

**Ghassan Shihab**

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Gainesville, Florida

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for University of Florida

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Alhadi: Thank you Mr. Ghassan Shihab for being with us. In fact, thanks because you allowed us to be with you in your store, "Falafel King," here in Gainesville, Florida. It is now 10:00 AM, Saturday, November 12, 2011. Thanks one more time and good morning.

Shihab: Good morning.

Alhadi: Would you please, Mr. Shihab, share some details with us about your early history such as where you were born and when, and also about any education you may have had during that period?

Shihab: I was born in Lebanon sixty-three years ago. I came to America in 1970 to continue my education here. The year I earned my degree in business administration here coincided with the time of war in Lebanon. I decided to stay here. I had a brother in the coastal city of Daytona Beach, Florida. We lived together and opened a restaurant there. This business continued for fifteen years. My wife's family used to live in Gainesville, Florida at that time and owned a restaurant named "Falafel King" on 13<sup>th</sup> street close to the university. They suggested that I should come to Gainesville because of the booming business at that time, and also because of the university which the children could attend when they grew up. I left Daytona Beach and came to Gainesville in 1984 and started this restaurant in 1984. I remained here ever since. My children grew up and, as we planned for them earlier, they joined the university here. My elder son, Mohamed,

graduated from the University of Florida Law School and he is doing good now. He is practicing law in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Alhadi: We will come back to your life in America, but I want to go back to your period before you came to America. You are originally from Lebanon. I want to ask you to tell us more about your early life in Lebanon. What village or city were you born in and what schools did you attend before your coming here?

Shihab: I was born in Beirut and finished my high school and two years of college education there. I then moved here.

Alhadi: What college did you go to in Beirut?

Shihab: I studied business administration in the Protestant College.

Alhadi: Did you come here alone or did you have a family with you at that time?

Shihab: I came alone. I had a friend who came to America before me to study. He suggested that I should come here to continue with my education. I requested a college application form and upon receiving it, I filled it out and sent it back. Soon after that, I got admitted and consequently came here to do my studies.

Alhadi: Would you please tell us about the study that you did here? Which college or university did you go to, and what did you study?

Shihab: I studied at Daytona Beach Community College for two years. I was working while I was studying because I didn't have any one to support me. After I finished my community college study, I got admitted to the University of Central Florida in Orlando. I was commuting three days a week until I finished my study.

Alhadi: Very good. After coming here and getting settled, did you continue to be in touch with your family in Beirut? Did you go there to visit?

Shihab: I go there every five years to visit. I spend two or three weeks.

Alhadi: When did you go there last time?

Shihab: It was last year. I went to do the Hajj in Saudi Arabia and from there I went to Lebanon and then back to here.

Alhadi: What about your family and children's connection with Lebanon? Do they also go there to visit?

Shihab: They go once every two years. My wife takes the children so that they will know their family back in Lebanon. This helped them to be good Arabic speakers. Here, we also speak to them in Arabic and we have kept this relationship alive.

Alhadi: That means they speak good Arabic.

Shihab: They speak Arabic. They understand it more, but they don't write in Arabic.

Alhadi: This is a problem that is facing all the Arab children who were brought up here. They can say or read a few words, but they don't write in Arabic.

Shihab: That is exactly the case with my children. We talk to them in Arabic and they answer back in English because it is easier for them.

Alhadi: Mr. Abu Mohamed, you have been living here in Gainesville for quite some time. How is your relationship with the other members of the Arab community here and how do you see the Arab community here doing?

Shihab: The Arab community here in Gainesville is getting stronger and bigger. Its members are also getting more connected with each other. They form groups and meet and also organize celebrations of their religious occasions and festivals. I can say that relations with each other are good.

Alhadi: What do you think the Arab community offers the surrounding society in Gainesville, Florida, or the USA at large?

Shihab: Those who are in charge of the Arab community are trying to make the Arab community create a presence. Here in Gainesville, the Arab community has a “Downtown Project” to help the homeless. These activities are part of the efforts by the Arab community to make others understand and know that their community is doing its best to become an integrated part of the bigger society.

Alhadi: That is good. It is a fact that most of the Arabs who are here in America, or more specifically, in Gainesville, are either professionals or employees. Very few of them own their own business. This store, “Falafel King,” is one of a very small number of stores owned by an Arab. How do you see the business situation for you as an Arab person residing here in America? Do you face any specific problem?

Shihab: My business is a Middle Eastern food restaurant. When I came here to Gainesville, I figured that this city lacks a store that offers typical Arabic food. I started my business in 1984, and continued to be here ever since. I felt there was a gap in this area and, by opening this store, I feel I have filled this gap.

