

Interview Summary:

This interview features Nayef and Jennifer Mogannam, a husband and wife who are both activists for the Arab communities in California. They were influential in working with the Palestinian community in San Diego, and the formation of the Majdal Center. In this oral history, you will see Jennifer and Nayef discuss what their journey to activism has looked like, as well as their involvement with the Palestinian Youth Movement. Jennifer and Nayef discuss what the Arab community looks like in San Diego, and how that influenced the need for a center like the Majdal Center in El Cajon. This interview covers topics such as youth organizing, Palestinian refugees, the Palestinian Youth Movement, activism, and community involvement. This interview was conducted over zoom, due to distance and to practice social distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic. This interview was conducted by Irelan Fletcher, a third year History major at UCSD who is interested in social justice activism and community organizing.

Interview Transcript:

Jennifer 0:00

Oh,

Irelan 0:02

Okay. Hi. Today I'm going to interview Nayef Jennifer for the UCSD oral history project in relation to the Majdal Center. And so first I want to just ask you guys, can you tell me a little bit about yourselves?

What is something that you guys think is important know about you?

Nayef 0:25

You want to start?

Jennifer 0:26

I can start. Yeah, so my name is Jennifer. I am. Um. I have been a longtime member of the Palestinian Youth Movement. Uh. [baby crying] I was born and raised in the United States. I joined the PYM in 2008, and worked on both international and national local levels. Um. And made my way to San Diego in 2015, uh, 2012. I'm sorry, 2012. Started PhD program at UCSD.

Um. {coughs} In ethnic studies, and that's also how PYM San Diego got started, which is relevant to today's interview.

Baby 1:20

Yeah.

Nayef 1:23

Hi. Are you done? Yeah. So my name is Nayef. I am a co founder of Palestinian Youth Movement. From the first meeting in 2006. I am a Palestinian refugee born and raised in Yarmouk refugee camp in south of South Damascus. Syria. Yeah. I started my activism there with many initiative and news center. And yeah, working with the refugee- refugee community in Syria, then start moving to more- some political stuff, more political work. And as like the BYU embassy and youth movement, I moved to I left Syria 2013, early 2013. And then 2012, to Europe, then I came to United States 2015. And I lived in San Diego for like, almost eight months of every 2016.

Irelan 2:57

Okay, thank you. I want to know a little bit more about like how you guys would describe your involvement like at the especially at the beginning of like, with the activism in the Palestinian community and the PYM, the Palestinian Youth Movement? I want to know more about that.

Jennifer 3:12

In general?

Irelan 3:14

Yeah. Like, how did you guys get started, in particular?

Jennifer 3:21

Um, as an organization or as individuals?

Irelan 3:25

As individuals, like How was your journey to being involved with that?

Jennifer 3:29

Yeah. Okay.

So I, um, I started my activism, organizing in 2004, when I started college with the general unit, Palestinian students, and in 2007, we were invited to the second PYM conference, it was the Palestinian youth network at the time as GUPS, as the general union of Palestine students. The first one in 2006 had already taken place and Nayef was there from then. You can talk to him, you know, about the early days, but so we sent a delegate from San Francisco, the only GUPS chapters still in formation in the United States. We sent two delegates to that conference. And then ever since then, I have kind of been following the follow up with the two delegates that went to the conference. And then in 2008, the Palestinian youth network got officially established. And so then one of those former delegates and I really were the two that tried to get a US based group going and so we launched some meetings and things and we were starting off at a time where it was the end of 2008. The first really egregious war on Gaza was happening. Um, in that 2008 2009 winter, and we got some youth together into a room. And that's kind of how we got the US sort of launched. The other person looking at Tommy was on the international board at the time. And then after starting things here, I moved to Lebanon and Jordan. And so I kind of bounced around. And I also became on the next International Board, which was elected in 2011. So I kind of was doing work on the international level involved in trying to build out and support other chapters and other places. And then when I got into the Ph. D. program in San Diego, I moved back and started a chapter in San Diego.

