

Amjad Alsaidi interviewed by Yamina Salah
March 19, 2020
Woodside, NY

Yamina Salah: My name is Yamina Salah and I am interviewing Amjad in Queens, NY on March 19, 2020. Do you give me permission to record this oral history?

Amjad Alsaid: Yes, I do

YS: Where did you grow up?

AA: I grew up in Yemen. In the city

YS: Okay, why did you leave your country of origin?

AA: I left my country for many reasons, like finding a better place that provides a better education or safety or other things. But I think the main reason why I left is because of the war that happened in 2015 and it is actually still continuing.

YS: What do you miss about your country of origin?

AA: What do I miss? I miss a lot of things. I miss my childhood where we used to play soccer in the street all day.

YS: What did your friends and family say when you told them you were leaving?

AA: What did they say when I told them I am going to leave?

YS: Yes, like how did they feel? What did they say to you?

AA: In the beginning, I think they didn't believe me that I'm going to leave.

YS: They thought you were lying?!

AA: Yes, I think some of them, yes some of them didn't believe me in the beginning. But then when they saw me serious about it, they stopped being close to me and spending time, and then even like in the last week, we were together in my house, spending time together, playing some video games and other things.

YS: Do you still talk to them?

AA: Of course, yea. Some, not all.

YS: Oh okay, that's good. What were your expectations of the United States?

AA: I mean my expectation of the United States, I was expecting a much different education then what I used to see in Yemen. I also expected a better economy, like finding a good workplace and also safety and I saw everything that I expected. I found a better job, a better education, safety, all that I expected was in the United States.

YS: Okay, tell me about your journey to New York entail, did it go according to plan?

AA: Oh, I don't think so because the plan was to travel to Djibouti with my mom, my brother, and my sister and meet my father there. But then actually on my way to travel to Djibouti, they stopped us and like I don't know the name of the island, it's a low island before Djibouti and then they had us waiting over there like refugees. So, we stayed there for four days then my dad came to get us with the lawyer. Then we spend about one month in Djibouti and then finally all the applications were done then we get to continue our way to the U.S.

YS: What's Djibouti?

AA: Djibouti, I think it's like a part of Africa.

YS: What language do they speak there?

AA: French.

YS: Really?

AA: Yes, they speak a little Arabic too.

YS: Oh, that's good, okay.

YS: So, like you felt comfortable being there because they spoke the same language.

AA: Not really, no, not all of them spoke the same language. Sometimes they use English, whatever works.

YS: This is kind of like off topic but how did you communicate with people there?

AA: A few of them spoke Arabic, so I had to talk to them to translate or anything like that.

YS: Oh, okay so when and with whom did you come to NYC with?

AA: We all came as a family. My mom, my brother, and my sister and we traveled to the US in 2015. I think around September 2015.

YS: Oh okay, so right when school started, right?

AA: Yes, a little bit before.

YS: Did you go to school like right when you came to America?

AA: No, I waited one month until I finished all the applications for school. My dad registered me in High School, International High School and that is where I started.

YS: How did NYC meet and fail your expectations?

AA: New York City met and failed my expectations of the way I was assuming that the education and a better lifestyle. That I would be able to see New York City and actually as I said these expectations became true and now here I am having a better education and a better life from before.

YS: So how were you received upon arriving in your neighborhood specifically and the United States more generally?

AA: Clarify the question.

YS: Okay, so how were you treated when you first moved into your neighborhood?

AA: Yea, at first everyone did not know me, I had no friends at all but some people still talked to me because they knew my father and my father has been in this building for a long time but now I feel like now they treat me so much different, like when they see me, they ask me how I am doing. I make sure I say hello to everyone I see that I know and yea now it's like two different things, before I wasn't speaking to anyone but now I talk to anyone I see and I know almost everyone in the building.

YS: Okay, that's good. So, it's like they weren't total strangers, they knew of you but they didn't know you because they never met you before.

AA: Yea

YS: Okay, how did you adjust to a new language or culture in New York City?

AA: Well at the very beginning, like the first month, it was really hard for me to communicate with anyone from the outside because of the language. Like if I go to the supermarket to buy something, it's hard for me to find what I really need and if I call someone or ask for help, I have to use google translate but then my father registered me in International High School. There are many people from different races and most of them were immigrants and also, they provide translators for the students like teachers. I have my history teacher. She was from Yemen and I think she helped me a lot and there were Spanish teachers and other teachers from different

racers that spoke different languages. Yea, so this school was really helpful for me and that's how I adjusted.

