

# Shadia Igram

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Muslim Space, Austin, Online worship, Online community, Youth engagement, Ramadan, Home life, Childrearing, Gender in the home, Muslim women's leadership, Board of Directors

## SPEAKERS

Shadia Igram, Mary Wilson

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- M** Mary Wilson 00:02  
Hi, my name is Mary Wilson. This is Monday morning - Monday afternoon, not morning. Daylight Savings Time has me all confused. Monday afternoon on March 15. I'm interviewing Shadia Igram. She has been, I would say, the founder, instrumental in founding a Texas Muslim space. And we're here to talk about the impact of the pandemic on her life and her community, and any other thing that comes to our minds. Shadia, welcome, and thank you for joining me today.
- S** Shadia Igram 00:33  
Thank you for having me, Mary, good to see you again.
- M** Mary Wilson 00:36  
It is good to see you, it's been too long. We're now hitting that year mark of the pandemic, and so it's been that long since we've seen each other in person. I had the great opportunity at times to come to the ATX Muslim Space Friday prayers, because they took place in my worship community's building and facilities. So our paths often crossed. So now I'm really curious, what's going on now? Tell me what the year has been like.

S

Shadia Igram 01:40

Oh, the year has been really interesting. Because of course, you know, when it started a year ago, we made a very last-minute decision to host our last - well, to cancel our last in-person Friday prayer service. I think it was the March 13. We decided, you know what, we're not gonna open it to the public. It'll just be the person giving the sermon, his immediate family and myself. And we will broadcast it on, I think, YouTube is what we did.

S

Shadia Igram 01:40

And then of course, those couple of weeks turned in to another month. And we realized this wasn't going to end anytime soon, especially when schools were being canceled. And then we started to - it started to hit Ramadan time, right. And so we had to cancel everything. We had planned to bring in an Imam to lead, nightly services and kind of have a robust schedule, and all that really went out the window. And I will say that what seemed very stressful for a lot of communities, we welcomed as a challenge and an opportunity. Because I think we were pretty nimble, in comparison to other at least mosques in town, because we didn't have our own space, right?

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Shadia Igram 01:42

And then we said that's it, we'll take off, hold off for a couple of weeks until this passes, and then we'll just resume in person. But in the meantime, well, we might as well just start streaming these things online. And I think that we were pretty quick to do that, we said, we're just going to do it online until we can get back in person. There wasn't a whole lot of debate as to whether we should just cancel altogether and sort of wait out the storm and then just gather as normal. We said, "You know what, let's just keep this this tradition going." Where we're still sending out this sermon, and what better time, right? There was so much confusion, there was so much stress, we thought for sure if there's anything we need to do it's maintain this weekly - even if it was one directional, right - this weekly remembrance of God. And so we did that.

M

Mary Wilson 03:02

Right. And you guys had had, what, a couple of years already of having events in different places around town anyway. So you weren't so committed to having just one thing, one place that everybody would just assume was going to be where they would attend. Yeah.

S

Shadia Igram 03:42

Right. So yeah, we didn't, we didn't feel like "oh, my gosh, we have this building, and we have to keep it full of people. Right? Well, how do we how do we make that as safe as possible?" Instead, we're like, "Well, now we can go online? And what is this flexible internet space going to allow us to do?" And just before the pandemic had kind of reached our doorstep, we had a speaker come in, Dr. Ingrid Mattson, who's a very well-renowned, Muslim, female scholar. And I really feel like that was one of the greatest things that could have happened, because part of her her talk that she gave was about sort of the history of community and the importance of community and the things to avoid, some of the things that hold community back. We sort of took her words, and it was almost like a blessing to move forward into this new uncharted territory of an Islamic community online.

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Shadia Igram 04:43

How do we bend the rules of praying in person, right? So you're not supposed to follow somebody on a computer. We did a couple of - I think the first couple of Friday services we actually held a prayer as well and for anyone who wanted to follow the person leading the prayer online was welcome to do so. And we didn't even really say you could or you couldn't we just did it. We just prayed. And then whoever was at home made that decision to pray on their own. So sort of giving the opportunity to people to be flexible in their form of worship was really empowering for us, and I think for the community.

