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Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections

Folklife Festival Narrative Session: Migration Across Generations: What Does It Mean to Be Muslim-American?

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: So, I think it's -- I think the current political climate has had two impacts. The first --

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: It's almost desensitized, I think, the Muslim community in a sense that one thing after another, after another, after another,

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: you get used to the trauma that this community -- has been continually inflicted upon it.

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: And that's kind of -- when you read the news, you hear it, you're watching the news, and there's yet another thing about Muslims happening or another person who's saying something inflammatory about Muslims,

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: you're kind of just like, "Okay, just another one of those -- another incident that's happened."

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: And then, you know, after a certain point, you realize that you're kind of internalizing all of that.

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: So, it's just kind of -- its an interesting place to be because it's very odd to just hear inflammatory statements being said about a group that you identify with, over and over again, and then trying to learn to desensitize yourself to that.

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: But I also think, on the other hand, it's created a really high level of fear that I don't think we -- the Muslim community in particular -- has felt since right after 9/11.

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: Having been -- you know, remembering 9/11, having gone through that experience --

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: I was in high school, I was in middle school -- I remember the fear that kind of cloaked the Muslim community at that time.

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: And I feel like it's similarly happening again.

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: We worked, the Muslim community worked -- and just the community in general -- we worked really hard to understand

one another, and I felt like after some time, that did get kind of shred --

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: We were able to dispel some of that fear, but then, now, we're right back there. We've had some progress and we've regressed now.

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: Ten steps backward, and that's kind of hard, because --

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: I know, for myself, I'm gonna be traveling soon, and I'm like, "Okay. Well, I was born here, but I don't know if that really means anything, right? Am I gonna be able to come back?"

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: I was just joking the other day with my boss, telling him, "Well, if you don't see me next week, you know why."

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: But that's kind of the reality of our existence, that actions that people may commit very easily, that you really don't think about twice, we have to think about twice.

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: We have to think about, "Okay, well, what am I gonna wear? What am I gonna look like? What's my facial expression gonna look like? What am I gonna pack? How am I gonna respond? Where am I gonna go?"

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: These are things that we have to consider actively and daily in every decision that we make, and I think that's kind of the biggest thing.

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<i>Sanjana Quasem</i>: The weight of the political climate really is seen and felt in our every interaction and every decision that we make.

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<i>Usman Sawar</i>: So, real quick, I wanted to add one thing. Being the president of MCC, the burden was felt on me initially, because how do you navigate your community through?

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<i>Usman Sawar</i>: But I want to speak to this one point. After the tragedy of 9/11, I think our community always felt like all eyes are on us, and we didn't really have much assistance at that time.

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<i>Usman Sawar</i>: We really had to navigate things for ourselves, and also introspectively at the same time deal with the trauma, but also deal with being very vocal about what our voice is, and what is not Islam.

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<i>Usman Sawar</i>: This time around it's been a little different, and I'll just explain it.

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<i>Usman Sawar</i>: So, we -- I think from the time of January up until now -- have had over one thousand, almost five hundred people of other faiths come through our doors.

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<i>Usman Sawar</i>: They want to know who we are, they want to support us,

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<i>Usman Sawar</i>: we've had flowers sent to us, we've had cards from churches that have been sent to us from their kids in Sunday school supporting our kids.

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<i>Usman Sawar</i>: I would really give a shout-out to Smithsonian Folklife Festival, they help us to get our voice.

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<i>Usman Sawar</i>: I also want to give a shout-out to Oyen [[??]], she's back there with the Strathmore Music Center.

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<i>Usman Sawar</i>: They've approached us to help us get our voice out, and the difference this time is we have so much support.

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<i>Usman Sawar</i>: And I want to emphasize it means the world to us. Because this time we feel like we have support.

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<i>Usman Sawar</i>: You know, before, the first time, we were really kind of fending, and it helped us, because we had to think a lot of things through ourselves.

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<i>Usman Sawar</i>: This time we're very clear, and the amount of support that's there is really really comforting for us.

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<i>Usman Sawar</i>: And that's why we feel that the best thing is just break bread and have dialog. We have to learn who we are, so that people can speak.

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<i>Usman Sawar</i>: You know, we can speak for others and we have taken on other minority causes as well, because there are other minorities that are affected and we realize that.

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<i>Usman Sawar</i>: But the difference is that we have a lot of support, and that really means the world to us.

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<i>Sabir Rahman</i>: Usman -- [[clapping]]

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<i>Sabir Rahman</i>: After 9/11 we did have the support of a lot of people.

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<i>Sabir Rahman</i>: We are fortunate to be located in Montgomery County, and Montgomery County government is so supportive of its population.

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<i>Sabir Rahman</i>: And right after 9/11, the county executive called MCC and held -- first, a prayer meeting at MCC,

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<i>Sabir Rahman</i>: and then a press conference at MCC,

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<i>Sabir Rahman</i>: and then he asked the chief of police to make sure that a police car is always at MCC for the next few weeks.

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<i>Sabir Rahman</i>: So we got a lot of support.



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