[00:00:04]

You are listening to Tell Me Your Story where we connect to HLS staff on a personal level [MUSIC]

Hello everyone. This is Edgar Kley Filho from HLS Human Resources department. My pronouns are he, him, his. Today we are talking to Sherif Hasham from ITS, who will tell us about his life, how long he's in this position at HLS, and the work he does. Thank you for joining us Sherif, and please tell me your story.

[00:00:40]

Thank you for having me. I'm glad to be here. I think my story is coming to America. Not the movie which I think is a great movie. But I'm going to try to tell you how I came here. I remember when I was younger, I liked rock and roll music.

[00:01:12]

Really?

[00:01:13]

Yeah.

[00:01:13]

Me too.

[00:01:14]

I think my cousins and some my parents and some other friends they got me, it was cassette tapes back then [OVERLAPPING]

[00:01:26]

They good ones.

[00:01:28]

Yeah. I took a liking to Pink Floyd.

[00:01:33]

Really?

[00:01:34]

Then Metallica.

[00:01:36]

Nice.

[00:01:39]

I got really into rock music back then. I just, as a boy that grew up in Egypt, I've always wanted to see those people and interact with the peoples that produced and listened to rock and roll music. As a child, I would tell my parents, I want to go to America.

[00:02:09]

You did say?

[00:02:10]

Yeah. They would ask me why and I said because I want to be part of that, just see what they're about. It was curious. They decided, my parents, I think me and my sister, my two brothers were not born back then, but they said, okay, we're going to take the kids to Disneyland land. He keeps saying he wants to go to America. Yes. I remember going with my mother to the Egyptian embassy its in the American embassy in Cairo. It is a very nice place called Garden City was just a lot of villas and a lot of gardens. That's where I don't know if the the American embassy in Egypt is still there or not. It's very nice building.

[00:03:04]

You lived in Cairo?

[00:03:05]

I lived in Cairo, yeah. I'm talking about probably I was eight or nine.

[00:03:09]

Eight or nine years old.

[00:03:10]

Back then. Yeah. I came here when I was 22, I'm 41 now, so I've probably been here [OVERLAPPING]

[00:03:19]

Say half of your life.

[00:03:20]

Yeah.

[00:03:21]

But you spent a good part of your youth while in Cairo in Egypt.

[00:03:27]

Yeah, I graduated college. I graduated the American University in Cairo in 2004.

[00:03:35]

How was going to going to school there? What's the school system there for people who don't know?

[00:03:45]

I had a culture shock [OVERLAPPING]

[00:03:47]

When you came?

[00:03:48]

When I came here. Yes. Because I'm not talking about universities. I came here to grad school and I came and I had a scholarship and a stipend. I remember them asking me to teach a undergraduate entry-level mathematics and physics class.

[00:04:28]

That's what you're good at?

[00:04:29]

Yes. My background is in engineering. I looked at the textbook and I'm like, it's not a college textbook. That's a high school textbook.

[00:04:38]

That was the difference?

[00:04:40]

Yes. For a while it was confusing because I always thought that I came from a third world country but then I was like, no, there's some deficiencies here. That was my take on it. It was a little bit more advanced, I think, on the Math and Science. That was one of my first culture shocks.

[00:05:14]

What about in another aspect of a culture shock? Because I'm asking the question because I want to compare, tell you also my view in terms of when I was in Brazil, and how it is. Was music and whatever is in that area open there for you, you will have musical influence from all places?

[00:05:34]

Yeah. Sure.

[00:05:36]

Or just US.

[00:05:38]

The American who was in college, at least, the American University in Cairo, was a liberal art school and benefited immensely from it. I remember we had a core curriculum that we had to take and you had to take a class in humanities, you had to take a class in history, you had to take a class in the performing arts. I resisted it at the beginning, I was like really, I have to pick a theater class or [LAUGHTER] an acting class. The engineer in me and I'm like, how about like a nice differential equations class or maybe advanced statistics? That sounds more appealing.

[00:06:21]

Exactly.

