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Oral History Interview with Darlene Bashir
Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.35
Interview conducted by Zaheer Ali on September 10, 2018
at Masjid Abdul Muhsi Khalifah in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn

ALI: I'm Zaheer Ali, Oral Historian at Brooklyn Historical Society. Today is Monday, September 10th, 2018. I am here at Masjid Abdul Muhsi Khalifah in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, interviewing Sister Darlene Bashir for the Muslims in Brooklyn project. Now, Sister Darlene, if you can introduce yourself to the recording, telling us your full name, and when and where you were born.

BASHIR: Okay. My name is Darlene Bashir. I was born at Maimonides Hospital on [date redacted for privacy], 1958, to my parents, Helen and Raymond Brown. We lived in Harlem on 125th Street, from the early stages in my life, up until around -- I was around 10 years old when my parents separated. My father worked at S. Klein's. He was a -- he was a shop stewardess. He purchased women clothing and he was a tailor.

A lot of the skills and talents that my father had, he shared with me. He taught me how to play the piano, which was a very important part of my development, because that is something that is a discipline. And taking time to apply yourself to learning a skill -- if you don't have that discipline, it sometimes lead into developing other developmental pro-- growth and developments in your life.

ALI: How did your father come by music? What was his musical background?

BASHIR: Well, he played at -- as an organist at White Rock Baptist Church. And during that time, he's very good friends with Valerie and Ashford Simpson, and very proud of being part of White Rock Baptist Church. I was in church the majority of the week. I was there Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday again, so I spent a great deal of time inside of a church singing in the choir, which was very exciting because they had a full orchestra there; the drums, the piano, the guitar, the very, very, very lively and engaging. However, though, for me, you always would sit in

the pier, and everyone in the church had the Holy Ghost, except for me. And I was trying to figure out why did I not get this Holy Ghost, as they called it. But as I grew older and I studied more about religion, I learned that it wasn't -- it's not really a Holy Ghost in that sense of the matter. It's what they internalized at that time, and what they were feeling. So I found that in Islam, really, and not where I have to get up and shout, but found it in a different way, in how we praised -- give glory to Allah, subhanahu wa ta 'ala.

ALI: What -- what kind of religious education did you receive during this time? Besides the activities that you were involved in, were you also getting some kind of formal education into the basic ideas or beliefs of Christianity? Or how did you absorb, or where did you get those from?

BASHIR: From my father. My father taught Sunday school, so therefore, I sat in on his classes and learned more about the scripture with the children in the group. Not only that too, my father, he was self-taught, self-learned in the visual who, because he was also from a child very sickly. So because of that, it was -- he was forced upon; whatever he knew he had to learn on his own, or otherwise, I guess become a bum on the street, sorry to say. But he desired more for his life, for his family, that -- and he knew what it took in order to be a contributor to society, to be a contributor to his family, like to be a contributor as a father, as a grandparent, as a brother, because he had siblings who was respon-- that he was responsible for. Because as being one of the older children, he was responsible to help his mom, because his parents had separated.

Not only that, too, my family life, my -- which brings me into learning more about Islam, the Nation of Islam, my family's life structure was a little different than the typical African American who started studying about the Nation of Islam, because my grandmother, who was pale-skinned, you know, blue eyes, blonde hair, and learning from the Honorable Elijah Muhammad that that's the devil, I could not really understand how I could possibly call someone that took care of me when I was a baby - - she watched me while my mom -- when -- had to return to work, she took care of me

and watched me from the window on 96th Street as I would walk up the hill to the corner store to purchase -- she gave me five cents to buy an Icie, these cups of Icies that was made out of Kool Aid, whatever it is. Even though it was no good for us. The point is, that I'm making, is that this woman who cared for me for the majority of my youth, my young life, they were calling her the devil. So I could never relate to that.

However, what I did learn as I was growing up, from my father, that as an individual, you have to work hard at whatever it is that you have to obtain, whatever the color of your skin. And as long as you do good, God will always protect you, because he's always by your side. He never leaves you. So even in difficult times that I had experienced, and as I mentioned the separation of my parents when I was 10 years old, that was really a strange time for me, because when my mother left, I did -- I had a brother also, he was four years younger than myself. And when my mother left because we had different fathers, she took him and left me with my dad. So we came home, and it was like everything was shattered. Not that the house was in a disarray, because everything was intact -- we had a piano at home, my brother and I shared a room, everything was color-coordinated, clean. Everything. But the idea of, when you opened up the closet door and saw that her things were missing, or I opened up the drawer and saw that my brother's things were missing, it was very difficult. And then me not knowing, well, why did she leave me behind?

As I got older, I realized that that was the only way that she could possibly see herself as separating at that time from my father, because I also grew up with the belief that when you marry in Christianity, when you marry a true Christian, once you're married, that's 'til death do you part. So my father, from that ideology, he really believed that there is no separation. The family structure, it stays together through thick and thin, whatever that may be. So I went through that process of going to family court, sitting at this long table with my mother on one side and my father on the other side, and the judge sitting there and, you know, asking me questions, and then the decision being

made that my father would return me -- I would leave with my mom, and my father would have me on every holiday, and any time that I -- on the weekends, every weekend, so -- but that didn't stop. It didn't change the love that I got from my dad, and the love that I was now getting from my mother. However, again, the thought still remained within me, why, why all of this? Why cause all this confusion in our lifestyle?

ALI: I was going to ask, because in your description of your childhood, it sounds like your father was a more prominent -- had a more prominent role in your life. And I was interested in asking about your relationship to your mother during this time period.

BASHIR: My relationship with my mom -- my father did a lot of things with me, okay. Like, for example, at that age, he was teaching me to play the piano. I also -- he taught me how to crochet, he taught me how to knit. He taught me how to do things that my mother -- those are types of things that you look towards your mother to teach you. But my father, on the other hand, he taught me those skills. And my mother's education, her education level, she -- her education level stopped at tenth grade, okay. Where my father, even though, as I mentioned before, he was sickly. He was an ill child growing up, so therefore, he was -- he forced himself to do his studies. And therefore, he eventually got his GED, and eventually went on to higher learning. And so he instilled upon me that type of growth and development, how important it is.

Now on the other hand, my mother, the sweetest little lady, she stands 4'9" now, the sweetest little person you ever want to meet, she only wanted me to have the very best in life. Now, at that time, I didn't understand it. But now today, you know, she worked -- she went out, and like all African Americans became the house cleaner, scrubbing the floors of some white woman's house to keep their house clean, so that she could just keep food on the table and clothes on our back. And I had more than my -- you know, her sisters, because she came from a very large family -- there were 15 of them. As we all grew up, with me being the baby to my aunts and uncles, and some of us being the same age, okay, there was even a resentment that have emulated from the simple fact that my mother just wanted me to have so much more, and she would give me so much

more. But what I can appreciate from what my mother's given me is that family structure, and how important it is to have the support of family. Because I remember the days when my grandfather, who had his legs amputated, but he would sit in the window and wait for me to return home from school. And I'll never forget, he had me timed to a science, okay? One day I decided to cut class, not to go to school. That was my first and last time that I did that. I got home only one minute earlier than when I was supposed to. And my grandfather asked me, "Where are you coming from?" Okay, because he knew I was not coming from school. And I told him, "I'm coming from school." And I'm thinking nothing of it. But when my mother got home, he told my mom, and my mom took care of me.

ALI: What do you mean, she "took care of you?"

BASHIR: She gave me such a beating, I'll never forget. And during those days, you know, you got beat with whatever they had in their hand at the time. So I got such a lashing, that it was something that stayed firm in my mind that how important education was. And I loved my grandfather, I loved him to death. He's the one that made me Darlene. So I was very close to him, and we would sit down. And I don't know if you -- there was this ice cream called Cho Cho Pops, well, anyway, this ice cream was made of, you know, it's an ice cream pop, and it had nuts on it with chocolate, and it was his favorite. And we would sit down and we would eat that. And he would just tell me about his life, you know.

So from that, I learned the importance of being where you're supposed to be when you're supposed to be there, because everybody's watching. And more importantly, God is watching. He's going to take care of you. So you need to be doing what you're supposed to be doing, when you're supposed to be doing it. So --

ALI: Where was your families from? Your father's and mother's families from?

BASHIR: Okay, my mother was from the south, okay, Tallahassee, okay, and my father was from Plymouth, North Carolina.

ALI: Okay.

BASHIR: And they met each other when they migrated here to New York City. And they met in Manhattan, young, fell in love and had me. Okay.

