

Interview transcript for Bhaa Elashkar
Conducted by Marwa Ghazali on 11/16/17



Interviewer: So we're doing a migration stories project right? And the whole point of it is to share stories about migration in Kansas. Specifically African migration, and you guys are a couple I thought would be really interesting to interview, because you both have experiences with migration individually, and then you have your own sort of like marriage migration story that isn't just here in the United States. It sort of goes across international borders and it's a beautiful story that I think would be helpful for people to hear. So why don't we start by just tell me a little bit about yourself. Where were you born? You know, how did you grow up?

Elashkar: My name is Bhaa, age 35, originally from Egypt but born and raised here in the United States in Shawnee Mission, Kansas. And parents migrated from Egypt in the 70's, got married overseas and then moved here and we're the first generation born here in the United States. And a little bit of background: I'm an educator of fifteen years, as well as an administrator, worked in school districts out here in the U.S., as well as overseas in the United Arab Emirates. And I'm currently working at a technology company right now that works in education.

Interviewer: So I notice that when you talk about your background, you said first you were Egyptian and then you mentioned that your parents were the ones who made the migration. What kind of role did Egypt as a country or a cultural identity play for you when you were growing up? Like, did you think about Egypt? Did you visit Egypt? How did your parents bring Egypt to you, if they did at all?

Elashkar: Well, Egypt was always a part of our lives here in the United States. Mainly our grandmother lived with us for over twenty years, and was from Egypt, and only spoke in the Arabic language. And so we had to grow up speaking in Arabic, and grew up in that culture and in that food, and in just everything about that culture being infused in our daily lives, just from that mainly. Our mom was also an Arabic professor, so Arabic was always taught to us at home, ... we always practiced it when we were at home. We visited Egypt several times over the years. We went in '87, and we took a break I think for like 10 years, and went back in '98 or so... and then as we got older, we went several times after that. So, we've always had that connection with Egypt and going to visit our family. All of our extended family - aunts, uncles, cousins, everybody - was in Egypt, so we always had that connection with them through phone calls, through visiting, through letters... when people use to write letters, back in the day. So, we always had that connection with Egypt.

Interviewer: And you're the oldest, well the oldest son in your family. Can you talk a little bit about how that played out growing up, because in Egyptian culture we tend to see that the eldest son has a lot of responsibility. They are celebrated, but you know, there is a lot of responsibility ...so, can you talk to me a little bit about how you sort of managed being the pillar and ...?

Elashkar: Absolutely. So, we are five children, my sister being the oldest, and then, like you said, myself being the oldest boy, and then three more boys after that. So, just like you said, in the African culture, Egyptian culture, the parents become the mother of the oldest son, or the father of the oldest son. So, my parents became *Umm Bhaa* [and] *Abu Bhaa*, although they already had a daughter. So that was just

a cultural thing where the oldest son has that kind of value in the family. A lot of responsibility is always put on the oldest son to look out for his sister, look out for his siblings, and be a good role model, be a good example. So that was always on me, I think, growing up.

Interviewer: Friendships?

Elashkar: So friendships growing up, and just memories growing up, I remember my family was some of the first people from the Middle East, and from Egypt, and from Africa here in Kansas City. And I remember them looking through the yellow pages, this was story that they mentioned, that they looked through the yellow pages for other names that were like their names, or from Africa and the Middle East, and found lots of our friends that we're friends with today, even to this day... just by looking in those yellow pages, and seeing those names and calling those people and forming those connections. And that became a huge part of our childhood. These are people that became like family for us, because our family was overseas, so these people became our family here in the United States.

Interviewer: So what were some of the things you guys did as this new sort of larger, Egyptian-American family? Like what were some of the shenanigans you engaged in?

Elashkar: So some of our childhood memories growing up were going to the lake. We used to go to Lake Jacomo and many of the other lakes here in the city and just have barbeques and rent pontoons boats, and just really enjoy the outdoors together with our friends and family. We used to go on camping trips and enjoy doing those kinds of things out here.

Interviewer: Okay. So growing up as a first-generation American, but carrying a migrant heritage or an immigrant heritage, do you feel that that had any impact on the way that you lived your life on the experiences that you had or didn't have?

