

Interviewee: Sanam Zaer  
Interviewers: Jack Klimaj and Alivia Kresowaty  
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Transcribed by Jack Klimaj and Alivia Kresowaty



Overseen by Dr. Christian Williams; Assumption University

**Abstract:** Sanam Zaer was born in 1983 and is a mother to 2 biological children and several foster children and who lives in Shrewsbury Massachusetts. Sanam grew up in Grafton and has lived all over, spending most of her time in Central Massachusetts and California. Sanam attended University of Massachusetts Amherst where she earned her bachelor's in journalism and English and a master's degree in education. Her early love for spending time with children helped her to her current profession as an elementary school tutor and a school administrator. She also describes her role in "A Better Shrewsbury," an online advocacy group to expand resources to serve all populations.

**AK:** Thank you for coming here and being a part of this. So we'll just start with like what is your full name, both maiden name and married name.

**SZ:** My name is Sanam Hakim, and when I got married, I became Sanam Hakim Zaer.

**AK:** Ok and when were you born?

**SZ:** I was born [ ] 1983.

**AK:** And you are married so when were you married?

**SZ:** July 10<sup>th</sup> 2010.

**AK:** And what is the name of your spouse?

**SZ:** His name is Navid.

**AK:** And do you have any children?

**SZ:** I do, yeah, I have two biological children, Talieh and Kimia, and they are currently 8 and 9 and I also have foster children.

**AK:** And what cultures and ethnicities that you identify with?

**SZ:** My family is Iranian so probably Middle Eastern. We don't get a box so I just click other and put Middle Eastern.

**AK:** If you could you tell me about your parents.

**SZ:** My parents, my parents came here from Iran after the Revolution and my father came here to go to school and my mom came also to go to school but she came as a refugee.

**AK:** Where have you lived during your life?

**SZ:** All over the place, I was born in California. I grew up in Grafton [Massachusetts], next door. And then we moved to Minnesota for a year. After I got married, I moved to Texas. And then I went to California, had a few babies then I moved back here, Marlborough [Massachusetts], and then Shrewsbury [Massachusetts].

**AK:** Where was your favorite place to live?

**SZ:** Here, here is home. California is awesome but here is home, so probably here.

**JK:** Not to interrupt but you said you were first born in California, is that where your parents met each other?

**SZ:** I believe they met in New York. They knew each other from Iran but they became reunited here in the United States.

**JK:** Ok

**AK:** So when you lived in California what was that neighborhood like?

**SZ:** We lived in three different areas. When we lived there initially, we were in Redwood City [California] because my husband was doing his fellowship at Stanford [University]. Had one baby there. That apartment was amazing. I could walk to everything. Which is not something that you can do here. So that's why I was saying California is just awesome. I literally, you know, needed baby clothes, I walked, groceries, there was a butcher shop next door, everything I needed was right there. A farmers' market would pop up in front of my apartment once a week. It was just incredible. After that we moved to Pasadena which was also awesome. We kind of lived in downtown Pasadena right near the Rose Bowl. There was a lot going on, a lot to walk to, very walkable. And then we moved to Cyprus which was more residential. We did have a little ice cream shop in the area we could walk to but mostly would need a car. And then we moved here.

**AK:** When did you arrive here?

**SZ:** I arrived in Massachusetts maybe 6 years ago and, you mean arrived from California?

**AK:** Just when you ended up living here?

**SZ:** Six years ago. I grew up in Grafton [Massachusetts] so I just came back home.

**AK:** Do you have like other family members that live in the area?

**SZ:** I do, my parents are living in Northborough [Massachusetts], my sister lives near Boston [Massachusetts], and my brother is living in Connecticut right now but he is going to be going to Baltimore [Maryland] to finish his fellowship so, their all very close.

**AK:** How did you start working in Worcester?

**SZ:** So I'm working in Shrewsbury [Massachusetts] and Worcester right now. I'm an administrator at a local school but I'm doing tutoring at Clark Street Elementary School. It's close to my house and I really just love the kids so that's how I ended up in those places.

**AK:** We're going to talk about the Worcester and Shrewsbury areas, what challenges do you think the area faces?

**SZ:** It's interesting because Worcester and Shrewsbury are just over the bridge from each other, but I think the challenges they face are a little bit different because you have Shrewsbury which is, you know I think when people think of Shrewsbury, they think of it as a very affluent area. But a lot of the problems that exist everywhere also exist here. Just I think we sweep them under the carpet here, but in Worcester they're a little more obvious. So, I think our problems here are that we don't necessarily have the resources that people need for sustaining a socioeconomic diverse town. You know if there is a homeless person walking around on the streets we just push them to Worcester because Worcester has those services there. I think suburbs in general need to build that capacity for socioeconomic diversity. So yeah, I think there's many but I think that's one of them.

