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**Oral History Interview with Yasmin Nagi**

**Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, 2011.019.082**

**Interview conducted by Amna Ahmad in her home on March 18th, 2014 in Bay Ridge,  
Brooklyn.**

AMNA AHMAD: [00:00] Today is March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2014, and I'm Amna Ahmad from Brooklyn Historical Society. We are here in my home in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. And this interview is part of the Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations oral history project. Now, if you would, please introduce yourself.

YASMIN NAGI: Yasmin Nagi.

AMNA AHMAD: Thank you. For the archives, can you tell me your date of birth, and where you were born?

YASMIN NAGI: My date of birth is [redacted for privacy] and I was born in Brooklyn.

AMNA AHMAD: Great. So, why don't you tell me a little bit about where you come from?

YASMIN NAGI: I come from a very mixed background, but mainly Yemeni. I was -- I was born here in Brooklyn, and when I was eight months old, my mother went back to Yemen. And I grew up there, till, like, until I became 13. While I was living in Yemen, I never actually lived around Yemenis. My community was mostly other [confire] Arabs, which were mostly Egyptians, and Palestinians. And other than that, my family is a mix, which, I'm a mix, too. I'm Yemeni, Sudanese. My grandma is from Sudan. So, my family leaned towards more the Sudanese side. So, if you ask me what I'm most comfortable with, I might say Sudanese more than Yemenese. But growing up in Yemen, I got, I'm kind of mixed -- I was, at least when I was 13, I was very confused between who is who and what am I?

AMNA AHMAD: So this question of "who am I?" When you were 13, what do you think you would say?

YASMIN NAGI: When I was 13, based on the art of logic and, like, the way they think, I would have to say I was Yemeni, just because my dad is Yemeni. That's how it goes. But, even in that, it was a little different, because when you're in Yemen, they ask you where you're from, because obviously I'm from Yemen, so they ask you where exactly

you're from. We lived in the city all of my life. I don't know anything other than Sana'a, which is the capital city. But my dad is originally from [Ibb]. And he even lived in Sana'a. So it's kind of a little hard for me be like, "Yeah, I'm from Ibb." But I don't know anything about it. So it was like, confusion within a confusion.

AMNA AHMAD: So that's interesting that your way of identifying yourself was with a place that you didn't really spend much time.

YASMIN NAGI: Yeah.

AMNA AHMAD: So nowadays, if someone were to ask you, Yasmin, where are you from?

YASMIN NAGI: Right now?

AMNA AHMAD: What would you probably say?

YASMIN NAGI: Like, this -- like, this day, right now, if you asked me what I am, I would be like, Arab. I'm an Arab-American. Just because I don't like to go through the whole explanation and whatnot, and also because I feel like I am an Arab, because I'm just mixed of this and that. And I had few of Palestinian, and I had -- even my family, like, they're mixed also with Egyptians. So, we do have all that connection with the rest of the Arab world, so that's why I feel like I'm Arab. It's only fair to say I'm Arab, and not only from one country.

AMNA AHMAD: So, great. You said that you have a Sudanese grandmother.

YASMIN NAGI: Right.

AMNA AHMAD: And is this your paternal grandmother, or your maternal grandmother?

YASMIN NAGI: I don't understand the terms?

AMNA AHMAD: Yeah, so is it your mother -- your grandmother on your mother's side?

YASMIN NAGI: My mother's mother. Yeah. My mom. Yes.

AMNA AHMAD: And why is it that you think you're a little bit closer to the Sudanese side?

YASMIN NAGI: Oh, it's just because my mom and her sisters, they all grew up in Sudan, until, like, a very old age. So they were pretty much Sudanese. They moved to Yemen, like at college age, kind of thing. And we live a very Sudanese-style life. We speak all Sudanese at home. We -- the people in Yemen, we mostly live with, like, or associate with our half-Yemenese, have Sudanese, like, or mostly Sudanese, or just -- we just hang

out with the Sudanese families in Yemen. So that's why I feel more comfortable with Sudanese.

AMNA AHMAD: So, did your mother ever share specific experiences about the time that she was living in Sudan?

YASMIN NAGI: Oh, actually, to think about it right now, no. She never did. Yeah. She would never speak about it. That's weird.

AMNA AHMAD: Interesting.

YASMIN NAGI: I don't know, it's not -- I don't know. They would speak about it when they're, like, the sisters are -- the siblings are all together, they would sign, and they'd be like, "Oh, remember this and that." But I don't remember a specific moment that they actually all speak about that, which is very weird. Thank you for letting me know that.

AMNA AHMAD: That's something to ask at home, right?

YASMIN NAGI: Yeah.

AMNA AHMAD: So, do you know why -- why they moved from Sudan to Yemen?

YASMIN NAGI: Yeah. My grandpa, [5:00] which is their father, died.

AMNA AHMAD: Oh.

YASMIN NAGI: And my grandma felt like the kids didn't know their, you know, their, like, actual land there, the other side of them. So she took them to Yemen, just to grow up and learn about the other -- their other side. And she wanted them to just know more. She felt like Yemen is more -- have more opportunities for them, versus Sudan, which, she said, at the time, wasn't as developed as Yemen. So that's why she took them all, and she moved to Yemen. And she died there.

AMNA AHMAD: Oh.

YASMIN NAGI: She was beautiful.

AMNA AHMAD: So it's interesting how you categorize yourself as an Arab now, today, when you're in the United States, probably because, you know, that's the way Yemenis and Sudanese are categorized and lumped together, because it's such a diverse society here. But what would you say some of the cultural differences are, between the Sudanese and the Yemeni? When we're not lumping them together as this larger category of Arab?

