

**Sam Jazji**

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Syriac Catholic Church

Jacksonville, Florida

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for University of Florida

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Also present, Richard Saltzburg

Alhadi: Hello, Mr. Jazji.

Jazji: Hello.

Alhadi: My name is Esam Alhadi. I am from the University of Florida. We are very happy to have you with here today, Mr. Jazji.

Jazji: Thank you.

Alhadi: This interview is taking place at the Syriac Catholic Church in Jacksonville. Today is Sunday, September 23, 2012. It is now 1:02 in the afternoon. Again we are happy to be with you, Mr. Jazji.

Jazji: Thank you.

Alhadi: We will begin by asking you to give us a general preview on the early stage of your life before coming to America.

Jazji: I was born in Nabaq, Syria, on July 18, 1960. I finished my education up to high school there. After that, I went to Abu Dhabi for one year to get my paperwork ready for migrating to America.

Alhadi: When was that?

Jazji: In 1981.

Alhadi: Have you been living in this country continuously since that date?

Jazji: Correct.

Alhadi: Has it all been in Jacksonville?

Jazji: Yes.

Alhadi: Why did you decide to specifically reside in Jacksonville?

Jazji: I had a sister who used to live here with her family since the 1960s. She is the one who arranged for me to come here and did the necessary immigration paperwork for me. I joined the college after arriving here.

Alhadi: Which college did you go to?

Jazji: I started at the FCCJ [Florida Community College at Jacksonville] and then to UNF.

Alhadi: What did you study?

Jazji: I did marketing.

Alhadi: Before going into further details about your life in Jacksonville, I would like to ask you to shed more light on your life in Syria before coming to America. Would you tell us what school you went to and where is the area you came from located?

Jazji: I went to school in Nabaq which is located in a mountain region and located halfway between Hums and Damascus. It is part of the Qalamun mountain region close to Lebanon. All the high schools there are part of the public school system which is supported by the government and provides a very good quality of education. It is almost equal to private education.

Alhadi: What is the medium of instruction? Is it Arabic?

Jazji: It is Arabic, but starting with seventh grade we had the option to pick another foreign language. I picked French. What makes the middle and high school education there remarkably good is that they make sure that we get the best level of education in everything. Students leave high school with a very distinguished certificate and good

level of education. At the eleventh grade, students have to choose between going into science or arts branches. Those who go into the art branch take courses in the arts and humanities. The ones who go into the science field take a number of science courses including physics, chemistry, and biology. When one of us comes here with such a certificate, we feel we have the opportunity to do much better than many others.

Alhadi: And what did you do after you obtained your high school diploma?

Jazji: I began to think of coming to America. I contacted my sister and she started the application process for me. I remained there for a short period of time before going to Abu Dhabi to work with my brother who happened to be there.

Alhadi: Does that mean you didn't go to college in Syria?

Jazji: I didn't. I started college here.

Alhadi: Have you been living in Jacksonville throughout the period since you came here?

Jazji: I have been living here all along.

Alhadi: Did you have the chance to travel inside America?

Jazji: I have been to almost three-fourths of America. I have visited all of the tourist attractions in the country.

Alhadi: Are these trips for personal entertainment or are they business-related?

Jazji: They were mostly for personal purposes. After I got married, we kept the habit of taking a week or ten days every year and going somewhere. We have been to many places including California, Hawaii, and New York.

Alhadi: What was the last place you have been to?

Jazji: It was California, and that was my fourth visit there.

Alhadi: When was that?

Jazji: Last March.

Alhadi: How about travelling abroad?

Jazji: I visited Canada: one time to Montreal and another time to Toronto. I have also been to Brazil several times, and one time to Argentina.

Alhadi: Have you ever been back in Syria?

Jazji: I went there in 1984 and another time for a week in 1985 to attend my brother's wedding. The following trip I made to Syria was in 1997.

Alhadi: What other languages beside English and Arabic did you need to use in these trips? I know that they care about the French language in Syria.