**AK:** What would you change about it?

**SZ:** I would build that capacity in town, that's something that my friends and I are working on. We have an advocacy group called A Better Shrewsbury, that just tries to push the town to develop and build up on existing resources in town to serve all populations. You know like refugee resettlement, homeless populations, people that suffer from addictions. Things that Worcester has those resources, but you can't keep pushing people to six major cities in Massachusetts. The suburbs need to build that capacity.

**AK:** What distinct characteristics make Worcester the place that it is?

**SZ:** Distinct characteristics, I don't know if I can—okay I'm going to use the word diverse here in every sense of the word. Because Worcester has a lot of diversity. And it's very cool to see because not only do you have predominant racial groups, you also have people from countries all over the world and that's just amazing to see in Worcester and then you see corresponding restaurants as well so you just see a lot of, you know, it feels worldly. I'll use the word worldly.

**AK:** And how do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been generally?

**SZ:** In Worcester, ... I can't really speak to that because I didn't grow up in Worcester I grew up in Grafton and I'm currently living in Shrewsbury. To speak to women's experiences in general, again I'm not sure how to answer that on behalf of other people. For myself one thing recently that has been an issue, I was a stay-at-home mother for a while and getting back into the workplace it's been really difficult finding workplaces that are flexible with their schedule to accommodate somebody who wants to pick up their kids from school or come in a little bit later in the morning to get them on the bus. The pandemic helped with that, companies are certainly more flexible now, but I think that's a challenge everywhere for woman trying to balance work with family life. I would assume many women in the area have varying degrees of that. I'm lucky that I am socioeconomically privileged so there are, it doesn't hit me as hard as many other people but that is certainly an ongoing challenge for many woman.

**JK:** I know you said you lived all over but can you talk a little about your education, starting at, starting at say high school, and then you went to college as well?

**SZ:** I started at Grafton High School for ninth grade and then we moved to Minnesota so I went to John Marshal High School in tenth grade and then we moved back to Massachusetts in Northborough, so I came to Algonquin [Algonquin Regional High School], eleventh grade. So I went to three high schools, ultimately graduating from Algonquin. Then I went to UMass Amherst [University of Massachusetts Amherst], I got my bachelor's degree in English and Journalism. And then I worked a couple years then went back and got my master's in education from the same school.

**JK:** Nice. Talking about high school a little bit, is there any moment that stood out to you that like solidified early like what you wanted to do in life. You had said master's in education, so is there like a specific moment you kind of realized you wanted to go into education early in life.

**SZ:** I always loved being around children and teaching. When I was younger, I would do like, Sunday school, camp counselor that kind of thing, babysitting. I think around 11 or 12 I was babysitting which is funny because I would never trust an 11- or 12-year-old with my kids today. I don't know if the youths had changed or if I don't know, I used to babysit all the time. And I

remember there was this moment in high school, I got bullied a lot in high school but in seventh or eighth grade my math teacher asked us to teach a lesson to the class. I got up and I did it effectively even though everyone in the class hated me, didn't talk to me, I did it effectively, I kind of realized it was a strength of mine, I kind of decided I wanted to go into education.

**JK:** That's awesome. Talking a little bit more about challenges in education, would you say you experienced this bullying starting at a young age or was it more as you got older?

**SZ:** It started when I was very young. I have memories from preschool. So Grafton was not, it was very different at the time, I was the only non-white student in a completely white district. And I didn't really process the bullying until later on in life, which was interesting. People were making fun of my facial hair, my name, they would call me Saddam Hussein because my name is Sanam and they couldn't pronounce it correctly, so they just were—I remember in second grade there was a whole school assembly about my name in particular and needing to pronounce my name correctly and stop picking on me. And like at the time, I just thought all kids get teased and that stuff and it wasn't until college really that I went back and processed what that all was and I try to make sure that's not still happening. I think the demographic has changed in Grafton and Shrewsbury as well, I think a lot of that is still there but now we're naming it, addressing it, we're talking about it more in classrooms, so I like seeing that it's different now.

**JK:** You said in college, you kind of started to process and realize what happened, did you realize people start, not start becoming more accepting but just stop the harassment and bullying around that age or did it still continue for you?