YS: Okay, that's good. So, I felt like your experience so far here was good but anyway I'm going to continue. What new opportunities were available to you upon your arrival in New York?

AA: Can you say it one more time?

YS: What new opportunities were available to you upon your arrival in New York?

AA: Oh, I think the best opportunity was to learn a new language and get to know new people.

YS: What did you say before that? Before getting to know new people.

AA: I learned a new language. You get to speak a different language and it is not only English, I have the opportunity to learn Spanish as well.

YS: Oh yea, that is true.

AA: You hear me speaking Spanish now.

YS: Yes, and I feel like because in a way I can relate to you because I am from a Arab decent too. So, like I feel like you have a little bit more freedom, not just you but also your mom like now she has a little freedom to do more than she did when she was in Yemen I'm guessing.

AA: I'm sorry Najid is my dad

YS: What happened?

AA: Not my mom.

YS: I know, but I'm saying your mom because you said that you came with your mom from Yemen.

AA: Yes, my mom has more freedom.

YS: Were any opportunities denied to you because you were an immigrant?

AA: Denied? Well, I have no experience or anything that made me feel different from other people because I'm an immigrant, but I think the right to vote was an opportunity that I did not get to have because when I first arrived, I was not a U.S citizen. My father was not a U.S citizen either at that time. So both of us couldn't vote and I think this was the time I feel like I can have an opportunity to do something but I can't because I'm an immigrant. But now yea, now I can vote, I can have the right to vote because I am a U.S citizen now.

YS: Where have you lived in New York City and why?

AA: I lived in The Bronx since I arrived in the U.S in 2015 because my father has been living in the same place specifically in the same building.

YS: How long was he living there?

AA: He's been living there for a long time, I think, I don't know maybe over ten or fifteen years.

YS: Oh, so after you were born.

AA: Yes but you know if you ask me why, I think it is because it is much safer than other in my opinion and it is in the Bronx and people be like oh The Bronx is not really a safe place but yea this building is really good and I also like have family members, specifically the floor like the 5th floor we are at right now, it is mostly people from my family.

YS: Yes, you're really lucky you have family in your building.

AA: Yes, it's really good

YS: Yes, okay, so what was the hardest part about your move to New York City?

AA: The hardest part was just traveling from one place to another before arriving in the U.S until, like all the papers done, all the applications so we can legally enter this country. That was like the hardest part of finishing all the applications and getting to the U.S.

YS: Okay, but I mean at least it was worth it right?

AA: Yea, it was worth it, yes, of course.

YS: What's your favorite part about living in New York?

AA: My favorite part of living in New York? Yea, it's actually to see a different culture and different color around me because in my country people are mostly the same race. I have never seen a person not from Yemen in Yemen actually.

YS: Oh wow.

AA: But I feel like the whole world is living together. When I walk outside, I see people speaking different languages, like Spanish, and different people.

YS: Yea, how has your neighborhood changed since your arrival?

AA: I think it changed a lot.

YS: It changed a lot?

AA: Not a lot, I mean my building is still the same but around us, it's changed. Like you know some activities, people have been opening a lot of stores and investing in more businesses. There are many stores now not just deli stores, other stores around us are like you know... A lot of people have open stores and you know and this area is for immigrants now, it's more immigrants coming to this area too.

YS: Do you like that?

AA: Yea, I think that's good, it's good and actually you know if you, especially the Bronx, what I love in my neighborhood, if I go outside, I can find anything I need. Anything I want to buy I find next to me. I don't even have to drive a little bit far or anything. I also like the trains right next to me. Everything's close.

YS: Oh okay, yes, I see, yes especially in New York, like if you were living in another state, you'd have to drive like a couple miles just to the nearest supermarket. But here, no.

AA: Yea, it has everything.

YS: How has your reception in your neighborhood and in the United States more generally changed over time?

AA: Can you repeat the question?

YS: How has your reception in your neighborhood and in the United States more generally changed over time? I guess how you're like, how your opinion is in your neighborhood or like in the United States in general like how your opinion in this country has changed since you've been living here?

