

**U.18 Long Civil Rights Movement:
Heirs to a Fighting Tradition**

**Interview U-0587
Khalilah Sabra
October 15 2007**

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FIELD NOTES- Khalilah Sabra

Interviewee: Khalilah Sabra

Interviewer(s): Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Isabell Moore and Manju Rajendran

Interview date: October 15, 2007

Location: Muslim American Society Office, 901 Jones Franklin Rd, Raleigh, NC

Length: 63 minutes

HEIRS TO A FIGHTING TRADITION: Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists is a multi-phased oral history project which explores the stories and traditions of social justice activism in North Carolina through in-depth interviews with highly respected activists and organizers. Selected for the integrity and high level of skill in their work dedicated to social justice, the interviewees represent a diversity of age, gender, and ethnicity. These narratives capture the richness of a set of activists with powerful perspectives on social justice and similar visions of the common good. These are tales of transition and transformation, sea change and burnout, organizing successes and heart wrenching defeats. These are the stories of the Movement. This collection will be a valuable addition to the modest amount of literature about contemporary social justice activism in the South.

THE INTERVIEWEE: Khalilah Sabra is a long time community activist and the Director of the Muslim American Society Freedom North Carolina chapter. Ms. Sabra completed her undergraduate studies at California State University and graduate studies at UCLA. She is active in education, media, and civil rights issues.

DISCUSSION OF INTERVIEW: This interview is different than the other interviews conducted for the Heirs collection so far. Manju Rajendran, who served as the Heirs Project's outreach coordinator at the time of this interview, approached Bridgette Burge and asked if the Heirs Project would support interviewing Khalilah. Manju, Isabell and Alexis all three were present and used notes and content from the interview for their personal research or project purposes.

The style is different in that it doesn't chronicle Khalilah's life history in a similar timeline from birth to date as do the other interviews. Also, the three interviewers did not take field notes or provide biographical data or a release form. Bridgette edited the interview, indexed it and sought Khalilah's approval for the bio, transcript, index and Heirs Project's use of the interview in October 2008, a year after the interview was conducted.

TRANSCRIPT—KHALILAH SABRA

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START OF INTERVIEW

KHALILAH SABRA: I'm going to California during Thanksgiving for a conference and probably that's the first time I'll see the ocean. I have to go to California to see the ocean because I haven't. My husband tried to drive there one day and I think he went in the opposite direction. We kept driving and driving and driving. He was looking at the map. He doesn't know how to read maps. After like two and half-hours, I said, "If you're not near it now, you're not going to be near it." We stopped someplace and they go, "No, the ocean is way over there." I said, "Oh, forget it."

ISABELL MOORE: My grandmother passed away a few months ago and for some reason ever since that happened, I've just wanted to get to the ocean. I just felt like I really needed to—

KS: Listen to the waves.

IM: And this was the first time I was able to. So it was really awesome. It was a good place for that kind of stuff.

KS: It is.

IM: Well, are we recording?

MANJU RAJENDRAN: We are.

IM: Alright, cool. Well, we have some questions, but it can kind of go in whatever direction that it needs to go. So maybe if you want to just start by telling us a little about MAS and your work here.

KS: MAS is the Muslim American Society and it consists of outreach, which basically outreach deals with humanitarian services, like we recently concluded our meat drive where we passed out meat to underprivileged people. Basically we did something different. We didn't want to take to like the Second Harvest [Food Bank that provides emergency food to community members in need], even though we contributed there; we wanted to take it directly to the people. So we went to some of the more tested areas of Raleigh and people actually lined up for meat and for canned food goods and things like that. We had build-a-backpack program and what we do is order all these backpacks and put crayons, pencils, and teachers give the kids those lists before school starts. Even though it's public free education, to fill that backpack costs approximately about seventy-five dollars each. So we decided to build backpacks and did mass outreach all across the United States, we typically do the same program, and then we went and we delivered the backpacks to certain schools where we knew that there are a lot of minority children and children who are in difficult situations.

Now I help out with outreach, but basically my job is with Freedom Foundation [Muslim American Society Freedom Foundation's mission is to build an integrated empowerment process for the American Muslim community through civic education, participation, community outreach, and coalition building; to forge positive relationships with other institutions outside of our community, that will ensure and facilitate the protection of civil rights and liberties for American Muslims and all Americans] and some of the things

that I've dealt with in the years, with the attorney general's office, Muslim women were systematically asked to either pull their scarves back or to have a third party come in and sign that they're wearing this for religious reasons, as if it's not obvious. She couldn't even sign her own affidavit. She had to have someone else to come in with her. So basically if she didn't bring someone with her, she was not allowed to get her driver's license. After discussing the matter several matters with the attorney general's office, they changed the policy because I said, "If you're going to do that, then someone with wigs, they have to drag her back." The Sikhs also appreciated the effort and other people that wear religious headdresses. They did change the policy and now it's state law in North Carolina that they can't do that and that just her face can be shown and that she doesn't have to have a third-party witness for her that it's a matter of religion.

MR: Congratulations.

