

Emily Gengenbach

Interview: Shahnaz Osso

Location: Yazidi Community Center

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Interviewee: Uh, my name is Shahnaz Osso. Um, what brought me to Nebraska. We moved when my family moved to the U.S. we originally moved to, uh, Houston, Texas, um, where there was really no Yazidi couples, but there was a couple of families here that we knew from back home. And so that's what brought us to Nebraska.

Interviewee: Um, so I was actually only about two years old when we moved here. Um, so I don't remember it. I, from my family's experience, they kind of liked

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Interviewee: that it felt a lot more like home. Um, not only because there was Yazidi here, you know, there was, when we came to Lincoln, there was five other. Yazidi families in Lincoln. And so it was just the six of us, six family. So it was very tight knit and they, and it's very, it was very tight knit. I mean, now it is too, but it was especially more than because there was a few yeah. Of us. And, um, you know, I just remember like, As a kid. I don't think I ever hung out with any of my non Yazidi friends. Like I would go to school with them and then I'd go home. And on the weekends, I'd go to my Yazidi friend's house, you know, and it was just like one big family. Um, and so that was really nice. Um, and it also just like the agriculture, the only really big culture shock was the

snow, I think for a lot of people. But other than that, like the agriculture, the parks and everything just kind of felt more like home.

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Interviewee: Um, I am a member of the local board, um, and I volunteered as well.

Interviewee: Um, I help organize events, um, and we sort of discuss ways to kind of keep the center going and different programs. We can try.

Interviewee: Yes. We went directly from Houston. Um, we stayed in Houston for, um, about a couple months and then moved directly to Lincoln.

Interviewee: I went to, I actually went to five elementary schools. Um, two middle schools and four high schools altogether. I did live in Chicago for a year in high school. Um, but as far as Lincoln high schools, I went to Lincoln high

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Interviewee: for a little bit and then Lincoln East, and then graduated from Northstar.

Interviewee: My family moved a lot. I moved from Lincoln high to East just because it was a little bit closer to my house. Um, but it was just a different environment. There was a lot of Yazidi at Lincoln high, um, and not as many at East. And, um, so I moved to East just to kind of, you'll get a different point of view a little bit, um, and then stayed

there for awhile. And then my family wanted to move to Chicago for about a year, try it out and then moved back. And at that time we moved to a house close to North star. So I ended up graduating from there.

Interviewee: Uh, it was in the suburbs in Hanover park. Um, so it was about two hours from downtown Chicago. It was quite a big adjustment.

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Interviewee: The biggest adjustment was the school system. It was set up very differently. Um, I was used to in Lincoln, just being able to kind of. If you didn't like a school, you could transfer to another one, right The district. Um, but you in Chicago, you couldn't do that yet. You had to stay at that school. And the point system was very different. So a lot of the classes that I took in Lincoln didn't count towards graduation credits in Chicago. And so I was being really behind when I moved. And then when I moved back, I was really ahead here in Lincoln.

Interviewee: I think my favorite thing about Lincoln is that, um, it's, it kind of gives you the big city feel a little bit while also still remaining kind of a smaller town it's right in the middle. Um, and I like that. It's very friendly. Um, it's. It's just, I feel like it's a completely different town. Like I've been to a lot of places and I haven't seen anywhere like Lincoln.

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Interviewee: Um, so it's very different and I like that. It's very, um, progressive as well as compared to the rest of Nebraska. Um, so I think that's some of my favorite things about Lincoln.

Interviewee: Not when I was in high school now, um, I graduated in 2014, literally three months before the genocide happened. Um, so there wasn't quite as many Yazidis there as there is today. Um, but that was after 2010, when in 2010, there was another big surge of Yazidis coming over. So there was quite a few and it was starting to get more easy to use, but it was still a very diverse school. Um, which is one of the best things about North star. I think it was the best high school I went to.

Interviewee: I had graduated right before the gen I graduated in may of 2014. So then the genocide happened that August.

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Interviewee: Um, and I had just started college and I ended up having to miss a lot of school. Um, so it was difficult to explain to my Instructors why I was missing so much school and so much class. Um, and then one of my, of teachers from high school actually invited me back. Um, mr. Barnacle teaches, um, Holocaust lit. He, um, invited me back to kind of teach his students that year a little bit about the genocide, um, because he wanted them. He has now incorporated into his curriculum, um, each year. To teach about the Yazidi genocide as well. I haven't been back yet, but I would love to go back again and teach them more about it. I've also, um, spoke at, um, Southeast

high school about it as well. And that was a good experience as well because, um, there wasn't really any Yazidis in that class at all, much less than that school there. Wasn't very many Yazidis. Um, and so it was a very different population and most of the students

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Interviewee: there were hearing it for the first time and had never even heard of what Yazidis were. So it was a very different experience from North star.

