[00:00:04]

[MUSIC] You are listening to tell me your story where we connect to HLS staff on a personal level. Hello everyone. This is Edgar Kley Filho from HLS Human Resources department. My pronouns are he, him, his. Today we are talking to Reem Al-Khalqi from ITS department, who will tell us about her life, how long she is in this position at HLS, and the work she does. Thank you very much for joining us, Reem. Please tell me your story.

[00:00:42]

Hi Edgar. My name is Reem and I'm a Software Developer at the Business Solutions team in ITS.

[00:00:50]

Software developer. I have something to question, but you are going to leave this for later on when you reach that point. Right now, I'd like to know a little bit about you, where you're from, your family history, whatever you can tell us about your background a little bit.

[00:01:07]

I was born and raised in Sanaa, Yemen. Sanaa is the capital city of Yemen and I lived there continuously, up until I was 10 years old.

[00:01:16]

Ten years old.

[00:01:17]

I left initially on 2008, we moved to the US. My life there it's different. I would say, I had half of my childhood in Yemen, half of my childhood here in the US. It was different between there and here.

[00:01:33]

I just kept thinking for someone who lived there until 10 years old, is such a really special moment as a child until you're 10-years-old and then you have to change and move to a completely different culture. How was there and then we can later tackle where you lived in US when you moved?

[00:01:56]

Yes. Sanaa, it is the capital city, but I would say it's not as compact, it's pretty spread out. We lived in small neighborhood and we moved around a little bit. But usually the type of neighborhoods we lived in were narrow places where you know everybody around the neighborhood, you know everybody in your building community. We did have a lot of times, as a child, after school I was always being on the street and just playing with the kids in the neighborhood. It was my favorite time.

[00:02:23]

Best time.

[00:02:24]

You always get told by your parents, No, finish your homework first before you go downstairs, you cannot.

[00:02:28]

My God, they just change address, but they same story, yeah?

[00:02:32]

Yeah. Just the address changes. There was always the norm after school, we go outside with the kids in our neighborhood, the kids like our neighbors, we would play until sunset, then everybody goes back to their home, change like a warm dinner meal, then we go on with their lives.

[00:02:52]

You're talking about going back to your dinner meal. How was food? I always make the comparison. Because as a Brazilian person, food for me is rice and beans every day for lunch and dinner, some meat or salad. How was dinner in Yemen?

[00:03:10]

Dinner in Yemen is very different depending on the places I would say. Also in the family preferences. One of the main and most popular dishes contains rice and that's like the main component of a lot of rice.

[00:03:25]

Also rice?

[00:03:26]

Yeah. You would have rice cooked with chicken or rice cooked with meat or some protein. We also, because we're very close to Ethiopia I think we'll have that injera bread that's popular, which looks like a pancake [OVERLAPPING] but really big pancake.

[00:03:46]

Would it be what we see here around like the pita bread?

[00:03:50]

No.

[00:03:50]

No?

[00:03:52]

It has the exact look of a pancake. Actually it has this little small holes around it and it's very light and fluffy. [OVERLAPPING] You'd usually have some meat sauce that goes on it. People would like to put boiled eggs also on top and you'd usually eat it together. It becomes this, I don't want to say, it's not like soup.

[00:04:16]

It's stew?

[00:04:18]

The stew, I think we would call it gravy of the meat would be poured on top of the injera bread. We actually don't call injera but we call it lohah which it's hard to pronounce a little bit for none Arabic speakers. But it's one of the most popular also dishes there, is something we have always enjoyed. We also have Khobz al tawa, which basically it's bread. I think every country has a mixture of flour and water, but it comes out different always. This is basically flour and water.

[00:04:52]

Sweet or sour?

[00:04:55]

It's plain a little bit.

[00:04:56]

Oh, plain.

[00:04:57]

You get to choose where you want to eat. I love having it with honey. My favorite.

[00:05:03]

That sounds good.

[00:05:04]

Then you could also chop it up into pieces and have it with banana and you'd have this little, we call it Fatat moz which is literally like breadcrumbs with banana. This is how you translate it.

[00:05:13]

That sounds so good. [LAUGHTER]

[00:05:15]

It is. It's very delicious and you'd have it with dates. If you want to have it with salty or sour things, you would have it with meat broth and you chop it up in the meat broth and lemon and you'd have that really nice sour recombination.

