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Oral History Interview with Annie Ferdous
Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.21
Interview conducted by Liz H. Strong on May 25, 2018
at Brooklyn Historical Society in Brooklyn Heights, Brooklyn

STRONG: Okay, this is Liz Strong for the Brooklyn Historical Society Muslims in Brooklyn Project. Today is Friday, May 25th, 2018.

FERDOUS: Yes.

STRONG: Annie, why don't you just introduce yourself and tell me where and when you were born to start?

FERDOUS: Hello. My name is Annie Ferdous. I'm from Bangladesh. And I was born in -- actually, I was born in Chittagong, Bangladesh. Chittagong is a port city of Bangladesh. And then from there my father moved to Dhaka. But in my birth certificate -- to get the birth certificate easily, I had -- they wrote it -- my birthplace in Dhaka. Because certificate had to get from Dhaka. So I got it from Dhaka. So yeah, I was born in Bangladesh.

STRONG: Tell me about your family when you were young, your life growing up, your siblings, anything you remember about that.

FERDOUS: Yeah. My -- my father used to work in -- in the city for -- he was a meteorologist. And my mother was a housewife. And they had five children, four daughters, one son. The eldest daughter, then a son, then other daughters. But before me, there was another son born who died after -- some couple of months after. So there's a thing. When I was little, my father used to tell me that, you know, there are -- there are parents who joke with the children that -- I found it, or I got it from hospital, or things like that. But my father used to tell me that I got you from Chittagong. So later on, it stuck in my mind. Oh, so they found me in Chittagong. Maybe I am not born --

And, you know, still that question is in my mind. Were I born in that family, or I was adopted? But in Bangladesh, adoption is not considered -- I mean, they are not going to

say that this child is adopted. Because the society will not take it as -- oh, that's not their own child. They'll not take it in that way. So I wonder, but I would never ask anyone. Because I was -- even if I -- I am adopted, I was grown as their own child. So that is a very funny question goes in my mind. Maybe one day I'll ask my elder sister.

So it was -- my family was, I would say, middle class. Meaning that income -- income was middle class level. But -- and my father came from a village in my mother's parents' home. So at that time -- so my father wanted to study in the city. That was -- that wasn't in Dhaka or Chittagong. In another district. So he wanted to get higher education in the city. He came from village and was looking for a house where he can stay and go to college. So he -- he came to my mom's house. He was -- used to stay there. Didn't have to pay for rent. But he -- he used to teach the kids in that house whatever. So he didn't have to pay for the rent or food. And he -- he did his college from that house.

So my mother -- when my grandma was very sick, my mother told my -- my grandma told my grandpa that this -- this young man is very intelligent and fine-looking man. You should get my daughter married with him. My mother was then very young, maybe 11 years old. So -- and my grandma was very sick. So in two years she died. And -- I mean, my fa-- by the time when my mother -- my grandma died, my mother was about 14 years old. And my father -- before grandma died, my father -- I mean, my grandma did the wedding with my father and my mother. So my mother couldn't get an education. She didn't even go to high school.

After that -- so she -- I probably -- she always had this in her mind, that I wish I could get education. She was very progressive. So she wanted her children -- that you all have to get higher education, good job. So with the middle -- middle class family income, she -- she tried her best for our education. And in -- in -- because she was housewife, my father used to get the salary and gave it to my mom. Just -- just a few amount he used

to keep for her -- for his daily use. And the rest my mom. And mom would know how to distribute it for everything, clothing, education, and everything.

So my youngest sister -- all my sisters, we all got -- finished high school, college, university. My eldest sister got master's degree in Dhaka University. Second sister, she didn't get to finish university because she got married and moved to London. My brother, only brother was -- he's an engineer from Lahore -- Pakistan, Lahore University. And my elder sister is an artist from Dhaka Art College. And my youngest sister. I'm -- I'm above her. And I got master's in Dhaka University.

STRONG: What was your master's in?

