

## Project Transcript

Me: Hello Asmaa, how are you? God willing you're good.

Asmaa: Hello, everything is good. Thank God.

Me: Um, tell us about yourself if you don't mind. Your name and where you are from?

\*Sound From Her Phone\*

Asmaa: My name is Asmaa al Kheir from Homs, Syria

\*Background Quran Sound\*

Asmaa: It is nice meeting you.

Me: Um, are you busy or anything?

Asmaa: No

Me: Um, Umm, So you said you are from Syria. How long have you been here in the United States? When did you come and settle?

Asmaa: From 6 years ago, I came to the United States. I came from Jordan in 2016.

Me: Um, where are you right now? Which city do you live in?

Asmaa: San Diego

Me: San Diego, mmm. Umm, how can you tell us about your experience? How did you move from Syria to the United States? How was your experience and how did you come, if you have no problem answering that?

Asmaa: I came from Syria when the war happened. I went to the neighboring countries, which is Jordan, and I stayed there for 4 years. Then, the United Nations called us through the UNHCR. You guys are accepted to immigrate and if you are ready, they ask because life in Jordan is very hard. Especially because we moved from Syria and there was no money. We accepted and in 3 months I was here in the U.S.

Me: Umm, of course you faced some hardships in life. It wasn't easy on you being an immigrant. How was it?

Asmaa: Life wasn't easy because it took a 360-turn moving from a country with an Arabic tradition to American lifestyle. Everything was different and that will cause a lot of problems, such as language. When you come you don't understand the situation that life is putting you in, so it causes a lot of problems. First year was the most miserable. Then, after that I overcame

those hardships because I decided to face reality. I have to live, whether it's for my kids' education or my job here at the center. They (the center) made my beginning easier because I was with them. Any questions that I had, they used to be here and they used to help me.

Me: How was your beginning with Majdal Center? If you would like to tell us?

Asmaa: When I first started with them, I used to give Arabic classes. I had to teach Arabic for the kids. I used to start as a volunteer because I didn't want people to go through what I went through. Whenever I used to hear a new family coming to the United States, I offer them to come to the center and family arise themselves with the life here. If you need any help or have any questions, the girls and the guys are ready to help with anything. My role with them was to inform the new families and we used to do whatever we were capable of doing at that time. Whether it is language, getting them educated, etc.

Me: So, you guys used to help with translation? Whether it's documents...?

Asmaa: Yes. Now I'm telling you what we do at the center. As I told you, it's something similar to the following.

\*Walking\*

Asmaa: I work in this organization in Majdal Center to help immigrants and refugees. All of the services that the organization does is for free. The following programs that the center gives includes classes for language, helping pass exams, mental health, general questions, doctor appointments as soon as possible, patient transportation from clinic to homes and vice versa for elders, government documents, Rental assistance, housing assistance, education, registration for schools, registration for colleges, registration for classes, and we help them pick clinics that gives them the fastest medical care to find appointments as soon as possible. We also helped with activities regarding COVID-19. Other documents such as Cal Works, SSI, IHSSI, and stuff like that.

Me: So, you guys help them with law related issues?

Asmaa: Yes, and all of these services is very amazing for the center to do it because it is free with no cost.

Me: Umm, so you think that having a center for immigrants, refugees, and Arab immigrants is like having a resource, a supportive resource to Arab refugees because when they first come here they face a lot of hardships due to language, society, traditions and ethnic backgrounds.

Asmaa: Most importantly language, that's the hardest part. In my opinion, the center is like a savior for new people. It's not only this center, there are many centers, but I love this center because it's all for free.

Me: Umm, and specifically because when we first come here as Arabs, we have problems because of how society perceives us. They don't see us in a nice way. Umm, in what year did

you guys start in this center? When did it get established? In the beginning, Ramah said that it was a small organization and then you guys started having a center?

Asmaa: True, because when I first came in 2016 there was no center. There was no center for us to gather in. We used to go to the park. Give me on second....

Me: It's fine, take your time.

Asmaa: Judy... Judy...

\*Background Conversation\*

Me: So, we were talking about how the center was established.

Asmaa: Back in 2016, how it all started is because my husband was looking for a job. He had no language background so they used to use him here in El Cajon. When I first came, there was some sort of exploitation. If you don't have a good English background, then your wage is less. Then, all of a sudden we got to know everyone in the center and they introduced themselves and helped find a job. It's true, they helped my husband and helped him find a job. It turned out that having a wage difference has nothing to do with language. Apparently, your language and communication skills get better by having a job.

Me: True, true.

