

Neda Hamid

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SPEAKERS

Mehlam Bhuriwala, Neda Hamid

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 00:02

Hello, this is Mehlam Bhuriwala. The date is May 8th, I'm interviewing Neda Hamid, and this is for the Muslim Voices in Texas oral history project. Hi, Neda.

N Neda Hamid 00:12

Hi.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 00:14

First, really I would just like you to introduce yourself, however you see fit doing that.

N Neda Hamid 00:21

My name is Neda Hamid. I use she/her pronouns. I am a third year Human Development and Family sciences major at the University of Texas at Austin. That's the basics.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 00:36

Okay, great. If it wasn't obvious already, the focus of this project is Muslim voices in Texas. I'd like to start with the Muslim aspect of your identity. As briefly or as elaborately as you

want, how would you consider your religious identity as it pertains to you?

N

Neda Hamid 00:59

I have very high visibility as a Muslim because I wear hijab. I had to explain [that] to the kids that I was teaching. One dude [asked], "When are you not wearing it? If you go to the mailbox, do you wear it?" And I had to tell them, "Yeah, if I'm leaving my house, when I am not in front of directly blood relative males, I'm wearing it, right. If I'm in public, I'm wearing it. And [in front of] family, no, not wearing it. But I have to wear it in front of the kids." Although they try to use the - "We're all children of God, so that means we're all brothers and sisters, we're all family."

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Neda Hamid 01:52

It's an interesting aspect, I guess, of Islam. I wear hijab and I follow my religion, even though it's not fard, so it's not required, but it's what I do. I get asked a lot of questions about it, because of that. It's like I'm the go-to. Actually, whenever the kids see me at work because I generally teach at the same school. I know the kids names and the teachers, and I'm familiar with everything. Today, I heard one of the kids say, "Oh, it's that Muslim substitute [laughs]." And I was like, "I'm glad that y'all have an identification for me." They don't know my name.

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 02:41

Okay. Actually, there's two things that I want to ask based on what you just told me, but first, it seems like - is that something that you're used to? In that when people do see you, like you said, you're very high visibility, how does it feel for you for the first thing for people to sort of relate you with is, oh, she's Muslim, right? As soon as they see you?

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Neda Hamid 03:09

I have to consider, what are the stereotypes, like preconceived notions, they associate with us? If they are someone who grew up in very rural areas, they haven't interact with a lot of Muslims, so they have a lot of possibly negative stereotypes. And the first thing when they see me - what do they think of when they see me - that's probably what I'm more concerned about, rather than the fact that they see me and see Muslim. Because being Muslim is obviously a very big part of my life. I grew up Muslim, [and] in the masjid all the time, reading Quran classes on every day of the week, Saturdays, Sundays, all the time, right? And learning and growing up, and my parents telling me [that], "What you

learn at your private Christian school is very different from what we believe."

N Neda Hamid 03:55

It's like working on just kind of putting it all together. I spend a lot of time at Nueces mosque. I do my homework there and go pray and stuff. It's nice because gives you a built in community. Sometimes it's not always the best community, but it's a community.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 04:20

Are you comfortable talking about that part of your childhood?

N Neda Hamid 04:22

Yeah.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 04:22

Okay, great. So you mentioned that you went to a private Catholic school, were there many other Muslim students?

N Neda Hamid 04:31

Usually, they transferred into the public school system after fifth grade. In middle school, I was the only Muslim.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 04:41

Wow.

N Neda Hamid 04:42

It's a K through 12th grade. Out of the whole school, it was just me and my brother. But I was the only one in middle school. I got bullied a lot for it, actually. I had a kid in third grade tell me, they're like, "Oh, do you believe that Jesus died on the cross?" I was like, "No, we don't believe that. That's just not a core belief of Islam." And then they were like, "Well, that means you're going to hell." I, as a third grader, I'm nine years old, I start crying. Literally, I'm baby [laughs].

N

Neda Hamid 05:19

The epitome of my entire elementary and middle school is that. I start crying and the principal comes over and she's like, "What's wrong?" And I was like, "Well, she said that I was going to hell because I don't believe that Jesus died on the cross." This principal literally tells me, "Well, she's not wrong." Going to a Catholic, I guess it was nondenominational, but going to a Christian school was a great time [laughs].

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 05:49

Especially that being at such a formative part of your life. Do you feel like that has sort of impacted you down the line in ways that you -

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Neda Hamid 06:00

Oh absolutely. I have a lot of very deep rooted insecurities in my friendships with people based on the fact that I didn't really have a lot of close friends in my school. I had friends outside of school. I had one or two people that I actually considered a friend in my grade, growing up. I didn't really develop friends who are in my grade level until high school. I was very lonely and so, I have a lot of really deep rooted insecurities.

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 06:33

So what do you think changed in high school?