FERDOUS: Political science, which is social studies. But it's completely not -- not my favorite subject. I just had to take a bachelor or master's degree from Dhaka University because that -- I was told to. And I did that. I -- I did it. But I always wanted to go to India to get a degree in dance and get a professional dancer. I used to -- I learned dancing from very early childhood, maybe from three years or four years old. And then when I was getting my education, I finished my high school, which is 10 grade, SSC, secondary -- secondary school certificate in 1975. Did I tell you I was born in 1959? In 1975. And then HSC, which is higher secondary [certificate]. So 10 grade is higher school. Then another two years is college. In 1977, I did that. And then there was one year gap. I used to -- I went to another college. After one year break, I got an admission in Dhaka University, and I got my master's in social -- political science in 1983.

But during all this time, after school and school hours, I was always involved in dancing performances. And my mother admired. My mother sent me anywhere I wanted to go to. My father was not that easy about this. Probably it's because he was coming -- he was from a village and very conservative family. He wanted -- and also income is also another thing. Because these are -- a lot of pressure on the -- on the income. Have the -- and in Bangladesh, the city school -- there are not many. But not all

of them are good. My mother wanted to go to -- let us go to best schools, college, good education. So we had to pay for that. School, college, everything we had to pay.

And then again, going to dance school, performances, getting costumes. Everything cost money. But still then, she -- she encouraged. She -- she sent me. And I was like -- dancing and singing, it was probably in my blood. And wherever I used to go, I was like -- I caught people's eye. Whoa, look at her. She's graceful. She's not shy. So yeah. Tell me which way should I --

STRONG: What -- what did you love about dance? Why?

FERDOUS: The rhythm, the movement of the body, expressions. Indian, Bangladeshi dance has stories to tell through that. So expression changes. We -- we -- through dance, we tell love stories. Sadness of life, and a little child is happy for getting something. It's a nice beautiful day. Let's show it through dance with expression. So everything about it. It's -- wherever I see a dance, even a picture in a newspaper, my eyes were stuck there. I -- so whenever -- back then, we -- television -- we had a black and white television when I was in -- maybe in 10th grade. Before we didn't have any television. So if I was passing by any houses, and I hear music, I would try to peek through the windows to see -- is that a dance? I would stop there. Someone has to push me, "Let's go home."

So I don't know. It's -- it's a joy of -- I get joy from these activities. Dancing, singing, everything.

STRONG: Did you tell me that you got on national TV with dance?

FERDOUS: Oh yeah. In Dhaka, I used to dance a lot on stages and national TVs in Bangladesh. And I had to do -- audition for the national TV. And I got chance. And not just that, now I -- now I can -- when I look back, I see that, yeah, I think I have talent. Because -- because when I was very young, I used to choreograph. Even my dance teacher, she -- she used to choreograph dances and manage events, dance events. So we used to rehearse in her house. She would -- a group of five or six kids. We were -- we were young. Like about -- like from 18 to 20 age, boys and girls. So if it was in her house,

in her living room we were dancing, she would tell, "Annie, could you just take care of this part? I'll be back." She would go to kitchen, do some of her own chores, come back. And I would done with two or three lines of the music, choreograph. And she -- she accepted it. That's how I got encouraged.

And I think I have practice of choreographing or -- the -- what is called? The -- she -- that -- she said -- how should I say it? Like, I can do it. Like, I can choreograph. That feeling I got from her. And the feeling and also the intention that -- let me -- let me find a new music. Or let me do it my own way. So wherever else I went, and I -- I was given the responsibility to run a group, to run a class, to run -- to make a new performance, I was very happy. It just got from inside. So I don't know if I answered your question.

STRONG: That's beautiful, thank you. Just to move forward in time a little bit, was it also dance that brought you to London to stay with your sister?

FERDOUS: Yes. So in 1986, there was a big group invited in London for Rabindranath Tagore's 125th birth celebration. There is a Tagore society in London. They invited us. And Tagore is a Nobel laureate from India. Bengal -- Bangla literature, Bangla music means Tagore has to be there. So very, very popular guy. His 125th birth -- birth anniversary. And we were, like, a group of 30 performers. Singers, dancers, people -- drama -- a group of drama, theatrical group.

So big group came to London. And I had two sisters who after marriage, they moved to London. So I went there as in the group. And my sisters -- and by that time, I finished my master's. So my mother said, "It's good that you are going." She thought it's good that I'm going there. And they're thinking, okay, we'll find someone for her so she could stay here. I didn't really want to stay there. I was thinking, what am I going to do here? No dance, no Bangla. I -- what I -- what I -- what am I going to do? But wherever -- wherever I moved, the dance will come to me. It's like, there was a group in London. They said, "Oh, you're" -- they were talk -- talking to my sister. They said, "Oh, your

sister came, and she used to dance? Why not she come over to our community school and teach dance to the kids?"

