

SHIRZAD TAYYAR
Little Kurdistan Tours – Nashville, Tennessee

Date: June 2, 2016

Location: Flatrock Coffee, Tea and More – Nashville, Tennessee

Interviewer: Jennifer Justus

Transcription: Deborah Mitchum

Length: 1:06

Project: Nashville's Nolensville Road

Interviewee: Shirzad Tayyar

Interviewer: Jennifer Justus

Interview Date: June 2, 2016

Location: Nashville, TN

Length: Two audio files; 01:05:41

START OF INTERVIEW

[00:00:00]

Jennifer Justus: This is Jennifer Justus with the Southern Foodways Alliance and it is June 2, 2016. We're at Flatrock Coffee off of Nolensville Pike and I'm with Shirzad Tayyar, and I'm going to ask him to introduce himself and say date of birth, please.

[00:00:18]

Shirzad Tayyar: My name is Shirzad Tayyar from Kurdistan, Northern Iraq, born in 1990, October 26.

[00:00:26]

JJ: And living here in Nashville, right?

[00:00:28]

ST: Yes, yes, definitely living here in Nashville, off of Briley Parkway and Murfreesboro Road, 16th District, South Nashville.

[00:00:36]

JJ: Great. So, to start, if you could maybe tell me about these tours that you've just been involved in.

[00:00:45]

ST: Okay. Well, to start off, I will kind of give you a glimpse of how it kind of got started, and that was a buddy of mine was interested in the mosque and where we get our traditional flatbread from and wanted to see the markets. He was like, “Hey, me and my wife want to go see it. Can you introduce us to some of the places, like where would you traditionally go?” I was like, “Okay, great,” and I was like, “Hey, the mosque is next door. Do you want to go in there as well and just kind of see everything?” He was like, “Yeah, just act like it’s a tour and just do it.” I was like, “All right, great.”

[00:01:15]

So, took them over there, got them flatbread, they saw everything, and he kind of put the idea in my head and was like, “Hey, you should definitely turn this into a tour and see what happens of it.” I laughed a little bit. I was like, no. I’ll do this for friends and whoever else that I know that wants to come on it or do it, but other than that I didn’t really give it much thought. I started kind of like thinking about it two or three weeks later and I was like, “Well, it’s not a bad idea. Let me just see what’s going to happen,” and I posted it on Facebook, social media, everywhere, and I got a really, really good reaction. Everybody was kind of like, “Hey, let us know when the dates are, the times; we’re going to attend. We want to see something like that. That’s amazing.”

[00:01:54]

So, it was going to happen in December, but we figured December was going to be cold and it turns out in Nashville it was like seventy degrees every Sunday, so we missed our chance. But in late March I decided to do it in April. I was like, okay, great; April’s a good month. It’s going to be decently warm. It’s not going to be too hot, crazy. I posted it back on social media and everybody was like, “Great. When are the times?” I decided to do it every Sunday from

about 1:00 p.m. to about 3:00 p.m. Two hours was plenty. But before that I decided to do a trial run on March 31 and I just got friends and neighbors that I already knew to kind of just like see how it's going to run, you know, like what the process would be of like which store do I take them first, what do I introduce them to, who do I talk to if I need something or if they have a question I can't answer or don't know. So, we did that, about twelve people showed up, and I was like, great; twelve people on this one. I was like, if I get twelve people on every Sunday, I'm happy. That's a total of forty, forty-five people. That's a wonderful number for something so small in one month.

[00:03:02]

So the first official one came out and we had ten people. I was like, I'm happy. I'm still happy. Even if it's three people I would still do it. I wouldn't cancel, because I'm already going to be there. Then after that we started a second official one and it turned out to be about twenty people, and I was like "Oh, my God! This is crazy." This is getting big. People are posting it on social media, taking pictures, putting the word out. I was like, great; we have twenty people. I'm happy. I got done with the first part of the speech and while we were walking into the mosque I counted everybody and we got to thirty people, and I was like, how did we grow ten people within like ten minutes? I didn't even see anybody else join, but apparently I was bad at eyeballing [*Laughs*] so I was kind of off on my numbers. And, yeah, the first trial run you had twelve people, then you had ten people, then you had thirty people posting it on social media, so it kind of got out there, and the third one, when we were partnering with Walk Bike Nashville, they put a registration page up on, I believe it was Eventbrite, and they capped it at fifty. I was like, that's great. We're not going to hit fifty people. We hit the limit within like five days and I was like, okay, like this is really getting there. What do we do? I need to get some help.

[00:04:16]

That day my brother came. We had about seventy-three people show up and my little brother was helping cut the bread and stuff while I was giving the speeches and kind of taking them into the mosque so the bread would be ready when we walk out. We could just kind of go there, take a piece, and then walk back out. That was, honestly, as big as I thought it was going to get. The *Tennessean* was there so I kind of got skeptical as well because I was like, “Well, if the *Tennessean*’s here, if they post an article by this week nobody knows what’s going to happen next week.”

[00:04:44]

Every tour, I got there about ten minutes prior to the [start time]. If it was going to start at 1:00 I got there at like 12:50. I got there that last Sunday and there was a line going around the mosque, like, of people just in line waiting for it to start, and I was like, “Oh, my God, I’m late!” and I looked at the time and I was like, “No, I’m early. It’s nothing. They’re super early. I’m not late.”

[00:05:07]

But what it initially started out to be was I wanted people to see the mosque, a glimpse of the mosque, see how we pray, see why we’re separated; kind of give an explanation of why we separate ourselves, men and women, when we’re praying. Then after that I wanted to take them to two of the markets that are literally right next door to each other. Both of them are family-owned, both of them know each other really well. But we went to first market, Azadi Market, and we got fresh bread, we talked about the kosher deli that we have, and that’s how Muslims—. We only eat kosher meat. We can’t eat anything that’s not kosher. I kind of gave them enough time to shop around and stuff. They saw some spices. If they saw something else they wanted

they were like, “Hey, we need some, you know, I guess, chicken at the house. Let’s just grab it from here. We’re already here.”

[00:05:55]

So I gave them time to shop, and that was wonderful, but when we walked back out, the reason why I took them to a second market was simply because I wanted to see like how they’re Kurdish-owned markets, both family-owned, but how they differ as far as some of their products that they have. Some of the breads that they make are a little bit different, and the second one has one of the best sandwich shops, in my opinion, around this area. It’s the House of Shawarma. They don’t have a big sign or anything outside. You walk in the market, head straight to the back, and it’s just a small little counter with two rotisseries, one is chicken, one is lamb and beef mixed, and you order and you either go or you have like these two or three tables that you can sit down and eat at. So, we consisted of that as well.