Nayef 6:19

Yeah, for me, it's more, as I said before, I grew up in a refugee camp. So it was Yarmouk camp is one of the biggest refugee camp outside of Palestine, eh, South of Damascus, that they you will find there are many offices for the Palestinian parties and for other or biggest organization, Palestinian organization they are active there they are they have a present and one with the starting of the Second Intifada in 2000. You start it was I was like in my 16, I was 16 years old. So I started involved more to go to protest, the protest, to start being active to meet Palestinians, other Palestinians. Youth from my age, during the protest or demonstration or going to some events. While there we decided or we thought about starting a culture club as we call the [?] and Culture Club [?] can refer to the old orientation as Palestinians that were living their indigenous native people of the area of Palestine and Syria and be like a {?} was called this region. So yeah, we start this club where as my teens, seven teens, you with different type of event mainly culturally about culture, reading books, meeting or elder people to speak about

their experience with neck pain or other or their life in general and trying to participate and host different types of music or culture events in general. Yeah, it was with time then after that I moved to another organization where I you start more war. More involved in war. It's called the Jefra Youth Center Palestinian youth center. We organize the different activities. One of them I remember mainly the children summer camp and children summer, children program in general mainly was in summer, the focus was with different program for diverse Tinian children or not just Palestinian all people, any one from the camp or around the area, Syrian or Palestinian or Iraqi even to come and we have the broke away like a program of the activities inside the center. Contain like theater, singing, all art stuff and some educational program. Because, as maybe, as you you will imagine, like the camp is something or the neighborhood or what is called the camp. Refugee Camp was really populated area where there is no area, no places to kids to play, they spend most of the time in the street so we tried to bring them to some programs. And we organized like a summer camp for the children for a week in like a neighborhood or like a big school outside of the of the city. And other activity was like a summer with the European volunteers that comes and spend like two weeks in the camp and we take them around and we show them the refugee camp but some to educational we go to different refugee comes in the same refugee comes in Syria and other activities, meeting with organization. And we push orders outward, where other activities like courses, educational system, educational stuff, and events, hosting events, different. Yeah. From there while I'm there, with my participation with the center, I remember, we, we received invitation from an old partner of us, asking us to meet to send the representative to meet into in Barcelona 2006 to discuss what's good, or what's discuss new ideas for, to connect, the Palestinian youth because after the last days of the Second Intifada, with the almost done between 2000 to 2004, then all these people that came or involved, the main reason was the momentum of the Second Intifada we start, like people start losing the connection or the start, like going back to normal life without any activism. And this has always happened with this type of work like grassroots stuff. So we decided we try to start to connect the activist from a Palestinian activism, activist scene from different countries, especially that after Oslo accord 1993 We lost all organize our Palestinian big organization and umbrella that used to connect the Palestinian refugee from different places. So we thought about the project. We call the Palestinian Youth Network to connect the Palestinian actives, activists from different countries to discuss and try to coordinate and coordinate events and projects. And the other thing moving experience from different countries to each one. Each group. Will still need to talk? Yeah, this is the main like involvement. For sure. I met the guys I met Jennifer and other people from different countries like Europe, United

States and other countries. And what time we moved from a network to movement. Yeah, yeah. At the end, we I moved to US too. After getting married, and we moved, we lived in San Diego where I met the the rest of the people there.

Irelan 14:00

So what did activism like begin to look like for you guys? Once you guys reach San Diego, like how did like what would you guys say? Like the involvement in the San Diego community, like what did it look like to you? And then that's like, yeah, I'm interested to see what your guys's take on the San Diego community is.

Jennifer 14:20

Yeah, so I would say both of us in very different contexts come from a very heavily active and saturated scene when it comes to both Palestinian well, when it comes to Palestinian organizing, and then, for me in the Bay Area, when it comes to like organizing in general, there's just such a robust scene here. So when I got to San Diego, I was, you know, trying to figure that out, like what does organizing look like in San Diego, how are people, you know, connected to each other what kind of organizations were around. And I have found that comparing to the other places I've lived, it felt really like a clean slate. There were like Students for Justice in Palestine on two campuses state and UCSD. And then there were, there was an organization called the ALODA at the time that I moved down, but it was kind of in a lol it had done some really great organizing in the past, but um, it was kind of slowing down and they were also based out of North County and, and you know, there were a few other things, but in general, there was no real Palestinian community organization. And so I was able to be connected with some SJP students more so from San Diego State, at UCSD at that time, it was mostly not Palestinian students, or Arab students when I had gotten there in 2012, 2013. Um, um, so I, you know, just got a group of students together and we um. I kind of talked to them about who I am, what it is they're interested in, you know, starting this thing, and we got plugged into community work. Our first like, public appearances, PYM, was in another Zapatista, and that was when we did our first breakdown borders 5k at the US Mexico border. Um, so that was our first action, but in the sort of getting the PYM launched down there, we had done some workshoping and needs assessment, we're just among ourselves regarding the landscape of the bay or of the Arab community. There. And so when we were talking about that, thinking about that, we have, um, we had always, so we knew that there were a lot of Arab refugees in San Diego, we knew that there were some organizations like the IRC, the Jewish Family Services, there's four. I'm

