



Oral History Project Interview

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

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Gender: Female

Name: Rreze Ibraimi

Country of Origin: Albania

Year of Immigration: Born in the United States

Abstract: In the interview, 25-year-old Albanian-Muslim woman Rreze Ibraimi Discusses her experience growing up in Janesville, Wisconsin. In this small Mid-Western town, Rreze was always viewed differently and reveals that she often felt the need to “white-wash” herself to fit in with her peers. While enjoying her summers in Albania, Rreze would often visit her friends My Space pages and miss her life back in America. Her Muslim identity proved not to be as oppressive as the expectations of her Albanian culture. An Albanian woman routinely marries, becomes a housewife, and has children at a young age. Breaking with tradition, Rreze has chosen not to marry at this time, and pursue a career in Dental Hygiene. Her main priority is to express her personal identity and establish financial independence. Due her largely secular lifestyle, Rreze illuminates the broad spectrum of Muslim identities in the United States. She shares her love of traditional Albanian clothing and recipes, thus revealing obvious love and respect for her culture. Alternatively, Rreze expresses gratitude for the independence and self-sufficiency that her American way of life has given her. She can enjoy Byrek (a traditional Albanian filo pie) as well as a good Cheeseburger. Rreze exemplifies the meaning of having both roots and wings.

I: All right, what is your name, age and your level of education?

R: My name is Rreze Ibraimi, I'm 24 years old, and right now I'm actually in school to become a hygienist.

I: Great. So when you were growing up, where did you go to school?

R: So.. growing up. I was born in Janesville, Wisconsin. So I went to Wilson Elementary School. First, I mean, kindergarten through fourth grade, and we moved and went to Kennedy elementary school, fifth grade year, Marshall Middle School, and then Craig High School. And that's where I graduated from.

I: Great. So tell me about any places or buildings where you spent a lot of time during your childhood.

R: My house for sure. I mean, my little sister, we shared a room pretty much our whole lives. So, I definitely, definitely spent a lot of time in my room when we were always playing with our toys.

I: So.. tell me more about your home, or your school or other places that you remember really fondly?

R: Probably when we lived on Cherry Street in Janesville. So, me and my little sister had a room, she had a bed on one side on one side of the room, and then mine was on the other side, but we slept together because we were scared. (Laughs) I know, super pathetic, but yeah, that's Honestly Probably out of all my memories definitely in that room, we had a lot of memories.

I: So who lived with you in your home?

R: So it's my dad, my mom, my oldest sister who is now 29 my other older sister who is 26 Me and 24 my younger sister was 23 and my little brother who is

I: So what was it like growing up Muslim? in Janesville?

R: Yeah, it's different, you know, cuz you're, my skin color is very pale. As you can see, it's really white. But we aren't viewed as like, white people were viewed as like, oh, like, they're the Muslim family. They're the foreign people. So we are definitely looked at, like, at a different perspective than another random white girl from my school, you know? Which to me, I don't know, I just didn't really make much sense. Because just because it's like, we knew English. I was born and raised here. So...

I: Was that hard for you growing up?

R: Yeah, for sure. Because no one you know, you want to be seen as like, you want to blend in with your peers. You don't want to be like the oddball or like you want to blend in and not feel like that? Yeah. Did you feel like it was harder for you to fit in? Because you were Muslim? Yeah, for sure. You know, my mom growing up, she was strict, like, no sleep overs, she barely let me go to the Valentine's Day dance in middle school or rock nights. She did not like that. And if I had a sleep over at my friend's house, you'd have to call their parents or she would tell me to ask them like, oh, what did your parents do as a job? And that's how I choose based off of if I could hang out with them or not.

I: So how was it for you being Muslim in different places other than your home? For example, like when you went to school? Did you feel like you express your Muslim identity differently at school than you did at home?

R: Yeah, definitely. At school, I would just try like white washing myself as much as possible and just fitting in, but at home might, you know, I felt more comfortable. You're on your family, you're all the same people. So I didn't have to feel like I had to act a certain way or to be viewed a certain way. Okay, that makes sense. that it'd be really hard.

I: Are you currently employed?

R: Yes. So right now, I work a couple times out of the week, because I'm in school full time. So I work as a waitress at a Sprecher.

I: Great! Are you married?

R: No.

I: And then since you're not married, we'll kind of skip all the married questions. But um, how would you say you identify yourself?

R: That's such a hard question. I do freelance Brian. Matt, I think. I think when I was younger, I tried identifying myself more as white and like not Albanian because, I mean, most of my friends were white. You know, I mean, my hometown is a lot of white people. But like when I would be wrong, like my Albanian friends, I try being more Albanian. You know, like, I feel like when I was younger, I never was able to like have one identity, but now I'm different. Now. I'm just like, I mean, I don't really identify myself as like, you know, like you when I'm around even Albanian people I'll still be more white? I guess not. So, like, I'm not gonna agree with everything you're saying anymore. Because I've grown to be like that, you know, I'm older and I don't feel like I need your approval.

I: Yeah, no, that makes a lot of sense.

I: So which culture, or cultures do you identify most with? Since you're Albanian and you're American, and you're Muslim?

R: Probably, probably more American, like people ask me after I tell my name and like the look I get, they'll be like, oh, like, what's your ethnicity? You know? Or I'll say I'm Albanian, but like, I don't really follow too much of their culture. So now, like, being 24 years old, I'm just I view myself as white- honestly. Yeah.

I: Well, you grew up here. So that makes sense. Sure. Um..

I: Do you feel that the way that you identify yourself changes with, you know, where you are? Or..you know, the place where you are in? If yes, how would you say, your identity or the way you identify yourself changes with different social situations?

R: No, not no, not at this age. I'm like me, you know, like, I'd be more reserved when I'm around Albanian people. You know, like, so not like me. I mean, you know, me, you know, I yeah, but like, when I'm wrong, I'll be more just like, reserved, very quiet, you know? Yeah.

I: So, do you feel like that's a cultural thing?

R: Yeah, I think so. I don't want to be like, like, as an Albanian girl, you want to be too like out there? You know, they don't like that. Not that I'm not doing it because they don't like it. I'm doing it because I'm too shy to be myself. Like, I get a lot of anxiety being wrong, like a room of Albanian Women. It's like, it's like worse than doing a test. I swear!

I: Yeah. So, do you feel like you feel more comfortable around Your more Americanized friends than you do with other Albanians?

R: Yes. 100%. Like, you can be yourself. You can say what you want without beating people. It's like, watch what you say in your actions. Because they'll like, take any little minor mistake you could have made and like, just run with it and like, just start making up rumors and whatever. They want to say, you know? Yeah.

I: Is that a cultural thing?

R: Yeah. I think that all the Albanian people do is talk about each other like that. That's just the culture? It's always been like that.

I: Do you ever take it personally?

R: People gossip, when I was younger. Yeah, but now I just don't care. Yeah, so probably like maybe in like, the middle of high school. Like, by the time I became a senior in high school, I just really didn't care what people had to say.

I: That's good that you felt like you could be yourself.

I: Are there places where you feel your best, and your most successful at expressing your true identity? And why would you say that is?

R: I mean, honestly, probably at home or with my parents, you know, like they know who I truly am to this day. Like they know my personality. Very comfortable around them. See what my sisters, my brother, like, that's probably the one place where I can really be myself. Especially around my sisters, though. Like, they just get it. Like we've lived the same life. So they just like really understand me. No one, no one understands me more than my sisters understand me, for sure

I: Yeah, yeah, that's a good relationship. I know. I have that with my sisters too.

I: What traditions of your religion or culture? Do you practice?