S

Shadia Igram 05:20

And then of course, it also said, well, a lot of the restrictions of having a woman deliver a sermon. Well, we're online, and it's a pandemic. So why don't we just let women also give sermons to both - to the whole community? You started to see this all over the place, right, because people weren't calling it a traditional Friday prayer service. Oh, this is just a Friday reflection, or it's just a Friday talk, which is really no different than a traditional khutbah or Friday sermon. So it was just really interesting to watch all of this unfold.

M

Mary Wilson 05:56

Right. So how has it specifically affected - Well, let me gather my thoughts here. I'm curious where you think this is gonna go in the future then. I know, you're moving and leaving Austin. But where do you think the community is going to be going in the future in terms of balancing the online and in person? Because there does seem to be at least a little light coming at the end of the tunnel, where maybe some of us can start meeting in person again, with the vaccine rollout. What conversations have y'all had about that?

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Shadia Igram 06:35

So yeah, we've had a lot of conversations about that. And I think it's not just within your faith community that you've seen, obviously, online things happening. Now all meetings are done online, right. And you could literally just put on a clean shirt and leave your pajama bottoms on and go in a Zoom meeting, and no one would know the difference, right? So I think we've spent a year getting used to that. There are a lot of things that I know for us, we've we've determined that it doesn't require an in person gathering. There are things that we can connect with. We can connect to people, we can connect to learning, enhancing our lives in an online space, because we've had to, and now we've gotten used to it, where we actually welcome it.

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Shadia Igram 07:23

But there are also certain things that can never be replaced, right? You can't replace a social gathering, where you're sharing food, you're sharing a meal, the children are actually interacting with themselves. So I think going forward, we're going to - definitely through Muslim Space, we're going to be incorporating more of an online presence, where there will be some programming that will either completely move online, or will offer an online option. But you can't move everything online. So that's been the struggle, right? People haven't really missed going to the sanctuary for a Friday service, but they've missed sharing a cup of chai afterwards. They've missed catching up with people afterwards. So that's where we're eager to get back in person to connect one-on-one, to work together on certain projects. But other things I think are going to have permanent place online.

M

Mary Wilson 08:17

Yeah, and I'm loving talking to you right now, but I would love seeing you in 3D even more. Right? So this does actually meet some needs and wants and so forth, especially in larger communities where you can get a lot of faces on there. It's like, "Oh, it's so good to see

people." But there's still something about the 3D experience that is totally different and irreplaceable.

**S** Shadia Igram 08:45  
Yep. Right.

**M** Mary Wilson 08:46  
How have your kids weathered all of this?

**S** Shadia Igram 08:49  
They've done really well. Of course, it was a struggle for everybody in the beginning, I think, honestly, mainly because of just the unknowns. What's going to happen, there was just the fear that we're all going to get sick and but they were they were fortunate enough to be able to go back to school in person back in August. Their school was able to open. They're Montessori school, so it's not really conducive to an online interface. They were they were able to open safely and we thought, "Okay, if we go two weeks, that'll be great." And then the two weeks went by, and it's like "Oh, if we get to Thanksgiving break that's awesome. But there's no way we're gonna come back after Thanksgiving." And we did and then now we're past winter break, and now we're into spring break, and they haven't really had any major issues. So super fortunate for that. But going back to the online thing, the one thing that the pandemic has, at least given Muslim Space is - which is why we have to keep some things online - is we have folks tuning in from all over now, not just the Austin area.

**M** Mary Wilson 09:51  
I had three or four weeks online before my retirement from pastoral ministry, and we were initially doing a Facebook live feed, and some things have changed since I left, which obviously was going to need to evolve as the situation evolved. But I noticed right away that we were getting people from very different places. And then I spoke to several ministers, Christian ministers in the fall about what their congregations were doing, and they've all said the same thing. So it's really interesting how this pandemic has connected people across geography. And I wonder how much of that will continue once people can go back to something that is physically nearby. I suspect it'll be a mix, but I don't know

