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**Oral History Interview with Nailah Lymus**  
**Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.37**  
**Interview conducted by Liz H. Strong on September 12th, 2018**  
**at Brooklyn Historical Society in Brooklyn Heights, Brooklyn**

STRONG: So, today is Wednesday, September 12th, 2018. My name is Liz Strong. I'm here for the Brooklyn Historical Society's Muslims in Brooklyn Oral History Project with Nailah Lymus. So, Nailah, just tell us where and when you were born, and a little bit about your life growing up.

LYMUS: Oh, wow, okay. I am -- well, my name is Nailah Lymus. I was born actually upstate in Oneonta, New York, and moved to Brooklyn around the age of three, and I've been a resident ever since. I love it. And, that's a little synopsis of who I am. [laughter]

STRONG: So, tell me about your parents, your siblings, what life was like when you were young.

LYMUS: Life was quite exciting. As, based off of the project, I am Muslim by faith, and in my family what was a little more unique with my upbringing was that I was born Muslim, whereas my parents, my sisters -- I have two sisters that are Muslim -- they all converted together as a family. So, it was a little more of an adjustment for my sisters to practice the religion, because they weren't raised that way and then they converted, whereas myself, I was born into Islam, so.

So I had a really good upbringing. I think by then, my parents had figured that they stood like trial and error like how to have me be like, balanced and like the religion but also, you know, in the secular world and how to have friends and not be like too harsh with like, covering my hair, anything like that, because you know, you want to cultivate a good social life for the child but also like the religion as well. So, because some of the stories I hear from my sisters, they -- it was a little more of an adjustment, [laughter] for them, like, "Covering my hair, now where'd that come from? You guys decided to become Muslim." But, you know, they adjusted.

But for me, it was a lot easier, and both of my parents were artists, so my father was like a photographer. He was a respiratory therapist career-wise, but as far as artistry, he was a photographer, and then my mother was like, very like, she's very like Bohemian chic, so I think that kind of sums it up. But they both like encourage me to be creative and artistic, so I had a good balance of that which, from a young age.

STRONG: So, tell me a little bit about your memories of the Brooklyn neighborhoods that you lived in -- what were they like, what were some key details of the neighborhoods -- anything like that.

LYMUS: Well, most of like my recollection goes back to living in Williamsburg. The area in Williamsburg that we lived in was by like, Graham Avenue, so that's more of like a Latino community, and it was very vibrant. I mean, I enjoyed living there. It seemed pretty -- because I did, I covered my hair and things but I didn't feel like ostracized in the neighborhood, or like anyone was like, looking at me like, well why is she dressed like that? Even like the children, it seemed very like open, but it's just a lot of culture, it's like, they're a very like celebratory group of people, so there was always like, baseball games going on down the block, and like, loud music, but in a friendly way. Like their music wasn't like, offensive in any way, or you know, it was welcoming, like I walk by and they're like spinning me around in a circle, like [laughter] as I'm walking down the street.

So, it was, it was interesting, it was very fun, and there were like a lot of parks around where I lived, so, you know, I was constantly like, getting more familiar with like the neighborhood and that, other children in the neighborhood as well. And there were other nationalities that lived there as well, but that was like predominately, because Williamsburg is, you have like more -- you have an area where there's like where your Jewish comprise, and you have an area that's like, Latina, then, so that was more of the area where I was at. You have even like an area that's a little bit Russian, so, that was more the neighborhood that I lived in, and I really enjoyed it.

At that point, I lived with my father, and I had started attending a Muslim school, so that was a bit of an adjustment, but I think being able to go, have the balance of being in an environment where there's Muslims and more like address like my religious needs, and then being able to come home and adjust to just like, the overall world, because it's not Muslims everywhere -- it's a multifaceted world -- then I think it just created a good balance for myself, and my father would bring me to work with him sometimes, being a respiratory therapist, and I would get to speak to some of the patients and things like that. So, just a very caring environment. That's kind of the sense that I had from Brooklyn, with my upbringing, but I loved the culture and the diversity; that's what I really enjoyed about it.

STRONG: You told me that you've been going to Masjid At-Taqwa, since the '80s, right, before it was at its current location?

LYMUS: Yes.

STRONG: Tell me what you remember about that.

LYMUS: So, there was a much smaller facility that Masjid At-Taqwa operated in, and then over the years of fundraising and things they were able to move into the space where they're at now, and over the years they've upgraded that space as well. But that experience, the experience went well. That was one of the home mosques that my parents took to like when they came back to Brooklyn. So like I said, I was born in Oneonta, and when they moved to Brooklyn, that was one of the [00:05:00] mosques that they went to. It was like, not too far as far as neighborhood-wise, and they were welcomed there, and it was predominately like African American, that mosque as well, because every mosque is like comprised of like different nationalities and some more nationalities than others.

So that was one that was related for them, especially being like, new Shahadas, like new to the religion, so that was like a home that they really enjoyed, and I mean, I enjoyed it as well. I had a lot of friends there, and it was good to see more Muslims, because like

living in Oneonta, it wasn't, [laughter] wasn't really so many, so that was like a good change for me of like, "Oh, there's a lot more other people like me going on here, so that really worked out well."

And then, over the years, I think just like with the change of neighborhood, and other nationalities moving in, and different just communities that want to find like a good home, like a mosque that they feel comfortable in, a lot of them did gravitate to Masjid At-Taqwa, and the location is very convenient to get to and familiar. It's not -- you know, some mosques are like, operated out of like a home, and things like that, which is fine, but everyone can't really navigate it.

So with that one being like in like prime Bedford-Stuyvesant location, it was easy for people to find and get to, and I just found, I found for myself that over the years, a lot of the demographic of the mosque changed, and I kind of outgrew it in a sense of, not really being familiar with like who was there. I mean, I definitely know the imam who's there, and some of his family that attends the mosque, and some others, but a lot of people, between moving away, or just growing families, or getting too expensive to live in Brooklyn over the changes, it just became more of a mosque that I didn't relate to as much because I wasn't really familiar with the, I guess I would say, the population that was more so attending.

And then a lot of the, the Khutbahs, which is similar to like a sermon I would say, for our religious service on Friday, was done, like constructed more in like Arabic, and although I understand Arabic because of like, my religious needs, I don't speak it fluently, so I didn't always know what was being said, which, I want to have like a clear message you know when I go for religious service every week.

So, that just made me navigate to kind of look, you know, explore New York City -- there's mosques all over the place -- and just kind of see if there's another mosque that

I may relate to a little more, and like my teenage years, because you know at this point now I'm older, and that's where I came across Masjid Khalifah, which is the mosque that I presently attend, and I've been going there, maybe since I was about 15. I don't know how many years that dates back, in my thirties now, but, [laughter] so, so I was going there for a number of years, and I found that, with the changes that I think a lot of people just go through in adolescent, or whatever you want to call it years, I just found that I could relate to that mosque better. It was definitely more African American community, and I think with any religion, you have -- it's kind of fuses like your religious beliefs, and then like culture as well does play a role.

So, when I went there, I felt like they understand the needs of like our religion, and pleasing Allah, but also at the same time, that we do have cultural needs or community needs, or like as a people, we need things that we have to work on maybe more than others, or some things that we need to address in a different kind of way, and I felt like that mosque was catering to those type of needs, and they still do. So that really connected with me, even myself at that time, I was kind of like, you know, I would wear my hijab in like a bun. Like now, I cover my neck and everything of that nature, but I kind of went through a little teenage phase, and you know, although I didn't uncover my hair or take off any clothes or show skin, it was, you know, my clothes were a little more fitted, and things like that, and I found that Masjid Taqwa, it was a bit frowned upon to come in that way, and although I understand that was not the best way to dress at that time, it just didn't make me feel very invited.

So, with Masjid Khalifah, it still was a conversation, because you know we are obligated to kind of pull somebody's coattail if we see them not quite doing the right thing, but the way they did it was just in a more inviting way, and you know, just making sure I knew, like, did I know how I was supposed to dress, first and foremost, and then, you know, I said, "Yeah, well, I was born and raised Muslim and everything," and they're

like, “Well, you know, Sister Nailah, you kind of know better. Those pants are a little tight.” [laughter] Like, okay. Let me start wearing skirts, you know?

So, so the way they did it was just more inviting, and what I really connected with was their understanding to the need of us being African American Muslims, and being like, in Bedford–Stuyvesant and being in Brooklyn, and the needs that the community needs overall, where, we need things as, you know, as Muslims we need to strengthen our ranks and be a tighter religion and a stronger force to show how positive the religion is.

But on the other level, the best way to do that is to interact with your community, and I found that they did a lot of like, community work, and food pantries, and we have a school there but the school is not only for Muslims; the school is just open [00:10:00] to children. But naturally when they come there, they just learn through being around other Muslims like, it’s not a scary religion, or, it’s not anything that promotes negativity or hurting anybody, and you just kind of learn through experiential movements, and that’s really what the religion is about. You know, we don’t have to like, go preaching to anyone, and there’s a forum for that, but it’s really just about learning through human interactions, and I really found that at Masjid Khalifah, basically, and that’s why I’ve been there ever since.

STRONG: When we talked before, you said there was also kind of a disconnect fashion-wise, not just that you --

LYMUS: Yes.

STRONG: -- were experimenting as a teenager, but that you saw people dressing and expressing themselves differently --

LYMUS: Yes.

STRONG: -- at Khalifah than at Taqwa. Can you say more about that?

LYMUS: Yes, so, as I mentioned, I was -- I grew up in a very artistic household. So it was always seeded in me to be like, creative, like even you know when I would cover my hair when I was young -- I’ve been covering my hair since I was five years old, and

when I used to wear it, I loved wearing it pinned and hanging in the back, because I felt like it was like an extension of my hair, and it was like, longer than on my front.

And so like I really embraced wearing a hijab or a khimār, you know either word can go, because when I hung out with my friends, it was like, this is my hair. It was like down to my butt, like, you know, [laughter] I would pin it really long. But my mother and my father was like, “You can wear headbands on your khimār, like, everything your friends are doing, you just put it on top, you know.” And then, I’d wear like a little bang in the front so like a little bit of hair was out, you know, because I wasn’t really obligated to cover my hair but they wanted to get me familiar with it for when I had to.

So I say that to say, I was always raised to be like creative and expressive and artistic, and you know, embellishments with my clothing, and I didn’t find that as much at Masjid At-Taqwa as I got older. When I was younger, I did see that more, but as I think the dynamics of the mosque changed and the congregation members started to change, then some of the, some of that creativity in the dress started to change, and when I went to Masjid Khalifah, I mean, it’s just so diverse, and what I found was, from young to the pioneers in the mosque, they all were like, these divas on wheels, and I’m like, what is going on? Like, they have like these African prints, then they’re wearing saris, then they’re like, wearing like jewels; they have broaches on their hijabs. I’m just like, what is going -- head chains.

I’m like, this is the place to be, like, not only is the religion, you know, intact here, but that fashion presence is dazzling to my eyes, you know, and like, I’m an artist. I’m into fashion, and like, I like this, and they found out a balance of how to be fashion forward, and you know sometimes I would like, after service, we would like go, grab a bite to eat or something, and like, everybody would be giving them compliments, and I’m like, this is like, This is great! Like, I, I need to be here. [laughter]

So, definitely the fashion was something that connected with me. I mean being young you know, 15, 16, you know, that's kind of important to you at that time. You want to look nice, and you want to be presentable, and get some compliments, and you know to see that -- and it wasn't in a flaunty kind of way. It was just, they just dressed with colors and you know, it was still modest, it was still covering, it still fitted the guidelines of dressing as a Muslim woman, but it didn't leave out their personality, and like their cultural, you know. I have -- there's women in there from like the Caribbean, and that's a very vibrant culture, so, they're wearing hot pink skirts, and you know what I mean, like neon green hijabs, like it's happening, and I just loved it. So that definitely, I connected with that for sure. From like an artist's perspective, that connected well.

STRONG: So, tell me about your early experiences as an artist yourself. When did you get into making your own clothes, or jewelry, or anything like that?

