Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher

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SPEAKERS

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher, Rimsha Syed

Rimsha Syed 00:03

Hello, this is Rimsha Syed with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. The date is January 25, 2022, and I am on a Zoom call today with Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher are the Muslim Voices in Texas oral history collection. How are you today?

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 00:20

Excellent. Great. How are you doing?

Rimsha Syed 00:22

I'm doing good, thanks. Would you mind introducing yourself and also tell us where in Texas you're joining this call from today?

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 00:32

So my name is Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher, connecting from Houston, Texas.

Rimsha Syed 00:39

Great. I know there's a lot that you could say about your journey and all that you've accomplished thus far, but I want to start by jumping way back in time and asking if you could share a bit about your childhood and any formative experiences that come to mind.

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 00:58

Whenever I think back on my childhood, especially in relation to America - I came here when I

was eight years old, and my parents are originally from Colombia, South America. So I had already lived in Colombia in the neighboring country of Venezuela before the age of eight due to my dad being an agricultural engineer and instructor. So when I came here to America, I'm just the son of immigrants, and I guess, everything that kids go through at that moment in time with parents not knowing the language or the culture. I enrolled in third grade when I was eight years old and had to learn English and just get acclimated to a whole new life and a whole new world. Obviously, I picked up on English a lot faster than my parents who were at the mid-forties. And I'm an only child, I don't have any brothers and sisters. So eventually, by middle school, I had already understood a bit of what living around so many cultures, and different backgrounds was. People who come from countries such as Colombia are used to being around people who are pretty much like them, similar background. Over here, you get so many different cultures and background, people from all over the world. So that's part of the acclamation, I think, to America.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 02:36

That's up to the elementary stage that I recall. Obviously, in middle school, things changed a lot. I noticed there was a lot of gangs popping up in my school. There was random searches for for drugs and weapons. It was at a time when certain movies were coming out from Hollywood that were glamorizing African-American and Latino youth doing certain things that have to do with crime and things like that. So I think media had a strong role in influencing the way people talked, walked, the sort of music that was coming out in that time. It just led to an environment where there was a lot of imitating those images. Unfortunately, by the age of thirteen, based on a misunderstanding - there was a gang, an African-American gang, that had it out for Latinos for no reason whatsoever. The leader of that gang came and hit me out of nowhere. My dad and my parents always taught me to respect people, but they taught me to defend myself. My dad had taught me how to box since an early age, so I ended up defending myself and beat this guy up that I had no clue who he was.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 04:08

But when that happened, based on a misunderstanding, everybody thought that I was a leader of a Latino gang. And based on that misunderstanding, Latinos got together and said, "Yeah, we're not gonna let anybody push us around." People are getting jumped just because of the skin color and so on. So eventually what happened was, by default, I became a leader of a gang. It seemed very innocent at first, but then later on, unfortunately, people got hurt. Some people lost their lives, and then it became territorial. I think the inner cities in America have similar issues, and that whenever there's scarcity in resources, people are going after those limited resources, and they have a way to divide amongst themselves, sometimes ethnically. In those neighborhoods, basically there is a survival of the fittest attitude.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 05:13

By the age of sixteen, I had lived a lot more than what a regular sixteen-year-old had lived that there was an attempt on my life. After some of my friends getting shot, and drive by shootings, and even attempts on my life, there was one attempt in my life that led to my parents sending me back to Colombia. So I went there at the age of sixteen. I hadn't been back since eight.

When I went to Colombia, I thought everything that the media said about Colombia. I thought it was going to be dangerous, drug dealers everywhere. But I found the opposite. I found a very warm community, people who cared for one another, and they gave me a welcome. That was amazing. Even people down the block wanted to know some guy who came from the United States.

J Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 06:03

Back in those days, people didn't know too much about America and the culture over here, but they were very interested. I knew the English language, so soon after being there, I became a professor in the English language at the age of sixteen at an institute called Speak English Institute. I was taught how to teach. I was making in one hour what a minimum wage worker made in eight hours. I went to a private school. I found the value of education in Colombia, because people really wanted to learn. Over here, school was relaxed, and there was a lot more socializing, things to do with social things than academics, even though I did well over here in school, because my parents always held me to a standard. I was an honor roll student, even though I was getting in trouble. But eventually, in Columbia, is where I really honed down and really got to study and became first in class after being one of the last when I got here. Trigonometry, physics, chemistry, it was very hard subjects. For a person coming from America, they wanted to place me one year back because their educational system was beyond the American system at that time.

J Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 07:21

But I leveled out, got really close to nature. I got a chance to spend time in the rivers and eat natural fruits. I saw the lifestyle of people over there, and I just felt like I possibly didn't want to come back to America. What I had seen in America led me to understand that education in Colombia was the ticket. So eventually, when I got back to America - my parents asked me to come back at the age of eighteen - my plan was just to study and go back to Colombia and live life the way my cousins did. I have a cousin that's a mechanical engineer, one's an electrical electrical engineer, another one's an architect. They were educated, they had fun in life, well-mannered. They had multiple houses, lived well-off, and just didn't really stress too much about work and the monotony of life that I found in America. I just didn't see it in Colombia. People really enjoyed life. So that's what I wanted.

J Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 08:25

When I got back to America, I just felt like, "Okay, I'm going to focus on education and go back." But at the age of eighteen in college, the whole issue of clubbing and going out and the girls, all that seeped in again. It's a lot of distractions over here, and unfortunately, I got caught up in that. After asking myself what the purpose of life was, I really began to research and began to read, began to look into different religions, philosophies. Even though I began having material things, the cars and everything that came with the glamour, I guess, of what that fast life was, I realized that there was an emptiness.

J Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 09:14

There was a childhood friend of mine who I knew since the age of twelve. She was always good, she was always doing good, she kept her focus on the books, and I knew her brother growing up. At the time when I was researching, she was researching about life. So her and I came together, we became boyfriend and girlfriend, and we started going to different temples. We went to a Buddhist temple, we went to a Hindu temple, we went to different churches, and we were just asking about the purpose of life. One day without really looking for it, a friend of mine told me about Islam. This friend of mine may not have been practicing because he told me after a club, after we left the club, and he looked at the alcohol he was drinking, and he said, "I can't believe I'm still doing this after having gone to Mecca." I asked him what Mecca was, and when he told me it was a house built by Abraham and Ismail, I knew these names because of my Catholic background.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 10:26

My parents never forced me to deal with religion in the way that they perceived religion. My dad always told me, "There is only one God. You seek your truth, and I'm seeking mine." By the age of a little bit after the age of twenty-one, began looking into Islam. I was looking into Kabbalah, ancient Jewish mysticism, and I was doing this with my girlfriend. Eventually, I was invited to a gathering in Tampa, Florida, where there was 3,000 Muslims. I was the only person who wasn't Muslim. I got an a bus, and we drove over there, and over there, I met a Muslim from Colombia. Because of my familiarity with him and culture and language, we spoke, and that's the day I decided to become Muslim. It was in Tampa, Florida. When I embraced Islam, I was amongst thousands of people from all over the world who were Muslim, different parts of the world that I'd never even known of. They dressed differently, they looked different.