[00:06:22]

But I took the theater class and it was probably it was acting in Arabic. It was probably one of my favorite classes. I learned so much from that theater class that I actually appreciated very much the liberal arts education that I received, even with a degree in engineering. It's because I think in that class that I learned public speaking and not to show the fear of public speaking because I, the instructor was saying, if you get onstage and you fall, it doesn't matter if the audience doesn't know, maybe it's part of the show. He said, If you're reciting the national anthem or reading the Quran or the Megillah, somebody knows it. They might realize where you made an error. But if you forget a line or two and there's no script [OVERLAPPING]

[00:07:24]

Majority will not notice that.

[00:07:26]

Nobody will notice. Just play along. I learned that in that class, and even the more powerful class I think I learned in the theater class was that the show must go on.

[00:07:44]

How does that work? I'm curious because I know that you said that you were into math, physics, engineering. Do you see a difference because you took the theater class and felt like was helpful in some way, how on mind that so into, what do you consider calculus and how much and lonely way to deal with numbers and everything else get opened up in the drama? Is that the part that theater did? Gave you a different sight or vision?

[00:08:24]

I think in theater class was my first exposure to that. There's more to a human than their mind. I think we have soul and we have spirit. You can't just try to live life through an equation or just tapping into the rational part of you. You have to consult your heart in conjunction with your mind. If your heart is telling you something, it's for a reason. Yeah. Don't just rely on your mind.

[00:09:08]

You were trying to see everything in the lowlands of programming that the make everything perfect. Because I think that's the fascinating thing that everybody tries. I've tried to balance the science and religion at the same time to figure out the humanity in the same way.

[00:09:29]

I'm going to quote from a book on that topic. It's a book called The Tao of Physics by Professor Fritjof Capra. I think he summarizes it best on science and religion. It was one of the most profound quote, I found in that space. I think it's this thesis of his book. The book talks about the parallelisms between physics and religion. Goes into great depth, I'll spare you the details. But I think in the forward of the book or in a part of the book, there was an area that stuck with me where Professor Capra says, science does not need religion, religion does not need science, but men need both.

[00:10:27]

That's really what it is. Because the intention sometimes depends on how you grow in your journey. Trying to debate between two and knowing that you need both. You have a sense or to tap into both sides, we still have your humanity, but at same time, there is a part of that in science that you need to respect and follow as well, because it help a lot.

I don't want to miss the chance. Your childhood and you were telling me and I think that's a beautiful part of this thing that I don't want to miss. You remember going with your mom through the American Embassy?

[00:11:03]

I did in Cairo. The first thing I remember that stuck with me there was you go into that lobby and there's a very nice picture of a man. That meant to me it looked like a movie star. Turns out after that he is a movie star. But also he was President Reagan [LAUGHTER]

[00:11:32]

[LAUGHTER] I know who he was.

[00:11:35]

Unbelievable I think you were thinking about all the American influence in music and this and that and you go and that is a movie star is on the wall. [OVERLAPPING]

[00:11:45]

The guy look like he's a movie star, but there was a very nice quote inscribed on the picture of a movie star slash President Reagan and it said, 'You can go to French and live and not become a Frenchman, and you can go and live in Germany or Turkey and you would not become a German or a Turk. But anybody from any corner of the world can come to America to live and become an American.'

[00:12:20]

Wow.

[00:12:22]

As an eight or nine years old, that really stuck with me and I wondered why he said that and what it means to come to America, live, and become an American. I look back at it in hindsight and use probably somebody that wanted the best and the brightest for his country. Also, in a very succinct way, he described that America is an idea and being an American is an idea and it's certain commonalities or values that unite us and we can come from all over the world and bond. [OVERLAPPING]

[00:13:15]

Part of it.

[00:13:16]

Of that, countries have colors and national anthems and what have you. But I think us as a melting pot we unite over that idea of what America is. People might have different ideas on what that idea is but at the end of the day, I think at its core, it's an idea.

[00:13:48]

Being here for 20 years or more, do you feel that you have got closer to this or we achieved that or not. Or you find out that your Egypt inheritances is still a strong part of your life and his heart should divide that and say, I leave here, I adopted this culture but that is more in me than the child saw in that inscription on a wall.

