

The Other Side of Charlottesville Final Transcript

[00:00:03] **ABDULLAH** Hi, my name is Abdullah Paracha, I am the son of Pakistani immigrants who came to the country in the late 90s and I am also a practicing Muslim.

[00:00:15] **ABDULLAH** So I just graduated from UVA with a degree in history and most likely I'll be going into medicine.

[00:00:23] **MEHDY** Hi, my name is Mehdy Elouassi. I see I am a rising third year at the University of Virginia, majoring in economics and history.

[00:00:33] **MEHDY** Just like Abdullah, my parents came to the United States in the 90s. They came here from Morocco. And so I also identify with that diaspora.

[00:00:43] **ABDULLAH** So UVA is in Charlottesville, Virginia. When I came in as a first year, it was August twenty seventeen.

[00:00:50] **ABDULLAH** My move-in was right after the far right rally, which was around August 11th and 12. For me coming in, it was a crazy time to to be coming into Charlottesville because the images you were seeing on TV, the violence that was happening, the rhetoric surrounding this town where it seemed like it was becoming a hub for far right activity. So even though that was what I thought coming in when I actually got here and got involved with the local Sunday school through the local mosque, the ICB, I realized that this town is actually more diverse than even what what I'm used to in Northern Virginia. And there's actually a lot of refugees, which is very unique because Charlottesville is a small town in central Virginia. And at least to me, it didn't make a lot of sense. But my image of Charlotte will change very quickly.

[00:01:46] **MEHDY** I came to UVA a year after Abdullah, and I was also kind of shocked to see the diversity that I encountered when I got here. I had a similar idea in my head of what it would be like, partially because of very old stereotypes of UVA and Charlottesville in general. And then just because of what we saw in the news, what made global headlines, the incidents of August twenty seventeen that took place in Charlottesville, I was very shocked to see what I saw in terms of diversity, what they

had arrived, according to the I.R.C., which is the International Rescue Committee headquarters actually in Charlottesville, there's about three thousand refugees currently living in Charlottesville.

[00:02:31] **ABDULLAH** So for reference, this past year under President Trump, the United States only allowed in about eighty thousand refugees into the entire United States. So clearly this city is a hub for refugees. And part of the reason is because there is a well-established infrastructure for refugees already in this town, partly through the I.R.S. being based here, partly just because of transportation, public schools. And in some ways, even UVA students play a role through the programs they have. So through the Religion, Race and Democracy Lab, which sponsored this podcast, Mehdy and I were told to do some type of research and our initial thought was trying to find something that related to us but that we could also do to benefit people in this town. And so we realized very quickly that we need to start talking to the refugees in this town and try to share their stories so more people know about what Charlottesville truly is.

[00:03:40] **MEHDY** So in our conversations with these two refugees, they shared a lot of information with us, particularly about them coming to Charlottesville, their challenges and how their identity changed over time, especially after the far right rally in twenty seventeen.

[00:03:57] **ABDULLAH** Like I said earlier, our first interview is with Habib. He owns a local grocery store.

[00:04:04] **ABDULLAH** And essentially we kind of just walked in and started talking to him. And it's kind of crazy because he actually knew my family who work in a similar business. And we had always seen him at the mosque. He'd always be walking in with his father, who kind of needs help walking. So it was always kind of in the back of my head and we knew that he would be someone interesting to talk to.

[00:04:28] **ABDULLAH** Habib's family came to Pakistan from Afghanistan many, many years ago because of the Soviet invasion. And for those of you who don't know, essentially what happened was that the Soviet Union decided to invade Afghanistan, encouraged by local communists and both the United States and Pakistan got involved with essentially supporting a rebellion against the Soviets in Afghanistan. And there was

a massive war because of that. And that also resulted in the rise of the Taliban. So. Family, while they were accepted into Pakistan with open arms at first, later the Pakistani government tried to push for a lot of the refugees to return back to Afghanistan, mainly because they thought that it was safe to return, even though there was a very, very hostile group still in charge of that country. Habib and his family were able to come to the United States through his father in the late 2000s.

[00:05:26] **MEHDY** So for our second interviewee, Majed, we actually got connected to him through a process that we had both taken place without ever before. And we actually kind of also knew Majed through his dad, who works at the mosque.

[00:05:42] **MAJED** Salam guys, my name is Habib and I live in Charlottesville currently.