KS: Thank you. Then the other thing is that even though according to the Constitution, you have the right to pray, some of the schools were not open to allowing the children to be involved in any spiritual practices during lunch. We thought that they should be accommodated whether they're Muslim, whether they're Jews, whether they're Christians, whether they're Transcendental Meditators. If they want to do this and it's their free time, why shouldn't they be allowed to do it? I think this society has gone way too far away from spiritual reflection and our children and the society are suffering because of it. If they have no spiritual basis, it's hard to develop a humanitarian basis, and schools should actually be encouraging this behavior. It makes it more functional for the students to get along and for the teachers to be able to go about their job as teaching instead of spending part of their time policing students. They weren't trained to police students; they were put there to

teach. But it's the biased education system that allows for us to try to cover spiritual issues and social and humanitarian development in the spirit of children. I think that's a major problem in this country. We need to be able to cultivate those relationships while they're still innocent so that when they grow up, they won't have to go through some of the trials and tribulation that Americans are still going through, even though I think that to a large extent, they refuse to recognize the situations that they thought had dissolved in the [19] 60s and 70s are really still here. I don't think they completely went away and if you don't destroy something at the roots, it can grow again.

What else is Freedom Foundation doing? We're also trying to, at the same time, nurture foreign-born Muslims to become involved in activism in the United States. If you want to be part of the melting pot, you have to be inside of it and not on the perimeter, not be on the outside looking in. If you want to define yourself, then you have to be part of those who are creating the definition. 9-11 taught Muslims, if nothing more, that they had failed to establish who they are and what they really believed. So the majority of American people depended on the definition given by people like Osama bin Laden [a member of the prominent Saudi bin Laden family and the founder of the jihadist organization Al-Qaeda; claimed responsibility for the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001] the religious right, who don't understand Muslims or who feel like there's something inherently evil about Islam. But you cannot really blame them for that if you're not speaking out on your own behalf.

MR: So does that feel like the tug and pull in terms of how one gets to define oneself as a Muslim in this society? Either people see you in terms of what the right wing is viewing, the fundamental right wing, or the Islamic fundamentalists?

KS: As soon as anyone hears the term “Islamicist,” they become intimidated, bothered. Well, if you look at what an Islamicist is, Islam means peace and basically the majority of Muslims are peaceful people that are trying to coexist in this society. But when you look at things through a narrow view instead of a broader one, you’re going to come up with very biased definitions and conclusions made by people who don’t really know Muslims at all and really they don’t understand Islam. So our job is to educate Americans by showing them not just who we are with words, but by our actions and that means that we have to be activists, we have to involve ourselves in dialogue, we have to communicate to people what Islam really is. And Islam never said, according to the Koran and the Practice of the Prophet, Muslims were never allowed to sideline themselves, but to go amongst the people and not attempt to convert the people, but to educate the people about our value system and our value system does not really go against the value systems of Christians, religious Christians, and religious Jews, or just spiritual people. You believe that you should treat others like you would want to be treated yourself. If you’re not doing that, then you put yourself in a very hypocritical zone. Every man deserves respect and to be judged on the basis of his character. It doesn’t matter whether he’s Muslim or not. You judge a person on his character and relate to him on that basis.

We were remiss. We were kind of in a hibernation mode in the masjids, or in the mosque, and that was wrong.

MR: After September eleventh?

KS: Before September eleventh. Now MAS, Muslim American Society, started before September eleventh, but September eleventh simply created a bigger urgency to advance our cause, to spread to more states, to affect more Islamic centers, to enter into a

dialogue with more Islamic organizations, to recruit people to participate in activist programs or humanitarian programs like NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, a civil rights organization for ethnic minorities in the United States], like justice organizations, ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union, a national organization that advocates for individual rights through litigation, legislation and education], groups like Stop Torture [NC Stop Torture Now, a grassroots coalition founded in 2005 whose aim is to stop torture everywhere and to end North Carolina's central role in the acceleration and escalation of U.S. torture programs guided by President George W. Bush's Administration], Black Workers for Justice [fights local battles in the South in defense of workers' rights and the Black community] to involve ourselves with the problems in the educational system.

Here in North Carolina, you still see what fifty years after *Brown v. the Board of Education*, why are those children in Hope County not getting the same financial backing as the children up in Preston? Because their parents don't live in the same kind of houses? That's not fair. All of us have a right to equal access to education. And Hope County, they've been trying this case for how many years? Most of the kids that were initially connected to that case, they're all grown up. You can't give them back their childhood. You cannot supply them with everything that has been taken away from them. Yet when they grow up in an adverse situation and they react to it, we're quick to punish them. We'd rather spend funds at that end of the spectrum instead of giving them what they had a natural right to have from the very beginning. So my job is to educate Muslims to involve themselves into social situations that are just not going to uplift Muslims, but uplift the society regardless of--. Those children in Hope County are all of our children and they have a right on all of us as Americans, as adults, as human beings, to fight on their behalf. But at the same time, people just don't

become activists overnight. There has to be a nurturing process, especially if they come from societies where they have been taught not to say anything, not to address the dictator, not to involve themselves in the political system. In many countries like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, I think recently Kuwait allowed some women to vote, but the majority of the women in some of the Middle Eastern countries do not have the vote, yet they are the majority of people in these countries. In Saudi Arabia, they're not able to even drive, so how are they going to affect policy? So when they come here, they have to be reprogrammed, so to speak, to speak out. Now they can speak out better from here than they can speak from there sometimes, but in order to speak, you have to open up your mouth first.

MR: So is that one of the biggest challenges you face—

KS: Yes.

MR: As a Muslim-American organizer trying to—

KS: To culturally deprogram, what we call it. Yeah, that's a major problem.