So I went there. I perform here and there. But still I didn't want to stay, because in Bangladesh, it was almost like full time I was doing. Because then I finished my education. It was just my job. And then I -- then -- by that time, I'm grown up. I can go by myself anywhere. And I was enjoying a lot. But I had to stay. And I got a job at the Bangladesh consulate in there. And -- and then I got -- I got connected with my husband who was in New York. I used to know him from before. He was my friend. So I got connected with him, started to speak to him. And that was it. Then he was -- he was saying that, okay, I was -- I'm thinking to get married. My parents are asking me to marry, to find someone. And your par-- you are in the same situation. Let's think about it.

And that -- that was the right time. The right time to click for us. And so we got engaged in London and went back to Bangladesh 1988. Got married in April 1st, [laughter] in Dhaka, Bangladesh. And I came back to London, because I was still doing the job. And he went back to -- he went back here. He had green card then. And I went back to London. I just -- I got a visitor's visa. In one month, I came here. Then he applied for adjustment. Took about six months for me to get green card.

But again, here, when I came, people came to know that -- oh, somebody's here in this -- here in this neighborhood who -- who dances. But not -- that was a little later. Because when I came, I was very new. We had a very beautiful house. My husband rented that house. I got my son very next year. My mother in law came. I was busy taking care of in -- my mother-in -- mother and father-in-laws. I was happy. I was very happy. New life, nice house, husband is very nice. I have a great son. And then in another two years I have a daughter. My other in-laws came. I was then -- then I was -- first I moved to Avenue U and East 13th Street. In one -- after maybe one and a half years, I had to

move to another house in Avenue L and East 16th Street, because my in-laws came. I needed a bigger house. And my daughter born there.

From there, probably 2004 I moved to Kensington. And I -- I was in a rental apartment on McDonald [Avenue] and Dahill Road, around -- not 2004, earlier. In 2006, we bought the house on Chester Avenue. So I am still there.

STRONG: Tell me about how you first met your husband, how you were friends before.

FERDOUS: Okay. Oh, okay. That -- phone. Through phone.

STRONG: Really?

FERDOUS: Okay, yeah. I was -- once, I was -- I got typhoid. It's a fever, right? I -- I was in -- it was after I finish my college. So I had typhoid. And I had to -- that means that for at least one month, I have to stay home and take care of myself. I was at home and bored. So I still read a lot of magazines in Ban-- Bangladeshi newspaper and weekly magazines. There was ads that -- looking for friends and want to talk. Like, phone numbers. So -- so I was doing that. I was -- I used to call. So I call someone. And that was Jafor [phonetic 00:20:40], my husband. But -- no, it -- it was someone else. Like, say, for -- I don't know -- remember the name -- Rahim [phonetic 00:20:48]. It was his name. So then I found out that it -- Rahim gives -- gave his phone number. But then he didn't want to -- they were joking. Like, friends were joking, gave his phone number. But he didn't actually talk. Jafor was the one who was talking.

So -- so yeah. I -- I spoke to him. He used to -- and I found out that he is -- he's a part time student and also working -- working very close to my house in an office. So he said, "You know, I -- I come over here. Do you want to come to my office?" And he loves -- he also loves art and culture. So when I said I dance, I have performances, he said, "I want to go. Can you get me a ticket or something?" So I went one day to give him an -- an invitation to that show. That's where I met him. And he later on said that he -- he wanted to get to know me more. He wanted to meet me more but we didn't get that

chance. But we -- we met a couple of times. But didn't we -- we were not that close to be more than friends.

So he came -- he came to America in 1980 or '81. But when he went back to Bangladesh, I don't know how to say -- when he was there visiting Bangladesh -- maybe for two weeks he went -- after two or three days after, I just called his house to find out, is Jafor -- do you know if Jafor is going to come soon? They said, "He's here." "Really? Can you -- can you ask him to call me?" So we met him again. So somehow we were connected. It was not just he gone -- he's gone, I have no connection with him. So then again, when I came to London, I got his phone number from Bangladesh. I called him. I got again connected with him. And then life partner. And I'm happy that best partner I could ever get. Because we are -- we like same things. And very calm and quiet, very healthful. So I should thank God for that.