[00:05:30]

Sounds perfect because it feel like you're getting either add whatever sweet component with, like a honey or whatever you have.

[00:05:37]

Yeah.

[00:05:38]

Then you also can use in terms of dessert, a soup or stew or a gravy or whatever it is. Bread allows you to go both ways instead. That sounds so good.

[00:05:49]

It's always the choice to go when you want something that you'd want to have for the main course. But you also want to have for dessert because it works for both. [LAUGHTER] Saves you the trouble.

[00:05:58]

Oh, let's have a little bit more of this one, save more. Now you're talking about the dessert. What are the most, I wouldn't say common, but the typical and most eaten dessert for you that you remember?

[00:06:14]

The most eaten type of dessert? There's one that's very popular. It's called Bint al Sahn, which literally translates to the “daughter of the plate”. We have interesting names for things.

[00:06:25]

That's a really cool, actually.

[00:06:27]

What it is basically is again, water and flour. You'd mix some eggs and some things that you would layer, you would create the dough. You would cut the dough into small circles. You would open these circles as wide as you can, becomes a really thin layer. Then you would layer these on top of each other with oil or ghee in between, and then you bake it, and then you get this huge thing that's layered and very fluffy, very soft, but also has the top crispy layer. You top that with some black seeds and honey. It's the best thing in the world.

[00:06:58]

That sounds also really good.

[00:07:00]

It's very interesting actually. We've tried doing this dish here many times and I don't think we've ever gotten near as close to the taste as you would have it in Yemen, just because the type of ghee makes all the difference. The type of butter, the flour that you use in this makes all the difference. Also of course, the flour. But the flour may have a little less importance, but the taste of the butter that you use or the fat, you choose the fat.

[00:07:22]

We say the same about, for example, meat here.

[00:07:25]

Yeah.

[00:07:25]

Like the beef, the cows meat.

[00:07:31]

We never can get the same tastes and even Brian, when you go to Brazil, he noticed the difference too. That is a complete different tastes in meats in general, whether it's chicken or beef, they are strong in here if it was okay. It sounds like is very decent. Now you're talking about the bread too. That has a difference.

[00:07:53]

Yeah. I think a lot of the meat that we have there tend to be more tender and don't need to cook for so long. I think that's another thing I know about, meat we have here, you'd leave it in, like for example, we use pressure cookers a lot.

[00:08:08]

Exactly.

[00:08:09]

You would put it in the pressure cooker and it would still not come out as nice and soft and you know that buttery flaky.

[00:08:16]

It's interesting you're saying pressure cooker. I bought one because I want to do stuff that my family does in Brazil once in a while here. My God, how many people here know how to use a pressure cooker?

[00:08:26]

I don't think very many actually, but I think it's become more popular now with the instant pot because that's become an option there or maybe it's been all along and people would use it. But I think it's still not as popular as it would be, for example, for us in Yemen you'd use it for everything.

[00:08:41]

Well, when I was the first time that I used it here with Brian, he was scared because the pressure starts to comes and have to lower it down to temperature so it doesn't get too strong because make that sound right when the air comes on.

[00:08:53]

Yeah. [LAUGHTER]

[00:08:55]

Are you sure that's not going to blow up? No, it's not going to blow up.

[00:09:00]

I was very scared from using the pressure cooker because I was much older because it felt like this is the thing, one mistake and it could just destroy everything.

[00:09:09]

Anyways, let's go back. I love the idea of the food or red and everything. Do you have siblings and how many?

[00:09:17]

Yeah. I have one sister. She's a couple of years older than me. She is currently working as the program director of the millennium fellowship at the Millennium Campus Network, it's not profit organization.

[00:09:30]

Nice. You and your sister and your parents?

[00:09:38]

Yes.

[00:09:39]

Many cousins?

[00:09:41]

Many.

[00:09:41]

Family members.

[00:09:43]

Many [LAUGHTER].

[00:09:43]

Those are awesome stories as well. Because in Brazil, for religious celebration, for example, Easter or Christmas. Then is the time, even if they live far apart, they all come together. There are 50 people sleeping on the floor, on foam mattresses and that kind of a thing. I used to love those things and seeing them once in a while or twice or three times a year. Then having fun and running around was the same idea.

