

Emily Gengenbach

Interview: Awaz Smoqi

Location: Yazidi Community Center

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Interviewee: My name is Awaz Smoqi And my dad was in the army. So that's how we came. It was through him and his friends.

Interviewee: Well, I was a kid when we came here, I was nine years old, so I didn't really know much, but it was much better than Iraq. I mean, I was there and we were just always in the streets, but here you're now you're always at home and it's so much different. Um, well, Lincoln's a calm place and that's a place that I like.

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Interviewee: Uh, it's really nice. Like the people here are so nice. I've been to Chicago and other places, but it's really, I don't know. It's really busy and people don't really have time for each other there, or they kind of get rude on this streets, things like that.

Interviewee: I for the first time. I love this. No, but now I don't really like the snow. Yeah. I don't like the cold at all.

Interviewee: Yes. Um, I don't really work at the center. I just volunteer here sometimes when they need people to do things.

Interviewee: But I work at Solarian, which is a drug testing laboratory, and I've been working there for eight months now. So for my job, it's all, you kind of do a little bit of everything that I wouldn't nurse. It would do.

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Interviewee: We do ECG, vital signs. We do urine processing and blood, or we draw blood to blood collections. And with dose people, things like that.

Interviewee: Uh, yes. Uh, when I was going my senior year in high school, I worked at McDonald's and my senior year, I actually didn't go to high school. I just took, um, classes at SCC because I was all done with my credits. So I got my, uh, um, my Medicaid sort of, uh, certification and my CNA and my phlebotomy. So I just like working in the healthcare and trying to help people out.

Interviewee: Um, well, my, uh, when I was doing these classes, all my friends were Americans. I literally didn't have any Yazidis in my classes, but when I was in high school, I did have, Yazidis in my classes.

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Interviewee: They were just beginning to come to high school and know the experience and trying to learn. Everything, but, um, Yazidis friends thought it was really cool and some of them are actually trying to do that too, to work with the TCA and highschool get done really fast.

Interviewee: I mostly worked with my high school counselor a lot. And he's the one who helped me through all of this and will actually, um, told me, or asked me about, um, trying to move faster. And I was like, yeah, this is going to be amazing. Like I want to be done really fast. So he said, okay. Um, so my senior year. He said, uh, if you do want to get this done fast, you should do summer school or some online classes you are here. So I remember once a month. Sure. I took nine credit. I mean, nine classes. That was really stressful, but I didn't have a job at that time. So I got everything done and yeah,

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Interviewee: he was the one who pushed me through it.

Interviewee: No. Um, um, I don't know. They were all open-minded, I've always liked my schools and everybody says, always been so nice to me at school yet.

Interviewee: Uh, so I'm going to SCC right now, hopefully transferring to UNL this coming fall. And I really want to get into med school because I want to study surgery, heart surgery.

Interviewee: So I thought maybe get into med school and try to do what I can to help others. And I know when somebody is sick, they're trying to do anything they can to help that person. For example, my brother is sick or my sisters, um, I'm always trying to help them and see what I can do to help them feel better. That makes me feel better

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Interviewee: trying to help others.

Interviewee: When I first came here, I didn't know English obviously, but when I did learn English, I made so many friends that are from all around the world. And that's really cool to me, like to know about other cultures and know there's so many people out there who aren't like you who have a different mindset and that's really cool.

Interviewee: I mean, it has kind of when you're really young and you move here, it will end, it has affected you all along. But I mean, when you are, um, growing up in Iraq and you come here as a teen or as an adult, it doesn't affect you that much. But with me, it has affected me, even though I follow all my culture, cultural rules and things like that. I mean, I still wear American clothes, obviously. I don't always wear Yazidi clothes and

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Interviewee: I do a lot of things that Americans do. So, and Iraq, you would have friends and you would obviously hang out with them. It wouldn't be just as much as you hang out with people here. Like for example, I can go out with Yazidi people with American

people. It doesn't matter what culture they are. As long as we're friends, we can do that. And I'm sure in Iraq, it's not like that everybody's Yazidis and they're just going around and hanging out with each other.

Interviewee: Well, my opinion is it doesn't really matter to me. Um, I have friends who are, Yazidis. But they date Americans, it doesn't really affect me, but to be honest, it does affect them as any culture. For example, if a woman does marry into the American culture and any other cultures, some of them aren't allowed back in their home. And that's, to me that's really difficult because why would you leave your family

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Interviewee: for a guy? You know? So I don't really understand why some people would do that. Um, for me, I don't date outside of my culture. If I do a date it's somebody Yazidi or a close friend that is Yazidi.

