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Nabil Bayakly, 2014

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Interviewer: _____. My name is **Hanna** _____. Today is Saturday, July 12th, and the time, I believe, is 11:30. On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Aspire 2014, Rhodes College and all other partners, thank you for being here today. We really appreciate you to do this interview, making time.

Nabil Bayakly: [*Speaking Arabic*]. It's a pleasure to be here. See all the young kids grown up now under the –

Interviewer: Okay. What is your name?

Nabil Bayakly: Nabil Bayakly.

Interviewer: And where do you work?

Nabil Bayakly: I'm associate professor in biology at LeMoyne-Owen College, and I am the coordinator of the Arabic Program at University of Memphis, and I am the coordinator of Islamic Studies at Memphis Theological Seminary.

Interviewer: Where are you from?

Nabil Bayakly: I'm from Lebanon.

Interviewer: When did you come to America?

Nabil Bayakly: 1979.

Interviewer: And how was it at that time?

Nabil Bayakly: America was nice, beautiful as usual.

Interviewer: What made you decide to come to America?

Nabil Bayakly: Well –

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I wanted to have a degree, and I wanted to hire a good place where I can get a good education so this, America, was the opportunity.

Interviewer: Did you come with anyone else?

Nabil Bayakly: No. I came by myself.

Interviewer: How did your parents and family members feel about you leaving?

Nabil Bayakly: Actually, my father has passed because there was a war in Lebanon, and he died in the war, and I only had my mother living at that time, and she really wanted me to get out because of the dangerous situations there was in Lebanon. So she was, in a way, very relaxed, relieved and happy at the same time for me to leave.

Interviewer: How did you feel about leaving your home country?

Nabil Bayakly: It's always bad to leave your country.

Interviewer: What was the image of America in your country at the time?

Nabil Bayakly: Land of honey and milk. Milk and honey. That's all that everybody thought. You know, you go there everything will be nice, and money grows on trees and all the good stuff.

Interviewer: Did you agree with that image?

Nabil Bayakly: Not at all, I guess.

[0:02:00]

It's many shocks when I came here, and realized Lebanon with the war was actually even better than – where United States had peace or whatever the situation was.

Interviewer: Were there any immigration issues when you moved?

Nabil Bayakly: No.

Interviewer: No?

Nabil Bayakly: It was hard on me to get a visa because they had very limited student visa at that time, but once I got the visa there was no problem.

Interviewer: What city did you arrive in when you came?

Nabil Bayakly: Lafayette, Louisiana.

Interviewer: Why?

Nabil Bayakly: Because that's where my _____ came from, and my cousin was living there. He was in the University of Southwest Louisiana at

that time, and he was there already ahead of me. So I came actually to be in a way with my cousin and also get the education.

Interviewer: Did you like Louisiana?

Nabil Bayakly: Louisiana is nice. Yeah.

Interviewer: Did you feel as though you were treated differently?

Nabil Bayakly: Uh –

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I cannot say I was treated different. I was just young and I was just out of high school, and it was really the problem was with Iran. It was the Iranian hostages at that time, and for some reason, I mean, people don't know the difference between someone from Iran, Iranian, and Arab, Lebanese or Arab. And wherever we wanted to go it seems like they wanted to fight us, you know, if they see you walking down the street. And when you try to explain is that we're not from Iran, and they really don't care, and this even was on campus, at universities' campuses.

So that was really, I would say, the overall issue, and that's because of that situation that happened. So we had a hard time until, really, the hostages were released, but really, other than that –

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Mostly, you know, the people who wanted to fight or wanted to show any kind of aggression were young individuals, and it wasn't as much as really like September 11. So there's a difference in a way.

Interviewer: What was your reaction when you arrived to America?

Nabil Bayakly: I was happy, you know. You know, I haven't seen my cousin for a long, long time, and he was at the airport, and this is my cousin that I grew up with. We did Boy Scout together, and we went fishing together, and in the beginning of the war he left.

Interviewer: Was it what you expected, America?

Nabil Bayakly: No.

Interviewer: Louisiana?

Nabil Bayakly: No.

Interviewer: When did you come to Memphis and why?

Nabil Bayakly: I came in 1991 because I received a full scholarship at University of Memphis –

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To get my PhD. So it was for education reasons.

