

**Interviewee: Dalia Namak**

**Interviewer: Andrea Simmonds**

**Date: November 30, 2017**

AS: Thank you for participating in this interview. Thank you again for agreeing to do this. We really appreciate your contribution. Do you have any questions before we get started?

DN: No, let's start.

AS: OK, let's start by getting a few pieces of basic information. What is your name?

DN: My name is Dalia Namak.

AS: And what year are you?

DN: A Junior, third year.

AS: And what is your major?

DN: I am a double major in Politics and Anthropology.

AS: On to the second question. What role does Islam play in your daily life?

DN: I would say mainly Islam is, what I take from Islam and incorporate in my daily life is the value that it gives me. So, for instance, how do I live my life? I live it according to what I think Islam says it is the best way to live your life which is the value of being kind to others. The value of making sure you remember Allah as God at certain points in the day and ensuring you're just a good person. On a daily basis, I'd say it's just the values I take from what I've been taught, what I've been socialized into being a Muslim by my parents, by my community and things like that.

AS: Very good. Did your religious beliefs play a role in where you chose to go to college? If so, how?

DN: No. It's mostly based upon where I live, because I want to be close to home, and I live in the city itself. That was a main factor. Where I wanted to go to college, besides Wake Forest is a great school. That was another big role. I think I'd like to say that I'm not, I don't observe wearing the veil, the hijab, and I think also plays a part in where I

decided to go to school because a woman who wears the veil, who chooses to wear the veil, may have, does have a vastly different experience than I do, not wearing the veil.

AS: What is it like to be Muslim at Wake?

DN: I would say this also plays a part because everything has your identity. I have a lot of conversations about the hijab and wearing the veil. I am talking as a woman who doesn't wear the veil and observes wearing the veil in everyday life. So, in the Wake Forest community, I don't look like a different person, like any other person and so because of that, my appearance, people don't treat me differently. And also, another big thing that I tell everybody that I come up to and they ask me your Muslim experience, I am a white person, white on the flesh, on the skin, and so that is also an identity that I hold and it influences how people interact with me, and because of that I also do not get, luckily do not get Islamophobic, whatever it may be, violence or through vocal verbalizations of violence, I do not get that. I do not recall experiencing that at Wake Forest from a non-Muslim or a Muslim even for that matter in regards to being Muslim. So, what is it like being a Muslim on Wake Forest campus? It's normal. People don't treat me differently even though I am a Muslim. Like I said before, I am the President of the Muslim Student Association this year, and those who know that, don't treat me differently. But the people that I am around, all my friends, are minorities of some sort. So, that's also very important to know.

AS: It's not one of the questions that's on here, but you choose not to wear the veil and your experience would be different from someone who did choose to wear the veil. Do you think you would be afraid to wear the veil? Does my question make sense?

DN: Yes, because that does change things. Actually I'll say one thing and then I'll say another. Firstly, I think I would feel very empowered because I have the conversation with myself, and the deliberation of whether to or not to put on the veil. When I'm wearing the hijab in the mosque and in spaces where there are Muslims, I feel great, I feel like this is wonderful. This is part of my identity and I want to show it off to the world. I just remembered this when you asked the question, but I have a memory from my Freshman year, that we have Jumah, which is Friday prayer every Friday. I was heading to one of those. I was telling my best friend at the time, I did Salat, which is the practice of cleaning yourself before, washing yourself before prayer. Before I walk from my dorm to the prayer space, on the lower quad, the prayer area, it's changed since then. But, in the process of me getting ready to go there, it's a walk and it can be difficult, I was wearing the veil after, and you don't have to do that, you can wear the veil before you go, if you don't chose to wear the veil every day, you can wear it just before you go to pray after doing your washing. So I was like no I'm going to wear it. So I wore

it, and I was very nervous before stepping out and I told my best friend, I'm very nervous. I don't know how, people who know me, how they'll react, because I don't normally tell, I don't outwardly say I'm Muslim to people. That was an experience I had, and those were the thoughts that went through my mind. According to the previous question, of being Muslim at Wake Forest, also I go to the identity that I have that I don't wear the veil. But that was also, you have to consider that was my one time when I wore the veil. I haven't been wearing the veil since 6th grade. So it's a different way of thinking maybe. I wanted to share that.