J

Jaime Mujahid Fletcher 11:34

But there was one thing, which was the notion of God that really attracted me to Islam. There was a direct relationship with Him, similar to Abraham having a direct relationship to him. When I became Muslim, I came back to Houston, and my parents knew my life was about to change because I stopped going out, I stopped drinking. My parents and friends didn't know anything about Islam. One week later, my girlfriend became Muslim, and a month later, we got married. I never even thought about getting married, but Islam encourages marriage. So we were no longer boyfriend and girlfriend, we pretty much got married. This is at a time when my father began asking me for information about Islam. He's an avid reader, so he always reads into things. He didn't want to judge, previous to reading, what it is that we had chosen. My mother thought I was brainwashed, because I stopped drinking and going out to clubs. It was a shock for her, and some of our other family members thought we became Arab. There was a lot of misconceptions because people just didn't know about Islam who were Latino or people from our neighborhood.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 12:52

Eventually, my father began asking me for material, and I realized there was no material in Spanish. So he began questioning, how is it that Muslims governed Spain almost 800 years? Did they not write books? Did they not leave books behind? In asking people of knowledge in different mosques, they didn't have answers for that. All of a sudden, I began taking my father

and translating for him in the back of mosques because his English, 'til this day, is not very strong. So I was simultaneously interpreting what people were teaching in the front of these mosques. At the age of fifty-seven, my father, after hearing about Islam, he chose to embrace Islam at a local mosque in Houston. My wife being twenty-one, myself, I was twenty-three, and my father fifty-seven, we were one of few Latino Muslims. We didn't really see too many.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 13:51

Then all of a sudden, September 11 happened. When September 11 happened, not only was it a shock for the Muslim community, but when the Spanish media came to ask some of the leaders of the Muslim community to ask some congregant or member of theirs to talk about what Islam was and who the Muslims were in the Spanish language, they didn't have much to choose from. They didn't have many people to choose from, so they asked me to speak in front of the media. It was a challenging time, being three months in Islam, you're still in an infancy stage learning about Islam, and then all of a sudden there is this social-geo-political - I mean, all kinds of different angles to looking at September 11. Some people were very hurt, because of people being hurt, innocent people. When I looked at all that, I said, "Well, that's not what I found in Islam." Right?

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 14:52

There were speaking engagements. After speaking in the media, and realizing that Muslims were weak in media - they didn't really know how to speak in front of the media, nor did they have their own media outlets. When I was asked to speak in different churches, and I was speaking in English and in Spanish, my wife and I decided to go into the field of media. We enrolled in the Art Institute of Houston, my wife enrolled in the graphic design program, and I enrolled in multimedia and film. Our objective was to learn a trade that would allow us to be independent, have our own business in the future, and along the lines, serve the general society in way of educating them on the fact that Islam, from a theological standpoint, is different than what people were making it out to be. It is a peaceful way of life, it is not violent, and it's professed by a great number of people in the world. One out of five people in the world is Muslim, but over here it was unknown, so we thought we'd produce some media.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 15:57

My wife actually designed the logo of IslamInSpanish in one of our classes, and I produced the very first audio CD in my audio engineering class about Islam in the Spanish language, because there was a lack of material. My father was the one that told me, "If there's no material in Spanish, then you're gonna have to produce that. You're gonna have to create it." And he said, "And I'll help." So my father, with his voice and good Spanish, any little booklet that we'd find in Spanish, we would sit down in local mosques, and then I'll take out a mini-disc recorder. That's before MP3s. I was just recording him, and then I would get a kid who was like sixteen years old, who was memorizing the Qur'an, to basically recite the verses of the Qu'ran. In my two bedroom apartment, I would edit the recitation with what my dad had read.

J

Jaime Mujahid Fletcher 16:58

We were making audio books, and the first audio book was given to my wife's aunt, who was so upset that we became Muslim. She was suffering from cancer, doctor said she had about two months left of life, and to break the ice, I thought, "You know what, I'm going to give her this audio CD but not tell her what it's about." I gave it to her, and I told her that it was a school project, and if she can give me feedback as to how it sounded. That audio book was called The Religion of Truth. It was based on a book written initially by a Jamaican convert, who literally explained to his father in writing why Islam was a religion of truth, and ultimately it became a book. We thought it was suitable. My dad read it, I recorded it, edited. We gave it to my wife's, and she listened to it, and even though she was the most religious Christian person in our family, in my wife's side of the family, after listening to the audio four times and asking questions, she became Muslim.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 16:58

That same day that she accepted Islam, she said she was going to let our family know that everybody was mistaken, that this is a connection to God, etc. That same day, she was hospitalized because she couldn't breathe. At the hospital, she had the tracheal tube that didn't allow her to speak, but every time they brought a priest to read the Bible to her, she would write down, "There's only one God." Without ever praying a day in her life, or fasting Ramadan, or things that Islam is made up of, she passed away. We asked her prior to her passing away if she would like to be buried as a Muslim woman, and she nodded, "Yes." This is the first instance in our family to see somebody embrace Islam. From my family, my wife's side of the family, they were shocked that she had embraced Islam. Now they're seeing how a person is buried as a Muslim, and this is all after September 11. Prior to her passing away, we remember her saying that if God gave her life, she would explain to our family that there's only one God, and He's the only one worthy worship.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 19:23

So when she passed away, we felt like, if this audio CD had an impact on her, maybe it'll build bridges of understanding with other people. So we began burning CDs, and with a marker on top, we just put The Religion of Truth in Spanish, La Religion de Realidad, and begin distributing it amongst people locally. The Muslims, when they knew that we had these CDs that we're taking and giving them to the janitor at the school where they worked or their neighbor, and all of a sudden, people who spoke Spanish started saying, "Where can we go? Where can we learn? We like what we hear." So we began doing gatherings once a week at a local mosque, and that turned into a class. Then we realized a lot of people didn't just like to sit and learn, so we started doing potlucks, which is where people would just bring food and share. That became 200 people. When it grew so much, eventually, we realized we needed a place. People were embracing Islam, a community was growing, and by the year 2016, we opened up the first IslamInSpanish Centro Islamico in the city of Houston.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 20:44

We didn't have any real tally of how many people had embraced Islam, but from the time that we became Muslim in 2001 to the time that we set up the center in 2016, in about a fifteen year span, we think that when counting families, we could have been about a thousand Latino

Muslims. Houston is forty-four percent Latino as a population. It's one of the most condensed cities in America. So what happened during the time of us explaining what Islam was, we started traveling to Dallas, working, explaining, same issue, speaking on CNN, it just became a need to communicate. So producing over 300 audio books, more than 400 TV shows, our production had to have some sort of a vehicle that carried it. There were advisors of ours that said, "You got to make this a nonprofit organization. This is the only way to do it. It will become a resource later on." So we founded IslamInSpanish. IslamInSpanish became the leading or pioneering organization in these times, focused on educating Latinos about Islam worldwide, because when you go online, I mean, you're dealing with people all over the world.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 20:59

We set up the center in 2016, had the only Spanish sermon in all of America being broadcasted online. There was a lot of breakthroughs, and this is when the Trump campaign was happening as a presidential candidate. The Latino community was at the crosshairs in regards to the discourse, and so was the Muslim community. We happen to be Latino and Muslim. So there was a lot of news media coverage. Whenever we opened up our center, there were over 500 people waiting outside. There were so many different media outlets. Before we knew it, any incident that happened with Muslims or anything related to Islam, Latinos, the media was coming and covering. So we were covered by the BBC, LA Times, we spoke on CNN when the Muslim ban happened. When any issue happened, San Bernardino and Orlando, all these different incidents, we were on the front line explaining how actions of some people don't represent Islam. Similar to the action of some Colombians. In the past, I mean, Pablo Escobar and people like that were very violent. They don't represent Colombia or all Colombians.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 23:35