LYMUS: It's, it's been some time. Like I mentioned about doing, wearing a khimār when I was young, one story that my mother will tell to this day -- she will tell everyone so they know -- like, "She's been an artist forever" -- is I used to take stockings, and tie the two stockings together, and then create like a flower on the top of my, on top of my scarf, and like that was my thing. So it was like, every time we would go to -- and it was like local, like Duane Reades, and what do you call those, like pharmacy stores, or things of that nature? We would go and buy like, a whole bunch of different stockings in like different colors, and like those are my headbands. Like I would make them into headbands, and it was like, every day, I'm doing my stocking look on top of my head. It probably sounds weird, but if you were to see me do it, it really makes like a rosette, like, on your head.

And so I say that just to say like, from five, I was doing that, and there was a moment where I lived with my mom for a few years, and I was actually homeschooled then prior to coming back to Brooklyn, and during that time, I was very into like gemstones, because my mother is. She's like a homeopathic healer, and she's very into like stones, and you know, healing powers, and things of those natures, so, I was into stones

naturally, and they're just so pretty. I mean, they're so sparkly, and I was just into it from a girly perspective but also because my mom had them all over the house, and [00:15:00] I came up with a jewelry line.

So there's a really big festival in Syracuse that they have. I forget the name, but it still happens, and it's all centered around gemstones. I mean, it's huge. It's like thousands of people come there for it. And, I showed. I had started a jewelry collection made out of gemstones -- I was seven -- and when I went and I had like a small table there, and I was selling like these bracelets that I made, and they had these little tags of like -- what? Like oh, turquoise stones are for tranquility, and like, amethyst and rose quartz, and like, how it can make you feel -- because I know that from my mom -- and they were just so impressed. I mean now when I look back at it, I'm like, that was kind of advanced, but when I was doing it, it's like, this is what my mom does, so I'm just getting the bead version of it, and putting for you guys to wear.

And so I sold some of my pieces there, and I got in the newspaper. So that was like my first like, little, I guess piece of like, exposure to like the youngest designer here, you know, who had like a jewelry line, and I designed jewelry for years, and my mother was very instrumental in like booking. So she, she had like -- I had a composition book, and every time we went -- we used to go to Jo-Ann Fabrics, and any time we got beads, I would have to take one bead, and glue it on to the composition book, on a page, with the label that, you know, how it indicates like the label of the size of the bead, glue that, so anytime I needed to reference the same bead, that I would be able to go to my book and go back to the store and get it.

And I was like, she was really, prepared me for what I'm doing now, but I just say that to say, from the age of seven, I was very into fashion and you know, having people -- have wearable art, is basically what my focus was, and I still, that's like what drives me now, is like wearable art, like you can be like your own canvas, and that could be like an

extension of who you are in representing yourself, and not necessarily being like a clone and looking like everybody else, and you know, like you can be your own person, and your fashion can, you know, can show that.

STRONG: So, tell me about, from that point on, how you got into making clothes.

LYMUS: So, it was a long journey. I mean, I was jewelry designer for a very long time, and then, I went to -- I took like two cosmetology classes, and I started working in a salon. So I had been doing that for a number of years, and then, I'm skipping years, but basically that brings me up to now, high school.

So in high school I joined this fashion group, and it was comprised of like, those who wanted to be models, or designers, or anyone who kind of just wanted to be in that industry. They'd do sketching. And we -- that was the first year; this was when I went to Benjamin Banneker High School, which is in Brooklyn on Clinton Avenue. And so we started this fashion group, and at the end of the year, we had a fashion show, and I was one of the designers that showed.

So I was designing things just to wear on my own, while I was in school, just because I wanted to be fashion forward, and express myself creatively because I'd been designing things for a long time just between the jewelry and just wanting to be different -- I always liked being different -- and then, trying to prepare a collection, because I just made things for myself, like every day going to school, and then, a lot of the students complimented me and they were like, "Well how come you don't just do something for the fashion show?" And I was like, "I'm not a designer; like, [laughter] like I just kind of make these things for myself." They're like, "Well I mean, it's a school show; like, why not do it? Nobody else in here is doing it, so in the school, we consider you a designer!" [laughter]

So I said, "Oh, okay," you know, so I just put a collection together from what I kind of did styles that I would make for myself, and the models who were in the group, the

students in the group that wanted to be the models, they wore the clothing. So we all kind of piggybacked off of each other, and they wore the garments, and what was surprising to me, because I didn't expect it to really go anywhere, was that a lot of the parents of the students wanted to actually order pieces, and I wasn't prepared with any order slips, or like, anything in that way, but, it just made me open my eyes, like "Whoa, whoa! If people are taking it serious enough to put some cash in my pocket, [laughter] maybe I should be looking further into it," because I'd enjoyed doing it. Like, it comes to me naturally; it's not a forced type of learning structured type of thing to me. It just is something that's innate. So, if they're interested in it, you know, why not move further?

So it was kind of like I fell into the clothing design. I mean the jewelry was intentional, the hair was intentional. But the clothing was kind of what I did for myself, and it just happened to be, you know, silhouettes and garments that others liked as well and would want for themselves.

So that's what really was pivotal in me designing, and from high school, from that experience, I went to LIU, downtown Brooklyn. I went there for a year, sad to admit, but, I got this internship at this boutique while I was going to school, and it just like, fast forward everything, because I started there as an intern, and then -- I was offered to put a few of my pieces on the rack. It was a consignment [00:20:00] boutique in Brooklyn. And, I was offered to put, just a few pieces to see how they went, and they sold, and they went well, and then the owner of the boutique offered me to have a full rack, and that was like, again, it's like I just kind of fell into it. Like, "A full rack?" Like "I'm really selling my clothes?" I can tell people, "Buy at this store," like, okay!

So, it just kind of went like that, and then eventually, she asked me to manage the space. So she was a makeup artist, an industry makeup artist. She did a lot of music videos, so a lot of time she wasn't at the store. So she felt comfortable for me to take

over and manage the boutique, and then even like, sign on other designers that come and wanted to have a place to sell their, you know, their designs as well. And that situation, then she would sometimes bring me on set where I can get some of the behind-the-scenes feel of how it goes, being in the industry and knowing the behind the scenes, because that's a whole 'nother level. Like, that behind the scenes is like, you have to be prepared and ready. If you really want to be in that business, you have to really learn all ends of it.

And so, with that being said, I didn't finish school, with LIU, but I just went to the school of the hard knocks, really, that's -- [laughter] I learned through my experiences, and just advice and mentorship and things of that nature, and this is where I am now.

STRONG: So LIU was for pediatrics, right --

LYMUS: LIU was for pediatrics. LIU --

STRONG: -- a completely different --

LYMUS: -- was not for fashion at all. Yeah, I love children, and I wanted to be able to help them, you know, in some type of way, and I said, "What better, you know, environment than the healthcare industry?" And, as much as I loved doing that, it just, because fashion came to me so naturally, you know, it -- not that I'm lazy in any way, shape, or form, but it was just, it's just in me, you know, and I think me being in this business for since 2003 to now it's clearly evident: that's just what I'm here to do.

So, that was more of like a learned career, of something that I felt like I did want to do to help people, and in this career, I mean, being a fashion designer and having an agency and many other hats that I wear in this business, it still allows me to help people, and that's ultimately what I wanted to do. So I feel like I'm still, I'm still on that path, and then, you know, I have a 10-year-old son, so, sometimes when he's sick, I have some knowledge from, [laughter] from my one year, and then just being a mom, that I can help him from some of my information so that works out.

STRONG: So, how did you find this boutique, and what was it called, and --

LYMUS: The boutique was called The Spot 88 [phonetic 00:22:31], and it was located on South Portland, which is in Clinton Hills, and I found it through -- how did I find the boutique? Taking me back now. I think I just, yeah, I walked into the boutique. I just came into it because I liked the way it was set up, and how they had their window and everything like that, and it was actually a carriage house, where they converted their, the downstairs area like, basically where they would have kept like, horses, like stables kind of thing, because they had these really large doors. They converted that into the boutique.

So, just the layout of it was so creative, because although I had been to other boutiques because I was always into fashion, shopping around, and going to SoHo, and all these places, I just never saw a place like that, and I was like, "There's so much character in here!" Then I went in there and I was like, "Consignment, I love consignment stores!" Like, consignment and thrift stores, I live in those places! So when I went in there, I was like -- and then it's like, black owned, and I'm like, "This is like, this is the place." Like, I'm loving it. You know, it wasn't far from where I lived. At that point, I lived in Clinton Hills as well, so it was like walkable, you know, for me to go to.

And, it was just -- I just loved the way it looked, and it was so creative, and they had such a variety of -- of different garments and accessories that they sold but it still like made sense. It wasn't like, hodgepodge like, all like, we're [phonetic] [00:23:47] -- you guys are selling sandwiches too? I'm like, well what do -- "Are you selling like, you know, key chains? This is random" -- like it just made sense. So, it just visually attracted me, but I came across it by happenstance. Like I was just walking down the block and was like, what's this place, and then I went in and I was like, and then I spoke to the owner, which that was like a big deal for me because I, I'm speaking now, but I can be quite reserved at times.

So, I just went, and then I was young, so like pitching myself is like, I don't know what I should be saying, but I knew I loved fashion; I knew I loved that boutique. So I just asked, you know, was she offering like any internships? You know, I was like fresh out of high school, and was like, "Well can I intern with you?" because I was going to LIU at the time, but I could fit in some hours of interning with fashion any day, and she, you know, took me up on the offer, and then that's, you know, that was like the history from there, then I just grew in that business.

STRONG: So, what were some of your first really important learning experiences when you were, you know, looking at the back end production of these things? What surprised you? What stuck with you?

LYMUS: In regards to the design, with my --

STRONG: Yeah, design --

LYMUS: -- clothing and accessory?

STRONG: -- or -- yeah.

LYMUS: One thing that surprised me was the difficulty in [00:25:00] finding someone who can, who can execute your vision. So for example, with the line, I quickly learned that if I want to take it seriously, I have to put it in stores, or I have to pitch it; I have to have basically a visual catalog of my collection, and in doing so, I'd have to do a photo shoot.

So now, when it comes to a photo shoot, I'm like, "Well, I'm not a stylist. I don't know what to do, so I guess I need to get a stylist." And then what I found was, a lot of stylists, or stylists that I came across, I would explain what it is that I was looking for, but then when they would try to bring it to life, it was not what I was thinking at all, and then I'm like, you know, I don't want to offend anybody because you know, they -- this is what they thought was what I was looking for, but it doesn't really match.

So it, it pushed me to start styling, because I kind of knew what I wanted, or I knew if I wanted someone's hair to be covered, like how I wanted it to be done, and, if I wanted

accessories, like if I wanted it on the right hand as opposed to the left, like I knew all those details, and it didn't seem to come across when others would do it. So although I appreciated what they were doing, it didn't, it didn't relay what I -- what the vision that I was going for to be able to then show it, to boutique owners or buyers, or anything like that, so...

So that was something that was surprising to me, because every time people spoke about stylists, there was some like, you know, that these miracle workers, like they just know how to -- you know, like all I have to do is find a stylist, tell them what I'm looking for, and it's going to happen, and I'm going to have this great look book, and that's -- and we're going to be about our business. And then, that just wasn't the case, and I, over the years, I've just realized like, there's a lot of stylists, but when you find one who really can execute what it is that you're looking for -- because, this is a visual industry. Like, you have to have someone who can relate what you're saying, or what you're expressing, or what you're showing them. They have to be able to do that, and that is, that was something that was surprising to me when I first developed that I wanted to really take this serious and create a look book.

It was a lot of trial and error, is the point that I'm making, because I thought it'd be like, oh, one, two, three; oh, we'll get a photographer and then, finding a qualitative photographer, you know, and I'm like, "Photographer, has no one ever said like the level of photographer, or what kind of camera?" Like no one ever told me those things. It was just like, "You need a photographer; you need a stylist; you need a look book," and then I'm like, you know, through my learning pains, I'm like, well, I went through about five stylists. You know what? I'm going to turn myself into a stylist, okay? Like, I'm [laughter] just going to do it, and worked out, because I mean, I still style to this day, and I'm like creative director on like three other brands so they trust my visual implementation of what it is that they're expressing to me. So I've basically become a stylist to some other brands at this point.