AS: Thank you for sharing. Could you tell me about an experience where you felt affirmed in your Muslim identity?

DN: Yes, every time I step into the MSA Lounge. Whenever I'm around Muslim people, I feel affirmed. I love that. I love the sort of like family that I have through the Muslim students and the MSA, which is the Muslim Student Association at Wake Forest. That's why I'm President. Those are definitely times I'm affirmed. I'm affirmed by non-Muslims too. I've been very active in social justice at Wake Forest, specifically through the Pro Humanitate Institute, which is the main organization I know of that deals with social justice, as well as some parts of diversity and inclusion. Through them, like the social justice retreat which happens. I was moderator, I was a participant and it was a great time. The people that were there normally are, I mean everyone might have a sort of minority within them or they are visual and/or internal minority of some sort. And when I say internal, I mean not outwardly looking as a minority. For instance, racialization is a big thing, is someone brown or black or an identity that is a minority or oppressed in some way in America (contextualizing America). And internally, they would have like, for instance a mental disorder or something also. So those are branches, they outwardly express this sort of thing. I'm within a group that understands the struggle. Through them, I have been affirmed in several ways as being Muslim. Everyone can understand, quote, the struggle I can talk about. The interactions with those people and the interactions with my Muslim counterparts, I'm affirmed.

AS: So glad to hear that. Are there any kinds of things that Wake Forest is doing that can support Muslim students?

DN: The biggest, positive things that I've seen is this year, the addition of Naijla Faizi, the very first Muslim Life Director, on Wake Forest campus. She is an amazing, exciting person and individual, and so Wake Forest has instituted her as part of the Chaplain's Office, and I hope this is a job that stays, a career that stays throughout the year and expands and grows. Previously, we had Imam Griggs, he was also very helpful and here, a representative of Muslims. But the addition of having Naijla Faizi has been

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wonderful for us, because she has helped MSA to a great extent, more than I can even say, or express. It was a big contribution. Wake Forest, through Allies, such as Dean Goldstein, Allies such as Chris Told, everyone in the Chaplain's Office, and various other people, like people in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, there are so many faculty and staff members on this campus that I know of, and that I can name, that have been so extremely supportive of Muslim students. I am so thankful for them. They have contributed in discussions on how to bring Halal meat, which is meat, some or maybe most Muslims observe in eating. They've been in discussions and helped with the institution of getting the Muslim Student Lounge last year, which was the very first time Muslims had a lounge space on campus. Nathan O. Hatch, our President of the University, was very helpful and played a very helpful and very big role in getting that lounge. There are so many people in the upper levels that have helped MSA and have helped Muslim students. Always, I'm grateful and gracious for them.

AS: Have you been involved in the Muslim Student Association on campus? Obviously, you have because you're President. But, I'll go ahead and ask what made you get involved or want to be involved with the Muslim Student Association?

DN: Definitely, that began prior to coming to Wake. In high school, I had one Muslim friend. There were maybe only 2 or 3 Muslim people in my high school. Maybe 3, me, my friend and another girl, I think. Maybe a guy, I don't know. So, there were 3 people or 4 in my high school. We didn't have an MSA, we didn't have anything. The only time I talked about being Muslim was with my best friend. I really wanted to know. Growing up, I didn't really go to the mosque that often. So, I really wanted to know more about Islam, I wanted to know more Muslims too, that was a really big thing. So, I came to Campus Day, which is Senior year of high school. I came and I met people, the leadership of the MSA at that time, and I just really loved it, and I really wanted to be a part of it. This was more of an internal drive. It wasn't like they didn't want me to me to go to Wake- definitely, they did, and they wanted me to be a part of MSA. I definitely wanted to do that. Applying to Wake, Oh, I want to know Muslim people, so how do I do that, and that was my thing. That was really why I wanted to go to MSA and why I wanted to be a part of it. I was all gung-ho about it, I still am. Even before my high school year, I was so excited. So throughout the years, I've just been totally, totally in love with MSA. That's how I got started. I met the people in my senior year and I came and met the President. He was very nice. When we had events, I'd go.