STRONG: So when you got to move in together here in Brooklyn, what was that transition like? Coming to a new city, building a home with somebody for the first time.

FERDOUS: Yeah, it was -- for me it was -- I was very happy. Because first, from Bangladesh I went to -- I was in London. And I was in my sister's house. I have two sisters. They live separate. I didn't like there that much. One sister's husband was very conservative. He used to tell her, why I go out so much? Why I'm coming late? So I -- I used to hear from the other room. I didn't like that. And at one point, I -- I wanted to stay in my elder sister's house more. So anyway, how -- I was adjusting from this house to that house. And I had a job.

So when I -- I got married. And -- and that marriage -- and also probably that marriage was -- oh, oh, I should add this. When I was in London, before I got connected to Jafor, my -- I was engaged with someone. It was a -- it was a family engagement. They found a young man who was looking for a bride. And they -- they looked into my bio data. My sister looked into his. We were fine. We agreed. We got -- I got engagement ring. And they went to Bangladesh. After the engagement, the father and the -- the guy, they went

to Bangladesh. And they said they're going to come back, shopping and everything. They'll decide a day of wedding. But after they came back, something happened. My sister didn't tell me elaborately. But it broke.

So probably that time I was also emotionally, mentally feeling very sad. When I was -- that time, Jafor used to call me more. And I -- I used to -- the -- the love turned towards him. So from London, when I came -- when I compared London to New York and I came to -- when I came to New York from airport to my house, it was a semi-basement one-bedroom apartment. Very cozy, small, but well furnished. And beautiful. I loved it. And as soon as I walked in, I said, "Wow, beautiful house." My husband still says that, "The first word you said -- you came in the house, and you said, 'Beautiful house.'" That -- that filled his heart, yeah. Because he was looking for a house for me.

So I started very happily. I didn't -- that time I was not thinking about -- like, the way I was thinking in London. What am I going to do? No dance, no Bangla. I was not thinking at all about any -- any of those. I loved the house. I started -- but he was -- he used to work in a Jewish company as a bookkeeper. And then maybe after two weeks, he started to go -- evenings he used to do car service to get some extra money he used to get this apartment rent and for any charge he -- he used to buy. So probably had more -- but he had also loans from his previous business. He had a -- he -- he bought a grocery store on Church Avenue with his -- with one of his cousins. So he -- he put a lot of money in that grocery store. But he doesn't have any experience in that business. So he was the only guy taking care of the grocery store. His cousin was doing something else, probably driving yellow cab. He put his money. They both maybe put his money, but lost the whole money. Like, \$40,000 went in the garbage.

So he started -- he went back to his job. He was doing car service. So when he -- he married me, he had a lot of loans. I came to know that. So -- and -- so I started to look for a job, too. Because during that time, what am I going to -- I -- I'm at home doing

nothing. And in -- maybe in two months I got a job in Ninth Avenue and around 41st Street in a drapery store. A Jewish guy, he had a drapery store. He still has it in 13th Avenue and 41st Street, where my -- later on my sister-in-law worked.

So I went there. He told me -- he showed me the sewing machine. I never -- I -- I used to sew our own clothes at home. I know how -- but we used to -- we had a machine we use with hand. Not electric machine, not with feet. So he showed me. "Can you do it?" So I was very slow. He said, "Yeah, you can do it. So I started to work there. And it was good, because time was very flexible. My husband could drop me, pick me up. When I had my children, I -- I even can go after my husband came home. So he used to take care of the baby. I went to work around three o'clock or four o'clock for two, three hours. Whatever hour I got, it's money. So that's how we worked.

So the question was, how was my transition here? Yeah, then when -- when I -- when I came to Church Avenue, Kensington area, then people found me. "Oh, you used to dance?" Then I -- again, I came to dance world. People --

STRONG: So it took a couple years?

FERDOUS: Couple of years. Because I was totally away from everything. If I dance anywhere, maybe people will know. I was totally away, and didn't come in my mind. I was not missing it. But when I came here, I don't -- I don't know how, but someone from the neighborhood, this neighborhood -- actually, maybe also for the neighborhood where I was, that neighborhood was a few Pakistani people over there in Avenue U. Mostly Russian and Arabic people over there. But here, Bengali, Bangladeshi community a lot -- even back then, there was some groups. They were performing. They found me. And then I started.