ALI: So you mentioned your father's mother, she looked white? Or she was white?

BASHIR: She was white.

ALI: She was white. Okay.

BASHIR: Yes.

ALI: Okay. So when your family -- when your parents separated and you went to live with your mother, is that when you moved to Brooklyn?

BASHIR: That's when we moved to Brooklyn.

ALI: Okay. Tell me about it, growing up, or spending that time. Where in Brooklyn?

Describe it for us.

BASHIR: I lived on St. Marks Avenue, between New York [Avenue] and Brooklyn [Avenue], that area; 769, with my grandmother at first. And we lived there for a while. We had a very large apartment, and my mom, she would go to work, as I mentioned, with my grandmother, who had met people who needed housekeepers. And she had taken my mother out with her, so that's where she begin to -- how she begin to work. My Aunt Nellie, she worked as a hospital aide. All my other aunts and uncles were -- I had one uncle who was a boxer, and then one who -- one uncle who had a candy store. So they were all individuals that worked and tried to develop and build our family, you know, because we had nothing when they came here. We -- my mother worked hard. And eventually, in that same building, my mother got an apartment on the -- they lived on the sixth floor, we lived on the fourth floor. So I went to the school that was right down the block, next to the Children's Museum. And that public school, that was the first public school that I remember that when they were teaching about African American history, I was made to feel so small and so little, that I wanted to crawl underneath my desk because I was so embarrassed. After the lesson was over, I just felt like nothing.

ALI: What was the lesson?

BASHIR: It talked about slaveries, slavery and how we didn't have anything, and everything -- the white man owned everything, and we didn't deserve to have anything. And we

needed to just be thankful for what we have, because, it's because they've given it to us. It made you just -- it made me -- it made me feel like I had to be totally in gratitude for the pain and the suffering that we were really having to go through for the struggles that my parents had to go through, because my mother -- I mean, I didn't wear the -- my mother kept me clean. Clean. But I didn't have the up-to-date fashion clothing and, you know, styles that every -- some of my peers had, because of our financial strains. So it just made me feel very uncomfortable.

So as I had gotten older, my parents did reunite. And my father then moved to Brooklyn, in that same apartment, on the fourth floor in the same building with my grandmother. And I had the biggest Christmas that I could ever remember. I had a bike, and we had a silver tree. [laughter] I don't know why it's silver, but, you know. We had an artificial tree, and it was silver. And it was, like, oh, winter wonderland, you know, for me to see. And to have all these gifts, and it was just for me and my brother.

So I was taught that anything that I wanted to have, I could have it. Nothing is given -- I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth, so anything that I wanted to have, all I had to do was work hard at it, and it's mine. All I had to do is claim it. So for that, I'm thankful to both of my parents; my father for teaching me that there is a process of learning to learn. And he was self-taught, so therefore no one can ever hold him down from accomplishing anything that he needed to accomplish. And my mother because she's given me also the strength to know that there's going to be some difficult times, but with those difficult times, you can appreciate what you do have, okay? And just enjoy life.

ALI: What was Brooklyn like during that time? Or was there -- was there -- do you remember feeling a difference between what Harlem was like, versus coming to Brooklyn?

BASHIR: Yes. The difference from Harlem and then Brooklyn, because on Harlem I lived on 125th Street in the projects. Very big building, lots of people around. In Brooklyn, I lived in a tenement, not as many people, the streets were not as crowded. Less African

American people during that time in Brooklyn than in Harlem. But it was -- I didn't travel a lot on my own, because I was still very young. However, I did know the difference. And as I grew up, we then relocated because again, my parents separated. But this time when they separated, my mom took both of her children with her at this time, and we then moved to Brownsville. And when we moved into Brownsville, we moved into the projects there, and I began to -- Tilden Projects. You began to know your neighbors, and my mom worked a lot. So therefore, we were -- my brother and I was left home to do -- take care of our chores, and do what -- she's given us all responsibility we needed to uphold while she was not there. So therefore, that led my brother into the streets more. And of course, now with me, my mother just felt that she needed to keep me on a close rein than my brother, because he was free to do whatever he wanted to do. And the chores that I had, I had so much more chores, so many more chores than my brother. My brother only had to take out the garbage, but I had to do everything. You name it, I did it.

ALI: Did you ever protest that?

BASHIR: Not openly. [laughter] Not openly. But I did, you know, mentally, I said, well, you know, if I ever had any children, my children would never -- it would be no discrimination. Whether you're a boy or girl, you're going to have to learn how to do these things in life. This is a part of living, okay, and doing -- being able to take care of yourself, where my -- and it was a difference, because I'd wind up going on one track, and my brother went on another track. He was the track of the street. And the street really captivated him, because it was during that time, you know, him being a teenager, whatever. He got connected with some well-known, eh, I call them gangs during that time, you know, members. And he was very prominent. And myself, on the other hand, I was academically in school doing what I have to do, and then fighting with him, because now, I'm being the older, trying to keep him under control. But at the end of the day, he winds up being more of a protector for me, especially on the street, because -- on the street, because they knew who he was. And because they knew who he was, they would not mess with me. And it was really amazing that --

ALI: Was there a -- was that kind of understood between you and your brother? Did you ever have any conversations about that?

BASHIR: I -- we didn't really talk about it. It was just an understanding. And then I further knew it to be more so when I was coming in from school one day, and some boys, you know, they just wanted to talk to me. And one of the boys said to the other guy, "No, you don't want to talk to her, because that's Justice's sister." So I knew at that point that no matter where I walk on the street, individuals would know who I was. And because I was his sister, they would not mess with me. So it was just understood that because he was out there on the street, that I was well-protected. But then not only that, my mother was well-protected, because they knew who his mom was. So they respected her as being his mother. Then I met my children's father, who became my husband in 1976.

ALI: Mm-hmm, when did you meet him?

BASHIR: I met him, I was around 14 years old.

ALI: So about '72, '73, around that time?

BASHIR: Around that time, yes. And in all actuality, he wasn't supposed to really become my husband. I was trying to hook him up with my best girlfriend, okay, but that didn't work out. So then he started complaining about her. And somehow we kind of fell in love with each other, and I more so than him. He was really -- he was also very well-known on the street, because he was a Five-Percent. And being a part of Five-Percent, he was Now-Allah, that was his name, Now-Allah. And on Livonia Avenue, Livonia-Rockaway, there is a parking lot where, you know, they used to just, you know, get together. It's a group of brothers that would get out there and they would just start to do, you know, their lessons. And he was very, very, very much into his study at that time. So that was his first introduction to what, I'm going to say, his growth and development, into becoming a part of Islam.

ALI: Okay. So I want to -- tell me, before we get to that, when your parents separated and moved to Brooklyn, it was Crown Heights or Bed-Stuy, depending on who you talked to at that time.

BASHIR: Right.

ALI: And then moved to Brownsville, were you still going to church? Was church still in your life at that time?

BASHIR: Church was very much in my life.

ALI: Okay.

BASHIR: Matter of fact, Ash Wednesday, I used to take a bus to get to school. On Wednesdays a bus used to come and get all of the children that was going to church, and I was one of those children who would get on that bus every Wednesday for Ash Wednesday. So yes, I was very much into the church. Matter of fact, there was a Baptist church that's on the corner of Mother Gaston -- Mother Gaston and Dumont, it's a Baptist church there. My mother was not really the churchgoer. It was my dad who was a churchgoer. So when we relocated to Brownsville, I would get up on Sundays and walk to church. And on Wednesdays --

ALI: By yourself?

BASHIR: By myself. All by myself.

ALI: What do you think -- you know, because I guess I could understand, or maybe people can understand when you're younger, because your father's there, and then all these activities, like the choir and the music, that helps explain why a young person would be there. Why do you think, looking back, did you continue to go without either of your parents, by yourself?

BASHIR: Because I knew that there was a supreme being. Now, I didn't know what to call him at that time, but I knew that there was a supreme being, and I knew that I needed to give praise. And my father had instilled in me so much that it's important that you go to church on Sunday and thank God for getting you through the week, that that was my mission. So regardless of -- no one else got up in my household to go to church, and because I was old enough to do it on my own, rather, I understood what the pastor was saying or preaching at the time, the Reverend was saying -- I would get up and go. And then after the sermon, I just walked right back down the block and go home. So that was what was important to me, because not only that, too, at 13th, I was baptized. Yes.

