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### **Nora Oral History Transcript**

**00:02 Shelvie:** Okay, great I'm going to quickly- Oh and if you ever notice me like kind of looking off to the side, it's probably just me taking any notes for any possible follow up questions that occur during our talk okay?

**00:15 Nora:** Okay, sounds good.

**00:20 Shelvie:** Okay, great uhmm. My name is Shelvie Mae Bumanglag and today is June 2nd, Thursday, of 2022 and I am interviewing Nora today through zoom for the University of California San Diego Race and History Project. Can I get you to agree to grant the university permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

**00:42 Nora:** Yes, I agree.

**00:49 Shelvie:** Great! Thank you, how are you doing today?

**00:47 Nora:** I'm doing good, how about you?

**00:49 Shelvie:** Doing really good too! I'm really excited tot talk to you oday and kinda go over some of the past experiences that you've had. So, could you briefly introduce yourself in some and some of the things that you do?

**1:03 Nora:** Yeah, My name is Nora and I was one of the founders of the Majdal Center along with a couple of great people. What I did was help run the Center. We did a lot of events for the community such as park days or movie nights and we also taught different types of classes like English and tutoring.

**01:54 Shelvie:** Alright, that's amazing to hear about. What kind of passions do you have?

**02:00 Nora:** **My passions include grassroots organizing and being involved in Muslim and Arab communities.**

**02:16 Shelvie:** Great uhm so as we move in, could you describe what your upbringing was like?

**02:25 Nora:** Growing up, I moved around a lot, so I moved around to different cities, different states, and even to different countries. Moving around made me really close to my family which I'm very thankful for. Once we would move to a new place my family and I would like to get involved in the Muslim community as much as possible so we would regularly attend the Masjid and sign up for Sunday Quran classes. It was really fun and I got to meet a lot of new people all the time.

**03:11 Shelvie:** Mhm, What was it like for you like personally with that constant moving around to different areas?

**03:19 Nora:** It wasn't too bad. It was actually very fun to explore new cities and countries with my family.

**03:38 Shelvie:** Yeah! And how do you think that these types of experiences as a child really affects your life today?

**03:45 Nora:** Yeah, I feel like because I moved around so much I am able to socialize and communicate pretty well with others. I relate to others quickly and can adapt easily.

**04:21 Shelvie:** It's great to hear, I love, about that uhm having that kind of effect on you. Could you- uhm I skipped around, so sorry. Were there any experiences or memories growing up that kinda still hold close today to your heart?

**04:39 Nora:** There's a lot. Just being able to experience new places and discover new things was really fun. Although I was really young, my parents did like to expose us to as much as possible. For instance new foods, nature, and sports.

**05:12 Shelvie:** Glad to hear about that. It seems like so much fun to just explore so many different areas.

**05:17 Nora:** Exactly, it was really nice.

**05:19 Shelvie:** Mhm, could you tell me a bit about your experience at SDSU for your undergraduate degree?

**05:27 Nora:** Throughout an undergraduate career I believe it to be an extremely pivoting moment in someone's life. You're shaped so much by the stuff that you learn and what you're exposed to. I studied biology and anthropology, both were really difficult and challenging but also extremely rewarding. During that time is when I started to get involved with clubs on campus like SJP (Student's Justice for Palestine) and MSA, Muslim Student Association. My

experience at SDSU was definitely a positive one and it's where I met a lot of my best friends till this day. [smiles and laughs]

**06:40 Shelvie:** Amazing, uhm could you tell me more about what it was like finding community in the Muslim Student Association, as well as the Students for Palestinian Justice

**06:52 Nora:** Student's Justice for Palestine

**06:53 Shelvie:** Yeah! Sorry.

**06:54 Nora:** It was really cool because growing up, sometimes we'd move to areas that had like zero Muslims and zero Arabs whatsoever. So when I went to SDSU, getting involved in those clubs were important because I was surrounded with people that were around the same age group as me with a similar background on campus.

**07:53 Shelvie:** Great, yeah and if you're comfortable. Could you kind of tell me more and describe a little bit more in detail how those experiences really informed your understanding of your familial background.

**08:05 Nora:** In 1948 the Nakba happened and my family fled from Palestine to Jordan. Making me no longer have family in Palestine and so that kind of connection was lost so much so that some of my family actually identify as Jordanian. Just because they were born there, grew up there, and have generations there. So it was always interesting to me growing up when I heard some people in my family say we are Palestinian and some say are Jordanian. As I started to get older and enter my teens and then going into undergrad I started to read more ask my grandmother and mother more questions about Nakba I started to be exposed to more information. Some of the connections I started making were a little basic but very important. [smile and laugh]. And when I started to get involved in SJP, that's where my sister who was copresident of the chapter, really taught me more politically about Palestine and my basic ideas became more concrete in understanding.