Nabil Bayakly: What was Memphis like when you got here?

Interviewer: I still remember when I drove downtown in Memphis, and I had my wife with me, and I said, “We don’t want to get lost here,” because it looked very, very – how shall I say? As of deserted town, you know. That’s how it looked like.

Interviewer: Some people have difficulty assimilating into new societies. Did you have any difficulties?

Nabil Bayakly: Not me, no, in a way because the school that I went in Lebanon is known as the American School as well, so I was very, very familiar with Americans because some of my teachers were Americans, and some of the students that I went with were either American or of American descent. So I understood, really, the American mentality, and I had – you know, I know how to –

[0:06:00]

Deal with that. So as far as an individual and, you know, how to deal with people, I had no problem.

Interviewer: You were comfortable in America?

Nabil Bayakly: I’m comfortable, **familiar**.

Interviewer: Great. Let’s talk about Islam in Memphis at the time. Was there a Muslim community in Memphis at the time?

Nabil Bayakly: Yes. There were actually three mosques at that time. Masjid Al-Muminun, which is on Third Street; Masjid Al-Salam, and there was a small house, Masjid Al-Noor. It was an old house.

Interviewer: Which one was the largest one?

Nabil Bayakly: Really, if you consider Masjid Al-Muminun, because Masjid Al-Muminun is three stories, so it was as far as building, and as I said, it was the largest, and also included Sister Clara Muhammad School. So by far that was the largest, but as far as –

[0:07:00]

Number of congregation, Masjid Al-Salam was larger; had more people coming to Masjid Al-Salam than to Masjid Al-Muminun. So larger could be either larger as a facility. In that case that would be Masjid Al-Muminun. In case larger as far as congregation, then that would be Masjid Al-Salam.

Interviewer: And can you tell us more about that school that you were talking about?

Nabil Bayakly: Sister Clara Muhammad?

Interviewer: Yes.

Nabil Bayakly: It was established in the '50s. First it was established as from the Nation of Islam, Minister Farrakhan's group, and after, really, the split or after Warith Deen Mohammad steered the Nation of Islam into the mainstream Islam, then, really, the change from being a Nation of Islam school to just mainstream Muslims, and so –

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And they stayed there, actually, for many, many years until I think in the early '90s we had a snowstorm, a very bad freeze, and it destroyed – it's an old building – shattered the building. They tried to remodel the building to start it again, but I think with the new requirements, the new codes, made it very hard on them, and they couldn't really open it again as a school so it was closed.

Interviewer: Was it a very active school?

Nabil Bayakly: It was, and I think Usmani's sons were going there.

Interviewer: Did you take part in any of the communities at that time?

Nabil Bayakly: I was always involved in the community, you know. Even when I was in Louisiana I was involved in the –

[0:09:00]

Small mosque that was there, and so when I came here I just kept doing more of the same thing.

Interviewer: What kind of work did you do at the masjids?

Nabil Bayakly: Well, when I first came I was the Imam at Masjid Al-Noor so I was really leading the congregation at Masjid Al-Noor, whatever leadership required. And as you asked me earlier, I am not really intimidated by going into the greater community and building bridges and seeking new friendship and all that. I'm as comfortable as maybe I'm in Tripoli, Lebanon, my city, so I don't mind going anywhere in Memphis to knock on anybody's house and talk to them about heritage about Islam, about culture, about history. I don't have any problem with that.

[0:10:00]

So parts of rebuilding Masjid Al-Noor was actually to make it the center for community activity and cultural bridges' building.

Interviewer: How did you become the Imam of Masjid Al-Noor, and why?

Nabil Bayakly: When I came in in 1991, the Imam who was there was about to leave so in a way that they were looking for a substitute Imam in a sense, interim Imam, and I filled that position in a sense that the committee said – they asked me to lead, and since really looking for an Imam, and most of the community at the time were really students. We were the Muslim Student Association.

Then the looking for an Imam took us from 1991 till 1996 or so.

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So during that time, you know, I served that position.

Interviewer: Can you tell us a little bit about the history of Masjid Al-Noor?