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Neda Hamid 06:36

I was around people that were like, not like, it's not necessarily good. Obviously, there's always going to be a religious kind of a characteristic in your classmates, but I was with kids who didn't care as much. There was more of a diversity in religion - people who are just like, "Okay, well, you're not Christian, and that's okay because neither am I."

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 07:02

Okay, great. You mentioned before that it seemed like you had two very different social lives as a child. It seems like you were sort of splitting time between masjid and your school life. Do you kind of feel like you were living a double life back in, back in those times? How would you describe that?

N

Neda Hamid 07:24

I felt like I had two different personalities in a way. I would go to the masjid and talk to the kids, I had friends at the masjid. Also because they were in my age group. I just spent a lot of time learning how to read Quran, learning how to write Arabic, and read Arabic properly, and speaking it with my parents, which was really cool. At school, it was just like I was a completely different person because I didn't have friends. I was very quiet, kind of cried a lot, because I was very sensitive.

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Neda Hamid 08:04

It felt very weird. Because sometimes, the kids would be like, "Oh, this is what I did." And it's like, "I was just at the masjid [laughs]. I didn't really do anything."

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 08:17

You mentioned speaking Arabic at home with your parents. How do you feel like that has impacted your relationship with Islam?

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Neda Hamid 08:27

I have not necessarily the best [Arabic] like, "Oh, I feel like I know every single word in the Quran. I know what all of it means." I have a better understanding of it. I feel like it helped me with being able to read the Quran because the original language is in Arabic. You can still get a Quran in Urdu, it's not like it has to be in Arabic. I don't really think that being able to speak Arabic or speaking it growing up really has an effect or an impact on my relationship with Islam. Rather, my relationship with my own cultural identity.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 09:05

Okay, so do you want to speak more on that?

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Neda Hamid 09:08

I'm Palestinian. I didn't really identify the Palestinian part of myself as strongly as I did [now], because it was super complicated. I didn't really understand what is the Palestine-Israeli conflict until I was nine. I guess conflict is a not the right word, it's a genocide. So when people would be like, "Oh, where are your parents [from]? Where are you from?" Well, I was born here, but my mom was born in Jordan and my dad was born in Syria. I fell under the monolithic umbrella of "Middle Eastern" rather than being - now [when] people

ask me where are you from - "I'm from Palestine." No ifs, ands or buts, without a second thought, Palestine.

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Neda Hamid 09:59

My parents were very big on making sure that I understood that the way that I'm to live my life, culturally [and] socially, is going to be different than the kids who are not Muslim or not Arab, that we're in my class environment. They were very big on me having really a lot of Arab friends, [and] a lot of Palestinian friends. When the Palestinian festival started, I think this was the ninth one this past year. I've gone to every single one of them except for one my freshman year because I didn't have a car to get to Houston. I've always gone and I'm always around the same people, and it's old people that I grew up with, right? All their parents are like, "free Palestine, we're Palestinian, everyone's gonna know it."

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 10:54

And so, what does that mean to you, you know, to be able to participate in an event like that, in public?

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Neda Hamid 11:00

It really gives me a very warm fuzzy, patriotic feeling. Because here, everyone has their little American or Texan flags or people have native Texan stickers on their car, which to that I say, "Are you indigenous to this land?" That's what I always think of when I see [that], "Oh, are you indigenous? Does that mean your parent or your family has been here forever?" I like being able to participate. It's such a slim occurrence right? It only happens once a year for a weekend and then you hold on to it. I would always look forward to it every single year and I would hold on tight to the feeling that I would get after. Palestine is so much fun, this is so cool. I would get henna tattoos and people would ask me, "Oh, where'd you get your tattoos?" And people made fun of me, told me that I literally put shit on my hands, which was terrible and annoying and rude. Also, I'm super white. The pattern shows up really clearly, you can tell that they're flowers and it tends to come out orange more than brown on my skin because I'm very white.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 12:16

Fair, yeah.

- N** Neda Hamid 12:20
I went to the Palestinian festival this weekend and we did dabke and danced and I got to eat Palestinian food and have this really great experience of actually being able to experience my culture, in a way that is, it doesn't happen every day besides what I experience at my house.
- M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 12:38
Right. Seems like there's a certain power to being able to live that aspect of your culture unapologetically and publicly.
- N** Neda Hamid 12:45
Yes, yeah, absolutely. And then you have people who don't understand. They're just wandering in like, "This is so cool for the experience." And I'm like, "Yes, yes, experiences, everyone understand Palestine."
- M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 12:59
I want to talk to you a little bit about you mentioning that - whereas in your childhood, you didn't have a firm understanding of what it meant to be Palestinian, right? You would consider yourself Arab more than Palestinian at the time?
- N** Neda Hamid 13:14
Yes.
- M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 13:15
And that seems to have changed a lot.
- N** Neda Hamid 13:17
Oh, yeah.
- M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 13:18
I was wondering if you could talk to me a little bit about how and when that shift or you

feel like that shift started to occur? When did you feel like you started to notice that change in yourself?

