

Interview 14

This interview was conducted by the Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center (MEMEAC) of The Graduate Center, City University of New York (June 2002 – March 2003).

Gender of respondent: Female

Age: 24

Q. Hi! Good afternoon [name of respondent]. My name is [name of interviewer], and I would like to ask you a few questions about September 11th and how you experienced it. Initially, I'd like to ask you a few questions about yourself. Where were you born?

A. Cairo, Egypt.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. The U.S.

Q. How old were you when you came to the United States?

A. About eight years old.

Q. Eight years? And before that you lived in...

A. In Egypt.

Q. Where were your parents born?

A. Egypt as well.

Q. So they're both Egyptian.

A. Yes.

Q. And what is your religion?

A. Muslim.

Q. And how old are you now?

A. Twenty-four.

Q. And how old were you when you came to the U.S.? You said eight?

A. Eight, yeah.

Q. And you are a U.S. citizen?

A. Yes.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. Col-- ... I'm an undergrad, college.

Q. Where?

A. Kingsborough.

Q. What are you studying?

A. Liberal arts. And I'm going into forensic psychology next semester.

Q. Oh. And when are you supposed to graduate?

A. Well, I'm supposed to graduate in two more years, within two more years, but you never know. (laughs)

Q. And what is your main occupation?

A. I'm an executive secretary at the [name of center].

Q. And what is that you exactly do there?

A. Well, I do administrative work and I do personal services for, I guess, our clients. I'm also in charge of the Health Access Program where I go with the clients here to the Medicaid office for whatever problem, whether it's legal or whether they've been turned down by the Medicaid for, you know whatever reason, or language problem, translating.

Q. What is your marital status?

A. Separated.

Q. Do you have any children?

A. One.

Q. Okay. How old?

A. Six.

Q. Okay. So now I'd like to ask you a few questions about how you experienced September 11th itself. Where were you on that day at around 9 a.m.?

A. I was in Kingsborough. I had a sociology class at nine o'clock. Yes. That's where I was.

Q. And how did you hear of the attacks?

A. Well, we had the TV all over the campus, or actually around the cafeteria, and it was on the news there. And people were talking about it. But I just ... It didn't click into my mind. I thought maybe it's a bad rumor or something, you know, kids are going around to say and I wasn't thinking about it. It was my first day in Kingsborough and I was looking for books and I was just overwhelmed by this new college 'cause I transferred to Kingsborough. And you know, one girl actually came up to me, I was getting ... I was looking for books on the bulletin board, and she came up to me and she told me, "You know what happened? The World Trade Center has just been bombed or been, you know destroyed." And I was like, "What? You're crazy. What are you talking about?" Like, "Yeah. It's on the news." I was like, "Yeah, whatever. You're... you're crazy. You're dumb." And then I left. And you know, I took my Dad's car and on the way home I see all this traffic and everywhere you go there's traffic. And I'm still not aware of what's going on.

Q. What time was this around when you left and you were in your car?

A. Like, around twelve, one.

Q. Okay. So this whole time ... it didn't click?

A. No. It didn't click.

Q. Okay.

A. I didn't believe it. I was going home and I'm, like, thinking this traffic, why is this traffic here? What's going on? And then I'm driving and I'm in my world. You know? And I get home and my Mom is, like, "Where the hell were you?" And ... because I was late going home. You know? I stayed after school to look for books and whatever. And she's like, "Where were you?" You know? "You know what happened? The World Trade Center ..." It's like, she's serious. And then I see the TV and I believe it. I believed it. Once I saw, like, the news and it was really coming down I... I started to realize that it happened. But other than that I didn't think it was true.

Q. So for those four hours you just thought it was a rumor.

A. I thought, you know, that it was just kids going around saying, you know silly things. You know? Sometimes college kids can act like high school kids. (both laugh)

Q. So when you did find out and it was confirmed that it was an attack and that you know now, what was your first reaction to it?

A. I sta-- ... I would say that I still did not believe it.

Q. Even when you saw it on TV?

A. Even when I saw it on TV I... I was shocked. But the... the second thing that I got was an Arab did it or an Arab is going to be accused of doing it. Who, where, what I don't know, but I know some Arab Muslim person is going to end up being accused of doing it. that's ...