Nabil Bayakly: Masjid Al-Noor was established in the '80s, mid 80s. It was really established by the MSA. First it was on Highland, not where the current location is, and then later I think Brother _____ and the rest of the committee found a house that was on Mynders Avenue, which is the current location, and they bought that, you know, for the MSA. And that house actually was an old house already when it was bought, and again, in the early '90s there was this winter storm, very bad freeze, and that storm actually caused the –

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Walls of the mosque at that time to really collapse. So we were even praying in a mosque in which you can see how the roof caved

in and the walls collapsing, and there was always the issue of we have to build a new mosque. We have to build a new mosque. So this was kind of the largest motive for us to really be more serious about it.

So this is when we actually did – we went and we had the blueprints and all that, and we estimated how much the project would cost, and then we committed to build the mosque.

Interviewer: Did you encounter any problems? Money? Financing? Discrimination?

Nabil Bayakly: Well, we were students so in a way we don't have the money to build a mosque. We noticed –

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For a long, so we knew that we would get the help. Money, it was where it got [*whisper*], and we couldn't – you know, we left our practice and we went on the street and everywhere to collect money and help.

Interviewer: What was the reaction of the surrounding non-Muslim communities like when you were building the Masjid?

Nabil Bayakly: Really, the non-Muslims were very helpful. They were very, very helpful, almost like when we destroy one of the mosques, the building, we were looking for a place to pray, and, you know, we got to pray five times a day. So first we went to the school, to the university, and they gave us some – they wanted to give us a room at the university, and we told them that we have to come like the first prayer, the morning prayers early –

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Like, you know, 5:00 and 4:00. They said, "We cannot guarantee that because of security reasons." So at that time was the foundation. I mean they just came to us and they said, "Here. These are the keys," and they gave us the keys to Wesley Foundation. So during that time we were building Masjid Al-Noor we were praying in Wesley Foundation, and they wouldn't take any money from us, not one penny for water or for electricity or for renting the place, and these are Methodists, you know, part of the Methodist church. So they were very, very – I mean amazingly helpful for us that we continued the congregation. The congregation stayed together, and we had a place. I don't know if

you know, it's just one block away from Masjid Al-Noor, and we had the parking lot. We had all this so in a –

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Sense we continued the prayers just as if you can say Masjid Al-Noor East. You know, this is how we felt about it, and we were very, very fortunate, and we love that relationship that we fostered early from that time, really – 1995, 1994, all there, and what developed from that, actually, many, many other – all what you see nowadays as far as community activities or relationship with others, interfaith, that all really started with this nucleus.

Interviewer:

After the Masjid was built, what steps did you and the other founders take to involve the Muslims in the community into making the Muslim community more active?

Nabil Bayakly:

Again, the intention of building Masjid Al-Noor was we are the Muslim Student Association so we wanted to be more involved in a sense with the University of Memphis. We wanted to bring lecturers. We wanted to establish courses –

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At University of Memphis that will make people understand the faith and the traditions, the cultures, and we wanted to – what was the library, we wanted it to be more like a science hub for anyone who wants to do research on Islam and Islamic studies, that we bought the fastest, best, the largest computers at that time so the students would be able to use it, and it's really one block from the university so the students can also stay there late night and do their homework and do all that.

We bought all the references, you know, the original text references because at that time there was no good Islamic library here in the mid-South. So we wanted to have, really –

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The central library for Islam in this area, and so we started with the, you know, like *[speaking Arabic]*, all the authentic traditions with the authentic interpretations and books and commentaries of all the scholars, all the scholars of Islam, really, we bought them, and then we started doing that in English as well, and we want to have a translation – you know, to translate all of these to English as well.

At that time, actually, the Internet wasn't – not too many people were – Google wasn't there. Doctor Google – Google wasn't there. So that's why, you know, we wanted to have – anyone who wants to make access or research in anything about Islam, they would have access to it at the mosque.

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This is as far as education is concerned. We also – like since we had already established a good relation with Wesley, _____ the same thing, either the mosque was small, and we were looking for a parking lot so we went to St. Luke Methodist across the street, and we asked if we can use their parking lot on Fridays, just for Fridays, and amazingly they just offered the parking lot. They said, you know, "We are on this side of the street. You are on the other side of the street, and most of the time we don't have five times prayer, so whenever you want to use the parking lot, you are welcome to use the parking lot."

