

Oral History Project Interview

Arab and Muslim Women's Research and Resource Institute (AMWRRRI)

Interviewer/Number of Interview: SA 4.00

Date: July 24th, 2019

Name: Noman Hussain

Year of Birth: 1989

Gender: Male

Country of Origin: India

Year of Immigration: Born in the U.S.

Abstract: Noman Hussain is a 30 year old Muslim born Indian male who was born and raised in Chicago. He memorized the Quran at 12 years old, then flew to South Africa for a total 8 year course program to studying Arabic, history, jurisprudence and all of the sciences of Islam. He then came back to America at age 20 to start teaching and has been an Imam for eight years now, four served at Masjid al Huda and now four+ at the ISM Brookfield masjid. He dedicated his everyday life to serve the masjid and community. His job requires him to always be available. Leading prayers, offering counseling, hosting and planning events, performing Nikkahs and much more has committed him fully to his community. Noman believes their Masjid is doing a great job and will still continue to try to accommodate the needs of their community members to the best of their ability.

Key Themes: Imam, education, elections, resources, marriage, islamophobia, counseling, disabilities

Note: In the transcript, I refers to Interviewer, and R refers to Respondent/Interviewee.

I: we'll go through some background information if that's okay. So can I have your name if you'd like to share?

R: Sure. Noman Hussein

I: and your age?

R: I am 30

I: place of birth?

R: Chicago.

I: Okay. Um, and where did you grow up?

R: Uh, I grew up in Chicago. I studied abroad, uh, for, you know, my, my teenage years and so I would say, uh, grew up both in Chicago and then my teenage years were spent in South Africa.

I: Okay. Yeah. So could you maybe elaborate on like your educational background, um, in terms of like high school, College and your Islamic background?

I: So I, I, yeah, no, for sure. I, um, so I studied, uh, in Chicago at Islamic school growing up. Um, I pulled out early. I actually memorized the Quran when I was, you know, around, uh, 12 years old. So, um, after that, you know, just around 12 or 13 after I completed my memorization, I went to South Africa. Um, I, I enrolled at a seven year, uh, alem course program, which covers the different sciences of, you know, fiqh, Hadith, uh, jurisprudence- you have history, aqeeda, you know, "creed", all of these different topics that generally we are taught, um, basically learning those sciences, starting off with the Arabic language and then sort of, uh, mastering that and then going into different topics and slowly over those span of seven years, getting deeper into each of those subjects and topics. So I've spent a total of eight years in South Africa.

And, uh, when I got back, um, you know, I was very- uh- this is probably just 10 years ago when I got back. And as soon as I got back, I started teaching a little bit and then I got into, um, the, the, uh- I moved to Milwaukee actually. So I had been in Milwaukee for about eight years now. Uh, I served as an Imam for four years at Misha Huda, where Sheikh (Sa'ad) where he is now. And then I, um, uh, I then started serving here. So I've been here for about four or five years as well. Alhamdulillah

I: So is being an Imam like a full time job?

R: Yes. Being any Imam is- I think more than a full time job actually. It's, uh, it's always, you know, you're always on call. And so it, you know, it's a Alhamdulillah a beautiful, uh, opportunity and position to be in, but it sort of has its, you know, it has its perks and then obviously has its, you know, difficult challenges of, you know, always being available for a community and serving community in different ways, which is something, something I, I personally enjoy.

So, uh, when you enjoy your job, it makes it a lot more easier to do.

I: So why did you choose to kind of become an Imam? How did that decision come about?

R: Yeah, I think, um, I think it was really from my, my mom, uh, I was very young still. And so when I, when I was in school, she would, you know, ask me, "hey, do you want to memorize the Quran? Do you want to become a Hafith? you know, I, I would generally say yeah, I mean, you know, I think it's a great idea. Um, they think the one reason she was really inclined to me becoming a hafith, it was a, from a very young age, had a, had a, you know I had a melodious voice. I used to give the Athan, you know, as a kid, I used to do this, these things and my mom

was like “okay, you really- you have a really good voice and so you have to become a hafith”
And I was like “okay”

You know, I was happy. I was excited. I started, I remember after I started I was like “this is a bit much for me” Um, and you know, when I wanted to pull out, she was just there and she would encourage me and push me. And, um, after memorizing the Quran, I really thought to myself, you know, “I’m going to go back to school, you know, get back in there and graduate, you know, uh, live the American dream of becoming a doctor.” And you know, whatever else it is. But a friend of mine, um, who was actually much older than I am, was planning to leave for South Africa. And our- we have a mutual teacher and my teacher who taught me the Quran told this older student “why don’t you take him along with you?” Um, and so, uh, he came, he came over to my house and met with my parents and spoke to us all about this and said “I’m leaving to South Africa-

I: and you were young at this time?

R: I was about 12 or 13, yes, and so he said “I’m leaving for South Africa, you know, I’m going to enroll in this program. Uh, you know, your son-“ he’s talking to me and my mom. So he’s like “look, you just finished hifith (memorization) then this may be a good time, this may be a good point where, you know, you make a decision whether you want him to go towards, you know, a secular degree or if you want him to go into the Islamic line.” And so my mom was like “yes, take him with you.” And I was like, I was a 12 year old boy, 13 year old boy, excited. I’m like “yes, let me leave home, get out” you know. So I left and Alhamdulillah it, it just, from there it continued to study and I spent the next eight years, I got back when I was 21 or 22

so we would come back home every year. So I would come home once a year. I would come home for Ramadan and that was usually the end of the year. So we would end by half, uh, a few weeks, a couple of weeks before in Ramadan. And then our school was started again a couple of weeks after Ramadan. So I was at home for about a month and a half usually. And then back to school again. Yeah. Yeah. So away from home for about at least 10 months a year. Yeah.

I: Mashallah, so, uhm, so how do you define yourself, like in terms of your national and ethnic background?

R: So, um, my parents are born and raised in India, so I mean, that’s my, my background in India, India, India, particular Hethrenad. Um, it’s a city, would say towards this south of India. Um, but yeah, uh, it is a place where I, uh, visit, uh, now and then I visited a few years ago. But that’s, yeah, home. That’s my parents’ home. I would say home for me is American. Yeah.

I: So how do you, like, what do you prioritize in terms of like your identification? Like for me, I would say like I’m a Muslim Palestinian American.

R: For me, I'm a Muslim American. I don't really have, you know, India is, you know, it's my parents' identity. I don't see as mine identity, I know that, you know, the Indian culture does exist obviously within our families and stuff, but I don't know if I identify as that except, you know, hey "what's your heritage or where did your parents come from?" Yeah, they come from India. Um, it's a beautiful place for sure. It is, you know, a, an amazing, uh, place with a lot of Islamic history as well actually. Um, but you know, I was born here, raised here and don't really feel like I have much of a connection to India except my parents and you know, they're, you know, whenever they're there. They go on a yearly basis. I, I to, I visited maybe I'm five, six times as well. So, you know, I, I love the country. Actually my sister moved to India recently. She moved back to India and she's staying there for I guess however long they could. So she, she was my older sister. She was born in India, but they moved here. My, she was like two when they came here. Very young. So basically raised here. Um, and she has four kids, but then they decided my brother-in-law's mother is elderly and she's not doing too well, I think health wise. And so they decided "let's move back to India." So they all moved back to India and she wanted for her kids as well. She was like, you know, let me just take them to India. We'll enroll them into some Madrasa (Islamic School) to some institution there, they can memorize and at the same time we'll be with, you know, your parents family and take care of the mother in law, and things like that. So it is a, uh, it was a big step for her, but you know, we still have that relationship and connection to the country, but I don't necessarily use it as an identifying point necessarily.