Interviewee: Um, a lot of them kind of want to know about the Yazidis here in Lincoln and how they came here and how many there are in Lincoln. Um, and they're always kind of. Amazed at how big of a Yazidi community there is in Lincoln. They'd never heard of it before. Um, they also kind of ask about what had led up to it. Um, there's a lot of questions I get is like, kind of, did we have any idea that it was going to happen and kind of what were some of the signs beforehand? And so they're really interested to know kind of, if there was any way that other countries could have prevented it. I kind of let them know, especially because. Before the 2014 genocide Yazidis weren't very well known. Um, especially to

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Interviewee: first world countries like European trees in the U.S. um, they weren't very well known. And so it wasn't on their radar to look out for these signs. So there, there was things that, um, other countries could have done to stop it, but I think for the most

part, yeah, a lot of it would have still happened. Maybe not to the degree that it did and it might not have gone as far, but, um, what's important is to prevent it from happening again, because now there's really no excuse for these countries, not to know what had happened. Um, and to let it happen again,

Interviewee: I always try to be kind of. Brief, because if you go in too much to the history of like Yazidism them and stuff, you can talk for hours and hours. So I try to be kind of brief to catch their attention. You know,

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Interviewee: I will usually start by letting them know These Yazidi are as a, you know, ethnic religious minority from Northern Iraq, um, and kind of letting them know what had happened on August 3rd, when. Um, ISIS originally attacked, you know, we were left defenseless. We had, we didn't have any idea. We were told it was safe, you know, that nothing was happening. And then, um, the Peshmerga just kind of left us and next thing we know we're being attacked. Um, and that, that is usually what gets a lot of, especially with high school is what gets their attention because they expected, like, you know, it's kind of like, The Holocaust, where there was a lot of things leading up to it, but we were kind of sheltered from all that, you know, they, the Peshmerga knew, but we didn't really have an idea of what was happening. Um, so these were kind of blindsided by it. And so that kind of catches them off guard because they had no idea that it was really sudden like that.

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Interviewee: Um, and I think just letting them know that it is the like 74th genocide, then they. We'll ask more questions. Like how did 73 other genocides happen? Nobody knew. And so that usually will catch their interest too.

Interviewee: Um, a lot of them had asked kind of if it was related to Al Qaeda, um, and kind of if it was less brutalism Al Qaeda, or if it was worse, Um, and kind of what the relationship was and why they were targeting Yazidis was the main question was why. Um, but a lot of them had already kind of heard ISIS, like if not really done their own research, they'd at least heard it on the news or, you know, with their parents. So they kind of had a brief summary of what ISIS was, so they didn't need too much explanation, but I would kind of explain to them why they were targeting Yazidis and

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Interviewee: Christians and Jews specifically.

Interviewee: My, um, teacher from Northstar, I had his class, um, and he was one of the best teachers I've ever met. Um, and so I was Facebook friends with him actually. And so when the genocide was starting to happen, he had learned about it through Facebook and had heard about it. So then when the next school year started, he'd reached out to me on Facebook and asked if I'd be willing to come and speak to his class. Um, with Southeast high school, I was connected through a mutual friend. One of the students there was in Holocaust lit as well. Um, and they were doing projects, um,

on different genocides. And she had chosen the Yazidi genocide because she had heard about it through her church. Um, and they had to provide like a visual aid. And so I. Was there as her visual aid pretty much. So she had asked, you know,

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Interviewee: can I bring, can I bring a guest speaker as my visual aid? And her teacher said it was okay, so I had went to kind of teach the class more about it.

Interviewee: Yes. So when the genocide first happened, I kind of didn't know how to react. And for me, I'm more of like a doer, you know, when I see a problem, I want to fix it rather than just. Learning about it. So I learned as much as I could, but I also, um, organized a lot of, um, different like educational events to educate others in Lincoln about what was happening. Um, I also organized a lot of fundraisers to be able to raise some money, especially for like winter clothes, because the winter was gonna come soon to those that were stuck in the mountain. Um, and just try to do as much as I could from Lincoln.

Interviewee: Most part, they were very understanding.

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Interviewee: Um, one of them actually spoke to my advisor and allowed me to drop her class past the, uh, like drop date. Um, and so they were pretty understanding about it

and it, they were a little more lenient on me, especially with grading and assignments and things like that. So I was really thankful for that.