**SZ:** No, the bullying stopped when I moved. When I was processing that later in life—because in college they started asking questions about like, there was one in particular, there was a teacher that asked, “When did you first identify your race?” and the class itself was predominately white so the class went around and would say, “When I was 17 and I got sunburnt,” or “When I was 15 someone called me white,” and for me suddenly I'm having all these memories where I'm like 4 or 5 just being labeled othered. And then I started going back and reassessing all these memories that I had as a kid and had this whole racial layer I was ignoring there.

**JK:** So, upon graduating college do you go immediately to get your master's degree, or did you work first for a little bit?

**SZ:** So, after college I actually had applied to law school, and I had gone to law school for one semester, and I was thinking of going into educational advocacy. But my life just took a weird detour here, because I was in law school in the evening program and I got a job during the day to pay for the law school program, and that job was in trusts and estates. And I thought, oh that's a stable job that I can do, and my life started turning in that direction. And it's interesting because I started talking to an attorney that was doing a lot of Pro Bono work and she kind of told me, she

said, “You know, don’t go into law unless you’re ready to be under a bunch of paperwork for at least 10 years to be able to pay your loans back.” And that’s when it hit me that that’s not the road I should go, and I just want to be in classrooms and work with youth and kids. So I dropped out of law school and then I applied for my master’s program, I think it was two years after I graduated.

**JK:** So you said that the, when you met that lawyer who was Pro Bono, you said that she was a support network to you or did you have any other support networks that were close to you that helped you come to this decision?

**SZ:** No she was at a conference, I don’t even think she knows who I am. She was just at a conference talking, they were doing some networking, she was just kind of, because she does corporate law, but she also does a lot of Pro Bono work for refugee women in particular. And then she was explaining how to pay your loans, you need to go corporate. And just her explaining that I realized that that would have to be the path that I would take. And just that one semester that I had dropped out it was like \$25,000 which is crazy, I had to pay all that back, which I did partially with some wedding money, which was funny I got gifts and I was like I’m going to pay back my loans,

**JK, SZ, AK:** [laughs]

**SZ:** But, I don’t think she would know who I am, but her words impacted me so I just decided to go directly into education and just see where life takes me.

**JK:** Growing up and in college were you involved in any community activity groups that sort of shaped you to who you are today?

**SZ:** Growing up, I grew up in the Baha’i community, that definitely shaped who I am. And so, the Baha’i faith is a newer religion and one of the—it was always stressed to me that everyone is equal and men and women are equal, justice is important and these concepts were my foundation growing up. When I got to college, I got really involved in student government, where I started shifting more into local advocacy work and that kind of stuff, because that was—when you grow up, I think sometimes in religion you can focus sometimes just on the fluff, like everyone is equal, everyone deserves rights, but then once you get in the weeds of it, it’s more nuanced and complicated and there’s a lot of advocacy and pushing back and pushing back against the status quo and I think, I think that shift happened in college for me.

**AK:** I just wanted to add one more thing, did you have any mentors or support system like growing up?

**SZ:** I did. My family was always there for me. In terms of someone that I was modeling my life after, no. I always felt I was just carving a path as I went. There are people that I relate to a lot and I try to keep them around me like friends who are like-minded, trying to do the same things in life. And then on the flip side, I try to very intentionally diversify my social network as well because I find a lot of comfort in education like that, like you know learning what people are struggling with, where they are coming from. I think sometimes we too easily funnel ourselves into one group, or with a handful of people and I think that really limits what we are able to see in the world and what impacts us and what we care about. So I try to, I try to mix it up as much as humanly possible to stay aware to what is happening in the world around me.

**AK:** Alright so we're just, I'm just going to ask questions about your work career. So, what was your first job?

**SZ:** My first job ever?

**AK:** Yes.

**SZ:** Babysitting, yeah.

**AK:** And then what other jobs did you have?

**SZ:** From babysitting I jumped to JCPenney in the children's department. I worked all over the Solomon Pond Mall [a mall in Marlborough, Massachusetts]. I started at JCPenney in the baby department and then the shoe department, then American Eagle, then I went to Filene's, which is now Macy's, and then Lens Crafters. I think I worked at AT&T for a little bit, I just went all over the mall. I don't know why, I think I was working at three of those places at the same time, at some point.

**JK, SZ, AK:** [laughs].

**SZ:** Yeah, every time in that mall I'm like oh my god, I've worked in almost every store in here, and Lens Crafters I kind of stuck with. And that was a cool place to work because I thought of it as a backup career, I figured if all else fails I can always go on and become an optician and I've got this job here, so that was nice. And then after college I went into (inaudible) Trust Company, I was doing trusts and estates. And then I applied for my master's program. I was tutoring kids at a local hospital.