[00:10:17]

It is and our best gatherings are usually around day time, the religious holiday that comes either after Ramadan, after the month of fasting or it comes in another month of the lunar calendar, a couple of months actually after Ramadan. It actually begins with Eid eve. The first night before Eid.

[00:10:41]

Oh before.

[00:10:41]

The night Eid. That's how I would say actually. We would get together, everybody would get together and especially the kids, the girls would have their henna on their hands and we would start doing these.

[00:10:54]

Wow that must be beautiful.

[00:10:55]

Then once you have your henna on your hand, you can't really do much because you don't want to screw it up. [LAUGHTER] You would just stand there as a robot or we would all be sitting next to each other or going to bed, laying next to each other. It's just big, big gathering for everybody. It's very nice. Also during Eid, one of the best parts in Yemen, that's unfortunately something that we're missing out on here, is visiting people in their houses like people would host each other every day. When you have a big family, that means the number of places you're going to [LAUGHTER] visit are very big. We would go and visit every single person, every person who has a different house, we would go and visit them in their own house treat us with whatever they have for Eid that they prepared. A lot of candy, a lot of cookies. It's very nice. This is something that I really miss. We don't have that here. I think it's hard to recreate it here because the work and just the lifestyle here doesn't allow that because sometimes it could fall on a weekend. But sometimes it would just fall in the middle of the week and you can't really prepare someone to say, hey, we're just going to come knock on you.

[00:12:12]

Even the community.

[00:12:13]

Yeah and the community of coarse.

[00:12:14]

You don't have the number that you had there or the people that were used to it. It is interesting. I feel like it's a good part of the culture.

[00:12:23]

It is.

[00:12:23]

That means a lot.

[00:12:25]

It's something I've valued a lot even as a kid. I think even also one of the things I liked a lot is every time you go to a house and even if you go to multiple ones during the day, they would feed you something in every house. It's offensive to say no. You can't say no. [LAUGHTER] Whatever they give you, you have to eat it. If it's something that you can't eat but you can take, you must take it. There is no option.

[00:12:47]

Because you don't want to offend anybody. Because that's exactly how I describe is so interesting. You mentioned Ramadan. How many religious holidays are the most important for you, for your family, for example in Yemen?

[00:13:04]

Ramadan wouldn't be considered a holiday, Ramadan is more of a month when we observe it, it's our month where we fast, almost some fast during that month. The holiday comes right after, it's the three days after Ramadan. What we call the Eid al-Fitr.

[00:13:19]

That would be.

[00:13:21]

Yeah, Eid al-Fitr literally translates to the celebration of breaking the fast. You break your fast, three days after that you celebrate.

[00:13:32]

The first thing happens in the tradition would be from sunrise to sundown?

[00:13:37]

Correct.

[00:13:37]

It's not like oh 12 hours from seven to we'll follow the sunrise and the sundown.

[00:13:44]

It's predawn, which is about an hour before sunrise. You would usually follow your mosques or applications on your phone will tell you when exactly that time begins.

[00:13:54]

Isn't that amazing, application on their phones?

[00:13:56]

Yeah [LAUGHTER].

[00:13:56]

But way back, could be, for example, the charts or whatever they consider at that time?

[00:14:02]

Yeah. In Yemen there is, I think it's called the canon. When it's time for a Al Fitr, you'd either wait to hear the mosques raise the call to prayer for sunset or a few minutes before that, very carefully, you'd hear the cannon and they would blow the cannon to tell everybody it's time to break the fast. That's before we had applications that could tell us when it's time to break the fast before we can really determine things by ourself. I didn't know if they still do that today.

[00:14:32]

It should be for the Catholic Church. Oh my God, I don't know the name in English now. The bells.

[00:14:39]

The big giant.

[00:14:40]

The bells. When that is in small towns weighing the bells, I don't know here if the tradition is the same, but if there was a specific events, not just religious one, but any in small towns, the church would balance that bell to make that noise, to allow the community to say something's up come to the square. You're learning and what, this is way better. But for the church started in preparing are getting closer to the mass or whatever they also would do as a form of sounds like the cannon. It's an announcement.

[00:15:15]

It's similar yet it's a way of alerting the community that the time has come for you to break the fast.

[00:15:22]

That would be for the morning and for the evening or not?