So that was surprising to me, and then, another thing that was surprising to me was that a lot of models were not very -- didn't have a lot of self esteem, which was shocking to me because I mean, all of my life I'm looking in magazines, and I'm buying *Vogue*, and seeing what's in, and they just look like the most confident women like ever in life, like, you want to be them. And then, you know, doing photo shoots, they say, "Oh, oh, do I look okay?" or like, "Oh, should I tur-- oh, I have to just lose a little more weight," and it's like, you're gorgeous; what's going on right now? [laughter] What's happening?

So, that was a shock to me, because I just knew these like, were the it women, and although they weren't -- you know, I was starting out, so although they weren't like supermodels or you know, Gisele, or Iman, or anyone like that, they were still gorgeous women. Like, so I, I mean, they had, they had everything, and you know, in my opinion; they wore the garments gorgeous, you know, beautifully. When I finally did get my look book together, they were very marketable for me to pitch to other boutiques because they wore the pieces well.

And then I just think to like, the behind the scenes of the photo shoot and, you know, some more than others, and I have come across models that are quite confident and comfortable with themselves, but, more often than not, they're very critical of themselves, and I guess because they're in a business where they're kind of like a dime a dozen. It's like, you see pretty faces all the time, you start to now scrutinize your pretty face, like, "Well is my face pretty enough?" And that was like a mind blow to me, like, "Really?" Like, "You're questioning like your beauty?" Because I see it all day, like I'm looking at you right now, like, and everything is symmetrical on your face, and your cheeks are perfect, and like, you know, so that was quite shocking to me, that a lot of the women were quite -- like had a lot of conflicted moments, and then sharing certain stories of different things that they would wear -- they were very happy to model for me because my clothing was always some level of modesty, and although I don't design

for like Muslim women specifically, I design what I call like a transitional clothing. So it can transition for different, different types of modest women.

So every woman does not cover to the extent of a Muslim woman, but there are women that do want to be more modest in how they dress, and that was the aim of my line, of Amirah Creations, and they really seemed to enjoy wearing the clothing that I design because they felt comfortable, they felt like women, they felt feminine, they felt, you know, a little sexy but not like being exposed, or anything [00:30:00] like that or sexualized, and that was surprising to me too, because I'm like, "Well you guys don't tell someone like if you don't feel comfortable wearing [laughter] the -- like you're just going to wear it anyway?" And then like, well yeah, because you know, some of the models I worked with that were agency models, they were like, "We'll probably get dropped, you know. If we complain too much, they'll just find somebody else to replace us."

And then, you know, some of them just felt like they couldn't speak up or they couldn't get signed. You know, the models who weren't signed yet was like, "Well I just got to, got to be quiet and take whatever I can get because I'm trying to get signed. If I complain a photographer might tarnish my name," or you know, whatever the case may be. So, that was a surprise to me as well that, it's like they kind of lost their voice as women, or just as a human period, but I say women because that's the gender I was working with, and it's like they just were like these silent women walking around, like making everybody else's business great and not being able to speak to them when they're not comfortable, and I'm like, that's insane. Like, "What's happening here? What's going on in this industry?" Now that I'm behind the scenes, I'm seeing a lot of this stuff where there's some kinks that kind of need to be worked out, and I made my efforts to address them, you know, in future career paths that I took, that I still do now, so.

STRONG: So, what kind of precedent is there or was there for establishing an agency like yours where you would kind of advocate for the models boundaries in this way?

LYMUS: Well, well like, what, what led me in that direction, or what --

STRONG: Well more --

LYMUS: -- was the turning point?

STRONG: Had you seen anything like it before, before you came up with this idea, is mostly --

LYMUS: No, so --

STRONG: -- what I'm asking.

LYMUS: -- I mean, being, being a Muslim woman and like I mentioned, like from you know, one mosque going to another mosque and seeing like those vibrant women, I had always, more my teenage years, but even when I was younger, I visually saw Muslims that were stylish, but definitely being in that mosque and going to different events with some of those women and seeing other women that they networked with that were very fashion-forward women, I, I just noticed that there's a lot of Muslim women that could very well be models, like, and why is that not happening? And, there was some that I spoke to that did want to model, but they just never even entertained it, because they know the status quo of the industry is more geared towards like a "sex sells" type of idea, and naturally, they're not going to do that unless they would be compromising their religion to do it, and they're not going to do that.

So, they just didn't do it, and I'm like, "That's really sad," because if this is like a dream or something that you're passionate about, I mean, you would going to -- they would go to casting -- I mean, they would do whatever they would need to do if there was an avenue to be able to maintain a balance of you know, religious guidelines, and then also pursuing their dream. But it's like, to choose one or the other, was just like, well I'm going to choose my relationship with my Lord; I'm not going to just sacrifice that. So they just didn't entertain it at all. And I'm looking at them like, I mean, the cheekbones

are perfect; it's like the eyes are like, almond. "Like, you could be walking someone's runway right now," but it's like, a dream deferred, like it just -- it's just not attainable.

And so for me, that was that made me really want to start this agency, and, and the beauty of Islam is that you know, it's an international religion. Like I had friends, I have friends still that are like, Egyptian; some are from Jordan; some are from Senegal. Like, these are gorgeous women that any agency would ideally go over there and sign them and bring them here and just get them a bunch of work. So the only thing that's stopping you is your religious beliefs, and the fact that you want to cover in a certain kind of way but you have everything else, like if you just took off your hijab, and maybe were willing to wear like swimsuits and do some lingerie ads, you'd be hired in like the snap of a finger, you know what I mean?

So, for me, I was like -- we have to find a balance. I mean, there has to find a balance where you can still do that, and again, it becomes a more beautiful way to show what this religion is about. We can be balanced. You know, we can pursue our dreams but still maintain our beliefs, and our faith. That can, that can happen; you just have to create it. You know, you have to create an avenue to be able to do that, and, and that was one of the driving factors for me, because I saw so many women that could be models. I mean, some of them I would just have them model in my look book, you know what I mean? Because it's like, "Although you're not a professional model, you have what it takes." That's, instead of me trying to find -- like, "you're it, like let's just do the shoot with you, please."

And that, and that was kind of the avenue that I went until deciding to launch Underwraps Agency, which is a modest and Muslim agency, and some, like in the beginning, it was a bit of a typecast I think just because I'm Muslim, that although I say "Muslim and modest modeling agency," a lot of people that learned about it, or even like media coverage, more so focused on the Muslim part, which, which is fine, but I

think it, it didn't truly show the reason why I started the agency. It wasn't to just focus on Muslim women being able to model. I mean, naturally that was my first instinct because I'm a true believer that you take care of your own before you take care of anyone else.

So to me, if I'm going to start a modest modeling [00:35:00] agency, I'm going to make sure I get some Muslims in there modeling before I get maybe some Jewish models, or Rastafarian models, or Catholic models, or models that don't have any religious, you know, association but they just want to be modest women. Before I do that, I'm going to make sure that I target my own first. But, it was the whole beauty of the concept of Underwraps Agency is the multifaceted layers of different women from different backgrounds. So, it kind of like, I had to always address, "This is not just some Muslim modeling agency, you know; this is an agency that is for modest-minded women."

So that's what I started saying over the years and I say that now, so that just kind of puts in people's head, in the minds that of those listening, that this is an agency that's for any woman who's modest minded, you know, and you want to maintain a balance in how you put yourself out there, how you present yourself, and we hear stories time and time again with models who are in the industry and when they cross different paths in life -- you know, maybe they get married and now they maybe don't feel as comfortable showing as much skin in catalogs, or doing lingerie ads, or things of that nature, because now they have a husband and they feel a little different. Maybe they're now a mother and they feel like as a mom, yeah, I don't want to really do as much scantily clad like clothing; you know, I want to dress differently. And they shouldn't have to feel forced to do that, you know, if they don't feel comfortable, for whatever the reason.

And that's, that's the focus of Underwraps Agency is to be a home and a comfort zone, to still pursue your passion, and your career and grow, while also maintaining that level of comfortability that you have. And granted, it may limit, it may limit some of

your opportunities as a model, but, if you don't want to sacrifice that, you know, comfort level that you have, and that innate like, I guess, I don't want to say integrity like those who don't cover don't have integrity, but if you want to maintain that integral portion of yourself, then you can do that while still being, you know, with Underwraps Agency, and any time you put a limit on something, it's not going to be of -- the masses is not going to take to it, so you just have to have that knowledge coming in.

STRONG: So, talk to me about the early days of establishing this idea for the agency. You talked a little bit about like, kind of doing like a straw poll and like asking people around, like would this --

LYMUS: Yes.

STRONG: -- work, and what was some of the advice that you got?

LYMUS: So, so I have a publicist who works with me now, and I spoke with her to get some input. She's Catholic by faith, so I spoke with her, because I just wanted to know like her thoughts on the agency, and more of the most extreme version of covering would be Muslims, so it was like, "How marketable, because I feel like other women would easily be marketable, but how marketable do you think that Muslim women would be being that some of them will be strict with covering their hair?" Because some Muslim women are not strict with covering their hair but they dress modest, and I do have like two models on the roster that are like that. But then, other Muslim women that I have on the roster, they cover, and I wanted to know how marketable does she think that that would be from her perspective, because anyone Muslim is going to have a little more of a bias kind of view.

So I didn't want to necessarily speak to Muslims about it. I wanted to speak to those who are in a secular industry because that's who I want, you know. I want, you know, Versace to say, "You know, we have a dress for Fatimah Muhammad to wear, so we would love to hire her." Like that's my aim, because Muslims, we already know. We already know how fashion forward Muslims can be and we have sister fashion shows all the time with all-women audience, and -- but my aim is to get it out to the world, and

so like the secular world, like what it is that we can do, and how beautiful you can be and be covered.

And when I spoke to her about it, you know, her main thing was just making sure that you show versatility with the styles that you do with the hijabs, and then, and also having a very versatile portfolio, as far as how they can dress. So visually when a client looks at their portfolio, they can see like, for example, some Muslim women only wear abayas, so it's a certain type of silhouette of a garment that's, it's not very fitted -- it doesn't really show a shape -- and that is what they wear. They will not wear anything else that is maybe a modest way of dressing, but that's what they want to wear. So, that would not that would not be a model that I would necessarily hire, because it really limits what she can do.

So, the Muslim women that I work with that are models, are more comfortable dressing, wearing clothes that are just out, like you know, fashionable clothes you can buy in a store, but that would still be modestly covering them, and some of it may have a little shape to it, but it's still long sleeved, you know; it's not skin tight or fitted or anything like that. So her, that was, another suggestion of hers was, "make sure that the Muslims that you do work with are comfortable and willing to wear different silhouettes of garments, obviously still being modest, but not, not pigeonholed in just one type of garment." So those are like her concerns, but she was like, "You know, creatively, I already know their portfolios are going to be on point because you're creative and people [00:40:00] have taken to your line for years. They take to you how you dress, so I don't have any concerns with that."

And then you know, professionally, like, I have like a strong photographer that I've worked with for years, makeup artist for years, so she knew that all those other areas of professionalism would be intact, but the area that people may be a little like, kind of hesitant would be those, the guidelines that have to be met, you know, because they do

like to just be like, you know, "Come" -- I mean, sometimes models, they just strip down to like bra and panties. My girls can't do that. They have to either be in a bathroom, they have to be somewhere, you know, behind some type of partition. I'm actually in the process of developing like a portable, like, like a portable partition they can bring with them, so it doesn't become like an inconvenience. Sometimes on set there's not really that much space like that, to just give them a separate place to get dressed, or if it's a unisex shoot, it's like, they just want to like, get dressed, just get dressed; like they don't want to be bothered with all those other things, so that may limit the some of the girls being hired.

