

“WE DON’T LOOK MUSLIM”

FOR LESSON

*Growing Up
and Fitting In***NARRATOR** Alyssa Haughwout

HAUGHWOUT We don’t look Muslim to a lot of people, you know. And that’s something that people — I remember people saying to me, when I was in like high school and college, they’re like, “Oh, you don’t look Muslim.” I’m like, “Don’t say it like a compliment, [laughter] like that’s, like that’s — are you complimenting me, that I don’t look Muslim, because that’s a weird thing to say.” And so I think that that’s — that definitely changes our experience of the whole thing, of coming to America, of proving ourselves as Americans and not just like you know, every, every culture got pooped on [laughter] when they came to America, you know? So being white definitely helped with that.

RUN TIME **5:00**

STRONG How did, you know, your life personally, being Muslim, living in areas where you may have been the only Muslim family, how did that, how did that go for you in the different phases of your life? Were you living out and proud; were you talking to your friends about it? What did you decide to do?

HAUGHWOUT Well, when I was little, like in elementary school, I didn’t know that it was a thing, like I didn’t even know there was a different thing. When I was in like kindergarten — I would say probably the community that I grew up in was probably — like my friends were half Christian and half Jewish, and that was always the question around December, was like are you going to celebrate Christmas or Hanukkah, and I’d be like, “I’m not going to celebrate either, huh,” and I thought that made me cool, like that made me special and different, and I suppose it did. But like, I was like, “We have a holiday called Ramadan, because it happened to land in December, around there, or in the wintertime anyway, around that time, so I’m like, “I get to not listen to music or eat for 30 days, but afterwards, there’s a party.” [laughter]

But yeah, so my friends and my friends’ families were all very accepting. There was never — it was never even weird, it was never a thing. Like I remember as kids, like, my parents would like abridge what Ramadan is for us, so we didn’t listen to music for 30 days, that was the thing that, that was our fasting, so to speak. So, I remember being in, I think it was like third grade, and we were watching a movie in class and I, like, excused myself, I’m, like, there’s — I think it was like *Sound of Music* or something like that, I’m like, “I can’t, I can’t watch this.” And my teacher was like, she felt so bad because she didn’t — she was like, “I didn’t know that was part of it.” And I’m like, “Oh, it’s okay.” And she’s like, “Okay, come,” and I just like hung out in the teachers’ lounge and like sat on the couch and like ate cookies [laughter] because she felt so bad that she, like, wanted to be sensitive to our needs, you know, and she’s like, “Oh, I didn’t even know that was a part of being, you know, part of Ramadan.” I didn’t even know to tell her, I’m like, “It’s not, my parents just made it up.” [laughter]

It was just like that’s how we’re going to do it, because, you know, I wasn’t going to fast as a third grader, and they wanted me to do something, you know? So, but yeah, everybody was, was — I’m really lucky because it could have gone — now, in retrospect, I see it could have gone a much worse route, you know, and I think it, it was good because people got to know us before they knew we were Muslim, you know like, “Oh yeah, Steve and Aisha, they’re great,” like, “Yeah, Aisha is kind of a weird name but whatever, you know, just like look past it.” And then it would come out, like, as like a nonchalant thing, like, “Oh yeah, it’s a Muslim holiday or it’s like one of my holidays is, you know, I’m like, I’ll be coming — I’m going to come in late today because it’s a, it’s a holiday, I have” — what did I used to say? I don’t know — I remember, I remember we used to say, there was like some phrase, it was like I have prayers, or something like that, you know,

and be like, one of my holidays I have to go do. And, and yeah, I think, I think that also goes back to the fact that we don’t look like what people think Muslim people look like. So, we did, we got that, like, first step in of like, “Oh, you get to meet us and know that we’re nice,” and then this other piece of what should be irrelevant information comes in, as opposed to like, “Oh, the first thing you know about me is my religion.” You know? So I think that’s — that was definitely again — helped, helped us integrate as a community.

As I got older, it really didn’t — it, it was a pretty — not so bad. I mean there’s always like stupid high school people, you know, but I think there’s just dumb boys in high — in every high school [laughter] who will say stupid

things, and nobody ever said anything to me, like, ever threatening or ever, you know, in any way like that. They would be like, “Oh yeah, Muslim, you’re a terrorist,” not, none of that, but it was like, it would be like some Muslim joke and be like, “Hey, moron. Is that what you think of me?” And they’re like, “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t — not you, not you, not you.” Like, yeah. [laughter] So it, it’s that kind of conversation where it’s like not directed, but like just a stupid thing, and the more that I, you know, talk, and the more people I meet, then you’re like, “Oh, not you,” and I’m like, “No, not, that’s not just it’s not me, [laughter] you’re just wrong. It’s not anybody.”

So you know, I think that overall, it was not a bad experience.

BIO Alyssa Haughwout was born in 1984 in Queens and raised in Long Island. Her family visited Williamsburg throughout her childhood to attend their Tatar community’s Brooklyn Moslem mosque, which had been founded following the group’s emigration from Eastern Europe during the early 1900s. Haughwout served on the mosque’s board with her aunt, Marion Sedorowitz (interviewed for this collection on April 11, 2018), while working toward a master’s degree in art and design education from Pratt Institute. She eventually became the board’s vice president as well as the mosque’s caretaker.

CITATION Haughwout, Alyssa, Excerpt from oral history interview conducted by Liz H. Strong, April 25, 2018, Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.16; Brooklyn Historical Society.