YASMIN NAGI: Sure, sure. OK, it's not fair for me to speak about Yemenis much, because I'm really not -- I wasn't -- even now that I'm here, I see more Yemenis. I feel like we totally live different -- in different kind of Yemens, every time they speak about Yemen. So I don't feel like it's fair enough for me to speak about them. But, I do know, like, the general things, so, in Sudan, it's OK for a woman and a man to be in the same room, even if they're not family. So if they're family friends, whatever, it's OK. Which is culturally accepted. And it's OK for them to have mixed weddings. What else? Food is different, of course. The language is very different. If you don't know either of the languages, and you're trying to learn it, that's very difficult. Yemenis, they're kind of a little close-minded, I might -- let me say. Especially because they're like, I don't know, more traditional.

AMNA AHMAD: Traditional, yeah.

YASMIN NAGI: Yeah. They, they stick to the culture very much, and yeah. So it's only fair to say that I don't know any more.

AMNA AHMAD: Yeah, perfect. So I'm always interested to know the stories of the way parents meet. Because really all of our stories start with our parents.

YASMIN NAGI: True.

AMNA AHMAD: So I was wondering if, perhaps they've shared their story with you.

YASMIN NAGI: They did. Um, it wasn't something out of the ordinary. Because my dad and my mom have the same last name. So maybe their grandparents, or great-great grandparents were related. My dad was friends with her older brothers, and he used to come over at home. And since they were Sudanese, it was OK for my dad to be with the family, you know? So he'd seen my mother, and she told me they were like brothers and sisters. He would take her -- he would take her to school and bring her back. And I'm like, "OK. Yeah, that's what we call dating."

AMNA AHMAD: (laughter) I know, right, exactly.

YASMIN NAGI: (laughter) So, yeah, she didn't want to say that. She's like, "No!" You know. [*Haib*]

AMNA AHMAD: Yeah, *haib*, yes.

YASMIN NAGI: So, yeah. So that's how they met. And -- and then after that, he just asked the brother for her hand, because since they were friends and whatnot, and my uncle was like, yeah. He agreed. He knew my dad. And he was like, "Why not?" So that's how they met.

AMNA AHMAD: Well, that's a great story. So, certainly not our idea of --

YASMIN NAGI: Of course.

AMNA AHMAD: -- dating, per se, here, or wherever everybody used the term. That's interesting. So, I'm interested to know what the activities and hobbies are that take up your time now?

YASMIN NAGI: Now, I'm actually very occupied with reading. I'm taking this one class, Arab-Israeli Conflict, and it takes most of my time, where I have to read 200 pages a day, or more, thinking that it's my only class. But yeah, it's mostly reading. Other than that, I just like to hang out with my friends. The other day, I just went to a shooting range, and once the weather gets better, I'll be out in the park, riding bicycles, horses, or whatever I find.

AMNA AHMAD: You sound really athletic.

YASMIN NAGI: Sometimes.

AMNA AHMAD: So, why don't you describe where you're studying, and what you're studying right now?

YASMIN NAGI: OK. So I study at City College of New York, that's the one in Harlem. I'm studying International Relations, concentrating on the Middle East. That's, yeah, basically it.

AMNA AHMAD: And what drew you to International Relations, as a major?

YASMIN NAGI: That's a tough question. So I started college thinking that I'm going to go into engineering. So I got accepted to City College as an engineering student. And I was going to major in [10:00] Computer Science. I took a semester of that, and I felt very pressured, thus, I didn't feel happy with my grades, or how the classes were. And my parents weren't the kind that would set what you have to be in the future. Like it's -- as long as you do whatever you feel is right, that's fine for them. So it was pretty hard for me, because, growing up, having your parents telling you what to do, and whatnot,

especially as Arabs, they are like, pretty much set up your life for you. But once you reach college, at least for me, they are like, OK, you can do whatever you want. That was pretty tough for me. So, from Computer Science, I didn't know what to do. I didn't want it. So I spoke to my mother, and I was like, "Mom, I don't want to do this anymore. I don't think it suits me." And she's like, "Whatever. Do whatever -- anything else." So from that, I went to Psychology. And I feel it's right. I switched to Economics, I didn't like it. I went through a lot of problems, and I felt like I don't want to do anything. But then, going back, like I just felt like -- I took a semester off. On that semester off, I cleared my mind, and I was like, "Let's see, what is it that I want to do?" It's not that -- quitting on college wasn't an option for my mother. So, I had to go back, but I kind of wanted to figure out what I want to do with my life. What is going to make me happy? So I thought about everything that I enjoyed. And it was, like, what, something I could put my heart into it. And going back through my high school essays and whatnot, I seen that my best grades, and like, my best ideas came out on the, like, the Arab topics, especially the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and anything that relates to it. So I felt like that would be my best -- my best -- I don't know, subject, or best interest. Something that I'm so passionate about that I would just take it out, all out. So like right now, I'm taking international studies, and focusing on all the Arabs, Arab classes, and I'm taking every Arab class that I can find in school. So, yeah. That's kind of how I needed up in International Studies.

AMNA AHMAD: Great. So, who is this professor that teaches your demanding Arab-Israeli Conflict course?

YASMIN NAGI: His name is Professor [Dayu].

AMNA AHMAD: I'm sure he would be happy to know that you're -- you're diligently reading. (laughter)

YASMIN NAGI: Yup. He teaches history, like the Arab course is a history course.

AMNA AHMAD: And I failed to mention at the beginning of the interview that I met you through outreach efforts at the Arab American Association of New York.

YASMIN NAGI: True.

AMNA AHMAD: So do you want to describe your relation to the Association for us?



