



## Oral History Project Interview

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

Number of Interview: CC 1.00

Date: Feb. 13, 2013

Gender: F

Name: Salma (Anonymous)

Country of Origin: Syria

Year of Immigration: born in U.S.

**Abstract:** Salma grew up in a Syrian-Christian household and very much appreciates her Arab heritage. She feels her father's reluctance to share his financial situation held her back in her education, but she is happy with her career and life. She did, however, give her daughters the freedom to choose their colleges. She does not believe her daughters need to limit themselves to an Arab community or Orthodox one, but she raised them in her Orthodox faith and her husband's Roman Catholic faith. Food is how she expresses her identity the most, and she taught her daughters how to cook Syrian food, as well. She considers herself American Arab because she was born in America. Salma's religion and her culture play a big role in her identity, but they are not the sole factors she uses to define herself.

**Key Themes:** Religious freedom, Arab-Christian culture, identity, faith, cultural food

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

I: This is Caroline Campbell with Salma on Feb. 13, 2013, in Brookfield, Wisconsin. I'm going to start the interview with some general questions about your background. Could you please state your name, your age, and your level of education?

R: My name is Salma. My maiden name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am 55 years old. I have completed college and have a Bachelor of Science degree in Family and Consumer Resources.

I: Where did you grow up?

R: I was born in Detroit, Michigan, and grew up in the suburb of St. Claire Shores, Michigan.

I: And when you were there, where did you go to school?

R: I went to school in St. Claire Shores, but I did my college at Wayne State University, which is in downtown Detroit.

I: Okay. And did you go to public schools or a community school or a private school?

R: I went to public schools from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

I: And when you were growing up, can you describe some of the places that you spent a lot of time?

R: Well, it's interesting because my mother was from Canada and my father's family was from the Detroit area. They met at a wedding, and so my mom's sister and her family lived in the Leamington-Kingsville area, which is close to the Point Pelee Beach. So, every other Saturday our family would pack up and drive the hour and ten minutes, and we would literally have breakfast, lunch, and dinner at the beach. We would spend the entire day at the beach, which was really a lot of fun. I grew up knowing my cousins and my mother's side of the family very well, we're very close. So that's one of the things we did. The other thing that we did was, my parents made sure we had a vacation every summer – two weeks – and sometimes we spent it in a travel trailer, a couple times in a tent, couple times in hotels but mostly in the travel trailer that they owned, and I've seen two thirds of the United States that way. Yeah, it really was a great way to grow up.

I: Can you explain a little bit more about your family's background. When your family first came to North America, where they came from and how that happened?

R: Yes, my father's family, my grandparents came from Daar in Syria, and they came with, let's see, one, two, three, four children and had two more born here in the United States. And they came through Ellis Island. Actually, if I'm lucky enough, I'll be able to put my hands on the document that shows their signature. One of my cousins actually petitioned to get that document so that we would have a copy. But they came through Ellis Island and went to Michigan because the Detroit area had the automobile industry and they felt they could get jobs there. My mother's family, my grandmother was born in Canada, and I really do not know the story of how her

parents got to Canada. But my mother was born and raised in Windsor and Tilbury Canada, which is just across the border from the Detroit, Michigan area, and other than that, I don't know much more of the history (laughs) of parents and grandparents.

I: So, when you were growing up, can you describe the house that you grew up in for me?

R: Yes! I grew up in a 3-bedroom, it was considered a GI track home in St. Claire Shores. We weren't the people that lived along the water in the big mansions, but we lived comfortably, we never wanted for shelter or food, my father always had a good job, he worked for United Parcel Service from almost their inception in the Detroit area for 38 years. It was a 3-bedroom home, and with three children, that means my sister and I bunked together for a while in one room. And, it had a backyard, we had a swimming pool when I was growing up, so we always had really fun summers and just really fond memories. It wasn't a large house, though. It was only 1500 square feet, so we took advantage of having a basement and my father eventually finished it off, but we would often have the holiday dinners – Easter and Christmas or Thanksgiving dinner, we never had less than 18 people there because my aunts and uncles had children, and everyone was invited, and we were very close-knit.

I: Can you tell me a little bit more about some of the holidays that you had?

R: Holidays were always very special times. My aunt, who was my godmother, she has 5 children, and you know, we were just together. And my father would play his durbecki drum. And we would dance in the basement or in the living room or he would take it with us to the picnic, if we went on a picnic in the summertime, but the holidays were always spent going to church and then having family together for dinner. Always.