MR: What are some of the other challenges?

KS: In every religious group, like I said, we still, there are so many problems in America in the 50s, 60s, and 70s that Americans didn't want to look back. Americans don't want to admit that we still have a problem with equality and justice with regards to race. You can convert to Islam, but to a large extent in a foreign-dominated community, you're still on the outside looking in. It's like everybody else is invited for dinner; you're only invited for tea. You feel that and it's across the United States. I've been to so many mosques across the United States and with very few exceptions, you'll see American converts on the side and even though they've been through these social movements and situations, they don't know

how to address religious rights and so as a result, you'll find that many of the councils and those who develop the programs for the Islamic organizations are not Americans.

It's hard to give what you don't have. So at the same time, we have to work for the rights of people outside the community and try to establish rights for people in the community and that includes the rights of women too, because you have women that come from situations where they have been completely oppressed, women who didn't even choose their spouses, and they're not encouraged and they're not inclined to speak up on their behalf. But sometimes they will find themselves in appalling situations, but they won't say anything. So we're trying to introduce them to a society where it's okay to speak out against domestic abuse, it's okay to speak out if your children are living in fear from verbal abuse or being harmed, it's okay to speak out if your child's teacher at school is practicing some type of discrimination. You don't have to be silent anymore and we'll help you, we'll speak with you. What we're doing now is developing a program which will help women to do that, which will teach them to be able to use a computer, apply for a job, skills that will make them feel empowered. Even if they don't use it, they'll feel empowered to do something for themselves and also in order not to destroy the family structure. Bryan Proffitt is part of the group Men Against—

MR: Men Against Rape Culture [a North Carolina grassroots organization committed to building the struggle against sexual violence].

KS: Yeah, and also he was doing programs against domestic violence and I wanted to align myself with him so that he could bring in people who have experienced this sort of situation. He knows men who have actually been abusers that have turned their lives around and become able to help their families and not be destructive to the family itself. So the first

thing is helping each person to identify their rights. As long as you don't recognize your rights, you subject yourself to being oppressed. But I do think in this society, there are so many things that Muslims are disconnected with and I'm uncomfortable with that. I want them to become connected with the situations, the difficult treatment that the Latinos have to live with everyday working in this country. I want them to become familiarized that there are black children—that Martin Luther King's [(January 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968) an African American clergyman, activist and prominent leader in the American civil rights movement] dream has not become fully realized, okay. His dream has only been, how can you put it? We woke up from that dream way too soon, that we didn't have a chance to complete it. I want them to realize that women are to be treated equal to men and that Islam dictates that there are to be treated with kindness in marriage, kindness in divorce. So you deal with them with kindness or you leave the situation. I want them to realize that other women need our help and that if your neighbor is being abused that you have a responsibility to speak up. Don't stand there and listen to the screams. No one should have to. If you're a neighbor, if you're part of the culture of humanity, you're going to report that a crime is being done. I want them just to speak, to voice. I want them to participate in the electoral process. Maybe you're not going to get everything that you're asking for, but if you don't even asked, then guaranteed you're not going to get anything.

I want to introduce the two different cultures where they learn to cohabitate together in an environment of peace, love, and true affection, not the artificial kind, but real affection. That's not just between Muslim and Muslim, but Muslim and Christian, and Muslim and Hindu, and Muslim and Jew. Obviously we should be able to see now that we're in this boat together. If we don't fight the struggles of the day together, then we're all going to sink.

Changes can only come by the masses of the people coordinating their effort to change the system and we can do that. We certainly have the numbers. Why would we, all these millions of millions of people, allow our country to do things that are against our better judgment, our sense of justice, and our need for peace? Why would we subject our children to suffer because they're willing to spend billions of dollars on weapons instead of feed kids. Why would we allow our children to go without health care so that we use money to bury dead soldiers? Why would people elect people to do that?

MR: Are there moments when you've been surprised by how much your fellow Muslims in North Carolina have risen to the occasion on issues like that, moments where you've been like, "Wow, we're really together on this?"

KS: Yeah. At first when national outreach made it very clear that our goal was just not to provide outreach services for Muslims, but non-Muslims, I wondered how that would go over with the Muslim communities, but it's gone over very well. We get so many donations and we try to make videos and if they're not going to come out and see that side of life, then we've got to take the information to them because any of us could be in that situation but by the grace of God. They have been outstanding in their contributions and the programs have become very successful. In Iowa, they've established the Iowa Humanitarian Corps, coordinated their efforts with another organization to provide health care, very, very low monetary health care. They get good services, but at a fraction of the cost. And they're opening up clinics where people that cannot afford anything can go in there, I think that one is in Iowa too, where someone can go in and get shots for their children, get treated for infections and colds, and they don't have to pay anything. And a lot of non-Muslims are utilizing the services and this is a good thing because nothing can progress without true

interaction. If we don't interact, I don't know who you are, you don't know who I am, and we become distant; our distance is permanent. So this is the outreach programs have been very good. Freedom Foundation works well because we're out there with everybody, you know what I mean? Just like how did I meet you guys? It was through the quest for civil rights and for equal opportunity and for livable wage and for justice. We've all got to take that stand together and because of our common interests and our dialogue, we've become friends, we know each other, and we know that we can trust each other. When I was stuck in Lebanon, I read that you sent out the email asking for help on my behalf and I want to thank you for that now. That's what happens when you get to know people. You develop relationships that you would have never, ever benefited or had access to if you hadn't made that connection. So it's about making a connection.