I: So what, can you kind of tell me about your family life? Like anything that you'd like to share? Are you married, do you have kids?

R: Yeah. So, uh, I am, uh, I'm the only son of a four kids. Uh, so my sisters tell me I'm the spoiled one. I'm the number three out of four. So I have two older sisters and one younger sister. Um, I am married, I have five kids. I have four boys and one girl. So it's like the opposite here. So I was the only boy. Now I have little boys and only one girl alhamdulillah. And so, yeah, my kids are still very young. I have a- actually, they're very close in age. So, uh, six, five, four, almost a three year old and a one year old. So they're very close in age. Um, some of them are, of within a year and a half apart, but still close in age.

I: Okay, so how would you describe your political participation or like involvement in the U.S.? so do you vote?

R: Yeah, so I, I vote, I, uh, I actually encourage people to vote, um, when it comes to some of the political landscape, uh, that we have around us. Um, it requires us to vote. And I actually continued to push from the pulpit for young people to get involved in politics that Muslims should be involved in politics and we need to have Muslims representing our communities. Uh, and not just because, you know, Muslims, you have Muslims back, but as Muslims, we need to stand up and be a part of the political system because that's the only way that we bring change within our community and bring good to with the community. So, you know, if you're able to

bring good to a Muslim, non-Muslim, whoever you are able to bring good to and you do that and that could be done in this political, uh, arena in a political position. And so, um, not only do I vote, but I encourage young people to take, uh, to get into a line of education that will help them into a political, uh, you know, position where they can bring about change within their communities, but also be a voice of reason in the chaos, the chaotic, you know, political scene that we have the moment.

I: yeah, So which, um, elections do you kind of encourage people to be more involved in? Like is it said to prioritize the presidential or ...?

R: well, generally I, I think most people prioritize the presidential without realizing that local elections have a more impact on them. So the last few years we've been really pushing for local elections because you know, your local congressman or woman or your local Alderman, all of these people that are around you, your senators are the people that you really matter to you that are going to be speaking on your behalf. And, and so we push people to try to look, vote locally for local positions as well as, um, they would for the presidential election. The presidential one is obviously is this big deal because it's, you know, everywhere and televised nationwide. But I think that we forget that the president doesn't have necessarily, you know, necessarily, a say in local politics, such as the people that we assign. And if we're going to sit back and not do anything, then we're letting people or other people represent us who may not represent our values in our feelings.

I: so when it comes to candidates who are from like the same religious background or cultural background as you, do you think that that kind of like impacts the way that you would vote or the way that, like, do you think that would like kind of affect it?

R: Uh, you know, it's really, really, it's really depends because I know most people would, if they see a Muslim name, they would probably vote for a Muslim. I think it's important that even though they're Muslim, that you're also figuring out what their values are, what their, what they're pushing, uh, what their, their, you know, what their goals are. As you know, we're going into this position of leadership. Um, you know, I don't necessarily think that we blindly choose someone just because of their faith if they don't think-

I: yeah I think we made that mistake in Minnesota.

R: I mean there's, there's different, um, you know, there's ups and downs and there's challenges obviously wherever you are. But I think, you know, really just choosing someone that can be, or have a voice for reason. Um, not necessarily just for Muslim causes, but for non-Muslim causes as well. I think when electing Muslim politicians, we can expect Muslim politicians to only do Muslim related stuff, but also, uh, how do they become, you know, a change in general for their

non-Muslim constituents as well. And so I think, you know, finding someone who is balanced, someone who is understanding and, and that would be important.

I: Okay. Um, so were you in the United States during September 11th?

R: I was, yes. I remember September 11 was, uh, interesting because we were so at that time, on September 11, I was, what, 10, 11 years old? Um, we were actually - there I was like 11 maybe. Um, I remember that we were, um, I was in a little town, uh, in, in, in Illinois. Um, southern Illinois, Kankakee, Illinois. Uh, we had um, a Madrasa there, a Hifth School, so it was a boarding school, small boarding school, so maybe 20 students, 20 boys. Um, and uh, we were one day studying and our teacher comes in, he says, listen guys, you guys need to pack and you know, the school is gonna be closed for a while. You guys all need to go home. And so we were just from like, we were very sheltered. We were not allowed to have anything. I had no idea what was going on to teachers. Our teachers came and said, look, um, "we're going to be sending you guys all home was in the middle of the week." So we're like really excited but confused at the same time. We're like excited to go home and yes, we get no break. But then we're also like, like is the school shutting down what's going on? Why are we going home so abruptly? I remember that, um, you know, when, and we used to generally dress and you know, culturally, so either like a thobe or like a, you know, you know, we would have like these koofey's on and dress very traditionally, especially because we're in an Islamic school and stuff. So I remember a father came in to pick up his kids and our parents came, this was about an hour and a half away from Chicago, so, you know, a far drive. And, um, interestingly we saw one of the parents come in, he had a bunch of American flags on his car and we're like, okay this seem's awkward. it seemed weird? We're like, okay, whatever. But he had like a bunch of American flags on his car and as soon as we were getting in the car, he started to tell the kids "Hey, listen, I want you guys to change where you are and wear your 'quote unquote' American clothes." Right?

I: who is this again?

R: The father of one of our fellow classmates. He said just take off your thobe, take off, you know, don't wear this, wear your- get your jeans on, get your shirts on, don't like- take this off of your head. So we were really confused. I'd be like, oh, he's still young. We were like, whatever, man, we're "okay cool". Yeah. Um, but then we got home and we're just realize, oh my God, this is crazy.

Right. You know, obviously you see the footage and the coverage of it all over TV and, and you know, as a young kid, I guess I didn't really understand the, the impact of September 11, uh, that it had. Um, definitely I know that it was right after that that I left for South Africa. And I think that was also a point where my mom was like, you know, wait, you know, and, and my friend that was going "is it a safe time to go? Is this the right time to go? This has happened. Would we be, you know, singled out? Will we be somehow in trouble if he goes to study Islam right after 9/11"

so 9/11 happened and then we went to go study. Um, we left, so the January of 2012- so just about four or five months after 9/11, we went overseas to go study. Um, and so that was, you know, definitely what I remember from just our, our, you know, some of the women who were very scared to go out in their Hijab. And I think actually many people in general who took off their hijab, many men who had beards shaved their beards. Um, many men who, and women- who were, you know, would go out looking, you know, dressed in Islamic way would not feel comfortable going out.