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Neda Hamid 13:30

My first most distinct encounter of Palestine was - they have those little games where they have the little metal balls, and you have to put them in a spot and you get all of them and you're like, "Yes I win." It was a Palestine one and it's of all the cities like Haifa, Yafa, Akka, Jerusalem, and those. I was just like, "Mom, what is this?" [She said], "Well, that's Palestine." And so, it's my first initial understanding of what is Palestine. It's just this old decoration. They still have it in their house. I'm probably going to play with it this weekend when I go home [laugh].

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Neda Hamid 14:08

As I got older, they started the Palestine festival when I was 12. Just kind of slowly but surely I was learning Palestinian culture exposure. And we would have international festivals in high school and I would always represent Palestine - yes, we're going to have Palestinian food, like tabbouleh and there's gonna be a really big cake with the Palestine flag on it so everyone knows what it looks like [laugh]. And having the traditional stitching and we would have Mohammed Assaf playing because you can never get away with not playing Dammi Falastini [laugh].

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Neda Hamid 14:52

The strongest initial push for the Palestinian identity rather than just Arab was whenever in 2014, I think, was whenever the first attacks on Gaza happened. I was screaming my voice, just screaming at a protest - "This is very bad, obviously, very violent and that's what your tax dollars are paying for." I was just really protesting and that was my first push towards activism and really understanding the Palestinian cause. Then even more so whenever I first started at UT and I joined PSC.

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 14:55

Do you want to define PSC?

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Neda Hamid 15:40

[laughs] Palestine Solidarity Committee. I actually can't talk about that because whenever

I go back to Palestine and they look up my name, this can't pop up.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 15:52

Okay, got it. So, would you not like to talk about the subject of the 2014 attacks?

N Neda Hamid 16:01
Yeah.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 16:03
That's fair.

N Neda Hamid 16:04
Because last summer, whenever I went, they asked me, "What is your opinion on Gaza specifically? What do you know about what's happening in Gaza?" [I said], "What's happening in Gaza?" I'm just going to play stupid.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 16:14
Right. I will say, in my experience, I do remember I was in high school when those attacks happened.

N Neda Hamid 16:21
Yeah, I was 16, so senior year

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 16:26
Right. I think we were all just looking at the TV screen and CNN and we saw how it was characterized. I think I was at debate camp at the time [laughs], so there was a lot of very progressive minds in the room.

N Neda Hamid 16:40
Yeah.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 16:41

It was just silence because we just had no words. There aren't any words. Okay, thank you. I want to backtrack a little bit to what you said in the beginning of our interview, and maybe talk a little bit more about your relationship with the hijab, especially living in Texas.

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 17:11

I'm sure that probably brings up some painful memories that you don't have to discuss if you don't want to. But I just wanted to ask you a little bit about your experience being a sort of public covered woman in Texas and maybe some of the misconceptions you might have come across.

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Neda Hamid 17:30

Alhumdulillah, I've only experienced two really outward hateful expressions of anti-hijab or anti-Muslim rhetoric. Senior year of high school, I was walking through one of the high school buildings and I was going to the art room because I needed to work on an assignment after school. And one kid comes up to me, some kid that I'd never talked to before, he taps me on the shoulder and he says, "You look like somebody who blew up my house." I was just like, "That's not funny." And I really grasp that, "Wait, what did he just say to me?" It took me a second to process it. He got suspended for a few days, which is cool because that's not something that's okay to say.

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Neda Hamid 18:21

The one I had literally today, in the classroom, when one of the kids told another kid to stop talking because if he didn't stop talking, I would blow up that kid's house. Obviously [they were] immediately sent to the principal's office. [I] get a text to their teacher and be like, "Hey, I wrote you a note, but this is what happened today. Make sure that kid gets suspension, referral, write up, something, whatever it is because that's not okay." I think the kid who did it my senior year was a freshman or something, like a baby, and the kid that I had in my class was a sixth grader.

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Neda Hamid 19:01

These ideas are being instilled at a really young age. It starts small and it just develops. Alhumdulillah this wasn't really - actually, one of the kids today asked me, "Have you ever had someone try to pull your hijab off your head?" And I was like, "The only time that my

hijab has ever actually come off in public was at a concert two or three weeks ago whenever someone was crowd surfing and they kicked me in the head because I didn't know that the guy was coming." His foot just hit me in the back of the head and I immediately flew, I ducked, and covered my hijab to keep it from falling off [laughs]. It just got really askew because I had to wrap it like a turban. But alhumdulillah, yeah, I haven't had - oh wait - there was one guy who was staring at me at HEB late at night. I was like, "What are you surprised that my husband let me out after dark? Why are you looking at me? I'm just going to get some milk?"