- S** Shadia Igram 10:47  
I think it depends on what they're looking for. Right? If they're tuning in, and they're hearing something that is really resonating with them that they don't have in their locality, they're going to want to stick around. Right? And I think that's so awesome, that people are able to find what they've been looking for halfway around the world.
- M** Mary Wilson 11:07  
Right. So when you return to in-person Friday prayers, will you continue to stream it in some way and always keep that as part of it?
- S** Shadia Igram 11:17  
That's the plan. Exactly. So that would be a hybrid program. Other things will just stay online, like our book club, probably some of the monthly programs that we do like the study circles and whatnot, those will probably move online. The trick is with the youth.
- M** Mary Wilson 11:34  
Yeah, tell me what's going on with them. Because I've seen that they've done some volunteer things in the community. Every now and then something will pop up on Facebook, it's like, "Oh, I know who's doing that." So tell me about your youth.
- S** Shadia Igram 11:48  
So we actually took a couple months off in the spring, because we just thought, again, thought we were just gonna wait it out. So let's just maintain the Friday prayer services. That's the most important. But then when Ramadan hit, we're like, "Oh, gosh." Usually Ramadan is a fun time for kids where we will do a storytime at Barnes & Noble or Book People, where the kids are getting out, and it's really a fun time for them. It's one thing when the adults can't socialize, you remember that, but what do we do for the kids?
- S** Shadia Igram 12:20  
So it was easy for storytime, we move that online, every week the kids would tune in, and we'd have a volunteer who would read a number of books just to kind of get them in the spirit. And then we also did an arts and crafts weekly thing. That was really, really popular. So we actually provided all of the materials that they would need. Each week, the kid would go to their bag and bring out the materials they needed for whatever weeks art,

then they tune in to Zoom and they do an art or craft with a guide. They were able to still stay at stay at home, connect with their friends on Zoom and do something really, really fun while remembering that it is Ramadan, and again, getting that spirit of the month. So that was actually a lot of fun. We were really proud of that, the parents were really happy. We said, "Why don't we do a card exchange, an Eid holiday card exchange?" So these kids were exchanging cards with kids all over the US and Canada.

M

Mary Wilson 13:18

Oh, wow.

S

Shadia Igram 13:19

It was just really cool, right? You were able to do things you wouldn't otherwise do. So it's been good, but of course, again, at the end of the day, the kids really need that face-to-face social interaction, I think more so than the adults do.

M

Mary Wilson 13:31

Yeah, I think it's a developmental thing. Adults can understand future time better than younger kids and minors. We supposedly understand delayed gratification, although not all of us are good at it, we understand the concept at least. So we can see that if we can be patient or somewhat restricted, and there's been all kinds of levels of practice of that, of course. There's just a maturity level and developmental stage that's different than for kids. My grandkids have been part of my bubble, and that's, honestly, that's really about the only people that I see is my daughter, her husband, and their kids, in terms of face-to-face. That's the only way I've really done face-to-face type stuff. And it's a challenge. It's a challenge, but I'm glad we have been able to do that with them.

M

Mary Wilson 14:31

Because initially we would - the first month or two last spring - we would just do drive bys in cars. We'd sit in the car and talk to them from the sidewalk or from the driveway or whatever. That was okay to a point but oh my goodness, it was also excruciating in ways to have be so close to not be able to hug them. So right and it seems like everybody is trying to figure out how to raise healthy kids right now, healthy emotional kids, with balancing the real danger of the pandemic versus their developmental needs. Sounds like y'all have done a really great job of that. I was gonna ask also, have you had anybody in your community, one, get sick, and have you lost anybody in your community to the disease?

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Shadia Igram 15:29

We have not lost anyone. Within the Muslim Space community, we're very fortunate. No one's popping to mind. So I know we've had a couple of deaths, but they have not been COVID related over the last year. But of course, everyone has been touched by it. We may not have lost anyone who is considered a member of the community or a participant in the community, but everyone in the community has felt loss somewhere, whether it was an actual death, or the fear of a relative getting sick, or just like you're saying, being so close to family not being able to see them due to wanting to take those those safety precautions. That fear is just gut wrenching. It's been tough for a lot of people.