So we had the experience of running a center for three years at a rental facility, and then we were asked to move out. It was tough to see that. We had already built the museum inside, we had a prayer area, everything built with the hands of people who became Muslim. We had a production studio, we had assisted the city of Houston whenever the hurricane happened, Harvey, the mayor came to our studio, and we raised $1.6 million dollars for the city by raising funds and connecting to ARY [Abdul Razzak Yaqoob], which is a channel out of Pakistan, and we broadcast it three hours throughout Canada and the US. All this good and teaming up with so many different organizations, we just thought that we were set, and we would just open up different centers and different cities in America. But not open them up like buying them, just renting. But we had a rude awakening when our landlord, who was in Islamic school, told us that we needed to move out because they were going to expand and build a high school where we were.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 24:46

That launched our global digital marketing campaign that led us to tell our story, that we wanted to come back to our neighborhood Alief, where we grew up, and buy land, buy a place, and take the good that we had seen that Islam did for us in a transformative way, back in our neighborhood where we possibly didn't do right in the adolescent years. Being the leader of a gang, I knew if I went back to my neighborhood, I could right some wrongs and work with some

of the different schools and just begin to help the community based on knowing better now and doing better. We were blessed to be able to raise $1.4 million online. I began producing stories, videos that just went out worldwide, and we asked 10,000 people to donate $100. So many people chipped in from all over the world. We raised the money online, and we purchased a location right under the water tower that says Alief. So we're literally right off of the freeway, right underneath the name of that very neighborhood where we grew up, two minutes away from the high schools that we went to.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 26:05

We purchased the place right before the pandemic, and we're now in a position where we're about to build it out to make the architecture the look and feel of Muslim Spain. We're going to build a museum inside that tells not only the city, but anyone who visits or anybody who sees us online, the contributions of Muslims to civilization, in way of mathematics, medicine. There's a lot of good that Muslims did, especially in Muslim Spain, that a lot of people don't know, and Latinos, when they find out that possibly their ancestors could have been Muslim prior to the Inquisition happening in Europe, or specifically Spain. Muslims governed Spain from the year 711 to 1492. That's 781 years. There are so many different discoveries, medical instruments, and things that people use now that they don't really join with the image of Islam. So we want to create a new set of discourse in way of the intersectionality between us being Latino, being Muslims, and being Americans.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 27:26

So that's where we're at now. We're about to start building out, hopefully in the coming month, and we hope to do a grand opening. We see this work started in 2001, September 11. If we could do a grand opening and have this place look like Muslim Spain with a courtyard and the ways that we're hoping to do it, we will look forward to shooting for a day to open basically this year by September 11, if possible. That would be great. Just to let America know that this is an expression, twenty years later, basically, of wanting to show that inclusivity and diversity that exists not only in the city of Houston, but in America. Looking back at Al-Andalus, it really was a very diverse society that thrived, built of people that were different ethnic groups, as well as different religions. There were Jews, there were Christians, and the Muslims allowed for synagogues and churches to be built. It's a period of of history that we had to actually see for ourselves. We traveled to Spain with a historian, and we filmed over a hundred hours worth of footage, which we hope to be able to make in Spanish and in English, to be able to put in our museum to tell that story.

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Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 28:56

We already got the approval from the city to begin building out outside. We have a 10,000 square foot facility now on two and a half acres of property. And yeah, the Muslims all over the world, I mean, really chipped in for us to be able to have this place. In 2017, the Obama administration invited us to the White House. There was a Vice documentary done about us, Switzerland sent some reporters to do a one hour special about this work. I mean, we're very humbled to see the amount of awareness that some people have of the project, and then they interface. There's people doing their masters thesis about how we use media at IslamInSpanish.

There are kids from different colleges that are choosing to do their research regarding the work that we do. We've spoken at Harvard University, we we've been working with the sociology department at Rice University, which is an Ivy League school here in Houston. There's so many ways that this work has just transcended, besides just dealing with the Muslim community and letting them know that we have to be proud of who we are, regardless of where we come from, and the fact that we're Muslim, we have to be proactive in society.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 30:19

We built a platform that's pretty wide, and just what it means to be an American, what it means to be a Latino, what it means to be a Muslim, we really want to identify with principles that are healthy and universal. We have that ability to do that, so we're very humbled. The people involved in this project have gone through all the adversity to get where we're at. Many of us are from the neighborhood, from Alief. My wife is from Alief. Imam Isa Parada grew up in Alief, and his wife. He's the educational director, first Latino-American graduate from Madinah University in Saudi Arabia. Alice Gutierrez, director of operations, went to Hastings, the same high school I went to. So we hope to use media and to tell our stories. We're in the middle of our production about our neighborhood in Alief, and somehow in that documentary will be the whole reason why we set up the center. We want the center to be a transformative place where people can come as they are from different walks of life, and we're seeing lives transformed, which really is ultimately our vision: to see lives transformed into productive global citizens collaborating for the common good.

Rimsha Syed 31:39

Thank you so much for sharing all that, and for all the work that you're doing. Would you say that Alief has already changed since you were going up there?

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 31:49

Alief has definitely changed. Alief, it's always been very diverse. I mean, we have so many different languages, cultures. But I think when I was growing up, especially the early 90s, Alief was going through a real challenging time. At one moment in time, Alief was one of the murder capitals in the United States. So there were a lot of drive by shootings, a lot of gangs, and unfortunately, we saw a lot of people lose their lives. I mean, friends and people that we just went to school with. I mean, there were obituaries of people who died in the yearbook, literally, when we were going to school. So we faced a lot of challenges. No doubt there was police brutality. George Floyd is from Houston, which got global notoriety regarding police brutality case.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 32:46

Alief now has really invested in education. The Alief Independent School District has so many different programs, and I'm glad they're also investing in the arts. There's a high school very nearby the center as well, Kerr High School, they invested millions of dollars in building theaters, and the arts and sports is two of the ways that really they've invested. So there's kids

that now are getting busy with busying themselves in something productive. and we're growing up, we had a challenge, just finding a basketball court where we could play. So when you have a lot of teenagers with a lot of energy and time and no adult supervision because parents are working, between the time we got out of school at three to six, that was the time that gangs formed. That was the time that people picked up smoking weed or drinking alcohol. The vices happened at that time. Now, there's a lot of programs, and even though it's not a perfect place, you don't really see the gang violence that was there. There's still some gangs, but you don't see it so apparently. There was a anti-gang task leader that was hired by Mayor Bob Lanier, and he hired Adrian Garcia, to literally go after the issue of the gangs, and that was back in the 90s. They had a really good program called Weed and Seed Sites, and Alief was one of them. So the notion was that they would weed out the bad elements in the community and seed in the good. So I think they really did a good job. It was transformative.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 34:34

Now, I'm very proud to say that our center, we at the IslamInSpanish Centro Islamico, we make it a point that we do school supply drives to donate to the kids that can't afford school supplies. We've done several things in the community that has helped these schools. We found out about a middle school where their media lab, they couldn't afford - the school literally didn't have the budget to buy the amount of laptops that they needed. So our center donated those laptops. And there's people who donate to us as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and some of those funds that they donate to us, they're just about doing good. They're not restricted to one specific thing. So whenever we see a gap or a need in the community, we have some funding that can allow us to just step in without having planned it. So we kept doing some of this giving back to the community to the point that one of the leaders, it wasn't superintendent, but it was somebody at a high level in the educational system of Alief, took notice of us giving back, and they were very nice to write a really amazing letter talking about the way they view us as an educational community partner, and they sent us a plaque. We have that hanging up at our center.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 36:02