Elashkar: Well, I think, for the most part, most of our experiences were very just American culture, and going to public school, and enjoying those holidays and celebrations that are known here in the West, and celebrating those. I think the differences would have been, maybe, food that would come, cultural food, that would come with you for lunch for school. You know, mom showing up with her hijab and Middle Eastern clothing to school as we tried to be a part of the Western culture and growing up here. And those things would just shine and show that like no, our heritage and our background are from a different place.

Interviewer: How would you explain that to people that would confront you if people asked you, "Where are you from?" or "Why does your mom dress like that?" Did you ever get those questions, and how would you repond?

Elashkar: I think at a younger age, you're more embarrassed by it, and you're more not sure how other people would respond to it. So you're more, kind of, worried about it and so on. Overall, the reaction was very positive though, and people really were very open and welcoming and friendly, but you could tell that you were definitely different and came from a different kind of background and culture. But growing up, of course, you become more confident in your culture and your traditions, and you start to be proud of those things and share them. I remember being in fourth grade and like actually sharing with my class and taking time to share about my religion to my class. Our fourth grade teacher had like a

coupon book we would get from like rewards of good behavior and stuff, and I remember one of her coupons was teach a lesson, like a thirty minute lesson. And I remember choosing that as a fourth grader and teaching about Islam and teaching about my religion to my class ... the five pillars of faith and all of that... and just being really proud of my religion and wearing the cultural clothing and stuff. So that was at ten years old. So I still remember that to this day, and that was also why I ended up becoming a teacher from those situations like that.

Interviewer: It sounds like stories about yourself and about your parents and about your background, your heritage, have played an important role in your life. So can you talk a little bit about the power you think that stories have in today's environment in America? Like do you share your stories still?

Elashkar: Oh yeah, absolutely. I just shared it working for an education company. We just shared stories about our favorite teachers, and how this program at work where we were having people call in with their stories and write us with their stories about their favorite teachers and how they impacted them and why. I remember reaching out to my fourth grade teacher recently, and actually telling her what I've become and what I've done, and reminding her of those different stories and stuff. And her really like appreciating that and saying "that made my day" and like, "wow after all these years." And just really... I think stories have a huge impact, and they are very powerful in people's lives to kind of open your eyes about different cultures and different impacts that your culture or the situations over time have made in someone's life. I think no matter what your background is or your culture, everybody wants to be loved. Everybody wants to share their story and their experiences and be hopefully a contributing and valuable member of society - just find those commonalities with each other no matter what your background is.

Interviewer: When you were an educator... I know you're working for an education company now... but when you were working directly with students, did you share your story with them?

Elashkar: Absolutely. My students always knew about my background and being from Egypt. And I always shared my culture and my faith with them, and they really loved that. I think that was their favorite part of me being their teacher. And a lot of my students now are in college and still remember how I would teach them the greetings of my faith: *assalamu alaikum* - peace be upon you, peace be upon you, too. We learned the numbers in Arabic, in my language. We would have pictures of Egyptian pharaohs in the classroom and just all kinds of cultural pieces of who I am were always brought into the classroom. And it seemed like those were the favorite parts of everything to my students.

Interviewer: So why don't you tell me a little bit about some of the challenges you've confronted in your life, growing up here, being an American, being Egyptian, being an African immigrant or just a child of African immigrants, being a first-generation, full-blown, blue-blooded American.

Elashkar: I mean, some of those challenges might be, you know, maybe in the way that we were raised or disciplined. So our culture might be a little stricter with discipline. Spanking might be the norm, or yelling, and a little more strict way of discipline. So those kind of cultural things were brought into our households and our families that we struggled with. There wasn't like a time-out or a discussion or conversation about your problem or the issue that you had. It was more like a spanking and yelling or something like that. So that was a kind of struggle that we grew up with being raised in a fashion where parents are always right, and there's no conversation or debate about it. And so you feel like you've struggled with those things, and always felt like I wasn't getting disciplined like my friends would have or something like that. Like you were on tighter leash or chain than others were.