I: Can you think of any specific stories that stand out in your memory?

R: There was one year, I was a younger teen, I'd say I was maybe, well, I'd say I was about 14. Just maybe just starting high school and my parents decided to have both sides of the family over for dinner for Christmas. And it was 42 people. That's the very immediate family was 42 people. And in the basement we had out ping-pong table up and we put our place setting around there and we had folding tables and card tables and my parents had this table that kind of squished up into, it looked like a serving piece, but if you opened the doors, you could pull out this whole table, and it had special legs that would go underneath it, and it sat 12. So, you know, it was a madhouse! (laughs) It was crazy! 42 people in a 1500-square-foot house, you can only imagine! We were smushed in! But you know, we sang, and we played cards and we played games and we were together, and as much work as it was, and I was part of that work, with getting everything set up and then cleaned up, it was probably the Christmas I remember most, cuz it was just so nice to have everyone together.

I: You talked about music a little bit. Was music a big part of your family gatherings?

R: Yes.

I: Can you tell me a little bit more about...

R: Well, my father, when he was young, played in a Syrian band, so he was the drummer, he played the *durbecki*, and so he was very musically inclined, although none of his three children ended up learning how to play that drum, he was very musically inclined, and people for their weddings, or whenever there was something going on and we were invited as a family, would ask him to bring his drum and his instruments, because he also had, oh, he had cymbals and he had wood stick knockers and he would have just different things that he could take and other people would line up with him, it was an honor to be asked to play one of the accessory instruments and it was just fun, so yes, we always had singing and music in the house.

I: So, in, while you were growing up, how did you, as an individual express your Syrian identity, or did you, and was it ever difficult or uncomfortable in the United States?

R: The best way I could say that I was able to exhibit my identity was through the food. I had friends that loved to come to our house because my mother was such a good cook, and they ate everything we ate. They ate the hummus, they ate the tabouli, whatever my mother put in front of them, and they never seemed to balk, and they were willing to try whatever she was making knowing that I had grown up and eaten and, so it was just all those American friends that I had they just partook in whatever mom served and it was kind of nice. But besides that, you know, I was a very American child. I wouldn't say I went out of my way, but if I was at church or a gathering where there were people of Middle Eastern descent or Syrian descent, then we would do what we would normally do.

I: And you're obviously Christian, what denomination was your family?

R: We're Eastern Orthodox, from the Antiochian Archdiocese.

I: Going back to the food a little bit, what were some of your favorite dishes that your mom made?

R: Well, let's see. The English terms or names that we've given it are green beans and rice, which is cubed lamb meat and green beans in a tomato sauce that you serve with rice. Yogurt is, to me, was always *lubbun*, and my mother made her own, and she made her own cheese from it, called *lubbni*, so those were some of my favorites. Probably tabouli and shishkabob and lamb chops. Actually, any way lamb comes is probably one my favorites. I eat a lot of lamb and we buy a lot of lamb still. And there is one dish called *shikriae* and rice, and it's a yogurt soup with cubed lamb meat and a little onion in it, and some all spice, it's absolutely delicious. It's probably the most-often requested birthday meal in our house here, my brother's house, my sister's house and it was when I was growing up. That was the, you know, "What would you like for your birthday?" and we would say *shikriae* and rice.

I: So, you still cook Syrian food?

R: I cook it all. My brother cooks it all, he's the main cook in his household, and my sister cooks. And we all learned from my mother.

I: How did she teach you, was it just through...?

R: Just being in the kitchen. One-on-one and then, of course, when you moved away it was (pantomiming a phone call), "Mom, I'm making this, but it doesn't look right, am I making it right?!" (laughs). And eventually she got us one of the church cookbooks and if we were making something, I would say, "We were making it like to cookbook says, but it doesn't taste like yours!" and then we'd talk about what was in it or what was missing or what was too much or something like that and, so my cookbook is written in. With Mom's advice (laughs).

I: When you're cooking here, where do you find the ingredients that you use to cook?

R: Mostly the import stores and sometimes the natural food health stores.

I: Do you ever struggle to find things?

R: Yes.

I: What sorts of things?