YASMIN NAGI: OK, so at first, I started work -- volunteering, actually, at the AAANY, that's the Arab American Association of New York for my internship. For International Relations, we had a class that you must take an internship outside the school. So I came to here, and I was like, OK, I need an internship, and they were like, "Fine. Here you go." So it was only like about -- I had to do 120 hours. So that wasn't much. But then after I was done with the 120 hours, they kind of hired me. They kind of -- they liked me, so they hired me. And I became -- they gave me an internship -- a fellowship, to be exact. So now I'm the Youth Fellow in the association. And the Youth Fellow, the position is for me to just develop my leadership skills. It was given -- it was designed, this fellowship, for the Arabs -- for the Arab youth, to be exact. To empower them, and give them chances that we feel like we are not having here enough. Especially as being Arab Americans. So, this program, I'm the first fellow. So this will continue for the Arab kids out there, to give them just the power and connection to everything around them.

AMNA AHMAD: So what would you say your everyday experience as a youth fellow, on the average day is like? Run me through your average day.

YASMIN NAGI: My average -- there is no average day at the Association. (laughter) It's amazing, because as a Youth Fellow, I do everything. The organization, what it offers to the people is immigration services, social services, ESL classes, after-school programs, and then, on top of that, all youth programs that, which I'm mostly involved in it. So, on an average day, I would come in. I would go to the front desk, and then help out with case work. Case work is immigration. I would help a little bit with that. I would have appointments sometimes. And then I would run upstairs to the ESL class, sometimes help them with their classes, if their [15:00] teacher is absent. And then there is Kitaab club, which is after-school program for the younger kids. And I go there, because there is the youth -- the youth would be -- it's a little different here, like, what, back home, what we would call "youth" is from 30 to 40, or something. Here the youth are younger. Like from 15 to, I don't know, my age, 21, or maybe older. I don't know. I'm not sure of the range, over here. But so, the younger youth, I would say, the high-schoolers, would be there. And I like to be around to guide them and tell them how to deal with the younger

kids, who are from, like first grade to eighth. So, yeah. I'm just there to help the younger youth to give them just moral support, just guide them through, if any problem happens. And other than that, I do a lot of workshops, to just bring -- because I feel like the Arab Americans are not totally -- we're our own thing. We're not Americans, and we're not Arabs. We're something in middle. And that something in the middle, I'm trying to make it clear to those younger youth that it's OK to be that in the middle. We are something special.

AMNA AHMAD: So do you think that being Arab and being American are opposed to one another, or why would you explain that they are in the middle?

YASMIN NAGI: They're in -- they're in -- just because -- like, OK, so when -- right now, we're in America. We're Arabs, but yet, we're not so American. There are still things that [*haib*], which is like, not allowed, and there is things that are *haram*. We still have that unique -- I don't know, there is something unique about us, where we're not totally Americans. We're, like, culturally-wise, family-wise -- we are very family-oriented, for the most part. Very -- I don't know, the way we eat, the way we -- I don't know, we're just different, I feel. And then, back home -- every time we go back home, just for the simple fact that you had -- did leave there, for, like, you didn't live there for a while, and you became Americanized, that's it, they don't consider you one of them.

AMNA AHMAD: Mm-hmm.

YASMIN NAGI: So that's why we are, like, special. We are kind of in our -- it's not something bad, it's totally something fine. I see it as a beautiful thing. We are just, we are something unique. The product of both worlds.

AMNA AHMAD: Yeah, I think your characterization is really fascinating. So I'm wondering what is the reception of your characterization of being Arab and American at the same time, coming from these kids? What's their reaction to the way you characterize the different pulls of being both Arab and American?

YASMIN NAGI: They kind of -- like, they feel like they fall into it. But then they are just afraid of just being too different. You know, they are like, "No, we're Americans." And then the recent immigrants, they're like, "No, we're Arabs." But then just give them a few years, those recent immigrants, they'll be like, "No, we're Americans." So it's just

like, kind of denial. They kind of, they don't want to be the new thing. They don't -- "We're afraid of being something different from everybody else." That's their reaction. But some -- most of them, like, when I'm talking to them about it, you see them nodding their head. You see them understanding it. So I had another workshop the other day, where I told the kids, like, "OK --" They're not kids. They're youth. I was telling them, "OK, so today we're going to learn [dabke]. They were like, "OK, cool." You know, they all turned, like suddenly, they all started speaking Arabic. They started signing Arab songs. And like, you could see, though, they're switching to Arab. And I was just like, OK, cool. And then I was like, "OK, and we're going to mix it with hip-hop." And then you just see their, like, their faces change, and like, "What? Yeah, like that --" you know, and then they started throwing out ideas there, and they're like, "Oh, how about this song with that song, and that --" Then I was like, "See, this is exactly what I'm talking about. We're in the middle. We are in between this and that, where we understand both things and we can just make it something unique." And they really loved the idea, and they started actually dancing. They showed me -- they showed off their moves. And they were having fun with it. And I was like, as we were doing it, at the end of the workshop, I'm like, "See what I mean? We're Arab Americans." They were like, "OK." So they are starting to accept the idea, but slowly, it's just the way that you give it to them, you present the idea to them.

AMNA AHMAD: Yeah, definitely. So you explained this feeling of when -- when Arab Americans go back to their countries of origin, they feel kind of strange, just by virtue of the fact that they've been in America, they are considered outsiders by some people. So, did you have that experience personally? Or...?