M

Mary Wilson 16:12

Yeah. And I don't want you to speak out of turn in any way that makes you feel uncomfortable. But did you see a change in Omar's practice and how they had to go about things just from your end watching?

S

Shadia Igram 16:26

Yeah, of course everyone's required to wear a mask. When the cases got really bad, he had to stop doing surgeries for a while. And then he had to reduce the amount of surgeries he was doing, or they were select surgeries, where it was actually outpatient done at a surgery center. You didn't want to add to the ICU beds, right?

M

Mary Wilson 16:49

Right, right,

S

Shadia Igram 16:51

He was having to postpone people's surgeries to say our fear is that you pose a higher risk to any type of post-operative complication. And you may end up - we don't want to add to the ICU's workload.

M

Mary Wilson 17:06

Was that stressful at home to have to juggle all that with the kids and with work and so on? And how long did that start to feel like, "Okay, maybe we've got this down."



S

Shadia Igram 17:17

Mary, I really can't complain. COVID is - as terrible as it has been for us internally, it's been a fantastic blessing. I know that feels weird. But he just said, "Okay, I'm not going to work, I'm going to hang out at home." The kids were home from school, and we had a foster boy living with us, a little guy, and so all of his things were online. So between the kids doing their things, because their schools were trying to maintain some sort of connection last spring online. So between their week, their daily tune ins, our foster son's visits with his mom, that then moved to twice a week because you can't put a kid on a Zoom call for two hours, right? So he was getting two 30 minutes. That all of his speech therapy and his visits. It was like 18 to 20 Zoom meetings a week for me to manage.

M

Mary Wilson 18:08

Isn't that crazy?

S

Shadia Igram 18:09

It was nuts. I was losing my mind. Because everything I was doing moved online, so I told Omar, when he had though that time off, where he was working like only two days a week, it was an absolute blessing. And I said, "When you go back, you need to take Fridays off, because I can't be at home with these three children. I'm gonna go nuts." So it was really great. He got to spend a lot more time at home with the kids. He has a setup where he doesn't work over hard, like a lot of physicians do. Right? They work a million hours a week, Omar values his home life too much to do that. No, it's been good.

M

Mary Wilson 18:49

But you were saying things that I've been reading and articles and various newspapers where women are like, "Whoa, we've managed a lot of this. Now, this is too much. I need more help. I need that partnership in this relationship." And then the parenting and, yeah, I'm glad. I'm glad you all were able to do that. And I know for many people, it's been quite a challenge to try to balance everything. There have been times where I've gone to help with my grandkids because my son-in-law has a job where it's better if he's not working from home. It's better if he's actually at his business. And then sometimes when my daughter would be at home, trying to do her job with the school district with three little boys, and I get a text "Mom [screams]." Yeah, so I've been able to help out in that way. But it's like all hands on deck kind of year for us.

S

Shadia Igram 18:56

Right and then we're just kind of like everyone, you're just sort of stuck, you don't really get a break from it. Right? Where are you going to go, you're not going to go out on a date and bring a sitter into the house. And of course, in the end of it, that's where the realization for us personally came that we really need to be closer to family. Because you sort of took it for granted. Well, we can just hop on a plane and we can go as a family, or let's meet somewhere because we always travel with my, with my parents. And you just didn't have that freedom and flexibility and accessibility. And then it was sort of like, "Why are we here? What are we doing in Austin so far from family for no good reason, right?"

M

Mary Wilson 20:42

Right.

S

Shadia Igram 20:43

So Austin is great for me, and it's great for him. But the kids need more than that.

M

Mary Wilson 20:47

Yeah. And how long have you lived in Austin?

S

Shadia Igram 20:48

Almost eight years?

M

Mary Wilson 20:50

I was gonna say, it's been a while.

S

Shadia Igram 20:52

Yeah, yeah.

M

Mary Wilson 20:54

And how old is ATX Muslim Space? I remember going to a grand opening, but I don't have a good timeframe in my mind.

S

**Shadia Igram 21:04**

January 1, 2018 is sort of our official first day. A little over three years. Last year was our was our third year, third Ramadan, where we really felt like we're getting our groove, this is going to be our year, everything. And then all of this change. But at the same time, we were still so young, that we were like, "Hey, man, let's mix it up. Let's see what we can do here."