So, yeah, that was the St. Luke's, and then there used to be Baptist Prescott on the corner of Mynders and Prescott Avenue. It's now a parking lot. You know, it used to be a church there, and amazingly these people, they are American Baptists. I mean –

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Once we opened the mosque they just came with roses and gifts to welcome us. It was just an amazing feeling, you know, that we were almost like in a precious place; that we have these two churches around us, and they are so welcome. They were so welcome.

Interviewer:

What other activities and programs did you guys have?

Nabil Bayakly:

We had jail missionaries – not missionaries, but they call them – you know, we started going – we had a lot of calls from jail that they want to learn about Islam and know Islam so we had people who would go to jails and inform, teach Islam, proper Islam, and jails I'm talking about not only here in Memphis, but all the way out to Ripley, Tennessee and Arkansas –

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And all the way to Jackson, Tennessee as well. So we're really going everywhere where we can, whoever needed us to teach them about Islam.

We also established, in a way, the core of – the beginning of interfaith was St. Luke’s. In Ramadan we started inviting them for the iftar dinner. Because they had the big gym, so they say, “Why don’t you do it at our place?” So we had iftar in the gym of this amazing –

On campus we were actually going to the history department and the Middle East department, and whatever department that they – when they said we are now a Muslim Student Association, anyone, any speaker that you want about Islam from the Islamic tradition, you know, people who practice the faith, you know, please –

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Let us know and we’ll be happy to provide you with lecturers.

The same with different churches, and also with the synagogues as well – Temple Israel. At that time it was Rabbi Danziger who was the rabbi in charge, and after Rabbi Danziger came in, Rabbi Greenstein, and he’s now the current rabbi since, I think, the early ‘90s. And we extended to everybody, to the temple – it’s called the Dragon Seed Temple, which is Buddhist Monk, also we –

So we really went north and west, east, wherever you want to call it just to let people know that we are here. We want people to learn about Islam.

Interviewer: Can you tell us more about –

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MSA and U of M and its history and its involvement?

Nabil Bayakly: Like I said, really the MSA at U of M started in the early ‘80s, and it was with Dr. Usmani, and he is the one who would give the hudba, and at that time it actually was just like a student organization, really, and had the offices, and they would ask them to have, like for the [Arabic word] they would have a student center, and the student center that you see now is not the same student center that was at that time. And they would have a small room, and they would give the hudba there. And I still remember the book was called *Oration from the Pulpit* by Dr. _____.

And also established, actually, you know, for Ramadan and –

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The iftar dinner for the Muslims, you know. Most of us were students, and it's very hard, really, for a student to get a meal at the end of the day, a cooked meal, so some of us would be free, let's say around 4:00, so they would come to the mosque and they would cook in the mosque. So at the time of iftar all the students then would come in. Bring their fast. And now you see meals at Masjid Al-Noor, Masjid Al-Salam, MIC. Almost every mosque now has a meal.

And I still remember at that time, whenever we had the meals people would come and just complain, and say, "Oh, this smells like cooking," 'cause there's a piece of rice here, piece of it, and I'd say, "Okay. _____," but we have students that don't have places to go to bring their friends so we continue with this.

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So from that all of the mosques until then now adopted the iftar, you know, baking iftar. So this is one thing that the MSA has done as far as for Masjid Al-Noor, and also, like I said earlier, is the bridge building. Because we are on campus it was easy for us to go to the Baptist Student Union, the Catholic students, the Black Student Association, all the different organizations on campus, religious organizations, like I said, also Methodist.

So we started, actually, student organizations having joint programs, and from that kind of work on campus, then the major churches started going, "No more," and they wanted us to come and speak and –

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Talk and all that. So **hunger lab** was a small effort that started and _____, and mushroomed.

Interviewer:

Can you name some of the others with you in MSA?

Nabil Bayakly:

Yeah. There was [Arabic names], Brother _____, and before me was Brother _____, and Brother **Alem**. He's no longer here, and _____ is no longer here. There are other brothers, also, who really left the city. I stay in touch with them on Facebook.

Interviewer:

Going back to the Muslim community, did the Muslim community start growing when you came?

Nabil Bayakly: Yes. The very best example I always give to everybody is that the last [Arabic word] we made at Masjid Al-Noor –

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I counted. There was about 78 heads at the mosque in the crowded area, and there was maybe three sisters in the sisters' section. Well, we demolished the building, and then we built the mosque, supposedly, to fit 300 people, and we thought that – when it was demolished, I think it was '94, and we opened it in '97. So if the community had grown, let's say it doubled. Right? So 78, 80, double 160. So we're building for a capacity of 300 so that maybe will serve us for ten years or so.