forgetting all, there's four organizations that do refugee services, I don't remember all their names right now. But there were some gaps in the services. And so we had always had an interest in building out a more refugee centered kind of community. Um, with the goal actually of creating a center. So that was like an early dream from like, the first couple months when we were workshopping like, what can PYM do in San Diego, I'm realizing like, okay, there's a Palestinian community. But there's also a very large Arab community. And the services just keep getting sort of, uh, they're shrinking over time. And so we really saw and I'm forgetting the exact gaps that we identified at the time, we identified a couple of gaps that like, none of the orgs were doing. But so this was definitely something that was all always on our radar. And so we wanted to build like a stronger Palestinian presence and political presence, or like a you know, to have like a grounded group that was really at the forefront of leading Palestine related activity in San Diego but then we also wanted to do like the more community based support and community building and cultural work as well, and that took a little bit more time to get started.

Nayef 19:50

Can you repeat the question?

Irelan 19:54

Just like how did you like with activism in San Diego, what, what did that look like to you and what would you say like, what was your interpretation of San Diego? When you came here.

Nayef 20:09

Interpretation of San Diego? Yeah, so for me, like so I moved here to understand in the United States in general, summer 2015. And it happens I was lucky to join shortly after I arrived, one of the first summer school for Palestinian Youth Movement in the US. And I met many Palestinians here activists, activist, Syrians. At that summer camp, then went back to for a couple months through the Bay Area. And we moved, Jennifer and I, to San Diego, early January, it was January 1, actually 2016. So it was, was really like, um, was early time for me, I was just adjusting to the new situation before this situation, like be in a different other country or even other continent, and far from back home, and for adjusting that to design a time difference, a lot of stuff, and more trying to explore what's going around me. So it was like, early time for me, so I was really, like what I remember is what, when I arrived in San Diego, that I noticed like, there is some difference, it's really different. Different areas are different. For me, everything was new. Like I notice how the city is big, scattered communities that are different areas, not like we are

not doing together, it's hard to notice how it's hard to meet the guys. The Palestinian members of the youth network, how it's really hard to organize the meeting or set up a time. Every time we talk about where we have to meet this cafe. No, no, I will be far. So no, there's no even that I lived a little bit like couple years in Europe, mainly in Spain. And there there's like metro and there is other transportation that you just go through the city you will arrive, train something. Here, you need car, not everyone will have like some car or I need to pick up someone to go. Yeah, so I was really, we were always talking about. We guys need to have a place a permanent place to meet to do activities or to do events, where and this is not to just be of the way I am or United States or San Diego. It's any grassroots dream to have a place where they can do some activity and meet and be, they give them flexibility with time because when you have your your own place, you will have your own schedule. You can, it's easier. Easier than like, oh, we need to get to this coffee because it will close between this time or this time.