At 13th, during that time when we moved to Brownsville, my father went up -- back up to Harlem, okay, and then I had a great aunt who was also affiliated with a Baptist church. And on the weekends, of course I would go to my father on the weekends, I would sometimes end up at my great aunt's house, where it was a big thing, going to church on Sunday. It was a big thing to where we would sit down to -- at the dinner table with the ham, you know, and the coconut jelly cake that was made from scratch, and the pies, and the whole spread of what happens after you come home from church, okay? So that aunt felt the need for me to be baptized. So I was baptized at 13.

ALI: What did that entail for you?

BASHIR: What that entailed for me was that I stood in a pool of water with the reverend, and he said, you know, whatever the words he needed to say. And then he dunked me down into the water and brought me back up, and it was supposed to be a rebirth, you know, for me to -- this is what my life is, okay, at this point. I had been reborn, and this is the life that I am going to live, I'm going to live that Christian life and do what has been outlined, or told, that that's what I'm going to do.

So one of the things, one of the positive things that I could see that I had gotten from that is the fact that it did keep me in church and doing the right thing, because there's always right and wrong. So if you're going to follow the Ten Commandments, you're going to do the right thing. So it gave me that foundation in my life. And I always wanted -- anyone that I've been around, I've always -- never wanted anything ill to be reflected towards them. I just always wanted to have peace. Because when you -- growing up during that time, and if you were bussed -- because I was one of the children that was bussed -- if you were bussed, and there was always cliques. So if you weren't with the right clique, you were either afraid that someone was going to do something to you, or -- and if you were a part of a clique, then you know, you were really bullying somebody else. So for me, I guess we were the outcasts, because I never -- I didn't bother anyone, nor was I afraid of anybody.

So I guess that made me a little different. And a part of that had to deal with the fact that who my brother was, he's kind of, like, given me some of that, not to have the fear of anybody. And then the fact that I also know that there was a supreme being who was going to take care of me when my parents aren't around, because that's what I was taught -- that's what kept me -- that's what protected me, shielded me from what was going on around me. So those that became in my circle, that was a whole 'nother, if you will, gang, gang of no we're not going to be taken advantage of.

ALI: So when you met Now-Allah, was he Now-Allah at the time when you first met him?

BASHIR: He was Now-Allah when I first met him.

ALI: So tell me about this meeting. Because here you are with a very clear, for you, understanding of religion, and here comes someone that you meet, who says, you know, "I'm Now-Allah."

BASHIR: Well, when I met Now-Allah, he was very much into his lessons, okay, but there were a few other brothers that he was with. But they would travel together, you know, because not only did they meet in the parking lot behind the, you know, the projects there, they traveled to various spots in the Brownsville area, you know, to, you know --

ALI: Hold their ciphers.

BASHIR: To hold their ciphers that's correct. So my -- so eventually, though, he, Now-Allah, became Khaliq Bashir, okay, and he was then introduced, somehow during his travels, he was introduced to the Nation of Islam. And then with him being -- now for me, I mean, one thing about it, we didn't get into any discussion about my religious beliefs and his religious beliefs, because when I went to church, of course he wasn't out there, they weren't out there while I was going to church, and he didn't see me really going to church, and we just didn't talk about that.

ALI: Did you ever, what was it like witnessing them do a cipher? Did you ever -- can you -- what was that for you? Or whatever you can remember -- what that experience --

BASHIR: Well, I thought -- I don't have to tell you, I was very fascinated. I have to tell you, I was really very fascinated when I heard them doing the ciphers, because everything is connected to the science. The science and the mathematics, okay? When you start to

study about the universe and they talked about the universe, and how everything is connected, really, when you looked at it as a whole, and when they started -- I found it to be very intriguing. But not enough to say that this is -- you know, I'm now going to become a Five-Percent, okay? A Five-Percenter, so --

ALI: Where there other -- were there young women around?

BASHIR: They -- they had --

ALI: Because they -- so the men were regarded as God.

BASHIR: Mm-hmm.

ALI: And the women --

BASHIR: Women were the queens.

ALI: The queens.

BASHIR: Yeah. They all -- we all -- they just hung out together. That's what they did. Okay now, the sisters, they also knew their stuff too, because they were studying the lessons alongside their -- their men at that time, you know. So when Now-Allah, who now became Khaliq Bashir, Basheik Bashir, when he became Bashik Bashir, he was now moving towards the Nation of Islam, and that white supremacy. Of course he got his lessons, and now he's moving into now, I guess, that development of removing the shackles that had been placed on the African American man, okay, because again, I could not really relate to the Nation of Islam at that time. Because Elijah, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, this is what they taught. They taught black supremacy, and the white man being the devil. So for me, I could not relate, but I understood the mission, because the black man -- and I just looked at the black man at that point from my father's position, was held down from achieving the status that he rightfully deserved because of the color of his skin. Since my father, I guess, he got kind of, like, gotten a ticket, if you will, because I am the same complexion, light-skinned complexion, same complexion as my dad. So the darker -- of course, you hear the darker the skin, the sweet of the berry, you know, that. That's what they -- that's what the black man kind of, like, fell on, and this is what they talked -- talked about.

But the struggle that they had to go through, I guess, for my father was a little less because he was a little lighter. So therefore, he was able to secure a stable job that would be able to lend -- fortify his family a little more than the darker complexion of the black man. So I understood that. And what I really could appreciate was the fact that they cleaned the streets, because when you walked our streets, in our neighborhood, you always saw -- you saw the black man with the wine bottle, they smoking cigarettes, or even smoking reefer on the streets. So for me, when I started studying what the movement of what was actually transpiring, I was able to see that it was something that was definitely necessary for our growth and development as a nation, as a people. When the brother -- when they started cleaning the brothers up off the street and bringing them into the masjids, or into the temple, letting them know how they had to clean themselves up and put on a suit, and go out and sell the newspapers and the fish. And I'm watching all of this evolve around me, you could see -- an individual can clearly see the importance of that movement for the black man. And then for me, as a reality check, was that now, with this movement going on, I was able to see that the black man could no longer say that he's going to be held in shackles, because what was being taught was, do for self.

ALI: How did you -- or did you see these changes reflected in Kalik Bashir as the --?

BASHIR: I did. I did because --

ALI: Describe the changes you saw.

BASHIR: His dress, because, you know, he became more of wearing more suits, and bow tie, okay? You know, the fedora, you know. He was just well-kept, okay? And that's appealing. That's appealing when you see -- educationally, because that's another thing, too, it was always expressed to the black man how important it was to educate yourself. Get an education, however you may do it, okay, so that's important. That was very important. And he exemplified that. He worked for the courts during that time as a clerk, so but at that time when we were growing up, that was impressive. So that kind of attracted me to him, and he worked in the treasurer, the treasury at the masjid, the Temple 7C, he had his mentors that had taken him under their wing. So these are the

things. I saw him as a young, black man that was on the move, on the move to something that was very positive and constructive, to development in society as a whole, because we were always made to feel that we were less, that we were not the kings and queens that we were, our ancestors were, and were stripped of that. So here it is now, he's on that road. So that was what really attracted me to him.

ALI: Do you remember your first experience visiting the mosque or the temple?

BASHIR: Yes. My first experience visiting the mosque, the temple, okay -- and actually it was really the masjid at that point.

ALI: Okay, so you didn't come --

BASHIR: To the temple at all. I didn't come to the tem--

ALI: -- to the temple at all prior to '75.

BASHIR: Exactly. In '75, I stayed home. And I listened to 8-track tapes of Warith Deen Mohammed, and with listening to those 8-tracks, and how I got the 8-tracks is from my husband. He would bring me 8-tracks home, and I would listen to them, I would play them. Warith Deen Mohammed, I was so intrigued by him in his knowledge that he had. Not only the black men and black woman, okay, because during that time, he was also talking about our development and what we needed. But I respected the fact that the FOIs [Fruit of Islam], they took care of their people.

There was -- you know, even the women. When the women came in, they had to go through their classes, okay, the sewing, the cooking, you know, that rites of passage. The women, we all had -- they had to go through that. When I say we, and I'm embracing it also, because even though I didn't physically do it when they were doing it. As the transition from the Nation of Islam into Islam, you had the sisters that were a part of the Nation, who just brought that right in. And they continued to dress the way they were dressing when they were in the Nation of Islam when it first happened, because I had my fez, and I had my uniform, and I dressed like that, too, you know. Of course my father was a tailor -- he also taught me how to sew. So I made my own clothes, so I was comfortable with how I looked. And so going through that process, I

was also taught, I got the recipe for making the bean soup and the bean pie and the fish, and the -- I had my own recipe book, which you wouldn't even believe. My third child, she is always claiming that book. But it's still in my drawer at home, and whenever they need me to make something, or they want -- I always refer back to it, because that is from the Nation of Islam.