R: In the, you're gonna laugh at me, I have not found a place where I trust to find good lamb meat here, unless I'm paying from Grosh's 13.99 or more a pound. So, when I go to Detroit, I take a cooler, and I go to the hallal meat markets, which is a particular type of meat processing, and I buy probably about 20 or 30 pounds of meat and I take it to my mom and dad's and I package it up the way I want to and I throw it into the freezer and I make sure it's rock-solid frozen and I bring it here to put in my freezer to use. So, if you want to laugh at me (laughing), that's probably the biggest thing that I bring from outside. I never have a problem getting spices, I never seem to have a problem getting grains here, but when I lived in Richmond, Virginia, I couldn't get like the cracked wheat that I wanted so my mom would literally ship it to me from home.

I: So, okay, we're gonna backtrack a little bit to some of the other basic questions. Are you married?

R: I am. I'm married to \_\_\_\_\_.

I: How long have you been married?

R: 26 years.

I: And was your marriage arranged or not?

R: It was not arranged.

I: Is your husband Middle Eastern at all?

R: No, he's a hundred percent Hungarian.

I: Okay.

R: And he had never eaten any Middle Eastern food before he met me (laughs).

I: How did your family feel about you marrying someone who was not Middle Eastern?

R: They thought he was a nice guy. But you have to understand that I didn't live at home until I was married. Nor would that have been my father's choice to arrange a marriage. He was American enough – he was the baby of the family and born here in the United States and that's not something that he would have wanted to do. I moved from Detroit, Michigan... I got my degree in college and then I lived on my own in an apartment for a couple of years. And then I moved to Philadelphia in 1981, I moved to Richmond, VA in 1982, and in 1984, I moved to Chicago, Illinois, all with my work. So, I had been out of the house and away from the house and on my own for quite some time. And I met him when I was in Richmond, VA in 1982 and, well, no, I met him in 83, excuse me, I moved up to Chicago in 1984, he moved to Chicago at the end of 85 and we were married in 86.

I: And do you have any children?

R: Two children, Lauren and Nicole. Lauren will be 25 next month and Nicole will be 22.

I: And do they still live at home, or...?

R: No, Lauren hasn't lived at home since she started college, and she's now working on her master's program at Mount Mary and wants to become a registered dietician. Nicole is at UW Whitewater and comes home every summer. She is studying to be a teacher, she's in her senior year.

I: Has you or any of your family ever served in the U.S. military?

R: No.

I: Okay. And, I'm assuming your daughters don't have children?

R: No, they're not even married yet. So, that's good that they don't have children (laughs).

I: Okay, so what types of, in Milwaukee, do you go to church regularly?

R: We do.

I: Okay, where do you go to church?

R: Well, my husband's Roman Catholic, so we split, we started a few years ago, actually when the children were first born and until, let's see, we've been here ten years, maybe 12 years ago, we would go to both churches every Sunday. But as of about 12 years ago, we alternate, one Sunday we go to the Catholic Church and one week we go to the Antiochian Orthodox Church. So, right now, we're going to St. John Vienni Church here in Brookfield and we're also members at St. Nicholas Antiochian Church in Cedarburg.

I: And, for holidays, which church do you go to?

R: Both.

I: Both? Okay.

R: We try not to miss out.

I: Oh, I had a question and I forgot it! Oh, do you, are you involved with either of your church communities other than just attending on Sundays?

R: We are. My husband is a lector at the Catholic Church, and that is the extent of our involvement there, other than supporting the fundraisers and at the Orthodox Church, well, I've been on the parish council. I'm not right now but I have been. We are both readers at that church, and we've helped out on various different committees at different times. It's a much smaller church. The average attendance is about 135 people, so it's so different than the 3,000-family church that is over here. You get to know everybody and I'm also serving on a women's committee that serves meals once a month at the women's shelter downtown, for instance, and, you know, there's just little groups that we're involved with.

I: When you got married, were you married in a church?

R: We were married in the Antiochian church called St. George in Troy, Michigan and we did that because the Roman Catholic Church recognized the marriage ceremony of the Orthodox Church, so nobody lost out on being, or their membership in a parish, and it was very much like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. He's an only child, so he had technically on his side of the church, 5 family members. And then the other hundred and whatever were family and friends on my side. I mean, our immediate list on my side was 88 people. So, it was quite a bit of fun to watch the film of that day and how people were seated. It was cute.

I: Can you describe a little bit more about your wedding?