[00:15:27]

No. It would be only when we start to break the fast.

[00:15:30]

For the three days?

[00:15:32]

No. It's during the entire month of Ramadan. But it's only when it's time to break the fast. It's around sunset when the call to prayer is about to happen, a few minutes before that, a few seconds before that, you would hear the cannon.

[00:15:44]

Then that's when you could break the fast?

[00:15:46]

Yeah, that's when you'd break the fast.

[00:15:48]

Would it be the 12 hours or during the period of fasting, that would be more or less 12 hours?

[00:15:55]

The time really ranges, especially for example, here in the US. Here's the lunar calendar. It doesn't always match the Gregorian calendar. You would sometimes have Ramadan happen during the winter, which becomes a really short time. Sometimes you would have the longest period of summer when the pre dawn begins 3:00 AM, but the sun doesn't set till 9:00 PM. It's like 12, 18 hour for the fast.

[00:16:22]

That also means that it doesn't fall, like we said, in the same dates. It's not a day-specific.

[00:16:28]

Yeah.

[00:16:28]

It's going through the lunar calendar and how that moves throughout the year?

[00:16:32]

Yes.

[00:16:32]

Great. You had Ramadan was the month of fasting, then you have three days of celebration, the break into fast?

[00:16:40]

Yes, Eid al-Fitr.

[00:16:41]

Then what are their important celebration that you'd have?

[00:16:45]

A few months after, a couple of months after Eid al-Fitr you would have Eid al-Adha which is very similar Eid al-Fitr. You would hold the same traditions. You would hold the same type of celebration. It's called the bigger Eid because it's four days long instead of three days.

[00:17:02]

Oh, does the celebration involve music and different food and everything? Is that when everybody gets together as well?

[00:17:13]

Yes.

[00:17:14]

Families and everything?

[00:17:15]

Yes. The way both of these holidays are celebrated is very similar. There's one difference for the Eid al-Fitr. The night of Eid al-Fitr is still the last day of Ramadan. There's still that not immediate celebration happening. It's also called the often night because it's still a night of Ramadan a night that you should still really be praying and continuing that spiritual journey. You shouldn't just end it by breaking the fast. You try to start preparing for Eid, but at the same time you try to also respect that it's the last night of Ramadan. It's a very nice combination.

[00:17:59]

[inaudible 00:17:59] because the mind might be, oh, I really want that birthday or down a little bit because it's still here.

[00:18:05]

It doesn't take away from that at all. It's not that you're still be happy about the upcoming celebration, but you also have to make that balanced very well. On the other hand, Eid al-Adha comes after a normal days. Some people would choose to fast the 10 days before Eid al-Adha. It's not required, but it's a choice some people would make. When you start preparing for Eid al-Adha, it feels just like a celebration that's much needed in the middle of the normal month. It's very nice.

[00:18:37]

That's really cool. Now, you are you entered school in Yemen?

[00:18:44]

Yes. Up until fourth grade before how was it as far as you remember?

[00:18:52]

My parents really valid education and they tried to give us quality education. My sister and I were in a private school. It was the Turkish international. One of the goals for that I think is so that we can pick up on the English language at a young age and not have to struggle with it. That did not save me from six years of ESL when I arrived here, unfortunately, [LAUGHTER] so I had to go through that. But education in Yemen is interesting because I knew that I was in a good school, but I think teachers there, I know they do their best and I loved my teachers there, but I think they don't have the amount of guidance and support that, for example, teachers here would.

[00:19:36]

Yeah.

[00:19:37]

I think that's something that comes from even far above like the ministry of education setting standards that could be a little bit higher to improve our experience as students and to also give needed support for the teachers there. It didn't make this comparison then as a kid, of course.

[00:19:53]

Yeah.

[00:19:53]

To me that was the norm. That was what we had and I felt that we were above other schools because it's an international school, it's a private school. But in terms of how I felt as a kid then, I did really enjoy what we're learning. I really did enjoy the teachers efforts, keep us focused and enjoy the learning process as we were going through it then.

[00:20:28]

Was a mixed boys, girls school or just women or girls school?

[00:20:35]

The school is mixed up until sixth grade. When you move to seventh grade, you're moved to the [OVERLAPPING]

[00:20:40]

Then change.