So those were areas that she said, "You know, you might want to work out some of those kinks, because although I feel like there's something in it, for it to really be like monetarily gainful, you want to just alleviate some of those concerns that people would" -- like clients would ask, like, "We do want to hire your model, but how does that work with her hair being covered, or like, you know, can she take it off and then put it back on? Or like, you know, how do we maneuver those things?" So, so that's where like, I developed like hijab stylists, so a lot of the times, with, which -- what's interesting now is, it's, it's kind of trending with like dealing with like a lot of Muslim designers now. So you have a lot of even hairstylists that have looked at tutorials, and kind of learn how to wrap hijabs, because they are working with other Muslim women, whether they're Muslims that are just in some level of the business -- you know, you have like Ibtihaj Muhammad. Like, she's not -- she does have a line at this point, but prior to that, with her just being the fencer and being with Olympics and things like, of that nature, they were familiar with the fact that she covers her hair, you know, and there's many other Muslims; that's just one that came to mind.

But, with those, in the beginning, because I launched the agency some years ago, I wanted to make sure I had a hijab stylist that would go with the models, so that they didn't feel like, "Well, what are we going to do about their hair, or how are we going to

cover it?" Like, this is somebody who's familiar with that. Just tell them the look that you want, and they're going to do the look on her. So it's not a hairstylist trying to figure out how to do it, because that's not their area. And I would still want to make a avenue where it'd be more inviting to hire one of the models with Underwraps Agency, so --

So those are a lot of the things that she mentioned to me, and I spoke to like, other -- like I spoke to a photographer, for example. My photographer is not only, he's not, is not Muslim, he's a man, so I just spoke to him, like, "What do you think about it?" you know, because he works with industry models all day, every day. And I asked him, "Well, do you think that there's something in it, and did it" -- and he felt like it was, and more of what they were saying was, not only do they feel like there's something there, but they feel like I could do it, you know. I could be that, the person to bring this like to the industry, because I've been in the industry for so long, and I've ha-- I've been received well. So, they felt like, well, "You started the agency; as long as you know their portfolios are on point, I think that will be received well too because it's coming from you."

So I mean, which was a good thing, and pat myself on the back; now, built up a good enough reputation here to try to carry out a different idea, and that's how it's been thus far. It's been received really well, and we've had a lot of press, a lot of coverage with it, and that always pivots you into like a different area, and more attention, so that helps quite a bit, and I'm just happy to see now -- you know, fast forward so many years later -- that I think that there was something in it, you know, for me to pioneer that idea, because there's like so many Muslim women now that, it's like not a taboo thing. Like, you know, and there were always Muslim women, but what I mean is like -- fashion-related women, that you'll look at fashion and you'll see like a Muslim in there, because we're considered to be fashionable women now. Whereas in the past, that wasn't quite the case.

And that's what I really wanted to bring forward with the agency, was like, "We're fashionable, too. Like, we have sense; like, we like style. We're in the boutiques too buying right next to you guys, but no one's ever seen us, like, but we're spending our money here; we're doing the same thing." So -- So I'm happy to see the progression, you know, over the couple of years where we've, where we've come.

STRONG: So, tell me, now that you're here, tell me a little about the women you are representing, how you find work for them, what kind of things you have to negotiate for them. Walk me through it.

LYMUS: So, I have a variety of women that I have on the roster now, so I have like, I have a Jewish model; I have a few Muslim models. Some cover strictly with their hair, and some are like on and off with covering their hair, so that, so naturally, their contracts are quite different, because I have to make sure although they're both Muslim, there's different guidelines in which they feel comfortable dressing. I have two Christian models, and then I have two models that don't claim any faith, but they just like the concept of being represented by someone who [00:45:00] allows them to be modest and not have to show their skin to like, be in the business.

So it's kind of like a nice melting pot, and what I like about the women in the agency is, how they all learn from each other, and like this was like kind of like an underlining thought to me launching the agency, because of course, it's about, you know, showing the world how beautiful you can be, and seeing Muslims on the runway and things of that nature, but bigger than that, you know, like, when I'm gone, you know, and I'm not on this earth anymore, like I want to have left some level of like a footprint, not only in like the secular world, but really to like -- what could I have done to show a better light on my religion? Like, that's very big with me, and for me, this is like my avenue because I'm very passionate about fashion. It's just like, this is what I love to do. And how can I teach about the beauty of my religion through doing that, but not making

people feel like I'm trying to convert them? Like, I'm not trying to make you a Muslim; I just want you to see that this is beautiful as well.

And, with the agency, seeing how the girls all interact with each other, and their different religions, it's like there's no one's getting -- it's no religious arguing debates going on, and a lot of times that happens when someone's passionate about their beliefs, and they're exchanging ideas, and, you know, some of them don't sync up, and then it becomes like, a battle. I mean, we see it all the time, because it's a touchy subject because you're passionate about what you believe in and if someone else doesn't believe that, you want to convince them, like, "No, no, no, see it my way!" You know, so, what I find with the girls, I think because they have that common line of, "Well, we're all artists. We're all pursuing model-- modeling. We all want to go far in our career," it unites them in that sense, where then everything else just becomes learning information about each other, as opposed to the religion being in the forefront. It's like, we're all models in the forefront, and we're all modest-minded women, which is why we all joined this agency.

So, I just, I feel like it's so educating when I see them all together, and -- and they count like, talk about religion and you know, Saturday is one person's religious day; Friday is one person's religious day; Sunday is another. You know, it's like -- and just to see like how they all interact and respect each other's way of life, and have learned so much about -- about their religious beliefs without arguing or getting into some territory thing, or like, oh, you know, "Muslims don't talk to Jews," or, you know, "how does a Muslim represent a Jewish person," or, you know, "Catholics --" there's a battle. You know, we, we don't have any of that going on, and I just love it because that's really what it should be, like we're just learning about each other, and granted that's not the focal point of how they interact with each other, but it just naturally comes about because they see each other, they work with each other a lot, and they start to want to learn about each other, you know, and in an inviting way not to critique anyone's way

of doing things, just, because you're interested to learn and you want to know, and that's just how humanity just gets better.

So to me, although it's just a few women, it's like, we're working on like building, and being positive, and showing that we can all really get along. Like, we don't really have to have every little niche of beliefs the same, but I mean, most majority of major religions, we have a lot of similarities, you know; there's just little nuances in there that make it different. But, you believe in God, you want to live right, you want to do right by people -- that's a commonality. We all want to do that, [laughter] you know? So, so that's how we operate there. So, so that, I observe that a lot with the girls in there. It works out well.

STRONG: Yeah. So, tell me a little bit about your own line, Amirah Creations.

LYMUS: Well, Amirah Creations started in 2003, and from there, I mean the line has grown.

It was really a lot of learning, because I'm a self-taught designer, so, as we mentioned, I went to school for pediatrics, but I did not go to school for fashion. So, as far as any designing was having a mannequin and being -- I'm a drapery designer as opposed to a sketch designer, so, that's really how my collection came about, with just a lot of pins and pinching, and putting a little whipstitch here and seeing how it works, and then that created my sample, and then I would replicate from there.

So, with the -- with Amirah Creations, that line has just maintained forever, like even to this day, like I still design, and over the years, I just learned. You know in the beginning I would design so many different things and it would be a bit like, discombobulated, like, a cheetah print skirt, and then you know, hot pink dress, and like visually when it came together in the look book, it was just like, disjointed. But that was just the learning process and I see, you know, now, working with other designers who start out, it's the same concept, because as a designer, you just want to show how different, and how unique you can be, and like, "I'm not like any other designer!" But then to, to someone who's viewing the collection, it's just like, "Okay, we get that you want to be

artistic and show us what you can do, but we need some level of cohesiveness to make sense to carry your line, otherwise, it does -- what are we going to get, just one garment? Like, we can't represent your collection [00:50:00] because we don't see a collection here; we just see random pieces."

So that was something that I really had to learn over the years, and my clothing, as I mentioned before, is, is a transitional clothing, so there are garments that I make that, it may be like a strapless dress, that's like fit and flare, so the bottom would be like flowy, but the top like, empire waist would be more like a fitted look, or it may have like spaghetti straps, but again, the bottom would be long. And, I did get some controversy with that in the beginning of designing because I'm a Muslim woman and I'm designing clothing that don't necessarily have long sleeves, or anything like that. So although it wasn't really risqué clothing, it still wasn't... it wasn't a ready-to-wear piece for a Muslim woman. You would have to do something to it.

But as I explained with like interviews or just to clients, or some, you know, women that would ask me those questions that were Muslim women, I just explained that I'm still like an artist, so it's like although I'm Muslim, like, God doesn't limit my creative thought process. So, these are still ideas that I have, and for myself, I like to layer; that's just how I dress, so when I design, I design with that mind-set of layering. So anytime I would wear those same dressed, I'd just wear like, a nice blazer on top of it, because I like that look, so I'm intending for it to be kind of worn that way now. Someone who's not Muslim, or maybe doesn't cover their arms, they can buy the dress and wear it just like that, and to me, that's still a modest dress in the scheme of what's out here, because some of these clothes, it's like -- I don't know what to say -- it's [laughter] quite interesting.

So, you know, with that being said, it was just that, this is how I dress, so I think it was more of an education of, although I'm a Muslim woman, like I've always dressed

layered. I never liked to wear a one garment, like a -- I've never been a one-garment type of dressing woman; that's just never me. Like, I like to wear like a high-waisted skirt and a fitted top and then put a vest on it, like I've always dressed like that. So naturally when I started designing, I design in the same kind of way, so, you can layer it the way that I do which then it becomes appropriate for a Muslim woman to wear, or you can not, and then it's maybe appropriate for someone else to wear.

So that was a lot of the a lot of kind of kickback that I would get, some from like the Muslim community because I think they felt like I was encouraging Muslim women to not cover, or like to not, you know, like have their arms out or something like that, which I would never do, but you just, sometimes just ends up being a conversation, or just reading more of what, you know, I'm about, because it would say that on like my bio or my website, it would say the type of clothing that I make and why I make them. But people are very visual, and sometimes they skip the reading very often, I'm sure. A lot of people know that, especially with like news and things. They see a picture and then they just jump to the conclusions and next you know they're on Instagram and they're saying whatever, and no one did any reading. It's like, it's fundamental guys; like let's get into the reading, please.

So, with, you know, having that information and me referencing, "Well, if you looked at what I said and da-da-da-da," because I'm always going to say that because I don't want them to think that I'm trying to promote something that's not correct, but, it's like, "You kind of dropped the ball where you didn't read and get the proper information which is why you're even asking me this question. So although I'm going to answer, I just want you to kind of refer back to where you saw the picture, and if you read, you would see that was like, a show from Fashion Week, and I wasn't promoting Muslim models. I was just showing my line, and I wasn't showing it on Muslim models so you're going to see models that have their arms out, or that have a high-low, you know,

skirt on with like skinny jeans or something because this is an industry runway show. It's not specifically for Muslims, nor are there Muslim women wearing the clothing."

So they just have to -- you know, I do other things. I don't just do this one area that you're asking me about. I wear many hats, so that, that, that is something that I constantly have to reiterate and explain but definitely beginning of Amirah Creations with the line, I had to explain that a lot because they just thought I was saying "Muslim women should dress like this," which I wasn't.

STRONG: Were these conversations happening within Khalifah, with your own community?

Or is this --

LYMUS: Not so much --

STRONG: -- more like in general?

LYMUS: -- in Khalifah, more in general, more in general, a lot of like social media, messages I would get --

STRONG: Oh yeah.

LYMUS: -- yeah when you post pictures and things like that on Facebook a lot about, you know, you know "God won't be pleased about you like, encouraging women to walk like that in front of men, like being uncovered," and I'm like, "Well this is kind of like an industry show; it's not a show that -- And they're not, and first and foremost they're not Muslim women, that, that are wearing the clothing. These are just models, like they're just like your models from agencies, and then secondly, I'm not encouraging Muslim women to uncover. If you look at the premise of the agency, like, I'm all about covering, and you know, being modest and maintaining those ideals. So, this is -- I don't -- you're maybe looking at the picture and misunderstanding what it is.