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Neda Hamid 20:09

Besides that, I'm chilling. Alhumdulillah, I'm so grateful. I've heard so many people - heard worse right after Trump got elected. The next day there was a spike in specifically anti-well general anti-Muslim speech and actions, like hijabis getting their hijabs ripped off or [people saying], "If you don't take that off I'll light you on fire." I remember that one and I'm glad that I've never experienced that.

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 20:43

No, I'm surprised and not surprised at the lack of originality of the comments and the fact that you heard these two things several years apart.

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Neda Hamid 20:50

[Laughs] this isn't really specifically anti-Muslim, but the kids are not allowed to have their jacket hoods on in class and so, I'll tell them to take their hoods off. They'll be like, "Nah miss, you first." And I'm "Ha, mine is a religious head covering and I've also heard that before. Take it off. You're just out of dress code. Also I'm your teacher, so don't back talk me." I'm glad that I've never experienced that.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 21:21

It seems like you have practice at this point.

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Neda Hamid 21:23

Yeah [laughs]. I just got used to these small children usually generally at this all boy middle school, that I like to work at, being boys.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 21:41

I know you personally, but your identity is very vocal. [You're a] sort of outwardly vocal facing person [in] that your personality is very - it doesn't take long to, maybe a few seconds in talking to you, to get a sense of what you're about. Do you feel like you ever have to play kind of the role of the contrast to maybe the image? Like you said, with your experience at HEB? If you do, I guess, I'm curious about your experience being a contrast to sort of the stereotypical image a lot of people here have of hijabis, as you know, these very domesticated, very tame.

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Neda Hamid 22:35

I think about that a lot. When I was younger, I didn't have this understanding of, "Oh, there are people that just don't like Muslims." I didn't really get that until I was a teen, maybe late teens.

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 22:49

Right.

N

Neda Hamid 22:51

I just didn't get it and experience it. To me, it was just whatever. My parents never talked to me about it either. I am also very white passing, right. I have red hair, very pale, or I guess my cousin is actually paler than I am, but i'm pretty fair toned. To me, I didn't experience it until I started wearing hijab when I was 16. I didn't have this understanding. I don't think that the way that I act necessarily is to be a contrast to this domesticated thing because my mother is very much the, "I run everything" [type]. My mom's side of the family is very matriarchal. I spent most of my time with my mom and her sisters growing up. I've just kind of taken on all of their characteristics in terms of being like, I run this shit. It's all me. I guess that's kind of it, but sometimes I wonder if I'm compassionate and kind, honestly, excessively to make up for the fact that I am the visual of a terrorist or quote unquote.

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 24:15

Right. So, you mentioned that you started to wear the hijab at age 16.

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Neda Hamid 24:22

Yeah.

M Mehiam Bhuriwala 24:22

Do you want to talk about that decision?

N Neda Hamid 24:24

My parents were just kind of like, "So, Neda, do you think you'll ever start wearing the hijab? I was like, "Yeah, I'll wear it eventually." This started at the very beginning of high school and they're like, "Okay." Then the next day, they'd be like, "Do you think you're ready now?" [I said], "Next year, next year."

N Neda Hamid 24:43

The day before junior year started, or maybe a couple weeks before, they went shopping for long sleeve shirts in different colors, so they can make sure that everything matched or whatever. They just asked, "So, you're gonna start wearing it tomorrow?" Yup, my first day of junior year, I put on the hijab and I've never looked back.

M Mehiam Bhuriwala 25:09

Did you feel like that was both your choice and something you were pressured into doing?

N Neda Hamid 25:16

It was completely my choice. It's just because my mom wears it and all my aunts wear it and growing up in the masjid, it's just an expectation. Like, Neda is eventually going to start wearing it. But I know that if I had told my parents "No, I don't want to," they never would have really questioned it. I think my dad might have been like, "Neda, maybe you should look into wearing it, here's a pamphlet or something." But if I had told him that I didn't ever want to wear it then they wouldn't have pushed me for it either, which is, I know, something that is alhumdulillah.

N Neda Hamid 25:51

I don't want to be like, "All hijabis who wear it, wear it by choice" because I know that is not the case in some Arab countries where it's more forced. I'm glad that I haven't had that experience where it was just a pressure on me. It was fully my choice. If I had said

right before junior started, "Oh, I'm not gonna wear it," my parents would be like, "Well, Neda, you did say that you were going to." My mom has always been like, "Neda whenever you make your decision on something, stick to it." That's more than a "You have to do this because of religion." They're just kind of like, "You said you were going to."

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 26:34

Why do you think your father would have wanted you to wear the hijab?

