

## “MY HORIZONS BROADENED”

**NARRATOR** **Linda Sarsour****FOR LESSON***After 9/11:  
The Political  
is Personal*

**SARSOUR** And apparently, NYPD intelligence officers and other types of agents came into their buildings and basically were going around knocking on different people's doors — and our people don't know their rights, and in fact opened doors for the law enforcement agents. And they basically were snatching up people's husbands and people's older sons, or their fathers, and what they would say to them: “Oh, don't worry. You know, they'll be back.” And then these women were claiming that it was almost four to five days since the — since they last seen their loved ones. And so I brought them to the, like, imam office, and then we're — I was like, “I don't know what's going on here.” And of course, our imams are not trained, either. And many of them, as you know, particularly the one in Sunset Park, they — they come from Al-Azhar University. They're Egyptian. They're, like, immigrants. They have no idea. In fact, they're — they're shell-shocked, because they come from authoritarian states where they're like, “I didn't know this happens here in America.” I didn't know this happened here in America, to be honest. Like, I was a very naive young person. And to be like, “This doesn't happen in my country.”

And then all of a sudden, went from, like, high school English teacher mode to became a translator. And I started translating for women, helping them connect to legal services. And at the time, a family, kind of cousin, but very — very dear friend of my family, had founded an organization called the Arab American Association of New York. And she also had — was working at a hospital, the Lutheran Medical Center at the time. Now it's called NYU [New York University] Langone. But in — in — in the — in — in — at the time, it was called Lutheran Medical Center. And she was a patient relation rep. And because of her position

RUN TIME **4:00**

as patient relation rep, and as an Arabic speaker, all of a sudden, while she's supposed to just help patients navigate the hospital, she became, like, the person that people went to, to the hospital, to be like, "They took my husband. They came to our home." And so she became — began referring these people to this new organization, that by the way did not know what it was doing. So it wasn't like an organization that had been set up with all the resources. It was just this idea that we needed something to work with in our community. And she called me up, and she's like, "What are you doing?" And I was like, "I don't know. Like, I'm a college student. Like, what do you mean, what am I doing?" And then she's like, "I need you. You speak English. You speak Arabic. You're from this community. You know a lot of these people. We — we just — you just have to come." So in those moments, the community that I grew up in, you don't really say no to people in your community, and not anybody that's related to you, nor someone that's very dear to your family. And so I showed up at the Arab American Association of New York, just a few months after 9/11, and there was when I discovered that my country and all the things that I learned about historically were actually the present. And I felt so naive knowing that this wasn't just happening to my community, and then my horizons got broadened. And so I literally pivoted to all these things that I had to learn so quickly to help my people. Certified interpretation, so I became a certified interpreter, both Arabic interpreter, but specifically around medical interpretation, mental health services, you know, doing counseling services. People were engaging, you know — in the course of the year and a half, even, after 9/11, I started seeing increased cases of substance abuse within the Muslim community, even knowing that people will say, "Oh, we can't drink, we can't do drugs, because it's against our faith." But people did — weren't finding outlets, and we didn't have outlets in the Muslim community, so being able to learn and pivot really quickly. Reading

policy, trying to understand how government works. Like, there was nothing. Like, I came to a community where there was — there were mosques, there were Islamic centers that were built, and I always am grateful to our elders who built that type of brick-and-mortar infrastructure, but that’s all they had. There was nothing else there, so I was almost, like, overcompensating, trying to absorb as much information as possible. And that was my first unfortunate introduction into my own personal activism in New York around these things that impacted my community.

**BIO** Linda Sarsour was born in 1980 in Sunset Park. Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, she became involved with the newly founded Arab American Association of New York (AAANY) as both an organizer and a certified Arabic interpreter. In 2005, she succeeded AAANY co-founder Basemah Atweh as executive director. During her tenure, Sarsour was active in a number of progressive causes, particularly the defense of Arab American and African American communities. During the 2016 presidential election, she campaigned for Senator Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primary and for Democratic nominee former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in the general election. When Donald Trump was elected, Sarsour took an active role in resisting his administration, including co-chairing the Women’s March on Washington, in January 2017, which attracted millions of participants, in protest of Trump’s inauguration.

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