ALI: As you now began making your own spiritual journey into Islam, did you have conversations with your parents, or especially your father, or your relatives who had baptized you? You know, what kind of reaction did they have to this?

BASHIR: Well, my mother was very much against me becoming a part of -- embracing Islam. And that was a very strenuous journey with her. However, for a matter of fact, because I went through this thing of cooking in the same pots. Again, I can't eat from -- if you cook pork in that pot, I can't eat out of that pot. You can't cook my food in that pot. And that, I think, I have to say maybe, for maybe a couple of years that happened in my lifetime, but -- during my lifetime. Then once she realized how serious I was about my religion, because I have been in the church, and I have -- I had to have a conversation with her to let her know that I've studied, and this is the true religion for me. She then started to embrace it. And then she wanted my children -- we had children, they were young, but then she wanted them to be a part of her life, so she started to embrace Islam for what she know it to be from me. And because my mother was never really into church, maybe that could be some of the reason why, even though there was some animosity about me becoming a part of the -- learning more -- becoming Muslim, that she just went through that. But it was not as painful, because --

ALI: What do you remember the basis of her objection being?

BASHIR: Well, the fact that I wasn't eating any pork -- any more pork, okay, and she was going to cook that pork, okay, because there was really nothing else, other than that. My dress, she could only just be -- she didn't even talk about that because -- so much. Oh, yes she did, the headpiece. Because a lot of times, what they would refer to the headpiece on us as that rag, putting that rag on your head. "What you putting that rag on your head for?" So once she realized, and then once she saw how beautiful I looked

with it, that changed that tune. So like I said, after the first couple of years, it was just -- she learned to embrace it. And even with my children, understanding, coming from that Christmas aspect, she wanted to give them Christmas gifts, because that was her holiday. Then we had to come to -- you know, I kind of had to find a mutual ground for us to compromise, to become one on. I found one. However, you have to be very careful when you're doing certain compromises with children, because they get confused. So she understood that.

And my mother lives with me now. And she no longer eats pork, which she knows it's no good for her. Because she -- in my family line, there is -- she suffered from hypertension. So with her changing her diet, it's made it much better for her, because also looking at it on that side, from a healthy perspective, usually the African American was oversized, obesity tend to exist, you know. You have the high cholesterol, and you have the hypertension -- these are all of the things, these ills that plague our society. So she's learned that these are the thing that are no good for you. And the smoking of the cigarettes -- that, that, my family, back then, they were chain smokers. You didn't even have to smoke, just being in the room, it's like walking into a smoke factory. And you come out, your hair is smelling like smoke, your clothing is smelling like smoke. Even if you didn't smoke, it was almost like the smoke was seeping through your skin. That's how bad, you know, they -- you know, it was just intense with the smoking. But now my mother don't smoke. And she smoked for 50 years, so she's added years of life onto her -- you know, stopping smoking after smoking for 50 years. It's been such a blessing for her.

ALI: What was the -- you said there was a compromise you made with her for Christmas.

BASHIR: With -- with the children?

ALI: What was that?

BASHIR: So now, also now, you also understand that principles, Kwanzaa also came into play in my household, you know, so you have the seven principles. So now what I had to -- I had to say to my mom and explain to my mother that the seven principles -- and I

went through all the principles with her, how important they were for the growth and development of our children, and family structure, that this Christmas ideology, this belief that she believed in, didn't really fit. And this gift-giving, I'm not into giving gifts like that. So either if you're going to give them a gift, it's either -- it's going to have to be before Christmas, it will never be on the day of Christmas. Or it would have to be after Christmas, never on that day. So she embraced that. And she was satisfied. So she would never -- she would always do it before Christmas. [laughter] At least, you know, a week or so, she would give them whatever it is that they wanted, she wanted them to have. Then of course she would still do the tree, however, and my children would see the tree if they visited her house. But they understood that this is -- we went through the knowledge of what that tree represents. So they got the understanding of what Christmas -- and got the full knowledge of what Christmas really stood for at that time.

ALI: How did your father respond to your spiritual journey?

BASHIR: My father was very open. My father and I had a very open relationship. And he allowed me to do whatever he felt that I needed to do, as long as I was doing the right thing. And I could talk to my father about any and everything, so I miss him dearly. And he was my friend. He was really, truly my friend. He only hit me once in my life. And the only reason why he hit me was because he had warned me not to carry my Jewelry in a pocketbook, because you lay your pocketbook down, and people will steal your things. Of course, you know, you think you know everything as a child. I would still put my Jewelry in a pocketbook, and guess what? I was robbed. And it broke my heart, because all of my Jewelry that he had purchased for me, or what was given to me, I took good care of my things. It was stolen. And I cried and I cried and I cried. And he told me to stop, and I wouldn't stop. So he tapped me. And it wasn't even a spank. And I was just devastated, the fact that he just hit me, because there was no reason for me to cry. So then after he hit me, I stopped crying, because he had already told me that he was going to replace everything that was in there. So there was really no reason.

So he -- we had that type of relationship. That he respected me for what I stood-- whatever it is that I chose, because I was a good child. I listened to what he told me not to do, and very responsible. So he embraced it. And I used to travel with my children, with him on vacation at least once -- one -- one week out of a year, every year, up until he died. So my children got the opportunity to really know their grandfather, and to live with him, at least that week out the year. Of course they would see him throughout the year. But however, got the time to spend, that personal time with him, and to learn who he was.

ALI: When did he pass?

BASHIR: My father passed in, oh, I want to say -- because I lost a son around the same time. My son died in 1991, in May of 1991. And my father passed away that January of '92. It was very, very easy for my dad to accept Islam. And he didn't -- one way or the other, if I was coming over, he would make sure that there was no pork out, was being served. So he respected what I believed. And then eventually mother started to do the same thing. And everyone else in the family started to do the same thing. And then if they didn't, then I would take my own. I would not, not go to family reunions or gatherings, because they were doing those things, because I always felt that it was vitally important for every member in the family to know who their relatives were. So we would go. And if they could not eat, they couldn't eat. They would eat when we leave, or whatever.

ALI: So you talked about having children, and you mentioned you lost a child.

BASHIR: I did.

ALI: Do you want to talk about what that experience was like?

BASHIR: Being Muslim, well, number -- I had three other children prior to giving birth to Hasan. Hassan, when he was born, he was born d-transposition of the main arteries. So as a blue baby, he would have had to have gone through a series of op-- corrective operations to repair his heart, to function, you know, in some type of normalcy. And but at one month old, he had a pulmonary banding, which held for 16 months of his life. So this child was born to our family, who was very -- my other children were older. My son,

at that point, was 16 -- 15. My other children, my oldest daughter is, like, three years younger than my son. And then Ayidah, you know, she's three years younger than her sister. So they were older, and when he was born, they embraced him and loved him dearly. And he was -- I would say, everyone would tell me how bright my children are. But for me, I feel that all children are bright, really. It's a matter of exposure, what they are exposed to. So they really did a lot of things with him. And he was very attached to them.

So when he, at 16 months, when he became sick, I totally devoted all of my attention to him. I stopped work, and I lived in the hospital, in North Shore University Hospital in Long Island. I worked for Prudential Securities at that time, in the corporate office, and they respected me as a Muslim woman, also as a mother of an ill child, and knew the devotion or dedication that I had to being with my child. So I didn't have any problems at all with taking care of him. And then my other children were old enough that they were able to do -- they knew how to do their homework, what was expected. And then because their brother was sick, not wanting to worry me, had really stepped up to the plate to do what they needed to do for -- matter of fact, they were attending Cushman Campus Schools at that time, and they were participating in the bees. My children, they always placed second -- first, second, okay, place. My third child, she would always come in second place, never first place. I couldn't understand why this child would not come in first place. However, this particular year she came first place in all of the bees, math, spelling. She did a skit on her own and put her clothing together -- she did the whole nine yards, and I was not even present. But she did it because she knew that she could, for one. And two, she wanted to let me know that mom, even though you're not there, I'm going to do what I'm supposed to do. And I can do this, even without you being here, okay. So that was such an enlightening feeling for me, because what she taught me was that it's not about what you want. It's about what I want. So as long as you give me the right ingredients, it will come out the way you want it to come out, so let me do what I need to do, and I'll be okay.