AS: Awesome. Are there other Muslim student organizations on campus?

DN: No, there are not. There is only one Muslim Student Association, and that's the Wake Forest Muslim Association I'm a part of. There are other groups that I am a part

of: South Asian Student Association, they were made before the Arab Student Association, which came into place last year, I believe. I'm Arab, I identify as Arab. I had the South Asian Student Association before them, because our association wasn't here. I love that group and am a part of them and work with them too because they're close with MSA. We're very close knit, those two groups. SGI, computer, I'm a part of that group. HSA, The Hindu Student Association, I'm a part of them as well and support them. They started this year. Mostly how it works at Wake is that if you're friends with people who are leaders of an organization, you're going to be part of that organization, even if you don't identify with them, you can still be allies. But other than the Muslim Student Association, MSA, there's Muslim Life, like I talked about that Najila Faizi is Director of.

AS: I was going to ask, and you may not know the answer, you said there was like three other Muslim students in your high school. What is the Muslim student population at Wake, or do you know?

DN: I know there may be 50-ish students that are on the listserv for Muslim Life. In MSA, the population that we have is about 30, in the Muslim Student Association, the members. Active members, I would say are about 15. That's all I know numbers-wise at Wake Forest. That's only those who identify and come to us and say they want to be involved.

AS: Do you feel like there are students on campus who don't talk about being Muslim, who are Muslim, but don't talk about it, and who don't feel comfortable saying they are Muslim?

DN: Definitely. We've struggled with that this year in trying to recruit members. It definitely has to do with or are about the racialization of Islam. It sounds very political because of the media blasting things after 9/11, specifically 9/11, because that was transformative for Muslims in America. So, if they are outwardly brown or outwardly Muslim, even if they are not Muslim, they are brown, and obviously they are attacked in some sort of way, negatively, they may be having struggles with that. Perhaps they are having struggles with learning about the Muslim identity, or even socializing, what is it, what does it mean to me, how much of a Muslim do I want to be, on a spectrum and I say that with quotes, because Islam ranges and every person has their own way of practicing Islam and way of being a Muslim, just like every other person and every other religion. So, that is a struggle. It is real and there are students that do go through how do I want to act while being Muslim on this campus. It could be for various reasons. I was not one of them, so I can't really say much to that.

AS: Could you tell me about a time when being Muslim was tied to a negative experience for you at Wake?

DN: OK, I can talk about internally. Nothing is really external for me because negative experiences, other things I've talked about previously, of looking like being white, not wearing the hijab, things like that. In class, in Politics, being a Politics major, you are normally in class with people who are intending on, or have declared being majors in Politics. And so I was in my Politics class this semester, and the majority except for one student who I know is South Asian, they were all white. In this class. it was going on, I was like I don't know anything about this topic, like all these people around me, they know everything, and I was really scared to speak up, and it also happened last fall in one of my Politics classes. I was really intimidated, and I think it really had to do with being Muslim. No, it wasn't this semester, well also, it was this semester, but one of the students I'm talking about was last semester in one of my classes. And also, everyone was not a brown person except me, everyone else but me, and the topic was about Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan, 2001 to Present, that was the class I was taking. And so, I was like, oh well, great. We talked about 9/11 the first day of class and I was like I felt visibly Muslim, not visibly, but I felt internally like so Muslim, if I identify as Muslim, if I stay, or I identify as Muslim some people will not like me, or think badly of me or something. So it was like an internal extreme that happened. But nothing happened, I didn't say I was Muslim. I kind of kept quiet the whole time. That's a way, I guess one way, and I think the only way really that it has been negative for me. It's in Politics, it only happens in Politics classes where the dominant is white students who I think and assume because they don't look, because it's not as racialized and things like that, they don't look Muslim, they don't identify as Muslim, not identify, but openly state they are Muslim, things like that. So I can't, whatever, I don't know what I'm saying. That was the only thing, internal, internal, not external.