[00:06:36]

That second market, if it wasn’t for the sandwich shop, it wouldn’t have taken much time, but because people were ordering—and everything’s freshly-made as well. So it took some time for them to order, get their sandwiches and everything. And the last piece that I wanted to include as well was Baklava Café, which is right down the street. It’s about a half a mile from where we were doing the start-up of the tour. But everybody was driving their own cars, carpooling, a couple people rode with me, some people even walked or biked there as well, but we went there for a couple different reasons: to kind of tie the tour all together with, of course, dessert, which is baklava. We had a couple different types. You can either get like Turkish coffee as well or regular tea to drink with it. We had a hookah, which is basically a Middle Eastern long-lasting cigarette, if you will. *[Laughs]* But we had that going as well so people can try it if

they wanted to, and we kind of explained the hookah, we kind of explained the baklava, we explained the dialects of the Kurdish culture, because we're four parts that are not initially a country yet. We're still trying to be. But we talked about how like if me and somebody else Kurdish, we can talk in our dialect and understand it one hundred percent, but if somebody from Syria came over, or Iran came over and talked to us, we would understand maybe like ten percent. It's not like a South, you know, United States dialect or, if you will, accent compared to a Northern accent. It's so different you can barely understand them.

[00:08:03]

So we kind of tied it in altogether like that, and throughout it most people kind of saw me interacting with the mosque, like the imam or some of the guests that were coming there to pray I would interact, so they saw me going in and out of Kurdish a lot and they were just like, you know—. I kind of told everybody, like, "Hey, if you see me doing that, it's because I know somebody, or I'm just saying hey to somebody that I've seen a long time ago and haven't seen them in a while, or something like that, or we're just kind of like—." If I was at one of the markets and I told them, like—. The people that were at the bakery that were making the bread, I would tell them, like, "Hey, we have such-and-such," and I wouldn't tell them in English, I would just tell them in Kurdish, and I think everybody enjoyed seeing that as well. If everybody was talking in English it's like, well, you're not getting the full spread of it. You want to see somebody talk the actual language as well because it's intriguing. It makes you feel good. You're like, oh my God. It's so beautiful, somebody speaking something else.

[00:08:54]

So, that's what happened. It was really good.

[00:08:57]

JJ: So food, it seems like, is an important component of it all, so I wonder if you can talk a little bit about how food helps express culture in a way that maybe helps people understand things better.

[00:09:11]

ST: Okay. Well, food in all cultures, I believe, is an icebreaker. If I don't know you, you don't know me, but if we're out at some place and you want to invite me over to have a dish, I'm going to try it, because I haven't had it before and I'm interested. I want to know what it's going to taste like, what it is, what's in it, how was it made. You have all these questions, so it's a good icebreaker and it brings similar—. I guess, if you will, it brings like items together. Chicken for example: if you like chicken, I like chicken, you can make it five different ways, I can make it completely five different ways. But if you like three of them you're going to ask me for the ingredients, how I made it so you can make it later. So it's a really good connection, food-wise.

[00:09:56]

Other than that, food is, well, the reason why I like it in different cultures so much is because you kind of see where the culture's been. I mean, in any culture when you go back far enough they made food with what they had, and when you see that and it becomes your culture of foods—. Kurdish people, for example, we eat rice probably five days out of the week, or four days out of the week. Why? Because back home that's majorly what we had. We had rice, we had a couple of livestock and whatnot, and then things like dolmeh. If you've ever had dolmeh, you have these grape leaves stuffed with rice and chicken or beef and these spices. When I eat them, every time I eat something like that, I'm like, man; who was the first person that thought about it, that was like, "Hey, there's some grape leaves. Let me take these off, boil them, and stuff them with this." I always wonder, like, what was their mindset? What were they going

through at that time? Was it a hardship or was it just something that somebody wanted to try or something like that? So, it's always interesting, and I think that's one of the biggest things.

[00:10:55]

JJ: Were you surprised by the interest in the tour? Could you talk a little bit about that?

[00:11:02]

ST: I was. I didn't think a lot of people were going to show up. Honestly, like I said, throughout the entire tour dates I was expecting maybe fifty to sixty people, total, to show up. When I got such a great reaction from everybody—and people from like White House, Tennessee. There was a guy from White House, Tennessee, drove all the way here because he heard about it, and I was like, that's a pretty good drive for you to come to this little tour for two hours, and it made me happy because I was like, if you're interested in White House, it's out there. People are interested. They want to know about it, they want to see about it, and especially since we've been here for, you know, twenty, thirty years, if that. The biggest migration was about twenty years ago but even before that we've been here, I would say, from like the early '70s. So, we've been here for so long and still so many people don't know about it. I mean, we have the largest Kurdish population in North America, total, in Nashville, and we're right above sixteen thousand people, but a lot of people don't know that. I mean, how else would you know if it's not out there, if people aren't talking about it. It's like a new restaurant opening up downtown and I would never know unless one of my buddies or a friend tells me, "Hey, you've really got to check this out. They have this, this, this, and it was really, really good." I'm going to go next week, *[Laughs]* you know?

[00:12:18]

So, I think that's what it was, and it was also people enjoyed it and it was a good experience so people kind of put the word out there a lot more. I think I had probably about ten people that came twice, and I was like, "Oh, hey, thanks for coming again. I appreciate it," and they're like, "Yeah, we loved it. We're like, 'We need to do this again.'" And there was maybe like a part where some people missed the first time they came because they had to leave for other obligations, so they came back a second time to catch up on that second part of it, so it was really, really fun.

[00:12:45]

My dad thought it was going to be really small. He was like, "What are you doing this for? It's pointless." I was like, "Man, I'm not asking for money." I did take donations and the donations went to one of my handicapped relatives back home, and of course [with] the war and whatnot that's going on right now his family was having a tough time, so he needs like diapers, milk, and all that stuff. So I was like, "Look, I won't ask for a charge to come to the tours or anything like that," but I put a vase out there and I was like, "Look, if you donate anything, or if you want to tip me for the tour, whatever, all the money's going to go to my relative back home. He's handicapped. He's mentally challenged. He needs this, this, this, and this, and I want to help him out," and we raised over five hundred bucks in two weeks.

[00:13:26]

So, it was wonderful but, like I said, I told my dad, "It's free of charge." Nobody's paying for anything so, one, that's going to drive people to come. Anything free, it's a beautiful thing. And when I ended up having thirty people on the second one, I told my dad, I was like, "Hey! We've got thirty people," and he's like, "Oh, my God!" Even he was surprised. People

were like, “Really? You’re getting that many people to come to something like this to learn about the culture?” I was like, “I don’t know how, but yes,” and it just got bigger.

[00:13:55]

JJ: Well, do you think something has shifted in the interest, or do you think the interest has always been there but people didn’t know how to interact or to tap into learning more about it?

[00:14:06]

ST: I would go fifty-fifty. Some, simply because with the war and whatnot that’s going on, recently we’ve had plenty of articles, plenty of *Tennessean* articles that have been out. We’ve had a couple of castings, and couple of news stories with some Muslims and of course some Kurdish people on there. NPR, or NPTV, something like that, it’s the Nashville public television channel and they have, every now and again, like a Kurdish broadcast on there, and I’m like, this is really cool. Like, if you’re just watching it – but who watches Channel 3? [*Laughs*] You know? So it definitely doesn’t get out there as much. But with the war going on now there was a lot of talk about how Kurds were helping defeating ISIS, stopping their, you know, helping their borders, helping, protecting people that they could, taking in refugees and whatnot, so the Kurdish name kind of got out there a little bit more as far as like in the news and politics and all that stuff.