The day we opened the mosque I counted how many people. It was like 260-something, and I –

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Was like amazed as to where these people came from, you know? So right there you can tell that from '94 till '97 it's more than doubled. The community more than doubled as far as – this is not the trend only in Masjid Al-Noor. Also it was Masjid Al-Salam, and also at Masjid Al-Muminun.

So as much as you hear bad things that's going on in the media about Islam, it's the more people want to know about Islam, and I mean there are stories that I bet you your hair would stand up if I would tell you what happened at the mosque when people will come and take shaheda, why they took shaheda. What is the reason that they took shaheda?

Interviewer: Can you tell us more about that?

Nabil Bayakly: See, the story that really stands in my heart, I never forget it, is about a woman who was originally from –

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Oregon, and, I mean, she came and she parked. She didn't have a place to stay, and she had two kids with her, two kids that were about ten, 11, boys. And I asked, "Can I help you?" And she said, "Yes. I am here because my husband didn't want me to take shaheda. Didn't want me to be Muslim, is a [Arabic word], and he is persecuting me for taking the shaheda and I don't want to stay in the house so I wanted to leave." And at that time there were no places in which you can send a woman, a sister, all that, with her children. And the mosque at that time at Masjid Al-Noor had

actually a room upstairs. Nobody would use it. We used it as an office.

So immediately we cleared –

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That room and we made it for her. And then I asked her, I said, “But how did you become a Muslim?” She’s on Oregon. She was a wife of a doctor, white upper-class. She said that when she was born she always heard a song in her head, and she doesn’t know what was that song. And at the year when Bush, Sr., when he went into Iraq, when he started bombing Iraq, Sam Donaldson – I remember the report – was broadcasting from Baghdad, and as he was broadcasting from Baghdad, he was showing that he is at the scene, and there was a mosque behind him, and that mosque was calling the adhan, the call for prayers.

This woman who was in Oregon, she’s already –

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Married now. She has her children, her daughters and boys, and she has been to all the clinics, psychiatry, all that to know about the song. She didn’t know what was the song. She always called it a song. She goes, “They tried everything and they couldn’t find it as far as songs are concerned.” So she was moving going from the kitchen, coming to the living room to give coffee to her husband, and that report was coming up, the TV was on, and there then it came on, and she froze right there.

And at the end Sam Donaldson said, “This was the call for prayers for Muslims.” She realized that’s what she’s been hearing in her mind since her birth was the call for adhan, and she knew that she had to go to the closest mosque to take the shaheda. So she looked up –

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In Oregon, you know, where the closest mosque, and she went there and she took shaheda. From that time her husband was persecuting her so she started running away, and she ended up at Masjid Al-Noor, and then she lived here years.

So this is one for me that affirms my faith, and it shows you how *[Arabic words]* wants to spread Islam. Any different people can

be used so that they will convey the message for someone who really needs to become a Muslim.

Interviewer: Going back to Muslim growth, how did the growth of the community affect the Masjid?

Nabil Bayakly: Like I said, when we opened it was 264. We opened it for 300. It was already – like the main hall was full so we –

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Start using the foyer or the atrium – the reception hall. We opened it to the main hall, and we joined them for the jama'ah prayers, and then later on, actually what was the library, we started moving some of the aisles in the library and expanding it so that it will accommodate more people for jama'ah. And I still remember at some time even they were praying in the parking lot for jama'ah.

And then [*Arabic word*], I mean the mosque was opened in 1997/'98, and you know that this year, early this year we opened Masjid Ar Rahman. So this is the difference of how many in 20 years we can say, less than 20 years? I mean normally Rahman is the largest mosque. So that tells you how the growth is as far as Islam and Muslims are concerned.

[0:33:00]

Interviewer: Transitioning a little to talk about the 9/11 attack and Muslims in Memphis at that time, what was your reaction to 9/11?

Nabil Bayakly: Well, I certainly remember I was at the house, and brother was already in the mosque, and he called me from the mosque and he said, "Nabil, do you know what happened?" I said, "No." He said, "Turn on the TV." So I turned on the TV. The first tower was already hit, and the plane was coming to hit the second tower. So I was really watching, and I just couldn't believe, you know, how that could happen, and you saw the second tower hit, and then after, you know, a few hours then building seven was – I mean we were all mesmerized.