YASMIN NAGI: Yes. Yes, yes, definitely. When I came here, like, I was 13 when I came here. So when I went back, it was three years later, so I was 15. Three years later, [20:00] I felt it was nothing, because it went by so fast for me over here, at least. So, but when I went back, kind of the language, I kind of totally forgot some -- a lot of Arabic words, because I wasn't practicing it over here, because my mother made -- like, she was concerned about us not catching up with the English, even though we studied British English back in Yemen. So when we came here, we were prepared. We just had

switched the accents, which was the toughest thing. But, so she spoke to us only in English at home for the first few years, and then she would only allow us to watch English shows, just for us to adjust. So, when we went back to Yemen, we were actually so Americanized -- I mean, like language-wise, we were so -- we got used to it. We were just speaking English to them, 24/7. And they, then -- that's when they started feeling uncomfortable. Like, our family. They were like, "Well, you've just been there for three years. What's going on? Why did you become so Americanized?" And then the way you dress. The way you talk, the way you act. You -- I don't know. The American -- I mean, the New Yorker, actually, to be exact. The New Yorker style just grow into people so fast, I feel. Because I have my cousin who came from Yemen last year. And she just went this summer. And everyone is telling her, "Oh, you've changed. Oh, you're not Arab anymore. Oh, you're too Americanized right now." I don't understand why that's -  
- I don't know.

AMNA AHMAD: Well, that's certainly an interesting perspective that you have there. Have you had the opportunity to head back to Yemen after that time, or...?

YASMIN NAGI: Yeah. We kind of go every three years. I went back, believe, in 2012, and then two-thousand... I don't know, 2011, and then 2013, last year. But last year was terrible. Because it was the whole war going on.

AMNA AHMAD: Oh, yeah.

YASMIN NAGI: Yeah, so. I had to come back fast. In mid-Ramadan. I didn't even get to finish Ramadan over there, which was terrible. Yeah.

AMNA AHMAD: So what was the experience like, during the war?

YASMIN NAGI: So, OK, maybe I went to Yemen a little more. I went three times, I just don't remember the years exactly.

AMNA AHMAD: Oh, it's fine.

YASMIN NAGI: OK, so, so the other two years that when I went back, Yemen was getting so -- I mean, OK, it was only Sana'a that I go to, the main city. It was getting better, and more like -- I don't know, developed, and more, let's say westernized, which is not fair to use, but it was getting up there, like the streets were getting better, where they fixed some. And the transportation was way better. Everything was just going up. And then

when I went last year, it just got terrible, because everything was destroyed, because of the war, because of the revolution, everything was just a mess. Other than that, it just, I felt like Yemen went backwards. Because, also because it was the war, a lot of people came out from the villages. And, like city people are not like the village people. So, just to see those village people around carrying guns, topless, with crazy hair, crazy long hair, it was just terrifying. I've seen snipers on, like on the roofs. And --

AMNA AHMAD: Wow.

YASMIN NAGI: -- yeah -- and buildings with bullet-holes, and it was just not a pretty sight. Not how I remembered Sana'a, even before I left. And then, just seeing it going downhill again was terrible.

AMNA AHMAD: Well, that is terrible. So I'm hoping that no one in your family, or that you knew was hurt in the --

YASMIN NAGI: Oh, no, [*Alhamdulillah*], nobody --

AMNA AHMAD: -- conflict.

YASMIN NAGI: -- nobody. Yeah. We stay out of it.

AMNA AHMAD: So, it seems that you are very in-touch with the Arab community in Brooklyn, as well as still in touch over the years with Yemen.

YASMIN NAGI: Mm-hmm.

AMNA AHMAD: So, recently, the community here has been the target of surveillance by the NYPD, probably other sources as well. Is that one of the points of contention that has come up, within maybe the Kitaab club, or other aspects of the AAANY, and if so, how did you guys deal with them?

YASMIN NAGI: It was actually not only recently, it started since the September 11<sup>th</sup>. They surveillance just got so heavy, it just -- it just got so heavy. And actually, recently, a leaked NYPD document came out, listing our organization and [Linda], which is the main -- the boss, as terrorists, and potential [25:00] terrorist group and organization, which was, like, terrible. How could they label such an organization that are helping people out. We're filling something that the government is not willing to fill up. Like, there is a gap that our association is giving, and there is a lot of people that are just volunteering there, just giving their time up, just to help others, and then they would list it

as a potential terrorist organization. Just for us being Arabs, or Muslims. It was just like, it was terrible. We don't really -- we actually went to a rally, and we do a lot of -- a lot of protests, a lot of -- what was the last thing we did? We did a press conference in front of Police Plaza. We try to get the word, like, our word out there. Sometimes -- sometimes, like, the feedback is positive. Most of the time, it's not. But we try.

AMNA AHMAD: So what's an example of some positive feedback that you've been getting, and negative feedback and the way that you responded to this particular problem with surveillance?

YASMIN NAGI: The positive is, like, the beauty of New York City is, like, so diverse, and I feel like people are very open-minded and willing to understand new ideas. So, sometimes when we are doing rallies and whatnot, I witnessed people just coming up to us and ask, "Oh, what is this about?" And then we explain it to them, and they'd be like, "OK, we are up with it. We are with you guys, we believe in this." And they are standing with us, totally strangers that we just see in the streets. Negatives are just, like, some people are still in their -- that bubble, or they are just still ignorant, and they throw hurtful comments. Like one time, we were actually doing voter registrations, and we were going door-to-door to people, and trying to get them to register for voting. And I knocked the door on this white residence. And they -- an old lady opened the door, and she was like, "Oh, what do you want?" So I was explaining things to her. And the whole time, she was looking straight at me. And I'm over here, like showing her the paper, like, look over here. But she was just looking straight at me. She goes like, "Um, I would sign this, but I wish, like, not a lot of terrorists came to this country." It was a terrible feeling. For me, I was like, I didn't know what to say, and at the same time, I felt like, oh, I'm representing the AAANY, so I couldn't say anything back. And at the same time, she was an old lady, and I didn't feel like disrespecting her in any way. And I didn't -- I just was in a shock, because being in New York City, feeling comfortable in my own zone, you know, like this is my place, this is my country, this is my city. You're not going to come and tell me that. So it was just -- I don't know. I mean, I just looked at her, and I'm like, "Oh, well, thank you very much." And I walked away. Maybe I should have done more. Or said something.