I: Do you feel like there was like- did you notice a big, um, change with the Muslim communities like prior and then after 9/11?

R: so, so generally, I mean again, I was what, maybe 11, 12 years old at this time. So I'm not seeing much of a, I'm not looking at things, I guess from a very critical eye at that age. But one thing that I do now, looking back at that time, one thing I do see is that until then, Muslims were very relaxed too. Like we didn't care to get involved with people. They didn't get- we didn't care to get involved in politics. We didn't care to do interfaith work. We didn't care for, you know, whether we said hi to our neighbors or not. And I think 9/11 was a wake up call, like wait- Muslims really need to start representing themselves. You need to start talking about who they are, talking to people who they are, what we believe in. Because a lot of our faith was being misrepresented. And I think over the years while I was studying, because I was sitting at this critical time, it made me, made me realize that the importance of engaging with people in an importance of interfaith and the importance of, you know, showing what Muslim, what a Muslim is and what it means to be a Muslim to our fellow non Muslim communities.

Yeah, I mean, and I started traveling, you know, to South Africa at that time. So this is my first time really doing some international travels and I used to come back home every year. And so after that I remember it, man. I, there was times where I was stopped for four hours. I landed in O'Hare and four hours and it was, I was, what, 14, 15 year old kid and they have me for, you know this off for no four hours. They're just asking the same questions. "Where are you going? Who was your teacher? what are you doing?" And it's like, just for four hours, just make me wait, and make my parents wait.

I: Okay, so we're going to kind of get into like your community involvement now, specifically here. So what do you know about the history of this Masjid? Um, in terms of like the population that comes? um, their national, like ethnic backgrounds? Like, do you know of where they come from?

R: Yeah. So, uh, the ISM Brookfield Masjid, uh, was opened, um, in the beginning of the January of 2015. Uh, I remember, um, it's really new. It's, yeah, it's about five years old now. Um, I remember when I was still Imam at masjid al huda there was a groundbreaking at this land here. And, uh, I gave, I gave a talk and duaa here for the groundbreaking. So it was interesting because, um, there was a guest scholar that was leading tawareeh with me at Masjid al Huda.

They wanted him to come, but he fell sick, so I had to take his place. And so I came, I did the groundbreaking, I made duaa, we gave a little speech. People, you know, loved it. I didn't know anybody in this community at that time, but it was interesting because it so happened that I was here for the groundbreaking and I ended up becoming the Imam here later on.

Subhanallah how things work. Um, but that the community here in Brookfield, I want to say is generally more affluent. Um, you know, it is, it is what it is. Um, the people here I think are generally, uh, you know, a lot of physicians that we have in this area because the school district is very good in Brookfield, um, in the cost of living. Cost of living is also very expensive in Brookfield. Actually. It's crazy here. Um, and I think that's why, you know, it drives in, you know, the doctors and anybody who's looking for schools, good school district, but then also can afford living here. And so generally a more, you know, affluent community, a community of mostly physicians, but there are people, um, from all walks of life as well. So because we have Brookfield now, Brookfield, sometimes I say our community, I told our community that we're living in a bubble because once we leave Brookfield go to a place like Waukesha, right?

Which is bordering Brookfield. You'll find homeless people there. I mean, you find a lot of challenges in Waukesha as well. So we have community that come up from Waukesha. Obviously we're more during Wauwatosa, west Allis and nominee falls. And so all of these communities also don't have masjid's. Now, West Allis folks, um, you know, New Berlin folks, sometimes go over to the ISM, but sometimes this is closer to them, so they'll come here as well. Um, but we have a, a group between, I would say between, you know, Indians, Pakistanis, and we have a lot of Syrians in this area here. I know on the south side there's a majority of Palestinian population, but here in Brookfield, I think there's a large Syrian population. There's obviously, uh, you know, some Palestinian families here as well. We have some Somali families that come, uh, to the Masjid's as well here.

Otherwise, it's really, you know, you know, we have a little bit, everything we have are very, um, you know, uh, a Malaysian family who comes very regularly to the masjid. some really down to Earth people. And so it's, you know, a very, I would say, diverse Masjid in that sense. Uh, we, we offer different types of events for different groups of people that we have in the area. And so it, it's meant to bring people together. Um, one of our sort of- the tagline we have at our Masjid is making the Masjid welcome to all people, all ethnicities, all races, all walks of life- able, disabled, whoever you are, letting people feel that they are welcomed in the Masjid. That's sort of our goal. So when we do programming, uh, when it's comes to Kutbahs, when it comes to anything, it's always centered around how does a Masjid, how do we allow the Masjid to become more welcoming to all people, whether they're Muslim or even non Muslim.

I: So what's your, um, like your main role as Imam here?

R: so, uh, here at the masjid, should I, although I am I guess the title of a resident's color, um, I lead the prayers. I do the Kutbah's, I do adult programming, but because I'm the only person here

actually, and because I'm still, I think I on the younger side and I connect with the youth while I do a lot of, I do the youth programming, so I really wear different hats at that most should I, uh, do the, I do really all of the different types of programming. I do a lot of the youth programming. I teach Sunday school here I am also do all the interfaith work. Salam school as well. I also did Islamic school. So that's s that's different. That's a site that's aside from all of the Mesh of the work that I have to do. So I do the kutbah's. I do the prayers as, as I can if I'm here. Um, I'm also involved in the interfaith, so I do a lot of interfaith work. I represent the motion on the interfaith level. I, um, uh, in part of interfaith group here as well that I actually am the convenor for. I actually am run the meetings at the moment for our interfaith group. Um, so it's, it's a mix of a lot of different things that we do. Um, a lot of times I focus on social events because I know that social events is what brings people together. When people come together, then we try to do different types of events. Um, you know, we try to think out of the box when it comes to programming. This weekend, for example, we're doing a, we have a seminar on emotional intelligence, so prophetic emotional intelligence. What does it mean to, you know, what is in, what is, what is ECU, what does emotional intelligence mean and how is, how are we impacted by it? So again, because a lot of this stuff is rooted within Islam, it's just- we don't know how to present it in a way that is number one, understandable and also attractive to our communities.

I: I hear you guys do great work here with your programs.

R: And so we try to do, you know, we try to do programming at this a little bit different that still is core to our values, but in a way that actually people feel a connection to connect it to it. And I think, you know, a lot of Masjid's are lacking that, um, you know, that connection, they're lacking the, the resources to put together these programs, assistance, you know. Um, so yeah, that's sort of my main role. And because this is a s I guess because of all of this as a smaller Masjid. There's, I'm not that many staff here, so I am pretty much involved in everything. It sort of seems like I am maybe too involved, but you know, Alhamdulillah for whatever it is.

I: Yeah. So what are your kind of connections to other having centers around Milwaukee? Like not just the other Masjid's but maybe the dawah center, Maroof, like, yeah. Do you have any personal connections?