[00:14:17]

I definitely look back at it and I think President Reagan was onto something that yes, you can come here and be an American.

[00:14:29]

Succeed.

[00:14:33]

I think definitely you can work hard and play hard in this country, and I think it is still the land of opportunity. I don't think it's a perfect country but I think it's the best out there, setting examples for a lot of other countries out there. I think that at the core of it is, and I'm not just saying that because we're at a law school and trying to plug the laws, but I think one of the brilliance of the US is our legal system because [OVERLAPPING].

[00:15:23]

Justice and how it is respected.

[00:15:27]

Yes.

[00:15:27]

The due process and everything.

[00:15:30]

These values, I think, found a way to get osmotically injected into our society. I've always, whether it is at work or in commerce or other jobs or just dealing with my neighbors, I always felt that the Americans will give you a fair shake. Regardless of your color or your creed or where you're coming from, you will always be treated fairly and with dignity. At least that was my experience, like if I was to go back and somebody would ask me what you think are the Americans in very broad strokes? I would say the fear of people.

[00:16:16]

I think that's a true assessment or whatever it is, because I think comparing, I don't know much about Egypt, but I can definitely talk about Brazil and everything that happens there, if you think about, when you're talking about due process, laws, and how you follow that and how it should be fair and have in all senses, I think you can see a huge difference in what we observe there. Of course, we have considered a lot of other things, status, economics, and who has privilege and power, but it's still here. We still have the chance to see someone in any level of society being tried and at least having a chance to defend or whatever it is they need to do inside of the legal process. I don't know how many places around., I don't know much about Europe and other places as well but considering in terms of a third world country where I come from as well, that's a clear message and it's something that to people and that's what I see when I see our Brazilian students coming here. Always my hope is, I hope whatever they learned, they will go back and trying to improve whatever used to have there in the country they're better too.

[00:17:34]

In order to put things in perspective, Egypt is a country that is what, almost 100 million people now and probably the size of Texas, maybe a little bit bigger or smaller, but it's around that. But then when you look at the magnitude of the US, that's 50 states and what, almost 350 million, if not more people changing administrations and change in the economy over the years but again those 350 million people go about their lives just fine. I hear some of the issues, but when I try to uncouple myself from them and look at it broadly, as a nation, we're doing just fine. The founding fathers put something I think on paper, the Constitution. They were very enlightened when they put it and they said, this idea of we, the people and the experiment of self governance and how we going to do about it, maybe it's not ready to declare victory because we're still a young nation and we've got a lot of learning to do I think, but I think so far we've done very well. There was a lot of wisdom and most people I talk to will tell you about the Bill of Rights and how that, that is the amazing part of our Constitution. You have a right to free speech and you have a right to religion. [OVERLAPPING].

[00:19:29]

To religion.

[00:19:30]

To express religion to everyone [OVERLAPPING].

[00:19:32]

I don't always know if that's the case or not because I look at the Constitution of Egypt, it's actually, we have much more rights. We have a right to education, and we have the right to healthcare, and we have rights, this and that. But I don't think any of these are worth even the paper that written on, but it's the structure of government I think that stands out uniquely. It is the whole idea of the separation of powers and have having three equal branches of government and having the localities and the state governments and the local governments.

[00:20:19]

With their own independence, the golden, and everything else.

[00:20:22]

The different town meetings and different even forms of government and continuing to have that action and accountability. I think at the core of the healthy government that we have is the ability of the people to hold their representatives accountable.

[00:20:48]

I think that's a very distinct difference in terms when you see in other cultures whatever is offered or not. I think it was a beautiful example. I want to go back, when you left the American Embassy your mom, she went to apply for the visa.

[00:21:11]

I think we interviewed and we got the visas and then we came here to Disneyland.

[00:21:18]

That idea was really just for the trip to come to Disneyland?

[00:21:22]

Exactly. Then it stuck with me.

[00:21:27]

How was your impression of Disneyland when it first came, was amazing or decayed, was it? Is that what it is? How did you feel, you remember?

