

Camellia Zakaria

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Gainesville, Florida

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for University of Florida

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Alhadi: Welcome Mrs. Camellia.

Camellia: Hello.

Alhadi: My name is Esam Alhadi. This interview is taking place in my office in Pugh Hall at the University of Florida. We would like to start by asking you to tell us about the early stages of your life, including your name in full and place of birth.

Camellia: My name is Camellia Zakaria. I was born in Cairo, and I am sixty-four years old. I graduated from Cairo University with a major in education in 1970, and I obtained a teaching certificate. I worked in Bahrain as a teacher for six years before coming to America with my husband and daughter. At that time, I was pregnant with my second daughter. Upon our coming to America, we lived in St. Louis, Missouri. I and my husband had huge differences in the way each one of us was brought up at home. My family was not that conservative. We were three girls and I was the youngest. My older sister graduated from the college of engineering and later migrated with her husband to France. She got divorced and then married a French man. My sister who was in the middle graduated as a doctor and later became an osteopathic. She worked in Libya and Saudi Arabia and later returned back to Cairo. She went to work abroad but her husband didn't go because he didn't want to leave Egypt. My daughter's son at that time was a student in the college of medicine and he had many private tutors. He wasn't

really doing well because he was not focusing on his study and may have been missing his mother. My mother called my sister and told her that her son will be dismissed from the college and advised her to leave everything and come back to take care of him. She did, and he managed to graduate and became a cardiologist, and later migrated to Canada.

Alhadi: Would you tell us about your life in Cairo—which part of Cairo you came from and which schools did you go to?

Camellia: I came from an area called Garden City which is very close to the city center and Al-Tahreer Square. It is walking distance to Al-Tahreer Square, and from there you may go anywhere you want. Since we did not go to school on Fridays, we were allowed on Thursday night and Friday morning to go to the movie theatre. I and my sisters loved going to watch movies. After getting our weekly allowance, I and my middle sister always went to see a movie. My elder sister acted like a grown-up girl, and didn't like going out with kids like us. I and my middle sister were one year apart and this made us always close to each other, but the elder sister is five years older than us.

Alhadi: How about school?

Camellia: School wasn't as hard as it is these days. My mother used to review with us and check if we were able to memorize some of the school lessons. Each Monday she used to go to each one of our schools to meet with the school principal. All the teachers used to come and report to her on our performance of [the previous] week.

Alhadi: Did you go to private or public school?

Camellia: We went to public school. Schools were good and classrooms were not as crowded as the ones of today where you find about fifty students in one room.

We were about twenty to twenty-five students in the classroom and the teachers did a great job. We used to go to school six days a week.

Alhadi: Which high school did you go to?

Camellia: It was called Saniya High School. It is a big school and was named after a well-known woman who served the revolution.

Alhadi: Do you remember some of your classmates with you in high school, and where are they now?

Camellia: Yes. One of them has become an actress who plays roles in movies. Her name was Nadia Subaih, but I am not sure of the name she took after she became an actress. Another one was a sister of a very famous actor. Her name is Fatima, and we used to watch her brother either on the stage or the roles he played in movies. I also remember my friend Nabeela Suliman who later became a lawyer. Our families used to know each other. Visiting each other was very limited. Nevertheless, my mother always insisted to know everything about our friends' families and also wanted to know what goes on in their homes. This is because she wanted to become sure that none of the men in our friends' families is an alcoholic or drug addict, and we were not allowed to go there had that been the case. When my father died in 1963, my mother told the three of us that nothing should be on our mind except school, and we were told to work hard to graduate from university. This remained to be my mother's main focus.

Alhadi: You mentioned earlier that you studied at Cairo University. Would you please tell us about your college study?

Camellia: True. I studied music at the music institute. I also took roles in some plays. The country at that time was very peaceful and secure. Once I took a role in a play with a very famous actor and I used to get back home by bus at 2:00 AM. I used to walk from the bus stop to my house, without being scared or fearful of anyone that may obstruct my way.