R: Yeah, so I mean at masjid Al- Huda obviously I was there for four years as an Imam, so that was my connection there. At dawah center I'm actually very close to a brother. We as a Masjid try to do some programs for the Dawah center and tries to give Kutbah's at the Dawah Center, um, for Maroof, I'm really close to the, the young, the young guys at Maroof, Amer, Amer Ahmad, and the others brother Hajj and all these guys have had a relationship with them since I was at Masjid Al Huda actually. I participated in many Maroof events and we actually collaborate with Maroof sometimes here at the Masjid to do certain events. Um, you know, I also, because we're under Ism, I give Kutbah's at the ISM, I'm at the ISM university center. We

do lectures at the Ism sometimes as well together. And so I have somewhat a good relationship with all the different machines and organizations. We have Masjid Al-Quran here in on Brown Deer Road as well. Um, [inaudible], so we have a, you know, good working relationship with him as well.

I: What about like National? Like ICNA or MAS? And do you have any like, um, do you participate in like the conventions maybe or events that they have.

R: I, um, I haven't really participated too much in international conventions overall. Um, I do have a network of, of the Imam's that we are in touch with that's, it's not necessarily through ISNA. I think that we have our own networks and we have our own, um, uh, you know, areas where we as Imam's connect with each other. So like, you know, the [inaudible] conference is actually, uh, a conference for Imam and scholars throughout America. Um, and then obviously on a national level, I know many different Imam's in your many different parts of the country, which we keep in touch and you know, benefit from each other and work with each other as well. So, yeah, I mean, every now and then you have an opportunity to speak at some of these conferences, but just nothing, nothing. I'm, I'm not really committed to it really.

I: yeah but you're not opposed to it either, so that's good.

R: No. So yeah, I mean I think they're doing great at work and so, you know, any opportunity for people to come together and benefit is great.

I: Okay. So do you have like, um, an idea of like the percentage of the Muslim- I mean the Milwaukee Community that is Muslim? Um, or more specifically like Arab Muslim, South Asian Muslim, uhm, community in Milwaukee?

R: Um, I, I, you know, I think Milwaukee may at this point, around 20 to 25,000 Muslims. I think we have a big population and I think continues to grow the overall Milwaukee area. Um, I want to say, I can't say for sure what our percentage is. I feel like we have a, maybe almost a 50, 50 between like the Arab population versus the Desi population, you know, I think they're almost equal. Maybe the Arab population is a little bit more, but I think it's almost very similar. I think it's very similar, but then we also have a very large African American Muslim population. We have a very large Burmese, a refugee population. We have our Syrian, uh, community that's continuing to grow here as well. So it's a lot of Iraq's that are, have, that are here, a lot of Somalian families that are here. So if you think about Milwaukee is actually, and a very interesting community because it's so diverse and that diversity is found at all of the Masaji'd so it's not that it's not that you don't have, you know, if you drive down south to Chicago, you'll find that, you know, in Chicago you have Masjid's that are based on ethnicities.

I would say the ISM, which is very just a mix of everybody. You know, it's just, I think when you look at ISM, it's really just a really diverse place. You find people of all walks of life and all backgrounds who are there-

And so I think that diversity at ISM is very, very beautiful to see the diversity lies definitely in the people. We may lack some diversity when it comes to leadership. And stuff. And I think that that can definitely needs that. That definitely could use some work for sure on a leadership level, but, but we need to sort of work towards that slowly. Um, and so I think for any organization to have a presentation from a mixed group of people is important. Um, not just for a particular community because different ideas, different perspectives, different, you know, approaches always are beneficial to all of us.

I: So what do you think your community does to increase non-Muslims, um, understanding of Islam? Do you guys work with a lot of like interfaith or a lot of-

R: I was, I, like I mentioned earlier, I am the convener or for our local interfaith groups. So we have something known as BEGIN here, which is Brookfield and ingrove interfaith network. So it's a network of different clergy, Imams, um, pastors, rabbis, um, you have the Sikh community that's involved, different, different communities that come together. And we do meet, we do a yearly Thanksgiving event together at different locations. Um, but we at the Majis that are always hosting different schools, different, um, church groups that come to the Masjid. I personally also get a lot of requests from different churches to come and speak. So, um, traveling to different areas. I have one next week and when I come back from Hajj, I have another, uh, you know, church that I'll be at. And so again, we have these different opportunities to speak as well. So again, I think when I think of our Masjid work here, my involvement is very much within the youth and interfaith work more than other areas as well. Programming is obviously all somewhat that goes through the Imam as well. But I think that these are two areas where we're really focused on youth and interfaith work as well.

I: Okay. Um, so do you think a lot of like your work also kind of, um, contributes to like combating like Islamophobia or do you think that's not really something, um...?

R: oh yeah, definitely. Yeah. I mean, a lot of the interfaith work, that's what the focus is generally. when I'm an interfaith, obviously, you know, the idea is how do we create a, you know, a, just a peaceful society altogether. But a lot of that work actually is because we have been, you know, facing discrimination and, and, you know, racism for the, for the past years and decades. Right? And, and so how do we start addressing that? But then when I started dressing out on my own behalf, I start realizing, well, there's so many other communities that have also experienced discrimination and racism and I have to start speaking on their behalf as well. Brookfield is a very republican, somewhat white, uh, suburb. And so a lot of times talking about these issues, people feel uncomfortable, but just having to address them and, and start figuring, you know, pushing people on these issues is what I think is important.

And, uh, and so yeah, it definitely includes, uh, addressing a lot of this Islamophobia. Um what people's perception are as Muslims. So anytime I'm invited to a church more than speaking about a specific topic of, uh, about Islam. I talk about who Muslims are, what we stand for and what it means to be a Muslim and how the media has sort of taken over the narrative of what a Muslim is and try to counter that narrative in front of these, uh, you know, people, uh, at different church events and whenever we have people that come to the Masjid as well.

I: Okay, that's great representation Mashallah. So now we're going to get into the topic of like marriage and culture. Um, so I never liked this question, but you can kind of take it how you go. So how would you view women in men's roles in society? Um, I think maybe like specifically in like the Muslim (pov)

R: Yeah. So, um, I, so the, the role of Muslim men and Muslim women in marriage, uh, both have their unique roles in marriage. Um, you know, uh, as Muslims we are taught that, uh, you know, there are certain responsibilities that the husband has and certain responsibilities that the wife has. And these responsibilities are not necessarily the- exactly the same. Um, you know, in Islam we know that for sure. Uh, it's the man's responsibility to, to, to provide for his family and to provide for his wife and his children. Um, and it's not the wife's responsibility. And so if the wife would like to, you know, stay at home and not do any work, that's her choice. And if she would like to work and also contribute to the household, that's also her choice. If she would like to, you know, she, I mean, we know that women do have a particular role.