[00:15:03]

And there was interest as well. That’s the other fifty percent. There was definitely interest as far as like, even my buddy, when like he wants to know where we get our traditional bread from, and spices, and all that. So there’s an interest there but people don’t take action simply because—. For me to go to a Buddhist temple, the reason why I don’t go now, or I’ve never been

yet, is because I want to have somebody that goes to that temple that if, let's say somebody's praying, I don't want to go in and interrupt them, or something like that, or make anybody feel awkward. I want to go with the buddy or somebody that can talk to me about it, answer some questions, show me around, kind of explain a few things, because you also don't want to offend anybody. I wouldn't want to go into a Buddhist temple, which I never plan on it, but with like a tank top and some shorts, you know. So, it was kind of that, and also having like a point of contact. So when people came they liked it a lot simply because they can see everything but then they also had somebody in the background talking about it, explaining certain things, breaking certain things down, like the dowry system, for example. Everybody knew there was a dowry system but nobody knew, like, how it was broken down, how we look at it, which, that's a whole different story, but [*Laughs*] that's how it goes.

[00:16:11]

JJ: Well, growing up, did you find yourself in this position before? Like, as you've been growing up, were you kind of a guy that would explain things to people that didn't know, or do you find yourself in kind of a new role?

[00:16:24]

ST: It's definitely a new role. Going through all schools—middle school, high school, elementary, college for my associate's and everything—. I never figured I was going to be anything like this. I never figured—. A year and a half ago, if somebody would have told me, "Hey, you're going to be in the *Tennessean*. You're going to be doing this, this, a, b, and c, and people are going to want to meet you," and, for example, like this, have an interview, "I would have been like, "No, they're not. Why me? I'm not going to do anything that special," and to me it wasn't that special. I don't look at it as I'm doing something so great, which it is because I hear

it so often now. I'm like, okay; maybe it was a great thing. *[Laughs]* But when I looked at it I was just like I'm just showing people how I see it, in my eyes, day to day. When I walk into the store, when I say hello to the cash register person, or if I say hello to somebody in a deli that I haven't met in two years or something like that, I want people to see it and then also kind of see it from our point of view as well, and I also wanted people to know that, hey, we're here to stay. We've been here for twenty years, we're not going anywhere. *[Laughs]*

[00:17:24]

When people have like this negativity look on Kurdish people or Muslims or anything like that it's like, we've been here for twenty years. We've made that little strip area, strip mall place, into a lively neighborhood. It's a positive thing. Every group has their bad apples. We had our few, a lot of whom are gone, a lot of whom were put away, so the crime levels from the Kurdish community have dropped dramatically, because you don't hear about anything bad, terrible, in the news from Kurdish people at all anymore. It was a small glimpse at a certain time and I think when that group grew up they were just like, "Whoa, this is really not for me. Let me do something else with my life." That's what it was.

[00:18:04]

But, I still don't see myself as a Kurdish ambassador. I know I've got that a couple of times as well. I don't think I am qualified to speak on behalf of sixteen thousand people in Nashville. *[Laughs]* And, like I said, in high school and everything, like went through all my schools; I didn't even know I wanted to be in politics. I didn't know that I wanted to go to law school or anything like that. This all happened two years ago. So, me, getting my name out there now and being a part of the neighborhood, and actually being a voice for at least, minimum, my family, at least for my family, maybe for the area eventually one day or something like that, but

at least for now, being a voice for my family, it makes me feel good and it has also a connection between our neighborhoods and the people of Nashville to my family, because if my family doesn't understand something I can always be like, "Hey, I know what it is now, because I'm involved. I see this. I asked about it before you even saw it." So when they see something, for example if they're tearing up our, you know, street in the neighborhood, they'll be like, "What's going on?" and I was like, "Oh, hey, it's the sewer line," or whatever, and it makes it so much easier and it shows them that it's a good thing to be social and be active. So hopefully my parents now, I mean they're older so they're not going to be active or anything like that, but hopefully my siblings will be in the near future.

[00:19:19]

JJ: Well, speaking of your family, do you mind to tell me a little bit about how you all came here and what it was like growing up here for you?

[00:19:28]

ST: Okay. I was born in 1990 and I was born in a little city called Dohuk. That's in Northern Iraq. I was about a year and a half and that's when we heard that Saddam was going to like bomb all the cities and whatnot, chemicals and everything. Some people called bluff and stayed. My family was like, "No, we're leaving. [Laughs] We're not taking the risk. It can be a bluff but if it's not, what do we do? It's going to be too late. Everybody's going to die. No. We're leaving."

[00:19:56]

So, we went to the villages, and our village is Kestay, K-e-s-t-a-y. We went there, we spent some time over there, and then when we noticed that the war was starting to like progress and come towards the villages everybody kind of had to flee there as well, and luckily Turkey

started taking in refugees. We went into a small town in Turkey and we stayed in huge tents; barely any food; barely any water; you don't really have electricity; you don't have A/C or anything like that; stayed there. I still have a picture of me at like two years old in like this really big, one-piece, marshmallow-type suit in the snow, like four feet of snow. It's the cutest, funniest little picture.

[00:20:38]

But we stayed there for about, I would say about a year, and at that time America and other countries came and started taking the refugees, kind of like how we're doing now for the Syrian refugees, and my dad signed up for America. Luckily they called his name and was like, "Hey, you and your family, bring them over. We're taking you guys." So we came; I believe it was in late July, early August when we came to New York. We stayed there for two days because we had to find a translator; we're new; we don't know where to go. We stayed in the airport for two days in the same clothes and things like that. We couldn't-. There was nothing you can do with zero dollars, everything.

[00:21:14]

So, we stayed there, they finally got a translator, and the translator pretty much asked us just like, "Hey, do you know anybody anywhere that can get you some help? Do you know anybody? Who can you contact?" Luckily about a year prior to us coming here one of my dad's buddies from back then came here as well, and he was like, "Oh, yeah. We know somebody. His name is such-and-such. He's in, I think it's Nashville." He gave them somewhat of the city name and they figured it out, found the guy, and they contacted him and was like, "Hey, we're going to send these people here. They're going to be there like tomorrow," or whatever.

[00:21:45]

So, they sent us down here, he picked us up, and at that time we had—. I don't know the exact number but we had a decent, small, but well-populated Kurdish community here already, maybe about forty to fifty homes, maybe, give or take. But we came here and us kids stayed in one of my relative's houses and my parents stayed in another house, because nobody had room for seven kids plus two adults. Nobody had room for nine extra people so they separated us. I think my oldest sister went with my parents and the rest of us kids stayed at my relative's house.

[00:22:18]

JJ: Sorry to interrupt. So, your family, there were seven children and—

[00:22:23]

ST: Yes, yes.

[00:22:23]

JJ: —your mom and dad?

[00:22:24]

ST: It's four boys, three girls, and of course [my two] parents. But we were separated, we couldn't see each other for like the first week because we didn't drive, and we didn't want to make any trouble for the people that we were staying with. We were like, "Hey, whenever you guys have time, let my parents—." Or my parents were like, "Hey, let us go see our kids. We just want to make sure everything's okay." But luckily we got a sponsor from a church – I forget the name of the church – and they found my dad a job, they got us kids in school, they put us in housing and everything like that, and where we first stayed was pretty much off of Charlotte Avenue in the downtown area. It was like the projects at that time. It was the funniest thing. We stayed there for about a year and a half and then we finally moved because my dad didn't like the

neighborhood. It was, at that time, a really, really bad, rough neighborhood and he was like, “No, we’re not staying here.”