R: Well, the Orthodox Church ceremony is pretty, I would say elaborate or ornate. You walk around the altar that they set up, a little temporary altar that they set up in front of the narthex, so in between the pews and where the sanctuary is, there's a table set up and you walk around it 3 times with a candle in your hand, they put crowns on your heads, so they crown you as king and queen of your own kingdom. You may know some of this...

I: Hmm-mm, no.

R: Oh, you don't?

I: No, keep going.

R: Oh my gosh! Well, and then, of course, there is a common cup where there is wine in it and it's not a mass or liturgy where it's made in to or transformed into the body and blood of Christ, but it's a common cup that is shared between the new king and queen. And we believe that once you're married, your souls are united from here and into heaven, so it's pretty elaborate, it's very ceremonial, it's very humbling in a way.

I: What did you wear?

R: I wore a wedding gown. I have a picture of that somewhere that I can show you in a little bit. It was very nice.

I: And was there a celebration afterwards?

R: Oh yes!

I: How was that?

R: (Laughs) Oh, lots of fun! My husband and I definitely made sure that, as we threw our party, we had fun at our party. We had about 160 people and we had a band, not just a DJ, and it was at the Detroit Boat Club, which was a really elegant country club kind of place. We were able to get in through one of his friend's aunts who was a member there. You had to have a membership and they had a cancellation and we snatched it up and it all seemed to work out and we had tons of fun, lots of fun.

I: What type of food did you serve?

R: We did not serve, you know, contrary to the way things are done now and the way we would probably do it for our daughters, we did not serve any Arabic food, but we had an Arabic sweet table with the cake, so that was really popular then. We also had my father bring his drum and we had Arabic dancing and so that was really nice, very traditional. He and I had a chance to dance, cuz one of my uncles played while he and I danced, and that was very nice.

I: So, you said that you would want it to be different for your daughters in the way that your wedding way? Why?

R: Well, if they're interested, I would like to do the appetizer kind of maza time frame, which wasn't really done back in our day, and that's probably the reason why we didn't have it. A lot of the weddings now through our nationality and, through some of our churches, while, and it's an accommodation that they are making to the guests, really, while they're taking pictures, they tell



them they can already go over to the hall and start with the appetizers and oftentimes the appetizer table, you know, which is free to enjoy or if you know you have waiters serving, includes some of the Arabic foods.

I: Okay, so, for your daughters' weddings, you would want to bring a little more of that culture in. How do your daughters express their culture if they do?

R: Mostly through food. And they both have a necklace that has their name written in Arabic in gold from the old country. And Lauren also likes the little evil eye charm that she has on her necklace. They both have, of course, like some religious things like crosses and icons and things like that. And through food. They both know how to cook.

I: And you taught them?

R: Of course. Where else are they gonna learn (laughs)? Except through me.

I: So, how would you define your identity? However, you want.

R: I would say I'm an American Arab.

I: Okay. And why American Arab as opposed to Syrian American or something else?

R: American Syrian? Syrian American? Well, partially because I was born in this country, and I have no knowledge of relatives in Syria. When my parents came, my grandparents came with four children and my grandfather never learned to speak English, so basically, as the three oldest sons grew up, they had to go to work to help support the family. They were very poor. They really didn't and couldn't afford to go home and they couldn't afford the phone calls back then very easily either, because they were so expensive. So, I don't even know who my family is back in Syria. The little bit of customs that we hold through, you know, what our family has brought down through the generations and the church is part of my identity, there's no doubt, but it's not something that defines me.

I: I know you mention that your grandparents brought children with them and then had children, was your father born in the United States?

R: Here.

I: Have you ever traveled to Syria? To anywhere in the Middle East?

R: No.

I: Do you want to?

R: Yes, I do.

I: What, how do you envision that going?

R: I envision going with my girlfriend (laughs) \_\_\_\_\_. She and I met after I graduated college, I had lived in an apartment with a friend for a year and then she took off in her own direction and I had, you know a room open in a two-bedroom apartment and she came along. Her name is \_\_\_\_\_, and she came from the United States from Syria...(thinking) I met her in 1980, she had been here already, so she had come in about 74, 75, and she came not knowing any English and when I met her, she spoke very good English and she was already working on her master's degree. She had flown through, you know, the undergrad in 3 years, so she's a smart lady. We had sort of lost each other when I moved to Philadelphia, and then we found each other living in Michigan again, and she was married with three children and I was married with two children, and then we became best of friends again, and even closer, so if I ever get to go, it's probably going to be with her and her family and she'll be the one speaking Arabic over there for me (laughs). Because I don't know very many words.