They, especially when it comes to the upbringing of their children. Um, at the same time, I always tell people that that doesn't mean fathers don't have a role because father's rules are huge. Um, but the mother is really the first school of a child. The mother's lap is a first school that a child, and that's where a lot of the upbringing of the children has done in the lap of the mother. Um, and, and I think that that when there's a mutual understanding between husband and wife sort of, these are the things that I'm going to try to focus on. And the wife says, well, these are the things that I'll try to focus on. And they compliment that that way they compliment each other, right? Otherwise, if you're both husband and wife are focused on for, we're going to do the same exact things and we're going to do the things that, you know, the wife wants to do the things that the husband is doing and the husband is doing things that the wife wants to do and there's going to be a large area where neither of them are focusing on.

And that becomes a problem within the marriage in itself. Um, so this is always a tricky question because people are like, well, no, you know, husband and wife should be doing the same thing. They should be contributing the same way. You know, if you are, if your marriage works that way, then totally, right. That's up to you. It's not un-Islamic, it's not un-Islamic. For a woman to say that I want to also contribute half to the marriage and by paying for the bills, totally fine. Um, but in many cases that's not necessary nor does it work. And so yes, the husband has a very important role, but the wife also have a very important role. Where I see a problem rising is

where husbands take this quote unquote authority and they use it to suppress their wives and suppressed women. I think that definitely is a problem that needs to be addressed.

I think that itself is an issue that we continue to see. Um, and we continue to remind ourselves that the Prophet (Peace be upon him) he says that “the best of you are those who are best towards your families and your wives” And the Prophet says “I’m the best towards my wife and my family.” So taking from his example, he was the best of human beings. He was a best example, the best role model. And then you look at his life, his life wasn’t as a suppressive, oppressive husband rather. He was someone who worked with his wives in a way that they both, they both compliment each other, husband and wife. And so, you know, in an era that we live in the society that we live in where there’s a really a push for, you know, women’s right, which is obviously very important because women have been oppressed and suppressed for you know, decades.

I mean, for, for, for all of our history, you know, not just Islamic history, I’m saying world history women have also always been, you know, suppressed and oppressed. And it was really the Prophet (PBUH) who came in, who provided rights for women who actually came. And so when you look at our history, we realized, you know, Islam is the one that introduced the ideas. And Islam is the one that introduced the concept of women being human beings. Women having the right to own money.

I: it gave women rights before anybody.

R: Yeah. And so, you know, I think that sometimes we forget that because of how progressive people have become, uh, now, that’s a whole different discussion whether progressive values are necessarily in line with Islamic values or not. Um, do, does Islam need to be in line with progressive values? Is Progressive Values something that we accept?

Are they okay? Are they healthy or unhealthy or the Islamic or Unislamid? There’s obviously a whole different topic altogether, but I think that approaching this topic with balance is very important. Um, and a lot of people’s marriages are based off of the generals. You know, when you think about the divorce in our Muslim community, a lot of the divorces in our Muslim community is because of gender roles. It’s because they haven’t figured out who’s responsible for what and they’re sort of fighting about their own gender roles. And because that’s not clarified beforehand and does bring about issues within the marriage as well.

I: Yeah, I never thought of it like that. Um, so do you sign a sign Islamic Marriage contracts?

R: Oh, yes. I, I perform Nikkah and I perform Islamic marriages and I do the paperwork. And all that kind of stuff.

R: So Islamic marriage doesn’t require any paperwork, right? It’s, it’s basically you have two witnesses and generally, the two male witnesses, Muslim, who are present, uhm, with the groom

and the bride. Um, according to one school of thought, the Hanafi school of thought, the bride doesn't need Wali uh, and the permission of the wali. Then according to the other schools of thought, though, bride needs her wali's permission. The father, the, you know, whoever's sort of her guardian needs to be the one that's okay with the marriage. Um, other than that, I mean it's, it's a simple exchange of I accept, you know, it says it's a, it's a, "I have accepted in my marriage and I, yes, I give you permission to perform my Nikkah" and the two witnesses are there.

It's pretty much- that's what it comes down to. That's what your real Islamic Nikkah is.

so it's, it's very, it's a very simple contract. Now, uh, from a legal perspective, uh, you know, one thing that I generally, um, do encourage and require for the Masjid as well, is that if someone wants to get married, that they have a legal marriage license.

That way we are able to confirm that this person is legally getting married in the United States and it isn't something shady. Um, and therefore that we could, you know, also, um, have some of that legal information for our own records

I: So do you kind of make it a must for them to have that before you would sign for them?

R: Yes. Uh, I generally say so, unless there's certain exceptions. You know, if I know that this, there's certain reason why they're not able to get a marriage license then and that we've checked out the stories and we checked other backgrounds and things aren't clear, then in those cases, yes we may do it, but then also require that, okay, once you're able to get their marriage license, you get their marriage license, you bring it in, and then we'll also have in the record as well. So sometimes it's a scheduling issue, right?

Someone's last minute. They just needed the nikkah. They weren't able to get their marriage license, but they want to get to Nikkah done, but they already scheduled their marriage license to come in the next week, for example. You know, sometimes there are these issues that come up.

I: Yeah I know of some people who never do it at all.

R: people don't do it at all and it isn't necessary. It becomes necessary at times. You know, when you need to prove that, you know, marriage, married, and you know, when you go for Hajj for example, you need to provide some type of documentation that you're married

Pulls out a physical copy of the contract

R: This is what a Islamic marriage contract or certificate looks like. Not a contract but a certificate. Um, so it just has the groom's name, the bride's name, Dowry. Dowry is a condition you have to set a dowry for the marriage. And so whether the dowry will be given now or

whether it be deferred for later. Um, and then you also have the two witnesses names and then the Wali's name on there- the Guardian's name, the Imam signs and then we have it all done. Is this necessary? Islamically no, it could all be done verbally, but if you want to show documentation of it for Hajj, like how do they know that you're married? You have to show some, some type of documentation, you only need something like this or even a legal marriage license would be sufficient. So like a lot of times when I perform like, so this is in Chicago, this is in Page County Clerk in Chicago. They give me their marriage license, I fill it out.

Like this is a marriage license that I filled out four for a couple. Right. So it's just, you know, their names, I sign it as the officiant and that there, that way it's legal as well and Islamically as well.

I: Did you ever have cases where people only married to the Islamic contract? Um, and then do you feel like that usually presents a problem? And if so, like what kind of like problems is it usually for like the woman and like her marital, um, like divorce rights?

R: So yes. Um, sometimes I see the people, and well sometimes this is discouraged because, um, they get married, the husband gets married and a lot of times it's taking advantage of the woman. The husband doesn't want a legal contract because you know, he just wants to sort of see how it would work out and then, you know, break off from there and then doesn't want any legal implications on him because if there's no legal implications and then there is, you know, he's not held accountable. He just gets, you know, this is, you know, I'm divorcing you and walks away from everything and there's no, you know, accountability for him. And so the legal system sometimes, although it's not necessarily in line with Islamic system, but it does hold a person accountable.