**10:16 Shelvie:** Yeah, that's amazing to hear about. You mentioned getting involved-more involved in organizing because of this kind of understanding of your background, so I'd love to hear about kind of initial events or initial exposure to organizing in general in San Diego

**10:39 Nora:** Yeah, so the first organizing that I ever did was actually in community college where I was in the MSA. I say organizing because at my College the MSA did a lot of Palestine awareness and education for other students.

So that was my initial exposure that I had for organizing. As for initial events during my experience in community college I took a black studies class and that's where I was first

introduced to the Black Panther Party and that really inspired me and had the biggest affect on me. That class lead me to read more about movement building and organizing. I started to make connections between the BPP and Palestine.

Then when I transferred to SDSU I started to join different types of clubs

**11:14 Shelvie:** [redacted for privacy]

**12:37 Shelvie:** Mhmm, yeah that's amazing to hear about especially with the gradual shift from community college into SDSU and the additions of other perspectives that I think commonly we don't think of originally. Uhm, so I think that's really interesting to hear about. Just as a question that sparked from what you spoke about. Uhm where were like your, were there any uh instances when first gietting into organzing that were emotional or like kind of difficult for you, because I knoat, at times, it can be quite draining

**13:13 Nora:** When I first got into organizing, ya I guess I would say it was a little draining and difficult. I say this because some times I didn't have the same political views as others in SJP and outside of SJP. We were called a lot of things by a lot of people. But also when you work so closely with others that are just as equally passionate about the work it can be inspiring but challenging.

**15:09 Shelvie:** Great, and I thank you so much for the vulnerability. About everything regarding organizing. Just to move on, I remember, we spoke before uhm that you made the decision to move to Jordan post-graduation, so I just love to hear about what really pushed you to make that decision.

**15:32 Nora:** Yeah, after graduating university there were multiple factors that lead me to move to Jordan. One of them being that I wanted to experience living outside of the United States as an adult. I was always a student when I was living outside of the US, but I wanted to know how it was working, and hanging out with family as an adult. I moved to Jordan with my sister actually and we got our first job together at the same facility teaching English. We taught ESL, English as a second language. Our students were primarily low income and refugee students. Some of our students were from Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, and Syria. All of them ranged in ages where the youngest I taught was 7, and the eldest was 42. I had a huge range of students so it was a good mix. Of course, the students were split up via age group and their English language level. It was really cool and fun to teach. And because I was in Jordan I teaching. I could speak Arabic to my students sometimes so we would get really close and they would bring me gifts and yummie food which always made my day. One thing I appreciated throughout this experience is that I was taught how to actually teach ESL. There's a certain program and protocol for it, that I didn't know existed. And you have to take tests and receive certificates to teach ESL. Although I did

not apply to receive a certificate to teach ESL I still use the skills I learned in the classroom till this day!

**17:59 Shelvie:** Mhm, that's amazing to hear about, especially with just the new learning you get from a different perspective than just being a student outside of the US. I think that's really interesting because most just think of it as I'm outside of the US, rather than being a student versus like having a full time job working outside of the US. Yeah, I think uhm, could you tell me more about the experiences that you've had in Jordan, aside from your work in the refugee camp?

**18:32 Nora:** I didn't do any specific work in the refugee camps. Most of the work I did was near downtown Amman and near the Jordan University.

**18:45 Shelvie:** Mhmm, okay. And if I have it correctly in my notes, I just wanted to ask about what guided you to return back to the US after living in Jordan for a couple years and getting that work experience?

**19:02 Nora:** I decided to move back to the US because teaching was an amazing experience, but I really wanted to try working with my degree. So I decided to move back so I can work in a lab. [laugh]

**19:23 Shelvie:** Could you tell me more about like what, maybe what the lab was focused on if you feel comfortable?

**12:28 Nora:** The first lab job I got I was doing early gender DNA detection.

**20:10 Shelvie:** That's great to hear about. How would you compare the experiences between the two occupations? Of course, I know that they're completely different so it's kind of hard.