R: Probably, I'll do one. Ramadan. I'll fast for one day, at least I'll try to. I mean, I don't eat pork, but that's because we didn't grow up eating pork. So that's the only reason why we don't eat pork. I'm not really much like.. I have no interest in eating it, really? Yeah. I suppose if you didn't grow up eating it. Why start now? Right?

I: Yeah, definitely. Yeah, if you didn't... How do I say this? If there wasn't.. Is it more of the religious aversion to eating pork, or Is it more because you're not used to eating it, and you have no interest in it?

R: Yeah, I think it's more of just having no interest.

I: Did you learn any Albanian recipes from your parents or grandparents?

R: I don't know how to cook at all. I'm gonna worst cook. Like when my mom is cooking. I'll try helping her out a little bit. You know, like as much as I possibly can do, but I honestly wish I would have more, but I just didn't have interest in it. You know? Yeah. Growing up, I wanted to be around my friends. Like, that's what my interest is making sure I'm having fun. And you know, like, I never really cared too much about cooking or being in food. But now I'm like, Oh my gosh, I should have learned at least a little bit. So my mom does it. Like, I'll go in the kitchen. I'll try helping her out a little bit until she yells at me totally.

I: Well, you're still young so you have plenty of time to learn.

I: So what is like a really popular Albanian dish, or what is your favorite Albanian dish?

R: I like biak. So it's pretty much just dough stuffed with either cheese or meats, or like this bean soup, which is my favorite. And then there is this like pepper spread almost like you can buy like at any ethnic snore store. Oh my gosh. And, then the last thing I like is like, it's almost like a pepper, onion, tomato stew. And I really like that. So those are like my main things, like if my mom's making Albanian food, like that's what I want her to make.

I: Sounds delicious.

I: So, in what ways, if any, do you participate in cultural or religious community activities?

R: Probably nothing.

I: That's okay. You're being honest. Not everybody practices, for sure.

I: How would you describe your religious life?

R: I feel like I'm more.. I don't know? I feel like spiritual almost in a way. Like, I just believe in like good energy and bad energy. That's the only way I can really say it. It's like, hard to get into. But like, that's just what I believe in. Like, I don't really know if there's like a God out there, but I feel like there's like a good energy and a bad energy for sure.

I: Right. Right. Which is really different than what people think of when they think of, of Muslim, right? They think that you have to be really religious.

R: Definitely. For sure. I feel like a lot of people they want to, like put us in one group and like that's what you are. There's just so many forms of what people practice, and what they choose to wear and whatnot.

I: Yeah, yeah. And it's the same thing growing up Christian. Like some of us are really religious, some of us are moderately religious, like very religious Christians and army Christians.

R: Like, just like you and me, not me, but like you like the way I am Muslim is like the way you are a Christian pretty much.

I: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. Sure. Definitely.

I: So, do you ever attend mosque or any church activities?

R: Okay, so when I was on a vacation to Turkey with my family, and we actually got to go on to the mosque. When we got in there, we had to put on like a skirt, and I had just a T-shirt on my chest, everything was covered. And then I put on a scarf. Yeah, I just found a scarf around my head. Just enough to just like kind of cover your hair and we got to go inside the mosque. It was very beautiful is my first time ever is on my first and last time in a mosque. So that was like 10 years ago, even more than that. But I have been to church though, with my friend. I'm not gonna lie, She's like, come to church today. Just you know, not to participate. Just see what it's like. And I was like, okay, so I went there. And it was, I mean, it was different, obviously. But like, I mean, every culture is when you're not used to someone's culture. You're thinking it's weird, you know? But it was interesting. I'm happy to see it. Like, you know

I: Was your friend, Christian or Muslim?

R: She was Christian. Okay, so Wow. But she was, like, Just come with me. Like, you want to do anything. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable. Just come see what it's like. Because you don't know. You know, you never been inside of church. So, I was like, okay, that's cool.

I: So do you ever pray?

R: No, no, never pray though. Maybe if I take my exam and say like God, please just let me fail this. I mean, no, no, don't let me fail this exam! Please let me pass this exam. I really need to pass.

I: Yeah, we all do that. I'm telling you, I do it in traffic.

I: So in your family, like in your household, who mostly does the cooking?

R: Probably my mom. I mean, my parents own a family restaurant. So my dad, he's like, always in the back cooking. It's really funny, but when he comes home, he does not cook, like at all. Like maybe he'll make stuffed peppers every once in a while. And, that's also another one of my favorite Albanian dishes, stuffed peppers. I go crazy for them. But, other than that, like, chili at the restaurant, or like, make something for himself at home. Nothing too crazy, you know? And obviously he has offered me food, but I'm like, I don't want to eat what you're making. But if I'm gonna ask anyone in my household to cook for me, it's gonna be my mom hands down for sure.

I: Oh, wow. stuffed peppers. That's funny. We eat those two. Like, I eat those too, I make them some nicer, make some longer bring some to you.

I: Okay.

I: So, um, do you think that your family's kitchen feels different from like, your friend's family's kitchen? Like say your parents kitchen? Do you think it's different?

R: Yes, for sure. Because you go to your friend's house and they're making like spaghetti or like, you know, just basic dishes that like you would eat.. you know, but then they come to your house, and you're like, it's Albanian food and they're like, Oh, what is this? You know, they might look at it like, Oh, that looks weird, but they try it and be like, Oh my god, this is the best

thing I've ever had. You know? Yeah, I think sometimes the food we make kind of looks questionable. Like what is that? But then you eat it and you're just like, oh my god, this is amazing. Yeah, you fall in love for sure. But, I still love American food. Oh, and pasta. I love pasta, cheeseburgers. I'm a diehard fan for cheeseburgers.

I: So what languages do you speak? I speak English and Albanian and I think that I'm definitely starting to kind of lose my Albanian. Like, when I try speaking it, it's hard for me to like combine sentences together where I don't sound like a 10-year-old. Boy, I mean, it's an A for effort, like I always started trying, I'm not like, if I want to try, I'm going to be confident, I'm not going to be embarrassed. You know, I know when I was younger, though, like, I would say, like, things wrong in Albanian. Like my cousins would always try, like making jokes of it, and all, but then when they come to America, and they try speaking English, they get so embarrassed in front of me, and I'm like, I'm not like you. I'm not gonna sit here and make fun of you! Like, I will teach you how to speak English. You know, I don't mind. You know? So, it's hard sometimes. Because you don't really know what but then you like, meet other people or other girls who were like, even like five years younger than you, they know. So well. And you're just like, oh, but you know, it's hard. My parents they're older, certainly in the restaurant in Janesville, when I was in third grade, so my mom was always working. So it's like, how is she going to teach me? Albanian? She's just more worried about me knowing English and like, understanding, you know?

I: Yeah. How do you say hello, and Albanian?

R: So you either say near DITA, which is like, Good day, you know, good morning, or you say min Rama, which is like, Good afternoon. Good night. Pretty much.

I: Wow, pretty language.

R: Thank you.

I: So, what are your connections with your parents or grandparent's homeland?

R: So we would travel there every other summer. And we have our own house there too. So that's cool. Yeah. So I mean, it's not like I go there. And I'm like, Oh, my God, this is so weird. But when I do go there, I feel like it's still like 2005/2006 there, you know, cuz not much changes when you go there. It's like the same style, everything looks the same. So like, maybe they added a new restaurant, but like, other than that, it's not anything that crazy. You know, I'm like, they're used to it. Like when I first get there, it might take me a couple of weeks to like...accept the transition, you know, because we'd go there for like two or three months in the summer. Oh, wow. Yeah. So we'd be there. Like, for a minute. So Wow. Yeah, I first remember like, the first couple weeks, I'm like, I want to go back to America. Like I want to be with my friends. Like at night, I'd see them posting pictures, like, on MySpace or Facebook or something like, Oh my gosh, like I'm missing this person's, like, a little house party, you know? So, I'd be pretty bummed out. But it's okay. For a couple months of it, like every other year.

