

“WE DIDN’T HAVE FRIENDS”

FOR LESSON

*Growing Up
and Fitting In*NARRATOR **Shahana Hanif**

HANIF And this is in high school, not junior high school. High school where the limitations and, like, restrictions of going out — because we were like, all of our friends are able to go out and hang out with each other outside of school. My parents felt that we didn’t need to cultivate friendships. They didn’t — and I could understand that. They haven’t — for my father, he’s had to work ever since he came to America. So, friendships were not the way that I’m imagining via watching cartoons, via watching movies.

RUN TIME **3:15**

And then, for my mother, she came here when she was 17 or 18, and similarly, like, was a married woman and had to — or was kind of pushed into taking care of two kids at a very young age. And so cultivating friendships were not nearly, like, how I have friends. Like, their friendships were very, like — to me it seemed very different. Like, them having friends is just honestly them saying hi to people, and that’s it.

So, they didn’t believe in us needing friends or, like, needing to hang out and having some, like, social time and, like, just hanging out with people and doing — not doing homework or not doing work. I think that drove them nuts. Like, they were like, “So what are you going to do with them?” And then, like, just letting them know that we were going to hang out was just, like, bizarre to them. They’re like, you go to school — am I sending you to school to, you know, to hang out?

And so we didn’t have friends. Or, we were unable to successfully cultivate these long-term friendships that many of my other friends are able to have and still kind of enjoy. But we still tried. So, like, we were always looking for opportunities

to get out of the house. But we needed each other’s kind of like backup, because we didn’t have the same friends. So we would make sure that if we were going out we were going to be out together and come up with this whole scheme to make sure that we were on time. And because this is also — we still don’t have phones, it’s a hard time to get in touch with us. So just making sure that we had ways to communicate with each other and then to get home by whatever time was mentioned — but I feel like I was still always a scaredy-cat. Like, I was the one who was just too scared to take any risks, to hang out far away from school or, like, to take the train and go into Manhattan.

Like, I just stayed in Brooklyn. We went to Bishop Kearney High School. That was in Bensonhurst. And I never — like, I just didn’t dare to even move away from Bensonhurst because I was too scared that I would get caught.

BIO Shahana Hanif was born in 1991 in Brooklyn and raised in Kensington’s Bangladeshi community. After a health crisis as a teenager led to a diagnosis of lupus, she went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in women’s and gender studies from Brooklyn College. While there, she became involved in intersectional activism and community organizing, especially with the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence and Naree Shongothok: Bangladeshi Women Organizing for Social Change. Hanif has worked as director of organizing and community engagement for New York City Council Member Brad Lander.

CITATION Hanif, Shahana, Excerpt from oral history interview conducted by Liz H. Strong, April 17, 2018, Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.15; Brooklyn Historical Society.