I: What parts of Syria would you want to see? Or anywhere else that you would want to go?

R: Well, I'd like to go to both Lebanon and Syria, and I wouldn't mind going to Beirut, either. I'd like to see the town of Daar and see if I have relatives there that actually have my same last name that are generations, you know, down the road. I'd also like to go to Antioch. I don't know anything specific besides those areas.

I: Thank you very much. I'm going to move on to more questions about your, sort of, just like daily life. So, do you read the newspaper?

R: No. I'll catch news online.

I: Where do you get most of your news? What websites do you visit most?

R: Probably CNN.

I: Do you watch the news on television?

R: I do.

I: What channels?

R: Usually, the major channels, 2, 5, and 12, I don't usually watch the BBC, although my husband will put it on every once in a while.

I: In what ways have political events in Syria affected you? It's been in the news a lot lately. Have you been following that?

R: I follow it somewhat; it affects me because I have friends from church who still have family there. Some were able to bring all of their family or their brothers and sisters here through extensive financial and legal means to get all of their brothers and sisters here and that's probably how I'm most affected. I mean I feel bad that there has to be war as much as there is

war there. I don't think it's necessary, but at the same time, I don't think I am as personally affected by it other than through my friends.

I: How would you describe your political participation in the United States?

R: I vote.

I: Okay.

R: That's it.

I: Okay, and the next question was do you vote (both laugh). What types of elections do you vote in?

R: All.

I: Okay.

R: I try not to miss any. Even the local ones.

I: When it comes to candidates who are from your own culture or religion, does that affect your voting behavior?

R: No.

I: Okay. Were you in the United States during the Gulf War?

R: Yes.

I: Did your life or interactions with others change during that time at all?

R: No.

I: How did you feel in your interactions with non-Arab friends and co-workers?

R: I believe everyone's a person first, so I do not think that because someone has a religious affiliation or has a different appearance makes them any different. Everybody has a mind and a heart.

I: And then, the same sort of thing with September 11? Did your experience change at all?

R: Only in that I felt sad that, even more concerned, I guess not sad, but even more concerned that there are people that take, there's a faction of people in each religion that are way skewed to one side. And it's too bad that they make it so difficult for everyone else in life.

I: Those are all the questions from that.

R: And I'd like to say one more thing.

I: Sure.

R: When that happened, we were in Detroit. There's a huge population of Arab people in Detroit. I don't know if you've come to know that or not. Actually there's, "Little Lebanon" (laughs) in one of the cities there, there's just a lot of Arab people, Muslim and Christian. But what's interesting is that my friend \_\_\_\_\_, whose husband happens to be at a high directorship level of employment, is Arab as well, and he looks Arab, and he had trouble going through the airports or even stopping and circling around to pick up his wife and his children that were coming in on a plane because he looks so Arab and there was definitely a level of discrimination at that time that wasn't necessary to imply or to have against all people that looked Arab, but I know everyone was on high alert so. But it was interesting how they treated everyone at that time whether they were Americans, because Gregory was born here in the United States and just had real bushy eyebrows and really dark bushy hair. Very clean cut, I mean, he's a doctor for goodness sakes! But, you know, he was stopped, and he felt bad that it was like that.

I: \_\_\_\_\_ and her husband, are they Christian?

R: They are.

I: Okay. At that time, did you feel the need to support your friends who were having maybe a little tougher time than you?

R: Mm-hmm.

I: How did you do that for them?

R: Just listened to them and talk about what was happening. And try to make sure that, you know, we weren't discriminating, but were cautious. You know it's really, there was a fine line, because everywhere you go in Detroit, in the area, there's just a lot of people that are Arab, whether they're Muslims or Christians or whatever the denomination is, there's just a lot of them. I never went out of my way to disassociate myself with anybody.

I: Okay, thank you very much for sharing. The next questions I would like to ask are about parenting. So, when you were raising your daughters, what are the major issues that concerned you when you were raising them?

R: Well, because we had a bi-religious household, I guess you could say between Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, my husband and I agreed that we would baptize them Roman Catholic, but they would be raised in both, so they were. And I felt that sometimes it was a little conflicting, but for the most part, we believe the same things, so it just took a little extra time in explaining and you know, the girls had two Easters, like they would this year, definitely one Christmas, but there were generally two Easters (laughs). There were rarely years where Easter fell on the same date.