And again, none of the clothes were anything naked. I think just thinking of a Muslim woman, now we couldn't wear it, but any other woman, like if I never was Muslim or [00:55:00] just a designer -- they would consider it to be a modest line, but because I'm Muslim, it's just looking at me, and I cover, and saying, "Well why would you put that

out there?" And I'm like, "Well I mean, I'm a designer and I keep a balance and have a mission to my clothing. It's to show that any woman could wear these clothing, not just Muslim women, because how is anybody going to learn about the beauty of the religion if we just talk to our own community about it? Like, that's not sharing the knowledge." So, you know, this is why I design the way I design.

STRONG: Talk to me more about the -- the faith reasons for women dressing the way that they do. What are the different philosophies about it? What are your beliefs?

LYMUS: So, the way that we need to dress -- that we need to cover our *'awrah*. So our *'awrah* is considered like our bosom, like the attractive parts of your body that will lure the opposite sex to you, so that is like your breasts, your ears, your neck. These are all like sensual parts of like a woman's body that do attract, really, men, like that's just what's happening.

So, I mean, you have the obvious of, you know, your shape and everything, so our clothes should be naturally loose, but on top of it, the purpose of a hijab is to cover your hair, to cover your ears, to cover your neck, to cover your bosom. So that is... And I mean, a purpose for that is, naturally, to not have like, sexualized relationships because other than your husband -- that's really like the relationship that, you know, is okay, [laughter] but outside of that, you know, we see how people operate.

Now when you show more skin it's just, it changes the type of relationship and the type of encounters that you have, and being more modest and more covered then you lessen that attention, and as women, you know, also for a level of protection, for ourselves, the more covered -- I mean, you have people that just want to be violent regardless, but I mean, you do want to protect yourself as best you can, and being covered and not putting yourself out there where it draws a certain type of attention to want to follow you or grab you or anything like that, these are ways of protecting ourselves, of being more covered in our dress, of also not interacting so much with men like not being in men's face, and I mean, when it comes to business, or religious

matters, that's one thing, but just kind of hanging around with men and just -- we don't do that, you know.

So that, [laughter] that's definitely another level of protection, because they can sense that we operate a certain kind of way, you know. If you want to approach like a Muslim sister, you really need to come with something that's making sense and something that is well thought out, not just foolishness of like, just talking to somebody on the street. But definitely the purpose is for our modesty and how we are received and perceived, and then also our protection, and also just to keep us closer to God, where we don't get so caught up in the worldly way of being, because what I find also, like just being a designer, what I find is that a lot of women -- and this is really more of an Americanized way of thinking -- around the world but I see more here -- is that our bodies are what is - - it formulates like our relationships.

So like if you want to be -- if you find a guy that you think is attractive, or whatever the case may be, you know, it might be a woman who starts showing a little more skin because she thinks that's what's going to draw that type of attention, which naturally, it probably would but I don't think that that's really what your ultimate aim is for. You know, if you're looking at me like, "Oh, he's husband material and I would love it," I don't think that wearing the V-neck shirt with your bosom all out is going to help him think of you in a wife capacity. It might, might do something else, you know. [laughter]

So, with, with those type of -- with that understanding, us being more covered and not showing ourselves in that way does develop a different relationship that we have with people. It just becomes a more respectful relationship. If there is a man who's interested, they approach us a different type of way. You can't even approach us by saying, "Oh, your hair's so nice," or, "Oh, well, you know, you got a fat behind," or like anything like that. You can't even say it, because you can't even see it. So it just forces you to speak to us in a different type of way, and you know, all of those things just

cultivate community life, it cultivates interactions with each other, it cultivates family life. All these type of things because people can't come at you a certain way, because you're not presenting yourself in that way to be approached in that kind of way.

So, so us covering is, is major and -- and just keeping the, I guess I would say the reputation of our religion intact, and I think that what I love about how I dress and like the community that I come from is being colorful and being exciting and vibrant about it. It does draw an attention; like, I hear a lot of women that just say like, "We really like the way you dress, so, I wish I could do that," and it's like, "You could totally do it; you could do it! Like, you, you don't, [01:00:00] you don't have to wear a hijab, but you can do it, because there's just something in flowy garments."

And when you look at designers that are like, in a very high-end bracket, that's how they design. Like when you see guests going to inaugural balls and banquets, they're wearing modest clothing. You know, ultimately, that's what it is. They may not have a hijab and a jacket on, but their clothing -- no one's going in there with a party dress, I'll tell you that! They're not getting in the door. Like, you know, and these are dresses that are \$5,000, \$10,000, \$2,000. So, if you really want to be in fashion, the modesty is already there. It's been there for years, you know. It's not a new concept. They just, they try to act like it when it comes to Muslims but, it's been here for a very long time, mm-hmm.

STRONG: Going back to something you've said a few times which is showing the beauty of the religion --

LYMUS: Yes.

STRONG: -- you said something wonderful to me over the phone that, because you're expressing yourself through the arts, people approach it with curiosity rather than judgment.

LYMUS: Yes.

STRONG: Expand on that a little bit.

LYMUS: I just, I feel like I've had a really good experience with being a Muslim woman, and it's really sad and unfortunate when I hear other Muslim women that don't, or have stories where people yank off their hijab, or just, just taunting them or teasing them at school because I, I mean, I never really encountered that. Maybe when I was really young, because it was new just being like in preschool with -- because I said, I covered when I was like five years old. [laughter] I'm going into preschool with a khimār on and they're looking at me like, "What's on your head?" You know, but it was like little-kid curiosity; it wasn't like bullying or anything like that.

And, I, I feel like me being in a creative household and being -- having that balance -- like my family really cultivated the balance with me of, this is the world, and this is the religion, and you can be artistic but you have to find a balance between the two. And because I was taught that at a young age and I found that young, and just, I think my personality is -- I have a strong personality as well. I think that just went hand in hand with being received well, because confidence is, it's an attractive quality, you know, and when you feel comfortable with yourself, people notice that.

So, me being a Muslim woman and covering and everything like that and still being comfortable and confident with myself, I think that kind of will draw somebody to ask you questions because they see that you're strong in who you are. So, if there's anybody to ask about the religion, it's like, "Well, I might want to ask you," and then, being in the fashion industry and going to shows and working behind the scenes and everything like that and always covering, a lot of the questions that I did get, because the curiosity is still there -- so I mean, naturally, it's going to be asked, but you know, it's just how people ask. Sometimes people ask in a, in an aggressive way or in a demeaning way, or they're still curious but they're not asking in a way that's inviting for you to want to answer.

But what I found, and what I have found is that, I always get questions in a way where they really seem like they want to know, like they just want to get the education, and it's not anything to offend me. Sometimes they'll even say, "Well I don't, I don't mean to offend you but I always see that you cover your hair, but you do it in such a stylish way. It's like, are you a Muslim, or do you just like covering your hair?" And I'm like, "Oh no, I'm Muslim!" And then of course, the conversation is like, "Well how do you do it so stylish? Like, we don't know Muslims that dress like that," and I'm like, "I know a bunch of Muslims that do; like, where are you at? All my friends dress like this, like, you know?"

So it just gives like -- it just opens the doors right then and there in like that two-second conversation like, this religion is so wide and like, you know, covers so many different types of people. The creativity is there, you know, like now what you usually see is like what media has kind of put out over the years, and that's a certain type of looking Muslim woman, and recent years you see different, but in the past, that's what was going on. So, when they see me, it just doesn't match. It's like, and then it's like, "Well, is it because you're like -- you know, I don't want to offend you but is it because you're like an African American Muslim, like is that kind of why you're dressed like that, or because you live in America?" I'm like, "No, it's just, just how I was raised. Like, I'm Muslim like everybody else, just like somebody from the Middle East or somebody from, you know, Africa or wherever, or you know, somebody from Europe. We're just all Muslim, like we just all follow the Koran. That's it, you know, but there's no differences there; it's just how I was brought up, and how I decided to cover."

But I love being in the fashion industry because we're all artists, so, we're very open to artistic expression. So I think me being Muslim, but because I do it in like a fashionable way was like, that's like my artistic expression as opposed to like, you know, a religious stamp, like, "Oh, she's Muslim." I think it was just like, "She's fly. Oh! And she's Muslim." You know like, it's like, an after fact, which, which I like in that, in

that sense because it doesn't -- you don't come at me at the angle of, like, "You're a Muslim and I guess, I guess you kind of got in here because you got a nice outfit on." It's like, "You're fly. You belong here, and you're Muslim. Hey, well let me ask you some questions because I don't really know that much stuff about Muslims and you're here, and you seem pretty cool, so why not?"

And that's how a lot of questions and curiosity have been [01:05:00] worded towards me, is in a very like, exciting like, inviting way or like, you know, "Well can you teach me how to do that like, turban wrap?" Or you know, they, they just want to know; they're more intrigued because it's, artistic expression is more so how those in my industry tend to receive it. So a lot of the questions that they've had are -- I'm excited to answer them because I'm like, always like, if I'm the one Muslim that you're going to meet, that makes you feel like the religion can be beautiful and we can be fashion forward, like, pick my brain. Like, please ask me whatever questions you want because I want you to have a better understanding of the religion, and like, what it is, and you know, whatever they want to ask.

I'm like, as long it's not interfering with time on set. Like, we have to get deadlines and things done here, like the model has to be ready to take the pictures, but, if we have some downtime or lunchtime or anything like that -- or sometimes I'll take a break and I'll go pray, and I'll tell them, like, "Well I have to go pray," and I'll, you know, if there, the time -- because we can make up our prayers but we are encouraged to make them when they come on time, when they come in, and if there's a time when during lunch, I'll go and pray and, you know, occasionally somebody has asked like, can they watch me pray, and you know, if it's men, I'll say no because some of the positionings that we do, we go down to the floor, and it's like, I don't want you staring at my behind, so, I'm probably going to pass on that.

But, but just giving that knowledge -- once I say prayer and then I come back, you know, and I come back a few minutes later, even that is like, "Oh, well, you don't pray for like a long time." Like, it's like, "No, it's just, you know, it's a few" -- I mean, depends on what sura, what prayer you want to... There's different suras, so it's like depending on which one you say, but some are short, and some are long, so if I'm on set and I'm doing a job, I'm not going to recite the long one; I'm going to say a short one so I can get back to work. But I do take my time out to make sure that I service my Lord, and that I thank him for everything that I have, and that I keep him in the forefront of my mind, because I wouldn't be here if, you know, if I wasn't doing what I needed to be doing with him.

So, but just, like just me, I would, I voluntarily would say, "I'm going to pray," because I want somebody to ask me. So I kind of like, encourage some of the questioning sometime. I want you to ask me a little, "You pray?" And like, "Well how much, how many times you do that? And what do you say, and is it in English or is it another language?" Like, and this how the conversations take place. That's how they always go and, and I welcome it, and, and it seems like those who I speak to really get a better understanding and a more positive reception of what Islam is about, and like, how again, I mean, I just say how beautiful the religion is because it's really a beautiful religion. Like it's just so positive, and it, it's sad to see like, how media can portray it and literally the exact opposite [laughter] of the religion. It's just like very corrupted because it's not even like -- they take something and they kind of stretch it. It's like totally made up.

Like, you know, we're -- it's sins for us to hurt innocent people, to harm an animal. Like this is a sin, you know, like even when we, you know, kill the animal that we eat, we have to do it in a certain way. They have to pray over it. We have to slit it at the neck, you know. That's halal food, is that we bless the animal because, you know, there is a circle of life and we do have to eat, and as humans, and God makes it in a certain way

that that's how it goes. But, that doesn't mean that you torture the animal. It doesn't mean that you shoot it or tranquilize it. It doesn't mean, you know, we don't -- so even harming an animal is a sin, so definitely, harming humans, I mean, it's pretty major.