Asmaa: Then they started having weekly activities in the park, whether it's kids playing football or drawing. Handmade lessons.... one issue immigrants always faced is that in apartments, kids are not allowed to play in front of the house or something like that. We, back in the Middle East, specifically in our countries, had a different lifestyle. Here, it's different.

Me: That's true, we used to play outside and we used to be happy with the kids.

Asmaa: Here, it's the opposite. Here it's different. We became unhappy because our kids are always at home and not having joy, and our houses are small. So, the girls and the guys in the organization had weekly activities.

Me: And then you guys started improving.

Asmaa: Yes, that's right. In 2017 is when the center was established. Little by little we started having classes and all of these activities are done by the girls and the guys. May God bless them. From the beginning, I'll always stay with them.

Me: Oh, that's amazing. It looks like a family.

Asmaa: Yes, that's right. I'm very happy with them and I get really happy when they start contributing and giving back. It gives you a really good feeling.

Me: You feel like you also love to help people the same way we all came as refugees. You love to help people that are new and are seeking help. Umm, Umm, one of Majdal Center's goals, I don't know if you'd like to answer this question or not, but it's to have Arabs or Middle Easterns in a separate category than Caucasians and whites, because we're not white as they say. We are Middle Easterners. As a group, we have our own traditions that is different from Caucasians. We have to be recognized with race,

Both of us: Our own traditions, our own culture, in religion.

Asmaa: I like it here in the United States because this is all available. Everyone can practice the religion that they want. Practice the culture that they want. They are very open minded regarding that. This is one reason that I was happy, is because I saw they were very accepting, open minded and interactive. At the beginning, I used to be scared until I got to know the girls and the guys in the organization. Speak in any way you want and live in your own way. Don't be scared of anything. In Arab countries, we are conservative regarding things. The same way I got rid of that close mindedness, I started to educate people. That view is actually very giving and the U.S. has a lot of opportunities.

Me: No, you're right, I feel the same way when refugees come and there is no community center like Majdal that tells them to live how they want and that it's okay to speak with an accent, I feel like they get affected negatively mentally. You feel like a stranger...

Asmaa: Even with food, and this is probably something that is very simple. When we go outside, we used to make activities such as movies. The kids, they have some simple type of food, and for the adults when they come to the activities, they bring something they cook, and this is a type of sharing. The good thing about it is that we share food not only with the Arab community but also with the American community.

Me: Do you do any educational activities here at the center? You told me about college?

Asmaa: Yes, we do. We help them register for classes and we help them with things such as FAFSA, registration for classes such as math, Arabic. We also help them with homework.

Me: So you guys offer tutoring for free?

Asmaa: Yes, all of it is free.

Me: Umm, do you feel like there is any difference in education between here and the Middle East?

Asmaa: Yes

Me: So, there is a difference?

Asmaa: Yes. This is something the kids struggled with. They used to study in Arabic and when they first got here it's all English. That's not easy. It's not easy on them honestly. Me as a

mother, my role, whenever I see an opportunity for my kids to succeed, I'll take them there. I feel here in the United States, they educate them and so many times my kids will say "I don't want to go to school", but then they started to love school.

Me: Do you feel like Majdal Center made them love school and studying?

Asmaa: Yes, that is true. They made them love being here in the United States. Don't get scared being here. As long as you are abiding the law, you will be happy and be able to build a life.

Me: Umm, speaking that we are both Arabs, and I really love the culture that Syria has. Syria was one of the countries that is very close to my heart as an Iraqi because you guys opened your arms for our refugees. Umm, do you have problems giving me any memories from Syria or any writing you like as a Syrian woman? What's the best thing you love about Syria?

Asmaa: I love poetry. I love Nizar Qabbani. I love my Arabic language, and that is the reason. Well, I only have a high school degree, but regardless of that I help the kids. It feels very unfortunate that they will forget their Arabic language and their roots.

Me: You mean like forget their roots because yes, definitely, America makes them forget their roots sometimes.

Asmaa: Yes, yes.

Me: Umm, I don't know if this is enough but I would really like to thank you for your time and it was a pleasure to meet you.

Asmaa: Me too, it was a pleasure to meet you.

Me: And I'm very sorry that I confused you with coming and going back and all that for transformation. Umm...

Asmaa: And if you'd like anything else, I'm here to help you.

Me: We asked about the activities of Majdal Center and I believe that is what we needed to know. I really don't want to get into personal questions because you have the freedom to privacy and don't want to get in depth.

Asmaa: You can ask me if there is something I can answer.

Me: When did you feel comfortable being in the United States? I'm pretty sure the first few years were hard but when did you feel comfortable?

Asmaa: Honestly, it was my first son graduating.

Me: Mhm.