AS: So, you said your politics classes, in particular is when you are most aware of your identity.

DN: I'm most aware, in a negative way. Other classes, I'm aware, but in a positive way. For instance, in the Politics classes you are talking about the Middle East and how the first people of the world were in the Middle East doing agriculture and things like that. Wow, they are doing a good thing, a positive, so I feel good about that. Still, people don't know that I am Muslim because I haven't said it, and I don't look it, and things like that. What I'm trying to say is it's internal. At least for me, my personal self.

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AS: Gotcha. That's good to hear that you haven't faced any external dilemmas or anything like that. Can you think of other challenges Muslim students experience on campus?

ND: Yes, definitely. Since this question extends to other people, not me, I will just talk about some experiences that I've heard from brown Muslim men, who are visibly brown in some way, light to dark. I've heard from a few people, they've had negative vocalizations, while the Trump Presidency was, while the election was going on, there have people who have said negative things towards them like, you're a Muslim, like bad things, I don't know the exact thing, but it was negative and it was hurtful. That is something that I know of. Also we had, post-Trump election, we had a self-care, the MSA and the South Asian Student Association came together and had a self-care moment in the MSA lounge where we came together and talked about how are you doing after the election, what's going on, if you want to talk, we're all here for everyone. That happened. I wasn't here, I was abroad, but I heard about it.

AS: It's good y'all were able to come together and support one another. I need to ask this-does being Muslim make it more difficult to socialize with non-Muslims? From what I can understand, it doesn't seem like that's been your experience, but I don't want to speak for you.

DN: Yes, thanks. Actually, it has not. Being Muslim isn't my whole life, it's not my whole identity. It's a really big portion of it, and I really value it and appreciate it, but it's not encompassing me as a whole person. No it hasn't, because my very first friends here, at Wake Forest, are non-Muslim. I have great connections with them. You know, after first year, it kind of like dwindles a little bit, you get different friends. The majority of my friends who are Muslim, identify as Muslim. But also, I'm President. I don't know if that relates or not, but anyway. There ya go. So, no it doesn't, I have many acquaintances and friends currently that are not Muslim. Like I said before, being Muslim doesn't really show on me, so it doesn't really pertain to how I interact with people.

AS: Do you feel like if your skin was darker you would have more problems or that your experience would be different?

DN: So maybe it's not necessarily being darker skin because I also as an Arab person look a certain way where it could be more attributed towards white. But, for instance some people in my family say you're Hispanic. Some Hispanic individuals approached my family and started speaking Spanish with us, not even English, in America. If I had been darker it might be Hispanic and so it depends. But if I had certain features of being South Asian or being Pakistani for instance, or I don't know what else, Indonesian, I

don't know if people know, but Indonesia has the highest population of Muslims in the world. Then maybe someone would attribute me, instantly, oh she's Muslim. Maybe.... It depends. Everything depends.

AS: Has been being Muslim every led to a negative experience in the classroom?

DN: Oh yes. It's kind of what I talked about earlier.

AS: The negative internalization?

DN: Yes. The only negative experience I had, the internalization.

AS: What changes would you want to make for the future Muslim students coming to Wake?