I: Wow. See, that sounds really interesting to me. Um, so I guess you have visited the homeland. That's really cool. Um, so do you still have relatives there that you're in contact with?

R: Yeah, I talked to, like, a couple my cousins. You know, though, like, my Instagram pictures are, Hey, how are you doing good. Or my mom's on the phone with somebody? Oh, tell them I said hi. I hope they're doing well, you know, but other than that, nothing. Like, it's just a very surface like, Hi, how are you? How's school, like nothing deep into, like my social life. And, I don't want to get to that point, either. And, I think they know at this point, like, we're just not on that kind of level, you know?

I: Sure. Sure. cultural differences.

R: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. What I'm doing, they might think is crazy. But like, I think it's normal, you know, right?

I: Yeah, that makes sense. Have you ever encouraged anyone to visit Albania or go to live there, Or would you, I guess?

R: Yeah, I think it's, it's an interesting culture, for sure. We actually...my sister brought her friend, her American friend there. So she came there for the whole summer, and it was fun. She liked it. She always wanted to go back. And yeah,

I: That's cool. Your sister got to bring her friend.

R: Yeah, for sure. It was the last the first and last time anyone brought her friends. So if that says anything.

I: So how do you get most of your news?

R: Snapchat, NBC on there, for sure. Instagram. Because I feel like, like on Instagram, it's more people actually recording themselves and like, things like that. Like it's a real you know, because sometimes they do lie on like, certain channels, you know?

I: Mm hmm.

I: In what ways if any, have political events in your parents or grandparents homeland affected you?

R: I don't know. I don't really think it's affected me. I mean, I just bought for where I feel like it's best for me, I guess, you know.

I: So, I guess that leads me to my next question would be Have you ever taken any action in those situations?

R: No

I: How would you describe your political participation in this country?

R: Anytime there's something to vote for. I mean, why not? Like, go and vote it takes five seconds. You stand in line for five seconds, and you're done. Right?

I: I agree. So, do you regularly vote? What elections? Do you only vote presidential or congressional, senate mayoral?

R: Everything.

I: Great. That's more than I do. For you. I vote for like, oh, going forward, I'm like, Okay, I'm not doing anything. Like

I: When it comes to where candidates are from, like maybe your own culture, religion, in what ways, if any, does that affect your voting behavior?

R: No, it doesn't. I do what I like. If I want to vote for something, I'm gonna go vote for your opinion. Like, I'm gonna take your opinion into consideration. I'm gonna think about it, but I'm not gonna let it affect the way I would want to do and what I want to do.

I: Yeah. So do you feel like a person's platform, like their beliefs? And what they plan on doing would be more what you would vote for?

R: My dad, my mom's like, Vote for this person, blah, blah, I'm gonna think like, no, like, I'm gonna do like, I'm gonna vote for the person who's best for America. Not even just for myself, but just for the country in general.

I: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

I: So this question, I know that you're young. So where are you in the United States in September? 11 2001?

R: Yes, I think I was in kindergarten. I want to say so yeah, I was in kindergarten, I was like, maybe five years old. But yeah, I was already just hearing a lot of... I mean, you're so young, where you don't really understand what is going on, and how much that affected my future as well. You know, I just remember after that, though, my mom did like end up learning English because they came to America only in like 1994 or 1995. So that was like five years after they came to America. My mom did speak English around the house. Like, my dad was the only one who worked at that time, you know? So, after that she like learned English. And you would talk to her now, and she does not have like... you won't even notice. Like, you'll notice that she's ethnic first because of her facial features but like, hearing her voice, you wouldn't really think too much of it. And like even my friends in high school would be like, Oh my God, your mom has no accent. Like, that's so crazy. I'm just like, yeah, I guess. But my dad, on the other hand, his accent is so heavy, like, he just refuses to learn. Like, he'll know, like basic words like Hi, bye, things like that, you know, I'm like, I can't have a full conversation with him. Like, I'd have to have my mom translate half the time, you might have her talking, because he doesn't know what I'm saying.

I: Really?

R: Yeah. But I'll try talking a little bit in English. And he'll understand when I'm trying to have like a phone conversation. I'll just say to my mom, she'll reiterate it to him pretty much so

I: Wow. So does that affect how you communicate with your dad? I mean, do you feel like your relationship is different, because you can't really communicate as much?

R: I mean, it's always been different. He's always just been to himself, like, just doing what he wants to do. You know? Like, I've never really been that close to my dad. Like, she barely, you know, like, he doesn't know what my favorite color is, you know? So, so hard. I can't imagine so, but he's a great guy. I mean, I'm not saying he's not a good guy. He's done a lot for a family. Like she was always made sure. We went to the dentist, the doctor had a roof over our head, put food in our mouths, like, you know, that was his main focus. He couldn't get us the world. When we were younger, we were really poor, you know. But I mean, I'm not going to dwell on the alligator. I mean, he came to America, and he made it all the way here. So it's like, yeah, you know? Yeah, our parents, they do the best they can, you know, yeah, for sure. As long as I mean, he it's not like he came to America was like screw this then became like a drug addict. And just like, left our family and all like he always made sure we are good. You couldn't get us extra things. But like, at least we were able to have food on the table clothes and a roof over a head.

I: Yeah. So do you feel like his role was more of the perhaps like the provider?

R: Oh, yeah. Growing up for sure. Before my mom started working, and he bought the restaurant, he was like a 100% provider. He was stressed out, but I remember growing up, like, you know, he was a cook, he didn't have any college education at all. Like, my dad really knows how to read and write. So even to this day, like he can read the tickets that the waitresses give them to make the food but that's so it's interesting. It's so different than, you know, then what most of us know. So it's just a very interesting thing. You know, to hear and to know that still, you know, that's still a danger for like, over 20 years and that's just like.

I: So, kind of thinking about your parents going back to 911? Did you notice any ways that maybe your parents, you kind of mentioned this already with your mom and I'm learning English? You know, did they behave any differently? Or did their interactions with other people change? Perhaps after 911 that you noticed?

R: Probably just like, me, my parents have always been great people probably just trying to be more like, Americanized, almost in a way like, I don't know, I can't remember too much. I just remember when I'm learning English after that. Sure. But my dad, I feel like he's just been the same. I think it's more so my mom who kind of made changes, I feel like, yeah, did they ever talk to you about any of it? Or did you just notice, you know, changes? Yeah, no, I think it was just changes in like, what you hear from school to like little kids coming from what their parents are saying and coming home. And you know, cuz it's like, I mean, we kind of knew we were Muslim growing up. So I don't think they wanted to scare us with like, Okay, this is like, what the Muslim people did. Like, they don't want to feel like it was like our fault. You know, because your child like, that's not your fault. What happened, you know? Right. Right. I think people take 911. And like just again, group us into that, you know, right. And that's one, one small segment. It's crazy. Yes. Not it does not represent us, and you know, it's been like that still to this day, you know, people will definitely still do that, you know, They're more quiet about it, obviously. Like, for sure.

I: Yeah. So your parents didn't really express any fears about being muslim to you any fears about being Muslim or saying anything to you about Like, your Muslim identity or anything like that?

R: No.

I: How do you feel women are viewed and what is their typical role?

R: Oh, my gosh. So, like a typical women, Muslim woman, they're usually housewives, they don't really have much say in anything. Could I say that? Sorry?

I: Sure. Sure. So in your culture, like, how are women viewed?