Q. Did you think it was an Arab or Muslim, or were you just assuming that that's what people were going to say?

A. Yes. I ... I knew that people are going to say that an Arab Muslim, because Arab Muslims are always associated with some type of terrorism. And, like, deep down inside me I knew the gov...the US government is going to find some Arab Muslim behind this.

Q. How did that make you feel?

A. Well, discriminated against. I... I... You know? I feel like Arabs and Muslims are always associated with that, not just... not just in the political sense but you know, people around, they just... They know who you are but they still go according to what they hear on the news or what they hear other people say. Or somebody had a bad experience with some Muslim or Arab ... and you know, we have a saying in Egyptian: "Not all your tools are the same." They're not all the same size. So, you know, not because you hear something about someone it means... right away it means the whole population is the same thing.

Q. Yeah. What would you say is your most vivid memory of September 11th? Is there anything that you wouldn't forget about that day?

A. The smell and the smoke.

Q. You could smell it?

A. Yeah. And I can smell it...

Q. Where were you living at the time?

A. Bay Ridge.

Q. And you could smell it there?

A Yeah. I can smell ... And the traffic and just, like, as if we were in a war. It felt like a war, like a war state.

Q. Because of the traffic and the smoke and...

A. Yeah. And everybody is just in fear, you know? Even my Mom. My Mom had the *hijab* on, you know, the cover? She took it off that same exact day.

Q. Really?

A. I mean, my Mom is not religious but she likes the custom to... she likes to cover her hair for some reason. I don't know why. It doesn't make a difference to me. But she felt scared. She... she felt unsafe.

Q. She took it off any time before... Does she have it back on now or is she still...

A. No. She took... she took it off and that was it.

Q. Did you ever ask her why she did it?

A. Well, I... I asked her and she just ... she knows people here are not... they're not very friendly towards anything that's different so she said, "they won't understand. All they see is somebody whose covered. And you know, I'm an old lady. I don't feel like hassling with this." Because to me, if that was up to me, I would still keep it. I wouldn't care. But I understand. She doesn't want to be put in a bad spot or a bad situation. And I'm, you know, I'm not scared. You come up to me and tell me why the hell you have this on your... you terrorist this, or you terrorist that...

Q. Okay. Going back to 9/11, what were your feelings about what happened immediately afterwards? When you found out that it was an attack and that it was Middle Eastern how did that make you feel? Did you feel anger? Did you... Were

you shocked? Did you feel guilty as an Arab-American?

A. I did not feel guilty because, for one reason or the other, I... I don't believe that it's true.

Q. You didn't believe it?

A. No, I still don't believe it's true

Q. Really?

A. Because, I don't believe that Arabs are... to be honest, I don't believe that Arabs are so good in doing something like that. They... they... they are not... I'm not... I'm not trying to put them down, but it wouldn't... it wouldn't be so perfect like that. I think it's... it's basically impossible for somebody to come from the outside to do something like this. It's got to be somebody who's in and knows what's going on with...

Q. Did you feel sadness or anger?

A. Did I feel sadness for... Well, I felt sadness because I consider the U.S. as my country. You know? I mean, Egypt also is my country. But I grew up here. I don't know much of Egypt that... you know, anymore. So I... I felt sadness for people here. I sympathized with them as if, you know, you know, they were my family like. And I'm grateful for not knowing anybody directly...

Q. At the Center, the WTC?

A. I don't know anybody directly that's been hurt by that so I'm grateful to that. But I sympathize with anybody that did know or, you know, somebody's relative or friend, 'cause it's a very tough situation. And I've called all the people I know to make sure that they've been okay, their family's been okay, their friends, whatever.

Q. When Americans asked you about your ethnic background before 9/11 what did you tell them?

A. American-Egyptian.

Q. And what about immediately after?

A. I still say the same.

Q. And now?

A. The same.

Q. So there's no change. You haven't...

A. No. I know I'm an American. That's one thing for sure, because, okay, although I was born in Egypt, but I grew up here. I don't know anything about Egypt to... to say that I'm one hundred percent Egyptian. Or I... I don't go according to the Egyptian tradition one hundred percent for me to say that I'm Egyptian one hundred percent.