[00:05:47] **MAJED** Um, I moved into the States right before September 11. Um, I was 12 at that time or 13. And, um, before moving in, I was born and raised in Pakistan. Uh, my parents are originally Afghans, and because of the war in Afghanistan, they had to migrate into Pakistan. And I was born and I would say it was a refugee camp, but I think it was a military base. So, um. The first where I was born was I think it was called Schiro Jangi in Pakistan, and then after a few years they had to move us and we moved into another military base called Warsick, which is in Peshawar.

[00:06:47] **MAJED** And, um, that's where I kind of remember most of my childhood was in Warsick. And then we moved to some city. That's where we stayed for another three years before before moving into America.

[00:07:05] **MEHDY** So Habib's experiences were actually quite similar. Habib's family had moved originally from Afghanistan to Pakistan.

[00:07:16] **MEHDY** Likewise, Habib's family had moved from Palestine to Iraq before they came to the United States. While they were accepted under Saddam Hussein, they faced hostility from the new government after the second U.S. invasion.

[00:07:30] **MAJED** My background was Palestinian. So back in 1948 when the.

[00:07:36] **MAJED** When this happened to Palestine, my my grandfather moved to south Iraq to the state of Basra that is very close to Kuwait.

MEHDY Because of the dangerous conditions under warfare and the crippling infrastructure of Iraq, Martin's family was actually forced to leave everything behind and make a new home out of a refugee camp in the desert.

[00:08:00] **MEHDY** They remained there for a number of years until eventually they received the opportunity to come to the United States in the late 2000.

[00:08:09] **MAJED** Life is a very undescrivable place, almost like a roller coaster in a matter of seconds, it can take up to the peak of your happiness.

[00:08:19] **MAJED** Other it can take you down with no hope. The real question is, how can you maintain your strength? To cruise through any difficult situation. My name is Majid Ossorio, I was born in Iraq, Baghdad. I opened my eyes to the invasion of 2003. I was six years old at the time when the invasion took place. A couple of things that I have noticed during the invasion at a young age was airplane flew over our house as this guy was all wet from the gun exchange. Dead bodies were on the ground after struggling for four years living in the camp.

[00:09:07] **MAJED** The United Nation has accepted us to come to the US. When they announced our name that day, all the sadness, the struggle and the hunger went away. Well, I remember that day was my family was so happy. You know, my brother were jumping and dancing around each other.

[00:09:30] **MAJED** So much emotion in that moment, I felt like my heart was going out of my chest and was replaced with a new heart struggle can only make the human being stronger.

[00:09:42] **ABDULLAH** So when Habib and his family came to the United States, they ended up in Northern Virginia where he went to middle school.

[00:09:49] **ABDULLAH** However, through meeting a UVA professor out of all people, his father actually decided to move his entire family to Charlottesville because he

thought that it would offer his children the best chance to succeed and essentially live the American dream.

[00:10:07] **HABIB** He was a cab driver and then he used to drive one of the professor here, Yoovidhya, and he told them, you know, you have five kids. I think it's best if you move to Charlottesville because is the professor that he was driving, his focus was like, you know, get your kids education, worry about their education. And, you know, it's like a perfect place. Uh, they're young, you know, transportation. You can just take the bus. It's a small town. They can get around easily.

[00:10:34] **HABIB** And then he decided to open a little grocery store here and everybody decided, well, we didn't decide. But like, you know what? We're going to move down.

[00:10:48] **HABIB** So in middle school and high school, like a lot of refugees and even to some extent, Muslim Americans have faced a lot of challenges with this identity.

[00:11:02] **HABIB** Absolutely. You know, I came right before 9/11. So, you know, middle school and high school was the toughest, you know, being a brown guy.

[00:11:11] **HABIB** And, you know, the first thing they come on their minds like, oh, you know, the boogeyman or whatever.

[00:11:20] **HABIB** But, you know, if you and that's the thing like we have a lot of students from private schools, they come in and attend.

[00:11:28] **HABIB** The Friday sermon is completely you know, it's not what you hear on TV.

[00:11:37] **HABIB** That's not I don't know what that is, you know, but that's not Islam.

[00:11:43] **HABIB** And, you know, there are more, especially this town, um, people that live here, there are a lot more open minded.