R: Yeah, it's like you're I mean, honestly, you're viewed as an object still, to this day, like, especially overseas like you're married at 18. Like your house life, by the time you're having your first kid, I like 20. You know, I didn't take that path in my life. So like, when I see I'm just like, that's just so crazy to me, you know. But for sure, as you're just like, seen as like, the person who makes sure the house is clean, there's food on the table and your husband comes home, the kids are, you know, bathed and fed. You're pretty much like the caretaker almost sort of family, you know.

I: So what about men in Albanian culture? What would their role be, from what you've noticed?

R: The man's role is Breadwinner. Like, their role is to like, support their wives and, like, make sure everything is good in their house. Working for sure. Like, yeah, like most Albanian men, like their wives don't work. I mean, most of the people have a lot of money. You know, my family didn't really happen to be like that, which is fine. It's not the end of the world. So it'd just be weird. Like, I have like my mom working but then you go to my cousin's house, and like her mom's just like a housewife. You know? Yeah. So I mean, she had the opportunity to because they've got money, like, you know, they're able to do that for my mom. It's like they had to go to work, you know, especially when we bought our restaurant. They're so stressed out. It was new. So there's still like a social I wouldn't say a social hierarchy, but there's a difference in social standing within your own culture. Like you know who the people that are wealthy and you know, the people who aren't that wealthy.

I: So, I know you said you're not a super religious or super observant Muslim. But are there any ways in which you balanced faith and your American identity? Again, maybe because you're not as religious...I don't know.

R: I mean, I just feel like good energy, and bad energy. And that's pretty much it. Yeah, just being a good person. Yeah, for sure.

I: How did your religious or ethnic upbringing contribute to the person that you are now?

R: I feel like now I can like actually be myself and I'm not like, oh, trying to be too American or trying to be too Albanian. Growing up, I feel like that's like what was really hard though. Growing up, it's like, one minute you're like, being very Albanian, and then you're being really American. So you just feel like growing up, you almost feel lost, like I don't know to act and,

you know. It kind of sucked growing up, for sure. But now that I'm older, it's like I am who I am. And if you don't accept it, I don't care.

I: Yeah, did you feel like you had two identities growing up?

R: Definitely like, might be around Albanian people into like, more reserved, like I cyberark American friends like I could just be myself do some things that we all thought were funny. But if I were to get in front of like my Albanian friend, they'd be like, like, why are you doing that? You know?

I: Yeah. So, was it hard to figure out how to classify yourself? In your mind?

R: Yeah, definitely. Because it's like, you don't know. And you're growing up. So it's very, it was just very confusing. I think, especially as a teen, you know, that you're already going through like puberty and like, you were kind of sassy. So it was just, it was definitely very confusing. And I think like, in high school, I wasn't unhappy. I was always a very happy girl. But I always felt like deep down like I never knew, like who I truly was. But things have definitely changed. And you know that you know who I am. So, yeah, that's good that you're, you're able to be who you are. And you're able to have a dual identity, I guess is what I was trying to say, and you can embrace both. You can have roots and wings. That's how I would say it.

I: So, in your culture, both Muslim and Albanian, what, I guess what factors would play a role in who you choose to marry? Maybe not you personally but like in your culture.

R: I mean, personally, because I've lost kind of connection with my culture, like, I just like really don't want to marry in it, because I'm just so used to being like, so Americanized. Now, you know, I'm not really wrong, that people have my culture that much anymore. You know, the last time I went to Europe to my own land was like, four years ago coming this year. Yes, it was 2017. Yeah, like four years ago, that's, you know, I used to go there every other summer now. It's like, I've definitely lost through with that. I feel like I'm more comfortable around American people, though, than I might have been people. Especially at my age. It's like, I'm 25 I'm not married. I don't have a boyfriend. So, they just kind of say like, oh, like, She's like, now, I won't say not worth it. But she doesn't work. Like she's not good. Because I know because once you get older, it's like you're seeing if you're not married by the time, you're like 20 to the latest, you're just seeing I was like almost rotten milk or something. But it's like, Yeah, but it's like that's not even what it is. Like, I'm just trying to get my education just to get my life set. Like I don't want to have to rely on a man because what if your marriage doesn't work out? And like you don't have money? You know what I'm saying?

I: Yeah, absolutely.

R: You want to be able to stand on your own two feet, and have your own identity, money and whatnot. So, I know financial security for yourself.

I: Would you ever personally move because of a marriage or relocate because of getting married to somebody? Is this something you would ever consider?

R: No. Would be just a wakeup call. Like, this is weird. Like, I wouldn't like that. Like I just especially having to move there. Like, I would never ever like I can kind of barely standing there like, after like, a month or two like in Europe like being there. You're like ready to go in America, you're ready to be more yourself and like, you know, not to watch like every move you do. And like, the way you sit, or you know, when you watch you know, you can't just take your coke and reliability. It's like pouring your cup and drinking out of a straw and I'm like a man. I'm just like chowing down. Like I don't care what anyone thinks.

I: So if you relocated, would you relocate within the United States for somebody? That you had a relationship or a marriage with?

R: Yeah, I would do that in the states if he's like, from America, and he's born and raised here. And like, we had the same view, you know, then yeah, but to be honest, like guys, even my age are still kind of like, more old school.

I: Yeah, really? as young as you?

R: Yes. 100% and I'm not old, you know, I'm 24 I'm turning 25 on Saturday. So, it's like weird because they're like super Albanian. You're just like, dude, you're like born and raised here. Like how are you that old school? You know, to me, it's just like, wow, like, I'm not like that, you know? Not that I'm judging them or anything, but I just get shocked, you know, but it's also like, what is their home life? Like? Like, how much are their parents really jamming into their head? You know, after a certain age like my parents just like my dad specifically just like stop you know, even growing up he was never like, you're gonna get married at this age. You're gonna do this and that. Like, he was more like go to college and like get your degree. You know, my mom was more like, so you know, you should try to find someone blah blah blah. But me and my dad get so annoyed with her. He didn't stop like, no, like, she's gotta go to school. like she'd saved her job. You know, you can't rely on a man for money like I know, I wish you could, but you can't.

I: So, are you grateful to your dad for teaching you that?

R: Yeah, definitely. Yeah.

I: Do you think that shaped the way that you think about yourself and your independence.

R: Yeah, I feel like I am so much more independent than my Grandma. Every Albanian girl I've ever met has her parents paying for their school, college, rent. Like, I paid for my own car and paying literally \$364 for my car. I'm, you know, even when I lived in Milwaukee, I would pay my own rent. You know, I would never ask my dad. Like he raised to be like that, because he knew he had too many kids. Like he had five of us. He's like, I cannot support barely any of you guys. So it's like how he raised us. You know, by the time I was 16, not even, by 10. I was like, 14 or 15. I started working at a restaurant like I was always waitressing. You know, it's not like, if I would even ask for money, even when I was in middle school, like, if I needed money, and my mom was at home, I have to like... I'd be too embarrassed to ask my dad, like, I didn't want to

ask, I wouldn't ask him.. And I would call my mom. And I'd be like, Mom, like, I need money. You know, when she would let me go to recognize or something like every once in a blue moon, I need money. Like, can you please tell Dad? You know about the car deck, Bob? So you say Dad, I'll be me. And I'm like, can you please give me some money? And then she'd catch your phone ringing like one minute later, and you pick up and you be like, Okay, then you call my name downstairs. So it's kind of weird. You know, as a kid, I would just didn't like to ask him. I just, it was always my mom. Like, I think it's because she raised us for so long, you know?