Alhadi: Does that mean your major in college was music?

Camellia: True, but I also studied education. When I went to Bahrain, I worked as a music teacher in one of the two-year post-high school institutes for girls there. Those who graduated from this institute also became teachers. I taught them music in order to make them qualified to offer music lessons in the elementary schools where they got appointed. When I was there, I composed some musical plays that were recorded on TV. When my name “Camellia Zakriya” was displayed on the screen, the minister of information who was a religious man and the brother of the prince thought I was the same Camellia who reads the news on the Egyptian TV. They corrected this misconception for him and told him that I was actually a teacher with them. They gave me an offer to work for the TV, but I refused because I wanted to immigrate. I didn’t like the idea of signing a contract that needs to be renewed every year, and no one will be certain if it will be renewed or not.

Alhadi: Why did you decide to study music, and did your family agree that you go into that field?

Camellia: Yes. I had the option to study English literature, which would have qualified me to become a teacher of English. Although this would have been good for me, I always loved music, and I was always part of the school music band in high school and played many instruments such as clarinet, soprano saxophone, alto saxophone, and I also played solo. I won many prizes from my solo playing or from being in the band. Music was my hobby, and my mother's vision was that we should study whatever we wanted. The important thing for her was to finish college. She also always told us that we may get married to whoever we wanted so as to be the ones who bear the consequences of our decision in the future. It is true that younger people don't always make the right decision. This is why soon after we arrived in St. Louis, Missouri, my husband and I got divorced. He is still in St. Louis, Missouri, and I am here. I brought up my two daughters. One of them lives in Atlanta, and the other one is here.

Alhadi: Let us now talk about your move from Egypt to America. What was the reason that pushed you to think of coming to America?

Camellia: My husband had a brother here, who came here after the war of 1967. He used to work for TWA. He became sick and had to have surgery. He had four children and his wife never learned to drive and never learned to help with anything else. It was her husband who used to do everything. Their children were still young. This brother of my husband called us and asked us to think of coming to America. He said he wanted us to be here just in case something happened to him, then we will be there to help his wife. He also wanted his children to grow up in this country. This is what had happened ten years later in

1976. I agreed to the idea of coming to America, but my husband initially didn't like the idea.

Alhadi: Was your husband's brother in St. Louis?

Camellia: They were in Hawaii, and our plan was to come to Hawaii. It happened that the TWA station in Hawaii was closed the same month we were supposed to arrive, and they were transferred to the company's base in St. Louis.

Alhadi: Is the TWA you are talking about the aviation company?

Camellia: Yes it was. We arrived in St Louis, and it was a complete culture shock for me. I used to see Hollywood movies when I was still in Cairo. I moved from the overcrowded Cairo that never sleeps. I was used to the public transport system there. I arrived in a city with snow and a climate with freezing rain. Nobody talks to anyone, and of course you don't have any family around you. I was stuck in the house because my husband used to take the only car we had, to work. I had to stay home with a three-month-old baby daughter and another two-year-old. I was unable to go anywhere. It was really depressing. I thought of going back to Egypt, but my husband objected and insisted that we should stay. I tried many times throughout the eighteen years that we spent in St. Louis to leave it for another city.

Alhadi: And when you got the chance to leave St Louis, did you come directly to Florida?

Camellia: I went to California where his brother was staying at the time. I wanted to find work there, but figured that California is not the best place to raise children.

Alhadi: Are you talking about the same brother that you mentioned earlier that was sick?

Camellia: Yes. He moved to California. I was unable to stay there because it was too dangerous.

Alhadi: What part of California?