So once I realized that with her, I mean, I was able now to accept. And when he passed away, it was very hard on my son. And with my son it was hard for me with him, because coming up, he didn't have a close relationship with his dad, because he never understood -- again, being a part of -- his father being a part of the Nation of Islam, and then moving into the Nati-- Nation of Islam, and then even then moving into Islam, he kind of made it somewhat what he interpreted it to be. And it wasn't really the right thing, so my son could not really embrace it to its fullest, but understood that I was concerned for him about the love that he would have. But Allah is truly merciful, because my son loved his brother dearly. And for that, I guess Allah has put him in our path, with that purpose, to show me that I don't need to worry about my son and what his relationships would be like with his children, because of the relationship that he had with his father. And so for me, with my belief system, which is never to question the will of Allah, was my saving grace. And also to be thankful for -- and know that and realize, number one, you don't question, and number two, you've been blessed with three others prior to. So you have to now take care of them and be the strength for them in order to move on. And then I had a fifth child.

So, which because they really wanted to have -- wanted us to have another child. So -- not that that was the reason for us having the next child, but it just happened to, you know, evolve in that way, and --

ALI: Did you -- were there any kind of special resources or support systems that you found in the community? Or did you feel like you kind of had to carry this weight of losing a child by yourself?

BASHIR: The community was very, very embracing. And the sisters were there for me, and they came to my house, and they were always there for me. And they would bring food, just showed -- they showed me that I'm not in this thing alone. And if I needed to talk with anyone, they were right there for me. And they were -- they knew who I was, because I was a worker in the community. They were there. They were just there for

me. So -- and having that support, that sisterhood, made it a whole lot easier. And then having the sisterhood that had spiritual growth that could guide me along the path. And with me also being the type of person, being a reflective type of person and saying, well, trying to see -- my philosophy has always been -- if something is wrong, if you do something wrong, if you can find something good in it, then that thing that was wrong can now be turned around to be good. So with me, looking back on it, and then seeing what a loss upon what Allah has shown me through my son, and knowing that when you lose a child as young as that, we believe that he'll be waiting at the gate for me when I return to Allah, because we believe in life after death. So he'll be waiting for me, and I'll see him. I'll see him then. So learning that and knowing, and truly being a believer, it softened it a bit.

But no loss, no loss is easy to bear when it's as close as that. And what I learned at that time -- I washed my son's body. Imam Siraj [Wahhaj] sent his assistant Imam to wash the body. And Imam Siraj came to do the janazah. But I then told the assistant, you know, Brother Malik that I would wash -- I wanted to wash my son's body. And he allowed me to do it. Once it was all over, and, you know was wrapped -- he looked like an angel, at peace. He looked so beautiful, so calm, so at rest. And I knew that suffering -- suffering -- you know, that massive heart attack, he would never be the same. And that was just going to be just the first of the operations that he would have to experience. So and then when I allowed, after washing the body and allowing my children to see how beautiful he looked and how at peace he was, and all of us knowing how sickly he was, we were at peace.

ALI: Why was it important for you to wash the body?

BASHIR: Because he was my baby. He was a part of me. In order for me to let go, I've always -- I did everything for him, his medications, everything. If they came and they wanted to extract blood and they didn't get it the first time -- go-round, they weren't doing it again. So you needed to send someone that knew what they were doing. For me, that was somewhat of the closure that I can let go.

ALI: And for people who would not know, what does it mean when you say, “wash the body”? What is it -- what kind of -- for Muslims, what is a preparation of the body for a funeral like? What does it entail?

BASHIR: Washing the body is like, is doing a cleansing of the body, okay, and there is -- there is-- words that are said as you’re washing the body. You cleanse the body. After you cleanse the body, you then -- you put oil on the body, and you wrap the body, you know, in linen. Then, you know, you position the body in the -- in the coffin in a certain direction, okay. Then it is now prepared for the transitional process, you know, to the hereafter. So I went through that whole process. And then, of course, I then asked Imam Siraj if my children can see the body, because as Muslims, you don’t have an open casket at all. Then, of course, the box -- the box that my baby was in -- is not -- it wasn’t a casket, it was a box.

ALI: A basic --

BASHIR: A basic pine, wood box. Basically, most Muslims, that’s what they go in, because, you know, even for us at that time, in losing him, we wind up getting -- buying five plots because we were a family, then, of five, besides his, so that we would be prepared for anything else that come.

ALI: I don’t want to dwell on a painful memory for you, but I do think people may learn something about the funeral practices of Muslims through this story. What kind of -- so Imam Siraj was available. Was there a Muslim funeral home?

BASHIR: Okay, yes.

ALI: Where are the plots? I’m just curious.

BASHIR: Yes. Once the body was washed, Imam Siraj was out of town. And because he was very close to our family, he was going to do the janazah. The janazah’s the prayer service, and it was at Juan’s Funeral Home here in Brooklyn. And he came and performed the funeral, the janazah, which he said some words, and you know, you have all of your family members and friends, and for matter of fact, I worked in, like I said, I worked in corporate America for a number of years. And I worked for a Fortune 500 company, and they shut down the whole department. And the head counsel even came

to my son's funeral. So it was well-attended by the Muslims, and also by non-believers. Imam Siraj performed the ceremony, and then from there he's buried in Rosehill in New Jersey, in the Muslim section, where we now -- I have several plots there now. But then that goes to say I just have several plots because, you know, as your children grow older, they establish their own families. And therefore, they then plan for their return home.

ALI: Well, you know, it's -- people think it's hard to find an apartment in New York, like but really --

BASHIR: It's hard to find now.

ALI: It's hard to find a burial plot.

BASHIR: In Rosehill, because there are no more there.

ALI: Yes. Yes. Yes. Okay.

BASHIR: Maybe because I still have so many, right? [laughter]

ALI: Well, my parents have done the same.

BASHIR: Done the same thing?

ALI: And they bought theirs very early, and they tell me how the prices have skyrocketed.

BASHIR: Skyrocketed.

ALI: I was just, like, wow. All right. So I want us to now get into how you got involved in independent education.

BASHIR: Okay.

ALI: And before talking about the experience of you as a parent, I want to backtrack a little bit, and tell -- have you tell me a little bit about your experience as a student. You talked a little bit about being bussed. And you also talked about being in the classroom, where you responded to the lessons on slavery as feeling something that you didn't want to have to feel. So we don't have to spend too much time, but I'm interested, what schools did you go to when you were growing up?

BASHIR: Okay. One of the schools that really -- I went to PS 52. That's an elementary school in Sheepshead Bay, okay? A few blocks -- I graduated from PS 52 to go to a junior high school called Shellbank Junior High, which I received citizenship award, because I

was, you know, quote-unquote, you know, somewhat of a “upright citizen,” okay. From there I went to Shellbank High School.

ALI: And where was that?

BASHIR: That’s on -- right across the street from -- right across the street from Shellbank Junior High. I would have to take the 44 bus from East New York -- well, at that point, make the connection, okay, to the 44 bus, and ride that 44 bus out to Avenue U, and get off at Avenue U, because sometimes it stopped. You had to get the 36 bus to take it over down to, you know -- Emmons Avenue, and walk over two blocks to the school. So I had to -- we had to travel. My friends and I, we had to travel to get to school. My experience in high school, I have to say, once I got in school, I stayed in class. However, the majority of the friends that I had in class, I was very much into my lessons. And of course we had teachers that weren’t really about establishing some kind of order and control in their classroom so that teaching could take place. However, they allowed those students that didn’t want to do anything -- and I’ve had a classroom where there were boys in the back shooting crap, while girls were back there, that really weren’t into the lesson, were back there jumping Double Dutch. However, I was sitting up front where the notes were on the board, and copying down the notes to get my lesson for the day. I got through that. And during that time, too, you didn’t really, as a female, you really didn’t want to get caught out in the hallways, because of the fear of you being jumped by others, you know, that wanted to bully you, or -- so that was heavy, you know, going on at that time. So you did what you needed to do. And any time you traveled, you traveled in a group, so that someone would have your back, if you will.