And on another hand, I was trying to do something. So I said I have to do something, I need to learn more English first, and try to practice something that I knew. Because I didn't have work that day. And I started I was hearing news about many Syrians refugee coming to San Diego area and El Cajon mainly. So I contacted the IRC to go and be part of the volunteering so we can help the new refugee coming in, based on my experience working with refugees, early in the camp and different. Yeah, then different projects so I met the people and start working with, with for three months, I volunteer to the IRC, I met many Syrians coming. I start notice that there is some problem, or a lot of problem facing them, they need the solution, they need someone to help them and work with them. Give them some services, it's really there is not big stuff in all organization. And I know how sometimes the organization with time, because it's work too, they become more really hard for them to work with the new comers or new refugees. Because you know how, you understand me, it's become like part of their routine or something you you don't feel this genuine relation and connection between the workers and the refugee. And I felt too, they need more people that, they can speak to them directly without feeling that they are, because refugee when they come here, they need to they really they especially refugees coming from Syria or the this region they are don't trust all organization and they are not aware of what exactly they can say not saying how they can express they are afraid from generalizing them or stereotyping them. So they will be really not feeling genuine in talking to employee that taking notes and stuff they need someone to just sit with them and spend time doing then routines that they like drinking tea or happiness going around sitting in a bar where you will hear from them what there really problems are. Not they will not that it's hard for them to suppress in

an interview or in a meeting with someone with a checklist when a bullet point and fill it the, yeah. On the other hand, these people are my community. I grew up in Syria. I wouldn't say I was 28, so I went to school there and went to everything. So I know my my most my most friends are Syrian. So I know them I know these people I know what they are. I know the language. I know that expression. Even I can understand them easily. Yeah. So I. On another hand, as I said that my experience with PYM, the Palestinian Youth Movement. We had this discussion, talking about the community we need to work with the community. But we need to understand some stuff like the Palestinian community, big measure, big amount of maturity, they are really old community there, and they live they already involved with the American life and live in different areas scattered not like where the people in a middle class situation tot It's not they don't need like services. You don't need to give them help or service. They already know everything they are. Yeah, and they are involved like they become normal, normal American.

If I can, I'm not sure if I'm expressing right but they don't need the help. They don't need, yeah, the working with them. There is a certain type of stuff that you can do. Not everything, and I was like oh we're thinking that these guys that are active here. Some many of them. They are Palestinians born here and grow up here. They, I felt the losing of the connection with people back home. So I said oh, this is another opportunity to give them push them to work with a new refugee coming where they are coming from, fresh from the back home, so when they can introduce themselves, themselves, to the mentality of the people back home. Feel more comfortable, if they go back home or visit or something.

They will have this experience working with these people that coming from they will hear more about the news, they will hear more about what's happening with them as a Syrian refugee coming, who went to refugee camps in Jordan or turkey or Lebanon, or Egypt and their life, they will hear it directly without any someone the middle organization with a man. Yeah, because we always say how we can work with the community. Oh, we have a community, there is a community in the horn, we need to go there. And it happened to some stuff happened to me, one there that I met some even not just within old Syrian community, and we are different. I remember, we went to one of the meetings, and it was really weird for me. These guys like they are from old Syrian community here. They want to do work. But they are looking to this refugee as they are coming from different [?]. And they were expressing, like saying, let's give you an example saying, Oh, this guy's I brought him a couch. But this couch. He said no for this couch. Because it's all how can he can say no for that. Oh, this guy, they don't have ABC working with

refugees, or asylum seeker or anything. These are all immigrants being in this status illegally, that doesn't mean that you I am different to you? Or you have a say to say yes or no. Like this, or I would prefer this house over this couch. Or I have. I have like I say about myself, my body, my what house I will repair what services I would like. It's not like when I'm you're giving me a service or need to just say thank you. Thank you. Yeah, no, and they have different personalities. Some people will say thank you, some people will accept that when some people are already not aware where they are. Yeah, they are in a different world. You can't like expect attempt to deal with you as one person or you you imagine this refugee or something. And this is- there are Syrians.

Jennifer 32:57

Yeah, I do you want to know.

Nayef 33:03

Yeah, we even met another group of Syrian ladies too. They are from high class. They were talking about some events are organizing, helping the refugee and they weren't really focusing you know, we need to teach them how hygiene and how they clean themselves. Who said they don't know how to clean themselves or who said that they need help to have them go to shower every day or shower couple days. They are not coming first they are coming from different backgrounds. They are coming from different class, they are coming from different education. Some of them they don't read or write and some of them they have high. Yeah, so this problem or comments, trigger me more to think no, we need to take this we need to try to push more services. So what I want to say is like the idea behind this war, or Yeah, it was many reasons like came together to be y m needs a community we our work needs a community our guys need to meet or work with people coming from back home more because they don't have the experience to under- working with people this as well as have the meeting even needing a more area like El Cajon, to focus or to more than San Diego City, San Diego community people that they are more toward working. Let's I want them to say that the Palestinian, some activist group, they are focused more in working elite status elite. Like even when they do the network, they will go to a hole in a very classy area, park, park Balboa Park where people like they don't have the opportunity to go there. And it will you will feel that the [?] event, it's more event for same people, they are not bringing anyone and for elite for a specific group of people, they-