MR: Do you want it to put it on pause? Do you need to address this person?

KS: No.

IM: Can you talk a little bit about how you got involved, what your path to activism was, and what your path to Islam was?

KS: Well, I became Muslim in high school. In a way, I was just searching and I met some Muslims in the mall and they convinced me to come to the mosque and I did. I felt very comfortable with the ideology and I converted. Through the process of converting and after my conversion, I came into contact with really, really, good, knowledgeable Muslims. At that time, there were a lot of Muslims students coming here to be educated and eventually they would return home, but they were activists in their own right. They came from diverse backgrounds, they came from oppressed governments, but these were the kind of people that spoke out. I began to learn about the situation of the Occupied Territories and it kind of

nurtured a sense of wanting to do something to create change and then I was able to go to Afghanistan and work in a refugee camp. During that time, after I came back, I went to UCLA and I studied paralegal studies and through paralegals, I came into contact with many immigrants and it is very difficult to remain disconnected from what they suffer in the society and their fears about being forced out of the society when they know that if they go home, that there's nothing there for them. I think it's been kind of a nurturing and there was a time where I kind of gave up on a lot. Nothing's changing, nothing's going to happen. But then if you give up, then the other side wins. Coming to North Carolina, I was surprised when I came to North Carolina. I saw so much activism. No one in California would believe it.

(laughter)

IM: We've never heard that from people.

KS: The only thing I knew about the South was that movie *Mississippi Burning* and I was sure I was going to be driving down a dark street at night and somebody was going to shoot at me. But I was shocked when I came here and saw all the groups and the collective activities and the things that they were standing up for and it was amazing. And I said, "Shame on me. It's time to get more involved." Then I met the head of outreach here, his name is Iyad Hindi, and he said, "What can you do?" And he really encouraged me to get active. He talked to me about mass ideology. He talked to me about the need to push ourselves to interact in the society and become a part of it, not sitting back, taking anything for granted. He spends most of his working hours doing just that. Then when Freedom Foundation wanted to open up the office here, yeah, I thought that I could do it. I wanted the

challenge and that's how I began here and it's been really rewarding. I've met really good people.

I've been able to go to Palestine and visit the Occupied Territories and see their situation. In fact, when I went, I was with Martin Luther King III and he was talking about realizing the dream and we met with Israelis and with Palestinians and heard the different stories and saw the situation there. And then there were congressmen with us who also changed their minds about the situation there, realized that the aid that the United States was giving to Israel was really harming the Palestinians. Then with Jimmy Carter's book, it really opened up the subject matter a lot. So we're working not just on the political scenario here, but how it affects those in the Middle East too. And I think what it does, it gives the Muslims here more confidence that they can be Americans and still keep their religious beliefs and integrity and still be considerate about the needs of their families in the Middle East. It doesn't mean they're not patriotic. It just means that they want a clear, accurate picture of what's going on and a situation where America is propagating justice instead of apartheid.

So little by little, I think I'm still in the process of growing and developing in this job. I know that I have a long way to go, but there's so many things that I'd like to see happen, the different programs. I'd like to get more Muslims involved locally in local politics as far as the school board is because like I said in the beginning, I do think that our children need to be more spiritually in tune to themselves and to nurture the innocence that they're naturally born with to cooperate with one each other, to be kind with each other, to recognize each other's differences. And if we can do this and we really have achieved and given respect to those concepts, multiculturalism and melting pot, if not, if we burn our children out, if we

teach them hostility instead of peace, then we've defeated and we've set up another generation for war and I don't think that's what we want to do.

MR: In terms of not setting up another generation for war, I know that you have an amazing track record of bringing things to the Masjid that people are not used to seeing in Masjids, like the counter-recruitment panel where you invited a group of us to come, young people, who had just attended this Not Your Soldier camp. Are there other things in that vein that have proved successful in terms of organizing within the Masjid? We're hoping that folks will be reading this across the country and they'll be getting good ideas about stuff they can do.

KS: Well, it used to be, there's a term now, Islamicphobia, where amongst Muslims, there was this thing called Jewishphobia. What we're doing now is you're going to find people with common values regardless of what their religious backgrounds are and people that stand for justice. So now we want to bring Jews to the Masjid and I want to take it further. Just don't invite them to the Masjid; invite them to your home. Sit down and break bread and drink the cup of tea, interact, become friends. From bringing different people to the Masjid, different groups, different religious groups, different political backgrounds, we had an interfaith camp in Greensboro and we stayed the weekend together and we talked about different issues.

We've had lots of ACLU presentations against racial profiling and now we're embarking on the taser project. We're inviting Rachel Corrie's [a 23 year old peace activist who was killed on March 16, 2003 when she was crushed by a bulldozer on the Gaza Strip while protesting the demolition of Palestinian family homes] family to come to the—we have an office actually in Charlotte too, huge center there. We want her parents to come there to

give a talk so that there's that human exchange. She was there fighting on behalf of people that she didn't have to be there. She made a choice to fight for freedom and she lost her life in doing so and I think that it would be cruel to not recognize her sacrifice and not recognize the sacrifice of her family. So I think this type of interaction will be productive. We're showing films like *Occupation 101* and we're actually planning the spring concert, a Canadian group that sings Palestinian songs about occupation. So we're planning on lots of programs. November tenth, we've have an "Exercise your Voice." It's like a town hall meeting and we've invited Keith Ellison. He's the first Muslim congressman from Virginia. We invited Walter [E.] Fauntroy, [(1963 -) civil rights activist and pastor] he co-authored a Civil Rights bill, Jamil Johnson, a congressional chief of staff. November tenth at Cary Senior Center, they'll all be there and a host of others and they've come there to teach, to advocate to Muslim population to vote. Sometimes it's not who you're voting for, but what you're voting against. Maybe if we had voted for the lesser of the evils, we wouldn't have George Bush as our president today. Now I'm not saying there is anything evil about—I can even remember his name now.

