

## Transcript

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Interviewer : Jamilah Bellinger

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Jamilah Bellinger: Ok, so first I wanted to share my screen request to show you the what's called the oral history release form.

J.B.: I don't know if Faiza already sent it to you- hold on, this.

A.A.: I guess, since you're recording, I'mma just I'mma go off, I'm take this uh, video off.

J.B.: Ok, thats fine, yeah. OK, here it is. [mumbles] Not sure if Faiza sent it to you already, but I don't know why it's not appearing. OK, there it is. Uhhh, can you see it?

A.A.: Yeah, I can see it. [J.B. mumbles] She didn't send me anything.

J.B.: Oh, okay. Well, this will count as like you signing it, so you'll be fine. After you agree, if you decide to. This interview is conducted in accordance with the goals and course description of HIUS 144 [stutters] race and oral history in San Diego. Under the direction of Professors Louise Alvares, Yen Espiritu, and Simeon Man in consideration of the recording and preservationists or history by students at the University of San Diego, California. San Diego. Do you accept [stammers] to transfer the university the rights to publish, duplicate or otherwise use the recordings and transcribed interview and all this stuff. I'm sorry. This is just a lot to read. Do you agree to the terms?

A.A.: Yeah.

Ok. If I have to, I'll send it to you and I'll just have Faiza send it to you.

A.A.: Ok

J.B.: But they- but from what I remember, they said this was fine. Ok, so let me go into the questions.

J.B.: So first, I would like to thank you for giving me and UCSD your time for this interview. If at any point you feel that the questions are too personal, I feel uncomfortable at any time. Just let me know and we'll skip that question, as we discussed a few weeks ago. This interview will be recorded, transcribed and then put into the UCSD Library digital collection for public use. I will give you the transcription before it put into the collection so that you can edit out whatever part you just wouldn't like the public to know. And so that you can have it for personal use if you wanted to like, show it to your family and whatnot. I also just hope I hope you see those modes of conversation rather than like an interview. And I hope to make this so welcoming and open space for you with all that said. Let's get started. What three words would you use to describe yourself?

A.A.: Caring, hard working. And probably spiritual.

J.B.: OK. What are some hobbies that you started? Or, gotten back into because of Covid-19.

A.A.: Reading and like playing video games.

J.B.: Yeah, I've been trying to get back into reading as well, but school means I have to read all the time. So I [mumble]. What is one question that you get asked a lot, that annoys you.

A.A.: Uh, why do I have the scar on my eye? They ask me, why do I have that scar?

J.B.: I think it's annoying. Trying to think of a dumb question I get asked, usually how to pronounce my name, to be honest. But uhm, do you feel comfortable sharing- Can you tell me about your family or your migration story?

A.A.: Yeah, no. I wasn't born here. I was born in Kenya. I came here six months. My family fled the war in Somalia and they moved to Kenya in '93. And we came straight to San Diego we've been here ever since.

J.B.: Okay. What were some of your first memories when you moved to the States?

A.A.: I mean, I was basically born here pretty much. I was six months when I got here.  
[J.B.: Yeah. OK.] So, like, everything I remember is from San Diego. I don't really remember anything.

J.B.: Ok. Well, [mumbles] just like a follow up question. So your family's from Somalia, Right? And then you moved to then they moved to Kenya?

A.A.: Yeah. They went to like a refugee refugee camp in Kenya.

J.B.: Was that like a, uhm like before you go to the states to go to a refugee camp there? Because I know, Like Trump [A.A.: Yeah] did that. What's it kind of like the same thing?

A.A.: Naw, there was a war like there is like a civil war. So like basically like people couldn't really live in the country. If you did, it was pretty dangerous, too. So a lot of people went down south to Kenya so they could find like a place to live in refugee camps or that was that place for them. [J.B.:OK]. And then they are getting sponsored and stuff to come over there. [J.B.: OK].

J.B.: So it's a for lack of a better term. It was like a rest stop before actually [stammers] finding asylum somewhere. Is that to.

A.A.: Yeah, no, we went to my family, went to Kenya to seek asylum. [J.B: OK, gotcha]. There's like. Can't live there, you know. So we were just in the camp until we got proof to come to America.

J.B.: Ok, well. Well, we're like some of your, uhm. Did you always live in City Heights?

A.A.: Yeah, we moved we moved to Lemon Grove when I was in high school, so I went to high school and like Spring Valley area. I moved back over here. Right now, I'm in City Heights now.

J.B.: Ok, how was it, uhm? See, my next question was like, how did you feel about your neighborhood when you first arrived? But you were like six months old, so you probably don't remember. But how do you. How did how did you feel growing up in this neighborhood, like a cultural standpoint?