These are the sort of gestures that we used to tell the Muslim community, who, majority, are immigrant, right. We used to tell them, "Listen, you came from another country? Add value to the community where you live, to the neighborhood, then people will get to know you." Muslims sometimes are shy, or they don't know how to really communicate, because they have a different ethnic background, different language. They just kind of seem isolated in their mosques away from the people where they live. I can't blame them, because it's just like my parents. I mean, they don't speak English very well. I mean, they'll just gravitate to their own. But a second generation, for myself as a second generation, growing up here, learning English, understanding the community and the people, we have the ability to operate in the society where we grew up in, and even though we're Latino, we're Muslim, we're still American, we're still Houstonians. We're still people who grew up from Alief.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 37:01

And now we go back, we speak in some of these schools, and when we speak in these schools, I mean, we can see that change happen. Back in the days, the schools, I mean, there were so many different drive-bys and shootings. Now, with social media, there's a lot of mental health

issues. It's almost like the same issues are there, but they're represented in a different way. So I really appreciate when I held the ability to go and speak in middle and high schools to kids that are possibly getting in trouble, and we tell them about our story, and they're inspired to know that we did something. And that's all we're asking them to do, try to step up and be productive and do something they care about instead of being destructive and wasting their time and not ended up in a good position in the future, especially people who are making bad choices. So it's a community that is really growing. There's Korean, there's Latino, they're Muslims. There's people from Africa. I mean, I don't know, there's over a hundred languages spoken just in the neighborhood. Houston has over 250 languages spoken as a city. It's the most diverse city in America. So we don't really have that issue of segregation or discrimination as some other places that we know of in America, or even sometimes even in Texas. So we're very fortunate.

Rimsha Syed 38:34

Right, right. Absolutely. So you touched on this already with giving back to the community and all, but from a social justice standpoint, how do you see IslamInSpanish benefiting communities for years to come, and how does Islam inform those decisions for you?

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 38:57

First thing that comes to mind was on Saturday, a few days ago, I was asked to speak in a symposium, and it was about re-entry. The prison system, as we know it in America, is a huge issue, especially for people of color. Something I'm passionate about as an individual, but as a Muslim, if we really understand Islam, we truly understand who created us, we will not only be good for the community, but we'll build the capacity of safety in community. The very essence of the word "Islam" means obedience or submission to one God, and in obeying Him comes the aspect of being secure because any commandment from Islam is there to safeguard the human being from harming themselves or harming others, mentally, physically, financially. It's a whole way and system of life. Your lineage is preserved, your belongings, your wealth. So what happens is, when understanding the construct of Islam, it is a way of life that if a human being does it, they themselves can be safeguarded.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 40:28

The issue with social justice in America - there's so many different issues, so many different ways to look at things. But one that was so close to us, and that we saw growing up was the incarceration rate of people of color, people who grew up in our inner cities in our communities, specifically Black and Brown people have the highest incarceration rate. One out of every three Black people in America will go to jail according to the ACLU stats, American Civil Liberties Union. One out of every six Latinos will go to jail in their lifetime, and one out of every seventeen White people will go to jail. So it's disproportionate, and a lot of people in Latin-America, when we let them know that in America, there's a privatization of jails, prisons, someone can own a prison as their business, be subsidized by the government, make money on this. As a corporate structure, there are businesses that manage seventy prisons in America. America's population is 5% of the population of the world, yet it has 20% of the world's incarcerated population. So it's disproportionate.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 42:07

Whenever looking at that, we have stories of people that we saw be affected by this. There's an empathy in regards to who goes to prison from us growing up, because if people are not aware of that prison pipeline system, they will think that anybody who goes to jail, they deserve it, they're criminals. But I've seen people end up in prison who I grew up with because their parents didn't fill out some immigration paperwork. And all of a sudden, the kid, he has a degree, he's working in the medical industry, has children, but they see a technicality in that they didn't fill out his paperwork, so now he's being deported. It happened to a friend of mine. Out of his desperation of being back with his family, he tried to cross the border. They caught him and put him in prison for two and a half years. I mean, this is a guy who works in the medical industry. All he wants to do is be with his family. He grew up here since age of four. So I've seen things like this.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 43:19

So it really moves us to realize that a lot of the policies that are in place right now don't give the same equal footing in regards to the way that legislation is looked at when it comes to people of color, and when you look at it at a deeper sense, specifically people living in poverty. When you have people who are living in poverty, majority are going to be African-American, Latino, and then there is a population of poor Whites. These are the people who are in the prisons, and when you look at Harris County, for example, the prison here in Houston, local prison, county prison, there's overcrowding. One of the reasons why there's overcrowding is because a lot of the people who are in prison should really be in a mental health hospital. People who don't have money, don't have the ability to go and hire a therapist or a psychiatrist. They're unmedicated. They're not getting their medications, they may have a chemical imbalance, they may be bipolar, they may have attention deficit disorder, they may be too hyper because they have ADHD.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 44:38

Whenever people have the means to have a diagnosis and to sleep comfortably and eat good food and have the right sort of medication, they have a different way of choosing how they go about life. Some of the people in the inner cities, the reason why they consume drugs is because they're self-medicating. They're going through things that they don't have coping mechanisms for. Whenever they're dealing with consuming drugs, they may make bad decisions that may land them in a prison. When they go to prison, now they have a record, right. They're their ex-offenders. So now they have extra problem, they can't get a job. So when they don't have a job, what's going to happen? They start having kids, they want to live somewhere, the life of crime becomes the only outlet, unfortunately. Drugs are going to be sold, because people are going to consume. So it becomes another dark or black economy, underground economy, right. So the recidivism recidivism rate, the amount or percentage of people who come out of prison, sometimes reaches 50% of those who go back, sometimes 70%. So out of ten people who come out of prison as ex-offenders, five to seven of them are going to go back, and they're going to keep coming back to prison during the lifetime.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 46:15

So you have families growing up without the parent, without the father, because he's in prison, so the kid grows up feeling that lack of parental guidance from your father, and now the kid is part of the society, right. He is going to do for himself and has to overcompensate, the mom has to have two jobs, right, to be able to take care of that kid. So she's not around. So what happens? No adult supervision, no guidance, a lot of time, right, it's the same cycle. So when we look at Alief, or when we look at the Fifth Ward, the Third Ward, a lot of the inner cities, and a lot of these neighborhoods, they're suffering from the social construct. It's not that they're bad people. So our center, whenever somebody walks in, even if they walk in dressed however, even if they walk in high, we never look down upon them. We look at people as they are, because we're not going to judge a book by its cover. Everybody has a story, so when we get to know their story, when you get to know their struggle, Islam has a way to be able to give guidance to everything, literally, in life. So what we become is almost like big brothers, like advisors.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 47:44

We have a young man that came in one day, got out of prison, and he found us. And eventually after becoming Muslim, he starts reattaching himself to his family, who he had severed his ties with his family. Why? Because he grew up watching his father beat up his mother. Again, these are frustrations that happen that lead to domestic violence, but now this young man, because we advised him and told him, "Hey, have you ever considered that your dad, there was a lot of pressure. Not justifying the fact that a man hit a woman, but try to look at it from his angle. Get to know him, get close to him. Don't have this issue of disrespecting your dad. It's only going to lead him to be more angry." Right? So that sort of advice goes a long way. We've seen some breakthroughs. And not everybody from Alief, obviously, has been in the prison system, but somebody knows somebody who got caught up in that.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 48:47