MR: Al Gore? [Albert Arnold Gore, Jr. (born March 31, 1948), an American environmental activist, author, businessperson, former politician, Nobel Prize winner, Oscar winner, and former journalist. He served as the forty-fifth Vice President of the United States from 1993 to 2001 under President Bill Clinton.]

KS: No, not Al Gore, the other one.

MR: Oh, John Kerry. [John Forbes Kerry (born December 11, 1943), United States Senator from Massachusetts and Presidential nominee of the Democratic Party defeated by

34 electoral votes in the 2004 presidential election by the Republican incumbent President George W. Bush]

KS: Yeah, John Kerry. But he didn't have the confidence of the people because his voice to the people was sort of limited. His wife [known as "Tipper", birth name Mary Elizabeth Aitcheson Gore (born August 19, 1948)] actually had a stronger voice than him. To me, she was much more impressionable. I would have voted for her in the minute. She knew how to stand her ground. He was too wishy-washy, so people ended up voting for George Bush, I think; we'll never really know. We want them to participate, do something. Maybe it's going to happen that the masses of the people are going to have to create a third party based on ethics and their conscience and we have the ability to put a third party into the White House. I think that people think that they have to vote either/or and that's how come Ralph Nader [third party candidate, consumer and human rights activist] has really never had his chance to do what he wants to do. At the same time, we damage our own chances of survival. Global warming has to be important to everybody. The environment is significant to every living thing and every living human being. So we want to teach them that politics goes beyond one man and one political party; it becomes the people's voice. And it's the least thing you can do. It takes you about ten minutes. You maybe have to stand in line for about five or ten minutes, but you get up there and you do your thing and go home. At least you've done something, but doing nothing—

MR: What's the taser project?

KS: Well, the ACLU, what they're doing is gathering statistics actually on who tasers are being used on. It looks as if that people that are being tasered are poor and minorities. You're not going to catch too many people being tasered in Beverly Hills or in the really

popular areas of New York City, but if you go to the minority areas in different states, who's getting tasered? I was shocked that recently there was an incident where a pregnant woman, she was just trying to get up and the officer kept using his taser gun to make her get down, but I think she was trying to turn to protect the baby. From what I understand, the baby wasn't injured, but it's becoming common use, kind of, I guess, the weapon of choice. But those tasers can do a lot of damage and the extent of the damage is not known. And if it's being selective, if they're using taser guns in selected areas, then the people need to be made aware of that fact and need to act on it.

As far as the racial profiling, if more people are getting stopped because of their ethnicity, it's something that we need to deal with, especially in North Carolina now that most of the sheriff departments are now deputized as ICE, Homeland Security agents, and they can literally stop someone for going through a stop sign and then the next thing they know, they're locked up being forced to sign voluntary deportation orders and that's not right, with no counsel, no family notification of where they are or how long they're going to be there. There's still something called the Constitution and it's not going beyond being a piece of paper; it's being used and abused by the administration. But the people have got to stand up and say, "We insist on having our constitutional rights and one man doesn't have the right to take it away, he doesn't have the right to elect a Supreme Court that's going to help him to do that." The Supreme Court have become the puppets of George Bush, he holds them on a string, and they're not a decisive factor in American rights. They're allowing the abuse to continue, whether it's here or Guantanamo Bay [Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp, a controversial United States detention center operated by Joint Task Force Guantanamo since 2002 in Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, which is on the shore of Guantánamo Bay,

Cuba]. So I think we're at a crossroads here, but the only way to get beyond it constructively is for all of us to put our resources together and stage a mass movement that guarantees our rights, our rights as human beings and as citizens.

IM: Can you talk a little, with all the different work that you're doing, it sounds like you're really busy with all of it. How do you stay grounded and stay centered and make it sustainable and try to stay healthy? And how does your faith and spirituality play into that or not play into that? What do you do?

KS: Well, I think I learned a long time ago that you have to depend on a higher power giving you that spiritual rejuvenation. If you depend on people, you might get let down. You have to look at the cause, instead of the people participating in the cause. I have to judge Islam by the Book, by the Koran, instead of by the behavior of people, because if you do that, you subject yourself to being let down. Like for example, when Osama bin Laden surfaced again, I knew that that would create a problem for Muslims. We wanted him to just disappear because his role is to divide Muslims from other people and to label people as enemies and we're fighting against that; that goes against all our work.