**AK:** What do you do now?

**SZ:** I can continue that timeline. I was doing that, and then my master's program, I was teaching

9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade at the same time. I got married and had to move to Houston (Texas). And when I went there I was teaching ELL [English Language Learners], which is English, not as a second language but English to foreign language learners. And I did that for a few years and then I had my first kid, so I stayed home for seven years. And now I am a school administrator and I do some tutoring at a local community college, and I am hoping to eventually get my principal certificate and become a principal. But I am waiting for my kids to become a little bit older so before I can actually commit to something like that.

**AK:** And what does your job mean to you?

**SZ:** Education in general is a game changer for any issue the world is facing. I think education is a tool for big social change. So that's why I was always so fascinated with education. But I just, I guess I just want to be a part of that, a part of those shifts and part of those, I would call it a revolution, I see education as revolutionary, and how it can change people's minds, change people's life paths, change people's goals, change people's mentalities so, yeah.

**AK:** So in terms of your home life, what were your primary responsibilities in house work and child care.

**SZ:** I was the primary caretaker in the house. My husband is a physician, so his work hours are a little unpredictable. I stayed home with my kids. My biological kids, they're about two years apart. So, the first five years were really tough because they were just babies. So, you know, just cooking, cleaning, diapers, the whole thing. And I still, I still take on a lot of that now that I am working, we share some of those responsibilities.

**AK:** And how were you able to balance these different responsibilities, and different priorities?

**SZ:** I just did them, when the girls were babies there were moments where I just wasn't sleeping at all. We were in California, we were isolated from our families, there wasn't much of a support network there. I tell people all the time, I think women, when they are young, they are taught if you don't do it no one will. And I think we kind of have that mentality like, I have to do it or else it won't happen. So I think that's kind of what kept me going because if I didn't do it, who will? I think, you know, I'm certainly generalizing here, because this certainly isn't the case all the time, but I think, sometimes or often times men rely on the women in their lives. Son to mothers or husbands to wives, but there's a lot of different dynamics. But yeah, I think it's just kind of wired in me. I don't know if that answered your question.

**JK:** Just to jump in for a minute, you said you were a stay-at-home mom for a while and then you jumped back into work. Can you talk about any, were there any challenges you faced and how you overcame that adjustment period between staying at home and going back into the work field?



**SZ:** I think the adjustment came for me gradually, because I didn't necessarily jump back into work. I was like a lot of local advocacy work and a lot of local committees and volunteer work. It kind of got me into—not that mom isn't always home, but like oh mom has a meeting or mom is going here, mom has to go and drop these off. I guess I was nudged into it. I was lucky to then find a school that was willing to accommodate to my schedule. Where if I needed to stay home, or come in a little late, I could work that into my schedule. And a lot of schools aren't willing to do that, but this particular one was. So that, that's been really helpful.

**JK:** That's great.

**AK:** And what do you think are the pros and cons of the path you have chosen?

**SZ:** The pros and cons? The pros are that I meet a lot of people all the time in intimate ways. I get to learn who they are, what they love, what they hate, that kind of stuff. Kids, adults, parents, all over the place. And the cons are that its exhausting because, one of my skillsets I guess is to do things at the same time, which can get tiring. But at the same time that's just how I am. I guess the pro and the con are the same thing.

**AK:** How do you feel about the choices you have made in your life?

**SZ:** I am content with all the choices I have made in life. I think it's hard to sit back and regret any one choice because it collapses the whole card tower, but yeah, I can't say it's any one thing I would change. And if there are things I would change, I would just change them tomorrow. But I don't think about the past.

**JK:** I have a question, I just completely forgot what I was going to ask you. It'll come back to me.

**SZ:** The answer is yes.

**JK, AK, SZ:** [laughs]

**JK:** Oh, um... kind of like just to understand your work a little bit more in your day-to-day life, what was the biggest challenge you faced when you're at work?

**SZ:** I was working in person as an administrator last year and I've gone remote, so it's changed a little bit. But I think for an administrator, the biggest challenge is balancing immediate needs with almost-immediate needs because both of them are in the immediate category, but then you have to really rank and prioritize things that all need to be done at the same time.

**JK:** Right.

**SZ:** But sometimes you can't be at the same place at once. So, I think that's one of the challenges of school administration, kind of picking and choosing what is most important among many important things, and moving forward on them and making sure the school is moving forward, the kids are happy, everyone's safe.

**JK:** I apologize if you said this already, but did you, were you working during the whole COVID pandemic? Were you in a school setting then?