Alhadi: Do you find that Americans are getting used to the Middle Eastern food? Do they like it? Do you have customers who regularly come to your store?

Shihab: Thanks to God. We have customers who regularly come and eat here. Most of them are vegetarians and they come here because we offer humus and falafel. These dishes will add to their salad and veggies options. Thanks to God that many of them favor our menu.

Alhadi: Do you know if some of your American customers have any sort of connection with the Middle East and the Arab countries, or have they been living here their entire life?

Shihab: Many of them have been to the Middle East. When they discover a restaurant offering the same food that they liked to eat there, they become customers and keep coming here regularly. Many of them tell me their stories about the restaurants they used to eat in and the food that was similar to ours that they used to eat there. They feel very happy when they find the same menu.

Alhadi: I want to know if the Middle Eastern food you offer here is only Lebanese or do you offer dishes from other countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq?

Shihab: We offer a variety of Middle Eastern dishes from Lebanon, Egypt, and Syria. For instance, we offer the two well-known dishes of humus and tabouli. Egypt, Syria, and Jordan are famous for their spinach, za'atar, and meat pies and pastries.

Alhadi: Some of the students I meet on campus tell me that they come to this restaurant regularly and they like it. Have you thought of expanding your business in the future?

Shihab: I am now sixty-three years old. I will be here for only a few years. I tried to get one of my children interested in this business, but none of them is interested. Most of those who own a business like mine have the same problem with their children. The children have their own interest. We leave this to God.

Alhadi: You seem to be in good health. Thanks to God for that and may he grant you more health. Aren't you thinking of opening another restaurant or expanding your current store to make it a bit bigger?

Shihab: I did have another store along with this one in the past. I started with one store with my brother in Daytona and then I opened this one. I figured that having two stores is

troubling, hard to do, and nothing more than a big headache. I decided to stay focused on this one, and because of that decision my income has remained the same. It was hard commuting between the two stores, and this one is doing well. Thanks to God for that.

ALHADI: Mr. Abu Mohammad, what do you, as an Arab owner of a well-known business here in America say to those who suggest that Arabs have no chance of succeeding in this country?

Shihab: I think everyone who comes here and works hard and is serious will be rewarded. It doesn't work for those who take it easy and still dream of becoming wealthy. They should work harder, and that is the only way for them to make it through.

Alhadi: Is your business facing any problem of any kind because of you being an Arab?

Shihab: Not at all. An Arab person is like a Mexican or any other person from any other country. There are opportunities for all. If everyone abides by the law, then he will get his share. This applies to everyone regardless of his ethnic background.

Alhadi: Back to your business history. Is this store the first Middle Eastern food store here in Gainesville?

Shihab: We had one before, on the corner of 13<sup>th</sup> Street at University Avenue. That one opened in 1983 and had the same name of Falafel King as this one. It was owned by my father-in-law. I joined them and opened this one.

Alhadi: Why did the other one go out of business?

Shihab: The rent was going up every year until it reached the point that made it inconvenient for us to stay.

Alhadi: And after opening this store, were there other ones that came later?

Alhadi: Yes. There were other stores that sprang up wanting to do this kind of business after mine. We, the Arabs, are smart. Some employees come and work with us. They very soon master the profession and go and open another business in another part of the town. There are two stores that opened after ours and they sell the same materials and offer the same menu as we do.

Alhadi: Do you, as store owners, communicate and cooperate with each other? Is it possible for each one of you to get something from the other store if one of you is running short on that item?

Shihab: This happens all the time. They are my friends and I always get what I need from them rather than wait until my shipment arrives. We help each other. I give them what they need when they need it and they do the same for me.

Alhadi: That means the relationship between you is not a competitive one?

Shihab: Not at all. Every one of us works in an area that is far from the others, and although Gainesville is small, everyone gets his share.

Alhadi: Where do you get the goods from?

Shihab: There are many Middle Eastern food merchants in Orlando, New York, and Tampa. We get most of our items from wholesalers in New Jersey, Orlando, and Tampa. They have all that we need.

Alhadi: Does that mean you don't import some items directly from Middle Eastern countries such as Lebanon or others?

Shihab: Wholesalers import goods in big containers from the Middle East and then they distribute them to the retail stores in America. It is hard for a store owner like me to get a whole container. You need to have an export and import business do that.

Alhadi: In terms of the goods that you have here in your store, do you encounter any problems with the authorities here? Do they come and check on your items?

Shihab: No. The items we have are checked when the containers arrive from the port of shipping. After the wholesalers get their shipments, they distribute the items. That means the goods we have here have already been inspected.