N Neda Hamid 26:46

He's a very emotional person and he's also very aggressively and conservatively religious. Not culturally, well, actually, I guess, the cultural, not politically conservative. He is just very scared of American culture in a way because he knows of the culture and he doesn't want me to experience some of the negative pitfalls that occur for American girls growing up in a very hyper-sexual culture. Not to say that Muslim girls and girls who grow up Muslim or convert or anything can't also fall into that, but he thinks of it as a protective factor for these kinds of things.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 27:43

Okay. Okay, thanks. I think now what I want to sort of pivot to is the other aspect of your identity that this study is comprising. I want to talk about how you feel about your Texan identity. First, you mentioned the festival every year.

N Neda Hamid 28:10

Yeah.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 28:10

Do you want to talk to us a little bit about where you're from?

N Neda Hamid 28:13

Yes. I was born, which is very important, honestly, because so many kids are like, "Where were you born?" or "where did you come from?" I was born in Baytown, Texas, home of Exxon Mobil. You can smell it as you drive in. It's terrible, but that's where my parents live.

That's where I go home on the weekends and during break, I go back to Baytown. It was a very big misconception growing up. People would see me or they would see my mom and know my mom is not American born and be like, "So where were you born?" I was like, "I was born in the same hospital that you were probably born in" because Baytown only has one or two options. I feel like they have more now, but most kids were born in the same hospital realistically. I always just said, "That hospital that you were born in, same."

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 29:07

Did you ever feel like they meant something else?

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Neda Hamid 29:09

They definitely meant, "Were you born overseas?" I remember when I was younger, I used to get really offended by that. I was just like "How dare you think that I'm anything but American?" or "how dare you think that I'm anything but Texan" or something. And now, I don't care. I just think it's really funny. Today, I had one of the kids who's like, "Miss, your English is like really good, when did you move here?" I was born in Houston or Houston area, but I don't know if this kid is going to know where Baytown is. I just said Houston and he was like, "That's a trash city" and I was like, "Don't you dare" [laughs].

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Neda Hamid 30:05

Some of the other kids in his class - actually, I was talking to some of the other teachers and they're like, "You know, they were talking about you in my class." I was like, "Oh, dear god, what were they saying?" And they're like, "They were very surprised to hear a very White girl voice when they were expecting heavily accented or something because of the hijab." It's funny because I have a very White American voice, I don't have the accent. To me, I don't have an accent. To a lot of people, I don't have an accent.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 30:36

And so, you mentioned that, as a kid, you would get sort of defensive when people asked. So, why do you feel like it was important to you, for you to establish that you were very much Texan? Why do you feel like you placed so much importance on you being American and you being Texan?

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Neda Hamid 30:56

I think because this is what I studied in my Human Development major. Literally, we were just talking about this in class. That's just how strongly and how important it is for kids to feel like they belong with their class group, right. To me, it was really important that the kids, especially because I felt like the kids didn't like me or I didn't really have friends within my classmates, that I fit in and that I was a part of them, right? So that they didn't have this us versus them perspective. More like a, "Oh, she's one of us, she fits in, she's in the norm." Because there weren't any other kids that were really born outside of the US in my class.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 31:42

Right. And so, as you got older, how do you feel like that changed?

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Neda Hamid 31:47

I remember I would get really defensive when kids would call me White. I was just like, "No, I'm not white, I'm Arab and Middle Eastern."

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 31:55

Maybe Caucasian, but not white [laughs].

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Neda Hamid 31:59

That's what I put on my census form and that's what I put for testing and for AP exams - [that] I'm Middle Eastern. I think in 2020 they're suppose to actually add Middle Eastern as an option, and I'm super excited about it even though I don't need to put that anymore for anything. I guess for job applications if they ask or grad school. Whenever people ask me, "Oh, where are you from?" [I say that I'm] from Texas. Even when I was in Europe, they're like, "Oh, where are you visiting from?" [I said], "Texas." They're like, "I don't know where Texas is" [laughs]. I could be in Amsterdam talking about how i'm from Texas - Austin, Texas - USA, like i'm one of the guestsbooks at one of the museums.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 32:53

So do you still feel like it's important to you to feel like you belong as a Texan? You mentioned earlier that it's not -

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Neda Hamid 33:03

Yeah. It's not a personality, but it's just kind of a facet of the culture that I guess I experienced growing up, like having really aggressive Texas history classes. I remember one time, we made little booklets and it had blue bonnets, [the] national flower, [and] the Mockingbird. Well, I guess it's not national, it's just the Texas flower. The Mockingbird is the Texas bird, and what the flag looks like, and everyone rides horses. It's this understanding of what is Texas culture? How is it shaped? I've asked even my cousins, "Do you have Georgia history?" And they're like, "What, no, what is that?" They don't have these classes in elementary and middle school in the way that we did.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 33:58

That actually surprises me.