[00:23:15]

So we moved over here to Woodbine in, I think it was like '95. In '95 we moved to Woodbine and we've stayed here ever since, if not the exact same house we're in now but we've stayed here ever since. Still went to schools, went to like—. I went to Berry Elementary here, which is like right down the street from here, went to Cameron Middle School, went to Wright Middle School, and then Glencliff High School. But, stayed in the house until about 2001, 2002. Early 2002 we bought the house that we live in now and I would say all the homes that we've ever lived in, including like apartments, are within like a five-and-a-half, ten-mile radius. It's not even that far, stone's throw away. But stayed there, loved the area ever since, been there ever since. No intentions of moving. *[Laughs]* We love the area.

[00:24:00]

All of my siblings went to school except my oldest sister. I think she went to two years of school because she was older. She was like turning right at eighteen and they put her in ESL classes for like two years, learned a tiny bit of English, and that was pretty much it. But the rest of them, my second-oldest sister graduated from high school. She's still in college now because she took a lot of time off. My oldest brother has his GED, my youngest sister has her GED, my second-oldest brother has his diploma as well from high school, and so far I'm the only person with an associate's degree, and my little brother, of course, got his high school diploma as well, but I think total three of us are still in college right now. It's fun. We want to progress. We definitely want to better ourselves and better our family.

[00:24:49]

I've never had any trouble going to school at all, other than I didn't like it. Just I guess as a usual, normal kid you're like, "Oh, my God, school! No, it's not good." But after a time, taking two years off after getting my associate's degree, I realized this is what I want to do. I want to be in politics, I want to go to law, and I want to be a voice and I also want to be a part of the neighborhood, and I want people to know who I am, and not simply as far as just like recognition but I want people to see me and be like, "He's Kurdish," and when they see that, like when they see my name, they'll automatically think—. I want people to know, "He's Kurdish," and then it goes to like, "Oh, my God, we have the largest Kurdish population. Oh, my God, Kurdish people do such and such. This is the traditions, this is how they live their life here, and this is where they're located." That's what I want, not recognition for myself but my name as of now or for now to be, when it is seen anywhere or heard anywhere, I want people to go back to the bigger picture of Kurdish people, not me specifically, like, "Oh, my God, Shirzad's doing this, this, this." It doesn't matter what I'm doing. It matters like, "Oh, my God, Shirzad is Kurdish. He goes to the mosque. This is Salahadeen Center; I've been there. This is the markets; they have wonderful flatbread." That would be enough for me. That would be my happiness.

[00:26:06]

JJ: Wonder what it is that makes you want to do that?

[00:26:10]

ST: [*Laughs*] That's kind of a tough question because I never have like an actual answer for it. My mom, one, raised me to be kind of that way a little bit. She's always told me to be involved. It's not always what you know, it's sometimes who you know as well as what you know, but also it's always great connections. It's always wonderful meeting new people because you never know where anybody comes from. You learn so much about yourself and others and

as a person you grow when you meet other people. Think about it: if you have a— Just a random example, but if you have a dog in a cage for its entire life, take him out, he's going to go crazy. He's going to go crazy. But take a dog, walk him every day, take him out, take him to the dog park, whatnot; he's going to be social. You can let him off the leash for a little bit. I guarantee you he's not going to go anywhere.

[00:27:03]

So, it's kind of that deal a little bit, and aspect, but she raised me to meet people, like I said, know as much as I can know, and definitely finish my school. She's the one that drove me to finish school. When I went and got my associate's degree I was halfway into it and I'm literally going because my parents are telling me to go, and the second half I was like, "No. This is what I want to do," and that's when it started hitting, and I got into an internship for a Metro council, helping out Mina Johnson from District 23, which is like Belle Meade, West Meade area. Helped her win her election, which was wonderful. I met a ton of people and that's what kind of started it all. When I started intershipping [interning] for her I still wasn't active in the neighborhood, didn't even know what my neighborhood consisted of, but she was like, "Hey, we're going to meet such and such people," and every time we would meet somebody, like for example, me and you, and if somebody else was to stop by now, I would introduce you, introduce them. When I saw that I was like, "Oh, my God. This is so cool," and she was speaking very highly of me, even though I wasn't doing much for her at the time, but I was like, "This is so cool. I've got to pay her back," and everything like that.

[00:28:10]

So, I made it worth her while, and I definitely helped her as much as I possible could, but then I started doing that in my own neighborhood. Like I said, there's a buddy that, now he's a

great friend of mine, but he lives four houses up the street from me; never met him before. He's known that we lived there, he knows where my family and stuff lives, but we've never spoken two words. Saw him pushing a lawnmower one day and I was just like driving by and I just like stopped, backed up a little bit. I was like, "Man, I'm going to stop by and say hello. He's pushing a lawnmower; maybe he needs some help. Be a neighbor." So I stopped by, he didn't need any help. He got the lawnmower started and whatnot then shut it back off and we chitchatted for about twenty minutes, and that's when he told me, he's like, "Hey, do you have Facebook?" I was like, "Yeah, I just opened one back up," and at that time he was like, "Join Facebook neighborhood page," and I was like, "Okay." So I did and I saw how active people were in the neighborhood, and I was like, "This is really cool." I don't want to go around door-knocking on people's doors to try to meet them. I was like, let me do something where I can get people to come to me and meet and then everybody kind of notices my name a little bit, just so later on when I do things they'll be like, "Oh, my God, hey: we know him. He's a good guy. Let's support him," or do something like that.

[00:29:19]

So I hosted my first picnic in the neighborhood. It was literally I posted on the neighborhood Facebook page and was like, "Hey, I'm going to do this. If I do it, how many people will attend?" and they kind of just—. Everybody got a great reaction. They were like, "Hey, set it up, we'll attend." I got about a hundred people to show up for this picnic, and of course nobody knew who I was. They just knew that my name was out there and I'm hosting a picnic and having free food. [*Laughs*] So of course they got together. It was really fun, and ever since then the ball has just rolled and I never know what I'm going to do next.

[00:29:55]

Like I said, the Kurdish tour popped up as well. I didn't have any intentions before that to do it until me and my buddy kind of sat down and he was just like, "Hey, do this," blah, blah, blah, as I explained earlier, and then that happened. And then now that's stopped, which I plan on continuing, like I said, in August and September as well, but I don't know what's after that. Now I'm thinking like, "Okay, it's going to end in September and I know when that ends I'm not going to do it again. What's next? What's the next big thing that I'm going to come up with?" and we don't know. We don't know.

[00:30:24]

JJ: So, picnic: I'll go to food. What did you have to eat? Was it Kurdish food, traditional American food?