So I just take any opportunity, where I can change that view, and give them more information, I'd use that as an opportunity to do so. So, and I'm in an industry; I'm constantly like, "I'm making sure I wear this hijab today. It's going to be bright colors because I want somebody to ask me questions." Like, I'm all about it.

STRONG: So, I read a quote from you somewhere where you talked about fashion as freedom of expression, and just as we're talking, you know, there's a lot that I'm connecting with even as a person without faith, but as a woman. You were saying --

LYMUS: Yes.

STRONG: -- that like, sex sells. And after a while, that's the only thing for sale, and women start to feel kind of, not just modeling, but like we have to dress that way --

LYMUS: Yes.

STRONG: -- if we want people to like us, let alone if we want people to date us. And, you know, in a way, it's -- it's kind of revolutionary to be insisting that there be more options, that there be more ways for us to imagine ourselves. So, I just wanted to focus on that idea of fashion as freedom of expression. I was wondering if you could expand on it more and how maybe you've seen it open, or change in the industry for the better. Are there more options, or, is it getting easier for models who want to insist on their integrity, as you call it? How is it?

LYMUS: I feel like, I feel like a lot of these limited ways of thinking or all these fashion rules have vastly been like, blown out the water in, I would say like the last two, three years, and even down to like different -- you know, I'll speak to the fashion piece, but this is basically in fashion as well, but even with the modeling agencies, I mean you have you know, Winnie Harlow, who has -- her skin is -- I forget what it's called. It's when there's like white, different --

STRONG: Oh --

LYMUS: -- patches.

STRONG: -- I don't know what the name for that is, but I know what you mean.

LYMUS: Okay, so there, there's a model who is like a major model, her name is Winnie, and she has this skin [01:10:00] piece, I think it's birth, from birth, and there's now an agency that caters to models that have this skin condition, because, again, it's like similar to like my concept -- they have the look, they have symmetry, they, I mean they have everything to be a model, just that this is how they were born, and like, that's just how their skin is, so now you can't model because of that? So like there's an avenue for that. There's like model amputee models now, so I mean there's -- what I'm saying is that a lot of things are changing and it's becoming more inclusive, more inviting, because these are real people. Like, although we do understand that models maybe need to have a, a certain type of look as far as marketing the clothing, which that does make sense, you know -- you don't want to have someone who's maybe too -- you know, and even like curvy models, you know, they, they are like major right now you know, so they've come a long way.

So you do want to have clothing that makes sense for the designer to showcase their garments, but outside of that, it's like, we have to get in the mind-set of being more sensible to the fact that the world is spacious and everybody is made very different. So, what does that mean when you only show one type of woman all the time, or one type of man all the time, or one nationality all the time? What does that say for 98 percent of the world? I mean, what are we doing here?

So, I, I feel like, to the clothing portion, I mean, I just touched on the agencies, but when it comes to clothing, I've seen more of that now, and, and I honestly think that -- this is my own opinion, but I think that a lot of designers have been going to more culturally diverse places around the world for like vacations and things, you know, because they like to have exclusive places, and they like to learn about different culture, and that's part of vacationing. You want to learn something new. You, you're over what goes on

here all the day, every time daily. You want to go somewhere else and experience something new, and, and oftentimes, instead of going to like resorts now, you find that they're going to like, you know, the mom and pop places, or like they want to really get the experience of where they are, and I think that as they've done that, it's opened their minds to fashion, like, because when you go, when you internationally travel, you're going to see some fashion. It's not going to be this like, limited, Americanized way of thinking when it comes to fashion. You're going to see colors. You're going to see beads. You're going to see things made out of clay, woven, headpieces. Like, you're going to see so much, and I've seen a lot of that implemented in a lot of lines over the years.

Over the recent years I've seen moccasin, like kind of Native American inspired collections; I've seen almost like Indonesian -- they have a way of designing but I've seen a way -- some of that and not from Indonesian designers, I mean from industry-noted designers that are doing that, you know, certain, these like, African-printed dresses. I've seen designers that have come up with collections like that. So it's like, they're starting to see like, I think where it was a more limited mind-set, I just think that it's, personally, from travels, and when you see, it's beautiful. You can't deny it. So it's kind of hard to go and be like, oh, that's no fashion. It's like, it opens your eyes. It's like, that is fashion! What have I been doing all these years?

And I feel like that's what you're seeing now and because you see it on major runways, it, once you see it on major runways, it trickles its way down into like, the Target, and the Marshalls, and the stores of that nature, and, and I see it now. Like, I mean, it's everywhere, and I'm super excited about it, because I'm like, "Hey, this is what I saw when I --" I showed in Indonesia one year and I'm like, when I see some things there, I'm like, "This is what those Indonesian women were wearing and now it's like, in, I don't know, Forever 21," you know what I mean?

Like, so, they're, they're definitely -- it's definitely changing vastly, and it does make for more inclusion for like, Muslim women, and for just women of like, other culture and other backgrounds and different lifestyles, because they're not seeing one type of dress anymore, or a monochromatic way of dressing. You see more colors, more, more prints, and embellishments and rhinestones sewed on here and pearls, on a regular dress. So like it doesn't necessarily have to be for an event; it just, you're a woman, like, why not be fancy? You could do it; you can have a regular dress, and just a maxi dress with some ornate neckline, that's okay, and wear it on a Tuesday. Like, you don't have to wear it, you know, to the prom.

Like, so, so me, I've seen a large change in that, and one thing that I really noticed where I said, "Okay, this is -- there's money in here," is going to the fabric stores, and I saw that a lot of fabric stores were now printing -- specifically I saw African prints, African-printed fabrics, and I also saw like, kind of like Asian kind of prints, but they were put on various fabric, fabric types, so different. So they were on like jersey knit, and, and like organza, and when they start, when the industry starts printing these fabrics on a variety of textiles, [01:15:00] there's money in it, because they're going to -- that's where you have these tribal-print swimsuits, and these like -- that's because -- the leggings and all those type of things -- that's when you know there's money in it. That's, when it's not just the, the traditional wax fabric that comes from Senegal, and they're putting it on Lycra fabric? There, that, there's money, you know.

So once I started seeing that, I said okay, okay, they, they know that there's something here with getting out of this, has to be one way of dressing, and you must dress, you know, in, in a semi-corporate kind of way all the time, and there is a time and a place for it, but, in your downtime, you don't have to be like that, you know? You can, you can be more exciting. You can express yourself as a woman. You can wear some hot pink and some colors, and you know, some fabulousness, and that's okay, and, and I've seen that boom, and I still see it. I still see it in, in the market, and behind the scenes when it

comes to like, textiles. I see that there. So I think it's, I think it's here to stay. I think they see beauty in it, and, we're going to just keep seeing a variety of implementation from around the world become more universal with the fashion.

STRONG: So, an important aspect of your career that we haven't really touched on yet is, you have a son --

LYMUS: Yes.

STRONG: -- and, that's, you know, something that you're doing on your own for the most part, and --

LYMUS: Yes.

STRONG: -- and is an important part of your life as well, and he was born just a couple of years after you started your own line, right?

LYMUS: Yes.

STRONG: So, tell me about him, and about working all of this in, and this part of your --

LYMUS: Oh my gosh --

STRONG: -- life.

LYMUS: -- that guy. So I have this -- I have a 10-year-old son. His name is Takashi [phonetic], and this guy, I don't -- he's an adjustment. He is an adjustment, but he's a good adjustment. I really feel like God just blessed me with him, because, I've been in the industry, I mean, from when he was in my stomach. I remember sewing, and like sometimes I'd have to take a break because he'd be like kicking the crap out of my stomach, like, "Mom, that's enough, I don't want the vibration anymore." So he's like a little fighter. He's like, been like that since he was in my stomach, but he's just -- adjusts to -- to my lifestyle so well.

I mean part of it is, you know, he grew up in it, like fashion shows and going to photo shoots, and like, sometimes I'd bring him to in like, every -- like my publicist, everybody knows him because they're like, "Oh, Takashi, coming to the photo shoot?" I'm like, "No, Takashi is not coming to the photo shoot." So they're very like, familiar with him, but I just feel like, it was a blessing to have a child like him, because this is

like an industry that I chose to be in and, and he didn't choose to be in it. So, every child, you know, is, is different, and I could have very well had a son who would be very upset with the fact that I'm in this business, or if he has to come to a photo shoot, just be like, annoyed, or you know, if I'm doing an interview and he has to kind of be around, like not talking on the side, like, "Mom, can we leave? When are we going to the" -- you know, and he's not that type of child.

Like it seems like he just, adjusted to like, how I am, you know what I mean? Like, and what I do, industry-wise, but I definitely had to map out how to still maintain my career, especially because I work for myself, and then, how to be a good mom, and that did -- it presented a big of a challenge only because I wanted to be a good mom more than I wanted to be a -- a designer, but I -- I'd establish a name as a designer, and, and a number of years in the business where I still want to pursue that, and continue to grow it, but I want to not miss out on things with my son. So it's like, well how do I balance the both, and, and a lot of people that I knew in the industry, they didn't have children, so it was kind of like, they don't really understand like, well, I have to get a sitter and I have to -- I can't make that show, or -- you know.

So that adjustment was -- was an adjustment because I was used to kind of being able to just drop and grow, and, and network and build my brand, and, I had to take some time to really be a little more like, behind the scenes with things, and do more conference calls and just stay relevant. Like, I would just go to like Fashion Week like twice a year, and just, that was like my going out, because his first couple of years of life was, obviously, focused on him, you know, and he's a baby and can't be dragging him out to shows. I mean, people do it, but that wasn't what I had chose to do.

So, but I just made sure I -- I knew that I still wanted to be in this business; I knew I still needed to stay relevant because fashion industry is like, [laughter] you're in and you're out, you know. So I really had to figure out a strategic way to still keep my face there

and keep a presence, and social media helps with that, you know. That was one avenue, but also just at least attending Fashion Week twice a year was like, my goal. As long as I do that, and I network and kind of update people -- like, "Well where you been, Nailah? What's going on?" It's like, "Oh well I have a little one now so, you know, I can" -- you know, and then they get it, but that was like, the area where I would of kind of see everyone to kind of give them the update of what's, what's happening.

And then as he got older, I started bringing him to different things, just so he can understand like, what I do, you know, because I can say "I do photo shoots" all day, but until you come to a photo shoot with me and you see that it's literally six, seven hours for that one fabulous picture, you won't get it, you know. So I would -- I brought him as he got a little older, like maybe around like, you know, five, six years old, I started bringing him to -- [01:20:00] to shoots, and not all the time, you know, that wasn't a regular thing, but just so he can understand what Mommy does, and like what goes into it and, and how, you know, disciplined you have to be and why I have to bring all this stuff with me, and you know, why I asked you to hold the bag, you know, so he understands what it was.

So I think that that kind of cultivated our relationship by showing him what it, what it takes, as opposed to just kind of preaching to him like, "Well this is what Mommy does and I have to do it and this how I pay bills." He is able to, to witness it and be around. And then do the same thing for some fashion shows, and you know, when the opportunity presented itself. Sometimes it's not very kid friendly but when it did, then I would bring him with me, and, and he understood, and, and he's the artist himself. Like, he's, he is working on a little anime jacket collection right now, because he really loves anime, and he's good at drawing. So he, he's coming out with his own little collection very soon, so I'm excited about that, but he's always been into the arts as well, and his, his dad is, is an artist as well, and then, I'm an artist.

I think, you know, a little bit of it is kind of in there, but you know, he's a pleasure. It's just, it's been an adjustment because, you know, it's one thing to have a child, but it's another thing to make it your business to parent them as best you can, and it is hard work. Like I have one child, and like, I just can't see two. I mean, if God would have blessed me with one, I'll accept it, but I'm just like, this is a lot of work. It's a lot of work, and then when you work for yourself, it's, you know, you just constantly have to make your own money, and establish for yourself and then it's like, now I have to establish and make, make for him, and make sure I go to parent-teachers conference, and make sure his homework's done right, and you know, make sure he's socially adjusting, you know. He's 10 now, so it's like, junior high school, and that's an adjustment, and it's just like, constantly on wheels, like there's like no sleep in sight.