[00:20:40]

Yeah. We don't actually have middle-school. It's an elementary school and then it's a high school. High school goes from seventh grade till 12th.

[00:20:48]

Okay.

[00:20:48]

That's where you would see the separation. The girls would be in classrooms by themselves, the boys would be in classrooms by themselves.

[00:20:56]

Then you were there until fourth grade, and then your family moved to US?

[00:21:02]

Then we moved to the US. Yes. My mom wanted to faster her master's degree, so we moved to America. My first reaction when my mom said, Hey, we're moving to America for two years, I was thrilled. It sounded exciting. America at that time was something we always saw through the movies and TV channels and news and big cities, big skyscrapers.

[00:21:25]

It's always that vision. I think around the world is always that whatever you seen Disney movies and things that you've seen from Hollywood's and look at that. Or houses with basements. Are certain things like the breakfast peanut butter sandwich. Oh my God, that sounds amazing when it comes to your first time that I don't know if I like that much.

[00:21:49]

Actually, I think what came to me as a shock was we landed in Athens, Ohio.

[00:21:54]

Ohio.

[00:21:55]

Yeah, and Athens, Ohio is beautiful, but it's nothing like what you see on TV. I liked it. It was very green. The community was nice, the people were nice. It was easy to travel around the town because it's really small college town. But it was nothing like what I expected.

[00:22:18]

Yeah.

[00:22:19]

I remember when we were on the airplane arriving to Athens, we actually arrived to Columbus, Ohio. I was just seeing Ohio from up top and I'm like, this is just all green. I don't see buildings just everywhere. It's green and it's not a view that I was used to seeing because as a kid when I would travel from Sunup to Cairo, you're traveling from a desert-like place to another desert-like place. Everything is just this beige color. But then you're off to Ohio and everything is beautifully green.

[00:22:50]

This is amazing. But I wonder. Your expectations were for whatever we started movies, big towns or New York, whatever is. But then you move for a small town, I will assume in the middle of Ohio, that's mainly farms and flat and everything. But it's still what you just described. Traveling in the area from Yemen, from one part to another, to Egypt, for example, like you said beige color, pastel color, because of how the landscape is there.

[00:23:24]

It did feel very breathtaking at first, I would say, because I hadn't seen so many. The mountains in Yemen are rocky mountains, but the mountains in Athens and pretty much around the cities that I've been living in, they're green, they have trees on them and I always wondered, why don't we have trees growing on our mountains? Why are mountains so [OVERLAPPING]

[00:23:44]

Yeah, that's interesting.

[00:23:46]

It just felt like, you have these little broccoli looking like mountains and it's a view that I hadn't seen before. I hadn't even seen or maybe focused on in the TV when I'm looking at images of the US.

[00:24:03]

Then when you go, you get into Athens, get your house, different shapes and everything else.

[00:24:10]

Yeah.

[00:24:11]

Going to school, any shock, you felt okay, everybody welcoming, was a good experience or you felt like the impact of the coach are different?

[00:24:22]

Going to school, the first couple of weeks in school were interesting for me because I was understanding everybody, but nobody was understanding me. I think it's because in my school in Yemen, I told you they were speaking English in that school. They were trying to teach us English, so I had the ability to understand them, but apparently my speaking skills weren't great. I would say something thinking that I'm saying it correctly, but the answer I always got was what? Sorry, can you repeat that? What are you trying to say? What do you want? They were genuinely trying to help me out. I think it was a few weeks into school that they spoke with my parents and they said, Hey, we think it would be a good idea for Reem to redo fourth grade. They dropped me down a grade so that I know the material, but now I need to pick it up in this language and focus on building the communication skill rather than focus on actually the material and the information that I'm learning.

[00:25:21]

I'm curious here. You knew the subjects.

[00:25:25]

Yeah.

[00:25:25]

They were focusing more in your accent in terms of [OVERLAPPING]

[00:25:29]

Not accent.

[00:25:29]

Okay.

[00:25:30]

I don't think it's accent. I think I had some real problems in my English. I think it's also because [OVERLAPPING]

[00:25:35]

Or the structure.

[00:25:38]

I couldn't communicate with my teachers or my friends when I first arrived.

[00:25:42]

But you were understanding them?

[00:25:44]

As far as I can remember.