Jennifer 35:42

We talk to people who agree with us, we talk to people who are in the same like mindset or class status or who have been involved already in Palestinian community or cultural or political work of some aspect. I think one thing I was just thinking about what Nayef was saying I wanted to piggyback but I think we really had a hard time connecting just to go backward a little bit with Iraqi communities, even though we knew that they were the main Arab refugee population in San Diego, and we wanted to, and I would say that we didn't try a whole lot, you know, to connect with them. But we also struggled there a little bit geographically further away from us than Palestine a little bit linguistically further, the different. You know, there's also this complex relationship with the US military in San Diego. Because some of you know, some of the Iraqi communities were able to, and especially places like San Diego because they were translators for the US military, or they were, you know, some of them work with the military now that they've gotten here. And that's sort of how the military industrial complex keeps reproducing itself. It's like, let's say these refugees, and then we'll employ them, and we'll make them always like, accountable to the US state and like, and so even if they want to defy those kinds of politics, it's become sort of like, we're not going to give them any other kind of life option and to continue working for the system. So we have struggles connecting with the Iraqi community. But we had one of our members had always worked in the IRC since we started Pym. And so we knew that San Diego was a hub for refugees, and that there was like, a few Syrian families coming and for us, Syria was something a bit closer. We had a chapter of PYM branch formerly in Syria, we have numbers from Syria, Nayef being one of them, we have, you know, they had direct relationship and consequences to with the uprising in Syria. So the context was a little bit easier for us to understand. And so there was a point in early 2016, where we got wind that like 1000s of refugees, were going to be coming in two waves in 2016. I think it was like 2000 in the first wave, like by summer, and then another 2000, or something, I can't remember the exact numbers, but like by September of that year, and so we knew that that was an area that we wanted to try to support in. And it really helps that Nayef had also come to San Diego at that time, because he really helped us build connections with the community members, and then what we decided the Syrian community members and the newly arrived refugees, he was able to really connect with them in a way that probably most of us would not be able to. But what we decided to do also was we created this collective called the Arab youth collective, and we decided to separate like, in name, at least the refugee service support work from PYM to draw in a bigger base of people of Arab community members who are not necessarily working on Palestine, or you know PYM, membership is not exclusively Palestinian, but to just draw in a broader base. And so we started going to these meetings that I have talked about, we had seen

these really weird dynamics that he also talks about, we were trying to do service in a different way that was more humanizing that was more refugee centered and needs based, centered. So we ended up being we're the least resource group, by far. But I think a lot of the refugees ended up appreciating our work a lot, because we didn't make them feel like they were subhuman or have a lower class or disposable in any way, or ungrateful and these kinds of things. So, and I actually, so in my academic hat, I wrote an article that was published last year, that brings up a lot, some of these stories and dynamics that I'd be happy to share, but they kind of analyze some of the stuff like the couch scenario that I was discussing, the meeting with the upper class Syrian community that we found out was taking Zionist money to support the refugee and challenging them on that, and what that experience looks like. So in terms of maybe analyzing that a little bit more, that might be helpful, I don't want to get into that too much. But I do think that, you know, it was work we always wanted to do, um, 2016 was a moment that we were able to kind of move on in a different way than we weren't really enabled the same way prior to that moment, to do that kind of work. And so we you know, and then my wife and I live later, in 2016, and August 2016. We were able to really get the Arab youth collective, a AYC off the ground moving, we plugged in different volunteers, we were working with them regularly, we were working with the different Syrian community organizations, we're all so doing support work trying to coordinate. And this is when we noticed that there are some fundamental differences and how we're approaching service work, and how, like the different politics around service work, we don't always know them or you know, not everybody maybe but you know, critique throne and geo system and things like that. We had our always had that, but seeing it play out across the Arab community, and these ways was really illuminating. Just kind of showing the like, yeah, the different ways that people relate principally to that kind of service. And the way in which, like refugees are perceived as well by, by different communities, so. Yeah. And then I think, after we left, the group stayed together, we stayed in conversation with both some sort of supportive when we came back to visit with support with meetings and that kind of thing. And all this work. And all of this visioning laid the foundation for the Majdal Center, and it was just kind of a matter of, like, we were already doing the work, we had already invested in it, and then like a space was found. It was very small and very cheap. And, you know, we- people wanted to do it. We weren't in San Diego a that point, but you know, that work had continued, and there was a desire and so they made it happen, you know.