AMNA AHMAD: Yeah. So that's -- I understand why that experience would stick with you.

YASMIN NAGI: Yeah.

AMNA AHMAD: Unfortunately. And then also, not only are you and Arab individual living in New York City, and you are an Arab woman, and you happen to be a hijabi. So, what has it -- what has the experience been with how people approach you, as a woman who wears a veil, in the city, during your time here?

YASMIN NAGI: If you say "the city," which is Manhattan, a lot of the people are not from New York, so it was pretty cute how they come up to me, like, "Oh, my God, what is that on your head?" I'm like, "Oh, the scarf." Like in the winter, it's not as bad, because people think it's like, just you have a scarf around because you're cold. But in the summertime, it's when people come up and start taking pictures with you, and you just feel famous. Not -- not much of a negative energy about it. Especially here in New York City, as I would say. It's just I feel a little uncomfortable when I go apply for a job. And the first thing, they would just look up at you and look at your head. They'd be like, "Oh, well, OK, well, we'll call you." You know. You just -- you just know. But that was -- I applied when I was younger. I didn't have enough experience. But I still don't think that would change. People would still look at the hijab and be like, no. I don't see a lot of hijabis working outside. I don't know. It's just -- I don't know.

AMNA AHMAD: So, I know it's difficult to predict the future, but I often ask people to do so. What do you think it would take for people to approach a woman wearing a hijab during a job interview as though she were any other woman or man?

YASMIN NAGI: [30:00] OK, the future -- oh, I don't know. I mean, just because I love New York City so much, and I feel like there is always hope in it, because we are all diverse. There is -- there will be always like a chance for an Arab woman to get somewhere in life -- a hijabi. I feel like Linda is a pretty great example. A strong woman, hijabi woman, who is doing a lot for her community. One day, *inshallah*, she will maybe become a mayor or something, who knows? And hopefully, so, once the people see how we aren't so different, and how we are helping out and we are just like them, and a piece of cloth on our head doesn't mean -- makes it different, they would just accept us. Just recently, my cousin, she lives in Colorado, and she plays soccer. She

wears a hijab. And this year was her first game, or something. It was a pretty big deal. And the referee didn't let her play because of the hijab.

AMNA AHMAD: Wow.

YASMIN NAGI: Yeah, so she was pretty hurt, but her teammates were great enough to post up a picture of all of them wearing hijab, in support for Samah, which was pretty cute, because they were like wearing their shorts with the hijab. And the picture really went viral. It went all over the internet. And right now, they're still seeing the case -- well, that day, they played -- they all did play with the hijab on; all of them.

AMNA AHMAD: Wow.

YASMIN NAGI: They were like, "We're not going to play unless you let us play this way, and Samah would play with us --" that's my cousin's name. So it was pretty cool. Like, see, that's in Colorado, where it's like, mainly white people. Not to say that all people are -- all white people are alike or any -- or any people or general race in general are like alike, but they start accepting the idea over there. And there aren't many Arabs or hijabis over there. So it's pretty tough for my cousins. But that was just a touching, beautiful beginning, I would say.

AMNA AHMAD: That's a really -- that's a really touching story that they -- I want -- I hope they won the game.

YASMIN NAGI: I don't know.

AMNA AHMAD: Not as important.

YASMIN NAGI: I was too -- I was so -- oh, I was mad about the whole, not letting her play, so I didn't even really ask if they won or no.

AMNA AHMAD: Yes, indeed. So one thing I left unasked, when we were discussing your time in Yemen, and your adjustment period back in the United States was the reason why your family decided to come back here?

YASMIN NAGI: My family -- oh, so, OK. My mom's plan was for us all to come here and get our college degrees from here. So that was her main thing. At the -- when we came back here, I was 13, so I had just started high school over here. That wasn't her plan, but she just felt like Yemen was getting a little hard. And she started seeing things that she didn't like. She would say -- till this day, she will say "unspeakable things," you see, she



doesn't want to discuss them with me. She still feels like I'm a little kid. But she wasn't feeling comfortable. My mother didn't -- never liked it in Yemen much, because of the discrimination, the, just the women were always discriminated against, and because she was -- she's -- my mother is a strong lady. She owned a daycare, so she was a business woman, in a sense. And she used to drive. My dad is totally OK with it. And he's -- my dad doesn't really like the [hamash], the face-cover. But my mother still wore it anyways, because the people kept bothering her, if she's not wearing it. So, she kept getting kind of bullied, let's say, by the Yemeni society. And because she was different. It was just like anywhere else. If you are different, people will bother you. And once they started figuring out that we are not pure Yemenis, people started bothering us in the streets. So she felt like Yemen wasn't safe for us anymore. I don't remember much of that, because it really doesn't bother me if someone calls me Sudanese, but in Yemen, it was like -- they would say it in a negative way. It was just like here, calling someone -- I don't know. I don't want to say that word. But yeah.

AMNA AHMAD: Very, very interesting.

YASMIN NAGI: Mainly it was for education. But it was also because she didn't feel comfortable anymore.

AMNA AHMAD: So when you entered the US, you went straight to high school, or was there still some time that you were in junior high?