And if poverty is the root cause of people being policed in a certain way and racially profiled, then one of the solutions is for people to understand entrepreneurship. For people to understand that you can't rely on anybody to get you out of your own situation. So we have some life skills class regarding financial literacy. A lot of people don't understand money. So we need to look at these root causes, and instead of talking about the problem, go and basically offer some solutions. So, we've been able to work with people that care about these things, whether they're Muslim or non-Muslim. And we try to address it at our capacity, as much as we can. I mean, as an organization, we have not applied for grants. We've all been funded literally from the Muslim community and individuals. I mean, not even organizations. So a lot of the work we do is just grassroots. We don't have any sort of limitations as to who we can serve or what we can do. Sometimes some grants come with some restrictions in regards to how you can use the money. We've been very blessed that people have entrusted us to look at issues, and then they support us so that then we can go back and empower our community. That's the ultimate aspect of how we look at being able to address these social issues.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 50:23

And I'll just end with this. I mean, a couple of days ago, I spoke at a symposium. I was the main speaker, or keynote speaker, and it was about re-entry, and people coming back home from prison. The idea was trying to build empathy of those that were there at the symposium to get involved as volunteers, to go inside of the prison system and offer a good word or offer support or offer some teaching inside of the prison systems, where people have the time to think differently. And there's a lot of prison volunteers from amongst the Muslim community that have taken the time to really go in there and volunteer their time and add value to people inside. Ahe people inside, I've seen people inside when we go and give a talk to them, and just add value to them. They're so thankful, because they feel like you left your freedom for a minute, you left your family, you could have been anywhere else, but you went and gave it to them. And that's huge, the impact that's had on some of these people coming out. They're like, "Man, somebody cared about me, I need to care about myself." And they fight their environment and everything that's pushing them to go back and do the same things that they were doing, because they realized somebody cared for them.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 51:50

So we build ties with people who are in need, and those are the social issues. Talking about it is one thing. I may be a keynote speaker, talking about some of these stories of people and some statistics and all that, but that's not going to fix the problem, right. For people to volunteer, for people to give their time, and even before people go to prison, dealing with youth. There's some youth that can be deterred from going into the prison pipeline. There's data that shows that in the public school system, they look at kids that have a specific grade point average and behavioral issues, and in some states in the United States, they start putting together an equation of how many prisons that state's going to need in the future. So there's almost a default of, there's going to be a certain percentage of these kids that are going to end up in prison. And in prison, a lot of the economy functions. People don't realize that the license plates of cars is basically produced by prisoners. Right, and they're getting paid between three cents to twenty cents an hour. So when you can hire people at three cents an hour, twenty cents an hour, it's better to keep them there, right, instead of having them come out and earn minimum wage of ten dollars an hour.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 53:17

So there's a lot of profiteering, there's all kinds of issues, but instead of people becoming victimized mindset people, they need to empower themselves and do for self and not wait for nobody to give them handouts. And I think that's a bit of what we represent in the work that we do as individuals, as the organization, as people who grew up here. And we can just be direct without having to worry about hurting anybody's feelings. And I mean, the Assistant Chief of Police of the Houston Police Department is a Muslim here in Houston right now. He's an amazing guy doing great work. The sergeant Donnie Williams from the sheriff's department, when he was in the symposium, he said, "Hey, we want you to come in and speak at the sheriff's before people put on their uniform." So there's amazing people working in law enforcement. There's some funding, that even the sheriff's office right now has access to, to go back into the inner cities and help out some of these youth in regards to social programs, so that they don't end up going to prison.

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 54:28

So we're being proactive in working with people who are doing things, regardless of who they are, regardless of skin color, regardless of religion, regardless of even if they work in law enforcement. I mean, if they're out there to keep the community safe - and they've seen that we're about keeping the community safe. Many of them have said, "Look, we have this team of people, right, as law enforcement, but we need coaches. We need people from the community to tell us how to better address the community." And we have. We've told them, "You can't expect to go up to people and deal with people in a disrespectful manner and think that they're not going to turn around and be disrespectful to you." Right? When pulling somebody over, you can't treat somebody like they're less than, because they may get upset. They may have had a bad day, and they may blow, and all of a sudden there's violence and all kinds of issues.

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 55:19

So we advise both sides, the citizenry, and some of the symposiums we've been in and where law enforcement is there, they've really appreciated our perspective, because because we've lived it. I mean, we have the experience, we've seen it. And when we speak about real case scenarios, it's not the theoretical anymore. It's about working to just make things better. So that's the crux of social issues. Besides just talking about it, we're doing our best at a local level, and wherever we can. I had the opportunity to speak in Capitol Hill to some of the policy makers as well. They'd never seen a Latino Muslim until that day. People are passing policies, and they don't really know the constituencies. People who, they're passing policies, and how it would affect them. So, yeah, there's a lot of different sides of the spectrum on that, but we just got to be productive citizens, collaborating for the common good. That's part of our vision.

Rimsha Syed 55:25

Right, right. Yeah, I'm so glad to hear that IslamInSpanish is working with communities on these very devastating issues. Backtracking a little bit to Centro Islamico, can you tell me a little bit more about the process of creating that prayer space, that museum, that production studio, and why those things were so vital to the beginning stages of creating the IslamInSpanish community?

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 56:50

So, we never thought about setting up an organization. The word IslamInSpanish really was a niche to highlight that this can actually work together. Having the Spanish language or being Latino and being Muslim and dealing with Islam is a thing. People didn't even know it was a thing. So the name IslamInSpanish has really withstood the test of time. It's been twenty years since we've been doing this work. But we realized that after getting together our local communities, we started feeling some challenges in logistics. There were some mosques that we would try to ask them for some space to carry out an event. And a lot of the mosques, their main space is in the prayer area. And whenever we would invite the public - remember, after September 11, we were running newspaper ads. Newspaper ads in the most famous Spanish newspapers. So we were paying for ads that said, "Come learn the truth about Islam." Right? And then we'd have an address.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 58:00

And what we started realizing is that the Muslims inside of the community, inside of that mosque, they were taken aback at the amount of people who were walking in through the doors, and these people didn't have the etiquettes that Muslims understood about taking off their shoes, sitting on the floor, the way that the women dress, right, the guy bringing his girlfriend. We've faced some challenges with the Muslim community, because the Muslim community, without any fault of their own, their behavioral pattern is different regarding Islam. If they lived in the Muslim lands, okay, place like Pakistan, or Algeria, or Egypt, or Saudi Arabia, they may have been hearing the call to prayer five times a day in loud speakers all throughout the city. People got up, went to pray, and went home. I saw this when I lived in Egypt. I studied the Arabic language in Egypt. So it was good for me to see that. The construct in society is you pray, you go home.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 59:10