M

**Mary Wilson 21:28**

So there was a gift in that too, because you were already like, "We're doing new things anyway, because we're a new community." Let me put you on pause for just a minute. And I apparently have a dog who wants to go outside, she's crying by the door. So normally, when I'm doing interviews, the dog - we usually just have one. And it'll be in the other room with Betty while she's working. But she's also on a meeting, so they gotta be somewhere. And here we are in Zoom world, right? Things don't run as smoothly. There are more interruptions, and you just have to be able to go with that flow. Well, tell me what it's been like, for the three years of ATX Muslim Space. Tell me more about the community and what your goals are, and then how you've gone about fulfilling that in the pandemic. You've already said some of that, but give us a little more of a background and help us understand the community.

S

**Shadia Igram 22:34**

Yeah, I think that's the key, right there, is community. What we've always set out to be is not so much a builder of a building, a builder of a mosque, but we really wanted to be builders of community. So how do you gather folks who either don't have community or unfulfilled in their existing community? Can we can we provide for them a spiritual home where they can thrive? That's always been our goal. We knew that it was going to be - because we are somewhat untraditional in a lot of ways, especially for the Austin community. You'll find pockets of communities, even here in this country, where the work that we're doing, the approach that we have isn't as far-fetched as I think the majority of the Austin Muslim community has kind of viewed us.

S

**Shadia Igram 23:27**

So we knew it was going to be slow moving, we knew it was going to be quality over quantity in that sense. We weren't looking to have a million members, right? We just wanted folks who had chosen to be with us, chosen an approach to understanding their faith, to understanding the divine, to understanding the essence of what it means to be

part of a community. We wanted people to come together who had a general understanding and agreement in that sense. We've grown over the last couple of years. You set your goals, what do you want to achieve? But there's only so much time and energy, right, that you can exhaust to meet those goals. In some regards, we've been extremely pleased. We've excelled what we thought we were going to do, and in other regards, we're like, "You know what, we really wanted to hit that goal, but we just can't."

S

Shadia Igram 24:22

And I think we've been very forgiving of ourselves. We realized we're just human. And for the vast majority of board members and volunteers, they have full time jobs. They have families. It takes a lot of work, right? But we've had a great amount of support from the community. We've always had phenomenal feedback far more than any criticisms that we have ever faced. What we hear most is, "We love the vibe," or "I feel like I'm with my people," you know? And then we get people tuning in who are from places like Chicago or New York or these big cities where you're thinking, "You should have all of this stuff." Right? And they're finding that comfort zone and what they may have not even known they were looking for. They just knew they weren't getting what they wanted in whatever community or mosque that they were attending. So yeah, in the end, we're extremely pleased with what we've been able to build and the folks that have come along to be a part of it, we really want to ensure that the community feels like community and that we are supportive of one another. We're not all the same, and that that diversity is what makes us better.

M

Mary Wilson 25:39

So with maybe not getting into specifics that you don't want to air publicly, what are some of the criticisms that you have faced and want to overcome?

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Shadia Igram 25:53

So the biggest criticism, I think, that we face often is: "Why another mosque? We have so many mosques here, why are you going to divide the community?" And I think that's really naive for a lot of reasons, but it's a very naive statement to make. You're assuming that everyone who claims to be Muslim must fit into the limitations of a mosque that are available in the community, not realizing that the mosques can only do so much. And they generally serve this segment of a wide spectrum of Muslims. What we're trying to do, and this is what we try to explain to people like, "Hey, man, if you go to your mosque, and you love your mosque, and you feel at home at your mosque, that is amazing. We want that to happen for other people who don't feel comfortable, for whatever reason." Right? So it's sort of like identifying those pain points for some folks, and then offering solutions. Cause

that's a really tough concept.