YASMIN NAGI: Yeah, I went straight into high school. I was -- I finished eighth grade there, and I came here in the summer right away. And also, I forgot -- oh, my God, how could I? One of the reasons why she picked that time is because my aunt was pregnant, and she was alone. So the main reason why my mother went back to Yemen when she had me is because it was so different for her to raise me up. She was getting worried there was no one around. So she was like, she didn't want her sister -- her younger sister to feel the same way. So we came, [35:00] kind of to just, at that time, exactly, to just help her out with that. And then, two weeks later, after we arrived, she gave birth to a beautiful girl, named [Sarah]. That's my little baby.

AMNA AHMAD: Oh.

YASMIN NAGI: Yeah. So that was -- that was the reason why we chose that time.

AMNA AHMAD: That's very sweet. So I think people find high school different enough when they're not switching countries. So what was your adjustment period like when moving and when starting a new school?

YASMIN NAGI: A lot of people, when I tell this story think I'm lying. But since I think -- I feel like it's because I was in a British school, back in Yemen, so I barely had any Arabic classes. The only Arabic classes that I took was [Arabi], and Islamic Studies, and Quran. Everything else was in English. So it was pretty easy for me to adjust. Actually, it was even easier than I thought it would be. Since we take advanced math and sciences, back home, when I came here, I felt like it was a joke. It was seriously a joke. I would tell the teacher out -- the math teacher in class -- I would point out the wrong -- where he made mistakes. It was kind of pretty embarrassing for him, for a student that just came from abroad, fixing his mistakes, and correcting him and calling him out. So yeah, I took -- it was -- there was, at the time, we had Math A, Math B, which Math A took two years, and Math B took one year, or the opposite. Well, I took the whole -- the Regent's at mid-, the mid-year, which was supposed to take the whole year. I took it in mid-semester, and I passed it with, it was, like, around 90-something. And then the next one, the Math B, that was two years -- whatever, one of them was two years. I took it also the next year. And I passed it. So I had a whole gap of a year and a half of math that I'm done with. So I took Calculus in high school, which wasn't something many people did.

AMNA AHMAD: And which high school did you attend?

YASMIN NAGI: It was in a John Jay, the John Jay building that's in Seventh Avenue. The school itself, they were divided into, like, four schools. It was called -- my school was called the Secondary School for Research.

AMNA AHMAD: And do you have siblings?

YASMIN NAGI: I have two younger brothers.

AMNA AHMAD: Two younger brothers. And do you think that they had similar experiences as you?

YASMIN NAGI: No. Unfortunately. They came a little too young, which they are missing out -- I feel like they are missing out on the other side.

AMNA AHMAD: So, race is not something that is biological, it's a construct that is created by people and it's not always apparent to young children. So I was wondering if you remember a time when race actually became apparent to you? I know that you may have been in the -- in the context of Yemen at that point.

YASMIN NAGI: Like my race, like, just being aware of where I am from exactly?

AMNA AHMAD: Or just --

YASMIN NAGI: Or what race I am?

AMNA AHMAD: -- race in general, the way people are categorized.

YASMIN NAGI: Yeah, that I felt in Yemen, just because, like I told you earlier, just the whole Sudanese side, they looked down at it, so it was just like, oh, no, just say you're Yemenese. And I'm just like, I didn't feel comfortable about it. Because in our household, we are all more Sudanese than Yemenese. We speak Sudanese, we eat Sudanese food. We do mostly -- I don't know, we are just -- we were brought up in a way that we are just Sudanese, more than Yemeni. We do have the Yemeni in us. It's just not as -- not as strong as Sudanese. It would just be something like over here, when you're outside your house, you're speaking English, you deal with everybody in English, and then when you come back home, it's all Arabi, if you're an Arab. So, for me -- for us over there, it was like, oh, you're outside your house, you're speaking Yemeni, dealing with Yemenis, and then once you come back home, you're just to your comfort zone, it was nice. That's how I felt. So my race, at the time, I was labeled as Yemeni. I didn't feel comfortable about it, even at a young age. But yeah.

AMNA AHMAD: And so, your mother -- part of the reason why she decided to move the family to the US was because of the sense of bullying that she felt for being different?

YASMIN NAGI: Mm-hmm.

AMNA AHMAD: And I'm wondering what she encountered, once she arrived in America.

YASMIN NAGI: I feel like it was easy for her. Because she had her brother and sister here. The country wasn't as bad as it was a few years ago, when she had me. A few years -- OK, 20 years ago. (laughter) So [40:00] it was easier, just because, like I said, her brother and her sister were here. It was just easier. They set up the, like the way for her, they introduced her to more Arabs. And she was surprised to see all these Arabs and

Yemenis and Sudanese, that she was like, “Oh, I wish they were here before.” So it was easier on her, *hamdulillah*. So yeah.

AMNA AHMAD: That’s great. So she found what she was looking for?

YASMIN NAGI: Not to be exactly, what she was looking for, it was just, yeah. She’s more comfortable.

AMNA AHMAD: Mm-hmm.

YASMIN NAGI: Yeah.

AMNA AHMAD: Great. So, we’re currently living in the era of a mixed heritage president.

YASMIN NAGI: Right.

AMNA AHMAD: And I was wondering whether you had expected such a thing to occur.

YASMIN NAGI: So in truth, it was about time, we needed some change. It was -- it was amazing, seeing a mixed president. Which was like, shocking, because I felt like, other than New York, everybody else is, like, very -- er, races, and stig-- I don’t know, but it just -- it was -- it was beautiful.

AMNA AHMAD: Great. And I was wondering whether you think of him as mixed heritage, or whether you think of him as more black? As a categorization of his race or ethnicity.