I: Right. But yeah, I thought that was funny. So you had to be super independent, because you were too embarrassed to ask for money. I can relate to that, too. I can relate to that.

R: Are there any kind of special ceremonies that your family went through any special rituals of your culture?

R: I mean, we have like, Albanian Independence Day. So it's like March 8, I think it's like women's Independence Day. No things like that. Other than that, that's pretty much that's pretty much it, I would say,

I: Okay. And then for you, there was no like, special ceremony for you as a girl or a woman or anything like that?

R: Unless you're getting like married. I mean, even then, it's not even about you. When women get married in Albanian culture, they actually don't even have that many family members at their wedding. Like they'll have their like immediate family members, like first cousins, a few second cousins, you know, maybe a couple of friends, but it's always because it's like you're coming into the guy's family. So they're like, having most of their family there just to see who you are. It's like so weird talking out loud about this, you know, to someone who's not like, you know, Albanian, because it's my sound so strange, even to me, it sounds strange. So I can only imagine like, you're in high school. I tell my, like American friends.

I: Every culture is different. So nothing's really nothing's really weird. It's all relative. It's all relative.

I: Are there any other rituals that were important in your culture?

R: Like, when you say rituals, like for us, like boys would have you know, they get circumcised. Like my brother, when he was born, he wasn't circumcised. And when he turned nine, we traveled to Macedonia, and he got circumcised there, and we had a party for him. And he made like a lot of money from it. Wow, I was like, what, nine years old? He like came to America and bought this like big TV computer thing. I'm like, I was so jealous. I'm like, I wish we could have that. You know, me, my little sister. We had like, like this laptop that was like half broken and then I would sit on our computer and it was like one of those really old computers you know, from back in the day and like, we would play Everscape. My sister would be on her laptop computer, and we would just like play and run and skip together, things like that. I don't know how to escape. Mm hmm. So it's like, I think that's the most towards like the medieval. I don't know, I can't remember. I think it was more towards just like, just a little game. You'd have to

look it up after this. But this is a long time ago. Like That was our little and he'd be like on his huge computer and like, we'd be on like broken computers like wanting new ones.

I: So what is the significance like in your culture of circumcision? And why do they wait until they're older to do it, like we do it here?

R: You know, I think it's just like, the day they almost become like a man almost in a way. I see their mind resolved but like, that's just how it's always been. Yeah, age nine, that's when they get circumcised. So, but yeah, I mean, he said he'd heard they like, give him a pill and it numbs you, and he didn't cry or anything, didn't flinch. I think after you get circumcised hurts to pee. Wow. But yeah, we were here before we'd go to Europe. Today for him to get circumcised we've always give my brother like a hard time. We would always make him cry because we just like to take our finger and make scissors and like pretend to cut our finger. We would scare him so hard anyway, he went and got it done. It really wasn't that bad.

I: So do you think it would be more upsetting for them? If you married a non-Muslim or a non-Albanian?

R: Non- Albanian For sure. Like if they're Albanian and they're like Christian or orthodox, it's not the end of the world. If they're not Albanian, they will get mad. You know, they just don't have that connection. You know, my dad has a very heavy accent. How is he going to connect with some white guy? You know, my dad, we've never been golfing, like we don't do things like that. Like snowmobiling, hunting. My dad's never been hunting. Like maybe in Macedonia, he'd go up and hunt like wild pigs, you know? Like in America, it's not like he's like he's in his camouflage and in a truck, you know?

I: Right? So totally different than like in Wisconsin, right?

R: Yeah, not at all.

I: Okay, so kind of back to what we were talking earlier regarding outside your culture...

I: Why do you feel that it would upset your parents, like, if you married outside your culture?

R: Cuz like Albanian people, they want to stay within their culture. Like, language like we go to like our songs, which are sung at parties, like, you know, things like that. It's easy to connect, but like, you know, you're bringing like a white guy there. And it's just like, he doesn't understand it. It's just, it's just a connection. I think that's what it is. And like, it just always has been like that, you know? I'd say no people have married outside of the culture, and I don't care. Remember, like, no one's ever brought their significant other who is American to a wedding? That I can remember? I don't think so.

I: So, one thing that I noticed as we're talking, and I was really fascinated by this, and since we're friends...I know I can ask you this, you keep referring to yourself as are like, you'll say, Albanian versus white. And, so when I think of an Albanian person, I think of you as being white... as being Caucasian.

R: For sure. But how do you like know my skin is white? I just was not raised in the “white culture”. Okay, like growing up, my parents were strict, no boyfriends in the house, like no dating boys. Like, when I went to Prague, it was actually really funny because my cousins, Mike, one of my cousin's- cousins (I know sounds confusing) just moved here. So she's in high school and like, her mom won't even let her go to prom. And I was like, okay, that's ridiculous. Like, she's in high school, like, let her go to prom. She doesn't have to deal with a guy. She was a girl like my mom, let me go see pictures on Facebook. And then I was just curious to like, because I'm at Facebook, and so on. And I just had to make one for school. So I went onto my mom's Facebook to see she ended up posting any pictures of me and my date, and she didn't. And, I'm like, Oh, my God, Mom, that is so like, that's so extra. Like, why would you not post a picture of me my day, it was just me and my friends only. Right? Yeah. And like, no pictures of us in our days, just like me and my friends. And that's it. I'm like, Oh my gosh, Mom, like you would? You would think she was worried about what other people would think. Oh, is that her boyfriend? You know, cuz he was really tall, He was handsome, He was so cute. So it's like, oh, are they dating? Like, what else are they doing? You know?

I: So, but like back again with like, the whole like the white versus Albanian thing?

R: I think it's just like, like, again, we didn't grow up in the white culture. We've all been in conflict. Yeah, I know. My skin is white. Like who I am is not what I grew up seeing was not white, you know, hanging out with my friends.

I: Okay. Yeah, thanks for explaining that. Because I was like, but she's white.

R: People see me like, oh, like I see your white, you know, but like, there's just like just so much more to it. Sometimes it's hard to explain unless you're like part of that like us.

I: So what are you going to school for?

R: So I'm going to go to school to become a hygienist.

I: a dental Hygienist?

R: Yes, yes. So I only have a graduate next name. So cross my fingers. It's hard. It's great, though.

I: So what made you choose that profession? I mean, I was a dental assistant, we work together, you know, I was down for like a good four years.

R: I like to be in people's mouths. I like to talk, you can see, I think this is like a really good job for me.

I: So did the possibility of having children like later in your life, influenced your decision to be a dental hygienist? Or was this just something you're interested in doing?

R: I mean, yeah, I think it only has to do with like building my future. Because when I was an assistant, I always thought like, is this going to be able to pay my bills, put my kids in sports, like I want my kids to be, I want to give my kids what my parents weren't able to give me because of their... you know, situation. That's pretty much the only way I can sum it up. So I want to give him a big aside and get out. We'll just find out. dwell on it. But in general, like, that's what I want

to do with my life. Yeah. And it makes sense you would want to provide, you know what I mean? Yeah, cuz I see all these tricks and like all this, and I'm like, Oh, my gosh, like, My daughter is like that skill to one day, you know?

I: So, would you consider marrying a person who's younger than you?

R: No, I don't think so. I just, I don't know. I feel like the maturity level is just aren't there? I've always liked older guys, like, I don't know, even as a young girl like I just liked older guys. Do you think it's a cultural thing? Or do you just think that's your personal preference? I think it's a personal preference for sure.

I: Okay. That makes sense.

I: So, we touched on this a little bit, but would you consider marrying a person born and raised outside of the United States?