For every human being who was here in the United States they will tell you exactly what they had done at that moment, and all what I was –

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In my mind all what I was thinking is that 34:03 just don't make it – don't let it be Muslims.

So right there when I saw this I knew I have to go to the mosque. When I saw all that I just had – you know, I had to go to the mosque, especially the way they were talking; saying that suspected Muslims and all that.

We had the Oklahoma City before, and we learned a lesson from there. So immediately I went to the mosque and I parked the car to block the entrance so nobody can come. And we were right there on the phones. I was calling CAIR, Council on American-Islamic Relations, and I couldn't get through. I was calling ESNA lines. I was calling any – I just wanted to know how to respond to that.

And at –

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The same time you had those – you know, the channels, all the media were coming to the parking lot. They wanted to have interviews and all that. So for us it was we still don't know. As long as they say “suspected terrorists,” and that's all how could they do it? You know, it was impossible. It's nothing no Muslim would think that another Muslim would do something like this. It's _____.

So we were actually right in the thick of all the media conversation, everything. All the media, it seems like they want to focus on Masjid Al-Noor.

In the year 2000 there was a shooting in Masjid Al-Noor. Somebody came. We were at _____ prayer, and somebody came with a gun and shot at us. So in a way that was another event that prepared us on how to deal with the media –

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What to say, what not to say, and how to respond to them.

So whenever they want to come and they want to ask reports, I would just take short statements from CAIR and from ESNA, and use that as a response. They always want you to put your opinion, and you don't want to put your opinion, other than, of course, saying that no human being would do that regardless of what their religion is. And some channels really wanted to stir up the mud

and wanted to say this, and I just had to ward off, and I stuck to the message that Islam is a religion of faith, and that's what Islam means, and whoever wants to kill innocent civilians must not be from the faith or doesn't follow the teachings of the faith.

So _____, I think it was –

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A very, very – how shall I say – testing times for Islam, for Muslim, but I think because we have already fostered a good relationship with St. Luke's, St. Luke's also sent their people to help us to protect the grounds, and Prescott Baptist.

I still remember Martha Brown. She came with her **cloak** to stand in front of the mosque so nobody would attack the mosque. So with that kind of relationship, really. So the Boy Scout at St. Luke also came, and they formed like a human shield, and they wouldn't allow anybody like looking hostile to come close.

There was also Second Baptist Church on Walnut Grove.

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Also the priest came, saying, "We're not going to Muslims to be persecuted." C.B. Baker from St. Mary's Cathedral downtown, he called and he said, "What can we do for you to help you?" Mayor Herenton, he said, "We're not going to allow Muslims to be persecuted in Memphis." So I know I had a strong, strong community support, whether it is from the members of the community or the political entities.

So whenever people come and started saying things, bad things, or the phone calls that we got and all the threats that were done against the mosque, against me, against the community, _____.

[0:39:00]

I mean we were careful, but none of it materialized, and I really think because of the way the whole community responded, especially the _____, how they came to our help.

Interviewer:

Talking about the present Muslim community of Memphis, what are some changes you have seen since you arrived here?

Nabil Bayakly: I mentioned really two in _____ months as we say. Right now we have seven mosques that are really active mosques, and we have other mosques. We have now a full-time school that almost can graduate students all the way up to high school. We have the cemetery. We have halal, food, everywhere. At that time we didn't have all that. So that as far as Islam and Muslim so Islam is well established from birth to death. _____ will be taken care of as far as Islam and Muslims and Islamic things.

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We have a great relationship with many churches. Up till now we're still using the parking lot at St. Luke. Heartsong also did the same thing to MIC, in which really gave the congregation a place to pray on Ramadan, and also the parking lot to use at the time of need. Heartsong is also Methodist. So you see Wesley Foundation, St. Luke's and Heartsong, all the same congregation, all the same denomination.

We have a strong established relationship with the Baptist community by most, by far, by all the Catholics, the Episcopalian, the Presbyterians. We go to churches, schools, communities. _____ I think we really –

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Well, we intended as far as when we started with Masjid _____ that we want all this to start and become, really, to show Islam to humanity what Islam is all about, and _____, it is materializing at every aspect of it, and there's more to be done, actually.