Q. Have your feelings towards the United States changed since 9/11?

A. Well, my feelings towards the United States did not change in the sense that I know... I know this is a country of opportunities and it's basically my country. But my feelings changed toward people who are still ignorant to, you know to the rest of the population because one crazy man, if he did, you know decide to... to do something I shouldn't be blamed for it.

Q. What about politically? Has your level of political awareness changed?

A. In which sense, like?

Q. Towards U.S. domestic policy or U.S. foreign policy.

A. Well, I don't think the U.S. should be involved with... with the outside world. They should try to concentrate more on the... the domestic affairs that we have here. You know? We have enough here to deal with.

Q. You mentioned before that you've lived here your entire life. You don't have much recollection of Egypt. Do you feel a sense of belonging to the United States?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you feel at home here?

A. Yes.

Q. Have you always felt like this?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you think that there's been a change in the way people from the Arab world

have been treated since 9/11?

A. Yes, of course.

Q. How so?

A. I mean, they've been discriminated against. A lot of people have... have backlashed. Like, you know?

Q. Can you give me some examples of what you know?

A. Well, okay. For me... I'll tell you about myself.

Q. Just...?

A. I had only one incident but I guess that's because I don't totally represent any... like I don't have any Arabic signs that says that I'm Arabic, or I don't wear the *hijab*, or I don't have anything that really classifies me as an Arab so ... But this person that I know at the gym, I go to work out, he's, like, he's almost my Dad's age or he is my Dad's age and, you know, I know him: Hi. How are you? Whatever. We're just acquaintance and we talk sometimes. On the date of 9/11 when I got to the gym I went up to him and I said, "I hope you're okay. I hope your family's okay. You know? I hope everything with you is all right." And he just stormed at me. He goes...

Q. Where was he from, do you know?

A. He's Italian. He's Italian-American. He goes, "Oh, you bombed my country and you go dancing on the street," and he was yelling at me. So I said, you know what? I'm going to leave the guy alone. Maybe he has every right to be upset. You know? If I was in his place I'd be upset too. So I gave him the benefit of the doubt and I just left him at that. I said, when he comes, he'll come by and he'll, you know he'll talk to me again so I'll just leave him alone. So I did. But he didn't leave me alone. He...

Q. During that day or afterwards as well?

A. That day. Because I, you know I changed my schedule. I... I didn't go to work about at the same times that he did any more, so he went up to his friends right next to me where I'm working out and he's like, "those Arabs, fucking Arabs, Muslims, those guys they

don't ... they're no good for nothing. They just come here, they sell hotdogs, they drive the yellow cabs, and they hit their women. And their women are smelly and their women, all they do is have kids. If it was up to me I would put them all in a ship and send them back to where they came from." And they were going on and on, all of them. And that guy had given me a book before. He wanted to introduce me to ti-chi since I do yoga, he... he's... he was talking to me about ti-chi so he had given me a book called *Enlightenment*. I'm like, this guy doesn't have much enlightenment himself. You know? So I wanted to give him back the book. So I said I'll bring it to me... with me to the gym and when I see him I'll just put it next to him or give it to him. So I... I brought it. And I saw him and I was... I was holding... I wanted to put down the book but I felt like it was more polite to hold it and give it to him and I shouldn't, you know, bring my level down to his.

Q. He works there?

A. No. He goes to work out there. He's a member there. So I... I was holding out the book to him and he goes, "I don't want to touch it after you touched it." So I just put it down. And I'm talking about someone who's like, in their late forties, early fifties, probably. So that's a man with a lot of experience, a lot of knowledge, and he's acting like a kid. So I just, you know, I left him alone, whatever. Months went by, I don't know, like maybe two or three months went by and he was the same way. So, you know and he came around. He came around and he said I'm sorry. I'm, like, I don't care. You know? But it's... it's for you. You know? You're... you're the one who's... who's labeling yourself as this little kid. You're not using your head. And you're putting me in the same category as whatever experience you had or whatever you think you know. You know? So that's... that's what happened with me. And I know for a fact that a lady who was wearing the *hijab* in Queens, she got killed. And also in Coney Island some Muslim person or somebody that looks Muslim got killed. You know?