R: No, no, that's culture shock. I couldn't like that would just be like, I would just have to give up going to school and everything, and like, move there and like, just be a housewife. And like, I just know, Oh, my gosh, I get stressed out even thinking about that, my sisters talk about that. Like, sometimes we're like, oh, my God, like, what if our parents weren't able to have the chance to come to America, like, we'd be living there and like, we would probably be different people. I would probably have like three kids by now. You know, I'm very thankful, like every day, and I don't know who I'm thanking. But like, I'm just so happy that we had the chance to come here. Because I can only imagine... sometimes I do wonder like, what it would have been like, you know, living there, like, I don't know, I wouldn't have liked it. You know?

I: Yeah. Yeah. You feel grateful that you had the choice?

R: Yes. And it's like, there's so many opportunities in America, I don't care what anyone has to say. Like, there is a lot of music, you go out there, and you get them and you can make something out of yourself here. And like, again, it's like, when you go to Macedonia, talk to them. They're like, yeah, they're making like, maybe 200 euros a month. That's like, what \$300 and I'm out here making over \$300 on one weekend working, you know, so I'm just like, Oh, my gosh, I couldn't imagine, and you know, they're not really up to date with their styling. Oh, yeah. It's a lot of like imagination for those girls there. They always imagine what life could have been if they were able to come to America. So I'm definitely very grateful.

I: Wow! So when you look at your parents marriage, who do you feel like made the most of the decisions in the marriage?

R: I think when we first moved to America, it was definitely my dad. He's definitely like,

I mean, I don't know. I guess I have to remember that. Like, he has five kids. He wasn't really making that much money. So he's kind of like, had a temper. What did you say? He was short tempered or low tempered? Yes. I want to say low tempered for some reason. But yeah, like, definitely a short temper, but it's just crazy to see like, how much he's come along. Like, now he's so chill, like always laughing. And like, you know, definitely he was very stressed out, I think. But now it's just like chill vibes. Like, he doesn't ever yell at me. Doesn't tell me what to do.

Like, doesn't tell me ever what to wear. Not to leave the house. It's like, I'm telling him. Like, I'm telling him what to do. Now the roles have been reversed. And I know that for sure. Not a thing for every single girl. Like I know girls out there who are like 30 years old, and they still like really listen to their dad and like, do everything he says. Look, my dad's not really the kind of guy who will say to do this or do that. He's like, you know, like I said before, get your education. Don't rely on a man. A man's not gonna want to take care of you. Like, just rely on yourself. You don't use your brain. So which is good, I'm happy. He's very progressive.

I: Right? So I guess in general, then this is gonna kind of an open question. But like, what do you think about dating just in general?

R: I mean, I've never even had a real boyfriend. I've never had a Valentine. I've never said I love you to a guy. I've never had a guy tell me that they love me. Like, you know, even my dad like he, I. I probably told him that I've loved him like a couple times in my life. You know what I'm saying? Like, he's never said it to us, either. I think my dad just shows love in different ways. I guess you could say but, I mean, yeah, no, it's kind of weird. I'm, like, nervous to get into my first relationship. Because it's like, I'm 24 years old. And I think another thing for me is that, like, Are my parents gonna accept him? Like, what if my parents don't really accept him? Like, is he gonna be okay with that? Or is he still gonna want to be with me? I feel like, people will steer away because it's like, who are you know, like, we're at the age where it's like, Who are your parents to not like except me. Like, who don't they? You know what I'm saying? So I think I have a hard time just like being open with guys, as I get older. I'm just very more to myself. I think it's a good thing. But it's also a bad thing. It's like, I've never been in a relationship. So it is what it is? Like? How am I going to be like, in a relationship? I was wondering, am I going to?

I: How do you think that marriage in America is different from your parents way of marriage?

Oh, my gosh, I feel like, like a white person like you and your husband compared to me, right? Like, you guys are like white and like born and raised in America. So I don't know it just like, I feel like with American couples, they kind of for the most part, they like, make decisions together. Like they'll cook and clean together. We're like, you know, guys, it's like you're cooking and cleaning for them. You know, sometimes it's not even really a connection there. Like, pretty much things like that. I feel like it's very like Americans like you guys are getting married. Because you want to get married. I feel like back in the day people were just getting married because it's kind of like, almost an arrangement, you know? Yeah. Like maybe it was expected. Maybe. Exactly.

I: So, a family, which has more than one daughter, do you think the marriage restrictions and processes are different between the oldest daughter and the younger daughter?

R: Yes, for sure. Yes.

I: How so?

R: Well... I mean, my sister's 29, and she's not married. You know. I think growing up my parents were really strict, strict with my two older sisters, you know, because I mean, if you think about it, they kind of paved the way. Especially my sister who's 26! I think my oldest sister

would listen more. Like she's kind of telling us, you know, but then my second eldest sister, she's my best friend. I mean, I am close to all my siblings. I shouldn't say that. But like my second oldest sister, who is 26, and my younger sister who is 23. We're like The Three Musketeers. Like, we are. I am like, we're always hanging out. So I think they definitely paved the way for us to like, hang out with our friends and things like that, for sure! So I guess, thank you.

I: So I guess you already answered this question. So your dad, your mom encouraged you to work? You said that your parents owned a restaurant? Did you work in the restaurant?

R: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I was always a waitress. Like, by the time I was like, 14, like a freshman in high school, pretty much. Wow. You know, and I'd be embarrassed because like, all my friends, like, their parents would just hand them money, like it was water, but with our family, you know, my mom, my parents had five kids, they couldn't do that. Right? It's like, if you were giving one kid one thing and buying them one thing, then you gotta buy everyone else. Because we all I mean, we're kids. We all start complaining, like I want that to you know, I want something new. So like back when you are maybe in elementary school or middle school, high school.

I: Were you involved in any religious or cultural organizations?

R: No, no, no, not that I can remember.

I: Okay.

I: Did your parents have any influence like your career choice or your choice of schooling?

R: My dad actually.. he really wanted me to become a nurse. Every Albanian girl becomes a Nurse pretty much. Wow. Yeah. Like if they're going to school, they're going for nursing. I feel like I'm like one of only people from my community is really honestly becoming a hygienist that I can think of. So they always become nurses. My dad's like, you're not gonna make money being a hygienist. I'm like, my job is nice, so easy, and I'm making just as much as a nurse. Like you're gonna see. So I guess we'll have to see next year.

I: So now we're going to kind of shift and talk a little bit about your parents. Who are your parents? What are their names?

R: Okay, so my mom's name is So she was originally named Muslim Cabrini. But when they were leaving Macedonia, there's like, a lot of Albanian people and white people, Albanian people and Macedonian people. So it's kind of like, I don't know, like black people and white people here. They just don't really like each other. But obviously, things have gotten better Macedonia, Albanian people in Macedonian people, you know, but I'm

R: Sorry, can you repeat the question?

I: Who are your parents?

R: Okay. Yeah, so my mom's name is Muslim chi Abrini. She moved to America. They changed her name to Muslim people in Macedonia. They just started to Albanian. I don't know. I can't remember. She was telling me about it one day. And then my dad's name is by Yami. brainy.

And my dad is actually named after a holiday. Oh, yeah. So Beit. yom is like, I actually should mention, I'm so sorry, by the way, um, is like a holiday of like, being with your family pretty much. So like when we go to Macedonia to be like five Yuan. So I think it's July August ish. I can't remember. I remember like, we'd go there. And I would dress nice. And we'd go to each of our family's houses. And we'd say hi, how are you? And like, things like that. So I guess we do kind of have our own little holiday. And that's what it's called.

I: I never knew about that. That's so how do you say that again? It's by deal. Yeah. So like that just hit me. I'm like, Oh, my God and my dad's name.

But yeah, that's like really about.

I: So Are your parents like, what's their current work status, still working?