[00:21:36]

I thought the fireworks had magic kingdom were really cool [LAUGHTER] because now I think it was the first time that I saw actually fireworks.

[00:21:43]

[inaudible 00:21:43] with that magnitude.

[00:21:46]

Then I was like, you guys are going to take me the next day because I got to see that thing again. I don't think I had seen fireworks.

[00:21:52]

We see it is amazing, right?

[00:21:53]

Yeah.

[00:21:53]

For imagination when a child see that, I think about my nephews and kids that are in Brazil, whenever that is fireworks, it is something that they are so fixated on. You said about music. The reason I was asking how much was the influencer they're from different places. Brazil had since the '70s as far as I remember, and I was a kid and my brothers and sister all over music and enjoy a lot and we always had music at our home. But we had such a variety of influence. We had influence from French music. The Italian music was huge in Brazil. European in general, were really big in Brazil, as well as the Americans. There was Spanish, French, Italian, and then the British around Europe and then Brazil they have the Brazilian popular music. But you always had that all sources of influence there. It'd be the same with Egypt in connection?

[00:22:57]

I would say definitely right, because you look at that part of the world, the Middle East, and especially I'm going to focus on Africa. There was a lot of different types of colonialism, right?

[00:23:14]

Yeah.

[00:23:14]

You look at Egypt, the Napoleon had his expeditions there and then the British were there after.

[00:23:23]

Germany had too, right?

[00:23:25]

Probably, yeah. And then you had other parts that had French and other parts that had the Dutch Shell corporation. Morocco and Algeria, they tend to be Francophone, I think. There is a lot French music in there to French language. Then, as now they got combined or into the Arab world a little bit more over time, you see more and more intermix of that. Yes, there was a lot of different influences that not just came directly into Egypt, but came into the Arab world or the Middle East from the colonial era and then they got amalgamated. The influence I would argue are probably indirect versus direct.

[00:24:31]

This is my personal curiosity. My dream someday is to go to visit Egypt. Of course, for, I think for many people, the obvious reasons, the amazing sights that you have in terms of our history there. As an Egyptian, a child there, did you have that idea or that was something that was there and you had knowledge that was there part of your own history? But when you think about the pyramids and everything around Egypt, it's just so the magnitude of a cultural and historical parts that's just incredible.

[00:25:10]

No, I'm going to try to not be biased. As an Egyptian, even back then and now, I view those 7,000 years of civilization to be very fascinating how advanced they were 5,000 years ago. Things like the pyramids and their sheer magnitude and the amount of construction project management, engineering design, their obsession with the documentation and preservation. It was interesting how I view they were enlightened 7,000 years ago and then there were cycles of enlightenment and dark age over the years and you wonder how that happens. I think, or at least that's what goes on in my head sometimes. Are we at the end of an age of enlightenment and going back to darkness and vice versa.

[00:26:23]

Because it has happened not just in Egypt but Europe as well.

[00:26:28]

I have actually watched it here. I've lived here in the last 20 years and I watched some of the fabric here starting to disintegrate and it's alarming. I watched it briefly before COVID and I think COVID accelerated it.

[00:26:55]

You're right.

[00:26:56]

But there is an issue of isolation. There is an issue of separation.

[00:27:10]

You see that in other countries? Brazil, I have noticed that throughout and since I was born, I didn't see so much as has happened that as well.

[00:27:20]

I've only lived the last 20 years here, so it's hard for me to comment on what the Egyptian society is, or it looks like. But it's probably more homogenous over there. But I'm sure there are the issues. There is some divisiveness or bitterness here that I'm starting to see sneak into our society and it worries me because I can actually see it, I observe it.

[00:27:55]

Jumping. What year you came to US? Is that 20 years, more or less?

[00:28:00]

2004.

[00:28:01]

2004. And you came through for the graduate school?

[00:28:04]

Correct. Yes. I came here for grad school and I've been here ever since.

[00:28:08]

You had the chance to teach as well?

[00:28:10]

Yeah.

[00:28:10]

Did you practice it that?

[00:28:12]

No, just as a grad student.

