

Sara Abdoaziz Interviewed by Samantha Ríos
March 16th, 2020
Staten Island, New York

Samantha Ríos: Hi, my name is Samantha Ríos and I'm interviewing Sara Abdoaziz in Staten Island, New York on March 16th, 2020. Do you give me permission to record this oral history?

Sara Abdoaziz: Yes, I do.

SR: Okay, where did you grow up?

SA: I was born and raised in Brazil.

SR: Okay, could you tell me a story about Brazil? First thing that comes to mind maybe.

SA: Oh, it's a beautiful, beautiful country. It's hot- oh my God it's just such a peaceful place and the only bad thing is the poverty. Like it's a lot of you know poverty- a lot of poor people but everything else is so beautiful.

SR: Okay. Why did you leave your country of origin?

SA: Because my mother wanted a better life for us. You know like it's a very poor country you know, and she wanted us to have a better life.

SR: How old were you?

SA: When I left Brazil, I was like twelve.

SR: Twelve?

SA: Yeah.

SR: Okay. Do you miss anything about your country?

SA: I have family there, so I miss my sister that's there. I just miss my sister.

SR: Okay. What did you say when your parents said you were leaving?

SA: Well I was very young. I was like eleven or twelve years old. She didn't ask, you know. She didn't ask me, "Oh, do you want to go?" She just told me, "We going to America.", and when she told me that, you know I was young. So, like just being with my mom, that's all I care about. So, I really didn't think about anything more.

SR: Right. What were your expectations of the United States? If you had any.

SA: I really didn't have any. You know what I mean like I didn't- we didn't talk much about the U.S. You know when I was like- back then was just about me going with my mom to another country actually.

SR: What did you think about it? About moving.

SA: About moving here?

SR: Yeah.

SA: It was scary a little bit you know? But like my mind was I'm with my mom so I'll be safe you know?

SR: Yeah

SR: Tell me about your journey to New York. Did it go according to plan?

SA: Not at all. Not at all! You know I was supposed to come here with my mom, and we found out my dad passed away back there. Like in Brazil so she told my aunts that lived here- like you know "can I leave my daughter with you guys?" You know and she went back to Brazil, so it was just- you know being in a country where I didn't speak no English- And I didn't have a way of communicating with your mom's sisters and stuff was a little bit hard. It was so hard.

SR: How did New York City meet and fail to meet your expectations?

SA: How New York City met my expectations you mean?

SR: Yeah.

SA: Well, I wouldn't choose to go back to Brazil. I mean this is my home now. You know what I mean? I mean this is a country where you know like I can be who I am with the freedom that gives it to me you know? Yeah. it's like I'll go back home for vacation, but this is home. So, it definitely met you know- it met my expectations you know?

SR: Okay.

SA: I don't know if I make any sense.

SR: How were you received upon arriving in your neighborhood specifically and the United States more generally?

SA: I mean I didn't really speak the language, I guess it was okay. I mean I really didn't speak the language. So, I had to go to school to learn the language so it's not- it was I guess okay, it was good.

SR: Right. Did you move directly to New York first or was it somewhere else that you moved?

SA: I came straight to New York.

SR: Okay.

SR: How did you adjust to a new language or culture in New York?

SA: Oh, that was hard. You know when I came here, I didn't speak no English. It was so hard to communicate; you know to ask anybody for anything and then I went to ESL. You know "English as Second Language" and I was taught. I was taught the language. It was hard in the beginning; I was young I didn't know anything but. It's good now.

SR: How long did it take for you to learn the language?

SA: Oh my God I still don't know the language!

SR: Really?

SA: No really! No. It's a learning process every day you know it's a learning process with me.

SR: Right.

SA: Yeah. Long time.

SR: Okay. What new opportunities were available to you upon your arrival in New York?

SA: Well, when I started learning English on ESL and you know like over there, we have students also that spoke Spanish. So, I learned Spanish you know, and then that's how I found my job because you know like the different languages that I learned in this country because there's so much divers- how you say?

SR: Diversity?

SA: ... Diversity that I learned like Spanish with the same students that was in ESL class to learn English.

SR: Right.

SA: You know, and that's how I got a job because the first job that I had most of the people spoke Spanish.

SR: Right.

SA: So, I had to speak Spanish at that job you know so that's the opportunity that this country offers you because it's such a diversity in this country that there are so many languages and I learned to speak so many languages here.

SR: Okay. How did your status affect you at school?

SA: I mean you know I keep going back to when I first came here, and I didn't speak English at all, so it felt very lonely. Being that age like you know, thirteen years old and not being able to communicate with nobody, it was very lonely, I felt very alone. You know that's how it is.

SR: Yeah, what opportunities were denied to you because you are an immigrant?

SA: Like because I have such a strong accent and I don't know- you know I can't speak about other people, people like don't think we're smart. You know just as smart as they are so a lot of times, say I want to go buy a car or sometimes say when we bought a house like they don't speak to me they all speak to the second person like, I was married you know say we went to buy a car, they spoke to my husband because my husband was Italian he didn't have an accent but because I had an accent they don't think we're as intelligent as they are. You know what I mean? So that's a disadvantage.

SR: Okay. Where have you lived in New York City? And why?

SA: Okay so when I first came to this country I lived in Brooklyn, New York because my aunt, she lived there and that's where I stayed when I first came here and then I went to Sheepshead Bay.

SR: Okay

SA: You know because that's when I went to high school in Sheepshead Bay. So I had another aunt that lived there and now I'm in Staten Island.

SR: Where in Staten Island?

SA: I lived by Forest Avenue, Staten Island.

SR: Okay. What was the hardest part about your move to New York City?