[00:25:45]

Yeah.

[00:25:47]

I think I was understanding what I was being told, what I was being asked. I was understanding. I remember being in that meeting and the person telling my mother, Hey, we're going to bring her down a grade. I didn't need more explanation from my mom, but I do remember understanding what he was seeing at the moment.

[00:26:01]

You were 10, 11?

[00:26:02]

I was 10.

[00:26:03]

Ten.

[00:26:04]

Yeah, I was 10 at the moment. Yeah.

[00:26:05]

That must be hard because well, I don't know if it helps you at this stage because you are totally fine. But being here, [LAUGHTER] not too long ago, talked to Brian's family. I still have because I learned English basically here. Old man. Talk to them. I remember Brian's mom and one of his sister when I was started, they were so folks in what I was saying, trying to understand me, and his sister sometimes bend her head and look at Brian, like what is he saying? Brian does. Yeah. I know what they mean because I'm so used to write my accent, that he would understand everything. You had a communication, but with them once in a while, depends on how fast I was talking or whatever I was saying. They would just bend. When I saw that bending head, they're trying to figure out if that is a close caption here that they can read something. But I think I know what you. But for a 10-years-old might be difficult, yes. But then that was something that passed quickly because kids pick up so fast, right?

[00:27:17]

Well, again, I think maybe what I was thinking at the time didn't really reflect my exact situation because I felt that I picked up quickly but I was still an ESL for six years.

[00:27:27]

Oh, yeah.

[00:27:28]

We had math exams and they weren't extend that would put us in to know how is our English skills developing? Are we doing well? Are we not? I think I'm just bad at taking tests because my results never came out well, and I was always short and meeting the required level to escape his whole classes. But I did feel that year after year my English became very well. I was missing out from courses that I really wanted to be in because they would block out two courses from my schedule to go to these ESL classes. At some point I was getting really bored and frustrated because I wasn't doing well on the test, but I was understanding everybody and I have reached a point where I feel people were also understanding me.

[00:28:15]

Yeah, you have a good relationship with the kids.

[00:28:17]

Yeah, I had good relationship with my friends. I had a good relationship with my teachers. I think I continued ESL until ninth grade. By that time, I had a good idea of how well my English was.

[00:28:31]

Yeah, and start questioning, is it really me or is that whatever it is you are applying here that's going beyond that wasn't necessary?

[00:28:39]

Yeah. I think I would only play when I think on the idea of standardized testings in general. I don't like that idea.

[00:28:47]

I don't like either.

[00:28:48]

I don't like that SATs and ACTs, I think, I never did well in these even though wouldn't I would go through the test runs, I would get a good score.

[00:29:00]

Yeah.

[00:29:01]

I would put myself in the same environment. Right now it's a cold room. I have 60 or 90 minutes or however long, I have time to finish the test and in reality and I would put myself through that and I would do very well. But then come test-time, which I took these center estates, I think four times. I would never get close to how well I would do.

[00:29:22]

I don't like this. I don't think that they are truth to knowledge and everything else. If that is the reference, I don't know. I feel like there are things that experience you teach you, but not you can learn basic stuff in general. You need to have that information. But testing someone and not taking consideration, anxiety, nervousness, because other things, if there was a possibility for you to have this kind of a conversation, if was in a different setting that someone would we talked, what do you think about this or about this subject, how you solve this problem, if it was a conversation, not called test, you probably would have explained everything and reach the result that they are expecting. But just because there is a name test exam, you have a certain time that you have to be there, amount of minutes that you have to resolve those things. I don't know how many quest through 100, 400, whatever it is. Then your mind started going off to a different place and thinking about failures or whatever it can, so you were not in your right environment.

[00:30:31]

Yeah.

[00:30:32]

Anyways. There's so much to be considered and they focus so much in the result of that, thing that the person failed for something that's not true. The environment is not the same. You will learn in an environment talking to your professor, discussing the class.

[00:30:47]

Exactly.

[00:30:47]

Then you go there to sit down. You're on like, hey, we have this many, so make sure that you don't miss anything. Oh come on, this is not an environment to have a test. Let's start a revolution thing. [LAUGHTER]

[00:30:59]

Let's do it. I really hope that someday in the future the people would agree that this is not the way to test people's abilities.