A person, a man will think again twice before, just making a dumb decision. And a lot of times I see this happening because they'll use, young people just get emotional and they just, you know, say words have, they don't mean at times, but it's, it's effective and it's a problem and a lot of times it ruins lives. And so, um, the legal, uh, part of it also is required because, you know, in the state that we live in, you're only allowed to get married to one person. And a lot of times this also is maybe- this also may be misused by some people, um, where they don't, you know, they're getting married to a second or third life without, uh, legally, uh, applying because they can, because they're already legally married to one person. So, okay. So sometimes those are the challenges, no, obviously there's a whole different discussion about that from an Islamic perspective, from a legal perspective, you know, obviously that's sometimes why men or even women at certain cases won't want to go down a particular legal route.

Yeah. But generally, yes. You know, if, you know, I always require, if there isn't some type of, you know, if it's a not a shady issue, then we'll sometimes accommodate it. But if it seems like

this is, you know, it doesn't seem right, sounds shady, there's something that's not right about this, then I'll say, look man, I need to know why, exactly you're not getting a marriage license and I need you to go get a marriage license for it.

I: So do you perform like any counseling, um, specifically for like, you know, marriage or community, like, you know, counseling or family counseling? Like what types do you do?

R: Man, interestingly, this summer has been really busy because like, literally I've done so many meetings of just different types counseling. Uh, I've, uh, I do a lot of, I do marriage counseling, so, um, I, I don't do very, you know, long term marriage counseling.

I meet with people and I'll say, look, if wanna meet once or twice, we'll meet a few times. And if things are beyond my capacity, I'm not a professional counselor. So I am going to then, um, direct you to someone. I'm wanting to refer you to a counselor that can professionally help you guys. Um, family counseling.

And so I think one of the roles of the Imam's, a huge role in the Imam is that we have to counsel people and more than counseling is we have to become a place where people can come and open up. So this, this little office here, um, is a place where people just want to come feel that they have, you know, your, um, best interest and that they can share their thoughts openly without being discriminated, without being judged and without that information going to anybody else. And so that is why confidentiality is huge when it comes to counseling. And when people come here, that's what they expect as well. Yeah. And in our communities there, this taboo around counseling, right? People don't want to go to counseling, go to counseling, right? Uh, I've seen that no husband ever wants to be brought to counseling and actually threatens the wife sometimes, uh, if she ever brings up counseling or if he, if she ever goes to an Imam or goes to someone for counseling or opens up their issues. Um, and because of that, a lot of people don't go to counseling and it continues to impact and ruin their marriage or ruin their relationships. And they only come a lot of people, this is what I've seen overall. Many people come and ask for counseling or ask for my advice when it's too late. That's when they come. They come when it's like at the end and I say, you know, if you guys just came a little earlier and if you prioritize this and just decided to come a few months earlier, few weeks earlier, you know, we could have really worked on things, but you guys are coming to me after you've made up your minds after you guys have already gone through all the difficulties.

It's just too much damage to is it repairable almost. But we still try and we still work and people still expect you to do what you can to help them out and you try your best in whatever way you can. Sometimes it works and sometimes it's just not meant to be. And so I think creating awareness around the importance of seeking help, seeking counseling, marriage counseling, premarital counseling. I actually tell young people, I say, you know what? I strongly encourage

you and I actually offer it. I tell people I offer premarital counseling. So I would definitely encourage you, don't just get married, come and sit down. Let's talk about what you're getting into both with both the bride and the groom. Yeah. So before the marriage. So you come in, you sort of go through like, and this is before marriage that are these both of you understand what marriages are with what, you know, the husband understands the, the, the groom understands and bride is understanding what am I getting into, what are my roles, what are my responsibilities?

And I actually present some times scenarios and then sort of see how each one we would react to it. So, right. So how would you react in this scenario here, husband or wife, how would you react in this scenario here if this were you, if this, this is how your husband said something, you did something and that really opens people's eyes. Like, oh my God, wait, okay, I didn't like how that response was, for example. Or I think this is where I need to work on, or this is where you need to work on. And so this way, that's why premarital counseling, especially in our day and age is extremely important. And, and, and then I always tell people, even after marriage, just like how we go for, you know, our yearly checkup, every couple should go to someone for a yearly checkup just to go and talk, just to talk.

It doesn't mean that you have issues. If we go to someone, it just means you're just going and just sharing what you've been going through, how marriage has been the person behind the table. Then we'll just give you advice wherever he or she can. And that way you're, you know, you have a pulse on your marriage, otherwise you go without, you know, you keep everything in the back of your head or you keep everything very hidden and then a time comes where you can't hold anything back anymore in your burst. And that's what I see a lot of times in marriages. People just are so fed up to keep things quiet and keep it inside themselves to themselves over over years and years and years.

I: so do males or females kind of seek your counseling more often? Or do you feel like it's just kinda like, oh, cause I feel like you've had a mix.

R: I think a lot of sisters are more comfortable coming in seeking counseling because men are a little bit more not willing to open up and are more private. Um, I've had some sisters who come to me and said, look, my husband has threatened to divorce me if I even think of coming to you for advice. And it's just very sad. And men are very more private people, I think in general. Or don't want people to know about the problems. Um, there was something that I've heard just recently from some relatives as well that, you know, looking down on people who get counseling, our, our, our elder generation looks down and people are getting counseling because it's like how, how, how can you go and open up your problems in front of another person and they missed the point then, you know, it's basically you're missing the entire point of, well, you're not going there to publicize your problems are you're going there to find a solution to your problems.

And sometimes that does not, that cannot be found on your own. People think they know, we'll sort it out on ourselves, but it's never sorted out on your own. Um, if you, and that's why if there's certain issues that you have with your family, family, wife, children, husband, and you can't find a resolution to within three days, then you need to find someone else, go find a third party that can get involved and help with that counseling. So yes, generally women are the ones that are reaching out for help. Um, a lot of times because culturally also women are the ones that are a little bit more pushed around. And so it's, it's hard because when I have the husband and finally come in, I have to convince the husband, look, I'm not being a bias, but sometimes most of the time I have to sort of side with the sister because it's like, look, you just, you know, she may have wrong, but it just seems like more of the problem is from your side and you need to be more than you- You have to be more active where you need to be, participate more in the marriage. You just need to be around more, you plan more with your family, things like that.

I: wow, these issues are so common. Yeah. Okay. Um, so do you deal with a lot of, um, instances of like interracial or inter-religious or intercultural marriages?

R: Ideally, these problems are becoming more prevalent now than it's becoming, it's becoming more common now. It's also a struggle that young people have. Um, a lot of young people have come to me and complain that I don't want to get married to someone from my own culture. Right. I teach at Salam school. So interesting. The, a lot of the girls are more comfortable talking about this, but they come "I don't want to get me to a Palestinian. I don't want to get married to a Syrian. I don't want to get married to someone from own culture.

I want to get married, someone outside of my culture. But if I do, then it's like I have done a grave sin. And so I can't get married to somebody outside of my culture. It's like my family would disown me if I did that." And from an outside perspective, you know, it's important to have similarities. But when we think about being- so this is where the whole discussion of culture comes in as an American Muslim, what is my culture, right? Is My culture what my parents' culture is or do I create a special culture identity of myself here? And a lot of times we're told that, no, you have to continue holding onto your culture. And because of that, you know, we, we then have a problem and it comes to marriages and things like that. You know? Uh, most young people don't care whether, you know, the person in front of them is w uh, Palestinian, Indian, Pakistani, African, Somalian.