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Neda Hamid 33:59

Yeah, right? It's weird. I talked to them and they're like, "No, we don't have that." I'm just like, oh, well then what are we doing? I guess it's because we used to be a country. The Texas flag is allowed to fly as high as the American flag because we used to be a country. I don't think that should matter. In retrospect, honestly, none of it really matters. But it's just whenever people ask, "Oh, what is it like?" Well, this is Texas.

N

Neda Hamid 34:30

I think it's really funny though because you have all of the associated stereotypes like, do you ride a horse to school? I remember I was a flower girl to a wedding when I was in the sixth grade and the wedding was in Canada for my aunt's best friend's daughter or whatever. She was telling everybody, "My flower girl, she's going to have a Texas accent." Then I get there and she's like, "Where's your accent? You don't have an accent, but you have to say howdy a couple times and y'all. I told everybody that the flower girl is going to have a Texas accent, so you have to at least fake it for this." Everyone was like, "Do you talk like Sandy Cheeks?"

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 35:19

So, did you fake it?

- N** Neda Hamid 35:20
Yeah, I did. I said howdy a few times and I was like, "Hey y'all." They thought it was cute and I was like alright, cool.
- M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 35:29
'Y'all' actually seems to be catching on.
- N** Neda Hamid 35:30
Honestly, yall is normal to me or now, I've shifted to [saying] you guys. Y'all is very gender neutral.
- M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 35:41
It is inclusive.
- N** Neda Hamid 35:43
It is very. I remember my cousin used to make fun of me for saying it, the ones that live in Georgia. But also, Georgia is really Southern, so y'all isn't Texas exclusive.
- M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 35:55
Not at all.
- N** Neda Hamid 35:59
I'm just thinking about that clip of Kacey Musgraves at Coachella where she's like, "When I say yee, you say haw" [laughs].
- M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 36:08
Okay, so really the last subject that I want to cover is something that you touched on a little bit before. And that is, sort of the transition from high school, which is where you were very much made aware of your being a minority, to college, where you were still a minority.

N

Neda Hamid 36:43

Honestly, I just got really, really left. I was looking through my old tumblr and what I used to post on tumblr four or five years ago, whenever I first made it, like freshman year of college or freshman year of high school. I was just this is pretty progressive shit for a 15 year old. And now it got even more so - it's even more left. I guess being able to be around people who really help cultivate your ideas and following people on Twitter that really help shape your ideas and share your values is really cool. It's really cool because I know that whenever I was in high school a lot of the kids were super conservative [and] probably voted for Trump. And now, I've gone to college where I am surrounded by people who are very anti-Trump, which is cool because so am I.

N

Neda Hamid 37:47

Being around people who really do understand, like know things about Palestine, like what's happening in Palestine, and being able to participate in organizations who really care, having a community of Muslims, having a masjid that's literally walking distance from my apartment that I can go to and pray or break my fast or just be around people who - really just being able to be in such a community - is amazing. It's just so cool to be around people who actually know things. I don't want to be like, "Oh, it's just because we're in a higher education setting because higher education is elitist as shit," but being around people who are experiencing and going through being at this university with all of these wonderful experiences. Going through that together and being able to be involved in the same things and activists things that are just happening, popping up all the time, it's amazing to me. It's really made me feel more secure in my personal and cultural identity and also being more comfortable socially to be around people, being like myself.

N

Neda Hamid 39:04

Because I know that not necessarily everybody's going to be like, "Oh, well, what she said is problematic, but we're not going say anything." I'm going to be around people who are willing to reach out and be like, "Hey, that's not okay" or "switch this word with something else" or like "hey that's ableist," which now I do all the time - tell people what they're saying is ableist. It's important. And also being around people who actually care about things.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 39:35

I'm gonna backtrack just a little bit. You mentioned that, you know, you're talking about this big shift from high school where a majority of the people around you were conservative. Do you feel like you had to repress that part of yourself or suppress anything

about yourself in high school?

N

Neda Hamid 39:51

No, I definitely popped off in some earlier classes. I remember during government class, I graduated in 2016, so it's not the height of the Syrian Refugee Crisis, but it was right when a lot of it was not necessarily becoming more mainstream news, but it was getting into that. And when refugees were actually a really big issue or even more of an issue than they already were. We were talking about it in my government class, and I was just like, "Well, my dad was born in Syria, so those refugees include his side of the family. I think that they should be let into the US." And this girl was like, "Well it might not be safe. They might be part of a terrorist group." I was like, "Are you gonna tell me that my parents, my family, shouldn't be allowed in the country?" Of course I'm going to say that they should be allowed. I remember I just got really angry with her and irritated from her being so narrow-minded and shallow about it. I just think that entire issue frustrates the crap out of me because I just think that we should just be more, as people, accepting and compassionate. And just let them in. It takes so much to leave a country.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 41:05

It really does. It's a country that you were born in.

N

Neda Hamid 41:07

Yeah, a country that you're born in. And so it's just like [cuts off].