[00:30:34]

ST: It was traditional American food because it was just an outside picnic and I wanted to meet people. I didn't want to make anything that was going to throw anybody off or make anybody uncomfortable. It was all kosher hotdogs and hamburgers, first of all, because I didn't know if any Indian people or anybody else Muslim was going to attend, so I didn't want to get any pork, no pork. We also had chicken hotdogs as well so, if somebody Indian would have come, and I know they can't eat beef, so I was like we have like a stack of theirs as well that we can always make for them. Just a couple of pies, cakes, sodas, water, things like that, so it was really traditional picnic style. We had—. I would say, the only traditional thing, I did go to my relative that owns the Baklava Café and was like, "Hey, I'm hosting this. Can you make me just twenty pieces of Baklava?" So I did have baklava there, and I think nobody is against having baklava ever. *[Laughs]*

[00:31:27]

JJ: One thing I thought of when you were telling your story, what line of work were your parents in, in their home country, and then what do they do now?

[00:31:39]

ST: My mom had on and off jobs, simply just like sewing clothes, making bread, really small stuff. My dad was a transportation driver for the Kurdish military so he would either take some supplies, food, actual soldiers and whatever, so he was just a driver. Whatever they filled his truck up with he would go from point A to point B, and there was times—. I think when I was born he wasn't even there because he was at work and, you know, at that time you couldn't say, hey, no; you're son's about to be born. You took it with what you can get it because let alone hard to find work already at that time, so you couldn't take a day off. So when they needed you, you were there, so I think when I was born—. I think he didn't see me till I was like four days old, which hurts my feelings now a little bit, *[Laughs]* but I understand and I thank him for his hard work every day, so, it's cool.

[00:32:33]

JJ: I have many questions, but I'll—.

[00:32:41]

ST: I'll try to —.

[00:32:42]

JJ: Do you need a break?

[00:32:42]

ST: —make it a little bit shorter for you. Yeah.

[00:32:43]

JJ: Do you need a break?

[00:32:44]

ST: No.

[00:32:45]

JJ: Okay. Growing up, what percentage of Kurdish food did you eat versus American food, and can you talk a little bit about that?

[00:32:57]

ST: Kurdish food, you had it every day at the house. When you're in school your traditional American meals were in school. That's all you had, unless, every blue moon or so, your parents would be tired, or they'd be at work, or maybe there was so much to do around the house they wouldn't cook, so we might have ordered a pizza or went out and got some KFC or whatever, something like that, takeout. But other than that you had—I wouldn't say breakfast, for us, because we were in school. On the weekends you have all three meals but every other day you had lunch and then dinner at the house. So, I would say about eighty to twenty percent, eighty Kurdish, twenty percent American traditional, takeout food, and things like that.

[00:33:42]

JJ: Do you cook, or are there certain things that you wanted to learn from your culture?

[00:33:51]

ST: Honestly, I'm probably like the black sheep, if you will. Since I was a kid I wanted to learn everything food-wise. Honestly, when I was a kid, I wanted to become a chef, so at that point—. My mom has pictures when I was like four years old, when we first kind of came here, and whatnot, and I'm helping her like make the bread. Even though it's garbage, you can't really eat it or anything, but it was just like [she] has pictures of me like messing with the dough, and whatnot. Even until now I can—. I've worked in Shish Kabob restaurant kitchen so I know how

to make like kabobs, chicken, sultans. I know how to make the rice, the soups, and whatnot. So I know my fair amount. There's just like certain dishes, like dolmeh and maybe something a little bit harder, which is like biryani, which is—. It's more of like a potluck rice type of deal. If you've got like rice, you've got spices, curry, seasonings, then you've got chicken, you've got almonds, raisins, green peas; you've got all this just tossed into a pan with rice. It's wonderful. It's a good dish. But like there's some like that that I don't know how to make, and then there's a lot of other stuff that I do know how to make, and I'm probably like the only guy in my family that knows how to make the stuff. *[Laughs]*

[00:35:06]

JJ: Culturally is it more common for the women to learn to cook and the men to just not as much? I mean, that's kind of the way it is in American culture too, sometimes.

[00:35:16]

ST: Yes, yes, and it's mainly because the men are always, I guess even in every culture now, men are the ones that, because we can handle the heat outside, we can do all this other stuff, so we're out working and they will just stay at home learning how to like clean something well, cook, or something like that. It definitely takes time. It's one of those things—. I think my sister took maybe like three, four years to learn how to cook all the stuff, and even until now she has a few dishes where my mom has to like still like, not hold her hand literally, but like show her, tell her, like, "Hey, it's a pinch of salt with this, and then throw this in there, and then do this." So it's a learning curve, definitely, for everybody.

[00:35:55]

JJ: Is there one dish that you feel like—? If you were going to show someone your culture through food, is there one dish that you would be sure to—or one thing or ingredient—that you would be sure to showcase?

[00:36:12]

ST: I don't have one ingredient. There's two. The most traditional one is dolmeh because it's the easiest one to make and so far a lot of people already know about it and it's a really good taste. It's the grape leaf stuff with rice, chicken, or beef and spices. So, that one dish that, even if you go to like Shish Kabob, House of Kabob, they have it so you can always order it. Now, if it was one personal dish, like I can probably sit there and eat about three solid plates of it because it's so good and it's my favorite dish. It's biryani, which is the one that I was explaining with the rice, the peas, the raisins, almonds, chicken, potatoes. It's unique. I feel like, going back to what I said early in the interview, when you eat somebody's traditional foods you're like, "Oh, my God! How did they think of this?" When I eat that dish, I promise you, when you look at it you're like, "I kind of see how they thought of this," because it's just like, "All right, we have potatoes, we have raisins, we had peas, we have chicken, and rice. What can we do? Here, let's throw it in a pot and mix it all together," and it worked. It worked. It's a wonderful dish and it's my favorite one, so that's one that I would actually have to showcase, like if I had to.

[00:37:26]

JJ: Is your mom the person who taught you the most about cooking?

[00:37:30]

ST: Yes, simply because when I was younger, I mean obviously I didn't work until the age of seventeen, so throughout all that time, when you're at home, you have your homework finished, you have everything else done, when she's making food—. We weren't really fortunate

in—. I mean, if you have four boys and three girls in a household, everybody's doing their own kind of thing and when you only have two controllers for a game system somebody has to sit out, and when I sat out I would go watch my mom cook, or I would help her, and whenever she made something I would sit there and be like, "Okay, how do you do this? How'd you do that? Why did you do that? Why'd you do it in that order?" and after a time you retain everything, all the knowledge and all the steps, and you just kind of like know it now. So, like if I was at home, for example, right now, and nobody was at the house and I'm starving, or whatever, I can sit there and make myself either a traditional dish or I can sit there and make myself just something else, like a traditional American dish. I can make both of them and just be happy or whatever, and still eat.

[00:38:35 *Break in recording*]

JJ: So, I believe I have it right, that you're the first Kurdish elected official in Nashville? Is that right?

[00:00:09]

ST: At least to this position that I'm in. I don't know about the other position because it is kind of separated. You have the Republican side and then you have the Democratic side, so I can't speak for the Republican side. I have no idea what they have on their executive committee or chairmen or anything like that. But on the Democratic side I know, as far as the research that we've done, I am the first Kurdish elected official on the committee, which is really cool. How it started was, when I was intershipping [interning] for Mina Johnson on her council race, I met this wonderful lady, Marisa Richmond, and she was on the committee, and I was like, "Hey, I want to be active. I want to do something, because I know the campaign's coming to an end. I want to be involved. I need to stay informed and things like that. How do I get a position like

you're in?" Obviously it's a volunteer position but you still have to be elected, you have to be sworn in, and whatnot.