The main thing that we always had in mind and still in my heart is that we have to have an Islamic scientific core in this area because a lot of Muslim scientists here, whether it is at the University of Memphis, whether it's at UT or in other places, FedEx and all that, we can have a Muslim scientific hub here as well, and that was one of the purposes of that small library we established at Masjid Al-Noor, and we will grow. We will mature into that.

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It is a maturation trip.

Interviewer:

What advice would you give to young Muslim leaders in the Memphis community?

Nabil Bayakly:

The sky is the limit. The future is in your hand, but the way you want to shape Islam is how you want it to be. You work on it right

now from now. You don't wait and say, "What am I going to do tomorrow or I'm going to do next year?" Right now you start establishing what Muslims nowadays need to be in the media. We have to have an army of lawyers. We need to have an army of lawyers. We have enough MDs; we have enough ITs; we have enough engineers, whatever they are we have enough of them. What we don't have is people in the media, and I'm glad that you are doing interviews, so hopefully you will continue the media, and we need an army of lawyers.

Muslims in the legal systems are persecuted, and you hear all those

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Ignorant people, who are actually in control, let's say, in Tennessee. Just a few years ago they wanted to do anti-shari'ah. They have no idea what shari'ah was. And we went to Nashville when they were debating the issue. You can tell that the person who's introducing the anti-shari'ah bill – of course they didn't call it anti-shari'ah at that time. They called it something else. Even my son, Ishmael, that I took him. I said, "Ishmael, you need to come so you know what's going on," and my son, Ishmael, was at that time, I think, maybe 12 or 13.

After the one who introduced the bill started talking, he said, "Baba," – this is my son's statement: "They say it's not against Islam. It's all against Islam, and this person doesn't really know nothing about Islam." This is my 12-year-old son, and I'm glad he gave me this gift; that I made him hear what that person said, and what his job –

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Is going to be in the future, and I remind him of that, and I remind all of you here, you know, is that the people who run the state or they are in the political establishments, they're all conservative, whatever they are you want to call them, their mind is back in the stone ages as far as Islam is concerned. So they don't know about Islam. Most of them they come from areas outside major cities. So all that they know of is the traditional thousand years of hatred against Islam, and the only way to change this is really by Muslims who were born here, not Muslims who came from somewhere else. Muslims who were born here, raised here. They know the system here. They know how it works. To become involved, to become involved in the political aspect so that this way when somebody in

the state is talking like this, then some other Muslim stand and say, “You can’t say anything about Islam.”

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“I am a Tennessean just like you are, and what you’re talking is nothing but nonsense. If you’re going to deny me the burial rite or the matrimonial rite, then you also should be denied all of these aspects as well. What’s good for the goose is good for the gander.”

So the only way for us to do that is to have people, Muslims like you, who were born here, raised here, know what Islam is, and be able to have that pride in Islam to face these bigots, and let them know that we’re not going to be standing for that.

So this is, I think, if we were able to do this that will be almost the final – how shall I say – block that people have against Islam and that foster Islamaphobia in this country. So what is the political establishment? And you need lawyers for that. You need people to understand what is the constitution, what’s the constitution law? What they can do, what they cannot do.

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Where we’re trying to get the cemetery in Lakeland, one of the elected officials, he said that if we allow the establishment of a Muslim cemetery in Lakeland, then we will make I-40 a terrorist corridor. They’re even thinking that if we bury our people there because it’s close to the I-40, as if the dead Muslim is going to wake up and walk like zombies because of what they think of Hollywood, these are people, elected officials, you know? What human being can think like that?