SA: Leaving my dad. You know, because my dad stayed behind. He was supposed to follow us but then you know, he passed away, so he wasn't able to come but, yeah, leaving my dad behind was the hardest thing.

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

SA: I love New York! It's a fast pace, you know like, just everyone's alive you know like, the shopping I love shopping! And the food, the food's amazing.

SR: How has your neighborhood changed since your arrival?

SA: Oh my God, like I explained to you I lived in Brooklyn when I first came in right? So, everybody used to be Italian you know, now it's like they are all Chinese now. That's how it's changed, it keeps changing.

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

SA: First it was good, then it was bad, then it was good. Years ago, when I first came it was easier for us to come into the country you know, my mom has a green card. My mom always had a green card and she was always able to go back and forth to Brazil.

SR: Right.

SA: Now when she go back to Brazil, she so scared that she has to just spend a couple of months there and come back because she's afraid that they're not going to allow her to come in.

SR: Right.

SA: So, it's different. It was easier for us to come before than what it is now. Now we fear that we're not going to be able to get back in.

SR: What would you like to change about the current US immigration system?

SA: Freedom for those that want to come here to want what I wanted, - just to be able to come to this country and be able to have freedom and not to be afraid and now it's not like that anymore. Not to stop to those people that need to come in here you know, that need a better life or want a better life for themselves you know, to let them in.

SR: Right. How has the politics of the last decade impacted your experience as an immigrant in the United States?

SA: Oh my God, it's leaving the country you know like I'm a citizen and I'm afraid that if I leave for a certain amount of time that I'm not going to be able to come in. You know like, I have sisters and my mom you know, that like I explained she has a green card and she's afraid to leave the country for a few months because she's afraid that they're not going to allow her to come in. And my sister you know, that she wants to come visit her mom or that she wants to come visit her sister and she's scared that they're not going to let her in because now like I said it's not as easy as when I first came to this country. You know what I mean? So, it changes especially over for years.

SR: So, for you it's negative right now?

SA: Very negative because you know like if my sister was to come sees me or my sister wants to come sees her mom, she doesn't know if she's going to be able to come in. It's really hard.

SR: Do you ever feel you have to hide who you are as an immigrant?

SA: Sometimes. You know? Sometimes I do because people treat you different. People think you less than them You know, not as smart as they are because of the accent or because you come from another country, we're not as smart as they are.

SR: I want to focus on significant events that impacted your community specifically. Can you elaborate?

SA: Sure. So you know the poverty?

SR: Poverty.

SA: You know it's so big in Brazil that like, the politicians you know like they crooked and all the cops, say you're driving the car and you want to stop at a red light, you can't make a full stop. You have to slow down a little bit, then you got to keep going because it's such a high crime there, so many thieves, that it's really bad. You know like you can't walk in the streets with a cell phone because they will actually rob you. It's really bad. It's not as people say or seem to think it is you know what I mean, it's because it's such a poor country, there is no middle class in Brazil. You're either poor or rich. So if you don't have the money, then you're treated really bad. You know, so that's how it is.

SR: Why did you come to America and not any other country?

SA: I came here because my mom's family lived here and then she- like I said, we were supposed to come here. I don't even know if we were supposed to come on vacation. We were supposed to come here and then my father passed away and she sent me here because her sister lives here and all her family's here so that's the reason I ended up here, because her family's here.

SR: How has your family stayed connected?

SA: I mean, I have family all around in the world you. Like in Brazil, in Spain, over here in America. I mean, there's so many technologies today that, that's how they stay connected through the phone you know, like to the computer, it's so many ways that we can be connected now.

SR: Can you tell me about your path to citizenship?

SA: Oh yeah, I remember. It was a little bit scary because I knew that there was going to be questions when you get there, so they gave us this book to learn all these questions about who's the president, how many presidents were in this country. So, it

was a little bit scary but when I got there, she just asked me three questions about democracy of the United States, and it was okay. It was a little bit scary, but then I was so proud of myself when they say you're a citizen and I had to swear the oath and it was pretty cool. It was good.

SR: Okay. Do you speak any other languages besides English?

SA: Yes. I speak Spanish, Portuguese which is my first language, and Arabic. (I speak) Arabic (because) my parents are from Jerusalem so that's how I learned the language.

SR: Okay.

SA: And Spanish like I explained to you, because of my first job. You know they always spoke Spanish, so I had to learn Spanish.

SR: Okay. What was the hardest language to learn and why?

SA: Arabic.

SR: Arabic?

SA: Yeah, Arabic is pretty hard. I don't know it's just a quick language you know. Either you know how to speak quickly or- yeah. Arabic is hard.

SR: Is there anything else you would want people to know about your immigrant status?

SA: You know, I was born and raised- I mean I was born in Brazil, but my parents are Muslim. I mean they're Arabic, so my religion is Muslim, so when 9/11 happened we were very discriminated. Like I was actually afraid because my mom she wears the you know the vail-

SR: Hijab?

SA: The Hijab and when 9/11 happened, we were afraid for her to walk down the street, that someone was going to attack her because you know. I feel sometimes that because of my religion, because people know I'm Arabic, sometimes that they do discriminate, besides me having an accent because I'm not from this country, you know, also being a Muslim sometimes.

SR: If you had to do it all over again, would you come here, or would you have done something differently?

SA: I would definitely had come to this country and not do nothing differently because you know what? This country has given me and my kids so many opportunities. My kids are American citizens, they were born here. I have three kids, one's a teacher you know. Like, one goes to a great school I mean, no I would have done everything just the

same. Just the same because it's made me who I am today and all the experiences that I had just- no I would not do it differently. I would've done the same.

SR: Well I want to thank you for your time and thank you for talking with me and letting me be part of, you know, a little insight of your life. This concludes our interview with Sara, and this has been Samantha Ríos. Goodnight!