And I started -- Queens -- started to go to Queens to teach in 1990. No, not '90, '89? Ninety-one. I had my daughter in '91. Maybe end of '91 or beginning of '92 I started. I took my two kids with me. My -- my husband is in favor of it. "Go," he said, "go." He let

me learn -- and he -- my husband is always -- will encourage with everything. I want to learn driving? "Okay, go, you can do it. I know you can do it." I did it. Can I drive? I mean, he's -- he -- even later, my children go driving. He doesn't care. I said, "Why you let him go?" "He can do it. Let him do it. She can do it. Let them do." So he was that flexible. He -- he used to let me do everything I want to do. I got support. So it was good, easy for me. And I should not -- I should say thank God again for everything.

STRONG: Tell me about getting the school started in Queens in '92.

FERDOUS: Okay. Before '92 in Queens, I was doing -- in Brooklyn, I'm -- there was someone in Brooklyn, an organization called [inaudible 00:31:53]. They started to -- they say that let's -- let's start a new school. The lady -- I can't remember the name now. Anyway, I was teaching dance in her house. But somehow I didn't like some of -- some of the things. Then I stopped there. I told my husband, "Can I find a basement somewhere here that -- where I can teach as I want to?" So I found a basement in Avenue -- somewhere in Avenue C. I was teaching there. And then from Queens, from Jamaica, Queens, someone -- there is a Bangladesh society, very old organization. They said, "Can you come and teach us?" It was in -- it -- so they had school in Hillside [Avenue] and 179th [Street], that area. I used to go there, teach there.

And so I got to know more people who are singing, dancing. Because I -- I helped them organize events and teach the kids, choreograph. They have yearly events. I dance that time so I get to know more people. And then we -- some of us decided -- said that let's -- just the artists make an organization. And that way we can -- we can make bigger shows like a musical play, which needs a lot of practice, months of practice, coordination. We have to think about different -- a whole lot of things. So we got together in 1992. We did first a musical play, Tagore's *Shyama*. It was live songs with instruments and vocal, and the dancers in front of it. Was about three hours performance. Was a hit in New York, in Bengali community, of course.

Because they -- they have not seen the -- with the live music a dance drama. In Bengali, they did not see -- see. So after that, we thought that we should organi-- should form it. It was like a -- we got together and put up the show. Now, we realized that we have to make the formation, register the organization. That's how we got registration, Bangladesh Institute of Performing Arts. And then after that, many thing happens. People left. We had -- we -- we fought with each other. One say this way, we said no, not that way. But the good thing is that we -- we made a school. We thought that we have to teach our generations that are growing. And we have to make the performing group bigger to continue -- continue it.

So we started school. And there are only few more very dedicated performing artists were with me, which we were very stubborn that -- we -- we -- this is our goal. We're going to do it this way. And we did it that way. And we had to fight some men. And then -- and then as women, we -- we did it. We didn't lose the fight. And -- and our fight was for the better thing. Our fight is for -- to establish the school, to teach our kid not to get profit from it. To spread our culture, to teach Bangla language, to let our generation know about Bangla. And I'm very proud now that we did it 25 years back. This year we had our 25th anniversary.

STRONG: So tell me -- you mentioned this when we spoke on the phone. But tell me on the record, why is it so important to tell this new generation born in America about language, dance, music, culture.

FERDOUS: Yeah. So I think the Bangladeshi people, Bangladeshi generation, the next generation who are -- whose parents were from Bangladesh or grandparents, great-grandparents -- one day they would realize that -- if they don't know their culture, they'll realize -- they'll realize that -- how come? How come my grandparents were from Bangladesh, and I don't know anything about it? And who would be responsible for that? Them -- them as a child, they would not know that they have to learn. And we have to make them to learn.

We have to tell them that, look, your mom or your grandma was not born here. And you are immigrant. They're immigrant. So they belong to a different culture. And the cul-- it's a rich heritage. You could learn it and then be proud of you. You can be American, Bangladeshi-American. But you cannot be proud of your -- of the Bangladesh or the culture if you don't know it, if you cannot tell about it. If you can't say how different sides of the culture -- you cannot be proud of it. It -- it will be opposite when you are a grown up. Now the people -- now -- some of our friends children, they blame their moms that -- why didn't you take us to a Bangla school? Why there wasn't any -- I -- I would know now Bangla.