**SZ:** I was not, no, no.

**JK:** Okay, were you, were you working at home at that time or?

**SZ:** I was home, and my kids were remote. I was involved in a lot of like volunteer work, advocacy work, but I wasn't formally working in any role.

**JK:** You kind of talk a little bit about how everyone being at home at that time kind of if that affected you in any way. Was that like something you and your family love, being spend that time together or was it rough moments or?

**SZ:** Oh I don't—No, does anybody say that?

**JK, SZ, AK:** [laughs]

**SZ:** I don't think anyone says that. No, it was really challenging because I say this all the time to my friends, but I can command a room of like 100 kids. But when it comes to my own, that's a very different story you know. Hey, go pick up your laundry. No.

**AK:** [laughs]

**SZ:** Whereas I'm like, okay, you know, six of you start doing algebra and they're like, "Okay." So, it's just kind of a fun, funny dynamic there. It was incredibly challenging getting my kids to focus and at the time we had one foster daughter too which was also challenging because she had just arrived a few months prior to the pandemic. And the whole foster care system was just kind of thrown for a huge loop at that point because they could no longer place kids. A lot of foster homes were you now scared and they didn't want to—they were closing the doors. So, it just created a really big mess in that regard. But ours stayed with us for the year and there were a lot of mental health challenges in our home at the time. So, I just kind of tried to shift from—again, we are in a very—we are socioeconomically fine. I fully acknowledge this as a privilege but I kind of just told myself that I'm just going to focus on mental health and then we will deal with any repercussions later on. I saw that my eight-year-old at the time was kind of starting to get a

little anxious, so I started telling her like, “Okay, it doesn't matter, we'll just deal with it later.” I figured after the pandemic, we could always just, you know, again, we have the privilege of adding extra math classes after school or getting tutoring if we need to, or even pulling her out and putting her in private school if needed. So, I think that was also really an eye-opener for me because it was really apparent who has privilege and who does not during the pandemic. [noise nearby] Yeah, I don't even remember what your original question was, but there's a bunch of thoughts so. [laughs]

**JK:** Thank you, I appreciate that. Shift a little bit towards more community involvement. So, the first question, always a tough question with people, but do you consider yourself politically active?

**SZ:** I do, yes.

**JK:** I know researching you a little bit before we met today, I saw that you were active in school committee or running for school committee.

**SZ:** I ran for school committee, but I didn't get on it. I ran for two years in a row. And my main motivation there was just to kind of change the conversation here in Shrewsbury. You had asked some of the challenges in Shrewsbury. One is that we have 100% white school administration, school committee leadership, in a district that's 51% non-white, which is, I mean that's a huge disparity. So, when I ran—and I think towns in general have a habit of not speaking directly about certain issues, because they want to uphold the appearance that everything is okay, everything is fine, we're an awesome school, that kind of stuff. But I think you know you can be an awesome school and also acknowledge, these are areas we need to work on and really tackle those. So, me running was just an effort to kind of encourage new people to run and push some of these different topics to the forefront of conversation. I did not put my name in this time. I just—like it's hard because my life is so busy. I don't actually have time to campaign or anything like that which actually that was a funny thing that happened during the election a lot of people wondered if I was taking it seriously because I would have loved to be on school committee, but I don't love standing in the middle of town, holding my name on a stick when I could be like, working with kids or doing something better with my time. So that was really hard for me to explain to people. I don't actually know who's running this time, but I hope that people who are in education are running and I don't know, people who are interested in not just upholding, [rustling noise nearby] but making the schools better and more accommodating of people that come from every corner of the world.

**JK:** Would you see yourself running for another title of all, whether a school committee or not? Would you see yourself running, [clears throat] running again? Or are you trying to focus more on being more changing people through classrooms instead?

**SZ:** I'm a behind the scenes person. It's funny because if you're in a position like school committee, you do have the opportunity to speak and be heard more often, but you also have to attend some really boring meetings. In the meantime, you're bound by public meeting laws, all of these things. Whereas, you know, if there's something I'd like to change in the schools, I can write a letter in the newspaper, I can go to school committee, I can write letters to the superintendent, I can publicly start a campaign against this specific issue and try to advocate for change so I find less restrictions in a non-public position. The reason I had run for school committee is because I don't actually—I understand why you need to run for a position like that, but I see that more as an advocacy position and not a political one. So, it was a little, so it was hard to kind of balance that out mentally, I guess. But to go back to directly answer your question, no, I'm very happy working behind the scenes. I find that I have more time to spend on issues I care about and not you know bogging down all my time with kind of more paperwork or bureaucratic things that need to happen, that need to happen to run a school, but that would prevent me from focusing on issues that I care about.