R: My dad still works. As a caucus, he's worked as a cook. He's worked at a restaurant probably for like over 20 years now. You know, it's probably most hitting 30 and it's my mom. She started working there when I was in third grade, and then she's been working there. Then, When COVID happened. They shut down the restaurant for a few months. So I got a job in a factory. My dad can't because my dad actually fell off the roof at our restaurant one day. Oh my God! He was trying to do something with the gutters. I'm trying to print them out. And he ended up falling backwards and he actually had to have surgery on his knee and they're doing surgery on him for like 12 hours, pretty much like he was really bad. So you can't just be like walking around. Like he's still limps around, you know. But now my mom is now pretty much like back at the restaurant pretty much part time.

I: So what are your parents educational levels? Do you know?

R: My dad has no college. My dad can't really read or write. So he has no college education at all. I don't even think you have finished high school. There. My mom, she finished high school. I think she wanted to become a major music teacher. But by the time she came to America, it's like she had kids. And you know, that was just out of the way. But it's actually crazy because her older sister became an ESL teacher. Oh, yeah. So I don't know, I kind of feel bad for my mom. I feel like she wishes she could have had more options. But you know, she was Fresh Off the Boat. Like she can only do so much and yeah. So when did your parents come to this country? Again? You mentioned that earlier about, like, 1994 1995 Okay, so my mom was 26 My dad was 30. Okay, so they're a little bit older, for sure. Did they mention their homeland at all? I suppose you've been there. But did they talk about Albania? Macedonia? Oh, yeah. They're just like, tell us about it. The first time we went I remember just asking a bunch of questions like What is it like, like, you know, what are the people like, and that's, you know, pretty much tell you about it. She was just like, wait until you go there. You're gonna see no, it's definitely different. Did any of your grandparents immigrated to the US? Yes. My grandpa, my grandpa has a main reason why my parents have their papers. Like he got them. Because back in the day, it was easier to get your papers than it is now. So he got my dad. And it was actually really funny. Because originally, my mom wasn't supposed to come tonight with my dad to America, but she was like, No, like, I'm coming to America. Like, we're gonna have kids there. You know what I'm saying?

I: So yeah, so did your grandparents come from Macedonia then? Or did they come from Albania? They came from Macedonia.

R: That's like, literally wearing a necklace right now.

I: And then what kind of jobs did your grandparents have before they immigrated?

R: So it was just my grandpa who came to us first, my grandma was a stay at home. Mom, and my grandfather came here. He was a busboy at first, and then he saved a bunch of money than him and his brother opened up a big way. Like we have weddings and where you can have circumcision parties there too, and that's like, literally right across the street from his house.

I: And then, for your parents, and I'm gonna kind of roll your grandparents into this, were their marriages arranged.

R: Yes. My grandparents didn't know each other until they got married. Wow, I think that's crazy. You know, I feel like a lot of toxic relationships, I'm sure back in the day just was like, how are you gonna meet someone the day of your wedding and then get to know them. Like, you have to like, you know, pee in front of them, things like that. That's just so weird to me. Like you don't even know them. And you have to sit here and like, do what you normally do every day in front of them. And you know, you never know what's gonna piss them off. You know, you got to learn what's, it's weird. I just think that's strange. Like you're meeting your husband the first time. What about your might? What about your parents? Where's their marriage arranged? Or did they know? Their marriage was not arranged actually. So.

I: So where did your grandparents Live when they came here? And your parents? Did they settle in Wisconsin?

R: No, my parents actually moved to New York when they first came here. Okay. Yeah. And they like lived in the city. I think we're somewhere near the city, but they just realized, like, we don't want to raise our family here. Like it just wasn't what they really wanted, so then they came to Wisconsin. And I think a lot of Albanian people either live in Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, New York. I feel like those are the main states.

I: Do you have any traditional cultural clothing? And have you ever worn it?

R: Yes. So we have like, we have like the neon and we have the draka. So I mean, like, if my boy cousin is going to get married, I wear it when we're picking up his wife to take them to like his house to like, you know, to welcome her or whatever. And then the drop I've never worn them because I'm not married. So usually after a woman gets married Like, she'll like, go to like an outside. Like say she gets married all of a sudden her someone and I decide the family's gonna get married, you know, a couple months later like when she goes to like their outside party show like where the Sterlington dress thing I guess you could say I wish I had a picture, but then that she actually puts like her hair in pigtails to pigtails and she puts like the little headscarf on and they paint her face. So I put powder on their face. And they put like a little bit of glitter and some like gold coins on their face. And they were like a bunch of gold coins and things like that. And like they just like do whatever. Like. you know a lot of dancing Bala. So I don't know if you

know but that's just like you're in a circle. Just like the way people from Grease do it. Pretty much.

I: Wow. That's really interesting. I didn't know about that. All right. So you have worn some cultural clothing to events. How do you feel when you wear it?

R: I like to wear it! Yeah, do you feel pretty. You almost look like a genie or something like this is the best way I can explain it. But yeah, it's definitely interesting. For sure. That's kind of how I picture it. That's funny when you're describing it. I like you. And I always felt like oh, like I like the way I look, you know, but only for a little bit. Then after a while. I'm like, Alright, I want to go home and eat a burger. So

I: So did your mother wear any traditional dresses? And if she did, did she ever pass any on to you?

R: Now, she would wear traditional, like way back in the day. But my mom's Wedding dress was actually borrowed, I think because she was really poor. So, but I mean, I do take this one Breslow, it's not even very traditional, but she's had it in her closet for a long time. And it's way too small for her. And it's really cute, like a little sweater dress. So I did steal that from her the other day. I guess as traditional as it gets. If you had some of these traditional clothing or if you have them in your closet, would you?

I: Would you consider passing that along to your daughter for any reason? Yeah, I know, my mom paid.

R: Well, when we went there, someone in my family was getting married. This is a summer where my sister brought her American friend there. And we dressed her up to it in one of our traditional dresses. And she would dance with us too. Oh, wow, I teach her like, like before, like it was very, it seems very easy to learn some of the dances you know. So we dressed up in our traditional clothing and stuff really pretty. And you know, we all looked really beautiful. But yeah, I think I'll definitely take them. My mom keeps them at home in a suitcase. They're very nice. She spent so much money that summer buying Alba semi just for girls, and then you know.

I: I know that kind of makes me want to go with you.

R: If I get married? Christina, you can then I'll borrow them to you.

I: So there's kind of some questions that we have here about perceptions toward people with disabilities in your culture. Do you think people with disabilities can lead lives that are as fulfilling as people without disabilities? yourself?

R: Like, I think in our culture, like, speaking of a disability, like I think of someone who's mentally challenged, or kind of like, maybe they can't walk or something, I feel like we definitely have a better chance of living more fulfilled life and feel like they're more hidden in a way, like their families almost embarrassed that that they ended up with someone with a disability, which I think is just, like really messed up, you know? Like, it doesn't matter if they have disability, just because they're mentally challenged doesn't mean that they can't, like you can still teach them some things like they don't need to stay at that certain level their whole life

like you could teach them to do... you know, other things. You'd be very surprised and what people were mentally challenged are capable of doing. It's sad, but I mean, I guess that's just how it's always been. I mean, if I had someone in my family mental challenged, I would not be like that with them. Like I wouldn't be embarrassed or anything.

I: Do you think people in your community keep that secret?

R: Almost in a way, Yeah. Or they just kind of keep them like not in the public eye and stuff, but I did have a cousin who kind of was mentally challenged. Like he couldn't really walk that well. Everyone was always really nice to him. He ended up getting married to some girl and I think she was a little bit slower too. But I mean, their family has so much money and like he's got like an elevator in his house. You know, he can't walk well, they're great. Like they're good.