AA: At the very beginning, you know when I don't speak any English, nothing, my opinion is a little bit different. This question, it's hard answering this question but yea, my opinion was a little bit different before than now. Now, I feel like my mind is more open. You know how in Yemen, we always are covered and everyone is like, you know. At first, I was like I thought oh my God, women like that are bad and whatever blah blah blah. But now it's like you know, you get to be more open-minded. You can't judge at people by the way they look. You got to talk to people like you know, you find other things that you're missing.

YS: Yea, What would you change about the current U.S immigration system?

AA: What would I change about the U.S?

YS: The U.S immigration system.

AA: Alright, I think, you know how there are a lot of people, you know how immigrants, some of them are not allowed to have the EBT I think. Yea, I think everyone should be the same, no matter if you live in this country, you should be the same as other people and you will have the same rights as anyone else because you live in this country and also you know the people that are stuck out of this country. I think the U.S should help them make them a little bit easier for them to be allowed to this country, to be allowed to come into this country or they should like you know, I mean they should help them with anything. Provide them food outside the country if they won't let them in right now or do any activities that will help them.

YS: How has the politics of the last decade impacted your experience as an immigrant living in the United State?

AA: Can you repeat it?

YS: How has the politics of the last decade impacted your experience as an immigrant living in the United State?

AA: Oh, yea I think the politics at this time has impacted many immigrants in different ways. And I want to give an example for me like as a Muslim Arab immigrant in this country if I wore my cultural clothes you know, my cultural clothes, that I use to wear back home and start walking outside, some people are just going to start staring at me and then they are just going to consider me as a terrorist, or something else. They will say this stereotype because of what happened outside the country in Yemen or Saudia Arabia, or Iran. You know some people wear these clothes and these other people, they just, when they see them like trying on these clothes if anyone else didn't wear the same clothes, they are going to consider them as a terrorist. So now, it is like I cannot wear any clothes that will relate to my culture. I have to be more American.

YS: Yea, okay so I'm going to ask you a couple of more questions like four or five more questions if that is okay.

AA: Yea

YS: Do you ever feel you have to hide being an immigrant?

AA: Yea, as I just said, I cannot just walk around with my Arabian clothes. But if I ever feel like hiding that I'm an immigrant? Like a specific situation that happened to me where I want to hide my identity? I don't think so, I never experienced a place where I just hide my identity as an immigrant. But if it's like now I will not wear my cultural clothes and bring more culture and tradition in this country. I will try to be more open like them and you know be more American.

YS: How does your family deal with living in a mixed-status household?

AA: What do you mean?

YS: Like, you say you have a lot of family in your building, do you have any family that was born here in America?

AA: Yes.

YS: So like how does it feel when you are not being born here but like your cousins, or your siblings, or nephew and nieces were born here? Like how does that make you feel? You and your family feel?

AA: It feels good and somehow it is kind of embarrassing. Sometimes you know when I first came here my cousin who was born here used to translate for me and then I'm glad that he translated for me but at the same time he made fun of me.

YS: Aww.

AA: So that is a little bit embarrassing, you know even now if I speak English you know I still have that Arabic accent. Then it begins to start to show.

YS: Okay, why did you come to the U.S instead of another country? Like you or your dad. Do you know why your dad at least came here instead of like somewhere else?

AA: Yea, you know that I think most of us believed in the economy. The economy in the U.S is much better than any other country and this is really good work to be in and my father has chosen this for a long time. My father has been here for over 30 years, he has been in the U.S. Yea, and then from then you know we just came to the same place my father was in and then all other countries, I feel like the U.S is the best country. But even if there is another country that provides a good job, a good workplace, a better education, and a good economy, we still feel like the U.S is better.

YS: How does your family stay in contact with your family in your homeland?

AA: Now we have the technology, you just facetime and talk to them over the phone. Sometimes we hear bad news like the airplane just threw a bomb or whatever and then we call to make sure they are safe and everything. But you know they are making it worse. Like my father sometimes he calls us and is like, oh he's scared, but like everything is good. It is not a big deal like that. You hear it as a big deal but it is okay and then we call them to make sure everything is okay then we keep in touch you know.

YS: Thank you so much for letting me interview you Amjad.

AA: You're welcome.

YS: Thank you so much, Amjad, I also wanted to ask you if you wanted the recording?

AA: Yes, you can send it to me.

YS: And can you send me a picture of you please?

AA: Sure, no problem

YS: Thank you so much, thank you.