Jazji: After graduating, I became fully immersed in English. I forgot about French. I am sure you are aware that English is currently more dominant at the international level—more than French.

Alhadi: Now, let us move on to talk about your early period after your arrival in America. Did you face any specific problem while you were trying to get yourself settled here? You may have been lucky that when you came, you already knew that there were a number of close family members living here.

Jazji: I arrived in October and I spent the first six months learning English. I then joined college. I admit that studying in English was not easy at the beginning. That is how I started. I can say that I didn't face serious problems.

Alhadi: What field of study did you join?

Jazji: I started with an A.A. degree at FCCJ. I focused on taking courses in the science area because I was intending to study engineering. After further thinking, I came to realize that business study was more promising than engineering, which appeared to be in

decline at the time. I started with taking courses such as Calculus 3 and differential equations to prepare me for the engineering study that I was hoping to get into. Later, I began to take business classes.

Alhadi: What did you do after finishing your study? Did you [find] a job?

Jazji: In 1985, I partnered with my brothers and opened a convenience store here in Jacksonville. It did very well, and two years later we opened another store. With the booming business environment at the time, we opened another store. This one was actually a gas station and was located in Callahan a little bit outside Jacksonville. In 1995, my brothers and I bought a gas station and then bought another one. In 2000, we owned a gasoline distribution company under the BP brand name here in Jacksonville. The company was previously owned by a gentleman from Daytona. After we bought it, we began to add more distribution locations until they reached fourteen locations.

Alhadi: Do you still have the distribution company?

Jazji: We still have it and we still have the fourteen distribution outlets.

Alhadi: Who keeps them running?

Jazji: They are all rented. We supply them with the gas. I moved on and bought another gas station with the land it stands on for myself. All the gas stations we own came with the land they stand on.

Alhadi: This sounds excellent. How is the business doing at the present time? Of course people never stop buying gas whatsoever.

Jazji: Starting with the year 2008, things appeared to be in decline. That is the time when my business interest shifted towards real estate. I started with building a shopping center here in Jacksonville. This is the new direction my business is taking. We thought it

might be a good idea to diversify the types of business we do. We bought around three to four pieces of land for construction projects. However, there is no demand for them now.

Alhadi: Are they fully built and ready for lease now?

Jazji: I have 45,000 square feet ready as a shopping area. I have another two locations ready for construction. We are just waiting for the situation to get better.

Alhadi: I understand that you and your brothers have been helping each other. How about your own children? Do they have any connection to the business? I am asking this question because I want to see if Arab immigrants tend to influence their children to follow [in] their [foot]steps.

Jazji: We, as a family help each other, and when I need help from my son, he will be ready to offer it. My son is currently in his fourth year at UNF and he is studying biology. If all goes well, his plan is to [attend] medical school. I can't say no to something he desires to study. This is his brother's desire too. For me, I take this as a personal decision that goes back to each one of them. It is also true that medicine is a good field and it is the one area that had the least negative impact of the late economic recession. It remained good at a time when all other professions were struggling.

Alhadi: I understand that your big family has a considerable number of people who chose the medical field. Could it be that your sons got influenced by their uncles?

Jazji: That is possible. However, I know that my children are smart and they are good at school. I don't disregard the possibility that they were influenced by other family members. We have eleven doctors in our big family. I advised my son to check first and see if this field is of true interest to him. He did a doctor shadowing several times where he goes with doctors while they are working. He had the opportunity to enter the surgery room with a

female doctor at Shands Hospital to watch a knee surgery. He saw it live. This is his own desire and I can't do anything except to encourage him.

Alhadi: Let us go back a little bit, Mr. Jazji, to the time when you finished your college study and directly joined the business field. Did you have the opportunity to work as an employee anywhere? Did you apply to any position?