If they like that person for the qualities, they're okay getting married to them. That's amazing. Right? Um, most of the time you don't find that in our older communities where we're really hesitant to get married outside of our culture, it's a, it's a, it's a taboo thing for our communities. Um, and so a lot of times when young people get married outside of the culture, it's not, it creates a problem. Not Because, uh, you know, the husband might have issues here but because the cultures of their parents are different. So their parents are clashing. The husband and wife are totally okay on the same board because for them they get along. But because let's say one's

family is from Pakistan, one family's from, you know, Syria, they have different cultures. Husband and wife get along totally fine because they don't care about culture. But no, both of the parents are like, oh my God, look at them.

“They didn't do this or do that.” That. And it's just this cultural clash. And so really, um, I see and that's why many times I bring this up in the Kutbah's because the Kutbah is probably the only time, especially when I'm at the ISM, that's the only time that I get to really address a really large crowd of elder parents. And then you go to sort of say, listen, look, if, if you, if your kids are born and raised here, then don't expect them to get married to someone that you want him to get married to or at least have a, or at least have a conversation with them from before. At least have a talk with them before that these are my expectations. These are your expectations. Uh, and that most of young people don't care about what ethnicity the person that they want to get married to is. As long as they're a good person, they are, are attracted to each other, attracted to each other, and they're Muslim, you know, they don't care about the other kinds of stuff. So, uh, I see a slowly becoming more and more common. Um, uh, but it's still, it's still, there's a lot of hesitation because of the cultural baggage that we have.

I: Yeah, definitely. So, okay, so now we're going to kind of get into the, um, the last topic, which is, um, views on people with disabilities or what we like to call “difference of abilities”. Um, and so that's kind of our main focus for our research project.

R: so, um, I think Masjid's in general, I think there's a taboo that you know, that that exists also in our communities. Everyone disabilities. And so most people don't bring their children with disabilities to the Masjid because of, you know, number one, how, what people say, how people react. Um, yeah, I remember that there was a parent once who, a father actually who once um, when we were having our initial meeting or the Masjid. So again, like I mentioned to you that we try to make mission very accommodating for everybody. So when we met with parents who had children disabilities, we sort of wanted to see what, what the issues were and how we could become more accommodating. And one said, look, one father started crying and said, look, I just, you know, it's sad when I bring my daughter to the Masjid, and my child to the Masjid, and, and uh, all the kids are playing with each other except with her because she has a disability.

There is, um, a need to create that awareness. And Yeah, and most parents are uncomfortable. Another parent says that I stopped bringing my child to the Masjid because I brought my autistic child, an autistic child, you know, sometimes they're loud or they make noises that are, you know, different. Um, and because of that, all the women started staring at me and gave me the dirty looks. And so I was felt so uncomfortable that I, I didn't want my child back. And because I didn't get my child back many times I couldn't come because I have to keep, I have to be with my child. So a lot of times women are discouraged from coming to the Masjid because of their children that have disabilities. So not only do they, not only the children miss opportunity to

have coming, they themselves, caretakers themselves are disconnected from the mission because there is no accommodation.

So that was something that we wanted really focus on. Uh, I'm not sure if you're familiar with the Muhsin Organization. "Muhsin" is, um, an organization that actually, um, focuses around, uh, Muslims with disabilities. Um, and actually what they do is they have a certification for Masjid's as well. So this is something that we have. So they have like a bronze, silver, gold and a, uh, a platinum level certification. So what they do is basically we, we team up with them. They come to the machine, they sort of see like what is the Masjid- for number one is their most basic. Is it disability accessible?

I: Are you guys?

R: Yes, yes we are. So we have wheelchair, wheelchair accessible to be ahead of things. Uh, number two is, and are you doing programming for people with disabilities? So, yes. So that requires you have to have these Kutbah's a year talking about a disability and awareness around disabilities. That's what we did that, so at the moment we are at a gold level, so this is very old actually. So we're at a, we're a gold level. That means where, what we do at the Masjid here is we not only do Kutbah's on it, npt only are we, uh, have accessibility for those with disabilities and special needs, but we also have, um, care. Uh, we also have, uh, support groups for caregivers. So we're doing support for, for caregivers. We also have events for special needs children, specifically. when we have any of our events, um, if there's someone who is deaf, we try to bring someone with a s ASL to do sign language for them. Uh, when we have like Eid fest, we have a uh, a fast pass for anybody with special needs or disabilities, they get priority on the front of the line. So we do different things here and I've had so many parents and so many people who just say like really, I've never come- And actually if you, if you notice ISM now offers um, a a room for special needs on aid prayer. That was because we pushed for that from here because we started this group here and then we started to push that from here so we said, look, you need to provide for that need prayer. There has to be a special room for parents who can come with their children. So we've had mothers who said that I haven't been to Eid prayer in the last 15 years because of my disabled child. I could never come to the Salah. And now because you are providing a room now I can come and pray with the entire community. And so it, it also, you know, becomes an opportunity to open doors for many of our, you know, families that are disconnected because they have children or even parents with disabilities. Many different types of disabilities that exist obviously. And so some are disabilities that people our new children are born with, but others are disabilities that our elders experienced because of old age. And so providing for both ends that elderly and also the young or those who are born with any type of disability or, or they incur the disability because of an accident or whatever.

I: Do you think there is stigma on one disability more than another?

R: For disabilities, I think there isn't much awareness around most like things like autism. People have no idea what autism is. And so they sort of see a child and you know, talking weird or, and they're like, they have no idea what's going on. Um, so definitely I think that we need to create awareness around, um, uh, things like that. Uh, autism, um, down syndrome, uh, these are, you know, people are affected by it, but yeah, physical disabilities. It's very near to me because my father is actually deaf and my father is deaf since birth.

And so that's also something that, uh, because of all that, it's very close to my heart as well, that there'd be some, you know, efforts within-. I know my father is always telling me, look, I've come, I've come to the masjid you know, almost every day I'm here all the time. Why don't Masajid ever accommodate people like me, right? I just come here. I just have to look at you guys and absolutely don't understand anything. So why don't Masajid accommodate people like me to at least understand what's going on? And so many Masajid now around the country are providing ASL, you know, if they have live streams or the Kutbah's, then there is someone doing sign language. And that's becoming more and more common. Now, I think in Milwaukee, Alhamdulillah, I say this, you know, with, with all humbleness, but we are the first Masjid to really, really open up the doors to disabled, uh, uh, disability, uh, uh, special needs children and disabled children and adults to our programming. We have a mother who comes with her disabled son who is 20, you know, mid twenties, 30s, doesn't come out much, brought him. Um, there was a young man who was sitting outside who has a disability and sometimes the disabilities are physical and sometimes they're what you can't see the disability. And is it connected to the mental health? Uh, and so the mental wellbeing. And so we try to provide, uh, seminars on both. So we do a seminars on mental health and seminars are on disability and creating awareness around disabilities here. And so I think that people have been very hesitant. They still are, by the way. They're very, very much still hesitant until now, but we're just continuing to slowly make people feel more and more and more comfortable and whatever the people, whatever their comfort level is, we just try to accommodate them at that level.