Alhadi: Now, Abu Mohamed, I want you to propose a breakfast meal for someone who wants to have breakfast. What would that meal consist of?

Shihab: If the customer is vegetarian, then he may get a plate of falafel, humus and tabouli. These are some of the famous items we have. We can also offer him bread with his meal. This will make a full meal. For those who eat meat, they can order shawirma which is a mixed lamb and beef meat. We may give him humus, tabouli and bread. This is also a full meal.

Alhadi: What about other meals such as dinner? Do you have a special dish for dinner?

Shihab: No, we offer the same menu for morning, noon, and evening. We have other side items such as pickles, spinach, and rolled grape leaves stuffed with rice.

Alhadi: Do you think that Arabic food is becoming known to American families? Do they cook it at home?

Shihab: American families are becoming more accustomed to Arabic food. Here in this store, I have this front part which functions as a restaurant and the back side is a grocery section. Some people prefer to cook their own recipes. It is hard for them here in Gainesville to find the ingredients they want in other stores. They come here and get what they want to cook at home. This shows that Arabic food is gaining ground here.

Alhadi: Thank you. These are very good details. I want to move on to your children's education. I believe all your children were born and educated here in America.

Shihab: They were all born and went to schools here in Gainesville.

Alhadi: They were all educated under the American system, and you had the earlier part of your education under the Lebanese system. Where do you think the two systems are similar or different, and which one is better in your opinion?

Shihab: I believe the American educational system is better. Here you can receive many aids to help you proceed with your education. In Lebanon, it is hard for those who don't have enough money, can't find a job, or have no family financial support to keep up with the costs of their education. Here in America, education is free up to high school. This makes it way easier. When they go to college, they can manage to cover the costs through loans, scholarships, financial assistance through government programs or private companies. I find it easier here.

Alhadi: In relation to that subject, I want you to comment on how children reach the decision of what to study in college. I know that Arab parents would love to see their children go into specific fields of study. How did you deal with this issue with your children when they reached the level of college education?

Shihab: I gave them the freedom to choose. We were observing them carefully while they were growing to discover what hobbies and interests they may be developing. My younger son grew up with a love towards inventing things and electronics. We encouraged him to go into engineering. We tried to convince the one in the middle to go into health-related professions by either becoming a doctor or a hospital administrator. This field is in high demand here in Florida. We didn't press him hard and allowed him to do what he wanted

to do. Because of his love of computers, he entered an information technology program. The elder one was determined from the very beginning to become a lawyer. He loves reading and knowing about different things. We also gave him the freedom to choose what he wants. We didn't press any of them to go into a specific field. They picked their favorite fields.

Alhadi: Would you please introduce their names?

Shihab: The elder one is named Mohammad and he is a lawyer. The middle one is named Taha and he graduated from the information technology program at the University of Central Florida. The younger one is named Waseem and he goes to Santa Fe Community College. He will be done in one semester. After that, he will join the University of Florida here in Gainesville.

Alhadi: That is excellent. I pray to God that he may give his support to all of them.

Shihab: Thank you.

Alhadi: What is your middle son doing now after he graduated from the information technology program?

Shihab: He graduated two years ago and kept looking for a job for a whole year because the economy was not in good shape. He continued living with us at home. Thanks to God that he is now working for an IT company here in Gainesville and he is still with us at home. He doesn't want to be away from us and find his own residence.

Alhadi: When you came to America, did you come directly to Florida, and have you been living here all along?

Shihab: True. I came to Florida and found that Florida's weather is warm. It is close to the weather we have in Lebanon. I have been living here in Florida ever since.

Alhadi: But, the weather in Lebanon gets snowy sometimes.

Shihab: That is high in the mountains. Lebanon is a small country. A forty-five-minute drive will take you up into the mountainous area where the snow is, and another forty-five-minute drive will take you to the coast where it is warm.

Alhadi: You apparently speak English and Arabic. Do you speak any other language?

Shihab: No, only English and Arabic.

Alhadi: Have you been to other Arab countries besides Saudi Arabia, and when?

Shihab: My trip to Saudi Arabia was to perform the Hajj. I also visited Egypt in 1970 on my way to here. I remained there for one week and then continued on to here.

Alhadi: Have you been to any non-Arab countries besides the USA?

Shihab: No. Whenever I take a vacation, I prefer to go to Lebanon to visit my relatives and sisters there.

Alhadi: Thank you, Abu Mohamed, for this interview. This is a good documentation for your history and contributions here in Gainesville. This will be kept and archived at the university library and everyone will have access to it. They can listen to it or read it.

Shihab: Thanks to you and to Brother Richard.

[END OF INTERVIEW]