**JK:** I know you said you spend a lot of time, you, and your family, with foster care children, when did that kind of start for you?

**SZ:** That started about five years ago. I actually always wanted to adopt, but my husband didn't want to adopt, so fostering was kind of our middle ground and then we ended up specifically fostering unaccompanied refugee minors. So that's kind of how that happened. These are more teenagers, they're older, and the nice thing about that is that our biological children are younger, so they're kind of in two different worlds and there's no competition or anything. It's just you know these kids are on their path, these kids are on theirs. We hang out together, but there's no comparison. So that's been really helpful in the home,

**JK:** You said there's no comparison or no kind of like challenge between the two of them because they live separate lives. But do your children tend to get along with the foster children?

**SZ:** Oh, yeah, they have a great relationship, that's not what I meant. Sorry, to clarify foster daughter, but I think I meant a lot of other foster parents I talked to said that sometimes if they have a ten year old and they bring in another ten year old, there's a lot of like, “Oh, you love him more than me, you don't love me as much as him. Why can he eat chicken nuggets, but I have to eat broccoli? Why does he have a cell phone and I can't have a cell phone?” So that's what I meant having our kids be eight and nine and fostering 18, 19-year-olds. It avoids a lot of that. So then you know they hang out together, they love each other. They consider their foster sisters their sisters, and even when they draw pictures, they always draw their foster sisters, and they play together, we do puzzles, activities. They do a lot. So I didn't mean that they're separate like that. I just meant that there isn't really a comparison. You know like, if my nine-year-old, she never comes and says, “Why can my 18-year-old sister drive?” And I'm like, “Okay, because she's 18.” Like it has nothing to do with your privilege versus her privilege. It's just she is 18,

and that's why she has a cell phone, because she's a teenager. You don't need one because you're eight.

**JK, AK:** [laughs]

**JK:** How long do I'm not really familiar with the system, how long do foster children usually stay for? Is there like a set limit or is it until they age out of the system or?

**SZ:** It depends. So, in standard foster care, kids are there temporarily, and the goal is always to reunite with the biological parents for kids in American, not American foster care in DCF foster care. So, the kids can be with you indefinitely until that happens. And if not, then if they are eligible for adoption, then you have the option to adopt. It's just a lot of moving pieces. In the one that we do there's a little more stability in terms of who's in your home, because these kids are like, largely 16, 17 years old. So, they come, they do high school, and then they move on. And the goal is their independence. They can stay in our home until they're 22, as long as they're in school, and then they move on. And I mean the goal is independence, so it's a few years. I'd probably say a few years for each.

**JK:** Whether in your own home or within the foster care community organization as a whole, what do you, what would be the biggest challenge that if you could change, you would?

**SZ:** I think that the resources that are given to foster parents need to be given to biological parents instead, and I think that would resolve a lot of the issues. And this is not me saying something new. This is something that a lot of people have been advocating for. But it makes complete sense. If a biological mother cannot afford to feed her children, to keep a safe home, give her food and a safe home for her children, give her the supports that she needs. If parents cannot afford to send their kids to school, to college, any of that, give them those supports. I have those supports as a foster parent. I get a small stipend every day. I'm sure a lot of biological parents would love to have a small stipend each day. I get a clothing stipend once every three months. I'm sure biological parents would love to have that. There are a lot of kids that are going to school in summer clothes because their parents can't afford clothes. But literally like every, I don't know what the current amount is, but it was \$300 like every three months, which is a lot. I mean, it's enough to get kids clothes. So, yeah, that's the number one thing. There's a lot, there's a lot but that's the number one thing. I think if we shifted our focus on providing biological families what they need to stay together and stay safe and warm clothed, then I think we would pull a lot of kids out of foster care that way, instead of just like giving random person over here all the same resources to take a stranger child that they don't know into their home. I'm not saying there's no need for foster care. There absolutely is. But I think a large portion of people in foster care is the result of poverty, not because of any other reason.

**JK:** Are there any other organizations you feel strongly about that you spend a lot of your time associating with?

**SZ:** So the same foster care agency is called Ascentria Care Alliance. We foster through Ascentria. I'm also working with them separately. We have a Shrewsbury neighborhood support team where we're working on refugee resettlement in Shrewsbury. This kind of goes back to what I was saying earlier, we don't resettle refugees here because Worcester has those resources. Our group has been working directly with Ascentria to try to build suburban capacity to resettle refugees in town, but that comes with a lot of, it's kind of a chicken and the egg situation. If you call the town and you say, we need language services for refugee families, we need public transportation for refugee families, there's no documented need, therefore they're not going to provide it. So once, you have to basically create a need. So that's what our group is doing, we are crowdsourcing and trying to subsidize rent and fill in a lot of links until the town can build their capacity to serve different populations.