But, you know, it's for a good cause, and it's like, I brought him into this world, and I have to do my job to make sure he's suitable to be able to handle it, I mean, as best I can, and that, a lot of that comes from the crucial years or like, the early years, because that's what he'll fall back on as he gets older, and knows like, instinctively how he should operate and how he shouldn't operate, you know. He'll make his own choices when he gets older, but, he had the foundation, so, I have to make sure that that's what I seed in him, you know, now.

STRONG: Talk to me a little bit about his faith education as well, since it's also so important to you.

LYMUS: So, when he was younger, I made it my business to put him in a Muslim school, because I did want him to know that that is important, and to know that -- that it's okay to be Muslim. So I think when he was young, I kind of wanted him to be around other Muslim students, to feel comfortable about being Muslim. As he got older, and, and going to the Muslim school, it's like they would break for like, prayer, you know. They would, on Friday which is our service they would go -- well, the school was actually in the mosque. It's actually a school at Masjid Khalifah. He, he went to that school. It's called the Clara Muhammad School.

And so he went to that school, and then on Fridays when it's time for service, they come upstairs to the prayer area and they, and they pray for service, and, and just, just being in that community and then, just different ways of operating, of -- you know, if you see somebody elderly, you help them with their bags, with -- you know what I mean? That, I think that's just a human way of operating, but, you know, in our religion it does speak to that as your responsibility, you know. You do help those that have paved a way before you, you know; that's just what you do. So, I think just implementing that then coming up the stairs, or, if someone's cooking -- sometimes we'll do, like, sell food afterwards as fundraisers for the mosque. So it's like, if someone needs help serving food, you serve the food, you know. So I think he -- it just was an easy learn, because it's what was happening. It's not me saying, "Oh Takashi, go over there and serve food." It's like, everybody is in here serving food. So you just naturally serve the food.

So, all those type of things I think he learned while being in the Muslim school, and when he got a little older, I wanted him to learn how to be comfortable being Muslim not in a Mus-- you know, being in the secular world because, you're going to be in an outside world; you're not always going to be in a Muslim school with Muslims. So it's like, you got this foundation now; now I'll continue to grow with you and you'll have to, you know, take your Arabic classes, and you know, you now have to go to these classes, but you won't be raised in a school with those type of classes.

So he transitioned into public school in the third grade, and it was, it was a bit of an adjustment and he wore a kufi, which is like the head covering that men, that men can wear, and he had a little bit of an adjustment with that, and like, somebody teased him about it and like, knocked it off his head or something, and he had a moment, and you know, the teacher handled it very well, and the school was like, no tolerance for anything like that, but you know kids. They do things, you know, and you just have to --

I just explained to him like, when I was young, like, there was a girl who like, ripped my khimār off. I mean, I kind of beat her up so she knew not to do it again. [laughter] “You know, I don’t want you to go around fighting people, but they have to know, that, you don’t do. You do not touch anything on me, [01:25:00] and definitely not something that has to do with my religious association, because that’s another level of offense.” So, I just had that conversation and, and we laughed. He was like, “You beat her up?” I’m like, “Listen, Takashi, they have to know. I mean, I explained it to her first, but when she did it again, it kind of warranted a beat up, yeah.”

So, you know, just his adjustment with like wearing kufi to school, and then he also has a unique name, so although Takashi is not a Muslim name, it’s just a different name, so going into the public school, you know, he had to adjust with the name being different, but I felt like, that’s what he needed, because “eventually, you’re going to get it anyway. So like if I didn’t start you in third grade, you know -- let’s say you go in high school, or you finally go in college, people are going to ask you about why you wear a kufi. People are going to ask you about -- you know what I mean? And then when you’re older, now you have this, you have to -- you have your hormones, you have testosterone, you have ego, you have all pride, all these things that somebody like says something, like just blow a fuse, you know what I mean? And like, [laughter] I want you to know how to handle it.”

So, I made the decision to put him in public school in third grade, and, and, the first year was a bit of a, of an adjustment, but the school handled things very well, and, and then he stayed there. He went to the PS11 which, that’s in Brooklyn as well. That’s the school he went to, and he finished out this summer. He just graduated from fifth grade and now he’s in sixth grade and he goes to school, another school in Brooklyn: Prospect Charter.

So, yeah he's doing, he's doing very well. He excelled. I mean, the rigor of PS11 was, was a bit of an adjustment, but he had to buckle down a little more because that's like a blue ribbon -- although it's a public school, it's like, they're intense. But it's what he needed, so, you know, I think it was a good thing, and it formulated a scholar. He went to the scholars' award ceremony at the assistant principal's, you know, reward, so he's, he's on to a great start. Just praying that he maintains it, because he's getting older, so he starts doing things on his own, and I'm like, "Just do the right things please, that's all I ask."

STRONG: [laughter] I also want to ask you, you're still very involved in Khalifah. You're like on the board, and on a --

LYMUS: Yeah.

STRONG: -- children's committee. Tell me a little bit about that.

LYMUS: So, when I, I used to teach at Clara Muhammad School, I did have two years where I taught there --

STRONG: Oh wow.

LYMUS: -- and, I was able to do more things in the mosque, because I was there, whereas before, I would just kind of like attend on Fridays, and different events that we had, and, and being there and teaching made me feel like, okay, although I have to leave from teaching, I do want to still maintain that connectivity that I have, because I liked the way that felt. It made me feel more complete to have, be able to like, seed into my community, and you know, maybe after school, stay for a little longer and help out with something that -- you know, maybe we need to paint walls, or vacuum the carpets for prayer that, you know, on Friday, or whatever the case may be. Like, I felt like, you know, that's -- those are blessings that I need, you know, needless to say. It's nice to have a fashion, you know, line and things like that, but those are not helping me get into heaven, you know what I mean?

So like, I need to really do some more things that are fundamental to my development, and, and I wanted to find a way to still do that, although I was not teaching in the

school, and that's where, like, the board -- well we always had a board at, at the mosque. We're a very like, involved mosque where we give transparency to like, our congregation, so, the board plays a large role in discussing matters of the mosque and developing the space, and just different classes that we have, and stays on top of everything that happens in the mosque. And then we have like, meetings that we -- that take place, quarterly meetings where we present everything: the monies vested and raised in the mosque, things we had to pay for. We have a lot of transparency, and I never really knew that end. I just was coming as a congregation member and I didn't really know the inside, inner and outside, and what monies needed to be raised, and our building is huge, so it takes a lot of funds to maintain it. And, so therefore, I just wanted to be more involved on that end, like what, what kind of things can I do?

So, I decided to -- you know, you have to run to be, or pitch yourself to be on the board, so someone who was on the board had suggested that I be on the board, and I said, "Well, I didn't really give it much thought, but, it is a way to be more involved, and it is a big responsibility because there's a lot of stuff that we have to do, but," I said, "I can do what I can do as long as ya'll are comfortable with that, because I do work for myself. I do have Takashi. I don't live right -- you know, I don't live on the block of the mosque where I can just hop, skip, jump, come here. I don't drive, you know. There's different elements, but I would love to do it, I mean, and do the best that I can," and they nominated for me. You know, the community then votes for those who have been nominated, and they vote for who, by popular demand, that's who makes it in to become a member of the board.

So I am presently a board member for a few years now. I was actually voted back in again when they did the next term of voting, I think maybe like a year and some change ago, and it's a very involved job. We do a lot more conference calls because it's hard for everybody to like, meet in person, but just addressing matters of the mosque, [01:30:00] and it gives me more of an understanding of the inner workings, you know

what I mean, of what's taking place, and you know, sometimes being targeted with, with you know, being a mosque and these different like -- building department always coming in there trying to find something because they really want the property, because it's like prime real estate, you know, and just those little nuances that most of the members, they just hear when we need to raise money for different things.

But it's like, you know, they'll try to like, hit you with a fine for like, putting up a school sign that says like -- you know, like, just like a new awning for the school sign. I'm like, "There was already a sign there; we put up a new one," and they're like, "Here's a fine!" It's like, "Well, it's, it was already there, like we just freshened it up," but it's like, you know, "You got to" -- they just find like, different things to do, and it's, it's unfortunate, but it just opens my eyes to the fact that, we just have to do more work. Like, that's just what it is.

And me being on the board, I'm one of the few members of the board who are considered like the youth. A lot of the board is comprised of pioneers who've been on, been in the mosque for years, and you know, I also can bring a bit of a youthful like, ideas to different things because, you know, you have to open it up, and the young do have to kind of come in and do the work. So they're very hesitant to, you know, pass on the baton, as all elders are, but, it has to be done, so I just have to really, when I'm in there, I really try to humble myself and just be respectful, listen to what everyone's saying, and then, sit and make my suggestions and, and they're starting to let loose a little bit with me, and they love the fashion, because I also do like, event planning as well, that's -- so I do wedding and baby showers and things of that nature, so.

So they're all for me doing like the decoration for different fundraising and the things that we've done, so now that they see like, "Well she kind of, she does do work. She, she does. She is a good mom. She has worked at the school." Like, I've done enough things where they kind of let go of the reins a little bit with me, like, "Okay, and she has good

intentions, and she's respectful," because you know, as youths, sometimes we have ideas but, the way we relay it to the elderly, like, community or to other pioneers, it just, it doesn't come off as respectful. I don't think we intend to be disrespectful, but it's just like, you have a good idea and you just want to push it and when they don't get it, it's kind of like, "Well you know what? Figure it out on your own." Like that tends to be like the millennial kind of way of operating sometimes, and it's like, you have to be more humble and be more respectful about how you deal with them, because they have great ideas as well, and once they see that you're willing to do the work -- because one thing about the pioneers that was a generation of hardworking people, and we do not have the same work ethic. I mean, we're all about social media and we can make fast money and we can Instagram this, but we're not putting in the work. It's just what's not happening.

So, they want to see that you're going to put in the work, so you could have all these great ideas, but they're looking like, "We haven't seen you do any work. So, we don't want to hear it." [laughter] But with me, they've seen -- they've seen enough to feel comfortable to let me -- you know, to listen to me and maybe take on one or two of my ideas, yeah.

And then I'm on a child interest committee as well, which basically focuses on keeping the youth in the mosque, because they do go through this time, like how I said when I was 15, 16, I went through like, the wearing-fitted-clothes kind of phase. They go through things. That's just, every child kind of goes through it, Muslim or not, and sometimes they don't feel like they want to cover, or they just don't feel as connected to the mosque, or, "Oh, why I have to go there? I could just look at it online, you know," like these type of ideas, and it's like, it's important, like I said. When I worked at the school, I realized the importance of being there, you know what I mean, and putting the -- and being seen, and the physical presence is necessary, and there's no internet -- that can't replace physical interaction, you know what I mean?

So that's necessary, and they're more of a generation where it's like, "Oh, well I could just livestream Jumu'ah service." Jumu'ah service is, is the name of our service on Friday, and they are like, "Well we could just kind of livestream," or like, "Sister Nailah, why do we have to come?" and, "We come here and the older pioneers, they're always trying to tell us what to do. It's like" -- [laughter] And it's like, you know, just trying to be like a medium between them like, "You know, well they have their ways, but they mean well, and you know they're not going to guide you into something that's not the right thing to do, but you have to be respectful, and also, you have to do the work. They start seeing you do work, they're not going to give you a hard time. But you come in here, not doing anything, and thinking, oh well, oh, how come this looks like that, or" -- you know, I mean, our, like again, like again, like I said, our facility is huge. So it's like, you know, maybe a floor might need to be mopped or something. "Y'all can mop floors! Why you not mopping the floor? Oh, how come the floor is not mopped?" It's like you're critiquing all day, but not doing any work, and I'm like, "Y'all got to do more stuff!"

