

**Wajeeh Demetree**

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for University of Florida

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Narrated by Richard Saltzburg

Alhadi: Thank you very much Mr. Wajeeh. We are happy to be with you in your house.

Thank you for hosting us. It is now 4:30 PM and today is Saturday, December 3, 2011. Thank you one more time for giving us the opportunity to be in your house today. Let us start by asking you to give us some details about the early stages of your life before coming to America.

Demetree: I was born in Syria and lived there up to nine years old. My father migrated to Kuwait for work, and there I started my middle school in 1969. I finished high school and then I joined the University of Kuwait where I obtained my B.A. in electrical engineering. After that I went to Georgia Tech for my M.A. study. After obtaining my M.A. degree, I went back to work for the University of Kuwait for three years. In 1987, I came back to the USA to do a Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. I spent three years in my study program, but in my last year I shifted my study to the computer field. I joined the University of Texas A&M and finished my M.A. computer studies in 1991. After that, I went to Syria for three years and worked for an American company in Damascus. My next destination was Saudi Arabia where I spent five years working as a computer programmer for the research center at the King Faisal Specialized Hospital. My work focused on computers in medical research. Next, I moved to America and got settled here in 2000.

Alhadi: When did you come to Jacksonville?

Demetree: In 2000.

Alhadi: Why did you pick Jacksonville to be your new home?

Demetree: This is a very good question. I was asked during the interview for the job that

I was applying for, about the city where I would love to be located. I picked Jacksonville because it is the only city where I had relatives, including my in-laws, cousins, and grand cousins. The story of my relatives' residence in the USA started with the arrival of my grandfather and his brothers around 1910 in Tallahassee. They lived there for a long period of time and started a business there. The brothers continued living here but they were split between Tallahassee and Jacksonville including the Demetree family—my family. My grandfather's health was ailing and he couldn't here, so he returned to Syria and lived there for the rest of his life. Now I have a big number of second and third cousins. This is the story behind my decision to select Jacksonville to be my hometown. Also, after experiencing the weather in the North, West and South, I found Florida weather to be the appropriate weather for me.

Alhadi: I assume having many family members and relatives around makes you feel like having part of Syria here.

Demetree: That is true. Having family members around you makes living abroad bearable and easier.

Alhadi: Let us go back to the early stages of your study. Did you have any of your study in Syria?

Demetree: I left Syria when I was nine years old and I returned back later to work for three years.

Alhadi: That means you only had your first years of education in Syria and then you finished the rest in Kuwait.

Demetree: True. I finished my middle, high, and university study in Kuwait.

Alhadi: Tell us please about your college study in Kuwait.

Demetree: I studied electrical engineering for five years.

Alhadi: That puts you in a good position to make a comparison between the Arabic educational system such as the one in Kuwait and the American system based on your experience at Georgia Tech. Can you tell us if you see any comparison between the two systems?

Demetree: I am going to tell you about my personal experiences in the countries that I know. I know about Syria, not from personal experience, but from my wife's experience, who had the chance to study there. I also know about Kuwait University which has a system that is 100% American. It follows the American curriculum model, number of credit hours required, small-size class settings instead of big lecture ones, and many other aspects. The American system is followed more closely in the colleges of science than in the field of humanities. It is, of course, different when you study subjects such as sharia and law that have an Arabic special nature. To give you an example of how closely the colleges for science topics have closely adapted the American system, one of my colleagues, who was at the top of his class, managed to join MIT which is known to be a very difficult school to join. This indicates how advanced the academic level is there.

Alhadi: Does that mean when you moved from Kuwait to be part of the American educational system....

Demetree: It was a very smooth move with no problem whatsoever. This came from my accumulated knowledge of the system, and also because of my good knowledge of the English language due to the fact that the English language is the mode of instruction in Kuwait. Most of the teachers there were from Egypt, Sudan, Lebanon and Syria. We also had non-Arab teachers. All this facilitated my transfer into the American system and made it way easy.

Alhadi: We talked earlier before we started this recording about the Arab community here in Jacksonville. I learned from Dr. Adnan that twenty years ago, the mayor in Jacksonville was of Lebanese origin. I want to ask you to tell us a little bit about the history of the Arab community here in Jacksonville so we can have it documented on tape.