So sometimes that can be disheartening and especially when you go outside in the scarf and people will say things or people will spit or people will holler or something like that. You say, "Oh wow, I'm going to move." But then you say, "It's easy to walk away. But if we all walk away, there's nobody left to take a stand." And so what I do is I just go home, get over my anger and my grief, and then we go back to the job of doing what we have to do and we are constantly in pursuit of people, recruiting people to work in Freedom Foundation. We tell them from the get-go that we're all in this together, that if you're about hiding in the closet, that Freedom Foundation isn't for you. You have to step out, you have to put yourself

with the people and in place of the people. Look at yourself. Look at where you're going. You want to help them transcend where they're at and go in the direction that you want to be going in. This means a decent, hospitable environment for everybody and we don't want them to be inhibited by their scarves. There are people that have suffered much worse than us and we're all obligated to help out. So you just have to put yourself back on task, get over it, and keep on going.

IM: Can you talk a little bit about your daily religious and spiritual practices and then how you might use those to find that strength to keep going?

KS: About four years ago, a friend of mine gave my daughter a little book. It's a little book with little supplications in it and if you see this book, it's real raggedy now and dirty around the edges because I always, I just keep reading it. Then sometimes I just, prior to Islam, I started Transcendental Meditation. In the past few months, I've gone back to just meditating, just quietly meditating, reminding myself, saying spiritual words, reciting the Koran, reminding myself of all the good people that I've come into contact with and seeing that there isn't just hardship in this work, but there's joy too because you really meet people that you would have never expected to meet and you hear ideas you would have never expected would come from the mouths of people that think just like you, that are just like you, and want the same goals. And that's always a kind of rejuvenation. It's a rejuvenation when you go to a rally and you see soldiers come up who are opposed to the war and want peace. It's a rejuvenation when you see those old grandmothers. Now if they can get out of their beds with their arthritis and come and march for freedom, then none of us have an excuse.

(laughter)

KS: You see the soldiers that have been crippled, that are blind, and you know that if you don't say something, they'll be more people that will have to suffer and the government is never going to give them the recognition or the recovery that they deserve. Look at the Vietnam veterans. So that's an incentive and also the national in Washington, DC, every day I get a support call: "So, what do you plan today and how can we help you? These are the issues that we need to look at." We have meetings and we have structured meetings. We will be meeting in the first week of November just to develop projects and ideas.

And actually, most of the Freedom Foundation directors across the United States are women and that helps; yeah, they're mostly women. So MAS, I think the one thing I can say about Muslim American Society is revolutionary when it comes to putting women in executive positions. In chapters all across America, you see women on the leadership councils, you see women as directors, you see women working the legal clinics—and the legal clinics is another project that's going to be expanded throughout all the Freedom Foundations across America—you see women lecturers at the annual conferences. So it's gone beyond the spiritual or the mosque norms. In fact, the head of Muslim American Society, his name is (**sounds like Suhel Ganooshi**), he tells the men, "Not only should you support your wives, but you need to be in the kitchen helping to make the dinner for the children. You need to be able to allow her the ability to do what she has to do." He actively recruits and puts women in these positions and gives them the support and the motivation and the training to do the tasks that need to be done in America. So it's working out really good. We have good support, really good support.

MR: Do you want to ask a question, Alexis?

AG: No, I'm just taking notes and taking notes and taking notes. They have been really good questions and really inspiring responses.

IM: I was going to ask you earlier, Khalilah, you said something about Islamophobia. Do you feel like Islamophobia is an issue within progressive organizations outside of the Muslim community? Have you had any issues within progressive organizations of people not understanding or acting in ways that mirror the larger society's issues?

KS: In North Carolina, maybe one, but I think the majority of the organizations are more open-minded than that and they're motivated toward cultivating good, solid relationships with Muslims. They would like to see more Muslims attend. They welcome their contributions to the organizations. Like North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition, [a statewide, movement-building coalition that worked for an end to imperialist wars in the Middle East and for social and economic justice] different organizations, Tikkun [a network of spiritual activists], I think that they welcome Muslims. I think that they still have a lot to learn about Muslim ideology and the thought processes and about the religious customs, but I think that there is a genuine, they're willing to give it a good go, that their sincerity is authentic.

I think sometimes because as Americans, we are sensitive toward those soldiers that go to war, that there is a tendency with some organizations to ignore the other victims of the war, like the situation with the Iraqis. I don't think that Americans would be so conditioned to, they develop an emotional immunity to what's going on with the people with regard to the rapes, with regard to what looks like murder, people just shot in the head. How is it a group of people can be lined up and shot in the head? I don't think that it's happening necessarily from Iraqis that are fighting other Iraqis. There is certainly enough evidence that has been

shown that there are soldiers that are participating in these murders and they come here and they get a light sentence, which creates hostilities in the Middle East and people want payback. I think that the government has to address this issue. But what was the question exactly?

IM: You're definitely getting at it. It sounds like what you're saying, that in some of the antiwar organizations are so focused on supporting the soldiers—

KS: Yeah, they're ignoring these points, right. Like Abu Ghraib prison [Also known as Baghdad Correctional Facility. In 2004, advocates and victims gave accounts of abuse, torture, sodomy and homicide of prisoners held in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq], they show the pictures of the crimes against the men, but Congressman Price [David Eugene Price (born August 17, 1940), a professor and Democratic member of the United States House of Representatives, representing the 4th district of North Carolina] told us that there were pictures about women being sexually abused; those pictures weren't shown. And I'm a little bit intolerant, as we were discussing earlier, about rape being used as a tool of war. This issue has never been properly addressed, whether it's in Darfur, whether it's in Iraq, even though it was in Bosnia. In every war, women are commonly used to punish the competitor. Soldiers rape the wives of whoever they're fighting against and at the end of the war, people are brought up on war crimes, but never for the rapes of women or for the mutilation of children. It just shows basic sexism. Why wouldn't you acknowledge, why wouldn't you make someone accountable for crimes so horrible? When three-, four-, and five-year-olds are being raped by grown men, this is pathological. Why would you ignore something like that? How do you think these people will grow up to live? How do you think they will psychologically survive that type of torment if the governments, all of them systematically ignore it? They

want to brush it underneath the carpet: “Well, the war is over. So we don’t want to deal with that issue.”