Camellia: He was in Redondo Beach in L.A. They had a very beautiful house, but after my younger four-year-old daughter was diagnosed with cancer, I decided to return back to St Louis. That is exactly what we did, and my daughter had a successful operation there. I realized that the environment there was not ideal and the pollution was too much. When a four-year-old is diagnosed with cancer, then that is too much. I, however, stayed there until my eldest daughter was ready to join a college, and I suggested for her to think about Florida. I and my sister, who is in France, came many times to Daytona Beach in Florida to spend the summer there. It is true that we loved Florida and Daytona Beach very much. They knew that I loved Florida, and because of that my daughter picked the University of Florida to be her college. We came here and I've stayed here ever since.

Alhadi: When did you come to Florida?

Camellia: It was in 1993.

Alhadi: And which school did your daughter go to?

Camellia: It was the University of Florida.

Alhadi: What did she study?

Camellia: She studied education, and later did her M.A. in business education from Duke University in North Carolina. She got married and lived with her husband in Raleigh, North Carolina. She worked here in Gainesville for a computer lab and received a lot of training in the computer field. In Raleigh she became a computer

programmer and held the position of a project manager there. One of her latest assignments was in a hospital in Atlanta. She and her team were there to help the hospital to decide where they can make cuts in their workforce. Unfortunately, many people got laid off following the suggestions they made. They offered her a job in Atlanta. When she was doing that assignment, she used to stay in Atlanta for the whole week and go back home on Saturday and Sunday. Now she has a small baby and she can't do the same anymore. She accepted a job offer and moved to Atlanta. This coming Friday will be the day when they sign up for their new home.

Alhadi: Do you go back to Cairo, and if yes, when was your last visit there?

Camellia: In 1999.

Alhadi: And you never have been back since 1999?

Camellia: No. My mother died, and my sister comes from France to visit. My other sister doesn't like traveling too much. She has a son who works for Microsoft in Seattle. She came here once to visit him and I went to see her. It is very hard to afford the tickets and other traveling expenses these days. Here in America, you have to work hard to be able to cover your basic needs. Also, going to Egypt means you have to get a long break from work.

Alhadi: Do you still have family members in Cairo?

Camellia: Only my sister and her husband. One of her two sons is in Canada and the other one is in Seattle. My other sister is in France with her sons. As for my cousins and other relatives, I don't know them and I don't know their names even.

Alhadi: Do you still have your home in Cairo?

Camellia: It was a rental apartment which my sister has transferred to her son. The landlord wanted to get back because the rent is at an old rate.

Alhadi: Do you still follow up with all the changes and events that are currently taking place in Egypt?

Camellia: I watch the news, but my sister usually tells me when big things happen. They are in Cairo, but they don't go to Al-Tahreer Square because they currently live in Al-Maadi suburb. They are both retired doctors. All they do is that they sometimes send money to their son in Canada.

Alhadi: How did you feel about the big change that took place in Egypt [this spring]? Were you happy?

Camellia: I felt happy that the constitution was changed. What always scares me are those fanatics. I came from a Muslim family, but it is a very easy family. We were raised in a way that motivated us to think about everything and then decide what we want to do. I never used the rule of "either this or none" with my children. They have to think about if anyone wanted to go to a mosque or a church. I keep telling my children it is not enough that somebody tells them this or that is what the Quran says. You are intelligent enough to read it for yourself and find exactly what it says. Don't take things for granted from other people, because they will try to make you believe in any idea that they are biased for. I lived in an area in St Louis where many doctors and engineers lived. It is true that we were not as wealthy as they were, and their children were enjoying a higher living standard than ours. Whenever those people meet, [they] do the prayers and sit together to chat. The chatting turns into nothing but gossip about this woman

or that. I decided this is not how I wanted my children to grow up. I kept telling my children they have to keep God in mind in whatever they do.

Alhadi: Would you please tell us what do you do here in Florida and what is your job now?