So yeah, I think for -- for every -- every immigrant, the -- the tradition, the culture should pass on. Otherwise it's going to die. One day it's going to die. And -- and it's -- it's like general. It's like, you talk about only America. But look at you. You don't look like here. You're from somewhere else, but from where? What about that? Yeah.

STRONG: I also want to ask you about your involvement in Kensington specifically. One of the things you told me about when we spoke is that you weren't satisfied with the -- the spaces and community opportunities for women. And so you got involved in trying to improve that. Can you tell me some of those stories?

FERDOUS: Yeah, I got involved -- so -- so I -- I think I got this from my mom. My mom was -- my mother was very active in many other things. At home she used to also do social work. She used to -- she was engaged in Bangladesh women's politics. So here again, wherever I see there is a scope to do something, or someone invited -- can you come? Something is happening there. I would go, and I get involved. So that's how I got involved in -- in Kensington. There was a world fair in some Brook-- Kensington women. They put up an event, a name, Kensington World Fair in 2010, probably. I got to know my neighbors at that time. They were artists, writers. I was a dancer, journalist. We did this big show after that.

So that's how I get to know my neighbors. Before, though I was living in -- in Kensington, but I used to work more outside of Brooklyn in Queens. Work, I mean, the cultural side, my art. But my job was in East New York in Brooklyn. So what happened -- so over there in Brooklyn, I -- I -- after that Kensington World Fair, these women got together again. There was a -- they formed Kensington Stewards. Again, mostly women. There were a few men. But the Kensington Steward, the -- they need to form Kensington Steward to help support Walgreens Plaza, which is right corner of Church Avenue and McDonald Avenue. It's by the Walgreens. There was a new plaza. [New York City] Department of Transportation offered that they can make it. But they need a community organization to take care of it.

And so Brad [Bradford S.] Lander, the council member, was looking for an organization. We were there. I was working with them. We used to go to the plaza, sweep the plaza, so that people don't complain. And we can keep the plaza there. There was some chairs. People could sit, relax. We used to garden there. So I -- I was involved, Kensington Stewards.

Before Kensington Steward, Brad Lander offered me -- and Mammunul Haq, another Kensington community member -- to become a community board member so we could take Bangladeshi people's -- could be a voice for Bangladeshi people in the community board. So I -- I was in comm-- I am still in community board. I think that's from 2011 or '12. I'm in the community board.

And so the problem we faced that Bangladeshi people, they don't get -- they don't go to any events or any meetings where the -- all other Americans are there. They -- they go to only Bangladeshi events. I think a big -- one -- one problem for that is -- the reason they go -- they don't go to other community events because of -- because of the language, probably. And, yeah, it's mainly language. And -- and any events, we see only men goes. And the men in Kensington -- not -- I'll say Bangladeshi men in Kensington

is concentrated around McDonald Avenue and Church Avenue, between Avenue C and McDonald avenue. And they -- they usually -- they -- they go there to any event just to relax, to have entertainment. Because after all day hard work, maybe construction or taxi driving, they need some entertainment. So they don't want to go to another serious meeting to do any social -- another social work. That is another reason.

But we wanted to have them come to the community board, talk about your problem. They -- they won't go there. But I -- to be -- to come to -- to your point about women, no women were there. It's only men. So because most -- I would say about 90 -- more than 90 percent women are busy taking care of the house. Doesn't matter she works outside or not. If she works outside, she will come back home and take care of the home business. And the day is gone. She doesn't have time to go outside. And it's -- hanging outside for women is, like, haram, [laughter] which is a no-no. It's against our culture in Bangladesh. But now the picture is very different in Bangladesh, too. But here, no.

So in Kensington, the -- the families are coming lately, like last 10th, 15 years. Men are getting citizenship. Families are coming. A lot of families are coming because schools are overcrowded. And 60 percent are Bangladeshi. But the women are housewives. Maybe they don't know English. They don't have job. But housework is a big job. But I feel bad for them, because they don't have any -- any entertainment. And it is also -- I also feel that they don't have any feelings that they're missing something. It -- when there is a big street fair, Bangladeshi street fair, if you ever go, you will see Bangladeshi families with their husband, children. That's the only entertainment, probably, they go. Not even movies they go.

