I really feel like our future is in God's hands, but we have to get the work done. And so we need to have the conversations, we need to create the spaces, so that we can share our stories, so that we can have places where we pass on our traditions, where we actually have hands on lovingly and with your spirit intact to pass down to the next generation to equip them so that they're able to move forward and bring our society more in alignment with that actual order.

MH: Do you—one of the big—I guess one of the big issues I've seen or read about the reason it's hard for a lot of women to breastfeed is simply because of their work, right? They can't take off time to pump during the day, and so it's difficult for them to breastfeed, and so they simply turn to formula. Is that part of your goal, too, to sort of help change with women and working? And if you're, let's say, in the service industry, it might be nearly impossible to ask your employer for time off to go breastfeed. Is that something that you're working toward, too?

AM: Absolutely, and more and more there are companies that provide space for breastfeeding mothers, but even in those instances where that's not the case. So for me, when I worked and breastfed, at lunch I would pump. If I had a break, I would pump. And then, of course, I pumped at home and nursed the baby before I went to work and then after I'm home. So I think again opening up those spaces where we can have the conversation where we can support each other, I think that's critical. And, you know, if we don't talk about our experiences, then it really leaves the path wide open for propaganda against that, you know, for the artificial world. So I feel like we have two worlds, actually. You know, we have the world that's been created by the One who created us, and then that which is in opposition to that.

So I know that there are outliers in breastfeeding. There are some mothers who have situations where they're really not able to breastfeed. But you know, we can bring back the wet nurse, too. That's another conversation for another day, but that's not so popular now. But that's perhaps something that we can bring back into our culture. Because I think so much of who we were before enslavement was interrupted. So I'm really all about going back and find those practices that were passed down through generations that were beneficial, that kept our community strong, that really fostered strong family life. So really I'm really interested in reclaiming what has been lost and incorporate that to make our family life stronger, our community life supportive, so that we get more of the good life.

MH: Mm-hm. How have you seen—do you feel like it's a strong community here in the Atlanta area, with being advocates for breastfeeding or natural home births? Do you think this is a safe space for that here in Atlanta? Do you think that it's a growing community?

AM: I do. Part of what we have to do is make the space safe. I really feel like it is a good area for advocacy, but I think wherever you are, you have to open up the space and expand it. And so the more you engage other people in the dialog, the more you open that space up, and it becomes more safe.

MH: And then, with the Muslim response to breastfeeding, how have you seen that change maybe over the years from your own experiences? Or if you haven't see enough change, or if you would like to see more change, or if you have, from your own experience as—the Muslim response to your advocacy?

AM: Well, actually, I think our community, our Muslim community, the community of Imam W. D. Mohammed, I think we have carried on a strong breastfeeding practice. And so I don't think—again, I don't think we've documented that. We haven't really taken that documentation to the wider community in a way that perhaps we could or maybe one day will. But I think you will find that most of the Muslim children are breastfed children. So that's kind of been the culture of our Islamic community.

MH: And one of the pillars is women—excuse me if I'm not saying it correctly, pillars—women staying home, taking care of the children for a few years, correct? After—for family?

AM: Well, that varies. I know lots of young Muslim women who work. And I know young Muslim women who stay home as homemakers, so I don't think there's so much now of a stay-at-home expectation. I think women really exercise their choice in that.

MH: And all that kind of goes back to, you can take care of your child in any sort of way and whether it's you have to work or you have to breastfeed, it's all sort of tied in with taking care of your children in your own way.



AM: Yes, and I think it's very beneficial, you know, that we do have Islamic schools, and we have Islamic childcare centers that are very strong in looking out for the best interests of our children. So that's helpful, although there are families that, you know, use services outside of the community. But I just think that's one more positive to have that.

MH: Trying to think if I have any more questions. Do you have any other thoughts?

AM: No, that's pretty much it. I think I related to what you specifically asked about.

MH: Well, I do want to thank you so much for your time, and that your story and this larger story, which—you know, part of me wonders if the [inaudible] or whoever created the DeKalb History Center decades ago, they might be shaking in their boots, talking about breastfeeding as part of their oral history, but I love it. [AM *laughs*.] I love that we're talking about it and that it's part of our collection, and it's part of a story, as you mention, that was never documented. And now we're starting to talk about it, and I'm so thrilled that this is part of a story that will be in our collection that everyone knows about but no one wants to talk about and document, and now we're starting to document it.

AM: Yes, well, I'd like to thank you as well. I appreciate the opportunity to go down memory lane with my very honorable grandparents and also my transition into Islam and the beauty of it all.

END OF RECORDING

Transcribed by CS