[00:01:06]

So, they appoint you if it's not election season for their chairs, so when I first started it was, I believe, in October of last year. So they appointed me and whatnot and then this year, of course it was election season for us in March. I believe March 1 was the last election day. But I didn't have to campaign or anything because I was running unopposed, obviously, thank God.

[Laughs] But I still had to get at least one or two votes just so my name was for sure going to be there. I just told my family, I was like, "Hey, vote for me." I was like, "You want me to be something? This is it. Go. It's going to be really cool. You'll see my name on the ballot. I'll feel really cool that I got four or five votes." But also on the neighborhood page and whatnot I kind of just put it out there. I was like, "Hey, this is my name, this is the position I'm running for, this is what it entails," the details of it, "and I would really be honored if I had your vote." Didn't do campaigns, no yard signs or anything like that because it's not huge, but I just kind of put it out there. I got a thousand and thirty-seven votes, and I was like, "Oh, my God! A thousand and thirty-seven." For a Muslim Kurdish person from the Middle East that wasn't born here to have that is phenomenal.

[00:02:19]

I've had [the position] ever since, I enjoy it. Hopefully they enjoy having me there, which I think they do. So, it's definitely win-win, but it's the first step because, like I said, I do plan on going to law school and getting my law degree and, not opening my own practice, but at least practicing law for many years to come, and as a hobby, if you will, I want to be in politics, stay informed, but also run for office. What office I'm not going to say, because I don't want nobody

else to kind of steal my thunder, but I definitely want to run for office and my initial plan is to be the first Kurdish person in that chair, or first Kurdish Muslim person in that chair, if you will. I think it will be a huge eye-opener for everybody because if somebody in this Bible Belt of the country in Tennessee, or whatever, if somebody Muslim that wasn't born here and is Kurdish, from a different, you know, ethnicity or culture, holds an elected official office chair, I think that'll show everybody. It's like, hey; we're ready for change. We want diversity. We want to see this. So, that's the plan.

[00:03:33]

JJ: How have you seen Nashville change in the last few years, or have you?

[00:03:40]

ST: I have. It's definitely gotten busier, traffic everywhere all day, but mainly it's—. Since we're getting so big you're getting more diversity as well, so since Nashville is getting big you're not only having people, like American people, move over here, you have people from different cultures moving over here as well. They're like, "Oh, my God, Nashville. Oh, hey! We know somebody in Nashville. Let's move there." We have Kurdish people from Dallas, from California moving here. Of course we have some that are moving away as well so it kind of like balances out the numbers.

[00:04:14]

But, it's really cool. Like, I was in Aldi, for example, the other day and I was picking some stuff up. I had like two or three items and the guy in front of me had an entire cart. Had no idea this guy was Kurdish. Two aisles over I noticed one of my relatives and I was just waving to him, said something in Kurdish, and the guy in front of me was like, "Hey, bro. You can get in front of me. You only have two or three items." I was like, "No, man. Look, I'm fine. They're

not heavy,” and he’s like, “No, man. We’re Kurdish. You’re going to go in front of me,” and I was like, “Really?” That’s what it came down to, because I’m Kurdish? All right, cool. I took the opportunity. I took it, so. But it was really cool and I started chitchatting and was like, “Hey, where are you guys from?” and they were like, “Oh, man, we’re from San Diego.” I was like, “What are you doing here?” He was like, “Nashville’s the place to be, man, and we’re here to stay for a little bit,” and I was like, that’s— I didn’t think anybody else was moving here, other than – I hate to say it – American people, [*Laughs*] if you will.

[00:05:05]

So, I mean, it’s definitely changing. Something else that is changing as well, within the past couple years we’ve noticed Kurdish people from like South Nashville and this Woodbine area, and then also a little bit further down towards like Harding Place, people are doing well and of course property values are rising, so the Kurdish population is starting to like migrate a little bit further south, and I don’t know what’s going to happen to our Little Kurdistan area. I don’t think it’ll ever change, simply because they’ll already have their customer base of all different religions, cultures, people, but that’s ground zero for us. That’s hometown. Like, the little neighborhood that was right behind the mosque, I think five years ago there was probably only two American homes that lived there, in that entire little strip, and now, of course, it’s switching over where we have like fifty-fifty percent. So, it’s definitely changing and we’ve got two Kurdish people, one of them is my sister and her husband are moving, and then one of my other relatives moved a couple months ago as well from like our area and they’re going even further out south as well. So, it’s really cool, but you kind of see it as far as how the Kurdish aspect is changing. American-wise it’s just the traffic, being busy, and it’s getting bigger, population’s growing. That’s about it, though.

[00:06:28]

JJ: In that Little Kurdistan area that you're talking about, can you kind of name—? So, there's the mosque, then there are the two markets, and then Grassmere Grill and Kabob. So can you kind of name the places that you can think of that are Kurdish-owned in the area.

[00:06:45]

ST: Okay. Well, you have Salahadeen Center, which is our mosque, and we're not confined to a specific mosque. That was our—. The Kurdish people kind of put their hands together and built this one and put it together and made it happen. So, it's technically a Kurdish mosque, but American Muslims, black Muslims, Somalian Muslims, people from anywhere, if you're Muslim or non-Muslim, can come there. If you're a Muslim you obviously just go to pray but if you're not and you're just visiting you're still welcome.

[00:07:13]

So, we have that, and when we first started there used to be like a small little Kurdish store, one guy used to own it. You can probably fit about eight people in there; it was really tiny, but it got big enough to where he actually just expanded. The first kind of store, big store that popped up, was Azadi Market, where we go on the tours to get the fresh bread and see the kosher deli and everything. Next door to that is Newroz Market. That's the place with the House of Shawarma and it also has like a computer section, or half of the store is kind of like a computer repair store, which is really cool because you can kind of go there, drop off your computer, pick up some whatever, and head out and do whatever you need to for the day. So, it's like two-in-one area.

[00:07:56]

I think right next to that, I don't know if it's Kurdish-owned or not, but it also has a traditional scarf-type-wearing clothing that you can go and pick something up, so like my mom wants a new scarf, she'll go in there and pick something up, but that one I'm not one hundred percent sure if it's Kurdish-owned but still Muslim in the same area. It's really wonderful to have.

[00:08:16]

Then you have Grassmere Grill and Kabob, which is Kurdish-owned as well. It's a nice little restaurant. During lunchtime they have buffets set up and then dinnertime, of course, they have just a regular full menu, and then after 8:00 they start selling hookah as well, so the younger generation kind of goes after 8:00. Then right next door to that you have this Kurdish-owned barbershop, which is really cool, and I didn't take people there during the tour simply because it's a barbershop and there's not really too much to see and our barbershops don't differ. You have chairs, you have barbers, you have a section where we sit, and that's pretty much it. The only cool thing about that one is because back home you have the Arabian world versus the Kurdish world and they are divided so much, but in that barbershop we have Arabians that work there as well and nobody says anything. We all get along. It's like, why can't we take that theory and just make it happen back home? It's like, you can live your way, we'll live our way; come see our area, we'll see yours, and just be happy. Why can't you do that, but over there? I tell people about it, I just—. There was no reason to go and see it because there's not like Middle Eastern music playing or anything like that so it's not significant.