Demetree: As I was telling you earlier, Jacksonville became home for many Arab immigrants from different countries. I know about the Palestinian immigrants who came in big numbers in 1948 from the area of Ramallah and got settled in Jacksonville. There are now many Palestinian families who are mostly Christian. They built their church and established their community here. This group is notably visible and known in Jacksonville. They are doing very well in commerce, employment, or private establishments. There is another group of immigrants which is composed only of doctors who came Egypt, Syria, or Iraq. In addition to these two groups, there is also an old immigrant community whose members came here a long time ago. They are basically of Syrian and Lebanese

origin and their children are still here. One sub-group of this category is my family, the Demetree family, in addition to many other families who came from the same neighborhood that I came from in the city Al-nabak in Syria. I found in a book that I was reading the other day that there are four or five families who entirely migrated to Jacksonville and continue to live here up to this date. The fourth generation of these who live here still see themselves as Arabs. Another group of immigrants are those who came here recently during the last twenty years due to the pressing economic situation in their countries. The members of this group have many fields of specialties and professions and they came from many countries such as Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq. There are also a large number of immigrants from Iraq who arrived in the last seven to ten years. I personally know many of them from the church that I go to. I can say that there are tens or may be hundreds of Iraqi Muslim and Christian families who now reside in Jacksonville and who came here basically because the security situation made it hard for them to continue living there. This is what I know about the Arab community here.

Alhadi: Very good. I also learned from Mrs. Mary Albert that there is a club here.

Demetree: Yes. Salam Club is an old club. My father came to Florida and had his studies in Tallahassee. He went to Tallahassee because his uncles were living there managing their business. He lived there for three years, studied the English language, and then joined a B.A. program. He was unable to finish his study because of his decision to return to Syria for a reason that I no longer remember. He continued to live in Syria, but because of his very good command of English,

he managed to find a job with an American Company in Kuwait. Since that early time, my father told me about the Salam Club. It is a club for the Syrian and Lebanese Arabs. In those early days, it was hard to differentiate between Syrian and Lebanese, unlike the case in the present time. It is truly an old organization that was established to bring the immigrant Arabs together. I believe with the growing numbers of immigrant Arabs today, there is a need for more than one club.

Alhadi: You told me earlier that the total number of immigrant Arabs may reach tens of thousands.

Demetree: True. It is no less than tens of thousands.

Alhadi: Would you be able to make an approximate number?

Demetree: I don't have statistics, although I work in the city and I should know.

However, I don't.

Alhadi: Is it, because of the presence of such a big community, possible that the Arab community members are integrated, cooperative, and helpful to each other, or they scattered?

Demetree: It is identical with the situation between the Arab countries. We came here with our national characteristics. Among these is the tendency to disagree. We may get together in one specific event, festival or a conference, but eventually, it is hard to say it is one unified community. It is also due to the presence of varied generations. For instance, my relation with an individual from the third generation can't be like my relation with somebody like you who speaks Arabic and well aware of the Arabic society. It can't be the same. The truth is that there

are many groups who meet together in either a mosque, church, or any specific professional interest. For example, on the tenth of this month we had the NAAMA meeting [National Arab American Medical Association]. This is a professional meeting and they join together for professional purposes. We are trying via the four Arab churches in Jacksonville to bring different views closer to each other. We think about this for the benefit of the younger generations because it might be a little late for those of us who already have their opinions on different matters. We hope to bring the younger generations together.

Alhadi: This is certainly a good experience. Let me ask you, Mr. Demetree, what do you feel America has given you?

Demetree: This is a very good question. America gave me a new homeland. Any person, like me, who had the experience of living in the Arabian Gulf countries, will never get the home feeling there. It is true that you may be living there happily, having a job or even a private business, but you neither never get the home feeling nor they make you feel so. America gave me a place to get settled and to call it home. I feel I belong to this country.

Alhadi: Does this make your feeling towards your original home country of Syria weaker?