Camellia: I used to work as a social worker with disabled adults with the government department of children and families. I have just retired this past August thirty-first. Most of my work was with mentally or physically disabled people. I also worked with abused children. My jobs always focused on protecting weak people. This is where I can act as a fanatic. It is probably due to the fact that I have seen discrimination firsthand when I first arrived in St Louis. I don't want anybody else to be in the same place where I found myself.

Alhadi: Do you still work in the same field?

Camellia: I am now a nurse assistant. Even when I was doing this work in the hospital, I was deeply concerned about observing patients' rights more than how much profit the hospital will make. Patients were more important for me than saving on supplies for the hospital.

Alhadi: Where did you get the nursing and hospital work experience from?

Camellia: When I was in St Louis, I worked for a government establishment. One day, a new manager was appointed and immediately called for a meeting. She asked us to submit our resignations within thirty days. She said after the previous manager was "put on the shelf," her desire was to infuse "new blood" in the establishment. She said she wants to work with people that she selects. I was, indeed, a very hard worker all the time. When I first joined that establishment, I found the

disabled children there uncared about. One example was that I found their skins peeling off as nobody cared about changing their diapers. In many cases I found cockroaches running on them. I literally cleaned this facility. I didn't expect to be sent out with the people who didn't do their work. It is true that some people didn't do their work, but that was not me. I realized that if the manager says she doesn't want somebody, the next step will be to put heavy pressure on that person to force him to leave. I decided to resign and go. That was shortly after I got divorced from my husband and got custody over my two daughters. The deal with my husband was that he wasn't going to fight over the custody of children if I agree not to touch the savings we made, and also that he will not be responsible of paying any bill that is left behind. I was ready to say yes as long as I will have custody of my children. We got divorced and I had custody of my children. I filed for bankruptcy because I was unable to afford the house payments. Until that time, I wasn't really familiar with the welfare system such as food-stamps or the financial helps services. This difficult family situation became harder when I lost my job. I was going crazy and didn't know what to do.

Alhadi: All this was in St. Louis?

Camellia: Yes.

Alhadi: Then you came to Jacksonville and started working.

Camellia: This happened two years later. I filed for bankruptcy and had to start from the beginning. But it was even harder without having my own car. I decided to work as a companion for old people, which [didn't] required [many] qualifications or a degree in that field. I taught myself how to do it. People were very good with

me. They gave me a residence for me, my daughters, and my dogs, in addition to a weekly payment. How can you say no to an offer like that, in exchange for being a housekeeper, being a companion, and cleaning the house or giving a bath to somebody? There is nothing wrong with an honest job. There is something wrong when you stretch your hand and ask for something free.

Alhadi: What happened to your music hobby?

Camellia: No more music.

Alhadi: Not even in your free time?

Camellia: I don't have the instruments. After my mother died, my daughter decided to keep my old piano. She shipped it from Cairo to Alexandria and then to Raleigh. Now it is on its way to Atlanta. She wanted to keep something that reminds her of her Grandfather Zakaria. She even named her son Zakaria, after her grandfather.

Alhadi: We don't have too much of time left, so I want to ask you about your relations with the members of the Arabic community in Jacksonville. Are you in touch with the ladies and other individuals in that community?

Camellia: No. I only know some people who own a grocery, and I go and buy food from them. They are from Jordan. I talk briefly to the lady in that place. It is not more than the shopping time. I have always been doing two jobs, and sometimes I worked seven days a week. That leaves no time to visit anybody.

Alhadi: You mentioned that you are currently working here in Gainesville.

Camellia: Yes. I am taking care of an old man. There is a staff with him around the clock, and I do the night shift. I feed him, give him shower, give him his

medication, and I serve him with everything else he may need. He has a daughter in New York who pays me. I return back to Jacksonville on the weekend. There, I am also taking care of a girl who has CP, “cancer procoagulant.”

Alhadi: That is very good. Thank you very much, Mrs. Camellia, for this interview. We are very happy for having you with us here today. It was great seeing you.

Camellia: Nice seeing you too.

[END OF INTERVIEW]