So, you know, they -- but they have an adversity to doing real work, because they're busy with the social media all day, and that's not work, but they feel like that's the fame and the attention and, that they do things for the accolades, and it's like, when you do things for community, and when you do things for your Lord, the accolades is the blessings. The accolades is not somebody telling you you did a good job. It's not somebody saying, "Here's some money." [01:35:00] It's not somebody saying, "We're going to make an award and bless you at the end of the month for like, you know, most contribution to the mosque." You have to do it for a higher purpose, and that's what I try to really like instill with them, with the child interest committee is that, you know -- you have to do the work, and you have to do the work selflessly. You can't do it for some other type of purpose, because the purpose of doing it is to get blessings, and

God won't bless you if he knows you're not doing it for him; that's just ultimately what it boils down to.

So just trying to like change their way of thinking, because, our society doesn't talk about it, you know what I mean? So unless you're talking about it, and you become like a lone soldier, because it's like, "Oh, they're always talking about that at the mosque. They're always preaching. I don't want to go there." You know, like that's like their attitudes and it's like, I don't have any choice but to -- I have to do that, because, otherwise, it's, it's not going to be a good situation for you, you know what I mean? You have to know what's the right thing to do.

And so a lot of that is the child interest committee, and then, you know, we have different events throughout the year, like we have our Eid celebration, which is our religious celebration, and the child interest committee, which, I'm the chairperson of that, is in charge of making sure the children have a memorable Eid. So, a lot of the members of the mosque will donate funds, and I'll go and I'll purchase gifts, and we'll give gifts to them. We get a bouncy house; we block off the block; and just making it a memorable thing so that they want to continue to be Muslim. You know, you can be Muslim. You can have fun. You can, you know, be with those who are your own, but even for the Eid, we say, "Invite your friends that aren't Muslim so they can learn about the Eid. They can come, jump around in the bouncy house with you."

It doesn't -- it's not just for Muslims, and like, that's like, this, that's part of what I say when I say the beauty of this religion is, it's, it's not just for certain people; it's just for people; like it's just for humans. It's just a better lifestyle of how to operate, and that's what we want to show. So, any opportunity we can do that, we want to invite others to come and witness that. You can come to a Jumu'ah service and sit there and listen to the khutbah that the imam is giving, probably not in Arabic, in English, but you'll be able to understand. It's just a positive message, that that's all anybody can receive

benefit from that. I can go to a church and listen to a positive message and derive benefit. I don't have to necessarily go, you know, and I, I've been to a church before of my -- some of my friends have asked me to come to more so like an event or something that's taking place, but I've been to like a service or two, or someone you know passes away and their family was Christian and they conduct the service there, out of my respects, I'll go and I'll, you know, pay my respects there, and listen. If the message makes sense, it makes sense! You don't have to be Muslim, or be wearing a kufi, for it to make sense!

So I mean that's, that's the beauty of this religion. When it makes sense and when it aligns with the way that we operate, we receive it. It's not like, well that came from this person or that, or a Buddhist said that, so I'm not listening. We're not encouraged to, to operate like that. We're encouraged to learn about different religions, and to be educated in that, and what's good, we keep, and then what doesn't correlate with how we operate, we just, we just don't do it.

STRONG: Tell me about your hopes for the future of Khalifah. Where do you want it to go? How do you want the community to endure? What are your hopes?

LYMUS: That's a good question, and, I mean, I just pray that it has longevity. I think that I see a lot of disconnects with, like I'm saying, with the youth, which is naturally the next generation to carry it, and I see that with youths, period. I mean, Muslim or not, there's just a very strong disconnect, and that seems like more religious. The times when they do mention religion is like in a trendy type of way, as opposed to an authentic connection, you know. So when it's convenient to be Muslim, you know, then they want to embrace being Muslim but like when it's not, then they don't want to talk about it, or, you know, it's like a kind of an on-and-off type of thing with them, or, you know, today I'll cover my hair because it's like, National Hijab Day and they, "Hijab Day!" and you know and then tomorrow, it's like, no scarf. It's like, well, what do you really want to do?

So, for me, it's just, it's like majorly important for the youth to understand the importance of like, their relationship with their Lord, and that you can't just say it; you have to show it, you know what I mean? And doing that, a large portion of it, is what you seed back into your own community, and that starts with your mosque, whatever mosque you attend, or you travel; you go to different ones. It's not like you have to be territorial with one, but you have to, you have to seed in the work, and I don't see as much of that happening.

So I mean, you know, that would be, you know, my concern for the growth and the longevity of, you know, the building. Like I said, we were like in a prime real estate location, so, you know, maintaining permits, maintaining not-for-profit, you know, 501(c)(3) status, like you have to maintain these things or they fall through, or you know, staying on top of making sure we renew it and things like that. Someone's quick to try to snatch the building, you know, so we have to make sure that we keep those things intact, and the youth would be who's going to start having to do these things that we're doing now, and they have to understand that and learn.

So it's just key to try to keep them in there so they [01:40:00] can learn what it takes to maintain this building, to keep the building, to keep, you know, emotions focused on, we're here to serve God, and not get into -- you know, people have quirks and personality things and sometimes we get caught up in that, and then we just completely leave the building. Like, well do you just never come back to the mosque because you got into a disagreement with somebody? I mean, you don't do that with your boss! You find your way back to work to make that money, so why are you not finding your way, [laughter] you know what I mean? Why are you not finding your way back to praise your Lord?

You know, you have to -- it's just a different way of thinking, and that would be my concern, is that you know, my concern is that the youth is, is not kind of like how our

youth was, like how my age generation was or even, I mean, before me. That was like a whole 'nother type of discipline and understanding and, you know, militant and respect your parents, and you go to your mosque, and you take care of your community, you know. Even with my generation, it's, it's a little bit of a disconnect, but the generation under me is like, whoa, it's, it's almost like, is there any strings connecting here?

You know, so, just working on that, I feel like once they really take that on -- because they're miles ahead of us as far as how to promote things and how to fundraise, and they have that down, but that piece of connectivity to what they say they are, and where they say they belong -- you know, if you, if you're claiming that you are Muslim, then you should conduct yourself accordingly, and, any other religion or anything else that anyone connects themselves to, then you have to represent it. Can't just be saying it and just flip-floppy all over the place. And I feel like that's something that I see with like, the, the next generation. That does become a concern because you know, what you say and what you do becomes an extended representation of -- of what you represent, and if you represent a Muslim or if you represent this mosque, well then you have to be an extension of it, and you have to carry yourself that way all the time. It can't be like, well I went to Miami, so what goes in Miami, stays in Miami, and then you're back in Masjid Khalifah, fundraising, and we see pictures of you like, looking quite interesting in Miami, you know what I mean? [laughter] This doesn't connect. What's happening?

So, so the future that I see for the mosque, I mean, it's definitely, it's, you know, it's flourished, you know. It's blossomed; it's, it's beautiful; it's vibrant. I do see a lot more just people in general be more receptive and open to Islam, so in that regards, I'm very excited about the future of the mosque because we've had a lot of newcomers that have come and converted to the religion, and seen like beauty in it, and feel comfortable with our mosque to come and let that be their new home, so.

So with that happening, like that influx of those things happening, it does make me feel better about it, because the combination of the youth who will step to the plate, and then those who convert to the religion who are passionate about it and want to really push the positive message, that makes me feel good about, you know, the future, and in our own children, and myself, my friends -- we have children, and we're seeding it in them, and they come to the mosque. We make sure we bring them, you know, so they can understand and have that connection to it to always want to -- you know, even if you drift off a little, you come back. You don't just drift and just, it just doesn't exist to you anymore. Like, you went to school here; you were raised here; everybody in this community knows you. Like, you can't just, you can't do that. That's unacceptable. You know?

So, but I see it to be a beautiful future. I mean, the building is beautiful; the neighborhood is changing and learning more. You know, we're doing more like, community events where we're more inviting for people to come in. They love the Eids. Everybody love -- we have the two Eids: Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr, and, they come out for that. You got a whole bunch of strangers you've never seen coming there. They come there; they get gifts, because we do extra gifts for other children as well; you don't have to be Muslim, so. So they come and they'll come right upstairs into the mosque, and see how nice it is, and you know, they'll get their gifts, and they'll be like, "Well what do we say?" I'm like, "Oh, you say 'Eid Mubarak,'" and then they're like, "Okay, Eid Mubarak!" Like, anything that's going to get me a gift, you know, the kids, that's all they know. They're like, "I'll say 'Merry Christmas, Eid Mubarak.' It doesn't matter, like, as long as I'm getting a gift."

But just saying "Eid Mubarak," and knowing, and then maybe you'll Google it, and maybe you'll go home that night and be like, "Oh, well what's the Eid thing about? Like, we really liked that when we went over there. Well, they do fun stuff, you know, and they might not celebrate Christmas and they might not -- but they have their own level

of fun and excitement.” So, you know, just teaching the balance, you know what I mean, and, and showing that is fundamental to me and because we are a mosque that does that, I feel like we will develop and grow to be like, just more amazing in the future.

STRONG: I don’t want to keep you too much longer, but I got to ask the same question about your business --

LYMUS: Okay.

STRONG: -- Amirah Creations, Underwrapped Agency, *MODA MANTRA*, which we didn’t talk about that much, but --

LYMUS: Yeah.

STRONG: -- what’s next? What, what’s the future?

LYMUS: Oh, wow. I will say, I’m, I’m working on a, a fashion show that will be a very large-scale fashion show. I think that’s all I can say.

STRONG: Okay.

LYMUS: But it will be a culmination of everything I’ve been doing for all of these years, so a culmination of, you know, the agency; *MODA MANTRA* magazine, which is a luxury modest magazine, fashion magazine; and Amirah Creations as well, so, this will be like a -- [01:45:00] It’s really the destination, so everything that I’ve done was in the works for many a year. So I always wanted to have my line, and then, a couple of years into my line, I realized, some of the issues that I was seeing with like, models, and concerns that they were having, I said, “I have to start an agency or something that gives these women an outlet to not feel like they’re forced to do something they’re uncomfortable doing,” and that was the agency.

And once I thought about the agency, I said, “Okay, now I have to have a publication where I can control the content that goes in here, and not be subject to someone else saying, you know, ‘yay’ or ‘nay.’” Naturally, the editor-in-chief of any magazine is going to pick what they want and what they don’t want, and that, you know, a lot of them follow politics, and they follow trends, and so you may have a gorgeous submission, but they’re just not going to take it because maybe your hair is covered, or they’re not

going to take it because you know, it's summer and they want to show swimsuits, and these swimsuits from this photo shoot might be a little more modest, so they don't want to cover that. And I'm like, you know what? I'm all about submissions. I'm still going to submit to other, you know, magazines, and *Elle*, and all these type of magazines in that nature, but, I will also produce my own publication so I can control the content and I can show how beautiful modesty can be, and this will be like a go-to guide for modest women.

So, the -- from the clothing line, the agency was start up; from the agency, I thought about the magazine; and from the magazine, I thought about this big hub of a fashion show that I'll -- that I'm working on that, you know, prayerfully, we will see it come to fruition next year. That's the aim.

STRONG: So is there anything we missed? Is there anything I should have asked you, before we wrap up?

LYMUS: I didn't mention like, the Indonesian -- well, I did mention; I threw it in there --

STRONG: Just --

LYMUS: -- right? We don't need to --

STRONG: -- briefly, but if you want to say more about it --

LYMUS: No, I don't --

STRONG: -- you're welcome to.

LYMUS: No, I don't, I don't feel the need to. I think --

STRONG: Okay.

LYMUS: -- I covered everything, yeah.

STRONG: Okay, yeah, we covered a lot, and thank you so much for your time.

LYMUS: Thank you!

STRONG: I really appreciated hearing your stories, and thank you for coming in.

LYMUS: I appreciate you having me on this project, and I think this is like, a beautiful thing that you're doing, and that knowledge is like, it's great. Like I said, I feel like this religion is so beautiful and misrepresented at times, and if there's any words that I can

share for those to -- for people to read and, and listen to and have a different outlook,  
then I'm here for it. Like, I love it.

STRONG: All right. Well thank you so, so much.

LYMUS: Thank you.