A.A.: Culturally, it was cool cause, like, there's a lot of people that are just like me. And like everywhere you go, you can find like restaurants with Somali food. You can find like mosques or community centers and stuff. So culturally, it's pretty like inviting. But aside from that, it was kind of dangerous, obviously, living city heights not was not easy.

J.B.: I'm so sorry my Internet like timed out for some reason. So I did not hear what you said.

A.A.: OK. Give me a second [sneezes]

J.B.: Bless you.

A.A.: Thank you. Sorry. What I said was culturally, it was cool. Like it was easy. Everywhere you go, there's like Somali restaurants and there's like mosques and like community centers. But it wasn't easy living there because, like, we're kind of like in poverty and there's like crime and everything. It was kind of hard at the same time. Ok. I can't hear you. I couldn't hear you. Can you hear me?

J.B.: No, sorry, I don't know what's going on with my laptop. I'm going to have close things, but I don't know if you heard me. But I said, how do you feel? Do you feel like City Heights has changed in any way, good or bad?

A.A.: Uh, Yeah. It's, less gang violence, I feel like there's less gangs. It's kind of getting gentrified, especially towards like when you go towards more North Park area. Yeah, it's real cool, it's fun. Yeah, it's a lot safer now.

J.B.: I can definitely attest to that. My brother used to. He was in gangs basically. He told me about a lot of the gang history from before. And it's just so different to like what I experience.

A.A.: Yeah. Yeah, definitely.

J.B.: Have you ever gone back to Somalia, Kenya to visit?

A.A.: No, I never.

J.B.: Never. Or, do you plan on that? Well, like, if things let up. Would you ever go back to visit?

A.A.: Yeah, definitely. Like my dad, my dad, my sister are there right now. I know that they're stuck. They can't come back [until] everything clears up.

J.B.: Do you? [A.A. mumbles] Would you feel comfortable like explaining that more?

A.A.: Yeah. My dad and my sister went there there- my other sister, she was getting married. So they went to go meet, like her husband in [unintelligible] . And they were there just for like like uh I think like a three week vacation, which turned into like a three month vacation. Yeah. They're just stuck until, like, the flights opened up from their airlines. Yeah.

J.B.: That's tough. I'm sorry, they have to go through that as [A.A.: Yeah] well. Do you still have like. [mumbles] Are you still in touch with people that live there? It seems like you obviously do.

A.A.: Yeah, definitely. We send we send money there every month.

J.B.: Oh okay. I'll come on with a follow up question later. I can do it right now. Do you have a favorite story about you or your family members that you would like to share?

A.A.: Nothing specific. But just like spending Ramadan together. That's probably my favorite memories.

J.B.: How has that - speaking of Ramadan because that was one of my questions. How has Covid-19 affected has affected Ramadan or any other cultural practices?

A.A.: Uh dang like, kind of like? I wouldn't say I ruined it because you can still be spiritual and do things at home. But it ruined the community aspect of Ramadan. Like, we can't go to the mosques anymore. Like, things are closed. So just caged up in the house. It makes like it makes me more like unproductive. We were supposed to be more productive during Ramadan.

J.B.: Ok, I get you. Are they doing like I know some spiritual places are doing like tele, uh, what's it called services. Are they doing that for mosques as well?

A.A.: Yeah. They have like like the head, the leader of the mosque. He's he's at the mosque. He does live videos. Where he does like reminders and stuff and lectures. And then he does like they do the prayer there. So I mean, we can't really pray with them, but just like enjoy the recitations.

J.B.: OK. I was also because, for one, I know very little about Ramadan, but I know that some people can, like, kind of opt out in a way if they're just not healthy enough to do it this year. Are some people. Is that more common now because of the pandemic?

A.A.: I don't really know. Personally, I don't really know anybody that got affected by the virus. Yeah, there's definitely like rule to where. Like, you don't have to fast if you are like like a severe diabetic or something or whatever. Like any. If you're if you're sick, you don't have to fast. It's always been like that. I wouldn't be surprised if people [affected by] the virus are not fasting.

J.B.: So you do work for UWEAST, right?

A.A.: Yeah.

J.B.: What is what inspired you to fight for immigrant and refugee rights. Sorry. It sounded.

A.A.: What inspired me is that I'm like, I'm in there. I was in their shoes. I'm like, what do you call it? Forgetting the word, but like I'm like a result of what could happen if you know we get the right services and stuff. And I'd be glad to help people in the same position as me.

J.B.: Would you? So back on like you're a product of, if people would have community resources. Would you say you're upbringing at all affected? Why you chose this line of work?

A.A.: Yeah, definitely like my mom and dad. My mom still doesn't speak English, but they they both didn't speak English for a long time. So it was hard for them to get services and stuff and seeing like programs like this, certainly companies, nonprofits like UWEAST really inspired me to help out. Once I was like, old enough and in the position to.