Interviewer: So now do you feel that your parents are different or the interaction ...have you seen a change in them?

Elashkar: I mean absolutely. I see a totally different style of discipline that they have with my child now... with their grandchild... than they did with us as their children. And I look at myself and my sister and my brothers who also have kids, and how we discipline our kids, and having them have those thinking times and talk to them and really discuss those issues, and really try to not spank, and go away from the way that we were raised, and really making that conscious effort to go away from the cultural way that we might have been raised.

Interviewer: And did you find it easy or difficult to make friends to find things to do, that were balanced between what your parents wanted or you wanted for yourself?

Elashkar: Um... yes and no. So, we always had this limit where we could have friends over... people to our house, but we could not go and like to their house or spend the night at their house or anything. Just because of just different faiths or cultures and beliefs, of not wanting to be in an environment that parents couldn't really control what was happening. So, we would have maybe friends over or interact with our friends that way. Or sometimes we would have our friends just at school, and then our friends of the same faith and background would be the ones we would socialize more in our personal lives with.

Interviewer: So, you had a very wonderful opportunity of finding love and getting married. And it's a really beautiful story, and I wonder if you wouldn't mind sharing that with us. How you met your wife.

Elashkar: Well, originally, having been born and raised here in the United States, I always thought I was going to be married to somebody born and raised here in the United States. And never had considered going back to my homeland or motherland, if you will, of Egypt to look for love. And, so that was already the first surprising thing, and just after having many relationships of trying that in the United States, and finding that really my faith and my culture was such a huge important part of really what I was looking for in a spouse, and not finding those things in the United States. Not that there isn't, but I didn't find that. Over time, I had a friend... one of my mom's best friends, when her husband retired and they got into their retirement, they moved back to Egypt, and lived their life over there and actually became next door neighbors with my wife and her family. So she came to visit over here in the States, and had known my since I was a baby, and was wondering kind of out of nowhere why I still wasn't married. And I told her "I just haven't found the one", and it was brought up, "Hey, I have my neighbor, and she has a really good daughter that I want you to meet, and that sounds kind of like what you're looking for." And recently at that time, I had accepted a position in the Emirates. And so I said, "Well, okay, we'll see how this position goes." And I had never been interested in trying to get to know somebody over 2000 miles away. So I had said, "Well, I'm going to be moving already to that Middle East, and being closer to Egypt. So, let's give that a try when I move overseas, I'll get to know this person." So after I had moved overseas, I went to a cousin's wedding in Egypt and during that same trip decided to meet the same family of my future wife-to-be. And got to meet her there for the first time, which was also something new, because in previous relationships and getting to know people, I hadn't met them in person first. I had met them in person after getting to know them. And that sometimes was a reason why things didn't click or work out in the long run, when you meet them and there's no chemistry and... so this was different in that we met the first time, and had that interaction... and it was kind of awkward in the very beginning just because it was kind of a set up, if you will. Trying to have two people meet each other, and get to know each other. And so that was kind of tough to do the first night. But we both decided to

give it a try the next day, and get to meet kind of one-on-one, and have a conversation about our goals and where we see ourselves and our faith, and how we practice and really just sharing those commonalities. And what we realized on that second day is that if really those things were true that we were both saying... and that's really what we were looking for, and how we were living our lives... that that really was going to be something that would give us at least a very strong base for a good relationship in the future. And then we just got to know each other kind of long-distance when I moved back to the Emirates, and a few months later, we felt like things were going really well, and we decided to get engaged. And after that, a few months after that we did our marriage contract, and then a few months after that we were married. And here we are now with one child later, and enjoying life and having our struggles, ups and downs, and having our differences in culture. You know my wife being born and raised in a country outside of the States, and me being born and raised here, and how we look at life and how we look at disciplining and raising our child, and career, and our goals, but still having that common strength keeping us together of faith.

Interviewer: Now when you got married, was it just assumed that your wife would move where you were? Or was there a discussion about perhaps moving to Egypt? Or was there a discussion about ultimately going back to the United States? How did you make the decision about where you would live?