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 41:15

Should I pause? [SESSION BREAK].

N

Neda Hamid 41:20

Yeah.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 41:23

Okay, sorry, go ahead and resume what you were saying.

N

Neda Hamid 41:27

So I was just talking about how frustrating the entire refugee [crisis is]. My political activism began junior year after taking world history or US history. And then I was just kind of like, hmm, I should be very conscientiousness of these things. I just started paying attention, especially as it took a more personal hit. I got very defensive with these girls who just like, "I don't think Syrian refugees should be allowed in the country." I was just like, "You're annoying and I don't like you anyway, but now I hate you more."

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 42:04

I think that's a very good point to segue into your work, your current work, that we have not mentioned yet, but I'm aware of.

N

Neda Hamid 42:19

They dissolved my position. They're reallocating all the social media, so I'm on the advisory council or committee or whatever. I served as the social media director and then our social media and publicity director for the Liberal Arts Refugee Alliance for two years starting my, I started spring of 2017, and now my reign is over. I have not actually officially logged out of all the social media accounts. Honestly, it's going to be great not having to switch back and forth between three or four different twitters to figure out which one I'm supposed to tweet on.

N

Neda Hamid 43:04

I spent all this time helping educate and connect UT students with refugee or related volunteer opportunities and just kind of educating people about the different refugee crises because it's not just Syrian refugees. It's not monolithic. And kindly helping because Austin does have a pretty big refugee community. And so, being able to just get kids out there where we work on this community farm. [I'd say], "Come work with us this Saturday for four hours or come help us." I remember one time we painted benches and that was really cool. It was really fun. We went in the kitchen and talked to everybody. I had some people come up to me and they started speaking to me in Arabic. I was like "Hell yeah, let's go" [laughs].

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 44:01

I wonder, how and when did you start to get involved with Liberal Arts Refugee Alliance?

- N** Neda Hamid 44:07
Junior year - not junior year - freshman year is January. I was out with people and I saw the news about the - these are also pro-Trump people so I don't talk to them. They were talking about how shitty Hillary Clinton would have been as president, which at the time, I was in denial, but now I understand why, as i've become more left and my political understanding has expanded. I went crying to my RA, literally crying, because I was so angry about the travel, Trump's first attempt, at the travel ban. She's like, "Well, you know, if you want to get involved, there's this org."
- M** Mehram Bhuriwala 44:52
Wow.
- N** Neda Hamid 44:53
"Join this org. Come by, there's going to be an ice cream social. I'll be there, so you won't feel by yourself in a room full of people that you don't know." I've just kind of been involved ever since. I made a joke about how i'm not on the executive board anymore, so i'm gonna drop off the face of the planet, and Nelson was like, "Don't you fucking dare, you're not allowed to do that, you have to still show up and help out." I was like, "Of course," but I don't have to bake brownies for the meeting.
- M** Mehram Bhuriwala 45:19
Oh no.
- N** Neda Hamid 45:21
I'm not obligated, but you can still buy them at bake sales [laughs].
- M** Mehram Bhuriwala 45:28
So, as of now, you've been involved with Liberal Arts Refugee Alliance for three years?
- N** Neda Hamid 45:32
Yes, or two? Two full years.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 45:36

Yeah, okay. So, you mentioned in high school how these issues became very personal for you.

N

Neda Hamid 45:43

Yes.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 45:44

And so, do you feel like you sort of carried that into your involvement with the organization?

N

Neda Hamid 45:47

Absolutely. Yeah. At the very beginning of the semester, the first couple meetings or so, I feel like we always introduce ourselves and why are we involved. I always mentioned that my cousin on my dad's side was imprisoned by the Syrian government for three years and we didn't know if he was alive or dead. Found out freshman year he's alive and I started crying at the PCL. That was cool.

N

Neda Hamid 46:13

I got to see him last spring break last year, which was really cool. I was just like, "I have these family members, who I don't know if they're alive or dead, and you want to tell me that you don't think they should be allowed in?" Now, it's being able to go out and help people. Like, hey, this is what I'm about. This is why I care so much. In general, I just think you should care about everybody.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 46:42

Yeah, I would definitely agree with that. You can choose not to answer this question because I understand it might be sort of painful to answer, but I'm curious as to how/ what your experiences are sort of experiencing everything that's going on within Syria, obviously in Palestine and sort of all over the region? Having sort of personal familial ties to that region, but being sort of on this side of the ocean? How does that make you feel?