J.B.: And, you uhm, just to get this on a recording, because we spoke about it in the pre interview, you spoke about how you like kind of slowly got in to UWEAST. Can you speak on that again, please?

A.A.: Yeah. In middle school, when I was in middle school, my sister was like a volunteer there. And she ended up getting hired. So when I was in high school, I would always tag along with her. So when I was in high school, I was a volunteer. And on those four years, I was volunteering. And then I started like kind of moving up ranks and getting more responsibilities. And then when I graduated high school, Sarah, she. She offered me a job. It was a blessing.

J.B.: And what was your like, your original title when you officially got the job?

A.A.: As a youth coordinator.

J.B.: I kind of do like the same work, but like not really at the same time it was basic- I work for a prime time. So.



A.A.: Oh,OK. I know a lot of people that do.

J.B.: It's like babysitting, essentially. So how did your organization react to the sudden changes and the uncertainty caused by the current pandemic?

A.A.: And I remember actually the first day that they announced everything was closing down. I was actually in the office and we had like a group of guys who were talking about stuff like for our programs. And then we got a text from our boss saying, like, all the programs are shut down and that we had to get all our stuff from the office. So it was kind of weird. We were sitting in the office at like 8 pm. And we got that text. I mean, everything's been closed. So, I mean, we've been doing things on Zoom. Still staying in contact with people, but it's not the same, obviously.

J.B.: Yeah. Can you talk about that a little more on how like everything being virtual, changing the dynamic of community work?

A.A.: Yeah, I feel like it's a good thing that we're I mean, obviously, like not meeting up right now, but we've definitely lost numbers. Maybe that's because people don't have laptops and stuff. I don't know. But we've definitely lost the numbers that we used to have. It just doesn't feel the same. Honestly, big. [unintelligible] with the program I ran. We were, we had a basketball theme. It was like we ran a whole basketball league. And then afterwards, people come to the office area and we have like a little hub area for gaming and playing cards or whatever it is. So we can't do none of that anymore.

J.B.: Yeah, I definitely see what my prime. Some prime time orgs are trying to like do Zoom for kids. But it's like we're a after school program and they don't go to school. So it's kind of weird to have an after school program where we're, just like because we're essentially there to like watch the kids. So it's I get how that it's very weird.It's just a totally different dynamic.

A.A.: Yeah.

J.B.: Dang, I had a follow up question, but I forgot. Anyways, what are the challenges that you have faced as a community advocate? This doesn't have to be pertaining to the pandemic, but you can speak on that as well.

A.A.: [unintelligible] challenges? Probably like, probably, getting like numbers, like getting a lot of people to come to events. Even though a lot of people, I feel like a lot of people do. But I mean, I would love more people to come. Another thing that sucks is like there's like a few other programs. I like a few other companies that do the same things. So it's like not that much unity, I would say.

J.B.: OK, are you tal- like the first nonprofit that comes to mind is the African Alliance. Or? I can not remember.

A.A.: I know what you're talking about. I forgot their name too.

J.B.: It's like alliance [or] assistance, there's a lot of A's in that one. So is there like.

A.A.: I mean, we work together on certain things. But I mean, we do the same things. So I don't know. That's just my point of view. I feel like they should all be working together instead of being different companies.

J.B.: Oh, ok. Like a conglomerate.

A.A.: Yeah. I feel like [unintelligible]

J.B.: I totally forgot the follow up, if I remember that follow up question. I would definitely ask cause [unintelligible]. What are three words you would describe that you would use to describe your neighborhood?

A.A.: Uh uh, uh noisy. Uh. Poverty like impoverished. I would say, like it's caring. People care about each other here.

J.B.: How do you think living in City Heights has like. Because you mentioned caring. And I feel like City Heights is a pretty close knit community. I don't know where I'm going with this. But like. I'm sorry. I'm really trying to get this follow up question out. Do you think that makes your work easier as the community is like a little bit more close knit and caring, as you say?

A.A.: Yeah, definitely, cause like when our hub are like the whole office was in actually in City Heights right now, it's like near La Mesa. When it was there, like people would walk there and like we had a way more like maybe more attendance. And then we had like a huge, like, hall area where people would have their weddings. Like, the community will come often. But, yeah, people felt like like they can come to us for anything. And that's the it just felt more personal than anything.

J.B.: I remembered the follow up question. What has the pandemic shown you about, like how you can still help your community? And like you? You mentioned that some people can't stay connected with you because they don't have a laptop or they don't have Internet or whatever, whatever. So what has the pandemic shown you that you can improve? Once it's over? If you know what I mean.

A.A.: It showed me that there's people I still care about the programs we offer, and that it showed us, like, people need us. And the things we're doing are good and that we need to ramp it up. Hopefully, when everything's over. Get more attendance. Yeah, that's about it.