So then I thought that maybe -- maybe we could do something, form an organization for the women to see if they want to come to ladies' club, ladies' association, where they can -- just do adda meaning chit-chat, have some fun time. So it's been not -- not even one year. I was thinking it for a long time. But from -- I think last October or November,

we had the first meeting in -- in my house. Three or four came. I -- I'm trying to do a meeting every month. It's -- it's still like -- now it's from eight to 10 members. They come -- again, one month six. And then another month 10. Whenever there is a celebration like Bengali New Year or spring event, a dinner, more people come.

But my target is the -- that generation, that ladies who -- who looks like they are very restricted with many things. Maybe they are not allowed to go anywhere. So we are -- we didn't get to get them yet. I'm hoping that the more -- if we -- we have to continue doing it. Do a meeting every month, or events, not -- meeting, maybe they won't be much interested. Because they're -- for the -- these women, mostly they're Muslim. They have Muslim -- Muslim community, they have a gathering for the women. But they -- they speak about religion.

But here we don't -- we say that we are not going to talk about any religion. It's about life, about children, about having fun, about our past. Just my past and my future. Maybe not even my husband or my children. So -- so to continue, we have to -- every other month we have to put some events. When we -- I organize events -- like we did pitha, is like pastries, homemade pastries. We did that. It's -- it was a competition, homemade pitha competition. Many family members came. I saw some husband was helping them.

So events like -- events like this. And if it's only for women, I think they will come more and more. We have to be known to people that they do -- what they do is not harmful for Islam or religion. And we don't say that we don't -- you cannot have your hijab. You cannot cover. We don't say that. But I don't want you to tell me that you have to cover, too. It should be -- we -- we formed it for -- just of the women to come and relax. We had a workshop, immigration workshop. It was an immigration -- NYC ID. And some -- yes, and some health issue. And many -- many women came. And -- and they showed interest to talk about family problems. So I'm thinking to do this more and more. They

more we'll do this, people get to know. And I think -- like, Bangladesh Institute of Performing Arts is a big -- a known organization now. It will be one day also more. And now that I'm heading towards my retirement, I think I can give more time to other organizations. [laughter]

STRONG: You know, I also want to ask you while we still have time about your faith and religious communities that you grew up in or raised your children in. Tell me anything that comes to mind on that subject.

FERDOUS: Yeah. I was born in a Muslim family. So now I think that as a Muslim -- as a Muslim, I wanted to teach my children, "Go learn how to read Qur'an. Learn the verses to -- learn the verses so you could use those to -- for prayers, five times prayers." They started to learn here in my house. And then stop at -- at one point. But I want to go back, what I wanted to say that in Bangladesh, also, we were taught -- because it -- it may be because my family was liberal, not so restricted, conservative. Liberal family. So we -- we were told, learn the basic. That you have to learn how to pray four, five times. Do -- how to keep Ramadan Roza for a month. And then those. So it -- those are all memorization. Memorize the verses, read the Arabic. Just reading, but I don't -- I didn't know meaning.

So now I think that, actually, to keep religion, I have to know what it is -- what it -- it is. That's how we need to teach. That, look, this is Islam. Islam says this. Not that, this is what you have to do. And then when I was teaching my kids, when they were asking me so many questions, I could not answer, because I don't know. And my -- my son was -- I think that he's smart. He used to ask me, "Look, this should not be this way, but the other way." He used to give me reasons. And I thought, maybe yes.

So I was born in a Muslim family. Probably my mindset was not as a very conservative Muslim. I just learned that I have to do the basic things. So your -- I got lost from the question.

STRONG: I'm curious about how you then taught your children.

FERDOUS: Oh, okay. So --

STRONG: So when he was asking you these questions.

FERDOUS: Right. So my mom -- my father and mother was doing five times prayer, Roza, everything. When I was in Bangladesh, not five times, but I used to regularly pray. But I also used to dancing, singing, everything. But in Islam, it's -- it's prohibited. So I -- now when I came here -- and my husband also very, very liberal. My husband says, "No, we don't have to do this way. We could do it another way." So now -- then I have this question. I don't think it's right that I'm doing prayer and also -- and right I'm going to -- to the performance. How it can be okay. But -- but some -- some of my friends, they'll do it. They do prayers and both. They say, "We're told to do it, to follow these rules." I think one day, God will know. That's -- that's how they're -- they're growing.