Going to Sheepshead Bay, I kind of got in the mindset that I wanted to really pursue becoming a -- business management, so I needed to get into a really good business school, like either Pace University or Baruch College. Well, I got accepted to both. Okay, I got accepted. The first letter I got was to Baruch College, and then Pace came afterwards. But of course, I wind up going to Baruch College, and studied some finance

there. And then I went on to getting my MA in Human Services from Metropolitan College of New York, which is -- which was very, very -- it was not an easy task. Because that's not a traditional -- you do -- you get your degree in record time, okay, so therefore that means your load -- you're carrying a load of 17 credits, opposed to 12, 14 credits a semester. And a lot of responsibility is placed upon you to get your work in on time.

ALI: And during this time, you were having a family.

BASHIR: I had a family. We did. I had a family, and a lot of my education was placed on hold, because the simple fact is, I understood the importance of educating my own children, that became my priority. We had to -- I had to prioritize things in my life in order for it to be successful. So my education kind of, like, fell back until my children became more firm in their direction to their educational growth and development.

ALI: So tell me what -- the kinds of decisions you made for your children's education, and how did your own experience --

BASHIR: Formulate that?

ALI: -- inform that? Yeah.

BASHIR: Well, for one, choosing the right -- my children weren't going to public school, that's number one, based on my educational background and what I experienced. I was not putting my children in that situation. And number two, I have also learned the importance in knowing your history, so no one can really tell you that you're less than who you really are. So the more you knew about your history, the stronger you became, and the more knowledge you would seek to obtain whatever it is that you wanted to achieve. So based on that, it was very hard for me to find a school for my children. And I started looking in the yellow pages, talking to people, visiting schools unannounced. That's how I found the school called Al-Karim which was located on Park Place in a brownstone house. I walked and walked and walked, and I stumbled upon 876 Park Place, was introduced to the head mistress, Ora Abdur-Razzaq, and that's where the relationship evolved. That's where every last one of my children went, even up until the last child, okay, my last baby girl. The same teacher, Sister Joyce, taught my -- all of my

children. I told her I have one more, and she has to give them -- she must give them what she's given all the rest of them. And she did that for me.

ALI: What did you like about Al-Karim School, that you wanted for your children?

BASHIR: When I was first introduced to Al-Karim, they had Islamic background there, because they taught -- Arabic was being taught by the man that used to be a part of this masjid, Imam -- his name will come to me in a moment. But he moved up to Albany, okay, but he was the man here at the masjid, okay? They taught a variety of language from African, Swahili to Spanish to French, to a whole plethora of languages that the children were exposed to from an early age. My children were being taught that someone that looked just like them, that understood the importance of us understanding about the history and where we came from. They also understood the importance in giving the children what they needed as African Americans, to stand up and be proud about where they came from. So all of that, you know, put together was the ingredients that I felt my children needed, coupled with the fact that I would give them anything else that they needed at home, or supplement anything else that they needed at home to be successful in their growth and development. And being in a family-oriented environment, and that's what it represented, Sister Ora being at the head. You know, she had her children working there, who was once -- you know her daughter, her oldest daughter was my daughter's teacher. And my daughter put her little feet in Sister Ora's daughter's shoes, and my daughter now teach-- she's a teacher in Dubai.

ALI: Hmm.

BASHIR: Okay? So all of these things is what was so prominent-- so, so, so valuable to me making the right decision for my children. The first schools, because I also understood that those were the foundation years of my children's growth and development. And they needed to have a strong foundation in order for them to be successful. And I've always been very, very concerned for my son; him being a black man, what would his life be like without knowledge? So I had to find the right institution that was going to cultivate what Allah had in him, okay? I found that at Cush Campus Schools.

ALI: And you started working there.

BASHIR: I did.

ALI: Tell me how you started, how you got to work there.

BASHIR: Well, I started working there because I always felt that -- I was always involved with the PTA, always involved with anything that was going to help keep the doors open, because I know as a private school, we struggled to keep the doors open. Also, being an African American, that those challenges, coupled with those challenges, it wasn't going to be easy. So staying involved was the key to bring about a change. That was my goal, to stay involved so that I could say that I have been a part of something that was very positive, that was giving something to my children, that I could say that I've given back to that community.

I served on the board for several years at Cush Campus Schools. Prior to that I was PTA president for several years -- anything the sister Ora -- I just felt in debt to -- I don't think in debt to Sister Ora, opposed to being more or less for me in debt to the institution as it stood as a whole, but then with her being at the helm to navigate it through, all of the challenges that had to be met in order to provide the community as a whole, you know, for all of our children to be successful.

ALI: So what role did you play when you started working there?

BASHIR: I was in the adminis-- part the administrative staff, the liaison between the regulatory bodies and also the parent body, building systems, you know, keeping the systems going. That was my role there. I only worked there for one year, 'cause they were financially struggling. And I had left. I remember during those times which led me to leave corporate America, sitting in my corporate office and my desk in my office and saying, making a du'a to Allah, asking him to bless me with the resources that I need to come and work in my community. And in doing that, when you make these prayers to God, you've got to be very careful what you ask for, because when you're given it, then now you have to be ready to accept what comes along with it. So I worked at Cush for that year, and it was very rewarding. Sister Ora was also very helpful to me,

as I was continuing my education, because I had to do internships. So of course I did my internship there. I learned much. One of the -- what can be very humbling to me is the fact that every -- the college, the Metropolitan College of New York, you had to do what they call "Constructive Action papers," and every last one of mine's were accepted into the library for other students to come in to use as a resource, because they were so well-researched and put together. So being there and being -- having that exposure just only wanted me to even give more back.

ALI: The papers you wrote, were they about the school? Or about --

BASHIR: They were about certain topics that you had to cover.

ALI: Oh, okay.

BASHIR: Like, for example, ADHD -- I did 125-page paper on ADHD. And by the -- now, I definitely don't have a doctorate, [laughter] but however, I would -- by the time I got finished with that paper, I had already diagnosed several people, okay? [Laughter] So it's just, you know, there were on various topics of my development, in order for me to be a professional in the field of Human Services. And one I did on study -- one of the papers that I did was on teaching, learning to learn. There's a process, and many people don't even realize that there is a process in learning to learn. So from even the way a room is set up, and the lighting, you know, the materials that you have -- it's a number of components that contribute to the learning process. So I'm really -- I was really grateful for everything in my travel that -- and the growth and development of my children that Cush Campus had given them, so that's why I was always by Sister Ora's side, 'til this day. I still -- you know, I see the family, we're very close in that sense. And it's very supportive of one another, because of that, because I also come from the background that whatever I have -- if I have, you have. We now have. It's not about just me as -- it's about me, I, this is mine -- no. No. Then nothing in this world belongs to you, everything belongs to Allah. So once you realize that, you're able to give it freely, and it will flow.

ALI: Mmm. So this was an important transition for you, because you were coming out of corporate American now --

BASHIR: Into the private --

ALI: -- becoming more involved in education.

BASHIR: Yes.

ALI: So now --

BASHIR: It was major.

ALI: Let's talk about how you came to be the director of the Clara Muhammad School at Masjid Khalifah.

BASHIR: Well, that was very interesting, because in 1997, the Imam Adib Rashid, asked me to be the director of the Clara Muhammad School, and I told him no.

ALI: Why?

BASHIR: Having the responsibility of educating other people's children is a great responsibility. That's how I see it. I saw it as not feeling that I was going to let down the parents or the student, but that I might fall short in the eyes of God. So for me, everything was about Allah. So taking on that challenges, and then really not understanding fear, how should you fear, I just -- it was just easy enough for me to say no. Then I knew that I had to give at least something back to Cush Campus Schools, because they had given me so much. So I'm just -- was just -- I took that pay cut because you make a lot of money corporate America, especially on Wall Street, okay, where my friends, you know, or my associates weren't getting bonuses at the -- you know on the top, the top. You always got a cut. Okay. So I had to give back. And when I gave back for that, yeah, I was going back into corporate America, because when I left corporate America, I left corporate America on a good note; very positive. Because of the type of individual I am, my work speaks for itself. So not really -- now to say that I didn't have any educational experience, I've always been -- education has always been a part of my life, and then now educating all of my children, you know, I had that experience, that exposure. So working there for a year, I wind up leaving there, and I was going to return back to corporate America -- Imam Adib asked me yet again. And he made me feel miniscule, real small, because -- and I think it's, you know, him saying to me, "We need to build our own educational -- we should have our own." Then also,

listening to Warith Deen Mohammed, because, you know, during that time, too, him, you know -- being a follower of his, and him talking about building community life and education, number one priority, okay, there was no way I could say no, that second go-around. So of course I didn't say no. But what I did do, even though I was -- I was still in the masjid at that time, but we just had a weekend school. And I made sure that all the textbooks, you know, I established a relationship with the publishing companies and got the materials sent here to the school. So I kind of, like, done the legwork, if you will, so it was here. So now it was just basically now for me just to commit to taking on that responsibility. And I did say yes. And hence, he did -- and this time, when he did ask, he only told me -- he was only asking for two years at that time of my life, just two years. And if I would commit to that, he would be grateful. And of course, I did commit to the two years. I've been here ever since.