**20:23 Nora:** Teaching English I was definitely more passionate about because the students were always extremely excited and funny. And just thinking about how my students got to class and how their families, or how they themselves worked to pay for their classes just so they can receive some sort of education really made me want to be a good teacher. A couple of my students didn't have high school diplomas or GEDs. They wanted to learn English to start a new life and I wanted to help them get their. Seeing them come in consistently wanting to learn made me love teaching. So I don't know being a teacher is really, really rewarding. I applaud every single teacher. I think they do amazing work and I honestly think it's one the hardest job ever. Working in a lab is great because I really like science and I like getting in the zone and working on my research. It's also just awesome to be on the front lines of new discoveries that can change the world.

**21:38 Shelvie:** Thank you so much for just talking about your experience and just you know going into that comparison, which I know is kind of difficult to do on the spot. As we- I'm going to kind of transition to focus more on the Majdal Center again. So I'd love to hear about and hear you describe what sparked the creation of the Arab Community Center, also known now as the Majdal Center because earlier you mentioned it was just an idea amongst you and friends.

**22:09 Nora:** When the Majdal center first started to become an idea it was inspired by the fact that San Diego didn't have anything like this and there was a lack for something like an Arab Community Center in San Diego. When I moved back from Jordan that's when I started to become involved with the Majdal Center.

We wanted to have an institution to centralize our work and a place that would help the new community of Arabs in El Cajon and San Diego.

**23:45 Shelvie:** Yeah, so I know you went ahead to the opening in January 2018 and mentioning and how the community was super supportive and you felt that energy. So I just would love to know like how did you feel on that opening night and overall energy from the community that was supporting y'all when it was still in development.

**24:12 Nora:** It was really exciting. A lot of hard work was put into the Center and when its doors opened everyone was happy.

We were all extremely hopeful as well because we just had so much energy. We knew the direction that we wanted to go into and we knew how important it was to build Palestinian lead institutions that we lost in the past..

**25:19 Shelvie:** That's amazing to hear about, could you tell me more about like what went on in the opening night and the types of bond that you're continually growing with those allies?

**25:30 Nora:**

We had a couple of speakers that night and some of them being our allies. We also had some performances, such as a poetry performance and a rap performance that was done by one of the Majdal Center youth.

We also had a bunch of statements from the community. It was really cool to see.

**26:54 Shelvie:** Uhm, could you say it one more time?

**27:11 Shelvie:** That's great to hear about, I don't think I've about that allyship with those groups in particular so it's great to hear that there were communities outside of the Arab community that were there to support. I think, just to maybe take a step back from the opening night and thinking about the process of choosing that specific space on Main Street in El Cajon and the process of it needing to be built up with your effort in order to be prepared for the community to enter. So I was just wondering what kind of emotions like did you feel or see in others when you first stepped into that new space, knowing that the center's journey was going to begin.

**28:01 Nora:** I think a lot of our members were like, "Okay this is our baby we have to shape it and build it and like take care of it".

But all of us were hopeful and excited because we all just wanted to get started. We all had a lot of ideas of what programs and events we wanted to do. We had ideas of the vision and mission of the Majdal Center and what overall goal we had for the center.

This is the first and only Arab Community Center in San Diego that is lead by Palestinian Youth so our energy is constantly high.

As for choosing the Center to be on Main Street it's a very busy street in El Cajon and central of where our community lives. It's near all the Arabic stores and a couple of really popular restaurants in the area.

**30:36 Shelvie:** It's amazing to hear about and I can see the joy in your face as you talk about it. It's amazing to hear about it. Like I feel the joy from it.

**Nora:** Yay!

**Shelvie:** Yeah, and I personally visited the center and I was just- I loved everything [laugh] about just the energy, especially with the green and it felt very-like a second home, in a sense.

**Nora:** Oh cool!

**Shelvie:** Like I felt very comfortable. And I just think yeah I just want to compliment y'all and all that.

**31:03 Nora:** Oh thank you, I'm glad you felt like that. That's definitely what we were aiming for. We wanted to make it comfortable and inviting because we knew we were going to spend a lot of time in there.

**31:14 Shelvie:** Yeah uhm and then as the Majdal Center was created and now running. Uhm you served as the youth coordinator and so I was just wondering about some of the responsibilities

that you had and whether or not you felt that they kind of matched the strengths you had or you know you had to develop as you worked as that role.

**31:38 Nora:** I had to develop a lot of skills for this role. Although I had some experience organizing and teaching nothing prepares you for opening a center. Everyone who was involved with opening the center grew a lot from this experience and are still growing today as organizers. It is a lot of hard work and dedication.