YASMIN NAGI: I’m not in a position to tell -- like, I wouldn’t -- I wouldn’t say anything. That’s up to him to say it. I don’t like to label anybody unless everybody’s labeled themselves the way they want to. Other than that, I just like, I feel like, it’s wrong.

AMNA AHMAD: Mm-hmm. Yeah, I mean, both labels are used. There are categories for --

YASMIN NAGI: If you want to be black, just black, he’s just black. Fine. If you want to be mixed, that’s fine with me, as long as he was like -- I don’t know. I see something beautiful in front of me. Something -- America’s changing, I guess. That’s what I feel like.

AMNA AHMAD: Great. And so, there are various international relations-related topics that are demanding people’s attention, particularly in the Arab world right now. So, I was wondering whether you have any feelings or feedback about what’s going on in certain areas of the Middle East that you feel strongly about, or that you’d like to share?

YASMIN NAGI: Like the whole uprising and everything else that’s going one?

AMNA AHMAD: Mm-hmm. Definitely.

YASMIN NAGI: Well, like -- like I was telling you before, with my whole major, I was always passionate about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. So that had been on my mind ever since, maybe even from before, from when I was in Yemen, when I was younger. That was like, that was always interesting to me. Well, I didn't know that Israel actually existed until I came here.

AMNA AHMAD: Oh.

YASMIN NAGI: Which is -- because in the Arab world, we don't recognize it. So in our maps and whatnot, it's only Palestine. So when we come here, it's like, you learn the truth. Or, what America would like to call it as a truth, because back there, that's what we see as the truth. So anyways, well, other than that, it's like the whole uprising. I'm actually taking a class about that right now, in the history of the modern Arab world, which we are talking about the uprising only. And I feel like labeling it that way, is not what it should be, just because I don't feel like it's an uprising at this point. Or the Arab Spring. I feel it's just -- they are destroying each other, is what I feel like. It would have just... Simply because it's mostly, like Syria, for example, it's a civil war. They're not -- it's not about bringing back the regime anymore. It's just like they're killing one another, which is terrible. So has in Lebanon been there for a few years like that. And Yemen, too, it started becoming a civil war, where just the powers are just -- each faction is just fighting for power, which, that's just -- that's not what I wanted to see the Middle East as. It might take a few years for them to get better, but yeah. Another way that I feel like -- I'm still connected of course, to the Middle East, strongly, and I do whatever I can to help. So the crisis that are happening in Syria is affecting us in the -- everywhere. Whether we were in the Middle East, or we were here -- like, just for us being here, and just seeing it, we are safe over here, but we see this thing -- we see the Syrians refugees here and there, in the cold, and they were just wearing nothing. It's terrible. It's a terrible sight. So, right now, at the Association, what I'm doing is a project where we're going to have a goods drive, just to bring -- to take every-- like, just to -- like medicines, books, school supplies, dried food, maybe some clothes, blankets. Like those things that you need in life. The essentials. Just to help the Syrians, [45:00] and *inshallah*, the whole community will get into this. We did this last year, we did it with clothes. And

the community was amazing. Like, seriously, the amount of things they brought in, they donated, it was just overwhelming, and it was just great. So this time, we are planning to do just a goods drive, where -- *inshallah*, we're going to help -- help out in the least ways possible.

AMNA AHMAD: That's -- that's really great to hear that you guys are mobilizing around that issue, because it's unfortunately, only been getting worse. And -- do you live in Bay Ridge, or...?

YASMIN NAGI: I actually don't.

AMNA AHMAD: Where do you live?

YASMIN NAGI: I live in Prospect Park South. It's -- we don't really have any Arabs there. That's why I was like, I need something Arab. When I came here, I felt great. It's just the connection between both worlds. It's perfect.

AMNA AHMAD: So how would you describe your community in Prospect Park?

YASMIN NAGI: To be honest, the neighborhood that I live in is so quiet, you barely know your neighbors, which is terrible. The only people that I know are, like, the two houses next to us, which, they are Indians and Guyanese. And then the house right next to us are Spanish. And they're -- everybody's like in their own bubble. Which I don't like. You see, I like Bay Ridge, because everybody knows each other. It might be bad here, but it's still great. I love it. But my neighborhood is just like -- it's a mix. But very quiet. Deadly quiet.

AMNA AHMAD: So I assume you prefer to spend more for your time --

YASMIN NAGI: In Bay Ridge, yeah.

AMNA AHMAD: -- in Bay Ridge?

YASMIN NAGI: I'm barely in my neighborhood, because the days that I'm not here in Harlem, in school -- and in college. So -- and I hang out in the city afterwards, because I'm right there.

AMNA AHMAD: Why not?

YASMIN NAGI: Yeah. So I come home. Nothing -- even in the summer, when you would think kids would come out. We'd be the loudest kids in the street. Always the Arabs being the loudest. But yeah.

AMNA AHMAD: So, what year are you in, in terms of your education?

YASMIN NAGI: Lower Junior, so third year. Third.

AMNA AHMAD: Great. And so, in a few years, when you will be entering the workforce, what are your aspirations for the future?

YASMIN NAGI: Oh, that terrifies me, knowing that I'm going to be done in like three semesters, just kills my -- kills me slowly. I don't know. I'm very terrified. I really don't know what I want to do. Mostly I want to keep doing what I'm doing at the AAANY. But I do feel like I have to let go, and try other things, just because I like to try everything. Because before, when I was, maybe in high school, I worked with a dentist, just to see how the medical field was. And I kind of totally hated it. So that was it for medical side. And then I tried working in retail stores with Yemenis. And it wasn't the thing for me. So finally I fell in love with what I do at the [Generia], because it's just social work, social helping -- just helping community. And that's something I feel like I'm going to do for the rest of my life. That's something I'm attached to. But there is, too, more things that I want to try before I settle down for a career, or whatever you want to call it. Which is banking, and real estate.