ALI: That was in '98?

BASHIR: Nineteen ninety-eight.

ALI: Okay.

BASHIR: This marks the --

ALI: Twenty years.

BASHIR: Twenty years.

ALI: Wow. For people who may not know or understand the history, I want to talk about the history of the school under your direction. But tell me a little bit about the name. Why is it called the Clara -- [inaudible] [pause].

BASHIR: The Clara Muhammad School --

ALI: Let me ask that question again.

BASHIR: Mm-hmm?

ALI: Before we talk about your tenure here, can you talk a little bit about why the school is called the Clara Muhammad School?

BASHIR: The school is called the Clara Muhammad School because of a woman, Sister Clara Muhammad, who was married to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. And her plight, her plight to educate her own children and provide them with the best

education possible -- she had taken in her own children -- well, other children besides her own, which were considered to be truancy children, to educate them. And she just stood the ground of what she believed in, which was, no one can educate our children better than we can, provide the very best education for them. So with that being said, we became a part of the Clara Muhammad School system under the W. D. Mohammed. And then eventually, we asked W. D. Mohammed if we could use his father's name, because we are the only school that has the name Elijah Muhammad Junior High School. So he had given us permission to do that. Today, or, you know, and years ago, you would have heard more of Sister Clara Muhammad School. Then what I did was, because there were so many Clara Muhammad schools -- and that's all they were known by, Clara Muhammad School -- I then put "Of Masjid Khalifah" for identification purposes. Because when -- I noticed that when the children take tests, if you are not able to really identify, your students' tests were being sent all over the world. And it just so happens that I had gotten, on my desk, students from California because of the name Clara Muhammad, students from Queens, okay, because their name was Sister Clara Muhammad. So and I've always got my Clara Muhammad School of Masjid Khalifah's, you know, grades, students' grades because of the fact that we had "Of Masjid Khalifah."

ALI: What do you think makes the program or curriculum here unique?

BASHIR: What I hear from others is that they're always looking for structure. They're looking for discipline. They're looking for spiritual or moral guidance. So those components is what make our school -- and also safety, with those components. And we offer that because we know -- we do our own security, okay. We have, we have the moral structure, because they're taught being proper, that character, okay, through the Islamic studies in the Arabic, with the spirit to grow to it. One of the beautiful things is, too, that when -- nowadays, not only the Arabic is considered one of the languages that is known in the public school system, you can actually learn Arabic in the public school system, so they have recognized that as being a vitally important language, that people are talking these days. It's something that we should consider offering to others.

So the simple fact that our children learn this, early on, makes it much easier for them to take on other languages, because you definitely know that they need to take maybe French or Spanish, or now Mandarin, okay, because that's now being penetrated through the public school system. So I think that is what really makes us unique. And the simple fact that we have a leader like Warith Deen Mohammed, who taught us about the intelligences, you know, the four intelligence, which is, you know, the professional, the educational, the financial and then, of course, the academic, okay? Academia knowing that we have to prepare ourselves in order to go out, to compete with others in the community that are non-Muslim.

What also makes us unique in itself is that we are small. We're like a boutique school, if you will. Family, being taught that family is very important, that I'm not going to say one thing, and another teacher is going to say something else. We're on the same track, which is going to lead us to education -- achieving educational, moral and educational success.

ALI: Are -- we might have to pause here.

[INTERVIEW INTERRUPTED]

ALI: Okay, so we're back, continuing our recording. It is still Monday, September 10th, 2018. I'm Zaheer Ali, and I'm still here with Sister Darlene Bashir. We were talking about the Clare Muhammad School of Masjid Khalifah. One of the questions I had was about the student population. Are all of the students Muslims? Or tell me about the students who come to the school.

BASHIR: All of our students are not Muslim; however, what we found is that when we first opened the doors, the majority of our enrollment population with non-Muslim children, the parents had expressed to me why they were looking, searching for a Muslim environment for their -- Islamic school environment for their children. And they had expressed that they were looking for a structure, a structured environment with a

discipline, where learning can actually take place. So they normally come to the Muslim environment, because they know that there is a discipline that we do, and there is a structure. Because we do stop for -- we open up with prayer, and then we pray certain times during the day. And in order for you to do that, you must have a discipline. So they have -- they seek us out.

ALI: Where do you think that reputation comes from? Or that sense that -- association with discipline with Muslim -- or at least with this Muslim community?

BASHIR: I think it all stems from the Nation of Islam. I'm a firm believer in that, because when you look at the discipline that was taught for us, you have to be -- you know, you don't -- if you were on security, you don't leave your post until you're properly asked to be dismissed, okay, so you're there until someone relieve you in the proper way. Not only that too, even with coming -- being dressed a certain way, you know, the cleanliness, clean clothing -- that's a process that you discipline, that you're going to have to -- steps you're going to have to take so the end result will be what you're looking for, and what others -- how others will perceive you. So I think it all stems from the Nation of Islam. I think for, in our environment, in the Clara Muhammed Schools, we exemplify that. I know that I -- one thing that's vitally important to me, and I try to encourage my staff the importance of being punctual. Because, you know, that saying, CP time [colored people's time] -- we don't believe in CP time. We say we should be here at 8:00 a.m.? Okay, then you need to get there at 7:55 to make sure that you're on time, because this is what the children will emulate. So when you have that responsibility of knowing that you are responsible for modeling for the younger children, you just have to go that extra yard.

And I truly believe that discipline, that structure, that we're supposed to have. And it just went from the Nation of Islam into Islam in itself, because the Qur'an, you know, there's a structure in the Qur'an. Once you understand what it is, because it's a -- and that's a discipline, because it teaches us even in the Qur'an there's certain times -- even with Ramadan, from, you know, for me, according to my understanding, my humble

opinion, I truly believe that it also teaches that structure, because there is a, if you will, a ritual, a routine, in what you're supposed to do, when you're supposed to do it, and how you're supposed to do it. Once you -- once that is established in one's life, you'll understand, and it's all connected to the universe. So that is what I truly believe.

ALI: What are -- I want to talk about what the challenges and the rewards are of directing a Muslim school, institution, here in Brooklyn. We'll talk about the challenges, and we'll talk about the rewards after. Tell me, what are some of the challenges of directing a Muslim school in Brooklyn?

BASHIR: Well, when I decided to make this, this change in life, career, which had -- I was 40 years old. I decided that I was going to go into the field of education. I never thought that number -- one of the challenges would be that everyone's vision is not the same vision as your own. And you have to get people to buy into your vision, whatever that may be. I never thought that parents, even though they send their children to a private school, really didn't want their child educated. And when I say, really didn't want their child educated, it meant that when you know that your child need your assistance, if you don't sit down with your child to give your child what your child needs at home -- school has a role to play, home has a role to play. And when the two of those paths merge together to be one, the outcome, the success, will be what you so desire to have. That was -- that's really a challenge.

Personalities, working with people is not a easy task. I'll never forget studying Naomi Brill, okay, and she spoke about -- she dealt with people -- way of communicating with people, people and others, working with people, people. And working with people, that's a challenge in itself. And adults trying to navigate through the different levels of understanding of indep-- individuals' growth and development is unique in itself. You now have to use a psychology of accomplishing what you need to accomplish with these people, and that's just basically to educate their children. So I never knew that that would be one of the challenges that I really had to face, coupled with the financial constraints that is placed on the community as a whole. I guess I never thought about

it as I was raising my children, because we just knew we had to sacrifice to pay that tuition, because it was either you pay on the front end, or you pay on the back end. And my philosophy was I wanted to pay on the front end, because I thought it would be less money on the front end than on the back end. And so be it, because what it did illustrate for myself and reflect -- reflected at the end is that my children were given scholarships. I, as an example, I received a presidential scholarship for every semester that I was in school, because of the fact that I applied myself to my study. So you can reap those benefits, if you were given the knowledge of learning how to learn on a early set.