I started to get involved with the tutoring program that we had. I would help with homework, or if students needed further explanation on any subject. It was originally meant for youth but then moms who needed help with their homework would join. It became this really cool, big tutoring session.

I also taught ESL to adults which was fun

**33:46 Shelvie:** Mhmm, yeah. I loved hearing about the kind of evolution of the types of programs that the center would have dependent on the community that is showing up and seeing what is needed. So I think it's amazing that y'all were able to kind of reorient for that because I think it is really important to offer it for also the older members of the community. You mentioned the ESL tutoring program so I was just hoping to know like, I guess, you might have a similar answer to that earlier regarding your experience in Jordan, but like some of the rewarding aspects of the program whether you saw it, specifically in the community or within yourself?

**34:29 Nora:**

When I started to tutor for English and Math it was really eye opening because some of the students would go to school and then come back with these huge packets- of homework and they would have just a week to complete it so they can "catch up with the rest of their class". It was really interesting to see because teaching in Jordan was different and I had never seen that approach.

I used to freak out for them and it seemed like they didn't mind. For them navigating a new school system at such a young age was really impressive.

**36:25 Shelvie:** Yeah!

**36:26 Nora:** Sometimes I felt concerned for the students we were tutoring, Just because sometimes they would get in trouble but they wouldn't mean to.

**37:04 Shelvie:** Yeah, well that's amazing to hear just how attuned you were to like everything they were experiencing like I feel like as you said, for like homework and such, we kind of overlook the differences in work, depending on the student. So you know, like acknowledging that was really- that was eye opening to me and. Also, while you're in, while you were working



with the Majdal Center, I found that you were servicing in a role within the refugee health unit so just wondering how you got involved with that and some of the responsibilities related?

**37:43 Nora:** I attended a couple of meetings which was really cool. And I remember them doing interview with me. Similar to this one.

**38:27 Shelvie:** Could you tell me more about like maybe the structure of those meetings and like the kind of focus that they had? From what you can recall, of course.

**38:36 Nora:** Honestly, I can't recall much. This was around 2019 I think. But I remember them being very welcoming and inviting

**38:51 Shelvie:** Of course! Yeah no worries. I think a question that kind of sparked in my mind as we were talking and you speaking on the responsibilities that you had with the different programs and events. Uhm was the fact that at this point, you working with the Majdal Center was very much a *volunteer* position at point. I'd love to hear about like the struggles with that even though it is so rewarding to work with the community that you so like, identify and value.

**39:27 Nora:** It was never an issue for me to do the work as a volunteer because it was for my community. I never really minded it and it was for something that I wanted to put my energy towards. With that being said, it was challenging keeping up with a center and a 9 to 5 full time job. I sometimes struggled with the balance of doing both. Especially working in a lab where they're just very different.

**40:41 Shelvie:** Aw well, thank you so much for being vulnerable and I know that balancing especially with passions and just survival is very difficult these days [laugh]

Nora: [laugh] yes!

Shelvie: I think that's really interesting to hear about. At this point, were you still working in that La Jolla lab or you had already transferred?

Nora: Oh yeah, I was still working in that La Jolla lab

**Shelvie:** Okay, yeah so then the additional commute and everything. I completely understand [laugh]

Nora: Yeah [laugh]

**41: 43 Shelvie:** So I think earlier, you had mentioned the different collaborations with other organizations that the Majdal Center had prior to its opening, as well as afterwards, so I'd just

love to hear about maybe like the ways in which y'all got in communication with one another and of course that's kind of hard to pinpoint but maybe different ways that both organizations were able to help one another or simultaneously do so.

**41:47 Nora:** The organizations we collaborate with have to hold the same political values and have to have the same "red lines" that we do. For instance, not working with Zionist organizations. When working with allies we know that our struggle is very much intertwined. Working with allies means we share the same resources, man power, and resistance strategies. And the resistance is stronger when we are united. When working with different organizations the Majdal center took inspiration from our allies. Inspiration for certain programs and events or even political education all to uplift our communities.

**43:56 Shelvie:** I think that- I think that's really important to do so because of course you both have the exact goal on uplifting the community. So I think it's amazing to kind of look at what they're doing and that they're so open to sharing that information with you. Kind of how you're doing it here [laugh]. I think that we're kind of coming to the end. I don't have any more questions, but I'd love to just ask as a closing, if there's anything you would like to share specifically, on any topic.

**44:31 Nora:** Nothing specifically but if any Arab youth is interested in getting involved at the Majdal Center they can always contact us through Instagram (@Majdalcenter), Facebook, or email.