**JK:** You say your work consists of a lot of like, not sure how to say this, like, working with neighbors or other people throughout the community to try and help you build this, achieve this goal?

**SZ:** Mhm.

**JK:** Okay.

**SZ:** Yeah. So there's a—during the pandemic, you know, there are a lot of forums online, town forums, and every time we tried to do any small initiative, it would just be, you know, like even simple things. There is racism in our schools. We just had to spend hours just fighting with people who said, like, “No, you're the racist. No, there's no racism. Why don't you go back to where you came from,” like these types of things. So we created an online space [A Better Shrewsbury] where we don't have to deal with that, so we can just put out an initiative. The people who just want to take up your time arguing back and forth, even though they don't really care about learning, are not allowed in the group. It's a learning space, but it's also an area where we can put forward initiatives, find collaborators, and move forward. And we've been very productive. We've been able to accomplish a lot of small but impactful changes in our town.

**JK:** You just said we were able to achieve lot of things, but was there like, one early on, like one defining moment, where you were like this really can work?

**SZ:** The group? There's not one. But a lot of people came to me, especially during the pandemic, and told me that the group was just really helpful and safe place for them because, because again, even if you're trying to do—no matter what you do if you say, “I'm raising funds to find housing for a refugee family,” you post that in the town forum, there's going to be at least ten people saying, “What about the troops? What about the Americans? Why are you helping this population and not this one?” And you have to just sit there and just go back and forth. Like It's just a waste of time, and then it also is just discouraging because you know you're not saying we

shouldn't do it for everybody. We would love to do it for everybody. It's just we've selected this particular initiative and that's what we are doing and help us or just move on, you don't need to waste our time. So, a lot of people came and said they really enjoyed having that kind of safe space to post topics that they want to discuss, that they want to learn about, initiatives they'd like to work on. And we've really been pushing people to run for a local office. Town meeting is our local form of government, we've been pushing people to run for town meeting and submit proposals and initiatives and get more active locally. So seeing that, I think that's been the biggest success.

**JK:** You said earlier religion used to play huge role in your life. Do you still feel that way? And can you kind of build on that a little bit?

**SZ:** I think religion was an important foundation for me. I wouldn't necessarily consider myself super religious, but I do acknowledge that religion was the foundation that a lot of who I am was built on. And I am giving my kids that same—like I do raise them in the Baha'i faith, so it is something that means a lot to me. But I wouldn't necessarily call myself religious. I don't know if that made sense, but that's kind of ...

**AK:** Have you had any like health issues that have impacted your life or your family life?

**SZ:** Not necessarily. I have migraines, which is not a serious issue, but sometimes if I'm looking groggy, it's because I'm just taking a bunch of pain medicine and just again, it kind of goes back to the just keep going, just keep moving. I think that's the only one. But no major health issues.

**AK:** What is your experience in assessing quality, affordable health care?

**SZ:** Assessing what?

**AK:** Quality affordable health care.

**SZ:** Sorry, can you ask the whole question?

**AK:** What is your experience in assessing quality affordable health care?

**SZ:** Assessing or accessing?

**AK:** Accessing. Sorry, that was my bad. [laughs]

**SZ:** Oh no no no, I am actually—so our neighborhood support team is actually working on affordable housing here in town, because towns like Shrewsbury, what we call affordable, is called 40 B housing, and that's basically 80% of market rate, which is not that affordable for a lot

of people. So you know if you have an apartment going for \$3,000, then affordable means that you only pay 80% of that, which is still a lot of money for a lot of people. So it really prices a lot of people out of our town. What we're trying to do with our neighborhood support team is through crowdsourcing. Well, we have long term goals of having this just be the norm, but in the meantime, if we crowdsource a rent subsidy and create truly affordable housing, then that would make our town more accessible for a lot more people. Our long-term goal is actually to hopefully acquire properties and set those at very affordable rates. But our town is—we passed the Community Preservation Act a couple of years ago, which requires us to meet a certain affordable housing minimum in town, and we're very far from it. I think we need 500 more units just to just to reach the minimum threshold, and we're not we're not close to that. So, our goal as a team as these you know short term subsidies to try to help get people in. And you know once you create the need, then you can address the need. But what suburbs have been doing is pushing the need into Worcester, Framingham, Lowell, Springfield, Boston. But we need to keep the need local so that we can actually address it.