And the only way to fight this back and educate them is by Muslims who were born and raised here; understand the political system; understand the constitution; understand the executive, what are the branches of the government. You go ask any Muslim who came maybe from overseas –

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Ask them, “What do you know about this?” They know nothing about this. Most of us are scared from our government because we grew up in a government that is always oppressive so if we see police, we’re scared. You know, we don’t read, “To protect and

serve.” You know, they’re police; must be trouble; get out of here. so we act as criminals, although if you look at the Muslims, I mean we are the best, the cream of the crop in this community, but because we still don’t believe, we still say, “When I go home,” and we don’t realize that this is home. For you you cannot say, “When I go home.” You cannot think like that. If you think like that, you’re dead wrong because this is home, and you have to own it now. So you have to learn how to get into the system to own the system and change things and change the perceptions. Things are happening. They’re happening in a very, very slow way, but in order –

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For it to be accelerated, in order for it to really move at a fast pace is that this generation of Muslims that were born here and raised here, that they become more and more involved, really, in Islam, whether it’s in the community or at mosques. Don’t take a backseat at the mosques. You ask for the agenda. Don’t take the agenda. You ask for the agenda. You put the agenda. Say, “This is what needs to be done.”

Most of us who are running all these mosques are from back home. We don’t know exactly what is needed to be established in the schools here. We don’t know exactly what is needed to be established to go to city hall. Ask how many people here or in the Muslim community how many times they’ve been to the city hall downtown. They don’t even know where it is. If the mayor is going to call them for a meeting in his office, they don’t even know where the mayor’s office is.

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That’s a major – that’s the last hurdle that we as Muslims must – must in order for us to continue to hear and to really excel we must overcome and ask Muslims to be genuinely involved in the political and the social area.

I keep talking _____. I don’t know.

Interviewer:

As an Arabic and Islamic Studies instructor, what are some of the things you have done and are planning to do for the Memphis Muslim community?

Nabil Bayakly:

I’m _____ as the Arabic Program at the University of Memphis. We started with only one course, and now it’s four courses, and

there's always a demand for it, even more demand. I do have also special studies in Islam and all that so it's really another – how shall I say – nucleus that needs to grow.

I have established the Islamic Studies at Memphis Theological Seminary and the courses –

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Has been now for more than ten years, really, the course has been going on, and it used to be like once every other year, and now almost every semester, and also I have some independent studies as well. So more and more people as far as the reverends and ministers who also want to learn about Islam. So these are two things. There's potential for growth there, and like I said, actually we really need like some kind of institution that talks about the heritage of Islam in America.

A lot of young Muslims don't know how far Islam goes back in this country. Really, the new studies that show that there's a Chinese colonel called Admiral Xian, X-I-'-A-N. There's a different way of saying it.

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Some say Xian, some say Huan, but that's his name – X-I-'-A-N-H-E. And he is now credited, he's the one who discovered the Americas or this part of the world 40, 50 years before Columbus. This is a new field. People have to know about it. He was a Chinese admiral, and is known as the Admiral of the Seas. He had the longest, largest fleet. It was like a city on water as they say, and it is now found that he has discovered – and he was a Muslim. He was known as Haji Admiral Xi'an. So that shows you the heritage of Islam in this country.

And then there are many different races here, like the Melungeons. Living in Tennessee, you ask any Muslim have you heard of the Melungeons. They don't know. The Melungeons, they live on the border between –

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Tennessee, Kentucky and Virginia, and their real name was Melungeons, which were actually slaves that came with the Spaniards. When the people of Spain came here, they brought these with them as slaves, and most of them were Turks, Moroccan origin, Middle Eastern descent, and they were left here when the Spaniards left, and that's why they called themselves Melungeons.

It means that they're cursed, and now they're just called Melungeons, and I don't know where the name came from and all that. And there's a book actually. The book is about the Melungeons, and you can read it.

The point is that Islam has been in this country. Islam is as old as this country, but Muslims were always persecuted, and the point is that you, as youngsters now, you should know that –

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And you should not allow this anymore to happen. So now you should own it. The point is that you should own it now and show that Islam has been here. It's not the new kid on the block. We have our contributions in everything. In order for really Muslims in a sense to be well-established here in this part of the world.

Interviewer:

Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Nabil Bayakly:

Yes. Keep on working hard. People are going to ridicule you. They're going to say a lot of bad things about you. As long as you're doing the right thing, they're going to try to put you down. They're going to try to call you names, but just always think that you're doing it only for the sake of Allah _____. Whatever you are doing is only for the sake of Allah. As long as you have that in your heart, the lie doesn't matter. What other people are going to say about you, it doesn't really matter, and Allah _____ will bless your work and make it grow. You know, you're never going to know –

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How things are going to happen, but with Allah it's going to happen because of the promise of Allah.

Interviewer:

Thank you for being here today. We really appreciate it.

[End of Audio]