[00:09:26]

You've got a jewelry store going towards more south on Nolensville Road, kind of like by Haywood Lane there's a Kurdish jewelry store. It's a majority all gold and silver but I would

say about eighty percent of it's gold because in our culture, dowry system, and whatnot, we have gold. We buy gold for our wives. If you come back north that's where you have House of Kabob, you have Baklava Café and things like that, and Baklava Café is Kurdish-owned as well, House of Kabob is Kurdish-owned, it's a restaurant. Baklava Café serves hookah during all their hours of operation but their baklava's made fresh daily by two Persian women: best baklava that you'll ever find. My sister can't even make the baklava that she makes, so it's wonderful.

[00:10:12]

JJ: Okay. Another food thing I wanted to talk about was this community Iftar that you're going to participate in. Have you done this before, because I've been to it before, and so what do you think—? Well, what will you be doing with the Iftar?

[00:10:32]

ST: I was reached out to by somebody in the neighborhood, because I believe they work for Metro Human Relations as well, Melody Fowler. I believe you know her name, probably. Somebody that knows Mark. *[Laughs]* And my name popped up and she reached out to me and was like, "Hey, we're doing this. This is what it is, this is what it entails, we'll give you more details but would you like to be a panelist? Would you like to speak?" and I was like, depends on how many people are there, because I get nervous a little bit, and it depends on how long I have to speak, what kind of speech it's about, and things like that. She kind of gave me the details so I'll be speaking—. I won't, of course, give you any of the speech that I'm giving, I'm working on it still, but it's more of—. The idea or the theme that they're going with this year would be, from what I hear, is American Muslims, or Muslim Americans, and our life and how we're a part of Nashville, and just kind of explaining like our stories for five or six minutes, or something like that. It's going to be an interesting thing. It will probably be about three hundred people, three-

fifty, something like that. It's a really high number and I'm just like, wow. I'll probably sweat on stage a little bit. Hopefully nobody sees it, so.

[00:11:48]

JJ: So, Iftar, that's—. Am I pronouncing that correctly, Iftar?

[00:11:53]

ST: Yeah.

[00:11:53]

JJ: That's got to be a pretty significant food situation in your community, right?

[00:12:00]

ST: It is, but Iftar stands for a time of Ramadan, Ramadan where we fast during sunlight hours and we eat only during sunset hours, like nighttime. So your Iftar is—. You can have food any time throughout the night but your Iftar is that meal where you break your fast, like you're done fasting, the sun went down, you eat something sweet to break your fast and then you have your food, and it's always a huge load of food. It's a very big amount of food. But it brings the family together. Just about anywhere you work or anything like that you let them know ahead of time, like, "Hey, it's happening. Sunset's about to go down. I'm going to go home and eat," so it kind of like brings the family together, because on regular days—. Tonight if I go home around 8:00 or 7:00 we might have dinner but it'll probably be like four or five of us. Ramadan time it'll probably be like all ten or eleven of us. You have your siblings, even if they live kind of far away. You have some relatives that might come over. So it is a really big deal, and everybody's starving, so I'm probably going to keep my speech as short as possible. I'm going to get up there and be like, "All right, guys. I know we're starving, I'm starving; we're going to make this short.

Let's hurry up and eat." [Laughs] So, it's one of those, but that's what Iftar is. Iftar is just, it's the meal you break your fast with, so it's your first meal of the actual day, is what it is.

[00:13:20]

JJ: One thing I wanted to ask you about was your—speaking of family—your brothers and sisters and the order. Where do you fall in with the—?

[00:13:31]

ST: I am the second-youngest, I believe. I've got my oldest sister, and right after her is my second sister, and then it's my oldest brother, then you've got the brother that's older than me, in between me and my oldest one, and then I've got my last sister that's older than me, and then me, and then my little brother. So, like I said, it's seven, so it's a big family.

[00:13:54]

JJ: And the age range is what to what?

[00:13:57]

ST: I know the youngest one right now, he just turned twenty-one. He's about to turn twenty-two. The oldest one, my oldest sister, I would say, is probably about forty-two years old, so.

[00:14:08]

JJ: And then what else are you working on now, other than school and headed toward law school and your position?

[00:14:18]

ST: Okay, so my mornings consist of school, as of now, because I just started back. Middays are usually campaign days, like right now I'm working on the campaign for Will Pinkston, school board, District 7, which is this area; really good guy. I'm really going to enjoy

working for him, and it's starting this weekend so that's also wonderful. But the middays are going to consist of that. During my off hours, or whenever there's nothing really to do, I work on my business, and that's Genie's Janitorial Services. It's a cleaning company for residential or commercial. Window-washing, one-time cleaning, anything that you can think of that you need to take a rag and wipe something down with, we can do it. And at nighttimes I work at Ruth's Chris Steak House; love the place. Love the place, love the food, love how they treat me, and they love having me there so it's definitely a good place to work, and that money just basically pays for my school, so. And of course the elected official position on the Davidson County Democratic Party Executive Committee is we meet once a month but we also have certain events that we need to go to and things like that, so just to kind of like make sure we're active, and we try to bring more people to our events, we try to bring more people to the executive committee for different areas, but our main goal is just, I would say, voter registration and getting the word out there and telling people why we need Democrats in office. But this is nonpolitical so I'm not going to get into that right now. *[Laughs]*

[00:15:55]

JJ: What do you do at Ruth's Chris?

[00:15:58]

ST: I am in the process of becoming a server, not a server yet but in the process, and don't like to brag or anything, and knocking on wood, but I think I'll make a great server and I think I'll be a beneficial part of the team over there, so.

[00:16:14]

JJ: Is there anything else—? Well, I'll ask one more question. So, back to Ramadan and growing up: what was that like, growing up, because it's sort of a food question that I have. I

know that it's way more deeper and important than that, but can you talk about what it was like to observe that holiday here as, I guess, a minority, and what that was like?

[00:16:46]

ST: It's a little weird because you have to explain it. I mean, because not everybody knows what it is. When you say "Ramadan" a lot of people kind of have a glimpse but then when you say it a lot of people have questions: "Oh, right. Okay, so, I hear the word "Ramadan" but what is it?" And Ramadan is, like I said, basically you wake up early in the morning, before sunrise, you stuff your face as much as possible, and you go to sleep. You wake up hopefully as late as possible, if you don't have to work or anything like that, so you kind of just like—. You're sleeping off the hours, or whatnot. There's a lot of praying involved during the daytimes and sunlight hours but you can't eat or drink anything, and I think a lot of people are just like, "How do you do that? You're fifteen years old. If I miss a snack I'm going to be upset." [Laughs] So it's kind of off.