Interviewee: I am still in college. I'm still kind of deciding what I want my next steps to be. So I'm kind of taking a break. Um, but I hope to go back very soon. Um, my major will be, um, English education and political science. Um, I saw a lot of. When a lot of the refugees came over after the 2014 genocide, um, I saw how their education was interrupted. I originally wanted to go into education just alone and just be a English teacher. Um, but I think the standards need to be different for students that

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Interviewee: have experienced trauma like that, or that come from a third world country and as refugees, um, because the standards can't be the same. Somebody who. You know, couldn't go to school for two years because they were stuck in a refugee camp Isn't going to be at the same level as a 16 year old. Who's lived in America, their whole life.

Interviewee: Um, I think that it is up to the older and mid generations of Yazidis to pass on the traditions. Um, I know, you know, in my personal experience, The genocide. I feel like brought me closer to my culture because I am a, I'm very curious of just by nature. So I always, I want to learn more. Um, and, but I've seen a lot of younger Yazidis, you know, wanting to return to Iraq, to learn more about their culture. Um, and you know, even my nieces who are like four years old and eight years old,

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Interviewee: they love getting involved in this kind of stuff and learning more about it. And so I think. Just speaking about it in the home and because it's an oral religion, just continuing continuously passing it on and more teaching them why it's important to know and why their culture and religion is so unique and special to know that will get them more interested in it.

Interviewee: Um, I think the cultural center has given me a little bit more hope because when my family came to the U.S. um, 20 years ago, there wasn't anything like this for us. So we kind of had to navigate everything on our own. You know, we didn't speak, my parents didn't speak the language. There was only, only one or two interpreters here. Um, and so we just kind of had to figure everything out on our own. So we don't want the newer, Yazidis

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Interviewee: to have already been through this tremendous trauma. I have to have to go through that as well to have to navigate all of this on their own. So it's great to have something like this, to be able to help them, um, you know, with something as simple as reading their mail, you know, when it was us, we'd have to wait a week until an interpreter was available and have them read our mail for us.

Interviewee: I think as a woman in the Yazidi culture, um, I feel like there's more pressure to continue on the traditions. Um, you know, our last name doesn't get transferred. You know, our it's everything. I feel like relies on the men. So like even in like American culture where like, You don't take your wife's last name, you take your husband's last name, you know? Um, that is something that I feel like happens in Yazidi culture as well. A lot of relies

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Interviewee: on men. So we have more pressure to be able to carry on our traditions. Um, I do also feel like there's a little bit of a double standard as well, um, as there is in many cultures. Um, and I feel like that puts more pressure on us as well to kind of. Show that we, we are serious about our culture and our religion. Um, whereas I feel like men don't have to really prove that. Um, but I think also being a Yazidi woman, um, especially one in America is very empowering. Um, because you know, women are the ones that are going to have the future generations of Yazidis. Um, and they're the ones that are. Regardless of, you know, if you're a woman that's working and your husband's also working, you have to pick someone to be, to help raise a family with you. That is going to have the same beliefs as you are in your culture

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Interviewee: and religion, and have the same beliefs too, onto your children. And you're going to have to teach your children that. Um, so I think it's very empowering because I feel like women. Kind of have a lot of the control behind the scenes. Um, and so I think

it's awesome and I feel like women in the U.S. in the Yazidi community get stuff done. And so I think that's really empowering for me as well, because it just makes me feel like I have a lot more in my hands than I would back in Iraq, per se.

Interviewee: I think, I think the whole, um, notion of it being, you know, like you have to date within the Yazidi culture is widely debated. You know, some people say, well, it's just because there was a small amount of Yazidi. And so they wanted to preserve that. Some people say that it goes back

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Interviewee: to biblical times. So I think, and I think it needs to kind of be clarified. Um, but I think it should start with easy to use knowing kind of why they want to marry within the Yazidi community. You know, some people feel that they kind of want their kids to be a hundred percent Yazidi or whatever. Um, and they want to be able to tell. For me personally, I feel like nobody else would understand the struggle of Yazidis. So it'd be hard to kind of have somebody to connect with. Um, and they wouldn't understand kind of what Yazidis. Been through, but for others, you know, it's completely different. I think everybody's story and preferences and, um, kind of beliefs is different. Um, so I think honestly, it's to each their own. And I think it should be based on the family. You know, if you think if your family, um,

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Interviewee: says absolutely not, then that's something that you can, you have to decide, like, is that something that you want to give up? Um, and if so, like if that's what's, if that's how you're going to be happy, then there's compromises. And I feel like that does happen in a lot of different cultures too. You know, you have to make the compromises, um, whether. You want to continue to fight for this and, um, you know, eventually your family can come around. Um, or if you want to kind of give up on that love and just keep your family happy. So I think you need to make your own choices, um, and kind of do what you believe in.