[00:11:54] **MEHDY** Majid's family came directly from Iraq to Charlottesville. And like most immigrant families, they placed an enormous amount of emphasis on the importance of education. However, like heavy metal also faced a number of different challenges while trying to pursue his education. This includes the lack of knowing any English.

[00:12:14] **MEHDY** He had trouble adjusting to the new culture that he encountered in the United States, as well as trying to balance between working and being a student.

[00:12:25] **MAJED** Moving to the US was one of the most major changes in my life. Education was a priority to my family. The lack of knowing the English language was a little bit of a challenge at the time.

[00:12:39] **MAJED** I remember getting mixed up between the word kitchen and chicken because they were both sound the same. The first couple of weeks I went to high school, I was too embarrassed to talk to people because I couldn't really, you know, made a full sentence.

[00:12:55] **A MAJED** nd at that time it took me about six, six to seven months to kind of, you know, get get to talk to people and stuff, you know, just socializing.

[00:13:08] **ABDULLAH** Habib graduated high school and went to VCU, where he was actually doing pretty good on the pretend tapas.

[00:13:16] **ABDULLAH** He was doing fine in his classes and he started actually applying to dental schools and did go to school, not UVA.

[00:13:24] **HABIB** I was in VCU, did my undergrad.

[00:13:27] **HABIB** The plan was to get into dental school, I was a pretty much finished. I took the exam. I was on my way. I did apply to a few schools.

[00:13:42] **ABDULLAH** However, because of a tragic, tragic accident with his father, he gave up on dentistry and decided to stay in Charlottesville and take care of his father while simultaneously running the store that their family owned.

[00:14:01] **HABIB** So I got home, I don't live that far from the VA hospital, I got home by three thirty, went to bed and all of a sudden I just hear a loud noise as if, like, a tree fell on a house or something. So I'm in my bed sitting. I'm like, OK, what's going on?

[00:14:20] **HABIB** You know, when you when you when you hear something, you're just like you're you're awake and you want to move and at the same time be like you're not sure whether you want to move or, you know, kind of scared.

[00:14:33] **HABIB** And then I heard my mom and I was like, oh, something's not right. I went upstairs, like right by the stairs.

[00:14:38] **HABIB** He fell. He was. Like, just trying really hard to breathe, like the fella kind of broke his teeth and some of his teeth were down, you know, in its trachea and like I was sure, like I thought he was gone for sure.

[00:14:59] **HABIB** Called the cops. The ambulance came within 30 minutes. The doctor came and said he has to do a head surgery, have to, like, cut open his skull to come off because it was inflamed.

[00:15:18] **HABIB** And so that was it. Um, spent the next year and a half in hospital trying to be there for him. And hopes of getting into dental school kind of faded away.

[00:15:33] **HABIB** I thought it was more important to take care of my father than, you know, spend the next five, six years in school.

[00:15:41] **MEHDY** Habib would spent the next year and a half at the hospital trying to help his father recover. Majid also started spending a lot of time at the hospital instead of tending to his family. He started tending to patients. He was actually training to become an E.R. nurse.

[00:16:01] **MAJED** So, yeah, there was a lot of a lot of actually a lot of doctors here, Yuva, that go go to the mosque.

[00:16:08] **MAJED** You know, I've seen I've seen a couple of of doctors, surgeons, orthopedic surgeons here. They were at the mosque and they always, you know, motivated me. They always push the right direction. They always tell me, OK, you should do nursing. And then after after nursing, maybe, maybe should go to being in a stadium. And they always there was motivated me.

[00:16:30] **ABDULLAH** So far we learned a lot about Majed and Habib things that Mehdy and I had no idea about. They're both big members of the local community. Majid is playing a huge, huge role in the local hospital, and Habib runs a pretty popular store that a lot of students and faculty and local residents of Charlottesville will go to. So, the biggest question at this point, actually, was that how did we, as Mehdy and I, students who live in Charlottesville and even see these people in the mosque almost every week never really talk to them. Why do Habib and Majed's stories matter to Mehdy and I now? Why didn't we learn about these people our first year coming in? And why is it much more relevant that we and other people learn about refugees in Charlottesville?

[00:17:24] **MEHDY** So it took us a long time to understand Charlottesville and our place in Charlottesville.

[00:17:33] **MEHDY** We kind of existed in a bubble as UVA students who were very many ways systematically isolated from the rest of the community.