Demetree: Not at all. It is just that I used to travel and move from one place to another. However, my national feeling of being originally Syrian never dwindled or weakened.

Alhadi: In what terms do you express your feeling of belonging to Syria? Are you still in touch with your remaining family members there? Do you go to visit?

Demetree: Certainly. I go to visit as much as I can. I am sure you are aware of how expensive these trips are. We go in the summer, then we skip another year or two before we go back again. It all depends on the overall circumstances. I also show my connection to Syria through the communications I always make with my family there. Thanks are to God that modern technology has made the world appear to be very small. We communicate through Skype with my sister's family and my mother or other relatives. It made living abroad more bearable. It is true that we are unable to touch them, but nevertheless, we are communicating with them.

Alhadi: One of the problems that face current Arab parents is how to connect their children to their Arab roots/national identity. Do your children see themselves as Syrian Arabs or American, and how are you tackling the issue of their language and culture?

Demetree: This is truly one of the biggest problems facing the new Arab immigrants to America. I believe most of them have trouble overcoming this problem. In my case, thanks are to God, that with the help and support of my wife, we have been able to make them develop a positive feeling towards their language and culture. One important factor that also helped a great deal to help them buy into this feeling inside them is the presence of relatives and family members around. They see how an extended family gives protection and helps in good and hard times. It also shows them how family members come together, cooperate, and care about each other. It gives them a good image of their society. These, in addition to the trips that we make to Syria, help these feelings of belonging grow stronger. I

always remained confident that my daughter and my son would learn their native language, not only the spoken one which is easy for them to pick up, but also reading and writing. This allows them, in case they pick up an Arab newspaper or communicate with somebody on Facebook, the ability to figure out what is going on. Reading contributes immensely to strengthening the feeling of belonging to their society. I also try to make them watch Arabic movies and listen to music. These also help to bring them closer to their communities. Thanks are to God, I believe that I have succeeded.

Alhadi: I can attest to that through my knowledge of your daughter Haya who is in my class. She is an excellent student, and she is very knowledgeable, not only of the language but also the Arabic and Syrian culture. She is very good, and this is my personal testimony to that. How about your son? What grade is he in now?

Demetree: He is an eighth-grader. Next year he will be in high school.

Alhadi: What is his name?

Demetree: Asaad.

Alhadi: Has Asaad been to Syria recently?

Demetree: We were in Syria this past summer for his uncle's wedding.

Alhadi: Do you think that Asaad would have been different in terms of education and culture if he had the chance to study in an Arab school like your case?

Demetree: No doubt. I did go to Arabic school. The curriculum in Arabic school leaves no room for creativity and talents to grow. It depends on memorization. Sometimes, memorization might be good. For instance, I have never seen my son reciting even two lines of a poem off the top of his head. When I was his age, we

were supposed to memorize long poems. They don't have to do such things in their schools, but what is important is that they have enough room to express their opinions and show creativity and talents. They train them to get used to this system. We became accustomed to it after we grew up. This is where I feel the difference would have been, but generally speaking, I don't think he would have had any problem proceeding in school if he had to go to an Arab school.

Alhadi: As I testified earlier, your daughter is doing well in college. I want to know if you had any influence in her decision to study what she is studying.

Demetree: Not at all. I am an engineer and I love technology. Neither she nor Asaad have any interest in this field.

Alhadi: I believe she is taking the same path other members of your extended family have taken before, which is the medical field.

Demetree: Yes, that is true.

Alhadi: Do you think the extended family had any influence on her to go into this field?

Demetree: No doubt about this. However, we didn't put any pressure on her here at home to go into this field. She is the one who picked it. In fact, we, on the contrary, wanted her to go into a field that takes less time, rather than the medical field which takes too many years to finish. It is true that she is qualified to do it, but ten years to finish it are still too much.

Alhadi: I pray to Allah to give them good luck and to keep them safe. We are very happy for being with you in your house today. Thank you very much for having us, and thanks also for facilitating our meeting and interviewing other relatives of yours here today.

Demetree: You're welcome.

Alhadi: I hope we get another chance to talk to you.

Demetree: God willing.

[END OF INTERVIEW]