So at one point, I stop. I said, "I -- I don't think I'm -- I'm doing it right." But what I'm doing, I'm not doing any bad thing. I'm doing good things. I'm helping people. I'm always honest. I -- un-- unless I -- I don't lie. I help people. I think I'll -- I'll go to heaven where the Muslims are going, the Hindus are going, Christians are going. I'll be okay. So I -- I am a Muslim, but I don't pray five times. And I'm okay with that. My husband is okay with that, too. Did I answer your question?

STRONG: You did, yeah. Are there any religious communities that you're a member of in Brooklyn or things like that? Or is it more a personal relationship, just for yourself?

FERDOUS: No, I'm not -- what -- what do you mean by that?

STRONG: Do you go to mosque? Do you have prayer groups, anything like that?

FERDOUS: Yeah, no, I don't go to mosques. I don't go to mosques. I don't -- actually, the -- I don't go to any. The -- there are women who sit together to talk about religion. But I don't know about other religion -- excuse me -- in -- in this Muslim community. I think -- I think they talk -- they talk about Muslim religion, which is good. But at the same time, they say that other religion are bad, which -- that I don't want to hear. I -- I don't like. So I -- I don't -- I don't go to any Muslim community organization.

But I don't know. Maybe it's just Bangladeshi Muslim community says that. I don't know. Maybe other community does not. I don't know. So I -- I'm very liberal, [laughter] but I'm still Muslim.

STRONG: You know, I -- I loved talking to you, and I wish we had more time. But I think we're -- we're coming up on -- on when you were hoping to leave. So I guess the last thing I will ask you is how do you hope Kensington will be different in the future, or your ladies' group, or, you know, even Avenue C Plaza, which we didn't even get to talk about, these public spaces you've invested in? What do you hope the future of this place will be?

FERDOUS: Yeah, Kensington. I -- in Kensington there are also a big Spanish group. They are not that much involved in the community. Only there are a few leaders who -- who get together in different activities. But when they have events, we don't see much. It's same as Bangladeshi also. So I hope that one day these women will take leadership, will come forward and say that -- like the event we had this April in Avenue C plaza, it was Bangladeshi New Year festival organized by Bangladeshi Institute for Performing Arts, which is a women-run organization. And the big street was closed. It -- actually, there was also Singing Winds. Jill Reinier was with me, too. I should say her name also. So also another woman. The big street was closed. It was just because Brad Lander, his help. And many women came. Only a few men came.

So if we -- I want to see that women organize -- probably only when women organize, more women come. Men don't come. So that's okay. We need to organize more of these kinds of events. And I -- I want to see one day that more women in Kensington take the leadership. In the meetings, women's meeting, I'm trying to teach -- not teach. Like, get it to them that we have to start to know how to lead. Anything, like, maybe a meeting. How you lead a meeting. From here you can take an initiative to an event. They all -- every -- they all think that I am a big -- something big because I did many big events. I always tell them it's just my experience. I keep doing for 25 years. Now the way I talk to

you guys looks like I know so many things. If you start now and -- you'll be able to be a leader.

So I want to see more women leader in Kensington. They organize more events. And I also -- so similarly, I want other community to come over and do more events. Now, in Avenue C Plaza, there -- it's good that many other organizations are coming together and doing events. Like, in Ramadan, they're -- we're having iftar where many communities come join. We're going to have one summer month of June -- art studio will be there. We are trying to put up shows where Arts and Democracy is coming forward. Bangladesh Institute of Performing Arts. Many other organization -- many other organizations.

So I hope to see that in Kensington many other organizations come together, leaders come together. Not just men. Not -- not just Bangladeshi separate. It's -- let's -- Bangladeshi, Hispanic, Chinese, Russian, all come together and build a big community, bigger community. Cultural exchange.

STRONG: Annie, thank you so much for your time and your stories. I loved talking with you. I could do it all day, frankly. And I'm sorry we have to end. But, you know, I look forward to being in touch as this project progresses. And I wish you all the best. So thank you so much.

FERDOUS: Thank you, Liz. It's been my pleasure. So