Interviewee: I mean for me, not really because my family is pretty open about a lot of things, but for other, I have friends who their families are really strict and they don't let them wear certain clothes or do certain things.

Interviewee: Well, I love my culture. I mean, it's really interesting. And I've learned about so many other cultures. It's just, they're all kind of, there's always something similar in every culture that you can. You know, I have in common with other people and that's

really cool. Well, most Americans don't know about Yazidi cultures or don't know that Yazidi culture even exists

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Interviewee: because it's so small. So I just like talking about it and helping them learn that there is more to this world than, you know, America, because most of my Americans friends, like they don't really know that there's other things outside of here and they think everything's safe as America is.

Interviewee: Well, Turkey was amazing. It was really beautiful. Um, the parks there were really nice. I mean, I hadn't seen parks and Sinjar because Sinjar is a really dry place. Uh, so the first time that I actually seen it, playgrounds and parks were in Turkey. So that was really cool.

Interviewee: They got really stressful and I don't really like politics so much. So I'm just like, no I'm saying, because there's so much going on and I don't know, it's just the killing, there's so much killing

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Interviewee: going on. And I feel like people shouldn't do that. Like they should just go with kindness, you know, it'd be nice to everybody. And if there's a problem, come up with a solution instead of like having a war. That's I don't know. That's not my thing.

Interviewee: Yes, I have from my mom's side, my grandma and my uncle, two of my uncles actually, and my mom's sister. So my ends, they were in Sinjar. One of them actually, the two of them, um, went to, uh, Germany during that time when that happened. And some of them are still in the tent. I mean, in Sinjar.

Interviewee: Well, I would stay here permanently, but I do really want to visit because my grandma, but here there's so much that you can do. You can go to school here and it's really safe and Iraq. Some people do go to school, but it's

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Interviewee: not always safe for them.

Interviewee: Uh, so I did go to school in Iraq till third grade. And I remember, um, even if it's snowed in Iraq, you would always have to walk to school. So that was kind of hard because when it did rain alot Iraq, and when it did rain, um, We, uh, there was no cement, like they barely had any cemet. So you would just walk in mud, to get to school and things like that. Um, I mean, all I remember was playing with the kids and the streets, and I remember at night it wouldn't be safe to be out. So like everybody with lock their doors. And, um, I remember the stores would close when it got dark, things like that.

Interviewee: I have no idea. I just know my dad, like he went to college in Iraq and then he, I guess he had friends

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Interviewee: who were in the military. So he joined too. And that he translated for them.

Interviewee: I started with ESL classes or as they call it ELL, um, I was in ELL classes all through middle school and elementary then high school that's when I got out of it. And yeah, the teachers here are amazing and they helped me really understand it.

Interviewee: Um, but the teachers and public school are really hopeful and open on. When I first came here, I didn't know anything. So they were talking to me with their hands, trying to help me understand. And, and when I did know English in high school, I remember when the genocide happened, the teachers were really supportive and they were there whenever you needed them. So that's really important here.

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Interviewee: Oh, there is a lot about the history of America and about how women, um, became as they are today. And I think it's really cool. How just like in Iraq woman used to be nothing here and how there are doctors right now, and that's really important.

Interviewee: Yes. I really do think so because I'm here. Um, you can do whatever you want, do your gender, gender doesn't matter. So that's really important to know. And, uh, if, if it was like the olden days, you couldn't do anything, it would just sit around our

home and yeah. What would you be doing with your life? You'd just be bored all the time.

Interviewee: I mean, um, I remember when I first moved here, I mean, there was a lot of people coming because

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Interviewee: they had either relatives here or they did work with the army. And right now, uh, with, uh, Trump being president, I've heard it's really hard to come here. So I don't, I don't really know.

Interviewee: At first, I really liked learning about the history of Nebraska or, I mean, America, U.S. it was really interesting to learn all that, but right now I am more, I'm more into science fiction books. I like things like that.

Interviewee: Well, I tell them a little bit about how Iraq was and how, about how it is living here. And there's a difference, like a big difference. So they really get interested in that. And I think it's really interesting because in Iraq, Um, even though I was a kid, it was really hard for some people like, um,

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Interviewee: most of them didn't even have it jobs in Iraq. They would just be at home or open their own stores and do it. Yeah. But here, if you actually do, do want your own business, try to do something, you could do it. Like if you really want it, you can do it.