- M** Mary Wilson 26:53  
I love that term, those "pain points," because it's been my experience that every faith tradition has communities, and there's a place where people just need something different than what's sort of mainstream maybe, or the most popular, or most traditional. There are other needs out there that need to be met. And they're typically because of the, as you said, pain points.
- S** Shadia Igram 27:22  
Right, right.
- M** Mary Wilson 27:24  
That's really, really great. Okay.
- S** Shadia Igram 27:27  
And I think it's important that the mosques pinpoint what areas can they address because no one can address them all.
- M** Mary Wilson 27:33  
Right.
- S** Shadia Igram 27:34  
So for instance, a lot of the mosques to a fantastic job serving the needs of new immigrants and refugees. Well, that really isn't - new immigrants and refugees are not going to feel very seen, or they're not gonna feel comfortable at Muslim Space, right? Because we're an organization that primarily serves the American Muslim with that identity of American Muslim. And it's not because we're excluding anybody, but we know our limitations.
- M** Mary Wilson 27:59  
Right, right.

**S** Shadia Igram 28:00  
So that's the key, that we're not trying to provide it all for everybody. We're trying to provide it to a subset of Muslims and work in partnership with all the other mosques. That is a really difficult concept for people.

**M** Mary Wilson 28:13  
Right. So tell us what your role is in ATX Muslim Space, and historically the role you filled in that.

**S** Shadia Igram 28:23  
Initially, the concept first came about through numerous conversations over many years, primarily with women who have complained or critiqued or sort of vented about issues that they have felt or faced within the majority of mosques in town. So that's how it started. And I kind of went through my Rolodex of contacts in my head. And I said, "Who are the people that I have come across in the last four years of being in Austin, that I would like to work on a brainchild project with?" And I gathered - what, were there nine of us all together? So I gathered eight people that I knew. And what I loved is that not a single other person knew everybody else in the room.

**M** Mary Wilson 29:09  
Oh, fascinating.

**S** Shadia Igram 29:11  
But so even though we're all Muslim, and we were all female, I knew everybody but nobody knew everybody else. So I took that as, okay, this is a fairly diverse group of people.

**M** Mary Wilson 29:22  
Yeah. Yeah. Your paths cross, but not always with each other. That's a nice little tapestry, that you strung together.

**S** Shadia Igram 29:32  
Right, exactly. So everybody brought something, and really, everybody that was there had

said something that stuck with me over the years that I had been in Austin. We brought that to the table, and we all worked together, and it was just a fantastic experience to build this with these women. And of course it wasn't just women, even though it was women at the table. You had their families, their children, their spouses, their parents, all involved, even if it was a silence. Because you know, you are part of your family, you're not just you, but you're also going to have these shared values and all those shared values are coming in together.

S

Shadia Igram 30:12

So then we moved from this sort of foundation committee into, "Okay, well, now we have to form a board. And so what does that board look like?" And I proposed early on, that instead of me being a just a board member, that I'd be the executive director, because I was willing to put in more time and energy, right, I was willing to invest more of me into the success. Just because that was my number one passion. Like I said, other people they had jobs or families or whatever reason, my husband was extremely supportive in this. And so my

M

Mary Wilson 30:45

Hang on one second, let me deal with the dogs again.

S

Shadia Igram 30:57

Don't worry, that's okay.

M

Mary Wilson 31:01

We'll see how the barking plays in the background. So you had the - well, one, it sounds like you had the connections to be the executive director in that you actually did know everybody, and were instrumental in bringing everyone together. And, two, you had the time, energy, and interest in doing it and a supportive spouse. So all those components mixed together made you a pretty natural choice.

S

Shadia Igram 31:30

Yeah, the board very much supported that proposal. So that's been my role as executive director. I've tried as hard as I could not to be the face of the organization. And that was my concern. When I said I was going to leave Austin, I needed to ensure that the board was willing to carry this forward because I didn't want it to be about me. If I'm gone, I

didn't want it to die. This was always kind of my mentality, because I could get hit by a bus tomorrow, right?

M Mary Wilson 32:03  
Right. Right.

S Shadia Igram 32:04  
So it was always important for me to have a lot of collaboration and anything that we did to bring a lot of the board members in to have their input. And to also lay things out in a way that God forbid, if I were to just disappear one day, things could still move forward.