I: It's good to hear. That is good to hear.

I: I Do feel like it's kind of a weird question, but do you feel like people in your culture who have a disabled female would feel more hardship and more restrictive than if they had a disabled male?

R: Yeah, I think they'd be more like embarrassed. For sure Yeah.

I: Um, so we're kind of talking about COVID-19. I think we'll just ask a couple quick questions about that, and how it's like impacted your life. I know your parents own a restaurant. So do you think that that's affected them in terms of their financial or social status?

R: Yeah, well, yeah, for sure. My dad can't really hang out with his friends too much. because things are closed down. Our main customer base at a restaurant is older people. And now they're very scared to come in. Like, I haven't seen some of the regulars I would see when I worked there. At first, you know, I haven't seen them since the shutdown. But we've been seeing a lot of new faces, or like younger people. So it's good, you know, they tip better. But it's still kind of sad. Just because you have like those regulars that you haven't seen, you know, in like a year out. It's sad.

I: So, during the pandemic, and I know you say you don't practice your religion a lot, but does anyone in your family who you know of is practicing Islam? Do you know anybody who's like attended virtual mosque or virtual church services at all?

R: No. Like the only people who are really super religious are my grandparents. They pray five times a day, and they've gone to Mecca. Like they're religious. My grandma wears her headscarf. They don't do virtual things like that though. I mean, they're born in like the 20s. Like they don't do those things.

I: Yeah, I suppose they wouldn't. That would be really hard for somebody who's 90 years old, right?

R: As long as they're able to pray, they're fine.

I: So would you consider doing that? Would you do virtual? Or would you just rather attend in person if you had your choice?

R: Yeah, it's too awkward, virtually no.

I: And then has COVID affected the way you interact like with your family and your friends, people of your culture, maybe more particularly, family members?

R: I kind of stay away from my grandparents because I don't want them to get sick. Honestly, they ended up getting sick, but not from us. I mean, I never got COVID or anything, so but now you know, I've seen them. I'll see him every once in a while. You know, I'm in school full time. So it's like so hard, you know, because it's like I'm studying all day in my free time. Honestly, I just want to take a little nap.

I: Are there any religious traditions that you continue with? I know you mentioned Ramadan. You did say you do fast a little bit for Ramadan.

R: Yeah, maybe for like a day or two.

But other than that, besides Baidu, and like how we talked about.. that's like more family based. So it's more of like a family. It's almost like an Albanian Thanksgiving in the summer. If That makes sense? Hmm.

I: That's like a lot of food. Right?

R: Yes, a lot of food. You wake up at like eight in the morning and you're eating like meat? You know, that's pretty much all.

I: And then I guess this COVID-19? Not so much culturally, but like, has it ever has it changed your religious beliefs or your faith or your lack of faith? Has it changed anything?

R: No, not really. No.

I: Was there anything really uplifting that has happened to you during COVID? You know, anything that inspired you or gave you hope or made you happy?

R: I think I realized that, like, be more. Like, I'm always a thankful person. I'm always positive. But I think just being more thankful and like, not taking so much for granted, I guess you could say. But yeah, for sure. I think I've learned a little bit more about myself.

I: I guess the most important question, and I kind of saved this for last, but what do you want people to know about Islam? What do you want people to know about your culture?

I: What do you want people to know?

R: I just think people need to stop moving us into one group. Like, you know, it's like, oh, you know, you're Muslim, or you're from the Middle East like you wear hijabs. Just be more mindful, because there's just so many forms of Muslim or it's just like Muslim Islam, like we're just like, you can't just think of one. I think that's just like a lot of things in America. It's like, they just group you as one type of person. It's like, you're all terrorists and like, you're out to like, bomb something someone like, like I told you like Middle School, when people find out they're always like, oh, you're terrorist or like, they meet like bombing noises and you know, as a middle schoolers just like, oh my god, like you don't want that. Like when you look at 20 middle

schoolers coming at you, you know, try and tear you apart. You don't get it, because you're not part of the culture. So it's, it's nice if people are just more educated. So it's good to do this interview. So people are able to know that there's just so many forms of like, just because someone says they're Muslim doesn't mean they follow this, this and this, you know? Maybe that's just like what they grew up on, you know, how I told you how that one time when I was at my friend's moms, like get together, and Hi! that lady came up to me, because I was wearing shorts in a crop top. And she was like, all like, Does your mom know what you're wearing? And I turned around, I was like, Yeah, she buys me these clothes. And she was like, well, aren't you Muslim? You should be covered up more. And I was like, No, I shouldn't. I was like, That's weird. You know, you're like 40 years old. Why are you coming up to an 18 year old saying that? You know, this is like, right after I graduated high school, and I just was so annoyed. I was like, that's what you view me as lady! Like, I'm like, the foreign like Muslim girl. . I was like, that's just a weird, like, weird. I don't know. It made me feel uncomfortable. Because it's like, Okay, so now I don't know how you all really view me and my family. We're just like, Muslim, like, gotta cover up, You know? But that's how every culture is.

I: Right? Going off of what you just said, Do you think she would have asked you that same question about your clothing? If you were not Muslim?

R: No. But then again, it's like, even in school, and they teach you about Muslims, they just specifically teach you about the Middle East. They don't teach you about like, other parts of like Europe, I guess, closer to the Middle East, you know, some people will still consider Macedonia, the Middle East, but we're not in the Middle East. Like, really par we're really part of Europe. We're just kind of our own country. And that's just how it's always been. But no, I don't think if she knew I was Albanian, If I was a Christian, I knew she wouldn't have came up to me and said that. So it was a little offensive. But I mean, that was so long ago, I look back to it now. And I just kind of laugh, like, you know, but I think it's also a good thing for schools to start teaching a wide range of like, the Muslim culture, you know, because, like I said, when the teacher teaches you more of like, places in the Middle East or an Africa, how it's like, they're very covered. It's like, Dude, it's not like that, like, there's just so much more to it. But, I mean, you can't really blame someone though, too. It's like you're born and raised in this culture. Like, you know, you can't blame them for being kind of like weird about it because I see that if I was probably American, I probably would be kind of weirded out too. That's why it's just different here than it is there. But it's okay. You know, hopefully in the future, they will learn about more than one group, I guess is pretty much what I can say.

I: Yeah, well, you know, and I think we have deficits as Americans too. We need to step out and learn about other cultures and especially Muslims because like you said, You're of European origin. You do not cover your hair. There's nothing distinguishable. Nobody would know that you are Muslim. If you didn't tell them. You know?

R: In Chicago, some guy came up to us and said like I appreciate your Southern American look, and I'm like, not from South America, and not any of Hispanic descent. I don't even look really Albanian compared to like a couple of my sisters that I have. So it's different for sure. But yeah, hopefully in the future things are better and people are more understanding. Yeah, and more

educated about us as a whole Well, I appreciate you know, I don't blame people like for wanting to know. I like when people ask me about my culture. I don't mind as long as you're not like saying offensive things like: Like why are you doing that? You know, like, I personally don't mind when people ask me about my culture. I know some people get offended but I don't. It's good to educate people. But yeah, I'm happy I did this. At first, I was kind of nervous. I was like, I'm kind of nervous to do this. I don't know what to say you know, cuz I'm not super religious. But I mean, growing up, you know, seeing my parents, my grandparents...

I: We need all the perspectives, so Rreze I thank you so much for taking this time to talk to me. And I am going to butcher her last name. So I'm gonna have her say her name one more time for me, we have talked with Rreze Ibraimi and that will conclude our interview on Albanian-Muslim culture.