But those women and children will have to deal with those issues for the rest of their lives and there was no healing for the women of Bosnia. So many of those women, they gave birth because abortion is typically forbidden in Islam. They gave birth to the babies of their enemies. Of course, they kept these children and they loved these children, but at the same time, they will be forever stained in their society for having the baby of a Serb. It will affect her entire life because chances are, she will never be able to be married.

Same thing with Darfur. Even though the women have nothing to do with the crime of rape, nothing to do with their victimization, they will be forever stained because they will be a constant reminder of having been with the enemy or having been used by the enemy. And I think there comes a time when someone has to pay for these crimes. Now I know the Sudanese government has aided and abetted the genocide, but so have soldiers from Chad and the surrounding countries. All these men have come from these different tribes, these different countries, and they created havoc in the lives of these women. They have raped them. There are documents of children from three to women eighty-nine years old. Now that’s not sexual passion; that is a crime of violence, criminal, psychotic violence. Yet nobody does anything, nobody does anything, unless we can get a movie star to come say, “Hey, this is wrong.” That should not be a tool to raise the consciousness of the people. It’s the act itself that should make the people scream, “Stop, this cannot continue.” But if our president, our vice president, and our leaders in Congress don’t address this issue, then who will? I think that a real women’s movement with the support of men has to evolve saying that this is a crime that can no longer go unnoticed. It’s wrong.

IM: I've told you I'm studying women and gender studies now and a lot of what we're talking about is how the traditional women's movement in the United States, a mostly white women's movement, sees these issues as separate or sees them as obligated to go save people from other cultures or from other countries. Do you see any of that playing out in movements here or ways that people address the issues specifically that affect Muslim women?

KS: I think that it's a good thing to want to export your humanity, but I think that there is a lot that has to be done here with regard to the women's movement. When a woman can work for a company and she's not being paid the same as a man, there's something wrong. When a woman has to look a certain way and dress a certain way just to be employable, there's something wrong with the ideology of that company. When women are subject to all kinds of sexual abuse and verbal abuse from management or from their managers, there's something wrong. These issues have never been properly addressed in the court system and women feel like that they have to cater to the people that hire them. They're not treated with the same dignity and respect as a man and that's wrong. I think by focusing on other countries, we have a tendency to ignore the problems that exist in our country. You have the right to follow your path and to be able to achieve your dreams without compromising your body or the way that you think. And compromising your body doesn't mean being forced to sleep with someone, but to have to dress a certain a way, or to have to smell, to wear a certain kind of perfume when you go to work, or to wear a certain kind of heels, or to look sexy. You have to be accepted based on your ability to perform in the job for which you were hired, not to appease the sensitivities of men.

So I think that these situations have to be addressed and it has to be addressed beyond Oprah. In corporations across the United States, women are being psychologically beaten up and to show you the difference in how this country and men in particular perceive women, look at the difference that Martha Stewart [Martha Stewart (born Martha Helen Kostyra; August 3, 1941), an American business magnate, television host, author, and magazine publisher convicted in 2004 of lying to investigators about a stock sale and served five months in prison] was treated compared to the guy from Enron [may be referring to Kenneth Lay, the former Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer or Jeffrey Skilling, former Chief Executive Officer and Chief Operating Officer, who were found guilty of a broad range of financial crimes, including insider trading, the same crime as Stewart]. She was dragged through the mud, but, basically being a friend of George Bush, he was given every type of exemption and privilege until finally he was convicted and then he died. He never had to suffer for anything. I think that was a detour not to look at all the white-collar crime that's actually being committed, the economic abuses in companies that was actually being committed by men at that time.

Women, it's very difficult for them to climb the corporation ladder. They still have to do double the job. They have to make a choice. If you're going to do this, you can't have a family. If you have a family, then you can't do this. Women are afraid to take off too many days even though their kids are sick because they're going to get fired. Men never get fired for taking off to take care of the kids unless they happen to be a single parent. It's a fact that we have diminished the meaning of what family is because we've lost that real pure sense of family values, that we demote what women contribute to the society and what women have to contribute to the family structure. That's not fair. Why should we be held to a different

standard? Some companies thought they were doing something revolutionary a while back when they were giving the guy a month off when his wife had a baby. Aw, gee whiz, isn't that great? He wasn't up there breastfeeding that baby and staying up at night. That's wonderful to assist him in the bonding, but the real bonding comes in that cooperative effort that it takes to raise a child when two parents are allowed the choice and the ability to take off from work and take care of a sick child, to nurture that child. But to make a woman to make a choice that she shouldn't have to make is ethically wrong and it's wrong for a country that claims to be democratic. It's wrong for a country that says, "We give women rights," and then at the same time, we're kind of scraping away those rights one by one, her right to parent, her right to fulfill her economic dreams or her goals in life. She shouldn't have to make that choice and men don't have to make a choice; she shouldn't have to either.