I: What kinds of questions did they ask you about your faith and your husband's faith when they were growing up?

R: There were quite a few because they went to Sunday school with both, or you know, CCD, and Sunday school is at the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church gave them much more detail, definition, individual prayers than the CCD classes, so they were very smart in their religion, and they were raised by us to know their religion. And I think that was helpful to be able to answer questions.

I: What were some of the major conflicts that you had with your daughters when you were growing up?

R: Well, some of the major conflicts were we were spending too much time at Church (laughs), especially as they got a little older, and it got to a point in time when they didn't want to go to CCD because they didn't feel like they were learning anything, it was stuff they had learned at a younger age, so, and neither one of them went through confirmation in the Roman Catholic Church. That's not something that you do in the Orthodox Church because you are confirmed when you're baptized. And actually, that's true in the Roman Catholic Church, as well, so it's kind of like, why repeat that stuff again? (chuckles). So, there was some conflict in the household that came around from that.

I: How did you deal with that as a parent?

R: As a parent, probably not as well as I should have, but basically, I said, I didn't really think it was necessary, I said you decide if you want to do it. They didn't want to do it.

I: When your daughters were deciding on what they wanted to major in in college, what type of roles did you play in those decisions?

R: Actually, I let them choose. We believe everybody has their own talents and that's how they were guiding themselves, and I think that they chose wisely.

I: If your daughters get married, what type of husband would you want for them?

R: A loving, caring one, it doesn't matter.

I: Is it important to you that they marry someone from the same religion?

R: No, because I didn't. And I think good people can be found in lots of religions. As long as they're soul mates. That's important.

I: Where did your daughters go to school? They grew up in Milwaukee?

R: They grew up in both the Novi Michigan area and some here, so they went to public school the entire time and then they went to major universities.

I: So, what part of their childhood was spent in Michigan and what part in Wisconsin?

R: Well, they were both born in Lake Forest, Illinois, and when Lauren was 5 and Nicole was 2, we moved to Michigan. So, from birth to 5 and 2 they lived in Illinois, then from that age to 16 and 13, at that age we moved here to Wisconsin. So, they spent 10 years in Michigan, and they've been here 10 years.

I: And why did you move to Wisconsin?

R: My husband's work.

I: What does your husband do?

R: He is a pharmaceutical senior sales representative, or senior accountant, I think is the phrase.

I: And I haven't asked you what do you do?

R: I work in customer service for a bank.

I: Okay, the next questions that I'm gonna ask, we've covered some of them already, but it goes back to your life growing up. Okay, what languages did your parents speak?

R: Well, that's an interesting question. My father was fluent in English and Arabic, my mother was English and understood Arabic. So, when they didn't want us to know what was being said, my father would say it in Arabic to my mother, hoping that her reply would be in enough Arabic with a few English words in between that we wouldn't catch on. So, that's the household that I grew up in. I ended up being an English-speaking person. I know a few words, but I couldn't hold a conversation and I can't understand a whole conversation that someone else is having.

I: Did your mother speak French at all, being Canadian?

R: No, she did not.

I: Did your parents encourage you to work when you were growing up?

R: Yes.

I: What types of jobs?

R: I started working when I was sixteen, and I started at the local nursery. I was one of their house plant specialists, built terrariums, knew the houseplants. I was there throughout the Christmas season, all the way around the year.

I: Did you ever work for or with your parents?

R: No.

I: What jobs, did both your parents work?

R: No, just my father worked. He worked for United Parcel Service and my mother was a stay-at-home mom.

I: When did you first start driving?

R: At age 16.

I: And who taught you how to drive?

R: The driving school at high school and my father was the one that went out with us after that before we were allowed to take the car out.

I: When you were deciding where you were gonna go to college and what you were gonna major in, what role did your parents play in your own decision?