The Muslims who came here to America, when they built the mosques, a lot of it was to safeguard that environment, to make sure that it's free from all the vices that are outside the gates, the drugs, the alcohol, the profanity. I mean, it's a place of worship in the end. And then their youth, they wanted them to have some principles from Islam. So the early pioneers of people who migrated from the Muslim lands, one of the reasons why they built these Islamic centers is because they wanted to have the ethnic, traditional way of them gathering. It's almost like a country club. They don't know how to talk to people outside of those walls, because it's just their own. That's why you have so many mosques that are predominantly Arab mosques, one is a South Asian mosque, we have a mosque here that's led by the Nigerian community, another one that's Indonesian. So if you're from that ethnic group, you feel like you belong. We as Latino converts, we walk in, nobody's speaking Spanish. Now we're going to invite people who are not even Muslim, who speak Spanish, and then we're going to be speaking in Spanish to them on this platform where people have never even met. So we got some resistance from the Muslim community, even though they wanted to, I mean, logistically it was just challenging.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:00:40

So the mosques became hard to work with. We were a different organization, and there was also that unfortunate divide, organizations working together. Unfortunately, sometimes it's difficult because of their delay of decision making, right? Somebody has to talk to somebody that talks to somebody that then can get approval that then has to come back and tell us, by the time all that stuff would happen, we were like, "All right, we'll just choose another place." So what happened with us was, in the early stages, when we had all these issues logistically within the Muslim spaces, we ended up inviting people to general parks. I mean, we would choose parks out in the open that, at minimum, had bathrooms that people can access. And that's how we were funneling people to go and find out about who we were as Muslims and to share a meal with us. Now, that became challenging, and then we started renting out club houses. There was a sister who lived in a neighborhood. She was a Latina Muslim, and she was like, "Hey, for $200, we can rent the clubhouse." And there was a capacity of 200 people, and it has a bathroom and it has a playground. It's like, "All right," so we started renting that. And

everybody would bring a dish, and there was this homey feel, and everybody wanted to just have more of that. But the more we did it, the more it grew, and then all of a sudden we fill the capacity. Two hundred people, the clubhouse, now we're just packed. It's difficult.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:02:21

So there was a lady doing a report on us from a magazine, a Spanish magazine, and she asked, "Do you guys have a church?" And a lot of times, reporters, they don't even know what a mosque is. And so I said, "You mean a mosque, right? So we have mosques, it's a similar place of worship. It's a mosque." And she said, "Yeah, do you guys have a mosque?" And I said, "Oh, yeah. In Houston, there's over a hundred mosques." She said, "No, you guys as Latinos. Do you guys have your own place?" And that day was interesting, because we'd always said, "Why are we gonna build another place that is ethnic?" We don't want to feel like we're breaking off from the community. We don't want it to be like, "Well, that's the Latino mosque." Similar to the way we felt like, "That's the Nigerian mosque," right? But that day it was like, "You know what? Let's ask the community here if they were like a place."

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:03:19

So we made it a point that day, it was like, "Hey, so-and-so's here doing this report, and she asked how come we don't have our own mosque as Latinos?" She actually talked, and she said, "Oh yeah, when Latinos come from different parts of the world, Latin America, Central America, they go and rent a little place, and they have their own church. That's why you got so many Latino churches. You guys don't have any mosques for Latinos anywhere? Not only here in Houston, anywhere?" We were like, "Nah." And that day we asked the whole community, "Do you guys think we should get a place?" And out of 200 people who were there, literally everybody raised their hand. So there's a principle in Islam that whenever there's consensus, it's established as the truth. You go with it.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:04:13

So we knew there was a need to be able to set up our place, but we didn't set up a place of worship first, we set up a production studio. And I worked with Hakeem Olajuwon who is one of the fifty greatest NBA players of all time. He's a Hall of Famer, Houston legend. I've known him for twenty years, good friend, mentor. And I was like, "Man, if we had a production studio, man, we could not only produce, but we could gather people, and we can do our events in there." He was part of the seed, initial phase of that. He told me to put together a proposal, so we built not IslamInSpanish center. We built something called the Andalucia Social & Educational Media Center. That was under IslamInSpanish. Why we named it Andalucia Social & Educational Media Center was because we wanted it to be for the society, not just for Muslims. Andalucia was a period of history we looked at, and inspired us.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:05:15

So we were like, "Hey, it's going to be a multi-ethnic environment. Young people are going to be able to come and do media training. We're going to be able to do some screenings of documentaries that have social justice issues. Let's put together a creative arts program,"

which we did. We launched something called Generaction Jam, and the niche of it was generation of action, where we encourage youth to come, high school and college students to come and do poetry. Things that were clean and that were thoughtful, and comedy and debate. And even though we were doing great in that space, it was a small space, so we'd get packed. And the elders of the community, the Muslims, when they used to come and look at it, they were like, "Oh, is nice, but what's Islamic about this?" Because they just saw cameras, and they saw the green wall and a lot of technology. They were like, "What's Islamic about this?" And I was like, "Are you serious? We're producing TV shows for IslamInSpanish here. We got this youth program. We got all these programs." And they were like, "Yeah, but you don't have a prayer area."

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:06:24

So what happened was there was an epiphany for us. We didn't know that for a lot of the Muslims that come from overseas, if you don't have a prayer area, it's not Islamic. And that's something I never even understood until I saw it happen. So the funding wasn't there from the community, the way it should have been from the good that was happening in there, because they didn't see a prayer space. So eventually, we did well in that place, but there was a huge storm that flooded our place. We lost all our equipment. And I was like, "Okay, that's it. I'm off the hook." Because at that moment in time, I was doing my my business. I own an advertising agency along with my wife called FocusPoint Studios, and we established that since 2003. And we've done a lot of corporate work, and we saw the only way to really make this be financially sustainable, is by dealing with the general society. Those people want media. So they will come and rent the place. There were films that the Houston Film Commission came and rented our place to do productions in.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:07:34

And I was like, "Okay, the society likes this place, but Muslims are confused by it." So whenever everything got washed away, I was like, "Okay, that's enough. I'm not gonna deal with the Muslim community. They don't get media. They're not having the scope of looking at society. They're kind of in their own little world, and I don't want to be cocooned to that. I'm just going to deal with business outside, and that's it." When it comes to community, everything that's on the IslamInSpanish website, it's all free anyway, it's free resources. That's enough. Doing this work of nonprofit work, sometimes you get burnt out, because you feel like even the people who you're serving, when they don't understand, it is disheartening sometimes. Like, "Okay, trying to help this community over here with this language, and youth and all kinds of converts." We had a convert program that launched out there as well called New You. And I'm like, "All right, all this creativity, all this media, all this production, all this graphic elements and building brands, all right, we'll walk away from it." And we did, and all of a sudden, it was just like, "Hey, when are we gonna do Generaction Jam again? Where can we go?" People kept coming and knocking on the door, and it's like, well, door's closed, there's no place.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:08:58

So at that moment in time, that's when some of the people who are involved, they called me and they said they wanted to talk to me, and they were like, "Listen, the only way that this vision is going to reach its potential is if you focus full time on doing this." And I was like, "Man,

there's $3,000 in the bank and this organization. We have no place, we have no staff, and I have a business. I'm not gonna step away from my business. I got three daughters, a wife. I got responsibilities, I can't do this." And it was Ramadan when they asked me to really think about it and so on, and maybe the best way to go about it is having a place, a bigger place, a place that could fit people, and that had a prayer area, and that we could really even do other things in.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:09:48