Elashkar: Well during my time when I was living in the United Arab Emirates, so it was known that my wife was going to move to the Emirates at that time. And having been born and raised there she was already used to it, and called it home actually more than Egypt. And I'm sure she'll speak about that a little bit more, you know, having that connection to the Emirates more than Egypt, having just been in Egypt for the ten years before we met. You know, so that was a kind of natural progression where we did move to the Emirates and she was used to that culture; I had more of a culture shock than she did over there, she actually enjoyed and loved it over there. Then eventually we did have the conversation of, you know, for the best future and career growth, and family upbringing and those kinds of things that we would eventually move back to the States. So that was an agreement that we had. But maybe not at the start of our marriage necessarily, but when we got to that point.

Interviewer: Do you return to Egypt frequently now that you're married with a child and you have in-laws there and your own extended family there? Do you find yourself going there more frequently? Or how do you feel about... What role does Egypt play now for you?

Elashkar: So Egypt I would say is even more of a significant role. Just because my in-laws are there, that's my child's grandparents and uncles and aunts and cousins. Although I had my uncles and aunts, and everything, I think growing up, I had been to Egypt maybe four times up until I was 25 or so. And in the past 3 or 4 years, I think I've been there 5 or 6 times. So that definitely had a huge impact and really connected us with Egypt and with our family and culture and the way of life over there.

Interviewer: Okay! And so back to Kansas then, in what ways do you feel you are not so much... an Egyptian? I mean what have you...what do you feel...really makes you a Midwesterner, a Kansan? Are there any specific qualities about Kansans or Midwesterners that you feel like you've picked up on that you didn't find when you went overseas that maybe...you know what I mean? I think that the Midwest has kind of a different feel to it than other places.

Elashkar: Absolutely.

Interviewer: And you ended up here again, so...

Elashkar: Oh yeah. Well I mean we returned back to where my roots were and family and friends and what we had known all of our lives here in the Midwest. I think I'm more of a Midwesterner as far as just values and openness to get to know people of other cultures and friendliness. I don't like that "go, go, go" lifestyle, maybe like the East Coast, and also I'm not very relaxed like the West Coast. So I think growing up, the Midwest was always a good balance of both of those. So I enjoyed that always about the Midwest. The way of life here was very kind of mid-tempo where it wasn't too crazy, wasn't so much traffic. You know, when we were living in the Emirates, it was crazy traffic, and it was feeling like we were living in New York with how busy it was. So that was a big struggle that I had living overseas, and made me really long for the Midwest and coming back here. And then just the culture and the holidays. I love the holidays. Just Halloween and Thanksgiving, and we give thanks everyday but just celebrating those customs and festivities here, something we were born and raised with and have always loved.

Interviewer: And that's something I assume that you didn't find when you sort of travelled to these other places but something that stays with you. Is that something that you also try to pass on in your life with your kids now or with your child now?

Elashkar: Absolutely. So we just celebrated Thanksgiving last week, and just those traditions and the way we were brought up here. And, you know, the celebrations we've ingrained into our family and started to make those traditions for our family and for our child over here in the U.S. too.

Interviewer: Do you feel settled? Do you call this place home? I mean what makes a home for you?

Elashkar: I think what makes a home is wherever your family and your loved ones are, at the end of the day. Because if your family and your loved ones are in the middle of nowhere, but they're surrounding you, then you're going to find a way to survive and be happy and enjoy life. If you're in a place where you grew up and [were] born and raised, and your family's not there, that's not really your home. You're not going to feel like at home. One of the huge reasons that brought me back to the area is because this is where I was born and raised. This is where my family and dearest friends are. You know, and so that's always tied me to this area.

Interviewer: Do you want to add anything that you feel your experience has taught you that is valuable to put out there right now?

Elashkar: Well, I would like to put out there that at the end of the day, you know no matter where you're from or your background or your country or your religion or faith, we are all part of one race - the human race. And we all came from the same starting point and we all end at the same ending point. And so to love one another, to learn more about one another, and really celebrate those differences and those cultures while having American values and traditions and things like that... but also embracing and understanding these different backgrounds and not judging people by their faith or by their background and just really having an open-mind and an open heart to people when you meet them.