M Mary Wilson 32:20  
Exactly. Yeah. I understand that feeling completely. Thinking about my own position, and realizing it's time for me to step away. It's like, okay, hopefully, I have nurtured an environment where this continues, maybe changes, but continues. Hang on.

S Shadia Igram 32:45  
[laughs] It's okay.

M Mary Wilson 32:48  
The dogs get another room now [laughs]. So we talked about your family and the adjustments there and your husband's practice and in the community and some of the gifts and flexibility that a new group can have, and the fact that you're moving and leaving Austin and the ability for ATX Muslim Space to carry on and having a board and the connections and relationships to allow that to happen. So now I'm wondering, is there anything else that you think would be good for people to be able to hear in terms of how this past year has impacted your community? Any struggles along with the nimbleness and gifts? Anything that we haven't hit on so far?

S Shadia Igram 33:44  
I think the only big change for us is the addition of a chaplain. That's one of those things where it sort of fell in our lap, right? It was interesting. Usama and I met the fall of 2019. I believe that that's when we first met. He at the time was at the seminary, and I got an email from him to the Muslim Space account saying, "Hey, I'm so-and-so and I'm at the



seminary, and I would love to get a chance to meet and talk about how Muslim Space and the seminary can collaborate. I'm thinking, "Your name is Usama Malik. That is a pretty Muslim name, but you're at the seminary."

M

Mary Wilson 34:30

[laughs] You're at a Presbyterian seminary.

S

Shadia Igram 34:33

Right, I gotta hear about this. So we met and I, in our in our conversation, I was like, "Wow, this guy is the future of Muslim Space. This is who I would love to leave Muslim Space to," in that his work was so aligned with what Muslim Space is trying to achieve, that if anything, I just wanted him to be a part of this community. I was so enamored by him that I went home and I told Omar, "I've met the most incredible young man. He's doing phenomenal things and he's got this great attitude." And then even Omar had reached out to him for just some questions about what Bible does he read, because Omar wanted to read up on some Bible verses while he's reading Qur'an, or just in general study.

S

Shadia Igram 35:19

And then when the pandemic happened, we decided to do a virtual holiday celebration service. He had just graduated from the seminary, and I watched his sermon, his graduation sermon, and I said, "Oh, this guy will give a great sermon at the celebration, this guy is great." And again, then we brought in a woman to do the - what we call the takbir, it's sort of this singing, instrumentless, singing the praises of the Prophet. And again, you are never going to get this anywhere, no other mosque, is going to bring in a woman to sing this. It's just not going to happen.

S

Shadia Igram 36:04

So we had this and we had him and we're like, "What's going to happen?" And we put it on Eventbrite, right? We publicized it. And it's a free event, we just asked you to sign up, so you can get the Zoom link. At that time, we had our simple Zoom account where you could only have like, 100 people. In the last 48 hours, we had, I think, 600 registrants from all over, we're like, "Who are these people? What are they coming from? What's going on?" I'm thinking, "Oh, my God, we're gonna get Zoom-bombed." I couldn't see, but I had the forums like, "Who are all these people?" And I'm looking at their email addresses, and they're like ".co.uk." and dot this, and they're not even in the States.

S

Shadia Igram 36:45

Somehow it started getting passed around, people were searching for an online celebration service. And nobody else was really doing this. And so granted, because we're in the Central Time Zone, and the celebration had already started 10 hours earlier in other parts of the world, we still ended up with I think 175 households from around the world tune in we had guys from India, we asked people to turn on their cameras at the end of the night, or at the end of the service. And there's a guy sitting on his balcony, it's pitch black outside, because it's 10pm in India. And he just said, "I'm so happy to be here with you guys." So that was a real game changer.

S

Shadia Igram 37:25

And then we continued to just follow Usama, and then he wanted to get more involved, we invited him to join the board. And at the time, he was doing an Islamic chaplaincy certificate through Hartford. And he said, "I've got to do 30 weeks of field work with an organization or a mosque. Were you guys looking?" I said, "Well, no, but put the proposal in, and we'll run it by the board." And it's only been about a month and a half of him working with the community, and it's one of those things where you didn't even know you needed it until it was right there. And now we can't go back. What he's been able to provide to the community has been so beneficial. The response from the community members have been outstanding. We didn't realize that even that's what they needed, right? So, we needed it as an organization, the community needed it. And it's just really brought everybody I think even closer, just having that chaplaincy services offer, and of course it was Usama's personality, that also helps.