Interviewee: I think most of the time, especially when I was in high school and my friends would ask, I would kind of go back to explaining, you know, the biblical beliefs

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Interviewee: behind it, you know, like how, um, many people believe that you see these aren't from Adam and Eve, but rather just from Adam and that. So it's basically like a separate. Thing. And so you have to try and preserve that. Um, but I would just say, you know, it's, it's really something that I've been raised on and my generations past have been raised on, but it's just a personal preference of mine, you know? And you know, a lot of my friends, if you kind of explained that it was more of a personal preference, um, it was more understandable that way. Um, and. So I think that was the easiest way to explain it back in high school.

Interviewer: Did you think boys had to explain that same thing or what

Interviewee: absolutely not. No, I don't think so at all. I don't think they, even now, as men have to explain that at all,

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Interviewee: my brothers are kind of on my side as well. They, um, No, that there's definitely like a gender inequality. Um, and out of my whole family, I'm the one who does a lot of like activism and advocating and stuff. And they don't where as in Iraq, that would be completely opposite and that wouldn't happen. And they, we always kind of talk about things like this and how there's a different culture here in the U.S. and that gives us the opportunity to Kind of change things back home too. And you know, if they see us doing it here, where the women are taking charge and the women are taking powers, positions of power, then maybe they'll kind of follow suit back home too.

Interviewee: I think it's really important actually for Yazidis to not only make a decision on it, but to address it,

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Interviewee: they don't even address it at all. You know, they kind of. Put it on the back burner for so many generations and I think it needs to be addressed. And I think a lot of it is it, I feel like it didn't happen as much back in Iraq or that we know of anyway, but there's a lot more choices here in America. You know, it's where the, mo we're more of a minority even now, you know, and I rack we a minority, but in the ?? alone, we weren't

the minority, but here we are, we're absolutely the minority. And so you have to address it and you have to. Come up with a plausible solution for it, you know, is, are you going to just leave it up to the families to decide like what we want to do if this happens with our daughter or our son, or are you going to make like a unanimous decision or all around? Um, and I think as like our generations get older, we're a lot more progressive. Um, and you know, eventually we're going to be the old ones making these decisions and I think.

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Interviewee: A lot more change is going to happen as we get older. And so I think for like our kids and our grandkids, it's going to be a lot easier. And they're going to know for sure, kind of what to do, because a lot of it is like they kind of feel lost and they don't know kind of what's going to happen or what to do. The problem is that a lot of the decisions are made by men. And so that's really something that needs to change. They need to Empower more women to be in on these conversations.

Interviewee: Uh, yeah, I absolutely have. I think, um, you know, like I said, when we came 20 years ago, we didn't speak the language or anything. Um, and I think it's kind of amazing to see a lot of the people that have come since 2014 automatically like. Because of the internet. Um, they already speak a little bit of English when they come to the U.S. and they pick up English so quickly,

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Interviewee: like in a year or two, they are absolutely fluent. Yeah. And it's crazy to see the difference because when we came to the U.S., it took us so long to learn enough English, to go with our parents, to doctor's appointments and translate for them. And my parents are just now like getting the hang of English. Whereas a lot of the newer generations that came over automatically know English when they come over. And so I think it's such a like big jump and, um, a lot of them are kind of surprised that we still speak Kurdish or Kurmanji because they think that we would have forgot it after 20 years of being here and learning English, but we still speak Kurdish in the home. So I think it's. Kind of cool to see the difference.

Interviewee: I've kind of seen more people speak kind of like a mix of the two kind

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Interviewee: of like Spanglish, like they'll mix English words into their Kurdish, or they'll mix a couple of Kurdish words into their English. And I still do that all the time. Um, and so sometimes even when I'm at work with people who don't speak Kurdish and only speak English. I'll forget a word in English and I'll just say it in Kurdish and they'll know what I mean. And so it's kind of, they kind of mix the two, um, and it kind of, it has taken on like a new language of its own too.

