

“BECOMING THE BULLY”**NARRATOR** **Rabia Ahsin****FOR LESSON***After 9/11:
The Political
is Personal*

ALI So can you tell me what you remember of 9/11, of that day, how it unfolded for you?

AHSIN Sure. [laughter] I'm laughing now because all these kids were leaving. So I remember — I didn't know what had happened. I — I did know that my — one of my teachers, I don't remember who it was, but — because in fifth grade, we had, like, different teachers for different subjects. So my teacher had received a phone call that something — some crash happened in — in Manhattan. I had no idea what this crash entailed, obviously. Like, all I thought was like, “Oh, this must be a car crash. Oh, how horrible. A car crash happened in Manhattan. But why — why did she have to receive a phone call for this?” Like, I think — I thought these things had happened normally.

And throughout the day, we had students, like, leave, like, their parents were calling them out, you know, and just asking to — asking them to come home. And I remember thinking like, “Oh, Mama would never call me home.” She would never — [laughter] she would never be like, “Rabia, come home,” for whatever reason. And actually, I didn't realize that those students were being called home because of the crash in Manhattan, whatever that crash may be. I hadn't connected the two. I just thought something other than that had happened, that students are being, you know, called out. And I remember, by the end of the day, I was just so upset. There was, like, maybe, like, five kids left in the class, me being one of them. And I was just so mad at my mom. Like, why didn't she pick me up? Like, why did she let me stay the whole day in school?

RUN TIME **4:50**

And later on that day, we found out that, you know, the planes had hit the towers and whatnot. But at the time, I didn't understand the implication of it. I thought — actually, it's so funny, because I thought this was, like, a regular thing. Like, this happens all over the world. Now it's just happening here. I didn't understand, really, what this would entail.

And then the following day we understood, oh, hijackers. Hijacking became something that was a regular part of my language at that point — or after that, rather. And then Osama bin Laden. And, you know, then, you know, understanding that there is a negative connotations to, like, Muslims being in the news, and Osama bin Laden. And I remember, like, a couple of months after that, I remember kids saying, “Oh, is Osama in your basement? Are you hiding him? Is he your uncle?” And all of these different things that I'm sure that hundreds, if not thousands of, like, Muslim New Yorkers, especially, had to, probably, deal with.

ALI How did you deal with it?

AHSIN I — you know, I became a bully. So, in order to prevent me from being bullied, I became the bully. I was such a — I was such a... especially, like, after fifth grade had ended. I remember in fifth grade, somebody had, like, pulled my scarf off, and I cried so much because I felt so violated, not that I had any real, like, attachment to the scarf, like, definitely not as, like, a religious thing, or not even as, like, a cultural thing. It was just like, “Oh, I do this. Whatever.” But I felt like somebody had violated me, because it was a part of me that they had ripped off. And — but the following year, especially this one kid. He would constantly — with, like, the Osama bin Laden jokes. Like, it — it was so lame. It was, like, you have, like, nothing else in your arsenal except this one lame thing that you keep saying? Meanwhile, I'm, like, literally...on your entire life. Like, how?

But I became a really big bully, like, in middle school. And a lot of it ended up — a lot of it was because of this fear that if I don't bully, someone's going to bully me. And —

ALI How did that manifest, your bullying?

AHSIN I — I picked on anyone and everyone, I would say. I was pretty witty, and so I could, like, you know — I don't know. I would just, like, make fun of people, make fun of the way that they looked, make fun of the way that they did things or, like, their — especially, like, their level of intelligence. I always hit — like, wherever I felt like somebody had an insecurity, I would, like, pick at that. So I was pretty good at finding out insecurities.

And — you know, and it's interesting, because, like, years later, when I met some of these people in college, and just randomly, like, totally coincidence — like, if I would meet them coincidentally or whatever, I would apologize for being that person. And I remember this one person in college. I — I randomly saw him, and I — I remember chasing him down, and being like, “Do you remember me?” And he's like, “No, I don't.” And I was just like — and I had to remind him. And in reminding him, I was crying so much. Like, “I bullied you, man.” Like, “I'm so sorry about the person that I was then,” and, you know, explaining myself to him, and that I'm different, and that I've, like, repented. And he does not understand anything, or did not understand anything that I was saying to him. But I remember crying so much. Like, “I'm sorry for being that way.” And — but I was a bully. I was — I was really mean, and — but it was survival.

BIO Rabia Ahsin was born in 1991 in Midwood. While studying political science at Brooklyn College as an undergraduate student, she joined the school’s Islamic Society of Brooklyn College as well as the Muslim Women’s Educational Initiative, both of which were targeted by the New York City Police Department for religiously motivated surveillance by an undercover officer while Ahsin was a member. She also became an outspoken activist against human rights abuses, including protesting with Brooklyn College’s newly formed Students for Justice in Palestine and focusing her studies on surveillance in New York City. She went on to work as a special education teacher at an all-girls secondary school.

CITATION Ahsin, Rabia, Oral history interview conducted by Zaheer Ali, September 01, 2018, Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.32; Brooklyn Historical Society.