So it was that Ramadan that I really - there's a prayer in Islam, called istikhara or the prayer of guidance. And I prayed that, and analyzed it, looked at it, and then sought out advice from others. And my wife was one of them, one of the people that I sought out advice, and I said, "What do you think?" And she said, "Well, we can keep focusing on our business. The creative agency is lucrative, and we could possibly do well for ourselves, make money, but could we, later on, look back and say, 'I wonder what would have happened if we spent time in developing the concept of IslamInSpanish?'" She said, "Could we live with remorse?" And that did it for me. I didn't want to live in remorse. I didn't want to live feeling like something could have. And it was her that really told me, "Let's do whatever we can." We give it back to community.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:10:49

So after making that decision, within three months, I traveled to Dallas, met with Nouman Ali Khan, Omar Suleiman, and many other leaders over there. And I told them, "Hey, we've always been clean over here, man, and we have something going on in Houston." Even though it's a different city, we knew that they were very generous people, and they knew the work, and they knew our struggle over here. And I'll give it to that community. I mean, they really supported us being able to get a place over here. And that's when we got the rental place, which was now 5,000 square feet. We built the mosque inside, I mean, a prayer area inside, but we made tile in the back where non-Muslims could walk with their shoes on the tile, so they wouldn't be weirded out by the whole issue or take off your shoes and sit on the floor type of vibe that we felt in the general communities. Someone, when they found out we were building the place out, they came, who owned a tile company, and they were like, "Hey, go to my company and get all the tile you need. Make this place look however you want." And they already trusted in our vision of design, and just knowing how to present things to do with media. And my wife, she's a graphic designer, but she loves interior design. She laid out the scheme of colors, the earth tones, how it was going to be laid out to make it feel very natural. We came up with a notion of building a museum with the arches of Cordoba from Spain, to highlight the contributions of Muslims in Spain.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:12:26

In all of that, four months, we built the place out to be really a state of the art place. I mean, we have a production studio that can connect to CNN there. We have a lounge area where it's coffee, people could just hang out. All the art was handmade. There was a mural as soon as you walked in that was done by a Jehovah's Witness guy that came all the way from Dallas. He wasn't Muslim, but he was Latino, and he really wanted to contribute. So we showed him the

geometric designs of the look and feel of Al-Andalus, and he made an amazing mural in three days. He ultimately became Muslim when we did our grand opening, because he got to know us and got to know the history. And that place was amazing, but the only thing is it wasn't ours. So after building out so nicely and doing so well for three years, the school ultimately said, "You know what, we're going to build the high school here, and you guys have to move. You have to leave." So that was like having carpet a taken from under you.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:13:38

And I knew I didn't want to go through all this again, rent another place, beautify it, and then have to move again. So we talked to the community and said, "The only way we're going to make this move again is if we buy a place, and we want to go back to our neighborhood and make the difference there." And we're very fortunate that the property right under the name of our neighborhood, Alief - there's a big water tower that says Alief - that property right underneath it was for sale. And we told our story. "We're being evicted. We have a hundred people embracing Islam yearly. We have all these programs for all these different age groups, demographics. Our background in this neighborhood puts us in a position where we can go back and do good. We just need 10,000 people to donate $100." And people answered. It's almost like they voted for us to be able to do that. And we collected the money, did an amazing campaign online. I was just producing content, like videos, to show the stories, so people could understand the value. We teamed up with a third party outside of the country, actually, to run our ads. We took off all our media savvy and just invested in media, what we knew.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:15:05

And at that moment in time I actually, playing basketball, I tore my ACL, so I couldn't travel. Usually, I would have traveled in different communities and been raising funds. But because I couldn't travel, I just had to sit down and just produce. So I produced over ten videos, ran ads, sometimes we're spending over $100,000 worth of Facebook ads. But we were raising like $300,000 off of it. And in about three and a half months, we raised $1.4 million, and bought that location, cash. That was a good feeling. To this day, when we walk in, we know it's paid off. We know we own it, and we know everybody chipped in. So it's truly a community achievement. And now, during the pandemic, we've been designing the architecture, the look and feel. And it's been challenging to do construction during the pandemic, but we now have a permit to begin building outside, and then after that, the inside.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:16:14

And when it comes to the Muslims, Muslims, sometimes they don't know Latinos. Sometimes they don't know the American public, and sometimes they don't know their history of Al-Andalus. Muslim Spain, I mean, it's a big deal to think that Islam was the native religion in that land, and Spain is considered to be part of Europe and considered to be part of the West. So it defies a lot of what people think of this clash of civilizations, and Islam being an Eastern religion. There's a lot of boundaries that are just being knocked down, and ultimately, what we'd like is just people to see the humanity, right, in one another. And we believe that's part of

Islam. So our center is a representation o that art, Islam on display, type of feeling. And everybody welcome, and just open up a dialogue. And we think that is going to do well in America, let alone our city, let alone our neighborhood.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:16:14

And what we hope is that it becomes a landmark in the city of Houston, and it becomes a one of a kind in the world, because it will now take all the history and all of our experience of what we learned from the previous rental place, and twenty years worth of work grassroots, into a space where, when people come, if they're Latino, they're going to get to see a little glimpse of possibly who their ancestors were as Muslims in Spain. If they're the American public, they're going to look and say, "Oh, Houston is so diverse, that there's Latino Muslims. Who are the people? What is a Latino Muslim? What did Muslims create that was left behind in civilization, that benefits us now?" That's where the museum kicks in. Even if a person is not Muslim, they can go and see that and get a glimpse of history, so that they a have a point of reference of imagery that's positive, with science and mathematics and all the good that's happened from the Muslims, instead of just images of violence.

Rimsha Syed 1:18:18

Absolutely, thank you so much for those details. Just out of curiosity, does IslamInSpanish follow a certain branch of Islam, or is it welcome to all?

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:18:31

So whenever we look at Islam, we look at it from the two sources, right? The Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. The first three generations of Islam is the sacred history of Islam, right? All of the different people of knowledge, have always looked at those three generations. So the Prophet Muhammad said, "My generation is the best generation, then the generation that follows that, and then the generation follows that. So that's the point of reference of the four major schools of thought, which literally become the schools of thought that in different places of the Muslim lands is followed, right? In these four schools of thought, they always reassess principles from that early period of Islam. So we're very fortunate that Imam Isa Parada, he studied Islam, he graduated with a theology degree, and I studied some time in Egypt, the Arabic language and Qur'anic studies. And we have people who have studied in Al-Azhar as well who are with us. So we have the ability to look at Islam from its roots separate from culture, separate from just the historical elements of what's happening with Muslims, and that's what we go with. It's just a mainstream look at Islam. Now, if somebody comes in and they're not Muslim, or they look at Islam differently, or they look at any aspect. I mean, even if they don't have any religion. To us, I mean, they're just human beings. They're coming in as they are, and that's how we take people, as they are.

Rimsha Syed 1:20:19

Right, right. So I want to be mindful of your time today. I have one last question before we sign off. This one is a bit more open-ended. Seeing as this interview will be archived, and people might be listening to it years and years down the line, do you have any words of wisdom or

advice to impart to people listening to this several years from now?