Q. Have you experienced any kind of other backlash or is that the only one?

A. Well, you know, I walk into some places, sometimes they don't know that I'm an Arab, and I hear them talking and making fun of Arabs. Like, I walked in... into this social service center in Sunset Park, I've forgot what it's called, and the ... the maintenance people or the janitor was cleaning up the bathroom because it over-flooded. And they put the water in a.. in a pail and they go, "Oh well, we should bring an Arab to drink out of that. We should make Arabs drink this water." And I was like, excuse me. I'm an Arab. And right... right there they just stopped talking. They were like, "Oh, I'm sorry." And I was like, "Oh, you don't have to be sorry. " But, you know, Arabs are people too. You know? It's not like we're barbarians or...(laughs)

Q. Has a member of your family ever experienced backlash, such as harassment or discrimination or...

A. My sister.

Q. What happened with your sister?

A. Well, my sister is a limo driver.

Q. How old is she?

A. She's thirty-three. She has her own car and her own radio. And she... like, people, customers, would come into her car and they started talking with her, having conversations. And then, you know, they get friendly so they asked her where are you from, and then she tells them and then all of a sudden, it's just quiet and it's deadly. It's like, all of a sudden they're having this lively talking stops. And then they start to act rude with her. They... they're like... I don't know what really happens, but she says they act rude once they find out she's Egyptian.

Q. Does this still happen now or did it happen, like, after 9/11?

A. It happened after 9/11.

Q. And it continues...

A. I don't know if it continues now, but you know, I was talking to her a month ago and she told me this.

Q. Do you think Middle Eastern or Arab-American groups have been effective in handling the backlash against our group since 9/11?

A. No, not really. I don't think they've been effective. I don't think they're leaving anything to protect the Arabs.

Q. Why do you think that is so?

A. Well, for one thing, like, march for that. We didn't try to promote ourselves better, or, you know talk about ourselves. We... we didn't really ... we didn't do anything. We didn't try to protect our self, period. I mean, if it wasn't maybe for the Arabic-American family Support Center doing stuff...

Q. Big plug.

A. You know, doing stuff or doing social services, I don't think the Arabs really care. They're like, okay. People look at us like that, we accept it. They don't do anything. And I think it's very important for a person to fight for themselves and to try to prove their point and to get it across. That's what I think.

Q. Have you joined any ethnic or religious organizations since 9/11?

A. No.

Q. Why?

A. Why? (laughs) It's a good question. Why? I'm stuck.

Q. Do you find that there aren't any for you to join or there's nothing appealing for you to join?

A. I don't think I fit into that. You know? I don't know what they would expect me to do or to be. I don't think I fit into that. I'm... I'm very... I'm a very peaceful person and I stick to what's right and what's true. You know? I don't... I don't try to take one side over the other. But I know that the U.S. did not handle... did not do the right thing for the Arabs and the Arabs did not do the right thing for themselves. That's what I think.

Q. In your opinion, what is the nature of the relationship between Arab-Americans and other groups in the United States at this time?

A. The relationship between Arab-Americans?

Q. Arab-Americans and other Americans, Italian-Americans, Spanish-Americans, things like...?

A. Well, I feel like the Arab-Americans are still considered foreigners because there isn't enough Arab-Americans in the U.S.

Q. So you think relations are more tolerant or less tolerant, kind of strained?

A. I think it's less... less tolerant.

Q. What do you think members of our community can do to improve the relationship between the different ethnic groups, between Arab-Americans and Italian-Americans and the Latino community and...

A. Well, I never really thought about that, because I do not think that Arabs would take the initiative to try to do something. But if there should be something done I think people tune more into TV so I guess it's just, you know, promoting Arab-Americans on TV. I'm not really sure what, like, what would be the best idea for that.

Q. What would you say...? Like, people in your community... do you live in an Arabic neighborhood?

A. In Bay Ridge.

Q. What do you think would be a positive thing for them to do in order for... Not even relationships in terms of, like, a whole American understanding, just in your community... within here in New York City, for example?