[00:31:08]

It's [inaudible 00:31:08] measurement of intelligence. Someone can be phenomenon in one skill but completely flawed in others because we tend to focus on certain things that we like the most or have better interest. We can have a good assumption of everything around. but whatever causes or whatever we say is our call in terms of a preference is distinct that we are going to [inaudible 00:31:30] our focus so much more and you cannot measure intelligence based on that only. I don't know. [LAUGHTER] I wish it could be. I don't know. You finish that and then you go to high school?

[00:31:45]

Yes.

[00:31:46]

How was high school?

[00:31:47]

Well, there's middle school in [inaudible 00:31:49]. [OVERLAPPING]

[00:31:50]

How was middle school?

[00:31:51]

Middle school was an interesting time.

[00:31:55]

Out of ESL or you're still in ESL?

[00:31:57]

No, not yet.

[00:31:58]

Nine?

[00:31:58]

Middle school was seventh grade. What happened there is, after fifth grade, my mom had finished the two years of masters. We went back to Yemen.

[00:32:07]

You did?

[00:32:08]

Yeah. It's part of her.

[00:32:10]

It was a program that she [inaudible 00:32:12].

[00:32:12]

You have to go back to your country after a certain time to spend two years there. We went back to Yemen. Situation in Yemen started going bad. It was around the 2011 Arab Spring. We've had our share of hearing gunshots and hearing all the fights in the streets and things weren't so pretty. The revolution that began and people marching through the streets was far from us, but it was still scary time.

[00:32:40]

Yes, I imagine.

[00:32:43]

Things started to deteriorate also in terms of having this access to electricity, being able to go outside at certain times of the day, being able to take public transportation.

[00:32:56]

Wow.

[00:32:56]

That safety feeling started to shake a little bit. After spending one year, we decided this is not going to work out, let's move, let's go out, let's leave.

[00:33:06]

Get out of there.

[00:33:07]

The neighborhood that we were in wasn't the greatest place to be in at that time, so we left. We left and we stayed in Egypt for six months. My mom came to the US and she applied for her PhD degree.

[00:33:19]

Wow.

[00:33:21]

We were back to Athens, Ohio [LAUGHTER]. which was nice, honestly. I liked that at that point I was familiar with Athens, Ohio.

[00:33:29]

Why Athens, Ohio? The program that also was linked to Athens, that was the connection?

[00:33:38]

My mom's masters and PhD was from Ohio University.

[00:33:42]

Perfect.

[00:33:43]

It was in Athens, Ohio. That's why we landed there and that's why we've went back there again.

[00:33:47]

Perfect.

[00:33:48]

Which was very nice because I liked that we were already familiar with the place. I'm going back to my friends. That was a good thing.

[00:33:55]

Yes.

[00:33:56]

Good thing except that when I was in Yemen, I was tested to go back to my normal grade and I passed the test. I come back to Athens, Ohio and I'm no longer in the same classes with my friends. I'm at a level above and I come back wearing the hijab more strictly and more often. I think that also made the experience a bit more interesting for me. I think at that time, I'd never thought that anyone could be upset by me wearing the hijab or me looking different. That only meant that I'm meeting new people again.

[00:34:37]

Oh okay.

[00:34:37]

It's not the same people who knew me before.

[00:34:42]

That makes sense.

[00:34:43]

It's a new group. Also in middle-school, you start seeing people, you don't see the exact same group that you were with in elementary. You're seeing people who are coming also from other elementary schools. It was great. Honestly, people were very nice. My teachers were great. They were supportive. I was still an ESL, but they started helping me build up the confidence to take higher level course workload I think. It was all great except that I think at that time, some of the people who I was still getting to know weren't understanding why I was wearing the hijab. I was too naive at the time to think that anyone could be ill intentioned or would be meaning to hurt people with their words or mean to bully purposefully. I think some of the comments that I received at that time I thought were genuine questions. One of the questions I was asked is, what do I have under my hijab? Is it something that could hurt people in the school? Is it something that's dangerous? Why am I covering my head? At that time, I didn't see that question offensive.

[00:36:04]

You thought that was just a curiosity.