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:20:48

This reminds me, I was interviewed by a young lady, she's doing a project for the University of Houston library. They wanted to interview me personally, for the archives of the University of Houston. And in Ramadan, they're going to display images of people who have impacted or changed America. And we're very humbled to hear that they're going to include IslamInSpanish and myself as an individual. So the one thing that I could say to you and to them, and every time that it just seems like, what does it all boil down to, right? And in the future, what do we hope this even means? All I can say is people such as yourself and them, young people - young people have a very nice way of just being optimistic about the future. There's some people that in age, they almost feel like they were idealistic when they were young, and then later on it's like, "Oh, life is just filled with all these obstacles," and they become pessimistic, and they just don't really feel like they have that spark anymore.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:22:04

So part of what I recall, when I was twenty-three when I became Muslim, is that I was a guy who just was trying to get my life together. I was trying to find order in life. Prior to Islam, I lacked the order of the way I thought about my priorities, and the sensibilities of people around me, possibly. I was out for what a lot of people out for: for themselves, and just trying to do what they think they should do. Very individualistic type of approach. I can't take credit for what all has happened with IslamInSpanish and all this, because it's a lot of people coming together do this. And when I was twenty-three, and I became Muslim, I didn't have some idea to create something like IslamInSpanish. In fact, there was never a plan to sit down and just create an organization that later on will have a center, that later on will be a one-of-a-kind. Because when this center is created, I mean, it's the only one of its kind in America, right? And I wish I could say that all of that was engineered, and it was thought through, but it wasn't.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:23:36

So, in a nutshell, our circumstances in September 11 pushed us to have to raise up to the challenge. And our challenge at that moment in time was people not being able to communicate with one another, especially in our language. People were misinformed or had no information about Islam in the Spanish language. So anybody out there just living has some skill that they're able to add value to others with. In retrospect, I look at, I had the language I happen to have been born into a Latino household. I had the cultural competence to go back to that demographic, but I also grew up in the neighborhood where I grew up. I knew how to connect with people like that. We always have to look at, what is our skill set, and how can we connect with others? And then ultimately, what is the challenge? What is something that is broke, something that we care about, something that is putting someone at a disadvantage, something that is unjust, something that shouldn't even exist because it harms me, it harms him, and it harms her? What is that one obstacle that's keeping people from thriving? What is the one thing that's deteriorating people's health? What is the thing that's keeping people broke and impoverished?

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:25:23

There's so many different industries. So many different ways to categorize society in regards to social, economic, ethnic, religious, it's so many different segmentations. But in the end, if you care about something enough to want to improve something, you want to change something, that's when you find that element of your humanity. Doesn't matter where you come from, doesn't matter what your skin color is, or even what your religion is. If you have a sense of empathy for other human beings, what that gives you is the ability to look within yourself and find the commonalities and the differences. To do something. And there are people who choose to do something and act upon something, and those people, I find, are the people who really come to life. Because when you choose to tackle an issue, some wrong that needs to be fixed, you want to right a wrong, right? What happens is you, yourself, as a person, start refining yourself, because that challenge is so much bigger than you that you realize you're not even ready for it.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:26:47

If somebody would have told me when I was twenty-one, that, "Hey, in two years, when you're twenty-three, you're going to be speaking in front of Telemundo and Univision, and you're going to go and become a producer, and you're going to produce media that's going to spread all over the world regarding Islam." I didn't even know what Islam was, let alone even think about media. But what I realized was, "Okay, people have a misconception about Islam. Muslims don't have media, right? I'm going to learn Islam. I have the Spanish language, and I'm going to learn media." So right now, twenty years later when we're building out the center, I mean, we're building out a production studio, so we could just tell our story, and not let others tell it for us, because if other people tell our story, they're not going to tell it right. Or they may have a bias or an agenda to tell it in a different way for a different alternate result.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:27:41

So in my way of giving back as an individual, I found that I like the aspect of the art, I love the art. I love art in general, I always did since I was a kid. Maybe I didn't have the access to many programs, but now I had something that I needed to learn art communication for. If I learned multimedia and film, there was a subject matter that very few people knew about, which was Islam. There's two languages that I am able to operate in, Spanish and English. Okay, I can do that. So when you start chipping away at that, here we are twenty years later, and we haven't even - we're just barely about to build out our permanent studio. So, ultimately, there's so much more to do. We want to get into documentary film-making as well as narrative film-making. I've done that in regards to my career for secular projects. I've been an assistant director for a film with Eric Roberts, Julia Roberts's brother. I've produced, I've been a location scout manager for films. I've gone all the way to Hollywood to study film, because I'm trying to get my level of ignorance out of myself to learn something, so that I can then add value to what I do. I had to go study in Hollywood, I had to go study marketing in Madison Ave in New York, I had to Orlando to learn leadership from John Maxwell, become a John Maxwell leadership coach. It's not about me, but what I'm saying is as an example, is that if I want to lead, if I want to produce media, if I want to do marketing, I have to go and learn from the best.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:29:33

So when you find a problem that you want to solve, the first person that has to grow out of their current state is you. So finding a problem actually benefits you, and then you can go and look at the world and see what it has available for you to learn, for you to go and learn from people who've done it before you. Take advice from them. Be mentored by people that go way beyond. I mean, Hakeem Olajuwon is a mentor of mine. He's from Nigeria. He played basketball. I mean, there's not much we have in common in regards to our background, but one thing is he loves people, he happens to be Muslim, and he saw something in what we were trying to do. We're trying to fix a problem, and he studied business at the University of Houston, so he's the first guy to tell me, "You know what, man, you're an entrepreneur." I didn't even know what an entrepreneur was. An entrepreneur is a person who finds a problem, works towards creating a solution.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:30:34

So whether people who listen to this have it in themselves to be an entrepreneur, or to be employed by a company, right, but be good at what they do. When they go into a company, there's a problem of some sort. They go and get after it. When you add value to people and you're fixing something in the world, you're going to realize that you have to grow yourself in order to grow something else. And if we focus on a niche, and really spend our time - not worry about other people. Not worry about what they say, not worry about their limitations that they're placing on you, not worry about any of that, just staying on course. Ultimately, when you look to see what life means, it really is about contributing the best of yourself to others. And that's why there's a notion called "convivencia" in Muslim Spain, which is where everybody brought the best of themselves to contribute to society to make society better. That's why you have astronomers and medical doctors and people who really contributed to the sciences, because they were making something to make everybody better.

J

Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher 1:31:54

If that's a takeaway that somebody can benefit from, hopefully it'll keep them from holding back to not make mistakes. A lot of people are scared to make mistakes. A lot of people are worried about what others think of them, and the uncertainty as to what people want in life is possibly because they haven't found that challenge and that problem that they need to be working on. And I don't mean that you work on it all by yourself and you're isolated, no, you're only as good as your team. When you step forward to fix an issue, you're going to see that there's other people in the world, who also value fixing that issue. And all of a sudden, you have your team, you have your tribe, you find your voice. And that really goes beyond just existing as a human being. It's living as a human being. We want to be intentional about the way we live. We don't just want to see days go by until we die. It's unfortunate to spend a life like that. The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, said, "Visit the graves, because when you look at the graves, that's the destroyer of life's pleasures. That's when it all ends." There's a mentor of mine that said that the most highly valuable resources of anything you can think aboutâ€”leadership, problem solving, ideas, patents, things that could have happened to change the world to the max - if you want to see where much of that ended up and didn't get out, it's in the cemetery. That's where it ends. And if people took some capability with them

that didn't put out, then it died with them. So hopefully, you give the best of what you have, and you leave this world empty because you put it all out there. I mean, that's a life worth living, at least in my opinion, yeah.

Rimsha Syed 1:33:55

Yeah, I really appreciate that takeaway, and thank you so much for your time. It was great to hear about this incredible journey, and all that IslamInSpanish has been able to provide. I'm going to go ahead and stop the recording now.