DN: Wow, you should've asked me earlier so I could have thought about this. Let's see, what changes? Oh! Firstly, there is a huge debate, not debate, but we're always trying to institute new things for every student and different things. For instance, the institution of bringing Halal meat to campus. It's been in the works for a few years, more than a few years, and actually having that would be amazing. Also, if Wake Forest wants to bring more students of diversity, if you bring the diversity rate up it looks better. Then you have to accommodate for those students who do actually practice eating only Halal meat. So that would be a big plus for them to come and have that available to them. So that's one big thing. If you asked me two years ago, I would have said get the lounge because that is a really big thing that we have that now. Another thing would be that, not for Wake Forest undergrad, but for Wake Forest Graduate students who are Muslim as well. I know this is another topic of discussion and something that could be instituted as well, and in the future hopefully will, having more prayer spaces available dedicated to, like for instance our prayer spaces need to be clean, you can't walk on it with shoes on them, you cannot bring dogs in, you cannot bring anything not clean, and there are standards of being clean and specifications. For instance, two years ago before the lounge, when I was a First Year, before we had the lounge, we had one prayer area, and sometimes I'd see dogs coming in there, and like they'd have meetings, people walking on it with shoes. That is not what is supposed to happen in a prayer area. But we didn't have any area or space that was for Muslims to gather to pray together. So, that was the best that we had. So, very happy to know we have a lounge now that has a prayer space for us--so to institute it for those who are non-undergraduate students, who are in Graduate School, programs in the Medical School even, having spaces for them as well would be wonderful. More support within organizations, not support, but maybe the university could like espouse Muslims more, I don't know, but like within



Greek organizations, we had an event last year maybe, where Imam Griggs talked to a specific fraternity. Actually, the President last year was in a Greek organization and he made an event where the Imam could answer questions for the people who went to the event in the Greek organization. Apparently, there was a really big turnout, it was a great event, so like having more visibility of Muslims and not negative thoughts about Muslims in Greek organizations. Because I think that's something that I need to work on, like thinking that people in Greek life because there are a lot of factors that I won't name, but there are a lot of factors that made me think that they may not see Muslims in the best light. Not just Greek organizations but all student organizations seeing how Muslims are good. I don't know how they'd do that but something put in place to tell them that Muslims are not bad. Because that's what the media is doing out there.

AS: Portraying Muslims as terrorists and being dangerous and all of those things. What is something you would want non-Muslims to know about the Muslim experience?

DN: I feel like I had more non-experiences for me. Non-Muslims. Every experience is different. First of all, I'll say that. Secondly, I've heard that a lot of people assume there's only one experience at Wake Forest, and that's so wrong. I'm thinking about various minority organizations and minority students that are a minority at Wake Forest. I've had conversations with them and talked about it, and also the leadership of minority organizations. They talk about their frustration with people thinking like, well you're at Wake Forest, you have the same experience as me. No, no, no, no, that's not true. Because a lot of students that are of different color, because 70+, I think 74+ % of this whole entire school is white. So that means 36+% of diversity that we have are non-white students are of some minority descent on campus at least. It means that they will have a different experience because there are, I've heard stories and they're real, of students who have been outright, had racist slurs told to them while they were walking to some place, doing nothing to other people, like racist, a lot of racism unfortunately. So that experience where you are constantly on red alert, well, not constantly, but you are constantly a little less so, are on alert, or you're attacked in some sort of way, or your identity is going to be attacked in some sort of way. It's a completely different experience from being accepted in all your identities in all forms of your existence. And so really getting Muslim students and non-minority students, or those who hold privilege and identities that are non-minority, or privilege in any sense, just know that experiences are different and they are not always positive and just be open-minded about other beliefs, other faiths, other ideas and whatnot. Be open-minded and don't judge at first look.

AS: Is there anything else I may have missed or that's important to know about Muslim life at Wake? Or you think you might want to share that I didn't bring out?

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DN: Well that's very expansive. Like we were talking about earlier, before this interview, my experience here has been extremely positive, I think. A big part of that is to my Muslim friends and to the support that I have had from faculty and staff that I talked about extensively in one of the questions. Even though there might be negative things, I have great privilege in being, as I have said many times and I will say throughout my entire life that I have white skin and do not wear the hijab currently. I have many privileges in that sense. In regards to being Muslim, I wouldn't trade being in the MSA or having my Muslim friends or being Muslim at all. I wouldn't trade that for anything. Wake Forest has helped me in shaping that, in shaping my identity. So, I'm thankful.

AS: Wonderful. This has been a really good interview, thank you.

DN: Of course, thank you.