[00:17:35]

Schools really accepted it. For lunchtimes they would let us Muslim kids, or whoever's fasting, go into the library and read, or something like that, so we don't have to be around food so we don't have to think about it and it's not on our mind. So, I think that was wonderful, that schools let us do that for their Muslim communities. And then of course we would just go home and after that when you're at home you don't really—. You try to stay away from the kitchen as much as possible. You usually just either focus on homework. You can't go outside and play as usual because you don't have any energy during the daytime. Certain things can also break your fast. It's not necessarily just drinking water, which it'll break your fast, but you're supposed to be as religious as possible during those times as well. So, like right now if I was listening to

some music that has more of a dancing-type club music, not even just American culture but even in Muslim or Kurdish culture, we have like certain ones where there's like wedding music that in our culture you can listen to it now or you can listen to it at an actual wedding. You try to stay away from those and you listen to more of the recitation of the Koran or something a little bit more calmer so your spirit and everything is just level, so you're not thinking about too much and things like that, so it doesn't break your fast.

[00:18:54]

So, it's really, really tough. You have to watch out for everything that you say. You have to watch out for everything that you do. It's an eye-opener for us every year, every year. It's not something you get used to. I mean, yeah, you get used to not eating during the daylight hours. Like, I think even after Ramadan is over and we have our big celebration, like the next week after that you just don't eat during sunlight because you're just like, "Well, I got used to it now," so things like that. But as far as like watching what you say and staying away from certain things, like, for example, Muslims don't drink anyways, alcohol or anything like that, but you stay away from it even more. If I'm going to a buddy's house and he's like, "Hey, man, come on over. We're about to have a drink," you just like, no. I can go there on a casual day because I know I can handle it still and don't drink, but you tend to like get yourself away from it even more, separate yourself even more, simply because you don't want to be around it at all. It makes it so much easier when you're not.

[00:20:01]

But the food is always phenomenal. They make something new every day, so the food—because Ramadan is thirty days, typically thirty. We've had some that's been like twenty-nine days and some that's gone thirty-one days. But every day you have pretty much a date, one of the

dates, and at that time back then the prophets had those as—. You know, you're supposed to break your fast with something sweet, and it's kind of like a good deed if you break it with the same thing that the prophets used to break it with back then. So you have that, and then right after that you have like this soup. It's called *nisk*. It's a really, really liquidy soup, it's like chicken noodle soup almost, if you will, but you have that every day. But then your main course, one day you'll have stuffed chicken, or rice, or you'll have *dolmeh*, or you'll have *biryani*, and then one day you'll have like this Kurdish ravioli deal. I say it's Kurdish ravioli because it's just like the American ravioli except bigger and more meat and stuff in it, but you have that as well. And then every day you almost have a different dessert as well.

[00:21:10]

So, like the first two things are kind of the same throughout, because it's just one of those things that's so easy to make and everything, but the main course and the dessert, everybody—. It's that time you have so much time on your hands because you're not doing anything, the house isn't getting dirty because nobody's really messing around. Nobody has the energy to. So, you have so much time to cook so my family will focus on, every day, like—unless one of us has like a specific craving and we'll be like, “Hey, make this. You haven't made this in a couple weeks,” or something like that, but they'll try to make something new. Dessert-wise, my youngest—. It's the youngest sister but she's still older than me. She's kind of like the baker in the house and every day she'll try something new. We've had American pie, sweet potato pie; we've had apple pie; we've had so many different pies but then we've also had like chocolate fudge brownies and different lemon pie cakes. It's phenomenal. It's something you enjoy. It takes a good two hours to finish eating everything because you're just so hungry and you don't want to rush. You'll take a break. You'll eat what you need to, take a break, and do whatever you need to to rest for like

fifteen, twenty minutes, and you'll probably go back and get dessert like twice, or something like that.

[00:22:22]

JJ: What's the ravioli, the Kurdish ravioli, called?

[00:22:25]

ST: There's a couple. They have kotulk daw, which is—. It's kind of like a yogurt-y soup but also it's more of meatballs, like really big meatballs, but it's meat—. I would say it's couscous boiled to where you can actually carve it into whatever shape or design you want to, if you will, and it's stuffed with usually beef, herbs, and spices. You have those and then you also have something that's similar, in the same soup, but it's also stuffed with just like this different vegetarian-style, you know, foods, so you have one for like—. My brother loves the meat ones but I, even though I eat meat all the time, but in that certain one I just like the other ones, the vegetarian ones, more. It just tastes better.

[00:23:19]

You have that one and then you also have—. God, I can't [remember] the name. [*Pauses*] Tersh. It's tersh, if I'm not wrong. But the other one's a, like I said, white traditional yogurt soup. This one is more of like a red tomato-base soup, same thing, couscous, and that one, it's kind of like the same ordeal but it's just two different types of soups. You have like the yogurt soup and then you have the tomato-base soup, and you can stuff them, like I said, either with chicken or beef, lamb, whatever you want to. But every time I see it, I didn't—. I never thought about calling it Kurdish ravioli until—. Ruth's Chris Steak House, we have a veal ravioli dish, and I was like, "Ours are like this except bigger and just more in it." That's all it was, and it just hit me and I was like, "Oh, my God. It's Kurdish ravioli." [*Laughs*]

[00:24:13]

JJ: What's your favorite Kurdish food to make?

[00:24:17]

ST: To make? Probably kabobs, simply because it seems really easy but it's not, and then also I like to grill outside so it's one of those where you need a fireplace. You need something, like an open flame, to grill it, and it's always wonderful. It's ground beef mixed with herbs, spices, and some onions.

[00:24:41]

JJ: So the kibbeh—is that what's it's called?

[00:24:44]

ST: The traditional name now that everybody's getting used to—. We in Kurdish call it “kabobs,” just because that's our kabob, but you have—. In the Persian world a kabob would be the one that has a piece of steak, or something like that, with an onion, a tomato, a pepper, and then you have another piece of steak. So, that's the traditional Persian kabob, but the Persian name for it would be “koobideh.” That's the one. It's the best one.

[00:25:11]

JJ: Anything else you want me to know, that we maybe touched on but didn't go into enough, or anything else about food in particular that sort of helps express or shape who you are, before we end?

[00:25:27]

ST: Not anything specific other than go to House of Kabob, or meet a Kurdish person and try it. That's all you can do, you can only try it, and if you don't like it, it's not going to hurt our feelings because we have a thousand dishes that you can try. I'm sure there's at least one that

you're going to like. So, don't be afraid. If you're allergic to something as well just let us know. We'll let you know what's in it. If you have a gluten allergy you might have to google some things, simply because, like my mom wouldn't know what gluten allergy is, so if she's making a dish, ask her, and if she doesn't know she can tell you what ingredients are in it and you can tell if gluten is in it, or something like that. And we're very cautious of not having pork, so if you want pork chops or something like that you're not going to find it at any of our places, and definitely no beers. You're not going to find a beer. You're not going to come out and grill with me and have a beer and some pork chops. *[Laughs]* It's not going to happen.

[00:26:30]

But definitely, out of everything, I would just have to say go take a look at Azadi Market, Newroz Market. Don't be afraid to go into the mosque. It's a welcome center. Everybody's welcome. If you have a tattoo of a cross on your neck or have a cross necklace or something like that just, please, go in. Nobody's going to stop you and pull your arm and be like, "Oh, you have to take that off. Hold on," blah, blah, blah. No. You can definitely go, and everybody's going to be welcoming, and we'll be more than happy to answer your questions, just give it a try, and that's all I got. I think that's it.

[00:27:03]

JJ: Well, thank you so much for your time.

[00:27:04]

ST: You're very welcome.

[00:27:06]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

Date: June 15, 2016