Jazji: Honestly, I didn't. I never felt the need for that. The fact that there are a large number of Syrian immigrants, and also that my brother-in-law was working in the field of business, encouraged me to join this field. It is also true that there was no need for a large amount of money at that time to start a business. A small amount of money was just enough to get me started. We borrowed money from here and there and added that to what we had at the time, and that is how our business was launched. So my answer to your question is that I didn't apply for any position.

Alhadi: You told us earlier that the business you have is a partnership between you and your brothers. Given that the Syrians form a large group of immigrants here in Jacksonville, do they help each other?

Jazji: Although it is possible to find people helping others, it is also a fact that sometimes sharp differences arise and fierce competitiveness persists.

Alhadi: It sounds like you benefited a lot from the help that you have received from your brothers, but how about getting help from financial institutions and banks?

Jazji: Currently, you can't do anything or move any step forward without having support from a financial establishment. The financial system in this country is the main pillar for all types of businesses in this country. Every aspect of American business activities rely on

it. Without financial support from these institutions, a business will plunge down and eventually vanish.

Alhadi: My following question will still be in the same area. I understand that what you have been saying is no doubt a reality. I want to know if your background as an Arab Syrian immigrant ever influenced the way these financial institutions had to deal with you. Was this background a problem for you to get the financial support you needed?

Jazji: They treated me very naturally. I am an American citizen. There is no serious case that I can remember. It is not a secret to say that we as immigrants come from countries where oppression and dictatorship dominate. After arriving here, we discover the unlimited opportunities this country provides to each one of us to succeed. It is also not a secret that we are a hardworking people. Nothing stops us from working hard when the opportunity is there. These are the factors that helped us to go forward and to achieve success and create a better life style for ourselves.

Alhadi: Do you think that you and the rest of your family members could have achieved the same level of success if you had continued to live in Syria?

Jazji: The answer is definitely no. It can't at all be the same level of success. However, it is still possible to manage to reach a good level of success and a comfortable life there. There are still opportunities in Syria to do well, and it is a fact that some people there are doing extremely well, but I don't think it will be comparable to the living standard and opportunities that we have here. This country is way bigger and the opportunities in all fields are unlimited and wide-open for everyone. Doors are always open to do better. It is in everyone's hand to go forward and do better. But, as I said earlier, there are still people who are doing very well in Syria, but it doesn't compare to the situation here.

Alhadi: Do you intend to transfer any part of your business activities or even the business ideas you have back to Syria?

Jazji: I think we all know that the situation in Syria is presently not at its best. It is very difficult indeed. We pray for peace in our land, for our people, relatives, and friends, and for everybody. It is very difficult to think of something like that at the current time. No one knows what the future entails.

Alhadi: Finally, I want to ask you if you feel there are any obstacles or problems that may be facing your business here.

Jazji: All the problems are related to the instability in the financial system and the credit crunch that we are facing at this time. I don't think it will ever be worse than how it currently is. Regardless of how your personal financial situation might be, it is very hard to get the loans and credit you are seeking.

Alhadi: In your personal case as an immigrant, did you ever feel there is any barrier of any sort that stood between you and your customers?

Jazji: Frankly, I never experienced any sort of discrimination and never felt that there was any dividing barrier between me and my customers. I have been living here for quite some time and my accent is gradually disappearing. During the thirty-one years that I have been living in this country, I may have encountered one or two cases where somebody may have uttered the word that I am an immigrant and that we are here to take away opportunities and work from American people. My answer to those who say such a thing is that this is about nothing more than them being lazy and me being a hardworking man. I also tell them that if they work better and more than me, they will achieve a situation better than mine. These are very small things and they might have happened on the go

but generally speaking, I have never been in a situation where I had to have a heated confrontation with any person, institution, or a customer.

Alhadi: We are very happy that we are here with you Mr. Jazji. Thank you very much. This is a very informative conversation.

Jazji: Thank you very much. I am very grateful for this opportunity. I wish you the best luck with the research you are conducting. I will be happy to help at any time you think I can be of help.