N

Neda Hamid 47:19

Oh my god. Okay, so this throws me back. I guess this is actually one of those Islamophobic attacks. It was the weekend of ACL. My friends were all here. One of them was like, "I want to get this, can we go to target?" because I still worked there, "Let's use your employee discount." I'm like, "Bet, let's go." We went to target and while we were waiting in line, this lady asked me, she was like, "I wanted to ask, what are you doing about trigger warnings, sexual assault, the rape crisis that are happening in refugee camps in Europe?" I was like, "I'm sorry? I don't understand the question." She's like, "Well, there's a lot of rape happening in these refugee camps, so what are you doing about it?" It took me a second to process what she said, right? It's like I am here in America, in Austin Texas, my location, where I'm based out of or whatever. What am I, with my relatively broke privileged, still relatively broke, supposed to do for people that are in Europe? She started attacking from the religious end and from the cultural end and it was just, "Why aren't you doing more?" I was like, "Well, you're white. And what's his face? Brett -

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 48:55

Kavanaugh.

N

Neda Hamid 48:56

Kavanaugh just got confirmed, what are y'all doing about it?" It was a very irritating conversation because it also comes back to a helplessness, like I can't really do anything. It sucks because I want to do more, but that doesn't change the fact that while I'm here, I cannot be in Gaza helping my family that still lives there. I guess most of my family, alhumdulillah, they're mostly in Manchester, UK and they're working and doing whatever. They're doing something, right. They're living, they're starting over after leaving a country that they were born in, making them second generational refugees because they were refugees from Palestine and now they're refugees from Syria. I can't do anything, but I know I like to tie it to the work that I do.

N

Neda Hamid 49:57

I just hope that the kindness and the help and as much compassion that I show for the refugees that are here, the ones that I work with, that I enjoy helping to learn English or pulling weeds on a farm, anything that I'm doing, that someone somewhere is helping my family members or any refugee family or refugees in general. Not all of them leave with their families. I'm helping them in the same capacity or in a way that I'm helping here because that's all I can do. You definitely start with your community because if you start

thinking about all the things that are wrong and all the things that you can't do, you are going to fall into a hole and it's a very hard hole to get out of, very difficult, it's very dark and depressing. I just try to focus on what I can do and what's within my reach.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 50:58

I think that's a very beautiful outlook. It seems like you're bringing up a really complicated dynamic of both understanding that you can't be held responsible for everything every Arab does or even every refugee does, any Palestinian does, all of that, but at the same time, sort of feeling beholden to those same people.

N

Neda Hamid 51:26

Yeah. Alhumdullilah, my parents have money. I am studying at a very prestigious tier one research university. I get to experience higher education and I know that when I graduate in the fall, I get to continue. I'm taking a gap semester just because year throw off or whatever, but I get to continue and my parents are willing to help me pay for my masters, my PhD. I'll be able to, as long as I want, to study. They'll help me pay for it or find a way to help me pay for it. I know that is a privilege that obviously not everyone gets because people go into debt because they are trying to pay for their education. It's like ridiculous amounts of interest. I'm just like, I have all of these privileges and I need to be able to use them.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 52:24

Do you ever feel like - let's strip back all of your refugee involvement, all of your community service, all of that, that you do to extraneously - do you ever feel like your sort of bare existence as you mentioned as a relatively privileged person, living here in America - do you ever feel like just that basic existence of sort of living and suddenly striving? Do you ever feel like that is sort of a form of resistance to a regime or a set of policies or a set of trends that seems to want to deny those same opportunities to a whole different group of people?

N

Neda Hamid 53:13

Yeah, I think in a way it does because I know that regardless of what color my skin is, people see me and think Muslim before they think White, right? Which actually was really funny because that lady that verbally attacked me at that target, she asked me, "Did you convert?" And I said no. She asked if I was born "over there," not specifying where "over

there" was. I just assumed Middle East and I said "No, I wasn't." She's like, "So you converted" rather than thinking it's possible that this girl was born into the religion.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 53:55

[laughs] randomly approached.

N

Neda Hamid 54:00

Just remembering people are so aggressive to these people who they don't even know. Also, she said that she had actually been to those areas and visited those refugee camps like, "Ma'an, what are you doing about it because you've actually been there? I have not even been to these areas." I guess, putting myself in people's faces whether they want me there, I'm gonna be there. I'm gonna be in your lecture halls, I'm gonna be teaching your kids, I'll be there. Like whether you want me to or not, nothing you say is going to put me down into a place where I can't get back up.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 54:47

I think that is a beautiful transition into my last question for you. Although you introduced yourself at the beginning, I want you to sort of strip back all of the social categorization, stigma, all of that and one more time, tell us who you are, Neda Hamid, absent of anything an outside source may try to pin on you. I know it might be a difficult question to answer.

N

Neda Hamid 55:28

I mean, honestly, the first thing I thought of is, I'm just a girl standing in front of the guy, asking him to love her, which is obviously not the situation [laughs]. But I guess in a way it kind of really does fit. I guess it's part of those insecurities, I just want people to like me, right? I'm just Neda Hamid, I am a student at UT, I care about everything, a lot, very deeply, and I just want to help people.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 56:08

Great. Thank you so much. That was amazing.