**JK:** Would you say this career support network, not career support network, but the support network you work with for refugees, would you say that they kind of face a challenge with the health care system being that you work sometimes with undocumented refugees? Is that like a big challenge you see a lot or?

**SZ:** Mass Health is awesome. My foster daughters are on Mass Health, and I've been able to access anything I need for them. So it's been—so no, I think through Mass Health a lot of that is alleviated, so that's just a really wonderful program that we have here in our state.

**JK:** That's awesome. Kind of to wrap up a little bit. I know you said just then just keep going, just get through. How do you get through tough times? What kind of thoughts keep you going that keep in the back of your mind?

**SZ:** So it's actually a religious quote. There was this quote that I read when I was younger that said—I don't know the exact quote, I'm paraphrasing, but it says, anytime you feel depressed, go and help someone else. And that'll immediately, I guess, downplay whatever you're going through because it'll just remind you that other people are going through different things. And I think that subconsciously, I think that just became who I am. So anytime I feel down, I'm like, “Okay, why don't I take soup for someone or go to grocery shopping for someone?” And it's actually effective. It's very effective because I've been very fortunate in my life that I haven't really faced significant adversity. But everybody has times where they're down. So it's just, you know, reminding yourself that that even if you're down, it doesn't it doesn't downplay how you're feeling, but it's even if you're down, there's always someone that's either going through the same or worse struggle as you. So if you just reach out, that human connection not even just helping someone, but just that human connection is helpful for those moments.



**JK:** It's a great way to think about it. How would you define success in your life, and how is success the definition you have of it changed from when you were young to now?

**SZ:** I think growing up in an immigrant household, I viewed success more as financial stability and financial success, I guess. In my life now, I recognize that financial stability is important, but you plateau at a certain point. And I think joy is the factor. I think joy means if you're joyful, you're successful. And I think you can find joy anywhere. There was actually this interesting documentary on Netflix called "Happy." If you haven't seen it, I recommend seeing it. It was showing just that. They did kind of a survey to see who is happy in the world, who is not happy in the world, and is there a correlation with money. And they determined that you know money does buy you happiness as long as it's buying your basic needs, house, food, you know, like basic things that you need. But after that point, money doesn't buy you happiness, it just plateaus. Where even if you have \$6 billion, that doesn't mean that you're happier than someone who has \$50,000, as long as your basic needs are met.

**JK:** Based on your life experiences, what advice would you give not only to younger women of today, but also younger Iranian children who might be going through some of the same bullying you said you went through as a child?

**SZ:** I think my advice is to find joy, whatever that looks like. I don't think kids who are being bullied necessarily need to go and stand up to bullies. I think that comes in your own time when you're ready. Me now, going back to high school, I think I could stand up for myself, but me then I could not. I just kind of was shy and quiet, and I think that's okay. But I think in those moments, you need to find joy, whatever that looks like to you. If that's an art class, if that's theater, if that's sitting in your room reading a bunch of books, you need to find joy in your life. I think Iranian communities and many immigrant communities, the stress is too much on go to school, get a really good job, buy a nice house, and there's more to life than that. You need to find joy. Otherwise, those things are meaningless.

**JK:** So, the purpose of our interview is to kind of tell a fuller story of the history of women inside our community. Is there any experiences you feel we didn't ask you that we should include?

**SZ:** No, I think that was pretty thorough.

**JK:** Lastly, is there anyone else that you would suggest we talk to from colleagues you've worked with in any of your whether schools or your community programs that you think would have a great story to share with us?

**SZ:** Yes, I can email those to you. [laughs]

**JK:** Okay. Alright, do you want to ask any of these other questions or?

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**AK:** Let me look. [laughs]

**JK:** I like this one. You said your parents were uh immigrated here from Iran. What was their education like?

**AK:** Good question.

**SZ:** They—my mom has her bachelor's. My dad has his master's. But in—so I mentioned we're Baha'is. Baha'is are persecuted in Iran, so that's the reason that they came here. So Baha'is are not allowed to attend institutes of higher education in Iran, and so that's why they both had to leave. If they wanted to go to college, they had to come here.

**JK:** Just for a transcript, can you just spell that for me?

**SZ:** B-A-H-A apostrophe I

**JK:** Okay.

**SZ:** Yup, it's a persecuted minority in Iran.

**JK:** Alright. Thank you.

**SZ:** Yeah, no problem

**AK:** Thank you.