R: Well, that's a pretty good story, actually. It's a difficult story for me. My grades were very, very good in high school and my math grades were of the highest in the class and my calculus teacher really wanted me to go to GMIT, and he really thought I should become an engineer. But that would have required me to leave the house and go away to school. And I really wanted to go to the University of Michigan, quite honestly. My father would not, as a typical old-world kind of Arab mentality, would not fill out any of the financial documents that was required for me to go to a college or university, but he didn't want them to know how much money he had. Nor would he afford for his oldest daughter to go away to school like that. He just didn't believe in it. So, that's why I ended up going to the local university and living at home and commuting. It has bothered me to this day, because I feel that he held me back and I really wanted to go away to school, I really wanted to get out of the house. He says, "I'm not sending you to school just to find a husband and stay at home and have babies." He says, "I am not paying for that." And that was that. He did pay for my first two years of school and then I got a scholarship for the last two years. I had all of my tuition paid. He did pay for the first two years until I got my associates degree and then I got a scholarship. I didn't apply for a scholarship at the local university because I was just so upset about not being able to go away, but, because I was able to, I had a car at my disposal and my four closest friends went to the University of Michigan. I was up there every weekend (laughs) enjoying life and enjoying that as much as I could of the college experience. So, they had a big influence as to what happened in my life and it was one of the reasons my brother, I'm the oldest of three, my brother didn't want to go to college but my sister did and I started with my mom real early, I said, "Mom, you have got to talk to dad about filling out at least the forms she needs to be able to get in to the school, whether you ask for scholarship money or not, I don't care, I don't know whose gonna pay for it, I know dad's got enough money to pay for it, please let her go to school." And she did.

I: Where did she go?

R: She went to Michigan State University. That was really good. I was so happy that he did what he needed to do to let her go. To know because at that point in time I was working and it was important for him to see that women hold jobs, so that was good.

I: Have you ever talked to him about that?

R: No. Why? Why upset him? You know, there's no need to create bad feelings? And I probably should say I ended up with the career I wanted and did very well, so (laughs). It didn't harm me.

I: When you were in college, obviously you were living at home, but were you involved in religious and cultural organizations other than what you already were at home?

R: I was involved with some with the church, but no, not outside of that.

I: Did religion or culture ever influence your choice of friends at all?

R: No, they didn't.

I: Did you ever make a point of making friends who have the same culture or religion as you?

R: Make a point? Hmm... I wouldn't say I went out and sought people, but it's just like it is today, you meet people, and you meet people. I didn't turn 'em away, but if I met someone, I didn't cling to them, either. If they were someone, I felt comfortable and compatible with, I would definitely hang out with them, so to speak.

I: The next questions, we've also talked about some of it a little bit about your parents. Are both your parent still alive?

R: No, I lost my mother just this January fourteenth.

I: I'm sorry.

R: Thank you.

I: And is your father still working?

R: Oh no, he's 87. He's been retired for 24 years, and he's had a very good retirement.

I: I can't remember if you already told me, but your parents' level of education?

R: High school.

I: Both of them?

R: Actually, no. My mother graduated high school, my father was pulled out to go into World War 2 three months before he would have gotten his diploma and he never went back and got his GED.



I: So, did he go overseas during the war?

R: He did not. He had a health issue, so he stayed here, his brothers all went and told him it was best if he had the chance to stay home to do it. I thought that was very interesting. But they all came home.

I: How do you think that your parents would define themselves or their identities?

R: I think they would consider themselves Syrian American.

I: Why?

R: Because of the families that they grew up in and the values that they were raised with that came from the old country, I mean my grandparents came on a boat with a trunk filled with clothes and a few pots and pans and my grandmother's jewelry and that was what they had. So, my grandfather was a cheesemaker. You know, things in the old country are different than they are here. You don't really have a person that makes cheese and sells it and that's their whole livelihood, but I mean, it's just, there's not very much of that here. So, I would say they're more Syrian American.

I: And what types of cultural and religious activities did they participate in, and did they also have their family participate in?

R: Everything that the Church did, they did. And that's really where it stemmed from mostly, but as I mentioned they were family people and party-gathering people. If there was a reason to have a party, it was had (laughs). Almost every weekend we would go and visit relatives. I think that was very old-world of the way I grew up. And they did that on purpose. You sincerely called someone and said, "I'd like to come see you, I haven't seen you in weeks" and they would of course have something to serve. At first it was a few munchies and soda or drinks, and then it was they'd have desert and coffee and tea, and you would stay, and you would visit and get to know them better. And that's what we did when I was growing up, because that's what they did with their parents and I think that's very uh, Middle Eastern esque. People go and visit, and they go in herds almost, you know, "Come to my house this time!"

I: Okay, so the next questions are about your grandparents. And they emigrated from Syria?

R: Yes.

I: What were their names?

R: Wadiea and Khalil and their last name is my maiden name. And on my mother's side, her mother's name was Emiline Haddad, and she ended up marrying a Cook and my mother does not know who her father is.

I: And it was your grandparents on your father's side, and three children?