AMNA AHMAD: And because the AAANY has been such a formative experience for you, are there any aspects of the operations of the organization that you would like to change at all, or that you would like to add on to?

YASMIN NAGI: Hm. There is a lot of things that needs to be done. Like, nothing is perfect, but it's just like a -- I don't know. There is something special about the AAANY. There is nobody who is on top of each other. There is no boss. Like even though they are labeled as your boss, they are labeled as your supervisor. But really, there is nothing. And I love that. There is nobody that would force you to do anything. It's just more of a, "Oh, you should do this." It's like more of a friendly environment, where each -- every single person is helping each other, even if they are doing something totally different. For example, I'm the Youth Fellow and I'm doing this Syrian thing, this Syrian goods drive. And that's a huge project for me, and if not for my help of my coworkers, I would totally reject the idea. But if the Youth Leader is willing to help me out -- it makes sense, because he is the Youth Leader, but then also Francis, that you are

going to interview soon, will also -- she's the Dream Organizer. She will also be helping me, [50:00] and also other -- our ex-coworker, [Adhwa], she will also be helping me, who did it last year. She was the organizer. So I -- we have just a lot of support, and we support one another in the Generia. That's the association. Another thing that -- maybe something that I would like to add, or just love to see in the Generia, the Association -- I'm sorry. I'm just used to saying the "Generia."

AMNA AHMAD: No, it's fine.

YASMIN NAGI: Is just more programs for the youth. Before I came, there wasn't much. And I started -- like, I started -- I'm trying to bring in more programs to keep the youth involved, because the most important part of the community are the youth. Or as -- that's how I see it. So, building on from the youth, our generation will be come better. The next community will be better, just because we start young. So I feel like we should -- the Association should focus more on the youth, which, we are trying our best right now. But I would like, like if I come back in two, three years, to the Association, I want to see be it runned [sic] one more youth. Which is -- that will be great.

AMNA AHMAD: Yeah. I think that's a great aspiration in and of itself for the future. So I'm wondering if any specific experiences have stuck out at you, during your time dealing specifically with individuals who came to the AAANY in need in some aspect, some experience that sort of sticks in your mind?

YASMIN NAGI: That's a tough question, because like, like seriously, I'm telling you, the AAANY is a special place, where everything is like, just every day is important. Every person is just, have a different story. And a lot of them, like they're stories stick out to me. I don't know, maybe like the most things that stick out to me is like when older, like the parents come to me, and be like, "Oh, my kids and my kids." They start complaining about their kids to me, feeling that, like, I don't know, I'm a counselor, or -- and I start advising them. Like, "Listen, your kids are Americanized. They're this and that." And I give them advices, and they -- they like my advices and they come back to me. I like that. And I don't know, it's just funny to me. Other than that, there is -- I'm telling you, there is a lot of great things that are happening. Maybe the thing that had the most impact on me till this day was last year when they did the clothes drive for Syria. It was just



lovely seeing all the donated clothes, and all the people that actually came afterwards to separate and fold the clothes into containers and stuff. It was just -- I was surprised. I was shocked.

AMNA AHMAD: And the people that come to contribute to these drives that you guys run, are they specifically members of the Arab community, or are there some things other members of the Bay Ridge community that will contribute?

YASMIN NAGI: The few days that I did help out, it was mainly from Bay Ridge. Some of them were not Arabs, not Muslims. But there were mostly strictly from Bay Ridge. But the beautiful thing it was like, there weren't only Arabs and Muslims. Some, like just people living around, they were like, "Oh, we heard there was a community service thing over here, we just wanted to help out. Oh, we heard it's for Syria, oh, I'm interested in the topic." "Oh, that's great." So, you know. A lot of positive energy, I'm telling you, in the AAANY.

AMNA AHMAD: That's really great. And I'm very happy that you were there. So, again, I hate to ask people to predict the future, but I think a lot of -- a lot might come out of it. So if someone is listening to this interview, let's say, 100 years in the future, what do you hope that they will get out of listening to your story?

YASMIN NAGI: I hope they just laugh, and see that the things that I'm saying right now, like, kind of unbelievable, the whole discriminations and things. They'd be like, "Oh, wow, they had that back then, I can't believe that." You know? Just like how now, we look back at slavery and be like, "Whoa." That was like a few years ago. It's not even that old. So maybe the future, none of this will happen. The world will become a better place. Who knows? I just want whoever is listening to me, 100 years later, to just be laughing at whatever I've said, and be like, "Wow, they were terrible back then."

AMNA AHMAD: (laughs)

YASMIN NAGI: Yup. I hope that happens.

AMNA AHMAD: Oh yeah. I hope -- I hope they can look back and laugh as well. So I think this is -- this might be a great place to wrap up. So do you have any further comments or questions, anything that you'd like to share about your story, before we wrap up?

YASMIN NAGI: I kind of said everything. It's just I'm glad to just be this mix. I would never trade it for anything. Being partly Arab, whatever, all these Arab little things that they're all mixed, and just be an American, [55:00] which I haven't really spoke about. But yeah, it's just -- I just love the experience. I just love this, and I just love everything. I love living there, I love moving here, and I just feel like it was a perfect time for me to move in here. And Like I said, *inshallah*, in a few years, people will look back and just laugh about all these discriminations and things. That's about it.

AMNA AHMAD: Great. Well, it's been an honor to interview you, Yasmin. And yeah. So I guess we'll end here. Thank you.

YASMIN NAGI: Thank you.

END OF AUDIO FILE