Yeah. This year we're actually planning to start a special needs Sunday school. So I think most of our machines don't have any programs for any children with special needs. Most of our Masjid's don't have any type of programming for anybody with disabilities. And so we started that programming already now and now, but now we wanted to start something more consistent, which is a weekend school for our disabled and special needs children, whatever level they're at. So we would have a TA with each student who was working with each student individually. And if there are students who are not, you know, don't need to have one on one, but there still, they can be in the classroom, but they still need special help, we'll put them in a classroom and have a TA with that person and with that child in the classroom. So we're looking at different ways that we can continue to provide these services.

I: So are there any like commendations that you can, can fill me in with that you have done in the past or that you, or any like, um, like discussions and talks that you guys like, bring it up

R: the, the, the disabilities, I do it. I do it here. Uh, I mean a few times a year, I've done it at ISM. I think I assumed the challenges is that the building is old and it's already built in a certain way that it's hard to do certain accommodations. Like ism is not wheelchair accessible. Women can never, there's no way women can get to the prayer hall without any stairs, right? There's always stairs for women. Um, and so they, I mean there's certain things that have to be done to make it more accessible. Um, but creating awareness I think is number one. So when you first create awareness, you have accommodation and then you have, you know, you have awareness, acceptance and accommodation, right? you're, you're doing all three. You're not just going to accommodate for someone where there is no awareness around the issue.

So the first thing is creating awareness, right? Talking about how disability is something that is actually very, very much, um, so that we can relate to in the Seerah of the Prophet (PBUH) as well. And how the Prophet (PBUH) interacted with people with disabilities. breaking away from the idea that did a disability as a punishment from Allah (SWT) because there are some parents who have said this that, you know, yeah, I have, I've had, I've had people say to me that, you know, "your child is like this because Allah (SWT) is punishing you" and things like that and sort of breaking away from the idea that your disabled child is a punishment, rather your disabled child or your special needs child is a blessing to you. Uh, and, and looking at that blessing as a blessing and looking at your child as a blessing to you and how they can help you.

And it's challenging. Obviously parents with special needs have a children's special needs have different types of challenges and that's why we also have a support group where parents can just come together and just sort of like, you know, blow some steam and just get there and burden off the shoulder, talk about what their challenges are. It is real on a human level, right? With other parents who have disabled children that this is just hard and they get to just open up because sometimes you need to have spaces where people can just talk.

I: Yeah. So last question. What do you think community leaders could do to start, um, helping like lesson to help lessen any stigma towards like, people with disabilities like you mentioned, but like what's the first step?

R: I think the first step is that, um, the Imam himself or herself, uh, does better to accommodate in the Masjid. Well, you know, uh, and making them feel comfortable. That means if you see a parent with a child with disability that you are out of your way and you say Salam. you got your way and say, well, come you go out of your way and make that child feel welcome. And that parent feel welcomed. And when that child in that parent or that child makes some noises that you're, you don't, you don't say anything to them, rather, you don't let anybody else say anything to them as well. Um, you know, when I, there's a child who comes here, disabled child, he is, you know, he's in his, maybe he's 10, 12, uh, and really beautiful soul, really beautiful kid. Um, but he has some type of disability.

Uh, when he came to the Masjid I said you know, I said, you want to give the Athan, and he said “yes!” and he was so happy and so excited that day I let them give the chance to do Athan and then I let them give the Ikkama. It's sort of just lifting the spirits of these young people and children with disabilities and parents, you know, just talking to parents and lifting their spirits as well. That's number one. Number two I think is addressing it from a, from the pulpit because that's when you have the largest audience. And I think that's where you talk about how disabilities are, you know, from Allah (SWT). How they're meant to make you stronger, how there were disabled people in the time of the Prophet and how the Prophet interacted with them. Right. You had, for example, uh, the whole Surah of “Abasa Watawaleh” that was revealed because of Prophet, you know, turned away from a blind man and Allah (SWT) is teaching us how to be interacting with people with special needs.

Um, I think that's, you know, creating that awareness. And the third one is doing special programming for them. Uh, you know, social events for them. And even at your own social events in the mission, you make accommodations for them. We have to start somewhere. So you start wherever is easy for you, right? Sometimes, yeah, you have to start at some level personal relationships. Then you create that awareness within the community. Once you create that awareness in the community, the next time you see someone in the Masjid, then you see someone yelling at me. If I, if I see an older person getting upset with, you know, uh, you know, a child who's making noises, but that child has- I will say from the pulpit, I will say immediately, I'll take the I and I'll say,” listen, don't please don't shout at this child: this child I have, I've, and that's why I have a parent who still comfortable, who brings this autistic child to the Masjid and this child is running around Mashallah. We're praying and he's running around. And one time I'm praying and I'm leading the Salah and he comes and grabs the mic and he starts talking to Mic and he does this. And after the prayer, nobody said anything. Because we've created, we've created that understanding of the people that look, you know, you're, you're not gonna, you know, no one's allowed to say anything. This is a child who has this, a disability, the child who has autism and we're going to, uh, still make them feel welcomed here. Right? This is how it is. And, and that's the reality. Uh, there was a, you know, recently, you know, there is a picture that was being circulated on social media with the Masjid in Turkey that has a child area, a play area in the back of the Masjid, right? That's really what a Masjid should be. Right?

I: I saw that people didn't like that, but I thought “isn't that what it was like in the Prophet's time, where children were laughing and playing?”

R: But not only that, but when you don't hear the laughter and, and, and the noise of children and the Masjid when they're young, then you're not going to hear them in the Masjid when they're older, we do know when you don't accommodate them from a very young age, then at an older age they're not gonna want to come to the Masjid. So, you know, we've got to figure out a way of accom- making the place. The Masjid is really a house of every believer whether you are, you know, male or female, whether you are white or black, whether you're Arab or non Arab,

whether you are able or disabled, the Masjid is a house of every believer and that is why every person has and should have access to the Masjid. Like everybody else does. And so that's, that's where-

I: Well that's definitely a good start.

R: Yes, Alhamdulillah, but we're trying to just continue to increase. I mean there, there's different sensitivity levels as well. And sometimes I may say something that a parent dislikes and they'll come and tell me and I'll say, well thank you for telling me, cause I didn't know that this was offensive, but now I'll be more careful. Like even the special needs and disabilities and parents don't like them being, don't, don't like the word "disability." And some parents don't like the, the, the word "special needs" and some people prefer one over the other. And so you have to be very careful with also, you know, what are, you know, the parent's preference and the children's preference in what we can you make them feel comfortable. That's really the goal. How do they feel comfortable? How do we allow them to feel into it, feel like they're integrated within the community and they're not otherized. They're not pushed to the side by other people.

I: Well, wow, Thank you so much.