Asmaa: When my first son got to the United States, he was in the eighth grade. In ninth grade, he directly went to any regular classes like the Americans. As we know, when the first refugees come, we don't go to the normal classes with the Americans because of language. My son, after the first year, he got over that hardship and he started studying in the normal classes with the Americans and that made me very happy. He graduated with an amazing success in high school. His graduation was very beautiful. Once I see my children succeed, that's what I came here for.

Me: It made you feel like this is what you came for.

Asmaa: Yes, you're right. My children are the reason for me to be here.

Me: May God bless them.

Asmaa: Thank you my dear.

Me: Umm, it was such a pleasure to meet you Asmaa. It was an honor and I wish you all the best with your family. You and the center.

Asmaa: Thank you dear.

Me: Thank you so much for this connection with Majdal Center and giving the opportunity.

Asmaa: Is the time okay? Is it enough?

Me: I really think it's enough, because in Arabic we speak fast and we speak a lot of words. We ask a lot of questions and very fast in Arabic.

Asmaa: And if you'd like to have more for project, go onto Majdal Center's website for pictures. Let's speak with Rama, although I don't think she's going to speak with us right now, but get some of the pictures regarding Majdal Center and take pictures of the activities and the gatherings and events.

Me: Is it okay with you? Do you give us the right to take pictures and document?

Asmaa: Yes, it's okay and right now I'll speak with Rama so two words is better than one. I believe I do have the right to give you that permission.

Me: I heard you guys have a citizenship class that you are holding right now.

Asmaa: Yes, there was. We currently postponed it, but so many people passed their citizenship exam because of it and that makes me happy to.

Me: Of course, it's a hard step taking your citizenship to any refugee. To take the citizenship that you came for at the very beginning, regarding language.

Asmaa: Now it's better than before. We still didn't overcome so many of the hardships. This is a very big move. Speaking of traditions, language, lifestyle, race, culture, the way we speak, even our way of dressing. We really face so many hardships regarding that.

Me: It's not easy to even go to shopping centers when you're a minority and find the clothes that you consider suitable for you. Specifically, as a woman, it may not be there.

Asmaa: Also, so many of our kids faced terrible things. For example, my son was playing soccer with the boys and we never used to send them alone and it was even prohibited in our apartment complex for them to play. Our houses were very small and we took them to the park next to the house and imagine when we went there was girls that used to come and attack them and wanted to fight. It made me very upset because their father used to tell them to stay home and out of trouble. It made me sad because I realized they are going through a lot and can't even have fun. I used to hate my new situation for one year, until I understood what the laws are. They told me "You can call the police"

Me: True.

Asmaa: Also, another time when my son was getting out of school late because he had something to do for one of his activities, some boys were following him. Can you please stop recording?

Me: Yes of course. Thank you so much for the interview, I really enjoyed it.

Asmaa: Yes, it is true, it's very joyful working at Majdal Center. I really love it because when we do gather, we really bring tables, food, people laughing, doing other things, you feel like the center has a lot of joy. If you want, we have a WhatsApp group and we can add you. It's for girls and guys. We make it accessible for new people to ask questions and seek help. They go out and grab food or something small. They discuss things regarding the center. They take the words of the kids for suggestions.

Me: Thank you so much! It's my pleasure that you are inviting me. I really wish, God Willing, that I continue with you guys. This is such a golden opportunity to offer me to be a part of this.

Asmaa: It's all up to you and your time. You're not obligated to stay if you have any work or any school.

Me: No, no, it's fine. Anytime that I am available I will come and help the kids, whether it's science or anything, it's my pleasure.

Asmaa: Are you good at math?

Me: Yes, I'm good at math.

Asmaa: Yes?

Me: Yeah, I'm good.

Asmaa: I need help with math for my kids.

Me: Well, thank you Asmaa for your time. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk to you and I wish I didn't cause you any trouble.

Asmaa: No, don't worry about it. Anything that I can help you or anyone, I'm here. I encourage all the youth, whether girls or guys, to help in these issues. I don't know how to tell you, but I have feelings regarding this topic. My goal and my purpose in working for this center is because of the hardships that I went through personally. I wish everyone that went through similar hardships helps new people for all of us to stand on our feet, and I really hope what I went through, new people don't go through that. So, whatever I can do, I'll do it very happily. And I wish anyone whose Syrian, Arab, or any other Arab nationality in general, doesn't have to be Syrian, for us to help to each other and show the image to the Americans who we are. We are very productive people. We love education. We love to share our cultures and accept culture, and show them what is our culture and our lifestyle. We love happiness and to make others happy. Thank you so much and I am so happy.

Me: Thank you so much, it's my honor.

Asmaa: Thank you.