[00:17:44] **MEHDY** In some ways, our interviews with Habib and Majed were more than just learning about their stories, but trying to understand how a group of people who have seemingly been invisible in this town matter now more than ever.

[00:18:04] **HABIB** Charlottesville, Virginia, is home to the author of one of the great documents in human history.

[00:18:10] **HABIB** Charlottesville is also home to a defining moment for this nation in the last few years. It was there in August of twenty seventeen, we saw a Klansman and white supremacists and neo-Nazis come out in the open and they were met by a courageous group of Americans in a violent clash in Syria. And a brave young woman lost her life.

[00:18:38] **MAJED** The Downtown area was just so busy, packed with police squads, soldiers, and they couldn't even save save that that girl who died.

[00:18:49] **MAJED** Yeah, it was it was sad. It was it was really sad. I mean, it kind of changed everything about the city.

[00:18:55] **MAJED** You know, it it was. Yeah, I was it was very different. You can call it terrorism. You can call it murder. You can call it whatever you want.

[00:19:05] **MAJED** You know, Charles, we went from one of the safest place in Virginia to a dangerous place,

[00:19:13] **HABIB** and in a way you had a group on one side that was bad and you had a group on the other side that was also very violent. And nobody wants to say that. But I'll say it right now, I think there's blame on both sides, and I have no doubt about it. And you don't have any doubt about it either.

[00:19:27] **MAJED** And it was it was all over the news. A lot of people heard, even even when I was working part time as a driver, I had to pick up people from the airport. They used to always tell me, hey, I was it was it safe people to see? It was on the news and they always believed us, was on the news. Yes. Yes. It was dangerous at that moment. And maybe for a little while. Yes, a lot of people felt unsafe, you know, just UVA student, Muslim people, just people going to work back and forth. Of course, they felt unsafe.

[00:19:55] **MAJED** But this is really not not not a dangerous place like anymore. I mean, the police say they kept it, kept it well, well, well safe.

[00:20:06] **MAJED** But after that, the the middle the people who works at the masjid (mosque) recommended that, hey, this has happened to this girl, maybe will have to one of us. So why don't we get a security role when we don't go? We are police from the city. Maybe they will like every event. I don't know if you guys know what it's like during Ramadan. So there was always a police car parked right in front of the door on the side just to kind of, you know, let people I mean, the fear is there. I can see it

because, you know, after that it changed a lot of people's, you know, perspective on, hey, am I going to go to the mosque safely? Is there anything going to happen to us? And it can affect a lot of people's life in a way, mentally, mentally. So, yeah.

[00:20:58] **MEHDY** When we asked Habib about the tragic events of August 11th and 12th, he preferred not to speak on the matter because of the politics surrounding the situation, August 11th itself has become so politically charged. It's been so relevant that we consider almost every aspect of it, except for a very important aspect. And that's how it's affected the lives of the people that live in Charlottesville. We sort of taken the people of Charlottesville out of the equation in some ways.

[00:21:30] **ABDULLAH** When Mehdy and I started this project, we thought that by showing the stories of refugees, we would almost counter the history we've had with essentially the far right after August 11th and 12th.

[00:21:45] **ABDULLAH** But through our journey, I think both of us also realize that these people have been here for much longer than just twenty seventeen. They've been here much longer than Mehdy and I and most UVA students, and they're going to be here for a long time.

[00:22:02] **ABDULLAH** There's a lot of people here who we've kind of forgotten about.

[00:22:07] **ABDULLAH** And in some ways we wanted to just show that by talking to them, we can learn and re-examine how we look at Charlottesville. Habiba Madjid come from backgrounds that are very different from most people. They've grown up in very, very dangerous situations and war zones, and they've made it even though some tragic stuff has taken place in their original homes. And then in Charlottesville, they continue to stay positive and all they do is they encourage everyone to come. Just talk to them.

[00:22:42] **HABIB** First of all, just go out and talk to people.

[00:22:46] **HABIB** That's how you break barriers. You know, you can read a book or you can read thousands of books.

[00:22:54] **HABIB** But this is never going to be the same as, you know, just getting to know a person talking.

[00:23:03] **ABDULLAH** They want people to learn that by keeping a very open and in some ways a very optimistic mind, despite all these difficulties were handed. And believe me, the difficulties that were handed in some ways pale in comparison to some of the people in this town.

[00:23:20] **ABDULLAH** And those difficulties are what shape Habib and Majed, and that's what keeps them going.