

“WE HELPED IT CHANGE”

FOR LESSON

*Belonging
in Brooklyn*

NARRATOR **Mahmoud Widdi**



KITTO What was the neighborhood like in the '70s?

RUN TIME **6:07**

WIDDI The neighborhood was rough. The neighborhood was rough at that time.

KITTO Can you give me some examples?

WIDDI In the '70s was — was — it was a lot of drug infestation, yeah. It was down there. It was a poor neighborhood, Fulton Street. I think it was called Bed Stuy? Yeah, I think it's still Bed Stuy at that time. Now they call it —

KITTO Clinton Hill.

WIDDI Clinton Hill, I don't know, for maybe real estate purposes, okay. It was called Bed Stuy back then. It was the crack epidemic and all that. It wasn't pleasant, you know, but we sort of like stuck it up with the people, the good people over there. There was a lot of good people, a lot of good people, okay. And now in the neighborhood now has changed.

KITTO Yeah.

WIDDI And we helped it change, as a matter of fact. We — by — by continue — continuing to stay in the neighborhood and provide them with the good food, you know, you go to a poor, poor neighborhood, what do you — what do you find in really poor neighborhoods? I mean, liquor store, bond shop, candy store with junk food. You don't find —

KITTO A supermarket.

WIDDI — a good supermarket with the — with the foods and good foods, fresh fruits and vegetables and all that. We always provided that, stuck it out with

that neighborhood, and the neighborhood appreciates that, yeah. They really do. They support us all the way through, yeah.

WIDDI My dad opened up the catering hall, I think, in 1980, 1980.

KITTO That's what I saw.

WIDDI I could be one year off.

KITTO Yeah.

WIDDI Yeah, yeah, I could be a year off or something. He opened it up. My — my — my dad's always been a pioneer. Like I told you, he opened up that coffee shop. That was for the people to come in and there's a — now they started having engagements, parties and stuff, social activities, and they had no place to go. So he opened that for them, okay, and he was giving it to them like near free, almost free in the beginning, you know. He wanted to introduce them to it, you know. And sure enough it's still there, and he was always, always good to his neighbors. He loved everybody. If — if somebody didn't have enough money to pay for the wedding he would just forgive them. Say — say you don't have — this one guy comes in, and he says, "You know what, I'm short \$1,000. I'll bring it." Sometimes he would say, "Forget about it. Give me what you got. Then that's it. You know, forget about the debt," you know. And he stayed there from — running that business, god bless his soul, and being active with the community from maybe '80 until — until he became — he died in [2012]. He stayed active, I would say, until maybe '96, because in the last two years he was bedridden. Yeah, '96, say from '95. So from 1980 to '95, that's 15 years, right?

KITTO Yeah, was that his only business at that time?

WIDDI No, no, we had — at that time we had the store. We had Fulton Street. He had a Key Food also on Franklin Avenue, yeah, that, you know, he gave to the second — his new family, to the family that his — the kids that he had from the Lebanese woman, yeah, which he loved and my half-brothers, and I loved them all.

KITTO Where was that one, Franklin and what?

WIDDI What? Franklin and Fulton.

KITTO Oh.

WIDDI Yeah, yeah, there's — there's a big development going on over there, yeah. My siblings sold it after he passed, and there's something big going on over there right now, you know. And that's it, and my dad was really, really, really good to the people, and people appreciated him, and they loved him in the neighborhood, that when he passed, when he passed, you know, the people in the neighborhood or at least a few of them got together, and they said, "This man was good to us all these years. We got to do something for this guy," you know. "We got to do something for him." So they got together, and they signed petitions. They went around the neighborhood and got some signatures. We as his children couldn't — couldn't — didn't know that we could do something like go name a street or something like that for him. They got this petition done for him, and they came to us, and they said, "This is what we did. Now we just got to finish up." Sure enough me and my brothers and my sister, we were active and we went to every community meeting, and I think it was community board number 10. I'm not sure. I think 9 or 10, okay. We went to the meetings, and we got an autobiography for him. We got some of his old pictures with important people,

his plaques that he acquired – some of the plaques that he acquired during his life, and sure enough, it was signed into law, yeah.

KITTO Where is it?

WIDDI It's on 56th Street, 56th Street and 6th Avenue.

KITTO Okay, so it's like Bay Ridge?

WIDDI No, it's Sunset Park.

KITTO Sunset Park, yeah.

WIDDI Sunset Park, yeah

KITTO And that – is that where the catering hall is?

WIDDI That's where the catering hall is, yeah. I mean, on your way back if you're going that way you can look at it. The corner of 56 and 6th Avenue it says Subhi Widdi Way...

BIO Mahmoud Widdi was born in 1957 in Beit Hanina during a period of changing political boundaries. He was raised primarily by his mother and paternal grandfather, and joined his father, Subhi Widdi, in the United States in 1975. He and his cousin opened a Met Foodmarket grocery store in the Prospect Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn in 1983, which they converted into a Foodtown in 2016. He and his wife maintain strong connections to their Palestinian heritage, regularly visiting Beit Hanina and the surrounding area with their children.

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