R: There were four and one died. And then she had two more. So I know that my father grew up, in my mind, he was of a family of 5 but there was actually 6 of them.

I: Do you know how your grandparents met?

R: Arranged.

I: Okay. Do you know more about your grandparents' marriage? How it was arranged at all?

R: I don't know how it was arranged, no, but I think it was very courageous of them, because they were the only couple on my grandfather's side of the family that I know of, and actually my grandmother's too, we never knew who their brothers and sisters were, and they both came from large families, so they were the only couples that came to the United States. Why they chose to do that, I was never told.

I: Do you think that your grandparents, since they had an arranged marriage, did they get along well with each other?

R: They did.

I: Did they ever talk at all about how their marriage was arranged, if it was through their families or anything like that?

R: I have no idea, and quite honestly, they were not English-speaking people and while my grandmother didn't pass away until I was 12, I think it was, it wasn't really discussed in the house. I suppose I could ask my father and get back to you.

I: The next topic I'm going to ask you questions about is cultural clothing. Do you own any cultural clothing?

R: No.

I: Do your parents?

R: My mother owned one of those kaftan kinds of things, but other than that, no. Table linens (laughs).

I: Where did they come from?

R: From Syria and Lebanon, they were gifts to us.

I: Wedding gifts?

R: No, just gifts. Friends of mine like \_\_\_\_\_ who would go home and come back, and they would bring stuff. And jewelry.

I: You mentioned that your daughters have some jewelry, is it from Syria as well?

R: It is. Actually, most of the jewelry they have is from Lebanon.

I: Can you describe some of the jewelry that you have?

R: Yes, I have a 24k gold bracelet that was my grandmothers on my mother side, I also have two other bracelets that are 22k gold from Lebanon, then I have, each of our daughters has a gold bracelet that matches mine from Lebanon and they have their necklaces that are their names written in Arabic out of 22k gold. My one daughter has a pair of earrings, all of this is yellow gold, and then they have pieces, like, my oldest daughter has that evil eye that's made out of turquoise with a real 22 or 24k gold jhook on it...I can't remember.

I: Is most of it has been gifts or that you bought? Or has most of it been from your family?

R: Most of it's what I bought through my friends that have gone and traveled there. I was also gifted a nice costume jewelry and earring set and I have never worn it. I guess I should find a dress and wear it to a party sometime (laughs). And we also have some other little trinkets, like I have this Kleenex box that is hand carved from Syria and I have one of my dad's durbecki drums made out of silver, that's all I can think of.

I: How do you feel when you wear that jewelry?

R: I feel like it's part of my heritage. Oh, I also have a ring. I have a ring that was given to me by a boyfriend. It's a very special girlfriend almost-more-than-girlfriend, it's a dotted hill of gold with a pearl on top. And I didn't realize it at the time, but it was given to me by someone who broke up with me two months later (laughs), but I guess he thought I was just the bomb for a while there (laughs).

I: What does this jewelry mean to you, the traditional jewelry that you have?

R: You can tell who wears jewelry from the Middle East because it's a color of gold, you can see the yellow gold in it. I just feel like there is history there and its part of my ancestry. There's an association that's built there by seeing those pieces, it's very traditional.

I: I think those are all my questions about the clothing or the jewelry. So, towards the end of our interview, these are my closing questions that I have for you. So, is there anything else about your history that you want to share?

R: I think something that's important to note is that our religion still really doesn't believe in divorce. I mean, if it's abusive or if there's a real reason for it, then yes. And I do know people who are divorced in the Antiochian Orthodox faith, but nicely enough, you know, my parents had been married 57 years and my brother and sister-in-law have been married and are still married to the same person and they have children that prefer to marry and never divorce. I mean you can't say that they won't, but we really hope that they have those long-standing relationships

with their partners. And I think that's a part of kind of something that's come down through the years.

I: Okay, are there any particular services or resources that you think AMWRRRI should provide to meet the needs of your community?

R: Resources. (Long pause) Here in Milwaukee? There's a lot that's missing here compared to other cities. But part of that is that the church itself is talking in a lot of people who have converted from other faiths, and they are a mixture of nationalities. I don't personally feel that we have to hold on to a lot for those old traditions. Whatever you have, great, share, but how would you provide that to people though? A museum? I don't know that that really helps people understand, no. I think it's just one on one communication with people that really brings an interesting aspect of what your culture has been.