Interviewee: Um, I don't personally, I don't personally necessarily disagree that he's done a lot. Um, he has done more in getting kind of recognition for what has happened to these Yazidi and recognition for even knowing that the Yazidis are here, especially in

Nebraska. And I think that's important as you know, a representative of Nebraska to know. That the largest Yazidi population in the U.S. is in your home state. Um, as far as

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Interviewee: kind of being an ally for Yazidis, I don't necessarily believe that's true. Um, not just because he's a Republican per se, but because he's very conservative and conservatives don't necessarily take the side of minorities or refugees. Um, but I also think he's more of a yes, man. And he'll just kind of say. Anything to make Trump happy. Um, even if that means kind of going against what he's saying to you, Yazidis, you know, he he'll come in for our event to get a picture on the news to say that he was there, but then he'll go back to Washington and say something that kind of contradicts all of that. And doesn't make it seem like he's actually an ally.

Interviewee: He has been, I think his silence says more about his character than anything else. Um, and the fact

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Interviewee: that he would agree with it knowing kind of the conditions and what that would, uh, kind of prove for easy to use and how dangerous that would be, kind of says more than enough. About what his true intentions are for helping these Yazidis

Interviewee: Yazidis didn't come here necessarily by choice, but more out of survival, you know, and half the Yazidis that did come here in 2014, especially never wanted to

leave their homes. They never, ever would have wanted to leave Sinjar. They had to come here because there was no other safe option for them. And while they are here, they're very, very, very thankful That the U.S. was willing to accept them and allow them to be here and create a life here. So not only are they upstanding citizens, but they're also very, very hard workers. You know, Yazidis historically are very hard workers and

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Interviewee: we're pacifists. So we kind of just keep to ourselves, keep our head down, do our work. Um, and it does, it is very empowering to be in the U.S. and have that kind of Power and equal opportunity that we didn't have back home. So I think it's important to know that you're not only just, you know, allowing somebody to come here and live. These people are also paying taxes. They're also becoming teachers and doctors and engineers and pharmacists and enriching the country while also teaching other people about different cultures and acceptance and different religions. And The kind of different gender norms as well. Um, and it not only teaches you kind of what is happening halfway around the world, but it also teaches you a little bit more about what's happening in the U.S. especially, and to keep kind of your, a little bit more appreciative of how much, um, progress the U.S.

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Interviewee: has made, especially with, you know, equal opportunity for men and women. Kind of, there's still the gender pay gap and all these other issues, but that's

nothing compared to the differences in Iraq between men and women. And so, you know, they, I think refugees and immigrants in general absolutely enrich the U.S.

Interviewee: Yes. And no, I think as far as with my parents being dressed differently, there is kind of like the looks inside eyes. You get my mom no longer wears a scarf, um, which she used to. Um, and so we'd get a lot more looks when she did, but now she's kind of seeing that. It's especially when, uh, in 2016 after the election and people ran attack, she honestly was too scared to even think about wearing scarf anymore. Um, but I think like a lot of the

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Interviewee: racism and stuff that I've experienced personally happened in like middle school where people were very ignorant and kind of said all these other things and they, you know, do the whole terrorist thing, um, which was very hurtful, especially now. Thinking about what terrorists have done to use Yazidi. It's very ignorant and very hurtful.

Interviewee: I think when I think about that, I think especially back right after 9/11, you know, my family was still new. We came here in 99. So we'd only been here a couple of years or 98, I should say. We'd only been here a couple of years when 9/11 happened. My mom still wore a scarf. My parents didn't speak any English and they put on all their documents that they're from Iraq. And I was only maybe four or five years old at the time. So I didn't know. But now when I think back to it, I'm like they must've been

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Interviewee: terrified because there will be people that will, you know, say it's your fault or, you know, call you out on something that had absolutely nothing to do with you. Even if you were in the U.S. at the time. Um, And I think it's just kind of like this mass hysteria thing. No, they, and it was a scary time for the U.S. in general, but I think, uh, people were rightfully scared. Um, but I think that they treated people very, very badly, especially people who were from Iraq and looked like my parents and spoke like my parents. Um, and even like in 2016 after the election, I saw some of that happening again. And it was a really scary time for my family because my parents still speak Kurdish to each other. When they go out in public, you know, they don't speak English to each other. Um, they only speak English when they need to, to other people. And my mom, mom was still wearing a scarf and she took it off and refuse to wear it after that because she kept hearing of people getting attacked.

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Interviewee: So I think a lot of it is kind of the masses going against the minorities again. Um, And I really hope that changes very soon. Um, and I do see that it's, there's a lot of progress being made. Um, one of the things that I think is great is when that was happening in 2016, there was more people on your side then against you. Um, and so when somebody was speeding and attacked or yelled at or screamed at for wearing a hijab or speaking a language that somebody didn't understand. There was for each

person that was doing that. There was 15 people behind them, counteracting that and showing love. So I think that that's a big, positive change in the U.S.