Those financial strains was quite challenging. Those are some of the -- besides, I could also think of another, which is parents not really want to parent. They want you to be the parent for them. And that has become challenging for me, because during that time it was ACS [Administration for Children's Services] -- you know, before that. It's ACS now, but prior to that you had -- they were called -- what was it? Child -- it was Children's Services. I can't even remember what it was called at that time. And it will probably come to me after this interview is over. But the thing is, when you have those regulatory bodies that are governing how you should -- and what you should do with your children, how to rear them, they're not also giving the parents the skills, or the tools to put in their toolbox to handle what the children are doing outside that's not -- that's negative. So in order for you to say not to do this, give them something to help them facilitate the positive outcome that it's trying to meet. Parents have a tendency -- some of the parents that bring their children to the school have a tendency of relying on you, the school, disciplining their children, disciplining their -- you know, having them using the reward system, you know, or just having them sit out, time out, or whatever. They're not really -- they don't want to -- it's like that good cop, bad cop scenario. So the school would be the bad cop, while they're the good cop. It has to be a balance.

What I found in educating children is, you have to have a balance force. Once you find that balance, the children will do what they need to do, without you even telling them to do anything. Once they had that respect, they will have respect for themselves first, and then everything else will follow behind. And that's what I've learned, based on some of the challenges that we've had.

ALI: What are some of the milestones that you're most proud of as the director of the Clara Muhammad School?

BASHIR: I would say when we reach -- I think the pinnacle would have been when we reached eighth grade, because the goal -- what was the goal? When we opened the doors in 1998, September of 1998, the goal was to go up to eighth grade. And we opened the doors, going to -- with grades K through 3. And having grades K to 3, we only had -- we had two classes, K to 1, and 2 to 3. As we started to evolve in to accomplish our goal, it became a little bit more challenging, because then you also have to deal with more people, giving them direction, and then making sure that you're choosing the right mix, the right fit. Because everyone can't work in our environment. And this environment isn't conducive to everyone's learning, or everyone's teaching, or everyone's philosophy in a way of they think a child should be taught. So making those decisions and having a banner school year is, is very enlightening. Then once we reached that eighth grade, it was, like, yes. I personally don't have a desire to go beyond the 8th grade, because I know ninth to twelfth grade is a horse of a whole different color. And I know that even the middle school, elementary to junior high, is a process; it's a change with discipline and a change with growth becoming -- thinking that you're more independent than what you really are. And you know, you think, when you get in that middle school, you know it all. And you're just starting to learn a little something, and a very little at that point. But you think that you know it all.

And then not only that too, you're starting to -- that understanding of the fact that God has created us really as opposite sex to be attracted to one another, and how do we manage that? The use of proper adab [etiquette] in pursuing relationships, because

there isn't no courtship, per se, for let's say male-female courtship in that sense, of having a boyfriend, girlfriend. So learning the proper way to pursue relationships, knowing that their peers outside of the Islamic environment do have boyfriend and girlfriends scenarios. So trying to manage that is --

ALI: How did you navigate that with your children?

BASHIR: It's very interesting. I have one child, which is my third child, she was very attracted to the opposite sex, okay, so much so that I told -- I went to Sister Ora, and I said, "Sister Ora, this child -- we just have to get her -- let her graduate. Let's get her out of high school, and she can get married. Once she has her graduation in high school, we can go right down to City Hall, and she can get married." And Sister Ora, she laughed. My daughter, I kind of, like -- I told her that you can be intended, intended to an individual, if that is what you so desire, okay, but that means if you're intended to this individual, meaning that you're dedicated to being -- saving yourself for that individual as they continue to work on building their resources so that you can become one. So you have to be dedicated to that individual, until you have consummated your marriage, to start your family. So she embraced that. She embraced it, I don't know, she must have been 13 years old. She went to my mother, and my mother, because I have a three-unit home, my mother was in the top unit. She went up to my mother, in the middle of the night, talking to my mother, talking about she's getting married. And my mother was livid. She came downstairs, and she said, "What, she's getting married?" Then of course, my mother not really knowing about Islam, and then you know in Islam you can marry your children. You know, that is a practice, where they have married their children. But not to say that that's the road that our children were taking. So my mother came -- and I had to calm my mother down and say, "Mom, no."

ALI: She thought you were marrying her off right then.

BASHIR: Right then. She just thought that her granddaughter was not going to college, you know. She was going-- not going to finish high school, she was going to get married. Because when she said she's intended, my mother said, "What? What are you talking about? Getting married? Oh, no! This is not going to happen." So I had to explain to

my mom what that process entailed. And no, the individual that wanted her hand in marriage, first of all, it had to be approved by her parents. And the process is, he has to be able to provide for the family financially. So then, of course, she has to finish school. So my mother was comfortable with that, she was able to go rest, okay. This is at 12:00 at night.

So she was able to go back to rest, and my daughter, mind you, the person that she became intended to, wind up not even marrying him. But it did save her, because she feared Allah, for one, and then she met her husband, who she has now been married for almost 15 years, and they have two beautiful children. So just like any other married couple that's faced with the challenges of being parents, and also male-female relationships, and how to get through that. But that's how I dealt with, you know, dealing with that boyfriend-girlfriend situation.

ALI: So speaking of marriage, you got remarried --

BASHIR: Yes.

ALI: -- in 2005?

BASHIR: Five. Yes.

ALI: And you married Imam Adib.

BASHIR: Yes.

ALI: What has that been like, to work, and in the same space with your partner or spouse?

BASHIR: Imam Adib is a very direct individual. And he has a vision for the community, in which he wants us to develop. So it can be very challenging, because, you know, everything is connected. It's all connected. So you know, you really don't -- I personally don't really want to have to take that home, because they say, you know, you never mix your personal with your, you know, your work experiences -- you don't want to take that home. It's a challenge, because I, as an individual, he is who he is. And he's a very strong, powerful individual. So, you know, even for myself, I find that I have to let him be who he is. Then, for that matter, to -- I kind of, like, need him to allow me to be who I am as an individual, because I do have my own vision. Not to say everything that I

think is right, but we both understand that Allah, by Allah's sign, have created us with an imperfection, but perfectly by design. So with that being said, neither one of us are perfect. But we are to strive for perfection.

So in a nutshell -- it's not easy. But we continue to do the work of Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala, and trying not to let that get in the way in what it is that we are doing. So that helps a great deal.

ALI: So this is the last question that I have. It is September 10th, 2018, and I think it was 10 years ago yesterday, September 9, 2008, when Imam Warithuddeen transitioned, or passed away.

BASHIR: Mm-hmm.

ALI: Can you tell me what that was like for you to experience in this community?

BASHIR: It was a very traumatic experience for me, because I embraced his Islam through his teaching, because he was such a humble man. And I have had the opportunity to be up close, as close as I'm sitting with you now, with him, and to be in his environment. And to hear him in his soft voice speak, and that you want to listen to what he has to say, because you -- I realized from early on in the '70s, in the mid '70s, that this man was way beyond his years at that time. And it was so much for us to learn. And I was saddened, really saddened, to the fact that where our community was at that time, it wasn't -- many of us weren't ready for him to make that transition. So and many of us have stopped, right then, you know, at -- on that date. But however, it has -- what it has taught me is that I have to go on. And I have to study, and I have to learn for myself what he was giving us. See, we have a tendency of taking for granted the knowledge of others until it's not there. And that's everything in life, in my humble opinion. I believe once that thing is gone, then we miss it, and then it's too late. So I don't, by a long shot, don't want all of that knowledge that he has been trying to pass on to us to be forgotten. And I will pass it on to my children, who will pass it on to their children, who will pass it on to their children -- so therefore, the legacy of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed will live on forever, if I can inshallah.

ALI: All right. Well, I'm good. Do you have anything else you think you want to add?

BASHIR: The only thing that I would like to share is that this experience of working in the community, and I've said that early on, that working in this community has been challenging, but yet it has also been quite rewarding, because anytime you pass on information to a child, and that child regurgitates that information, or passes it on to someone else, you're being led. So the reward for me is that I've been able to share with them the knowledge and the skills that Allah has blessed me with, and that's what I asked him for, to give me that. So I've been rewarded for that. And then even my son, and the imam that was teaching him Arabic back at Al-Karim, Imam Zaki -- he's given my children so much during that time that helped them. So all of it, it's like a full circle, if you will. And I just want the circle to continue not to be broken, for it to continue -- just to continue. Because that's what life is. If I'm not here, it lives on and on and on. And that's what makes us a powerful people as a whole. Thank you.

ALI: Thank you. Thank you very much.

BASHIR: Okay.