J.B.: So what would you want people to know most about your community?

A.A.: Like are, like UWEAST or.

J.B.: It can be you UWEAST or uhm City Heights or just culturally.

A.A.: Ok, Yeah. I'll just say for like City Heights. Like don't judge by the cover like what it looks like and stuff like that. But the people are, people are really caring, loving. And I like people care about each other. And that's the way I would say, like don't be frightened by what you see and get to know people more.

J.B.: So what is your opinion on law enforcement agencies like ICE or CP, CBP and the way they execute their jobs in your neighborhood? I know, especially in City Heights. I think it was in the summer last year. They had random checkpoints.

A.A.: Yeah. Yeah, I feel sad like that they're targeting people. And personally, I haven't had any problems with law enforcement, thankfully, but I know a lot of people that have like there's a video on YouTube, like one of our mosque leaders, like getting guns aimed at him, like for no reason. But I feel like they're better, like the cops. They are in this area more understanding rather than like other areas. Like if I was to go to like La Mesa or something, I feel like they'll be harder on me than the cops in this area.

J.B.: Why would why do you feel that way?

A.A.: I just feel like the cops there feel like I'm out of place and I shouldn't be there. And, you know, they do go pick on me more like I've never had I've never had any problems, the cops here. But I have. I have in La Mesa, definitely and up north.

J.B.: Oh, I see, I forget where La Mesa's at, is it east county.

A.A.: Yeah,yeah.

J.B.: Okay yeah, that makes sense. East county is so different. How do you believe community advocacy will evolve during the pandemic? Like, how are people still going to be advocates from home, essentially?

A.A.: I feel like it's the pandemic, like it opened up like a new layer to us, like we can reach out to more people than than we never thought we could. Like, it's I feel like it's easier to reach out through social media and, like, platforms like Zoom and stuff, but I feel like it's better, honestly. But you still need like that community part of it where people come. But I feel like they expanded a lot through online work.

J.B.: So um, are you, like saying that since you can reach more people that it's better.

A.A.: Yeah.

J.B.: Is there any other way is how this is like better than like I guess the normal or previously normal way to do it.

A.A.: I don't really I personally, I don't really like this way, but I mean, reaching more people that's probably the best part of it.

J.B.: And you said you're still doing zoom conferences with people like what activities are you still doing with the community?

A.A.: Not me personally, because I've been busy, but they've been doing like power points on, like different things, I have it on my phone. But um, my my job right now is like to get the kids and the youth to, like, join those Zoom's. So I'm just sending them out and talking to them. But they're doing a lot of things. I can't give specifics right now. I'd have to look at the list.

J.B.: Ok. [A.A.: Yeah] How is your daily routine changed slash remained the same, due to Covid?

A.A.: Workwise or just in general, [J.B.: In general] change big time like I used to, like wake up, go to the mosque, come back home, go to work, and then probably go to the mosque after work, go to the gym and then come home. But now all I can do is go home. I can't go to the gym and I can't go to the mosque. It's really just work and home.

J.B.: I get that. Is there like anything new you've been trying to do, so I've I've like. I bought a bass just to pass the time.

Video games, uh that's about it. I mean, I just had a baby. My wife had a baby. Like, last week.

J.B.: How is that then?

A.A.: Uhh

J.B.: [sighs] That's a lot of

A.A.: Yeah, it's I feel like it's easier because we're both home and we give her all our attention so she doesn't have to do it on her own and stuff.

J.B.: Ok. Is there like. Well, I guess being home, that is like a major plus when having a baby to take care of. But is there like any type of difficulties or just in this time?

A.A.: Yeah. There's like no diapers in any stores.

J.B.: Yeah that's true

A.A.: Yeah. And then like, Amazon takes like 15 days just to order one pack of diapers. So luckily we stocked up before.

J.B.: Well that's good.

A.A.: Yeah.

J.B.: I totally forgot about the diaper of thing.

A.A.: Yeah. Like we're about to run out right now.

J.B.: Hopefully y'all get some soon. Already, ask all this. OK, so I'm just going to go on to our closing questions cause I've pretty much asked everything. Yeah. Is there anything else that you would like to discuss or clarify of something we've already covered?

A.A.: Not really.

J.B.: Ok. And what is the main thing you want people to take away from this interview?

A.A.: I would say like. There's people that care. There's people like especially within City Heights. There's communities and there's organizations like UWEAST that actually care about people and want to help people out. And they're experienced and they've been through most of the things people are going through currently. So, I mean. Like, don't be shy. That's how'd say it. Don't be shy. Asking for help, getting to know people. People that don't look like you especially.

J.B.: That's great. Well, thank you for your time, I really appreciate it. I hope you have a good rest of your day. And.

A.A.: Yeah. Thank you. Take care.

Welcome. You, too. Goodbye.