M

Mary Wilson 38:29

Well, I can't wait to meet him and talk to him in a couple of days when I do this with him, it's really exciting. He was immediately responsive to when I sent out a request to see if he'd be interested. So that'll be a lot of fun, I think.

S

Shadia Igram 38:45

Yeah, yeah, he's good people. We're lucky to have him.

M

Mary Wilson 38:49

Well, wonderful, and I am so appreciative of the work that you do in the community, the work you have done and what you do with ATX Muslim Space. I've had a chance to view

it, adjacent and be excited with you about its development. So I'm excited then to meet Usama and see what the future holds, and to watch it flourish and continue to flourish.

S

Shadia Igram 39:18

Thank you, and Mary, obviously, a lot of our success is really linked directly to you. Not even just the building, but you yourself for opening up your doors in a time where we didn't even know where to begin. But we knew a Friday prayer service was something that is where we needed to start. And ability to offer a women's only service, that could have only been done because you reached out and you invited us in and it's through these, just these pure divine blessings, right, that folks come together and we are able to support and collaborate. And I'm grateful that we've been able to not only receive these opportunities, but also take advantage of them, we've made that conscious decision. Let's explore this. And I really think that a lot of our success is because of that, because of the good people of the community in Austin and beyond. And then our willingness to take a chance and go see and explore what these opportunities may hold for us.

M

Mary Wilson 40:18

Yeah, well, I remember seeing conversation, like on Facebook and so on. It's like, "Huh, no, I think I know, place where they can meet [laughs]. Because I think I know my community and their willingness to open their doors." And so it was about community because it was about having had relationships for a few years with some of the folks that were part of the conversation and then expanding those relationships, and then being a part of a community, pastoring a community that was totally interested in and being for our overall community, and not just myopic about our own particular faith tradition. So yeah, it was all that community word again, becomes really important, and how we understand we are in community with one another. And yes, we have our faith traditions and our faith communities. But I think my community and yours both have said - and now part of that is to also know that we're part of a larger community, and that we can help one another.

S

Shadia Igram 41:28

Yeah, 100 percent.

M

Mary Wilson 41:29

That has been an inspiring piece of work for me to be able to be a part of.

S Shadia Igram 41:34  
Likewise, absolutely.

M Mary Wilson 41:38  
Well, Shadia, thank you so much. I think this has been a great interview, it's been so much fun talking to you and to see you. And I hope there'll be something that actually allows for that to happen in person before you're gone completely. And I understand that desire to be close to family, as I was mentioning earlier with my daughter, I could get a text and I could go over and help out with kids and so on. And her life would be - and her family's life would be harder in many ways without us being nearby and available. So I totally get that. And I bet you have some family that really would love having grandkids around.

S Shadia Igram 42:22  
Oh my gosh, of course. You know, it's harder without family, but it's so much richer with family.

M Mary Wilson 42:30  
Yeah.

S Shadia Igram 42:31  
Every time I come up here, I - I moved out of Cedar Rapids 11 years ago, when Omar and I got married. And I always like to look through old family photos and recall the memories of my youth and the community and just the history, and it's great that I was in Austin and I was able to, to develop those friendships and those memories with people there. But I am looking forward to reigniting some of these things here that I feel like I've missed out on the last 11 years. I'd like to invest in this community as well.

M Mary Wilson 43:05  
Well, I wish you nothing but goodness and blessings and so much joy for you and your family.

S Shadia Igram 43:13  
Thank you



Mary Wilson 43:13

In the next phase of your journey.



Shadia Igram 43:15

Thank you so much, so much, Mary. Thank you.



Mary Wilson 43:18

Thank you so much for taking the time to share all this with me today.



Shadia Igram 43:23

Well, thanks for listening and thanks for bringing me into the conversation and of course, whatever you need, I'm always here for you.