[00:36:05]

I thought that was a genuine curiosity. What do I have under my scarf? I answered that question. Very normal. [LAUGHTER] I realized that now some of the comments or a lot of the comments that I received about my hijab from people who didn't know me before, middle school, were pretty offensive. But I wasn't thinking that people could mean to bully or people could mean to hurt me in that way and I think that actually protected me. That protected me at the time because I could have gotten into fights. I could've gotten into big arguments that I didn't need to get into. [LAUGHTER] I could've lost friends at that time, but that didn't happen because I assert things in a very simple way. Looking back at them now, they would have been very offensive and they would have even probably hurt me and hurt my psychology, hurt my confidence even as a person who looks very different from everybody else and I was the only hijabi in school. There wasn't anybody else there who wore the hijab at that time.

[00:37:03]

It's interesting that your response and your attitude that [inaudible 00:37:06] that bullying is always an intention to build on your reaction. That's what they always say. You did in a way more or less like that, without the intention to show them, hey, don't come to me for this. But worked because it's exactly that design to complete their attitude in terms of being whatever feeling that they have at that moment. That's always what moves bullying in general, which is awful.

[00:37:34]

I think it's an interesting scenario for me, actually the situation because they were playing on thin lines so they didn't want to say something too direct that would put them in trouble, so they never came to me with an exact label that I would be like, no way this is coming with good intention. This is just straightforward calling out a bad name to a person. They were bringing up comments in a way where they wanted to make me feel uncomfortable, but it wouldn't put them in trouble at the same time.

[00:37:58]

It was not a standarlized test.

[00:38:00]

[LAUGHTER] Exactly.

[00:38:03]

You went through with good grades in that one. That also happened in high school or high school was easier?

[00:38:10]

No, high school was easier.

[00:38:11]

Really?

[00:38:11]

At that time people knew me. I knew people and we had better connections.

[00:38:15]

You go back to the old fashion way. If we have a chance to know you and you have a chance to know me, everything is okay.

[00:38:25]

Yes, definitely.

[00:38:26]

It's always what do we don't know when you are to perceive that generates prejudice and judgment and this kind of a thing.

[00:38:34]

Yes, 100% agree with that. I think as I started to create more friendships and I started to have community, like I started to have good group that I was with, people would not come near and try to hurt because they knew that I have a group who's also going to support me, which was very nice and valuable.

[00:38:54]

Do you think that your sister or your mom went through this too [inaudible 00:38:57] way or not?

[00:39:01]

During the nine years of living in Athens, we had one incident.

[00:39:06]

One incident?

[00:39:07]

One incident and not counting these minor comments that I received in middle school. But one incident, I was at that time in high school. My mom and I were coming out of Walmart of course. [LAUGHTER]

[00:39:27]

Sorry, Reem. That's perfect.

[00:39:30]

We were coming out of Walmart. It was a couple of days I think after the Charlie Hebdo incident. There was hate rising anyway and across multiple cities in the US. It was also around Christmas time I think or the New Year and we were coming out of Walmart and this person comes our way and he screams something and we don't understand it first. We turn around, we are talking to each other. He comes closer and he points at us and he's like, why are you wearing that? He's pointing at our scarves, at our hijab. I look at mom and just ignore Let's not say anything, just ignore him. That didn't really work out very well because he came closer.

[00:40:10]

Wow.

[00:40:11]

He said, take that off. You hear the famous sentence, go back to your country. I'm remembering that event right now and it's not coming back with fear because there were things that happened that night that made me feel safe. It's three people in that situation that stood up. One person was coming down off their car, immediately yelled back at the man and told him to stay away. Another Walmart worker came out immediately and stood by our side to keep him away, not come closer to us. Then this other woman also screamed from far, leave them alone.

[00:40:50]

That's beautiful.

[00:40:51]

It changed the situation. As a teenager at that time, alone at night with my mother, I deeply appreciated them standing up.

[00:40:59]

Community.

[00:40:59]

Their actions, their support spoke louder than the hate that we received from him and it became very crucial to the way I felt the next day walking around the city again, walking around the town again. If no one stood up, if everybody just ignored, I don't know if I would've been feeling comfortable the next night just going to Walmart again. [LAUGHTER] It would have felt scary. If somebody comes and attacks me, no one is going to stand up and that's not a great place I want to be in.

[00:41:37]

Our lovely conversation with Reem Al-Khalqi will continue on the next episode. Don't miss it. [MUSIC]