A. Well, maybe I guess, like, I don't know, hold a festival and invite people and make Arabic food and invite all, anybody who's American to come in and see what our culture is all about and just educate them about it. But again, I think TV plays a big role. You know? So anything that's will be done in my community it will be for that community and anybody that's outside of that won't know. So, okay, that's good as far as Bay Ridge to have an Arabic festival and for people just you know to get an idea. But for the outside, for the rest of the U.S., you really need to go, like, media.

Q. Okay. What do you think Arab-American organizations can do to improve the relationships?

A. Well, Arab-American organizations can basically do the same, I guess. You know?

Q. Like, such as this one 'cause you work at the [name of center]. What does this organization do to improve? What do you think this organization can do to improve the relationship?

A. I think ... I think Arab... the Center... Well, I wasn't working here during that time. But they can educate Arabs on how to handle the situation, instead of, like, for the Arabs ... If they got backlash they shouldn't act the same way back, you know? To tell them how to handle the situation better. And I guess to, like, hold workshops. This is what we're good at, holding workshops, (laughs) going to town h all meetings and promoting... You know? 'Cause we have a lot of media that come in and they want to find out about us and about what we do. So I guess, in a way, promoting it again through the media.

Q. What do you think the status of Arab-Americans, like the immigrant group in the United States is right now, after 9/11?

A. Well, a lot of... a lot of them have been sent back. (laughs)

Q. So would you encourage a lot of people from these countries, from Egypt, from Iran, from Lebanon, from... from the Middle East, would you encourage them to come to the Untied states?

A. Not at the moment.

Q. Why not?

A. Because it wouldn't be such a... a happy time for them here. You know? I... I believe that opportunities for Arabs in general here have been going down. I mean...

Q. Since 9/11 or before, do you think?

A. Since 9/11. I mean, it's been going down for everyone but in particular Arab-Americans especially if you have anything that you know will make you stand out, like a cover or something. I mean, a lot of people have been backlashed that, you know... I don't

want to go into it, but you know so many of the cases were of people who were working at one place and they've been discriminated against. And this is not a life, you know because you spend eight hours of your day in your job so you know you have to be comfortable.

Q. So we've talked about some of the negative consequences of 9/11. Do you think there are any positive consequences of 9/11?

A. No. Well, the only one positive thing that I believe is that it brought the New Yorkers together. It made them more aware that you can lose a person any time. And since we lost a great number of people, people started to be more caring, family oriented. So that's the only positive thing that... that people now are more caring of each other.

Q. What about in terms of visibility of Arab-Americans in the United States? Do you think that there has been more visibility or improved understanding?

A. Just somewhat, not that much.

Q. Not too much?

A. Like, I think that something on TV about Arab-Americans, you know, a few shows here and there, but not so much. But people are now interested to know about Arabs. They don't know enough but at least they want to know.

Q. Okay. Why do you think the attacks on the World Trade Center happened? Do you think Arabs or Muslims from the Middle East, for example, hate America?

A. Perhaps. I really don't know.

Q. Depending like... You were hesitant in the beginning. You insisted that Arabs, not insist but you're kind of wary about the idea that Arabs did not do the attacks?

A. Because it was successful. That's why. (laughs)

Q. So what... what do you think the U.S. can do to resolve this problem of terrorism against it?

A. To resolve the... the terrorism against the U.S. in general, not from the Arabs?

Q. From the Arab world?

A. From the Arab world in particular?

Q. Since the United... Yes, particular?

A. Stop interfering with problems in the Middle East and around the world. Stop interfering with Israel. You know? Stop interfering with Iraq. Top interfering with any problem that deals with something in the outside. Because they try to go out to help and... and to, you know, effect the problem in a positive way but they end up damaging their reputation over there. And people don't like that. You know? And Arabs outside, they're like the mafia. They retaliate. If... if it was the Arabs. But I doubt it was because it was successful. (laughs with unintelligible words)

Q. Are there any other issues or points that we have not discussed in this interview that you'd like to comment on?

A. Not that I know of. (laughs)

Q. Well, thank you very much for your cooperation. This is a lot of fun.