Yeah, so- I think we'll close off with this last question. What did life look like for you now as an activist and community that you're at? Like, how are you seeing kind of the payoff from all of this work that you've done?

Jennifer 45:32

That's an interesting question at this particular moment, because we're in, we're in the point where we're sort of transitioning out of PYM, we've invested about a decade and a half in this organization. You know, we've been in this for the long haul. And you know, we've just seen a lot of different shifts and transitions. We've moved through a lot of different political contexts, and local contexts. We're in a transition. {baby mumbling} And so I think that's difficult because we don't know what our next year will look like, we're also in like, a moment where we're parenting really, really small kids who we have three year old and a one year old. That's also changed our relationship to the work in the sense that our capacities have really shifted in terms of organizing work, but I think it's time for new folks to be taking up this work and they are and they're doing it. That's fine. That's great. And you just hope that there are some lessons to be taken away from the labor that's done before them and work together.

Nayef 47:53

Can you repeat the question for me?

Irelan 47:58

Just asking what life looks like for you guys right now and your involvement? And then what are your- how you guys have seen kind of the payoff of some of the activism that you guys have done?

Nayef 48:07

Yeah. So first, I want to say to finish the story of the center special Center in San Diego, I will ignore at the end- we Jennifer and I removed the back ike at the end of July 2016, so we didn't stay for a long time. And people like Hatem and- especially Hatem. [?] Carried the work and carried everything by himself with other groups, for sure. Other people Nadine and yeah, especially Yeah, carry the work forward and really worked and move this from goals and discussions and what we want to want to do our goal to a reality. Reality to have a center at that area to establish, establish all this really work and do the connection. I'm not really 100% like following everything that's going on there. But I think they did. A good job is making this and

hopefully, like, what we were thinking they are doing or carrying some of the ideas that we tried to start especially what Jennifer mentioned, giving a different type of services than other organization and different even staff members that more people that involved and unrest and under from the community giving the chance to lead not just to be the targeting character, this group we knew we need that this community the refugee community to lead their own work and or yeah, they influence this for [?] general life like you're not for myself, I will say, I'm not really thinking about to be paid back or what does something go like I'm Palestinian refugee grew up in a refugee camp. My work or struggle in general is to dedicated to have more better world without- better world. For of justice for people for work, like give the people more- good opportunity of live life and yeah, justice for everyone and equality. And the Yeah, this is my struggle. Yeah, but so anything we do is part of this struggle, we think, or we believe that it's part of this struggle. Helping people and we are hoping ourself to do will have a message in this life in this world. Here why we are we are who so there is nothing, actually to- Yeah, to think about. We know we read the history, a lot of people work and dedicate the work. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. I'm not really thinking about about it a lot, we are doing that to ourselves, first, your free will so we can survive in this life that this tough life. We are trying to help us, each other to that goal, as we said, to have this world with equality and justice to everyone.

Jennifer 52:34

Yeah, I think like, through doing the work also, it's, it's changed. It's given us this, like larger world perspective to that we really, it's not just about one singular struggle like Palestine, can Palestine be free, like, actual, like global shift the creation of a new world so our struggle is on different terrain, you know, but everything that we do we hope to move in that direction.

Irelan 53:18

Thank you guys so much. I hope you guys have a wonderful day.

Nayef 53:27

Yes, thank you. Thank you, if you need any, you think you need to finish any question or answer just contact us through the week like, yeah, you know, call us or send us an email or anything. We are really here to help. Yeah, it's really tough, hard time with the kids and what's going on what we're trying to do our best