[00:28:14]

Just as a graduate student. Part of your curriculum, and stuff like that. What did you do after you graduate? Stay here? Did you work? When did you got to Harvard, for example? Whole in between what did you do?

[00:28:28]

Yeah, I actually graduated the Northeastern and I worked there for a little bit and then I went to work at the Harvard Medical School in Longwood, and then I came to work here. I've been here for the last 10 or 11 years now.

[00:28:46]

Ten or 11 years. And you came straight to ITS?

[00:28:51]

Yeah.

[00:28:51]

It was your interests?

[00:28:52]

Yeah. I did network engineering, so I was building computer networks at Northeastern. I went and the same thing at Harvard Medical School. It felt that it was functionally the same. I said, I need to think differently about my next job. I just don't want to keep doing the same thing over and over. When somebody tells me they have 20 years experience, I always want to understand if it's truly 20 years experience or is it a one-year experience repeated 20 times.

[00:29:34]

That's a good point.

[00:29:37]

It felt that the three years that I worked at Northeastern and the three years that I worked at the med school were functionally, the same thing. I said I want the next 3-5 years to be something different.

[00:29:56]

You could learn in a different process.

[00:29:58]

Correct. I said let me give management a shot. I was an individual contributor at the med school and I came here because there was a manager of network position open and I took that job and I liked it.

[00:30:15]

You did.

[00:30:15]

I liked working with people more than working with computers.

[00:30:21]

Was again, a different shift between what you learn most of your life in terms of going into the mathematics, physics and engineering aspect. Then you go again to the management and dealing with the humanity. Interesting. Since then, that expanded, changed over time being disposition?

[00:30:46]

Yeah. I came here and I was the manager of the networks as a manager of network in Linux systems and then the role expanded. I was the Associate Director of Infrastructure, we added the different technologies to it and then as more demand for things like AV and classroom technologies and seminar rooms and meeting rooms that were in that also became part of the infrastructure. The infrastructure needs grew and expanded and we were able to expand the team and build more stuff for the school.

[00:31:30]

If we could consider just came to my mind thinking about the school as a human body. What part would be ITS? Because I know how important it is. I was going to say is ITS the heart of the school? Because it is vital.

[00:31:51]

Harvard Law School does two things. We teach law and we practiced law. We have classrooms and have the clinics. Our students come here to learn law and practice law. IT is an enabler. As an IT department, we're not in the business of creating or management technology. We're not Google, we're not Facebook. We're not an IT company. We are there to support the mission of teaching law and practicing law. We're here to help.

[00:32:24]

Yeah. That's exactly what you do. But it is in such a scale because you are in everyone's office, of course, you are in every classroom, you are in every faculty's office as well, which will make them succeed in what they came here to do, which is incredible the amount of work that it is here.

[00:32:43]

But my department, I think exists so that the people that are here to teach law can teach law, the people that are here to learn law, can focus on learning law. Then I let me deal with the IT issues. [LAUGHTER] I do IT and then they can teach law and practice law without any interruptions.

[00:33:04]

You are repeating the same thing that someone in Facilities said and then I interviewed Brione that works for the HUDS and then he said, if you see that everything is beautiful and working, it's good. That's our mission. Facilities says the same when you don't see any problems, we are dealing with that and our job is done. You're basically saying the same thing. One, I have another curiosity. How is your relationship with the students? You will have access to them in general or once in a while you have that connection? Is a follow-up question that I have about one specific issue.

[00:33:44]

Yeah. I actually enjoy working with the students a lot because you can hear from them direct. You can see how their needs are, and it constantly changes. Like so I for example, watched the students from being in Lengdel library and having their laptops and Ethernet cables connected and there was a lot of Jack's there so removing those jacks to adding wireless in the library, the reading rooms and then students are no longer going into the reading room. They're now going back to their dorms so we got to make sure they have the wireless there and they can access the resources. They're also working on their dockets together, so they need those collaboration tools and they don't want to deal with wireless so we give them the wireless projection just through ethnography, watching what they do, how they do it, and them inviting us to sit on some other lectures and seeing what they do and their needs. Hearing it from the horse's mouth tends to be very helpful so it's a privilege to be part of it and to get to hear from them direct.