When a woman walks away from families, they charge her in court with—what is it called? Child abuse or not child abuse...

RM: Neglect?

KS: Child neglect or child abuse. But men walk away every day from their families and nobody says anything. In fact, it's hard to find them to even get child support. But if that child is not being fed properly, the hit's on her; it's not on him. Where is the father? She didn't make that baby by herself. She shouldn't be forced to take care of that baby by herself. In fact, one time I was in court and the judge actually told the mother—the father was there—he cannot force the father to spend time with this child, but she's forced to spend time with that child. If she was to leave that child in the house alone, she would be arrested for abuse or for child neglect. Why is he allowed to walk away? Why is he allowed to walk anywhere in the United States and start over without ever being made accountable for the life

of a child that he helped to create? These are the problems in society that have to be dealt with. If you want to divorce your wife, that's fine, but don't divorce your child. You have a responsibility to take care of that child. But until these things are enforced or at least we can educate a man with the ethical ability to perceive his role in the family structure, then we're not going to succeed as a family. These kids out there, they're looking for something to hold on to, something that they can trust, and they don't have it and I think that's the problem.

MR: Do you feel like the teachings of Islam offer that kind of ethical grounding?

KS: Yeah, I think that the teachings of Islam are. Sometimes the cultures in which Islam is evolving don't put the same type of emphasis and responsibility on both parents. But in Islam, it says that men are the maintainers of women and children and Islam is just not talking about economics; they're talking about parenting, they're talking about the education and welfare of that child. That means that a man can pick up a pot and make some rice and meat for a child and feed that child with his hands. It means that he can wipe a runny nose when that child has a cold. It means that he's obligated to sit and read a book with his daughter or his son. It means that he's not allowed to walk away because it's not even until the age of eighteen that a man is supposed to be responsible for his children. Until his daughter leaves the house and marries, he is financially responsible for his daughter and forever emotionally; he is responsible for his child. He should always try to uplift and reinforce and to help his daughter with emotional development throughout his lifetime. You never cease to be a father and a mother, but sometimes I think we limit the responsibility we place on parents. I think Islam encourages, certainly the Book mandates it, the Koran mandates it, but every individual has to assume his responsibility for the words that are included in the Koran. And also technically the Muslims, we have three books, which is the

Koran, the Bible, and the Torah. So we need to draw from all these sources the spiritual guidance that's been put in all of these books and to practice them to the best of our ability and to voice our concern and to look for the welfare of our children and our neighbor's children too, because at the end of the day, we all are our brother's keeper. So if you see someone next door to you, a child that looks lost or looks like they need your help, then it's your responsibility to reach out and help that child. We're trying to get Muslim parents involved in more foster care and the youth into boys' clubs. We're trying to encourage our high school students now. We're working with—you know Rukiya?

MR: Rukiya Dillahunt? [Educator, activist, and organizer with Black Workers for Justice]

KS: Uh huh, an after-school tutoring program to help kids that maybe their parents have to work. It's hard to work ten hours a day and support a child and come home and have the wherewithal to help that child with their homework. If they can get someone to help them after school at a boys' club or even at this center, then we want to be able to do that, to give some relief to that working mother or that working father that has to work twelve hours to day maybe for only seven or eight dollars an hour, which isn't a livable wage. It's very difficult to support a child and fulfill the needs of a child off of that kind of money. These issues affect us all and the Koran says that we have to give help where it's need, regardless of what someone's religious background is.

IM: I guess I have one other question or maybe a couple related questions. In terms of working, it sounds like a lot of your work is in working within your community, but also with trying to build those coalitions. What do you wish that non-Muslim organizations would do to support the work of Muslim organizing differently or better?

KS: I wish that they would go to the mosque and get up close and personal and say, “Why aren’t you here helping us? Why have you chosen to sideline yourself when you’re a part of this country?” I don’t think that we should allow Muslims or anyone else to be in denial about what his role, what his or her role is in the society. If the Muslims don’t come to them, then they should come and say, “What are you going to do? You can’t be in it and not of it. What are you going to do about the conditions of the poor? What are you going to do about the people that have to bring those barbecue pits into their house just to warm up in the winter? What are you going to do about a president that wants to destroy the reasons that you came here?”

And I’d like for them to get to know what authentic Islam is instead of the artificial Islam created by extremists who really, I think, are looking for their own interests and their own—I don’t know what causes them to do the things that they do or harm to people that they hurt, but I want them to turn a deaf ear to these people. Listen to them in matters of security and for self-protection, but listen to the mainstream Muslims and to their voices and you’re going to see that their voices are much different. We may pray five times a day, but we look at television. We like to have fun. We go to the movie theatre. Some of us listen to music. We like to go to a picnic and a barbeque and like to have fun just like everybody else. We’re ordinary people. Don’t let the scarf fool you into creating an idea of us, an idea of Muslims that doesn’t really exist. And don’t judge us by the behavior of countries or cultural values that come from places like Saudi Arabia. We’re just ordinary people.

MR: Thank you so much.

KS: You’re welcome.

IM: Yeah, thank you so much.

MR: This has been an interview with Alexis, Manju, and Isabell with Khalilah Sabra at the MAS office. Thank you.

KS: You're welcome.

IM: Thanks for giving us so much time, Khalilah.

END OF INTERVIEW