Interviewee: Um, I don't really remember the war because I was never in it. Like Sinjar, the town was really, was safe as like, it was really safe, but at the same time, it wasn't like, um, uh, my parents would always have an eye on me and my brother. My sister was, uh, six months when we came here. So, uh, yeah, they would always watch out for us and we couldn't go further than two blocks from our home. Yeah. Not just because of the war, but because of other people, because like, Um, and Sinjar are sometimes like Arabs or Muslims would come

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Interviewee: in our streets and try to sell us food and things like that. But then at the al, at that time, there were a lot of people getting kidnapped, so they didn't know what the reason was or how it was happening, things like that.

Interviewee: Yazidi culture. I've been asked this so many times that sometimes I forget, I'm like, what is it? I don't even know anymore. But, um, well, my family has taught me is that the Yazidi culture is you are a person just like everybody else. And you have to be kind and open minded to everybody or everybody's religion. Um, So, yes, Yazidi, they don't, as, you know, they don't marry outside of their religion and if they do, they have to leave their family or leave their religion. Nobody can come into their religion. And if you

leave, you leave. Um, and I know some other cultures aren't like that you can marry into their religion

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Interviewee: outside the religion. It's fine. But here it's you. Okay. Okay. And I also know that. For Yazidis. You always have to be kind to each other, no matter what, if somebody needs you, you have, you like have to help them and like, they need you and you're there. So why not help them? And if they need something from you, you should always help them. Things like that.

Interviewee: Well, it's kind of hard to explain, but once you get into it, they understand it more. For example about the woman's woman being forced to have sex with them, if not, they would be killed or about if you don't, um, change your culture or whatever you were killed. And, um, I mean, most of my friends thought that was stupid and they did not stand with that. I mean, why would you have to change your culture and who you are? And I mean, what the,

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Interviewee: what ISIS did was really wrong because they had, um, Why would they make somebody change their culture or who they are for, for them? I mean, who says that their culture is more important, more important than our culture?

Interviewee: I mean, um, the history, it, it was kind of similar here because what they did to African Americans, that was really harsh too. And. Here. I mean, I've learned to just be open minded and to respect, like every culture and religion that is out there because everybody thinks that their culture is important. Right. And you know, um, who says it's not, I mean, it is every culture is important in its own way. So I think that should be respected and a person should be more open minded to things like that.

Interviewee: Uh, yes, the temple in Iraq. I did go there.

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Interviewee: Um, they call it a Lalish. I went there when, before we came here actually a few months before we came here, I went there with my family and my aunt came with us too. Yeah, it was really beautiful. I was really small, so I don't really remember much, but so we would walk there. We couldn't have shoes on. We would, uh, I mean, we would go there. There's like, uh, a water there. Um, they said, if you drink the water, it's really good for you and things like that, or it would give you good luck, something like that.

Interviewee: Yeah, I think that's really awesome how everybody just decided to gather of here. There's people in New York and Chicago and Canada, but the biggest community is in Lincoln. And I think that's amazing. Like every store I walk into every street I go on there, somebody, Yazidi right there?

19:03

Interviewee: I think so. Yeah, I think so. Because when we have weddings here, the weddings are so big. Like sometimes they wonder if the hall is enough for them because there's like a thousand people going there and they're like, well, there's not enough building, like the building. Isn't big enough for people here. So, but sometimes they come here to visit us too from Chicago and Canada and New York.

Interviewee: Um, so we have a lot of yesterday costumes. I mean the white ones were the older elderly where we have those. And then there's some like Kurdish dresses that aren't really like Yazidi dresses, but Yazidi people wear them. I mean, they did wear them interact too. Because Kurdistan wasn't that far from Sinjar I guess. And then they were selling their clothing, um, in Sinjar.

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Interviewee: So that's how the Kurdish dress has become. But with me, I usually just wear American dresses, like prom dresses to those events because they expect you to dress well and look nice at those parties.

Interviewee: I think that all of them all men should wear a suit to weddings and things like that. I think that's just respectful and they look much nicer like that. Yeah. There's some that come in shorts. I'm just like, are you serious? I don't know if other people care about it, but me and my group of friends were just like, it's easier. Serious. Why did he come in shorts?

Interviewee: Well, I just, um, growing up here, um, helps you have more open mind and you're set, you can set up for your future really young age. And if you really want that, there's nobody or nothing that can get in your way.

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Interviewee: I mean, if you're passionate enough to want it, you can go for it.