[00:35:03]

Yeah. I'm asking all this because I know we had an Egyptian student. I loved that kid. The kid was wonderful. We were in DOS at a time when he started working here and we have the accessibility group and Laurie was the person who takes care of conversions and everything else. How was your relationship with Mohammad?

[00:35:27]

It was probably one of the most rewarding things and why enjoyed the law school so much. I got the opportunity to meet him and work with him and learn so much and learn how people perceive the world differently. Mohammad is not shy to talk about that he's visually impaired but he allowed me to see the world through his eyes. I found that to be very fascinating. You don't get to see the world from a completely different perspective or somebody's view and how developed his other sensors were and his ability to perceive things. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and it's things like that that made me stay here for 10, 11 years and I've have this job for 11 years and I wake up every morning and I get so excited and I get so much enjoyment and I look forward to coming here.

[00:36:50]

Yeah. I think what an action that you make. The opportunities that you have to see.

[00:36:54]

Yeah. I call it magic. This is a magical place in a way. How come like it's a lower and lush, has not changed for 10 years and it hasn't gotten old yet. I think it has to do with the people that work here.

[00:37:10]

I think so too. One thing, going back to Mohammad, when he came to the office, he would bring such an energy. When you were with him talking, Mohammad would make you feel worthy the King of Egypt, the way that he talked. Edgar, how are you doing, the way that he came to the front desk and everything or when he talked to anyone in the office that came to chat with him. Wonderful, beautiful soul. Those are the opportunity, like you said, that you have here to connect with these people coming from different places. Staff, the faculty that I have some of them that I admire so much. I think that's the magic really.

[00:37:52]

He's definitely one of the happiest and jollious people I know.

[00:37:57]

I heard that he is in Toronto now.

[00:37:59]

Yeah.

[00:37:59]

In good place there. Fantastic. I really enjoy. What do you like to do anything, if you can, outside of the work?

[00:38:10]

I like reading. This place will have that influence on you. It will get you to read the what. [LAUGHTER]

[00:38:22]

Yeah. You try to catch up with them.

[00:38:25]

Yeah. Our faculty here have that influence. A, they write books and be like, hey, read this or what do you think that that article.

[00:38:36]

They bring a lot of the students and faculty as well for a lot of insights in many topics around what you see in the news or in the country that's happening. You always have an opportunity to watch some of those talks here too.

[00:38:52]

I love our book talks. The ones that library does, they're really good.

[00:38:57]

That's another resource. That's the advantage that so many people probably would pay to go and watch someone with this expert talking about this and you have them coming to the library, or coming to Tuesday at 2, is that your Topic is whatever it is, that's a privilege to be here, and have the chance to be part of this is a privilege. I think that's it. I think that's a wrap. Sherif, thank you.

[00:39:23]

It's my pleasure.

[00:39:24]

Thank you very much.

[00:39:25]

This was a lot of fun.

[00:39:26]

Yes. I'm thinking about this for a while and I'm so happy that you accepted. Is really an honor for me that you came in and participated and gave a chance for this project.

[00:39:37]

I enjoyed talking to you. I've admired your work throughout the years and the different stuff that you've done here.

[00:39:43]

It's really mutual.

[00:39:45]

Hopefully, this takes off and we get more people on the podcast. We find different topics.

[00:39:54]

Really the main reason behind this, I want people in our community to know each other. These stories give a chance for them to listen to in their leisure time when they have a chance. That's it.

[00:40:09]

A wonderful community building, especially with remote work and hybrid environment which is here to stay. I think that's a brilliant idea for us to get to see and talk and hear some of the people that we've never met before.

[00:40:24]

Then now, hopefully when you have our fries that for events, we can see that the person and go and say, hey, I heard or let's chat about this and that. I think that's [MUSIC] my goal to make the engagement happen in a different way.

[00:40:39]

I think you're on the right track.

[00:40:40]

I hope so. Thank you very much.

[00:40:43]

Thank you for having me.

[00:40:44]

For everybody out there listening to our story, I'll see you soon. Bye, bye. [MUSIC]